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## Jews in the American porn industry

Nathan Abrams | Winter 2004 - Number 196

A story little told is that of Jews in Hollywood's seedier cousin, the adult film industry. Perhaps we'd prefer to pretend that the 'triple-exthnics' didn't exist, but there's no getting away from the fact that secular Jews have played (and still continue to play) a disproportionate role throughout the adult film industry in America. **Jewish involvement in pornography has a long history in the United States**, as Jews have helped to transform a fringe subculture into what has become a primary constituent of Americana. These are the 'true blue Jews'.

### Smut peddlers

Jewish activity in the porn industry divides into two (sometimes overlapping) groups: pornographers and performers. Though Jews make up only two per cent of the American population, they have been prominent in pornography. Many erotica dealers in the book trade between 1890 and 1940 were immigrant Jews of German origin. According to Jay A. Gertzman, author of *Bookleggers and Smuthounds: The Trade in Erotica, 1920-1940* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 'Jews were prominent in the distribution of gallantiana [fiction on erotic themes and books of dirty jokes and ballads], avant-garde sexually explicit novels, sex pulps, sexology, and flagitious materials'.

In the postwar era, America's most notorious pornographer was Reuben Sturman, the 'Walt Disney of Porn'. According to the US Department of Justice, **throughout the 1970s Sturman controlled most of the pornography circulating in the country**. Born in 1924, Sturman grew up in Cleveland's East Side. Initially, he sold comics and magazines, but when he realized sex magazines produced twenty times the revenue of comic books, he moved exclusively into porn, eventually producing his own titles and setting up retail stores. By the end of the 1960s, Sturman ranked at the top of adult magazine distributors and by the mid-70s **he owned over 200 adult bookstores**. Sturman also introduced updated versions of the traditional peepshow booth (typically a dark room with a small colour TV on which the viewer can view X-rated videos). It was said that Sturman did not simply control the adult-entertainment industry; he was the industry. Eventually he was convicted of tax evasion and other crimes and died, disgraced, in prison in 1997. His son, David, continued running the family business.

The contemporary incarnation of Sturman is 43-year-old Jewish Clevelander **Steven Hirsch, who has been described as 'the Donald Trump of porno'**. The link between the two is Steve's father, Fred, who was a stockbroker-cum-lieutenant to Sturman. Today Hirsch runs the Vivid

Entertainment Group, which has been called **the Microsoft of the porn world, the top producer of 'adult' films in the US**. His specialty was to import mainstream marketing techniques into the porn business. Indeed, Vivid parallels the Hollywood studio system of the 1930s and 1940s, particularly in its exclusive contracts to porn stars who are hired and moulded by Hirsch. Vivid was the subject of a behind-the-scenes reality TV show recently broadcast on Channel 4.

### **Nice Jewish girls and boys**

Jews accounted for most of the leading male performers as well as a sizeable number of female stars in porn movies of the 1970s and '80s. The doyen of the Hebrew studs is Ron Jeremy. Known in the trade as 'the Hedgehog', Jeremy is one of America's biggest porn stars. The 51-year-old Jeremy was raised in an upper-middle-class Jewish family in Flushing, Queens, and has since appeared in more than 1,600 adult movies, as well as directing over 100. Jeremy has achieved iconic status in America, a hero to males of all ages, Jewish and gentile alike - he's the nebbischy, fat, hairy, ugly guy who gets to bed dozens of beautiful women. He presents an image of a modern-day King David, a Jewish superstud who supersedes the traditional heroes of Jewish lore. No sallow Talmud scholar he. His stature was recently cemented with the release of a pornumentary about his life, *Porn Star: The Legend of Ron Jeremy*. As probably the most famous Jewish male porn star, Jeremy has done wonders for the psyche of Jewish men in America. Jeremy has also just released a compilation CD, *Bang-A-Long-With Ron Jeremy*. For £7.99 (including delivery), the lucky listener gets to enjoy Jeremy's hand-picked favourite porno grooves along with narration by 'the legend' himself. As the publicity blurb gushes, 'Out of the brown paper wrappings and into the mainstream'.

Seymore Butts, aka Adam Glasser, is everything that Jeremy is not: young, handsome and toned. Glasser, a 39-year-old New York Jew, opened a gym in 1991 in Los Angeles. When no one joined, he borrowed a video camera for 24 hours, went to a nearby strip club, recruited a woman, then headed back to his gym and started shooting. Although the movie stank, with a bit of chutzpah and a few business cards he wangled a deal with a manufacturer and started cranking out films. Within a few years, 'Seymore Butts' – his nom de porn which is simultaneously his sales pitch – became one of the largest franchises in the adult-film business. As the king of the gonzo genre (marked by handheld cameras, the illusion of spontaneity and a low-tech aesthetic meant to suggest reality), he is today probably the most famous Jewish porn mogul. Seymore Inc., his production company, releases about 36 films annually, most of them shot for less than \$15,000, each of them grossing more than 10 times that sum. Glasser employs 12 people, including his mother and cousin Stevie as respectively genial company accountant (and matchmaker for her single son) and lovable but roguish general gopher. Glasser currently even has his own reality TV show (also broadcast on Channel 4), a ten-episode docu-soap called *Family Business*, whose opening credits show Glasser's barmitzvah photo.

### **In search of a buck**

Jews became involved in the porn industry for much the same reasons that their co-religionists became involved in Hollywood. They were attracted to an industry primarily because it admitted them. Its newness meant that restrictive barriers had not yet been erected, as they had in so

many other areas of American life. In porn, there was no discrimination against Jews. During the early part of the twentieth century, an entrepreneur did not require large sums of money to make a start in the film business; cinema was considered a passing fad. In the porn business, it was similarly straightforward to get going. To show 'stag' movies or loops, as they were known, all one needed was a projector, screen and a few chairs. Not tied up with the status quo and with nothing to lose by innovation, Jews were open to new ways of doing business. Gertzman explains that

"Jews, when they found themselves excluded from a field of endeavor, turned to a profession in which they sensed they could eventually thrive by cooperating with colleagues in a community of effort . . . Jews have for a very long time cultivated the temperament and talents of middlemen, and they are proud of these abilities".

The adult entertainment business required something that Jews possessed in abundance: chutzpah. **Early Jewish pornographers were marketing geniuses and ambitious entrepreneurs whose toughness, intelligence and boundless self-confidence were responsible for their successes.**

**Of course, the large number of Jews in porn were mainly motivated by the desire to make profits.** Just as their counterparts in Hollywood provided a dream factory for Americans, a blank screen upon which the Jewish moguls' visions of America could be created and projected, so the porn-moguls displayed a talent for understanding public tastes. What better way to provide the stuff of dreams and fantasies than through the adult-entertainment industry? Performers did porn for the money. **As ADL National Director Abraham H. Foxman commented, 'Those Jews who enter the pornography industry have done so as individuals pursuing the American dream.'**

### Secular sex

Like their mainstream counterparts, Jews who enter porn do not usually do so as representatives of their religious group. Most of the performers and pornographers are Jewish culturally but not religiously. Many are entirely secular, Jews in name only. **Sturman, however, identified as a Jew - he was a generous donator to Jewish charities** - and performer Richard Pacheco once interviewed to be a rabbinical student.

Very few, if any, porn films have overtly Jewish themes, although Jeremy once tried to get several Jewish porn stars together to make a kosher porn film. The exception is Debbie Duz Dishes, in which Nina Hartley plays a sexually insatiable Jewish housewife who enjoys sex with anyone who rings the doorbell. It has sold very well, spawned a couple of sequels and is currently very hard to buy - perhaps indicating a new niche to exploit. Indeed, according to an editorial on the World Union of Jewish Students website,

"there are thousands of people searching for Jewish porn. After things like Jewish calendar, Jewish singles, Jewish dating, and Jewish festivals comes 'Jewish porn' in the list of top search keywords that [GoTo.com](http://GoTo.com) provide".

## Sexual rebels

Is there a deeper reason, beyond the mere financial, as to why Jews in particular have become involved in porn? There is surely an element of rebellion in Jewish X-rated involvement. Its very taboo and forbidden nature serves to make it attractive. As I written in these pages before, *treyf* signifies ‘the whole world of forbidden sexuality, the sexuality of the goyim, and there all the delights are imagined to lie . . .’ (‘Reel Kashrut: Jewish food in film’, JQ 189 [Spring 2003]).

According to one anonymous industry insider quoted by E. Michael Jones in the magazine *Culture Wars* (May 2003), ‘the leading male performers through the 1980s came from secular Jewish upbringings and the females from Roman Catholic day schools’. The standard porn scenario became as a result a Jewish fantasy of *schtupping* the Catholic *shiksa*.

Furthermore, as Orthodox Jew and porn gossipmonger Luke Ford explains on his website ([lukeford.net](http://lukeford.net)): ‘**Porn is just one expression of [the] rebellion against standards, against the disciplined life of obedience to Torah that marks a Jew living Judaism.**’ It is also a revolt against (often middle-class) parents who wish their children to be lawyers, doctors and accountants. As performer Bobby Astyr put it on the same website, ‘It’s an “up yours” to the uncles with the pinky rings who got down on me as a kid for wanting to be musician.’

As religious influences waned and were replaced by secular ones, free-thinking Jews, especially those from California’s Bay Area, viewed sex as a means of personal and political liberation. America provided the freest society Jews have ever known, as manifested by the growth of the adult industry. Those Jewish women who have sex onscreen certainly stand in sharp contradiction to the stereotype of the ‘Jewish American Princess’. They (and I’m speculating here) may have seen themselves as fulfilling the promise of liberation, emancipating themselves from what feminist Betty Friedan in 1963 called the ‘comfortable concentration camp’ of the household as they set out into the Promised Land of the porno sets of Southern California. It signified their economic and social freedom: they were free to choose to enter, rather than coerced into it by economic and other circumstances. Once they had lain down, they could stand on their own two feet, particularly as female performers typically earn twice as much as their male counterparts.

## Sexual revolutionaries

Extending the subversive thesis, Jewish involvement in the X-rated industry can be seen as a proverbial two fingers to the entire WASP establishment in America. Some porn stars viewed themselves as frontline fighters in the spiritual battle between Christian America and secular humanism. According to Ford, Jewish X-rated actors often brag about their ‘joy in being anarchic, sexual gadflies to the puritanical beast’. **Jewish involvement in porn, by this argument, is the result of an atavistic hatred of Christian authority: they are trying to weaken the dominant culture in America by moral subversion.** Astyr remembers having ‘to run or fight for it in grammar school because I was a Jew. It could very well be that part of my porn career is an “up yours” to these people’. Al Goldstein, the publisher of *Screw*, said (on [lukeford.net](http://lukeford.net)), ‘**The only reason that Jews are in pornography is that we think that Christ sucks. Catholicism sucks.** We don’t believe in authoritarianism.’ **Pornography thus becomes a way of defiling Christian culture and, as it penetrates to the very heart of the American mainstream (and**

is no doubt consumed by those very same WASPs), its subversive character becomes more charged. Porn is no longer of the 'what the Butler saw' voyeuristic type; instead, it is driven to new extremes of portrayal that stretch the boundaries of the porn aesthetic. As new sexual positions are portrayed, the desire to shock (as well as entertain) seems clear.

It is a case of the traditional revolutionary/radical drive of immigrant Jews in America being channeled into sexual rather than leftist politics. Just as Jews have been disproportionately represented in radical movements over the years, so **they are also disproportionately represented in the porn industry**. Jews in America have been sexual revolutionaries. **A large amount of the material on sexual liberation was written by Jews. Those at the forefront of the movement which forced America to adopt a more liberal view of sex were Jewish.** Jews were also at the vanguard of the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Wilhelm Reich, Herbert Marcuse and Paul Goodman replaced Marx, Trotsky and Lenin as required revolutionary reading. Reich's central preoccupations were work, love and sex, while Marcuse prophesied that a socialist utopia would free individuals to achieve sexual satisfaction. Goodman wrote of the 'beautiful cultural consequences' that would follow from legalizing pornography: it would 'ennoble all our art' and 'humanize sexuality'. Pacheco was one Jewish porn star who read Reich's intellectual marriage of Freud and Marx ([lukeford.net](http://lukeford.net)):

"Before I got my first part in an adult film, I went down to an audition for an X-rated film with my hair down to my ass, a copy of Wilhelm Reich's Sexual Revolution under my arm and yelling about work, 'love and sex'."

As Rabbi Samuel H. Dresner put it (E. Michael Jones, 'Rabbi Dresner's Dilemma: Torah v. Ethnos' Culture Wars, May 2003), 'Jewish rebellion has broken out on several levels', one being 'the prominent role of Jews as advocates to sexual experimentation'. Overall, then, porn performers are a group of people who praise rebellion, self-fulfilment and promiscuity.

### What are we ashamed of?

This brief overview and analysis of the role and motivations behind pornographers and performers is intended to shed light on a neglected topic in American Jewish popular culture. Little has been written about it. Books such as Howard M. Sachar's A History of the Jews in America (New York: Knopf, 1992) simply ignore the topic. And you can bet that the 350th anniversary of the arrival of the Jews in the United States did not include any celebrations of Jewish innovation in this field. Even the usually tolerant Time Out New York has been too prim to deal with it, although the more iconoclastic Heeb plans an issue on it. In light of the relatively tolerant Jewish view of sex, why are we ashamed of the Jewish role in the porn industry? We might not like it, but the Jewish role in this field has been significant and it is about time it was written about seriously.

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