

Mikhail Horowitz

Chosen Clowns

The Influence of Jews on Segregated Baseball

It's probably safe to assume that not one baseball fan in fifty thousand has ever heard of the Belleville Grays. No less an authority of our National Pastime than John Thorn, official historian for Major League Baseball, acknowledged his ignorance to me as to who they were or when they flourished. But thanks to the efforts of Rebecca Alpert, this independent team of Black ballplayers — who identified themselves as “Hebrew Is-

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Out of Left Field: Jews and Black Baseball, by Rebecca T. Alpert. 2011, Oxford University Press, 236 pages.

raelites” — has been rescued from the segregated dustbin of history. During their heyday in the 1920s and '30s, the Grays, who were based in Belleville, Virginia, competed successfully against top semipro and even Negro League teams, and were actually a part of Temple Beth El, which practiced a “heterodox” version of Judaism that combined elements of Christianity with Torah service.

The saga of the Belleville Grays is pretty much a footnote, albeit a fascinating one, to the primary focus of Alpert's extensively researched book, *Out of Left Field: Jews and Black Baseball*. The author's larger concern is with the Jews — Ashkenazi, not African-American — who did not set foot on the diamond, but whose influence extended to all facets of the Black game, and ultimately to the major leagues. These were the Jewish own-

ers of Negro League franchises and the Jewish impresarios who fielded, ballyhooed, and booked games for independent Black touring teams, and the Jewish sportswriters who, from the pages of *The Daily Worker*, railed against the white baseball establishment and rallied the masses to support the desegregation of the pro game.

Black baseball has a longer history than many fans of the game suspect. Players of African descent were competing against Caucasians in professional ball as far back as the 1880s, and historians have uncovered the existence of independent Black teams of an even earlier vintage, in the period immediately following the Civil War. In the late 19th century, however, white managers and players (most prominently the Hall of Famer Cap Anson, the first pro to accumulate three thousand hits) increasingly refused to compete against Blacks, and a “gentleman's agreement” went into effect to ensure that they would not have to. This unofficial “color line,” which wasn't erased until Jackie Robinson signed a contract with the Dodgers' minor-league team in Montreal in 1946, necessitated the formation of segregated circuits for Black players who wanted to play professionally.

Beginning with the formation of the League of Colored Baseball Clubs in 1887, the “Negro Leagues” were actually a checkered succession of eleven different leagues that lasted until the early 1950s. At their peak in the 1930s and early '40s, the two leagues then in operation — the Negro National League and the Negro American League — had hundreds of employees and millions of dollars in revenue.

But as Alpert, a Reconstructionist rabbi and a professor of religion and women's studies at Temple University, points out, Black baseball was never a stable enterprise, and the pervasive presence of institutionalized racism didn't help. “Because Jim Crow reigned in both North and South,

Mikhail Horowitz is a frequent contributor to JEWISH CURRENTS. His baseball bona fides include authoring *Big League Poets* (City Lights, 1978), working on the seventh edition of *Total Baseball*, and serving as contributing editor to (the now defunct) *Elysian Fields Quarterly*.

blacks needed their own hotels, transportation, and leisure activities to cope with the reality of segregated spaces," she writes. "But even to support segregated institutions, blacks were compelled to forge financial connections with whites. And when black businesses did achieve success, whites were always ready to enter and take over."

Hence, white businessmen, for the most part European immigrants eager to exploit the opportunities afforded by the newly expanding arenas of sports and show biz, were involved with the operation of Black baseball from the get-go. Working with Black entrepreneurs, they helped provide funding, venues, publicity, equipment, and other essentials for both league teams and unaffiliated teams. By the late 1920s, most of these white businessmen were Jews. Three of them merit special consideration from Alpert: Eddie Gottlieb, owner of the Philadelphia Stars of the Negro National League, who also served as the league's booking agent and one of its officers; Syd Pollock, promoter of the Cincinnati (or "Ethiopian") Clowns, a touring team (later based in Indianapolis) whose on-field shenanigans were as controversial as they were lucrative; and, most famously, Abe Saperstein, the genius behind the Harlem Globetrotters who, as a booking agent, wielded enormous power—disproportionate power, as far as many Black executives were concerned—in the day-to-day operation of the Negro Leagues. (Saperstein and Gottlieb, who was the first coach and manager of National Basketball Association's Philadelphia Warriors, both eventually became members of the Basketball Hall of Fame.)

Gottlieb, Pollock, and Saperstein were complex characters, and their relationships to the Black businessmen and athletes they worked with were knotty — always complicated, often contentious. In the microcosm within a microcosm that was the African-American sports world, they played roles that more often than not reinforced stereotypes of Jews as greedy, conniving money-grubbers, and stereotypes of Blacks as the buffoonish characters depicted in minstrel shows. The trio's tendencies to advance their own financial interests whenever the opportunity arose, at the expense of the leagues



they were aligned with, were a source of consternation to the Black owners — who also, for the most part, appreciated and depended upon the business acumen and organizational skills of the Jewish entrepreneurs. But perhaps the biggest bone of contention stemmed from the Clowns, a touring "baseball comedy" team that Pollock owned and that he and Saperstein promoted.

As Alpert tells it, "The conflict between making a good living and the debasing nature of the work would cause much hardship and ambivalence for the Black athletes employed by Pollock and Saperstein." This "debasing nature" included the ballplayers having to apply "war paint" to their faces, wear grass skirts, and adopt bogus "African" names, all of which reinforced pernicious racial stereotypes. Perhaps even more upsetting to Black sensibilities was the original designation of the Clowns as "Ethiopian," at a time when Ethiopia was bravely resisting the fascist invasion of Mussolini. Although he considered Pollock "a

swell person, personally," Cum Posey, the Black owner of the Homestead Grays, could not forgive him for "capitalizing on the rape of Ethiopia when that country was in distress," Alpert writes, and other owners and fans were equally outraged. In their defense, Pollock and Saperstein pointed to the profitability of these circuses, which in addition to swelling their own pockets made money for the Black athletes who played for and against the Clowns, and helped financially to stabilize organized Black baseball.

The problematic nature of comedy and Black baseball has not gone unexamined by other writers. For instance, in his essay in *Negro League Baseball*, a book of photographs by the late Ernest Withers (I cite this only because it seems to be one of the very few books on the subject that is not included in Alpert's exhaustive, thirteen-page bibliography), Daniel Woolf argues that the tradition of clowning in Black ball was essentially subversive: "The American pastime was one of the many institutions that black people couldn't enter. But they could excel at it and transform it — and poke fun at it." Yet a terse comment by Withers, to accompany a photo of five stars of the Clowns, reveals the inimical feelings of many Black fans and players towards the antics that were deemed necessary to draw bigger (and whiter) crowds. "They were top-notch ballplayers; there was no junk," says Withers, expressing both pride for the excellence of the Clowns' play and contempt for the clowning that served to cloak that excellence.

Alpert's book, however, goes deeper into the history, psychology, and political ramifications of blackball comedy than any previous work I have encountered. Likewise, its exploration of the crucial role enacted by three *Daily Worker* sportswriters — Lester Rodney, Nat Low, and Bill Mardo — in the eventual integration of Major League Baseball is comprehensive.

While acknowledging that the independent Black press had been the prime mover for the admittance of Black ballplayers onto the largest national stage, Alpert notes that "white journalists, politicians, and team owners played strategic roles, and Jews were prominent among them." As in other areas, though,

"the interests of blacks and Jews in integration were sometimes compatible but at other times antagonistic." Although mainstream Jewish journalists such as Roger Kahn and Shirley Povich and politicians such as Isidore Muchnick and Fiorello LaGuardia (who had a Jewish mother) had small but important parts to play, according to Alpert it was Rodney, Low, and Mardo who took "the only consistent and fundamentally moral stance against segregation and on behalf of justice." They (along with Jackie Robinson, naturally) are the heroes of her book.

Of the three, Rodney fired the first salvo. A journalism student at NYU, he was not yet a Communist Party member when he was hired to edit the fledgling sports section at the American communist paper of record; he was simply a young man who, like so many Jews of his generation, was passionately committed to an ideal of social justice. His first column (in August 1936, on the heels of Jesse Owens' triumph over athletes of the "master race" in Berlin) exhorted his readers to press the rulers of baseball for the game's integration. "Some pressure is already being brought upon them, but much more is needed," Rodney wrote. "It won't take much, sports fans. The performance abroad of our stellar Negro athletes in the Olympics has brought the question of baseball's short-sighted discrimination squarely to the fore."

Up until he left the paper to join the fight against Hitler in 1942, Rodney kept up the heat. He badgered the Dodgers to sign Satchel Paige and other Black stars; he spearheaded a drive to collect thousands of signatures calling for an end to the ban on Blacks, a petition that was presented to the commissioner of baseball and the presidents of the two major leagues; he helped form a committee to "End Jim Crow in 1940" — all of this and more helped to keep the issue alive in the public eye. Even well after the white pro leagues began to be integrated, Rodney and his colleagues continued to demand more, such as the hiring of Black executives and the elimination of the unofficial racial "quotas" that determined how many Black players a team could field. He was also the first baseball writer to nominate the great Paige for the Baseball Hall of Fame. (It would be more than fitting if, one of

these days, the Hall of Fame named Lester Rodney posthumously as the recipient of its J. G. Taylor Spink Award, which honors "meritorious contributions to baseball writing." Of course, it would also be great if, one of these days, there were a Jewish lesbian in the White House. In either case, I'm not going to hold my breath.)

Ironically, posterity held the same fate for the courageous and principled Rodney, Low, and Mar-do as it did for the self-serving stage managers of the old school of lowball comedy and shameless promotion. By the late 1950s, Saperstein, Gottlieb, and Pollock, "who made their living from a segregated institution . . . did not fit into a Jewish community that emphasized liberal religious values and the importance of working against discrimination," writes Alpert. But the *Daily Worker* sportswriters were likewise *personae non grata* in the brave new world of postwar affluence and aspiration: "Their affiliation with the Communist Party put them outside the range of phenomena that the Jewish community wanted to claim as its own."

Out of Left Field is not a book for the casual baseball fan. It is the fruit of meticulous, in-depth research, and its true audience is the scholar — not only of baseball, but also of American history and two subsets thereof, Black studies and Jewish studies. The wealth of detail that Alpert marshals is impressive, but it can also be numbing at times, as when she dutifully reports who said what, and to whom, at which league meeting. Considering the larger-than-life quality of many of these (you'll pardon the expression) colorful characters, her writing at times can be disappointingly dry. In a perfect world, we'd have two great books on this subject — Alpert's erudite, trustworthy historical account, and another book by someone with a novelist's touch, who could flesh out these wheelers, dealers, political agitators and proud athletes in all their tragicomic glory, giving us their poetry with the prose. **JC**

"There is talk that I am Jewish," Al Schacht, the "Clown Prince of Baseball," once said, "just because my father was Jewish, my mother is Jewish, I speak Yiddish and once studied to be a rabbi and a cantor. Well, that's how rumors get started."

JACK BOBROW

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 Had contract with YMCA to show up daily
 Speaker in loud voice with wisdom
 at art exhibitions
 Lover and learner of travelling where
 he often left the pack to
 meet the locals in their own homes
 Stubborn, intense, generous, caring,
 devoted father and grandfather
 Died peacefully with dignity in his sleep at
 home on June 18, 2011 at 93.75 years of age

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 Reston, Virginia

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 (for more than 55 years!)
 and monthly sustainer

LESTER SCHLOSBERG

of Chicago,
 who died in July at age 93.

JEWISH CURRENTS condoles with
 our former office manager

Esther Surovell

on the loss of her daughter,

HARRIET, at age 57.

May the family be embraced by their
 community and spared any more grief.