



Joe & Paul

the Best of the
**Barton
Bros.**

Cut Speech: A Look At The Barton Brothers On Record

Comedic Yiddish music entertainment was far from new in 1947. The hyperactive Yiddish theater scene produced many great musical comedy stars who sang funny words delivered in a funny way. Molly Picon was certainly the best-known and most widely loved, but there were many others.

However, Eddie and Joe Bart – who were neither brothers nor named “Bart” or “Barton” – were a whole different thing. Coming out of non-Jewish vaudeville and supper-clubs, they were inspired by a radio commercial for Joe & Paul’s clothing store that ran often on local New York City Jewish radio – WLTH, WHN, and, most famously, WEVD all featured at least *some* Jewish programming. They handily seized on something timely, well-known, and relevant to the New York Jewish community.

The commercial has not been heard in years. Famed Yiddish music scholar Henry Sapoznik recently found a radio transcription disc of it, but, at the time of this writing, it needs to be restored before it can be played. My former mother-in-law, who

grew up in Brooklyn, remembered having heard it often but could not recall how it went. About the only information about the commercial I can safely offer is that the music for it was written by Sholem Secunda, the great Yiddish theater composer who sold “Bei Mir Bist Du Schon” for thirty dollars.

The Bartons had been bumping around for years when they came up with “Joe & Paul”. It was a natural regional hit. They quickly found an enterprising indie label who specialized in a variety of smaller ethnic releases.

The Bartons cut several two-sided numbers – “Joe And Paul”, “Cockeyed Jenny”,



On the set of The Bell Boy

“Minnie The Flapper”, and “Tzouris”. Each is marked by rapid fire Yiddish monologues punctuated by some of the edgiest klezmer music backgrounds of the era. Each of these records is boisterous, loud, and nervous, as if the guys in the studio are trying to beat the three-minute-and-thirty-second timing mark that was necessary in the age of the 78 rpm (3:30 was as much as could fit on one side of a seventy-eight).

Remarkably, “Joe & Paul” was a huge hit. Not just in New York, not just the Northeastern Corridor, but wherever the term “Jewish community” could be uttered. If the parodied commercial *per se* only ran in New York, it was no matter. Commercials like it ran wherever a local radio station catered to Jews. And TV was on the horizon, so radio was something everybody knew. If the commercial “Joe & Paul” lampooned ran only in New York, it was no matter. There was surely one similar in Cleveland, Philadelphia, or wherever – just as every sizable city had its own version of Crazy Eddie or Mad Man Muntz back in the seventies.

Scratch just about any Jewish person

born before 1940 and you’ll find somebody who can sing at least *part* of “Joe & Paul”. Few people lately can speak that much Yiddish. Whether speaking about Jewish music with folks in New York, Philly, Cleveland, or Los Angeles, “Joe & Paul” was a hit. In fact, it was enough of a hit that Joe and Paul – *the clothiers* – took the Bartons to court.

“Joe & Paul” also exerted a powerful influence on Yiddish comedy music. That it was a hit beyond Manhattan Island was a shocker. Among those who were affected by its success was a clarinet player in Spike Jones’ City Slickers – Mickey Katz – who realized that if he took what he had learned from his tenure in the Slickers and apply it to Jewish music and comedy, he might be onto something. In his autobiography, *Papa, Play For Me*, Katz says in no uncertain terms that the Bartons’ success inspired his leaving Jones to pursue his own career in a similar musical vein.

The success of their records made the Barton Bros a major draw on the Borscht Belt, most notably the Catskills. “Cockeyed Jenny” was also a sizable hit (and is said to



have influenced Phillip Roth's popular novel *Portnoy's Complaint*). The microgroove LP came into usage just before the dawn of the fifties, and their record company put all their Barton sides onto one ten-inch thirty-three-and-a-third. If its appearance in Hadassah thrift stores is to be believed (and this is a fairly reliable way to track the popularity of Jewish records, for which there were no *Billboard* charts), the ten-inch Lp was also a pretty sizable hit.

There were more records to come from the Barton Bros, but none were as good nor as commercially successful as the recordings herein. Even so, the team remained a popular draw with Jewish audiences. Inspired briefly by the trio successes of the Marx

and Ritz brothers, a third member, Jackie Kahane (most famous as Elvis Presley's opening act) was added to the act. The Brothers even enjoyed small roles in the Jerry Lewis film *The Bellboy* . Eddie still lives in Florida.

"Joe & Paul" remains a joyous slice of life for the people who were around to hear it upon its first release. For the fans and scholars of Yiddish comedy music that have popped up since, it is both a milestone and a window to how much fun that entertainment world must have been. Its rambunctious party atmosphere still bursts forth with all the edge and vitality it boasted in 1947.

Cut speech, indeed.

Skip Heller
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Editors note: The musical accompaniment on these recordings are by the *Irv Carol* Orchestra, whose members included Julius and Willie Epstein