

This Day in History... May 26, 1886

Birth of Al Jolson

Asa "Al" Jolson said he did not know his true birthday, but he later chose May 26, 1886, as the date he would use. From a poor immigrant childhood, he rose to become one of America's biggest entertainers and the star of the film that helped bring sound to the movies.

Jolson was born Asa Yoelson in Srednike, then part of the Russian Empire and now Seredzius, Lithuania. His family was Jewish, and his father, Moses Yoelson, worked as a cantor. In 1894, the family moved to Washington, DC, where Moses hoped to give his children a safer and better life. The next year, Jolson's mother, Naomi, died. Her death deeply affected the young boy.

Jolson and his brother Hirsch, later called Harry, soon found an escape in show business. By the late 1890s, they were singing on street corners for money. They often used the coins they earned to buy seats at Washington's National Theatre. Jolson later said those early performances helped him learn what audiences liked. He wanted applause, and he learned how to get it.

In 1902, Jolson joined a circus as an usher. When the owner heard him sing, he let Jolson perform during parts of the show. The circus soon closed, but Jolson kept moving. He worked in burlesque, vaudeville, and touring acts. For a time, he performed with his brother and comedian Joe Palmer. Their act gave Jolson more experience in timing, comedy, and bold stage presence.

By 1909, Jolson was working in minstrel shows. Like many white entertainers of that era, he often performed in blackface, a practice now widely recognized as racist and offensive. It became part of his public image, especially in *The Jazz Singer*, and remains one of the most debated parts of his legacy.

Jolson's energy set him apart. He did not simply stand and sing. He moved, joked, knelt, shouted to the crowd, and made each performance feel personal. In 1911, he made his Broadway debut in *La Belle Paree*. The show helped make him a star. He followed it with roles in several musicals, including *Vera Violetta*, *The Whirl of Society*, and *Robinson Crusoe, Jr.*

One of his biggest stage moments came with "Swanee." George Gershwin and Irving Caesar wrote the song in 1919. Jolson heard it and added it to his show *Sinbad*. His recording sold in huge numbers and helped make Gershwin famous. The song became one of Jolson's trademarks.

In 1921, Jolson starred in *Bombo* at Jolson's 59th Street Theatre in New York. At 35, he was one of the youngest performers in America to have a theater named for him. He reportedly suffered terrible stage fright on opening night, but the show was a success. The audience called him back again and again, and Jolson told them, "I'm a happy man tonight."

Jolson's most famous role came in 1927, when he starred in Warner Bros.' *The Jazz Singer*. The film was not a fully spoken movie, but it was the first feature-length motion picture with synchronized recorded music, singing, and spoken words in selected scenes. Jolson's line, "You ain't heard nothin' yet," became linked with the arrival of talking pictures. The film helped speed Hollywood's shift away from silent movies.

Jolson continued making films in the 1930s, including *The Singing Fool*, *Say It with Songs*, *Mammy*, and *Hallelujah, I'm a Bum*. His style later seemed old-fashioned to some audiences, but he remained a powerful symbol of early sound entertainment. In 1946, Columbia Pictures released *The Jolson Story*, with Larry Parks playing Jolson and Jolson dubbing the singing. The movie was a hit, and a sequel, *Jolson Sings Again*, followed in 1949.

Jolson also became known for entertaining American troops. The USO had been formed in February 1941, before the United States entered World War II, to support military morale. After Pearl Harbor, Jolson pushed to perform for service members and toured widely. He sometimes gave several shows a day, including performances at remote bases.

When the Korean War began in 1950, Jolson again volunteered. He traveled to Korea at his own expense and performed 42 shows in 16 days. The trip exhausted him. Jolson died of a heart attack in San Francisco on October 23, 1950, shortly after returning home. Defense Secretary George Marshall later awarded him the Medal for Merit for his service to the troops.

Jolson's reputation has changed over time. During his career, he was billed as "The World's Greatest Entertainer" and was admired for his powerful voice, dramatic delivery, and close connection with audiences. Today, his story is also viewed through the painful history of blackface minstrelsy. Both parts are important to understanding his place in American entertainment history.



From the 1994 Popular Singers Issue



Issued for the 50th anniversary of The Jazz Singer.

This Day in History... May 26, 1886

Birth of Al Jolson

Asa “Al” Jolson said he did not know his true birthday, but he later chose May 26, 1886, as the date he would use. From a poor immigrant childhood, he rose to become one of America’s biggest entertainers and the star of the film that helped bring sound to the movies.

Jolson was born Asa Yoelson in Srednike, then part of the Russian Empire and now Seredzius, Lithuania. His family was Jewish, and his father, Moses Yoelson, worked as a cantor. In 1894, the family moved to Washington, DC, where Moses hoped to give his children a safer and better life. The next year, Jolson’s mother, Naomi, died. Her death deeply affected the young boy.

Jolson and his brother Hirsch, later called Harry, soon found an escape in show business. By the late 1890s, they were singing on street corners for money. They often used the coins they earned to buy seats at Washington’s National Theatre. Jolson later said those early performances helped him learn what audiences liked. He wanted applause, and he learned how to get it.

In 1902, Jolson joined a circus as an usher. When the owner heard him sing, he let Jolson perform during parts of the show. The circus soon closed, but Jolson kept moving. He worked in burlesque, vaudeville, and touring acts. For a time, he performed with his brother and comedian Joe Palmer. Their act gave Jolson more experience in timing, comedy, and bold stage presence.

By 1909, Jolson was working in minstrel shows. Like many white entertainers of that era, he often performed in blackface, a practice now widely recognized as racist and offensive. It became part of his public image, especially in *The Jazz Singer*, and remains one of the most debated parts of his legacy.

Jolson’s energy set him apart. He did not simply stand and sing. He moved, joked, knelt, shouted to the crowd, and made each performance feel personal. In 1911, he made his Broadway debut in *La Belle Paree*. The show helped make him a star. He followed it with roles in several musicals, including *Vera Violetta*, *The Whirl of Society*, and *Robinson Crusoe, Jr.*

One of his biggest stage moments came with “Swanee.” George Gershwin and Irving Caesar wrote the song in 1919. Jolson heard it and added it to his show *Sinbad*. His recording sold in huge numbers and helped make Gershwin famous. The song became one of Jolson’s trademarks.

In 1921, Jolson starred in *Bombo* at Jolson’s 59th Street Theatre in New York. At 35, he was one of the youngest performers in America to have a theater named for him. He reportedly suffered terrible stage fright on opening night, but the show was a success. The audience called him back again and again, and Jolson told them, “I’m a happy man tonight.”

Jolson’s most famous role came in 1927, when he starred in Warner Bros.’ *The Jazz Singer*. The film was not a fully spoken movie, but it was the first feature-length motion picture with synchronized recorded music, singing, and spoken words in selected scenes. Jolson’s line, “You ain’t heard nothin’ yet,” became linked with the arrival of talking pictures. The film helped speed Hollywood’s shift away from silent movies.

Jolson continued making films in the 1930s, including *The Singing Fool*, *Say It with Songs*, *Mammy*, and *Hallelujah, I’m a Bum*. His style later seemed old-fashioned to some audiences, but he remained a powerful symbol of early sound entertainment. In 1946, Columbia Pictures released *The Jolson Story*, with Larry Parks playing Jolson and Jolson dubbing the singing. The movie was a hit, and a sequel, *Jolson Sings Again*, followed in 1949.

Jolson also became known for entertaining American troops. The USO had been formed in February 1941, before the United States entered World War II, to support military morale. After Pearl Harbor, Jolson pushed to perform for service members and toured widely. He sometimes gave several shows a day, including performances at remote bases.

When the Korean War began in 1950, Jolson again volunteered. He traveled to Korea at his own expense and performed 42 shows in 16 days. The trip exhausted him. Jolson died of a heart attack in San Francisco on October 23, 1950, shortly after returning home. Defense Secretary George Marshall later awarded him the Medal for Merit for his service to the troops.

Jolson’s reputation has changed over time. During his career, he was billed as “The World’s Greatest Entertainer” and was admired for his powerful voice, dramatic delivery, and close connection with audiences. Today, his story is also viewed through the painful history of blackface minstrelsy. Both parts are important to understanding his place in American entertainment history.



From the 1994 Popular Singers Issue



Issued for the 50th anniversary of The Jazz Singer.