

COVER STORY

THE JOLSON STORY

BY CLAIR SCHULZ

After a memorable war of words between those perennial squabblers, W. C. Fields and Charlie McCarthy, Edgar Bergen tried to excuse his little chum's behavior by saying, "Charlie is his own worst enemy" to which Fields snarled, "Not while I'm around." Al Jolson probably would have delivered the same retort if someone had told him "I'm your greatest fan."

That Jolson had a high opinion of himself was obvious to those in show business who knew him. He let the meek inherit a part in the chorus while he stepped boldly into his natural place in the spotlight. His strutting carriage said it before he did: "Here I am, folks. Prepare to be entertained." Even the detractors who considered him an unctuous peacock had to acknowledge that he made good on his promise. No one dared approach the box office for a refund after one of his performances because the name Al Jolson out front guaranteed that everyone would get their money's worth.

That name was merely a slight alteration of Asa Yoelson, the one given him after his birth on May 26, 1886 in a small Russian village. Four years later Rabbi Moshe Yoelson, fearing the pogroms would soon claim his family, fled with them to America where he found a position in a Washing-

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ton, D.C. synagogue. After Asa's mother died in 1895, the conflict that had been growing between his stringent father who wanted him to become a cantor and the boy's desire to use his voice to entertain was exacerbated when he belted out ballads on the street for coins or ran away from home to sing in saloons. If this sounds like the plot of *The Jazz Singer*, it is, for Jolson was actually living the part he would play some thirty years later.

After getting a taste of life on the stage as one of the *Children of the Ghetto*, he hit the vaudeville circuit with brother Hirsch in a new act with a new identity as Harry and Al Jolson. During Al's rise to fame he appeared often in burnt cork as end man in minstrel shows and also as a single. It was in those early days on his own when, billed as "The Blackface with the Grand Opera Voice," that he first rattled the rafters with songs and quieted an applauding throng with "You ain't heard nothin' yet."

Jolson eventually made noise along Tin Pan Alley by putting his mark on tunes such as "Hello, My Baby" and "Alexander's Ragtime Band." Starting in 1911 he rapped out three straight hits on Broadway: *La Belle Paree*, *Vera Violette*, and *The Whirl of Society*. Al, his chief supporter even back then, took out an ad in *Variety* that read "Everybody loves me. Those that don't are jealous."

Not even the envious could deny that he carried the shows and sometimes stopped them. During *The Honeymoon Express*



AL JOLSON -- "the world's greatest entertainer"

Jolson would interrupt the proceedings and ask, "Do you want the rest of the story — or do you want me?" and then unleash every song in his repertoire to the delight of an enthusiastic audience and the chagrin of the cast who had to spend the rest of those nights backstage. Jolie had a way of tapping into the emotions of those who heard him so that when he warbled a number like "You Made Me Love You" down on one knee with his arms outstretched he made it seem like a love letter addressed directly to them. Jolson didn't just sell a song; he also wrapped, embellished, and delivered it right into the laps of his listeners.

By 1914 he was earning \$70,000 a year and taking his act on the road in extended tours of his musical comedies which allowed people all across the country to see why he had become the toast of New York. In *Sinbad* he sang "My Mammy," "Swanee," and "Rockabye Your Baby with a Dixie Melody," three tunes that will probably be associated with his name forever.

As his reputation grew, Jolson had to live up to his legend by engaging in one-upmanship. On September 15, 1918 he followed a performance by Enrico Caruso by dashing onstage and stealing the celebrated tenor's thunder with his already famous assurance of "Folks, you ain't heard nothin' yet."

In *Bombo* he introduced over twenty new songs including "April Showers," "Toot, Toot Tootsie," and "California, Here I Come." *Big Boy*, a hit in 1925 and 1926, is best-remembered for the one that got away. Jolie regretted his decision to give a number he pulled from the show to Eddie Cantor every time he heard someone sing "If You Knew Susie."

But he made a wise career move in 1926 when he sang "Rockabye," "April Showers," and "When the Red, Red Robin Comes Bob, Bob, Bobbin Along" in front of the cameras for a one-reeler. The following year Warner Brothers wanted George Jessel, star of *The Jazz Singer* on Broadway, to be in their talking version of

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that play, but when he asked for too much money they turned to Jolson whom they had already seen singing on screen.

The Jazz Singer is only partially a talkie, but the revolution had to start somewhere. Although the maudlin story may seem crude when viewed today, audiences who had never seen him in person got a taste of how he could wrap a song around the heart when Jolson, as Jack Robin, sang "Kol Nidre" to his dying father and "Mammy" to his mother.

The Jazz Singer proved to be a sound sensation from the night of its premiere on October 6, 1927 so Warner Brothers wasted no time in putting Jolson in another weepie,

The Singing Fool, about a father's affection for his doomed son. The bouncy strains of "I'm Sitting on Top of the World" helped to lighten the gloom, but nothing could prevent the parade of hankies when Al sang "Sonny Boy" to sweet Davy Lee. The picture, which earned a whopping \$5.5 million, no doubt helped the sales of "Sonny Boy," the first song to sell a million copies.

Jolson's third film, *Say It With Songs*, said the same hokum with the same Davy

Lee. Both of his 1930 releases, *Mammy* with tunes by Irving Berlin and *Big Boy*, an adaptation of the Broadway smash, featured featherweight plots. Jolson himself must have felt audiences deserved more because at the premieres he would jump up on the stage after the movies ended and go into his act.

In 1933 he starred in *Hallelujah, I'm a Bum* which featured the novel use of dia-

logue delivered in rhyming couplets. In this singsongy tale the life of the hobo king of Central Park (Jolson) was juxtaposed with that of New York's mayor (Frank Morgan) to the accompaniment of a Rodgers and Hart score. The film failed miserably because it was too innovative or because the



plight of the poor struck too close to home during the depression or because moviegoers wanted escapism rather than strained whimsy. In any case, Jolson may have thought he was indeed a bum with producers at United Artists after the movie lost over a million dollars and plans for three more pictures with that studio were dropped.

Although screen magazines began asking the question "Is Jolson Through?" Warner Brothers still thought enough of

him to team him with his third wife, Ruby Keeler, in *Go Into Your Dance*. Al viewed the success of this picture with a jaundiced eye for he suspected that people wanted to see the dancing star of *42nd Street* instead of him. *The Singing Kid* gave him an opportunity to reprise his most popular numbers, yet he thought co-star Beverly Roberts stole some of his luster. Jolson didn't like to share the limelight even when off the set. One night at a party when George Burns tried to join him in a refrain of "Rockabye Your Baby" Al grabbed Ruby and left in a huff.

After his dyspeptic reaction to how *The Singing Kid* looked had hurt his chances for future projects with Warner Brothers, he accepted offers from Twentieth Century-Fox to appear in two musicals, *Rose of Washington Square* and *Swanee River*. The four numbers he sang in *Rose* resonated with his old verve and so outdistanced the efforts of Alice Faye and Tyrone Power that one reviewer claimed Jolson was "the only member of the starring trio whose performance has warmth and vitality." Similarly, he rose above the vapid cast of *Swanee River* when he presented his stirring rendition of "Old Folks at Home." Despite the fact that he had to settle for third-billing in both pictures, these handsomely-mounted productions have worn much better and showcase his talents in a brighter way than those early helpings of schmaltz in which he did the whole show.

To Jolson's credit he didn't let the vicissitudes of his career or his divorce from Ruby prevent him from giving his all for the troops during World War II. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, he was among



RUBY KEELER and AL JOLSON

the first entertainers to offer his services. He also put his money where his heart was by purchasing war bonds in quantities few stars could match. When illness kept him from making any more trips overseas, he visited military hospitals here in the states to lift the spirits of the wounded with music and mirth.

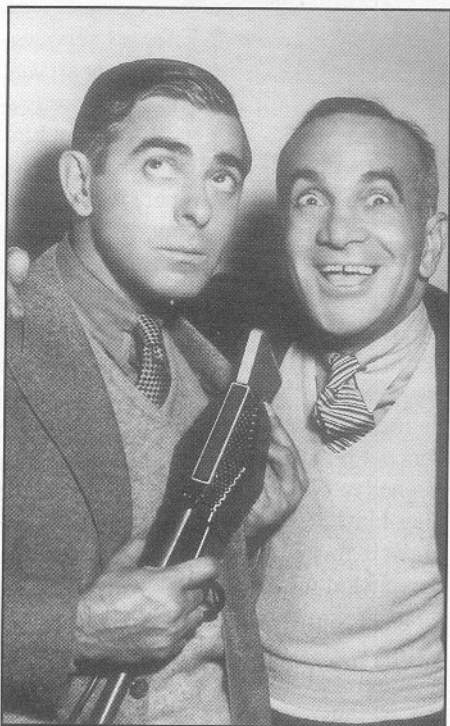
In 1945 after a bout with malaria cost him part of a lung and his first record in a decade flopped, it seemed like he was going down for the last time until Columbia Pictures threw him a lifesaver. When the concept of filming his life story was first pitched to him, Jolson naturally wanted to play himself, but eventually he resigned himself to just recording the songs and demonstrating that even with less than two lungs he could still be a powerhouse.

The Jolson Story followed the motto of most screen biographies: don't let the facts get in the way of telling a good story. Jolie's philandering, early troubled mar-

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riages, profligate gambling, and the wounds caused by his sharp-edge demeanor had no place in this exaltation of a man whose life was absorbed by show business. It didn't seem that important that Larry Parks lacked the dynamism of the man he was portraying. What mattered most was that while Parks was lip-synching the real Jolson emerged in all his show-stopping glory.

The newspapers that had been taking notes in preparation for printing obituaries and tributes were now filled with stories of how the popularity of the movie had rescued him from the ashcan. But any journalists expecting a new and improved Jolson would have been disillusioned had they seen his present to Stephen Longstreet, author of the *Jolson* screenplay, given "to show how much I appreciate what you did."



EDDIE CANTOR and AL JOLSON

The gift: a signed photograph of himself.

Jolson became a singing sensation all over again by going into the studio for Decca and releasing similar versions of the songs he had recorded for Brunswick and Columbia over twenty years before. The Jolson sound seemed to be coming out of every phonograph and emanating from every spot on the radio dial.

His track record on radio had been pretty spotty at best. *Presenting Al Jolson* and his first turn as host of the *Kraft Music Hall* fizzled as incompletes in the early thirties. His stay at the *Shell Chateau* lasted just thirty-nine weeks. *Cafe Trocadero* had a better run from 1936 to 1939, partially because Martha Raye and Harry "Parkyakarkus" Einstein provided some much-needed albeit corny humor. When he tried once more during the 1942-43 season on the *Al Jolson Show* for Colgate, neither the star nor the sponsor was pleased with the result.

But four years later as the hottest property in Hollywood he was popping up on all three networks to sing and joke with Amos 'n' Andy, Burns and Allen, Jack Benny, Eddie Cantor, Bing Crosby, Jimmy Durante, Bergen and McCarthy, and Bob Hope, who asked Jolson on his April 8, 1947 show why he didn't have his own radio program and was told, "What — and be on the air only once a week?"

Due to the positive response following his appearances with Bing Crosby on *Philco Radio Time* Kraft invited him back to be in charge of the *Music Hall* again. Because no one could play a Gershwin melody like Oscar Levant and no one could sing a Gershwin lyric like Jolson, the neurotic pianist joined the show to perform at the keyboard and to trade quips with the star, although the mating of two abrasive personalities with oversized egos made it seem that some of the barbs directed toward each other were delivered with more



BING CROSBY and AL JOLSON

relish than necessary. Jolie made certain everyone knew it was his show and undoubtedly caused some imprecations to be muttered in the control booth when he regularly deviated from the script or insisted on singing his favorite standards over and over. After two seasons Kraft, noting the cooling of the Jolson mania and the slipping ratings, closed the *Music Hall* for good on May 26, 1949.

Three months later *Jolson Sings Again* had people lining up at ticket booths to see the next segment of the Jolson saga. Parks assumed the role again as an older Jolson who struggled through the valley of loneliness caused by his stagnant period and the loss of his wife to the peak of his finding love again with a nurse and experiencing a revitalized career.

Al may have been too gray-haired and paunchy for audiences to accept him on the screen as himself, but radio presented

no such barrier so he did get his chance to play the man he most admired on the *Lux Radio Theatre*. On February 16, 1948 he starred in the *Lux* production of *The Jolson Story* and on May 22, 1950 he starred in the *Lux* version of *Jolson Sings Again*. (On June 2, 1947, celebrating the 20th anniversary of talking pictures, Jolson had starred on *Lux* in the radio adaptation of *The Jazz Singer*.)

Jolson listened seriously to offers trying to lure him into television, but he had his doubts whether people would want to see the same faces week after week. Instead he headed for Korea to pour his energies into performing for soldiers in camps and hospitals. Throughout the tour he battled a cold that was sapping his strength. When he returned home in September, 1950 after doing forty-two shows (which, in typical hyperbole, he inflated to 160 for reporters), his face and body showed all of his sixty-four years. A month later he died of a heart attack in a San Francisco hotel but not before reportedly telling the two doctors who came to his bedside to "Pull up some chairs. I've got some stories to tell."

That was Jolson being Jolson right up to the end, the master showman who knew how to work an audience regardless of whether he was flat on his back in a bedroom or on the tips of his toes in a nightclub. Jolson the man may have been little in more ways than one, but Jolson the performer was a giant who towered over his contemporaries. Only Jolson would have the gall to wear a badge bearing the initials *AJTWGE*, (Al Jolson, the World's Greatest Entertainer"); only Jolson had the talent to prove that claim every time he opened his mouth to sing. ■

(NOTE— *Lux Radio Theatre* productions of *The Jazz Singer*, *The Jolson Story* and *Jolson Sings Again* will be presented on *TWTD* during August and September. See listings on pages 20-24.)