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Red Hot Mama: The Life of Sophie Tucker by Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, and: *The Eddie Cantor Story: A Jewish Life in Performance and Politics* by David Weinstein (review)

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American Jewish History, Volume 103, Number 2, April 2019, pp. 227-231
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ajh.2019.0018>



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Review Essay

Red Hot Mama: The Life of Sophie Tucker. By Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018. 276 pp.

The Eddie Cantor Story: A Jewish Life in Performance and Politics. By David Weinstein. Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2018. xi + 303 pp.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, many of the performers aspiring to stardom on the stages and silent screens of America were Jewish immigrants and the children of immigrants. Most of them, fleeing the shtetls and crowded cities of Eastern Europe, brought the inflections and particular worldview of Yiddish language and culture to their lives in America. Among the many fields that would be radically altered by this population were most aspects of the popular culture industry: song-writing and promotion (including the production of sheet music), nickelodeons and movie theaters, vaudeville and other popular stage performances, and the development of both the film industry and the Broadway musical.

Several book-length studies have recently provided well-rounded pictures of major figures involved in the entertainment industry. The success and breadth of Yale's *Jewish Lives* series is perhaps the best testament to the recent surge of interest in individual life stories, though excellent portraits of individual performers have been integral to some more wide-ranging studies, like the section on Al Jolson in Michael Alexander's *Jazz Age Jews* (2001). One stand-out that bears mentioning is the 2003 exhibition catalog *Entertaining America: Jews, Movies, and Broadcasting*, edited by J. Hoberman and Jeffrey Shandler, which contains a dizzying array of short biographies, essays on culturally significant radio and television shows and films, and a section entitled "Nickelodeon Nation" that provides an invaluable overview of the links between Jewish immigrants and early twentieth-century movie houses, complete with a map that reveals the concentration of nickelodeons in lower Manhattan around 1910.

Against this framework, and very much in concert with the impulse to focus on popular culture as a reflection of American Jewish acculturation, biographies of Eddie Cantor and Sophie Tucker offer abundant resources. Tucker shines as the bold star of her own show in *Red Hot*

Mama: The Life of Sophie Tucker by Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, while Cantor receives a more nuanced, and somewhat more scholarly treatment, in *The Eddie Cantor Story: A Jewish Life in Performance and Politics* by David Weinstein. Both works provide comprehensive pictures of these two giants of the stage. Extensive archival research is augmented by interviews, and particularly in the Cantor book, the performer's actions are firmly situated both within the political climate of his lifetime and Cantor's relationship to his own Jewish identity.

Both stars exemplify the Jewish immigrant's meteoric rise through the ranks of American popular culture; Weinstein informs readers who may not appreciate Cantor's impact that his subject (whose parents immigrated from Russia to New York's Lower East Side) was a blockbuster success, one of the biggest headliners in the country, with hit records, books, board games, buttons, and cigars sporting his image. Weinstein makes a strong case to support his contention that Cantor maintained a strong Jewish identity and was greatly concerned with the welfare of Jews around the world. Sklaroff, meanwhile, argues that not only was Tucker distinguished by the longevity of her sixty-plus years on the stage and the variety of media in which she worked, but also that she worked hard at burnishing her strong, feminine, yet often bawdy image while maintaining hard-headed control of her career and financial affairs.

In the 1910s, during a stint with the Ziegfeld Follies, Cantor was inspired by comedian Will Rogers to include political references and topical humor in his routines. This blend of comedy and satire would become a hallmark of Cantor's performances throughout his career. He cleverly lampooned gender roles and employed racial and ethnic stereotypes for comic effect, sometimes to mock the people he was portraying, but also to throw societal hypocrisy into sharp relief. He took antisemitism to task—including powerful figures like Henry Ford and Father Charles Coughlin—at a time when most Jewish personalities shied away from such confrontations. His political side was not only evident in his barbs against bigoted celebrities and his bravura response to his movies being banned in the Third Reich: “Why should I send my films to Germany and make people laugh who make my people cry?” (129) It was also evident in the relationships he cultivated with President Roosevelt and others, using his fundraising prowess to make the March of Dimes a blockbuster event. However, even his support for FDR's pet charity was apparently not enough to warrant the President's attention in 1939 when Cantor tried to elicit his sympathies to support the Wagner-Rodgers Bill, which could have saved 20,000 German-Jewish children. Around the same time, he became the leading celebrity fundraiser for Hadassah's Youth Aliyah program. Cantor's personal background was evident in

a variety of scenarios, from his involvement in an actors' strike on the side of the Actors' Equity Association, to the judicious use of his tough guy persona as a former gang member from the Lower East Side. On the other hand, he consciously softened and complicated his image by performing routines as a slightly goofy figure of indeterminate gender and race, his rolling eyes and sashay often accompanying clever exposés of powerful antisemites and politicians.

The strength (and sometimes weakness) of Weinstein's book is that it is so extraordinarily detailed that one cannot imagine any possible stone left unturned in Cantor's life. The author reveals important aspects of the American Jewish role in fundraising for the nascent State of Israel (mostly through the Israel Bonds program) and explores the meaning of Jewish identity for someone who, like Cantor, didn't consider himself "religious" but was emotionally invested in Jewish culture and the Jewish immigrant experience. However, in his zeal to be comprehensive, Weinstein sometimes simply includes too much information about even the less colorful chapters of the entertainer's life. Still, his prose is clear and sophisticated, and he marshals extensive anecdotes and Cantor one-liners to spice up the narrative. Weinstein builds a convincing case throughout the book, arguing that Cantor is a paragon of both the entertainer as political figure and as an ethnically-identified American Jew.

Weinstein's greatest ambivalence is reserved for his subject's extensive use of blackface. Cantor's reliance on this artifice lasted well beyond the realm of any conceivable argument that he "only" employed it to establish himself in vaudeville and that it was more a way of hiding his real identity than an actual racial slur, as many white entertainers would later claim about themselves. The author stops short of confronting Cantor's legacy, repeating Cantor's claim that he was the first comedian to perform "without [black] dialect and without comedy clothes while using blackface," as if the absence of other insulting behavior mitigates the practice (29). Weinstein further acknowledges that the entertainer donned black face paint well into the 1920s, after the practice had fallen out of favor, reasoning that the makeup "was so central to Cantor's persona that he could not abandon it" (69).

This questionable role of Eastern European Jewish performers in exploiting black imagery is also a major feature of Sophie Tucker's career, though Sklaroff goes to even greater lengths to rationalize Tucker's behavior. Although Tucker's use of blackface was much more limited than Cantor's, Sklaroff spends much more time than Weinstein on detailing—and seemingly rationalizing—her subject's mixed bag of behavior with her black colleagues. Pronouncements such as "Tucker did not feel that she was in a position to move away from the caricatures

. . . [thinking] she could do more for her black counterparts once she achieved a higher degree of fame” are sprinkled throughout the book (63). The author explains Tucker’s decision to pay Ethel Waters and other African-American singers to teach her their songs and their “style” privately before performing the songs on stage as her own: “Although this may sound like Tucker was taking advantage of her fellow artists or . . . ripping off their music and style, [it] was not entirely one-sided” (112). Meanwhile, in contrast to some Jewish celebrities who spoke on behalf of the NAACP and other civil rights organizations, Tucker did not publicly condemn American racism. However, Sklaroff assures readers, the star had a number of close friends who were black and “was dismayed by segregation” (6). This dissonance is all the more notable when one considers Tucker’s risk-taking in matters of politics and gender that later influenced performers from Carol Channing to Judy Garland to Joan Rivers to Tucker’s most faithful imitator, Bette Midler.

The lives of Cantor and Tucker contained a striking number of intersecting paths. Both started out in single-act sketches and moved from vaudeville to Ziegfeld to bigger stages and finally to film and television. Both were involved in actors’ unions and participated in the 1919 Actors’ Equity Strike, and Tucker followed Cantor as president of the American Federation of Actors (AFA), the first woman serving in that position. Both were in the vanguard of American Jewish support for Israel, raising money for Israel Bonds and Youth Aliyah, and both were close friends with other Jews who were industry stalwarts, like Fanny Brice and Irving Berlin.

These parallels certainly did not mean that Cantor and Tucker always agreed. Probably the tensest moments in their friendship resulted from Tucker’s missteps as AFA President, when she supported the union’s longtime manager who had been accused of fiscal mismanagement. Sklaroff dwells on Tucker’s loyalty to the union manager in the AFA fiasco and her dogged insistence on standing firm even when she had apparently misjudged a situation. She emphasizes such stories in order to reinforce a much more important point: that the singer’s unconventional and sometimes self-aggrandizing choices made her a powerful symbol for women in show business, in the business world overall, and for women in general. As a physically large woman who made her sex appeal and sex life central to her stage presence, Tucker helped to create a more inclusive environment for various body types. As the architect of not only her own business dealings but her own personal life, Tucker often acted with self-interest even in the face of public disapproval and personal sacrifice. She left her infant son from a hasty teenage marriage to be cared for by her sister, defied the wishes of her family when she

entered show business, had a number of lovers and marriages, managed her own money, and even ran an unofficial political campaign late in life, nominating herself to be president of the United States.

Ultimately, Tucker even exercised an unmatched influence over her own legacy, keeping massive scrapbooks for almost sixty years that preserved every piece of memorabilia from her life and career, including press coverage. Sklaroff acknowledges that her book benefits from her privileged access to Tucker's scrapbooks, but this becomes a liability at some points. That access encourages the author to include seemingly every detail of costumes and even unsuccessful shows and establishes Tucker as the ultimate provider of information and arbiter of judgements about her own life. Sklaroff acknowledges in her introduction (as does Weinstein in his) the overwhelming admiration that she bears for her subject. While this feeling is understandable because of Tucker's colorful persona, sometimes a certain lack of objectivity prevails.

Despite these foibles, what Tucker represents as a woman, a Jew, a businessperson, and an entertainer means that this biography is critical to appreciating many of these issues in our recent history. From sexually-charged routines that lasted from her earliest days on stage to USO tours in her 60s, to her open identification with Jewish concerns and with Yiddish culture in one of her most famous songs, "My Yiddishe Mama," to her pathbreaking role as the first female in a number of professional capacities, Tucker offers an unapologetic example of a formidable woman who embodied much that women in the twenty-first century still struggle to attain. As such, the timing of this biography's publication is important, despite its occasional flaws.

These two volumes ensure that their subjects' legacies will be recognized far beyond the personal memories of those who saw them perform. Cantor and Tucker stand on their own, of course, as epic stage presences and important agents of change. But the value-added measure of these works, especially when considered together, is reflected in the many topics of surpassing importance that readers still grapple with today, in our increasingly multicultural and gender-aware society. Performers have frequently been in the vanguard of this type of social awareness, and Jewish public figures often juggle such general concerns with their ethnic identification. Neither Tucker nor Cantor balanced their many roles without occasional stumbles, and yet both ultimately triumphed—in life, and in the long trail of those they influenced—as stars who were openly, positively Jewish while fully embracing the world as much as the world embraced them.

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