“Hello Muddah, Hello Fadduh”--Allan Sherman (1963)

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Essay by Joseph Dorinson (guest post)*

Allan Sherman

Alan Sherman’s favorite book from childhood featured the life of Horatio Alger (Autobiography, 45) Not in his wildest dreams, could the youngster, growing up in a complex and dysfunctional family have foretold his meteoric success in 1963. At the age of 39, after numerous setbacks during his itinerant life, Sherman hit the jackpot with a single record and record album. “Hello Mudduh, Hello Fadduh” that provided fame and fortune, earning praise from Presidents Kennedy and Johnson along with fellow comedians from Harpo Marx to Jack Benny (Autobiography, xi-xiii, 274). Reportedly, it was inspired by his son Robert’s disenchantment with sleep away summer camp life. The back story, however, is more complex.

The music for this sensational debut issued from the Ponchielli’s Italian opera, “La Gioconda” with the “Dance of the Hours,” which Walt Disney highlighted in “Fantasia,” a film that mesmerized this author along with many other children when first exposed to classical music in 1940. Unconvinced by the maxim of Shakespeare’s Polonius in the play, “Hamlet,” Allan proved to be a prolific borrower as well as a generous lender (Cohen, 214). The song is a familiar kvetch (complaint) in Jewish families, mine included, expressing children’s separation anxiety, spurred by the sleep away from home camping experience. After the conventional salutation, delivered in a comedic accent, the young correspondent complains that rain precludes entertainment, followed up by three plagues besetting Camp Grenada: poison ivy, stomach poisoning, and malaria, a cousin of *chilaria* or cholera in Yiddish. The litany of woes continues with the bears roaming the forest, the alligators swarming the lake, and the counsellors hating the waiters. The Coach reads “Ulysses” to prevent the rise of sissies. Jeffry Hardy, a fellow camper is missing; therefore, the need for a searching party. Beseeching his parents for rescue, he promises to be good, clean, and willing to endure hugs and kisses from a pesty aunt. The last paragraph conveys a happy ending. The rain has stopped. Play returns on the lake and on the ball field. So, he urges his parents to discard the letter. Underlying this recollection, Lawrence J. Epstein argues, is a “fearful sense of American society and the place of Jews in such a society (“Haunted Smile,” 176-177).

Like his prize-winning lyric, Allan Sherman was an enigma wrapped up in riddle—or parody. A brilliant wordsmith who borrowed other people’s music, he was born to a licentious and self-absorbed mother,

Rose, and a peripatetic father, Percy, whose passion for fast cars and ample food led to obesity and accidental death in 1949. Alan's mother "a beautiful looking little thing" (Autobiography, p. 18), would have flunked the test of "good mothering" as formulated by psychologist David Winnicott. Both parents died young, mother at 49; his father, after a fall from a treehouse, where he was trying to carve 100 pounds from a bloated body, at 53. Allan had two stepfathers named Dave. Neither one provided guidance. Indeed, Dave Segal, the second stepfather was a con artist and criminal who beat Alan's mother, absconded with his first wife's money, and, when cornered by police for his latest illegal action, ended his life with a gunshot into his mouth (Cohen, 111-112).

As a youth, Alan resided in three cities: Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York at various times and attended multiple schools, living primarily with his mother's parents, Esther and Leibish Sherman. A musician in the old country, Leibush, now Leon, worked in the garment industry by day and drank whiskey by night. Libidinous and cunning, Esther was a lascivious cardsharp, a gambler, a hustler but a great cook. Although they hated each other, Allan's grandparents lavished love on their grandson who took their surname and devoured Esther's home cooked meals as an affirmation of that affection while absorbing their Yiddishkeit as a culinary Jew. A frustrated music man, Leon took his grandson to the Yiddish theater in Chicago, where Allan developed his passion for dramatic entertainment (Autobiography (24-33).

After his mother's death, Allan plunged into depression, necessitating psychological intervention. Guilt ridden by his sudden success and the death of his mother, Allan denied any value desired from psychotherapy. He insisted that the four "shrinks" that he consulted were unhelpful and crazy to boot. One of his analysts, Edmund Bergler, was highly regarded among his peers and well versed in the psychology of humor in the creative process. Sherman remained fat and just as crazy as his psychiatrists (Autobiography, 160; Cohen, 182) he confessed in his memoir. Despite his enormous success, Sherman suffered from anxiety. Fear of failure led him to excess in food, drink, gambling, drugs, golf, and sex. It also spurned his creativity through sublimation. His plea for love courses through the "Muddah, Fadduh" song and culminates in a happy coda. Bent on sexual gratification with younger women, including women of commercial affection, he separated from his wife Dee. Sailing on this river of denial, he lost his moral compass.

With the advent of the Beatles, the rise of rock and roll, and the surge of other ethnic groups into comedy, Sherman receded from the limelight. His later parodies failed to fly like the earlier ones. He received bad reviews and fell into disfavor and his 20-year marriage finally dissolved into divorce. His decline evoked the arc of Greek tragedy, whereby the hero, plagued by hubris or tragic flaw, is pursued by nemesis, only this time as a Jewish, rather than a Greek hero/antihero. At the age of 49, Allan Sherman nee Copelon died. The cause was a culmination of illnesses: obesity, diabetes, asthma, alcoholism or, simply, a broken heart on November 20, 1973 (Cohen, 247, 249).

Lest we end on a discordant note, it is important to cite Sherman' s legacy. He helped to reverse the decline of Jewish humor in response to external threats (Hitler) and internal challenges (Father Coughlin). Henry Popkin charted the desensitization of American Popular Culture in a "Commentary" article: "The Vanishing Jew of Our Popular Culture…" from the 1930s through the 1940s. Wallace Markfield cheerfully noted a comic reversal in the Yiddishization of American humor in the decade that yielded a new crop of Jewish comedians in the post-World War II Era, when Jewish humor became American humor (Markfield, 114). The crossover artists—newer comics like Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, Woody Allen, Mel Brooks Alan King Jackie Mason, Rodney Dangerfield followed veterans Jack Benny, Eddie Cantor, Phil Silvers, Danny Kaye, Sid Caesar, and Milton Berle to craft a strong ethnic identity.

Writers Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth contributed to the cause (Dorinson, 12-17, 123-131). They articulated Will Herberg's thesis regarding the three generations of immigrant response to Americanization, namely tradition, assimilation, and return or succinctly put: what the first generation refused to forget, the second, refused to remember, the third brought back as acculturated American Jews (Herberg). They created a new paradigm that embraced both cultures, a process that won friends and influenced people across ethnic lines. Music also resonated in the return of Jews to center stage. Witness the works of Leonard Bernstein, Frank Loesser, Joseph Stein, and a host of others.

In this dramatic transformation, Allan Sherman played a vital role as Marc Cohen points out in his excellent biography "Overweight Sensation: The Life and Comedy of Allan Sherman." Cohen identifies Sherman's strengths as well as his flaws. Sherman had no peers as a parodist. His quick mind enabled him to spawn multiple lyrics at breakneck speed. His rotund body, amply supplied by bountiful meals gave Sherman a cuddly image and childlike patter, projected innocence. Sherman's regression to childish antics with a frequent use of a beanie and blankie on the "Tonight Show," rankled host Johnny Carson and repelled popular culture critics (Cohen, 181, 182). As an art form, parody pegged to the *zeitgeist* (spirit of the age) has a short shelf life.

In recent years, however, as the world turned, cultural critics in the "New York Times" rediscovered Sherman's wit and Rutgers History Professor Jeffrey Shandler sang his praise (Cohen, 258-259). Sherman's parodies not only played well in Peoria, but they also resonated with the comic antics of Mel Brooks, Woody Allen, Jerry Seinfeld, and Larry David. Finally, Allan Sherman earned *derech eretz*: the respect that Rodney Dangerfield craved, and Aretha Franklin sang about. Allan Sherman proved authors F. Scott Fitzgerald wrong and Leo Tolstoy right. There are second acts in America even if "God sees the truth but waits."

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.