

# ENTERTAINING "ENTERTAINING AMERICA"

J. HOBERMAN AND JEFFREY SHANDLER

This volume and the exhibition that it accompanies address a topic that has provoked one of the most extensive public discussions of identity and culture in America: the relationship between American Jews and the nation's entertainment media.

It is a charged and sprawling topic; simply to raise it is to prompt further questions. Which relations between Jews and the mass media are under consideration? Are we discussing Jews as the creators of media institutions or Jews as individual artists? Do we mean Jews as producers of entertainment or as its subject? Is it possible to speak of a Jewish audience, or is it more accurate to speak of Jewish audiences? Moreover,

what assumptions are being made about "Jewishness" (a religious conviction? an ethnicity? a national or racial identity? a sensibility or consciousness?) and "Americanness" (especially in a discussion whose locus is largely confined to New York and Los Angeles)?

Other questions follow: How can Jews be seen simultaneously as cultural outsiders—a minority seeking integration into the American mainstream—and as the ultimate insiders—a group with decisive, "disproportionate" influence over a nation's cultural sensibilities? Do popular films and broadcasts now provide Americans with the most widely familiar stories about Jews? If so, what are the implications of this phenomenon? Is the Jewish case unique or is it a paradigm for other communities—African-Americans, Italian-Americans, Muslims, women, gays and lesbians—and their relationships to the nation's popular culture?

Such questions testify not only to the subject's challenge, but also to its enduring appeal. Collecting the names of Jewish celebrities, especially those prominent in popular entertainment, is not a recent phenomenon. This activity even extends to the debates over the Jewish identity of fictional characters on television series. (Is Sgt. Bilko *really* Jewish? Sally Rogers? Mr. Spock? Barney Miller? George Costanza?) In recent years, this practice, once largely confined to private conversations in front of the TV set or on the way home from the movies, has grown increasingly elaborate and public, sometimes becoming the subject of media works themselves. When comedian Adam Sandler recites an inventory of Jewish entertainment celebrities in a live recording of his 1994 "Chanukah Song," the youthful audience cheers this open declaration of a communal secret.

Similarly, one of the most popular displays in New York's Museum of Jewish Heritage, which opened in 1997, is a multiscreen video installation that celebrates the Jewish contribution to contemporary culture, featuring a preponderance of performers and others who have worked in American film and broadcasting. Frequently, a rapt museum visitor can be heard to exclaim, "I didn't know so-and-so was Jewish!" (Of course, he or she can always check on [www.jewhoo.com](http://www.jewhoo.com) to make sure.) Nor is this simply a pastime for enthusiasts; since the early decades of the twentieth century, anti-Semites have avidly listed the names of Jewish producers, writers, and performers in the entertainment industry as a means of exposing and rooting out a Jewish presence in American culture that they consider to be as hegemonic as it is pernicious.

What inspires people—Jews and non-Jews, fans and detractors—to keep track of who's Jewish in American show business? To debate the Jewishness of characters, dialogue, and plots? To characterize an entire industry as a Jewish "empire"? What

can we learn when we collect these collections, debate these debates? What can they tell us about the role of popular entertainment in modern American life, the place of Jews in American society, the ways that Americans talk about culture and identity? This is the agenda of *Entertaining America*.

Discussions of American Jews and the media can be extensive, passionate, and contentious; they are anything but trivial. Indeed, debates over the presumed Jewishness of a stand-up comedian's material or the submerged Jewish themes in a particular television series have often been an indirect, even encrypted, means of analyzing something more substantial. The central argument of this volume and the exhibition is that the discourse about American Jews and entertainment media, far from being at the periphery, is at the heart of the matter. The topic of *Entertaining America* has not been called into existence by something inherent either in Jews or in the American entertainment industry. Rather, it arises from the public observation of the connections made between this community and that component of American culture. To approach our subject, therefore, it is essential to scrutinize the nature of its discourse and to treat the discussion as a cultural phenomenon in itself—or, to think of it in museological terms, as an array of artifacts.

*Entertaining America* is not simply an inventory of people or works or institutions. Nor does it strive to offer a comprehensive history of American Jews and entertainment media. It does not collect Jews so much as it examines the ways in which the subject of Jews and the entertainment media has been presented from the beginning of the twentieth century to the start of the current millennium—in fan magazines as well as literary fiction, by religious and political leaders as well as journalists and historians, and by Jews working in the entertainment business themselves. These primary materials are complemented by reflections on this discourse by contemporary scholars of media, American culture, and Jewish history.

Like the exhibition, this volume deals with film and broadcasting, as they are the “new” mass media of the past century in which the consideration of American Jews figures most prominently. Taking a selective approach to this vast subject, *Entertaining America* focuses on a key group of widely discussed works (such as the 1960 film *Exodus*), figures (Gertrude Berg, creator and star of the long-running radio and television situation comedy *The Goldbergs*), institutions (early-twentieth-century nickelodeons on New York's Lower East Side), and events (anti-Communist blacklisting in the entertainment industry during the years immediately after World War II).

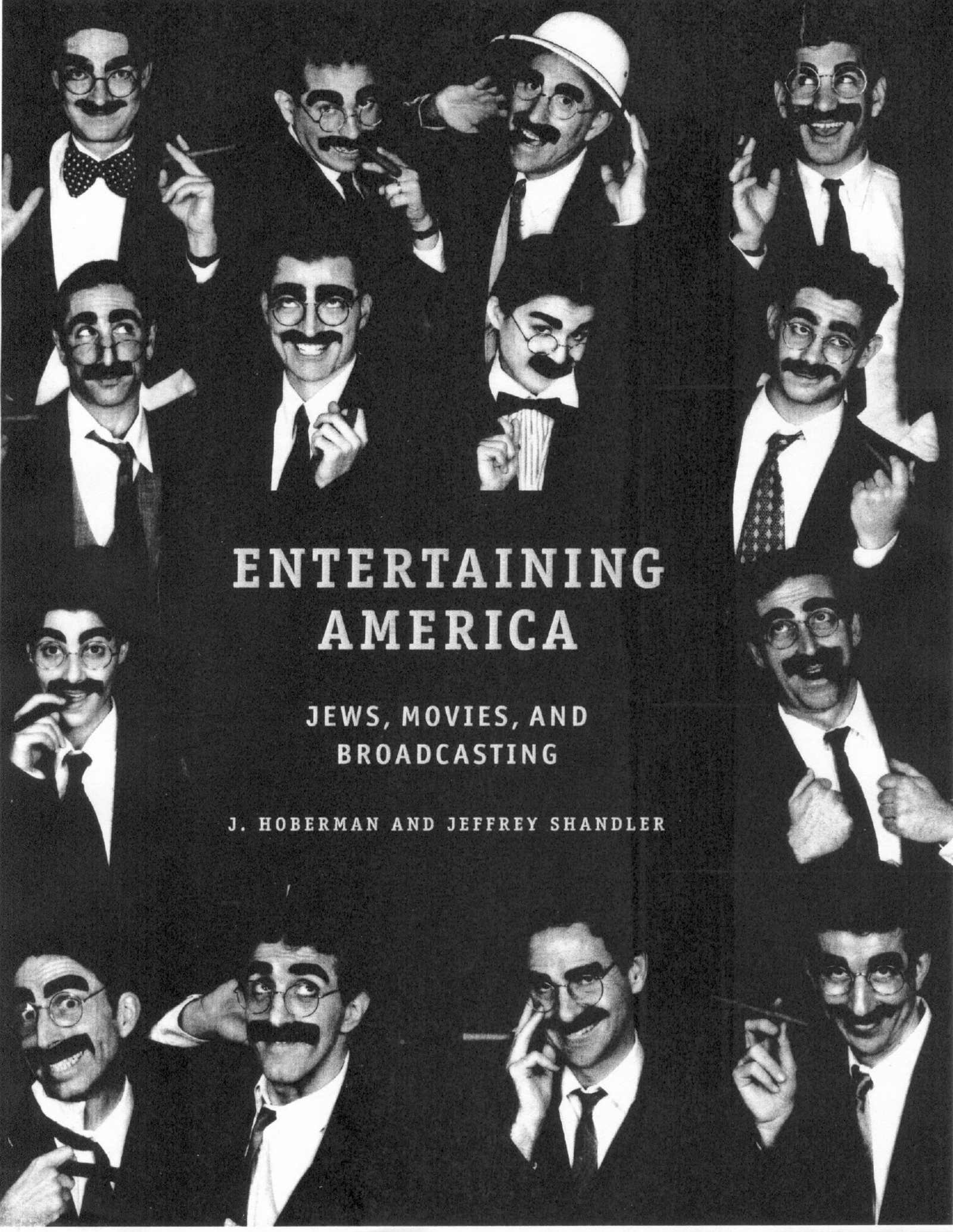
While it is organized according to a general chronology, this book makes occasional leaps across the decades to demonstrate the resilience of particular issues, some of which endure for generations. For example, important as it may be in its own right, the landmark 1927 film *The Jazz Singer* is but one realization of a particular American Jewish myth that runs throughout the twentieth century. Similarly, the Star Gallery at the center of the book samples the extensive scrutiny of Jewish performers in film and broadcasting from the silent era to the present, tracing the dynamics of the Jewish celebrity as a subject of public discourse over the decades.

At any given moment, the discourse on American Jews and the entertainment media gives prominence to certain issues while leaving others largely unaddressed. This balance, too, shifts over time. Jewish professional involvement in the film and, later, broadcasting industries has been an especially widely discussed topic. Now over three generations old, the discourse on the Jewish presence in Hollywood—which is

the subject of "Hollywood's Jewish Question," the central essay in this volume—chronicles shifting notions of Jewish distinctiveness and visibility in America and, more generally, of identity politics in the public sphere.

While examining the most widely known examples of this discussion, *Entertaining America* considers some that are either less familiar or more oblique. In approaching American Jews and the entertainment media as a discursive phenomenon, these prove to be as telling as more obvious cases. Thus, notions of Jewish essentialism have been complicated, as well as clarified, by the projection of a Jewish identity onto non-Jewish performers, epitomized by the example of Charlie Chaplin. And while Jewish religious media generally lie beyond the scope of mainstream American entertainment, *The Eternal Light*, the Jewish Theological Seminary's broadcasts of ecumenical dramas during the 1940s and 1950s and, more recently, the annual telethons aired by the Lubavitcher hasidim are revealing examples of how Jewish religious communities in America employ the conventions of popular entertainment to address moral and spiritual issues before a national audience.

The examination of American Jews and the entertainment media that took shape over the course of the twentieth century continues to develop. The Jewish Museum's exhibition and the debates that it, too, generates—including those that accumulate on the exhibition's Web site ([www.thejewishmuseum.org](http://www.thejewishmuseum.org))—are yet another marker in this remarkable process. Similarly, readers of this volume will have their own say on the matter. We hope they will find herein ample material that will help them locate their personal responses within this contentious and polyvalent discussion.



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BROADCASTING

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