

“Girls Need to Dance”: How Jewish Women Navigated Twentieth Century Dance Halls

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Abstract: This paper dives into the vibrant world of early 20th-century dance halls, where Jewish immigrant women in New York City found freedom, excitement, and a chance to redefine their roles in a rapidly changing world. While reformers saw these dance halls as dangerous, immoral spaces, the women who flocked to them saw something entirely different: a place to explore romance, flirtation, and even sexual autonomy, all while challenging traditional gender norms. This paper explores how these women used dance halls to assert agency, challenge traditional matchmaking, and experiment with new forms of romantic and social relationships. Drawing on historical analyses by Kathy Peiss, Randy McBee, Sonia Gollance, and Mary Odem, as well as firsthand testimonies and period literature, the study examines the tension between perceived moral dangers and the lived experiences of Jewish women who found pleasure, independence, and self-determination in these spaces. Through commercial amusements like the dance hall, Jewish women navigated shifting cultural boundaries, formed homosocial bonds, and exercised the newfound ability to select their own partners, helping to shape evolving notions of gender, sexuality, and social identity within New York City's immigrant communities.

“Pimps infested the dance halls,” writes Michael Gold in his 1930 semi-autobiographical work, *Jews Without Money*. “Here they picked up the romantic factory girls who came after the day's work... No wonder East Side parents wouldn't let their daughters go to dance halls. But girls need to dance.”¹ Gold proposes two distinct yet intertwined truths—first, that the dance halls were threatening, and second, that the dance halls were desirable. To moralists and social reformers, they were epicenters of vice that made young, immigrant, working-class women vulnerable to the sexual appetites of young men.² They did not consider the other truth presented in *Jews Without Money*—that in spite of the alleged danger, these young women were determined to maintain relative autonomy, both on and off the dance floor. As they continued to defy their traditional dependent role in society, “working-class daughters became the focus of great social anxiety,” writes historian Mary Odem.³ This social anxiety can obscure the nuanced and even radical reality that young women could use the dance halls to forge new roles in the spaces they inhabited.

Jewish immigrants were no exception to the dance hall craze, in spite of traditional Jewish law prohibiting men and women from dancing together.⁴ “Jewish mixed-sex dancing is thus not only a story of changing Jewish social mores,” writes Sonia Gollance, “but also a case study for the importance of the dance floor space as reflected in the experience of a heterogeneous, diasporic minority group.”⁵ By focusing on young Jewish immigrant women rather than young immigrant women more generally, a more specific and intimate perspective of the dance halls can be understood. The work of historians Kathy Peiss, Randy McBee, and Sonia Gollance are also invaluable to this endeavor, and analyzing first-hand testimonies and period literature reveals much about the newfound independence of these girls that allowed them to create new definitions of intimacy, courtship, romantic heterosexual relationships, and homosocial relationships. In other words, young Jewish women used the flexible social boundaries of the dance hall to forge new urban identities for themselves in New York City.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, commercial dance halls took New York City by storm, with hundreds opening on the Lower East Side alone.⁶ “If you walk along Grand Street on any night in the week during the winter months,” reported reformer Belle Lindner Israels in 1909, “the glare of lights and the blare of music strike you on every side.”⁷ There were over 500 registered dance halls in

¹ Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money*, New York: Horace Liveright, 1930, 33.

² Mary Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920*, The University of North Carolina Press, 1995, 3.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Sonia Gollance, *It Could Lead to Dancing: Mixed-Sex Dancing and Jewish Modernity*, Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture, Stanford University Press, 2021, 13.

⁵ Gollance, *It Could Lead to Dancing*, 12.

⁶ Elisabeth I. Perry, “‘The General Motherhood of the Commonwealth’: Dance Hall Reform in the Progressive Era,” *American Quarterly* 37, no. 5 (1985): 721.

⁷ Belle Lindner Israels, “The Way of the Girl,” *Survey* 22 (1909), 494.

New York City, with even more dance halls left unregistered due to their informal or illegal nature.⁸ Unlike earlier brothels or later speakeasies, dance halls were visible in the urban landscape—Kathy Peiss writes that they were “large structures that enticed their patrons with bright lights, blaring music, and a festive atmosphere... hall managers stood in the streets and declaimed, like circus barkers, upon the splendors.”⁹ To put it simply, Jewish immigrants living on the Lower East Side could not avoid the dance halls. They were as much a part of the city landscape as pushcarts, synagogues, and tenements.

This increased visibility coincided with more and more young immigrant women having their own job, and often, their own paycheck, although many women had to turn their earnings over to their families.¹⁰ Peiss explains that because women were entering the wage economy in large numbers, commercial amusements lowered their prices in order to capitalize on the new consumer market.¹¹ For dance hall owners, the market was lucrative—young people in New York spent over five million dollars a year on dance hall admission (not adjusted for inflation), a statistic officially striking considering that most dance halls had an admissions fee of only ten cents.¹² Additionally, girls were often admitted for free, further decreasing any potential economic barrier to dancing. Most importantly, the dance halls were epicenters of fun and excitement. “After the long day laboring in a factory or shop, young women dressed themselves in their fanciest finery, put on their dancing shoes, and hurried out to a neighborhood hall, ballroom, or saloon equipped with a dance floor,” narrates Peiss. “The gaily decorated hall, riveting beat of the orchestra, and whirl of dance partners created a magical world of pleasure and romance.”¹³ As Peiss illustrates, dance halls were not only common, affordable, and easily accessible, but appealing to young women. All of these factors led to a thriving dance hall economy, built on the foundation of young working-class women who could spare a dime.

For Jewish working women who spent all day toiling at their jobs, the dance halls were often all they had to look forward to on a daily basis. They “carved out of daily life a sphere of pleasure... in a few hours of dancing and camaraderie, they could seemingly escape the social relationships and expectations tying them to their household responsibilities, jobs, and ethnic communities,” chronicles Peiss.¹⁴ With poor living conditions in the tenements,

⁸ Randy McBee, *Dance Hall Days: Intimacy and Leisure among Working-Class Immigrants in the United States*, 2000, 60.

⁹ Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, Temple University Press, 1986, 96.

¹⁰ Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 4.

¹¹ Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 52.

¹² Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 219.

¹³ Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 88.

¹⁴ Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 1.

and poor working conditions in the sweatshops, going out was a welcome opportunity for a brief respite.¹⁵

To reformers of the early twentieth century, though, the dance halls were nothing more than traps. One such reformer, Ruth S. True, warns of the horrors of dance halls in her 1912 survey of New York City urban conditions that “the dance hall, with its air of license, its dark corners and balconies, its tough dancing, and its heavy drinking, is becoming familiar to every reader of the newspapers.”¹⁶ According to True, the dance halls were cesspools of immoral behavior, regardless of how popular they were. Her sentiments are echoed in the writings of prominent dance hall activist Belle Lindner Israels (later known as Belle Moskowitz), who fought throughout her life for the political regulation of New York City’s dance halls.¹⁷ From a Jewish background herself, Israels saw the dance halls as the ultimate place to take advantage of one of New York City’s most vulnerable populations—young immigrant women.¹⁸ “You cannot dance night after night, held in the closest of sensual embraces, with every effort made in the style of dancing to appeal to the worst that is in you, and remain unshaken by it,” she proclaimed. In her eyes, everything that made the dance halls so appealing, from the lights to the music to the dancing, blended to produce a combination that intoxicated New York City’s most impressionable women.¹⁹

Minnie Goldstein, a young Jewish immigrant from Warsaw, recalled the excitement of being asked to dance at a ball by her older dance teacher. “Once, the professor said to me,” she reminisced, ‘Minnie, we are having a ball in a large hall, and I am going to lead the march. Do you want to go with me?’ I felt so happy that I could not even think straight.”²⁰ This kind of power dynamic, where a man had control over a young woman who “could not even think straight” is exactly what True and Israels feared. Jewish writers, too, were concerned about this power dynamic. In his 1912 etiquette manual *Etikete*, meaning “etiquette” in Yiddish, Israel Joseph Zevin dispenses advice to a Yiddish-speaking audience. He insists that young Jewish women should not “go to balls without a proper escort, dance more than three times with the same partner, sit in dark corners, or show an immodest degree of emotion.”²¹ These protocols seem to be an attempt by older Jewish adults to regulate the sexual morality of young Jewish women without being physically present at the dance halls. To both Jewish and non-Jewish reformers, the moral threats of the dance halls were coupled with the threat of

¹⁵ Nina Warnke, “Immigrant Popular Culture as Contested Sphere: Yiddish Music Halls, the Yiddish Press, and the Processes of Americanization, 1900-1910,” *Theatre Journal* 48, no. 3 (1996), 331.

¹⁶ Ruth S. True, *West Side Studies: Boyhood and Lawlessness; The Neglected Girl*, 1912, 69.

¹⁷ Elisabeth Israels Perry, “Belle Moskowitz,” Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women, Jewish Women’s Archive.

¹⁸ McBee, *Dance Hall Days*, 5.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Annie Polland and Daniel Soyer, *Emerging Metropolis: New York Jews in the Age of Immigration, 1840-1920*, New York University Press, 2012, 239.

²¹ Gollance, *It Could Lead to Dancing*, 151.

newfound adolescent independence. Odem posits that working for wages adolescent girls could use on commercial amusements “gave them a level of power and autonomy within the family that reformers considered inappropriate and even dangerous.”²² How young Jewish women chose to utilize this newfound autonomy had wide-ranging consequences on their relationships with men, other women, and the city itself.

Once inside the dance hall, young Jewish women were free to “meet, flirt, touch, and sometimes engage in more overt sexual activity.”²³ They could even try alcohol or cigarettes, both of which were widely accessible in the dance halls.²⁴ In daily life, though, romance and courting were more heavily controlled by parents.²⁵ While matchmaking had largely died out by the early twentieth century, Jewish parents remained an enormous part of their children’s love lives by monitoring who they were seeing and where they were seeing them.²⁶ Thus, the dance halls were one of the only places where young men and women could explore romantic compatibility without their parents watching over them.²⁷ For example, when a young man was interviewed about why he went to the dance halls, he explained that “When you see a cute looking girl on the street you can’t go up and talk to her but at a dance hall you can.”²⁸ Dancers could approach one another on the dance floor, dabbling in new types of romance that “contrasted sharply with the idea that parents should arrange marriages or supervise courtships.”²⁹

Additionally, Jewish parents expected that dating should eventually lead to marriage.³⁰ Yet, at the dance hall, one could have a romantic encounter with a young man and not officially court him. Chava Brier, a young Jewish immigrant, said that the young men she met at the dance halls “might be bums, who knows what they were?”³¹ Yet, Chava danced and formed brief relationships with them, even though her parents would never have allowed her to do so otherwise.³² As Peiss puts it, “women enjoyed dancing for the physical pleasure of movement, its romantic and sensual connotations, and the freedom it allowed them. The commercial dance halls were public spaces they could attend without escorts, choose companions for the evening, and express a range of personal desires.”³³ In the past, physical compatibility was difficult to assess when parents strictly

²² Odem, *Delinquent Daughters*, 106.

²³ Polland, *Emerging Metropolis*, 238.

²⁴ McBee, *Dance Hall Days*, 118.

²⁵ Elizabeth Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945*, University of North Carolina Press, 2006, 34.

²⁶ McBee, *Dance Hall Days*, 31.

²⁷ McBee, *Dance Hall Days*, 67.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ McBee, *Dance Hall Days*, 3.

³⁰ Clement, *Love for Sale*, 34.

³¹ Clement, *Love for Sale*, 221.

³² Ibid.

³³ Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 106.

regulated the romantic activities of their children.³⁴ Historian Randy McBee explains that the sensual feeling of dancing with a partner “allowed them to call into question their parents’ ideas about intimacy and leisure.”³⁵

This romantic and physical experimentation that took place in the dance halls is illustrated in a short story by Samuel Lewenkrohn called “Shadchen’s Luck,” published in the journal of the Lower East Side’s Henry Street Settlement in 1905.³⁶ The premise of the story is that two Lower East Side families, the Feldmans and the Greenbergs, seek to arrange a match between their children, Annie Feldman and Joe Greenberg.³⁷ They hire Baruch the *shadchen*—matchmaker, in Yiddish—to bring Annie and Joe into an arranged marriage.³⁸ In her analysis of the story in *It Could Lead to Dancing*, author Gollance argues that Lewenkrohn “clearly sides with the young Annie and Joe, and his dismissal of their objections is an ironic rehearsal of the attitudes of their parents.”³⁹ In a twist of fate, Annie and Joe meet at a dance, with Joe not having a “lady friend,” and Annie having “a bevy of other girls” by her side.⁴⁰ Joe is drawn to Annie’s beauty and skill at dancing, and asks her to dance. Lewenkrohn wryly notes that there was “no need of such a thing as an introduction here; they calmly ignore such formalities on the Lower East Side.”⁴¹ Then, Lewenkrohn writes, “they danced,” he says, “and because they both enjoyed it very much, they danced again. It was not the first time the feet instead of the head led to the heart.”⁴² Annie and Joe are brought together by mutual physical attraction that is intensified when they dance together. While “Shadchen’s Luck” is not a traditional academic source but a work of literature, it offers a writer’s perspective of the dance halls and their impact on young Jews based on lived and witnessed experiences on the Lower East Side. Because of the autonomy she possessed in the dance hall, Annie was able to test her physical compatibility with a potential match, and see it through of her own volition, much like her real-life equivalents.

One such equivalent, a young Jewish woman who worked at a department store in the early 1920s, expressed her disaffection with her day-to-day life, insisting that her job was “a drudge.”⁴³ She insisted that she instead wanted “to live,” and loved to go to dances.⁴⁴ “I love good times,” the young woman said. “Every girl does. And it’s the only way I’ll meet a prospect... you got to keep plodding along until you hook your fish.”⁴⁵ This amount of choice in a potential

³⁴ McBee, *Dance Hall Days*, 67.

³⁵ McBee, *Dance Hall Days*, 234.

³⁶ Gollance, *It Could Lead to Dancing*, 114.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Gollance, *It Could Lead to Dancing*, 115.

⁴³ McBee, *Dance Hall Days*, 96.

⁴⁴ McBee, *Dance Hall Days*, 97.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

male companion would have been unthinkable even two decades earlier. The lack of adult supervision in the dance halls allowed women to have more of a say in who their partners were, whether it be for marriage, dating, or just one dance.

“Treating” was another kind of sexual interaction that Jewish women could experiment with both inside and outside of the dance hall. Even though commercial amusements were cheap by nature, working-class women still received extremely meager wages, and had to scrimp and save in order to consistently attend dance halls.⁴⁶ To gain entry into dance halls, young women could give sexual favors, ranging from kissing to intercourse, in exchange for entry to urban amusements.⁴⁷ In *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945*, Historian Elizabeth Clement describes treating as “a new category of sexual identity that allowed them to profit from sex without completely abandoning their particular culture’s conceptions of female respectability.”⁴⁸ New York City’s Jewish girls had stifling cultural boundaries around sexuality under their parents’ roofs.⁴⁹ Treating allowed them to experiment with sexual barter without considering themselves prostitutes.⁵⁰ Clement contends in *Love for Sale* that “young Jewish women did treat,” as demonstrated by the records of Bedford women’s prison.⁵¹ Regardless of the risk of conflicting with their parent’s views on sexual morality, the ability to barter their sexuality was yet another way that the dance halls allowed for more control over courting and sexual activity at home and work.

The community found in the dance halls was not merely about physicality—young women often strengthened their relationships with other women by dancing together and helping one another navigate sexual and romantic encounters. Russian-Jewish immigrant Chava Brier recalled that when she came to New York City at the age of fourteen, she would go out to the dance hall with a group of work friends, telling her interviewer that “I had a lot of friends, boyfriends I didn’t care for, you know, only we were five girls [and] we used to see shows, you know, we lived nice, you know, very decent.”⁵² As McBee maintains, the time that women devoted to dance halls served not only to establish heterosexual connections but also to reaffirm homosocial bonds.⁵³ He writes that “women usually arrived in groups of two or more; they almost always danced together, at least at the start of each dance; and they often spent the time in between dances with each other, almost as if men were there only to satisfy their urge to dance.”⁵⁴ In a Jewish immigrant society that was generally reliant on women being subverted to men’s needs, the dance hall was a unique space where

⁴⁶ Clement, *Love for Sale*, 45.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Clement, *Love for Sale*, 3.

⁴⁹ Gollance, *It Could Lead to Dancing*, 151.

⁵⁰ Clement, *Love for Sale*, 47.

⁵¹ Clement, *Love for Sale*, 37.

⁵² Clement, *Love for Sale*, 220.

⁵³ McBee, *Dance Hall Days*, 95.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

men served the needs of women. This subversive space where women could bond with each other provided them with a unique form of social interaction against which they could evaluate other relationships, particularly upon returning home to confront parents whose views on intimacy and leisure sharply differed from their own.

Jewish women who wanted to go to the dance halls learned quickly that no two dance halls were the same, and they had to learn to navigate the urban landscape to fit their needs. In memoirs and interviews with Jewish immigrant women growing up going to dance halls, many of them express that they found some dance halls more appropriate for their moral standards than others. For example, Irma Knecht scoffed at public dance halls, saying in an interview that “we didn't go to these dance halls, [we] used to go to organization affairs,” meaning balls hosted by *landsmanshaftn*, Jewish mutual aid organizations popular in the early twentieth century. In contrast, Ruth Kaminsky loved to attend the public dance halls, reminiscing that “As single girls we went dancing... in dancing halls, we used to have a nice time, to meet fellows.”⁵⁵ Another young Jewish woman, Rose Kaiser, who was described by a vice investigator as a “dance hall habitué,” had many informed opinions on the different dance halls New York City had to offer.⁵⁶ According to Kaiser, a dance hall called The Empire was “the limit,” meaning not enjoyable, and a dance hall called Tighes was “tough,” because the Car Barn Gang, a New York City street gang, frequented it.⁵⁷ Kaiser insisted though, that “the fellows all know me [at Tighes], and they would not touch me.”⁵⁸ When asked her preferred place to dance, Kaiser described a place close to home, “a small hall behind a saloon... [where] nice Jewish girls and boys go,” because it was “not tough” and “a great deal of fun.”⁵⁹ As McBee puts it, “dance meant the chance to define what were acceptable heterosocial relations and to challenge the conventional gender norms they confronted in their day-to-day lives.”⁶⁰ For Knecht, Kaminsky, and Kaiser, living in the city meant exploring and investigating different dance halls in their neighborhood and beyond, until they discovered one that aligned with their interpretation of heterosocial interactions.

For reformers like Belle Lindner Israels and her peers, the dance halls left no room for female empowerment. Their writings reflect a deep-rooted fear that as soon as young immigrant women entered the world of commercial amusements, they would lose all their sexual morality at the hands of predatory men and their weapons of choice—alcohol and provocative dancing.⁶¹ This fear was also apparent when Yiddish writers like Israel Joseph Zevin sought to

⁵⁵ Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 96.

⁵⁶ McBee, *Dance Hall Days*, 82.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ McBee, *Dance Hall Days*, 83.

⁶¹ Dale Cockrell, *Everybody's Doin' It: Sex, Music, and Dance in New York, 1840-1917*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2019, 137.

regulate Jewish women's behavior by insisting they avoid dancing with the same partner, sitting in dark corners, showing "immodest" emotion, and attending without a "proper" escort.⁶² However, amplifying the voices of women like Minnie Goldstein, Chava Brier, Irma Knecht, Ruth Kaminsky, and Rose Kaiser provides a far more nuanced interpretation of the dance halls than can be gleaned from the writings of reformers alone. Without the work of Peiss and McBee to include women's direct quotes in their studies, the feminist framework of Gollance's 2021 book *It Could Lead to Dancing* might not have been possible.

McBee writes in *Dance Hall Days* that "the simple pleasures of passing over certain men for dances, attending unescorted, and refusing invitations to step out during intermission or for escorts home allowed women to defy the idea that companionship led inexorably to commitment and to reject their parents' attempts to supervise relationships and arrange marriages."⁶³ This autonomy in heterosexual interaction is only one facet of dance hall culture—young Jewish women could also strengthen their interpersonal relationships with their female peers, experiment with sexual barter in the form of treating, and, notably, find their ideal place in a new urban environment. If the reformers had total control over the world of commercial amusements, these women might never have had these opportunities. But, as Mike Gold put it in 1930, "girls need to dance," and so, too, did Jewish girls, regardless of religious and cultural standards.

⁶² Gollance, *It Could Lead to Dancing*, 151.

⁶³ McBee, *Dance Hall Days*, 83.

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