

# Music/journalism

## Percy Faith – Bandleader, Composer, Arranger, Conductor



By

DAVID EISENSTADT

Whenever I hear the tune “Theme from a Summer Place,” it brings back a flood of happy summertime teenage memories.

That instrumental hit single exemplified the easy-listening or “mood music” format of the 1950s and ‘60s. I knew it was performed by Percy Faith and his orchestra. What I didn’t know was that Percy was Jewish and was born in Toronto.

One of eight children born to Abraham and Minnie (née Rottenberg), young Percy studied violin, then piano, and was destined to become a concert pianist while studying at the Toronto Conservatory of Music.

But that career objective ended when he suffered serious burns to his hands while saving his younger sister’s life after her clothing caught fire. He couldn’t play the piano for nine months but during that time, became interested in arranging and composing. He quit the Conservatory without completing his degree. Soon thereafter, he married the former Mary Palanage, a union that lasted until he died in 1976. They had two sons.

In the 1930s, his experience as a theatre and hotel orchestra conductor helped land conducting and arranging radio gigs at the CBC, until he moved to Chicago in 1940 as orchestra leader for the NBC-produced *Carnation Contented* program. In the late ‘40s, he was the orchestra leader on the CBS network program *The Coca-Cola Hour*, collaborating with orchestral accordionist John Serry Sr.

As a naturalized U.S. citizen, he joined Decca Records, then moved to Columbia Records where, under the iconic Mitch Miller during the 1950s, he produced many of the albums for Tony Bennett, Doris Day, Johnny Mathis and Sarah Vaughan.

In 1960, *Billboard*’s Year-End Hot 100 single was his “Theme from a Summer Place,” which won a 1961 Grammy Award as Record of the Year. Other Faith trademark recordings are “Delicado” (1952) and “The Song from Moulin Rouge” (1953).

Some music critics and others disparaged Faith for the dreamy excesses of the easy-listening genre. In the movie “Good Morning Vietnam,” the Army radio DJ character Robin Williams played was given a list of “acceptable” music he was allowed to broadcast: “Lawrence Welk, Jim Nabors...” at which point the irreverent Williams slips in, “Percy Faith.”

He remains the only artist to net Best Selling Single of the Year for “Song from Moulin Rouge” in 1953 during the pop era, and for “Theme from a Summer Place” in 1960 during the rock era.

Faith mined Broadway, Hollywood and Latin music for many of his hits and also scored motion pictures, receiving an Academy Award nomination for his adaptation of the Doris Day musical feature “Love Me or Leave Me.” Other film scores included romantic comedies and dramas and the theme for the NBC series, “The Virginian.”

The *Billboard* Hot 200 best sellers’ chart through 1972 lists 21 Percy Faith easy-listening albums. But with rock’n’roll taking centre stage in the 1970s, Faith saw his trademark arrangements wane, although he produced two significant albums, “Black Magic Woman” and “Jesus Christ Superstar.” He ventured into country music and completed a disco-style reworking of his “Theme from a Summer Place”, titled “Summer Place ‘76,” which became a hit after he died.

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The above column is excerpted from *UNDER THE RADAR – 30 Notable Jewish Musicians – available on Amazon.ca in paperback and E-book version.*



Percy Faith in a 1949 photo

## Six Jewish words no journalist can live without

By ANDREW SILOW-CARROLL

(JTA) — Philip Roth’s character Alexander Portnoy captured the insecurity of second-generation immigrants in two priceless sentences.

“I was asked by the teacher one day to identify a picture of what I knew perfectly well my mother referred to as a ‘spatula,’” Portnoy complains. “But for the life of me I could not think of the word in English.”

The joke is about a child of immigrants whose parents mix vocabulary from the Old Country into their everyday English, and pity the kid who has to figure out which is which. My parents weren’t immigrants, but I feel his pain. When I was growing up the few Yiddish words that sprinkled their vocabulary had essentially entered the English dictionary. I developed my “Jewish” vocabulary later in life, after time spent in Israel, classrooms, synagogues and in a series of Jewish workspaces.

I’m Portnoy with a difference: I know which words are Yiddish and Hebrew, but I can’t think of the words in English that do as good a job.

This comes up in my work at a Jewish media company. Journalism has its own specialized vocabulary, with talk of “ledes” and “nut grafs,” “sigs” and “kickers.” But there are also Jewish words for which there are no satisfactory substitutes in the newsroom.

Consider “nafke minah,” a Talmudic phrase that means something like, “What is the practical difference?” It’s a useful tool for examining in what ways the thing you are writing about is fresh or different from some other thing, or if it advances a developing story. It’s a close cousin of “hiddush” (or “chidush,” not to be confused with kiddush), Hebrew for a fresh insight. If something doesn’t pass the nafke minah or hiddush test, it may not be news.

Similarly, “tachlis” (“tachlit” in Modern Hebrew) is indispensable in describing the main or operative point of something. Think of “brass tacks” or “bottom line” in English. I want to use the word whenever I am reading a story with a meandering opening and am restless to get to the main point, or if I suspect a source is dancing around a subject. It’s the difference between an organization saying “it is our goal to actualize new modalities for young Jews to engage in lasting relationships” and “we are a dating app.”

“Pshat” (rhymes with spot) is the plain meaning of something, stripped of “drash” (rhymes with “wash”), or interpretation. It’s essentially the who, what, where and when without the why. Reporters can be itchy to get to the interpretation of a news event; editors can be cranky in demanding that they first stick to the facts. Just give me the pshat. (Not that I am allergic to drash: It is also the role of journalists to interpret an event or phenomenon for the reader, once they have lined up the facts.)

“Nisht ahin nisht aher” is a Yiddish phrase my father used, meaning “neither here nor there,” or maybe, “neither fish nor fowl.” To me it describes a piece of writing that doesn’t know yet what it wants to be. Is this a profile of a bagel-maker or a story about the inexplicable popularity of the cinnamon raisin variety?

I polled my colleagues for the Jewish vocabulary they either use only in Jewish settings, or wish they could use outside the bubble. There were the untranslatable usual suspects like “davka” and “mamash” and “stam” and that Swiss Army knife of interjections, “nu.”

Which is not to suggest that my colleagues share a vocabulary or frames of reference, Jewish or otherwise. Hebrew Union College’s Sarah Bunin Benor studies the language of contemporary American Jews and has written about the ways their vocabulary tracks with their Jewish biographies: the older Jews steeped in Yiddishisms, younger Jews who have brought more Hebrew into the Jewish-English vocabulary, devout Jews who speak a Hebrew/Yiddish/Aramaic patois known as Yinglish. There are proud Jews who have very little “Jewish” in their language and “insiders,” like me, who slip in and out of different Jewish skins depending on their audience.

And Benor’s latest project, tracking historical and living Jewish languages, demonstrates the linguistic diversity of the Jews beyond Ashkenazi Europe. (Benor’s side project, the indispensable Jewish-English Lexicon, introduced me to the Ladino *gesundheit*: “Bivas, kreskas, enfloreskas!” [“Live, grow, thrive!”])

Because of that variety of experiences and influences, I am hesitant to inflict my Jewish vocabulary on my colleagues – or, for that matter, on our readers. It is a challenge for anyone working in ethnic or specialized media: How much jargon do you use? In our case, do we use or need to explain words like shul, shiva, haredi or havurah? Is too much untranslated and unexplained specialty language just one more barrier to readers accessing not just our Jewish news sites but Jewish life as a whole?

Or, if you get too “explainy,” do you sacrifice your own credibility – and perhaps come off as patronizing to your readers?

The trick is hitting on a vocabulary that flatters the intelligence of readers without leaving them behind or on the outside — which, I might add, should probably be the guiding principle of any journalism enterprise, and any Jewish organization or institution, that wants to remain relevant.

Otherwise, bishvil lama litroakh?

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