

the bohemian aesthetic

provocant, intelligent et gratuit—pas la revue de votre père



**jewface • lily allen • akon • liz mcombc • snoop dogg •
lesa carlson off blue • cassette • beyoncé knowles •
tecate & summer's discotienda**

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When members of an ethnic community lampoon themselves or play upon the stereotypes given them by outsiders, is it proper for outsiders to laugh or play along? And how dangerous can it be for those in the ethnic community in question to give everyone else fodder for their possible misconceptions?

You are forgiven for thinking the above hypotheticals were directed at today's commercial hip-hop and its often derogatory assumptions about African-Americans of both genders.

Psych!

The topic at hand is *Jewface* (Reboot Stereophonic), and *its* topic is the depictions of Hebrew-Americans on wax cylinders and 10-inch 78 RPM records from the 1900s-1920s. Sixteen such curiosities are collected, here.

Skinflintedness, prominent probosces, cultural juxtapositions, overbearing mothers, kohser food. Everything that, today, might raise the hackles of the National Alliance was taken in stride by a people secure in their assimilation a couple of generations into their American experience. And don't count Gentiles responsible. Writers and performers renowned for their work beyond the novelties found here—such as Irving Berlin and Fanny Brice—were plying their talents with tongues distending their cheeks quite far, no doubt.

Compilations like *Jewface* remind us how far we've come as a society. And how far we, perhaps, don't need to go. Jewish-American rappers, from The Beastie Boys to Smooth-E, kid their background. Stand-up comics, including Lewis Black, Jonathan Katz, and Jon Stewart, rely on their ethnicity for *some* yuks; and it's not as though they want only their fans who've undergone bar- or bat mitzachs to laugh along. The hyphens between [insert ethnic origins, here] and "American" dissolve as we can all share the humor of each other's ubringing and heritage.

Digital reproduction from the antique source materials is most stellar, but the few bumps and stretches of scratches add the character that you'd likely have to pay through any given orifice to secure in their original form. Liner notes nicely set historical perspective against cheekiness.

I shan't encourage you to use it to address a friend on the way to or from synogogue in like fashion, but...Yay for *Jewface*!

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Sometimes a guy in my position (that being an internationally-read, underpaid pop music critic out to avoid the herd mentality tendencies certain to be encountered among his elite ilk) happens upon an act to which—wouldn't it figure?—the herd also flocks.

But the herd is pretty well right about young Englishwoman LILY ALLEN. Like The Kinks, The Jam, and an artist to whom Allen's sometimes compared—Mike "The Streets" Skinner, her artistry might be so Anglophilic as to avoid overseas crossover of greater proportion (although MTV and certain press have gone to bat for her admirably).

What Allen's *Alright, Still* (Virgin) shares with the cinematically rapping Skinner's work is an analysis of—and love for—London's seedy underbelly. What she shares with English '70s hitmaker Alex "Judge Dread" Hughes is a Caucasian complexion mixed with the application of reggae and ska into integrity-riddled pop. And bawdiness. She's not shy about stating what she wants in the sack or wherever else she desires manroot for relief of the hornies.

Allen's incorporation of loungey-ness à la Stereolab, grime, breakbeats and trip-hop elements, sound like her own extensions of Jamaican popular music's riddmic (they use 'riddims' over there, right?; well, that's the adjective) aesthetic. And her slight-but-tough voice is as right for her rare expressions of regret as it is for her more frequent mean/snarky streak.

Thankfully, Allen's music is strong enough to buttress—and not distract from—the reputation she'd already built up online (where I discovered her; Thank you, BBC Radio 1!) as a fearless slagger of other pop divas' and divos' excesses and ridiculousness.

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I'm all for a bald Senegalese guy being an international singing star, but must the only guy who fits that description, and who's getting R&B and pop radio play in this country, be AKON? One could reasonably assume, at this point, that his stint in the slammer was almost a set-up to pen and sing the engaging "Locked Up", earlier in the '00s, and deliberately follow up that solid début with increasingly risible singles.

OK, the exception to that might be what he did with sped-up samples to Bobby Vinton's "Mr. Lonely", but that's possibly only because it was the closest thing to a novelty song, on the chart, in relative eons. That Akon got some love from Radio Disney with what he did to that 1964 hit, and surrounded that point in his discography with odes to watching and/or...*ahem*...engaging strippers, doesn't so much prove any hypocrisy on his part as much as how rinky-dink he sounds

as a lothario. If I want to hear someone with a voice I'd like to hear in church but whose lyrical proclivities betray the likelihood of darkening one's door, give me Nate Dogg; his sung choruses on Warren G.'s "Regulate" continue to enthrall and spook me 13 years after the fact. Akon's a wuss, by comparison, and dueting with a brilliant theatrical sociopath such as Eminem (infamously, on "Smack That") doesn't toughen him up any.

I invite any other chrome-domed pop aspirants from below the Sahara or, indeed, originating from elsewhere, to make Akon a distant memory sooner than later. A cage match will work as well as Ryan Seacrest's top 40 countdown, I'd say.

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Maybe next time I'll cover some soul gospel by an act that's not a female soloist; but, this month, LIZ McCOMB's just too good for me not to hip you to her.

McCombs has flitted about the edges of commercial Afrimerican gospel, but it was probably never the most comfortable fit. If it's her fault, that's no bad thing. There may be no more inventive, intuitive, and judicious gospel singer since Marion Williams and Mahalia Jackson (some Mavis Staples and Gladys Knight could very well be in McComb's catalog of influences, also). Tastes wide enough to embrace traditional Golden Age black church stomping to a variety of jazz styles, hip-hop, country, neo-soul and chamber classical, not to mention the occasional secular love ballad, and recording it all *on the same project*, may have hindered her chances among some parishioners, too.

So, like a sanctified and singing Josephine Baker, McCombs is as well off in France. Or at least on a French *label*, where *Soul, Peace & Love* (Bonsai/EMI France) has been released. One hopes that her eclectic breadth and artfully elastic vocal versatility can bring McComb greater appreciation, despite the current U.S. radio environment for any of the numerous genres into which she slips in and out.

Meanwhile, you—from fundamentalists to atheists—have my endorsement that, at first listen, you'll fall in love with the impressive McComb.

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How much cooler was SNOOP DOGG's recent collaboration with R. KELLY, "That's That" (or "That's That Sh*t" if you're not hearing it on terrestrial radio), when I thought Dogg was rapping about "the Shire" and, thus, extrapolated that the man responsible for too many people adapting their speaking to include "-izzle" after the end of every third word was giving his environs a nickname taken from Tolkien novels?

Considering how I finally understood that Kelly, in his current chart climber, "I'm a Flirt", was singing about "the Chi"—as in his hometown of Chicago—and figuring Dogg was saluting his

duet partner's burg on "That's That", it was fairly *plenty* cooler when I thought Dogg was shouting out the Hobbits' habitat.

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And, now, a word about LESA CARLSON OFF BLUE.

Carlson: an ethereally, archly compassionate, opera-trained jazz singer (and raw foods chef/restaurateur). Off Blue: Carlson's improvisatory band—featuring flute, trumpet, drums, bass and turntables. The album (with a 2003 copyright, but just sent to me on last month): *Evolution Into the Conscious Revolution* (Yellow/Strange Fruit). The result: tripped out funkiness of a mistily psychedelic, socially conscious (duh?) redolence.

And though *Evolution* is completely musically improvised, it's tight enough to give the opposite impression. Carlson's search for meaning, connectedness, and the impulse of the aural moment is as much about the cascade of sound around her as it's in the impressionistic verse of her lyrics. Her refashioning of standards such as "Brother, Can You Spare Dime?" and "Nature Boy" alter contexts almost perversely but, ultimately, sensibly.

My guess is that seeing Carlson (and) Off Blue live would be, at once, intense and serene. There's a peculiarly transfixing energy about this effort that has me interested in hearing more.

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I know I'm not the first one to mention it in print, and that doing so, now—a few years after its release on DVD—may seem a moot point, but how is it that songs fun, educational and catchy as those heard on "Fat Albert and The Cosby Kids" were never released apart from the TV show? Apart from being a bonus in one of those DVD releases, that is. There must be some reissue label—Sundazed? Numero Group? Rhino? Hip-O?—that could release those Junkyard Band gems for the first time and, even with that buubblegum soul bumptiousness that marks the ditties as products of the '70s, push them in the children's market, where more happening parents (and, at risk of cluing you into my age) grandparents could turn on their young'uns to, arguably, the best music to ever be associated with Bill Cosby.

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Devin Smith took the alias of CASSETTE for what was intended to be: a one-shot performance opening for another band. It's gotten a bit further than that now.

One instrumental track from his/(now) their *Beautiful California* (Atomisk/Honor Roll) has already been used in a VISA Card commercial. And Cassette's touring behind the re-release of this album beyond its initial über-indie pressing.

Oh, the music? Weird, but familiar. Made in Smith's bedroom, it's both synthetic and organic. In a stream of acutely aware consciousness, 35 songs fly by, no silence between them, in under 40

minutes. Manic but mannered oddball pop that ingratiates itself into the bloodstream via the usual auditory routes. And, like a good episode of Seinfeld or a dream you immediately remember just before the end of your R.E.M. cycle, it's about everything but next to nothing at all.

If Smith and his foils can pull this off in live performance, I'm supposing it would remind me of the one time I saw The Fiery Furnaces tear through something around 20 songs without so much as a "Hi, how ya doin'?" from singer Eleanor Friedberger through the rush of sound. Here's wanting to find out for myself.

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Am I in a miniscule minority in believing BEYONCÉ KNOWLES' bitterly buttery recent smash, "Irreplaceable", halfway sounds like a country song?

I finally figured out why. It's not only the acoustic guitar strums (or programmed facsimiles thereof?). Nor is it the melodic and lyrical combination that comes off like Tammy Wynette's song for a black fraternity/sorority step show ("To the left/to the left"...).

Down to the chordal progressions, it sounds like 'Yorncé (as I'm fond of calling the annoyingly ubiquitous diva) has recorded an answer song to Keith Urban's best slow jam so far, "You'll Remember Me". She even captures the same type of sugar-coated spitefulness Ms. Kidman's blonder half handled so well in *his* hit.

That doesn't mean I've much more use for La 'Yorncé, but that neither means I'll not credit cross-genre cleverness when I hear it, either. Good job, Knowles. Urban, start recording songs as good as the aforementioned, again. Soon, please.

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It's just a Web site, and I don't know if I'm going to buy anything from it any time in the near future, but TSDiscos (a/k/a Tecate & Summer's Discotienda) is a hecka fun way to while (waste?) away some interWeb time.

T&S specializes in selling Spanish language pop music collectibles—be they a Mexican promo CD of that country's up and coming pop-punk band ALLISON or an early '90s RICKY MARTIN picture disc LP, also from the country south of Tejas (and, at \$50, one of the site's pricier items). A few perusals of the site reveal that a majority of the items sold there come from Mexico, even if all the acts whose goodies are sold don't.

I don't know whether I'd ever have time enough to listen to and read/look through all the cool stuff I could buy from TSD, but I'd love to collect it in roughly the same way I did cartoon cocktail napkins from mom's bowling nights, when I was a kid. I only have so much in common with the culture from which the material derives, but it's colorful, fun and, in this case, iconic of

that odd paradox of youthful innocence and commercial carnality that seems to typify Hispanic countries' teen pop culture. That summary goes a long way in explaining RBD, anyway, huh?

Hey, Tecate and Summer, how about supplying one of your biggest fans—if not customers—with promos of the Spanish language pop/rock he wants to keep writing about in this very column?

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As always, dear readers, send music—most any kind you like that you think I would, too—to the usual...

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