

COLOSSAL CULVER CITY CLAMBAKE

by David McCarthy

As with previous Al Jolson Festivals, the unofficial opening function takes place on Thursday evening when attendees can enjoy a friendly get-together and karaoke, giving the ideal opportunity to meet with old friends and make new ones. This year was slightly different as the sound equipment for the karaoke was being supplied by Vlad Petnicki who also was attending his first Jolson Festival. Great to have you with us Vlad and thank you for supplying the sound, which helped us get the festival off to a great start.

The evening commenced at 7 pm with Vlad singing a few songs joined by others only too eager to grab the microphone, or in the case of Steve Rothschild, no mic was necessary as he lip-synched! There was some confusion about the start time of the karaoke as some thought that the evening started at 8 pm which is when many turned up, including our President Jan Hernstat. Jan soon took over the mic to officially open the evening, and he was soon cajoling others to join in, which many did.

These Karaoke nights are a great way to commence the Jolson Festival before the serious stuff starts on Friday.

Friday, Let The Presentations Begin

The first official day of the Festival started with registration from 8:30 am. Many of us had registered early on Thursday evening, and so we had all of our paperwork and programs already.

By 9 am the daytime room was prepared in readiness for the presentations to follow and Debbie Eifier, together with her new best friend Yahtzee (a lovely golden retriever guide dog), had the Jolson memorabilia tables ready with all of the Society goodies for us to buy.

9:30 am arrived and with it Society President Jan Hernstat who officially welcomed those present to the Jolson 2017 Festival. Jan started off his intro with an apology. The printed program had omitted the name of one of the daytime presenters, and Jan wished to correct that omission as quickly as possible. Who was missed out of the program? ME! It was reminiscent of the scene in *Jolson Sings Again* when Larry Parks as Al Jolson looks for his name in the newspaper advertisement for the charity benefit show where he's to appear. When Ellen asks to see the advertisement, he says: "Names a bit hard to find baby, it's at the bottom—and many others, that's me" Oh well these things happen—thanks for putting it right, Jan.

Jon Sonneborn: "The Strange Case of the Misunderstood Mammy Minstrel"

First presenter up was our Vice President Jon Sonneborn who had a presentation called "The Strange Case of the Misunderstood Mammy Minstrel." Jon looked at the effect that Jolson's blackface performances had on his legacy. Today it seems popular for those that know nothing about the issue of blackface to label Al Jolson, a racist. That line of thinking could not be further from the truth. Jolson was a great friend to black entertainers of *his* day, and he would often go out of his way to stand up for them whenever he could.



The first presenter, vice president Jon Sonneborn.

As far as we know, Jolson first applied the burnt cork makeup as early as 1906, probably while he was touring with his brother Harry and their partner Joe Palmer.

Jon showed a well-known photograph of Al with the Jubilee Singers in which he was in blackface. Interestingly, Jon told how Al liked to include a section within his shows in which he would sing Negro spirituals, always accompanied by a group of black singers. By insisting that he always had a group of real black singers for this feature it is hardly surprising that black entertainers of the time loved Jolson, he gave them work at a time when there wasn't much work for blacks on the stage. At this stage of his presentation, Jon showed the film clip from *Big Boy* in which he sang spirituals with an all-black singing group, much like he had done in his Broadway Shows.

The next film excerpt Jon showed was a scene from *The Jazz Singer* in which Jolson blacken up in front of the camera. Jon just loves to get controversial saying that this scene showed just how good Jolson was as an actor.

Jolson could be and to be fair he had a point. Oh, dear, I'm in trouble now! In the scene, Jolson is torn between his desire to be a Broadway star and the calling of his people to be a Cantor in the Synagogue. Agree or disagree with Jon on this issue you can't help but understand what he means during this one important scene—Jolson DOES manage to convey the inner turmoil of his desire to appease both his longing for fame and fortune on Broadway and his inbuilt loyalty to his religion and family.

"Mother of Mine" from "The Jazz Singer" had Jolson sing the first song written especially for the new medium of talking pictures and it was again a very powerful scene. Al Jolson was always a friend of black people, and he empathized with them.

Al's alter-ego was, of course, the character of Gus, and he played that role a number of times in his Broadway Shows. He also played it on film in his 1930 film *Big Boy*, based on his Broadway Show



Paul Bowers

of the same name. Jon showed several scenes from the film to illustrate the way Jolson's character of Gus could answer back to his white bosses and importantly, to get away with it. In reality, a black person would never have been accepted talking back to or even worse getting the better of a white man. Jolson's Gus did both.

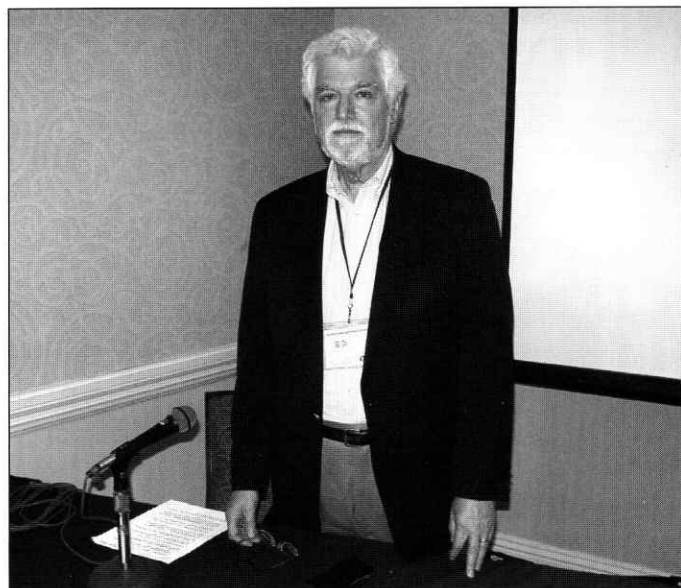
In 1936 Jolson appeared in the film *The Singing Kid* and in the film he shared the stage with a black entertainer—Cab Calloway. Calloway loved Jolson and always gave him credit for getting him the part in the film and also for ensuring that he was treated right. Calloway was not going to be treated poorly because he was black while Jolson was around!

In 1937 on the Lifebuoy Radio Show Jolson recorded his life story—as he liked to think of it. In the Fox film, *Rose Of Washington Square*, Jolson played himself in his performances and also in *The Jolson Story*. Columbia played to the public perception of what Jolson's life was like. Sadly in the blackface numbers, there was no real acknowledgment of what the reasons were for putting on the burnt cork other than the lame excuse of standing in for another performer who couldn't go on because he was drunk—it was just there!

Paul Bowers: "Al Jolson in the Media"

Next up was Paul Bowers with a presentation that he called *Al Jolson in the Media*. Paul weaved together a collection of film and TV clips showing Jolson's appearances in a variety of films, TV shows and animation produced since his passing in 1950. It wasn't necessarily Jolson himself of course, but others are making mention of him or alluding to him.

The presentation started with the opening of the 2005 movie *King Kong*, with the voice of Al Jolson singing "I'm Sitting On Top Of The World." It finished with Lucy and Desi singing "California Here I Come" in a 1955 episode of the popular TV show *I Love Lucy*. And sandwiched in-between, we had Doris Day donning blackface, singing "Toot Toot Tootsie," Jolson himself singing "Blue Skies" during the film "The Aviator." Even the Brits mention of Jolson in "Downton Abbey." My favorite scene was from the movie "Rules Don't Apply" in which Warren Beatty as Howard Hughes sings some Jolson songs while piloting a plane and scaring the life out of the flight crew. Magic stuff, Paul.



Master Jolson archaeologist, Ed Greenbaum.

Ed Greenbaum: "Oldies But Goodies, Part 2"

Ed delighted his audience with a skillful selection of recordings taken from his vast collection of rare Jolson. Many of the recordings he played for us had never before been heard. Starting with the upbeat version of "April Showers" from *The Jolson Story*. Ed followed this up with a lovely version of "April Showers" with piano accompaniment by Louis Silvers, a singing contest between George Burns and Al Jolson and a recently-discovered version of "After You've Gone" recorded for *Jolson Sings Again*, but not used.

If you've ever wondered how Larry Parks was able to lip-sync so brilliantly in the two Jolson biographical movies, then wonder no more. Ed played a recording of "Give My Regards to Broadway," which had specially-inserted clicks that told Larry when to start his mime. Simple technique, but it worked well. Other gems such as "There's A Great Day Coming, Manana" from a 1942 Scrap Metal Drive. A beautiful recording of "You'll Always Be Beautiful" recorded for *Jolson Sings Again*, but never used; "Avalon" recorded for *The Jolson Story*, but never used, and a rare never-heard-before Kraft Music Hall version of "Memories." It went on and on with rare recording followed by rare recordings. It could have gone on a lot longer but time called a halt to the presentation, it was lunchtime! Given a choice, I am sure that many wouldn't have bothered with lunch and no doubt Ed would have entertained us for another hour.

The Jolson Forum

The Jolson Forum was introduced as part of the Jolson Festival a few years back and was intended to give attendees the opportunity to share their favorite Jolson stories. Jon Sonneborn once again moderated the discussions, and there was no lack of people wanting to talk about their favorite subject—Al Jolson.

Jon started off the forum by playing two rare tracks for us. The first was "Say It With Music," a promotional recording for his Brunswick radio appearances. There was an orchestral version of "There's A Rainbow Round My Shoulder" played, and then Jon played a promotion for Al's film *Say It With Songs*, where he sang "Little Pal," this was followed by "Liza."

An incredible story followed in which our audio guru Shelley Herman talked about the time that he met Al Jolson. Yes, you read



Tony B., Vlad Petniki, and Nigel Dreiner.

that correctly—Shelley met Al Jolson! He was only 14 years old at the time, and he had seen and loved the new film that was out—*The Jolson Story*. Shelley was one of the lucky ones who got to meet and talk to the great man himself. Shelley tells us that Jolson was both friendly and chatty with him. Shelley also remembered vividly his feeling of loss on the night that Jolson passed away on the 23rd October 1950.

Moving on a few years, Shelley had another memory to share with us. He said on the night of his wedding; Rudy Wissler sang “The Anniversary Song” for him and his new bride. Brilliant memories; thank you, Shelley.

It was 5:30 pm and the bar was open for Cocktail Hour. I didn’t see any actual cocktails consumed, but the barman was certainly kept busy selling booze!

Showtime

Friday’s night entertainment, starred the great song stylist, Mr. Tony Babino. But before our headliner took the stage, other entertainers warmed up the crowd.

The ever-present Jan Hernstat started the evening off by introducing Vlad Petniki our DJ from the Karaoke Night. It was down to Vlad to kick off the proceedings which he did by performing, “There’s A Rainbow ‘Round My Shoulder” and one you don’t tend to hear that often, “You Look Good to Me.”

Nigel Dreiner then took the microphone to give us spirited versions, “Never Again,” “Go Into Your Dance” and “When The Little Red Roses Get The Blues For You.”

At this stage of the proceedings, Jan announced that we had an important guest with us, Mr. Edward Scott Jr, who is the grandson of legendary boxing great, Henry Armstrong. Edward Scott Jr spoke passionately about his famous grandfather, the Henry Armstrong Foundation, and, Al Jolson. As has been well-reported over the years, Al Jolson, together with actor George Raft, put up the money to buy the contract rights for Armstrong—who then went on to win fights in three different weight divisions, becoming featherweight, welterweight and lightweight champion. An achievement never equaled by anyone else! Henry Armstrong was, of course, a black fighter and his grandson Edward Scott Jr spoke about the love and respect that his grandfather had for Al Jolson. Edward is well aware that Al Jolson’s reputation has been tarnished unfairly by his performances in blackface. What his detractors omit is the respect that Al Jolson had from many in the black community. Henry Armstrong was one of those that truly respected Al Jolson as a good

friend. Edward said that he would like to see the world recognize Al Jolson for the true friend that Jolson was to black people in general and especially to his grandfather Henry Armstrong in particular. Mr. Scott presented Jan Hernstat with an “Award of Excellence” from the Film Advisory Board Inc. The award reads as follows:

TO AL JOLSON: IN RECOGNITION OF HIS SPELLBINDING TALENT AS A JAZZ AND BLUES SINGER AND COMEDIAN WHOM SO MANY ENTERTAINERS HAVE EMULATED, AND FOR BEING THE FIRST PERFORMER TO ENTERTAIN U.S. TROOPS INTERNATIONALLY, ACT IN THE FIRST TALKING MOVIE, “THE JAZZ SINGER, HIS GENERAL DEVOTION TO THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY AND RECOGNITION OF BLACK ENTERTAINERS.

JANET STOKES CHAIRWOMAN/CEO

Inspiring stuff indeed from Edward and that led on to a performance by his friend singer Larry Covin who he had brought along with his party. Larry is an accomplished singer, and he entertained us with a selection of songs including “On the Street Where You Live,” “When You’re Smiling.” Unforgettable”. “Bojangles” and “Wonderful World.” Larry left the stage to our grateful and happy applause.

And now, it was time for our headliner the great Tony Babino. Mr. B. started straight off with a selection of classic Al Jolson songs, “Let Me Sing, And I’m Happy,” “You Made Me Love You,” “Toot Toot Tootsie,” and “California Here I Come” all flawlessly sung to orchestral tracks from *The Jolson Story*.

Popular pianist Dave Gross accompanied Tony for two songs, “Is It True What They Say about Dixie?” and “April Showers.” Dave then took over with “Oh How I Hate to Get up in the Morning,” “Over There” and “Yankee Doodle” before being joined by Tony to perform “A Real Piano Player” and “The Spaniard That Blighted My Life.”

Tony, using his *natural* voice, treated us to lovely versions of “I’ve Got You Under My Skin” and “Everybody Loves Somebody Sometime.” Then moving back to the Jolson songbook for “Back In Your Own Backyard,” “Where Did Robinson Crusoe Go?” and “Who Paid The Rent for Mrs. Rip Van Winkle”. Tony always invites Jan Hemstat up to sing a few duets with him and this year was no exception as Jan came rushin’ to the stage to sing “Ma Blushin’ Rosie” and “Carolina in the Morning.”

Jan stopped the show briefly to announce that Tony was a recipient of one of this year’s Presidential Awards. Tony was presented his award during his performance as he wouldn’t be with us on Sunday morning. The audience gave Tony a well-deserved round of applause as he accepted his award.

Back to the entertainment, with Tony singing a beautiful version of “Sonny Boy” much to the delight of a very appreciative audience. Tony then invited both Nigel and Vlad back onto the stage, and all three entertained us with “When The Red, Red, Robin,” “Alabama Bound,” “Golden Gate” and “I Want A Girl,” great fun!

To round off the Friday night entertainment, Tony sang, “On The Banks Of The Wabash,” “By The Light Of The Silvery Moon,” “Rockabye, Your Baby With A Dixie Melody” and finishing with “My Mammy.” A great way to finish the Friday night entertainment sending us all out of the room feeling very happy. Thanks, Tony.

Saturday, A World Premiere

Paul Bowers: “Jolson Film Spectacular”

Saturday mornings are always a conflict for a smallish group of us. Officers and Trustees need to attend the Officers meeting that



Left to right: Edward Scott Jr., Nigel Dreiner, and Jan.

takes place, but it's at the same time that the first of the Saturday presentations take place! Oh well, for some of us a meeting of the Officers and Trustees took place while others were in for a rare treat from Paul Bowers, a screening of the newly-restored film *Swanee River*.

For many of us that purchased the official film release of *Swanee River*, the word, 'disappointed' goes nowhere near to describing our feelings for the release. Whoever was responsible for the release of the film had no respect for the film or the viewer. The release was frankly awful. Scenes so dark that faces couldn't be seen and the colors were terribly degraded. Well, the film can now be seen in all its beautiful technicolor glory. The thanks for that must go to Paul Bowers, who has spent two years carefully going through each scene to enhance it and produce a film that can now be seen as it was intended to be seen. The colors are now bright and clean, and it must be said that the film is a delight to view.

Strangely when the film screening was over some in the audience was less than complimentary about the film, not the restoration but the film itself. OK, it wasn't a film that would please every Jolson fan as there wasn't enough Jolson in it to please some people—he had third billing so you can't expect him to be in every scene. But every scene he was in, Jolson stole.

Regardless as to whether you like the film or not, and many did, Paul Bowers has done a great service to the Society members, and the film is now available for purchase by Jolson fans around the world through the Jolson Society. If sales during the Festival are anything to go by then the newly restored film has gone down big time—poor Debbie was rushed off of her feet selling copies during the Festival.

Dare we now ask Paul to look at the film "Go Into Your Dance" which also had a poor quality release and could well do with the tender loving care that Paul can give? That's maybe something for the future!

David McCarthy: "Al Jolson The Man & His Music"

The last presentation of the Festival was my own *Al Jolson: The Man & His Music*, which started after lunch on Saturday afternoon. For the presentation, I concentrated on using rare and unheard recordings to entertain the attendees. I started off with the song that introduced most of us to Al Jolson "Let Me Sing, And I'm Happy." But not the version heard in *The Jolson Story*. I used an alternative version, and I coyly left in some of the studio chatter before the recording started to further enlighten and titillate my audience. It illustrates the amount of work that went into the recording for the soundtrack. Jolson worked

long and hard to give the studio exactly what they wanted. That set the scene for the rest of my presentation as song after song was played to a very much appreciated round of applause.

One of the highlights of the presentation was the song cut from the film "Cantor on the Sabbath" but shown in a different format to that seen before. I subtitled it so that those not fluent in Yiddish would be able to understand what the song was all about. The final song of the presentation was "Rock-a-bye Your Baby with a Dixie Melody." But of course, the version used in the film *Jolson Sings Again*. After showing the start of the scene as filmed with the camera focusing on the poster advertising the charity event and showing Jolson's name, I faded into images of Jolson throughout his illustrious career before coming back to the ending with Larry Parks smiling at Barbara Hale from the stage. But this is a Jolson Festival, and so the sign off image had to be of Al Jolson himself. I chose the scene from *The Jazz Singer* where he has just finished blacking-up, puts his wig on, then smiles at the audience. With the wonderful voice of Al Jolson ringing in their ears and Jolson smiling down on us my presentation came to an end.

Jan Hernstat & The Jolson Society Auction

The last item on the agenda was always the auction with of course our President Jan Hernstat as the auctioneer working hard to make us part with our hard earned money. And I am pleased to report that the auction was quite successful, as usual.

Saturday Showtime

Jan kicked off the Saturday night festivities by presenting two Presidential Awards—one to Jon Sonneborn and the other to Ed Greenbaum, both of whom would not be around on Sunday morning to accept their awards. Jan then introduced the six visiting members from the UK before going on to welcome US attendees from all of the States represented at the Festival.

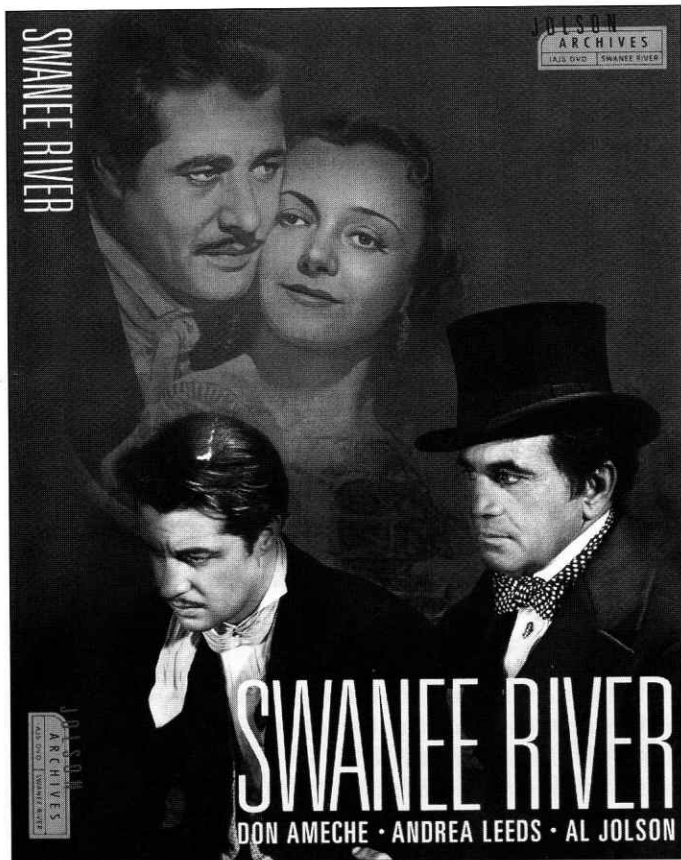
Jan then introduced some special guests. Members of the Jolson family who had come along to enjoy the Festival with us. Present were Victoria Jolson who was, for a short time, married to Al's adopted son Albert. Victoria's daughter Kate was also with us together with Stephanie and Steven. It was a delight to have members of the Jolson family with us.

With all of the introductions out of the way, it was time to start the entertainment proper. First on the stage was the Blue Serenaders Dance Orchestra, a very talented five piece orchestra who were going to perform for us and back the other entertainers.

Nigel took to the microphone for the second time in the Festival to sing "Where Did Robinson Crusoe Go?", "Let's Misbehave," "Oceans Apart" "That Little German Band" and "Hallelujah, I'm A Bum."

The Blue Serenaders Dance Orchestra gave us a lovely solo version of "Japanese Sandman." This orchestra was exceptional and gave superb solo performances as well as accompanying our entertainers. I could have listened to them all night!

Next up were the very talented Evans and Rogers who entertained us with "Everybody Rag with Me," "All By Myself" and "The Spaniard That Blighted My Life." One of the delights of this entertainment duo is when Sharon Evans sits at a small table with a framed photograph of Al Jolson and sings the Judy Garland version of "Dear Mr. Gable" but with the lyrics changed slightly to "Dear Mr. Jolson." Always an audience pleaser, Sharon has the most beautiful voice.



Rick Rogers' turn again, this time to perform "How You Going To Keep 'em Down On The Farm?" and then he was joined by Sharon for "It All Depends on You" and a very spirited version of "Home in Pasadena" which brought the show to a short break.

The Blue Serenaders Dance Orchestra opened the second half of the show for our star for the evening—the incomparable Richard Halpern.

Richard's performance was to be in two parts—Part One: A tribute to the songs of Al Jolson that he sang during WW1. First up was the tongue twister "Sister Susie's Sewing Shirts for Soldiers." Followed by the beautiful yet sad "Hello Central, Give Me No Man's Land." Richard followed this by "On The Road To Calais" and finally the comedy song "I've Got My Captain Working For Me Now."

Richard then performed a further selection of songs made famous by Al Jolson. "My Buddy," "Blue River," "Hollywood Rose," "Old Man River," "I'm Looking Over A Four Leaf Clover," "Who Played Poker With Pocahontas?," "Banks of the Wabash" which he sang acapella, and "My Papa Doesn't The Time No Time."

The second part of Richard's set was a tribute to the 90th anniversary of *The Jazz Singer*. Starting with "Dirty Hands, Dirty Face" and Jolson's spoken dialogue sandwiched between "Toot, Toot, Tootsie." He then moved on to "Blue Skies" again with Jolson talking sequence in the middle before taking off on a jazzed-up version of "Blue Skies." "Mother of Mine" has always been a favorite of mine and Richard performed it beautifully. He finished off the evening as we all knew he would with the classic "My Mammy."

Sunday Morning Breakfast Meeting

The 2017 Festival was nearly over as we gathered together for a buffet breakfast. After we had eaten, Jan announced that the next Jolson function would be his one-day event at Oceanside on August



Our festival hosts, Jan Hernstat and David Greim.

12th, and the next Jolson Festival would be held in May 2018, hosted by Jon and Cleo Sonnebom in Hartford, Connecticut. Jan also informed us the UK Jolson Festival would take place on October 20th to 22nd.

Henry Armstrong's grandson, Edward Scott Jr, took the microphone away from Jan. I was surprised. Jan usually doesn't give it up so easily. Mr. Scott related a few stories which exemplified the esteem in which Henry Armstrong held toward Al Jolson. We in attendance appreciated hearing those anecdotes.

With the microphone securely back in Jan's hand, he announced that the 50-Year Loyalty Award was the first award to be handed out. Daryl Thomas, the recipient, lives in Australia and was unable to attend the festival. Jan then announced the recipients of the 25-Year Loyalty Award were: Garrett Rademacher, James M. Moore, George Solomon, Leonard Norvell, Patricia Elkins, John J. Perry, David Rosenblum, Daniel Di Giacomo, Glenn Kaplinsky, Jerry Kaplan, Mel Cebulash, and New York 2 Representative, Bob Daniels. Bob was present and graciously accepted his award.

Next up was the presentation of two Honorary Membership Awards. The first one went to one of our former vice presidents and a fifty-seven-year member, Mr. Maynard Bertolet. Due to health issues, Maynard was unable to attend. The second recipient was Doug Galloway, who also couldn't be with us. Doug asked me to accept on his behalf. I happily did.

The final presentations of the day were the coveted Presidential Awards. Those awards went to David Miller, David McCarthy, Paul Bowers, Nigel Dreiner, Shelley Herman, Richard Halpern, and lastly to David Greim the co-host of the 2017 Al Jolson Festival.

High Upon A Hill

Following the Sunday meeting our weekend impresario, David Greim led us on an excursion to Hillside Memorial Park for a graveside service. It was quite the moving ceremony with Richard Halpern reading the eulogy which George Jessel had delivered at Al's funeral. After the ceremony, David led us on a tour of some of the celebrity graves in the park.

High atop Hillside Memorial Park, looking over at Al Jolson's magnificent edifice proved the most fitting end to a fabulous festival and four fantastic days of celebrating the life and career of "The World's Greatest Entertainer."

—The End