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## On Music, Politics and Scholarship

### Christine Griffin

Let us begin with a story about the history of social psychology, forged in the shadow of World War 2 and the even longer shadow of the Holocaust. It is no exaggeration to say that contemporary social psychology was shaped by the work of a substantial number of Jewish refugees who fled the rise of Hitler and Nazism, relocating to the USA, Britain and other countries in Western Europe. The list is a long one, and what follows is by no means exhaustive, but it would include Henri Tajfel, Solomon Asch, Stanley Milgram, Marie Jahoda, Paul Lazarsfeld, Gustav Jahoda, Theodore Adorno and many more. Respect is due to these eminent Jewish theorists and researchers, whose work was often informed by attempts to understand the social and psychological dimensions of the hateful regimes from which they escaped. Jewish social psychologists produced some of the key theoretical and empirical work in the field between the 1930s and the 1950s. Contemporary social psychology was formed, in large part, out of this foundational work on prejudice, stereotyping, racism, social influence, obedience to authority, intergroup relations, social identity, cooperation and competition.

Michael Billig is a product of this influential ancestry. As a postgraduate student working with Henri Tajfel on intergroup relations and social identity within the minimal group paradigm, his work was shaped by the legacy of that earlier tranche of 'social problems' psychology (Billig and Tajfel, 1973; Billig, 1976). Billig went on to engage with a far broader range of social psychological phenomena, drawing on a wide spectrum of theoretical frameworks and research methods, spreading his wings beyond the relative confines of the experimental approach. His key works on fascist ideology (Billig, 1978), nationalism in everyday culture (Billig, 1995), argument and rhetoric (Billig, 1996) and the legacy of Freud (Billig, 1999) are just a few examples of his subsequent contribution to contemporary social psychology. Despite, or perhaps because of the importance of his work, it is salutary to note that Michael Billig has a similar status within mainstream academic psychology to that of Sigmund Freud. His work is often valued more highly outside of psychology than within it.

This chapter engages with one of Billig's less familiar texts. During the 1990s Billig gave a talk to the Nottingham Council of Christians and Jews that led him to begin work on a short pamphlet about the Jewish contribution to rock, instigated by Ross Bradshaw from the local Nottingham publishers 'Five Leaves'. This pamphlet eventually expanded to become the book *'Rock 'n' Roll Jews'* (hereafter *'RRJ'*). This is not one of Billig's standard academic 'outputs' (as they are now known), but a product of his enduring love for and interest in popular music and Jewish history.

Popular music seldom appears as a key topic in social psychology texts on rhetoric, discourse and ideology, but its inclusion here reflects Billig's distinctive approach to academic endeavour. In his appreciation of questions that lie on the edges of traditional academic work and his commitment to avoiding "the heavy words of social science", Billig's

writing on the Jewish contribution to rock music tells “a story about culture, prejudice and identity” (Billig, 2000, p.1). It is also written with what British sociologist Simon Frith termed “a rare combination of insight and affection” in his notes on the back cover. In this small and relatively modest book we can identify a number of familiar themes that pervade Billig’s more well-known academic texts. I want to use ‘*RRJ*’ as a lens through which to engage with Billig’s work and to discuss his distinctive contribution to social science.

### **Who wrote for Elvis? Absent Jews and telling a fuller story**

One of the core arguments of ‘*RRJ*’ is that traditional historical narratives concerning the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll tell a limited story because they fail to acknowledge the formative influence of Jewish songwriters, performers and producers. There have been many influential Jewish managers in the rock era (the Beatles’ manager Brian Epstein and Malcolm McLaren<sup>(1)</sup> who worked with the Sex Pistols are two notable examples), but fewer Jewish performers. However, Jews – primarily men – were involved in rock ‘n’ roll from the start as promoters (from Alan Freed to Harvey Goldsmith); owners of independent record labels (eg. Leonard and Phil Chess of Chess Records); and, importantly, as songwriters and producers. Jews made a substantial contribution to the popular music emerging from Tin Pan Alley that pre-dated the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll in the 1950s, and their influence continued to be felt in the new musical forms of the rock era.

‘*RRJ*’ devotes a whole chapter to the work of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, two Jews from Baltimore and New York respectively who wrote ‘*Hound Dog*’, the breakthrough hit for Elvis Presley. ‘*Hound Dog*’ has been the focus of a long-running debate about white artists copying (and diluting) songs by black artists and reaping the rewards (eg. Ennis, 1992). Willie Mae (‘Big Mama’) Thornton recorded ‘*Hound Dog*’ in 1953 and had a hit in the Rhythm and Blues (ie. ‘black music’) charts three years before Elvis had his success with the song. Billig demonstrates how various well-respected historians and sociologists of rock have represented ‘*Hound Dog*’ as an authentically ‘black’ song, indeed as the epitome of the American ‘black music’ tradition, overlooking the contribution of its Jewish writers (eg. Weinstein, 1998).<sup>(2)</sup> As Billig argues:

“much of Elvis’s music was coming from the same source, one generation removed, as the classic music of Tin Pan Alley. It was still urban Jews who were writing hit songs. Like the great Jewish composers of Tin Pan Alley before them, they were drawing on the latest developments in African American music to do so, this substantial Jewish contribution was hidden by the acceptably WASPish aura of the new, young mega-stars” (2000, p. 47)

According to Billig, Leiber and Stoller viewed their own Jewish musical tradition of the period as ‘uncool’, preferring Latin rhythms and African-American blues and boogie-woogie music and dance. Working with black vocal group the Robins (later to become the Coasters), Billig argues that Leiber and Stoller brought “a sense of familiarity, but apartness” to their “highly vocal” work. Their songs were “little playlets” that were “written for black voices and used black slang”, and which referred to everyday events and situations that were relevant to the newly emerging market of teenage consumers across the USA – and

beyond (2000, p.52). Their lyrics communicated a distrust and disenchantment with the WASP world that also had resonances for young black Americans.

Throughout *'RRJ'* Billig draws our attention to the significant ways in which Jewish cultural influences have been rendered invisible in pervasive narratives about the emergence of rock 'n' roll. Billig makes these absences visible, 'filling the gap' by identifying Jewish cultural influences on rock music and providing an account of a Jewish history that has been largely hidden. He also discusses those instances in which Jews themselves sometimes strove to downplay or hide their own Jewishness – but that is for later. Of course, *'RRJ'* contains its own absences, notably the significant influence of Jewish women on rock and pop music. Billig does mention this as a structured absence, noting the work of Carole King (born Carole Klein) for example, but her work is not subjected to quite the same lengthy detailed scrutiny as male Jewish singer songwriters of the period. A more obvious absence concerns the harsh treatment of women by some key Jewish figures, notably Phil Spector's violent and controlling relationships with his female partners and Leonard Cohen's sexual double standards in his relationships with women. Few texts consider the potential influence of this on their work (Nadel, 1996).

The absence of millions of Jews from across Europe following WW2 was palpable, but this very obvious 'gap' was obscured in a prolonged post-genocidal silence about the full horrors of the Holocaust (Melnick, 1997). When Billig points out the relative absence of Jewish performers from the history of Western popular culture, or the minimal recognition of their contribution to rock 'n' roll during the 1950s and '60s, he never loses sight of the terrible context to these events. In identifying *whose* work is being overlooked and *whose* contributions are not being fully recognised, Billig does full justice to the psychological, cultural and political dynamics of these absences. In so doing he gives these Jewish performers, song-writers, producers and managers the respect they are due.

This concern with searching for and interrogating 'absences' is a pervasive theme in Billig's academic work, including his long-standing contention that people are relatively absent from many social psychology texts. His argument here is that social scientists (including social psychologists) tend to adopt overly technical terminology and fictional concepts which they then treat as 'things' or entities with the power to act at the expense of engaging with people as agentic beings in all their complexity (Billig, 2008a). In earlier work he advocated a 'repopulation' of the 'depopulated pages of social psychology' (Billig, 1994), and in more recent texts this has been linked to a critique of current social science writing and thinking (Billig, 2011; Billig, in press). In his academic work and in *'RRJ'*, Billig's close attention to exactly *what* is being lost, and the processes through which such absences are established and maintained, does much more than identify absences or 'fill a gap'. The absence of over six million Jews in such horrific circumstances has reverberated down the generations, and continues to be felt to this day (Bar-On and Gilad, 1994). It is, of course, a 'gap' that can never be filled.

## Rocking Jews are hard to find: Doing more than ‘filling the gap’

While *‘RRJ’* inserts the contribution of Jews into the history of rock and pop music, it also explores the complex relationship between black and Jewish people in the USA from the 1920s to the 1960s. Billig’s argument that ‘race relations’ were (and continue to be) “not just a matter of black and white” (2000, p.34) is a long-standing theme in his work. It is as a core argument in *‘Fascists’*, his study of the British National Front (Billig, 1978). In this early text Billig identified anti-Semitism as a key underlying ideology of the National Front during the early 1970s. As Billig argued: “beneath the racist and anti-black rhetoric, the National Front is perpetuating a long-established anti-Semitic tradition [which] has retained the full force of its Nazi and genocidal antecedents” (Billig, 1978).

In *‘RRJ’* Billig illustrates how key songs such as *‘You’ve Lost That Loving Feeling’* by the white male duo The Righteous Brothers, and *‘River Deep, Mountain High’* by African American R and B act Ike and Tina Turner could not be classified as simply ‘black’ or ‘white’ music. This was due to the distinctive input of Phil Spector, who recorded and co-wrote both songs. In particular, *‘RRJ’* highlights the important role of Jewish songwriters in enabling certain songs and performers to “cross the racial divide” in the highly segregated US music and cultural scene. More than this, Billig argues that Jewish songwriters and producers such as Phil Spector, Jerry Wexler, Leiber and Stoller and many more were not simply acting as relatively passive ‘go-betweens’, but forging distinctive and novel forms of music that shaped rock and popular music. *‘RRJ’* explains why Leiber and Stoller’s work with the Drifters and later with Ben E. King during the early 1960s was so ground-breaking at the time. In songs like *‘Spanish Harlem’* they combined gospel tenor, Latin rhythm, electric guitar and orchestral strings in a synthesis that produced something distinctive and new. When Billig brings formerly absent Jews into the history of rock music, he shows us that their contribution did a great deal more than fill a ‘gap’: it played a crucial role in shaping contemporary rock music and popular culture.

*‘RRJ’* also explores some lesser known aspects of the relationship between Jews and blacks in the US Civil Rights era. Billig recounts the story of Simon and Garfunkel’s signing with Columbia Records during the early 1960s. Young middle class Jews Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel were unsure about whether to use their own names in case their album sales were held down by the anti-Semitism of potential buyers; they had previously recorded as ‘Tom and Jerry’. Their producer at Columbia, Tom Wilson, was black, and supported the duo’s politically-edged songs, such as *‘He Was My Brother’* about the death of Simon’s school friend Andrew Goldman and another Jew named Michael Schwerner, along with African American James Chaney in Mississippi. The three were murdered in a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) campaign to register black voters.<sup>(3)</sup> Wilson insisted that Simon and Garfunkel should put the album out under their own names, given their stand against political injustice. Although stories of Jews helping African Americans in the Civil Rights movement provide the basis for a more familiar narrative, Billig identifies this as one example of an African American helping Jews to come to terms with their own identities in the context of a racist culture.

Billig also cautions against jumping to conclusions about the nature of the relative silence around the Jewish contribution to the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll. He urges us not to view this as some sort of top-down racist conspiracy, arguing instead that this is “a story of

not noticing and not wanting to be noticed” (2000, p.14). Billig certainly does not minimise the damaging impact of anti-Semitism, but he also acknowledges the extent to which some Jews downplayed their own Jewish identity, for example by anglicising their names. He renders their actions comprehensible in the context of the historical and political conditions of particular periods, urging us to understand their actions without judging them by the standards of a later era. This capacity to appreciate and analyse the complexities of such phenomena is at the heart of much of Billig’s academic work on ‘everyday’ racism and nationalism (eg. Billig, 1978, 1996).

### **Jewish singer-songwriters and their troubled relationship with their roots**

In *‘RRJ’* Billig argues that the lack of acknowledgement of the important contribution of Jews to the emergence of rock and popular culture arose in part from the reluctance of some Jews in the music industry to ‘come out’ as Jewish. He points to the role of anti-Semitism in US culture as a significant factor here, giving detailed accounts of the struggles of figures such as Doc Pomus and Jerry Wexler and their different approaches to identifying as Jewish. Billig also explores the position of more recent and well-known figures such as Paul Simon, Bob Dylan and Lou Reed, who entered the music business in the 1960s when the situation appeared to have improved – at least to some extent.

There is insufficient space here to do justice to (or even list) the numerous texts on Dylan and his contribution to rock and pop culture (eg. Scaduto, 1996; Heylin, 1992; Spitz, 1989). It is scarcely novel to represent Dylan as “the Presley for middle class whites”, an “ambivalent outsider” (Billig, 2000, p.118), or a “traveller in disguise” (p.129), nor even as “escaping from those categories which would pin him down to being one particular type of musician” (p.119). Yet Billig’s perspective on the heated debates about the underlying reasons for Dylan’s name change from Zimmerman moves into different territory. Rather than speculating on this name change as reflecting the young Zimmerman’s possible rejection of his father or his affinity with Dylan Thomas, Billig sets this event in its historical and political context. He points out that many Jews of Dylan’s father’s generation would have anglicised their names as a means of ‘fitting in’ to US society, rather than as a “symbol of shedding their Jewish identity” (p.121), as many other commentators have speculated. Billig argues that this move, which predated Dylan’s musical career by some years, was unlikely to have been viewed as a momentous event at the time, especially since his parents, Abraham and Beatty, had already given him the “easily assimilable” forenames of Robert Allen (p.121). In *‘RRJ’*, Dylan’s name change somehow emerges as both “no big deal” (p.121) and more shocking as a result of its relatively unremarkable status at the time.

Billig goes on to argue that despite all his various disguises, there is one identity which Dylan has avoided embracing with some determination over the years – his Jewishness. Again, others have pointed out that Dylan appeared ill at ease with his Jewish identity when growing up in Hibbing, northern Minnesota (Spitz, 1989). He initially reinvented himself as a mid-Western American, taking on the persona of Woody Guthrie amongst others. Billig takes a careful and detailed look at Dylan’s relationship with Judaism and Christianity, arguing that it is still possible to find Jewish influences alongside the many Christian references in Dylan’s work.<sup>(4)</sup> Although Dylan did go through a “Jewish period” in

the 1980s (p.130), this did not have the same influence on his work as his missionary Christianity around the time of the *'Slow Train Coming'* album for example. As Billig argues:

“Dylan’s music is that of an outsider posing as a dispossessed insider. He claimed an American folk tradition that had not belonged to his grandparents. In taking over this tradition, and claiming to be its guardian, he could not but subvert it. His imagination would not stand still. He had to keep moving – to keep wandering – as if fearing exposure, just as, when a young man, he had feared being revealed as ‘Zimmerman’” (2000, p.131).

Billig has some sympathy for Dylan’s apparent reluctance to be ‘pinned down’ in musical or cultural terms, and for his ambivalent orientation to his Jewish identity. He appreciates the allure of Woody Guthrie’s ‘outsider’ persona for Dylan and for other Jewish folk musicians such as Ramblin’ Jack Elliott (born Adnopoz) during the early 1960s. As always, Billig’s appreciation of Dylan’s perspective rests on an understanding that sets his actions in historical, social and political context. Dylan was born into a small town with a majority WASP population and a small Jewish community near the Canadian border in 1941, at a time when Jews were still barred from the local country club. Unlike Neil Sedaka, Jerry Leiber, Mike Stoller and many others, he did not grow up in the far larger and more ethnically diverse urban environments of major US cities with larger Jewish communities.

*'RRJ'* is rather less sympathetic towards a later Jewish American singer songwriter who came onto the British folk circuit from the US popular music scene some years after Bob Dylan: Paul Simon. Only three years after their first album as ‘Simon and Garfunkel’, at around the time of the hugely successful best-selling album *'Bridge Over Troubled Water'*, Billig notes that Paul Simon appeared to have forgotten about the duo’s initial reluctance to record under their real names in a 1967 interview with the *New Yorker* magazine. After his considerable success with Art Garfunkel, Simon developed a strong and long-standing interest in what eventually became known as ‘world music’. Starting in the early 1970s, and especially with the release of the album *'Graceland'* in 1986, Simon drew on and synthesised a wide range of musical sources to shape his work.

The controversy over *'Graceland'* was substantial, sustained and unpleasant, with black and white artists across the world taking a variety of different positions. Billig references the “old accusation of theft”, of white artists stealing black African music in this heated debate (2000, p.137). Even more seriously, Simon was accused of breaking the UN cultural boycott against the apartheid regime in South Africa by employing South African artists. As Billig notes, of all the many musical traditions Simon has drawn on in his work, there is one notable gap – “there is virtually no Jewish influence ... It is as if, in this restless travelling of the musical imagination, there is a gap at home” (2000, p.139). He is not convinced by Simon’s repeated assertions that his Jewish musical tradition and his identity and cultural heritage have had the least influence of all on his music. Simon was not quite of a generation to publicly deny his own Jewish origins (at least after 1963). Yet when he expressed pride on discovering that his grandfather was a cantor in Rumania during Simon’s research into his family genealogy in the 1970s, this was still not strong enough to be translated into his music.<sup>(5)</sup> As Billig puts it:

“but why, of all musical traditions in popular music, should Simon claim that his own tradition has had the least effect? Again, something more is not being said” (2000, p.140).

### **On being ‘cool’ and being Jewish (and male): An impossible combination?**

With its heartfelt evaluations of such unashamedly popular performers and song-writers as Neil Sedaka and Leiber and Stoller, *‘RRJ’* is refreshingly free of the endless discussions concerning the search for ‘cool’ that bedevils so much ‘serious’ writing on rock and pop (Hebdige, 1979). A comparable text by US rock journalist Stephen Lee Beecher with the wonderful title: *‘The Heebie-Jeebies at CBGB’s’* (hereafter *‘HJBs’*), traces the vital role of Jews in the emergence of US punk music (Beecher, 2006).<sup>(6)</sup> *‘HJBs’* takes a different approach, exploring the striving for ‘cool’ amongst Jewish performers and promoters involved in the US New York punk scene. The book begins by acknowledging that ‘coolness’ was not automatically associated with Jews in the rock music scene, before going on to trace the ways in which the strong Jewish influence on punk managed to shift that association – at least to some extent.

*‘HJBs’* begins with the forthright assertion that “punk is Jewish” (2006, p.xi). Beecher is arguing here that punk was fundamentally shaped by Jewish culture, as well as being forged by Jewish performers, managers, promoters, producers and journalists. According to Beecher, punk “reeks of humor and irony and preoccupations with Nazism. It’s all about outsiders who are ‘one of us’ in the shtetl of New York. It’s about nervous energy” (2006, p.xi). There are two strands to Beecher’s argument: firstly that New York (and especially downtown Lower East Side/ East Village) was the rightful home of punk; and secondly that this area is “the home of the Jews” in New York, so it follows that Jewish New Yorkers combined with their non-Jewish compatriots during the late 1960s and into the 1970s to form punk.

*‘RRJ’* has relatively little to say about punk, given its focus on the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll in earlier decades. However, both books cover some common territory. Beecher identifies Lenny Bruce as paving the way for subsequent Jewish ‘outsiders’ from Dylan to Lou Reed, from Boston punk Jonathan Richman to half of the Ramones. *‘RRJ’* traces the complicated and troubled history of Bruce as a key ‘outsider’ figure for Jews in the music industry, and also references the work of Lou Reed and Phil Spector, as well as Bob Dylan.

For Beecher, first Lenny Bruce and then punks showed New York Jewish kids “how to behave like cool kids” (2006, p.2). Beecher’s point here is that punk operated as a collective musical and (sub)-cultural movement that provided Jewish kids with the possibility of being ‘cool’. Of course, Bob Dylan had already appeared as the epitome of the ‘cool’ outsider from the early 1960s when he went electric, but his relationship with his Jewishness was distinctly ambivalent. Like Dylan, Lou Reed is frequently represented as a figure epitomising ‘cool’, and as Billig points out, he also “oozed decadence” (Billig, 2000, p.141). Reed’s gender and sexual ambiguity was most in evidence during the 1970s *‘Transformer’* period, associated with his links to Andy Warhol’s Factory. But again, there is the familiar theme of Reed’s troubled relationship with his Jewish roots.



Born Lewis Reed in 1942 in Freeport, Long Island to a suburban middle class family, Reed's father had changed the family's name from Rabinowitz. Beecher devotes considerable attention to Reed's troubled relationship with Velvet Underground singer Nico, his drug use and outlaw status, his connection with Andy Warhol's Factory and his hospitalisation and electro-convulsive therapy treatment during his youth as his parents attempted to literally 'shock' their errant son back into line. Billig also references most of the above events (apart from the electric shock therapy), but he also makes some more surprising connections with Reed's work. He likens the directness of Reed's work to that of pre-War German Jewish composer Kurt Weill, and his melancholy song writing to the 'urban playlets' of Leiber and Stoller and the work of the Drifters, albeit with a harder edge. Billig argues that like Doc Pomus – and Dylan – Reed does not censor outcasts, he accepts them and is sympathetic towards their lives. Indeed Reed and Pomus became very close immediately before the latter's death in 1991, rather like Dylan's relationship with the dying Woody Guthrie. The unusual associations that Billig makes with Reed's work reflect his imaginative approach and intellectual openness as well as the breadth of his knowledge. This is very much in evidence across all of Billig's academic work, notably his recent work on the 'hidden roots of critical psychology' (Billig, 2008). As ever, this scholarship is worn lightly and expressed with a marked lack of arrogance.

### **Intimate histories: Doc Pomus and the importance of the personal**

'RRJ' is characterised by an attention to the intimate details of personal lives and the concrete minutiae of everyday life. Even in a relatively short text such as this, we discover that Doc Pomus, composer of songs such as '*Save the Last Dance for Me*' (a hit for The Drifters) with his long-time song-writing partner Mort Shuman, was born Jerome Solon Felder in 1925 in Brooklyn, New York. Pomus had polio as a child, which left him unable to walk without the aid of crutches for the rest of his life. Having acquired the nickname 'Doc' in school, apparently due to his ability to give wise advice to friends, Jerome later changed his family name to 'Pomus' in his youth, allegedly so that his parents would not find out he was spending his time singing in less than salubrious clubs and bars. Pomus wrote songs for many early Rhythm 'n' Blues artists, including Big Joe Turner and Ray Charles, and his songs (with Shuman) were later covered by artists as diverse as the Beatles, Marvin Gaye, Bruce Springsteen, Bob Marley, Dolly Parton and ZZ Top. Billig tells us that after B.B. King finished recording an album of Pomus's songs, he "broke down and cried for over an hour" (2000, p.67).

Billig is not content to simply list Pomus's contribution to early rock 'n' roll and pop music more generally. He also addresses the possible reasons for Pomus's change of name in some detail, and tells us about the charities Pomus set up to help blues singers living in poverty. Billig often recounts the details of these personal histories in order to discuss complex theoretical questions in everyday language, to bring abstract concepts into a more accessible realm. In this case, he uses the story of Doc Pomus to ask a series of questions:

"whether Pomus's background, and that of those other pioneers, Lieber and Stoller, is a mere coincidence. Did it have to be a Jew who would be the first white so honoured by the Rhythm and Blues Foundation? Could non-Jews have created the syntheses pioneered by these writers? What would rock 'n'

roll have been like without these Jewish inventors? All we can say is that those composers are at the centre of rock's early story. Without them, the story would be different" (2000, p. 68).

'*RRJ*' begins with a story from Billig's own domestic life, in which he recounts the search for suitable music to use at his youngest daughter's Bar Mitzvah. Preferring not to hire a specialist band or make a tape of traditional Jewish Klezmer music, Billig and his wife Sheila decided that he should compile a tape of rock music with Jewish composers. To his surprise, many of his own favourite rock tracks turned out to be suitable candidates for inclusion. This small narrative is presented as an impetus for the research that became '*RRJ*', and it is also used, with characteristic modesty, as an anecdote in which Billig casts himself as someone who shared a regrettable ignorance of the extent of the Jewish contribution to the rock era. He never sets himself above or apart from the phenomena that he is examining.

Michael Billig has also written himself into some of his academic texts. In one recent paper he introduced the call for social psychologists to write in more 'populated' styles with a story about his own struggles to understand and use 'academic language' (Billig, 2011). This is cast as "a personal admission" that he always had problems understanding the specialized language of academic theory and research. Billig recounts a narrative about his attempts to "translate the specialized phrases into a simpler language that I could understand", but often as he did so "the ideas just disappeared" (2011, p.5). Billig's account represents such struggles as producing a loss of confidence and "injuries [that] can last for years" (p.5). Only on the cusp of retirement could he feel able to make such a public admission.

In this paper, Billig's use of his personal history is presented as a (partial) rationale for his "main" arguments about depopulated academic writing (Billig, 2011). He could have used this point to link the lasting 'injuries' from his struggles to learn academic language to social class, given the significance of class in shaping the British education system and the psychological 'injuries' frequently inflicted by class inequalities (Education Group, 1981; Sennett and Cobb, 1975). Whilst this is undoubtedly an important issue about which some academics have written with eloquence (eg. Steedman, 1986), Billig does not narrow the focus of his point in this way. He prefers to explore the wider implications of the academic reliance on fictional 'things' and technical language for the quality and relevance of social science as a whole (Billig, 2008a; Billig, in press).

### **From 'Yakety yak' to Leonard Cohen: Taking the mundane seriously and analysing the little words**

'*RRJ*' shares two other attributes with Billig's academic work: his interest in taking the mundane seriously (Billig, 1995); and his commitment to noticing and analysing the significance of 'the little words' (Billig, in press). '*RRJ*' contains an in-depth analysis of the lyrics of such popular Leiber and Stoller hits as '*Charlie Brown*', '*Yakety Yak*' and '*Along Came Jones*'. As Billig argues:

“Leiber and Stoller could present characters, tell tales and crack jokes inside a couple of verses, together with a chorus that sticks in the brain and a brief instrumental break. Not a second was wasted” (2000, p.54).

In ‘*RRJ*’ Billig’s penchant for focussing on ‘the little words’ is most evident in his consideration of Leonard Cohen’s work. Cohen was different from the rock and pop performers discussed so far. He was older (born in 1934), he was Canadian, and he was first and foremost a poet, who only began to issue records well into his thirties. Nor did he try to throw off or distance himself from his Judaism in the same way as Paul Simon or Bob Dylan. Cohen was brought up as a child of a bourgeois, deeply Jewish family in Montreal, as part of a well-established Jewish community. His poems, especially his early work, addressed explicitly Jewish themes, and he maintained a close relationship with his Jewish religious and cultural heritage, even when practising Zen Buddhism.

As Billig argues, “Cohen can be seen as a very Jewish author”, and given that his books and poetry are “unambiguously Jewish” (2000, p.149), one would expect his songs to be “shot through with Jewishness” (2000, p.149). Billig’s careful analysis of Cohen’s songs demonstrates how “Cohen’s records can be enjoyed, even loved, without the listener catching the echoes of Jewish references” (pp.149-150). Billig mentions Cohen’s so-called “Jewish blues” during the 1980s, but points out that even here: “the Jewish themes are still discreetly, even ambiguously, introduced. In fact, the listener has to know the references in the first place, in order to recognise them” (2000, p.151). Among several examples Billig cites the song ‘*If It Be Thy Will*’ from Cohen’s 1984 album ‘*Various Positions*’, which like the earlier song ‘*Who By Fire*’, takes its title from a Hebrew prayer. As Billig puts it: “The Jewish references are covered in such a tapestry of allusion that a non-Jew could easily miss them (...) Christians need not feel uncomfortably excluded” (2000, p.152).

Billig recounts a story of an interview between Cohen and Paul Zollo for the book ‘*Songwriters on Songwriting*’ (Zollo, 1997), about the song ‘*Democracy*’ from the album ‘*Various Positions*’. In this interview Cohen said that the original version of ‘*Democracy*’ dealt with relations between blacks and Jews, but when the song was issued on the 1992 album ‘*The Future*’, this verse and others on the same topic were missing, including the line: “First we killed the Lord, and then we killed the blues” (Zollo, 1997, p.336; Billig, 2000, p.153). In mentioning the line “I’m the little Jew who wrote the bible” from another song on the same album, Cohen responded to Zollo’s question about how seldom Jewish songwriters refer to being Jewish in a song. Cohen recounted how a friend had said: “I dare you leave that line in” (Zollo, 1997, p.341, Billig, 2000, p.152). True to form, Billig pounces on the little word ‘dare’ in Cohen’s account. He casts it as “a strange, but natural, word to use” (p.153). One would hope that the days when Cohen or any other Jewish singer-songwriter might fear attack for making explicit reference to Jewish themes in their songs are surely over. Yet, as Billig demonstrates with this careful analysis of ‘the little words’ in Cohen’s work “the inhibition remains” – even for Leonard Cohen.

As Billig argues: “If daring is required for the Jew to stand as himself or herself in the world of popular music, then Cohen has shown it” (2000, p.153). This daring is also evident in Billig’s own academic work, notably his research for the book ‘*Fascists*’ (1978). Michael Billig was known to the National Front during the mid-1970s as a regular contributor to the anti-fascist magazine ‘*Searchlight*’. To produce a text with such a clear declaration of his

argument on the cover as the sub-title (*'A Social Psychological View of the National Front'*) was an act of daring, especially for a relatively young Jewish academic early in his career with a young family. The National Front and some of their associates were unlikely to view this book in a positive light.

### **To conclude...**

Billig's appreciation of the popular and his refusal to dismiss the mundane is reflected in the final chapter of *'RRJ'*. He recounts the familiar narrative about the growing influence of popular music following the rock 'n' roll era that is found in many histories of the period. This casts the work of Leiber, Stoller, Doc Pomus, Phil Spector and other Jewish songwriters as a sort of prelude to Dylan's more poetic work, part of a progression to more challenging intellectual lyrics. Billig prefers another story "that does not favour the intellectual over the popular" (2000, p.164), in which the high point of pop music occurred just before the emergence of singer songwriters like Dylan "when Jews were still mainly confined to the backrooms of rock" (p.164). For Billig, the collaborations between Jewish songwriters and black musicians during the late 1950s and early 1960s "cross racial lines" to produce music in the soul idiom of unsurpassed optimism, reflecting the hopes of the period. Billig refuses to dismiss such popular music as mindless fluff. Quite the reverse, he views it as more significant than the more apparently 'radical' work of the late 1960s when the music scene, especially in the USA, had fragmented along racial lines once again.

So Billig ends this little book with a paean of praise for *'Stand By Me'* and the popular songs of the early 1960s. Created by a combination of white Jewish songwriters and producers and African American performers, such songs spoke to a mixed mass audience of young WASPs and Jews, African American and white, urban and rural, female and male. They had an optimism that was soon to be dashed, and an inclusive potential that eroded with the emergence of the Beatles and other male pop/rock bands whose style was unmistakably white.

*'RRJ'* illustrates many aspects of Michael Billig's contribution to contemporary social psychology. Above all, Billig's scholarship is not displayed like a personal accomplishment or a reflection of a superior intellect. To paraphrase Bill Shankly's immortal comment about football as akin to a matter of life and death: "it's more important than that". For this, and many other reasons, Michael Billig is more than an academic. He is a scholar, one of that small minority of theorists and researchers still thinking and arguing across the world. To paraphrase Billig himself on the influence of Doc Pomus on the history of rock 'n' roll: "without [him], the story would be different" (p. 68).

### **Notes**

- 1) Malcolm McLaren only 'came out' as Jewish some years after his involvement with the Sex Pistols, so his Jewish identity is likely to be less well known than Epstein's.
- 2) Billig points out that Leiber and Stoller were not the only Jewish songwriters to compose songs recorded by Elvis, indeed more of Elvis's hits were composed by Jews than by black song writers (Billig, 2000).

- 3) Billig points out that Paul Simon's final recorded version of this song made no mention of the Jewish dimension to this story.
- 4) As Billig points out, "there are no Hebrew songs, or explicitly Jewish quotations" in his music (p.130), although Billig does identify one implicitly pro-Zionist song 'Neighbourhood Bully' on Dylan's 1983 album 'Infidels' for example. However, Dylan has always referenced Jewish religion and culture in his work, albeit in implicit and indirect ways, as Billig discusses in relation to songs on 'John Wesley Harding'.
- 5) Billig points to the irony that the "great white gospel classic of the sixties", 'Bridge Over Troubled Water' was written by a Jew, just as the "great Christmas song" of the previous generation, 'White Christmas' had been (2000, p. 140).
- 6) Unfortunately Beecher's text does not reference 'RRJ', but this is hardly surprising given that Billig's book was published by the relatively small UK publisher Five Leaves.

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