The Buffalo Film Seminars

Conversations about great films with Diane Christian and Bruce Jackson

The Jazz Singer

Al Jolson...Jakie Rabinowitz
May McAvoy...Mary Dale
Warner Oland...The Cantor
Eugenie Besserer...Sara Rabinowitz
Otto Lederer...Moisha Yudelson
Richard Tucker...Harry Lee
Cantor Joseff Rosenblatt...Cantor Rosenblatt - Concert Recital

Crossland directed John Barrymore in Don Juan, which had sync sound effects and music, but no dialogue, using Vitaphone.


ALFRED A. COHN (b. March 26, 1880, Freeport, Illinois—d. February 3, 1951 in Los Angeles, California) has 41 writing credits, some of which are 1934 Harold Teen, 1932 Me and My Gal, 1931 The Cisco Kid, 1929 Divorce Made Easy, 1929 Her Husband's Women, 1929 The Carnation Kid, 1929 The Last Warning, 1928 We Americans (adaptation / screenplay), 1928 The Cohens and the Kellys in Paris, 1927 The Gorilla, 1927 The Jazz Singer (adaptation), 1927 The Cat and the Canary

Academy Awards—1929—Honorary Award (Warner Bros.) for producing The Jazz Singer, the pioneer outstanding talking picture, which has revolutionized the industry.

National Film Registry—1996

Directed by Alan Crosland
Adapted for film by Alfred A. Cohn
Based on the short story by Samson Raphaelson (“The Day of Atonement”)
Original music by Louis Silvers
Cinematography by Hal Mohr
Edited by Harold McCord

Al Jolson...Jakie Rabinowitz
May McAvoy...Mary Dale
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(adaptation), 1927 Frisco Sally Levy, 1926 The Midnight Kiss (adaptation / screenplay), 1925 His People (adaptation / screenplay / titles), 1925 Private Affairs, 1924 Half-a-Dollar Bill (titles), 1923 Fashion Row (titles), 1923 The Drums of Jeopardy (titles), 1923 The Unknown Purple (titles), and 1923 Jazzmania (titles).


HAL MOHR (b: August 2, 1894, San Francisco, California—d. May 10, 1974, Santa Monica, California) won two Academy Awards, his first in 1936 for Best Cinematography for A Midsummer Night's Dream (1935), for which he was the first and only write-in nominee to actually win, and again in 1944 for Best Cinematography, Color, for Phantom of the Opera (1943), which he shared with W. Howard Greene. He has been the cinematographer for 144 films, among them 1968 The Bamboo Saucer, 1965 Invisible Diplomats (director of photography), 1962 The Creation of the Humanoids, 1961 “Father of the Bride” (TV series), 1961 Underworld U.S.A. (director of photography), 1958 The Gun Runners, 1958 The Lineup (director of photography), 1957 Baby Face Nelson, 1956 The Boss, 1953-1954 “I Married Joan” (7 episodes), 1953 The Wild One (director of photography), 1952 The Member of the Wedding, 1952 The Four Poster, 1952 Rancho Notorious (director of photography), 1951 The Big Night, 1950 Woman on the Run (director of photography), 1949 Johnny Holiday, 1948 Another Part of the Forest, 1947 Song of Scheherazade, 1945 Salome Where She Danced, 1944 Enter Arsene Lupin, 1944 The Climax, 1943 Top Man, 1943 Watch on the Rhine (director of photography), 1943 Phantom of the Opera, 1940 When the Daltons Rode (director of photography), 1939 Destry Rides Again (director of photography), 1936 The Green Pastures (photography), 1936 Bullets or Ballots (photography), 1935 Captain Blood (photographed by), 1935 A Midsummer Night's Dream (photography), 1934 Charlie Chan's Courage, 1934 David Harum, 1934 Carolina, 1934 As Husbands Go, 1933 The Devil's in Love (photographed by), 1933 State Fair (photographed by), 1932 Lady with a Past (photographed by), 1931 The Common Law (photography), 1931 A Woman of Experience (photography), 1931 The Front Page, 1930 Free Love, 1930 Outward Bound (photography), 1930 Czar of Broadway, 1930 King of Jazz, 1929 Shanghai Lady, 1929 Broadway, 1928 Noah's Ark (photography), 1928 Tenderloin, 1928 The Honeymoon, 1927 The Girl from Chicago, 1927 The Last Performance, 1927 The Jazz Singer (photography), 1927 Slightly Used, 1927 The Heart of Maryland, 1927 Old San Francisco (photography), 1927 A Million Bid, 1927 Bitter Apples, 1926 The Third Degree, 1926 Sparrows (photography), 1925 Little Annie Rooney (photography), 1925 He Who Laughs Last, 1924 A Woman Who Sinred, 1920 The Deceiver, 1920 The Golden Trail, 1914 Salomy Jane, and 1912 Panama-Pacific International Groundbreaking Ceremony (documentary short), and has directed 6 films, which are 1943 Watch on the Rhine, 1937 When Love Is Young, 1917 The Big Idea, 1917 Perils of...
the Secret Service, 1914 Pan's Mountain, and 1913 Last Night of the Barbary Coast (documentary short).


Cantor Joseph Rosenblatt (b. May 9, 1882, New York City, New York—d. June 19, 1933, Jerusalem, Palestine [now Israel]) appeared in one film, 1927 The Jazz Singer, and contributed a song (“Kaddish”) to its soundtrack.

Asa Yoelson was born in Seredzius (a.k.a. Srednike), a Jewish village (“schtetle”) in the Lithuanian region of Imperial Russia. Although he would claim Mar. 26, 1886 as his birth date, no documentation exists to verify it—it may have been anytime from 1884 onwards. The openly anti-Semitic authorities were not interested in recording the arrival of another Jew. Asa was the fourth surviving child of cantor Moshe Yoelson and his wife Naomi, after daughters Rose and Etta, and their son Hirsh. The Yoelsons raised their family according to strict orthodox tradition, and Moshe expected his sons would one day become cantors too. He trained both boys to sing, propping open their mouths with matchsticks to encourage them to sing loud and clear.

Moshe Yoelson wanted to get his family away from the ongoing threat of Tsarist oppression. Soon after Moshe’s studies brought him the title of rabbi in 1890, he traveled to America, promising to send for his wife and children at the earliest opportunity. The emotionally strong but physically ailing Naomi held the family together, becoming the center of young Asa’s world. When Moshe became head of a Washington D.C. congregation in 1894, Naomi and the children made the long journey to join him there. Any hopes the Yoelsons had of resuming a normal family life were dashed when Naomi died in 1895. Eight year old Asa was in the next room, his world shattered….

Asa and his brother Hirsh soon immersed themselves in American culture, learning the ragtime songs performed on the streets and in the saloons of Washington. Moshe did what he could to keep his sons in line. To restore some semblance of a happy home, he married Cheysa Yoels (a.k.a. "Hessi"), an old neighbor from Seredzius who had genuine affection for the children. But nothing could keep the Yoelsons from embracing a new way of life. Hirsh changed his name to Harry, and Asa became Al. Both boys ran away from home several times. At one point, Al spent several weeks at St. Mary’s Industrial School for orphaned boys in Baltimore.
The Yoelson brothers both became obsessed with breaking into show business. Al sang in a traveling circus (1899), then toured in burlesque and vaudeville beginning in 1901. As part of an "illustrated singing act," he performed popular favorites while a series of lantern slides were projected on a sheet. Al and Harry managed to get bookings with a crude ethnic comedy act called "The Hebrew and the Cadet." They also changed their last name to "Joelson," and then the even less ethnic "Jolson." 

Wheelchair-bound comic Joe Palmer recruited the Jolsons for a three-man vaudeville comedy act that showed promise, but Al's self-conscious performances were holding them back.

In 1904, while playing an engagement at Keeney's Theatre in Brooklyn, Al started performing in blackface, supposedly at the suggestion of veteran blackface comedian James Francis Dooley. Working behind a burnt cork mask gave Al a sense of freedom and spontaneity he had never known before. The act became a surefire laugh-getter, and was soon booked on vaudeville's Orpheum circuit.

Blackface was not considered racially offensive in the early 1900s. White men smearing their faces black and imitating African Americans had been common on American stages since the 1830s, and was just one form of the coarse, humor that all racial and ethnic groups were subjected to at that time. We have no reason to believe Al Jolson's use of blackface was motivated by anything other than a desire to entertain. He was never known to express racist attitudes, and often went out of his way to befriend black performers who were subjected to segregation in theatres, hotels and restaurants. I am not defending blackface, a convention most people consider unthinkable today. However, I am suggesting Jolson's use of blackface is best understood in the context of his era. He was not making a statement; he was hiding behind a mask – a mask that gave him an extraordinary sense of confidence while on stage.

... Columbia Pictures began work on a film version of Jolson's life. Al recorded the songs, but was not allowed to play himself – that honor went to the relatively unknown Larry Parks. Parks lip-synched to Jolson's vocals and used many of his performing mannerisms, not so much imitating Jolson as creating a characterization of his own.

_The Jolson Story_ (1946) became a sensation, thanks in large part to Jolson's electrifying renditions of two dozen of his hits. The score included one new number, the sentimental "Anniversary Song" ("Oh, how we danced on the night we were wed . . ."), which became an immediate standard. The plot was a heavily revised version of Jolson's life story. Serving up schmaltz with style, it added up to extraordinary entertainment. In just one examples of network radio at its best. In 1947, Jolson returned to hosting the Kraft Music Hall, a series he helped initiate back in 1933. After years of being dismissed as a "has been," this job was particularly satisfying.

Al's new stardom restored his zest for life. He and Erle adopted two infants, naming them Asa Jr. and Alicia. Jolson also started to dye his hair and put away his glasses when friends were on hand. His recordings of "Is It True What They Say About Dixie?" and "Baby Face" made the hit parade, and his version of the Israeli national anthem raised over $100,000 for the United Jewish Appeal.

Columbia Pictures filmed a sequel to _The Jolson Story_. This time, Jolson's thinly veiled displeasure with Larry Parks erupted into a sound stage tirade, and Jolson was barred from the set. _Jolson Sings Again_ (1949) took as many liberties with Al's life as the first film had. Jolson's singing voice sounded sensational in sixteen numbers – fewer than the first film but still far more than the average musical. Jolson toured the country to promote the film and soak up the kind of audience acclaim he had always relished.

Offers poured in, and Jolson signed up for a new film and a series television specials. But he put everything on hold to go entertain soldiers fighting in Korea. When the Defense Department said it had no budget for entertainers, Jolson paid all expenses himself. During seven days in September 1950, he gave 42 concerts, carrying on despite a cold that would have silenced anyone else.

On his return to California, Jolson looked tired and admitted to reporters that the trip had been difficult. On October 23, 1950, he was in San Francisco preparing for another appearance on Bing Crosby's radio show. While playing cards with friends in his hotel room, he complained of indigestion. When two doctors arrived, Jolson was in bed. He joked with them and belittled his symptoms. Suddenly, he felt for his own pulse, said, "Oh, I'm going," and went limp. The "World's Greatest Entertainer" was dead.

At Jolson's funeral days later, his friend (and sometime nemesis) George Jessel gave a eulogy that remains a show business legend in its own right:

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And not only has the entertainment world lost its king, but we cannot cry, "The king is dead, long live the king!" For there is no one to hold his scepter. Those of us who tarry behind are but pale imitators, mere princelings." . . . Jolson was synonymous with victory – at the race track, at the ball game, at anything that he participated in, he would say, "I had the winner, ha, ha, why didn't you ask me?" This was not in bravado alone: this was the quintessence of optimism. Whatever game you're in, whatever game you play, feel like you are the winner.

**Blackface (Wikipedia)**

Blackface is a form of theatrical makeup used in minstrel shows, and later vaudeville, in which performers create a stereotyped caricature of a black person. The practice gained popularity during the 19th century and contributed to the proliferation of stereotypes such as the "happy-go-lucky darky on the plantation" or the "dandified coon". In 1848, blackface minstrel shows were an American national art of the time, translating formal art such as opera into popular terms for a general audience. Early in the 20th century, blackface branched off from the minstrel show and became a form in its own right, until it ended in the United States with the U.S. Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

Blackface was an important performance tradition in the American theater for roughly 100 years beginning around 1830. It quickly became popular elsewhere, particularly so in Britain, where the tradition lasted longer than in the US, occurring on primetime TV as late as 1978 (The Black and White Minstrel Show) and 1981. In both the United States and Britain, blackface was most commonly used in the minstrel performance tradition, but it predates that tradition, and it survived long past the heyday of the minstrel show. White blackface performers in the past used burnt cork and later greasepaint or shoe polish to blacken their skin and exaggerate their lips, often wearing woolly wigs, gloves, tailcoats, or ragged clothes to complete the transformation. Later, black artists also performed in blackface.

Stereotypes embodied in the stock characters of blackface minstrels not only played a significant role in cementing and proliferating racist images, attitudes and perceptions worldwide, but also in popularizing black culture. In some quarters, the caricatures that were the legacy of blackface persist to the present day and are a cause of ongoing controversy. Another view is that "blackface is a form of cross-dressing in which one puts on the insignias of a sex, class, or race that stands in binary opposition to one's own."

By the mid-20th century, changing attitudes about race and racism effectively ended the prominence of blackface makeup used in performance in the U.S. and elsewhere. It remains in relatively limited use as a theatrical device and is more commonly used today as social commentary or satire.
Perhaps the most enduring effect of blackface is the precedent it established in the introduction of African-American culture to an international audience, albeit through a distorted lens. Blackface's groundbreaking appropriation, exploitation, and assimilation of African-American culture—as well as the inter-ethnic artistic collaborations that stemmed from it—were but a prologue to the lucrative packaging, marketing, and dissemination of African-American cultural expression and its myriad derivative forms in today's world popular culture.

MINSTRELCY (WIKIPEDIA)

The minstrel show, or minstrelsy, was an American entertainment consisting of comic skits, variety acts, dancing, and music, performed by white people in blackface or, especially after the Civil War, black people in blackface.

Minstrel shows lampooned black people as dim-witted, lazy, buffoonish, superstitious, happy-go-lucky, and musical. The minstrel show began with brief burlesques and comic entr’actes in the early 1830s and emerged as a full-fledged form in the next decade. In 1848, blackface minstrel shows were the national art of the time, translating formal art such as opera into popular terms for a general audience.

By the turn of the 20th century, the minstrel show enjoyed but a shadow of its former popularity, having been replaced for the most part by vaudeville. It survived as professional entertainment until about 1910; amateur performances continued until the 1960s in high schools, and local theaters. As the civil rights movement progressed and gained acceptance, minstrels lost popularity.

The typical minstrel performance followed a three-act structure. The troupe first danced onto stage then exchanged wisecracks and sang songs. The second part featured a variety of entertainments, including the pun-filled stump speech. The final act consisted of a slapstick musical plantation skit or a send-up of a popular play. Minstrel songs and sketches featured several stock characters, most popularly the slave and the dandy. These were further divided into sub-archetypes such as the mammy, her counterpart the old darky, the provocative mulatto wench, and the black soldier. Minstrels claimed that their songs and dances were authentically black, although the extent of the black influence remains debated. Spirituals (known as jubilees) entered the repertoire in the 1870s, marking the first undeniably black music to be used in minstrelsy.

Blackface minstrelsy was the first distinctly American theatrical form. In the 1830s and 1840s, it was at the core of the rise of an American music industry, and for several decades it provided the lens through which white America saw black America. On the one hand, it had strong racist aspects; on the other, it afforded white Americans a singular and broad awareness of what some whites considered significant aspects of black-American culture to be.

Although the minstrel shows were extremely popular, being "consistently packed with families from all walks of life and every ethnic group", they were also controversial. Racial integrationists decried them as falsely showing happy slaves while at the same time making fun of them; segregationists thought such shows were "disrespectful" of social norms, portrayed runaway slaves with sympathy and would undermine the southerners' "peculiar institution".
COMING UP IN THE FALL 2013 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXVII:

September 3 Frank Capra *It Happened One Night* 1934
September 10 Jean Renoir *The Grand Illusion* 1937
September 17 Billy Wilder *Double Indemnity* 1944
September 24 Delmer Daves *3:10 to Yuma* 1957
October 1 Kon Ichikawa *Fires on the Plain* 1959
October 8 Peter Bogdanovich *The Last Picture Show* 1971
October 15 Sidney Lumet *Network* 1976
October 22 Bruce Jackson & Diane Christian *Death Row* 1979
October 29 Jim Jarmusch *Dead Man* 1995
November 5 Pedro Almodóvar *Talk to Her* 2002
November 12 Charlie Kaufman *Synecdoche, New York* 2008
November 19 Wim Wenders *Pina* 2011
November 26 Baz Luhrmann *The Great Gatsby* 2013

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....for cast and crew info on any film: http://imdb.com/

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