

Nature Boy

By Gene Homel

While today the phrase “Nature Boy” suggests many different images, sixty years ago it could refer to just one thing: the most popular song in North America. “Nature Boy” was a song with a tangled history that reveals the powerful links between European Jewish and popular American cultures.

In 1948, “Nature Boy” was a huge hit for Nat King Cole. In fact, the record was crucial for Cole’s career—and perhaps even for American race relations. Prior to that year, Cole was known mostly for his peerless jazz-piano playing and his singing of jazz novelty songs. “Nature Boy” greatly boosted Cole’s career in the white American mainstream, and showed that Americans could respond positively to a black musician singing what sounded like a romantic love ballad.

However, despite his keen musicianship, Cole didn’t write “Nature Boy.” In Autumn 1947, a Los Angeles man calling himself Eden Ahbez, “who wears his hair shoulder-length, practices breath control and eats only fruits, nuts and vegetables, shuffled into Los Angeles’ Lincoln Theater,” reported *Time* magazine in May 1948. He brought some tattered papers he wanted Cole to see.

That day, Cole later recalled in an interview, Ahbez offered him a couple of songs he said he’d written. Even more surprising to Cole than the songs was the man’s appearance—Cole quipped that Ahbez looked like “something from above,” presenting a Christ-like appearance with his long beard and long hair, flowing white robe and sandals.

Despite any qualms about Ahbez’s exotic appearance, Cole looked over the songs, and was struck by one called “Nature Boy.” He recalled that he was “fascinated by the poetic, lyrical set up that it had....[it was a] very nice way of putting a song together.” Cole wondered whether the melody would work on its own, thinking the song “was a little ethereal.”

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But as Cole recalled, one can “never know what the public is going to buy.” Live audiences enthusiastically demanded the song, and Cole released a recording of “Nature Boy” on 29 March, 1948, with the new Capitol label.

“Nature Boy” promptly shot to the top of the popular music charts and stayed there for many weeks. By late April, *Variety* magazine, the bible of the entertainment industries, reported that

“Nature Boy” was the most requested disk, the biggest seller in coin machines, and the biggest-selling disk at retail stores. *Variety* declared that “eden ahbez (who spells his name lower-case), a Hollywood ‘hermit,’ wrote the tune and got Cole to record it,” adding that the “Music and recording phases of the business have seldom seen a rise to hitdom to match the path of the current ‘Nature Boy.’” The song was “top of the heap...Virtually every disk company of any importance” recorded it, and it could be heard on almost every radio program. Besides Cole’s version, recording stars

Frank Sinatra, Sarah Vaughan and Dick Haymes rushed out their versions.

What accounted for the song’s popularity? Besides the obvious romantic appeal, Cole was correct that the lyrical melody sounded ethereal and haunting. In a frenetic post-war period when North Americans were busy trying to forget the war in the hustle of a booming economy, the song was a little oasis of peace and quiet, perhaps like stepping into a quiet chapel from a noisy boulevard. Capitol’s recording backed “Cole’s voice with a rich, fluty orchestral accompaniment...it sounds something like an old Marlene Dietrich special,” *Time* reported.

Many years later, Ahbez’s sister-in-law wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* that “‘Nature Boy’ was a song that touched everyone. Even the disenchant-ed buck-hungry stopped to listen and wonder where they had missed the final pay-off in their lives.”

Variety’s explanation was naturally more business-oriented. The song appealed to the then-considerable group of classical-music listeners—those who, in *Variety*’s distinctive lingo, buy “longhair



Nat King Cole and Eden Ahbez

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platters.” In fact, “Nature Boy” could easily remind listeners of a lush, romantic concerto by Rachmaninoff or Tchaikovsky.

Then there were the lyrics, a bit different from the usual tin-pan alley content of the period:

There was a boy.
A very strange enchanted boy.
They say he wandered very far, very far
Over land and sea.
A little shy and sad of eye
But very wise was he.

And then one day,
One magic day, he passed my way.
And while we spoke of many things,
Fools and kings,
This he said to me.
“The greatest thing you’ll ever learn
Is just to love and be loved in return.”

With an estimated \$20,000 beginning to accrue from the song, and Ahbez traveling to New York to appear on television and in theatres, listeners may well have wondered just who the man was.

Ahbez (pronounced ah-bee) was what people then would have called a “character.” It’s not easy to get much verifiable information on him. A few web sites offer biographies, but the sites lack references and documentation, so the following information should be treated skeptically. Born in 1908 as George Alexander Aberle in Brooklyn to a large Jewish family, he became an orphan and was sent to a foster home in Kansas. He hopped freight trains and walked across the country, may have returned to New York in the 1930s to play music in Yiddish theatre, and arrived in Los Angeles in the early 1940s.

What is verifiable is that Ahbez became associated with a small German-inspired, California-based social movement sometimes called *naturmensch*, based on men who lived outdoors as much as possible, favoured nudism and long hair and beards, ate raw, healthy food, and advocated yoga and a kind of pagan mysticism. The reference to the “very strange enchanted boy” in his lyrics was possibly Ahbez’s tribute to an older German-born mentor of the movement.

According to legend, when Cole’s people needed to find Ahbez to sign a music contract, he couldn’t be located. He was finally discovered living outdoors under the Hollywood sign with his wife and a juicer.

Reading from a prepared script, Ahbez told New York’s simulcast radio/television show *We The People* that his song was “the story of my life” and came from a “love for nature and desire to find God.... Suddenly one day a melody just started singing inside of me.” *Time* magazine related that “he has been hearing wonderful music in his head ever since he can remember.”

But just at the time when the song became a hit, some other people were listening to that wonderful music in a completely different spirit. Her-

man Yablokoff, a leading actor, playwright, composer, director and producer in the Yiddish theatre, was at home in New York talking to his wife about a pending lecture and concert trip to Canada. His step-daughter called out, “Mom! Dad! Do you hear what they’re playing on the radio?”

As Yablokoff related in his memoirs (translated from Yiddish into English as *Der Payatz. Around the World with Yiddish Theater*), “We stopped to listen and caught part of a beautiful, catchy melody that sounded strangely familiar. For the moment none of us could pinpoint which of my many compositions it resembled. But soon I was convinced that it was indeed one of my songs, only sung in English.... I concentrated on the words and melody and finally pinned it down. No question about it. It was a ballad I had composed and sung in *Papirossen*: ‘Schweig Mein Hartz’ – Be Still, My Heart.” (*Papirossen*—Cigarettes—was one of Yablokoff’s most impressive Yiddish musical plays.) The radio announcer said the song was written by Eden Ahbez.

Yablokoff’s publisher, J. J. Kammen, which owned “*Bei Mir Bist Du Sheyn*,” was also convinced that the “overnight sensation,” was really “Be Still, My Heart.” The Kammen company turned the case over to Ed Masters, a lawyer for the Yiddish Composers League.

The incredible popularity of “Nature Boy” meant that “I suffered the agonies of hell,” Yablokoff wrote. “Be Still, My Heart” had been in print since 1935 and was copyrighted in the Library of Congress, yet everywhere he traveled in Canada, “even in such far-flung corners as I was able to reach only by dogsled with an Eskimo driver, the strains of ‘Nature Boy’ followed me.” The song sold over two million records in the United States alone, and was published in different languages, bringing millions more in sales, according to Yablokoff.

On 5 May, *Variety* reported that Masters and “Jewish-tune music publisher” Kammen “have had tune experts making comparisons between the two songs.” Masters was sending letters to everyone involved with “Nature Boy,” including the song’s owner, Nat Cole’s new firm Crestview Music, and the publisher and selling agent, Burke-Van Heusen and Morris Music, advising them that the song was an infringement of copyright. A week later *Variety* said that Masters’ suit “expects to demand 100% of the tune’s earnings, a rare claim in infringement cases,” and a measure of Masters’ confidence in his case. Additional suits followed. Yablokoff filed a claim with the New York Supreme Court charging plagiarism of his words and music. An order issued by the court declared that all money past and future from “Nature Boy” was to be frozen until after the trial.

In the pretrial examination, Yablokoff wrote, he presented “ironclad proof that the song was mine, music and lyrics. Ahbez, I claimed, took the text of the verse in which I tell the story of a little boy who wanders the world hungry, forsaken, wanting to love and be loved, and had set it to my chorus of ‘Be Still, My Heart.’” The nature-boy angle had

nothing to do with his song; it was just a publicity gimmick, Yablokoff felt, to enhance what he contemptuously dismissed as Ahbez's "yogi image." Yablokoff says he scornfully rejected Ahbez's telephoned plea of innocence and his claim that the song came to him "when he heard angels singing in the California hills...And if he heard angels singing it, they had probably bought one of my printed copies..." Yablokoff also laughed off the younger man's offer of \$10,000 if Yablokoff withdrew the legal claim.

The case dragged on and "my family and I had nothing but heartache over the entire affair." When Yablokoff "was offered an out-of-court settlement of \$25,000, the greatest amount ever settled in a case of this kind, [he] decided to accept it." He invested the money in his great love, the Yiddish theatre.

Born in 1903 in Grodno (then in Russian Poland and now in Belarus), Yablokoff emigrated to New York in 1924, and combined his diverse talents with an intense lifelong commitment to Yiddish theatre, which he called a "religious experience, a movement of the soul." The poor immigrant, he wrote, went to the theatre "to find solace and to forget his daily cares. Here, he could have a good cry, a good laugh, learn moral behavior, enjoy a Yiddish song, a bit of ethnic humor, meet *landsleit*, all in the Yiddish theater."

Much of his life was spent traveling across North America and around the world, putting on shows in numerous Yiddish theatres. In the 1920s he spent much time in Montreal and in Toronto's Standard Theatre at Spadina and Dundas streets. After World War II, in which he lost members of his family and relatives to the Holocaust, Yablokoff toured 94 displaced-persons camps in Europe and entertained 180,000 Jewish survivors. He continued to help produce many Yiddish shows in the 1950s and 1960s, such as *Uncle Sam in Israel*, a "story of the zeal and sacrifice of the pioneers" of the new nation, and died in 1981.

Ahbez continued to preach a simple, some might say banal and silly, mysticism. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, he earned an occasional reference in Walter Winchell's celebrity gossip column. In 1950 Winchell wrote that Ahbez hadn't received a penny of royalties for "Nature Boy," but promised to give the money to a charity for "unfortunates" when the money arrived. Nine years later, gradually fading into obscurity, Ahbez complained that his budget for fruits, nuts and vegetables had risen from \$3 to \$10 a week. "He was a fruit picker in California, living under a tree and devoting his time to the contemplation of nature and its wonders, when his song caught on."

Ahbez evidently assigned some or all of his royalties to other people and reportedly to a corporation during a 28-year copyright term, and then renewed copyright in his own name. It's not apparent how much royalty money he received from the song, but he continued to remind anyone who would listen that health and spiritual philosophy, not money, were what really mattered. He

enjoyed some moderate success in the 50s writing more pop songs, became a minor "hippie" cult hero in the 60s and 70s, and died as a result of being hit by a car in 1995. Four years later, legal conflicts over royalty payments for "Nature Boy" were still surfacing in a California Court of Appeals.



Herman Yablokoff

Today, a classical-music fan hearing Cole's "Nature Boy" for the first time might be forgiven for thinking the tune familiar, even if he's never heard "Be Still, My Heart." That's because the beginning of the second movement of Dvorak's Piano Quintet No 2, Op 81 from 1887 features the same melody. Dvorak, who often incorporated Central and Eastern European folk music into his compositions, based the movement on a Ukrainian Dumky, a folk-originated classical-music form characterized by slow, melancholy, plodding music that transforms mercurially into exuberance. It's interesting to consider whether Yablokoff—or Ahbez for that matter—borrowed the melody from Dvorak, or alternatively from an original folk melody, one that Dvorak may also have borrowed.

In any case, the "Nature Boy" incident is another example of the Yiddish influence on so much North American popular music and theatre. The schmaltzy sentimentality, the idealistic earnestness, the longing, perhaps even the ironic humour of much Yiddish music and theatre can be found in "Be Still, My Heart," with, as Yablokoff said, its "story of a little boy who wanders the world hungry, forsaken, wanting to love and be loved..." Yablokoff, and perhaps even Ahbez, are examples of how the European Jewish passion for music and theatre enormously enriched the popular culture of North America. ♦