Yiddish Cylinders from the Standard Phonograph Company of New York and the Thomas Lambert Company (c. 1901-1905)

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Essay by Joshua Walden (guest post)*

In 1903, a record producer known as the Thomas Lambert Company of Chicago released its latest catalog advertising new cylinder recordings in its collection. This edition of the company’s listings featured a category of recordings titled Attractive Hebrew Selections, which included 20 newly released cylinders. These cylinders are the earliest surviving recordings of songs in Yiddish, liturgical hymns, and folk music. Sung by Jewish voices trained in cantorial tradition and the more modern Yiddish musical theater, the performances provide a compelling and surprising opportunity to hear the sounds and languages of modern Jewish life among mostly recent immigrant communities in the New World at the turn of the last century.

The Lambert Company was a prominent producer and distributor of cylindrical phonograph records, a novel technology for recording sound invented by Thomas Edison and further developed by Alexander Graham Bell and his engineering partners. Founder Thomas Lambert was an engineer who, in the early 1890s, discovered that if he made cylinders out of sturdy celluloid instead of wax, he could mass-produce them for a broader market and promise greater longevity and durability. Lambert patented the technology in 1899 and formed his company that same year. The company was known for its colorful cylinders: the first were white and then for several years they were released in arresting shades of pink, before the company shifted to selling black cylinders in 1903.

The Lambert Company was short-lived—it descended into bankruptcy in 1906 after Thomas Edison filed a series of lawsuits against it—but it was initially enormously successful, selling over 75,000 cylinders by the end of its first year alone. The Lambert Company typically released vaudeville sketches, minstrel songs, ragtime tunes, and marches, but in 1903 it put out the
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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