

BALTIMORE'S BIG BASH BEGUILLES BRITS AND COLONIAL COUNTERPARTS ALIKE

by David McCarthy



Our hosts Stan and Sandy Gerloff.

The Embassy Suites Hotel in Baltimore was the location for the 2014 Baltimore Bash (Al Jolson Festival), which began on the 15th and ran thru the 18th of May. First to arrive at the Festival Hotel were five members from the UK who arrived late on Monday evening. America is a long trip so apart from giving us the opportunity to look around; it also gave us a chance to overcome the dreaded jet lag.

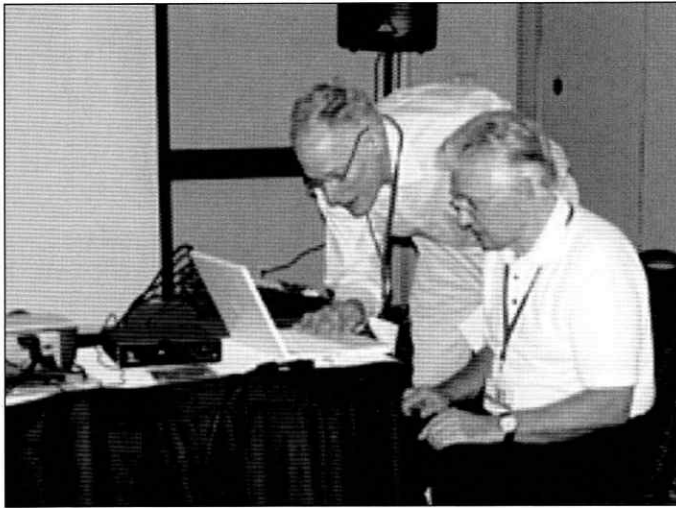
Wednesday saw the arrival of a number of other Jolson members including Skip and Lois Mack and event planners, Stan and Sandy Gerloff together with daughter, Heather. Thursday of course sees the official start of the Jolson Festival, and that is when the majority of members arrived with an eye toward Jolson Karaoke evening. Many a wannabe baritone took to the microphone with varying degrees of success (or lack of) but who cares—it was a fun evening and a great way to kick off the festival.

Friday morning and the registration desk helmed by Trish Elkins and John King was open nice and early so that we could all book in and receive our Jolson program and other details about the Festival. The doors of the memorabilia room opened shortly thereafter with Skip and Lois Mack, John and Joan Webster and Debbie with Cagney offering CDs, DVDs and some wonderful Jolson merchandise.

Over in the "JFK" room there was a lot of early activity as the room was being prepared for the first of five presentations (plus our feature film). This year we were fortunate to have the very capable Peter Belmonte on hand to run our audio and visual equipment. After a slight hitch which all presenters joined in to resolve, all was ready for the first of the presentations which was given by our very own webmaster Marc Leavey. With "Al Jolson: His Heritage and his

Career", Marc regaled us with a fascinating look at how influential Al Jolson's Jewish heritage was on his performing over the years. Although we all knew that *The Jazz Singer* was about an entertainer torn between his love of the Theatre and his heritage as a Jewish Cantor's son, we didn't realize just how many Jewish references there were in Jolson's early films until Marc pointed them out. It wasn't just with in his films that Jolson was faithful to his Jewish heritage and Marc looked also at his stage and radio work. For example, on June 10, 1948, Jolson closed his Kraft Music Hall show with the song "Israel" which was written to mark the birth of the State of Israel. Also on radio Marc played us extracts from three shows that Jolson was involved with called: *Operation Nightmare*, *Nightmare Chapter 2* and *Operation Dawn* where Jolson spoke about the plight of the Jews following the holocaust—very moving stuff. Near the conclusion Marc spoke about Jolson's Will, which left a staggering \$4,000,000 much of which went to charities, and many of those charities were Jewish. Jolson was faithful to his heritage right to the end. The audience showed their appreciation for an excellent presentation by giving Marc a well-deserved standing ovation.

Next up was Jon Sonneborn's scintillating lecture entitled "Al Jolson In A New Look: Understanding the Magic; Reappraising the Hollywood Fiasco" Jon discussed various aspects of Jolson's film career starting with the reason why the "The Spaniard That Blighted My Life" scene is excised from today's prints of *The Singing Fool*. The reason was to appease the writer of the song who didn't like the idea of having his song performed in England by Jolson when he was still performing it as part of his own act. The song was removed from the English print and sadly, they are the only prints of *The Singing Fool* in existence today. The film for *The Singing Fool* was on fragile nitrate and so far no existing film elements of the USA version have been found though the Vitaphone discs exist, hence the reason why the audio is thankfully in existence. Jon further raised the issue of Jolson's stock character Gus, and discussed why in his opinion the character is not as well-known nowadays as the Chaplin iconic character "The Little Tramp". More gems were talked about, for example, who knew that there were two different versions of the song "Yes, We Have No Bananas" from *Mammy*, and yet Jon advised us that the UK print of the film contained a different version of the song to the one that we are all familiar with. As with *The Singing Fool*, the Vitaphone discs for it exist, which explains why we have the alternative "Yes We Have No Bananas" audio but so far we are not aware of any film elements for the European version of *Mammy*. In 1923 Jolson had signed with famed Hollywood director D.W. Griffith to appear in a silent film. Sadly Jolson decided after a short time of filming that he didn't want to continue and walked out. What sort of actor might Jolson have become had he been directed by someone of stature of D.W. Griffith? For anyone who hasn't heard Jon speak all I can say is that you have missed an experience. Jon puts his subject



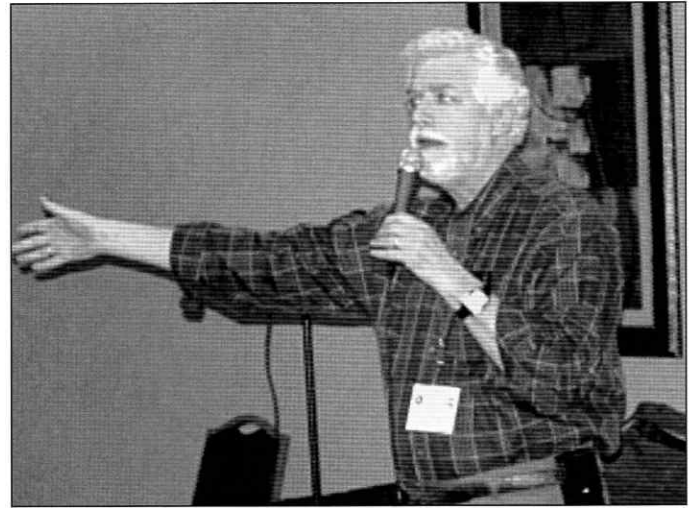
Video wizards Jon Sonneborn & Paul Bowers.

over with such passion and drive that he just pulled his audience in with him. Superb stuff and very entertaining. Jon's presentation flashed by and it was not long before it was the lunch break, although as far as the audience was concerned they would have happily listened to Jon for another hour!

After an abbreviated lunch break the afternoon session kicked off with "The Winter Garden, Al Jolson and the Shuberts" presented by Professor Paul Bowers. Before starting his presentation, Paul updated us on the collection of family memorabilia donated by Asa Jolson Jr. to the Tennessee State Museum in Nashville. Paul showed us a selection of some of the photographs that are now being held securely by the Museum and we were amazed at the quality and uniqueness of them. Paul now continued with his advertised presentation which looked at the Broadway years of Al Jolson up to the making of *The Jazz Singer*. Although Paul has shown this presentation before there were many additions to it and it is a presentation that once again enthralled the audience.

It was at this juncture that Jan asked the audience about an issue that had arisen concerning the memorabilia room. The Society members, Skip and Lois Mack, John and Joan Webster, and Debbie Eifler and Cagney, give up their time freely each festival to sell CDs, DVDs and worst of all they were missing all of the presentations as they spent all day sitting in the memorabilia room. A logical answer to the problem was to move the memorabilia room into the same room as the presentations. It was decided that for Saturday all of the memorabilia would be moved into the "JFK" room to encourage sales in between presentations.

The last presentation of the day "Oldies But Goodies" was given by Ed Greenbaum. Ed presented a potpourri of Jolson tracks that are rarely played. He started off with his personal favorite "April Showers", the upbeat version from the end of *The Jolson Story*. He continued with such gems as, "Hooray For Baby And Me" the unissued record from 1930, a superb recording of "I Got Plenty of Nothin'" which Jolson had sung on air as a tribute to his friend George Gershwin the day after his death, a spoof recording of "The Wearing Of The Green", "My Mothers Rosary" and finishing with Al's rendition of "Auld Lang Syne" which was the last song that he sang on his Kraft Music Hall. There were calls from the audience for Ed to play more of his Jolson recordings and Ed was of a mind to



Ed Greenbaum delights at preaching to the choir.

do so until a call went up from our sound technician advising that he had to move the equipment into the ballroom for the evening's entertainment. Poor Peter, he was really put through the wringer over the course of the festival with requirements to satisfy not only all of the presenters but also the entertainers—Not an easy task!

With presentations running over there was not a great deal of time in between them and the start of the evening functions—but we somehow managed. How better to kick off an evening than with an hour of free cocktails in the Central Bar. It was a happy start to joyous evening.

We were hustled into the ballroom for dinner sharply at 7:00 pm and the room was buzzing with the wistful chatter of Jolson fans that happily traveled from around the globe to be present at Baltimore. Our Society truly is International, as the title says, and apart from the usual American fans there were members from England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Argentina, Germany and Australia.

President Jan Hernstat got things started off in a rousing big way by introducing, "England's answer to Larry Parks, John Carter." John recreated the Larry Parks' performance of the nightclub scene from *The Jolson Story*, lip-synching perfectly to: "Robert E Lee", "Rock-a-bye Your Baby with a Dixie Melody" and "April Showers" to much enthusiastic and sustained applause.

John was followed by the incomparable "Scottish Songman" Mr. Bill Campbell in suitable Scottish attire (he was wearing Scottish Tweeds). Bill's act consisted of a selection of songs that he sang in his own lilting style with an expert mix of gentle patter and jokes. Bill's selection of songs started with "His Name Was Jolson", "Who Said That Dreams Don't Come True", "Among My Souvenirs", "Danny Boy", "When I Leave The World Behind" and "Without A Song". A very appreciative audience sent Bill off the stage to a thunderous round of applause.

Next up was the very popular and dynamic Tony Babino. Tony made use of the orchestral tracks from *The Jolson Story* to sing his first four songs, "Let Me Sing And I'm Happy", "California Here I Come", "You Made Me Love You" and "Toot Toot Tootsie". It was then that pianist Dave Gross joined Tony and accompanied him as he sang



The Sottish Songman, Bill Campbell.



Tony and his boys Anthony and Steven.

"Mammy I'll Sing About You" which of course is the favorite song of our own Skip Mack, and Tony dedicated the song to him. Tony then embarked on a string of Jolson numbers such as "April Showers", "When The Red Red Robin", "Where The Black Eyed Susans Grow" and "Margie" before switching to his own voice to sing "Stardust". Back to his Jolson voice and the songs were "Back In Your Own Backyard", "Sitting On Top Of The World" and a lovely version of "Remember Mother's Day".

There was a lull at this point in the performance as Jan joined Tony on stage (only kidding), and they both sang "My Blushin' Rosie" and "Carolina In The Morning". An unexpected surprise was now announced by Tony B—his sons, Anthony and Steven whom perform together under the name of *Sons of Origin* had come along and Tony B. invited them on stage to join him. And what a fabulous performance they gave! Together with their proud papa Tony, the boys sang a beautiful version of "Is It True What They Say About Dixie", which was a perfect recreation of the Jolson/Mills Brothers Decca recording and it had us jumping outta our seats and madly applauding. Moving away from Jolson, briefly, (sacrilege as it is), Tony and his sons treated us to a Beatles number—"This Boy" followed by an upbeat version of "Avalon." Tony turned the stage over to *Sons of Origin* who then sang "Bye Bye Love", "Folsom Prison Blues" and finishing with "Me and Julio down by the Schoolyard." The inclusion of Anthony and Steven in the evening's festivities took us all by surprise—a pleasant surprise and, what a *tour de force* performance was given by these talented young men and papa Tony B.

Piano virtuoso Dave Gross serenaded us with a medley of tunes by George Gershwin, followed by a duet with Tony B. as they recreated the routine that Jimmy Durante wrote especially for his KMH guest appearance with Jolson "A Real Piano Player." As a topper Tony sang two great Jolson standards, "Rockabye" and "Mammy." What a wonderful way to finish off an incredible evening's entertainment.

Saturday started early with the screening of the film *Wonder Bar*, which was co-introduced by Ed Greenbaum and Jon Sonneborn. We were told how the film had skirted around the censors of the time and just how risqué it was back in 1934. After the film there was to be a Q&A session. Some of those in our audience hadn't seen *Wonder Bar* before, so it would be interesting to hear what they thought of the film. The Q&A was a great success with questions and points of view

being put forward sometimes passionately but always interestingly.

The afternoon session was late starting, but, surprisingly, all the attendees rushed thru their lunch to get back to see the last presentation of the day, which I'm told was probably the quintessential presentation of the entire festival. Those yanks like to save the best for last. And I was it!

My presentation was called "Al Jolson: The Man And His Music" and I took a relaxed approach to look at various stages of Jolson's life with appropriate music and images. Towards the beginning of the presentation I showed an audio visual that I had been working on, Al singing "God's Country" and this went over quite well, in fact many of the audience asked if they could buy a copy. Various areas of Jolson's life were looked at with special attention being given to his life with Erle, his fourth and last wife. This year marks the 10th anniversary of Erle's death so she naturally came in for some special attention. After showing Jolie overseas in Korea I dealt with his death and the presentation of the "Medal For Merit" to Erle and Asa Jr. I always worry about how to finish my presentations and this year I opted for the song "April Showers" from the end of *The Jolson Story* with a kaleidoscope of pictures showing Jolson from a young boy on stage and pictures from throughout his career. I'm pleased to report that as with the other presentations over the two days; mine was also enthusiastically received by the attendees.



David McCarthy ready to deliver "Al Jolson: The Man and his Music."

The "Jolson Auction" was the last piece of business on the busy daytime schedule, and this of course was hosted by our perennial president, and wannabe Auctioneer, Mr. Jan Hernstat. Jan seems to love these auctions. He is in his element as it affords him the comedic outlet to push his audience into parting with their hard earned cash.

Following the Happy Hour, dinner was once again served promptly at 7:00 pm. to allow Jan to open the evening's festivities at 8:00 pm by singing "No Sad Songs For Me" before leading the singing of "Happy Birthday" to his wife Sherry. Jan's last number was "I Can't Give You Anything But Love" which of course he dedicated to Sherry.

There was also a nice thank you to all of those that attended and Dave Gross played music that was appropriate to those destinations, such as, England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales each had a snippet of music from our homeland as did Canada, Germany, Argentina, and Australia.

For the Saturday show Bill Campbell took to the stage this time resplendent in top hat, white tie and tails—hmmm wouldn't that make a great title for a song! Bill always puts a massive amount of work and heart into each of his performances and this year was no exception as he worked out a set he called "Dancing With Jolson". What a wonderful way to start off with Jolson's "Go Into Your Dance" followed quickly by the "The Anniversary Song" and "Cheek to Cheek." As with the previous night, Bill interspersed jokes between his song performances. Bill has a delivery style all of his own and knows how to milk the tag line of his jokes. Bill continued his singing with "You Danced And Stole My Heart Away", a lovely version of "I Got Lucky In The Rain" followed by The "Darktown Strutters Ball", "My Mothers Eyes" and finishing off with "At Sundown". Bill left the stage to tumultuous applause.

John Carter has appeared at several previous US Jolson Festivals but this year for the first time he was asked to be one of the featured performers. John took to the stage in classy dress suit and commenced his act with "Is It True What They Say About Dixie?" followed by "Back In Your Own Backyard." The recordings that John used contained not only the Jolson singing voice but sometimes also the introduction to the song which was delivered in the film by Larry Parks. A number of people remarked that they hadn't expected

that and were surprised that John had mimed to the spoken word as expertly as he mimes to the singing. John continued his act with "I'm Sitting On Top Of The World", "You Made Me Love You" and "Toot Toot Tootsie". John then stepped away from the two biographical movies to perform "If I Only Had A Match" and "Cantor On The Sabbath" the second of which though originally in *The Jolson Story*, had been cut out. The "Cantor On The Sabbath" promulgated a well-deserved standing ovation. But, John was not through, and then he delivered from the film *Jolson Sings Again*, "Sonny Boy", "Pretty Baby", "Carolina In The Morning" and "Rockabye".

And finally to round off the evening we had the extremely talented "Evans & Rogers" who last year stopped the show cold in Palm Springs. Accompanied by superb pianist Dave Gross, they entertained us with a mixture of Jolson songs some going way back. Starting off with "Toot Toot Tootsie" they continued with a Jolson song that was a purported cylinder recording, which Al supposedly made in 1910, called "Come Along My Mandy". Next ups were a rousing "Follow The Swallow", a lyrical "Carolina In The Morning", a bouncing "Everybody Rag With Me", a mellow "It All Depends On You", a melodic "Where The Black Eyed Susans Grow" and an exuberant "Ma Blushin' Rosie". Rick as many of you may know performs brilliantly as Eddie Cantor and he now treated us to three of Eddie's songs "Now's The Time To Fall In Love", "Makin' Whoopee" and "If You Knew Susie."

Anyone who was at the Jolson Festival last year in Palm Springs will remember the next number, and if you are like me, you will have marveled at the vocal talent of Sharon Evans as she lovingly sang the Judy Garland number, "Dear Mr. Jolson" (okay so it should have been Dear Mr. Gable!), which she performed sitting at a table talking and singing her heart out to a photograph of Jolson. Brilliant performance, Sharon!

Rick and Sharon then treated us to a Jolson medley of "Rainbow Round My Shoulder", "Back In Your Own Backyard", "She's A Latin From Manhattan" and "A Quarter To Nine", and they closed the show with, a fantastic and rhythmically pleasing "Home In Pasadena."

Sunday morning and a tired but happy group of people gathered to be part of the Society meeting. Jan opened with a Q & A session asking for comments and suggestions, and boy did he get them! The Sunday



The fabulous John Carter thrilled us with his dynamic performance.



Sharon Evans & Rick Rogers.

wrap up session is also the time when awards are handed out and Jan had a ton of them to hand out. We paid our respects to a person that has been a Society member for over sixty years, Dick Bonesteel, and although he wasn't with us his award will be sent to him. This year Jan had three 50 year loyalty awards to present to: Robert Pomponi Jr., Jon Sonneborn, and Maynard Bertolet. Congratulations!

Jan then had two Honorary Awards to present, the first one going to Jon Sonneborn, and the second to our Society treasurer, Sandy Gerloff. If applause is any indication, I'd say these were both very popular choices for the awards.

The next order of business was a host of Presidential Awards and they were presented to: Paul Bowers, John Rendon, Steven Hanks, Alice Boyd, Jon Sonneborn, Marc Leavey, Evans & Rogers, David McCarthy, John King, Peter Belmonte and last but certainly not least to: Stan & Sandy Gerloff for their efforts in managing the Baltimore Festival.

The highest award that the Jolson Society can bestow is the coveted "Irvin Warwick Award." Jan called upon Stan Gerloff to make this special presentation to the recipient, past President Bruce Wexler. This award was richly deserved and that was made obvious judging by the riotous applause.

With the awards given out, it was my honor to present what has become the traditional festival closing ceremony, an Audio/Visual featuring Al singing "I'll Be Seeing You" with accompanying photos projected onto a large screen showing the attendees enjoying themselves during the three day festival. I'm told that this presentation, which is available to view on my YouTube Chanel, will also be included on Marc's Society DVD of the event.

Although the Sunday morning awards session was the end of the festival for many, for some of us who were staying over, it was only the beginning. A contingent of die-hard Jolson fans took advantage of a tour which was hosted by Dr. Marc Leavey. Our luxury coach took us to various locations associated with Al Jolson. Leaving the hotel at 11:30am we travelled to the Anacostia area of the District of Columbia where the graves of Jolson's parents were located. The coach was comfortable and a sheer joy to be in and the trip took only 45 minutes. Arriving at the cemetery we were led to the location where Jolson's father Rabbi Moses Rubin Yoelson was buried. There were three graves next to each other, that of the Rabbi and on his right was his second wife Ida Yoelson and on his left that of Meyer Yoelson.

While we were standing looking at the three graves our attention was called to another grave just a couple of rows away—it was the grave of Jolson's mother Naomi Yoelson. Not as imposing as that of Jolson's father, Naomi was buried in a grave with a simple dignified headstone. It was a strange feeling to be standing at this grave where Al Jolson himself would have stood so many years ago as his beloved mother was laid to rest. The moment was even more moving when Marc Leavey chanted a prayer and we all stood silently in respect. Marc had brought with him a bag of stones for us (a nice touch), and then he explained the custom of Jewish cemeteries, and that leaving a stone is quite significant and is regarded as the respectful way of showing there has been a visitor to the grave. I put a stone on each of the graves of Jolson's family as did the rest of our entourage. It was quite an emotional experience.



Jolson Society President, Jan Hernstat.

Our time was up and our next stop was a visit to the National Mall and on the journey we were treated to a "Jolson Quiz" courtesy of our host Marc Leavey. It's not easy to devise a quiz for a group of people on a coach but Marc managed to pull it off. We were asked a series of questions the answers to which would be either A, B, C or D and we had to hold up appropriate cards to indicate our answers. I won't go into details, but the overall cheater, er I mean winners, were Stan Gerloff and Debbie Eifler.

After a two-hour sojourn we made our way back to our coach for our next stop was Fort McHenry. While there we had the option of going into the Fort for the nominal fee of \$7 and some of our party took that option. For the rest of us we had a quick look around and then we were dragged kicking and screaming by Stan back to the coach as he had the forethought to bring along a cooler packed with liquid libation. That's what I call good planning!

What better way to top off a spectacular 2014 Al Jolson Festival than with soft drinks, cold water, and bottles of ice-cold *Yuengling* lager, which I was told was America's oldest brewery. A few of the "connoisseurs of brew" in our group had a spirited debate over the legitimacy of the beer being labeled as a lager. After our second round though, we pretty much agreed that it was indeed a lager! With everyone back in the coach and our next stop was Federal Hill from which we had a grand view overlooking Baltimore Harbor. Our final destination was St. Mary's Industrial School, where in his youth, Jolson spent some time. The building unfortunately is no longer in existence due to a fire, but at least we were able to visit the site.

The Sunday Excursion was a wonderful finale to a fabulous and memorable week. It was like the maraschino cherry on top of an ice cream sundae! I would like to thank Marc Leavey our knowledgeable tour guide, Stan and Sandy, along with Jan and Sherry Hernstat with providing all of us with a fun-filled and delightful three-day festival.

—The End