

Paul Shapiro's 'Vout' Mishegoss

by Kirk Silsbee, Contributing Writer

In 1945, the hippest Hollywood nightlife destination was Billy Berg's, on the corner of Vine and DeLongpre. A tall, suave black man named Slim Gaillard, who favored pin-stripe suits, held court there. Black entertainers were seldom booked west of Western Avenue in those days, and Gaillard's appearances at Berg's were, in a very real sense, where Hollywood's racial integration began. With supreme self-confidence, Gaillard and his ro-tund bassist, Tiny "Bam" Brown, mesmerized audiences (which included Ronald Reagan and Jane Wyman) with original novelty songs that mixed Harlem jive, Greek, Spanish, Italian, Yiddish and plain old gibberish. His favorite invented word was *vout*, and Gaillard used it liberally. When Hollywood committed him to film, a feature movie was titled, "O'Voutie O'Rooney."

The polymath entertainer spoke seven languages, sang, played the guitar and piano (with the backs of his hands), and was capable of extemporizing whole songs in the moment. Gaillard, who died in 1991, was extremely resourceful. He could practically make an entire song out of the word "avocado." Gaillard had a million-selling record in 1945, "Cement Mix-



Slim Gaillard

er." The tune came together as Gaillard took a break from a recording session, walked outside the studio and saw some men doing street repair. One of his most endearing records was a ditty called, "Dunkin' Bagel" (1946). It's largely a 4/4 instrumental, with Gaillard hollering rhythmic epigrams ("Matzoh balls!") to Brown's exercised responses ("Matzoh balls-oreeny!"). Gaillard gave the term *mishmash* a good name.

Fast forward to the present. Saxophonist Paul Shapiro, a mainstay of New York City's downtown creative nexus, recognizes Gaillard as one of his musical forebears. Shapiro's background in jazz and funk led him to recording session work with Michael Jackson, Rufus Wainwright, Queen Latifah, Lou Reed and Jay-Z, among many others. The saxophonist recorded two albums on John Zorn's Judeo-centric Tzadik label as a leader: "Midnight Minyan" (2003) and "It's in the Twilight" (2006). They were both serious instrumental collections of traditional Jewish songs and standards, seen anew through the contemporary prism of Shapiro's working aesthetic of jazz, funk and rhythm 'n' blues. But a funny thing happened on the way to downtown hip street cred. Shapiro encountered songs from

the 1930s and '40s — like Gaillard's "Dunkin' Bagel" and Cab Calloway's "A Bee Gezindt" — that clearly indicated a significant musical exchange.

Prolific songwriter Henry Nemo, who died in the Pacific Palisades in 1999, wrote "A Bee Gezindt." Nemo was an academy of jive (like Calloway and Gaillard), but also a fine tune-smith. He wrote several Cotton Club revues with Duke Ellington and contributed the lyrics to Duke's evergreen "I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart." In 1992, I asked Nemo about the black stride pianist Willie "The Lion" Smith, Ellington's piano mentor and the cantor of the Harlem synagogue. "We got along great," The Neme recalled, "because I was usually the only one on the scene he could talk Yiddish to."

On his new album, "Essen" (Tzadik), Shapiro explores the cultural mash-up that occurred in American popular music when Jewish music — Yiddish theater songs, vaudeville tunes, klezmer songs and novelties — met blues, jazz, rhythm 'n' blues and swing. The result is a collection that touches history in several ways, yet always manages to make a contemporary statement that's fun to listen to. His crack band, Paul Shapiro's Ribs and Brisket Revue, can sound like a Lower East Side wedding outfit, an R&B group, a strip club combo and a cooking funk band. Brian Mitchell alternates traditional Jewish theme chords and manic, eight-to-the-bar boogie-woogie piano on Gaillard's "Matzoh Balls."

From a phone in central New York, Shapiro talked about the ways Jewish culture melded with other cultures. "You know where I think a lot of it occurred?" he asked. "The Catskills resorts. It wasn't just Jewish bands that played in those hotels. Jews were mad about Latin music in the '50s, and many Latin musicians went up there. They learned some Jewish songs, like any good musician would. But there was a connection, I think, because the Sephardic among us came through North Africa and Spain, with our Ladino music. There was not only a natural affinity between cultures but it was also a work opportunity for the bands."

The Ribs and Brisket Revue has two great assets in singers Cilla Owens and Babi (pronounced Bobby) Floyd. Their vocals are both exuberant and nuanced. Floyd sounds like a crazed cantor on his *vilde chaya* vocal for "Utt-Da-Zay." Torrents of pidgin Yiddish that would have delighted Gaillard had occasional bits of irony bobbing to the surface ("you actually vant this thing?").

Owens would have made a fine singer for swing era orchestras like Lucky Millinder or Andy Kirk (in fact, she brings to mind Kirk's vocalist June Richmond). She displays fine blues feeling on "A Bee Gezindt." She also manages to play both sides of the coin on Sophie Tucker's "Mama Goes Where Papa Goes," where she delivers some of the lyrics in Yiddish. The band plays like a juke joint combo used to dodging beer bottles and bullets. Shapiro's nasty alto sax breaks would have qualified him for duty at Duffy's Gaieties on Cahuenga Boulevard, when Lenny Bruce emceed for the peelers in the '50s.

Tucker is also a seminal figure for Shapiro. "I hear in her," he said, "a serious blues infection. She had the Yiddish inflection from her background but she seriously studied the blues. It was absolutely unique that she had

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