



THE 2022
V I R T U A L
Jolson Festival

By Marc I. Leavey, M.D.
Webmaster and Festival Chairman



Paul Bowers



Ed Greenbaum



Jon Sonneborn

Our Third Virtual Festival

It was like a roller coaster ride. A very bad, very sick roller coaster ride. Watching the statistics on the COVID-19 pandemic, we thought, that maybe, just maybe, we would be able to have a real festival this year. But as we watched the emergence of new variants, the spike in infection and hospitalization throughout the world, and the dire forecasts of the experts, it was fairly clear in early 2022 that it would be unlikely that we could have a successful face to face festival again this year. As it turned out, it proved to be a prescient decision, with a spike in disease at the very time we would be getting together.



Stéphane Palladini

As I started to plan a third festival, it seemed straightforward to base it on the previous two. But fate would throw us another curve ball, in that, for a variety of reasons, the bulk of our core entertainers would not be joining us this year. Over the span of the pandemic, Richard Halpern had been giving virtual concerts from his home, using Facebook, with great success. The idea was floated to have Richard perform such a virtual concert, live, for the Festival, and he accepted the challenge with excitement. This was set to be the finale of the Festival experience.

I received an email from Stéphane Palladini, a French Canadian from Montréal, who had recently discovered the music of Al Jolson. Having been singing French songs, and a tribute to Edith Piaf, he was challenged to sing "April Showers" in December, 2021, and he quickly took to Al Jolson's music and style. He had performed a set of Jolson songs on Canadian Public Television, and asked if I would like to see the video. Once I viewed his performance, I knew that we would have to feature him on the main stage for this year's Festival. His segment was very popular with Festival visitors.



Vlad Petnicki

Vlad Petnicki is a Society member and Facebook regular, who had submitted a Karaoke piece last year. I knew that he was performing for venues in his local area, and asked him if he would consider doing a longer performance for the Festival. With vigor and verve, and even changes in costume, he provided a wonderful assortment of unique Jolson songs, and was a great addition to the Festival as well.

Jan Hernstat had been in touch with Tom Stevens, a Las Vegas performer who does a dead on impression of Dean Martin. Tom was interested in including some Jolson material, and gave his treatment to a number of Jolson tunes. After seeing a video of his performance, I had to include his George Burns and Dean Martin impressions as well, making it a well rounded package just right for Festival viewers.

And then I saw a news item about New York singer Celia Berk, who was opening a new act called "ON MY WAY TO YOU: Improbable Stories That Inspired An Unlikely Path," which debuted at The Laurie Beechman Theatre in New York City in 2022.



Tom Stevens

The first story she told was about Al Jolson. I contacted her, and she was excited to share that segment with the Festival. Her touching performance adds a wonderful feeling to our main stage this year.

Celia suggested that her friend, Mark Nadler, an award winning New York performer, also loved Jolson and might add his voice to the event. Mark was excited to contribute, and, sitting at his piano, combined two Jolson songs with a New York connection as never before, in a unique, energetic performance that made you want to applaud.

And Richard Halpern came through with an hour and three quarters of Jolson performed live at the end of the Festival that left them wanting more. Using Facebook Live as a platform, but open so that anyone could tune in, Richard sang the standards and familiar songs, and took requests for the less often sung Jolson tunes. He even tried to sing songs for which he did not know all the lyrics, or for which he had no backing tracks. This performance brought us as close as possible to the feeling of a face to face Festival.

Celia Berk



Mark Nadler



Jan Hernstat



Richard Halpern

Most of our presenters from previous years were able to put together new presentations about various aspects of Jolson history, trivia, or new works. Paul Bowers updated a piece showing Jolson references in modern media; Ed Greenbaum produced even more outtakes and alternate takes of Jolson songs; I took a look at what those who knew Jolson had to say about him; and Jon Sonneborn updated us on the progress of his new Jolson musical, capped off with a performance of one of his original songs by Richard Halpern.

As last year, there was a Karaoke section, which drew a few entries. Some we've seen before, others not, but all gave it a college try to voice some Jolson tunes.

One feature of our annual events that was missing from the Virtual Festival was the auction. While we did not have Jan there hawking items, a group of items was posted, low priced and

easily mailed, many of which were purchased by interested buyers.

Having established the program for the 2022 Virtual Festival, there was one other problem which needed to be addressed. For the last two years, posting the Festival on one day put a strain on the server, and all of the video streaming slowed to a crawl. May people complained that they could not see the various performances and presentations. The solution was twofold. First of all, the postings for the Festival were spread out over a week's time. Every day, a new item or two was added to the website. Traffic to the site remained constant through the week, as people came back to see the new features, and bottlenecks caused by everyone signing on at once were avoided. Also, rather than stream the video from the website, the video files were uploaded to YouTube, using a private link. They were then ported from YouTube to the website pages, so that the data flow could proceed

unimpeded, without pauses or stuttering.

With wonderful gestures of support for the IAJ, many members stepped up with some very creative ads to show their support of the Society and its activities. With those ads and patron listings, donation by Karaoke performers, and auction sales, the Festival was able to produce a reasonable amount to benefit the Society. Sincere thanks to all who participated.

As this is being written, work has begun on the compilation DVD of this year's Virtual Festival. In the same manner as the last two Virtual Festivals, the DVD will have all of the material from the Festival, along with some bonus material to make it special! It will take a few months to organize and edit all of the material, so watch for an announcement of the DVD on the website, and Society publications.

The 2023 Jolson Festival is scheduled for Baltimore, Maryland, from May 18 to May 21, 2023. Given all that has happened over the last several years, we will probably be taking a poll to gauge interest, and the likelihood of having sufficient attendance to support a Festival. Please be sure that we have your correct information from Marc, including Email address, so that you can a part of this process. You can update your information through a form on the website, <https://www.jolson.org>, just click where it says to Update Your Information. I look forward to greeting you all in Baltimore next year.