

Up from the Borscht Belt: Jerry Lewis, Jewish Genius

An Historical Review

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ABSTRACT

The French love Jerry Lewis because he fused hysteria, regression, and physical comedy on both stage and screen while American audiences were more ambivalent in response to our “sacred monster.” This revisionist study attempts to show Mr. Lewis in a more positive light as modern Renaissance Man—actor, comedian, *auteur*, director, teacher, philanthropist-- who wrestled with knotty issues of cultural identity, physical pain, family dysfunction, and a roller-coaster career in comedy. Rediscovering his Jewish roots, Jerry Lewis found inner-peace, fruition in creativity, and that the French were right after all.

Keywords: Sacred Monster, psychic splitting, Putz and the Playboy, male bonding, *Tzadakah*, *tumbler*, Borscht Belt

Introduction

The Early Life of Joseph Levitch

If Jesus saves, then Moses invests. And that's a six-percent difference; advantage to our tribe. Jews are funny people: funnier in fact than highly serious followers of Christ. Jerry Lewis ne Joseph Levitch, the principal subject of this paper, was born into the culture of Moses in 1926. But early in the game of life, he discovered that mainstream America preferred a white Christmas to a happy

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Chanukah (or "Happy Harmonica" in the self-mockery of Groucho Marx); so he changed his name, his partner, his associates, and married a snub-nosed shiksa named Patti. He raised six sons, largely in absentia, as Christians. His behavior often bordered on the hellish. To reach the heights of show biz and achieve celebrity status, he cut a deal with the devil, a kind of Faustian bargain. Enter Applegate, his alter ego in *Damn Yankees*, smirking.

How I came to write this article:

Several years ago, Larry Mintz asked me to review a book on Jerry Lewis for *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*. Reluctantly, I took the assignment. My admiration for this "Sacred Monster"--in the appellation of French enthusiasts--was at that time well under control. Physical comedy, particularly when it targets the disabled, is offensive, indeed repugnant. The adulation of Lewis in French literary circles baffles this writer and probably illuminates Gallic sensibility, perhaps pedantry, more than it explains our comic genius. While engaged in addressing "the enigma wrapped in a riddle" that is Jerry Lewis, I became more appreciative of this uniquely American comedic force though not quite ready to blow him French kisses.

Origins of Jewish Humor

I will try to locate Lewis as a Jewish comic in lamb's clothing. Suffering from a Manichean duality, Lewis did not resolve this dilemma of identity until he abandoned his first wife and suffered a near fatal heart attack. Lionized in France and ignored in America in recent years, he made a dramatic comeback when he returned to his ethnic heritage. Concentrating on the early Lewis, one finds discernible tendencies that recur like a haunting refrain or a daunting Wagnerian *leitmotif*. Author Shawn Levy correctly places Jerry Lewis in the context of Jewish humor tracing its roots back to shtetel life. There, the *badchen*, "a cultured clown" entertained at weddings. Coming to America, he adjusted to the new environment as a legitimate entertainer, a master of ceremony.¹ His role sanctioned the Jew as court jester. Later, in the Catskill resorts, this character evolved into a tumpler, a designated comic fool, also with antecedents in the *shtetl* as *nar*, *letz*, *kuni lemel*, and *shlemiel*.

The role of the Catskill Mountains in American Jewish life in general; its impact on the young Jerry Lewis

Immigrants had to escape from the sweltering city in summer. A few pioneers ventured into the country: in the Catskill region about 100 miles north of New York City. Hotels, bungalow colonies or *kuchalayns* where *yiddishe mames* did their own cooking (no reservations, please!) sprang up. Fresh air and good food were not enough. Visitors needed--no, demanded--comic relief. In charge of this categorical imperative was the "social director." One of the best descriptions of this role can be found in the autobiography of Moss Hart who penned a bittersweet evocation of Catskill Culture.²

A product of the "Borscht Belt," Jerry Lewis grew up as the only child of a show business couple, Danny and Rae Lewis. Infected by the "show biz" virus, his parents pursued their "golden rainbow" often at the expense of their only, none but the lonely, child. They encouraged his antics and he rewarded their attention with a poignant rendition of "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" at a benefit in the Catskills in 1932. He was six years old.³ Also bitten by the entertainment bug, Lewis was hooked. He left school when he was sixteen. The young native of Newark developed a bit, part Charlie McCarthy, part Al Jolson. He would mime to music with exaggerated, even spastic movements. He worked his "dummy act" wherever he could get a gig: from hospitals to military dances.

Fate brought Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin together in the summer of 1944. Martin already had star billing while Lewis played second banana as emcee and novelty act. Nine years younger, Lewis adored Martin who had a fascinating resume: boxer, bouncer, croupier, and lady-killer. At a New York nightclub called the Glass Hat, Lewis and Martin began to "poach" on each other's act. Two years later, they improvised a finale to an act which blended their respective talents.⁴

Jerry Lewis picks a partner, Dean Martin and writes the most successful comic act in America on a brown paper bag

An instant hit, the crooner and the comic, Italian and Jew, Mr. Cool and Boy Frantic, handsome man and ugly monkey--in short, polar opposites--followed the Catskill *kunst* (read culture) in "letting go." Biographer Levy comments, in an almost futile effort to decipher their act, that the "Playboy and the Putz"(his designation) played to their opposite's strength and weakness. More

germane to my take is the desperate need for the "Putz" to be accepted, flaws and all. Lewis, heavily freighted with Jewish-American baggage, chose to ignore his ethnic roots until later in his career.

Reasons for the Lewis-Martin success story

The zany duo's leap to fame carried them to Hollywood measurably beyond Judy Garland's rainbow and right into the lap of television, our nation's rising medium. Biographer Nick Tosches provides a compelling explanation for their striking success. Crossing boundaries served as a much-needed escape from Cold War anxieties while sustaining, at the same, male comradery forged during World War II. Building on this base, critic Frank Krutnick carries the analysis load into deep, perhaps more muddy waters. He argues, for example, that the Lewis-Martin linkage is at bottom a sexual bond nurtured in war. Theirs is a distinctively different pairing. Earlier, Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, Hope and Crosby were all both often predictable and basically similar. Not so Martin and Lewis. While Hope and Crosby used Lamour as a non-threatening female, Martin and Lewis represented two distinctive kinds of masculinity joined in sexual hostility.⁵ This same-sex version of screwball comedy focused on Jerry's feminine side as "a jester in the court of sexual panic" according to writer Ed Sikov.⁶

Psychological underpinnings of this dynamic duo

Allow me a variation on the above themes. Combining psychology and common sense, one can discern a pattern in the Martin-Lewis (cash) nexus. From Jerry's point of view, Deano represented all that he was not: swinger, athlete, singer, cool and above all: gentile. A good "goy," Martin fulfilled Jerry's psychic needs as the older brother he never had and a surrogate father to replace the absent one that he regarded with painful ambivalence. The insouciant crooner also provided a kind of security blanket. "Every small Jew," Mel Brooks pontificated, "should have a tall goy for a friend, to walk with him and to protect him against assault."⁷ Yet, Lewis could never completely sever his Jewish roots. In his lip sync routine, now a major flowering from Japan as Karioke, Lewis invariably closed his shtick with the name, Feibush Finkel, a prominent Yiddish actor with cross-over appeal.⁸

Alienated from his ancestral roots, Jerry Lewis hid behind "a tall goy." Escape into fame and fortune constituted a rebellion against his parents. His father in particular framed comedy in a Jewish mode. Lewis bolted from the flock. We see elements of assimilation in his early--and ultimately unhappy--marriage to Patti, the *shiksa* (gentile girl) next door. In rapid succession, they produced six boys (the second by adoption). Patti gave up her career for role as housewife/mother while Jerry would put up a popular front as good husband and good father. He was neither. Years later he erased his son, Joseph, his namesake, his *ben-yuchedl* (youngest son) who had the *chutzpa* (temerity) to tell all to a magazine noted for malicious gossip, *The Inquirer*.⁹ Just as his father had rejected him earlier and Dean Martin, later, Jerry would reenact this deadly drama. Again and again, he returned--repeatedly and compulsively--to that primal bond of loyalty. He loved all: father, mother, wife, Deano, children and, a haunting lyric reminds us: "You always hurt the one you love."

Success, at the onset, linked the "swinger" and the "putz." Their first film, based on a hit radio series "My Friend Irma" did not overly impress critics. Nevertheless, the usually acerbic Bosley Crowther praised Lewis. "This freakishly built and acting young man...has a genuine comic ability." The critic went on to describe "the swift eccentricity of his movements, the harrowing features of his face, the squeak of vocal protestations" and his idiocy which "constitutes a burlesque of an idiot."¹⁰ Crowther found Lewis "the funniest thing in the film." Martin and Lewis also performed on stage in between film showings.¹¹ Subsequent films would elicit less favorable reviews. Lewis and Martin cut a wide swath in Hollywood. Low budgeted films like *Sailor Beware*, their fourth cinematic duet, cost only \$750,000 to produce and grossed \$27,000,000. Hal Wallis discovered a cash cow, which he milked with a simple formula. Martin played the straight lead singer who gets the girl. On the other hand, Lewis incarnated the urban idiot. One of Crowther's colleagues at the *Times* praised Lewis in 1954 for his "needle-sharp impersonation of three foreign medicos in a hospital sequence" as "a piece of comic artistry." The film, *Living It Up* reprised an older version, *Nothing Sacred* in 1954. Lewis personified the stationmaster as perfect local martyr even though the film failed to match the vintage model¹²

Critic Krutnik insists that Jerry provides a regressive fantasy of revolt against adult responsibility. In addition, he secretly harbors a passion for his male buddy. Is this a queer--instead of a fine--romance? No doubt Krutnik is onto something. Prodigious research and

friendly persuasion support his arguments. But I believe he does not pay sufficient attention to another, perhaps more important element, Lewis's ethnicity. Lewis tried to lighten his mother load. For many years, he succeeded in this "great escape" from Jewish roots. But he paid a high, perhaps prohibitive price. In a real sense, Lewis cut a Faustian deal to secure fame and fortune. The rakish Martin began to chafe at the bit and bay at the moon.

Why Dean Martin bolted from the stable

Hit in the eye with a big pizza pie, Martin bolted from the Paramount stable leaving Jerry in a cloud of dust. His personal stock soared in film and later on television, the "tube of plenty." Indeed, television as Marshall McLuhan's "cool medium" was ideally suited to the aloof performer whose mask matched his manner. Life after their divorce in 1956 proved problematic for the younger comic who had worshipped the gentile singer/actor.

A product of a troubled relationship with his own father, Danny Lewis, Jerry must have sensed another paternal rejection in this break-up. In pursuit of self-legitimation, he sang too under the influence of Judy Garland. And a star was reborn. The reinvention of this complex, rootless comic was no easy task. Many critics found Lewis's extreme form of comedy repugnant. Bosley Crowther, a powerful movie critic at the *New York Times*, savaged this would be king of comedy. Thus demonized, Jerry quickly became the whipping boy of the *cognoscenti*. Even the castor oil treatment could not purge this creature from American popular culture.

Rethinking the Lewis phenomenon from the vantage of my students

One reason, I suspect, of this resilience was his mass appeal. Let me explain by reference to personal experience. Many years ago while working my way through graduate school, I taught in a junior high school deep in the heart of Harlem. On certain days when education was put on hold for administrative reasons, we had to cope with hundreds of restless students going through the rite of puberty. What could we do? The favorite respite from uninspiring books and teachers' dirty looks for hundreds of students massed in the auditorium proved to be: any film featuring Jerry Lewis! Why? I wondered.

Baffled at first and often repelled by Lewis as comic, I now know why my students responded so positively. In 1962, the time of my apprenticeship, America was a very different

country. Despite laws to the contrary, segregation dominated: overtly in the south; more subtly in our region. The vast majority of my ghettoized students--I learned--had never ventured into Petula Clark territory, namely, downtown. Symbols of white culture saturated the media. Watching a white man, therefore, parading his inadequacies ("What kind of fool am I?") gave the audience a much-needed sense of Hobbesian superiority when black inferiority appeared as the operative mode of our racist culture. Confined to a closed space, these highly kinetic youngsters could roar ("letting go") with impunity. They experienced, shades of Freud, the laughter of release and relief.

Influences on other Jewish comedians

Lewis interacted with younger Jewish comedians. For example, he tried to influence Lenny Bruce. Jerry urged Lenny to develop a kinder, gentler act: less larded with political commentary and charged with Jewish idioms.¹³ *A nechtikn tog* (a nightly day); no one could change the course of "Dirty Lenny." A link to Woody Allen also merits mention.

Woody wanted Jerry to direct *Take the Money Run*. Since he was unavailable, Lewis urged Allen to direct himself. The film launched Allen's career as *auteur*. He also asked France's favorite American *artiste* to direct *Bananas*. Again the veteran comic rebuffed the young filmmaker. Forced to do it again, (Sam?) Allen "remained grateful to Jerry for inspiration and encouragement throughout his career."¹⁴ Allen's alleged rival at this juncture, Mel Brooks was injecting a Jewish love for humor and a concomitant hatred for Hitler into his first movie, *The Producers*, later a mega-hit on Broadway. Brooks also learned from the Lewis while working on *The Ladies Man*. Krutnick argues that Lewis created a bridge between Jewish comedians.¹⁵ Their working relationship, however, was less than idyllic. Lewis commissioned Brooks to pen the script for a film, *The Ladies Man* (1961). The final draft bore little of the Brooks' original. Contrasting Jack Benny invidiously with Jerry Lewis, Brooks may own the last laugh. To critic Kenneth Tynan, he asserted: "High key comics like that burn themselves out. Lewis could do thirty-one takes, and when you've seen them all that was it. Low-key, laid-back comics like Jack Benny are the ones that last."¹⁶ In his candid assessment, Jerry's biographer acknowledges that his subject repressed overt Jewish tendencies except, of course, when putting on the nebbish.

Nevertheless, he paved the way for more explicitly Jewish comics to tap into tribal roots and *mama-loshen*.

Wrestling with Jewish identity while climbing Jacob's ladder

Exposure to Yiddish culture by parents whose rejection of their only child fueled the young comic's ambition and triggered deep anger. I believe that Jerry subconsciously rejected--point, counterpoint--his Jewish heritage. That is why he gravitated to his polar opposite, Dean Martin. And that is also why the most traumatic event in a life filled with *angst* (high anxiety) was Dean's departure.¹⁷

Martin bolted from the stable in 1956 after finishing their last film, *Hollywood or Bust* and their last television appearance together, before reconciliation in 1976, aptly on July 4. Initially, as their careers diverged, Martin left Lewis in a cloud of dust. His stock soared both in film and on the "tube of plenty." Life after the divorce proved more problematic for the younger comic. In pursuit of self-legitimation, Jerry Lewis, prodded by Judy Garland, sang too. Emulating his idol Al Jolson, Lewis, now flying solo, belted out "Rock-a-Bye Your Baby with a Dixie Melody."¹⁸ And a star was reborn.

Becoming an auteur; doubling an identity

A pivotal point in Lewis's career as *auteur* occurred in 1963. Released that year, *The Nutty Professor* shows off Lewis's immense talent as performer/writer/director--in short, Renaissance man. Derived from the bi-polar matrix, Jekyll and Hyde, the film projects two sides of Jerry's persona: introverted (Jewish?) intellectual Julius Kelp and chemically charged (Goyish?) ebullient Buddy Love. To woo Stella Purdy (Stevens by starlight), the nerdy professor tries a Charles Atlas program of transformation--better living through chemistry. He fails dismally if comically. Arguably, a satiric thrust at former partner Deano, Buddy packs a charismatic punch as crooner, boozier and womanizer. Biographer Shawn Levy insists that Buddy is Jerry, not Dean. He is "loud, arrogant, abusive, abrasive, and conceited"--a mirror image of the comic's dark side--first articulated in *The Bellboy* (1960) and reprised in *The King of Comedy* (1983).¹⁹

Lewis provided a clue to the real persona in his own words. In one account, he claims that Kelp was modeled after a fellow traveler on a train from Los Angeles to New York. A

nebachl, a small Pittsburgh salesman named Hartman with glasses perched on his nose fascinated Lewis who plied him with drink. At the end of this possibly disingenuous story, the entertainer confesses: "Many people can identify with him because somewhere, sometime, they may have met the likes of him. He may even be a member of the family."²⁰

Whose family? Skeletons (white as opposed to red) rattled in his own closet. In a profoundly revealing statement, rich in psychological content, Lewis writes:²¹

He's Buddy Love, infinitely for himself and disliking all other humans. I made him a glaringly destructive force, despicable to the core, as a balance against the loving professor. Creating the role had me in a sweat, especially when I saw images of Buddy Love creeping out from inside me onto the page. A crying horror!

It got even worse during the actual filming. I kept pushing the Buddy Love sequences to the end, procrastinating my ass off, dreading to see him come alive on the screen.

Thus, Lewis's comic bifurcation is tap-rooted in family and culture. Using many Yiddish phrases in his informative book on filmmaking, the *auteur* identifies Chaplin with the *shlemiel* ("the guy who spilled drinks") and *shlimazel* ("the guy who had the drinks spilled on him"). Lewis admits that "My idiot character plays both *shlemiel* and *shlimazel*, and at times the inter-mix."²² It is precisely the oscillation between the quest for intellectual attainment, "highbrow" culture and the pursuit of filthy lucre, *geldt* by association, that informs the marriage of "lowbrow" and "middlebrow" culture. This dichotomy provides the enduring dilemma confronting Jewish-Americans as noted in the work, among others, of Mark Shechner, Albert Goldman, Stephen Whitfield, Joseph Boskin and this writer.

Reconnecting with Jewish roots:

Diminished popularity and personal problems led to Lewis's virtual absence from the screen from 1970 until 1983. Lionized in France, he was bearded in America and forced to put his pet project, *The Day the Clown Cried*--a film about a German circus clown who winds up in Auschwitz--on permanent hold. Never released, mired in litigation, the film represents a grandiose attempt at self-promotion and Chaplinesque bathos. More significantly, it served to

reconnect Jerry with his Jewish roots. This aborted film invites a post mortem. Why did the aging star invest so much time, energy, and money into the money?

As originally written, the plot takes a selfish German clown, 78 years of crusty old age, into Auschwitz. His assignment is to entertain the Jewish children prior to their death. Indeed, he functions as a Pied Piper leading his charges into the gas chambers. Hired by producer Nate Waschberger to both direct and play the lead role based on a Joan O'Brien book, Lewis sprang into action. As deliberately revised by Lewis, the clown is transformed into a Jew who reconnects, through the children, with community and self. The final scene of this incomplete and unreleased film fixes on Lewis as he marches with the children into the jaws of death.²³ Writer's block and financial woes, however, precluded a happy ending; the film failed to materialize.

Creating a new life

Subsequently, Lewis shed his old skin and marched into semi-retirement. He left his wife for a younger, Jewish woman, SanDee Pitnick in 1983. Unable to bear children, Mrs. Lewis and her husband adopted a daughter. Strangely, Lewis lavished more love and attention on his adopted daughter than his six sons. His official biography, on the Internet, describes daughter Danielle Sara as the "light of their lives and the air in their lungs."²⁴ After such knowledge," to echo the poet, "what forgiveness" from ex-wife and sons?

Zaddakah Man

Even in the lean years and the in-between years, Mr. Lewis remained in the public eye with his annual Labor Day Muscular Dystrophy Association Telethons since 1950. In lampooning Lewis, the ill-fated Jewish comic Lenny Bruce claimed that muscular dystrophy was a disease invented by Jerry Lewis and offered to host a "Clapathon" for victims of venereal disease. Lewis's assessment of his critic is worth quoting:

Lenny Bruce was the most infuriating man I ever met in my life because he preferred to make his way with four letter words. He was brilliant but couldn't make it as a straight comic, so he steered that brilliant mind into a joint with fifty-eight people.

He could have swung with the best if he'd gone straight. I am not the enemy of Lenny Bruce, rest his soul...

Lewis also attacked Mort Sahl and Andy Warhol for "wasting talent on so few, rather than working for the masses."²⁵

Fund-raising also links Lewis with traditional Jewish imperatives. To be sure, the motives embrace both *zeddakah* and *koved* (philanthropy and respect). Krutnick adds a psychological dimension in his analysis of Lewis's role in fundraising. He is the mediating father figure who, empowered and impassioned with the rhetoric of love--largely absent from his own nuclear family "rages, cries, pleads and cajoles on behalf of...the victim-child against the villain of disease."²⁶ He thus translates guilt and fear into love, a precious kind of love measured in money.

The big comeback; summary statement

Lewis's regeneration began in 1983 with a stunning performance in Martin Scorsese's *The King of Comedy*. Jerry plays Jerry in a strikingly--for him--understated performance. The 1990s witnessed a resurgence of in and admiration for Jerry Lewis. *Washington Post* media critic Tom Shales lead the chorus of cheers.²⁷

What do you know? The French were right--Jerry Lewis is a genius after all. At least, a genius of sorts. He wants to be thought of a great film director, but it's as a performer that he's earned his honors. He is a comic genius. He also has a genius for surviving and is... inevitably a symbol of hope. Who better to host the biggest telethon of the year?

Granted the hyperbole from a critic not known for effusive praise, this view is share by younger comedians like David Letterman, Steve Martin, Robin Williams and Martin Short who have acknowledged their debt to Lewis.²⁸ Clearly Eddie Murphy's 1996 remake of *The Nutty Professor* pays homage to Lewis "as symbolic godfather to" to contemporary screen comedians.

Seeking love--a staple of Jewish comedians from the shtetl to suburbia--and fulfilling his dad's dream to "make it" on Broadway, Jerry Lewis achieved apotheosis in 1995. He had traveled a long way from the Jewish Alps. From there to fame, from here to obscurity, he resurfaced as

Applegate: the Devil in the revival of *Damn Yankees*. His Faustian bargain had at long last paid off. Thus, the sacred monster of medieval carnival culture that opposed the social order and generated visceral laughter among the masses returned to national favor. Were the French indeed right all along or was Leo Tolstoy's observation that "God sees the truth but waits" the appropriate measure of Jerry Lewis? American academics--this writer included--had underestimated him. My students, vintage early 1960s, deserve the last words. "He funny." The absent predicate represents the laughter that crosses class (lost?) boundaries and reinforces the bonds of our common humanity. In the final analysis, laughter saves more souls than either Jesus or Moses.

Since I wrote this coda, Jerry Lewis was relieved of his role as chief fundraiser of the MDA telethon. Ever resilient, he resumed his career as entertainer. More significantly, he contributed his immense talents to a film, *When Comedy Went to School* which debuts on July 31, 2013 at theatres across America.²⁹ Evidently, the "Sacred Monster" and Jewish Genius lives!

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⁴ Nick Tosches, *Dino: Living High in the Dirty Business of Dreams* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 56-93 describes the genesis of their coupling.

⁵ Krutnick, *Op. Cit.* 45.

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⁷ Kenneth Tynan, *Show People: Profiles in Entertainment* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), 213.

⁸ Elliot Finkel, the son of Fybish, related this coda to Harvey and Myrna Frommer, *It Happened in the Catskills...* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991), 72.

⁹ Levy, *Op. Cit.* 450-451.

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¹¹ *Ibid.*

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¹⁴ *Ibid.* 340.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 341

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