

The 2019 USA *Jolson Festival* P H I L A D E L P H I A

by Kevin Roberts

The 2019 International Al Jolson Society Festival took place in the Sheraton Suites Hotel, Philadelphia with our hosts being Jan Hernstat, our Webmaster Marc Leavey and Marcia Leavey.

Thursday 16th

In time honoured Festival tradition, the weekend activities began with the Thursday evening Karaoke hosted by President Jan Hernstat. As usual there was no shortage of enthusiastic participants. The highlight of the evening was, however, the debut karaoke performance of Past President Harry Rhinehart, who was accompanied in a spirited rendition of "Swanee", by Nigel Dreiner.

Friday 17th

After the previous evening's informal get-together, the weekend began in earnest on Friday morning with registration opening at 8.30am and the room available for the Society's audio, video and merchandise sales, in the capable hands of Debbie Eifler, Jeff Busch and David Huss. The room soon filled in anticipation of the day's events and attendees were officially welcomed by President Hernstat.

Hallelujah I'm A Bum

First presentation of the Festival was a showing of the Jolson feature film, "Hallelujah I'm A Bum". The film was introduced by Ed Greenbaum who spoke about "Hallelujah" being the first of three films for which Jolson was contracted to United Artists. The film was not typical Jolson and was a totally different direction from his previous Warner Bros. productions. Composers Rodgers and Hart had experimented with rhythmic dialogue in a couple of earlier films but expanded the concept for "Hallelujah I'm A Bum".

It was, said Ed, the release of the lavish backstage musical "42nd Street" a few months later, that killed off rhythmic dialogue. Despite an impressive array of talent which, in addition to the composing team of Rodgers and Hart, included director Lewis Milestone,



Marc and Marcia Leavey hosts of the 2019 Jolson Festival in Philadelphia

musical director Alfred Newman and a story by noted author Ben Hecht, the film bombed.

Following the showing of the film, a lively Q & A session followed, hosted by Ed Greenbaum, whose extensive knowledge provided more detail regarding the complexities of this troubled film. The film had had a variety of titles including "The New Yorker" and "Happy Go Lucky" and was later re-released as "Heart Of New York". As a result of two cast changes and a change of director, it was effectively filmed twice. United Artists, incurred huge losses and Jolson did not fulfil his contract to make the remaining two films.

"Ed explained that the film experienced an unlikely resurgence of interest in the 70's when it was

regularly shown at college campus cinemas."

the subject matter of the film and it's political content did not endear it to audiences during the depression era.

"Hallelujah I'm A Bum" also experienced problems over in the UK with the British Board of Film Censors objecting to several of the words used in the film, the main objection being with the word "Bum" which had a different meaning in the UK - it referred to a certain part of the anatomy. The title was changed once again to "Hallelujah I'm A Tramp" for UK distribution. Ed played the alternate recording of the title song in which the word Bum was replaced with 'Tramp'. An alternative take of the film's main song, "You Are Too Beautiful" was played, together with "Sleeping Beauty"; a six-minute recording which was cut from the film. The consensus amongst the Festival audience was

that the decision to cut this scene was correct, Ed explained that the film experienced an unlikely resurgence of interest in the 70's when it was regularly shown at college campus cinemas. Despite its checkered history, it is clear the film remains popular amongst Jolson fans.

Jolson Songs He Never Recorded

The afternoon session kicked off with a presentation from our host, Marc Leavey, who displayed on screen, a wide variety of sheet music covers which stated "Introduced by..." or "Sung by..." Al Jolson. Al didn't however, record any of these songs. The display of songs was a chronological tour through Al's Broadway years and included numbers such as "Row, Row, Row", "Hitchy Koo", "Goodbye Boys", "Everybody Rag With Me" and "The Irish Tango". Whilst there are no Jolson recordings of these songs, Marc used the sheet music with audio recordings from some of the most prolific recordings artists of the early 20th Century such as Collins and Harlan, Billy Murray, Henry Burr and Frank Crumit. Marc also played a couple of later recordings of early Jolson Songs – Bing Crosby's 50's recording of "Along The Way To Waikiki" and "Grieving For You" recorded by Rosemary Clooney in the late 40's.

The Challenge Of Creating A New Jolson Story in 2019

Jon Sonneborn advised us that he had been working on writing a novel for around 15 years. The novel was not "gelling" and now in his retirement, Jon had decided to transfer his attention to writing a musical play about Al Jolson, though he is under no illusion as to the difficulty presented by the issue of blackface in the 21st Century. Jon explained the surreal concept of his play, which would have three characters portraying Al at different stages of his life. The musical would not contain any of the standard songs used in the two 1940's biopics. Instead, Jon had written original lyrics to 34 songs, which he had now pared down to 22. Jon is applying his new lyrics to the music from a range of Jolson songs from the 20's.

In addition to giving an outline of the play, Jon read extracts from his working script and also played recordings of original songs he'd written. Jon's passion and enthusiasm for the project certainly came across to the audience.

Oldies but Goodies

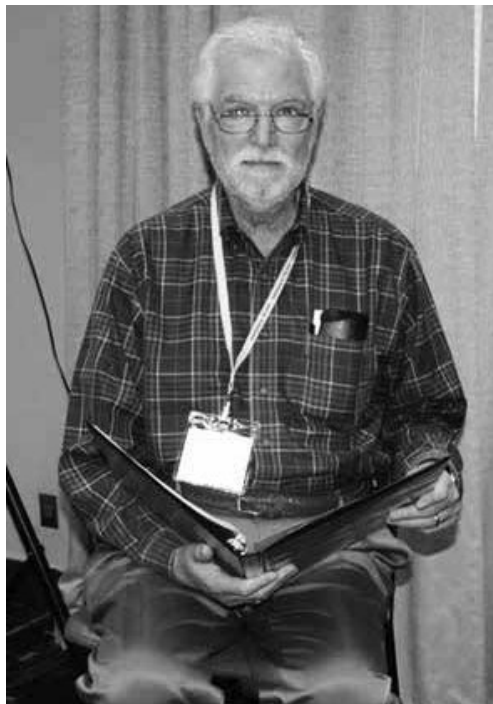
When it comes to out-takes, alternate takes and Jolson rarities, Ed Greenbaum is the acknowledged expert. Ed's presentation began with an interesting track of Eddie Cantor duetting to Al's records. Appropriate to our location, Ed played an interview Al gave on a visit to Philadelphia to promote Jolson Sings Again.

In the late 1940's, Bing Crosby began to pre-record his radio shows. We listened to a rehearsal recording of Bing and Al having some fun with "Lullaby Of Broadway" from Bing's Chesterfield series. We heard an interesting recording made on the anniversary of Jolie's death on October 23rd 1975, in which broadcaster Barry Gray recalled that famous evening in 1946, when Al appeared

on his late night radio show. Amongst the out-takes and alternate takes, a particular rarity was a recording of Al singing "You'll Always Be Beautiful", written by Saul Chaplin. The song intended as a romantic follow up to "The Anniversary Song" was, however, not used in the film. Ed included some novelty items including a recording of "Toot Toot Tootsie" by Mel Blanc, of Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies fame, and also Jolson soundalike Norman Brooks' singing a commercial for a Chevrolet dealership.

Banquet followed by the Evening's Entertainment

Following an excellent buffet meal, our MC, Jan Hernstat, took the opportunity to thank our hosts, Marc and Marcia



Ed Greenbaum with the first Jolson presentation of 2019



Jon Sonneborn with his novel presentation

Leavey, for their efforts in arranging this year's Festival. Jan went on to welcome Society members and their guests from all over the United States and beyond. As a bit of fun, pianist Dave Gross played appropriate music for each State for those attending the Festival. The evening's entertainment began with Steve Rothschild, lip-synching to Jolson's 30's recordings of "Cantor On The Sabbath" and "Night Boat To Albany". Steve concluded with an energetic mime to Eddie Cantor's "Josephine Please No Lean On The Bell". Jan then introduced popular Nigel Dreiner, whose songs included "When The Little Red Roses..", "That Haunting Melody" and "How Ya Gonna Keep Them Down On The Farm". Nigel was joined by Jan for a duet of "Carolina In The Morning" before concluding his performance with "Avalon".

"Steven wowed the audience with his solo versions of the Bobby Darin classics "Up A Lazy River" and "Birth Of The Blues".

Jan introduced our star performer, Tony Babino, accompanied by the talented Dave Gross. Acknowledging the 70th Anniversary of Jolson Sings Again, Tony opened with a selection from the film, including "Pretty Baby", "I Only Have Eyes For You" and "Back In Your Own Backyard". Tony continued with more Jolson favourites and then called upon Dave Gross to join him in the perennial Festival favourite, "A Real Piano Player".

In recognition of the recent passing of Doris Day, Tony was joined by Jan in "My Melancholy Baby" and "My Blue Heaven"; a medley that Jolie and Doris sang together on the Kraft Music Hall. Nigel Dreiner then joined Tony and Dave for a rendition of "Red, Red Robin". Tony introduced his son Steven, who joined him in a duet of "Me And My Shadow". Steven wowed the audience with his solo versions of the Bobby Darin classics "Up A Lazy River" and "Birth Of The Blues". Tony re-joined Steven for another Darin favourite, "Beyond The Sea". In tribute to other great entertainers, Tony gave us Sinatra's "High Hopes", Jimmy Durante's "Make Someone Happy" and Dean Martin's "Everybody Loves Somebody". Finishing off a fabulous evening's entertainment, Tony sang the great Jolson song, "Rockabye Your Baby With A Dixie Melody" and, for his encore, "My Mammy". A great way to bring the entertainment to a conclusion.

Saturday 18th

See Jolson On The Radio

Saturday's events began with a presentation from our Host Marc Leavey. In addition to administering the Society's official website, Marc has been regularly posting video podcasts on the Society's Facebook page. In this presentation, Marc gave us a taste of the

podcasts, with audio selections from the first season of Kraft Music Hall broadcasts, including guest appearances from Bing Crosby, Jimmy Durante and Groucho Marx. The selections were accompanied by a montage of photographs of Al and his guests taken at the NBC radio studios.

Recent Restorations **Cantor On The Sabbath**

We have become familiar with the video restorations of Paul Bowers as a result of his work on the Jolson features, "Swanee River" and more recently "Go Into Your Dance". In his presentation, Paul explained the challenges of his latest project, to clean up the "Cantor On The Sabbath" scene, which was cut from The Jolson Story.



THE CANTOR ON THE SABBATH
DELETED SCENE FROM THE JOLSON STORY

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Paul explained how the scene, which had been missing for many years, was finally acquired by the Society in 2006. Jan explained that Doug Galloway had tracked the film down and after much negotiation Jan was able to obtain the funds to purchase the elusive film. After several viewings of the film clip, it became apparent to Paul that it had some deterioration. He illustrated individual frames of film which clearly showed lines, cuts and dirt which needed cleaning and restoring. Software developments now allowed the restoration and improvement to be undertaken. The newly restored film clip was shown and Paul had cleverly added a scene from The Jolson Story to illustrate where in the film the cut sequence would most likely have been included. The restoration met with universal approval from the members present.

The Immortal Jolson

The Hollywood And The Stars TV documentary, "The Immortal Jolson" has long been a favourite with Jolson enthusiasts. Nigel Dreiner thought that the popular documentary was in need of a refurbishment to update the film for a modern audience, including additional scenes and colour sequences. Acknowledging the help



Marc Leavey welcomes everyone to the festival cabaret on Friday evening

and support of Paul Bowers in this project, Nigel advised that, as the original documentary had overlooked a number of Jolson films, his remastered version opened to an overture of clips from all of the Jolson movies, plus one or two surprises! Following the showing of Nigel's enhanced film, the audience gave an overwhelming vote of approval. Both of the above mentioned restorations are available to purchase through the Jolson Society Video Directors.

New Insights in the Life and Legends Of Al Jolson

With anecdotes, facts and theories, Jon Sonneborn's presentations never fail to enhance our Jolson knowledge. Jon, described Jolson as a force of nature, and by way of illustration he showed Al singing "Let Me Sing And I'm Happy" from his fourth film "Mammy". Jon observed that there were three Eastern European immigrants whose craft was embodied in this performance; film director Michael Curtiz, composer Irving Berlin and the film's star Al Jolson. Curtiz, who had seen Jolson in Big Boy on Broadway shortly after arriving in the United States had stated, contrary to other directors, that he did not find Jolson difficult to direct.

In 1926, Warner Bros. released their second sound feature "The Better 'Ole" starring Sydney Chaplin. Jon, a film historian, described how, when shown in theatres, the film was preceded by a number of Vitaphone shorts. These included a song and monologue from George Jessel, and the Al Jolson short, "A Plantation Act". The Jolson short stole the show and the audience reaction was undoubtedly a major factor in Warner's decision to cast Jolson in the starring role in "The Jazz Singer" a year later.

"Allan also described how he appeared again as Jolson in a 2009 UK Tour of "Jolson & Co".

Al's stock character in his hit Winter Garden shows, was Gus, who was always the smartest person on stage. The blackfaced Gus could talk in a manner that no black actor of the time would be permitted to do. This was demonstrated in excerpts from the film "Big Boy", a recreation of Jolson's Broadway show. Jolson considered himself a comedian first, and through his comedy was able to make social commentary on issues of the day.



Al Jolson: The Man And His Music

The last presentation of the Festival got underway with David McCarthy's tribute to Jolie. His presentation began with an alternative version of "Let Me Sing And I'm Happy" played over various film clips of Al. David then gave us "Look For The Silver Lining", the faster version of two that Al sang on the Kraft Music Hall series, followed by two takes of "You Made Me Love You", recorded for The Jolson Story. David spoke about the award winning West End Show, "Jolson The Musical" and played an interview by entertainer Allan Stewart.

Allan explained how he'd originally been hired as understudy to Brian Conley, but as the show's run progressed, the physical and vocal pressures of the lead role, meant he was called upon to take on more of the performances and, by the time the show moved to Toronto, Canada he and Brian were sharing the role. Allan also described how he appeared again as Jolson in a 2009 UK Tour of "Jolson & Co".

The presentation continued with a video tour of Seredzius, Al's birthplace. The video, taken by David on his recent visit to the town, played to the accompaniment of Al's recording of "Back In Your Own Backyard". David always likes to acknowledge Al's fourth wife, Erle, in his presentations and included a montage of photographs of the couple, accompanied by Jolie's recordings of "It All Depends On You", "I Can't Give You Anything But Love" and "I Only Have Eyes For You".

Following a TV interview given by George Jessel where he talked (very inaccurately) about Jolson and The Jazz Singer, David played a recording of his glowing eulogy as written for Al's funeral, David then showed "Cantor on The Sabbath", this time with on-screen subtitles in English for those of us not of the Jewish faith. The next montage of films and photos, showed Al on his tour of Loew's theatres, promoting "Jolson Sings Again", accompanied by a selection of alternate takes from the film's soundtrack recordings. Following two contrasting recordings of "Lazy", the presentation moved to Al's fateful tour of Korea played to a soundtrack of alternative takes from the Jolson biopics. The presentation concluded as it began, with Al singing another version of "Let Me Sing & I'm Happy", this one taken from one of the Al's Kraft Music Hall programmes.



Top: Thursday Karaoke Night saw three Old Groaners (I mean crooners) Jon Sonneborn - Jan Hernstat - Paul Bowers
Center: Friday & Saturday Night Line-up left to right: Nigel Dreiner, Tony Babino, Steven and Anthony Babino
Bottom: Tony with his son Steven going through some Bobby Darin classics

Society Auction

The daytime events came to a conclusion with the Society auction. In addition to providing the Society with funds, and it's members an opportunity to acquire Jolson memorabilia, the auction provides something of a comic interlude. Our auctioneer, and resident comedian, was Jan Hernstat with his assistant (and comic foil), Rosalie Olson.

Banquet followed by the Evening's Entertainment

For the Saturday night banquet and entertainment we moved to the atrium where President Jan Hernstat kicked off the evening with a version of "Pretty Baby" in honour of his wife, Sherry's birthday and also the arrival of his new granddaughter.

Steve Rothschild again demonstrated his lip-synching skills to songs from the film "Go Into Your Dance" which included a nicely staged routine of "About A Quarter To Nine", with dance partner, Rosalie Olson. Nigel Dreiner then took to the stage where his set included "Where Did Robinson Crusoe Go With Friday On Saturday Night", "It All Depends On You" and "When The Grown Up Ladies Act Like Babies" amongst others.

Top Of The Bill, Tony Babino opened with "Pennies From Heaven", followed by a number of Jolson classics including "April Showers" "You Made Me Love You" and "Sonny Boy". Tony was joined on stage by his sons, Anthony and Steven and the trio gave us what has become a Festival favourite, "Is It True What They Say About Dixie", followed by "After You've Gone", "Down Among The Sheltering Palms" and "Red Red Robin". Anthony and Steven sang a selection of standards from The Jolson Story and Jolson Sings Again.

Returning to the stage, Tony joined the boys for "Me And My Shadow" followed by a wonderful rendition of The Beatles classic "This Boy", with Anthony taking lead vocal. Nigel Dreiner was invited to join the trio for a stunning salute to The Beatles including "One After 909" and "Honey Pie". The guys then gave us a selection of songs made famous by artists who have cited Jolson as a major influence, including Bob Dylan's "Blowin In The Wind"; Jackie Wilson's "Your Love Is Lifting Me Higher"; Bobby Darin's "Up A Lazy River" and Tom Jones' "She's A Lady" and "Delilah".

Bringing an excellent evening's entertainment to a close, the audience rose to it's feet to sing along with the nostalgic "I'll Be Seeing You".

———— Sunday 20th ————

Morning Membership Meeting

President Jan Hernstat, opened the meeting by again thanking our hosts Marc and Marcia Leavey with special thanks to Jon Sonneborn for finding the ideal venue. Jan gave a special, personal thank you to Ed



Tony Babino with his Presidential Award

Greenbaum for his constant help and support, and to Anthony DiFlorio for setting up a radio promotion for this year's Festival. Acknowledgement was given to the sterling work of Debbie, Jeff and David who had manned the merchandise tables over the weekend; the daytime presenters for their unique insights into Jolson; and of course, the evening entertainers who gave us two superb shows. With no location set for the 2020 Festival, Jan confirmed he was open to suggestions and would be looking for weekend; the daytime presenters for their unique insights into Jolson; and of course, the evening entertainers who gave us two superb shows. With no location set for the 2020 Festival, Jan confirmed he was open to suggestions and would be looking for volunteers to help host the event.

Presidential Awards were given to Tony Babino, Jeff Busch, Skip Mack, John Wehrman, Paul Bowers, Nigel Dreiner, Jon Sonneborn, Stan and Sandy Gerloff and Marc Leavey. 50 Year Loyalty Awards were given to Martin Green and Paul Bowers, with 25 Year Awards going to Stephen Hanks, Bill Campbell, Helen Campbell, John King and Ray Knight. The weekend drew to a close with what has become a Festival tradition as David McCarthy displayed a montage of photographs of attendees taken over the weekend, to the accompaniment of Jolie's "I'll Be Seeing You" and "Auld Lang Syne".



Josh and Francie Kranzberg



Harry and Barbara Rhinehart



Tom Nester and Nancy



Steve and Karen Cowan



David Huss and Steve Rothschild