Sophie Tucker (1886-1966) was one of the most influential female American performers in the first half of the 20th Century, beloved as a singer and comedienne. Beginning in burlesque and moving through the genres of vaudeville, motion pictures, radio, and television, she was hailed for her brazen delivery and self-deprecating humor. Working alongside male industry giants such as Irving Berlin, Eddie Cantor, and Ed Sullivan, Tucker was one of only a few women to achieve financial and commercial success. A dedicated philanthropist, Tucker donated millions to charities across the globe, particularly for Jewish and African American causes. Best known as a “Red Hot Mama,” Tucker rose to fame during a period of incredible transformations for both African Americans and women, which are represented in her music.

As a child of Russian immigrants, Tucker, like so many other Jewish contemporaries, longed to embrace a burgeoning, mainstream mass culture. She grew up in Hartford, Connecticut, in an Orthodox Jewish household and married in her teens, giving birth to a son, Albert. When domestic life could not satisfy Tucker, she left her family and traveled alone to New York City to forge her own path on the stage. After many failed attempts to attract Tin Pan Alley songwriters and meager wages singing in restaurants, Tucker began more steady work as a blackface performer on a burlesque troupe. Abhorrent to us today, many major stars of burlesque and vaudeville began their careers in blackface, and Tucker detested it at the time, preferring that audiences witnessed her outside of a disguise. The singer, rising in fame as America’s greatest blackface performers, would ironically find her closest friend in Mollie Elkins, a black woman who had worked in vaudeville with Bert Williams and George Walker, one of the most renowned black troupes.

Tucker first met Elkins as a newcomer to the “Ziegfield Follies” in 1909, feeling ignored by the bigger players in the show. Tucker’s conversations with Elkins, who was at the time working as a maid for star Lillian Lorraine, gave Tucker the courage to shed some of her insecurities. Tucker remembered being forever changed by that initial interaction with Elkins: “That friendly,
wholesome talk, that promise to root for me, the feeling that there was now at least more than one person in the theater to whom Sophie Tucker was more than just a name on the program, sent my blues flying.” The relationship between the two would not end with this first meeting. Elkins worked for decades as Tucker’s personal assistant and their friendship was documented in the press.

As Tucker recollected in her autobiography, it was Elkins who brought the song “Some of these Days,” to her attention in 1911. Penned by a then-unknown African American songwriter, Shelton Brooks, the song was sought after by many artists but made famous by Tucker. Ontario-born Brooks had spent his youth playing piano in Detroit before working in vaudeville and, at the age of 22, he wrote the music and lyrics to “Some of These Days.” This would not only become Tucker’s theme song, but also the title of her 1945 autobiography, which she then sold before every show.

In her autobiography, Tucker recalls Elkins asking, “[S]ince when are you so important that you can’t hear a song by a colored writer?” at a time when Tucker was becoming quite popular. In this recollection, Brooks was waiting around “like a dog with his dog hanging out” hoping that the vaudeville star would give him the time of day. Once Brooks met the songstress, Tucker was credited not only with making the song famous, but also with giving a black writer a unique chance to be heard. The black press published several stories about the relationship between Tucker and Brooks and at her Golden Jubilee celebration many decades later, Civil Rights leader Ralphe Bunche told the story of Tucker’s generosity towards Brooks as a representation of her overall attitude towards African Americans and racial equality.

“Some of These Days” is a commentary on the precarious nature of Tucker’s celebrity staying power. Telling listeners “when you leave me/I know you’ll grieve me,” she describes the unique, maternal qualities that only she could provide to audiences, but would die out as her star faded. Brooks’s composition fit Tucker perfectly as an overweight, brassy woman who could always have fallen out of favor in popular culture. The song also more literally spoke to the things she could not offer the son in Hartford that she abandoned. “You’ll miss my hugging/you’ll miss my kisses” was not merely a prediction; it was also a consequence of her decision to choose a life on the road over motherhood. The irony of Tucker as a maternal figure in the broader cultural imagination who was not, in her real life, cut out for motherhood, was not only captured in “Some of These Days,” but even more literally in her other huge hit, “My Yiddishe Mama.”

“Some of These Days” not only fueled Tucker’s already skyrocketing career, but also that of Shelton Brooks. Afterwards, Brooks penned several other successful songs, which Tucker performed as well. The song is not only a testament to Tucker’s staying power, but also to her commitment to a more inclusionary vision for American show business. “Some of These Days” exemplifies a more dynamic process of racial exchange within the music industry and is one of the few songs performed by a white artist that remained very publicly attached to its African American creator. It is also a testament to the fleeting nature of fame, which was Tucker’s greatest anxiety.
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