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Why Did Negroes Love Al Jolson and The Jazz Singer?: Melodrama, Blackface and Cosmopolitan Theatrical Culture

Charles Musser

Alan Crosland's *The Jazz Singer* (Warner Bros., 1927), starring Al Jolson, was the first feature-length "talkie", and so one of cinema's milestones. If its importance has been impossible to ignore, the picture has been subjected to frequent, wide-ranging criticism that has tended to fall into three different but ultimately related categories. First, there has been a long-standing criticism of the film due to its excessive appeal to emotions, its sentimentality and its lack of obvious seriousness.¹ Echoing the sentiments of Samson Raphaelson, who wrote the play from which it was adapted, Neal Gabler has declared that the film "failed as a drama".² Second, commentators have often condemned the film for the way it depicts the Jewish immigrant community in the United States. Lester Friedman and others have, for instance, harshly criticized the film as "assimilationist" because it presents a model of success that "depends upon a severe curtailing, if not a total rejection of traditional Jewish values".³

Third, and perhaps most forcefully, as Americans have continued to struggle with their fraught history of race relations, the film has come to be demonized as a racist text. When Warner Bros. released an eightieth Anniversary DVD set, *Entertainment Weekly's* Steve Daly savaged the movie, remarking that "there's an ugly stereotype under wraps here", for "Jolson spends a significant portion of *Jazz Singer* in blackface, masquerading as an African-American man – that is, as a grotesque,

degrading approximation of one". In the process, he "blunted his own 'racial' heritage (a term used freely at the time in discussing Jewish identity) by assuming the trappings of another. The gimmick helped make him a recording superstar ... and pigeonholed him forever inside an indefensible minstrel-show tradition". At the end of his review, Daly concludes, "Thankfully, history has moved beyond this movie and its attitudes. How sobering to be reminded that something so wrong could ever have been so popular."⁴

The Jazz Singer and the production of excessive emotions

While it is tempting to focus on the most fraught aspect of this criticism – condemnations of *The Jazz Singer* as a racist "text" – these three areas of concern are deeply intertwined and a more far-reaching reassessment is in order. Judgments as to the film's artistic value offer a good starting point, since *The Jazz Singer* has had its critics from the outset. Robert

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Fig. 1. The premiere of *The Jazz Singer* at the Warners' Theatre, Broadway and 52nd Street, New York City, 6 October 1927.



Fig. 2. The Winter Garden, site of Jolson's theatrical triumphs (and two blocks from the Warners' Theatre), dressed as the site of Jack Robin's breakthrough hit – *The Jazz Singer*.

E. Sherwood, a famed member of the legendary Algonquin Round Table, complained that the film was “hoked and sugared to a regrettable extent”.⁵ Nobert Lusk, a New York-based critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, considered *The Jazz Singer* to be “negligible” as a picture and “unfortunately” second rate in almost every respect. He was both puzzled and appalled that Jolson, who watched the film on opening night, was “in a loge with tears in his eyes and a spotlight on them”. Even worse, the star was still crying when he reached the stage and addressed the audience.⁶ In contrast, Edwin Schallert, Los Angeles-based critic for the same newspaper, remarked that, “For once the superlatives may be liberally distributed and they ought to be of the super sort of superlatives such as the movies only can indulge in really vociferously when something away out of the ordinary happens”.⁷ In this instance, Schallert, rather than Jolson, was displaying a notable degree of “excess”.

Reactions to the film were certainly divided but, given this essay’s concerns, it is worth noting that the weekly *American Hebrew* celebrated the wholehearted enthusiasm that greeted Jolson and the “sentimental melodrama” on opening night and applauded both his rendering of “Mammy” and *Kol Nidre*.⁸ Jolson’s tears were seen as a natural result of such a conjunction. Perhaps somewhat more surprisingly, African American newspapers also praised *The Jazz Singer* and reported that race audiences (and it would appear, particularly black women) had intense emotional reactions to the film. When it was shown at Harlem’s Lafayette Theatre, “sobs were heard all over the theater at the Monday matinee during the dramatic moments in the picture”.⁹

The Jazz Singer belongs to what Linda Williams calls “a body genre”. As she suggests, “the film genres that have had especially low cultural status are those in which the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen along with the fact that the body displayed is female”.¹⁰ If the male star Jolson seemingly violates this insight due to his gender, we must remember that Jolson as Jack Robin has often been characterized as feminized and passive. For instance, it is Mary Dale who sees Jolson/Robin, is smitten by him, and subsequently promotes him. Moreover, Jack Robin ultimately decides to throw away his career in support of his family’s needs – a classic woman’s role. (Although Robin returns to the show, this is an unanticipated

bonus as he was repeatedly told that to sing *Kol Nidre* for his father and mother would end his career.) That Jolson as Jack Robin is constructed as the subject for feminine mimicry has contributed to the distress among scholars focusing on the construction of Jewish identity in film. This demasculinization is seen as part of a longstanding practice of denigrating representations of Jews – even of Jewish self-hatred. That Jolson is chased by a goyish girl makes these gender reversals even more fraught. Though known as the “first talkie”, *The Jazz Singer* functions as a weepie. One’s evaluation and appreciation of the film may depend on how one feels about this body genre (as well as inter-ethnic or inter-racial romances that often cross religious boundaries). Since I personally prefer weepies to the horror film (another of Williams’s body genres), and *The Jazz Singer* speaks to me and makes me cry, I tend to fall on the affirmative side of criticism.¹¹

The mongrelization of stage and screen

The Jazz Singer, however, is not simply a weepie, and other approaches to the film’s artistry reveal a much more complex, dynamic and sophisticated text than has previously been recognized. One of particular interest involves its status as an adaptation. *The Jazz Singer* was a well-publicized remake of Samson Raphaelson’s play of the same name. Opinions on its success or failure in this regard were quickly framed by Raphaelson and highbrow critic Sherwood, who accused the film of undermining the play’s literary merits and pandering to the lowbrow expectations of a broader, mass audience. Robert Carringer likewise complained that the film was unfaithful to its source.¹² In fact, the process of adaptation and appropriation that occurred in making *The Jazz Singer* is ill served by a narrow concern with fidelity and accurate correspondences. The “first talkie” is both an adaptation of Raphaelson’s play and a remake of *Das Alte Gesetz* (*The Ancient Law*, aka as *Baruch* or *The Old Law*), a feature film that E.A. (Ewald André) Dupont had made in Berlin in 1923. This previously overlooked conjunction can enrich our appreciation of Crosland’s *The Jazz Singer*. That is, the Jolson film is the product of a collision (or as Eisenstein might say, a dialectical synthesis or sexual union) between instances of high and low culture, in this case two forms of theatrical entertainment that co-existed in uneasy relationship:

stage and screen. It thus embodies a process of creolization or mongrelization.

Before proceeding to an analysis of *The Jazz Singer* as a creolized text, a brief review of a somewhat similar play-to-film adaptation is productive because it involves Ernst Lubitsch, who had planned to direct *The Jazz Singer*. This is Lubitsch's *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1925). Made for Warner Bros., this radical adaptation of Oscar Wilde's famed play resulted in a brilliant comic duel between the filmmaker's visual wit and the playwright's verbal pyrotechnics.¹³ Certainly, as numerous newspaper critics suggested, the film could be better appreciated if one had seen the play performed or read the playscript, which was then widely available. And there was one particularly noteworthy fact: while Lubitsch claimed his film was a faithful adaptation, he did not use a single line of dialogue from the play. As critics remarked, only a brilliant director such as Lubitsch would have been so audacious. The film both negates the play and is "faithful" to it at the same time. Fair enough, but my own interest in the film took an unexpected turn after seeing the original 1916 British film adaptation of Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*, directed by Fred Paul for Ideal Films. It was immediately obvious that Lubitsch's film was not only a radical adaptation of Wilde's play but a hidden remake of the Ideal film.¹⁴ For Paul (or his screenwriter) had already discarded Wilde's dialogue. There was one near exception that is worth noting:

Line in the play (Lady Windermere to Lord Windermere): Yes, you gave me this fan today; it was your birthday present. If that woman crosses my threshold, I *shall* strike her across the face with it.

Intertitle in 1916 film (Lady W to Lord W): If that woman crosses my threshold, I *will* strike her across the face with *this fan*.

Paul kept Wilde's dependent clause of the complex sentence unchanged, while changing the independent clause. Lubitsch went on to keep Paul's independent clause while changing Wilde's dependent clause:

Intertitle in 1925 film (Lady W to Lord W): If she dares to come here – I will strike her across the face with this fan!

Here Lubitsch shows himself more faithful to the Ideal film than to the Wilde play (the "word play"

I argue was an intentional, private joke). Moreover, within the play itself, what is hidden is what is closest to one's heart: for Mrs. Erlynne, the secret that Lady Windermere is her daughter; for Lord Windermere, his payments to Mrs. Erlynne; and for Oscar Wilde, his homosexuality. For Lubitsch, it was his hidden use of the earlier film (ultimately he loved the movies more than the stage). The play's various triangles echo this triangularization of adaptation, which involves borrowings from both film and play – and so inevitably an impurity of sources. Lubitsch and his film combine elements of some ideal cinema and wild(e) theater. That is, in his use of dual sources – Lubitsch expresses his double allegiance. He draws equally from the stage and from film, from legitimate theater and cinema, from established/high and emergent/low art. His own work is a mixture, an almost utopic synthesis of the two; and such a unity would also hold for his ideal audience of theatergoers whose knowledge of stage and screen would be equal and encyclopedic.

While shooting pick ups in New York City for *Lady Windermere's Fan* (with Irene Rich), Lubitsch saw Samson Raphaelson's play *The Jazz Singer* shortly after it opened. He went with some of the Warner brothers, who eventually produced the film adaptation. Neal Gabler, author of *An Empire Of Their Own: How The Jews Invented Hollywood*, sees the Jewish American Warner brothers tackling a subject of Jewish American culture, based on the experiences of the play's author (Raphaelson), who grew up on the Lower East Side, and the film's star (Jolson), who is the inspiration behind the film's main character – Jackie Rabinowitz, aka Jack Robin.¹⁵ Unfortunately for some of this argument, the Warner brothers did not think very much of Raphaelson's play. It was Lubitsch who had them buy the property and who hoped to direct the film.¹⁶

The Ancient Law and The Jazz Singer

Once again Lubitsch was preparing another triangle. An accomplished and fascinating film, *The Ancient Law* was never widely shown in the United States. Though reviewed neither by *Variety* nor the mainstream press, it was casually referenced by film critic Harry Alan Potamkin, writing from England in a 1927 survey article for *National Board of Review Magazine*.¹⁷ In a later article Potamkin compared Dupont's *The Ancient Law* to Crosland's *The Jazz Singer*, finding Dupont's film to be much superior but failing to recognize their interconnectedness (beyond a



Fig. 3. This full-page advertisement for *The Jazz Singer* appeared in *American Hebrew*, 21 October 1927.

shared Jewish identity and concern.).¹⁸ Other scholars have also noted their similarities, but the dynamic generative nature of this relationship has never been considered.¹⁹ In the US of the 1920s, *The Ancient Law* was obscure – hidden like the English film version of *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Although Lubitsch did not make *The Jazz Singer*, his idea was obviously not a secret and is strongly reflected in the completed film. We will obviously never see the audacious masterpiece that Lubitsch would have likely made of it, but textual comparisons suggest that *The Ancient Law* provided the creative team at Warner Bros. with a reference point in making *The Jazz Singer*. Here again, the equal drawing on both stage and screen for its antecedents has multiple potential meanings, some of which differ from *Lady Windermere's Fan*.

The Ancient Law and *The Jazz Singer* are two

films about the tension between timeless tradition – as evidenced by the weight of Orthodox Judaism – and the energy of modernity as embodied by the theater. However, beyond Samson Raphaelson's stage version of *The Jazz Singer*, which opened in September 1925 to mixed reviews, we must keep in mind one other well-known antecedent. That is Raphaelson's earlier short story, "The Day of Atonement", published in *Everybody's Magazine* in January 1922.²⁰ This story contains the basic idea evident in all three components of the subsequent textual triangle: the actor has gotten his big break, but his performance is to premiere on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement – forcing him to choose between the secular religion of the stage and the sacred religion of the Jews.

Of course, Raphaelson's story had its own antecedents, in particular Mark Arnshteyn's play *Pieceniarze* (*Singers*, 1903), written in Polish but later translated into Yiddish as *Der vilner balebesl* (*The Little Vilna Householder*) and performed all over the Yiddish speaking world, including New York. Based on the legendary life of a nineteenth-century Vilna (Vilnius) cantor, the play was subsequently adapted as *Overture to Glory* (1939), which David Roskie has described as "a revival on film of a theater classic". A cantor is lured from his synagogue to Warsaw and the world of opera. He becomes a star but his family suffers and his son dies. Losing his voice, he returns home and, after chanting *Kol Nidre*, dies in the synagogue on Yom Yippur.²¹

We can only speculate, with varying degrees of confidence, the extent to which earlier texts are sources for later ones. It is certainly possible that both Raphaelson's short story "The Day of Atonement" and *Der vilner balebesl*, provided inspirational starting points for *The Ancient Law*, which also drew from theater maestro Heinrich Laube's reminiscences, *Erinnerungen, 1841–1881* (*Memories*, 1882). There are numerous ways in which Raphaelson's short story could have reached Dupont in Berlin: the story could have been translated into Yiddish or German and published in Europe; or since Jolson was interested in the story and an associate had flogged the idea to various film studios looking for a producer, word of it could have reached the German industry.²² Certainly this powerful dramatic dilemma of an actor having to choose either theatrical performance or religious ritual was present in both antecedent texts. However, the dilemma is more credible when set in 1860s Vienna, as it is in

The Ancient Law, than 1920s New York, as in *The Jazz Singer*. (It is hard to imagine that any New York theater manager would be stupid enough to open a musical on such a night.) Moreover, the protagonist in *The Ancient Law* does not give up his career by returning to the synagogue but puts aside his emotions and goes on stage to perform. E.A. Dupont may have owed a debt to "The Day of Atonement", but he made its plot point his own.

Although Raphaelson supposedly turned his short story into a play after a fraught meeting with Jolson, who wanted to turn it into a musical, it is also possible that Raphaelson had seen *The Ancient Law* and that the film contributed to this decision or at least influenced the process of adaptation.²³ Certain scenes, such as Jack Robin in his dressing room (Act 2, Scene 2), torn between going on stage or going to sing *Kol Nidre*, are not mentioned in the short story but have a clear counterpart in Dupont's film. Perhaps this is coincidence, but other things, such as the increased tension between the father and the son (the fact that the son has been declared dead) are also not in the Raphaelson story but shared with *The Ancient Law*. Moreover, the girlfriend, now named Mary rather than Amy Prentiss, takes on an entirely new narrative role as she discovers and promotes the aspiring performer – a role exactly like the one performed by Archduchess Elisabeth Theresia (Henny Porten) in Dupont's film.²⁴ Clearly, assuming that this extensive borrowing was the case (and why not borrow since Dupont may have already borrowed from him), his debt to *The Ancient Law* remained hidden – unspoken.

Lubitsch was one of the directors with whom E. A. Dupont had apprenticed in Germany.²⁵ After the success of his instant classic *Variety* (1925) Dupont went to Hollywood, where the duo enjoyed a reunion. As secular Jews and Berlin-based directors, they shared a sensibility and reference points. For instance, the performance of *Romeo and Juliet* by the fourth-rate theater troupe in *The Ancient Law* recalls – if Dupont was not consciously evoking – Lubitsch's *Romeo and Juliet in the Snow* (1920). By March 1926, in an ironic twist, Dupont himself was scheduled to make a film version of *Romeo and Juliet*.²⁶ Dupont (or his agent) had probably been screening his film around Hollywood, and it seems certain that Ernst Lubitsch saw *The Ancient Law* – either before or (more likely) after he saw the stage version of *The Jazz Singer*. Perhaps Lubitsch even surmised the ways in which Raphaelson had forged his play from



Fig. 4. Darryl F. Zanuck, Jack Warner, Al Jolson, and Alan Crosland pose with other cast and crew members on the set of *The Jazz Singer*.

these dual sources – his short story and Dupont's film. Lubitsch was evidently eager to add a new twist, a new triangle to this litany of texts. Soon after Warner Bros. bought the rights to Raphaelson's Broadway play in June 1926 (if not before), Lubitsch and a screenwriter presumably began to prepare a script –

Fig. 5. Breaking with the past: Jack Robin eats ham and eggs in *The Jazz Singer*, an action which parallels Baruch's cutting his sidelocks in *Das Alte Gesetz*.





Figs. 6 and 7.

In *Das Alte Gesetz*, the Archduchess Elisabeth Theresia is smitten by Baruch in the role of Romeo, and will foster his career.

one that drew from both play and film.²⁷ Such a script must have been well advanced if not completed by the time Lubitsch left Warner Bros. in August. How this idea got to those ultimately responsible for making the film is unclear. In any case, fellow Warner Bros. director Alan Crosland – highly capable if not brilliant – understood what Lubitsch was planning to do in a general way (in all likelihood so did production executives such as Sam Warner and Darryl F. Zanuck). How often the replacement director and the Warner Bros. team saw *The Ancient Law* can only be surmised, but it is quite possible that Dupont's film was shown with some frequency in the company's screening rooms. Knowing what Lubitsch had done



for *Lady Windermere's Fan*, it is impossible to dismiss this connection.

The indebtedness of Crosland's *The Jazz Singer* to *The Ancient Law* is only confirmed by comparing the two films. For instance, both films offer spectacular displays of Jewish ritual in the synagogue in ways that are extensive and highly unusual. Crosland must have found a useful model in Dupont's successful deployment and integration of this material. However, there were many other moments in *The Ancient Law* that provided narrative building blocks for the Warner Bros. film which were not in Raphaelson's play. As had been the case with Lubitsch's *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the earlier picture was a particularly useful reference point for the play's back-story as visualized in the later film. There are parallel moments early in each film as young Baruch (Ernst Deutsch) in *The Ancient Law* and Jakie (Bobby Gordon) in *The Jazz Singer* perform for an audience and have their performances brought to an end by their fathers. Jakie sings in a saloon while Baruch dresses up and plays a king on Purim. Both youths are punished and subsequently run away from home to pursue their desire to perform.

Later, after the two young men have been inducted into the theater world and are getting ready for their big breaks, they signal their commitment to this new world by somewhat similar gestures: Jack by eating ham and eggs, Baruch by cutting his sidelocks. A crucial scene in each film is the moment each aspiring performer is discovered – Jack Robin by Mary on one hand and Baruch by Elisabeth Theresia on the other. In Raphaelson's short story it is David Lee who discovers the protagonist, and in his play Mary's discovery of Jack is only discussed. In both films this moment of discovery is shown as Elisabeth Theresia/Mary looks at Baruch/Jack as he performs and is smitten. Likewise, the scenes when Jack and Baruch are in their respective dressing rooms backstage, agonizing over the impossible choice between their religious and familial heritage or their commitment to the law of the theater – between going to synagogue or performing in the opening night of the show – have uncanny visual similarities until we recognize that one was indebted to the other.

Crosland's *Jazz Singer* seems to draw equally and alternately on Raphaelson's play and Dupont's film. Moisha Yudelson – the kibitzer in *The Jazz Singer* – looks very much like the wandering Jew (the *schnorrer*) in *The Ancient Law*. They have a similar

relationship of father and son, though one is the inside-out version of the other. If Crosland does not always have Lubitsch's famed touch, there are moments when his ability to find a third way might have pleased Lubitsch – even if Lubitsch had already sketched them out. This would include the ending. In Dupont's *The Ancient Law*, the father has a change of heart after reading Shakespeare. He travels to Vienna and comes to the theater where he sees his son perform Friedrich Schiller's *Don Carlos*. The rabbi then realizes that his repudiation of his son (that his son was dead to him) was horrifically wrong, for *Don Carlos* is a play about a King who does not understand his son's aspirations and ends up by literally having him killed. Baruch's father staggers back to his son's elegant home and dies asking his forgiveness.

In Raphaelson's play the father dies without offering forgiveness, brokenhearted that his son became an actor. The mother lives on, but it is not at all clear that her attitudes toward the stage are much different than her husband's. She also does not go to see her son perform. In the film version of *The Jazz Singer*, the mother (rather than the father) goes to the theater and sees her son on stage. Instead of performing Friedrich Schiller's *Don Carlos*, about the relationship between father and son, the son sings – first "Mother of Mine" and then "Mammy" – about the singer's relationship with his mother. Moreover, in Crosland's film – not unlike Dupont's – the father realizes his mistake. Rigidity caused his death, but in death he rejects his rigidity and tells his Jackie/Jack that he loves him. None of these are, strictly speaking, happy endings, though critics have somehow tried to make it seem as if the film version was having it both ways.²⁸ It is striking that the film version of *The Jazz Singer* ends differently than the other two works on which it relies, and in particular does for the mother what *The Ancient Law* did for the father. In the process, Crosland's *The Jazz Singer* signals its distinctiveness and originality.

Complaints that the film was unfaithful to the play miss the much richer process of creative appropriation. Recognizing the dynamic of this textual triangle adds much that is new and important. Crosland's *The Jazz Singer* inevitably participates in a rivalry between the stage, which might be said to embrace tradition (whether *Hamlet*, *Don Carlos*, *April Follies* or the Raphaelson play itself), and the cinema, which might be said to embody modernity (particularly the Dupont and Crosland films) – echoing the



theatrical entertainment-religious ritual that generated the melodramatic tension. The 1927 film's simultaneous appropriation of theatrical and cinematic antecedents rejects the stage-screen binary that had opposed dialogue-driven theatrical performance to silent, visual cinema in theory and practice.²⁹ In this respect, "the talkies" and this new sound film offered a means to transcend elements of the stage-silent screen distinction, and so this burden; such transcendence is also embodied in this mode of adaptation.

Figs. 8 and 9.
In *The Jazz Singer*, Mary Dale is likewise enchanted by Jack Robin in performance.



The appropriation and engagement with antecedent texts evident in the Jolson film is connected to a second line of disparaging comments about the film – its treatment of Jewish identity. Some commentators have perhaps seen Yoelson's and Rabinowitz's adoption of de-ethnicized stage names as assimilationist; if so, this is a highly reductive criticism that lacks an adequate understanding of theatrical culture in the early twentieth century. The further suggestion that the film turns the play into a characteristically American fable of success misses the fact that Robin is clearly meant as an avatar for Jolson, who was a Broadway star while the play itself ran on Broadway. Jack's drive for success is no greater than Baruch's – indeed Baruch never returns to his father's synagogue: his father must come to him. Jack Robin never tries to conceal his Jewish identity and roots – nor did Jolson. His “real name” – Asa Yoelson – and the fact that he was the son of a cantor and did his first singing in a synagogue were standard parts of his biography, even back in the 1910s.³⁰ During World War I, Jolson helped form the Rabbis' Sons' Theatrical Benevolent Association with Harry Houdini, Irving Berlin, Bert Cooper and others.³¹ (Almost all of the rabbis' sons seemed to have stage names.) Robin's status as a Jewish performer is echoed by the film's display of Jewish ritual, much of which takes place inside the synagogue (which is not shown in Raphaelson's play).

Neither film nor actor advocate for a vast melting pot of ethnic groups that discard their cultural heritages to form a homogenized identity: *The Jazz Singer* with Al Jolson remained immersed in a strand of storytelling that came directly out of Jewish culture.³² Moreover, the film is permeated with Jewish culture: it begins and ends on Yom Kippur (excepting the post-script), while several extensive scenes take place in a Jewish synagogue. Midway through the film Jack Robin visits a concert hall to hear Cantor Yossele Rosenblatt sing a religious song, and in the penultimate scene Jolson himself sings the *Kol Nidre*. Some commentators have contended that the film stacks the cards against tradition, while Raphaelson's play suggests that life in the synagogue as a cantor is Robin's true calling. Again this is either contradictory or hypocritical – and not reflective of Raphaelson's original short story, where Robin finds the special vocal expression he needs to become a Broadway star by returning to sing *Kol Nidre* in temple.

The Jazz Singer is not assimilationist, though

it is integrationist. In all its permutations, Raphaelson's story embraces the modern as well as the possibilities of choosing spouses outside one's ethnic and religious heritage. This is perhaps one unspoken reason why many critics are uncomfortable with the film. Free choice of a marriage partner – when it leads to choosing someone of a substantially different cultural background – upsets the apple cart. In *The Ancient Law*, Baruch marries a woman his father does not approve of, but she is Jewish and from his hometown. Robin/Jolson do not. *The Jazz Singer* with Jolson is a mongrel text not only because its protagonist chooses a non-Jew – a small but significant further step from *The Ancient Law* – but because it combines high and low, stage and screen. As an adaptation, *The Jazz Singer* thus offers an overtone expression or aesthetic trope that resonates with the film's subject matter and ideology.

Demons of blackface

The many parallels between *The Ancient Law* and *The Jazz Singer* underscore the fact that the issue of the film's purported racism is fundamentally linked to Al Jolson and his use of blackface. However popularized and reductive Steve Daly's review of *The Jazz Singer*, it echoes the point of view of Michael Rogin's devastating analysis of the film in his renowned study *Blackface, White Noise*. Moreover, in complex and variable ways Rogin and other critics link the film's racist politics to its subversive politics of Jewish identity. Rogin asserts that the film fails to acknowledge many of the realities of Jewish life, which leads him to conclude: “Anti-Semitism is *The Jazz Singer*'s structuring absence. The visible cost it leaves behind is born by Jolson as he plays not a Jew but a black.”³³ Echoing previous critics who damn the film for its assimilationist ideology, Rogin suggests that putting on blackface is a way for Jolson to escape his Jewish identity. The film thus engages in a double operation, a semiotic seesaw, for *The Jazz Singer* also “blacks out the non-Jewish group behind the black mask. . . . The lips that speak Jack's personal voice are caricatured, racist icons.”³⁴ And, “The jazz singer rises by putting on the mask of a group that must remain immobile, unassimilable and fixed at the bottom.”³⁵ Rogin buttresses his harsh characterizations with an impressive array of references and footnotes. Although there is much that is interesting in Rogin's analysis, it is in the end not only a symptomatic, psycho-analytic reading of the film, it is a hysterical

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one – not only hysterical but sometimes even wrong.³⁶

Rogin's arguments, which elaborate on assessments by such film scholars as Lester Friedman, who has criticized the film's latent racism, have been widely acknowledged and engaged.³⁷ Susan Gubar echoed Rogin by aligning *The Jazz Singer* with *The Birth of a Nation* and claiming that it is "reenacting spirit-murder in its own albeit different register".³⁸ Linda Williams offers a more sympathetic treatment, arguing for the picture's "power to speak of racial affliction through music".³⁹ Williams focuses on the final moments of the film, when Jolson sings "Mammy" in blackface, and concludes, "The pathetic figure in blackface, now an empty icon of African-American suffering invested with Jewish dilemmas of integration and miscegenation never

imagined by Stowe, presides incongruously and precariously over a new musical form of racial melodrama in the Jazz Age".⁴⁰ Arthur Knight considers some of the screenings of *The Jazz Singer* in Chicago's race theaters even as he focuses on blackface and seeks to soften the militancy of Michael Rogin's critical remarks.⁴¹ Carol Clover suggests that the use of blackface in *The Jazz Singer* at least acknowledges Jolson's love and theft, which *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) did its best to efface and deny.⁴² Although these more sympathetic perspectives are useful, further investigations point towards a more forceful affirmation of Jolson and the racial politics of *The Jazz Singer*.

Given the conventional disapproval of *The Jazz Singer's* racial politics, we might reasonably ask how the film and Al Jolson were received in black communities during the 1920s – and then try to make sense of it. When it came to issues of race and representation, the black press was quite sophisticated and vigilant, with robust discussion and frequent disagreements. If, as Rogin claims, "*The Jazz Singer* facilitates the union not of white and black but of gentile and Jew", and if, "*The Jazz Singer* watered down revolutionary, black modern music in the name of paying it homage", how did black people respond to the film at the time of its release?⁴³ To put it simply, in the late 1920s African American newspapers and moviegoers warmly embraced Al Jolson and *The Jazz Singer*.

When the top end black theaters converted to sound, usually in 1928, *The Jazz Singer* was almost always the first feature-length talkie to be shown. In at least two instances, theaters catering to blacks did not even wait. In the first week of May, 1928, Harlem's esteemed Lafayette Theater showed *The Jazz Singer* before it was wired for sound. Willie Jackson sang the songs from Tin Pan Alley live, while "Cantor Silverbush" sang *Kol Nidre* and *Eli Eli*. The *Amsterdam News* called it "one of the greatest pictures ever produced".⁴⁴ Very shortly thereafter Chicago's Metropolitan Theater did the same. According to the *Chicago Defender*, "The picture is put on without this accessory [the Vitaphone], but Jerome Carrington capably sings and accompanies himself in the 'Mammy' song at the pipe organ".⁴⁵ Here are notable examples of white face, black noise.

The Republic Theatre in Washington, D.C. was one of the first race theaters to be wired for sound. Its newspaper advertisements declared that *The Jazz Singer* on the Vitaphone was being held over for

Fig. 10. *The Jazz Singer* held over for another week at the Republic Theatre. Advertisement, *Washington Tribune* (13 April 1928).

Fig. 11. Al Jolson Week at the Pearl. Advertisement, *Philadelphia Tribune* (4 April 1929).

a “2d GREAT WEEK”, 15–22 April 1928. The holdover occurred because:

No picture ever shown has gained the favorable comments such as “The Jazz Singer” has during its run at the Republic. Young and old alike have expressed their enthusiasm in tears and laughter as “The Jazz Singer” unfolds its great story. To see and to hear Al Jolson sing and talk is a thrill that perhaps comes once in a lifetime . . . For your own comfort attend the matinee shows if possible; so as to avoid the night crowds.⁴⁶

Less this be dismissed as standardized ballyhoo, a short article by Felix Walker in the same paper went:

Seen it? Heard it? If not you had better, because if you miss it you’ll miss the treat of your

life, so don’t fail to see Al Jolson in “The Jazz Singer” on the Vitaphone now playing the Republic Theatre.

Each performance of “The Jazz Singer” rouses the audience to wild outbursts of enthusiasm, expressed by tears, laughter or cheers . . . It is unique. Tremendous. Unforgettable.⁴⁷

Four weeks later the Republic Theatre offered a return engagement that lasted a full week, at a time when that venue showed most films for only two or three days. *The Singing Fool*, Jolson’s next film, also had a two-week run, after “many thousands . . . couldn’t get in the Republic to see this picture during its first week’s engagement”.⁴⁸

In Baltimore, the Regent Theater opened *The Jazz Singer* with a “Sunday midnight show” – on Monday (at 12:01 am), 7 May – with great anticipation; it was “acclaimed by throngs of Regent patrons”.⁴⁹ In Philadelphia, the Vitaphone sound version of *The Jazz Singer* was shown at the Royal Theater, 14–16 June 1928, and followed by Jolson in *The Singing Fool* at the Pearl Theatre, 25–27 February 1929.⁵⁰ The two films were then brought back for an “Al Jolson Week”, 7–13 April 1929 – including a midnight show on Sunday night of *The Jazz Singer*. This was done “owing to the insistent public demand.” Not only had *The Jazz Singer* “created a sensation that has never been equalled by any picture of this type”, but *The Singing Fool* “broke all records when last shown at the Pearl and thousands were unable to gain admission to see this famous Singing and Talking success”.⁵¹ Simply put, Al Jolson was the most popular Hollywood star among African Americans in the late 1920s.

Before The Jazz Singer: Jolson and the African American community

African Americans’ embrace of Jolson was not a spontaneous reaction to his appearance in talking pictures. In an era when African Americans did not have to go looking for enemies, Jolson was perceived as a friend and ally.⁵² In this respect, the frequently repeated claim that Jolson was encouraged to use blackface by a black man is noteworthy. Whether or not it was actually true, this story acted as a form of authorization that came from within the black community.⁵³ Admittedly, a souvenir booklet for *The Jazz Singer* told one version of the story for white consumption that was little more than a colorful backstage tale. Jolson was struggling as a performer

until “an old darky ... who assisted the comedian when he dressed” suggested that he adopt blackface. “Boss if yo’ skin am black they always laugh.” After blacking up, Jolson performed before his old dresser and was told “Mistah Jolson, yo is just as funny as me”. With blackface, Jolson was an overnight hit. This story, noted by Linda Williams in *Playing the Race Card* and Arthur Knight in *Disintegrating the Musical*, was told in such condescending terms that it caused Turner Entertainment, which reprinted the booklet as part of its DVD box set, to print a disclaimer: “These depictions [of ethnic and racial stereotypes] were wrong then and are wrong today”.

Linguistically modified versions of this story, however, appeared frequently in the black press – proffered with considerable pride. *The Baltimore Afro-American* reported:

Acknowledged now as the greatest comedian on the American stage, Al Jolson was a small time vaudeville actor until 1909 when he was induced to black his face to put over his comedy. An old race man who insisted [sic] him in dressing gave him the start toward fame by declaring, “If your skin’s black they always laughin’”.⁵⁴

A few months later, the *Washington Tribune* offered the same story with the following successive headlines: “Al Jolson’s Negro Valet Made Him Success ... Suggested that Comedian Use Burnt Cork. Star of ‘Singing Fool’ Once Lived Among Negroes in Washington.” Jolson himself now told the story. “I was not creating the riotous enthusiasm that I wanted to create”, the performer admitted:

Lived Here

Finally the solution came from an entirely unexpected source. While living in Washington, D.C., in the midst of Negroes [capital N], I had often imitated their dialect. At the time I was playing an engagement in Brooklyn and had an aged Negro assist me in dressing.

“Boss”, said he one night, “why don’t you put some black on yo’ face? Why don’t you sing yo’ songs all blacked up that-a-way. That always makes ‘em laugh.”

Made Instant Hit

“I got some burnt cork and put on a rehearsal for the benefit of the old man. In his opinion I



Fig. 12. Al Jolson, the blackface jazz singer.

was an unparallel[ed] success. “Mistah Jolson”, he said, beaming, “you is just as funny as me”.

With his encouragement I tried out the experiment on a theater audience and the change was so well received that I have clung to the characterization ever since.⁵⁵

From addressing a mainstream (primarily white) audience to a specifically black one, the telling of this story shifts on multiple registers from language to a much more sophisticated notion of blackface as a convention – a theatrical mask that was commonly used by performers, particularly comedians. And, as the *Washington Tribune* suggests, particularly black comedians. Jolson was seen as working in a theatrical form that had strong African American participation. On more than one occasion, Al Jolson was described as “the successor to the great Bert Williams as the leading black face stage comedian”.⁵⁶ Moreover, as the lead in the above *Washington Tribune* article suggests, Jolson grew up on the streets of Washington, D.C., playing with blacks. According to yet another theatrical legend, repeated by the *Baltimore Afro-American*, one of his fellow newspaper boys and playmates was Bill “Bojangles” Robinson – though they had a falling out after Robinson wrecked a prize bike he had just been given. (In adult life, they had apparently repaired the friendship.)⁵⁷

Fig. 13. Al Jolson plays the black jockey Gus in the musical comedy *Big Boy*. Advertisement, *New York Herald Tribune* (11 January 1925).

WINTER GARDEN B'way & 50th St. Evenings 8:30
MATS. TUES. & SAT. at 2:30

You Can't Beat Him! Hung Up A New Record!!

The World's Greatest Entertainer

AL JOLSON

in "Big Boy"

Jolson's relationship with the world of black culture and entertainers tends to contradict Rogin's insistence that blackface was a way for Jolson to identify with native-born whites. This was evident quite early in his career. When he covered the Jack Johnson-James J. Jeffries fight for *Variety*, he praised the new black champion's talents and refused to participate in the racist discourse around that event.⁵⁸ When Jolson was in Hartford, Connecticut, and read a local news item that a restaurant had refused to serve Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle, the performer immediately contacted them and accompanied them to dinner the next day.⁵⁹ Nor did he use blackface "to replace black bodies" and "silence their voices and sing in their name".⁶⁰ Jolson was known for "discovering" and promoting black talent, perhaps most notably Garland Anderson, the first African American to have a serious drama produced on Broadway (*Appearances*, 1925).⁶¹ The black press frequently and appreciatively mentioned that Jolson provided Anderson with train fare and expense money to travel from San Francisco, where he had worked as a bellhop, to New York City, where Jolson's ongoing sponsorship contributed to his

break.⁶² (The play required an integrated cast.) Although some black critics, such as George S. Schuyler, dismissed Anderson as a white creation, James Weldon Johnson took this breakthrough seriously and devoted several pages of *Black Manhattan* to it.⁶³

Jolson and *Big Boy*

The complex, multi-faceted nature of Jolson's interactions with African Americans and their culture in the mid-1920s is seen most clearly in the musical comedy *Big Boy*, which opened 7 January 1925 at New York's Winter Garden.⁶⁴ In this instance, it is fair to say that Jolson had essential creative control. Not only did the show hire "an all colored combination of 10 musicians", but "contrary to the usual arrangement the band will play on the stage and not in the pit".⁶⁵ Jolson was making black music more visible, while there are other indications that his relationship with the group was close. The musicians were members of the Clef Club, and Jolson was scheduled to be a guest of honor at a fundraiser for the Clef Club Orchestra at the Manhattan Casino on 155th Street



Fig. 14. Al Jolson rehearsing with singers for *Big Boy*, 5 August 1925. William C. Elkins is standing at the upper right. [Courtesy of Bettmann/CORBIS.]

on Easter Monday, bringing with him many of the white stars from *Big Boy*.⁶⁶ When Jolson became seriously ill and closed his show and retreated to the Bahamas to rest his voice, his absence was partially filled by the Al Jolson silver loving cup, which Garland Anderson presented to the winner of the Charleston contest.⁶⁷

Although *Big Boy* was enthusiastically received, the *New York Times* reviewer felt that, "perhaps the only distinguished numbers are the negro spirituals sung against banjo accompaniment by Al and the jubilee singers".⁶⁸ His enthusiasm was seconded by Percy Hammond of the *New York Herald Tribune*, who declared that "Mr. Jolson and a choir of colored men sing 'Deep River' and similar mellow Afro-American Hymns in a way that makes the other good tunes in the play seem hanky-panky".⁶⁹ This was early in a cycle of revived popularity for Negro spirituals, and this part of the show was often considered a novelty.⁷⁰ Paul Robeson found that Negro spirituals were not in vogue among either black or white elites, but was able to sing them in Nan Bagby Steven's play *Roseanne* in March 1924 and on other occasions. His successful concerts featuring spirituals with Larry Brown did not begin until April 1925, several months after the opening of *Big Boy*.⁷¹ James

Weldon Johnson and his brother J. Rosamond Johnson did not publish *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* until September 1925, while Alain Locke's *The New Negro*, which included his own essay "The Negro Spiritual", did not come out until December.⁷²

For this part of the show, Jolson hired "William C. Elkins and a unit of the Folk Song Singers".⁷³ William C. Elkins, almost entirely forgotten today, was then a significant figure in the world of Negro spirituals. In an extensive article in the *New York World* entitled "Negro Spiritual Rendition Stirs Up Big Composers War", black critic Lester A. Walton wrote:

"Should the Negro spiritual be sung in its original, primitive form or with more highly developed harmony?" On this question exists a pronounced difference of opinion among prominent Negro musicians. Harry T. Burleigh, composer and baritone soloist in St. George's church choir, entertains the views of a modernist. William C. Elkins, conductor of the Dextra Male chorus, and at one time conductor of the Williams and Walker Glee Club, is an uncompromising fundamentalist.

"Modern arrangements of Negro spirituals are necessary if this distinctive style of native

music is to become popular with the public at large", declares Mr. Burleigh.

"Members of the opposite race, particularly in ensemble, seem to better appreciate our music when they hear it in its simple state or what we might term its original form as heard on the plantations and in the churches", says Mr. Elkins ...

Harry T. Burleigh, Nathaniel Dett, J. Rosamond Johnson, Will Marion Cook and other Negro composers in recent years have attracted the attention of devotees of music by arranging the folk songs of their race more in keeping with the ideas of modern harmony and making it possible for these numbers to be rendered with orchestral accompaniment. ...

But the Fundamentalists assert that while in the new arrangements the harmony is more highly developed, the songs are robbed of their melody – "that the soul is taken out of them".⁷⁴

Burleigh's goal was to refine and elevate the art value of spirituals "to a plane where musical worth absorbs the attention". The emphasis on artistry was a central tenet of the Harlem Renaissance, and in this regard William C. Elkins may have been on the wrong side of the "composers war". Nevertheless, with the forced if temporary closing of *Big Boy* in April 1925, these singers billed themselves as Al Jolson's Jubilee Singers and took to the road, singing Negro spirituals.⁷⁵ They returned when *Big Boy* reopened in the fall.

There were several much debated issues as to the best way to perform spirituals. According to Alain Locke, "One of the worst features of this period has been the predominance of solo treatment and the loss of the vital sustained background of accompanying voices. In spite of the effectiveness of the solo versions, especially when competently sung by Negro singers, it must be realized more and more that the proper idiom of Negro folk song calls for choral treatment".⁷⁶ In contrast to Roland Hayes and Paul Robeson, Jolson was singing spirituals as the soloist within a choral group. On the other hand, Locke was undoubtedly not thrilled to have spirituals sung in a musical comedy – or by a blackface Jewish comedian. Nevertheless, as Nathan Huggins remarked, there was not only a desire "for spirituals to be recognized as the emotional and imaginative record

of the Negro's past" but for "Americans, white and black, to discover their souls in this true American folk music".⁷⁷

Jolson adeptly engaged the Negro-Jewish interplay that was at the heart of much commercial music in this period. In this regard, spirituals embodied one important conjunction. As James Weldon Johnson noted,

It is not possible to estimate the sustaining influence that the story of the trials and tribulations of the Jews as related in the Old Testament exerted upon the Negro. This story at once caught and fired the imaginations of the Negro bards, and they sang, sang their hungry listeners into a firm faith that as God saved Daniel in the lion's den, so would He save them; as God preserved the Hebrew children in the fiery furnace, so would He preserve them. As God delivered Israel out of bondage in Egypt so would He deliver them ...⁷⁸

"Go Down Moses", which demand such an allegorical reading, was given pride of place as the first song in Johnson's *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*. Although reviews of *Big Boy* rarely listed any titles of spirituals, the 1930 film version featured Jolson singing "Go Down Moses", a credible indication that it was in the original stage musical.⁷⁹ Problematic as the movie version of *Big Boy* may be, there is no doubt as to Jolson's sincerity, nor as to the power of this scene, especially when it was earlier performed on stage. A Jew using blackface to play a black man who sang spirituals with black singers about the plight of the ancient Jews: this was a powerful assertion of shared experience and unity. Jolson was using blackface as a way to assert a special bond between Negroes and Jews, challenging assertions that he used blackface to efface his Jewish identity or parody and demean blacks.

On and off stage, Jolson was actively participating in the cross-racial conviviality, to use Paul Gilroy's term, which characterized the Harlem Renaissance.⁸⁰ David Levering Lewis has called 1925 "year I of the Harlem Renaissance", and one wonders if Jolson might not have merited more mention in *When Harlem Was in Vogue* than as Anderson's benefactor. *Big Boy* was part of a changing racial dynamic on Broadway, which can be aligned with Sissle and Blake's *Chocolate Dandies*, which premiered 1 September 1924, and Florence Mills in *Dixie to Broadway*, which premiered 29 October 1924.⁸¹



Fig. 15. Lobby card advertising Al Jolson in the 1930 film version of *Big Boy*.

Jolson's mobilization of blackface needs to be investigated with greater accuracy, nuance and depth, and in this respect it is important to recognize that Jolson did not play an African American in *The Jazz Singer* (he played Jackie Rabinowitz aka Jack Robin, a blackface jazz singer). However, he did play a black character – Gus – in many of his stage musicals including *Big Boy*, in which Gus was a jockey devoted to the colt Big Boy, which grows up to race in the Kentucky Derby. In performing Gus, Jolson did not try to render invisible the mask of race and theater. It was a self-conscious construction with similarities to Chaplin's gentleman tramp, who took on different circumstances and occupations from film to film but always remained "Charlie".

Reviews of *Big Boy* provide a sense of Jolson's performance style as the singer was constantly breaking out of character to assert his on-stage Al Jolson persona. As one reviewer wrote,

For in "Big Boy" ... nothing is more interesting than the spectacle of Al stepping in and out of the picture. Now he is Gus, the black-face

jockey, sufficiently obsequious to his master and mistress, although obviously indulged by them out of all proportion. Presently, however, he is Al Jolson on the runway over the orchestra pit, bantering with the audience or discharging a "Mammy" ballad with as much noise and speed as a gun discharges a projectile. Gus and Al are by no means identical, but you cannot lay your fingers definitely upon the spot where the personality becomes the one thing or the other, where the metamorphosis occurs. However, just at the moment when Gus is about to turn into Al, you can perhaps feel a wave of self-consciousness pass lightly over the audience, and perhaps you are a little embarrassed yourself. Perhaps that is the alchemizing point.⁸²

So Jolson would play the role of Gus and sing with the Jubilee singers – being "as if" black (love and theft) – not to usurp or replace black bodies (the real black bodies were more numerous) but to align himself/identify himself with them.⁸³ Jolson would

then oscillate back into his Jolson persona, the Jewish son of a cantor who was nonetheless still in blackface. All of which left the audience enthralled but vaguely unsettled – perhaps because it was playing a little too aggressively with the color line. In fact, this oscillation was occurring on yet another level, since this musical comedy and the stage drama that was inspired by Jolson's life (i.e. Raphaelson's *The Jazz Singer*) were sometimes playing within a few blocks of each other that fall. (Jack Robin has the role of "Gus the porter" in *April Follies*, the musical he is rehearsing inside Raphaelson's play.)⁸⁴

The same *Times* critic sought to describe the alchemy that made Jolson such a compelling performer to watch:

Doubtless part of Jolson's hold on the audience that comes to see him, to be entertained by a stage entertainer, is the frankness all around, this breaking-down of all the usual theatre barriers when he steps on the runway. That in itself is not sufficient. Part of the hold is the complexity of his mood, the shrug or gesture that suggests more than the words have already spoken, the rapid turns in his patter. Part of it is the radiance of his high spirits, enhanced by the black-face that emphasizes threefold the expression in his eyes and in his mouth. Part of it, likewise, is the completeness with which he gives himself.⁸⁵

Jolson's use of blackface involved elements of distanciation, and his frequent self-reflexive moments constantly broke down the Stanislavsky-like illusion of naturalist-realist theater.⁸⁶ It differed sharply from the blackface that D.W. Griffith continued to use well into the 1920s. Griffith had white actors playing black butlers and maids in *One Exciting Night* (1922) and *The White Rose* (1923). These were for comic relief – and certainly demeaning. In fact, there was a moment when Jolson was scheduled to star in Griffith's film *Be Yourself*, which became *His Darker Self* (1924). At some point, the entertainer realized he had made a mistake. Jolson told the story this way:

A few years ago D.W. Griffith assured me that I would be a success on the screen. His arguments were so sound and plausible that it would have been unkind to doubt them. And so, as a preliminary step, I donned my makeup

one fine morning and underwent what is known as a camera test.

And the next day I saw the result on the screen! I was shocked and agitated beyond expression – so much so, indeed, that I promptly went away from the place and took the first boat to Europe. I felt there was not enough room in this country for both me and my shadow.⁸⁸

Jolson was later sued by Griffith; the performer's readiness to stand up to the famed director, whose racial politics were well known among African Americans, was widely reported in the black press.⁸⁸

Many aspects of Jolson's stage performance are hard to discern from the film version of *Big Boy*, which was also directed by Alan Crosland and released by Warner Bros. in August-September 1930.⁸⁹ In the film, Jolson stays in character as Gus until the very end, when he appears as Al Jolson without blackface make up, along with other members of the cast. That is, the film embraces the seamless style of performance that dominated Hollywood acting – not unlike the acting style that Griffith had wanted from Jolson for *His Darker Self*. *Big Boy* not only became a compromise formation between theater and film, but it lacked much of the freshness and originality it possessed in 1925–26 (for instance, the singing of Negro spirituals).

Although the film *Big Boy* is an awkward adaptation, its overall storyline and specific incidents are worth examining for what they tell us about the 1925 stage musical. Gus is a black jockey who ultimately wins the Kentucky Derby, though by the 1920s this once important opportunity for African Americans had become effectively closed off. In a flashback of sorts, Gus's grandfather – also played by Jolson and also named Gus – withstands and outwits the racist and sexist bullying of Southern plantation owner John Bagby (Noah Beery), gaining the permanent gratitude of the Bedford family for whom his descendants continue to work. Even so, there is doubt that Gus should ride Big Boy in the derby. Gus then becomes the victim of a conspiracy to throw the derby, but again triumphs, emerging as the musical's hero. That is, the stage musical offered an overtly critical commentary on racial practices in the United States, expressing outrage and offering interracial trust and conviviality as an alternative.⁹⁰

Blackface comedians

Rogin contends that blackface was already a resid-

ual practice by the 1920s, suggesting that “Jews had almost entirely taken over blackface by the early twentieth century”.⁹¹ This would suggest that African Americans and more established European Americans had abandoned a performance practice that they found demeaning, while Jolson and other Jewish comedians still embraced this residual mode of performance. Instead of rejecting racist practices, Jolson has been seen as guilty of perpetuating them. Yet, as Arthur Knight has already noted and even a casual look at the black press in the late 1920s confirms, this is not the case.⁹² The use of blackface remained a well-established convention among African American comedians. When black-face comedian Sammie Russell, aka Bilo, played Gibson’s Standard Theatre in Philadelphia in May 1928, he was billed as “the Funniest man on Earth”.⁹³

Six weeks later, when Sandy Burns (aka “Ashes”) came to Philadelphia with a company of comedians, he was likewise ballyhooed as “the world’s greatest comedian”. Under a picture of Burns in blackface, the promo claimed that “‘Ashes’ as he is commonly called has already become a Harlem idol of theatergoers. Witty, black-face nonsense, side-splitting humor and screaming funny situations enable Sandy Burns to almost satisfactorily entertain any audience alone”.⁹⁴ By early 1929, Burns and Russell had joined forces as “Ashes and Bilo”, and were touring with a company of 35 people.⁹⁵ Johnny Hudgins was another hugely popular African American comedian who performed in blackface in the 1920s and 1930s.⁹⁶

Certainly, there were rumblings of change in the blackface tradition. When the musical revue *Deep Harlem* came to the Howard Theater in Washington, D.C., black critic Jack Lytell noted, “Throughout the presentation the blackface comic, so essential to Negro offerings of the past, is conspicuous by his absence. Whether Broadway will stand for this or not remains to be seen”.⁹⁷ But the question of blackface was not what most concerned Lytell. After some further reflection, he denounced the musical as a degrading portrait of African Americans, one which played into all the stereotypes of urban blacks “with its degenerates, its creepers, its pickpockets, its number kings, its bootleggers, its lewd women, its mass of shiftless drifting rum soaked flesh mad Negroes”.⁹⁸ The critic quickly forgot about the absence of blackface comedians when confronted with more serious concerns. In his eyes blackface and demeaning black stereotypes were not equatable. The



Fig. 16. Bilo (stage name of Sammie Russell), one of many African American comedians who used blackface in the late 1920s and beyond. [Courtesy of Paige VanVorst.]

absence of blackface could even generate a “new realism” that could prove far more distressing.⁹⁹

The performance of modernity

If the above assessment makes sense, then by putting on blackface Jolson might be understood as putting on the mask of theater, specifically American theater, as much as the mask of race. *The Jazz Singer* is certainly “about” many things, but one of the most fundamental is the struggle between tradition and modernity, between religion and secular public culture: that is, between the synagogue or church and the theater, between the dress and rituals of religious worship and the dress and rituals of theatrical entertainment. The law of the father is replaced by the law of the theater – that “the show must go on” (and perhaps certain caveats such as “There’s no business like show business”). In Samson Raphaelson’s playscript, Jack Robin says, “The finest actors keep right on working, even if there is a death in the family. The show must go on . . . It’s like a religion”.¹⁰⁰ *The Jazz Singer* dramatizes the conflicts between traditional religion and the stage. This is not simply a Jewish immigrant’s story of Old World traditions confronting New World dynamism. It is a story with which African Americans in Northern cities could easily identify as they left behind the traditional

Figs. 17 and 18. Cantor Rabinowitz (Warner Oland) and his wife Sarah Rabinowitz (Eugenie Besserer).



and apparently timeless norms of the agrarian South in the Great Migration.¹⁰¹

The conflicts between traditional religion and cosmopolitan modernity had meaning to many native-born white Americans as well. Here, at the risk of adding a personal note, I offer my grandfather as a parallel example. John Musser was born in 1887 and was a year younger than Jolson. The son of a minister in Lancaster and Bedford, Pennsylvania, he undoubtedly complained about traditional religious “stuff that doesn’t mean anything to me anymore”.¹⁰² When he was sent to a boarding school, he stole the clapper from the chapel bell that had been donated to the school in his father’s name (an offense that would have normally led to instant expulsion). This was only an early instance of rejecting – indeed quite literally silencing – his father’s religious devotion. When he married my grandmother, who was from another Protestant denomination, this was such a serious breach of religious faith that ministers from both denominations refused to marry them. (Like Jolson, he married outside the faith.) They married at

city hall. It seems quite possible that my grandparents went to see *The Jazz Singer*. If so, my grandfather’s possible identification with Jolson would not have been facilitated by some notion that Jolson was becoming more “white” (that is WASPy) by putting on blackface but by their shared rejection of traditional religion and their embrace of cosmopolitan culture (though my grandfather, who later chaired the NYU history department, saw academia and the entertainment world as antithetical in other respects).

The religion of Cantor Rabinowitz is mono-cultural and mono-racial, while people in the theater came from many religions and possessed numerous customs, backgrounds and beliefs. One has only to look at those who performed in front of Edison’s motion picture camera in 1894–95 to gain a glimpse of this world: they were Catholics, Jews, Protestants, Muslims, Hindus and atheists; boxers, drunks, animal trainers, children, bums and queers; people from every part of the globe – American Indians, Japanese, British, French, Germans, Arabs, Irish Americans, African Americans, Mexicans, Latin



Americans, South Sea Islanders and so forth. In joining the theater, these performers joined an alternative, secular religion – one that theoretically accepts anyone provided they share the one commitment and belief that “the show must go on”. By putting on the mask of theater, Jack Robin/Jolson does not escape the defining issues of race, religion and ethnicity. Quite the opposite: he becomes immersed in it through what we might call backstage conviviality. Moreover, by putting on this mask and becoming part of America and its public culture, he enters into a world where the color line was (and is) a conflicted and pressing issue and where his identity as a Jew is triangulated and destabilized.¹⁰³

The construction and mobilization of identities happens in a very particular way in *The Jazz Singer* – and in ways that are quite different from *Big Boy*. That is, publicity repeatedly emphasized that Jolson was essentially playing himself. Such a doubling is quite rare in the cinema, and this merging of actor with his role dissolves the normal binarism of performance for which the mask of theater is an exem-

plary form. Like his character in *The Jazz Singer* – Jackie Rabinowitz/aka Jack Robin, Asa Yoelson/aka Al Jolson was the son of a cantor and rabbi. There is a correspondence here, not only because both Al/Asa and Jackie/Jack retained the first letters of their first and last names when assuming their new, modern American identities, but because *Jack Robin*’s full name begins with J and ends in N – like Al’s last name. Likewise, Robin’s romantic relationship with Mary Dale echoed Jolson’s relationship with his first two wives, *shiksa* chorus girls. It is only here that we might see a potential loss or dilution in Jolson’s/Robin’s Jewish identity, since in Jewish tradition if the mother is not Jewish, the children are not considered Jewish. (In this way the world could be populated by non-Jews with Jewish last names and people with non-Jewish last names who are Jewish.) Rogin seems to have displaced his anxiety over such a potential loss of Jewish identity from these kinds of romantic relationships onto blackface.

Identity has particular kinds of instability on the stage and in the movies. Consider some of the other

characters in *The Jazz Singer*. The comic kibitzer Moisha Yudelson was played by Otto Lederer, a Jewish actor who had played many Jewish roles, but he was an exception (perhaps in a funny way, he was Jolson's double).¹⁰⁴ In contrast, consider Jackie Rabinowitz's parents. Cantor Rabinowitz was played by Swedish born Warner Oland, who played a wide variety of ethnic and racial roles, many in yellow face; Oland "immersed himself thoroughly in the Talmud and kindred Jewish writings in order to properly play the cantor".¹⁰⁵

The French Canadian and Catholic actress Eugenie Besserer played Sarah Rabinowitz. Correspondingly, Jack Robin's romantic interest, Mary Dale, is a nice WASPy girl who was played by Catholic May McAvoy. And the director of this Jewish coming-of-age story was WASP Alan Crosland. These boundary crossings, which occur most obviously in performance, allow for other forms of boundary crossing and alliances among the personnel.

The taking-on of other ethnic identities evident in the production of *The Jazz Singer* (and many other Hollywood films) has its counterpart in the process of spectatorship. Indeed one could argue that the publicized nature of these disjunctive performances encouraged audiences to follow suit, allaying guilt or anxiety as they are sutured into the fictive world of the film. Perhaps the movie theater was, in this respect, the great melting pot for America. Did black audiences participate in this process? Contrary to what we might suppose, they were not sutured into some kind of ideological cultural process from which they were simultaneously excluded. As James Snead suggests, "It is not true that we identify only with those in a film whose race or sex we share. Rather the filmic space is subversive in allowing an almost polymorphically perverse oscillation between possible roles, creating a radically broadened freedom of identification".¹⁰⁶ James Baldwin put it somewhat differently:

No one, I read somewhere, a long time ago, *makes his escape personality black*. That the movie star is an "escape" personality indicates one of the irreducible dangers to which the moviegoer is exposed: the danger of surrendering to the corroboration of one's fantasies as they are thrown back from the screen.¹⁰⁷

It is impossible to ascertain the extent to which Jolson might have been an escape personality for African Americans who thronged to *The Jazz Singer* and *The Singing Fool*. His public persona – perhaps

even his use of blackface – would have facilitated such fantasmatic identification, which was elsewhere authorized by the identity shifts of other actors in the film. Perhaps these audiences identified less with the Jolson persona itself than with the similar experiences of familial loss as well as the narrative of aspiration and eventual success (in the realm of theater, itself open to African Americans). In short, viewing could become a private performance of the soul – one that could have a tremendous emotional kick.

Although Michael Rogin imagines that Jack/Jolson loses his religious and ethnic identity "by putting on the mask of a group that must remain immobile, unassimilable and fixed at the bottom", something quite different might be occurring.¹⁰⁸ First, the choice facing Jack in *The Jazz Singer* is not between converting to Christianity or staying true to his Jewish culture and religion, it is between tradition and modernity.¹⁰⁹ Second, if *The Jazz Singer* depicts ethnic, racial and cultural mobility at a time and place where many urban-based, cosmopolitan Americans were feeling a new sense of freedom and possibility (particularly in the realm of culture), *this was also true for African Americans*. It was not only Jackie who was driven to make it on Broadway, jettisoning old identities in the process. Garland Anderson with his play *Appearances*, dramatic actors such as Charles Gilpin and Paul Robeson, and performers in musicals such as *Shuffle Along* and *Dixie to Broadway* were also Broadway successes. The narrative of upward mobility and success was being realized by a small but highly visible component of the black community.

In the 1920s, moreover, black mobility took a number of other forms, including the troubled one of passing. Some African Americans passed sporadically "as a joke, a game, a lark, a pastime".¹¹⁰ For others it was more permanent. Estimates of the number of blacks who crossed over and passed for white vary widely, from 2,600 per year (between 1920 and 1940) to as much as 40,000 to 50,000 per year. The actor Noble Johnson was among them. Passing was "the favorite theme of Negro fiction" until 1940.¹¹¹ Here George S. Schulyer contributed a satirical, futurist novel in which "America's premier black-faced troubadour", that is Al Jolson, sang

Vanishing Mammy, Mammy! Mammy! Of
Mine,
You've been away, dear, such a awfully long
time



Fig. 19. Al Jolson sings “Mother of Mine”.

You went away, Sweet Mammy! Mammy! One summer night.
I can't help thinkin', Mammy, that you went white.
Of course I can't blame you, Mammy! Mammy!
Dear
Because you had so many troubles, Mammy, to bear.¹¹²

As one black newspaper critic remarked, somewhat tongue in cheek, vis à vis *The Jazz Singer*: with all the Negroes trying to pass for white, it was nice to see a white man [Jolson] trying to be black for change. That white and black performers used blackface suggests a kind of equivalence or interchangeability, however much that suggestion of possibility fell short in practice. When commentary in black newspapers asserted Jolson's debt to Bert Williams, it was a way of reordering relations of authority and power. Although new possibilities were

painfully constrained and distorted by racial prejudice, many African Americans did not feel that they lived lives that were immobile, unassimilable and fixed at the bottom. We should not be naïve about racial politics on screen or off, but we do need to respect the reception that Al Jolson and *The Jazz Singer* received from black moviegoers.

The black community's appreciation for Jolson faded somewhat during the 1930s. Even as *Mammy*, starring Jolson and directed by Michael Curtiz, was moving into race theaters three months after its New York premiere on 26 March 1930, the *New York Amsterdam News* saw Jolson as “the one white man who performs ‘blackface’ in such a manner that every colored performer is proud of him”.¹¹³ Nevertheless, during the 1930s Jolson's films had shorter runs and enjoyed noticeably less attention in the black press. As Rogin suggests, sound cinema – but also pan-chromatic film, the close up and a persistent emphasis on a verisimilar mise-en-scene – worked against

his gestalt as a blackface entertainer. Not only the movies but also the radio rapidly consumed his theatrical nest egg and forced him into a search for new material. He continued to foster black talent, but black newspapers vehemently protested when he reportedly wanted to buy *The Green Pastures* and play De Lawd.¹¹⁴ His wishes to play Brutus Jones and Porgy on the stage were met with disapproving outcries. Longing to somehow establish himself as a serious dramatic actor, Jolson took on starring roles in *The Emperor Jones*, *Porgy* and other dramas over the airwaves.¹¹⁵ But in the 1920s, at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, this apparent loss of perspective was still in the future.

This inter-textual assessment suggests that Crosland's *The Jazz Singer* was not reinforcing the black/white racial divide – and certainly not depicting Jews trying to pass for lily white WASPs at the expense of African Americans. Rather, in part by mobilizing Jolson's persona, the picture offered audiences a utopic vision of crossing racial, religious, ethnic and media-specific boundaries, and reaffirmed the ways that a newly reconfigured theater (and a newly configured cinema) could provide a liberating force over and against tradition. Religious identity is not discarded or forgotten. It gives way and must accommodate to secularism, modernity, cosmopolitan culture, and a form of multi-cultural interaction that is transgressive in a positive sense. At the same time, both play and film versions of *The Jazz*

Singer suggest that the rigid commandments of the theater must be softened along with those of religion. (Premieres should not happen on Yom Kippur; children should be allowed to suspend their performances and honor their parents in death, even as sons and daughters who become actors should not be deemed dead by rigid, sanctimonious parents.) This utopic aspiration, which has often been dismissed as sentimentality, was one reason why African American audiences flocked to *The Jazz Singer* in the late 1920s. Another, of course, was Jolson himself – a man who had already challenged the color line on stage and off in ways that African Americans (whether performers, journalists, or audiences) appreciated. *The Jazz Singer* thus spoke to their circumstances and their aspirations – not against them.

Acknowledgements: The idea for this essay began while working on *Oscar Micheaux and His Circle: African American Filmmaking and Race Cinema of the Silent Era* (1997) as I occasionally encountered items in black newspapers that indicated *The Jazz Singer* was warmly received in black communities. And it was sparked into actual existence after I saw E.A. Dupont's *Das Alte Gesetz* at the 2007 Giornate del Cinema Muto in Pordenone, Italy. This resulted in an initial presentation at Emory University in April 2008: special thanks to both Matthew Bernstein and Karla Oeler for their encouragement and suggestions. Thanks also to Richard Koszarski, Maria Threese Serana, John Williams, Jacqueline Stewart and Laurence Kardish for their comments and support. Krin Gabbard also kindly shared a helpful bibliography on *The Jazz Singer* for a forthcoming project.

Notes

1. Robert L. Carringer (ed.), *The Jazz Singer* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), xx.
2. Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1988), 143. Raphaelson was publically very upbeat about Crosland's *The Jazz Singer* when the film was first in theaters. See "Birth of *The Jazz Singer*", *American Hebrew* (14 October 1927): 812, 821. In a later, 1959, interview for the Columbia Oral History Project, he was much more critical. This more negative view was picked up by Carringer, Gabler and others.
3. Lester D. Friedman, *Hollywood's Image of the Jew* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1982), 52; Gabler, 141–143.
4. Steve Daly, "DVD Review: *The Jazz Singer* (2007)", *Entertainment Weekly*, 16 October 2007. <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20151980,00.htm> I, accessed 2 April 2008. The review generated a wide range of responses—some agreeing that the film was racist, others protesting. Some, astutely I think, pointed out that modern day entertainment still has its own very real issues and that we should not be so self-congratulatory on the progress that has supposedly been made. For an essay that looks at Jolson and *The Jazz Singer* in a less judgmental way, see Krin Gabbard, "Al Jolson: The Man Who Changed Movies Forever", in Patrice Petro (ed.), *Idols of Modernity: Movie Stars of the 1920s* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 202–226.
5. Robert E. Sherwood, "The Silent Drama: *The Jazz Singer*", *Life* (27 October 1927): 24.
6. "Jazz Singer Scores a Hit", *Los Angeles Times* (16 October 1927): C13.
7. "Jazz Singer Is Landmark", *Los Angeles Times* (30 December 1927): A11.
8. "Al Jolson Triumphs in *The Jazz Singer*", *American Hebrew* (14 October 1927): 823.

9. "Revue and Jolson Picture Score", *New York Amsterdam News* (2 May 1928): 7.
10. Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess", *Film Quarterly* 44:4 (Summer 1991): 4.
11. Although it would put me in the Mary Dale position, my daughter's mother is Jewish of Eastern European background. Not unlike the Rabinowitz, my parents bitterly opposed my desire to work in film and there were times when we were not speaking. Only after returning East from a two year stint on *Hearts and Minds* (the film was cut in Los Angeles), did they stop trying to convince me to become a lawyer. But there are more recent resonances as well.
12. Carringer, 26–27.
13. For a detailed discussion, see Charles Musser, "The Hidden and the Unspeakable: On Theatrical Culture, Oscar Wilde and Ernst Lubitsch's *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1925)", *Film Studies* 4 (Summer 2004): 12–47.
14. Ideal copyrighted the film in the United States in 1917, although it does not seem to have been released there until 1919. (*Wid's*, 18 June 1919.)
15. Gabler, 139–141.
16. Carringer, 14–15; Scott Eyman, *Ernst Lubitsch: Laughter in Paradise* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 120.
17. Harry Alan Potamkin, "The Plight of the European Movie", *National Board of Review Magazine*, December 1927, in *The Compound Cinema: The Writings of Harry Alan Potamkin* (New York: Teachers' College Press, 1977), 277. Here the film is called *Baruch*. Chris Horak discusses a German film from this period, *The Fall of Jerusalem*, which had limited distribution in the US and was invisible in the trade press. See "The Strange Case of *The Fall of Jerusalem*: Orphans and Film Identification", *Moving Image* 5:2 (2005): 26–49.
18. New York Notes: II", *Close Up*, February 1930, in *The Compound Cinema*, 369–370.
19. Laurence Kardish, "The Old Law", *Members Calendar*, Museum of Modern Art, March 2011.
20. Samson Raphaelson, "The Day of Atonement", *Everybody's Magazine* (January 1922): 44–55, reprinted in Carringer, 147–167.
21. J. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film between Two Worlds* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 270–271; "Arnshteyn, Mark", *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Arnshteyn_Mark (accessed 28 February 2011); David Roskie, email correspondence, 31 January 2011. Thanks also to David Goldfarb.
22. Herbert G. Goldman, *Jolson, The Legend Comes to Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 126–127.
23. Carringer, 12; Goldman, 146. Raphaelson sold the rights to the play, then known as *Prayboy*, in May 1925 (Carringer, 12).
24. The most famous Archduchess was Maria Theresa of Austria, who ruled the Hapsburg empire from 1740 to 1780. While there was an Archduchess Elisabeth Franziska of Austria (1831–1903) and her daughter Archduchess Maria Theresa of Austria-Este (1849–1919), there was also – not surprisingly – an Archduchess Elisabeth Theresia. Did Raphaelson choose Mary as an anglicized name for Maria?
25. Paul Matthew St. Pierre, *E. A. Dupont and His Contribution to British Film* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010), back cover.
26. "New Faces for the Screen", *New York Times* (7 March 1926): X5. It is always possible that this reference to *Romeo and Juliet* was an inside joke played on the press. Assuming otherwise, *Romeo and Juliet* would have been Dupont's second Hollywood production. It was apparently called off when the first – *Love Me and the World Is Mine* (1926) – was not a commercial success. Although there is a modest literature on E.A. Dupont, virtually nothing has been written about his time in Hollywood during the mid-1920s. See Jürgen Bretschneider (ed.), *Ewald André Dupont: Autor und Regisseur* (Munich: Verlagm 1992); Herbert G. Luft, "E. A. Dupont, 1891–1956", *Films in Review* 28:6 (June–July 1977): 343–358.
27. If the process for *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1925) is any indication, Lubitsch was quite possibly well advanced in his film adaptation of *The Jazz Singer* before Warner Bros. purchased the rights to the play.
28. Carringer (26–27) suggests the new film ending "changes the overall nature of the story" and sentimentalizes it. He suggests the success narrative is new, but in the short story, Jack Robin has—because he is singing the *Kol Nidre*—found something new in his voice that will make him a great jazz singer. See also Gabler, 140–143.
29. See Hugo Munsterberg, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (New York: D. Appleton and Co, 1916); Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1957); Noël Carroll, *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).
30. "The Story of Al Jolson", *New York Times* (24 February 1918): 54.
31. "Sons of Rabbis Organize", *New York Times* (22 July 1918): 10; Raphaelson went to Rabbi Cooper's synagogue as a youth.
32. See Friedman, 52.
33. Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 89.

34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 92.
36. For instance, Rogin (116) says that after the father yells "stop", Jolson never again sings except in blackface. Yet he takes on the role of the Cantor to sing while his father is dying. It is frankly difficult to see how Jolson/Robin is escaping his Jewish identity, but this point is frequently reiterated. See Charles Scruggs, "Sexual Desire, Modernity and Modernism in the Fiction of Nella Larsen and Rudolph Fisher", in George Hutchinson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 162.
37. Friedman, 50. Friedman was disturbed by the widespread use of blackface by Jolson and other Jews. He rejected the kind of historical contextualization that this essay undertakes and remarked that "the undisguised elements of ridicule in such blackface portrayals by Jews mimicking the outlandish stereotypes of blacks now looks suspiciously like one group's desperate need to assert its own superiority by mimicking another. Such a motivation while perhaps unconscious is nonetheless hard to ignore".
38. Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 66.
39. Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 148.
40. Ibid, 158.
41. Arthur Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performance and American Musical Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 29–30, 52–58.
42. Carol J. Clover, "Dancin' in the Rain", *Critical Inquiry* 21: 4 (Summer 1995): 722–747. Recently, most critics have focused on the issue of blackface in *The Jazz Singer*. One noteworthy exception is Charles Wolfe, "Vitaphone Shorts and *The Jazz Singer*", *Wide Angle* 12 (July 1990): 58–78.
43. Rogin, 79, 115.
44. "Revue and Jolson Picture Score", *New York Amsterdam News* (2 May 1928): 7. This exhibition is actually mentioned by Rogin (196), but in a way that is careful to minimize the contrarian evidence that he was beginning to discover. Willie Jackson is better known as "New Orleans" Willie Jackson; see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Orleans_Willie_Jackson. Silverbush was probably the actor Sam Silverbush. He can be heard singing "King Lear" at http://faujsa.fau.edu/jsa/discography.php?jsa_num=503718-B.
45. "The Metropolitan", *Chicago Defender* (12 May 1928): 10. This screening is mentioned in Knight, 29–30. See also "Baltimore Musician Sings Jolson Songs for Theatre", *Baltimore Afro-American* (12 May 1928): 9. Carrington was from Baltimore, and when the Roosevelt Theatre announced *The Jazz Singer* was coming soon in May 1928 it may have intended to use the same strategy. See advertisement, *Baltimore Afro-American* (12 May 1928): 8.
46. "The Jazz Singer Held Over for Second Week at the Republic", *Washington Tribune* (13 April 1928): 10.
47. "Al Jolson on the Vitaphone at the Republic", *Washington Tribune* (13 April 1928): 10.
48. "Al Jolson Held Over for Second and Final Week", *Washington Tribune* (16 November 1928): 9.
49. "Al Jolson to Open in *Jazz Singer*", *Baltimore Afro-American* (5 May 1928): 7; "Jazz Singer Seen as Gripping Drama", *Baltimore Afro-American* (12 May 1928): 8.
50. Advertisement, *Philadelphia Tribune* (7 June 1928): 6; Advertisement, *Philadelphia Tribune* (21 February 1928): 6.
51. "Al Jolson Week at the Pearl", *Philadelphia Tribune* (4 April 1929): 6.
52. The Wikipedia entry for Al Jolson offers a portrait of Jolson in which his interactions with blacks were notably positive.
53. According to Jolson biographer Herbert G. Goldman (35–36), it was blackface singer and monologist James Francis Dooley who suggested Al Jolson don blackface in 1904. Goldman took this information from Harry Jolson, *Mistah Jolson* (Hollywood, CA: House Warven, 1951), 93.
54. "Al Jolson to Open in *Jazz Singer*", *Baltimore Afro-American* (5 May 1928): 7. One might note that backstage positions for African Americans were often sinecures for aging black actors.
55. "Al Jolson's Negro Valet Made Him Success", *Washington Tribune* (16 November 1928): 9.
56. "Jolson's Pay Envelope \$15,000 Weekly", *Baltimore Afro-American* (2 June 1928): 6.
57. "Smashed Bicycle Wrecked Jolson-Robinson Combination", *Baltimore Afro-American* (12 January 1929): 7. This story, without the mention of Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, is also told in Goldman, 16.
58. Jolson wrote, "Johnson just played with him as a cat does a mouse. It's all right to say that, if Jeff were in his prime, what he would have done to Johnson, but believe me, it would have been just the same. The majority at the ring side must say that Johnson is the greatest fighter who ever lived. "The Fight at Reno", *Variety* (9 July 1910): 4.
59. Goldman, 170–171. Goldman presents this as a spontaneous, isolated event rather than part of a systematic pattern. The Wikipedia entry for Al Jolson has tried to correct this oversight. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al_Jolson.
60. Rogin, 112.

61. James Hatch and Ted Shine (eds), *Black Theatre USA: Plays by African Americans* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 95–97.
62. “Anderson East with New Play”, *Baltimore Afro-American* (29 November 1924): 7; “Pierce Tells It”, *Chicago Defender* (13 December 1924): 8; “Bellboy To Read His Play Before Governor and Mayor”, *Baltimore Afro-American* (4 April 1925): A2.
63. George S. Schuyler, “Thrusts and Lunges”, *Pittsburgh Courier* (2 May 1925): 16; James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Knopf, 1930), 203–205.
64. “Al Jolson Triumphs as Jockey in *Big Boy*”, *New York Times* (8 January 1925): 28.
65. “Colored Band Now with Jolson”, *Baltimore African American* (22 November 1924): 8.
66. “Fifteenth Clef Club Dance Easter Monday”, *Chicago Defender* (4 April 1925): A7.
67. “Post Lenten Dances Give Many Thrills”, *Pittsburgh Courier* (25 April 1925): 3.
68. “Authors vs. Actors”, *New York Times* (6 September 1925): X1.
69. Percy Hammond, “Mr. Jolson at His Best in *Big Boy*, a Good Show of Its Kind”, *New York Herald-Tribune* (8 January 1925): 12.
70. “Jolson’s the Real *Big Boy*”, *Los Angeles Times* (25 May 1927): A9.
71. Paul Robeson, Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: An Artist’s Journey, 1898–1939* (New York: John Wiley, 2001), 74. “Paul Robeson, Lawrence Brown Score Big New York Success With Negro Songs”, *Pittsburgh Courier* (2 May 1925): 10.
72. “Publish Johnson’s Book of Spirituals”, *Chicago Defender* (26 September 1925): A1; “‘Opportunity’ Dinner Celebrates New Book”, *New York Amsterdam News* (9 December 1925): 9.
73. “Around Harlem with Jackson”, *Baltimore Afro-American* (24 January 1925): A4.
74. Reprinted in *Pittsburgh Courier* (25 October 1924): 11. In early 1927 Elkins was director of the Dexter quartet”. See “Sidelights of Society”, *New York Amsterdam News* (19 January 1927): 4. Were the Dexter quartet and the Dextra Male chorus the same group, with one newspaper guilty of a misspelling?
75. Floyd G. Snelson, “Theatrical Comment”, *Pittsburgh Courier* (11 April 1925): 10; “Jolson Jubilee Singers”, *Chicago Defender* (11 April 1925): 6.
76. Alain Locke, “Spirituals”, in Locke (ed.), *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), 209.
77. Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 77.
78. James Weldon Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* (New York: Viking Press, 1925), 20–21. See also Locke, 201.
79. See Knight’s fine analysis of Jolson’s use of “Go Down Moses” in *Big Boy* (64).
80. Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 67.
81. David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Knopf, 1981), 164.
82. “Authors vs. Actors”, *New York Times* (6 September 1925): X1.
83. See Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
84. Samson Raphaelson, *The Jazz Singer* (New York: Brentano’s, 1925), 66.
85. “Authors vs. Actors”.
86. Brechtian distanciation as one source defines it: “Brecht used a number of techniques, including songs and direct addresses to the audience, in order to prevent the audience from empathising with the characters or abandoning themselves to the narrative and thereby missing the political content of the drama”. (“Brechtian”, <http://www.luxonline.org.uk/education/glossary.html>)
87. Al Jolson, “What I Think of the Movies”, *The [Jamaica] Gleaner* (18 May 1929): 36.
88. “Demand for Film Actors Increasing”, *Baltimore Afro-American* (20 December 1924): A6; “Al Jolson, Black Face Stage Star, Realize His Lack of Personality on The Screen”, *Pittsburgh Courier* (25 September 1926): 9.
89. *Big Boy* opened first in Baltimore on 28 August 1930, but did not screen in New York until mid-September.
90. Jolson was also apparently sensitive to issues of language. When “Singing Sam” appeared on Jolson’s radio program in the 1930s, he employed the word “coon” in one of his songs. Protests elicited a quick apology from the Al Jolson Company, along with the assurance that it would not happen again. See “Woman Attorney Protests Radio Slurs on Negro”, *Pittsburgh Courier* (22 April 1933): 3. Moreover, both the play script and screenplay for *The Jazz Singer* contain the word “nigger” – which does not appear in the final film. The person responsible for these changes is unknown but Jolson is certainly a likely possibility.
91. Rogin, 97.
92. Knight, 31–48.
93. Advertisement, *Philadelphia Tribune* (24 May 1928): 6.
94. “‘Sandy’ Is Coming Back Opens at Pearl Theatre with Cast of 40 People”, *Philadelphia Tribune* (5 July 1928): 6.

95. Advertisement and "Ashes & Bilo Return to Pearl", *Philadelphia Tribune* (31 January 1929): 6.
96. Johnny Hudgins Papers, 1927–1988, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.
97. "Deep Harlem Epoch Making Presentation Pleases", *Washington Tribune* (21 October 1928): 8.
98. Jack Lytell, "Down Theatrical Lane", *Washington Tribune* (28 October 1928): 8.
99. Arthur Knight (40–48) details the process of what he calls "wearing and tearing the mask" in the late 1920s and 1930s.
100. Raphaelson, *The Jazz Singer*, 96. The last sentence in this quote was reprised in the film.
101. Jacqueline Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).
102. Raphaelson, *The Jazz Singer*, 186.
103. These are not the same processes or experiences as the pejorative term "assimilation" as used by both Gabler and Rogin. Although clearly used as something of an epithet, what they mean by assimilation and why they considered Jolson particularly guilty of it is largely unclear. Was it because Jolson learned English, became an American citizen, was a Republican (before Franklin Roosevelt), worked in show business, or married non-Jews?
104. Another conflation of identities was Richard Tucker in the role of Henry Lee, the producer who stupidly opens a New York musical on Yom Kippur.
105. "Oland Is Oriental White Man", and "Oland Likes Role of Cantor", *Los Angeles Times* (8 January 1928): 19, 24.
106. James Snead, *White Screens, Black Images* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 23, quoted in Stewart, 99.
107. James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (New York: Dial, 1976), 29.
108. Rogin, 92.
109. Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
110. Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 275.
111. Edward Byron Reuter, *Race Mixture: Studies in intermarriage and Miscegenation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1931).
112. George S. Schulyer, *Black No More* (New York: Macaulay Co., 1931), 159.
113. "Jolson Picture At the Lafayette", *New York Amsterdam News* (9 July 1930): 9.
114. "New York Critics Pan Al Jolson for His Wish to Play 'The Lawd'", *Pittsburgh Courier* (6 June 1931): 4.
115. "The Play's The Thing", *New York Times* (29 July 1934): XX15.

Abstract: Why Did Negroes Love Al Jolson and *The Jazz Singer*?: Melodrama, Blackface and Cosmopolitan Theatrical Culture, by Charles Musser

This essay offers a reassessment of *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and Al Jolson by challenging several different lines of persistent criticism: its lack of artistic merit, its effacement of Jewish identity and its racist depictions in light of Jolson's use of blackface. Rather than a failed adaptation of Samson Raphaelson's play of the same name, the picture innovatively reworked both that play and E.A. Dupont's film *The Ancient Law* (*Das Alte Gesetz*, 1923), further placing it within a framework of Jewish culture. The black press and Negro moviegoers warmly embraced both *The Jazz Singer* and Jolson for a variety of reasons, including his promotion of black artists. Among African Americans, he was the most popular Hollywood movie star of the late 1920s.

Key words: Adaptation; Al Jolson; blackface performance; *The Jazz Singer*; E. A. Dupont; *The Ancient Law* (*Das Alte Gesetz*); *Big Boy*; African Americans; Racism; Samson Raphaelson.