



I will admit it, I am a musical comedy geek. It can be on Broadway or a film adaptation. I just love musicals. Jolson fits right in with that mode. But this year, as COVID-19 continued to rear its ugly head, the line that came to mind was not from Al Jolson, but from Yul Brynner, in *The King and I* when he extended his hand to Deborah Kerr and said, "Come, we do it again." Just as with last year, the 2021 Jolson Festival would be a virtual one, not one held in our Baltimore venue.

Put together quickly, last year's Virtual Festival was an unqualified success. Comments from around the world demonstrated the reach of an Internet based event. The increased traffic to the website was astounding. It was evident that this reaction to adversity had an unexpected consequence of allowing more people to experience the magic of Al Jolson. With more time to promote and prepare the 2021 Virtual Festival, and being able to build it on the skeleton of the previous year's model, work began on gathering talent for our celebration.

THE 2021 VIRTUAL Jolson Festival

By Marc I. Leavey, M.D.

All of the presenters from last year stepped forward with more fascinating material exploring the various aspects of Al Jolson. Paul Bowers gave a peek at two works in progress. The first, a compilation of the orchestral recordings from the Jolson film biographies, is a treasure for those who enjoy trying to sing those songs. These are not backing tracks, but the full orchestra, playing the songs without Jolson's voice. His second project is a continuation of work to fully restore *Go Into Your Dance*, making the film look as crisp and alive as a contemporary film. The visual clips from these were stunning. Ed Greenbaum regaled us with a series of alternate takes and outtakes from his collection. The clips provide a lens to reveal a bit more about the man behind the performer. David McCarthy presented a beautiful series of songs and images, including film clips as well as photos, a remarkable presentation. Jon Sonneborn engaged in an interview with me, detailing his progress on his work in progress, *You Ain't Heard Nothin' Yet*, a new musical on the life of Al Jolson. My segment for the Virtual Festival was a look at radio programs in which Al Jolson gave various versions of his life story, showing how these elements could be woven into the fabric of the film biographies.



The Presenters: Left to right - Paul Bowers, Ed Greenbaum, Jon Sonneborn, David McCarthy and Marc Leavey

Music is at the heart of any Jolson Festival, and, again, our core performers came through with the entertainment. Tony Babino provided one of his personal favorite clips of a socko performance. Nigel Dreiner produced a video intercutting him with clips from Jolson films and intertitles, done quite effectively. Richard Halpern performed a number of songs, as he has been doing throughout the pandemic on the Internet. And for the second year we were treated to the sounds of Lithuania's Ensemble Vilniaus Divertimentas, adding the flavor of Jolson's birthplace to his music.



The Entertainers: Left to right - Tony Babino, Nigel Dreiner, Richard Halpern



One element of our annual festivals was missing that first year, Karaoke Night. It had become a tradition, rooted in those present the night before the festival enjoying libation and song, to begin the festivities with those of us who typically don't perform, doing our best to put over a Jolson song. With the chance to add a voice to the Virtual Festival, a dozen brave souls from around the world added their talent to the event. With varying degrees of success, all had a great time in adding their voices to the celebration.

We are indebted as well to the many who placed ads of support for the Virtual Festival. The creativity and variety of those ads illustrate the unique character of every Jolson fan, and they were a delight to see displayed. With this support, the Virtual Festival was able to continue to further the goals of the International Al Jolson Society, Inc.



Karaoke Night: Jan Hernstat, Jeffrey Shev, Vlad Petnicki and Lithuania's Ensemble Vilniaus Divertimentas amongst others took part in this years Karaoke evening.

Combined, this year's Virtual Festival exceeded four hours in duration. That's about 1.5 times longer than the 2020 Virtual Festival. Again, the traffic to the website upon release was massive. So massive, in fact, that it slowed download speeds to a crawl, causing many to experience stuttering of videos, or just being unable to get on at all. With time, that problem cleared, and, again, multitudes of Jolson fans, or potential fans, were able to enjoy the Festival worldwide.

To meet the need to preserve this body of work, and allow more to enjoy it into the future, it is again compiled into a DVD presentation, available from the Video Department of the IAJS. Along with the full 2021 Virtual Festival, a Bonus DVD includes more material from previous Festivals, for a total of some seven hours of entertainment. Including Clive Baldwin, Tony Babino, and others from Festival through the past 35 years, the Bonus Disc alone is a treasure you will want in your collection.

As this is being written, there is yet another wave of coronavirus building throughout the world. Hopefully, with good medical care and community practice, this will not devolve into a return of past restrictions. Without making any promises, we hope to be able to gather together in Baltimore in May, 2022, for an actual Jolson Festival. We've learned from these past two years, and may try to incorporate some new features when we see each other at the hotel. My sincere thanks to all who participated, assisted in, and viewed the 2021 Virtual Festival, and I look forward to thanking you in person next year.



VIRTUAL JOLSON FESTIVAL

DVD 2021

ENTIRE ONLINE PRESENTATION PLUS
BONUS DVD WITH 7 HOURS OF JOLSON

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