

BOOK REVIEWS

Michael G. Coenthal, Cohen on the Telephone: A History of Jewish Recorded Humor and Popular Music 1892-1942. Milwaukee: Yesterday's Memories, 1984. Pp. vii & 108. soft-bound. \$12.00.

Recent interest in the various kinds of ethnic music documented on early 78s has also prompted a new look at the recorded skits and music which produced laughter for some Americans at the expense of others. The "Two black crows," "Virginian judge," and "Cohen on the Telephone" were the best-selling and hence best-remembered examples of the genre, which reaches back into the earliest days of sound recording. When the medium was new it naturally looked about for entertainment models to capture. Though minstrelsy was on the wane by the '90s, its humor continued to exert a powerful force on our culture. Vaudeville, by then a healthy adolescent, both borrowed from minstrelsy and established models of its own. Amongst the stock characters were the garrulous and combative Irishman, the benighted Black, the curmudgeon German (or "Dutchman"), and the comic Jew. These stereotypes were variously perceived; few examples were really harsh and more often the kidding was thought to be affectionate rather than derisive. Certainly some members of these maligned classes would have seen the jokes in the latter light, and contemporary views of earlier racial and ethnic humor are often unforgiving.

Though Jews received their share of these jests, such recordings do not figure prominently in early record lists--"coon" songs and skits, the Russell Hunting "Casey" series, and the "Uncle Josh" monologues by Cal Stewart dominate instead. But in 1914 an English comic named Joe Hayman recorded a monologue for Columbia in which he portrayed a Jewish immigrant having a telephone conversation with a native whose inability to understand the speaker's dialect provides the basis for broad comedy. It was quickly reissued in America where it enjoyed hefty sales. But, judging by the number of surviving copies, it was superseded in 1916 when one Barney Bernard waxed a cover version for Victor which became a runaway and enduring best-seller. Bernard (who might have been the dialect comic Lester Bernard) made no further records, at least under that name, and another comic, Monroe Silver, kept the momentum going, both by rerecording "Cohen on the Telephone" for nearly every company in existence over the next decade and by introducing fresh Cohen material to record. Hayman also continued to record Cohen material on both continents. Others attempted Yiddish comic routines on record but, with the exception of Julian Rose's "Levinsky" series, none made a further impact.

How did Joe Hayman's Jewish contemporaries view the success of his Cohen? An examination of newspaper and other files would shed some light, but it's worthy of note that catalogues of Jewish records (that is, records in Yiddish intended for the Jewish-American community) begin to feature humorous skits by Rubin Goldberg (no relation to the cartoonist so far as is known), Gus Goldstein and Clara Gold, Sam Silverbush and Sadie Wachtel, Joe Feldman and others who began to appear regularly after 1915. Even the well-known theater composers Louis Gilrod, Isidor Lillian, and David Meyerowitz contributed a few examples. On one occasion even the famed storyteller Sholom Aleichem made a record, though the occasion was almost inadvertent.

The Victor recording logs show that one Solomon Rabinowitz made a trial recording in New York on 7 September 1915, while Hayman's Cohen record was doing a brisk business but before Barney Bernard's was made. The name "Sholom Aleichem" does not appear on the recording sheet, and it seems likely that the company failed to realize the man's significance. Following his death the next year (and Victor's success with "Cohen") the record was rediscovered and rushed into print, using a special label which describes Aleichem as "The Jewish Mark Twain." The nature of the record is clearly revealed on hearing. A brief excerpt from a story, "If I Were Rothschild," is recited in Yiddish; then faint footsteps are heard and a voice asks in English, "Is that all you got?" Whereupon Rabinowitz recites a portion of a second story, "A Joyful Holiday." This admittedly parenthetical anecdote is worth telling not so much in the Cohen context but because it is the only surviving record of Sholom Aleichem's voice.

Michael Corenthal is a Milwaukee collector and dealer who does us a service by calling attention to the Cohen phenomenon on records, though not the service he might have done were this book a serious study. Its subtitle promises far more than the book delivers. Corenthal fails to make the crucial distinction between material by and for Jews and material about them intended for general circulation. Given its concentration on Cohen, it is not surprising that the book rarely deals with anything beyond the last category, and then only with an occasional bibliographic/discographic entry or the reproduction of a graphic. The former category is well represented on record in a universe which encompasses everything from liturgical music to theater songs, dramatic excerpts, and dance music--those delightful "klezmer" tunes which are currently enjoying an international revival.

A "discography" is included, but it is little more than a record list with frequently incorrect guesses at dates. Reissues are cited as new recordings and, in one case, a label appears on the book's cover but not in the discogra-

phy. A bibliography of printed works contains no annotations and it is often unclear whether they deal with the subject at hand or are just general works on Jewish life. Lists of sheet music and films are included, but these also fail to make the distinction between in-group and general production. The book's nicest feature is the random assortment of graphics, which include sheet music covers, record labels, picture postcards, and newspaper/journal clippings.

Perhaps the last two paragraphs are too harsh on the book, when it is not clear that the author meant it to be more than an affectionately compiled scrapbook. Ethnic humor is an important lens with which to view our past and one thumbs through the pages wishing the subject had been treated with more thought and research.

Richard K. Spottswood

When I grew up in New York and Bridgeport in the late Thirties and Forties, far more white people were immigrants than, say, ten years later, and many still spoke English with an accent. It wasn't just the Jews--the lucky ones who came over before the Holocaust and, after the War, the survivors. It was also Poles, Hungarians, Italians, Puerto Ricans, and a bewildering variety of others who were translating as they spoke. Ethnic stereotypes referred to contemporaries or parents rather than figures of the past, particularly in the industrial cities. Attitudes toward items like the "Cohen" records were far less defensive than today's.

Perspectives have changed. Stories about topping Mount Everest only to find a 7-11 store run by Sherpas might offend, so we hear few jokes using Koreans, Vietnamese, Cambodians, or other recent Asian immigrants as comic subjects--at least in the media. Yet the assimilation process generates much humor, particularly of the non-sequitur and absurd variety. Regardless of ethnic garb, many older routines are based on folks with one group of social mores encountering those of a larger group. Play some of the Cohen routines in a down-East accent and the result is Uncle Josh.

Mr. Corenthal's book is a general survey with texts of some of the Cohen routines. Beware: illustrations have been tampered with. Pictures of record labels have been substituted for other panels on sheet music covers, some of the label photos are so dark as to be unreadable, and much of the illustrative material is well off the book's stated subject. Why the cover appears of Michael Gold's book, Jews without Money, an advocatory sociological study of poor Jews during the depression, or the title page of a program for the play The Golem, which is hardly humorous and is certainly devoid of popular music, is beyond me. Similarly, the discography lists Alma Gluck and Efrem Zimbalist's record of