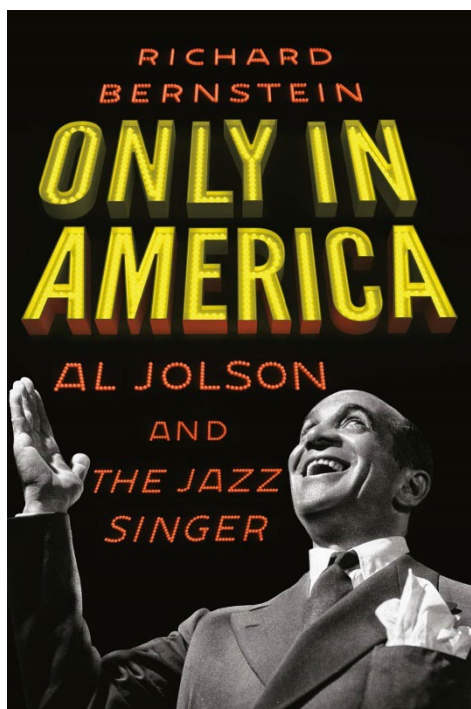


## ‘Only in America’ Review: Al Jolson’s Rebellion Al Jolson turned personal family drama into the grist for his star turn in ‘The Jazz Singer.’

By Gary Giddins

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A few music lovers were musing about jazz a couple of decades ago when Al Jolson’s name came up. A notable musician and scribe remarked: “I wear headphones when I play his records because people might pass by our door and get the wrong idea about me.” Upon receiving a copy of Richard Bernstein’s “Only in America: Al Jolson and *The Jazz Singer*,” I thought: He wouldn’t say that today because few people under 60 know the voice or care. Then, book in hand, I kept a doctor’s appointment and, looking about the waiting room, furtively folded back the cover so no one would get the wrong idea about me.

Wherefore my shame. Every Jolson fan, and I am one, knows that he is hardly ever just a voice. He is literally the poster boy for blackface minstrelsy as it was in its final hurrah, forever tarnished by complexion-appropriation: the odious fake blackness wedded to the “I’s-gwine-t’-hebben” brogue. Also, a muddle invariably arises from his nominal connection to jazz. As I see it, Jolson wasn’t jazz as we understand it, yet he remains a significant harbinger whose performance style, wholly bound to rhythm, made perceptive use of elements in late-19<sup>th</sup>-century black music that black innovators of

spirituals and ragtime often dismissed as vulgar. These very same elements grounded the development of jazz and blues.

Still, Jolson has faded into our relentless cultural amnesia. So I welcome Mr. Bernstein’s attempt at reclamation even as I quarrel with some of his deductions. As the book’s title makes clear, he is primarily focused on the historic 1927 film that introduced talkies, and eternally conflates Jolson with jazz.

Mr. Bernstein finds in “The Jazz Singer” a leitmotif of blackface not as racial mask or theatrical custom but as an emblem of Jewish-American rebellion against traditions of the Old World, specifically the hero’s paternal legacy of cantors, rabbis and Talmudic scholars. This is an old, old story, explored by Abraham Cahan in his daringly picaresque novel “The Rise of David Levinsky” (1917), published a decade before “The Jazz Singer.” Mr. Bernstein’s approach is largely beneficent. He revels in the American liberality that enabled blacks and Jews, “each endowed with the outsider sensibility,” to dominate a great deal of American entertainment. Racists and antisemites who flourished in those years are relegated to memory’s darkest swamps by Jolson’s dramaturgical shining and the adoration it stirred. Jolson, Mr. Bernstein concludes, “heralded the greatest era of Jewish history since the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D.”

Hallelujah!

He begins more quietly, with a succinct look at the Yoelson family's life in a Lithuanian shtetl and its arduous journey to the New World, first the father and four years later his wife (who died soon after) and children. By that time, Papa Yoelson became the cantor at a synagogue in Washington, D.C., which allowed his family to avert the worst of immigrant tenements. He was a respected figure in the capital's Jewish community but an autocrat to his sons, especially the youngest, Asa, who renamed himself Al Jolson and began singing on the streets and riding the rails.

Mr. Bernstein, a former foreign correspondent and book critic for the [New York Times](#), glosses rather freely over Jolson's apprenticeship and career but takes his time with a detailed narrative on the making of "The Jazz Singer." He lays out his premise by contrasting two scenes from the film. In the first, Jolson's character attends a concert by the renowned cantor Josef Rosenblatt (playing himself), whose art, dress and copious beard are patently "foreign"; in the second, he gazes at himself in a dressing-room mirror as he applies the black paste of burnt cork, each facial smear advancing the transformation from Jakie Rabinowitz to Jack Robin, a singer of only-in-America jazz.

"The Jazz Singer" premiered when few theaters could exhibit the Vitaphone system of sound-on-film. Jolson was the ideal performer to force a high-tech upgrade. He was a national phenomenon after years of Broadway hits, which he had taken on yeomanly tours, building his renown and influencing vocal and entertainment styles everywhere. "No other performer," Alexander Woollcott wrote, "holds such an absolute dictatorship over his audience." At a time when eminent black players donned cork in minstrel shows and vaudeville, hardly anyone, including black reviewers, objected to Jolson's racial charade. As "The Jazz Singer" is largely a silent film, audiences were stunned by the improvisational brio that animated his relatively few minutes of singing and speaking.

The film's cinematic stature is more foundational than creative. It is shamelessly maudlin, and Jolson's rendering of "Toot, Toot, Tootsie," "Blue Skies" and the blacked-up "My Mammy" are, respectively, prescient (more rock than jazz), eccentric and mind-numbing. Aldous Huxley's 1929 review of the London opening includes this: "I felt ashamed of myself for listening to such things, for even being a member of the species to which such things are addressed." Yet "The Jazz Singer" is a permanent part of movie history, and not just for its Vitaphone innovation.

The film touches on several American obsessions: immigration, identity, race, family, mother-worship, God, blending in, the evolution of show business, and the rights and rites of secularity. The script was adapted from Samson Raphaelson's hit play, with the addition of a happy ending: Jakie/Jack pleases all, rendering unto God "Kol Nidre" and unto Caesar "My Mammy." The plot had originated in Raphaelson's short story "Day of Atonement," which was inspired by Jolson's much-reported defiance of Cantor Yoelson, who did not believe in happy endings. Alan Crosland, a shallow filmmaker, directed it cannily enough not to diminish the star's magnetism, which—love it or run for the hills—lingers on as wickedly transgressive. Warner Bros.'s choice of material acknowledged the studio's own American beginnings in the mass emigration of East European Jews, a subject generally deemed un-mogul by Hollywood moguls.

Floating on the nirvana of his triumph, Jolson left Broadway for Hollywood, and, after a handful of increasingly fascinating but decreasingly popular movies, lost his audience. Ironically, the year Jolson was tagged with the word "jazz" was the year jazz left him in the dust. In the previous decade, "jazz" had been a catchall for whatever induced a flapper and swain to Turkey Trot; F. Scott Fitzgerald hijacked it to describe the era. In 1924, George Gershwin's resplendent "Rhapsody in Blue" seemed to define jazz as a concert hall crossbreed. Few people knew then of Duke Ellington or Louis Armstrong. After 1927—when Ellington conquered the Cotton Club (with Jolson among those cheering) and Armstrong (who thought Jolson "a master" and boasted of having all his records) debuted the Hot Seven and began working with Earl Hines—the playing field was redefined. As the dust cleared, the mainstream congregation left Jolson

for Bing Crosby, who synthesized a calm, cool, jazzier persona by braiding the styles of his three idols: Jolson, Armstrong and Irish tenor John McCormack.

Mr. Bernstein doesn't bother about any of this, reasonably enough, but the limitations of his frame leads to other omissions and misstatements. Some are copy-editor issues, like tagging Jolson as 35 when he was 39 or twice referring to "Blue Skies" as "Blue Moon" or to Stephen Foster songs "like 'Swanee River' and 'The Old Folks at Home,'" which are one and the same.

More egregious is his reluctance to acknowledge Jolson's apprenticeship in blackface minstrelsy: "He did it because everybody did it," Mr. Bernstein writes, denying without corroboration the amply documented experience of blackface as a mask unfettering many a performer's id. He refers to Lew Dockstader's *Minstrels*, a ritual minstrel show, as "the most famous of the traveling vaudeville troupes," as though the formats were interchangeable. Jolson's innovation was his subversion of minstrelsy's orthodoxy, undermining its uniformity with an uncontrollable individuality that, when transferred to Broadway, helped free musicals from the constraints of operetta.

Mr. Bernstein writes interestingly on remakes of "The Jazz Singer," each reprehensible in its own way, but omits what is often referred to as the black version, "St. Louis Blues" (1958), in which Rev. Handy forces his son, W.C., played by Nat King Cole, to lead a secret life, choosing between his family and the Devil's music—a reminder that blacks and Jews had more in common than persecution and alienation. He also does not discuss Jolson's later films, among them "Mammy" (1930), the first of two collaborations by Irving Berlin and Michael Curtiz, a valentine to minstrelsy that takes the protective mask as a theme; and pictures where Jolson worked opposite black actors. "Hallelujah, I'm a Bum" (1933), made with a vaudevillian named Edgar Connor, is a socialist fantasy with a verse libretto timed to a click track beat and a Rodgers and Hart score. "The Singing Kid" (1936) features Cab Calloway, who was top-billed at black theaters.

As biography, "Only in America" elides, sanitizes and is prone to hyperbole. Mr. Bernstein's claim that "from the early 1910s to the late 1940s, there was nobody more beloved, more in demand, more celebrated, bigger than Al Jolson" is preposterous and misreads his two-part career. From 1933 to 1945, Jolson didn't make a single recording, returned to Broadway only once and suffered plummeting radio ratings. The public had heard enough, and blackface was not a factor. On the contrary, during World War II blackface was revived as a source of cultural continuity, appearing in dozens of Hollywood films and peaking after the war, when Jolson's own revival was launched by the fictional biopics "The Jolson Story" (1946) and "Jolson Sings Again" (1949). Mr. Bernstein justly belittles those films, but they introduced a new Jolson, a bass-baritone singing signature songs in high fidelity. Teens swooned. He sold millions of records from 1947 until his death in 1950 and during the next two decades.

Jolson wasn't the first distinctive American singer to record; his predecessors included the incomparable Bert Williams, Pete Hampton, Nora Bayes and Sophie Tucker, among others, but no one exuded a more tenacious personality. His invariably high-spirited recordings, made between 1910 and 1930, show him slipping in and out of his Southern-parody diction and adapting other voices as well. The recordings retain his originality, humor and impudence and are swaddled in jazzlike touches and thumping rhythms.

Jolson's cantorial style, admired by Mr. Bernstein, is unmistakable in "On the Road to Calais" (1918) and in the verse to "You Made Me Love You" (1913), while "I'm Going South," (1923), a mammy song, sways over a measured four-beat. "Toot, Toot, Tootsie" (1922) and "I'm Saving Up My Means to Get to New Orleans" (1916) have trombone glissandi, a double-time obbligato ad-lib and bent-notes. He sings the prison song "Waiting for the Evening Mail" (1923) with black inflections, but elsewhere his diction is varied and hilarious, notably in his faux-aria "The Spaniard That Blighted My Life" (1913, though his 1947 remake, with Crosby, is superior); in his unrivaled version of Berlin's "I've Got My Captain Working for Me Now" (1919); and in Gershwin and Irving Caesar's "Swanee." (1920). The scat-like breaks and

changing rhythms on “When the Grown Up Ladies Act Like Babies” (1914) are futuristic, and I confess that I can’t listen to “Snap Your Fingers” (1912) without thinking of Ellington’s 1940s “finger-snapping bit” on “Dancers in Love.”

Now that Mr. Bernstein has reopened the door, this is the Jolson we ought to probe next, the recording artist.

*Mr. Giddins, the author of “Bing Crosby: Swinging on a Star—the War Years,” was recently named a Jazz Master by the National Endowment of the Arts.*