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# Americanizing America: Irving Berlin's Influence On His Adopted Culture

Jay Herman  
*University of Puget Sound*

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## Americanizing America: Irving Berlin's Influence On His Adopted Culture

Irving Berlin, one of the central figures of American popular music, wrote in every popular idiom for at least two generations of Americans. In his 101 years he wrote parodies, vaudeville tunes, ethnic novelty songs, ragtime and dance music, Broadway revues and shows, and over a dozen scores for the emerging movie industry. If one can imagine an engineer leaning out of the front car to lay his own tracks, this is Berlin in America; he created the culture into which he would assimilate. Through the myriad of genres and audiences to which he contributed, Irving Berlin the Russian-Jewish composer of American music, assimilated into the American culture for which he was one of the primary standard-bearers.

While his entire career was a prototype in many ways for the immigrant American composer, this paper will enumerate the distinguishable aspects that indicate his movement into and articulation of American culture from roughly 1900 to 1950. Between these selected examples, other important milestones will be noted in passing. However, to avoid adding another Berlin biography to the many already in existence, it is more poignant to select only those examples that specifically address his and his country's acculturation process.<sup>1</sup>

Israel Baline was born in 1888 in Russia, and his family moved to America when he was five years old. After his one-time cantor father died, Berlin left his Lower East Side home feeling as if he was not contributing his fair share to the family. Living in shelters and on streets, he picked up odd jobs and eventually landed as a singing waiter at Mike Pelham's Café, where he took on the name Irving Berlin. His path from here is mostly discussed in the business section

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<sup>1</sup> Although this paper's purpose is not to assign points in Berlin's life to continually deeper "levels" of assimilation, it is necessary at times to note events that demonstrate connections to mainstream American culture (as opposed to Russian or Jewish culture). The goal of these examples is to show that whatever "stage" he currently occupied in the path to becoming culturally American, his influence was on a culture in which he was not native.

below, but it should be noted that his leaving home was not equated with self-estrangement. He maintained contact with his family and supported them as he climbed the socioeconomic ladder through revues, hit songs, and movies. By his sixtieth birthday, however, Berlin was mostly a legend of the past being overtaken by rock and roll. The last third of his life was spent on other hobbies and often in a despondent state, no longer doing the thing he loved most: writing songs. He died in 1989 at 101 – an incredible feat for someone who once lived in New York’s infamously sordid tenements. Over these years Berlin gave his adopted country countless American songs and influenced other aspects of American culture through his entertainment. Indeed, the man who was continually becoming an American taught those who had long since assimilated what it meant to live in this country.

### **Berlin as Entrepreneur**

Although Berlin certainly enjoyed writing music, his perspective on songwriting matched that of a businessman crafting a product rather than an artist creating a masterpiece (see Appendix, “Nine Rules for Writing Popular Songs”).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the only way of explaining his near superhuman output is to imagine him slaving away over his songs as a businessman would to increase profits. While most songwriters stick to writing music and lyrics, Berlin’s entire life was a series of steps in creating his own upward mobility and assuring success for future endeavors not only by writing songs, but also by successfully promoting them. Although Berlin is known as a centerpiece to American music, his life as an entrepreneur, from singing waiter to owner of his own theater and publishing company, portrays a much more familiar image of the American Dream.

Growing up in the Lower East Side, the quintessential melting pot, Berlin observed the stereotypes of various cultures. When he saw their representations in vaudeville shows, these

caricatures were more pronounced. Having matured in this environment, Berlin's first years of performing and songwriting, unsurprisingly, were laden with risqué parodies and ethnic novelty songs. In fact, although his talent was clear, publishers initially refused him due to his ribald prose.<sup>2</sup> At this point, however, Berlin did not see far beyond his nonexistent front door, and he was merely beginning to demonstrate his unmatched talent: reading his audience and delivering exactly what they wanted. Patrons of cafes in the area did not want grand opera; the mixture of Italians, Germans, Irish, and Jews wanted the parodies to which they had become accustomed.

When Al Piantadosi, the pianist at the rival restaurant Callahan's, wrote "My Mariucci Take a Steamboat" to gather publicity, Berlin's boss, Mike Salter, asked the young man to try his hand at writing lyrics. To this point he had only performed parodies of existing songs, now he would start his writing career. The resulting song, "Marie from Sunny Italy" (1907), does not compare lyrically to later songs, but it drew attention and was even purchased by a well-known publisher.<sup>3</sup> Even this first work foreshadows the Berlin mindset; he wrote the song to help business at the Pelham Café. In a way Berlin is like the immigrant who opens his family shop and is able to provide a life for himself that he would have never thought possible in his former land. In this case, however, Berlin's "business" is songwriting.

Still entertaining at Pelham, Berlin agreed to write an Italian dialect song for ten dollars. When the man who asked for the song no longer needed it, Berlin took the song lyrics, more appropriate than many of his parodies, to Waterson & Snyder publishing company. Receiving an offer of twenty-five dollars for music and lyrics, Berlin claimed that he had music planned and was forced to improvise a melody on the spot.<sup>4</sup> This quick thinking and natural talent allowed Berlin to make his first business move with the firm that would play a major role in his lasting success. After another freelance song, "Sadie Salome, Go Home," achieved success with

Waterson & Snyder, they agreed to take him on as a staff lyricist.<sup>2</sup> Showing early signs of control over his endeavors, Berlin rejected the initial complicated contract and signed a simplified version that offered twenty-five dollars per week plus royalties.<sup>5</sup> Quickly Berlin rose from the vaudeville stage to a “higher” stage, one shared with the great Florenz Ziegfeld.

Around the turn of the decade the American public began an obsession with ragtime song and dance. By now Berlin was fairly well known and his next ambition was to link himself with Ziegfeld, the glorifier of the American girl. In the 1910-11 theater season, Berlin wrote interpolations, songs chosen by the performers to insert into a show, for major productions by Lew Fields and Ziegfeld.<sup>6</sup> In 1911 he contributed four songs to the *Follies* including an early rhythmic ballad, “Dog Gone That Chilly Man.” Possibly recognizing his higher audience, Berlin parodied Donizetti in his “Ragtime Opera Sextet” for *Hankey-Panky*. In another innovation, Berlin challenged the Broadway norm of singing only to the audience with his song “Down in My Heart” from George Cohan’s *The Little Millionaire*; in this interpolation, two characters sang a dialogue to each other.<sup>7</sup> By linking himself with the ever-popular Ziegfeld (and Cohan) and experimenting with various genres of songs, Berlin established himself as a major player on the “legitimate” stage.

Partly due to this rising status and success on Broadway, Waterson & Snyder made Berlin a partner at their publishing firm, now called Waterson, Berlin & Snyder. This promotion came at the end of 1911, a particularly successful year for Berlin in which he had written “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” the theme song of a generation,<sup>8</sup> “Everybody’s Doin’ It,” which will be discussed below, and contributed four songs to Ziegfeld. Considering he was only in his early twenties, Waterson & Snyder were likely well aware of this fledgling star’s potential.

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<sup>2</sup> In the beginning of his writing career Berlin was strictly a lyricist, but he quickly moved to writing music as well.

After getting his feet wet in the glamorous world of Broadway and rising to the top of a major publishing company, Berlin knew his next step was to become a major figure in his own right, the new Ziegfeld of the songwriting world. In 1913 and 1914 his song output decreased significantly. Charles Hamm suggests this was in part because he was observing and learning from experienced stage writers like Ray Goetz and Vincent Bryan.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly Berlin took time to learn the ways of this new world but would never get more than a few lessons in music notation and performance outside his preferred key of F-sharp. Berlin's need to understand the market indicates his businesslike mentality. He knew he possessed the skill to write popular songs, but he had to learn about his new demographic of performers and viewers. In December of 1914, Berlin opened *Watch Your Step*, a Broadway revue with his name at the top of the bill. Also at the top of the bill were the faces and feet of the dance craze, Irene and Vernon Castle. Berlin's choice of a dance musical showed clear understanding that ethnic novelty pieces were obsolete and unpopular on the "higher" stage. Understanding the ebb and flow of popular taste, Berlin said to the *New York World*: "Song writing depends on the public. The thing it likes one minute it tires of the next. . . . You must be able to switch your lyre to something else. If not, a new writer will take your place and your star, which rose so suddenly, will set as rapidly as it came up."<sup>10</sup> Consequently, *Watch Your Step* had no ethnic characters, and it was composed entirely in syncopated dance music style. For Hamm, the show's place as the first full-length book musical with this consistency makes it a "seminal work" in American musical theater.<sup>11</sup> As musical theater evolved, cohesion became more important. Before this landmark, American musical comedies featured performers with various skills in various styles with less emphasis on plot. While *Watch Your Step* brought unity to the score's style, it would be years, but well within the scope of Berlin's innovation, before plot, songs, and dialogue would unite to create the

“integrated musical.” For now, the performer-centric revues of Berlin and Ziegfeld would reign, much to the pleasure of audience and critics.

While Berlin’s first show was a major success for the businessman in him, it was also quite innovative from an artistic perspective. After 1914, the last of what Hamm calls Berlin’s “formative years,” the composer entered a new phase in his life where, in short, he went from student to authority. Among the myriad of reasons Hamm offers for the success of this show, he values it because of the way it combines genres:

[The] Rhythmic vitality of the day’s syncopated dance music with more sophisticated compositional techniques derived from operetta, and his lyrics are written in a colloquial language that nevertheless manages to appear more sophisticated than his earlier material for the vaudeville stage.<sup>12</sup>

Because this section is meant to elucidate Berlin’s business career, it is imperative to see his ability to shift with public taste as a business asset. In modern times his versatility would be comparable to a composer who writes a song for Billy Joel, then NSYNC, and then Lady Gaga – three very different sounds for very different audiences. Without adapting to new audiences and performers, Berlin’s fame would have remained in the vaudeville arena and ended with its demise. Instead he maintained his position as a top-tier songwriter as one genre replaced another.

Besides his general brilliance in reading the market, Berlin had two other major business moves in his future, not including such opportunities as his partnering with Rodgers and Hammerstein for *Annie Get Your Gun*, joining the film industry in 1929, or writing shows connected with both war efforts, all of which demonstrate his ability to successfully create or take advantage of opportunities in the music business. Just before opening *Watch Your Step*, Berlin quietly opened his own publishing firm, Irving Berlin, Inc. His valid concerns about Waterson’s gambling problem ended in Waterson, Berlin & Snyder’s bankruptcy. Biographer Lawrence Bergreen points out that the location of his new office in the theater district indicated

his plans for the future. Now the owner of his own publishing firm and the composer of a full successful Broadway show, it had been only six years since he first submitted a song to Waterson & Snyder.

To this point, all of Berlin's achievements – accolades most would consider iconic of the American Dream – were achieved by Berlin the immigrant. It was not until 1918 that Berlin actually became a naturalized citizen of his adopted country.<sup>13</sup> His ultimate business move in 1921 would allow him to join the ranks of Ziegfeld, Hammerstein, and the Shuberts as the prime arbiters of musical theater (and for him, music) in the early twentieth century. Producer Sam Harris presented Berlin with the idea of opening their own theater as a way of assuring complete control over his material and avoiding nomadic habits of wandering amongst the various Broadway venues. Although many thought the lavish theater would bring Berlin the same destitution that shook his idol Stephen Foster, the innovator eventually opened the Music Box with the first of his very own annual series, *The Music Box Revue of 1921*. Continuing Berlin's trend of greatness, the theater, the show, and the songs were each met with praise and Berlin made profit both as owner of the venue in ticket sales and from sheet music revenue collected by Irving Berlin, Inc.

Berlin's ownership and operation of a publishing firm and a theater alone are signs that Berlin had a knack for American business. Before *Watch Your Step*, or "Alexander's Ragtime Band," or the Music Box Theater, his eventual patrons could not have articulated what they wanted in entertainment. After enjoying his works, they would retrospectively state that whatever Irving Berlin was doing is what they wanted; he was trusted as an entertainer and articulator of American culture. This may just be a flowery way of saying that he knew his "customers," but the extent to which Berlin could influence American sentiment, even as he was



hardly a member of that demographic is exceedingly important. Bergreen notes that Berlin matured as the nation “embarked on an apparently endless binge of frivolity (reflected and encouraged by Broadway).. . . For a man who’d risen from immigrant to singing waiter to impresario, limits did not apply.”<sup>14</sup> This frivolity with which Americans commonly identify the 1920s was indeed “reflected and encouraged” by Berlin. Not only did he provide the songs and the revues which his audiences religiously patronized, he also demonstrated financial risk-taking for something frivolous in his purchase of his own space. It is often difficult to find tangible evidence of songwriters’ impact on culture when their works have risen and fallen in popularity and seldom remain known, but for Berlin the dance, the ragtime, the American girl, the spectacle, and the extravagance all remain as his marks in a culture he helped create, and one into which he concurrently planted his feet deeper and deeper.

### **Berlin as Showman**

Although the previous section focuses on Berlin’s knack for business, he was famed for being an exceptional songwriter. By the opening of the Music Box, Berlin had written some of the country’s favorite songs including “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” “Everybody’s Doin’ It,” and “Oh! How I Hate To Get Up In The Morning.” While these songs all had an impact on American public and culture, his simultaneous assimilation into and influence over his new culture is best encapsulated by his work on Broadway, a stage with more visibility and an increased likelihood of withstanding the test of time than his work on the vaudeville stage.

It is almost uncanny how much influence immigrant Jews had over the Broadway stage; Berlin was not the only one who found his way into a culture he helped define. Rodgers and Hammerstein, the Gershwin brothers, and Jerome Kern are just five among the many major Jewish figures in Broadway’s seminal years. Andrea Most, author of *Making Americans: Jews*

*and the Broadway Musical*, writes that many Protestants in the early twentieth century found the theater sinful, which left it open for Jews and Irish Catholics. When Jews came to America from Central and Eastern Europe, theater was a part of their tradition. Yiddish theater began in Romania and spread quickly wherever Jews immigrated. In the year 1900, “1,100 performances [of Yiddish theater] were given before an estimated 2 million patrons.”<sup>15</sup> It is no surprise that as immigrants learned English, they continued this tradition in their new language and new home. As Jews, Irish Catholics, Italians, and others sought to find their place in the melting pot, African Americans also faced their seemingly interminable uphill battle. Irving Berlin, a “mere” showman actually played a major role in the progress – although arguably as much forward as backward – of African-Americans on stage. While many Americans likely disagreed with some of his racial decisions, he made substantial steps in creating the melting pot culture in which he desired to partake. Finally, demonstrating his swift allegiance to his new country, he played a major role in both major wars of the twentieth century; two events that defined American culture more than almost anything else. Most eloquently states, “Being both Americans *and* creators of mainstream American popular culture gave Jews a particular visibility that landed them in an assimilatory paradox,”<sup>16</sup> that paradox being their disproportionate influence on American culture before they had completely assimilated. Despite his position as an immigrant, Berlin would embrace this paradox and use his position on Broadway to influence his culture’s direction.

Around the same time as the nation had its depression, however, Berlin also slowed his progress. After this dry spell, as the twenties gave way to the thirties, Berlin surged again, as vitally as if he was the new rising star in America. To address the depression he composed a new show called *Face the Music* with book writer Moss Hart. Since the Gershwins’ *Of Thee I Sing*, satire was the genre du jour, and Berlin, as always, knew what would sell. The show portrayed

the former high society waiting out the storm and Berlin wrote what Furia calls “a less bitter anthem (of the depression) than ‘Brother Can You Spare A Dime?’ called ‘Let’s Have Another Cup O’ Coffee.’”<sup>17</sup> Once again Berlin would write the lyrics (and music) to help America articulate, or satirize, their collective emotions: “Mister Herbert Hoover/Says that now’s the time to buy,/So let’s have another cup of coffee/And let’s have another piece o pie!”<sup>18</sup> Another song that did not achieve great fame but did satire public sentiment quite well was “Two Cheers Instead of Three,” in which the characters laud thriftiness: “It’s smart to be thrifty/When times are so bad./ Let’s be patriotic,/But let’s not go mad;/We must cheer the colors we prize,/But here’s what I strongly advise:/We’ll just have two cheers/Instead of three/ . . . Why give them three cheers/When two will more than do?”<sup>19</sup> Always knowing just what would please his audience, Berlin brought laughter and smiles to a depressed public.

His next show demonstrated mastery over the non-songwriting aspects of theater. Being completely in control of his music and venue (and frankly his public), Berlin came up with an idea to make a show completely out of newspaper headlines. The idea intrigued critics and audiences and gave Berlin yet another platform for dazzling the world. This show, called *As Thousands Cheer*, demonstrates Berlin’s influences both on race and in the development of the Broadway show. As mentioned earlier, unity among a shows elements increasingly became the goal as Broadway advanced and through songs such as “Man Bites Dog,” “Heat Wave,” and “The Funnies,” the headline concept gave the otherwise piecemeal show a sense of cohesiveness.<sup>20</sup> While Berlin did participate in the annual Follies-like revues of the day, he also sought new frontiers in entertainment and was a vital part of Broadway’s transformation in the 1920s and 1930s.

Arguably more historical value exists in *As Thousands Cheer* because of its ability to demonstrate Berlin's outlook on race and thus his influence on the nation's race dialogue. As a young writer and performer, Berlin took part in the common practice of blackface, a trend in which performers painted their faces with burnt cork to appear as African Americans. The makeup was hardly a disguise; it was more of an emphasis on stereotypical appearances and literally "putting on a face" than a desire to be identified with black music and traditions. Because many vaudeville performers were Jews, and much of the music was ragtime or another black-inspired feel, Hamm suggests that blackface was a way of expressing one culture's woes through the voice of another.<sup>21</sup> During his vaudeville years Berlin often portrayed African Americans negatively in his "coon" songs, but this was not a unique case; all minorities received their share of mockery. An example for blacks is the use of Alexander as a name for the protagonist. Because this name was seen as intellectual and elevated, audiences would have found it funny for a black man (implied: a man without an education) to carry it. While this humor and the use of blackface would certainly be inappropriate today, these practices must be taken in the context of their time (this is not to excuse racist practices, rather to seek a deeper understanding of the context in which they existed).

Berlin occasionally showed even stronger signs of racism by claiming that popular song writers and composers are not "Negroes," they are "pure white blood."<sup>22</sup> It is possible that attacking a common victim like African Americans, and thus distancing himself from them, could expedite Berlin's adoption into "normal" American life. Bergreen elaborates saying immigrant composers "hastened to proclaim themselves as Americans rather than Jews, Russians, or Lithuanians . . . (Their music) was a route to the American mainstream."<sup>23</sup> Most contributes that Jews "shared a connection (with blacks) in pop culture – furthering jazz, ragtime,

swing, tap, but they also continued racist standards in musical comedy to achieve ‘white’ status themselves.”<sup>24</sup> This is a classic case of an enemy’s enemy being a friend; a mutual target brings parties together.

As Berlin moved out of the vaudeville stage and away from ethnic novelty songs, his lyrics became less obscene (by modern standards) but his use of blackface continued through *Holiday Inn* with the number celebrating Abraham Lincoln. Hamm summarizes his evolution saying:

Protagonists who are unmistakably black largely disappear in the later songs, to be replaced by characters with no clear ethnicity, and stylistic elements drawn from or suggesting black music became more integrated into an increasingly generic musical language. Berlin was fashioning his own melting pot.<sup>25</sup>

This fashioning of the melting pot is exactly the practice that this paper emphasizes; while integrating into American culture, Berlin sculpted that world to his liking. Contrary to what the previous examples may suggest, Berlin did take two specifically progressive actions that deserve a mention in this country’s racial history.

For his show, *As Thousands Cheer*, Berlin needed the African-American sensation Ethel Waters. Showing his respect for black music, he wrote two specific songs that stand out as deliberate outlets for a prominent black performer. The first song, “Harlem On My Mind” tells of a black girl who has become wealthy but is still “so blue.”<sup>26</sup> Rather than dancing frantically with wide eyes and an unrealistically big smile as an actor in blackface may have done, Berlin’s lyrics portray a woman feeling nostalgic about her roots; a theme, incidentally, that Berlin recycled time and time again. The feeling of longing for home, friends, and family is one that any audience member of any race could understand. The other song, “Supper Time” was “a song, musically and lyrically, more innovative than anything the Broadway stage had yet seen.”<sup>27</sup> Under a headline reading “Unknown Negro Lynched by Frenzied Mob,” Waters mourns the loss of her husband as she tries unsuccessfully to complete her routine task of preparing supper.

Coming from the old guard, Berlin often wrote songs for specific individuals; he knew Waters could “put this over” like no other performer. In this song Berlin went beyond merely portraying an emotion with which anybody could identify, but pushed social criticism by exposing the black person’s perspective on racial issues such as lynching. Waters could sing an angry rave about white murderers, but instead she chants a hypnotizing lament that biographer Phillip Furia believes anticipated George Gershwin’s “Summertime” in *Porgy and Bess*.<sup>28</sup> In Berlin’s daughter’s memoir, Mary Ellin Barrett tells a story of the other lead actors in *As Thousands Cheer* refusing to bow with Waters because of her race. Berlin accepted their difference of opinion but suggested that if that was the case then nobody needed to bow. With that lighthearted threat, all of the performers agreed to bow together. Barrett recalls saying as a child that Waters’s colleagues must have been jealous because she was the best.<sup>29</sup> The selection of these difficult topics, the powerful lyrics and music, and his steadfast attitude toward equality for the performers indicate that the racial status quo in his country did not sit well with Berlin, and he had the power and the passion to change things.

A few years after *As Thousands Cheer* Berlin anticipated social change in America in his World War II show *This Is the Army*. Just as he had done in the First World War with *Yip! Yip! Yaphank!*, Berlin wrote a full musical revue to be staged by soldiers. After its success in America Berlin traveled the world to the Pacific and Atlantic fronts. Between the Broadway run, the national tour, and the tour to bases around the world, approximately 2.5 million people saw *This Is the Army*.<sup>30</sup> Racially the show stood out because it employed the only uniformed company in the Army where blacks could live and serve (through performing) with their fellow soldiers. Although Bergreen is criticized for occasionally dramatizing Berlin’s life, his assertion that Berlin “believed in the armed forces as the great leveler in American society” is well supported,

if slightly dramatic.<sup>31</sup> The author continues to say that Berlin had seen World War I “reduce barriers separating Jewish, German, Irish, and Italian ethnic groups in the United States (but blacks had been excluded from this quiet revolution.”<sup>32</sup> It is certainly not farfetched to assume that an immigrant from the eclectic city of New York who constantly worked with African Americans would notice injustice and try to use circumstance (World War II) as a way to bring one more demographic into the melting pot.

Unfortunately, as the seemingly contradictory examples over his life demonstrate, Berlin’s progressivism was not completely synchronized with his ideas for the show. Initially he wished to include a substantial minstrel portion but the director was able to convince him that logistically the men could not remove the blackface quickly enough (after attempts to dissuade him on counts of the genre being outdated failed).<sup>33</sup> His insistence on integrating the unit combined with his desire to include an offensive minstrel section demonstrate that while he perceived the injustices of the status quo, he may not have recognized that he was, at times, party to the gross misrepresentation of African-Americans. Thus, while Berlin’s record on race is mixed, it is fairly clear that he respected black music and performers and leaned slightly on the progressive side of the aisle. Because of his profile, however, his modest actions achieved dramatic results and stood out as early signs of social criticism.

As mentioned above, early homegrown American theater (as opposed to imported theater in America) consisted of vaudeville and variety shows in which songs and acts caricatured different ethnicities. The discussions and theories of these practices abound, but it seems widely accepted that “to be noticed, even if through the cruel lens of parody, meant to be accepted.” Hamm proposes a similar idea that a bond is formed in the moment of shared laughter because everyone can have a target, even occasionally they must be “it.”<sup>34</sup> As anti-Semitism increased and the

mocked ethnicities began to object, Jewish characters disappeared from songs and shows,<sup>35</sup> but their characteristics remained, veiled in other personas. Andrea Most explains that one characteristic of the Jew is supporting natural love in situations where the lovers are from different circles. She believes that *Annie Get Your Gun* is an immigrant story in which Sitting Bull is the assimilated Native who supports love (Jewish character hidden inside an ethnicity which is still acceptably caricatured), and Annie must be assimilated into high society and show business.<sup>36</sup> The practice of veiling “Jewish” characteristics inside other characters – which Berlin, along with Rodgers and Hammerstein helped invent – follows the same phenomenon that occurs in Berlin’s life: although the Jew will always still be there, it is hidden in the primary identity, the American. Once *Annie Get Your Gun* is viewed as an assimilatory musical, similarities to Berlin’s life exude, the most important being the fact that in America, Berlin and Annie both learn that they can achieve incredible wealth, fame, and stature by “Doin’ What Comes Naturally,” participating in show business. His hit song then, “There’s No Business like Show Business” is not only an anthem for his profession,<sup>37</sup> but for his life; he is excited by the opportunities that exist in American theater.

Another shining example of Berlin influencing culture even as he becomes a member was his approach to the Buffalo Bill musical. After so much success in his own shows and songs, Berlin accepted the offer to write for *Annie Get Your Gun* hesitantly. He did not want to write “hillbilly” songs and he and book writer Dorothy Fields were skeptical about the new “integrated musical” concept that *Oklahoma!* had recently made so popular:

*Annie Get Your Gun* can be seen as (Berlin’s) and Dorothy Fields's response to the new integrated musical theater that had won over theater critics. But Fields and Berlin defiantly resisted the impulse to integrate song and story too closely. Instead, they strengthened both elements, allowing story and songs to work with and against one another, without ever conflating the two. While most of Berlin's songs have an obvious connection to the plot of



the play, they also work as 'hits' which could easily be lifted out of the show and performed on their own.<sup>38</sup>

Setting a record for independent hits from a Broadway show, *Annie Get Your Gun* contained nine songs that achieved success as isolated pieces of music. To this day few shows, if any, can claim as many successful singles. Berlin's craftsmanship allowed him to write an integrated musical with vague enough lyrics that the songs could succeed independently without making the show appear to be a revue.<sup>39</sup>

The final two shows that exemplify Berlin as a creator of American culture and as a newcomer to the culture are his productions for each world war. The mere fact that he felt compelled to stage these shows, let alone donate all proceeds shows a genuine, personal desire to be identified with other Americans. Once enlisted, and thus identified as an American, Berlin proceeded to write two shows strictly about patriotism. Around the same time as *Yip! Yip! Yaphank!*, Berlin wrote "Let's All Be Americans Now," a call to all Americans, especially the newcomers like him to "fall in line."<sup>40</sup> His composition, "I Can Always Find A Little Sunshine in the YMCA," for this show, also foreshadowed the arrival of "White Christmas," both of which suggested he could partake in iconic Christian activities despite his ancestry. By laying claim to Christian holidays and the Young Men's Christian Association, Berlin suggested they were primarily American, not religious symbols. Of course, his most famous song from the show was "Oh! How I Hate To Get Up In the Morning," which described the feelings of so many soldiers faced with reveille in the mornings. Countless songwriters could construct lyrics about heroism, enemies, or patriotism, but Berlin captured a specific sentiment and spoke for the nation.

A generation later, Berlin returned to the country's megaphone and wrote music and lyrics to speak for the masses. Although it was not one of the lasting singles from the show, Berlin's song "American Eagles" is unapologetically patriotic:

“Eagles/American Eagles-/America sings/Of her wings/In the sky./Eagles,/American Eagles-/America’s strong/Just as long/As they fly./ More bombers to attack with,/More bombers till the skies are black with,/Eagles,/American Eagles-/America sings/Of her kings/In the sky.”<sup>41</sup>

Another study could demonstrate the numerous ways in which Berlin influenced the actual sound of American music (the aural aspect, as opposed to the lyrics and content), but one example fits well here. Musically, “This Is the Army, Mister Jones” represents sounds that listeners associate with America and the military. The melody between the first and third scale degrees leaping on the word “army,” and then the third and fifth scale degrees in the second line on a march-like rhythm mimics a bugle call, which is actually present in the accompaniment. Another major example of Berlin’s musical influence would be his promotion of rag rhythms most notably in “Puttin’ On the Ritz.”

For his contribution to American morale during the troubling Second World War, General Marshall presented Berlin with the Congressional Medal of Honor. While Berlin had been writing the sentiments of America in his songs for almost fifty years, his lyrics of patriotism and nostalgia as well as his application of various American musical styles were what brought him the event that Bergreen claims finally completed his assimilation.<sup>42</sup> Most agrees saying that World War II – the songs and the resulting award – represented the “arrival” of Berlin the assimilated American.<sup>43</sup> Interestingly, a mere few weeks later, Rodgers and Hammerstein approached Berlin with the offer to write a distinctly American musical, *Annie Get Your Gun*.<sup>44</sup>

The method, subject, and songs of Berlin’s Broadway career foreshadowed major Broadway movements and articulated perfectly the sentiments of the nation. After playing a major role in the era of Ziegfeldian revues, he participated with Kern, Rodgers, and Hammerstein in the shift to integrated musicals. In addition to his American themed shows including *Miss Liberty* in which he set Emma Lazarus’s famous “tired, poor, huddle masses”

poem inscribed at the Statue of Liberty to music, Berlin helped speak the thoughts Americans wanted to hear in *Yip! Yip! Yaphank!* and *This Is the Army*.<sup>45</sup> Berlin presumably would have felt a special connection to *Miss Liberty* because he was among the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free” whose first image of America was the impressive statue recently dedicated to the United States. Between his racial stirrings in *As Thousands Cheer* and *This Is The Army*, his expression of life after the Crash in “Let’s Have Another Cup O’ Coffee,” and his early integrated musical, *Annie Get Your Gun*, Berlin again stood at the helm of American culture, creating it even as he moved into it.

### **Berlin as Songwriter**

It would be nearly impossible to walk the streets of any town in the United States and find a single person that did not know a song by Irving Berlin. They may not know who Berlin is, but his lyrics and music have become icons of American culture. They have spoken for and to people who first heard them in dance halls and on the radio, and several have maintained their place as timeless classics. Every December radios stream “White Christmas” multiple times per day; at countless events across the country “God Bless America” is sung with or takes the place of the national anthem; and “Blue Skies” has become the standard American song for leaders throughout the varied terrain of musical genres to remake. Songs that have not maintained popularity over the years are no less important. When Berlin’s songs hit the stage, radio, or television many rose instantly to the top of the charts and became anthems of the day. In 1909 Berlin wrote “My Wife’s Gone To The Country” with Ted Snyder which sold three hundred thousand copies of sheet music and became “the best-known song in America.”<sup>46</sup> Even though this song is not a hit today, it was surely a part of that generation’s culture. Berlin claims that this song’s success was attributable to the catch-word “Hurrah.”<sup>47</sup> This catch-word concept also

worked well in “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” with the echoed invitation to “Come on and hear!” From the dance craze before the First World War up until Elvis Presley and rock and roll finally trumped him, Berlin “endured half a century of changes in musical fashion and wrote outstanding songs in every prevailing idiom.”<sup>48</sup> With every new song that spoke for America, Berlin immersed himself deeper and deeper into the American culture that he helped create.

Perhaps one of the most fascinating aspects of Berlin’s career, besides his inability to read or write music (a fact that is challenged by his daughter’s memoir), was that he did not stay within one genre. Popular music historian Alec Wilder wrote that he could not find any stylistic common denominators in Berlin’s output.<sup>49</sup> Jody Rosen, author of *White Christmas: The Making of an American Song*, writes “He strove to write ‘in the simplest way . . . as simple as writing a telegram.’ In so doing, he filled the American songbook with pop standards that sound as inevitable as folk songs.”<sup>50</sup> This word, “inevitable,” is the clearest mark of a well-written song. Sometimes music and lyrics struggle to fit each other, but in Berlin’s hits such as “White Christmas,” and “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” the words sound as if they are the only possible syllables that could accompany the given music. For example, if someone heard the chromatic melody that opens “White Christmas” without hearing the words, they would likely fill the void in their heads with “I’m dream-in of a white Christ-mas” (assuming they have heard this tune as much as most of us have). In a sense, he grew into this part of American culture with the rest of America because they had to wait for him, the Jewish immigrant, to write it.

In almost every decade of Berlin’s first sixty years in the music business he wrote at least one song that swept the nation. For this argument, however, three songs will be discussed as particularly poignant examples of Berlin influencing American culture, and moving deeper and deeper out of his Baline past and into his Berlin future. The first song, “Everybody’s Doing It

Now,” is more a symbol of his overwhelming influence on the dance craze of the 1910s than an individual hit. Within a decade of World War I, white Americans began to subscribe in droves to the more physical dance steps of black Americans. Pushing out the proper Victorian steps of their parents, young adults in their teens and twenties danced much closer together and employed suggestive steps like the “dip” that has become a standard move in a dance but was once extremely shocking to older audiences. Capturing the craze at its nascence, Berlin wrote “Everybody’s Doin’ It Now:”

Honey, honey can’t you hear funny, funny music, dear?/Can’t you see them all, swaying up the hall?/Everybody’s doin’ it, doin’ it, doin’ it./See that ragtime couple over there,/Watch them throw their shoulders in the air,/Snap their fingers, honey, I declare,/It’s a bear, it’s a bear! There!/Everybody’s doin’ it now!<sup>51</sup>

As in “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” Berlin employed the echo of “doin’ it” and its corresponding music so that the song would have a catch phrase. The selection of “doin’ it,” like the choice of “come on and hear!” was not arbitrary. It’s ambiguous meaning allowed the listener to decide what “it” was – whether it be the dance, or something more rebellious. Also, as will be the case with each example here, Berlin allows the listener to sing along and be their own narrator by setting the lyrics in first person. His words are also persuasive, depicting the dancers “throw(ing) their shoulders” and “snap(ing) their fingers.” The use of the negative (“can’t” instead of “can”) suggests that any sane person would “hear the funny music” and “see” the dancers; asking in the negative (can’t you hear) persuades more than asks. While the lyrics coerce the listener, the music also seduces the soon-to-be dancer with the syncopated rhythm and quick pace that was characteristic of ragtime era songs. To clarify, ragtime in Berlin’s sense is not to be confused with our historical use of the term ragtime for such artists as Scott Joplin. Charles Hamm likens ragtime around 1910 to “rock” in the 1960s and 1970s – it was a broad term for the popular music of the day.<sup>52</sup> This distinction is important for Hamm because he advocates for the historian

to pay close attention to contemporary audience reception, rather than how the song sounds today. Consequently, it is unwise to evaluate a song's genre (or another characteristic) through the lens of history – a contemporary listener of “Everybody's Doin' It Now” has not lived through the jazz age and does not know what is to come; we as historians have a skewed perspective due to our ability to compare it to songs that were not yet written.

His influence over the dance craze continued in 1914 when he opened *Watch Your Step* with light-footed dance heavyweights Irene and Vernon Castle. In the article “Everybody's Doin' It: The Pre-World War I Dance Craze, the Castles, and the Modern American Girl” Lewis Erenberg describes the immense impact that the Castles had on the American girl within high society and without. Calling them the “premiere ballroom and cabaret exhibition dancers of their day,” Erenberg lauds their contribution “to a new female identity – one which valued experimentation with dances and fashions, and a single standard of sexual conduct.”<sup>53</sup> Without minimizing the Castles' influence in American culture, it is imperative to credit Berlin with writing a number of songs to which they danced and for pushing the entertainment industry in that direction. The syncopated rhythms that he borrowed from black America and the catchy lyrics depicting the joy of dancing empowered the Castles, and all those Americans who idolized them, to dance. Berlin's brilliance as a businessman with *Watch Your Step* is noted above, but it was not all good business that made it successful; it was a product that could sell itself. Early in his life Berlin made a career out of “plugging” songs – singing new works in stores and on the streets to increase sales of sheet music. He later expressed that “plugging gives a quick verdict on a song and advertises it; but no matter what you do, you can't make a success out of a bad song . . . plugging has its big value in making a success out of a good song.”<sup>54</sup> Therefore, even the best business could not have moved *Watch Your Step* without Berlin's skill in music and

lyrics. His songs “Show Us How To Do The Fox-Trot,” “The Syncopated Walk,” “Look At Em Doin’ It,” “Watch Your Step”, and “Ragtime Opera Medley” where Berlin “ragged” famous opera melodies, gave America an opportunity to watch their favorite dancers move, and then dance themselves to the very same songs. The shift from the Victorian songs and dances of propriety to the skipping and suggestive music of Berlin’s early years defined American culture before and between the two World Wars. According to Furia, producer Charles Dillingham’s invitation to Berlin to write *Watch Your Step* represented “the first time Tin Pan Alley got into the legitimate theater” and that Dillingham and Berlin were determined to “infuse modern American musical styles into the stuffy world of operetta.”<sup>55</sup>

After writing many of America’s wartime songs, Berlin returned to dance music, this time taking on the vague term “jazz.” In “Everybody Step: Irving Berlin, Jazz, and Broadway in the 1920s,” Jeffrey Magee notes that jazz then was nothing like jazz today with the blue notes between natural and flat third scale degree, slides, growls, grunts, and plunger wahs; Berlin’s jazz was such solely because it contrasted with classical music and it got people dancing.<sup>56</sup> Also, much as in the ragtime era, Berlin’s music was called jazz by the proper upper echelons because it inspired dancing, drinking, and other “sins” like other jazz music did.<sup>57</sup> After “Everybody Step” came out in his *Music Box Revues of 1921*, Berlin was lauded for creating a “paradigm for the new style,” a combination of blues and ragtime.<sup>58</sup>

When observing Berlin’s early songs, one cannot help but notice the plethora of titles including any of the words dance, step, or rag. Outside of vaudeville (and frankly, even within vaudeville with his ethnic rag tunes), dance music is the genre that gave Berlin his prominence in American music. While he did read the public well by choosing to write dance songs at a time when the young public wanted a rebellion, his business skills, as he knew, could not alone have

plugged bad songs. “Everybody’s Doin’ It Now,” “Everybody Step,” and “The Syncopated Walk” gave everyone from the Castle duo to the high society to the lower class immigrants an opportunity to discard the woes of every day and “do what came natur’lly.” And just as his music and lyrics allowed millions of Americans (not excluding immigrant Americans) to practice their culture, they also brought Berlin into his place as an American icon – the milestones of his assimilation were their entertainment.

Between Berlin’s reigns as king of ragtime and jazz, he took the public musically through the First World War. Culturally he would continue to assimilate, and when he was drafted into the war and summoned to Camp Upton, he fulfilled his American duty the best way he knew how, by writing music. There is not much more one can do to enter a culture than to participate in its military endeavors, and Berlin’s contribution was no exception. In both wars Berlin joined his fellow Americans, further entrenching him in the melting pot culture of America, and writing the music that would inspire the public and articulate their emotions.

In addition to his participation in both wars, one song serves as a link between the two. To close his war show, *Yip! Yip! Yaphank!*, Berlin wrote “God Bless America” but found it “a little bit too patriotic, and . . . a little too obvious for the soldiers to sing.”<sup>59</sup> Had Berlin published the song then, it may not have been as successful. After the surplus of songs for and against entrance into the war, including two opposing Berlin tunes “Stay Down Here Where You Belong” and “For Your Country and My Country,” “God Bless America” would have just been one more among many.<sup>60</sup> About twenty years after Berlin wrote the song, however, he reworked it, changing the message slightly, and the moment was right. Originally, the lyrics made it very specifically a song about war: “God Bless America, land that I love,/Stand Beside her/and guide her/To the right with a light from above./Make her victorious on land and foam,/ God Bless



America, my home sweet home.”<sup>61</sup> In the final version, the middle lines were changed to “Through the night with a light from above./From the mountains, to the prairies, To the oceans white with foam.” The change was made because Berlin wanted a prideful song about peace rather than a war song. According to Kathleen Smith, author of *God Bless America: Tin Pan Alley Goes To War*, Berlin wrote the lyrics after a 1938 trip where he saw “the shadows of fascism lengthening across Europe.”<sup>62</sup>

Berlin’s lyrics and music in “God Bless America” are indisputably a testament to his ability to connect with the American spirit. The small nuance, however, in his changing the song from a war song to a peace song is the true indicator of his connectedness to America.

Bergreen’s summary of Berlin’s motivation reveals a personal desire to promote peace:

Many Americans felt as Berlin did; almost no one wanted to go to war. To express this widely shared aspiration, the songwriter . . . began giving thought to the tricky task of composing a ‘peace song’ rather than a war song. ‘I’d like to write a peace song,’ he told a visiting journalist, ‘but it’s hard to do, because you have trouble dramatizing peace. Easy to dramatize war. . . . Yet music is so important. It changes thinking, it influences everybody, whether they know it or not.’ . . . Never before had he contemplated writing a song to change or to mold public opinion, rather than articulating it.<sup>63</sup>

Many other writers stuck to dramatizing war, but Berlin revived a masterpiece that allowed patriotism to dramatize itself. Furia exclaims that “‘God Bless America’ was a simple but superbly crafted work that captured both its own historical moment as well as an enduring universal sentiment.”<sup>64</sup> By addressing the timeless desire for peace rather than the temporary pursuit of victory, Berlin set up his song to succeed as a national symbol, rather than a blurb in the history books.

Using God’s blessing for dramatic effect, as opposed to his previous attempts “Thanks America” and “Let’s Talk about Liberty,” allows the song to be met with the same passion with which a person sings a prayer. Countless recordings, especially the original Kate Smith version,

have the lyrics sung in a way that no other popular song is sung, like something from a holy space rather than the radio or a concert hall. Further, the longer tones, especially on “God,” bring an intensity to the song that notes with a shorter duration cannot. Kathleen Smith points out that the song succeeds musically, emotionally, and lyrically by allowing the listener to pick which feature of the country to appreciate (mountains, prairies, foamy oceans).<sup>65</sup> Her other complementary points about the song are the personification of the United States as “her” giving it a maternal image, or one that needs protection, and its cleverly contradictory traits. It is personal and impersonal being the “land that I love” but also such a massive icon, and it can be march-like or reverent, sometimes achieving both qualities simultaneously.<sup>66</sup> Also, like other major Berlin hits, “God Bless America” is relatable in part because it is in the first person. Without “my home sweet home” the lyrics may not connect so closely with each listener and performer.

The song was premiered by Kate Smith on her weekly radio show in 1938 and it was an immediate success. Once again Berlin had perfectly estimated public opinion. It became such an icon of the war that when Kate Smith did one show without the song, three weeks after its premiere, listeners protested prompting the song’s return to a permanent position as Smith’s finale in every show until the end of the war.<sup>67</sup> Now Berlin’s song is one of the unofficial national anthems of his adopted country, a prominence that it won quickly after its release. Some particularly anti-immigrant Americans protested that any product of a foreign-born person, no matter how popular, should not become a national symbol. Others claimed that his rags to riches story of the opportunities available in America recommended him to be the author of the country’s anthem. Whether its status is unanimously supported or not, “God Bless America” is the quintessential embodiment of the American dream; it is the music and lyrics of each person’s

connection to his or her home written by a man who understands the blessings of the United States first hand.

The final example of Berlin's simultaneous creation or articulation of American culture and his movement into that culture combines each of the three sections above: Berlin the businessman, Berlin the showman, and Berlin the songwriter. From the very beginning of his career, Berlin wrote songs that would sell rather than songs that expressed his own emotions. In other words, rather than emotions, they express his social observations of human behavior. Perhaps his greatest foresight into the market was the public's interest in Christmas. The songwriter himself had mixed emotions about the holiday. During his childhood in the Lower East Side, he would sneak over to his neighbor's house to eat non-kosher Christmas foods.<sup>68</sup> Remembering their tree that "seemed to tower to Heaven," this experience was "among the best of his early memories."<sup>69</sup> After leaving home and beginning to write, Berlin attempted an early Christmas song called "Christmas Time Seems Years and Years Away." Bergreen asserts that the assimilation process had already started: "Unlike Izzy Baline, who was irrevocably rooted in the Lower East Side, Irving Berlin had no particular identity; he could portray . . . whatever he decided the market demanded."<sup>70</sup> While the market did not demand this particular song, the Christmas theme would return in one of the best-selling songs in American music history.

Not all of his Christmas memories were positive though. On Christmas Day, 1924 Berlin played "Remember" for Max Winslow, who was not impressed. Berlin would later say, "That Christmas was the worst one I ever spent in my life. Every time I felt worried or troubled I remembered that day and felt worse."<sup>71</sup> The simple fact that someone of Jewish descent would refer to Christmas as an annual event demonstrates his assimilation into American culture. Perhaps a worse holiday season, however, was in 1928 when Berlin's four-week-old son, Irving

Berlin, Jr., died on Christmas day. In his daughter's memoir, Mary Ellin Barrett recalls that her parents would visit the grave every Christmas Eve, but then Christmas Day was "the most spectacular holiday of the year" in the Berlin family.<sup>72</sup> Later claiming that the parents only celebrated for their daughters' sake, Barrett says both parents actually hated Christmas.

Almost a decade after his son's death, Berlin had to be in Los Angeles for the filming of *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, where he wrote his homesickness into his greatest song, "White Christmas."<sup>73</sup> Originally the song portrayed his perspective more specifically. The lyrics for the virtually unknown verse are: "The sun is shining,/The grass is green,/The orange and palm trees sway./ There's never been such a day/in Beverly Hills, L.A./But it's December the twenty-fourth,/And I am longing to be up north."<sup>74</sup> Even at its premiere in *Holiday Inn*, however, the verse was cut. Without the California-specific verse more listeners could connect with the nostalgia and the longing for a white Christmas. Also, the verse would not have fit in the final version of the film. Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of this song is its depiction of Berlin's ideal Christmas and the way Berlin empowers all listeners to celebrate Christmas. As a cultural Jew, Berlin's image of Christmas consisted of the symbols: foods, snow, Christmas tree, presents, and a generally happy spirit. What he neglected in his celebration and in his song, were the religious aspects of Christmas. On this and on other points about the song, Phillip Furia is particularly eloquent:

"White Christmas" sidesteps all religious associations, but where "Easter Parade" converted the religious holiday into a communal urban festival, "White Christmas" evokes the associations of home, family, and landscape that are as endemic to Christmas as the religious celebration, but makes them all the more poignant by having them voiced by a singer who cannot share but only recall them. If Berlin's melancholy Russian heritage ever came to bear on the perfect subject, it was in this secular carol of nostalgic loneliness.<sup>75</sup>

His use of “Jewish” musical characteristics such as chromaticism in the first words and melancholy leaps on “glisten,” “listen,” and “Christmases” give the song a musical tear that even non-Christians can appreciate. To justify his contribution to the Christian holiday, Berlin insisted that Christmas was an American holiday, and he was a self-identified “professional patriot;” thus it did not matter that he was Jewish.<sup>76</sup> He also sidestepped religious identification for “Easter Parade” in *As Thousands Cheer*. The song ignores religious connotations and “evades” the celebration of the coming of spring.<sup>77</sup> Instead, Furia writes, “Berlin transforms this natural holiday of fecundity into an urban ritual of donning new clothes as a sign of rebirth.”<sup>78</sup> By celebrating a holiday but redirecting the excitement toward secular symbols, Berlin concurrently demonstrated his movement into American culture even as he spoke for those already American.

While the song serves today as one of the many Christmas tunes heard between Thanksgiving and New Years, it was originally made popular as a war song. Although some wanted an upbeat tune that touts American strength and prosperity, Berlin knew that the soldier wanted “something sentimental about home and love.” “The soldier,” Berlin said, “prefers this more to the martial tunes of the last war.”<sup>79</sup> In the same book that discusses “God Bless America,” Smith calls “White Christmas” a sentimental war song; one similar to “When The Lights Go On Again” in that it anticipates a return to normalcy.<sup>80</sup> She says that “White Christmas” sets up a picture of the holiday “that cannot be destroyed by war.”<sup>81</sup> In both of his major war songs Berlin painted a picture rather than simply expressing his – and the listener’s – feelings. This way the listener could relate to a time when they were able to see the beautiful mountains or hear the sleigh bells in December. These are the things that Berlin, the newly-arrived American loved about America.

As mentioned above, the song was not a “Christmas song” as audiences know it today. In fact, there was no genre of popular American Christmas music until Berlin proved that there was demand for it. Initially the song did not catch on; the expected hit from *Holiday Inn* was “Be Careful, It’s My Heart.” Across the oceans, where none of Berlin’s or Hollywood’s plugging could have much effect, soldiers latched on to the song as if it matched their thoughts exactly. By November the song spiked in popularity and spent a precedent-breaking ten weeks in the number one spot on the Hit Parade.<sup>82</sup> After it served its purpose as the anthem of GI nostalgia, it became the epitome of a timeless hit. For over fifty years Bing Crosby’s recording was the best-selling record in history, and of the twenty years after its release, “White Christmas” spent nineteen on the Hit Parade chart. Equally impressive is the statistic that out of eighty six weeks on the chart, thirty-eight stood as number one. In all, global sales of different “White Christmas” recordings have reached over 125 million copies.<sup>83</sup> More than any other songwriter, Irving Berlin gave American audiences the sound of Christmas.

The overwhelming enthusiasm with which the American public met the song did not go unnoticed by other songwriters. Even more than with dance music or ethnic novelty pieces, Berlin’s groundbreaking hit sent American songwriters scrambling to flood the market with Christmas songs. Because many songwriters of the time were Jewish, plenty of the songs celebrating Christmas are written by Jews. As such, if one observes the lyrics, they often follow Berlin’s lead in depicting secular symbols of Christmas. Every year since 2006, Nate Bloom has published a column of the top twenty five Christmas songs of the year. He then examines which of them are written by Jewish songwriters. In 2008, the songs that top the list include “Let It Snow, Let It Snow, Let It Snow,” written just a few years after “White Christmas” by Sammy Cahn and Jules Styne, both Jews; “The Christmas Song,” written the same year by Mel Tormé

and Bob Wells; and “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree,” and “Holly Jolly Christmas,” all written Johnny Marks, a Jewish composer who may have been inspired by “White Christmas” during his time serving in World War II.<sup>84</sup> After Berlin set the metaphorical snowball rolling in the American public, he initiated an entire sub-genre of music that dominates radio stations for over a month each year to this day. His impact here is comparable to the Beatles in rock and roll and very little else. While Bergreen calls “White Christmas” the limit of “musical assimilation” for Berlin,<sup>85</sup> it is clear that Berlin had reached an entirely new level. Not only had he assimilated, Berlin had also reached the pinnacle of his career and had arguably contributed more in this half century to the contemporary and lasting culture of American life than any other American, “native” or immigrant.

In his teens, twenties, and thirties Berlin wrote dance music to start one of the most clearly identifiable American trends in the twentieth century: the dance craze, including both ragtime of the 1910s and the jazz age of the 1920s. At the outbreak of World War II, around his fiftieth birthday, Berlin wrote another culture-guiding hit, “God Bless America.” About four years later he released what he called the greatest song he wrote, and the greatest song anybody ever wrote. Personal taste for the song aside, the numbers for “White Christmas” corroborate this assertion. Besides these groundbreaking hits that will forever be identified with social American history, Berlin wrote countless other songs to which the public flocked. Jody Rosen’s account of Jews in popular entertainment summarizes the point perfectly:

Much of twentieth-century pop culture is a kind of Yankee Doodle Yiddishkeit: All-Americanism as imagined by Lower East Siders, intoxicated by showbiz and its fast track out of the ghetto. “White Christmas” . . . is a milestone of Jewish acculturation matched perhaps only by another Berlin magnum opus, “God Bless America”: a symbol of the extraordinary way that the Jews . . . turned themselves into Americans – and remade American pop culture in their own image.<sup>86</sup>

More than his entrepreneurial knack or his showmanship on Broadway, Berlin's songwriting had a timeless effect on American culture, and in turn irreversibly effected his and our cultural identities as Americans.

When Berlin was young, he sang in the synagogue choir, he went to Yiddish theater whenever he could afford it,<sup>87</sup> and yet he wanted to be a cartoonist.<sup>88</sup> Each of these aspects of his life showed a proclivity for his later profession. He started out as a singing waiter, he became one of the foremost contributors to American musical theater, and although he did not become a cartoonist – an ambition that Furia says demonstrated his early Americanization – he contributed overwhelming numbers of American songs to an eager public. As a businessman Berlin kept his own song's rights in his own publishing company, and built his own theater. He also approached songwriting as an entrepreneur would, seeking out themes and subjects that people would enjoy. His success in business led his daughter to write:

From tenement to penthouse: that was what could happen in this country if you were lucky; if you had a 'little knack,' as (Berlin) referred to his talent, and knew how to use it. Whatever else was going on in the world around us in the winter of 1932, at 130 East End Avenue, the American Dream persisted.<sup>89</sup>

This "American Dream," made up of opportunity and the pursuit of happiness, was exactly what Berlin lived and helped promote. As a showman he collaborated on numerous shows and films that challenged a racist status quo and heavily influenced the dance craze, the frivolous twenties, and the depression-era satire. In his unfathomable canon of songs he gave Americans the music and lyrics to match their feelings including laughter, rebellion, patriotism, loneliness, or nostalgia.

All of these accomplishments contributed to the various media of American culture. Author Kenneth Aaron Kanter says, "Berlin represents the essence of the Jewish contribution to the song industry. An immigrant, he revolutionized popular music and in the process became as



American as the songs he wrote.”<sup>90</sup> Even before his later accolades such as *Annie Get Your Gun* and “White Christmas,” and even “God Bless America,” Berlin was called the “Songwriter for the American Nation” by the *Washington Post* in 1934; an immigrant-turned-American was named the singular songwriter for his new nation.<sup>91</sup> According to Furia, in the year of Berlin’s seventieth birthday he did not write a single song; this was the first time in over fifty years that Berlin went one year without publishing; but that would not stop America from hearing his music. His climb from poverty to wealth, his shaping of American musical theater, and his anthems of dance, patriotism, and nostalgia are permanent marks of his assimilation and America’s own journey into its current self.

Appendix I – Irving Berlin’s “Nine Rules for Writing Popular Songs”

From Laurence Bergreen, *As Thousands Cheer: The Life of Irving Berlin*.

1. The melody should be within the range of most singers.
2. The title should be attention-getting and, in addition, repeated within the body of the song.
3. The song should be “sexless:” able to be sung by men and women.
4. The song requires “heart interest.”
5. And at the same time, it should be “original in idea, words, and music.”
6. “Stick to nature . . . Not nature in a visionary, abstract way, but nature as demonstrated in homely, concrete, everyday manifestations.”
7. Sprinkle the lyrics with “open vowels” so that it will be euphonious.
8. Make the song as simple as possible.
9. “The song writer must look upon his work as a business, that is, to make a success of it, he must work and *work*, and then WORK.”

For original list see *American Magazine*, “nine rules for writing,” December, 1920.

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- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.
- <sup>6</sup> Hamm, Charles. *Irving Berlin : Songs from the Melting Pot : The Formative Years, 1907-1914*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, 197.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
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- <sup>10</sup> Furia, Philip, and Graham Wood. *Irving Berlin : A Life in Song*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1998, 38.
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- <sup>13</sup> Furia, 78.
- <sup>14</sup> Bergreen, 187.
- <sup>15</sup> Most, Andrea. *Making Americans : Jews and the Broadway Musical*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004, 18.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.
- <sup>17</sup> Furia, 150.
- <sup>18</sup> Berlin, Irving, Robert Kimball, and Linda Emmet. *The Complete Lyrics of Irving Berlin*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 2000, 274
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.
- <sup>20</sup> Bergreen, 313.
- <sup>21</sup> Hamm, 69.
- <sup>22</sup> Bergreen, 121.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> Most, 26.
- <sup>25</sup> Hamm, 100.
- <sup>26</sup> Berlin, 288.
- <sup>27</sup> Furia, 55.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.
- <sup>29</sup> Barrett, 120-21.
- <sup>30</sup> Bergreen, 440.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 396.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 397.
- <sup>34</sup> Hamm, 31.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.
- <sup>36</sup> Most, 140.
- <sup>37</sup> Furia, 229.
- <sup>38</sup> Most, 122.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.
- <sup>40</sup> Berlin, 153.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 362.
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- <sup>43</sup> Most, 139.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.
- <sup>45</sup> Berlin, 417.
- <sup>46</sup> Furia, 31.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.
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- <sup>53</sup> Erenburg, 155.
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- <sup>58</sup> Ibid., 703.
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- <sup>61</sup> Berlin, 322.
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- <sup>64</sup> Furia, 194.
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- <sup>67</sup> Ibid., 21.
- <sup>68</sup> Barrett, 125.
- <sup>69</sup> Furia, 9-10.
- <sup>70</sup> Bergreen, 46.
- <sup>71</sup> Furia, 114.
- <sup>72</sup> Barrett, 60.
- <sup>73</sup> Furia, 202.
- <sup>74</sup> Berlin, 351.
- <sup>75</sup> Furia, 204.
- <sup>76</sup> Bergreen, 414.
- <sup>77</sup> Furia, 161.
- <sup>78</sup> Ibid., 161.
- <sup>79</sup> Smith, 132.
- <sup>80</sup> Ibid., 23.
- <sup>81</sup> Ibid., 24.
- <sup>82</sup> Rosen, 143.
- <sup>83</sup> Ibid., 6.
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- <sup>87</sup> Kanter, Kenneth Aaron. *The Jews on Tin Pan Alley: The Jewish Contribution to American Popular Music, 1830-1940*. New York: Ktav Pub. House, 1982, 134.
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