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“If Jewish People Wrote All the Songs”: The Anti-Folklore of Allan Sherman

Jeffrey Shandler

A number of years ago I was in a store with a friend of mine. There was music playing, and my friend, hearing a familiar melody, began singing along: “My Zelda, My Zelda, she took the money and ran with the tailor.” I smiled, recognizing the words to a song on an Allan Sherman record I’d often heard as a kid in the early 1960s, as, apparently, had my friend as well. But then he stopped and listened more closely to the recording. “Those aren’t the right words,” he said, looking puzzled. I listened too and quickly realized the cause of his confusion.

“That’s the original,” I explained. “It’s Harry Belafonte singing ‘Matilda.’”

“What do you mean ‘original?’” he asked.

“It’s a parody,” I replied. “‘My Zelda’—it’s a send-up of ‘Matilda.’”


It is not only noteworthy that my friend and I both remember the words to Allan Sherman’s “My Zelda” decades after the album on which it appears had been released and long since we’d last listened to it. It is also remarkable that, for my friend, this song exists for him not as a parody of another song, but as the “original.” His understanding of the song has provocative implications; while Sherman’s parody loses one register of meaning, as much of its humor relies on familiarity with “Matilda” as performed by Belafonte, “My Zelda” acquires added value when thought of as an “original” work.
Doing so situates Sherman’s artistry not merely, or even primarily, as a spoof of something else but as having an inherent worth in its own right as an example of American Jewish popular culture. Indeed, Sherman’s parodies of familiar folksongs are revealing artifacts of Jewish life in mid-twentieth-century America. In addition to their comic portrayal of middle-class American Jews at the time, Sherman’s recordings raise provocative questions about what might constitute “original” American Jewish folkways.

In October 1962, Warner Brothers issued a long-playing record album entitled *Allan Sherman’s Mother Presents My Son, the Folk Singer: Allan Sherman Singing Very Funny Folk Songs*. This LP consists of ten numbers, all parodies of songs widely familiar to the American public, culled from a range of folk repertoires: African-American, English, French, Irish, and Jamaican. Allan Sherman, an American Jew who worked in New York and Los Angeles as a television writer and producer, composed the mock lyrics and performed them, accompanied by a group of instrumentalists and, on some numbers, by other singers. The album was recorded live at a party in Hollywood before an audience of Sherman’s family, friends, and entertainment industry colleagues. *My Son, the Folk Singer* quickly became a bestseller. Warner Brothers’ fastest selling album at the time, it sold 65,000 copies in its first week, 500,000 in its first month, and eventually sold well over 1 million copies. This success established Sherman’s national prominence as a musical parodist. All three of his “My Son” recordings—*My Son, the Folk Singer* was followed in 1963 by *My Son, the Celebrity* and *My Son, the Nut*—reached #1 in sales on the US album charts (Cohen, *My Son, the Book 5*).
recording another half-dozen LPs, Sherman performed his parodies in live concerts and on television variety shows during the 1960s.

Though his fame proved to be short-lived—Sherman died in relative obscurity and penury in 1973—his parodies have found a niche in American popular culture. Rhino Records issued two “best of Allan Sherman” compilations in 1979 and 1990, followed by a boxed set of six CDs of Sherman’s work in 2005. *There Is Nothing Like a Lox*, a CD of thirteen Sherman parodies never before released, was produced by Rock Beat Records in 2014. A search of Youtube in 2016 yielded thousands of videos featuring one or more of Sherman’s recordings or clips of his appearances on television. Though his oeuvre does not seem to have entered the repertoires of other professional singers or comedians, it has inspired similar comic songs, such as Christine Nelson’s 1966 album *Did’ja Come To Play Cards Or To Talk*, and has even become the subject of parody itself.

Allan Sherman was born Allan Copelon (following his parents’ divorce, he took his mother’s maiden name as his surname) in Chicago in 1924. During college he performed some of his earliest musical parodies, such as war-themed spoofs of songs from the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Oklahoma!*; these include a number titled “Everything’s Up to Date in Berchtesgaden” (Cohen, *Overweight Sensation* 52). After college and military service, Sherman came to New York in 1945. Hoping to make a career as a songwriter, he found work writing jokes for comedians such as Jackie Gleason and Joe E. Lewis. This led to Sherman’s involvement in television during its early years, working as a writer or producer for several variety shows, such as *Cavalcade of Stars* and *Broadway Open House*. During this period, Sherman continued to write song parodies. Prominent among these were Jewish-inflected spoofs of Broadway tunes, including a
full-length parody of Lerner and Loewe’s musical *My Fair Lady*, which Sherman tried to produce but was unable to do so, due to legal problems of copyright infringement.

Sherman’s work in television continued throughout the 1950s. He helped produce *I’ve Got a Secret* and other game shows, as well as another popular variety program, *The Steve Allen Show*. In 1961, Sherman moved from New York to Hollywood to work for CBS. In California, he became a popular guest at entertainment industry parties, where he performed his parody songs with great success. This eventually led to an agreement with Warner Brothers to produce an album of his parodies. For this recording, Sherman elected to spoof folksongs rather than Broadway numbers, in part to avoid legal challenges to their publication; the result was *My Son, the Folk Singer*. Though his use of folksongs as the basis for his parodies may have been expeditious, it proved to be a defining feature of his first well-known works.

Sherman is best remembered for songs from this and the subsequent “My Son” albums. In addition to demonstrating a mastery of pun and dialect rhyme, some of his lyrics are noteworthy for their deft satire of American Jewish life in the early 1960s. Sherman’s humorous observations about work, popular culture, family life, and relations between the sexes or between parents and children were then the stock-in-trade of many American joke writers and stand-up comedians. What distinguished Sherman’s comedy is his Judaized spoofing of well-known folksongs to address these topics. Through this device, Sherman lampooned not only American Jewish life but also the songs he parodied as well as their singers. Indeed, Sherman mocked the very idea of the folksong and of folk culture itself.
Sherman’s performance of his parodies and the way that audiences responded to them were also key to his mockery of folk singing. His debut album pokes fun at a spate of folksingers, including Burl Ives, Theodore Bikel, and especially Harry Belafonte, who had become celebrities in the United States during the 1950s in large measure due to the recording and broadcast media. For example, in “My Zelda” Sherman invites different groups in the audience (such as “members of Hadassah”) to sing along with him, in a comic imitation of Belafonte’s similar practice during life concerts, thereby extending this parody of “Matilda” to a sendup of the folksinger’s interactive style of performing.

Belafonte’s performances were well known to Americans through occasional appearances on television and especially a series of popular long-playing albums, the first appearing in 1954. Other songs he recorded that Sherman subsequently parodied include “Water Boy” and “Jump Down, Spin Around” (like “Matilda,” issued on the 1955 LP Belafonte). Though best known at first for music from his native Jamaica, Belafonte also performed African American, French, and Irish folksongs, as well as blues numbers, Christmas carols, show tunes, and even the occasional Jewish song.

The medium of the long-playing album was as important to the success of the “My Son” recordings as it was to the careers of Belafonte, Bikel, and Ives. Sherman’s parody extended to this new means of disseminating their performances, including the cover art and liner notes of his albums. The “My Son” recordings appeared at a strategic moment in the history of the long-playing record. Though the technology of 33 1/3 RPM records had been pioneered before World War II and commercial production of LPs began in the late 1940s, the format entered its prime in the late 1950s and early 1960s. At this time a growing number of recording artists made innovative use of this longer
format, and the “age of the album” came to dominate the commercial recording industry, surpassing recordings of individual songs on small 45 RPM discs.

In addition to the possibility of recording longer works, which had its greatest impact on classical music and jazz, LPs enabled performers of all kinds to compile sequences of shorter pieces—especially popular songs, which, by dint of the limitations of early sound recording technology, were still typically about three minutes long—within a strategic structure. Individual songs on an LP might follow the order of numbers in a Broadway musical or a live concert, and popular singers such as Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra created original sequences by recording thematic albums, such as collections of love ballads or Christmas songs. Performers of traditional folksongs recorded LPs that demonstrated the international range of their repertoire. At the same time, a new generation of folk musicians—Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Peter Paul and Mary, among others—used long-playing records to integrate into a traditional folk repertoire their own compositions, many of which addressed contemporary social issues, thereby articulating a link between established folk music and their new songs.

Though short, humorous monologues and sketches had been issued on 78 RPM discs since the early twentieth century, the LP provided expanded possibilities for recording comic routines as well. Among American comedians who issued popular LPs in the late 1950s and early 1960s were Shelly Berman, Lenny Bruce, Dick Gregory, Bob Newhart, Mort Sahl, and Jonathan Winters, as well as the comedy duos Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner, Bob Eliot and Ray Goulding, Mike Nichols and Elaine May, and the Smothers Brothers. Some of these recordings document live performances, providing listeners with a sense of how these comedians interacted with audiences in nightclubs.
Sherman’s first albums straddle the new use of long-playing records made by both folksingers and comedians. He was not the only performer to do so. Most famously in this period, the Smothers Brothers also recorded mock folksongs, beginning with 1961 album *The Smothers Brothers at the Purple Onion*. But whereas the Smothers’ parodies are salacious or frivolous (e.g., “Tom Crudely,” a sendup of “Tom Dooley”), Sherman’s rely on a comic Judaization. In this respect as well, Sherman was not alone. Other postwar American Jewish comic performers, most notably Mickey Katz, issued recordings of Jewish spoofs of familiar songs. However, their humor relied on bilingual wordplay for their comedy, which assumed knowledge of Yiddish language and culture, as borne out by such titles as “Borscht Riders in the Sky” (Katz’s spoof of Stan Jones’s “Ghost Riders in the Sky”) and “Geshray of De Vilde Kotchke” (Katz’s sendup of Terry Gilkyson’s “Cry of the Wild Goose”).

The distinctive conceit of Sherman’s mock lyrics are, as he is quoted saying in the liner notes to *My Son, the Folk Singer*, “What would happen if Jewish people wrote all the songs—which, in fact, they do.” In another note on the back of the album cover, Sherman’s former employer Steve Allen explains that, “unlike those forms of Jewish humor which, because they involve such a high percentage of Yiddish words and private allusions, are difficult for us gentiles to appreciate, this package has an almost universal appeal.”

What marks the parodies on the “My Son” albums as Jewish is not, as Steve Allen notes, a matter of having access to insider vocabulary or traditional lore. Sherman’s lyrics for these recordings contain all together no more than a half-dozen Yiddish words or a few passing allusions to traditional culturally specific phenomena such as Jewish
holidays or foods. Rather, Jewishness is signaled more frequently by such linguistic elements as the first or last names of characters—e.g., Yetta, Mr. Meltzer, Mrs. Goldfarb—as well as by rhetorical devices typical of the English spoken by urban American Jews who were the children or grandchildren of Yiddish-speaking immigrants. These elements include idiomatic renderings of Yiddish expressions, such as “How’s by you the family?” in Sherman’s song “Sarah Jackman,” a parody of the French folksong “Frère Jacques,” as well as dialect rhyming and punning, as in a verse from his parody of the Mexican Hat Dance (recorded on My Son, the Celebrity), which rhymes “Calcutta” (pronounced “Calcuddah”) with “butter” (“buddah”) and “another”—or “an udder”—(“anuddah”). Dialect is an essential element of the title of Sherman’s single most popular song, “Hello Muddah, Hello Faddah,” (which appeared in 1963 on the album My Son, the Nut as well as on a 45 RPM single), a number that does not spoof a folksong but sets lyrics to a melody from the “Dance of the Hours” ballet in Amilcare Ponchielli’s 1875 opera La Gioconda.

The audible presence of an enthusiastic audience of Sherman’s acquaintances is also understood as an important marker of the Jewishness of the “My Son” albums. On these recordings one hears Sherman’s family and friends howl with knowing laughter and applaud wildly at key moments—all of which signal to listeners what is to be savored as well as how. Thus, Judy Harris, a fan of Allan Sherman recordings, writes on her website:

One of the great delights of listening to these recordings is the fun that both Sherman and the audience seem to be having. I am not Jewish and know next to no Yiddish, but just to hear the screams of the audience when he exhorts
“members of Hadassah” to sing along to My Zelda adds to my pleasure. I don’t think these recordings would be as enjoyable if they did not have this audience feedback.

Sherman’s mock folksongs situate Jewishness in the milieu of his contemporaries: middle-class American Jews who live in or near major urban centers. Thus, the songs mention such locales as the Catskills, Levittown, Miami, Shaker Heights, and Brooklyn’s Ocean Parkway, and they include characters who work in the garment industry, sales, accounting, and advertising. There is, moreover, a sensibility in Sherman’s parodies that the recordings identify as Jewish. For example, the liner notes to *My Son, the Folk Singer* urge the reader to listen to these songs, in which Sherman “expresses his own Jewish acceptance of another’s plight but, as well, his Jewish disapproval of a person taking on airs just because he’s oppressed” (album back cover). As this issue is not addressed explicitly in the parody lyrics, it implies that the act of parody is itself a distinctively Jewish idiom. Jewishness is thus defined by a self-conscious difference in relation to the sensibilities of others, a distinction with which Jews are familiar and against which they take measure of themselves. The skewing of folksongs through this parodic sensibility constitutes a performance of Jewishness. Sherman is, in effect, the inverse of another Midwestern Jewish musician who changed his last name, Bob Dylan (né Robert Zimmerman), whose eponymous first album appeared the same year as *My Son, the Folk Singer*. Whereas Dylan’s performance of American folksongs facilitated a refashioning of himself that obscured his Jewish identity, Sherman remakes the international repertoire of folksingers as if “Jews wrote all the songs.” To be an American
Jew, Sherman intimates, is to be parodic—that is, to engage in polemically motivated acts of imitation that, according to literary scholar Simon Dentith, define parody. (Dentith 9)

Typical of comical parodies in general, the humor in Sherman’s “My Son” recordings is generated by a risible disparity between the songs’ original lyrics and his mock versions. As is true for all parodies, comical or not, familiarity with the original is key to their appreciation. In this case, the disparity is a cultural one—a gap between the various ethnic worlds evoked by the original songs and a Jewish parody-world. Sherman’s parodies compound this cultural disparity by identifying Jews both as familiar types and as cultural outsiders. In his mock folksongs Jewishness is not merely substituted for conventionalized images of Englishness, Irishness or Frenchness, but is juxtaposed against them. Similarly, Sherman characterized his mediocre singing voice, in contrast to the “beautiful and legitimate and lush” sound of the instrumental and choral accompaniment to his vocals, as key to articulating this disparity: “You’re looking into Tiffany’s most elegant show window, and in the middle of the window is a black velvet pillow, and right in the middle of the pillow is an onion. That’s me” (Allen n.p.)

“Sir Greenbaum’s Madrigal,” recorded on My Son, the Folk Singer, exemplifies Sherman’s use of parody to articulate the cultural disparity between Jews and others. The hero of this spoof of “Greensleeves” is a reluctant knight who considers his life of chivalry “not right for a boy who is Jewish” and eventually abandons it for “a position in dry goods.” This number is not only a Judaized sendup of an English folksong that mocks a mythical vision of “Merrie Olde England”; it also uses this parodic device to satirize folksong performers and enthusiasts who endorse this romanticized image of the past. As the agent of Sherman’s satire is a Jew—conceptualized as a cultural outsider both in
England of yore and in the American present—the satire has a double edge. On one hand, Sherman’s lyrics imply, Jews were (and are) not cut out for robust virility, exemplified by knighthood; on the other hand, Sir Greenbaum is portrayed as more sensible, if less intrepid, than his gentile comrades. He prefers the comforts of suburban middle-class life to that of chivalry, deflating its heroic image by, for example, characterizing medieval armor as “a pair of aluminum pants.” The ridiculed Sir Greenbaum gets the last laugh.

The double-edged nature of his satire resonates with Sherman’s glib, yet telling, assertion that his recording reveals “what would happen if all the songs were written by Jews—which, in fact, they are.” Very likely he had in mind the many Jews of Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and Hollywood who wrote everything from Christmas carols to cowboy ballads to New England sea shanties. These composers and lyricists not only created new repertoire for the American public but also disseminated it in radically different ways from the traditions of the folk singer—namely, through the modern, urban marketplace, in the form of sheet music sales, theatrical performance, films, radio and television broadcasts, and recordings. At the same time, other performers—ranging from Belafonte and Ives to Baez and Dylan—were themselves transforming the art of the folksong through the release of highly successful commercial recordings, even as these performers strove to invoke the cachet of a genuinely pre-modern aesthetic on these albums by cultivating an informal performance style, employing traditional instrumentation, offering anecdotes on the source and context of songs, and recording before live audiences—all to simulate the intimate, unpolished, “homespun” authenticity of folk music.
By using the folksong as the conceit for his satire, Sherman assailed the conventional integrity of folk culture and, therefore, of folk identity. Whereas the romantic notion of folk culture, rooted in the defining work of the eighteenth-century German critic Johann Gottfried Herder, conceptualizes it as the distinctive expression of the inherent spirit of a particular people, Sherman demonstrates, through parody, that this music is something that can be imitated, commodified, and thereby transvalued. He, too, can sing to the accompaniment of “authentic” instruments—and so harps, flutes, drums, castanets, marimbas, mandolins, and tambourines punctuate his performances, according to various ethnic conventions. He, too, can pose on the album cover of *My Son, the Folk Singer* in bare feet and with shirt unbuttoned, head thrust back and strumming a guitar, or break down the formal performer/audience barrier on the concert stage. In the parodic world of Allan Sherman, folk music is not a received tradition, the unique expression of a pre-modern people, but is something manipulated, manufactured, and marketed. What Sherman offers is a kind of “anti-folklore”—that is, a work that both reproduces and subverts conventional folkways. This anti-folklore, Sherman further implies, is an appropriate folk expression of the modern Jew, who is portrayed in these recordings as a rootless cosmopolitan, an inveterate dealer in commodities, and as inherently risible.

In this regard, Sherman’s images of the Jew and of Jewish culture both resonate with scholarly perspectives, such as the notion of the Jew as archetypal middleman minority, and play provocatively with anti-Semitic accusations that Jews, as a people who have no legitimate folklore of their own, merely appropriate the traditions of others. Moreover, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, Sherman’s anti-folklore implicitly asks what
Jews in America might now consider their folk heritage to be, following the recent destruction of the centuries-old center of Jewish culture in Europe.

Sherman’s most elaborate use of anti-folklore to address contemporary American Jewish culture can be heard in his one parody of a Jewish song, which appears on his second album, *My Son, the Celebrity*. In “Harvey and Sheila,” a spoof of the modern Hebrew song “Hava Nagila,” Sherman replaces the original lyrics exhorting Zionist pioneers to sing and rejoice with the story of the eponymous American Jewish couple. Harvey and Sheila meet in New York City, fall in love, marry, move to California, have children, achieve prosperity, and become Republicans. The couple’s rapid rise is voiced through the mock lyrics’ extensive use of abbreviations (CPA, IBM, MIT, PHD, PBX, RCA, JFK, PTA, TWA, XKE, GOP, VIP), culminating in the observation that this success could only take place “in the USA.”

Sherman exploits a key element of how “Hava Nagila” is usually performed to enhance his comic portrait of contemporary American Jewish life. Over the course of the song’s three stanzas, the tempo increases from slow to fast (a performance convention of an East European Jewish *hora*, on which the hasidic-inspired melody of “Hava Nagila” is based). This acceleration, combined with the linguistic device of abbreviations, underscores the message of the lyrics, which both celebrate and mock the fast-paced upward mobility of middle-class American Jews in the Eisenhower and Kennedy years. The result is Sherman’s most deft and complex satire of American Jewish life. By replacing hasidic and Zionist celebrations of the joy of singing and dancing with an account of the pursuit of professional and material success in the American mainstream,
Sherman leaves listeners to ponder the tacit implication of the cultural price Jews might be paying for this success.

“Harvey and Sheila” also marks the culmination of Sherman’s parodic Jewish anti-folklore. Beginning with some of the numbers on his second albums, he moved beyond the mock folksong format, writing parodies of Broadway tunes, Gilbert and Sullivan songs, theme songs from movies, and rock-and-roll numbers. These parodies were also often satirical, but they no longer relied regularly on Jewishness to create the comic disparity. Rather, they tended to be built increasingly on a generational, rather than cultural distance, as the middle-aged Sherman complained about teenagers, the Beatles, avant-garde theater, dieting, computer technology, advertising, and the urban jungle. By turning from subversive satirist to conservative curmudgeon and relying less on Jewish idioms, Sherman may have been looking to expand his repertoire and his audience, but his later albums never rivaled the commercial success of the “My Son” series.

Though Sherman initially mocked folk music’s commodification by the recording industry, it was the source of his own success. The popularity of Sherman’s first albums in the early 1960s transformed his parodies, which he had been performing for years at private gatherings, into popular culture on a national scale. In a tribute to Sherman, published in the booklet accompanying one of the CD reissues of Sherman’s parodies, Steve Allen recalls an oft-repeated anecdote that “President John F. Kennedy was overheard singing ‘Sarah Jackman, how’s by you?’ as he hurried though the lobby of the Carlisle Hotel in New York.” Allen also recalls, “At one point it seemed as if every twelve-year-old child in the country was singing ‘Hello Muddah, Hello Faddah’” (Allen
n.p.) The facility with which sound recordings allow listeners to hear, on demand, the same performance as often as desired enabled Sherman’s songs to enter a national repertoire in a matter of months. Unlike most “traditional” folksongs, his parodies are too closely associated with Sherman’s performance of them to have entered any other professional performers’ repertoire or to have encouraged the creation of variants or additional verses. Instead, the fixed nature of the recorded performance, heard over and over again, promotes memorization by the listener and enables vicarious participation in the performance by singing or lip-synching along. These activities constitute a new folk music practice, centered on recurrent playing of recorded performances. Listening to these recordings was primarily a domestic activity, providing auditors with vicarious access to a posh Hollywood party or nightclub and the fantasy of being part of a larger, “insider” audience. For the many middle-class American Jews who purchased and listened repeatedly to Sherman’s first albums, the comedy was also self-reflexive, simultaneously mocking and celebrating their lives in ethnic urban enclaves or suburban communities, including their professions, social practices, foodways, and aspirations.

Sherman’s “My Son” albums appeared during a threshold moment of American Jewish self-representation in the public sphere. In 1961 Levy’s rye bread launched a longstanding ad campaign that informed the American public, “You don’t have to be Jewish” to love Levy’s “real Jewish” rye bread. These print ads featured photos of an Irish policeman, an Italian cook, as well as an American Indian, African American, and Asian American, all savoring Levy’s rye bread. As I have noted elsewhere, this ad campaign “offers an especially complicated message for Jews. Jewishness is not only a tempting possibility for Gentiles, it is an option for American Jews as well—*they* don’t
‘have to’ be Jewish, either.” Here, Jewishness is configured as “something both indelible and consumable. People may or may not be Jewish; it is a matter of election through purchase—but the product (and the act of ingesting it) is Jewish reliably and authentically” (Shandler 190).

Sherman’s mock folksongs entered the American Jewish repertoire at this moment and, paradoxically, become part of its culture. Like the ads for Levy’s rye bread, his songs transgress ethnic boundaries as they problematize the notion of Jewish authenticity while also tacitly staking a new claim for its possibility. This possibility was soon realized in other recordings that enacted a similar comic expression of an American Jewish culture founded in ambivalence, including the aptly titled 1965 LP You Don’t Have to Be Jewish. Both this album and its successor the following year, When You’re In Love, the Whole World Is Jewish, feature an ensemble of performers in sketches and comic songs. Allan Sherman’s notion that his songs reflect “what would happen if Jewish people wrote all the songs—which, in fact, they do” also presaged later interest in the Jews of Tin Pan Alley, including by author Philip Roth. In his 1993 novel Operation Shylock, the protagonist offers a provocative, subversive disquisition on the Jewishness of some of Irving Berlin’s best-known contributions to American popular song a half-century earlier:

The radio was playing “Easter Parade” and I thought, But this is Jewish genius on a par with the Ten Commandments. God gave Moses the Ten Commandments and then He gave Irving Berlin “Easter Parade” and “White Christmas.” The two holidays that celebrate the divinity of Christ—the divinity that’s at the very heart of the Jewish rejection of Christianity—and what does Irving Berlin brilliantly
do? He de-Christs them both! Easter he turns into a fashion show and Christmas into a holiday about snow (157).

Allan Sherman’s most famous song, “Hello Muddah, Hello Faddah,” has itself become the subject of parody in a Yiddish song, titled “Hello Mameh” (Toiv). This number was recorded in 1987 by Country Yossi and the Shteeble-hoppers, one of several groups of musicians who create Judaized mock lyrics—in both English and Yiddish and mixes thereof—to a variety of popular American songs, which are targeted to a young Brooklyn-based Orthodox Jewish audience.

Country Yossi’s “Hello Mameh” is set to Ponchielli’s ballet music and retains the conceit of Sherman’s original lyrics, written in the form of a letter, about a boy’s suffering while attending summer camp. But there are telling differences: not only does this version make extensive use of Yiddish, but when the boy promises his parents that he will behave if they bring him home, he assures them that he will be not only a good boy, per Sherman’s song, but also a pious Jew. Country Yossi’s parody reverses the anxious, ambivalent acculturation of Jews’ into an American mainstream as portrayed in Sherman’s lyrics and asserts instead a proudly different American Jewishness, expressed in language and religiosity. At the same time, “Hello Mameh” evinces its creator’s familiarity with Sherman’s recording, and an indebtedness to his parodic anti-folklore, as would a full appreciation of Country Yossi’s song by his Orthodox listeners—though, like my friend mentioned at the start of this essay, they, too, might think of “Hello Mameh” as an “original.”

Thanks to the presence of Sherman’s songs on CD reissues, Youtube videos, and this Orthodox takeoff, his parody has come full circle. It is now a fixture of the folklore
of the American Jewish community that he satirized. This continued engagement both reinforces and complicates the significance of Sherman’s anti-folkloric parodies as examples of American Jews’ culture and thereby demonstrates new possibilities for considering what might constitute their folkways.
Works Cited


----- An Evening with Belafonte. RCA Victor, 1957.


Booklet included in CD boxed set My Son, The Box.


-----. My Son, the Nut: Allan Sherman Sings Nutty Things, This Time with Strings. Warner Bros., 1963.


Notes

1 A search on March 3, 2016 yielded “about 17,700 results” (Youtube, “Allan Sherman”).

2 Nelson sings the duet “Sarah Jackman” with Sherman on My Son, The Folk Singer.


4 On Mickey Katz, see Kun. Sherman recorded a Yiddishized parody song, “A Satchel and A Seck,” on a 78 RPM disc in 1951. It was later issued in a compilation of comic Jewish songs sung other performers, including Fyvush Finkel, Sylvia Froos, and Lee Tully, on an LP entitled More Folk Songs by Allan Sherman and His Friends in 1962, “to capitalize on Sherman’s new popularity” (“Allan Sherman Discography”).

5 On anti-folklore, see Miron.

6 On Jews as a middleman minority, see Bonacich.

7 I thank Peter Pullman for this observation.