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# 'The Singing Blacksmith' is a slice of history



By Daniel M. Kimmel

Two interesting and almost unclassifiable talents crossed paths in the making of the 1938 Yiddish musical "The Singing Blacksmith," known in Yiddish as "Yankel der Shmid." One was the movie director Edgar G. Ulmer, who charted his own unusual course in film. The other was Moishe Oysher, a singer with matinee idol looks whose career as both a cantor and musical star made him a popular, if controversial, figure.

## Movie Maven

Beautifully restored in 1998 by the National Center for Jewish Film (although still somewhat short of its original two hours plus running time), it provides a fascinating glimpse into the work of both men. The story, based on a non-musical Yiddish play, is about an earthy, fun-loving blacksmith who has been romancing a married woman but is now preparing for his own marriage. Will he finally become a mensch and straighten up?

Ulmer was a Jewish filmmaker who worked on the periphery of the film industry from the 1930s to the 1960s. In Hollywood he turned

out the horror classic "The Black Cat" with Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi, and the film noir gem "Detour." (Devotees have been trying to rehabilitate the reputation of other, forgotten films.) When he couldn't get work in Hollywood, he moved east, making films for specialized audiences from blacks to Ukrainians to the Yiddish market. Among his Yiddish films were such stand-outs as "Green Fields," "The Light Ahead" and "American Shadchen." Ulmer was an artist who could do wonders on a miniscule budget. "Singing Blacksmith" was shot on land belonging to a monastery in New Jersey, and he used the fake shtetl built for the film to simultaneously shoot "Cossacks in Exile," a Ukrainian film.

As for Oysher, he was the Elvis Presley of chazzanim, performing on stage and radio and deemed too "show biz" for some members of the synagogues where he appeared. His wife, Florence Weiss, had previously been married to one of his producers. (In "Blacksmith" she plays the married woman.) Even when Oysher settled down, there were reports that at one shul a delegation would be dispatched to walk him to the synagogue on Friday night

so everyone could be assured he hadn't come by taxi.

Oysher on screen is all virile manliness, with his shirt opened in many scenes to show off his broad chest. He gets to sing, including a duet with Weiss, but under Ulmer's direction he eventually comes across as a man who has sown his wild oats and now wants to be a good husband and father. Naturally the plot requires the old flame be reintroduced at this point, and Oysher conveys the agony of Yankel fighting off temptation.

"The Singing Blacksmith" is a fun slice of Jewish movie history that can still be enjoyed today. They really don't make them like this any more.

Daniel M. Kimmel, a Boston-based film critic and author, reviews Jewish films for the Advocate. He lectures widely on a variety of film-related topics and can be reached at [daniel.kimmel@rcn.com](mailto:daniel.kimmel@rcn.com).

"The Singing Blacksmith" is available through the National Center for Jewish Film for \$36. Public performance rights separately available. Call (781) 736-8600 or go to [www.jewish-film.org](http://www.jewish-film.org).