

SESSION THREE



The American Dream: *The Jazz Singer*

Feature film, 1927

Playwright: Samson Raphaelson

Adapter: Alfred A. Cohn

Director: Alan Crosland

Jakie Rabinowitz (Jack Robin): Al Jolson

Mary Dale: May McAvoy

Cantor Rabinowitz: Warner Oland

Sara Rabinowitz: Eugenie Besserer

Harry Lee: Richard Tucker

Concert recital: Cantor Yosele Rosenblatt

Length: 89 minutes

Half subtitled, half a “talkie,” really a “singie,” *The Jazz Singer* is an historical landmark in the opening of a new era in the cinema. The first feature with spoken dialogue, the film gives the celebrated Al Jolson, the best-known Jewish entertainer of the day, the opportunity to speak 280 words. When the film opened in New York City in October 1927, it received standing ovations in the theater.

Written by Samson Raphaelson, the original play *The Jazz Singer* ran on Broadway for 38 weeks in 1925. The story focuses on the son of an immigrant cantor who goes on to great fame as a jazz singer but has to confront his heritage in a profound way.

Jolson, who plays the son of Cantor Rabinowitz, was himself the son of a cantor in Washington, D.C.. The singer – who reached the height of his career as a minstrel, singing “Mammy” in blackface – began his performing career in the synagogue choir. For Jolson, *The Jazz Singer* was the “essence of Jewish autobiography,” as rabbi and scholar Arthur Hertzberg points out. Hertzberg also explains that the film marked a turning point in Jewish life. “For the first time,” he writes, “the Jews who dominated Hollywood came out of the closet as Jews.”

The film’s musical interludes, performed by Jolson with the prominent cantor Yosele Rosenblatt singing the liturgical music, are movingly and beautifully rendered. With clear lines demarcated between the pull of an ethnic past and the lure of an American future, the plot struck a chord not only for immigrant Jews and their descendants but for many other ethnic Americans, and it continues to resonate.

The Jazz Singer, filmed mostly on location on New York’s Lower East Side, opens on the eve of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Quickly and effectively, the conflict

Narration: *In every soul, a spirit cries for expression – perhaps this plaintive, wailing song of jazz is, after all, the misunderstood utterance of a prayer.*

is set up in musical terms. The viewing audience is introduced to two Eastern European immigrants, the Cantor and Mrs. Rabinowitz, and their Americanized young son, Jacob, known as Jakie. The cantor, a bearded patriarch, “stubbornly held to the ancient traditions of his race,” as the title card explains. The elder Rabinowitz’s Jewishness expresses itself in and is symbolized by his exclusive and steadfast devotion to Jewish liturgical music, and he expects that his son will carry on in the family cantorial tradition. Jakie, however, is more drawn to America and its music than to Hebrew liturgy, and even as a young boy has a true passion for jazz.

Jakie decides to follow his passion. His mother, Sara, a traditional Jewish woman, understands her son and, unlike her husband, appreciates his talent. The cantor wishes to break all ties with Jakie when he leaves home to make a living singing secular tunes. Jakie becomes “Jack Robin,” and his talents bring him great success – acclaim as a jazz singer, a leading role on Broadway, and a beautiful (gentile) girlfriend.

A dramatic and lovingly melodramatic ending brings Jack/Jakie home, where he must decide whether to go on with his opening night performance or accept his mother’s request to chant Kol Nidrei in the synagogue on the eve of Yom Kippur, in place of his dying father.

In Depth: Leaving the World of Our Fathers

The uses of musical talent have moral and religious dimensions in this film. Both father and son sing out of a deep place in their soul and touch deeply those who hear them sing, although the settings for their music differ. The father sings to plead with his God; the son sings to entertain an audience.

To the cantor, the songs one sings declare either loyalty to or defection from Jewish history. When young Jakie is discovered by a neighbor singing “My Gal Sal” as “Ragtime Jakie” in a local saloon, his father thinks that he literally can whip the American music out of the boy. Even years of distance and separation do not soften the sharp lines of the conflict between Jewish and American values embodied by the songs of the grown artist and his father.

Throughout the film, the jazz songs that Jack Robin

chooses to sing transform his own experience into an American idiom. Immediately after the scene in which the young Jackie is whipped and, furious and humiliated, leaves his anguished mother for years, the film turns to a scene of the young man singing about a father and his son. The song, “Dirty Hands, Dirty Face,” depicts a father who loves his son tenderly and gently, even though the child is mischievous. The understanding American father Jack Robin sings about is unlike his own stern Old World patriarch.

When Sara Rabinowitz comes to the theater with trepidation, she is treated to her son singing about a son who loves his mother dearly, who has been separated from her for too long, and who is giddily looking forward to his reunion with her. However, the son who sings is in blackface, and the mother he longs for is his “Mammy.”

Sara: *Yes, papa – he knows all the songs – he has them in his head – but not in his heart.*

Significantly, Jack’s Jewish heritage contributes to his talent and his success. He is said to “sing just like his father, with a tear in his voice.” Jolson’s singing is a powerful evocation of the numerous sons of Jewish immigrants who shaped and defined American music, often by celebrating the music of other minorities, men such as George Gershwin, Aaron Copeland, Irving Berlin, Oscar Hammerstein, Sammy Kahn, Leonard Bernstein, Steven Sondheim, and many others. Indeed, as Al Jolson puts on blackface to sing a “Negro” song, the contemporary viewer’s mind leaps forward to such American Jewish musical contributions as Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*.

The Great American Conflict

Decades before social scientists promoted the theory that the Jewish community was in the process of being transformed (and suggesting an alternative interpretation to the current fear among community leaders that it is in the process of assimilating to the point of disappearance), the Jewish creators of American films, music, and fiction depicted their own version of Jewish transformation. In the music of George Gershwin and Leonard Bernstein, the novels of Edna Ferber, the films of a host of Jewish screenwriters and directors, the American Jewish experience was translated into a generic American experience. When specific ethnic groups were invoked,

they were often not Jewish. *The Jazz Singer* is one of a limited number of the many films produced by Jews that focus on a Jewish family.

The issue, as the film sees it, is how the children of immigrants should respond to the unprecedented meritocracy American society offered to people whose ancestors' goals had been limited by antisemitism. Should they be loyal to their "racial" heritage and reject American culture and opportunities, which lure them away from their past? Or should they freely pursue an unencumbered American life as far as their talents and their energies will take them, leaving the past behind? Is it possible to do both?

The Jazz Singer sides with youth and opportunity. The authors of the film describe Cantor Rabinowitz as a man with "his face turned toward the past." Jack agrees, and chides his father. Significantly, he sees his father's religious objections to his lifestyle as outmoded vestiges of an outgrown world. When the father insists on whipping Jakie, the mother writhes in agony. The young man emerges from the experience humiliated and alienated, an alienation that sets the stage for his decision to leave his parental home and throw himself into a life in the theater.

The conflict between the generations is primarily a conflict between father and son as to how the son will live his life. The son, already an American, feels that his life belongs to him; the father feels that his life belongs to Jewish continuity, to the generations of Rabinowitz cantors of the past. When Jakie prefers jazz songs to religious ones, Cantor Rabinowitz declares that his son has rejected both him and the chain of Jewish tradition. "My son was to stand at my side and sing," he mourns, "but now I have no son." The patriarch stands alone in *The Jazz Singer*, like fathers in many pieces of immigrant fiction, as the wrongheaded, anachronistic defender of the faith.

The Jewish Mother, Revisited

As with many other mothers in immigrant fiction, Sara Rabinowitz respects and pities her husband, but deeply empathizes with and understands the young boy – and continues to dote on him, in the tradition of the stereotypical Jewish mother. "But Papa, he doesn't think

Jack (to his father): *My songs mean as much to my audience as prayers to your congregation.*

like we do,” she pleads. In this film, the mother is treated with great affection; she is depicted as flawlessly lovable and wholly beloved by her son at all times.

Despite physical distance, the intense bond between Jack and his mother remains unbroken, because she has not put herself in the position of opposing his American goals. Years later, a major breakthrough in his career brings Jack back to New York and into his parental household for a brief visit. The relationship between him and his mother is as warm as ever, except that the son is now a man. He flatters and gives gifts to his mother and teases her sweetly; he promises her a pink dress, a new apartment, a trip to Coney Island; he sings “Blue Skies.” The old woman is touched and charmed.

A real potential for conflict exists between Sara Rabinowitz and Jack’s girlfriend, Mary, a beautiful, talented, gentile woman who has been very instrumental in furthering his career. Mary and the producer of the Broadway musical Jack is starring in encourage him to feel that he is now a citizen of the world, a man with artistic responsibilities as profound as religious beliefs. His mother, however, seeing him perform, does not oppose his career but states, “Here he belongs. If God had wanted him in His House, He would have kept him there. . . . He’s not my boy any more. He belongs to the whole world now.”

Returning Home

Jack’s passage into the world of true Americana, however, is not meant to be uncomplicated. In remarkable dramatic coincidence, the opening of the new show takes place on the evening of Yom Kippur, with Cantor Rabinowitz lying on his deathbed. Sara pleads that Jack come home to sing Kol Nidrei and, in doing so, save his father’s life. Mary pleads that Jack fulfill his responsibilities to the theater and his career. Both women, who truly love Jack and truly believe in what they are saying, use the heaviest possible moral and emotional artillery. Torn between his mother and his girlfriend, between his religion and his career – in truth, between his “race” and his new country, America – Jack is distraught and tormented, and keeps the viewing audience guessing, until the last minute.

Sara: *Maybe our boy doesn't want to be a cantor, papa.*

Cantor: *What has he to say? For five generations a Rabinowitz has been a cantor. He must be one.*

While you watch, consider:

- ◆ How is humor interwoven with pathos in this film?
- ◆ How does this set of parents relate to the Jewish parents seen in the previous films viewed, *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Mirele Efros*?
- ◆ How do you feel about the film's ending?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Jack: *Wait a minute, wait a minute. You ain't heard nothing yet.*

- ◆ How are the values of the Old and New Worlds contrasted?
- ◆ As in *Mirele Efros*, in this film the parent (in this case, the father) expects the child to follow in the path he has determined. How do the two films seem to view this differently, and how do we react to such expectations today?
- ◆ How do you explain the very different reactions of Jackie's father and mother when he rejects his father's career and lifestyle?
- ◆ What, if anything, does Jackie/Jack lose in his rush to become Americanized? If the Jewish past is forgotten and abandoned, can it be recovered?
- ◆ The film's ending has it both ways: Jack honors his father and his tradition while also becoming a huge success in the secular world. How do we experience and resolve such conflicts between Jewish tradition and secular goals in our lives?
- ◆ Could a contemporary version of this story be made today? In what ways might the father stand for "tradition," and how might the son depart from that course? What temptations, for example, might take the place of singing forbidden popular songs?

Jack: *But there's something, after all, in my heart – maybe, it's a call of the ages – the cry of my race.*

SUGGESTIONS FOR READING AND VIEWING

Books and stories

- ◆ Cahan, Abraham. *Yekl and the Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of Yiddish New York*. New York: Dover, 1970.
- ◆ Howe, Irving. *The World of Our Fathers*. New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1976.
- ◆ Potok, Chaim. *My Name Is Asher Lev*. New York: Knopf, 1972.
- ◆ Whitfield, Stephen. *The Voices of Jacob, The Hands of Esau: Jews in American Life and Thought*. New York: Anchor Books/Shoe String, 1984.
- ◆ Yeziarska, Anzia. *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*. New York: Persea Books, 1988.

Films

The Chosen (1981)
Hester Street (1975)
His People (1925)