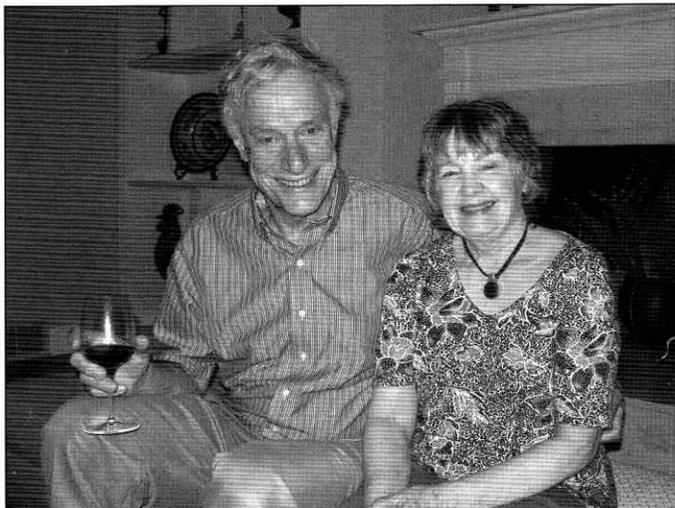


STUPENDOUS STAMFORD SOIREE

by David McCarthy



Our soiree hosts Cleo and Jon Sonneborn.

Our genial hosts, Jon and Cleo Sonneborn officially kicked off the 2015 Stamford Jolson Festival on Thursday evening though there was a buzz of activity in the hotel from early in the day as attendees started to arrive for the event. Jolson Festivals bring together a host of friends both old and new and all for the one reason, that of celebrating the life and works of “The World’s Greatest Entertainer”—Al Jolson.

Thursday evening is historically reserved for our karaoke night where singers abound, thanks in part to Jim Bean and Jack Daniels, both of whom seem to bring out the good and . . . well, not so very good. Nothing can deter these happy folks whom gather to sing their hearts out and have a good time. This year there were some surprises as usual, but the highlight of the evening came when our unflappable audio technician Peter Belmonte introduced his partner, “Ms. New York 2012,” Donna Dean to the microphone. Donna certainly possesses a phenomenal singing voice and a delightful stage-presence.

Not to be left out, or, outdone, the professionals in the guise of Tony Babino, Bill Campbell and Richard Halpern were also on hand to bring some respectability to the evening’s event. Other performers who took to the microphone were Nigel Dreiner, John Carter, Ed Greenbaum, Cleo Sonneborn, Paul Bowers and a host of others too numerous to mention because, well, I was drinking at the time.

Friday Morning the 15th of May

Jolson Society President Jan Hernstat opened the festival festivities by introducing its organizer and co-host Jon Sonneborn who welcomed us all on behalf of both himself and his lovely wife, Cleo.



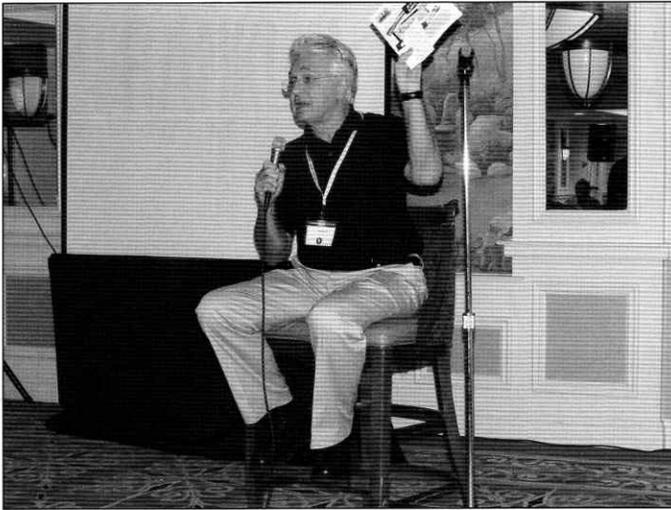
Song-stylist Donna Dean held sway at Karaoke night.

First up on the daytime schedule was our Webmaster Dr. Marc Leavey in a presentation that he called “In Homage to the World’s Greatest Entertainer” and what homage indeed it was. Marc had assembled video clips of a host of artists who over the years had paid tribute to Al Jolson.

Starting off with a film-clip medley of Jolson hits sung by Dean Martin and Bing Crosby, Marc kept the tributes flowing with clips of Harry Richmond, and the All Barkies Dogville Comedies (a dog act featuring a black dog singing what else? “Mammy!” Norman Brooks singing Sonny Boy, Doris Day performing “Toot, Toot, Tootsie” . . . in blackface, Shirley Temple performing “Smile” including a quick Jolson impersonation, Eddie Fisher with a superb Jolson medley, George



Al Jolson Society President Jan Hernstat officially opens the 2015 festival at Stamford, Connecticut.



Paul Bowers delivers a spellbinding presentation.



The controversial and delightfully animated Jon Sonneborn.

Jessel singing "California Here I Come", Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney singing "Robert E. Lee", Jerry Lewis and Sammy Davis Jr with a Jolson medley and finishing with Jerry Lewis singing "Sonny Boy" first with his Dad, Danny and then with his son, Gary.

Before his advertised program Paul Bowers announced a new Jolson Society CD that was being launched during the festival and told how the CD had originally come about, starting with the idea as a proposed Warner Brothers project with audio supplied by Erle Jolson Krasna, and produced by Doug Galloway. Added to the CD set is the unpublished, alternate Decca track of "My Mother's Rosary" which has been restored to its original brilliance. Jolson kept the recording in his own private collection.

Paul then introduced his advertised presentation "The Winter Garden, Al Jolson & the Shuberts" which skillfully took us through the early years of Al Jolson, explaining how he was talked into accepting the Shubert's offer of a spot in the show La Belle Paree by his then Manager, Arthur Klein. It was this performance way back in 1911 that of course had set him on course for stardom. Paul's highly praised presentation took us all the way through Al's Broadway years with the Shubert Brothers earning a much deserved round of applause from the audience.

An extra presentation was slipped into the program and we were all delighted that it was. Jens Renke showed us video updates of AJ-Images involvement in Jolson projects over the years. This included the unveiling of a memorial to Al Jolson in the Jakovas Bunka's Litvak Memorial Park near Platelai in Jolson's homeland. AJ-Images have done much to perpetuate the memory of Al Jolson and we are all appreciative of their work.

The next presentation was entitled "Al Jolson, What Made the Legend Tick" and was presented by festival host Jon Sonneborn. For those of you that haven't been present at one of Jon's talks, you have missed an experience which defies description. Jon speaks with a passion that draws you into the subject. Jon started by showing a clip from "The Singing Fool" which showed the entrance of Al Jolson. The film was blatant inasmuch as they were introducing not the character in the film but the star—Al Jolson! He then went on to talk about the importance of the Jolson character of Gus and how in its own way was every bit as iconic as that of Chaplin's, The Little Tramp.

On the issue of blackface Jon explained why the black communities of the time were not offended by Jolson's use of blackface because of the way that Jolson used the traditional makeup in a manner that had never been used before. Al's character of Gus was not a downtrodden characterization, he was always the winner, and he was smart and wisecracking, always coming out on top. He didn't portray a stereotype; his character showed that he was an equal and often the top dog.

Jon explained the synergy of the black man and the Jewish man which is the way that Jolson performed. As an example, in *Bombo* Jolson had introduced the song "April Showers" and with this song and others it cannot be ignored that the black character was singing in a Cantorial style of singing that had never before been heard on the American stage.

Jon can be controversial when he wants and was VERY controversial with his suggestion that Jolson was a great actor and could have done a lot better in his films if given the chance and a good strong Director.

Last presentation of the day went to Ed Greenbaum with his "Gems from the Jolson Archive". Ed started his presentation by talking about the Kraft Music Hall shows that we all love so much. Of the 71 shows Jolson recorded we are missing parts of 15 because they were cut and sent out to servicemen overseas as AFRS recordings. Some of these lost recordings are now coming to light and Ed was able to play for us an unheard Kraft Cheese rehearsal (no Jolson) and a beautiful version of "Memories" that we have never heard before. This was followed by recordings of "A Dime Becomes a Diamond" and "All My Love". After playing these gems Ed went on to talk about the Colgate Shows and how of the 39 shows that Jolson recorded we only have 6 complete shows plus some excerpts—there is still plenty out there somewhere! Ed continued by playing a number of alternate recordings made for the two Jolson biographies before playing a host of other rarities finishing with a recording Jolson made with Mayor Le Guardia from a 1942 scrap metal drive.

Our Friday evening's entertainment began with festival host Jon Sonneborn taking to the microphone together with Bill Campbell as co-hosts which started the evening off with a delightful comedy routine. After some amusing shtick from Jon and Bill, Richard Halpern came on and joined Bill with the song "Mandy".



Masters of Ceremonies Messrs. Jon Sonneborn and The Scottish Song man Bill Campbell.

Richard then warmed-up the audience with "Let Me Sing and I'm Happy" before launching into some early Jolson songs such as: "I'm Ka-razy For You", "Who Played Poker with Pocahontas?", "Where Did Robinson Crusoe Go with Friday on Saturday Night?"

A regular part of Richard's set is Nigel Dreiner who sang "No Sad Songs for Me" a Capella. Nigel's voice is deeper and richer than ever before. Then back to Richard briefly for "My One and Only" before it was the turn of John Carter.

John Carter usually known for his very accurate recreation and portrayal of Larry Parks' performance in the two Jolson biographies, surprised many by miming to Jolson's Decca recording of "If I Only Had a Match" and then another non Larry Parks performance this time with Al's "Mammy, I'll Sing About You" from *Go Into Your Dance*.

Back to Richard who sang "I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise" before bringing Bill, Nigel and John back on stage for a lively version of "If You Knew Susie".

It was now the turn of Bill Campbell to serenade us with a selection of songs from *Brigadoon*, "Come to Me, Bend to Me" and "Annie Laurie" which he performed in his own unique style.

Headliner for Friday night was of course Tony Babino who announced that he was appearing for the fifteenth successive year at our Jolson Festivals. Tony with piano accompaniment by popular Dave Gross, regaled us with his Jolson style voice singing the following Jolson classics, "Let Me Sing And I'm Happy", "I'm Sitting On Top Of The World", "Toot Toot Tootsie", "California Here I Come", "April Showers", "Back In Your Own Backyard", "You Made Me Love You", "The Old Piano Roll Blues". "Way Down Yonder in New Orleans", "When the Red, Red Robin", and "Old Man River". Coming away from Jolson briefly Tony gave us a beautiful version of the Hoagy Carmichael classic, "Stardust". As has become a regular part of Tony's act, he invited Jan Hernstat onto the stage to sing two duets, "Ma Blushin' Rosie" and "Carolina in The Morning". Back to his solo act Tony continued with "On The Banks Of The Wabash", "The Spaniard That Blighted My Life" with Dave Gross singing the Bing Crosby part, "Sonny Boy", "I've Got A Crush On You", "Rockabye Your Baby With A Dixie Melody" and



The sensational Tony Babino.

"My Mammy" before finishing off with a lovely version of the Bobby Darin number, "The Curtain Falls".

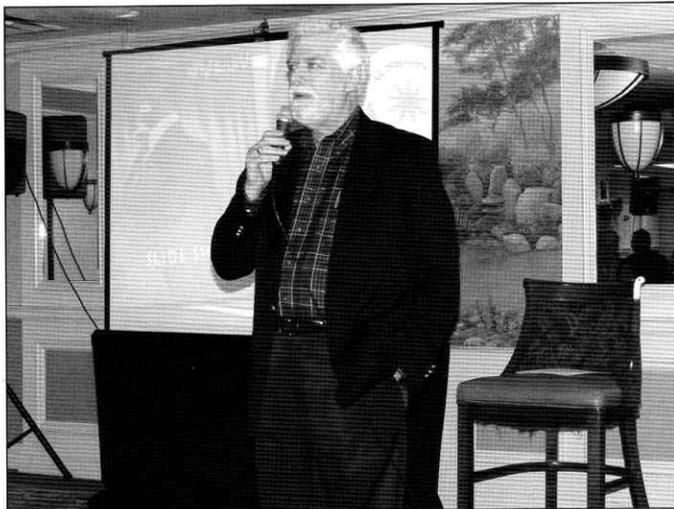
With the resonant tones of Tony B. ringing in our ears we went to our beds a happy bunch of Jolson fans.....well some went to their beds while others went to the bar to spend a few more hours enjoying themselves with friends that we hadn't seen since the last Jolson Festival in Baltimore last year. I do seem to remember Paul Bowers educating me as to the delights of a drink I'd never heard of before called an 'Old Fashioned'. Thank you Paul, for introducing me to a deliciously, nutritious beverage.

Oh what a day Saturday the 16th would be!

Saturday morning started with a viewing of the Jolson film "Rose of Washington Square" but before it started Ed Greenbaum showed some short extracts starting with a piece of film of Jolson that had never been seen before followed by Al recording "My Mammy" on film for Warner Brothers, this showed Al supposedly entertaining the troops but in reality it was shot in the Warmers Studio. Last clip was of Al singing "April Showers" at Madison Square. Ed then screened outtakes from the feature film from the video "Hidden Hollywood"; the outtakes were Jolson singing "April Showers/Avalon" followed by Webber & Fields and finally Alice Faye singing, "I'm Always Chasing Rainbows".

Ed was joined by film historian Philip Harwood who discussed the making of the film "Rose of Washington Square" and how it had been based on the life story of Fanny Brice. Brice had threatened a law suit against Al and Fox for using her life as the basis of the film though this was eventually settled out of Court. The discussion also turned to whether or not Larry Parks had watched this film and based his recreation of Jolson on the ROWS performances.

Following the feature film we were treated to the screening of a unique piece of film, Al Jolson live in Korea.....in glorious color! This was evidently from the camera of Harry Akst and was magnificent. Jolson performing live in front of American servicemen, and in color. The film is available to all Jolson Society members with a soundtrack added by Josh Gerloff. Poor John Webster our Video Director was run off his feet selling copies to us eager fans—wonderful footage.

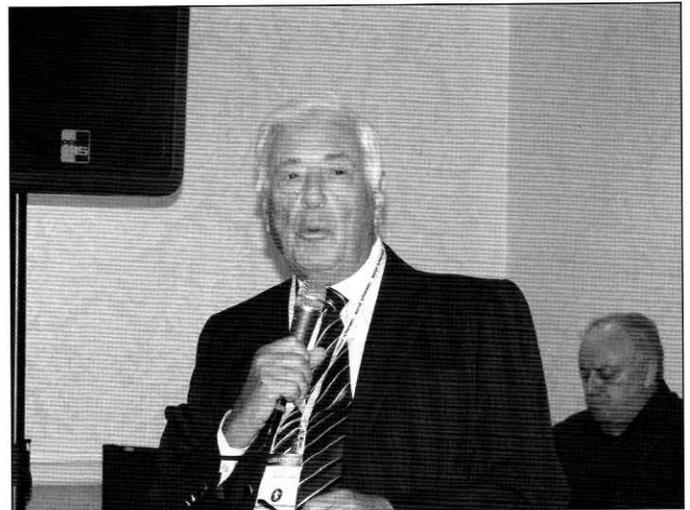


Ed Greenbaum discussing Rose of Washington Square.

There were a few problems encountered during the morning sessions which delayed the start of the lunch break, and so attendees were tardy getting back from lunch. We were a bit late starting the next part of the program but it was something that no serious Jolson fan would want to miss, "In Search of Jolson" was the next presentation and it was to be a talk by well-known Jolson biographer Michael Freedland in his first ever visits to the U.S. Jolson Festivals. Michael is a wonderful raconteur and spoke about his discovery of Al Jolson and how over the years Jolson has become so important to him. Of course that is the story of most of us, discovering Al Jolson and getting more and more involved with him. Michael however was very different to the rest of us and when the opportunity arose he was able to put the Jolson name in front of the public. This started when he interviewed stars such as Maurice Chevalier and was able to speak to them about Jolson. He also persuaded the BBC to broadcast a Radio program entitled "The Jolson Touch" where artists such as Ben Lyon, Ralph Reader and Frankie Vaughan talked about the influence of Jolson on them. This was followed by other radio shows on Jolson presented on British Radio by Michael Freedland and even a three weekly hour long shows on Jolson hosted by British singer and comedian Max Bygraves. Michael has made his name as a show business biographer and his first biography in 1972 was "Jolson" and that particular biography has been reprinted and reprinted and is still in print today, quite a feat. Michael also spoke about the West End hit show "Jolson—The Musical" which won the Oliver Award for best musical and enthralled London audiences for over two years before moving on to Canada and America.

There was of course a question and answer session following Michael's talk and this could have lasted all night but by this time we were overrunning and had to move on.

The final presentation of the 2015 Jolson Festival was my "Al Jolson—The Man and His Music". The title enables me to offer a different presentation every year while keeping to a similar format i.e. that of showing a mixture of film clips and photographs with accompanying rare recordings by Al Jolson. Starting off with an alternative version of "California Here I Come" from the film "Rose of Washington Square" I played rare versions of Jolson recordings starting with an alternative version of "Bright Eyes". Al Jolson during the war days featured an array of photographs of Al entertaining overseas in WWII to a medley of songs recorded for "Jolson Sings Again".....no, not the medley



Author, broadcaster, and raconteur Michael Freedland.

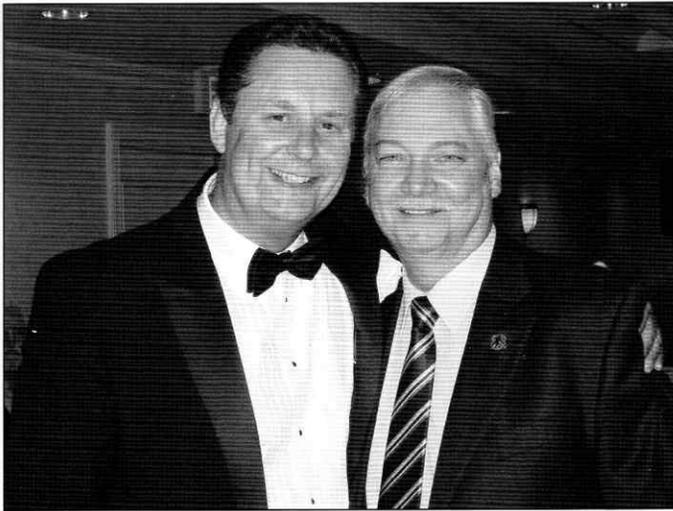
used in the actual film! I always like to include a tribute to Al and Erle and this year was no exception with unused versions of songs recorded by Jolie for the biographical films, "I Can't Give You Anything But Love", "Pretty Baby", and "For Me and My Gal". As a tribute to Asa Jolson, Jr., who had sadly died earlier this year, I played the obvious song, "Sonny Boy" to which I added photographs and films from his early life with Al and Erle and then more up to date with rare photographs of Asa with his mother thanks to Doug Galloway. The presentation finished with the upbeat version of the song "April Showers" from The Jolson Story with accompanying pictures that took a quick look at Jolson over the years from his days working with his brother to his Korean shows.

Last part of the day is always devoted to the Jolson auction which as always was in the capable hands of Jan Hernstat ably assisted by Dave Greim and Philip Harwood. Not sure if these gentlemen were helping or hindering Jan as the banter and friendly insults were going both ways. Jan loves getting money out of us and he must have been good as he managed to get an obscene amount out of me for a framed picture of Jolie.

Saturday evening's entertainment started off in the same vein as Friday once again with Messrs. Jon Sonneborn and Bill Campbell as hosts. Bill began with a song, "His Name Was Jolson" before Jon interrupted him for some more good natured banter.

Next came the surprise hit of the Festival, a young singer named Aaron Caruso. who was advertised as The Voice of Mario Lanza. There was a degree of apprehension as to how a Lanza style singer would go down at a Jolson Festival BUT we were won over with the first song which was a lovely version of "With a Song in My Heart", this guy could really sing and he also had a pleasing personality. Together with Dave Gross who evidently wrote the routine, Aaron delighted us with songs such as "Anema E Core" and "Core 'ngrato (Catari, Catari)" before belting out the George M Cohen song "Over There". Moving up to date the next song was "The Phantom of the Opera" followed by "The Music of the Night" but with special lyrics about Al Jolson. By this time Aaron had us in the palm of his hand and he could do no wrong.

"One Alone", "Volare", "The Loveliest Night Of The Year", "They Didn't Believe Me", "Be My Love", "Funiculi Funicula", "Ave Maria", "Ochi Chernye", "Vesti la giubba" and finishing with "O Sole Mio" Aaron



David McCarthy congratulates John Carter for a great performance.

had received several standing ovations during the course of his act and he received a prolonged one at the finish. This young man with the "golden-voice" will be welcome back at any other Jolson Festival he chooses as far as all the ladies in the appreciative audience is concerned.

After a short intermission Jan called the raffle together with Richard. From here on it was all down to Richard for the evening's entertainment. Richard always manages to delight us all with his singing of the earlier Jolson songs and he commenced his routine by explaining that he was going to sing songs from all of the Jolson-starring movies, working his way back from "The Singing Kid" to "The Jazz Singer". Kicking off in great style with "I Love To Sing-A", and ending with "My Mammy."

At this point John Carter entered from stage left to a slightly earlier Jolson than we are used to from Mr. C. as he performed to the recording of "Swanee" from "Rhapsody in Blue", to much applause. John was on his way back to his seat when Richard called him back for an encore and John was only too happy to oblige with "Waitin' for the Robert E Lee".

The end of the evening was fast approaching as Richard invited back on stage Nigel Dreiner, John Carter and attendee George Muegel for a rousing finale comprising of "You Made Me Love You" and "California, Here I Come". It was quite an evening of classic Jolson songs!

Again, as with Friday night, I heard reports of drinking in the bar until the early hours of the morning. I don't know whether it's true but I was told by a reliable source that the six gentlemen above lead the charge to the hotel bar. Sadly I was not there as I had to put together the last presentation of the Festival.....well when did you think it was done!!!

Sunday morning is the time for good byes, thanks and awards to be handed out and that as always is with Jan Hernstat at the helm. To start off Jan announced the 25-year Loyalty Awards which went to Les Guzik, and, the husband and wife team John and Joan Webster, Michael Invergo, Karen Graff, Martin Schorr, Raymond McEvoy, and Ralph Vilardi.

This year there were two 50 year Loyalty Awards: Clive Baldwin and Phillip Episcopo, Jr.



Cleo Sonneborn, with Neapolitan crooner Aaron Caruso, and husband Jon MacSonneborn??

As usual Jan likes to hand out the Presidential Award to those he feels deserve special thanks and this year his awards went to: Steve Hanks, David Miller, Tony Farnfield, Mike Modero, Philip Harwood, Sandy Gerloff, Kevin Roberts, John Wehrman, Stan Gerloff, Ed Greenbaum, Paul Bowers and festival hosts Jon and Cleo Sonneborn.

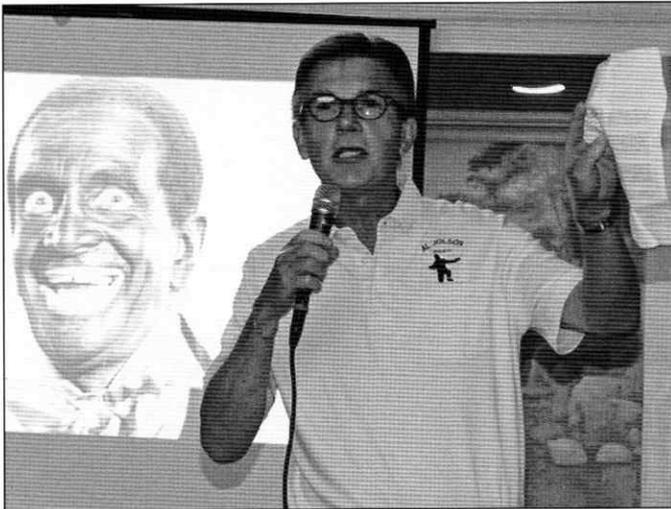
Jon Sonneborn took the opportunity to thank his co-host and wife Cleo Sonneborn for all of the work that she put into making the 2015 Jolson Festival such a success.

Jan thanked the people that gave their time and energy to entertaining and educating attendees during the daytime sessions: Michael Freedland, Ed Greenbaum, Paul Bowers, David McCarthy, Marc Leavey, and Jens Renke. Jan then went on to thank the evening entertainers, Tony Babino, Dave Gross, Aaron Caruso, Bill Campbell, John Carter, Peter Belmonte who worked tirelessly to provide the excellent audio, Richard Halpern, and Nigel Dreiner.

Those indefatigable folks who run the Society memorabilia tables at each festival, Skip and Lois Mack, John Webster, Debbie Eifler and Cagney were thanked for unselfishly giving up their time to serve.



Left to right, Michael Modero, Stan Gerloff, Bruce Wexler, Harry Rhinehart, Jan Hernstat, and John Wehrman, "the living" Jolson Society Presidents – past and present – at the Saturday night Aaron Caruso dinner/show.



Stan Gerloff introduces Michael Freedland on Sunday.

Jan also recognized Trish Elkins and John King for working the registration desk.

From the audience various attendees spoke and offered their personal thanks. First up was Debbie Eifler who praised the young singer Aaron Caruso from the previous night. Aaron together with Dave Gross had enthralled the audience in the first half of the show. Next to speak was Bob Daniels who spoke about the Jolson website and forum bringing together people from all over the world through their love of Jolson and each other.

Bruce Wexler's wife, Gail spoke about Jolson fans bringing along their wives to the festivals. There is always plenty for the wives to do while the husbands are enjoying Jolson so more should be encouraged to come along.

The Irvin Warwick Memorial Award is the Jolson Society's most prestigious award. Stan Gerloff had the privilege and high honor of introducing this year's recipient, Michael Freedland. Michael was feted for his more than forty years of keeping Al Jolson's name before the public. Michael, who authored one of the first biographies on Al Jolson, and amazingly his book has remained in publication in various updated versions ever since 1972. In addition to his Jolson biography Michael has kept the Jolson name alive by presenting many BBC radio shows in the UK, he was also responsible for the wonderful South Bank Show TV tribute to Al Jolson and he was instrumental in bringing the stage show *Jolson the Musical* to the West End stage. Michael was a most worthy recipient for the prestigious Irvin Warwick Memorial Award and he received it together with a richly deserved standing ovation from those present.

This year the Society has made available a very special CD which is being offered to Society members as *The Ultimate Al Jolson Collection* and Paul Bowers paid tribute to Doug Galloway and Erle Jolson Krasna for their work in obtaining the original audio files and putting them together under the working title of "The Definitive Jolson... His Very Best". Although the project was put together with the intentions of it being released to the general public this was sadly not to be. This unique double CD is now available to Society members through the Society Audio Directors in both the USA and UK.



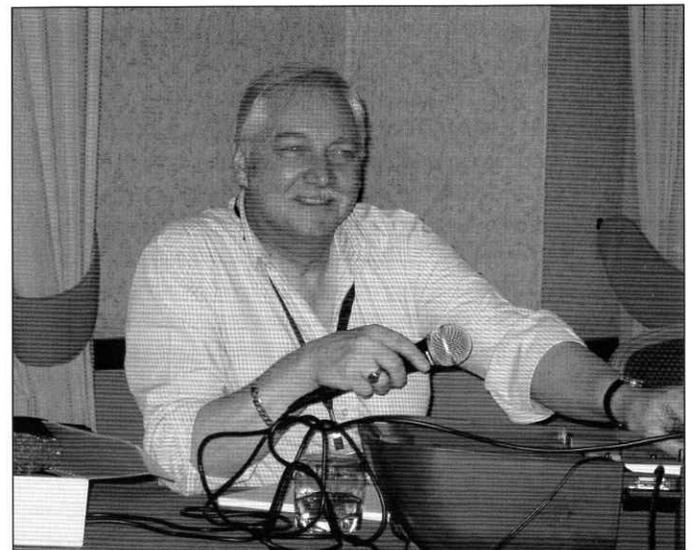
Jan Hernstat and Michael Freedland.

It's election year in the Society and Jan announced that the positions of President (Jan Hernstat), Vice President (Jon Sonneborn), Secretary (Stan Gerloff) and Treasurer (Sandy Gerloff) were unopposed and therefore those people were straight through into the positions mentioned. As for the Board of Trustees, there are five places and seven nominees, Skip Mack, John Rendon, Tom Nestor, Harry Rhinehart, Trish Elkins, Freddie Goldstein, and David McCarthy. A postal beveragevote will take place for the Trustee positions.

With the last of the Society Business over Jan handed over to me to finish off the Festival with the last presentation of the event, "I'll Be Seeing You" which as you are all by now familiar with, shows attendees enjoying the event over the three days of the Festival. This year I extended the presentation by including Al singing "Auld Lang Syne" to allow for more photographs of attendees to be shown up onto the screen.

With the rich voice of Al Jolson ringing in our ears, the 2015 Al Jolson Festival was over for another year.

—The End



David McCarthy, as usual, gets in the last word.