

A JEWISH HISTORY OF AMERICAN DRAG?

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When I tell people that I'm writing a book about Jewish American drag performers, some have scratched their heads or made quick assumptions.

That sounds...
...specific.
Are there even that
many of them?

But, in my view, there may actually be too much relevant material for one book to contain it all! A multifaceted Jewish presence in American drag (and drag's precedents) has arguably existed at least since the nineteenth century.

And it's likely no coincidence that many of the leading theorists and cultural documenters of drag (in general) have also been Jews, sometimes drawing upon their own Jewish backgrounds, from **Esther Newton** to **Judith Butler**, **Marjorie Garber**, **Jack Halberstam**, and **Jennie Livingston** (who directed *Paris Is Burning*, 1990).

A history of Jewish American drag offers a revealing window into the fraught dualities of the American entertainment industry and U.S. popular culture.

It's also a springboard for understanding how Jewish artists have reworked social obstacles into tools of creative expression and political activism, and how Jewish Americans have navigated between assimilation and self-preservation, progressive ideals and tradition

Throughout the history of American entertainment, queerness* and Jewishness have alternately intersected and diverged with each other, and with dominant American culture, in a variety of contexts, producing a kaleidoscope of interactions within drag and its theorization.



These interactions have propelled Jewish "cross-dressing,"** drag, and theatrical gender-redirections toward a number of divergent aims

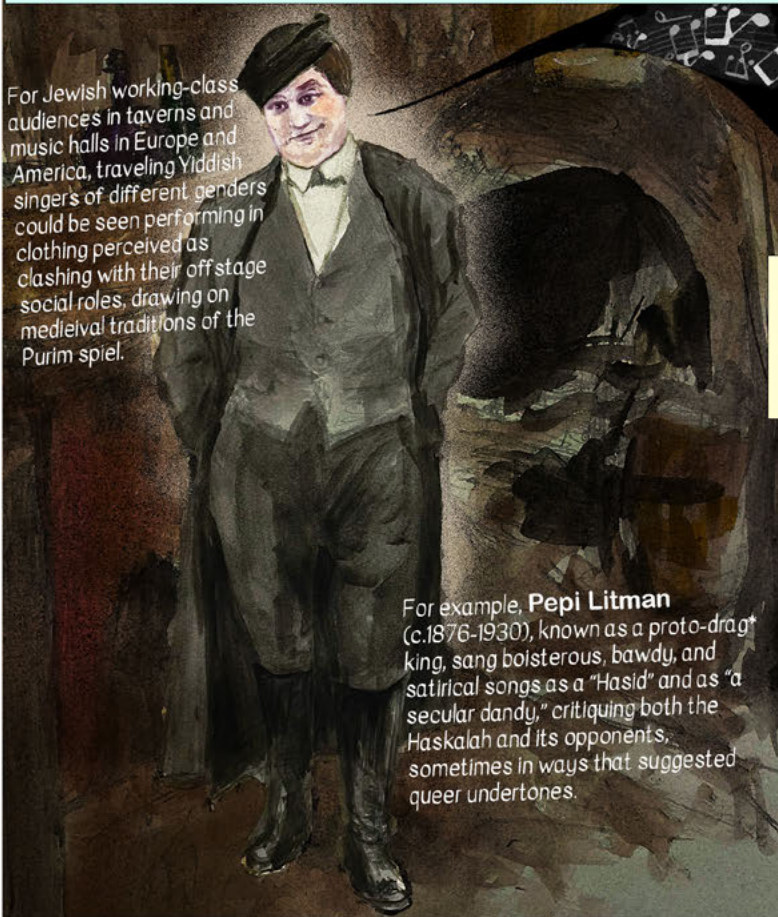
*marginalized, non-normative embodiment, gender experience, or sexual orientation ("normative" varies across time and space, of course).

**While "cross-dress" suggests the outmoded idea of one gender performing its "opposite" (and often doing so comically or "badly," in ways that reinforce the traditional gender order), more subversive forms of theatrical gender performance reject the idea of a strict binary and instead intermix, deconstruct, or reimagine gender signifiers in creative, political, or personally meaningful ways, often in relation to the performer's own queer, fluid, trans, or otherwise expansive relationship to gender.

American Jews (and Jewish-adjacent figures) have related to the art form of drag in a number of different ways over the ages...

...as a prism for social critique within in-group spaces when modernization challenged tradition,

For Jewish working-class audiences in taverns and music halls in Europe and America, traveling Yiddish singer's of different genders could be seen performing in clothing perceived as clashing with their off-stage social roles, drawing on medieval traditions of the Purim spiel.



For example, **Pepi Litman** (c.1876-1930), known as a proto-drag king, sang boisterous, bawdy, and satirical songs as a "Hasid" and as "a secular dandy," critiquing both the Haskalah and its opponents, sometimes in ways that suggested queer undertones.

*exhibiting drag-related impulses (i.e. queer creativity or performative gender-deconstruction) before "drag" was framed as such for the public (which happened mostly in the mid-to-late twentieth century). Some proto-drag existed also in the variety and vaudeville convention of "impersonation" or "illusionism."

Fierstein's Torch Song Trilogy (which moved to Broadway and then became a feature film) dramatized the experience of a Jewish drag queen who proudly inhabited his queer gender expression and sexual orientation while also seeking traditional romantic love, adopting a son, and recreating his own version of a Jewish family. It compelled spectators to understand that queer and gender-atypical people are human beings with hearts, minds, and families, even if differently constructed. *Torch Song's* success on Broadway is credited for having made drag commercially viable in mainstream culture thereafter.

Vayn vet rinen fun di stelyes
af der rebetsin aleyn veln vaksn dreyes,
Mir, heylike kushere khsidim
veln hobn vos tsu lekn.

Wine will flow from the ceilings,
grapevines will even grow on the rebbetzin.
We holy and kosher hasidim
will have what to lick.**

**Source: The An-sky Jewish Folklore Research Project.
<https://yiddishsongs.wordpress.com/tag/pepi-litman/>

as a means for generating empathy across American, Jewish, and queer cultural divides,

After the 1969 Stonewall Riots, as gay and lesbian Americans hotly debated whether to court conditional acceptance through performing "respectable" gender-normativity or advocate for trans and gender-nonconforming people, **Harvey Fierstein** (b. 1954) straddled worlds.

Raised in a middle-class Jewish Brooklyn family, he performed drag roles in New York's underground theater scene and became involved in *Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries* (STAR), founded by **Sylvia Rivera** and **Marsha P. Johnson**.

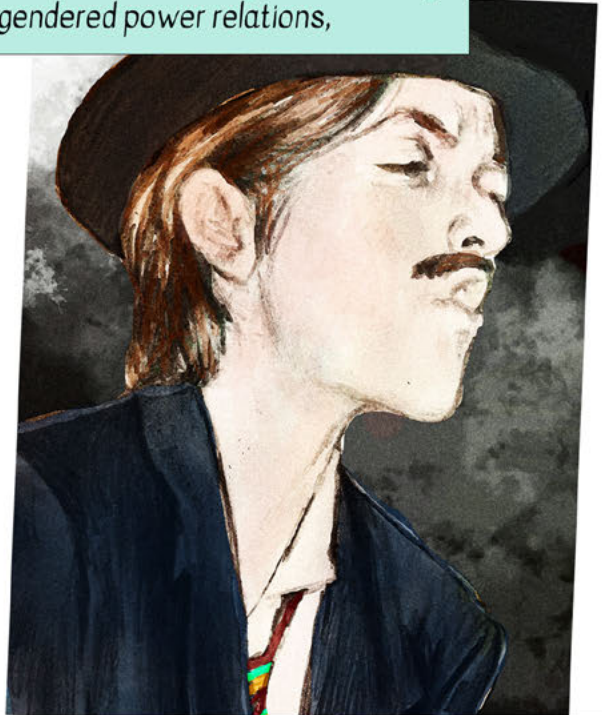


as a means through which to claim space and rework exclusionary cultural frameworks,



Vaginal Davis (b. 1969), an intersex queer champion of guerilla-style performance art, drew from punk sensibilities, the iconic activist and philosopher Angela Davis, and from her own family heritage of German, Jewish, Mexican and French-Creole elders.

as an erotic fantasy of redirecting gendered power relations,



Performance artist **Shelly Mars** (b. 1960) was one of America's leading drag kings in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the term "drag king" entered popular discourse. Mars appropriated and reworked chauvinist male stereotypes at New York's Pyramid Club and other venues.

and as a means for breathing expansive new life into Torah learning, Jewish folklore, and communal ritual.

Rebbetzin Hadassah Gross was a beloved drag persona of **Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie** (b. 1969), a queer social activist and community leader, who emerged from a dynasty of 38 Orthodox rabbis to employ gender-transcendent theatrical storytelling in ways expanding what Jewish spiritually and ritual can look like.



(Just to name a few!)

Why has so much drag involved American Jewishness, and why has drag meant so many different things to American Jews? Is there a “story” to be told here?

If so, maybe it's a story about the way Jewishness itself has long stood, through the eyes of nationalist social fictions, as a placeholder for “excess,” as Alisa Solomon suggests.

As modernity strained to define nations, races, genders, cultures, the Jew became a figure of **excess**, spilling out of categories even as their contours were drawn. For what were these people, after all? An ethnicity, a race, a religion, a nationality? Even they couldn't say. Internally, Bundists, Hasidim, Zionists, and others competed vigorously to determine Jewish identity and meaning. So whether playing for Jewish audiences or for gentiles, when Jews gallivanted across such boundaries in Western theaters or in their own theater of the early twentieth century they performed an overdetermined dance on the fraying demarcation of difference.

---Alisa Solomon, “Queering the Canon: Azoi Toot a Yid,” in *Re-Dressing the Canon: Essays on Theater and Gender* (1997), p.98



Covering later eras, Marjorie Garber's *Vested Interests* (1992) somewhat similarly described “cross-dressing” as a symbolic marker for broader cultural uncertainty around shifting social roles (a “category crisis”), and she used Barbra Streisand's *Yentl* (1983) and a number of other Jewish examples to make this point.

For **Adah Isaacs Menken** (c. 1835-1868), about whose ethnic/racial origins historians continue to disagree, billing herself as a Jewish, shapeshifting performer during an era that associated Jews with dramatic biblical archetypes and the mystique of an Orientalized East, helped her to launch a boundary-crossing career, thwarting social conventions both on and off stage.

Most notoriously, she played the Tartar military hero Ivan Mazeppa, for which she shocked international audiences with her masculine conviction and equestrian feats in states of undress that flouted expectations of Victorian feminine decency. Menken's performative boundary-crossing brought her a mixture of public praise and condemnation, the press both celebrated her and deemed her a dishonest Jewish interloper who bewitched men and women alike.



Despite the problematic, age-old tropes that associate Jews with mimicry or falsity, performative “shapeshifting” is, at its core, not always about imitation; it has also been a crucial strategy for excavating and magnifying unseen or suppressed dimensions of one’s personhood.

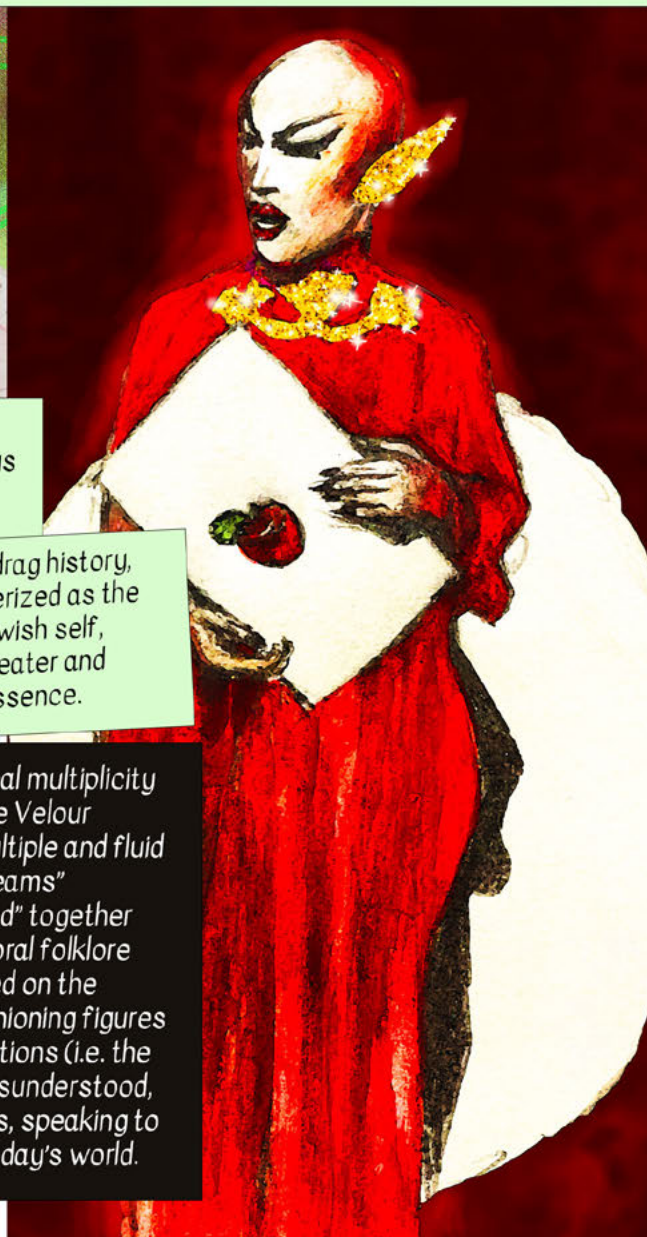
For example, performers like **King Femme**, the drag king persona of **Sage Cassell-Rosenberg**, have used drag to explore their own embodied trans and nonbinary experience, as well as to navigate tensions between their queerness and restrictions of the Orthodox Judaism in which they were raised.

As genderfluid drag queen **Sasha Velour** (b. 1987) writes, drag (unlike imitative “cross-dressing”) is “not really about becoming something opposite to yourself, but rather revealing a heightened and transformed version that was there all along. [...] Drag is the art of bringing queer possibility to life.”*

In this regard, drag has also been a sort of reflexive reading of the embodied self, one that transcends “Peshat” surface readings to enable secret and allegorical dimensions to creatively break free beyond the limitations of social constrictions.

Maybe the most important throughline of Jewish American drag history, then, is something closer to what Andrea Most has characterized as the multiplicity of the improvisationally-performed American Jewish self, which underpinned the development of American popular theater and contrasted Puritan models of selfhood as a fixed, interior essence.

This idea of embodying an improvisational multiplicity speaks to the approaches of figures like Velour whose performances attend to their multiple and fluid identities and intentionally reveal the “seams” between their various influences, “quilted” together across time, like Talmudic discourse or oral folklore traditions. Velour’s drag has also focused on the constructedness of monstrosity, refashioning figures long-associated with antisemitic projections (i.e. the vampire and the witch) into tragically misunderstood, beautiful heroes with powerful emotions, speaking to many of those labeled “monstrous” in today’s world.

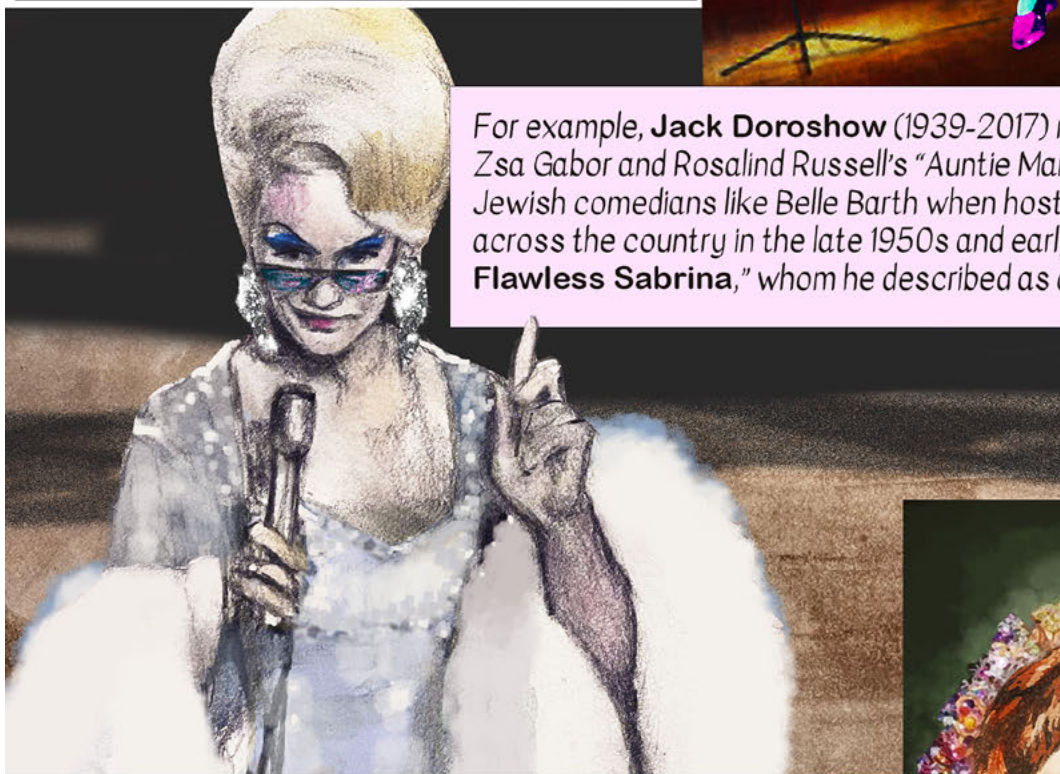


*Sasha Velour, *The Big Reveal: An Illustrated Manifesto of Drag* (New York: HarperCollins, 2023), p. 11

Velour is certainly not the only Jewish drag artist to invest in symbols that walk the line between humanity and monstrosity. It may even be argued that “the Jewish American drag story” is really a story about insider-outsider ambivalence, toggling between self-deprecation and glamorous self-reinvention. Drag regularly intermixes the energies of vaudeville-descended Jewish stand-up comedians (like the bawdy, fast-talking Pearl Williams and Joan Rivers) and classic Hollywood’s silver-screen American dream (which was also influenced by many Jewish creatives).



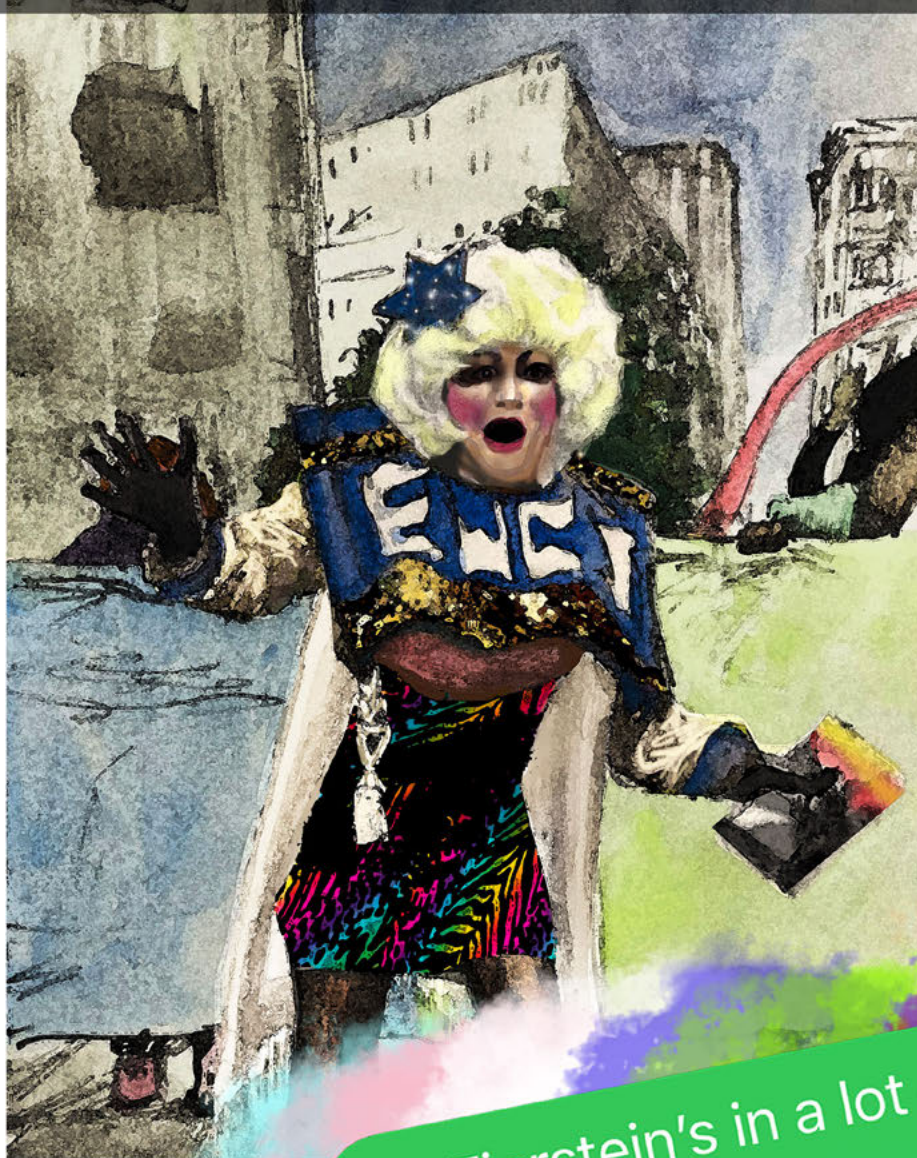
For example, **Jack Doroshow** (1939-2017) merged the glamor of Zsa Zsa Gabor and Rosalind Russell’s “Auntie Mame” with the sharp wit of Jewish comedians like Belle Barth when hosting then-illegal drag pageants across the country in the late 1950s and early 1960s as “**Mother Flawless Sabrina**,” whom he described as a Bar Mitzvah mother emcee.



And **Charles Busch** (b.1954) has starred in his own plays in drag, often as an elegant “Hollywood starlet” type who eventually reveals a no-nonsense, Brooklyn-inflected persona from under the surface, associated with her “rouger” past. Busch’s protagonists symbolically “undo” the effects of assimilation, empowering themselves to triumph over Nazis and other onstage villains. In these iterations, drag itself becomes a sort of metpahor for a layered or hybrid cultural identity.



Or maybe the Jewish American drag story is best told through a history of activism – of using “larger-than-life” forms of visibility to advocate for political change. Jewish drag performers have been committed activists and iconic symbols for social justice causes, fighting against racism, book bans, anti-trans legislation, and other obstacles to the progressive futures they represent.



To offer one example of many: **Sadie, Sadie the Rabbi Lady**, the drag persona of Gilbert Block (1944–2010), was a formative member of San Francisco’s Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a street performance movement of “nuns” from different backgrounds who redirected feelings of shame or exclusion from their own religious upbringings by employing spiritual symbolism in staged public rituals to raise funds and awareness for their causes. In the 1980s and ‘90s, Block used his drag platform as a “rabbinic nun” to (among other things): protest homophobia at the Oscars, conduct a public exorcism for Jerry Falwell’s bigotry before thousands of spectators outside the 1984 Democratic National Convention, debate with politicians on television, run for public office in drag, and travel the country to teach safer-sex practices during the AIDS epidemic.

So Fierstein's in a lot of good company!

Stay tuned for my book, which will illuminate an array of understudied impacts made by Jewish American drag – from creatively navigating cultural tightropes, to negotiating between tradition and possibility, to refashioning one’s relationship to self and society, to political activism, world-making, generating queer Jewish joy, and more!