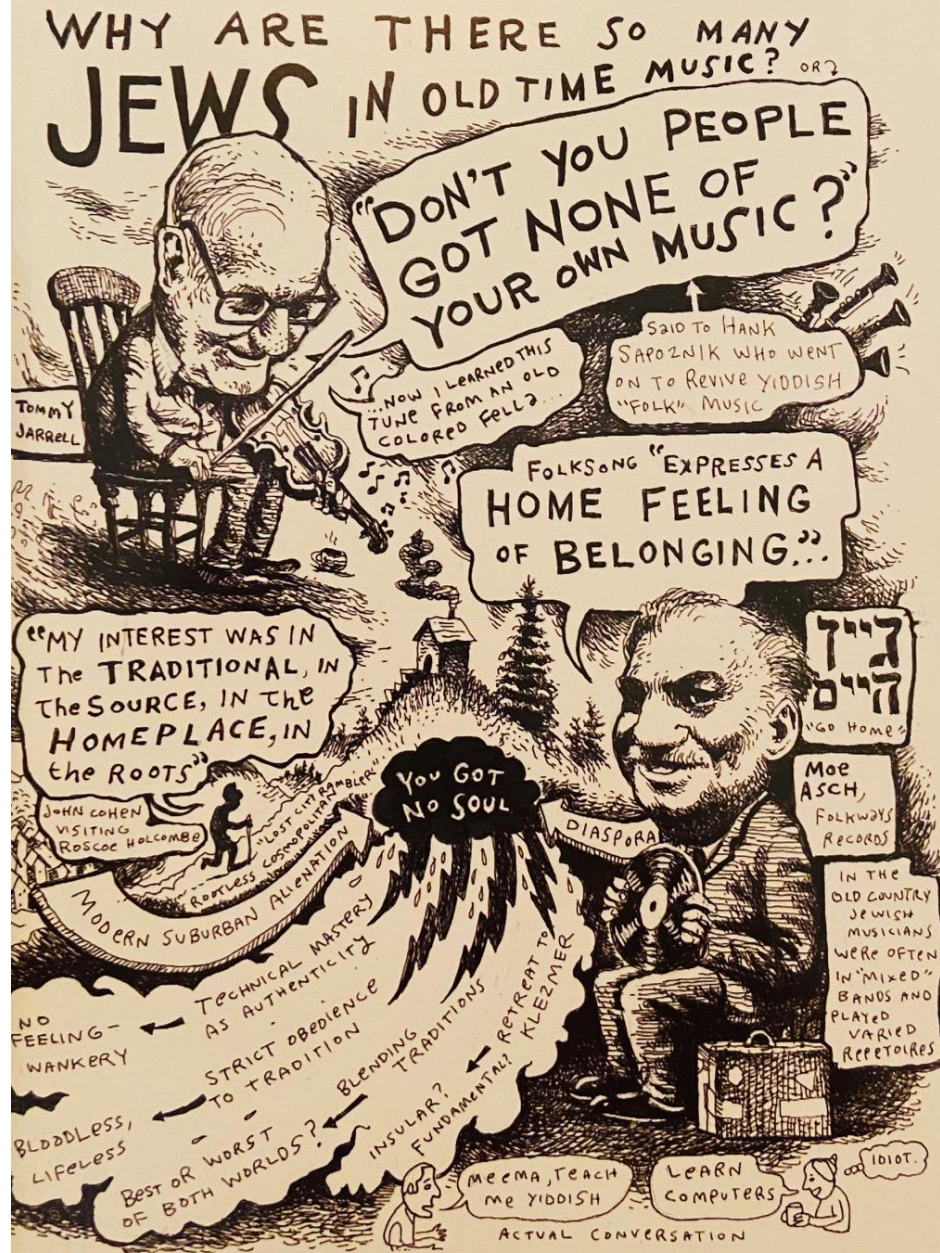


"YOU PEOPLE" ■ PHIL BLANK

FEBRUARY 13 – MAY 9, 2008



PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF JEWISH ART

In “You People,” Phil Blank—a native Philadelphian working and living in Chapel Hill—explores issues of authenticity, identity, ethnicity, modernity, class, and race in boldly graphic, decidedly pictorial art. Pairing a rigorously inquisitive and philosophical nature with deep affection and respect for folk and popular culture—from American “roots” music to comics to the poetry of Allen Ginsberg—Blank created an entirely new body of work for this exhibition. His large-scale drawings and watercolors—which he describes as “poetic non-fiction”—meditate upon and illustrate connections between seemingly unrelated topics ranging from the Jewish Diaspora to Native American traditions to contemporary American race relations.

Matthew F. Singer, Curator, Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art: Why “You People”?

Phil Blank: “You People” is part of the full quote “don’t you people got your own music?,” which was said to Hank Sapoznik by Tommy Jarrell. Tommy was an old fiddler living in the mountains of North Carolina. Hank was learning old-time country music with Tommy but subsequently went on to help launch the “klezmer”—or Yiddish folk music—revival. It’s a great question and has been the entrance to a lot of imagination, thought, and imagery for me.

MS: In your work, roots music, race, and identity—Jewish and otherwise—are often interwoven and placed front and center.

PB: Music has been the place where many issues of ethnicity and experience have arisen with greatest force in my life. For instance, lately I’ve been thinking about improvisation in the music of the American South, where I live. There, musical improvisation is almost always traced back to the inventions of people who don’t self-identify as “white.” Improvisation is a subtle thing, but it creates a very particular sort of person and community. Without it, the source of creativity is someone else’s and what it has produced cannot be changed. But what is more Jewish than improvisation? The Torah, Talmud, and all the study and debate that have followed represent millennia of dancing around questions of practice, belief, and life. We’ve reinvented ourselves countless times and in innumerable ways over thousands of years in the Diaspora. That impulse to improvise is something missing from part of the Southern tradition. So is my impulse Jewish? Northern? Modern? I don’t know, but those questions are what I hear in the music of my fellow Jewish banjo players.

MS: Your work looks and feels contemporary, but has strong and steady roots in an earlier America—say, from the New Deal to the Great Society—with a special affinity for the Beats.

PB: The Beats have been so parodied and maligned that the cliché of them is better known than the truth. The beat tradition I admire grew out of the previous generation’s approach to art as a living experiment in exploring subjectivity. The rigor and focus of their program led to real social effects and a permanent change in the culture. There was a genuine belief that our lives could be examined and communicated in a way that benefited both artist and viewer, and that this could be done by normal everyday folks. It was a “down to earth” and democratic program in that the ultimate bottom line was not the authority of a mystical genius—such as Jackson Pollock—but the authority of one’s own humble experience, as with Ben Shahn and Will Eisner.

MS: Allen Ginsberg and Maurice Sendak seem, in particular, to engage your intellect and spur your creativity.

PB: A common factor in their work is the pursuit of images that connect to their lives. Their work is full of humor and contradiction but it’s not self-consciously smart or dogmatic. They achieve this in very different ways. Ginsberg leans toward objectivism—he tends to describe rather than analyze—and Sendak has an almost Jungian involvement with images in the imagination.

Like Ginsberg and Sendak, I try to capture the images that float through my head unnoticed. Memories, fantasies, perceptions. Once these are noticed, our experiences become richer, wider, and—hopefully—more compassionate. I enjoy popular, “lowbrow” styles—full of stuff and emotion—as opposed to the abstraction or conceptualism of high art.

MS: What drew you to the South as a place to live and subject matter for your work?

PB: Not sure I’ll ever know! The South as a location of folk traditions has been overemphasized, but I’m sure my romantic fantasy of the South had something to do with moving there.

**This publication is made possible by a generous gift from
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"This painting depicts the 'bee maidens' of the ancient world. Bee maidens were groups of women whose religious practices often involved ecstatic behavior and were associated, in their artifacts, with bees. Evidence of female spirituality connected with the bee can be found across the ancient world from Egypt to India, including the land of the ancient Hebrews. The term 'land of milk and honey' is thought to possibly refer to an ancient intoxicant derived from fermented milk that may have been associated with this ecstatic group."

Bee Maidens in the Land of Milk and Honey, Watercolor, gouache, and ink on paper, 25 x 15 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

MS: How did you become involved with American roots music?

PB: The Abington Public Library had a great, diverse record collection. One recording in particular, of Big Bill Broonzy and Sonny Terry being interviewed by Studs Terkel, sort of hypnotized me—it created a space, a sense of place. I can also remember very clearly hearing an acoustic guitar being beautifully finger-picked in a friend's room. I had never heard a guitar played unamplified and in a casual way. Since then, I've been completely addicted to playing music unamplified in casual situations and recreating that space.

MS: Your work is very *personal*—it's figurative, includes many very carefully considered and re-alized portraits, quotes snippets of conversation, etc. You paint those you admire.

PB: I felt completely drained after studying art in college. For some reason, the slow way back involved paintings of "Things I Liked." It was and is a kind of devotional activity, like prayer. Practitioners of Eastern religions sometimes begin meditation by focusing on a devotional element. This makes sense to me. I was building a little fort with these images where I could build back my strength.

MS: Does this show represent a change or evolution in your work?

PB: As an American Jew, I've often found myself wandering in the vast middle space between "white" and "person of color." In every area of life, I can feel lost, overshooting, walking in circles. The works in this show are all little dots on the map of this territory for me. Living with these images helps me return to these places and navigate the territory a little better.

These works are all experiments in using the devotional feeling as a steppingstone to other areas of experience, whether going deeper into

historical narratives or personal questions, memories, dreams, and anecdotes. It's as if devotion was the door to a large Home of Experience and I'm just beginning to stumble past the foyer.

MS: You're a skilled painter, but you planned and realized this show primarily as an exhibition of drawings.

PB: Drawing is a primal first love for me. Devotional work likes to be doted upon and caressed. It thrives on long planning and careful execution. Drawing can be more spontaneous and feisty.

For me, a drawing or painting has its genesis in a strange kernel of imagination wrapped around an event, idea, or memory. Images seem to drift toward it after that.

MS: Your work explores issues of authenticity. There's an exhibition at the Spertus Museum in Chicago called *The New Authentics: Artists of the Post-Jewish Generation*. The Spertus says of this cohort, "Free to choose their affiliations, they are Jewish culturally, religiously, spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, partially, biologically, or invisibly."

PB: There is a literal-mindedness to those who are convinced that their Judaism is 100% authentic that I can't connect to. I'm more drawn to those with questions about it. I've never been more confused about ethnicity and religion—ironically this means I've never felt more Jewish.

In addition to mapping personal and artistic terrain, the drawings and paintings in this show celebrate those Jews who "left" Judaism and Jewishness only to discover that the other banjo players in the mountains, the other monks in the zendo, the other atheist dreamers—they were Jewish, too!

“Why There Are So Many Jews In Old-Time Music?”

By Bob Carlin

Growing up, American traditional music and dance were part of the fabric of my family's life. Along with Passover seders, dreidel spinning at Hanukkah, and dressing up for Purim, we listened to my parents records of Leadbelly, Woody Guthrie, and the Almanac Singers, learned to play guitars, banjos, mandolins, and dulcimers at summer camps and within local folk-music societies, and danced the dances of the Southern mountains. Looking back from forty years later, I suspect that my parents' generation came to American roots music through its adaptation by left-wing and Communist groups in the 1940s as representative, albeit somewhat ironically and erroneously, of the downtrodden worker. I've always explained, when asked why there are so many Jewish fiddlers, that the assimilating American Jewish community valued art and music and included American roots traditions in that pool.

After my family moved from the northern New Jersey suburbs of New York City, with their large Jewish populations, to the more genteel environs of Princeton, I discovered a new home for myself in the old-time music community. Living in Princeton made me aware that, by

default of my ancestry, I belonged to a group apart from the majority of Americans. Unfortunately, you never recover from being asked about your horns and tail, nor from being denied first-chair in the high-school band because of your religion.

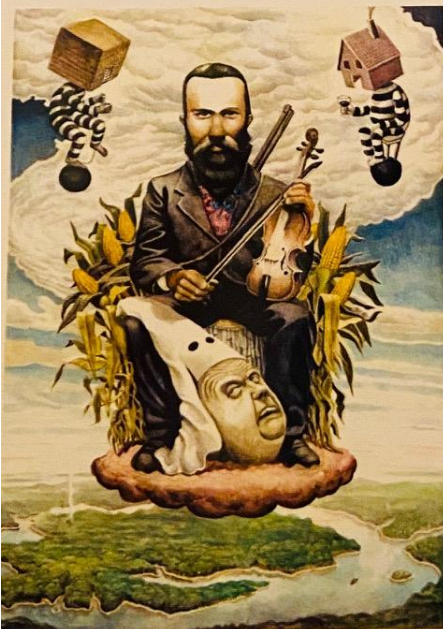
While feeling like an outsider in my new hometown, I found solace and a modicum of acceptance within a community of other outcasts forming around master Southern musicians like Tommy Jarrell and the yearly summer fiddlers' conventions of the mountain South. It was at these gatherings, and at the feet of Jarrell and his ilk, that we young adults, many of us originally urban, Northern Jews, learned and honed our musical skills—and became the inheritors of a rural, Southern Christian tradition.

Some aspects of my adopted tradition never sat well with me. For example, I could never sing Christian hymns without feeling uncomfortable. And I never hid the fact that I grew up outside the South by trying to dress or talk like a native. On the other hand, the Eastern European Jewish tradition—my tradition—of klezmer music never had the visceral appeal that old-time banjo and other roots music had for me. Klezmer never hit me in the kishkas.

Ultimately, we have to ask the question of what makes an artist “authentic”? Is authenticity genetically generated, or is it based in how well an artist absorbs and understands a culture? I believe that if you study traditional music through traditional means and become a master practitioner, then you're just as traditional, as authentic, or more so, then one raised in that culture.

Bob Carlin is a musician, record producer, teacher, and researcher. Perhaps the best-known “clawhammer” style banjoist performing today, he has toured throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, and Japan. He lives in Lexington, North Carolina.

“Henry Berry Lowry was a famous Robin Hood-like figure who lived in the swamps of North Carolina's Robeson County as part of a self-governing and tri-racial community. He was famous for killing a high-ranking Klan member who had harmed a member of Lowry's family. Although hunted by the Klan and pursued by the government, he was never caught. An ex-slave—one whose suffering included having her teeth knocked out by her master—said ‘it was hard times here, Mr. Lowry is just paying them back.’”

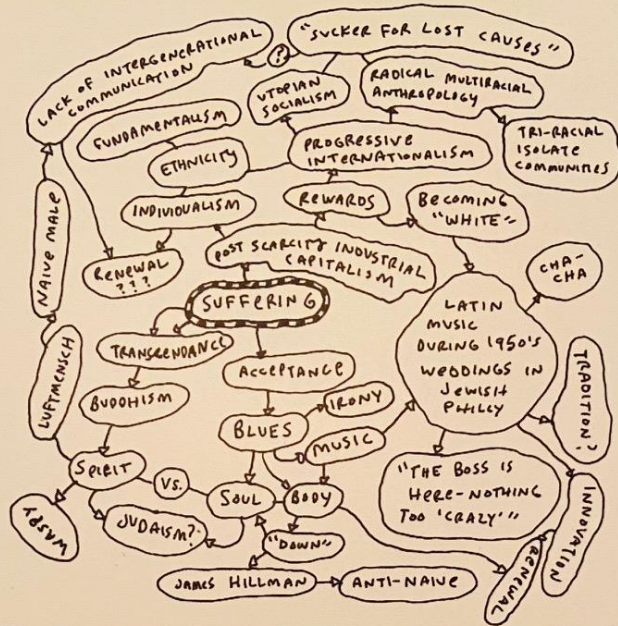


“WITHOUT FEAR WITHOUT HOPE DEFYING SOCIETY”

Henry Berry Lowry and other resistors hid out in the swamps of Robeson County, North Carolina in a village called “Scuppernon.” After the war, they remained in the swamps as a free & independent community of Native Americans, African Americans, “white” and “black” people. To survive the Lowry had to be the local hero and savior. Henry Berry Lowry said, “We are not allowed to get our living peacefully and we will take it from others. We don't kill anyone but the Ku Klux Klan.”

Often imprisoned, Lowry would always escape. Even when hunted by the government and bounty hunters, Lowry was always able to wig through the sticks with grace and humor. An ex-slave who had all but a few teeth knocked out by her master said that in 1872, “Oh the way a hard country and Henry Berry Lowry's just a paying them back! He's just a paying them back! It's better days for black people now. Now master, he's just the king of this country!” (1914 quote from 1909 description of Rob. in “The Lowry History as acted in fact by Henry Berry Lowry”)

Henry Berry Lowry “Without Hope or Fear.” Watercolor, gouache, and ink on paper, 19 x 25 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Suffering Map. Ink on paper, 8 1/2 x 11 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

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FEBRUARY 13 – MAY 9, 2008

Opening: Wednesday, February 13

Free and open to the public

Discussion with Phil Blank: 6:30 – 7:30 p.m.

Reception: 7:30 – 8:30 p.m.

PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF JEWISH ART

Congregation Rodeph Shalom
615 North Broad Street [at Mt. Vernon Street]
Philadelphia, PA 19123

Entrance and parking on Mt. Vernon Street

Monday – Thursday: 10 – 4

Friday: 10 – 2

Sunday: 10 – noon

Hours are subject to change.

Please call (215) 627-6747 to confirm

Organized by Matthew F. Singer



The Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art is dedicated in memory of Jacob C. Gutman.

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This publication is made possible by a generous gift from Joan and Hyman Sall.

Why Are There So Many Jews in Old Time Music (page 2). 2007, ink on paper, 8 1/2 x 11 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Cover image: Why Are There So Many Jews in Old Time Music (page 1). 2007, ink on paper, 8 1/2 x 11 inches. Courtesy of the artist.