

# HULLABALOO AT HARTFORD

by David McCarthy



Karaoke with "The Jolsonairs," a doo-wop group consisting of Jan Hernstat, Cleo Sonneborn, and Jon Sonneborn.



Jon Sonneborn takes us behind the taboo of blackface.

## Thursday 17th: Arrivals, Anticipation, and Karaoke

As the bright afternoon sun slowly gave way to dusk, one could feel the tension mount as anxious festival goers began to arrive steadily. Our genial hosts Jon and Cleo Sonneborn had for weeks been hinting there would be surprises galore. Anticipation was at fever-pitch by 8:00 p.m. with our popular karaoke sing-along about to begin. The room filled as eager Jolsonairs led by our resident disk-jockey, Jan Hernstat, who inquired as to who would like to have a go at singing along to Al Jolson's Columbia Pictures accompaniment tracks. Jan cajoled those inclined to participate in the karaoke, and induced everyone to make full use of the bar facilities in the room so we'd meet our contracted minimum. Karaoke night was a great success with everyone enjoying the relaxed atmosphere of spirited-refreshment, song, and camaraderie.

## Friday 18th: On with the Show of Shows!

Friday morning President Jan Hernstat welcomed us to the festival before he introduced our festival hosts, Jon & Cleo Sonneborn. Ed Greenbaum took a moment to introduce Special guest Herb Goldman, author of the definitive Al Jolson book: "Jolson: 'The Legend Comes to Life.'"

## Jolson Film Spectacular

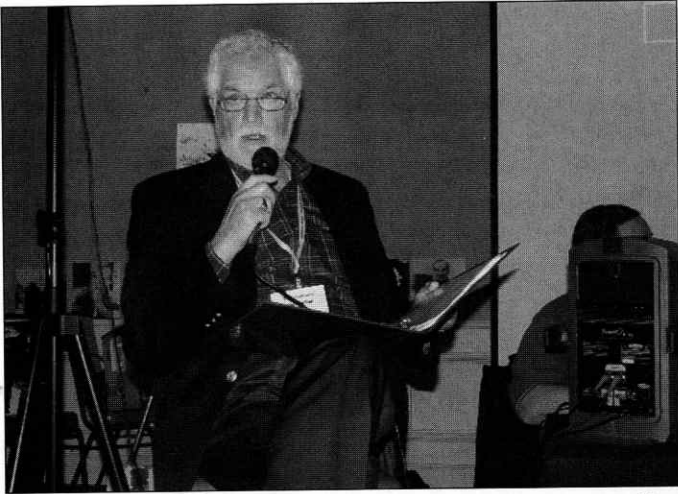
The first program was the *premiere* screening of the "new and improved" Paul Bowers' DVD *Go Into Your Dance*. The film has been

readily available for years on video and DVD, but the picture quality had always been muddy because the master print Warner Bros. utilizes is spliced together from several different film sources. After hundreds of hours of painstaking work, Paul worked his magic to brighten and enhance the picture to where it is a pure delight to watch.

## Behind the Blackface — Jon Sonneborn

Jon's presentations always enlighten, and this one was no exception. He commenced by saying that history had distorted the use of blackface and then took a thought-provoking point of view regarding events. Jon asked: "What 'if' Al Jolson had not died in 1950 but 2018?" An interesting premise. Jon then explained the highlights of the Jolson career had Al had a different timeline.

In the days before social media, Al Jolson had to promote himself and that he did so, with drive and self-confidence. Jolson was a living bundle of energy. Jon showed several film clips to illustrate this aspect of Jolson's character. (Film clips provided by our friendly member from Germany, Jens Reinke who worked with Jon on the presentation.) The first clip was "I'm Sitting On Top of the World" from *The Singing Fool* followed by "Liza Lee" from *Big Boy*. Both film clips showed Jolson giving an energetic performance. The second batch of film clips consisted of "When the Red, Red Robin Comes Bob, Bob Bobbin Along" from *A Plantation Act*, and "There's A Rainbow Round My Shoulder," again from *The Singing Fool*.



Ed Greenbaum is sharing some rare Jolson tunes as well as his vast wealth of knowledge.

Jon explained that Jolson similarly exuded sexual energy as Elvis Presley did in the late 1950s. The only movie director to understand Al Jolson was Michael Curtiz who knew exactly how to film his performances.

With *The Jazz Singer*, Jon said that there were two scenes that for him marked the end of silent pictures, the first being the scene where following the singing of "Dirty Hands, Dirty Face" Jolson breaks into a spontaneous introduction to the next song. The scene is famous as are the words Jolson spoke: "Wait a minute, wait a minute, you ain't heard nothin' yet!" Followed by Jolson telling the orchestra leader to play "Toot, Toot Tootsie."

And after a spirited performance of this song the film reverts to a silent movie. The second scene is towards the end of the picture—Al returns to his faith and takes his father's place in the Synagogue to sing "Kol Nidre" during which his father, who had just passed away shown as a ghostly figure placing his hand on his son's shoulder invigorating Jolson's performance.

Jon addressed the use of blackface by Al Jolson who never used it to ridicule black people as many think today. With his character of Gus, Al Jolson was able to put forward a favorable view of the black man. As Gus, he was smarter than the white man, and he was able to do things on stage that no black man of the time could do. For example, Jon showed a clip from *Big Boy* where his Gus character talked back to the white man—"Bully John Bagby," and at the end of the scene, he was actually shown rescuing an abducted lady from Bagby and then literally dragging him back to face the consequences of the abduction.

In the film *Hallelujah, I'm A Bum*, Jolson's best friend is 'Acorn' a black man who is with Jolson all the way through the film. And in the film, *The Singing Kid* Jolson shares scenes and songs with Cab Calloway. It was at Jolson's insistence that Calloway was in the film and Jolson even insisted that he be treated equally with the other stars of the film. Cab Calloway attested to the way that Jolson stood up for him.

In *The Jolson Story*, although Larry Parks performed in blackface and even had a scene on stage as Gus, the film never attempted to explain the reasons behind the blackface character. The blackface



Mel Simons warms up the Friday night crowd.

just continued from his time with the Dockstader Minstrels. From 1927 onwards Jolson did not appear on stage as Gus or in blackface. His only use of blackface was limited to his films.

### Oldies But Goodies: Part Two — Ed Greenbaum

Ed pointed out that there are over 1700 known recordings by Al Jolson and that he would play a selection from that massive stockpile of Jolson recordings. Starting with the upbeat version of "April Showers," from *The Jolson Story*, we then were treated to such wonderful numbers as "Look for the Silver Lining," "California Here I Come," "Swanee," and three versions of "Avalon." Song after song played to the pure delight of the audience.

Ed also played recordings of impersonators, some well-known and some not-so-known, such as Charles Gregory singing "April Flowers" for an FTD Florist radio commercial. And, Norman Brooks singing a radio commercial for "Chevrolet" and even Al Jolson himself singing adverts.

To finish off his presentation, Ed played a recording that we had never heard before, "For All We Know" a song from August 2, 1934, broadcast of the Kraft Music Hall recorded onto an aluminum disk.

### Banquet Followed by the Evening's Entertainment

To start off the evening's entertainment Jan Hernstat introduced the festival organizer, Jon Sonneborn, who in turn introduced Mel Simons who entertained us with his piano accordion and some jokes. Mel started off by singing the old standards "You Are My Sunshine" and "Take Me out to the Ball Game." Mel had a delightful shtick stopping during his gentle singing to impart some humor in an easy-going manner. A selection of old commercial jingles was sung leaving us to fill in the last line. Mel even went into Children's TV programs to rekindle some fond memories.

Jon Sonneborn reappeared on stage ready to introduce the next act, but was rudely interrupted by a noisy, disruptive member of the audience who didn't seem happy with the show, in fact, he was a most unhappy fellow! Genial Jon urged the argumentative individual, to join him on the stage so he could plead his case. Well, the irate



John Carter on stage with Jonathan Sonneborn.

person was none other than John Carter from England. (*Haven't we Brits got ourselves into enough trouble over here?*)

John Carter growled to Jon, "I'm unhappy, I hadn't been asked to perform." Okay! Simple remedy, if John Carter wants to perform, we'll let him. The audience, however, was gob-smacked when John put on a battered grey fedora, opened his mouth and the next song we heard was "Inka Dinka Do" with John lip-syncing to Jimmy Durante's voice—much to the delight of the audience.

Next on stage was Tony Babino who introduced a surprise guest, a young lady who amazingly loves and performs the music of Al Jolson and so with our own Dave Gross at the keyboard Krissy Ross took to the stage to sing "Let Me Sing, And I'm Happy." Krissy has a lovely voice, and an equally lovely personality and her love for Jolson was obvious as she sang a selection of Jolson standards: "You Made Me Love You," "The One I Love," "Anniversary Song" and "Swanee." Sidestepping away from Jolson standards, Krissy closed her section of the show with wonderful versions of "Can't Help Loving That Man of Mine," and "My Man." Krissy was a pure delight to watch and listen to and a very welcome addition to our Jolson festivities.

It was now the turn of Tony B., who never fails to deliver what we want to hear. Tony, using his Jolson voice sang, "Let Me Sing, And I'm Happy," "Pretty Baby," "California Here I Come," "Toot Toot Tootsie," "April Showers," "Back In Your Own Backyard," "Where Did Robinson Crusoe Go," "Rip Van Winkle," "Sonny Boy," "The Old Piano Roll Blues," and "Way Down Yonder in New Orleans." What a selection!

At this juncture, Tony welcomed Jan Hernstat onto the stage to sing a couple of duets: "Ma Blushin' Rosie" and "Carolina in the Morning."

Now it was the turn of Tony to perform with Dave Gross, and the pair gave a hilarious performance of "A Real Piano Player" and "The Spaniard That Blighted My Life." If you've ever heard the outtakes of Jolson and Crosby trying to record "The Spaniard," you'll know how much they fluffed the lines and clowned around. Tony and Dave did the same, though I'm not sure if all the banter was rehearsed or not, the audience loved it just the same.



The great Tony Babino and his sons, Steven and Anthony.

It was now time to bring on stage Tony's two sons, Anthony and Steven. These two guys entertained us at a Jolson Festival a couple of years back and proved a great success so we were all waiting in eager anticipation for what they would do for us this time. I think the phrase—"blew us away"—would be an apt description of their performance as they performed with Tony: "When the Red, Red Robin," and "Is It True What They Say about Dixie." A short move away from Jolson with a nod to the Beatles with "This Boy" before moving back to Jolson with "Me and My Shadow," followed by "I've Got You Under My Skin," as Tony invited his friend Steven Maglio onto the stage for a duet.

Tony brought the evening to a close with fabulous versions of "Rock-a-bye Your Baby" and "My Mammy." What a beautiful finish on the first day.

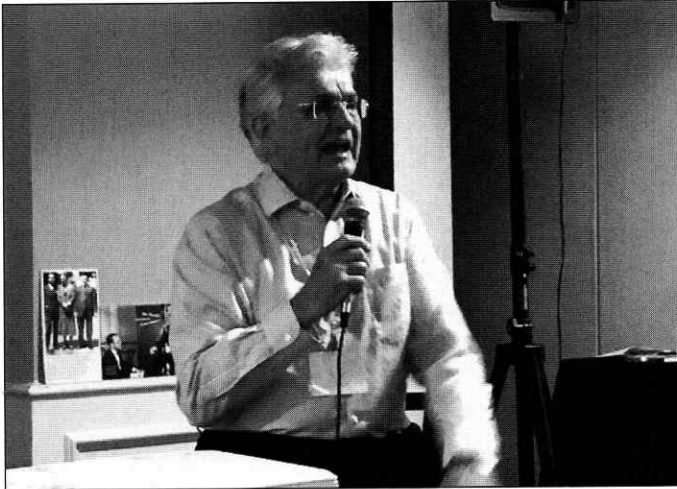
## Al Jolson the Man and His Music — David McCarthy

First up on Saturday morning was the presentation "Al Jolson: The Man and His Music," presented by Mr. David McCarthy. The perfect song to start with is "Let Me Sing, And I'm Happy," and this year the recording used was the 1930 Brunswick with a photo montage depicting Al Jolson through the years.

Last year I had the pleasure of being invited over to Lithuania to talk about Al Jolson prior to introducing the musical group Vilnius Diversities who were to perform a musical afternoon of Al Jolson songs. I showed photos of the group performing and played a short selection of their delightful interpretations of Jolson standards. Following this, we viewed a short audio-visual of my visit to Jolson's actual birthplace of Seredzius.

We have all been to or seen pictures of the magnificent memorial to Al Jolson at Hillside Memorial Park, but many have not visited the graves of other Jolson family members. I've been to many graves of Jolson's family. So, with the music of "When I Leave the World Behind" were pictures of Jolson's mother, Naomi, his father, Rabbi Moses Rubin Yoelson, his stepmother, Ada Yoelson, his ex-wife Ruby Keeler, his last wife Erle, and their two adopted children, Albert and Alicia, and lastly, Al's brother, Harry Jolson.





Paul Bowers shares details about the Shubert Archive.

Each picture accompanied by a photograph showing their final resting place. This brief section, of course, finished off looking at Jolson's magnificent grave.

My presentation finished off with the upbeat version of "April Showers" with photos of Al during his career with the last image of Jolson coming from "The Jazz Singer" where he has just blacked up, puts his wig on and suddenly beams at the camera. With that image of a happy smiling Al Jolson, my contribution to the entertainment came to an end.

### **The Winter Garden: Al Jolson and the Shuberts — Paul Bowers**

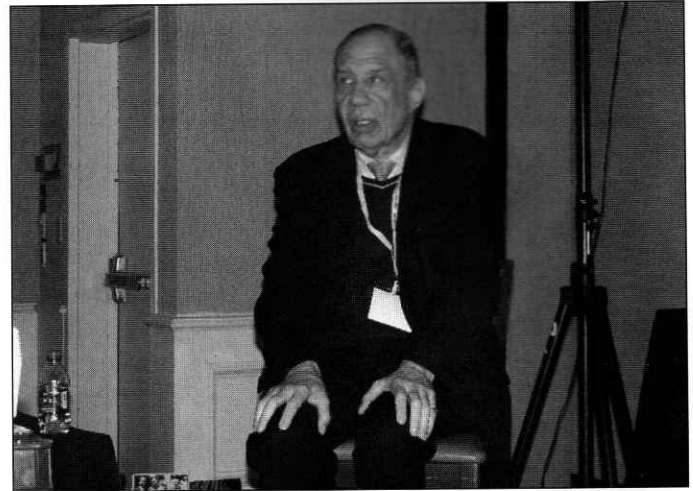
Jon Sonneborn introduced Paul Bowers, who explained his relationship with the Shubert Archives. Paul has had the unique privilege of having access to the Shubert Archives and he produced a compelling program of Al Jolson and the Shubert years. It includes rare photographs and recordings from the early part of the 20th-Century taking us from 1911 right up to 1927 and *The Jazz Singer*. What a fantastic and very professional presentation documenting the rise to fame of the legendary Al Jolson.

### **Herbert G. Goldman Tells of Bringing the Jolson Legend to Life!**

Herb Goldman is a walking encyclopedia when it comes to Al Jolson, and interesting facts and dates just poured out of him as he talked about the great Al Jolson. Contrary to all of the negative things we read about Al Jolson, Herb spoke about Jolson's generous side and how he could be a loyal and helpful friend as in example when orchestra leader Al Goodman's son was ill — it was Al Jolson who stepped in to ensure the boy received the treatment necessary.

Questions were naturally called out to Herb, one being: "What is his favorite Jolson movie," followed by "what is his least favorite?" Well for favorite Herb not surprisingly went for *Big Boy* and for his least favorite he went for *Say It with Songs*. I think many would agree with his choice.

The important news from Herb was that he was working on a new book about Al Jolson. Of course, the question was then asked:



Herb Goldman, the man who brought the legend to life.

"When will we be able to buy the new book?" To this, the answer is—when it is ready! The book is in its early stages so it is something we can all look forward to, but there isn't a date set for its publication.

As far as the audience was concerned, Herb could have kept on talking for the rest of the afternoon and night, but that was not possible as we had one more item in the program. Herb received a well-deserved round of applause.

### **IAJS Auction — Jan Hernstat**

A highlight of the Jolson Festival is Jan's auction, and this year he was aided and abetted by Dave Greim and Rosalie Olson who coaxed us into buying Jolson related items.

### **Saturday Evening Banquet and Entertainment**

Festival host Jon Sonneborn kicked things off again with Mel Simons who had gone down so well the previous night. Mel delighted us with another easy-going performance of old songs with many jokes interspersed along the way.

Jon then introduced John Carter who felt more like himself that evening treated us to his amazing lip-syncing and this time it was pure Jolson with "Rock-a-bye," "My Mammy," and "Robert E. Lee." John works many hours to deliver such perfect lip-syncing to Jolson's voice.

Tony Babino came onstage at this point to introduce the surprise hit from the night before, Miss Krissy Ross. Krissy spoke about her love of Al Jolson and proudly announced that she had signed up as the newest member of the Int'l Al Jolson Society; there's enthusiasm for you! For tonight's performance, Krissy announced that, in accordance with the theme of the evening she would be singing some songs by artists who were influenced by Al Jolson starting with "Zing Went the Strings of My Heart" a big hit for Judy Garland, and the Loretta Lynn tune "You Ain't Woman Enough."

Krissy followed with "It Must Be Him," a rousing performance of "I Am What I Am" from La Cage Aux Folles and back to Jolson for her closing number "Rock-a-bye Your Baby with a Dixie Melody" An



*The vivacious vocalist, Miss Krissy Ross.*

excellent closing number saw Krissy leaving the stage to thunderous applause.

Time for Tony B. to again step up to the microphone. This time Tony sang "April Showers," "I Only Have Eyes for You," "It All Depends on You," and "California Here I Come." Stepping away from the Jolson Songbook Tony sang from the Frank Sinatra songbook (well, he was pretty good, too!) "All Or Nothing At All," "You Brought A New Kind Of Love To Me," and "You Will Be My Music." Tony then gave a lovely rendering of "Everybody Loves Somebody," with a nice Dean Martin impersonation before surprising us with another spot-on impersonation of the great Jimmy Durante with "Make Someone Happy." Tony finished with yet another Jolson influenced singer, Tony Bennett with "Stepping out with My Baby."

At this stage of the proceedings, Tony was joined on stage by his two sons Anthony and Steven for the Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters' version of "Have I Told You Lately That I Love You." Back to the Jolson songbook and sensational three-part harmony versions of two songs that Jolson had performed with The Mills Brothers, "Down Among the Sheltering Palms" and "Is It True What They Say About Dixie?" and for extra measure they sang, "When the Red, Red Robin Comes Bob, Bob Bobbin Along."

Tony then gave the stage to Anthony and Steven who sang classic Jolson music in an updated style. They included a tribute to Rudy Wessler with "Banks of the Wabash," "By the Light of the Silvery Moon," "Goodbye My Bluebell," and "I Want a Girl." Tony's lads spoke about being brought up on *The Jolson Story*—whether they liked it or not! I guess they must have liked it as they performed Jolson song after Jolson song with flawless interpretations of such great numbers, "There's A Rainbow Round My Shoulder," "I'm Sitting On Top of the World," "I'm Looking Over A Four Leaf Clover," "Give My Regards To Broadway," "Chinatown My Chinatown," "I'm Just Wild About Harry," "Baby Face," and "Avalon," before moving briefly away from Jolson.

The applause for the boys was deafening, but Anthony and Steven stepped up the pace with modern music, "Bye, Bye Love," "When Will I Be Loved," "Folsom Prison Blues," "Me & Julio," "Love Grows Where My Rosemary Goes." The Beatles were not left out as the guys sang "Here Comes the Sun," then Frankie Valli's "Can't Take



*Our auctioneer, Jan Hernstat, is having a grand old time.*

My Eyes Off Of You" for which they were joined on stage by Krissy Ross. In keeping with the theme of the night, they performed Bob Dylan's "Blowing in the Wind," Jackie Wilson's "(Your Love Keeps Lifting Me) Higher and Higher," Bobby Darin's "Dream Lover," and "Up a Lazy River." The lads finished with two Tom Jones songs "She's A Lady," and "Delilah," which brought the excited crowd to its feet in wild applause!

Tony closed with Bobby Darin's beautiful song "The Curtain Falls," but it was left to Anthony and Steven to perform the final song of the evening, "I'll See You in My Dreams," which had us all on our feet wildly applauding. What a truly incredible evening of entertainment.

### **Sunday Morning Membership Meeting**

The Sunday Meeting hosted by Jan Hernstat began with the presentation of the 25 Year Loyalty Awards. Recipients were David Anstett, Myrna Barth, Raymond C. Barber, Paul Bowers, Ken Foster, John Heinlen, Marty Hershkowitz, Joseph Randall, Bernie Semourson, Steve Shear, Dr. Philip Sunshine, and John J. Woodruff.

Jan then presented the Dolores Kotowicz Presidential Awards, and these went to Cleo Sonneborn, Jonathan Sonneborn, Paul Bowers, Tom Nestor, Allen Davies, Susie Miller, David McCarthy, Anthony Babino, Steven Babino, Sandy Gerloff, and Stan Gerloff.

Lastly, Jan thanked all the scholarly folks who presided over a variety of informative daytime lectures, Herb Goldman, Paul Bowers, Ed Greenbaum, Jon Sonneborn, and some bloke named David McCarthy. Our prestigious president then thanked the folks who worked throughout the weekend behind the scenes doing a multitude of tasks, such as Debbie Eifler, who single-handedly manned the merchandise tables. David Huss who gave Debbie Eifler and Jan aid and assistance whenever it was needed. And, Jens Reinke, for all his invaluable help to Jon Sonneborn before and during the festival.

With the awards distributed there was but one final piece of business, viewing a kaleidoscope of photos taken over the weekend shown accompanied by Al Jolson singing "I'll Be Seeing You" and "Auld Lang Syne." And with the glorious voice of Al Jolson still resonating in our hearts, the Jolson Festival concluded until next year in Philadelphia.

—The End