

“Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen”—The Andrews Sisters (1938)

Added to the National Registry: 2008
Essay by H. Arlo Nimmo (guest post)*



The Andrews Sisters, c. 1938



Original label

For six years during the 1930s, Patty, Maxene and LaVerne Andrews toured the United States, first with a vaudeville show and then with their chaperoning parents, singing in any club, dive or theater that would hire them. In late 1937, their father was becoming increasingly disgruntled with their struggling career and gave them a deadline for breaking into the big time. If they didn't make it by the end of the year, they would leave New York, return home to Minneapolis and attend secretarial school.

The deadline was approaching when Dave Kapp, head of Decca Records, happened to hear the Andrews Sisters singing on a New York radio station. Impressed by the young sisters, he asked them to audition for a contract with his record company. They did so and were hired. The contract they signed was a flat fee of \$50 without royalties for each two-sided record they made, a common arrangement at that time. Their first record went nowhere on the charts, but Kapp liked the trio and called them in for a second recording session on November 24, 1937. The A-side of the new record was “Nice Work If You Can Get It,” a Gershwin song from the popular Fred Astaire film “A Damsel in Distress.” The B-side, or throw-away side, was an obscure Yiddish love song called “Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen,” often translated as “To Me, You Are Beautiful.”

The song was composed by Sholom Secunda with lyrics by Jacob Jacobs for a short-lived 1932 Yiddish musical comedy called “I Would If I Could.” Accounts vary as to how the song ended up in the Decca recording studio. Sammy Cahn, who wrote the English lyrics with Saul Chaplin, claimed that he first heard the song performed by an African-American act at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem, and later found the sheet music in a store in the Jewish Lower East Side of Manhattan. At that time he shared an apartment with Lou Levy, who was managing the Andrews Sisters. Cahn played the song for the sisters; they liked it and would eventually record it. Vic Schoen, the sisters' arranger, said he discovered the song in a little shop in the lobby of a

Yiddish theater on Second Avenue. He gave it to Lou Levy who in turn gave it to Sammy Cahn who with Saul Chaplin wrote English lyrics for it. Levy, however, claimed that he bought the song for fifteen cents in the Lower East Side and passed it on to the sisters to sing in Yiddish at various Jewish clubs and functions in New York City.

However the song got there, it was chosen for the B-side of “Nice Work If You Can Get It.” The recording session was piped into Jack Kapp’s office and when he heard the song being recorded in Yiddish, he interrupted the session and said he wanted it in English. Conflicting stories relate how the English translation came about. Cahn claimed he didn’t want to do a translation, but eventually did so after a couple of days. Levy maintained the song was translated within a few minutes in the recording studio. In another interview, he said the translation was made over the telephone. Vic Schoen created a swing arrangement for the song and directed the studio musicians for the recording. Schoen and Bobby Hackett played trumpet, Al Philburn was on trombone, Don Watt on clarinet, Frank Froeba on piano, Dave Barbour on guitar and Stan King on drums. All were unknown at the time, but several would go on to illustrious careers.

The record was released in December 1937 and to the surprise of all involved, it was “Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen” that drove sales. Word spread rapidly about the new song and record stores were flooded with requests for “Buy a Beer, Monsieur Shane,” “Mr. Barney McShane,” “My Dear Mr. Shane” and “My Mere Bits of Shame.” The customers may not have known how to pronounce the title, but they bought the record. According to one story at the time, a woman’s leg was broken when she was knocked down by a crowd that mobbed a record store to buy copies. The song became such a national sensation that “Life,” the leading photo-news magazine of the day, published a photo essay giving its version of the song’s history. “Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen” reached the Navajo Indian reservation in Utah where it was chanted by Navajo and Ute Indians to aid polio victims in a ceremony celebrating President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s birthday. Some sources claim the song was a hit in several European countries, including Germany until the Nazi Party banned it after learning its composer was Jewish and the song’s title was Yiddish and not a southern German dialect.

“Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen” sold 100,000 copies in its initial release and by the end of January had sold a quarter million copies, an enormous number in those days. Bing Crosby was the only other Decca artist at the time with records surpassing the 100,000 sales mark. The song became a hit before it was published as sheet music, a rare phenomenon back then. Twelve other artists, including Ella Fitzgerald and Kate Smith, recorded the song in hopes of cashing in on its popularity. The American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) named “Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen” the most popular song of 1938.

Writer Victoria Secunda (Shalom Secunda’s daughter-in-law) offered the following explanation for the song’s great popularity:

Its singable melody...was set in a bittersweet, minor key, reflecting the mood of a world on the cusp of crushing economic depression and World War.... Internationalism was in the air. So a Yiddish title to a song containing Italian and German [words] had a cosmopolitanism not reserved solely for the upper classes... “Bei Mir” had the universal appeal of a love-song that ignored politics and poverty.... The energetic young women

sang with eagerness, optimism and perfect vocal harmony. To a world full of dread and anticipation, it simply cheered people up.

The original composer of “Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen,” Shalom Secunda, sold his rights to publishers J. and J. Kammern for only \$30 a few months before the song was recorded by the Andrews Sisters. The Kammern sold the rights to Harms, Inc. who published the English version. After much publicity about Secunda receiving so little for the enormously popular song, the Kammern gave Secunda a percentage of the royalties they collected from Harms. Decca also rewrote the Andrews Sisters’s contract and gave them a percentage of the song’s earnings rather than the original flat rate of \$50. According to the Milken Archive of American Jewish Music, ownership of the copyright on “Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen” reverted to Secunda and Jacobs, who then signed a contract with Harms, Inc., under which they were paid appropriate royalties.

“Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen” launched the successful career of the Andrews Sisters who would become an enduring part of musical Americana. In 1996, their version of the song was inducted into The Recording Academy’s Grammy Hall of Fame in honor of its “lasting qualitative or historical significance.” In 2008, it was added to the Library of Congress’s National Recording Registry.

Cultural anthropologist H. Arlo Nimmo has published ten books, including “The Andrews Sisters, A Biography and Career Record” (2004), as well as dozens of articles. Many of these publications are based on his Philippines research, but he has also written about American popular culture, San Francisco history and Hawaii’s volcano goddess Pele. Nimmo is currently Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at California State University East Bay and resides in San Francisco.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.