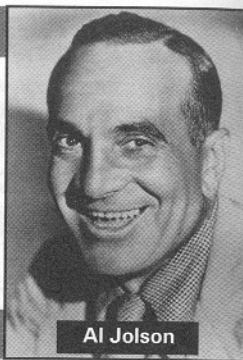


YOU AIN'T HEARD NOTHIN' YET!

BY WALTER SCANNELL



Al Jolson

Al Jolson loved to stand on the balcony of a New York skyscraper and look down on the bright lights of Broadway and think of it as “his” street. But in this bootleg-mad year of 1927 he was no longer effervescent with confidence. He was about to take a career risk and betray a friend at the same time by appearing in a movie version of *The Jazz Singer*, a role George Jessel was still making famous on the stage.

Jessel would claim he refused to do the film version when he read the script and saw that instead of giving up Broadway, Jackie Rabinowitz does a big show number at the end. In reality, the script he saw had the same ending as the play. Jessel said he went down to a theater where Jolson was playing and told him about his decision, and Al assured him that he was right in turning the movie down. “The next morning I read in the paper that Al was going to do this,” Jessel said. His only consolation was that everyone was telling him talkies would be just a fad.

Warner Bros. had caused no great stir when it began adding music to its films with *Don Juan*, and *The Jazz Singer* would essentially be just another silent film but with musical moments and a few passages of largely unscripted dialogue. The play-

wright, Samson Raphaelson from central Illinois, admitted the story was “corny” but he knew it was a crowd-pleaser.

Jolson didn’t want to rehearse because he had a practice of never doing the same performance twice, one reason his audiences would come early and stay for a second show. Since he always performed impromptu, he had a one-on-one rapport with his fans that no other American singer ever had.

Unlike the well-bred Jessel, Jolson was born in the Russia ghetto of parents who had to scrimp for passage money to the United States. Al – his real name was Asa Yoelson – wasn’t even sure of the day or year he was born, later choosing May 26, 1886, because it sounded about right. His father, as a cantor, was sternly Orthodox but Al was American all the way and never thought himself particularly Jewish. But, as in his future movie role, he sang as a boy in his father’s synagogue in Washington, D.C.

Al and his mildly delinquent brother Harry took a train to New York to stay with an uncle. Al fell in love with the Broadway theater district just from marveling at the marquees and posters. He and Harry then took a train to Baltimore, where Harry got into a little trouble. The police mistakenly took Al to St. Mary’s Industrial Home for Boys, a reform school that helped turn out Babe Ruth and dancer Bill “Bojangles”

Walter Scannell is a history buff and nostalgia fan from Chicago.

Robinson. But as soon as Al could, he ran away – and joined a circus!

The boy returned home when the circus folded, but he knew that performing was in his blood. He took a small role in the play *Children of the Ghetto* and supplemented his income by occasional petty stealing. Now an eager but undisciplined teenager, he decided

to turn his modest voice into a career and tried vaudeville, in which he joked with the audience between songs. His act was as if he were performing in front of his family for attention.

Jolson would later say that a Negro performer suggested he would be funnier in blackface, a fading tradition from minstrel days. The absurdity of his appearance in burnt cork and white gloves made audiences pay more attention to him, and the makeup let him hide his initial insecurity – perhaps too well.

He added whistling and unchoreo-



The Jazz Singer (1927)
Premiere at Warner's Theatre

graphed dancing to his act, and one night got down on one knee to sing because he had a toe infection and it eased the pain. Whatever his fans loved, he kept performing forever. In the early 1920s, he introduced “April Showers” and “California, Here I Come,” helping composers Buddy DeSylva and Lou Silvers write songs to his untrained style. Gus Kahn gave Jolson “Toot Toot Tootsie, Good-bye.” Reviewers noted that Jolson gripped an audience as soon as he walked on the stage and never let go. He became addicted to applause, and never denied it.



The Jazz Singer (1927)
Director Alan Crosland and Al Jolson

Brimming with confidence, he once ad-libbed to his audience, “You ain’t heard nothin’ yet!” The audience screamed and demanded more, and the line would be his signature for 44 years. Jolson the World’s Greatest Entertainer was born, but in some ways Jolson the man – the *mensch* – had died. He was a great



The Jazz Singer (1927)
May McAvoy and Al Jolson

guy to know casually, but no one could ever become emotionally close to him, not even his four wives.

Okay, let's list them here because they had no effect on his life: small-town girl Henrietta Keller; dancer Ethel Delmar; actress-dancer Ruby Keeler, and, late in life, Earle Galbraith, who went from autograph-seeker to bride.

Jolson sang on radio for the first time on



For Warner's, it was a no-brainer. (Jessel spent the rest of his long life feeling double-crossed.)

The camera operated in a booth that looked like a refrigerator crate with windows, and the door was sealed to keep the sounds from being recorded. Jack Warner Jr. said that when a scene was finished, the cameraman "staggered out of the nearly airless box." Since the usual lights emitted a low buzz, the silent scenes were shot first and the songs and brief dialogue passages were filmed with incandescent lights, which meant using a relatively new type of film.

The studio decided to keep in Jolson's gabby interruptions to the "Blue Skies" number because he was likable and funny, and to women he, in the words of film historian Scott Eyman, "was blatantly sexual." The producers even decided to give the movie a "sock" ending, Jolson singing "Mammy."

The scene negated the drama, but the studio thought this was a film for movie fans, not theatre devotees. After all, the three Warner brothers were putting their careers on the line with this expensive film, but Sam died the day after it premiered in New

April 30, 1927, for a flood relief program. The national exposure made him more popular than Jessel, and Warner Bros. decided to hire him instead of his friend for the world's first (partly) talkie. Jessel had been asking for more money because the film would be in sound, killing his Broadway run of *The Jazz Singer*, and Jol-

walking out on him. He loved her, but not as much as he loved gambling and applause.

Jolson might have become a has-been, but then World War II erupted. He sang for the troops, and when he returned to the U.S. he personally telephoned families and told them that their boy or husband was all right. Unexpectedly popular again, Jolson decided when the war ended that he deserved a memorial – not a statue, but a movie. He envisioned something like *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942) and even wanted James Cagney to play him. Of course, Jolson said, he would do the songs himself, which would have made Jimmy look even more ludicrous.

Columbia Pictures writer Sidney Buchman (*Holiday*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*) was working for a “poverty row” studio and could not hope to plan an expensive production like *Yankee Doodle Dandy*. He came across a fresh notion –

basing the film on Al’s real life. What a concept! To do this, Buchman combined his first three wives into one, “Julie Benson,” who was mostly Ruby Keeler.

Many performers would be insulted at the suggestion that they were the villains in their own lives, but Al embraced the idea. He not only painstakingly coached unknown actor Larry Parks on his mannerisms, he performed “Swanee” himself in a long shot (a fact not realized until a print of *The Jolson Story* was greatly enlarged in 1969). But someone abruptly thought the film needed a song other than Jolson standbys.

Film composer Saul Chaplin was in a panic with only six hours’ notice. To help him out, Al hummed a lovely old Viennese melody. Saul quickly wrote some lyrics and added a lilting second part to the waltz, and the result, “The Anniversary Song,” became one of the post-war year chart-

Jolson on Radio

SOURCE: *On The Air, the Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* by John Dunning. Oxford University Press, 1998.

“The World’s Greatest Entertainer” had a decent career on radio, entertaining millions who were not able to see him on the stage or screen.

In addition to scores of guest appearances on a variety of programs, Jolie was the star of a number of popular radio series between 1932 and 1949:

Presenting Al Jolson with Ted Fio Rito and the orchestra. Chevrolet, NBC. November 18, 1932 – February 24, 1933.

Kraft Music Hall with Paul Whiteman and the orchestra. Kraft Foods, NBC. August 3, 1933 – August 16, 1934.



Shell Chateau (1935)

Back row, from left, maestro Victor Young, actor Lionel Barrymore, singer Carmel Myers and Al Jolson. In the front row are the Watson Sisters comedy team and comedian Vince Barnett

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busters.

The movie went on to become one of the hits of 1946, and Jessel, who had been left behind in Jolson's dust, snidely said no truer movie biography was ever made.

Jolson thrived on the success of the film, appearing on dozens of radio shows as featured guest. Eventually, he became the star of his own show, the *Kraft Music Hall*, for two seasons in the 1940s.

Al even insisted on a sequel to *The Jolson Story*, even though all the material was used up, so Buchman cranked out the thin



Larry Parks

Jolson Sings Again, based on Al's love affair with his fourth wife.

The 1949 movie was successful only because it rode on the coattails of Columbia's biggest hit. Some said that at 64, Jolson had never sung better than on that soundtrack. By then the young actor portraying him was so well known that Jolson said, "When I die they're going to bury Larry Parks."

With two films as his legacy, Al was ready to pass on. But in the autumn of 1950 he made a tour of American troops in Korea. I was in the fifth grade in a Chicago parochial school on October 24, 1950, when a nun entered the classroom in tears to say the radio had just announced that Al Jolson had died the day before of a heart attack shortly after returning to America. She wanted to say more but couldn't.

Unique as Al Jolson was, an era had died with him. ■

Shell Chateau with Victor Young and the orchestra. Shell Oil Company, NBC. April 6, 1935 – March 6, 1936.

Lifebuoy Program with Harry "Parkayakarkus" Einstein, Martha Raye and Lud Gluskin and the orchestra. Lever Bros., CBS. December 22, 1936 – March 14, 1939.

Colgate Program with Monty Woolley and Gordon Jenkins and the orchestra. – Colgate-Palmolive, CBS. October 6, 1942 – June 29, 1943.

Kraft Music Hall with Oscar Levant and Lou Bring and the orchestra. Kraft Foods, NBC.

October 2, 1947 – May 26, 1949.

TUNE IN TWTD in August to hear an abundance of Al Jolson's radio appearances... on his own program and as a special guest on many other shows.



Kraft Music Hall (1948)
Al Jolson and Oscar Levant

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