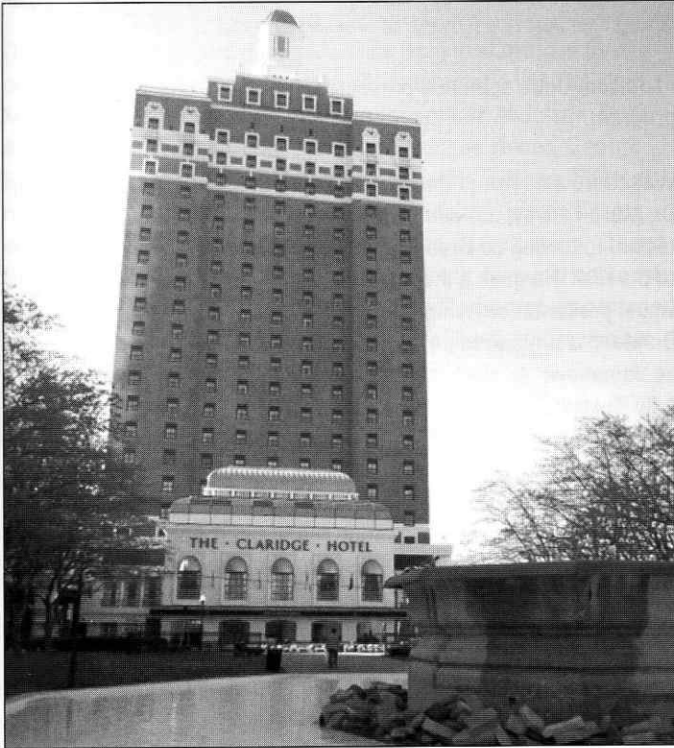


ON THE BOARDWALK IN ATLANTIC CITY: "HOME OF MISS AMERICA, SALT WATER TAFFY, AND 'THE 2016 AL JOLSON SOCIETY WINGDING!'"

by Stan Gerloff



On Thursday, May 12th, fans of Al Jolson converged on the seaside resort town of Atlantic City. They made the trek knowingly or unknowingly to help commemorate the 31st Anniversary of the Jolson Society's first festival. And each year since 1986, the faithful fans gather for a weekend of festivities devoted to celebrating the life and career of Al Jolson. And what a celebration it was. The festival turned into a real wingding! I wish you could have been there. The beautifully refurbished *Claridge Hotel* proved the ideal venue. The hotel was recently renovated to look exactly the way it did when it first opened in 1930. I gotta tell ya', each time one of those elevator doors parted, I half expected to see Al Jolson saunter out.

The usual cadre of familiar party goers were present, those wonderful folks who travel from across the United States, and elsewhere, though sadly, we were minus a few of our regular British family of friends. I wish they could have been there, too. Somehow, it wasn't quite the same family reunion without our dear friends from across the pond. It wasn't a total wash-out though, because Bob Hollis and Donald Sloan (who did make the trip over), propitiously represented the Union Jack contingent.

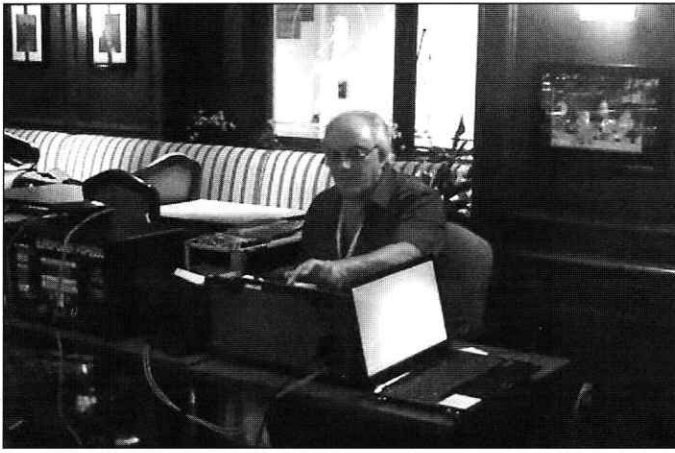


Donna Belmonte and Jan at karaoke night.

It was a great party. And, for people of a certain age, it's comforting to see old familiar faces. You should have seen them all. They were smiling and laughing. It's pleasant to spend time together sharing stories with people you really care about. Old friends share a lot of good stories. Stories that hunger to be heard. Listening feeds the soul for both the teller and the told. Some of the stories I'd heard before, but a good story is always worth hearing again.

For those of you who've never attended a festival, you should know that they provide a confluence of daytime meetings and presentations. Festivals truly do play an important role in our society membership; they bring us together from all walks of life, to embrace old ties, and to help us remember where we've been. Best of all, they remind us that we're still alive, and more importantly, that we are not alone in our appreciation of Al Jolson.

This year our family reunion began on Thursday evening with a slightly different twist. We met at 7 o'clock in *The Twenties* restaurant for dinner. Jan fortuitously planned this additional meal, which gave us the opportunity to break bread together so we'd all be finished at the same time. Afterwards, we kicked off *Karaoke Time* on a riotous note right from our tables inside the restaurant. The usual ensemble of musically-challenged would-be crooners and tabletop tenors were liquored-up, er, I mean, they were all *primed* to sing. Karaoke always is a frolicsome event, especially when the bar is within close proximity to the mic. (Mercifully, we were sitting almost in the bar.) And, no amount of talent (or lack thereof); could dampen the spirits of these musical merry-makers. Even our waitress, Amy broke into song with a rousing rendition of "Over the Rainbow."



Our fantastic sound man, Mr. Peter Belmonte.

[It would be virtually impossible to have karaoke without a competent soundman. We had the best in the business. Our guy, Mr. Peter Belmonte, worked tirelessly the entire weekend at every event. Peter is a very talented guy who not only engineered the sound, but who also provided comic relief, when comedic relief was sorely needed. Peter even sang for us.]

We sat through the entire evening's performance clapping like a bunch of trained seals. I am sorry to say that our lovely, talented, songstress, Miss Donna Dean was unable to attend. However, Mrs. Donna Belmonte more than made up for the latter's absence. Actually, I'm pulling your leg here. Donna Dean and our super-talented soundman, Peter Belmonte tied the knot, less than two weeks before the festival. What a wonderful way and place to spend your honeymoon! Jolson fans are the best.

Friday morning at 9:30, we assembled in the *Southampton* room and anxiously awaited the first presentation. Our affable vice president, Jon Sonneborn revved our Jolson psyches with an audio/visual discussion, *Al Jolson: Some Perceptions and Surprises*. Jon methodically delved into Al Jolson's much-maligned and underrated screen acting abilities. And there were surprises galore! Jon Sonneborn is a highly charged and manically, animated film scholar. (I don't know what Jon is on—but I want in.) The interaction with his enthralled audience was appreciative and quite stimulating. We were off and running!

Then the old professor, Paul Bowers, surprised us with a brand new video presentation titled *Al Jolson in the Media*. Paul craftily, and quite seamlessly, I might add, took the time to painstakingly assemble some twenty-eight pristine video clips, which were borrowed from various television shows and films sources. Of course, each clip had a little something to do with Al Jolson. The clips ran the whole gamut from *I Love Lucy* to *Downton Abbey*. (I loved Lily James (Lady Rose) singing the praises of Al Jolson.) That's quite a gamut! The program was so very well received that we naturally felt compelled to nominate Paul Bowers for president—not of the Jolson society—the United States!

After a break for lunch, we reconnoitered back at the *Southampton Room* at 1:30 for the afternoon session. Mr. Ed Greenbaum, who never disappoints, delighted his audience taking them on a Jolson high as he played a potpourri of rare and/or seldom heard audio tracks that featured the glorious voice of



Left to right Dr. Marc Leavey, standing in the shadows, is Jon Sonneborn, and putting their best side forward, Ed Greenbaum, and Paul Bowers.

Al Jolson. Once again, Ed presented a fabulous and memorable program.

Was there a doctor in the house? I'm so glad you asked. Because, Dr. Marc Leavey, our ever vigilant webmaster had the unenviable task of following Ed Greenbaum. Dr. Leavey was more than up to the task. He gave a thought provoking and insightful audio/visual presentation, which detailed Al Jolson's lasting legacy. Dr. Marc is not one to go precipitously out on a limb and make wild acclamations; so predictably, he had video clips to back up and fully illustrate his points. So, if some putz tells you that Al Jolson is passé—you tell them they're meshuggah.

The Friday afternoon session came to a climatic conclusion with an informal, but totally fascinating round table discussion led by our Society's preeminent quizmaster, Jonathan Sonneborn. Jon called upon members to relate some of their own Jolson experiences and/or tell stories related to their interest in Al Jolson. It was an evocative experiment, loaded with opinions, banter, and great non-stop comments by society members.

At 5:00, there was a cordial (no pun intended), cocktail party, held in *The Twenties* bar adjacent to the restaurant. I wish you could have seen the place. I felt swept back in time. I am not paranoid (okay, maybe a little), but I gotta tell you, I did feel a twinge of nervousness while sitting on a bar stool inside that joint. I found myself glancing over my left shoulder, just in case Enoch "Nucky" Thompson and his henchmen were there. It is just that kind of a place. So, after the feds left, we adjourned next door to the *Southampton Room* for dinner. I thought the food was delish! But my opinion does not count. I say this, because Sandy claims that I will eat just about anything.

Oh what a night! The Friday night shindig was a blast. At the onset of Friday evening's show, our indefatigable president, Mr. Jan Hernstat, sang "Let Me Sing and I'm Happy." (It was all downhill after that. I'm kidding, don't turn on me yet.) Actually, it was at that precise moment when Jan introduced the bubbly Donna Belmonte who warmed up the audience with, "Goody, Goody," then "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered," and finished with a smoldering, sultry rendition of "Whatever Lola Wants." I think it was about then when the air-conditioning seemed to go on the fritz. The hotel had to call the Horizon guy.



Ms. Florida 2016, Donna Belmonte.

The evening's main event was Mr. Tony Babino starring in past-president Michael Modero's radio script adaptation of *The Kraft Music Hall*. Tony Babino, of course, appeared as Al Jolson. Duh! Also in the show's cast, was the man of multiple voices, George Bettinger, who made a pig of himself appearing in three different roles—George Jessel, Groucho Marx, and Eddie Cantor. Grand wizard of the keyboard, David Gross, played Oscar Levant. Donna Belmonte appeared as Mae West. And last but certainly not least, the part of proverbial *KMH* announcer, Ken Carpenter, was intoned perfectly by America's foremost exponent of Kraft cream cheese—Mr. Jan Hernstat.

[Incidentally, Michael Modero first adapted this *KMH* script for the very first Jolson festival, which was held at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel in 1986.]

Tony B.'s set list provided us a tuneful evening of Jolson *Kraft Music Hall* songs, such as, "Waitin' for the Robert E. Lee," "Sitting on Top of the World," "If I only had a Match," "Liza," and "When You Were Sweet Sixteen." Mae West sang a slinky version of "Hey Big Spender," and also did a lovely duet with Jolie on "Pretty Baby." And just as Al Jolson did in the 1940s, Tony B. finished off the *Kraft Music Hall* program with "April Showers."

During his encore, Tony called upon Jan to come up and sing "Margie" with him. (Believe me; Tony only whispered to Jan, he didn't have to do much calling.) Tony then sang all by himself, a whole slew of songs associated with Al and the *Kraft Music Hall* program, such as, "Melancholy Baby," "The Darktown Strutter's Ball," "Rosalie," "I Can't Give You Anything But Love," "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," "Dinah," "Chicago," and "In The Good Old Summertime." Mr. Babino momentarily stepped out of character to sing "Stardust," and then segued back into Jolson persona and ended the evening's entertainment with "My Mammy."

The Saturday morning presentations began at 9:30 a.m. with the screening of *The Singing Fool*. Jolson historian, Ed Greenbaum introduced the film telling the aficionados to look upon the film in a 1928 context. He then played the missing *Vitaphone* soundtrack of "The Spaniard That Blighted Me Life." At the conclusion of the film, Jon Sonneborn joined the discussion. (Jon was absent at the start of the picture because he was having the time of his life at the Officer's Meeting.) A lot of varied questions and some interesting points of view followed. By all accounts, and much to Ed's surprise,



Tony, Donna, and holding the applause sign Karen Rendon.

The Singing Fool actually was very well-received and proved to be a popular choice to screen and definitely one of the highlights of the festival.

After our break for lunch, Professor Paul Bowers thrilled the assembled group with some vintage film clips. Paul reeled off some wonderful home movie footage which was shot by Harold Arlen in 1936 of Al with Sybil Jason on location for *The Singing Kid*. And then Ed Greenbaum joined in the action and screened some sound footage of Al Jolson wearing a private's uniform and singing "My Mammy" with Martin Fried at the piano on a Hollywood soundstage. Ed said the footage was shot at Warner Bros. It was a recreation of AL singing to GIs overseas.

Drum roll, please! The long-awaited hour had finally arrived for the *Jan Hernstat Auction Show*. And, good golly, what a treasure trove of memorabilia Jan had to sell. There were records, books, photographs, sheet music and more. I must point out that the bulk of the auction material was generously donated by past-president Bruce Wexler. One particular item that caught my hawkish, discerning eye, but sad to say, slipped away past my grasp, was a 16" transcription disk of one of Al's *Lifebuoy Shows*. (Thanks, Jon; you ruined my life! I'm kidding, who wants some dusty old record? I do! I do!)

Saturday night found the joyous Jolsonairs thronging back into the *Southampton Room*. The Big Bash began at 7:00 p.m. with what I modestly describe as a fabulous array of culinary cuisine. Once again, Chef Al, and his artisanal kitchen staff, prepared a delicious and bountiful buffet. And, for desert they served my all-time favorite—coconut cake. I don't wish to appear shaky here (okay, appear any shakier than usual—how's that?) But, I'd kill for coconut cake. After all, coconut is a super-food!

Our genial president, Jan Hernstat opened the evening's entertainment with a special surprise guest, Miss Olivia Tilton. For those of you with memory loss (which definitely includes me), Olivia Tilton was only eleven years old when she first appeared at our 2011 Philadelphia Jolson Festival. Wow! Those five years sure have been a helluva lot kinder to Olivia than they have to me. Olivia has truly blossomed into a stunning young woman. This charming, radiant, brown-eyed songbird possesses a stage presence and poise that simply defies her age. Her beautiful perfect-pitch voice has matured as well. I absolutely loved her entire performance,



Jan Hernstat doing his "shtick" at the Saturday auction.

and not just because she sang Jolson tunes while wearing white gloves. That was a nice touch though.

Saturday was not a great beach day. It rained most of the day, and as dusk fell over the resort town, a foggy mist permeated the air. Atlantic City resembled London. (I wish more Brits were there—they would've felt right at home.) By show time it was dank inside the *Southampton Room*.

(Yeah! You guessed it. Now the *heat* was on the fritz.) Jan's facile mind was clicking like a fine Swiss timepiece. He plunged into action to save the old folks (meaning me) from developing a life-threatening case of pneumonia. Jan knew now was the moment to introduce Donna Belmonte. Hot diggity, dog ziggity, boom! Donna not only lit up that room, she substantially raised the room's thermostat with "My Guy," "Am I Blue," and "You Took Advantage of Me." The hotel manager happily sent the *Horizon* guy packing!

[For those of you who do not reside in our immediate area, Horizon Services is a heating, plumbing and air conditioning company that utilizes TV advertising more than the politicians during a hotly contested election.]



The effervescent Olivia Tilton with David Gross



The Heart of Al Jolson—Tony Babino.

The great Tony Babino opened his Saturday concert with "Let Me Sing and I'm Happy." And with that, Tony made everyone happy! With his good friend and accompanist, David Gross at the keyboard, Tony was in a Jolson Story groove and he could do no wrong. Mr. B. segued into a youthful sounding rendition "ala" Rudy Wissler of "On the Banks of the Wabash." Man, you could hear a pin drop during Tony's ballad. Tony then rocked his audience with "California Here I Come," "When the Red, Red, Robin, Comes Bob, Bob, Bobbin Along," "Toot, Toot, Tootsie," "April Showers," "You Made Me Love You," "Anniversary Song," and "Sonny Boy." All was going well!

And then Tony did the unthinkable. He asked Jan to come up and sing with him. (What the hell was he thinking? I know what you're thinking. Why didn't I leave? Yes, I could have easily sneaked out; I was sitting next to the door. But I couldn't just walk out and leave. You see, my drink hadn't come yet! I hate to abandon a perfectly good Jack Daniel's whiskey sour leaving myself open to accusations of alcohol abuse. So, like the old soldier in that long ago barrack's ballad of the day, you know, that guy who never dies—I... just faded away in my seat.) And, boy was I glad that I did!

Tony B. and Jan cut loose with some terrific duets, such as, "Ma' Blushin' Rosie," "I'm Sitting on top of the World," and "About a



Jan Hernstat, Tony B., and David Gross.



Tony B. and David Gross on the keyboard.

Quarter to Nine." Mr. B. then switched gears with "The Spaniard That Blighted Me Life," and "A Real Piano Player" duetting with his accompanist, David Gross. Sometimes one needs to sink back into the familiar. So, in his own soaring voice sang "Fly Me to the Moon" and "It's Now or Never." Tony then turned in a perfect imitation of Dean Martin crooning, "Everybody Loves Somebody Sometime." As is his custom, Tony B. closed the show with a song made famous by the late Bobby Darin in his Las Vegas nightclub act, Sol Weinstein's, "The Curtain Falls."

Sunday morning came much too quickly for me. At 9:00 a.m. the faithful remaining attendees, congregated once again in the *Southampton* room for a buffet breakfast. There was plenty to eat and, as my old pappy used to say: "Where freeness exists, there's no reason to resist." Come to think of it, I saw very little resistance that morning.

After we pigged-out on pounds of bacon and pork sausage patties, Jan opened *The Members Meeting* and the floor, to anyone who had a question, gripe or wished to make a comment. Harry Rhinehart asked: "How is the society doing?" Jan said though membership is down we currently are financially sound through the many cost-cutting initiatives that we have put into place the past year.

Joan and Jack Proctor who were guests of Harvey Goldberg let Jan know that they thoroughly enjoyed everything, and that the weekend was fantastic. Roz Wolkon added that she loved the buffets. Rik James told Jan he enjoyed talking with and meeting some of the people he had only read about in MSO letters in the Journal.

Jan thanked the entertainers, Tony Babino, George Bettinger, Donna Belmonte, Olivia Tilton, David Gross, and our omnipresent soundman, Peter Belmonte. He then acknowledged the dedication and hard work of our daytime presenters, and thanked, Paul Bowers, Marc Leavey, Ed Greenbaum, Jon Sonneborn, and Debbie Eifler, who single-handedly manned the merchandise table.

Jan announced that next year's festival would be held in Culver City, California at the Doubletree Hotel. He said the hotel is so



Tony Babino holding The Irvin Warwick Memorial Award and Society President, Jan Hernstat.

close to Al's gravesite at Hillside, that if you had a mind to, you could walk to it. Jan then announced that his Long Island festival is scheduled for August 27th.

Next on the agenda, Jan presented Presidential Awards to: Harry Rhinehart, John Wehrman, Paul Bowers, Ed Greenbaum, Trish Elkins, George Bettinger, Jonathan Sonneborn, John Webster, Peter Belmonte, and to festival host and hostess, Stan and Sandy Gerloff.

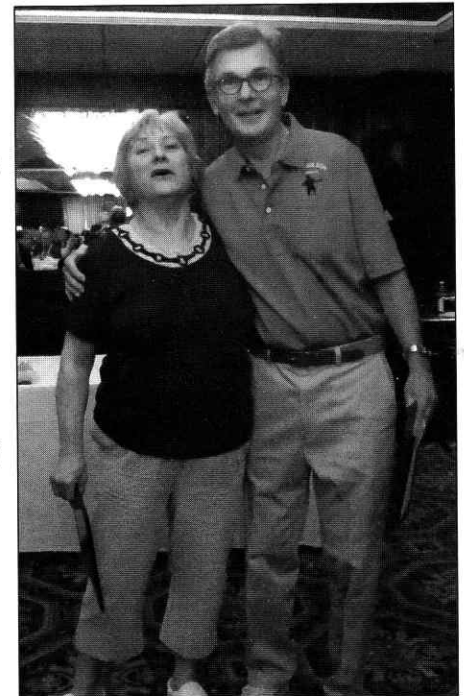
Jan then presented the 25 Year Loyalty Awards to: Marq Stankowski, Anthony Di Florio III, Mathew Garfield, Frederick Henderson, and Martin Tobin. The only 50 Year Loyalty Award was presented to Pat Hawkins.

The final presentation that Sunday was the coveted "Irvin Warwick Memorial Award," which was bestowed upon a very appreciative Tony Babino.

It's not for me to say whether or not the Atlantic City festival was a success—that is up to those who attended. I can say, though, to me, the weekend was one helluva family reunion—and, without the fistfights.

—The End

[All the photographs throughout the article are courtesy of our New York 2 Representative, Robert Daniels.]



Sandy and Stan Gerloff.