

# ***The Jazz Singer* – comments**

by Phillip W. Weiss

In the introductory section of his article on *The Jazz Singer*,<sup>1</sup> Charles Musser writes: "Neil Gabler has declared that the film 'failed as a drama'. Lester Friedman and others have ... harshly criticized the film as 'assimilationist' ... [and] Steve Daly savaged the movie, remarking that 'there's an ugly stereotype under wraps here' for 'Jolson spends a significant portion of *Jazz Singer* in black face ..." (196). These criticisms ignore certain facts. Regarding Mr. Gabler's criticism about the movie failing as a drama, the plot of *The Jazz Singer* suggests the opposite. The movie succeeds as a drama precisely because of its dramatic content. The movie explicitly and candidly dramatizes many themes that were directly relevant to the Jewish community in 1927 and equally relevant to any immigrant community in the United States today: Young versus Old; Old World versus New World; Religious versus Secular; Reaction versus Change, Father versus Son. Regarding Mr. Friedman's criticism of the movie as "assimilationist," an examination of the movie reveals nothing that can be construed as endorsing assimilation. The movie's principal protagonist, Jakie, is conflicted; the entire story is about his desperate and heartbreaking search for an identity; he is wracked by guilt; he is torn between his duty as a cantor's son and his burning desire to entertain. If this movie was endorsing assimilation, it would show Jakie completely repudiating his father without hesitation. Yet no matter what he does, Jakie is a Jew, a fact that the movie depicts. Mr. Daly's comment about the movie's "ugly stereotype," referring to the use of black face, is overstated. First, when

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Musser, "Why Did Negroes Love Al Jolson and *The Jazz Singer*?: Melodrama, Blackface and Cosmopolitan Theatrical Culture," *Film History*, Vol. 23, 2011, pp. 196-222

*The Jazz Singer* was released in 1927, the black face and minstrel genres were part of the mainstream of American entertainment, and so the movie was not pioneering or promoting a new art form. But second, and what is far more germane, is that in *The Jazz Singer*, black face is not used to gratuitously mock, degrade or denigrate a particular group but rather is used as a dramatic device to metaphorically underscore Jakie's identity crisis. That is, the use of black face is an integral part of the story. When Jakie is happy and upbeat he is singing "Toot, Toot, Tootsie" in white face, but when he is in torment he is shown in black face. The racial connotation is obvious: white equals happy and black equals sad. By today's cultural norms this formula is outdated and offensive. Yet in 1927 it was considered acceptable, and it is within that historical and sociological context that the movie should be critically analyzed and not summarily labeled, reviled and dismissed.