

Attractive Hebrew Selections that appear originally to have been produced by the Standard Phonograph Company of New York, probably between 1901 and 1903.

The Standard Phonograph Company had an even briefer existence, surviving a mere three years after its founding in 1900, but during that time it produced recordings of songs from multiple Jewish musical traditions, sung by some of the most prominent Jewish performers in New York. The company was formed on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, surrounded by the tenements where thousands of new Jewish emigres made their homes and a few blocks from the Yiddish theaters that lined 2nd Avenue. Started by an optician and wholesale phonograph merchant named George Lando and his partners, the company advertised in New York's Yiddish-language newspapers, trumpeting itself as offering "the largest stock on the East Side of Edison and Columbia phonographs," "supplies and records in all languages," and "eyes examined free." Little more is known about Standard, which is evidently one of the first labels dedicated to recording the music of a United States minority culture, or how the recordings it produced came to be distributed by the Lambert Company.

The Lambert Company released 48 cylinders of "Hebrew" songs, but only 20 recently discovered recordings are known to survive. Nineteen of these were released in 2016 by Archeophone Records under the title "Attractive Hebrew: The Lambert Yiddish Cylinders, 1901-1905." (The twentieth song in this collection—Joseph Natus's rendering of "The Honeysuckle and the Bee," also distributed by Lambert—was not one of the Standard recordings.) A twentieth has since been found, and it can only be hoped that archivists will be able to uncover the remaining 28.

The songs collected here range from somber to silly. "Odom Yesoyde Meofor" ("Man Comes from Dust") provides an example of the several traditional liturgical melodies in the collection. This chant is from the service for Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year celebrated as a high holiday. It is typically sung in the style of the cantor, the synagogue prayer leader, characterized by frequent ornamentation, repetition of melodic phrases, and the absence of a clear musical meter. Such cylinders were rare novelties at this time, not only because the technology was of course so new, but because they provided a highly unusual opportunity to listen to liturgical music, intended to be performed only on a particular day of the year and within the synagogue, in the listener's domestic space and at any time he or she wants.

By contrast, the songs "Rozhinkes Mit Mandlen" ("Raisins with Almonds") and "Shiker Lid" ("Drunkard's Song") may sound like age-old folk tunes, but like so many Yiddish songs, they were in fact composed in the late 19th century for the Yiddish theater. The birth of this musical genre is typically dated to a performance in a wine-garden in Iasi, Moldavia (today Romania), in 1876. Over time, Yiddish theater's composers, performers, and designers developed a more professional artform that spread across Europe, to the United States, and before long to Jewish immigrant communities across the world. Yiddish theater, which merged slapstick with high pathos, was typically characterized by improvisational performances and an eclectic blend of musical forms, including operatic arias, prayers, lullabies, and comedic parody songs.

"Rozhinkes Mit Mandlen" was a lullaby composed in 1881 by Abraham Goldfaden (1840-1908), known as the "Father of Yiddish Theater," for his opera "Shulamis," which tells the story of a

young shepherdess in ancient times who falls in love with a soldier. The song soon became famous independently of the opera because of its lush melody and sweet lyrics about a mother rocking her young son to sleep. “Shiker Lid,” from Goldfaden’s 1894 opera “Akeydes Yitzhok” (“The Sacrifice of Isaac”), provides a contrasting example of another standard song type from the Yiddish stage, the fast and humorous drinking song. Sung by a man worn down by the nagging of his family, the song uses fast-paced rhymes and the repetition of brief melodic phrases to conjure a spinning drunken monologue.

The cylinders in this collection preserve the voices of four Jewish immigrants to the United States who brought their musical traditions from Europe to New York, where they further developed their style, borrowing inspiration from what they heard in their new home.

Little is known of the career of Dave Franklin (1881-?), whom the Lambert catalog describes as “The King of Comic Singers,” other than that he published sheet music for two original songs in 1906 and 1910. Kalman Juvelier (1863-1935) began his career as a traveling synagogue chorister in eastern Europe until at 17 years old he joined a touring Yiddish theater troupe. He immigrated to the US at the turn of the century and became a star on the New York Yiddish stage and a prominent recording artist. William Nemrell (1882-1940) was trained as a cantor and worked in synagogues in New York after he immigrated in 1901. Like many Jewish singers of the time, he crossed over between genres, singing in operettas and even publishing an English-language patriotic song. Finally, Solomon Smulewitz (1868-1943) began his career in his youth as a synagogue chorister, cantorial apprentice, traveling singer and violinist, and published songwriter, all by the age of 20. He moved to the United States in the 1890s and continued his prolific career, performing on the stage, making 120 recordings, and writing hundreds of songs, including the famous, richly sentimental number “A Brivele Der Mamen” (“A Letter to Mother”).

This treasure trove of expertly restored cylinder recordings provides an invaluable opportunity to listen for the first time to the voices and melodies of Jewish artists, recorded within the first few years of their immigration to the United States. As aural time capsules, they conjure the merging of history and modernity that can be heard in the sounds of America’s turn-of-the-century Yiddish theaters, synagogues, and homes.

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Learn more:

Scott A. Carter, “Lambert Company,” *Mayrent Institute for Yiddish Culture*, <https://mayrentinstitute.wisc.edu/collection/record-labels/lambert-company.html>.

Scott A. Carter and Henry Sapoznik, “Standard Phonograph Company of New York,” *Mayrent Institute for Yiddish Culture*, <https://mayrentinstitute.wisc.edu/collection/record-labels/standard-phonograph.html>.

Henry Sapoznik and Richard Martin, liner notes to *Attractive Hebrews: The Lambert Yiddish Cylinders, 1901-1905*. Archeophone 8001. CD. 2016.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect the views of the Library of Congress.