



**ENTERTAINING
AMERICA**

**JEWS, MOVIES, AND
BROADCASTING**

J. HOBERMAN AND JEFFREY SHANDLER

ING AMERICA

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ON THE JAZZ SINGER

J. HOBERMAN

The archetypal American, so it's been said, rebels against the father's rule; the archetypal Jew accepts the patriarchal order. Jackie Rabinowitz, child of the Lower East Side and son of an immigrant cantor, breaks with a thousand years of tradition to reinvent himself as Jack Robin, an American performer, blacked up and singing about his "mammy from Alabama" on the vaudeville stage. More than a popular play or the first talking picture, *The Jazz Singer* is the stuff of American Jewish myth—a story that conflates charged issues of patriarchal order, family obligation, secular success, assimilation, and racial identity in one melodramatic package.

For traditional Jews, America blurred accepted distinctions between religion, worldly success, and popular culture. The late-nineteenth-century crowding together of Jews from hundreds of *shtetlekh* on the Lower East Side, and the Darwinian struggle thus engendered among their transplanted *shulin* (synagogues) stimulated liturgical music and promoted a star syndrome already nascent in Europe. During the 1920s, popular Jewish-American entertainers such as Al Jolson and Sophie Tucker were frequently referred to as secular cantors, while the Harlem-based cantor Yossele Rosenblatt not only recorded liturgical music but also performed it on the vaudeville stage, along with secular songs such as "My Yiddish Mama." The cantor was a major site for the struggle between the sacred and the secular—one dramatized in the film version of *The Jazz Singer* (1927), which starred Jolson, himself a cantor's son, taking inspiration from his own life.¹

Jolson was perhaps the greatest of the immigrant Jewish performers who burst upon the American scene in the early decades of the twentieth century. He infused some of the oldest conventions of New World show business—including the blackface makeup that was the central characterization of America's first indigenous theatrical form, and the "mother song" that had given sentimental comfort to three generations of pioneers—with the new ragtime syncopation. Although Jolson never appeared in the Yiddish theater nor sang more than a few Yiddish songs, he had, as the foremost Jewish-American celebrity, a special significance for Jewish audiences and performers. A ferociously vital performer, Jolson inspired out-and-out impersonation. During his early success, his blacked-up, mammy-singing disciples included not only Eddie Cantor and George Jessel, but also future studio head Harry Cohn, the young Walter Winchell, and Jolson's own older brother, Harry. In his streetwise apprehension of American popular culture, in his fantastic vitality and gangsterish monomania for success, Jolson was cut from the same cloth as the so-called movie moguls. Brash and egocentric, a compulsive gambler and womanizer, yet insecure and apt to wrap himself in the American flag, Jolson was a flamboyant distillation of their composite persona.²

In his preface to the film souvenir program, Samson Raphaelson—author of the play from which the movie was taken—recalled that when, as a college student, he first saw Jolson perform, he was overwhelmed and astonished by the religious fervor of Jolson's ragtime. This epiphany was the genesis of his play:

I hear jazz, and I am given a vision of cathedrals and temples collapsing, and silhouetted against the setting sun, a solitary figure, a lost soul, dancing grotesquely on the ruins . . . Thus do I see the jazz singer.

Jazz is prayer. It is too passionate to be anything else. It is prayer distorted, sick, unconscious of its destination. The singer of jazz is what Matthew Arnold said of the Jew, "lost between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be

Poster for *The Jazz Singer* (1927).

born." In this, my first play, I have tried to crystallize the ironic truth that one of the Americas of 1927—that one which packs to overflowing our cabarets, musical revues, and dance halls—is praying with a fervor as intense as that of the America which goes sedately to church and synagogue. The jazz American is different from the dancing dervish, from the Zulu medicine man, from the negro evangelist only in that he doesn't know he is praying.

By no means a universal success, the Broadway production of *The Jazz Singer* was dismissed by the *New York American* as "a garish and tawdry Hebrew play." The *New York Herald Tribune* reported that the "almost entirely" Jewish audience complained that many lines were "wholly unintelligible" and that even understanding the play required total "understanding of and sympathy with the Jew and his faith."⁴ The anonymous and conspicuously ambivalent English-language reviewer for New York's largest Yiddish daily, the *Forward*, deemed *The Jazz Singer* "full of false-ness. Reeking with hokum and glorifying the cruelty of parents to their son. . . . And yet it is a moving and thrilling play, a play that caused the vast audience the night I attended to rise and cheer and demand a curtain speech by the principle actor. *The Jazz Singer* is a play by a Jew about Jews and designed for 100 per cent Jewish consumption." Noting *The Jazz Singer's* basis in the life of Jolson, the reviewer concluded that the play spoke directly to Jews who were estranged from their traditions but uneasy in their assimilation to American life.⁵

In April 1926, Warner Bros.—a small studio whose major asset was the trained dog Rin-Tin-Tin—formed a partnership with Western Electric, creating the Vitaphone Corporation. Over the next few years, Sam Warner would produce scores of one- and two-reel "acts" (mainly solo vaudeville performances) with synchronous sound-on-disc accompaniment. Two months later, at the advice of its then top contract director Ernst Lubitsch, Warners paid \$50,000 for the rights to *The Jazz Singer*.

In August, the first Vitaphone program—eight "talking" shorts (ranging from a speech by industry watchdog Will Hays to the overture to *Tambourine* to a song by novelty guitarist Roy Smeck), plus the feature-length *Don Juan*—had its premiere at the Warners' Theatre in New York. Warners' Vitaphone experiment proved successful. A second program opened in October 1926, a third in February 1927. Now Warner Bros. was ready to produce a feature with music and incidental dialogue, protecting its investment with the presence of superstar Jolson.

Appropriately, the film that would sound the death knell for silent film opens on a mournful note. To the accompaniment of a pseudo-Semitic melody, a series of titles identifies the Jews as "a race older than civilization" whose culture is threatened by a new urban music that is "perhaps, the misunderstood utterance of prayer." It is Yom Kippur Eve on the Lower East Side and thirteen-year-old Jakie, son of Cantor and Sarah Rabinowitz, is to chant the Kol Nidre prayer in his father's synagogue. Cut to Jakie performing "My Gal Sal" in a local saloon. Jakie is spotted by Yudelson (Otto Lederer), the film's comic stand-in for the Jewish community, who rushes to report the boy to his father. The cantor (Warner Oland) arrives, drags Jakie by his ear home-ward past the pushcarts of Hester Street and, despite Mama's tearful supplications, administers the strap. Tearful Jakie runs away from home, even as his father's Kol Nidre wells up on the soundtrack.

A decade or more passes. In a studio reconstruction of Coffee Dan's, a San Francisco show business hangout of the era, Jolson makes his first appearance as the

mature Jackie, now known as Jack Robin. The entire scene is redolent of his liberation from tribal taboo. Jack wolfs down his breakfast of *trayf* (unkosher food), with ragtime ebullience, eyes his Gentile patroness with awe-filled lust, and puts across "Toot, Toot, Toorstie" with lascivious assurance. When called upon to perform, Jack first sings "Dirty Hands, Dirty Face," which is richly evocative of his conflicted patrimony. The song is a mawkish ballad of paternal love in which, alternately maudlin and mocking, the singer revels in the role of father to an incorrigible street urchin who, beneath a grimy exterior, is "an angel of joy." But Jack's inability to sever all connections to his past is made overt in the next musical sequence. While on tour, he is drawn to a hall where the famous Cantor Rosenblatt is giving a concert.

This ambivalence is further developed when Jack is called to Broadway and triumphantly returns to New York, heading immediately for the Lower East Side, where, as a title informs us, "For those whose faces are turned towards the past, the years roll by unheeded." He finds his mother at home alone, and she embraces him. He then springs to the parlor piano for a strenuous rendition of "Blue Skies." In her only authentic moment in the film, Eugenie Besserer seems utterly flummoxed as Jolson interrupts the song midway to steal a kiss, promise her a new pink dress, offer her a new apartment in the Bronx, and tempt her with a trip to Coney Island, all the while suggestively vamping on the keyboard.

The communion is broken when the cantor/father appears and, catching his wife and son together at the piano, cries "Stop!"—whereupon the film abruptly reverts to silence. In the next title, the cantor denounces the jazz-singing prodigal for his misuse of divine energy. At first, Jack attempts to pacify his father by suggesting that America transcends Jewishness: "If you were born here, you would feel as I do." When his father accuses him of apostasy, a startlingly blunt title appears in which Jack makes explicit Raphaelson's point: "My songs mean as much to my audience as yours do to your congregation!"

The Jazz Singer culminates on the afternoon of Jack's Broadway opening, which is, with cosmic inevitability and comic improbability, Yom Kippur Eve. In the middle of the final rehearsal, his mother comes backstage to inform Jack that only by singing Koi Nidre in the synagogue that night can he save his dying father (and, by extension, the Jewish community). Refusing his mother's request, Jack madly rushes onstage and hurries through the chorus line to intone a fevered incantation of mother worship. He is now, for the first time in the film, the full-blown, iconic essence of "Jolson-ness." Finishing the song to tumultuous acclaim, the dazed and tormented jazz singer returns to his dressing room where, gazing into the mirror, he sees not a blackfaced minstrel but a synagogue filled with praying Jews. Jack realizes he must return to the Lower East Side "before the sun is out of the sky." His producer Hatly warns him that if he walks out, he will never again play Broadway. Caught between conflicting commandments, Jack elects to chant Koi Nidre.

This prayer ends the play. The repentant son replaces his dying father as cantor, who had in turn replaced his father, who had in turn . . . a ritual, sentimentalized affirmation of the pain, burden, and eternal nature of Jewishness. For the film, however,



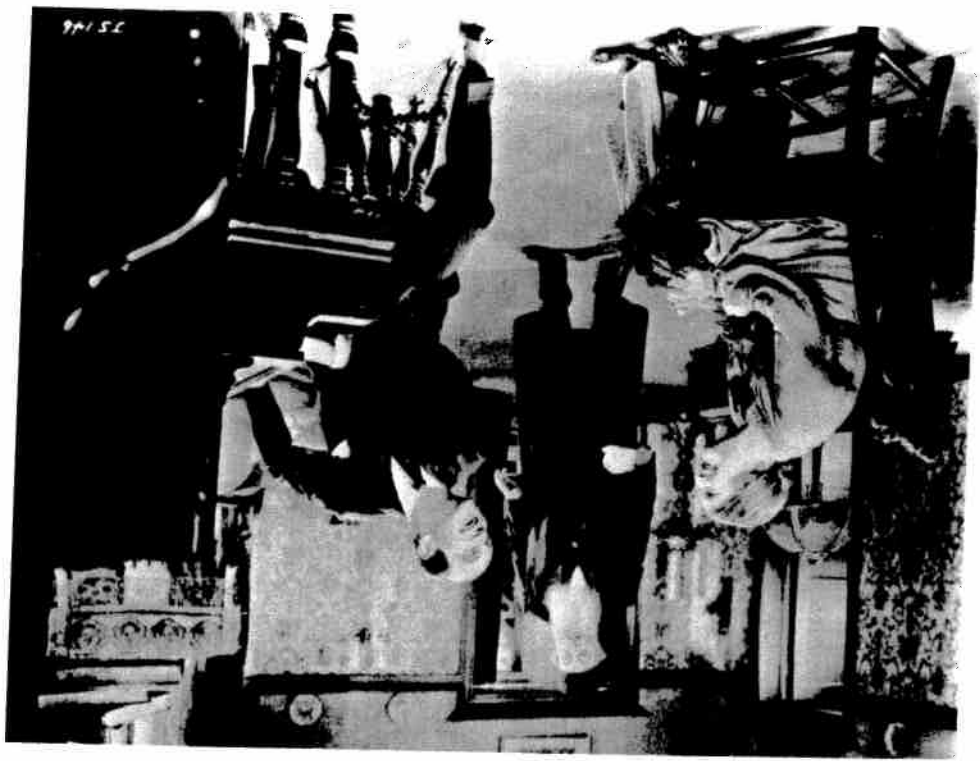
Jack Robin (Al Jolson), formerly Jackie Rabinowitz, singing "Dirty Hands, Dirty Face" in *Coffee Dan's*.

the Warner brothers provided a dream-like reversal in which, back in blackface and back on Broadway, Jack goes down on one knee to sing "Mamma" as Mama herself sits *kvelling* (beaming) in the audience, the fatuously proud Yudelson beside her, and the cantorfather gone forever from the picture.

"Are Jews white?" the scholar Sander Gilman asks. "Or do they become white when they, like Jack Robin, acculturate into American society, so identifying with the ideals of American life, with all its evocation of race, that they—at least in their own mind's eye—become white? Does black-face make everyone who puts it on white?"

As the Warner brothers shot *The Jazz Singer's* Lower East Side scenes on location and used the Winter Garden Theater (Jolson's "personal kingdom") for the final number, reconstructed the Orchard Street Synagogue on a Hollywood back lot, and included a lengthy interlude with Cantor Rosenblatt in performance, we cannot but be struck by the surplus of authenticity with which they invested the film they would advertise as their "supreme triumph."

The Jazz Singer's souvenir program, which included a useful glossary of the Hebrew and Yiddish words found in the film's intertites, tersely declares that "the faithful portrayal of Jewish homelife is largely due to the unobtrusive assistance of Mr. Benjamin Warner, father of the producers and ardent admirer of *The Jazz Singer*." This statement, which attempts through paternal approval to legitimize the overthrow of Jewish traditionalism depicted in their film, suggests that the Warners were uneasily aware not only that of Jolson or many of their employees, but also of themselves.



ABOVE
Cantor Rabinowitz (Warner Oland) walks in on Jack Robin serenading his mother (Eugenie Besserer).

RIGHT
Jack Robin comforted by Mary Dale (May McAvoy) backstage.

BELOW
Jack Robin returns to the synagogue to chant Kol Nidre.

OPPOSITE
Cover of souvenir program for *The Jazz Singer* (1927).

PAGES 82-83
Pages from the souvenir program for *The Jazz Singer*.



HOW I CAME TO WRITE "THE JAZZ SINGER"

By SAMSON RAPHAELSON

But I had already guessed it. I knew there was the spirit of Cantors in him, the blood of Cantors in him.

Five years later in California I wrote the story, I called it "The Day of Atonement." My stories at that time were being published in various magazines. I was a professional writer. I knew most of the editors and they knew me. I said to myself, the first editor that sees this will jump at it. For I felt that it was easily the best story I had ever written. The story turned down by five magazines, Sewell Haggard, editor of Everybody's, bought it. When it appeared I got letters, from my other editors saying, "Why don't you send us stuff like that?" Solomon should have added to a certain remark, "And the ways of an editor with an author."

Mr. Haggard, when he accepted the story, wrote me: "For goodness' sake, don't sell the movie rights on this. You have the makings of a play. Write the play first."

Three years ago I wrote the play. I felt about it as I did about the story. I sent it to Sam H. Harris, who turned it down. I couldn't believe it and wouldn't believe it. I went to his office with genuine concern for Mr. Harris' welfare, fretted him into a state where he handed me over to Al Lewis. Mr. Lewis pointed out certain things in the play which could not be done on any stage. He suggested that if I rewrote it he might be interested. I rewrote it and read it to him. When I finished, there were tears in his eyes. He said, "I'm sorry, but I can't produce this play." I said, "Then why were you crying — because it broke your heart to turn me down?"

I really think Mr. Lewis accepted this play because I wore him out.

If anyone had told me ten years ago, when I first saw Solomon, that he would be in a movie of a play inspired by my seeing him, it would have sounded like a bit of fairy tale to me. At the time this article is being written the motion picture of "The Jazz Singer" has not yet arrived. Solson, who was so damn decent to me in Champagne, Illinois, in 1916 — Solson, who came up to me in Stamford after the opening of "The Jazz Singer" two years ago and said, "Boy, if there's anything I can do to make this show a success, just say the word. If it flops, I'll put my own money into it to keep it alive." — Solson, electric, palpitating, the most American figure in the world today — Solson's going to be in it. And I'm as eager to see it as if the movie was based on his play, not mine.

PREFACE TO "THE JAZZ SINGER"

By Samson Raphaelson

HE who wishes to picture today's America must do it katechopically; he must show you a vivid contrast of surfaces, rancous, sentimental, egotistical, vulgar, infamously busy — surfaces whirling in a dance which sometimes is a dance to Aphrodite and more frequently a dance to Jehovah.

In seeking a symbol of the vital chaos of America's soul, I find no more adequate one than jazz. Here you have the rhythm of frenzy staggering against a symphonic background — a background composed of lewdness, heart's delight, soul-racked madness, monumental boldness, exquisite humility, but principally prayer.

I hear jazz, and I am given a vision of cathedrals and temples collapsing and, shimmered against the setting sun, a solitary figure, a lost soul, dancing grotesquely on the ruins... Thus do I see the jazz singer.

JAZZ is prayer. It is too passionate to be anything else. It is prayer distorted, sick, unconscious of its destination. The singer of jazz is what Matthew Arnold said of the Jew, "lost between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born." In this, my first play, I have tried to crystallize the ironic truth that one of the Americas of 1927 — that one which packs to overflowing our cabarets, musical revues, and dance halls — is praying with a fervor as intense as that of the America which goes sedately to church and synagogue. The jazz American is different from the dancing dervish, from the Zulu medicine man, from the negro evangelist only in that he doesn't know he is praying.

I have used a Jewish youth as my protagonist because the Jews are determining the nature and scope of jazz more than any other race — more than the negroes, from whom they have taken jazz and given it a new color and meaning. Jazz is Irving Berlin, Al Solson, George Gershwin, Sophie Tucker. These are Jews with their roots in the synagogue. And these are expressing in evangelical terms the nature of our chaos today.

You find the soul of a people in the songs they sing. You find the meaning of the songs in the soul of the minstrels who create and interpret them. In "The Jazz Singer" I have attempted an exploration of the soul of one of these minstrels.



WHEN I was a Junior at the University of Illinois, it became very necessary that I should impress a certain young lady. I had a date with her for a certain evening. I wanted to show her the best time to be had in the town of Champaign, Illinois. I borrowed ten dollars and bought two tickets for

the one-night performance of Al Jolson in "Robinson Crusoe, Jr."

I had never seen Jolson before. I had heard of him. I shall never forget the first five minutes of Jolson — his velocity, the amazing fluidity with which he shifted from a tremendous absorption in his audience to a tremendous absorption in his tremendous obnoxiousness in his song. I still remember the song, "Where the Black-Eyed Susans Grow." When he finished, I turned to the girl beside me, dazed with memories of my childhood on the East Side — memories of the Pike Street Synagogue.

I said to the girl, "My God, this isn't a jazz singer. This is a Cantor!"

This grotesque figure in blackface, kneeling at the end of a runway which projected him into the heart of his audience, flinging out his white-gloved hands, was embracing that audacious white-gloved melody didn't matter, the melody didn't matter. It was the emotion — the emotions of a Cantor.

I said to my friend, "There's a story in this — a dramatic story."

I went backstage after the performance and I talked to Jolson. He was very busy, but I shall never forget the feeling I had about what a "damn decent guy" he was. I was a youngster deeply stirred by something which undoubtedly stirred him as much as it did me. He sensed that. In those days he had already become the world's greatest entertainer, and a lot of stirred youngsters must have tired to say nothing in particular to him. He behaved as if I were the first. He told me a little of his background.

"WARNER BROS. Present"

HEREVER there is a motion picture theatre there is a place set aside for announcements of the program of the day and days to come. Frequently the movie fan sees a line that arrests his attention. It brings a glow to his face. It is a line prefacing an announcement and it reads:

Warner Bros. Present.

Time was when this line brought no thrill of expectation. That was years ago when Warner Bros. were little known outside the motion picture industry. What happened since then sounds like romance, and would be taken as such if it were not for the concrete facts which accompany a story that might be called:

"The Making of A Name."

The story of Warner Bros. opens in Poland in 1885 when Benjamin Warner, chafing under conditions which prevented his children from getting an education, made his way to the land wherein all men are free and equal. Landing in Baltimore, he opened a shop and a few months later sent for his wife and youngsters.

The elder Warner found it no easy matter to feed a family of six, but the youngsters exhibited a sense of responsibility not only to themselves, but to their parents. School sessions over, they hustled for work.

One day news came of a boom in Bluefield, West Virginia. Benjamin Warner went to investigate it, leaving the shop in charge of ten-year-old Harry M. with admonitions that he look after his three brothers, Albert, Sam, and Jack. After ten years spent in the Monumental City the family moved to Youngstown, Ohio, where Harry and Albert stuck over a shop a sign reading: "Bicycles Repaired." Occasionally Sam would help, but the thing he loved was the theatre. When he got a job at a summer park outside Sandusky, Ohio, Sam was elated.

Motion pictures were coming along at this time and those exhibited at the Sandusky park intrigued Sam. He talked Albert into going in with him on the purchase of "The Great Train Robbery," a two reel classic of its time, and began exhibiting it in that famous country known as "the sticks." The tour was not a success, but oh, what a lot it taught those boys!

Going into Newcastle, Penn., Sam and Albert leased a house contracting for two changes of bill a week. The initial payment was all right, but when told they had to deposit two hundred dollars as a guarantee of good faith, they paled. They did not have it. But Harry came to their rescue.

He sold his bicycle shop and found himself also in the movie business.

From this point on one would imagine the young men had easy sailing. Far from it. Having opened an exchange they set about establishing a chain of houses for which they would guarantee to supply the pictures. This was the first plan for a booking exchange. When the whole thing was ready, a combination of the picture producers was instrumental in wiping out their plan and also every dollar they had. It was a terrible blow. The brothers saw that if they were to succeed they would have to produce their own pictures. Harry was to do the financing. It was not long before motion picture exhibitors were showing films that bore the introductory line: "Warner Bros. Present."

A resume of the record of Warner Bros. since that time is illustrative of what can be accomplished by brains, perseverance, and honest business dealings. These men had the will to succeed and refused to allow any little tricks of fate to retard them. Since Warner Bros. produced Ambassador Gerard's "My Four Years in Germany," they have done many big things, including the production of John Barrymore as a star in "Beau Brummel," to be followed by "The Sea Beast," "Don Juan," and "When A Man Loves." The Warners introduced Dolores Costello as a star, in "Old San Francisco" for which the public has applauded them. Syd Chaplin's greatest screen successes have been scored under the banner of Warner Bros. Among the other stars identified with the Warner name are Monte Blue, Irene Rich, May McAvoy, Conrad Nagel, Louise Fazenda, Clyde Cook, Warner Oland, and last but not least, that tremendously popular screen figure, Rin-Tin-Tim, the wonder dog of the ages.

It was Harry M. Warner who virtually developed Vitaphone, which is the biggest thing in connection with motion pictures since the birth of pictures themselves. Surely an enviable record. And now comes their supreme triumph, Al Johnson, the greatest comedian of the times, in "The Jazz Singer."

As it was found fitting to open this sketch with reference to Benjamin Warner, it should be fitting to close it with further reference. What bearing to close it with further reference? That came of him as his boys grew to manhood? That he should have gone into motion pictures seems only natural, and for years he proudly guided the destiny of a cosy theatre in Niles, Ohio. It was only the other day that he agreed to retire. Then with his wife he went to Hollywood. Unobtrusively he moved through the Warner Bros. Studios during the filming of "The Jazz Singer." Once there arose some question of the authenticity of a Ghetto scene. He quietly settled it and from that moment his presence was felt and his advice welcomed. From this point Mr. Warner practically became a technical director of the picture and much of the charm of the home and Ghetto scenes is due to his suggestions. Always eager to listen to their father, the Warners are more eager to do so to-day than ever, so while the public only knows of four Warners there are in reality five, including the quiet figure that takes so much interest in every thing bearing the announcement:—Warner Bros. Present.



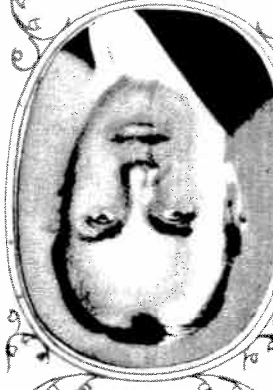
H.M. WARNER



ALBERT WARNER



S.L. WARNER



J.L. WARNER

Circa 1886
Asa Yoelson (Al Jolson), the fifth child of cantor Moses Yoelson and Naomi Cantor Yoelson is born in Srednik, Russia. Brought to America as a child, he grows up in the slums of Washington, D.C.

1889

Sholem Aliechem publishes *Yoshe Solovey*, a novel about a young cantor's corruption through worldly success. His next novel, *Wandering Stars* (1891), includes a character known as the Lomzer *khasn* (cantor), who comes to America and reinvents himself as the Lomzer Nighthingale, singing Kol Nidre "every night in the famous operetta called, by a strange coincidence, *Kol Nidre*."

1902

Mark Arnshteyn's Yiddish play *Der vilner balebessl*, based on the story of cantor turned-opera singer Yoel-David Levinshteyn-Strashunsky (1816-1850), has its world premiere in Lodz—in Polish.

1904

Naomi Cantor Yoelson dies. Jolson first performs in blackface.

1907

Jolson joins Dockstader's Minstrels, the most important of the remaining blackface minstrel shows.

1911

Jolson signs with the Shubert Brothers, becoming the first star of vaudeville and the minstrel show to be legitimized on Broadway.

April 25, 1917

University of Illinois undergraduate Samson Raphaelson sees Jolson—then billed as "The World's Greatest Entertainer"—perform in blackface in *Robinson Crusoe, Jr.* at a theater in Champaign, Illinois.

January 1922

Everybody's Magazine publishes Raphaelson's story "The Day of Atonement," about Jack Robin (born Jake Rabinowitz), a ragtime-singing cantor's son caught between his Jewish tradition and his desire for show-business success. The story ends with Jack abandoning Broadway to take his dead father's place in the Hester Street Synagogue.

September 14, 1925

Raphaelson's play *The Jazz Singer*, an adaptation of "The Day of Atonement," opens on Broadway at the Fulton Theater with sometime-blackface singer George Jessel in the role of Jack Robin. In November, the play moves to the Cort Theater, where it runs through June 5, 1926.

THE JAZZ SINGER: A CHRONOLOGY

J. HOBERMAN

October 7, 1926
 Jolson makes his film debut in the Warner Bros. Vitaphone short *Al Jolson in a Plantation Act*, singing three numbers in blackface: "When the Red, Red Robin Comes Bob-Bob-Bobbin' Along," "April Showers," and "Rock-a-Bye Your Baby."

February 11, 1927
Film Daily reports that Warners' upcoming version of *The Jazz Singer*, starring Jessel, will be "the first picture into which Vitaphone will be introduced for dramatic effect."

April 18, 1927
 Jessel stars in a week-long engagement of *The Jazz Singer* at the Century Theater on Central Park West. Early the following month, the production appears at Werba's Brooklyn Theater.

May 16, 1927
 Three weeks before shooting is scheduled to begin, Warner Bros. announces that Jolson has replaced Jessel in *The Jazz Singer*.

October 6, 1927
 The Warner Bros. film *The Jazz Singer* premieres—one day before Yom Kippur—at the Warners' Theatre in New York. Unlike the play (and the original script), the movie, which runs on Broadway for twenty-three weeks, does not end with Jack Robin chanting Kol Nidre, but rather shows the star back on Broadway and back in blackface, singing "Mammy."

December 19, 1927

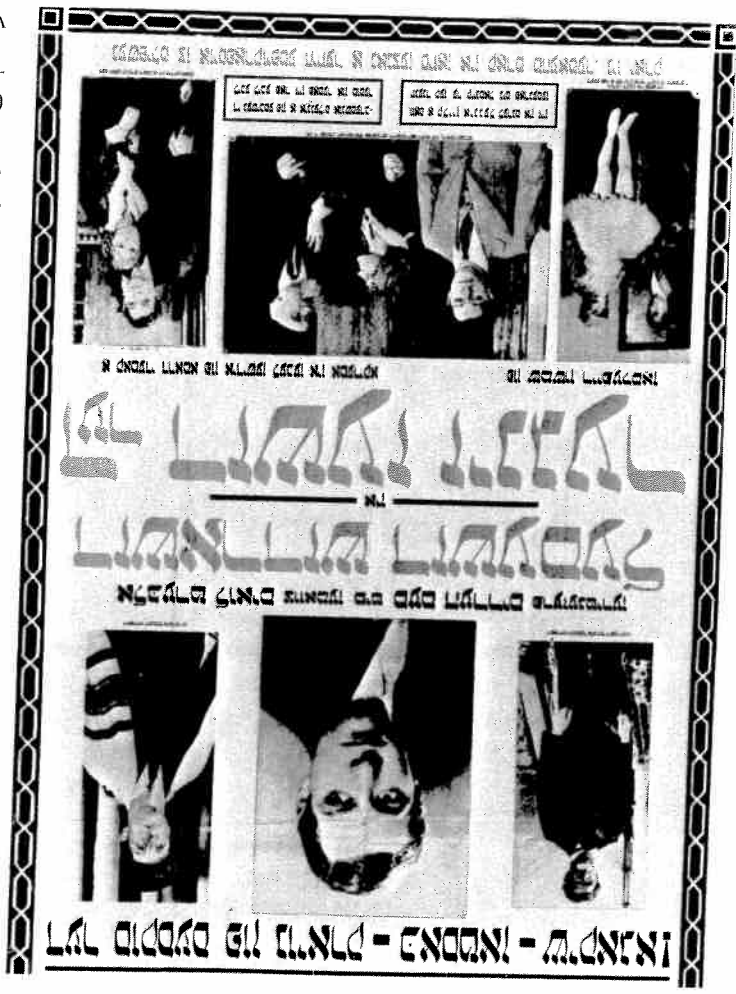
Jessel re-creates his starring role in a week-long revival of Raphaelson's "comedy-drama" at the Majestic in Brooklyn. On December 26, the production moves for a week to the Windsor Theater in the Bronx and, on January 16, 1928, reopens for a limited run at Teller's Shubert Theater on Broadway.

December 28, 1927

The Jazz Singer has its Hollywood premiere. Frances Goldwyn, wife of Samuel Goldwyn, recalls the night as "the most important event in cultural history since Martin Luther nailed his theses on the church door."

January 1, 1928

The Jazz Singer opens in St. Louis, Seattle, and Washington, D.C.



RIGHT
 Yiddish-language poster for the English-language stage play *The Jazz Singer*, "a comedy-drama of Jewish life in America," by Samson Raphaelson, starring George Jessel, 1925.

AGES 86-87
 World premiere of *The Jazz Singer* at the Warners Theatre on Seventh Avenue in New York, 1927.

May 14, 1928
 Raphaelson's play is revived for a week at the Public Theater, on Second Avenue. Although the Public has long been a venue for the Yiddish stage, the production is in English.

August 7, 1928
 Jolson signs a three-picture contract with Warner Bros. that not only gives him approval of script, director, and cast, but also includes the unusual option to participate in possible profits.

September 19, 1928
The Singing Fool, Warners' partial-talkie follow-up to *The Jazz Singer*, starting Jolson, opens at the Winter Garden on Broadway and goes on to become Hollywood's top-grossing picture up until *Gone with the Wind* (MGM, 1939).

March 26, 1930
 Warners' *Mammy*, featuring a new score by Irving Berlin and starring Jolson as a blackface minstrel, opens at the Warners' Theatre.

1930
 A Yiddish-language version of Raphaelson's play *The Jazz Singer* is staged in Warsaw with a cantor's granddaughter, Ida Kaminska, in the role of the blackface minstrel Jack Robin.

August 10, 1936
The Jazz Singer is broadcast on *The Lux Radio Theater* (CBS) with Jolson in the title role and Yiddish actress Vera Gordon as Mrs. Rabinowitz. Later that year, Warner Bros. abandons plans for a tenth-anniversary remake to star Jolson, with his wife, Ruby Keeler, as Mary Dale and Lionel Barrymore as the cantor.

September 28, 1936
 Warner Bros. releases the animated "Merrie Melody" *I Love to Singa*, in which the youngest son of Professor Owl rebels against his father's classical music by becoming a jazz crooner named Owl Jolson.

December 24, 1937
 The Eron Pictures film *The Cantor's Son* opens in New York. In this American-made, Yiddish-language anti-jazz *Singer*, real-life cantor Moishe Oysher leaves his Bessarabian shtetl to become a singing star in America. Having returned for his parents' fiftieth anniversary, he remains to marry his childhood sweetheart and assumes his father's place in the shtetl synagogue.

May 5, 1939
 The Twentieth Century Fox production *Rose of Washington Square* opens at the Roxy. A crypto-biography of Fanny Brice, it features Jolson performing several songs, including "Mammy," in blackface.



October 13, 1939
 Twentieth Century Fox's production *Hollywood Cavalcade* opens at the Roxy. A musical about the silent movie era, it gives Jolson a cameo role, chanting Kol Nidre, in a re-creation of the synagogue scene from *The Jazz Singer*.

February 9, 1940
Overture to Glory (Elite Productions), another anti-jazz *Singer* and the last of the (relatively) big-budgeted American Yiddish talkies, opens in New York at the Cameo Theater. Based on the play *Der vinner balebessl*, it tells the story of a cantor (Oysler) who deserts his family and congregation to become a star in the Warsaw opera.

January 30, 1945
Variety reports Warner Bros. plans to make a "modernized" *Jazz Singer* starring Paul Muni.

June 26, 1945
 Warners' George Gershwin bio-pic *Rhapsody in Blue* opens at the Hollywood Theater. Jolson plays himself, singing Gershwin's "Swanee" in blackface.

November 28, 1945
Variety reports that Warners Bros. has abandoned plans for a *Jazz Singer* remake, which would have starred John Garfield.

1945
 Cantor Moses Yoelson dies.

October 10, 1946
 Columbia's *The Jolson Story*, based on Jolson's life (from his childhood through the making of *The Jazz Singer* to an imaginary 1946 comeback) opens at Radio City Music Hall. Larry Parks plays Jolson. Although uncredited in the film, Jolson dubbed the songs. The movie is the third top box-office attraction of 1947 as well as Columbia's highest-grossing release to date.

June 2, 1947
The Jazz Singer is again broadcast by *The Lux Radio Theater* with Jolson in the title role. Ludwig Donath and Tamara Shayne, who played Jolson's parents in *The Jolson Story*, are featured as the cantor and his wife; Gail Patrick plays Mary Dale.

February 16, 1948
 Jolson plays himself again in *The Lux Radio Theater* presentation of *The Jolson Story*.



Yiddish film *Der vinner balebessl* (The Cantor of Vilna), known in English as *Overture to Glory* (1940). Moishe Oysler (right) as Cantor Yoel Strashunsky succumbs to the spell of Western classical music as performed by Polish composer Tadeusz Montusko (John Mylong).

August 17, 1949
 Columbia releases *Jolson Sings Again*. The sequel to *The Jolson Story*, it again stars Parks as Jolson, and Jolson once more dubs the songs. The movie ends with the making of *The Jolson Story* and Parks—playing not only Jolson but also the actor who plays Jolson—performing “Rock-a-Bye Your Baby” in the movie’s only instance of blackface. It is the highest-grossing movie of 1949.

May 22, 1950
 Jolson plays himself yet again in *The Lux Radio Theater* presentation of *Jolson Sings Again*.

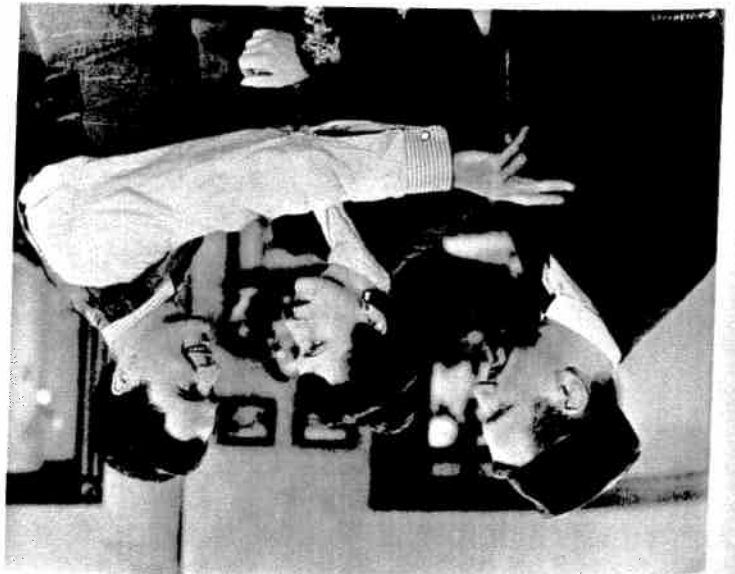
October 23, 1950
 Jolson dies in San Francisco shortly after returning from Korea, where he gave an estimated 160 shows for U.S. troops.

March 21, 1951
 Parks is the first witness to testify before the newly reconstituted House Committee on Un-American Activities. Expected to take the Fifth Amendment, he admits his one-time membership in the Communist Party but pleads not to be forced to give the names of other party members: “Do not make me crawl through the mud like an informer.” Parks is threatened with holding Congress in contempt; in a closed-door session two days later, he names a dozen names.

Summer 1951
 The National Theater on Second Avenue opens a Yiddish-language version of *The Jolson Story*. In addition to staging Jolson’s meeting with General MacArthur in Korea, the play interpolates material from *The Jazz Singer* “improved” to include a tearful reconciliation between father and son. According to Robert Brustein, who played the part of Jolson’s announcer, the production employed a Yiddish-speaking Jolson and a blackfaced Jolson-impersonator who mimed to actual Jolson recordings, including “Hatikvah.”⁴

December 6, 1951
 Warners’ *I’ll See You in My Dreams*, a musical bio-pic of songwriter Gus Kahn that includes Doris Day’s blackface imitation of Jolson, opens at Radio City Music Hall.

December 31, 1952
 Warners’ remake of *The Jazz Singer* premieres in Miami (it is released on New Year’s Eve to qualify for the 1952 Academy Awards). Singer-comedian Danny Thomas stars in the title role as a GI who returns to North Philadelphia, where his father is cantor of a synagogue that their family founded in 1790, determined to break into show



ABOVE, TOP
 Al Jolson, later to become Al Jolson (Larry Parks, right) with his parents (Ludwig Donath and Tamara Shayne) in *The Jolson Story* (1947).
 ABOVE, BOTTOM
 Poster for *The Jolson Story* (1947). Al Jolson dubbed his own songs for this film but is uncredited on the poster.

Theater on Broadway.

Lewis includes a Jolson impersonation in his first one-man show at the Palace

February 7, 1957

Jerry Lewis has a top-ten hit with "Rock-a-Bye Your Baby." The single sells 1.4 million copies. The album *Jerry Lewis Just Sings* (which features three other Jolson songs—"I'm Sittin' on Top of the World," "Mamma," and "When the Red, Red Robin Comes Bob-Bob-Bobbing Along") goes to number three on the LP charts.

November 1956

Oysher's last (and only English-language) film, the independently produced *Singing in the Dark*, opens in New York. In this post-Holocaust variation on *The Jazz Singer*, Oysher plays a German cantor who loses his family and his memory during World War II. Having made his way to America, he becomes a nightclub singer, but after a blow to his head brings back his tragic past, resumes his identity as a cantor and a cantor's son.

March 7, 1956



Columbia re-releases *The Jolson Story* with stereophonic sound. Despite Parks's "friendly" testimony three years earlier, the Brooklyn Fox Theater is picketed by the American Legion.

May 1954

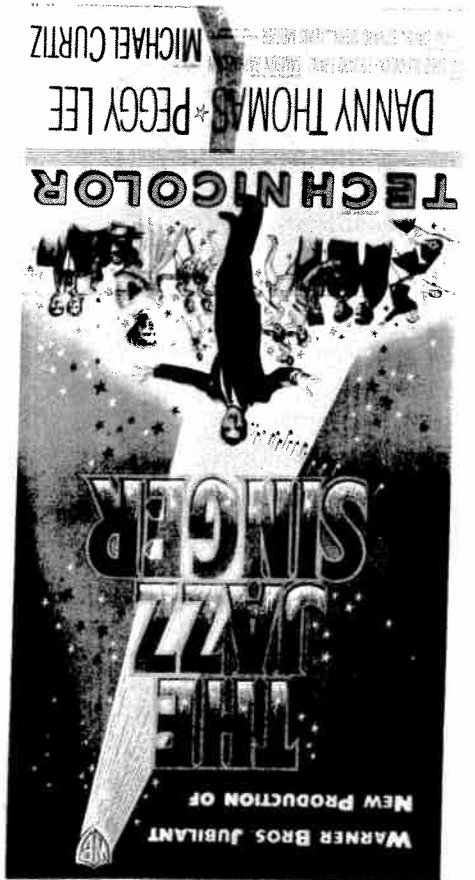
Warner Bros. releases *The Eddie Cantor Story*.

December 25, 1953

business. Thomas does not perform in blackface—nor is there any other reference made to African-Americans—and his climactic Kol Nidre segues into an onstage rendition of "Living the Life I Love."⁶

ABOVE, LEFT
Danny Thomas and Peggy Lee in the 1952 version of *The Jazz Singer*. Jerry Golden (Thomas) shows Judy Lane (Lee) portraits of his ancestors, all cantors in the same Philadelphia synagogue, dating back to the late eighteenth century.

ABOVE, RIGHT
Poster for the 1952 remake of *The Jazz Singer*.



ITS JOY SET TO MUSIC!
A STORY THAT SINGS
OUT TO YOUR HEART!



October 13, 1959
 NBC's *Ford Starline* broadcasts an hour-long version of *The Jazz Singer*, with Lewis in the title role. In this case, the cantor's son breaks with family tradition to become a singing comedian. Molly Picon appears as the mother; Eduard Franz reprises his role as the cantor in the 1952 remake. Scheduled a day after Yom Kippur, the color telecast concludes with Lewis chanting Kol Nidre in clown-face.

July 1974
 Plans are announced for a new musical to be based on *The Jazz Singer*, transposing the story from the Lower East Side to Harlem and featuring a black cast. The show is never produced.

TV GUIDE LISTING FOR THE 1959 STARLINE PRESENTATION OF "A MODERNIZED VERSION" OF "THE JAZZ SINGER," STARTING WITH SAMSON RAPHAELSON'S PLAY "THE JAZZ SINGER," STARRING JERRY LEWIS, MOLLY PICON, AND EDUARD FRANZ (WHO WAS REPRISING HIS ROLE AS THE CANTOR IN THE 1952 REMAKE OF THE 1927 FILM).

9:30 2818 (3) STARTIME — Drama

Jerry Lewis in "THE JAZZ SINGER"

JOEY RABINOWITZ father begs him to carry on the family tradition and become a cantor, but Joey ignores his pleas and enters show business as comedian Joey Robbins. Oliver Crawford wrote this modernized adaptation of "The Jazz Singer," by Samson Raphaelson. Giny Gibbons and Anna Maria Albergheiti. Sarah Rabinowitz and Molly Picon. Cantor Rabinowitz. Ed Giddleson. Alan Reed.

Cast
 Jerry Lewis
 Molly Picon
 Eduard Franz
 Alan Reed

August 1975
 Fifty years after *The Jazz Singer* opened on Broadway, Columbia Pictures re-releases *The Jolson Story* in 70mm.

October 1977
 The United States Post Office marks the fiftieth anniversary of *The Jazz Singer*'s release with an Al Jolson commemorative stamp.

Fall 1978
Jolson, a new musical play with British-born Jolson impersonator Clive Baldwin in the title role, has its world premiere at the Paper Mill Playhouse in Millburn, New Jersey.

Spring 1979
Joley, a new musical dramatization of Jolson's life, runs for eight weeks at the North Stage Dinner Theater in Glen Cove, Long Island, with Larry Kert in the title role. The following year, Kert tours American cities in the one-man show *Al Jolson Tonight!*

December 19, 1980
 A third version of *The Jazz Singer* opens at the Ziegfeld, with pop star Neil Diamond as an aspiring rock singer. Sir Laurence Olivier co-stars as his father, Cantor Rabinovitch, here a Holocaust survivor. (There is no mother in this version.) Diamond briefly appears in blackface and an Afro wig as a means of performing with a soul ensemble in a black nightclub.

October 11, 1981
 SCTV parodies the Diamond *Jazz Singer*. A Jewish recording executive (played by Eugene Levy with dreadlocks) opposes the desire of his adopted African-American son (singer Al Jarreau) to become a cantor.

May 22, 1983
 Kert sings a medley of Jolson songs on the ABC network special "The Parade of Stars," produced at the Palace Theater in New York.

July 21, 1988
 Michael Dukakis accepts the presidential nomination at the Democratic National Convention in Atlanta, entering the convention hall accompanied by "Coming to America," the anthem Diamond wrote for his version of *The Jazz Singer*.

October 24, 1991

The Simpsons (Fox) broadcasts "Like Father, Like Clown," in which Bart and Lisa attempt to effect a rapprochement between Krusty the Clown and his father, Rabbi Hyman Krustofsky (Jackie Mason), who disowned Krusty when he gave up the rabbinic to become a clown. "If you were a musician or a jazz singer, this I could forgive," the rabbi tells his son. "But a clown?!"

October 23, 1995

Jolson: The Musical, based on an original idea by Jolson biographer Michael Freedland, opens at the Victoria Palace in London and subsequently wins the Laurence Olivier award for Best New Musical of 1996. The show portrays Jolson from 1929, covering his stormy marriage to Keeler and subsequent career decline, through the postwar comeback triggered by *The Jolson Story*.

June 1996

Michael Rogin's *Blackface, White Noise* is published: "Anti-Semitism is *The Jazz Singer's* structuring absence. The visible cost it leaves behind is borne by Jolson as he plays not a Jew but a black."

October 6, 1998

Jolson: The Musical opens in Cleveland and tours the U.S. with sometime Yiddish actor Michael Burstyn in the lead. Unlike the British show and the 1997 Toronto production, the American version does not employ blackface.

1998

The Jazz Singer places ninth on the American Film Institute's list of the one hundred best American movies.



RIGHT
 Neil Diamond at the climax of the 1980 remake of *The Jazz Singer* (1980).
 Foster for *The Jazz Singer*

ABOVE
 Neil Diamond at the climax of the 1980 remake of *The Jazz Singer*, singing the hit song "Coming to America." Note the scarf, suggestive of a traditional *talis* (prayer shawl).

The fierce brave is only Mr. Eddie Cantor, as he appears in one scene of the gorgeous Ziegfeld musical comedy at the New Amsterdam. The shadow is, symbolically speaking, the shadow of his former self, for in this show he wears but for a brief time his old familiar blackface makeup. The ladies are not figures on a curtain but are to be seen, very much in person.

“WHOOPEE”



FAR LEFT
Double caricature of Eddie Cantor, in the New Yorker, January 19, 1929.
NEAR LEFT
Eddie Cantor in blackface.

MARK SLOBIN

PUTTING
BLACKFACE IN
ITS PLACE

In 1927, the first “talkie,” *The Jazz Singer*, appeared, a musical combining antique blackface routines with older synagogue stylings. But it was the electricity of Al Jolson’s performance, delivered by the new technology, that seized the public’s attention and established him as a Hollywood star. Recently, the pathos of the Jewish performer who needs to blacken up to become an American star has attracted extensive critical response, the best-known of which is probably Michael Rogin’s book *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot*.

In this article, I seek to put the Jewish blackface moment of the early twentieth century in a number of entertainment contexts of its time; also included are some reflections on the fate of blackface in more recent decades. As Stuart Hall has written about any snapshot view of popular culture involving blackness, “these moments are always conjugal. They have their historical specificity. . . . They are never the same moment.”

The United States is the first modern society to express its sense of identity solely through popular—rather than folk or elite—culture. The “minstrel show,” an amalgam of entertainments that emerged in the 1830s, was the quintessential expression of identity for a society of Europeans that was eradicating Indians and enslaving Africans while expanding across a continent and preparing to receive large waves of immigrants. Views of minstrelsy have ranged from repulsion against its racism to revisionist analyses of its class- and gender-based comedy. Recently, some writers have even suggested that working-class whites were expressing their own resistance to capitalist domination by channeling their subversive urges into producing and consuming blackface material.³

Instead of entering this debate, I want to move on to the larger framework of mixture and invention that the popular song represents and distills, a transatlantic stew of sentiment and commercialism served up to the dispossessed, the uprooted, and the culturally confused. Charles Hamm plays up the complexity of the process by spotlighting Henry Russell as a prime inventor of the American popular song. Russell was “an English-born Jew who studied in Italy, first came to Canada, and then furnished Americans with songs in an Italian musical style, mostly to texts reflecting an Irish type of nostalgia. Of such ethnic mixtures was popular song in America born.” The process of objectifying and selling culture was like a vacuum cleaner, inhaling all the available sources. Minstrelsy helped drive the engine of popular entertainment, which also relied on the energy of other ethnic-based sources.⁴

Summing up the situation for the late nineteenth century, Edward Marks, a major song publisher, looked back on the scene from the vantage point of 1927, the year *The Jazz Singer* opened: “A successful song had to be noble, sorrowful, Irish, or all four. Moreover, thirty-six of the hundred and thirty songs [on his list of top hits] came directly from England. . . . it was a distinctly British period in the tune business.” But earlier, in 1897, when Irish-American entertainer George M. Cohan brought an Irish tune to Marks and his partner, they turned him down flat: “No more Irish; Joe and I chorused, for we had seen the ragtime handwriting on the wall.”⁵

Despite the flow and flux of trends, the music industry also relied on stable topics, marketable over the decades. One constant was the need for nostalgia in a nation of dislocation. Even back in Russell’s time, he succeeded with “one of the most persistent themes of the nineteenth century—nostalgia for youth, home, parents, old friends, lost innocence.”⁶ It is always easy for entertainers—and politicians—to peddle nostalgia to a country built on mobility and the fast turnover of popular culture. By constant repetition of this topic through the image of the antebellum plantation, minstrelsy overlapped with longlasting American reactionary trends and social anxieties.

Another durable formula common to both minstrelsy and its competitors (and still very much alive in the twenty-first century) is ethnic stereotyping, a kind of pop culture commentary on the integration of immigrants as both producers and consumers. Marks noted the appearance of “first the Irish comic song, then the Italian, and very shortly afterward the Yiddish—the cycle closed in 1920 with ‘The Argentinians, the Portuguese, the Armenians, and the Greeks.’ In each case, the crop of songs followed from ten to twenty years after the main tide of immigration, as the arrivals impressed themselves on the public consciousness.”⁷

The successive cresting of immigrant-topical song waves speaks to the main urge

appear in three scenes, two of which are corkless; only the closing number offers the full minstrel regalia hinted at in the backstage blacking-up scene. Beyond the sparse sound sequences that offer the sizzle of stardom, *The Jazz Singer* is mainly a "silent" film with an orchestral score—a little-remembered fact. There are no fewer than eighty-five musical numbers in the film.⁸

These items look like a checklist of conventions: popular songs, including some by Jewish immigrant songwriters, an arrangement of a Hasidic melody, a Yiddish didactic song and synagogue favorites sung by the star cantor Yossie Rosenblatt, a made-to-order "mother" song co-written by Jolson, and a slew of symphonic excerpts, including snippets of Tchaikovsky, Lalo, and Sibelius. Taken as a whole, this pioneering soundtrack is as encyclopedic as American entertainment itself. The blackface moments we find so startling are inserted into an overarching framework that tells the whole story of sound and sensibility, socially situated.

Blackface is not a unitary tradition, and by 1927, it had floated free of its anchor, minstrelsy and the plantation setting. Surely *The Jazz Singer* relies on the inner vitality that whites associate with blackness to counteract the class and immigrant handicaps of its hero. Yet the real emotional mooring comes from Jake Rabinowitz/Jack Robin's mother, who benefits from the accompaniment of both Tchaikovsky's *Roméo and Juliet*, which literally underscores the film's Oedipal theme and Jolson's more restrained tribute, "Mother of Mine." The latter is particularly generic, descending from a long line of Irish mother songs, but addressed here to a Yiddish mama. The Jewish mother reciprocates this tribute from American popular culture by embracing her son's blackface turn from his cantorial heritage. For the first time, the Jewish mother and the black mammy are linked. The silver-haired, care-worn lady beams while her son sings about a fictitious black Alabama nanny.

This overlap of sensibilities clashes sharply with the most famous contemporary Jewish mother song, "My Yiddish Mama," released in 1925 with a Yiddish text on one side of the record and an English version on the flip side. Sophie Tucker's big hit uses the Yiddish vernacular to attack its audiences with a wrenching depiction of filial guilt, exposing the gap between a deeply felt immigrant use of the mother theme and Hollywood's generic version. Jolson's "Mother of Mine" represents a kind of standardization that highlights popular culture's clever crafting of sentimental stability. It is designed to reach the widest audience, belying the apparent narrative interest in immigration and ethnicity, with a blackface coating.

Berlin's "Blue Skies" is the most spontaneous number in *The Jazz Singer*, and, like "Mammy," it is sung straight to mother. At the time, Berlin, like his immigrant songwriter colleagues, was felt to have a special sensibility—"the tear in the voice"—that allowed him deeper access to the wellsprings of feeling and creativity. Their music was understood to bubble up from an almost genetic source of deep ethnic/racial/religious feeling. Yet "Blue Skies," like most of his work, was remarkably generic, just as the earliest melodies of nineteenth-century minstrelsy had little to do with vernacular black roots. Berlin came to public attention with "Alexander's



Al Jolson in blackface in *The Jazz Singer* (1927).

Ragtime Band," a surprisingly non-ragtime sounding song. Written for a nonspecific audience, the vast majority of the Jewish songwriter's output has little contextual grounding, as Hamm points out: "There is no way to tell, from listening to a song by Irving Berlin or any of his contemporaries, whether it was written for vaudeville, musical comedy, the movies, or simply composed for radio play and possibly recording," or to be sung and whistled by people of any generation, country of origin, or social position.⁹

Of course, what is so striking about *The Jazz Singer*, as with all Hollywood sound film until the 1940s, is the absence of an African-American presence. This makes Jolson's blackface seem almost an innocent ingredient in the stew of Jewish ethnic numbers, generic songs, and wallpaper classical underscoring that make up the film's musical mosaic. There is a certain thoughtlessness, vividly expressed in the automatism of his hand gestures while covering his face with blackness—even as he tortures himself over his ethnic identity. His triumphant smile when he sees his minstrel mask in the mirror, quashing all doubts about assimilation, drives home the point of exclusion. Susan Gubar writes that Jackie Rabinowitz, Jack Robin, and Al Jolson himself "appear to suffer the torture they inflict on the black male body."¹⁰ But it is unlikely that Jolson, who brooked no competition from rivals of any race, identified much with the absent blacks of *The Jazz Singer*.

DISPLACING BLACKFACE

Moments of black-Jewish interaction with entertainment have changed shape with the times. Rogin points to Robert Rossen's *Body and Soul* (United Artists, 1947) as an explicit attempt by left-wing Jewish screenwriters and directors to keep Jewish and black figures in the same social space.¹¹ In the film, John Garfield plays a Jewish slum boy who has close and traumatic interactions with black boxers as he rises to become the champ. The song "Body and Soul" is consistently used by composer Hugo Friedhofer to underscore emotional scenes. Written by Jewish songwriter Johnny Green, and popularized by Jewish bandleader Benny Goodman and black saxophonist Coleman Hawkins, it can stand in for decades of unspoken collaboration between African-Americans and Jewish-Americans. But what it might have signified as a social statement for the film viewers in the late forties has been lost to our knowledge, over fifty years later.

Left undiscussed is the music that accompanies the opening sequence of *Body and Soul*. The hero awakens after a nightmare about the black boxer he has beaten and injured, and races downtown from his training camp to see his Jewish mother and non-Jewish girlfriend (shades of *The Jazz Singer*). This scene is set to what was eventually called "a jazz score" and is in fact an early appearance of the style, which is usually associated with later films, like Leith Stevens's score for *The Wild One* (Columbia, 1954) or Elmer Bernstein's work on *The Man with the Golden Arm* (United Artists, 1955).

Both Stevens and Bernstein's writings about their scores, which portray the lives of troubled white Americans, attribute the use of jazz elements to either generalized big-city "hysteria and despair"¹² or "exhibitionistic . . . confused and wondering."¹³ This justification glosses over any possible audience identification with the African-American sources of the music. But Shelly Mann's frenetic (white)

drumming in *The Man with the Golden Arm* might well have struck a "black" chord with viewers accustomed to explicit indexing of these components in earlier films. (For example, a 1930s Betty Boop cartoon, featuring the Louis Armstrong orchestra,

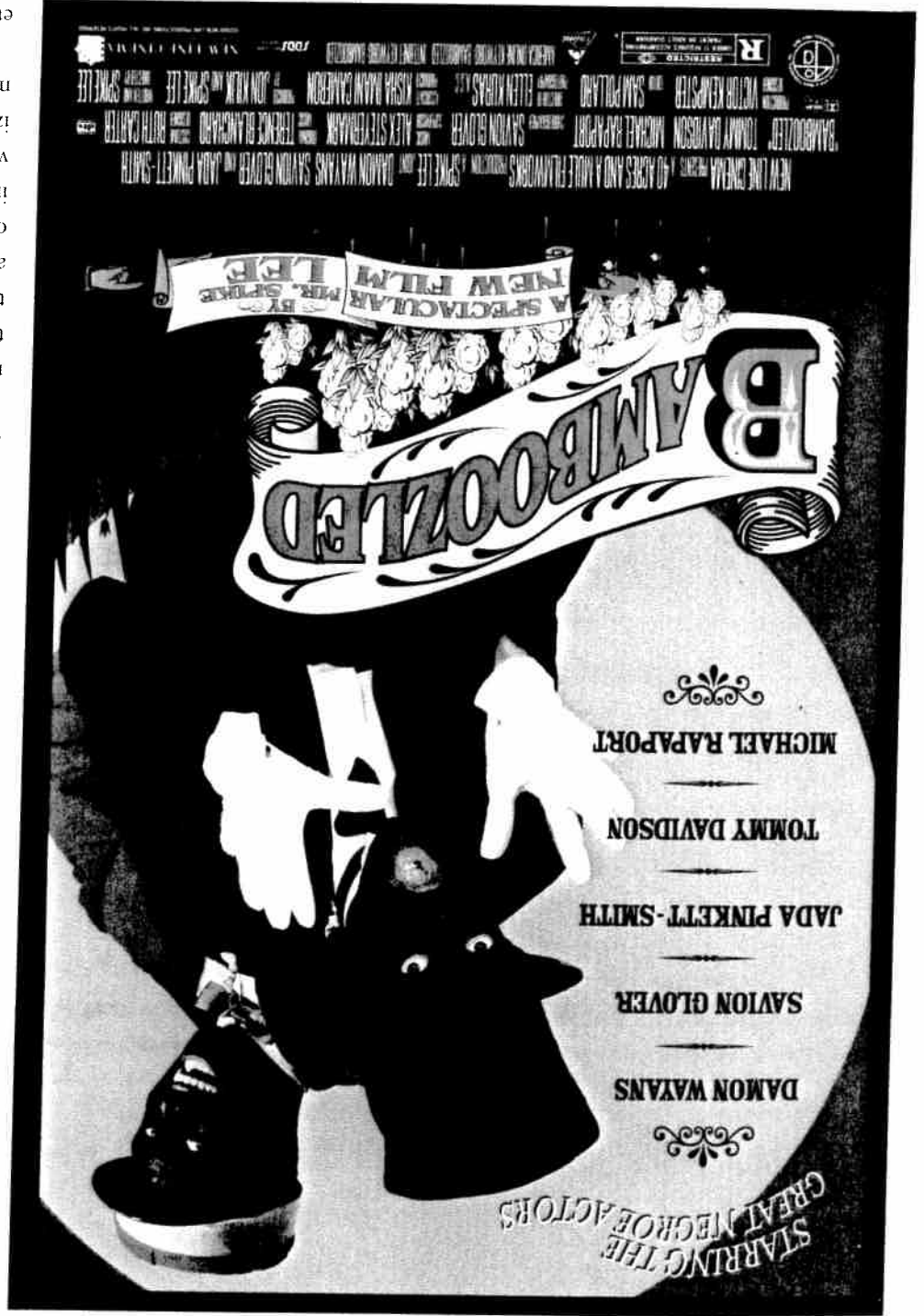
cuts back and forth between the live black drummer and the animated image of a cannibal banging a cooking pot.) It is in these attenuated, ventriloquized ways that the traditions of blackface have lived on, much longer than the obvious displays of blackface from the 1930s to 1950s by non-Jewish stars like Mickey Rooney and Fred Astaire. A

common continuation of the Bernstein approach comes in the frequent narrative move of white people who spontaneously break into Motown songs whenever they need to truly bond, which happens continuously across the film and television landscape. Usually we see con-

strained white families or groups of buddies that need to break the ice with each other by invoking the sounds of soul at key narrative junctures—in shows or films that have no visible or important characters of color. This kind of every-

day, exclusionary incorporation of blackness tends to be the current form of reference to the older issues this essay addresses. More recently, the Motown move might be replaced by rap. In a mindless television movie, for example, we see a teenage nerd pumping himself up to accost pretty girls at a party by carrying on an interior rap monologue. His blacking up is purely mental, but voyeuristically visualized for the viewer. This internalized mimicry is yet another ingenious method of displacing blackface. Even the techniques of outright ethnic ventriloquism have hardly van-

ished from American media, as Patricia Williams points out in a scathing analysis of the "lovable" character Jar Jar Binks in *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1999).¹⁴ Blackface may have been ruled out of order in today's entertainment, but the use of "spaceface" in sci-fi vehicles shows just how far the tentacles of old showbiz monsters can reach across the years. Both exclusionary incorporation and blatant caricature are long-term descendants of the older forms of American entertainment.



Poster for Bamboozled (2000).

Significant differences do separate past and present practices. Jolson's grease-paint was external, while the more recent forms are internal. As an exterior marker, by Jolson's later film days in the early 1930s, blackface had become outdated. In one of those films, a quartet of musicians pursues him from the recording studio through the streets of the city, imploring him to abandon "Mammy." They are splashed by a passing truck, turn black, and end up backing up his triumphant minstrelsy.

The scene is designed to make Jolson look like what we would call today a pop music dinosaur: stubbornly anachronistic and proud of it. Film discourse on stage and screen had moved to newer, more sophisticated stylings, such as the early all-white Hollywood musical or the all-black neo-plantation films that began as early as 1929 with *Hallelujah* (MGM). In the 1930s, the southern white playwriting duo of DuBose and Cora Heyward penned both *Mamba's Daughters* and *Porgy* about the colorful life of Carolina African-Americans. The latter work was raised to new dramatic and musical heights by George Gershwin, whose status grew from Jewish songwriter to operatic composer by imitating the vernacular song of a black community. The move that began in the 1950s toward internalized coding of white settings and characters, leading from the jazz score through Motown mouthings, seems perhaps even more thorough as a process of ethnic erasure.

In 2000, Spike Lee made an audacious move, bringing old-fashioned, excruciatingly literal blackface back to public attention. In his film *Bamboozled* (New Line), a cynical African-American television writer produces a blackface show performed by African-Americans, which becomes a national hit, only to bring death and disaster to the principals. Lee skewers everyone, including the Jewish industry types that rationalize the return of minstrelsy. Brilliant and caustic as its premise and production numbers are, *Bamboozled* was critically treated more as an oddity than a sensation, and vanished quickly from the screens. As Paul Gilroy argues forcefully in *Against Race*, we have moved into a "post-race" phase where bodies—even black ones—figure more as tools of consumerism than as political pawns.¹⁵

Still, we should recoil reflexively and retrospectively at any display—however covert—of the minstrel mask and closely scrutinize its Jewish wearers of earlier decades. We should also see the blackface moment that culminated in *The Jazz Singer*, along with its metamorphoses since then, as part of a durable structure of race-conscious sentiment, crafted through music, that became integrated into American life over many generations of entertainment. Its traces have been painted over, but not erased.