

“Ride ‘Em, Jewboy”: Kinky Friedman and the Texas Mystique¹

by

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Kinky Friedman, the country singer-turned crime novelist, once described himself as “the bastard child of twin cultures.” “Both cowboys and Jewboys,” he explained, “wear their hats in the house.”² This is a typical Friedman throw-away line: clever, a bit crass, played strictly for laughs. But like many of the jokes that pepper his songs and novels, it hints at something much deeper. By calling himself a “bastard child,” Friedman implies that his two heritages, Texan and Jewish, are incompatible in some way, and that their marriage cannot produce a legitimate child. Simultaneously he calls them “twin” cultures, indicating that they do in fact have something in common, that however incompatible they appear they are still closely related. The joke unites the two groups, each with its distinctive headgear, while reminding us that Stetsons and yarmulkes are really not the same thing at all.

The paradox that Friedman touches on here lies at the heart of any understanding of Jewish life and assimilation in Texas: Jews are both part of and separated from the Texas mystique, the bundle of assumptions and icons that has come to define what it means to be Texan, at least in a mythic sense. Jews have lived in Texas since Anglo settlement began in the 1820s,³ and a few participated in the Texas war for independence from Mexico in 1836.⁴ Since then the state’s Jewish population has grown steadily and, as in other parts of the country, Jews have come to represent a significant portion of the state’s business and professional class.

Today the Jewish population exceeds 109,000, although Jews still represent a mere six-tenths of a percent of the state's total population. This relatively small representation may partially account for why, as Friedman implies, Jews seem somehow out of place in Texas.⁵

In addition to demographic factors Texas Jews have found themselves a step outside a Texas mystique which often runs counter to everything Jewish tradition demands of them, their perception of themselves as Jews and their historical sense of what it means to be Jewish. The mythic Texan is a person (usually a man) of the outdoors, of the rural wilderness, comfortable amid the state's great distances, strong and uncompromising, fiercely independent, willing to fight, and overtly anti-intellectual. These qualities define the most enduring figures in Texas folklore: the cowboy, the frontiersman, the outlaw, the wildcatter. The mythic modern Jew, on the other hand, is a person of civilization and cultivation, a professional or tradesman, not physically intimidating in the least, most at home in an urban setting, savvy in intellectual matters but not especially rugged. Such a person, it would seem, just does not belong in a place like Texas.

Texas Jews do exist and have learned to ascribe to themselves qualities that are recognizably Texan while still holding to a sense of Jewish continuity. By doing so they have assured their authenticity as Texans and as Jews. As Seth L. Wolitz has written, "the powerful myth of Texas—even if tongue in cheek and it is more than that—envelops the newcomer willingly and unconsciously, and his native-born descendant becomes the absolute imprimatur of authenticity by birthright. . . . They have created a Texan Jew which fits the dominant normative practice of Texas."⁶

Texas Jews express that authenticity in a variety of ways which exhibit a self-consciously blended identity that draws equally—or at least substantially—from both traditions. It is visible in synagogues like Brenham's B'nai Abraham, built in 1893, whose white clapboard exterior is indistinguishable from surrounding Baptist churches but which on the inside could be an eastern European Orthodox synagogue with its enclosed octagonal bimah and upstairs women's gallery. It is evident in the

rebelliousness of Texas Jewish leaders against their counterparts in the north, as when in 1912 the [Houston] *Jewish Herald* declared a "Jewish civil war" on the leaders of New York's Jewish community, charging that they were a "syndicate who for years has been in absolute control of the Jewish voice and without whose authority no man dare move."⁷ It is also in blended recipes like the matzo balls one Dallas family serves every Passover with crushed pecans in the batter.⁸

As a self-consciously emblematic image of the Texas Jew, Kinky Friedman exemplifies this mixture. He is not a typical Texas Jew any more than Lyndon Johnson was a typical Texan. But in creating a public image for himself, Friedman has drawn on familiar icons of both Texas and Jewish character, exaggerated them in typically Texas fashion, and combined them into a bigger-than-life and deeply resonant personality. While no one else in Texas is like Kinky Friedman and no other example of Texas-Jewish culture expresses this blended identity so broadly, it is possible, through a study of Friedman's presentation of himself in life, song and novel, to uncover an original and meaningful model of contemporary Jewish identity.

Kinky Friedman, who has today taken his place as "Bill Clinton's preferred mystery writer and Nelson Mandela's favorite country singer,"⁹ was born Richard Friedman in Chicago in 1945. While he was an infant his family moved to West University Place, a tony Houston suburb, where, at the age of eight, Richard refused to participate in his school's Christmas pageant, "the first recorded instance," according to one report, "of his wearing his Judaism on his sleeve."¹⁰ When he was nine the family moved to Austin where his father, Tom, was a psychology professor at the University of Texas. The family also owned a ranch, Echo Hill, in the Texas Hill Country near Kerrville. Summers at the ranch, which the family later operated as a children's camp, were perhaps the only times separating the young Kinky from a life of utter suburban normalcy.

As an honors student at the University of Texas, Friedman's life began to take a turn toward the unconventional. He formed a band, took his nickname—a reference to the frizzy hair he calls his

"moss"¹¹—and began writing some of the songs that later made him famous. During the two years after graduation he continued writing songs while serving as a Peace Corps volunteer in a remote village in Borneo where, he has told several interviewers, his greatest achievement was teaching the Punan tribesmen how to throw a Frisbee.¹²

Returning to Austin, he formed the band that became the Texas Jewboys, not all of whom, incidentally, were Jewish. The group released three albums between 1973 and 1976,¹³ broke a song, "Sold American," into the country Top Ten, and appeared on the Grand Ol' Opry, a sure sign that they had achieved some level of fame and respectability in Nashville.¹⁴ Nonetheless they were hardly the typical country-western band. Friedman himself has described them as "avant-garde" and "a cult band," and one early reviewer proclaimed them "the world's first Jewish-longhaired country band."¹⁵ Lester Bangs, a music critic for *Rolling Stone*, praised the group's first record and hailed Kinky as "a stocky cigar-chomping Jew from Texas" who was "a true original, blessed with a distinctive wit and a manner of carrying himself both musically and personally that begins to resemble the mantle of a star."¹⁶

As Bangs indicates, Kinky's early success was largely built on his look and his supremely symbolic clothing. "His macho, cigar-chewing posturing is classic," wrote a London *Melody Maker* magazine author in 1973. "Wearing . . . a 10-gallon hat, a pearl-buttoned velvet shirt with tinted glasses, and cowboy boots with . . . gold Stars of David embroidered; there's no sight quite like it."¹⁷ At a 1976 taping of the PBS music program *Austin City Limits*, which never aired, "Friedman was dressed to kill, sporting a large Star of David belt buckle, tinted glasses and a color-coordinated satin shirt and fake-fur guitar strap."¹⁸

His outfits have mellowed somewhat over the years but remain distinctive. A 1995 article in the *New York Times* reported that "Mr. Friedman is resplendent in blue jeans, a turquoise polo shirt, a beaded-and-fringed brown suede vest and a belt studded with silver medallions, each with a Star of Texas entwined with a Star of David."¹⁹ The style, which he has called "Texas-Jewish

flamboyance,"²⁰ accents Texas fashion accessories like hats, boots, and belt buckles with recognizably Jewish symbols, displaying his wish to be conspicuously Texan and Jewish at the same time. These outfits are designed to be outrageous while merging disparate elements into a single, identifiable look.

Fashion scholar Fred Davis concludes that clothing styles are often used to express identity, "our sense of who and what we are." Because clothing "comprises what is most closely attached to the corporeal self," it "acquires a special capacity to . . . 'say things' about the self," to serve "as a kind of visual metaphor for identity."²¹ Women entering the work force, for example, have encountered the assumption that work is a "male" role and so have chosen clothing that suggests masculinity. Kinky's deliberately chosen outfits show his ability to take control of a similar process: his outward appearance, on stage and in life, speaks volumes about who he believes himself to be and how he wants the world to perceive him.

Kinky's strategy for making himself physically recognizable as a "Texas Jew," moreover, also has precursors in the theater. As Harley Erdman has shown, the history of stage performance is filled with stock characters who, while often unidentified as Jews in the dialogue, were recognizable as such "outwardly through other signs." Audiences brought to the performance preconceived notions of how Jews looked, talked and acted, so actors could manifest a character's ethnicity through "grotesque gestures, intonations, and appendages [costume noses] that can only be inscribed through performance."²² Friedman's success at creating a meaningful presentation arises from his ability to suggest his Jewishness without overtly stating it and to present it as a seamless part of his performance by shrewdly relying on his audience's preconceptions. As such he has become a living caricature of the Jewish Texan—or at least what someone unfamiliar with their actual history might suppose a Jewish Texan should look like.

It was not only the look that made Kinky a true original, but also the musically innovative and socially relevant content of his songs. "He's had the moxie," wrote Lester Bangs in 1973, "to inject Nashville with a heavy strain of Jewish Consciousness."²³ In

a 1995 interview Friedman observed that the Texas Jewboys had been “a country band with a social conscience. . . . And looking back, it was a rather ludicrous notion.”²⁴ Friedman wrote songs for the group tinged with sarcasm and overt political commentary. “We Reserve the Right to Refuse Service to You,” for example, contains a sequence of stories about discrimination, and “Rapid City, South Dakota” was, according to Friedman, “the first and only pro-choice country song ever written.”²⁵

To be political is to be controversial and Friedman has always taken pleasure in courting controversy. “Kinky walks his own road,” wrote Lester Bangs, “and doesn’t give a damn who he offends as long as he gets the message across.”²⁶ In 1973 he was booed off the stage at the State University of New York at Buffalo after singing a song called “Get Your Biscuits in the Oven and Your Buns in the Bed,” a satirical diatribe against feminism in which he states that “uppity women” ought to “occupy the kitchen, liberate the sink.”²⁷ The next year the National Organization for Women named Friedman, Male Chauvinist Pig of the Year. “I have managed,” he bragged several years later in a *New York Times* interview, “to offend everyone at one time or another.”²⁸

That willingness to offend and challenge his audience’s assumptions about what is acceptable discourse places Kinky firmly in an American Jewish tradition of anti-authoritarian humor. Albert Goldman writes that this tradition, best represented by the Marx Brothers and Lenny Bruce, consists of “the anarchic mockery of conventions and values, which crumble to dust at the touch of a rudely irreverent jest.” Such subversive humor, Goldman maintains, arises from comics who “refuse to be trampled by the conventional pieties, delighting instead in demonstrating the fragility and preposterousness of much that passes as social law and order.”²⁹ In Friedman’s early career as an equal opportunity offender through songs and a stage presence that challenged conventional understandings about Jewish character and public image, he fit neatly into that comic tradition. It is no coincidence that Lester Bangs proclaimed him “the Lenny Bruce of country music,” a title that Friedman, who once named the aggressive,

anti-authoritarian Jewish comic as one of his primary influences, must have worn proudly.³⁰

As might be expected, not everyone found his persona humorous. When the Texas Jewboys first came to national attention, Friedman received complaints from Jewish organizations about his liberal and unabashed use of the word "Jewboy," a term that in almost any context is disparaging.³¹ Like the word "boy" when used to refer to African American men, it is a term of belittlement that charges Jewish men with childishness, simplicity, dependency and weakness. As it is frequently used it evokes the whole Jewish history of persecution and, in some measure, blames Jews for their own victimization: had they been more mature, more manly, perhaps they could have defended themselves more successfully. In the contexts in which Friedman uses it, however, particularly when he so frequently turns it on himself, it becomes less an insult than a deeply evocative and even empowering expression.

In calling his band Kinky Friedman and the Texas Jewboys, Friedman made a pun on the name of the western swing band Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys, a group that revolutionized Texas popular music in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Presumably anyone steeped in Texas culture will catch the joke, and the word "Jewboy" will recall the word "playboy" and borrow some of its meaning. Immediately, then, Friedman uses the anti-Semitic slur to suggest something more masculine, more adult, more aggressive than the term standing alone can do. These are not, after all, simply "Jewboys," whose whole sad history is too familiar; they are *Texas* Jewboys, a new breed, rougher and tougher than before. The term of belittlement still shocks, but through a deft pun Friedman turns it into its opposite, an expression, at least in a 1970s context, of masculine strength and sexual prowess. The pun suggests that assimilation into Texas culture has made the Jew manlier than before.

The idea that the Texas Jewboy, influenced by the Lone Star State's toughened culture, is an improvement on older Jewish images appears most notably in one of Friedman's most popular songs. "They Ain't Makin' Jews Like Jesus Anymore" is a bold

statement of Jewish assertiveness and self-defense. It appeared in 1974 on Friedman's second album, has since been recorded and released several times, and is a favorite at the few concerts he still performs.³²

The song's narrator, a recognizably Kinky-like person, is sitting in a Texas beer hall listening to another drinker, a "redneck" as he calls him, spew out a barrage of anti-Semitic remarks. "You just want to doodle a Christian girl," the redneck says to the narrator, "and you killed God's only son." When the singer objects, suggesting that as far as Jews were concerned Christ was killed by Santa Claus, the drunken redneck answers with a stream of ethnic slurs directed at Jews, blacks, Catholics, Asian Americans, Greeks, Chicanos, and a handful of others. Civil words having failed him, the singer rises and "hits [the redneck] with everything I had right square between the eyes." The redneck falls defeated to the floor, and, with the cheers of everyone in the bar accompanying him, the Texas Jewish hero confidently strides out the door. The song's chorus summarizes its central message:

They ain't makin' Jews like Jesus anymore,
We don't turn the other cheek the way we done before.
You could hear that honky holler as he hit that hardwood
floor,
Lord, they ain't makin' Jews like Jesus anymore.³³

The song asserts that there is a new kind of Jew afoot, one who refuses to "turn the other cheek" as Jesus did or, by implication, as Jews have done throughout their history. This Jewish narrator stands tough in the face of an ethnic assault directed not only at himself but at virtually every American minority. He is a defender, even by violence, of his right to exist and to express his ethnic difference; he is an aggressive advocate of self-defense and civil rights.

This urbanized, modernized Texas Jew, who inhabits a beer hall rather than a shul, is a figure very much of his time. His stand against the redneck's racism shows that he has absorbed the liberal vocabulary of the day: "If there's one thing I can't abide," he tells the redneck, "it's an ethnocentric racist." He is a product of

the late civil rights era, of Black Power and *La Raza Unida*, and of a political culture that was learning to value pluralism and ethnic assertiveness. And his violent defense of himself as a Jew also recalls Israel's triumph in the Six Day War of 1967, a conflict that did much to transform the image of Jews and the Jewish self-image into one of toughness and assertiveness. When the singer lands his punch, it is a blow simultaneously to lingering southern racism and global anti-Semitism, and the blow is struck by an iconographic Jewish figure of a time after the Holocaust and after the establishment of Israel. Friedman's blending of Jewish and Texas imagery allows him to create a Jewish figure who is tougher than ever, tough even by Texas standards.

Friedman addresses this transformation more thoughtfully in another of his most popular songs, "Ride 'Em, Jewboy," a piece that served as the band's theme song and which Lester Bangs praised as "both an anthem of ethnic pride and a hauntingly evocative slice of classic American folksong."³⁴ Released in 1973 on Friedman's first album, it is a somber ballad to the victims of the Holocaust. The song is slow with a simple rhythm carried on an acoustic guitar, much in the style of cowboy campfire songs. Its mood and sound resemble "Home on the Range" as much as any more recent influence. The lyric draws a comparison between the persecuted Jew and the mythic cowboy of the Texas prairie: Friedman fuses the cowboy's rootless, solitary life into the Jews' history of oppression and forced migration.

Ride, ride 'em Jewboy,
Ride 'em all around the old corral.
I'm, I'm with you boy
If I've got to ride six million miles.

Now the smoke from camps a' risin'
See the helpless creatures on their way.
Hey, old pal, ain't it surprisin'
How far you can go before you stay.

Don't you let the morning blind ya
 When on your sleeve you wore the yeller star.
 Old memories still live behind ya,
 Can't you see by your outfit who you are?

How long will you be driven relentless 'round the world,
 The blood in the rhythm of the soul.

Wild ponies all your dreams were broken,
 Rounded up and made to move along.
 The loneliness which can't be spoken
 Just swings a rope and rides inside a song.

Dead limbs play with ringless fingers
 A melody which burns you deep inside.
 Oh, how the song becomes the singers,
 May peace be ever with you as you ride.

How long will you be driven relentless 'round the world,
 The blood in the rhythm of the soul.

In the window candles glowing
 Remind you that today you are a child,
 Road ahead, forever rollin',
 And anything worth cryin' can be smiled.

So ride, ride 'em Jewboy,
 Ride 'em all around the old corral.
 I'm, I'm with you boy
 If I've got to ride six million miles.³⁵

On the surface this could be any one of a hundred western folk ballads in the "git along little dogie" tradition, songs sung by cowboys on the cattle drive or, more likely, by Gene Autry in the movies. Again Friedman adapts the word "Jewboy" to his own purposes, this time playing with the familiar cliché "ride 'em, cowboy." Again a pun makes the word far more than a term of disparagement. It tells the listener that this is a song with two con-

texts, Texan and Jewish, and allows double meanings to illuminate most of the song's images. Candles glowing in the window now evoke both the prairie tradition of lighting a candle to help the wanderer find his way home and the lights of Sabbath or Hanukkah; the "yeller star" (with that wonderful dialectical turn) recalls both the badge of a western lawman and the identification tag of Jews in Nazi Europe; the deliberate mention of "six million miles" recalls, of course, the six million Jewish Holocaust victims; and ominously the smoke rising from "camps" is both the comforting image of a campfire in the wilderness and the horrific one of Nazi smokestacks. The pun in the title permits us to visualize these double images and makes the piece indisputably a Holocaust memorial set in the tradition of American country-western music.

The juxtaposition of these two traditions, western campfire song and Holocaust commemoration, is a peculiar one which nonetheless works. Borrowing the traditional scene of the cattle drive, Friedman casts Jews as the cattle—"helpless creatures on their way" who are "driven relentless 'round the world" and ultimately to the slaughter—and in doing so he calls attention to the dehumanization they suffered during the Holocaust and throughout history. Later they are "wild ponies" whose "dreams were broken,/ Rounded up and made to move along." Friedman alludes to the whole Jewish history of abandonment and persecution culminating in the Holocaust, and his use of the word "Jewboy," a familiar expression of weakness, underscores Jewish victimization.

But even as the word reminds us of Jewish helplessness in the face of the Nazi threat, it makes a pun on "cowboy," a word weighted with very different meanings. When we see the figure the narrator addresses not as the cattle but as a fellow rider, the phrase "Ride 'em, Jewboy" suggests a position of strength and power atop a horse in charge of the drive. The word is recast, then, giving the impression not of a victimized Jew but of a Jewish cowboy, a product of the Jewish past but with a cowboy's toughness and control. Drawing on the mythic history of the American West as a place of boundless opportunity and limitless futures, the

narrator reminds the Jewish cowboy that he will always remember his tragic past ("old memories still live behind ya," he says), but that he should not "let the morning (with a pun on 'mourning') blind ya." With Texas optimism the singer insists that "the road ahead [is] forever rolling" and that "anything worth cryin' can be smiled."

Friedman's creative use of the most familiar icons of both traditions and his clever manipulation of the imagery draw the two together in an unexpected and meaningful way. As presented here both the Jewish and the cowboy traditions involve wandering, restlessness, loneliness, regret, and loss. The cowboy and the Jewboy are both melancholy figures, haunted by the past, isolated from society and cut adrift from community. In the Jewish tradition this is, of course, a tragic experience, a reminder of ancient persecution. But by blending that interpretation with elements of the Texas mystique, Friedman presents a uniquely Texan Jew with a uniquely Texas Jewish memory: the tragic past is part of who he is, but as a Jewish cowboy rather than simply a "Jewboy," he need not be crippled by it.

After the Texas Jewboys broke up in 1976, Friedman toured solo for a while, including a stint as an opening act for Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue before settling into a weekly gig at New York City's Lone Star Cafe. He spent eight years there hovering in the limbo that only overlooked celebrities inhabit until 1986 when he resurfaced as the author of a series of crime novels. To date he has published ten books, roughly one a year, as well as several compilations for European publishers.³⁶ He travels extensively on book signing tours and still plays on stage occasionally, but he says that he generally limits himself now to performing at "bookstores, whorehouses, and bar mitzvahs."³⁷

The change of medium from country singer to novelist may seem strange on the surface but Friedman's persona, the character who does the singing and the storytelling, is consistent across both genres; the narrators of the songs and of the novels share an essential Kinky-ness. The singer is brash, often vulgar, politically conscious and funny with a hard-edged cynicism, although in several ballads and more traditional country songs he reveals a

side that is surprisingly sentimental. The detective narrator of the novels, presented as Kinky himself, is also hard-edged, hard-boiled and cynical, but he also shows an inner softness through ruminations about lost loves, good cigars, and old friends who have, as he says, "gone to Jesus."³⁸ It is this persona, a blending of Texas and Jewish influences, that unifies Friedman's work over the course of twenty-five years.

His career as a novelist, he has said, represents a "second act" in his life,³⁹ an opportunity that came only after returning home to his family's ranch in Texas and kicking a drug and alcohol habit he had acquired in New York. "I was feeling like Lenny Bruce and Judy Garland in their last days," he told one interviewer, and he credits his flight from New York with saving his life.⁴⁰ The man who emerged from the New York years was somewhat chastened and matured, still outrageous in his personal style and penchant for one-line witticisms, but less confrontational, less shocking, less spiritually and politically driven. The change is visible in the shift from country song to crime novel—more specifically from avant-garde country singer to marketable, best-selling writer. The older Kinky is calmer, more mainstream. Much of the anarchic humor that made his 1970s performances so shocking and so meaningful is gone from the novels.

The books are almost all set in Greenwich Village and are populated by characters based on people Friedman knew while living there. Kinky himself is the hero-detective, a reluctant amateur who, of course, always manages to solve the crime a step ahead of the local police. In the meantime he ponders the meaning of his rather dissolute life, enjoys the company of a series of women, and helps his recurring circle of friends, whom he calls the Village Irregulars, get out of one scrape after another.

In his new medium Friedman falls within a burgeoning genre of mysteries featuring Jewish detectives, but unlike other writers in the field he places relatively little emphasis on the Jewish aspect of his hero's character. In Harry Kemelman's series of mysteries, for example, his detective figure, Rabbi David Small, makes his Jewishness a basic part of his crime-solving process. "On the basis of inferential logic," Kemelman explained once to

the *Boston Globe*, "the mystery is solved. That's pretty much what Rabbi Small does. It's Talmudic, this determination of the meaning of one thing by virtue of a single word."⁴¹ The stories of another Jewish writer, Faye Kellerman, feature the husband and wife team of Peter Decker and Rina Lazarus, "an attractive modern Orthodox Jewish couple" who solve crimes while struggling to maintain a traditionally religious home and family.⁴² For these characters Judaism is a deep part of who they are, what they think about, and how they approach their vocations.

In contrast Kinky's detective persona reveals almost nothing of a traditional Jewish consciousness. In fact, in one of the few passages in the novels dealing specifically with religious faith, he shows himself to be more ecumenical, even agnostic, than Jewish. "Let us pray," he suggests to his cat in a moment of existential crisis, and the two bow their heads. "Dear God, Jesus, Buddha, or L. Ron Hubbard, please help us," he prays, then explains that "I didn't really expect to hear from L. Ron Hubbard. And Buddha hadn't spoken to anyone in years. But I did hope that God or Jesus might be more forthcoming." Receiving no response, he determined that "either they didn't exist, they didn't care, or they were both autistic."⁴³ In a later moment he considers prayer again but opts against it. "I said to hell with it," he explains. "Let the good Christians around the world pray for my eternal soul."⁴⁴ As in the songs Friedman's sense of his Jewish identity really does not contain a genuinely religious component.

In a secular sense, however, the narrator does identify himself as a Jew, and self-consciously "Jewish" language pervades the novels. He describes one character, for example, dressed in "off-lox-colored slacks"; another is a partner at a New York law firm called "Schmeckel & Schmeckel"; and the family dog back home on the ranch is characterized as a "Jewish shepherd."⁴⁵

On the other hand, by setting the novels in New York Friedman greatly diminishes the significance of his persona's Jewishness: in New York, where Jews are a large part of the population, it is not his Jewish background that sets him apart but his "Texanness." There are several other Jews, in fact, among the Village Irregulars, and they often remark on the difference that arises

from their cowboy friend's place of origin. On setting off to investigate a lead, one, for instance, tells Kinky to "Head 'em up. Move 'em out. In the language of your people."⁴⁶ Kinky himself makes much of his blended personality, and the apparent incongruity of a Texas Jew provides the basis for many of his one-liners. When a friend asks him when he might play another concert at the Lone Star Cafe, Kinky replies, "probably on a cold day in Jerusalem, pal," adding that "I missed performing there like I missed having a mescal worm in my matzo-ball soup."⁴⁷ Descriptions like these show that the narrator thinks of himself as both a Texan and a Jew, but they never really confront either as a meaningful category of identity.

While in the songs of the 1970s Friedman put the Jewish cowboy persona to thoughtful thematic use, he does relatively little with it in the novels besides mine it for jokes. Detective fiction depends heavily on the appeal of its central figure and Friedman turns his dual heritage into little more than an odd character trait that helps guarantee he will be interesting enough to carry the story. What was in the songs a dynamic confrontation with issues of Jewish identity, assimilation, meaning, and memory is calcified in the novels into a quirky, wise-cracking character who, however funny and entertaining, has little of substance to say. Friedman has found the mainstream popularity that eluded him in the 1970s, but he has done so at the cost of the depth and anarchic spirit that made his career as a country-western singer and songwriter truly revolutionary.

Even if the irreverent persona he constructed for himself lost much of its potency in the transition to the mystery genre, it is still a meaningful and important creation. As Friedman presents a toughened, "Texified" Jewish figure, he suggests several ways of thinking about Jewish assimilation in America. First, he demonstrates that assimilation happens locally rather than nationally, that immigrants to the United States become not Americans so much as they become Texans, New Yorkers or Minnesotans. Friedman is thoroughly part of a particular place, and his blended

Jewishness is a product of a locally specific, rather than any kind of nationally American identity.

As Mark K. Bauman has argued, however, it is easy to make too much of regional or local differences. Writing about Jews in the American South, Bauman has concluded that they “were influenced by the regional subculture in a relatively marginal fashion.” In Bauman’s view, “ecological” influences—factors such as community size, demographics and economic bases—define the environment within which assimilation occurs and have a much greater impact on the development of Jewish identity than any specifically regional qualities. The experiences of southern Jews, then, “were far more similar to those of Jews in similar environments elsewhere in America than they were to those of white Protestants in the South.”⁴⁸

Bauman makes a very convincing case that regional differences are often superficial and ultimately less influential than the economic and social realities that daily affect people’s lives. Nevertheless he gives too little attention to an important part of the process that Kinky Friedman exemplifies: self-perception, what people *think* is unique about themselves and their local environment, can be just as powerful as the “real” forces affecting their lives. Whether or not there is a south that differs substantively from the north, whether or not there is anything that is actually unique about Texas, southerners and Texans *think* they are unique and believe that they are surrounded by a distinctive culture that belongs especially to them. They consciously embrace elements of that culture—dress, language, food, folk tales, even political values—as a way of experiencing and expressing their participation in it. As Jews have entered these local subcultures, many of them have chosen to adapt local peculiarities as a way of demonstrating their wish to belong—and, in fact, their success at having done so. As Bauman, with Bobbie Malone, has correctly noted, the decision to “serve fried rather than baked chicken on Friday nights or eat bagels alongside grits does not indicate complete acculturation to southern mores.”⁴⁹ But these choices do indicate a strong desire to be a part of what is perceived as a distinct local culture, and, regardless of the sociological realities that impinge on people’s lives,

it is these more folkloric qualities that help them understand and express who they think they are.

Kinky Friedman stands as a prime example of this process. He is wholly atypical, representative of no one but himself. But in the way he has built a personality out of elements that are distinctively Texan and Jewish—or, more precisely, that he and his audience think are distinctive—he embodies the assimilation process. No one else has become a Texas Jew in precisely the same way that Kinky has, but many others (perhaps all others) have followed a similar, if less flamboyant process of choosing which elements of the Texas mystique to adopt in order to express their own sense of being at home in Texas.

The specific character of the Texas Jew as Friedman inhabits it suggests, moreover, that there is, in fact, something special about Jewish assimilation in Texas, that the particular qualities of the Texas mystique offered Jews who migrated there an assimilation option that they may not have had anywhere else. In particular, Texas is a place where the mythology, to a greater degree than elsewhere in America, honors self-determination and independence, the freedom to live fully as oneself, to be different. The Texas mystique loves a maverick, the individual who stands up for him or herself *as* him or herself. When the narrator of "They Ain't Makin' Jews Like Jesus Anymore" defends himself as a Jew against the redneck's prejudice, he shows himself to be a true Texan, ready to defend not only his honor and his pride, but his differences. The narrator fights back precisely because he is not of the mainstream, and, by defending his right to be different, he paradoxically shows himself to be more Texan than the redneck. As Jews have made Texas their home and have contributed to its myth and history, they have found that "Texanness" and Jewishness do not necessarily conflict. Rather they discovered that the more fully they lived their lives as Jews and the more strenuously they defended their singular heritage, the more Texan they became.

NOTES

¹ This paper is derived from my dissertation, "Texas Jews: Assimilation and Identity in the Lone Star State." I am deeply grateful to Professors Robert H. Abzug and Seth L. Wolitz, both of the University of Texas at Austin, for their guidance as I have conceived and developed the ideas in this paper and in the larger work in progress. In particular, I wish to thank Professor Wolitz for sharing with me his unpublished paper, "Bi-focality in Jewish Identity in the Texan-Jewish Experience," which first awakened me to Kinky Friedman's importance as a cultural figure.

² Andrea Chambers, "It's elementary: shooting from the lip, cocky Kinky Friedman has a talent for music and mysteries," *People Weekly* 28 (November 9, 1987): 117.

³ Some scholars have suggested that the first Jews to set foot in what became Texas were Spanish *conversos*—forced converts to Christianity—who were members of exploratory missions into the region in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. To my mind, the evidence of their Jewish identity, most of which passed through the hands of the Inquisition and so has lost much of its reliability, is inconclusive. At any rate, they did not settle in Texas or form there anything that can rightly be called a community or a culture. Only with Anglo settlement in the mid-nineteenth century did a documented and active Jewish community begin in Texas. For the evidence that supports a *converso* presence in Texas, see the relevant sections of Natalie Ornish, *Pioneer Jewish Texans* (Dallas, 1989), Ruthe Winegarten and Cathy Schechter, *Deep in the Heart: Lives and Legends of Texas Jews* (Austin, 1990), and Martin A. Cohen, "The Autobiography of Luis De Carvajal, the Younger," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* (March 1966): 277–318. For evidence suggesting Jewish roots in contemporary Chicano families, see Richard G. Santos, "Chicanos of Jewish Descent in Texas," *Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly* 15 (July 1983): 327–333, and Carlos Montalvo Larralde, *Chicano Jews In South Texas* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California at Los Angeles, 1978).

⁴ There is a substantial body of scholarship exploring Jewish involvement in the war for Texas independence. See, for example, relevant sections of Henry Cohen, "Settlement of the Jews in Texas," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 2 (1894): 139–156; Ornish, *Pioneer Jewish Texans*; Winegarten and Schechter, *Deep in the Heart*; and I. Harold Sharfman, *Jews on the Frontier* (Chicago, 1977). Studies of individual Jewish participants or sympathizers include Saul Viener, "Surgeon Moses Albert Levy: Letters of a Texas Patriot," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 46:1 (September 1956): 101–113; Daniel N. Leeson, "In Search of the History of the Texas Patriot Moses A. Levy," *Western States Jewish History* 21 (July 1989): 291–306 and 22 (October 1989): 22–37; Gloria Frye, "Eva Catherine Rosine Ruff Sterne (1809–1897)," in *Women in Early Texas*, ed. Evelyn M. Carrington (Austin, 1975): 233–237; and Archie P. McDonald, "Introduction," *Hurrah for Texas! The Diary of Adolphus Sterne, 1838–1851* (Austin, 1986).

⁵ Compared to the higher proportion of Jews in the nation's other most populous states—New York (9 percent), California (3 percent), and Florida (nearly 5 percent)—Jews are in fact somewhat underrepresented in Texas. *American Jewish Yearbook* (1995): 186–187.

⁶ Seth L. Wolitz, "Bi-focality in Jewish Identity in the Texan-Jewish Experience" (unpublished paper, 1996).

- ⁷ *Jewish Herald* (February 8, 1912; February 1, 1912).
- ⁸ Joan Nathan, *Jewish Cooking in America* (New York, 1994): 113.
- ⁹ "Texas Talk: Ask Kinky," *Texas Monthly* Online, <http://www.texasmonthly.com/texas-talk/tmkinky/index.html>. This and other internet sources used herein were available at the indicated addresses as of February 8, 1998.
- ¹⁰ Evan Smith, "The Comeback Kink," *Texas Monthly* 21 (September 1993): 133.
- ¹¹ Enid Nemy, "Married to the Wind," *New York Times*, (August 31, 1995): C1 (L).
- ¹² See, for example, Chambers, "It's elementary," 117.
- ¹³ A complete Kinky Friedman discography is available online at <http://www.kinkyfriedman.com/kfdisks.htm>.
- ¹⁴ Bill Malone has noted that Friedman arrived in Nashville as part of a trend of "ethnic" acts challenging "country music's 'Anglo-Protestant' consensus." He was part of a new country-rock fusion that exhibited "a greater tolerance for beliefs and diverse lifestyles." *Country Music, USA* (Austin, 1985 [1968]): 311-312.
- ¹⁵ Alice Wightman, "Real Kinky," @Austin 1 (1997): 34; Bill Mann, "Are you ready for Kinky Friedman and the Texas Jewboys?" *Melody Maker* (December 8, 1973), <http://www.kinkyfriedman.com/press1.htm>.
- ¹⁶ Lester Bangs, Review of *Sold American*, *Rolling Stone* 137 (June 21, 1973): 63.
- ¹⁷ Mann, "Are you ready."
- ¹⁸ Wightman, "Real Kinky," 34.
- ¹⁹ Nemy, "Married to the Wind," C10 (L).
- ²⁰ Wightman, "Real Kinky," 36.
- ²¹ Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity* (Chicago, 1992): 24-25.
- ²² Harley Erdman, *Staging The Jew: The Performance Of An American Ethnicity, 1860-1920* (New Brunswick, 1997): 2.
- ²³ Bangs, Review of *Sold American*, 63.
- ²⁴ Paul Cohen, "The Kinkster," *London Calling Internet* (June 1, 1995), <http://www.london-calling.co.uk/muskinky.html>.
- ²⁵ Kinky Friedman, Liner Notes, *Kinky Friedman*, 1994 [1974].
- ²⁶ Bangs, Review of *Sold American*, 63.
- ²⁷ Kinky Friedman, "Get Your Biscuits in the Oven and Your Buns in the Bed," *Sold American* (Vanguard Records, 1973).
- ²⁸ Nemy, "Married to the Wind," C1.
- ²⁹ Albert Goldman, "Laughtermakers," in *Jewish Wry*, ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen (Bloomington, 1987): 82.
- ³⁰ Bangs, Review of *Sold American*, 63. In a 1973 article in London's *Melody Maker*, Friedman named his four greatest influences as Lenny Bruce, Anne Frank, Mahatma Gandhi, and Hank Williams, a motley and calculated group to be sure.
- ³¹ Actual statements by Jewish organizations have proven difficult to locate, but in a 1989 interview with the Los Angeles Times Friedman recalled that "Many people never could get past . . . the name of the band. It got a lot of people's backs up." Sheldon Teitelbaum, "The Tale of a Kinky Cowboy Who Made Good," *Los Angeles Times* (October 15, 1989): E16. Also, in his 1973 review of *Sold American* in *Rolling Stone*, Lester Bangs suggested that Friedman's "wry racial persona" had made it hard for him to find supporters among "a good many tradition-bound Jewish factions in the recording industry itself," many of

whom "are still shuddering at the prospects of promoting an item called Kinky Friedman and His Texas Jewboys." Bangs, *Review of Sold American*, 63.

³² Seth L. Wolitz has written of one such concert: "This song was recently performed at the annual 4th of July Luckenbach Folk Festival 1996 in Texas where the song still brought cheers and at points boos from the Texan audience." Wolitz, "Bi-Focal Identity."

³³ Kinky Friedman, "They Ain't Makin' Jews Like Jesus Anymore," *Kinky Friedman* (ABC Dunhill Records, 1974). Transcribed by the author.

³⁴ Bangs, *Review of Sold American*, 63.

³⁵ Kinky Friedman, "Ride 'Em, Jewboy," *Old Testaments & New Revelations* (Fruit of the Tune Music, 1992), originally recorded 1973. Transcribed by the author.

³⁶ A complete Kinky Friedman bibliography is available online at <http://www.kinkyfriedman.com/biblio.htm>.

³⁷ Evan Smith, "The Comeback Kink," 134.

³⁸ As in, for example, *Armadillos and Old Lace* (New York, 1994): 3.

³⁹ Wightman, "Real Kinky," 32.

⁴⁰ John Barron, "Words of weirdness," *Chicago Sun-Times* (September 8, 1996):16; Diane Feischel, "Reinventing Kinky," *Chicago Tribune* (October 1, 1989).

⁴¹ Irene Sege, "Tuesday the 'Rabbi' made headlines," *Boston Globe* (May 21, 1996): 77.

⁴² Fritz Lanham, "Orthodoxy revisited," *Houston Chronicle* (November 24, 1996): Zest Section, 22.

⁴³ Kinky Friedman, *Elvis, Jesus and Coca-Cola* (London, 1993): 6.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁴⁵ Kinky Friedman, *Greenwich Killing Time* (New York, 1986): 16; Kinky Friedman, *The Love Song of J. Edgar Hoover* (New York, 1996): 43; *Armadillos and Old Lace*, 24.

⁴⁶ *Elvis, Jesus and Coca-Cola*, 55.

⁴⁷ *Greenwich Killing Time*, 16.

⁴⁸ Mark K. Bauman, *The Southerner as American: Jewish Style* (Cincinnati, 1996): 5.

⁴⁹ Mark K. Bauman and Bobbie Malone, "Introduction: Directions in Southern Jewish History," *American Jewish History* 85 (September 1997): 192.