

The 2020

V I R T U A L

Jolson Festival

By Marc I. Leavey, M.D.



Lithuania's Ensemble Vilniaus Divertismentas

A funny thing happened on the way to this year's Jolson Festival. After having a great time, and a successful Festival in Philadelphia last year, we decided to head about 100 miles (that about 160 km for those on the other side of the pond) south to Baltimore and plan another memorable event for May, 2020. We secured a booking in a great facility that promised us all the rooms we needed, free parking, an unbelievable room rate, and even a major shopping center within walking distance. The outlook was for a phenomenal 70th Anniversary celebration. And then came two words which no one had ever thought they would have said: Global Pandemic. And there were other words as well: coronavirus, COVID-19, social distancing, shelter in place, lockdown. By February, it was becoming apparent that our annual get-together was in serious jeopardy.

As webmaster of the IAJS Internet and Facebook pages, I had an idea. Jan Hernstat and Bruce Wexler weighed in with suggestions and support, and the outline of a Virtual Festival began to take shape. The ideal would be to bring the presentations and entertainment that were at the core of our annual event to the Internet, so that all could enjoy. Without everyone in one room, but rather scattered all over the world, having the sessions "live" was untenable. Performing in the afternoon for the east coast would be in the morning on the west coast, late evening in the UK, and the middle of the night in Australia. No, the sessions would be recorded, but new for this event. With the Virtual Festival on the IAJS website, people who had never been able to attend a Jolson Festival, and people who never knew of a Jolson Festival, would be able to enjoy the various presentations and performances.

The mechanics of the process appeared to be straightforward. The website, www.Jolson.org, could easily support a virtual festival. Over the past several months I had changed the programming style for audio and video files to make them compatible with a wide range of computers, tablets, and smartphones. That would be ideal to present the types of presentations we enjoyed at our yearly retreats. With the foundation and basic structure completed, it was time to search out the necessary content.

Messages were sent out to the presenters and performers from recent festivals. To their credit, everyone responded that they could help. Of course, there were some sessions, typically parts of the festival, that we could not have. Karaoke night would have been a lot of fun but given time zone differences and logistics it was essentially impossible to pull off. It would have been great to have an auction as we do every year but there was no practical way to incorporate this activity, either.

In recent years, the daytime presentations have become an integral part of the weekend, and the usual presenters were contacted to put together material suitable for a virtual presentation. Not everyone was comfortable with the new technology, and we experimented with remote recording and editing material together into seamless presentations that were informative and entertaining.

My sincere thanks to Paul Bowers, Ed Greenbaum, David McCarthy and Jon Sonneborn for producing the material that we presented, along with a piece that I put together.

And then came the question of entertainment. I was thrilled that both Richard Halpern and Tony Babino were able to put together short programs that showed why they have been favorites at so many Jolson Festivals over the years. Nigel Dreiner produced a unique piece, commensurate with his unique style. We were also fortunate to have a song provided by Krissy Ross, who has performed at our festivals in the past, and we hope in the future as well. David McCarthy had been in touch with Lithuania's Ensemble Vilniaus Divertimentas, a five year old big band style group from Al Jolson's native land, that specializes in his music. Their presentation was the icing on the cake.

A favorite part of the annual Festival, for many, is the ad book, in which many express their support for Al Jolson and the Society. I crafted a section of the Virtual Festival to contain ads and entries of support, with a significant number of people responding to place ads. That provided a meaningful replacement for what was lost to the Society for not having a traditional Jolson Festival, and those individuals' contributions are sincerely appreciated.



Jan Hernstat



Paul Bowers



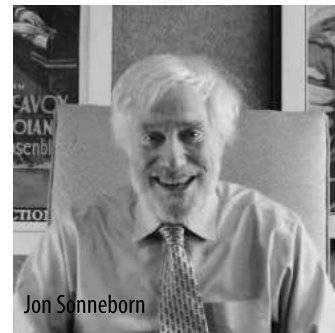
Ed Greenbaum



Marc Leavey, M.D.



David McCarthy



Jon Sonneborn





Tony Babino



Richard Halpern



Krissy Ross



Nigel Dreiner

The Virtual Festival went live on May 15, 2020, the same date that was scheduled for the Baltimore Jolson Festival. Traffic on the website went through the roof, with people viewing the material from all over the world. Comments were received by people who had never attended, or never even been able to attend, festivals in the past, with appreciation for being able to see what was involved. There were new members joining the Society, and we all turned our eyes to 2021, when we hope to be together in Baltimore to celebrate together.

But, that is not the end of the story. Realizing that there were yet people who could not view the Virtual Festival online, and having an idea to include archival material to observe the 70th anniversary of Al Jolson's passing, the production moved from the Internet to the digital library. A DVD has been produced which contains all of the material that is in the online Virtual Festival, over two hours of education and entertainment. And, in addition, a Bonus DVD with over three hours of archival material completes the package. That Bonus DVD includes appearances by Davey Lee, Betty Garrett, Sybil Jason, Barbara Hale, Beverly Roberts, Rudy Wissler, Ira Green, and, of course, Dolores Kontowicz. There are clips from appearances through the years, great and memorable moments, and segments rarely seen. We even included some of our Karaoke night fun. This two disc set will be available exclusively to members of the International Al Jolson Society, Inc., through the Video Department. With well over five hours of rare and unique material, this is a DVD set that every Jolson fan will need to have.

Plans are underway to meet together in Baltimore in 2021, at the same hotel and with the same accommodations that we booked for this year. It will be on the weekend of May 13-16, and we plan to have a great time. Maybe, some of what we learned this year with the Virtual Festival will carry over to next year, so that those who cannot attend can still take part. But, hopefully, we will be able to see each other, to sing and laugh together, and pay tribute to the World's Greatest Entertainer and his legacy.