

Harry and Leo Popkin Open Cinema to African-Americans

I was surprised to discover that the pair of brothers who have done so very much to keep the congregation going in its last years were actually important in an unusual aspect of the film industry. I'm going to wrap up with them because I think that story is so very important

Leo C. Popkin (1914–2011) was a film director and producer in the United States. His brother **Harry M. Popkin** was the executive producer of Million Dollar Productions, a partnership that included Ralph Cooper.

Harry was the long-time Chairman of the Board and I believe, as long as he was alive, he kept that board from going overboard. At the end of each year, when there would be a budget shortfall, he would pull out the check book and close the gap.

His brother Leo used to call me up for years after I had left to chat with me about all sorts of things. He also left a generous donation for HTBE in his will.

This was from my eulogy notes for Harry Popkin:

.He owned his first theater in 1929, and then built up one of the largest movie theater chains in the state. He involved himself in a variety of entertainment and sports ventures .

Harry Popkin made a brave stride into the world of independent movie production in the age of the all-powerful studios.

His first pictures were perhaps a first in and of themselves-for they featured an all -black cast for a public too much ignored then, and today. [I will say more of it later]

One of his films was nominated for 5 Academy awards (The Well). and he cast such actors as Kirk Douglas, Brian Donleavy. Ronald Coleman, & Robert Young

.. with his success, despite his success, he was a boon to his fellow human beings.

Just a few examples. The family still owns the door to a Japanese command car--signed with movie stars names-it had been the auction prize for bidding for US Bonds- during the Second World War. Harry Popkin versus Al Jolson- each one ready to buy an astronomical sum of bonds, till Jolson gave the prize over to Harry.

Harry Popkin had always been a strong supporter of Israel.

He was particularly close to the Histadrut, Israel's Labor Federation.

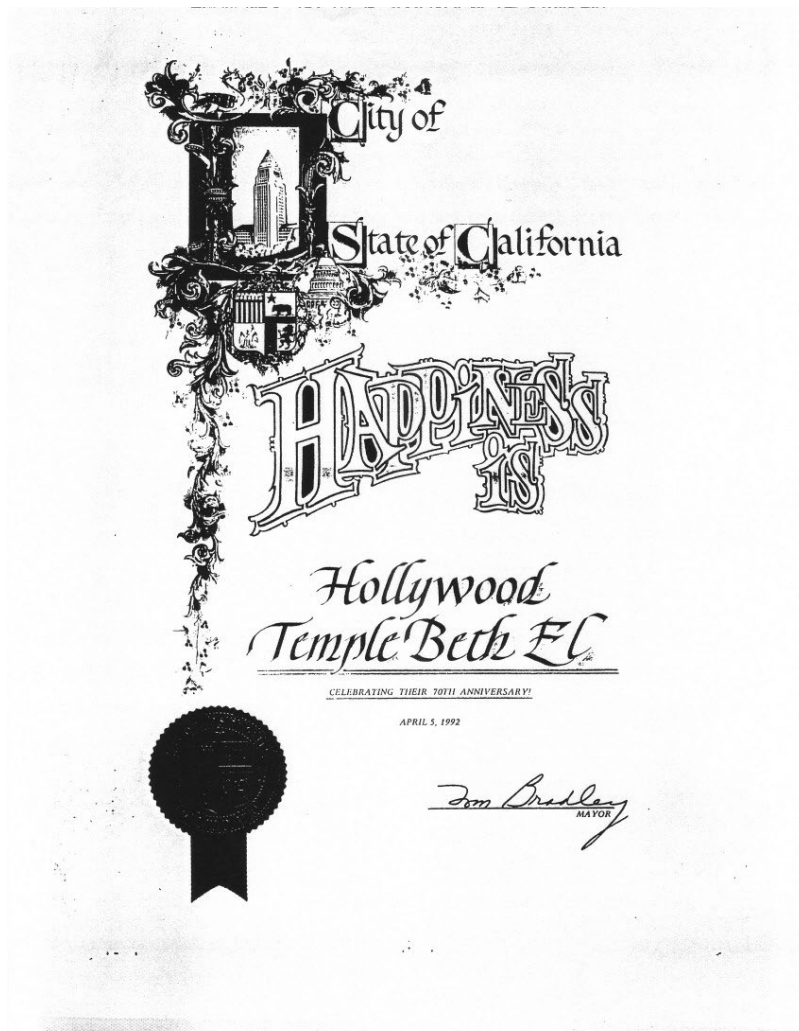
Our paths had crossed, indirectly. I had worked at Bet Berl for the Histadrut[I ran a program of Jewish Studies for the union membership]. He was proud to tell me that he had been a close friend of the director of the federation's bank, Bank Hapoalim. "Did I see the convention center now built in honor of his friend, Levinson?", he asked me. He had given them a good donation. Had I seen it? I told him," I put the mezuzah personally on every door in that building!"

Harry sat on the board of the Fund for Higher Education, together with Abba Eban and Mayor Teddy Kollek. Through the Harry and Frances Popkin Endowment fund, they could target individual projects, such as providing scholarships to the Hebrew University for promising students.

As a curiosity- if you saw the movie, Bugsy, with Warren Beatty, Bugsy walks into a Beverly Hills house and buys it cash on the spot. The movie used Harry and Francis Popkin's house in Beverly Hills. Harry had actually bought that very same house in that same period and paid cash on the spot for it the very same way, I believe it was \$ 45,000!.

He had a strong social conscience. He told me that he had a night club and made appoint of higher a young off-duty cop for security. Years later, that

same off-duty cop came to HTBE to present a plaque from the City of Los Angeles in honor of our 70th year.



That off-duty cop, none other than hizzoner the Mayor, Tom Bradley.

This was undoubtedly the most important contribution to social justice that was possible at that time:

This from an article about a document buried in the time capsule at Val Verde Pool House in Santa Clarita(Val Verde was known, in the earlier years of the 20th Century as “The Black Palm Springs”)

<https://scvhistory.com/scvhistory/cp3908.htm#:~:text=In%201937%2C%20the%20white%20Los,to%20form%20Million%20Dollar%20Productions>

(The website draws on material from: *"Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939"* by Tina Balio. Volume 5 of *"History of the American Cinema,"* University of California Press, 1993. Pp. 344-347.)

In 1937, the white Los Angeles theater owner Harry M. Popkin and his movie-producer brother Leo C. Popkin ("D.O.A.," 1950) teamed up with the black actor Ralph Cooper ("Dark Manhattan," 1937) to form Million Dollar Productions. Picking up where the pioneering black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux (1884-1951) left off, Million Dollar "moved black filmmaking away from a marginalized form toward the mainstream, advancing considerably its reputation and ability to attract audiences" ([Balio 1993](#):345).

Cooper, who had founded amateur night at the Apollo Theater in Harlem in 1935, had been brought out West by Fox "but was immediately dropped when he didn't fit the desired stereotype" (ibid.:346). Now, Million Dollar would use the crime/gangster genre as a vehicle to make Cooper a star of black cinema.

Harry Popkin (1906-1991) was already featuring many African American performers on stage and in film at his Million Dollar Theater at 307 S. Broadway in Los Angeles. Built by Sid Grauman — Grauman's first theater, opening in February 1918 with William S. Hart's "The Silent Man" — Popkin bought the place in 1935. In the 1940s, stage acts ran the integrated gamut from Billie Holliday and Lionel Hampton to Artie Shaw.

Popkin leased the premises in 1945 to Metropolitan Theatres, which added it to the Orpheum vaudeville circuit and booked such acts as the Nat King Cole Trio. Around 1949 it was subleased to Frank Fouce, who turned it into a major, long-running Spanish-language film house and Mexican vaudeville theatre. Dolores del Río, José Feliciano, Juan Gabriel and many other luminaries weren't strangers to its stage. Fouce and partners would acquire many media companies

in the coming decades, eventually selling them in 1986 for \$301 million to Hallmark Cards, which rebranded them as Univision.

Million Dollar Productions didn't last all that long — its filmmaking days were over by 1942 — but it created a lasting legacy in 1938 when it paired Cooper with a hitherto-unknown actress in "The Duke is Tops." Nine or 10 months later, when Harry Popkin penned the history that's featured here (photo above, text below), he obviously didn't know what he had. He mentions the long-forgotten film — and its male lead — by name, but he doesn't mention its costar. Her name was Lena Horne.

This is the letter that Harry Popkin wrote and placed for the time capsule:

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NEW YORK OFFICE
723 Seventh Avenue
Suite 301
New York City

ATLANTA OFFICE
148 Welton, N. W.
Atlanta, Georgia

MILLION DOLLAR PRODUCTIONS, INC.

4516 Sunset Boulevard
HOLLYWOOD, CALIF.
OLympia 2131

HISTORY OF MILLION DOLLAR PRODUCTIONS, INC.

To be sealed in this corner stone of Val Verde Club-house and Pool on
Sunday, April sixteenth, Nineteen Hundred
and Thirty-nine

Million Dollar Productions was organized May, 1937 for the purpose of
producing all-colored cast, modern, Class -A- talking pictures with
themes taken from modern Negro life.

The corporation was headed by Harry M. Popkin, who served as Executive
Producer. The personnel of the original company was:

PRODUCTION DEPT: Ralph Cooper, Halley Harding, Walter Jones

DISTRIBUTION DEPT: Leo C. Popkin, Distributor; Alyce Pettus, secretary;
John Jenkins; Al Westen; Henry Sonenshine and
Adolph Klaz

PUBLICITY DEPARTMENT: Harry Levette, Director.

Stars and featured players under contract were: Ralph Cooper, Louise
Beavers, Edward Thompson, Lawrence Criner, Reginald Fenderson and Monty
Hawley.

The first picture produced was "Bargain With Bullets" starring Ralph
Cooper, with Frances Turnham, Clarence Brooks, Sam McDaniel, Edward
Thompson, and Lawrence Criner, in the supporting cast. It was finished
on August 1st, 1937, and released Friday, September 17th, 1937. This
picture was received as the harbinger of a new era for the Negro in the
portrayal of intelligent roles in Hollywood pictures.

Following it came "Life Goes On," starring Louise Beavers, released
New Year's Eve, 1937. "The Duke Is Tops," starring Ralph Cooper,
released June 10th, 1938; "Gang Smashers" starring Nina Mae McKinney,
released December 27th, 1938; and "Reform School" starring Louise Beavers,
in April, 1939.

At this writing the company is completing plans to produce for the first
time in the history of motion pictures, films depicting the part the
Negro has played in the upbuilding, culture development and art of
America, also his patriotic nature.

(signed) *Harry M. Popkin*
Executive Producer.

"A MILLION DOLLAR PICTURE IS THE TALK OF THE TOWN"

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Harry Popkin



Leo Popkin

Here is link to one of the movies, featuring Ralph Cooper- and Lena Horn. The film is called The Duke is Tops-but after the public sees it, it is rereleased as “ The Bronze Venus” and Lena Horn is now tops! This launches her career.

<https://youtu.be/JjszOtGXujg>

Lena Horn sings -and that's show biz at HTBE!

This is also a reminder how significant was the contribution of the Jews of Hollywood, and in particular, of Hollywood Temple Beth El, in breaking the stereotype image of the black in America and opening new avenues for African Americans in the film industry.