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Milken Archive of Jewish Music introduces online multimedia volume
Volume 13:
**Great Songs of the American Yiddish Stage–Yiddish Theater,
Vaudeville, Radio, and Film**

Imagine a time when actors were as likely to burst into song as they were to recite a few lines of dialogue.

A time before the golden age of movie musicals, or even the golden age of Broadway: the golden age of Yiddish theater, the heyday of Second Avenue.

Fortunately, you needn't rely on your imagination. Thanks to the Milken Archive, that golden age lives again, captured in 50 classic songs rendered by the finest contemporary performers in Yiddish musical theater.

Born in Eastern Europe and carried to the United States by the millions of Jews who emigrated from the Old Country during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Yiddish theater became a distinctly American art form, one that was eventually exported to South America, South Africa – and even back to Europe.

Its highbrow European antecedents were rife with biblical and historical themes, moral lessons and literary allusions. But the immigrant audiences who flocked to the theaters of Manhattan's Lower East Side - many of them located near Second Avenue, whose name became synonymous with the entire genre – craved different fare: farces and romantic comedies, melodramas and tragedies set not only in the towns and villages of Russia and the Ukraine, but also in New York City and the Catskill Mountains, their plots reflecting both nostalgia for the Old World and the challenges of life in a new one.

The playwrights, lyricists, and composers of Second Avenue obliged. And the resulting avalanche of Yiddish musical theater, which spilled over into radio and film and eventually made its way into the precincts of Broadway and Hollywood, became the quintessential immigrant art form.

You can hear that immigrant voice loud and clear in a tune like "*Di grune kuzine*" ("The Greenhorn Cousin"), from 1921. Its swirling, Eastern European-inflected melody – crafted by the great klezmer bandleader Abe Schwartz, who came to the US from Romania in 1899 – became a swing-era hit for Benny Goodman and Peggy Lee, complete with a new title ("My Little Cousin") and a fresh set of romantic English lyrics.

But the original Yiddish ones dealt head-on with the disillusionment and frustration that many working-class immigrants experienced when confronted with the gritty reality of

life in America, where the streets were supposed to have been paved with gold.

*My cousin from the old country came over here,
she was beautiful as gold, the "greenhorn"
Her cheeks were rosy like blood oranges
her feet were just begging to dance
Nowadays when I meet my cousin
and I ask her, "How are you, greenhorn?"
She answers me with a crooked expression:
"Columbus's land can go to hell!"*

Yet that voice was nearly stilled. Second Avenue reached its zenith between the 1920s and 1940s; by the 1950s, it was already in decline, its original audiences having assimilated or passed on. And while archival recordings abound – the Archive plans to add these to its already substantial online video offerings, which include live performance footage and interviews with some of the biggest stars of the golden age – few complete or authoritative orchestrations survive. So after years of meticulous musical research, the Archive commissioned new, historically accurate versions of 50 classic songs from today's leading film orchestrators. (Go to the "Articles" section of Volume 13 for noted Hollywood orchestrator Patrick Russ's first-hand account of the challenges involved in bringing the original sound of Second Avenue back to life.)

It was worth the trouble.

Many of Second Avenue's leading composers, including the Big Four – Joseph Rumshinsky, Abraham Ellstein, Alexander Olshanetsky, and Sholom Secunda, all of them well-represented here – were classically trained. And it showed. These men wrote show tunes as polished as any heard on Broadway or the soundstages of Hollywood, where some Second Avenue acts did indeed strike gold. (Molly Picon, the great Yiddish actress and comedienne, was the first to cross over, but not the last. She was soon followed by the likes of Paul Muni, Walther Matthau, and Leonard Nimoy.) They often conducted the performances of their own works—nestled among the Archive's many oral history videos featuring stars of the Yiddish stage, there lies a fascinating comparison of the conducting abilities of several of the Big Four, offered up by two performers who knew them well. Yet they also produced concert and synagogue music as sophisticated as anything composed by their contemporaries.

And they poured the full range of their talents into the music of Second Avenue, crafting scores that nodded by turns at Viennese operetta, cantorial song, and the rich blend of folk and popular music – Ukrainian, Gypsy, klezmer, jazz, Latin – that percolated through the teeming streets of the Lower East Side.

Just listen to the cantorial acrobatics of Secunda's "*Dos yiddishe lid*," a tune that alludes to no less than three of the most familiar Hebrew prayers in the Jewish liturgy. The composer may have been uniquely equipped to merge pop, classical, and liturgical music; he had been a celebrated boy cantor before attending the Institute of Musical Art – now

The Juilliard School – and studying with the renowned Swiss-born composer Ernest Bloch. He also wrote "*Bay mir bistu sheyn*," the most famous song ever to emerge from Second Avenue. (The Archive contains a brief essay on the surprising history of that tune, along with several related oral history and performance videos.)

Bounce along to "*Skrip, klezmerl, skripe*," which sounds as thoroughly drenched in Eastern European Jewish melody as anything from *Fiddler on the Roof* – right down to the pseudo-Hassidic nonsense syllables.

Or check out the bustling "*Watch Your Step*," by Rumshinsky – the Lithuanian-born composer who elevated Yiddish musical theater to the same standards as light opera and Broadway, where his brisk paean to the hectic pace of life in America would have sounded perfectly at home.

These and the rest of the songs that have been lovingly restored to life in Volume 13 once provided the soundtrack to an entire generation of newly minted Americans. And now, with the help of the Archive, we can once again revel in the glory days of Second Avenue.

To view this volume online and download related media, please visit:

http://www.milkenarchive.org/press_releases/view/volume-13-great-songs-of-the-american-yiddish-stage

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