“Swanee”—Al Jolson (1920)

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Essay by Cary O’Dell

Al Jolson

Original label

Thanks to tributes, covers, excerpts and parodies, there are few people of any age that don’t know the chorus to “Swanee”:

> *Swanee, How I love ya, how I love ya,…*
> *My dear old swanee….*

Irving Caesar and George Gerswhin wrote it; Al Jolson made it immortal.

“Swanee’s” success and endurance can be ascribed to many things, not the least of which is its cross-sectional appeal. It has the upbeat feel of a show tune (as which it began), the pride-of-place enthusiasm of a patriotic anthem, and the sing-along-ability of a campfire favorite.

Along with becoming one of the songs most identified with the legendary Jolson, “Swanee” would also prove to be the prolific Gerswhin’s most successful song ever. As a recording, it sold over two-million copies and, as sheet music, one million copies. Its success allowed Gershwin to concentrate almost exclusively on his work in the theatre while solidifying Jolson’s position as one of America’s most revered entertainers.

The birth of the song “Swanee” is well noted. Gerswhin and Caesar wrote it—allegedly as a response to Stephen Foster’s “Old Folk Home”--while on the upper deck of a double decker bus while traveling from the offices of the T.B. Harmes Publishing Company to Gerswhin’s apartment. As Caesar would remark later, “In those days, you wrote a song and then you tried to place it.” The first place “Swanee” was placed was in New Wayburn’s “Demi-Tasse Revue” which opened at New York’s Capitol Theater on October 24, 1919. The first staging of the song was impressive: six chorus girls sang it accompanied by twinkling lights attached to their shoes. Yet, for all that, the song seemed to make little impact. It probably would have disappeared into Broadway oblivion except for a few weeks later when Jolson heard Gerswhin playing it at a party at the Biltmore. Smitten with the song, Jolson soon added it to his current show, “Sinbad.”

In January 1920, Jolson recorded “Swanee” for Columbia Records. Upon its release, the song went through the roof. It was on the charts for 18 weeks, nine of them spent at number one. Though by the time of the song’s release, Jolson was already a major name in American entertainment, one of the nation’s biggest, already earning over $1,000 a week, his “Swanee” success only furthered his fame.

Except for perhaps Garland, to whom he is often compared, no one could sell a song quite like Al Jolson. And for “Swanee,” he gives a typical robust reading of the song. His rendition is

heartfelt but bold. Those who saw him perform it in "Sinbad," said he reached all the way up to the rafters with it.

If "Swanee's" first, and often omitted, verse sort of drags then it more than makes up for it with its addictive hook of a chorus. Also often omitted in other singers' versions of "Swanee" is Jolson's unique approach to the song's bridge: he imitates a bird. Call it a bird song or a bird call, Jolson whistles along to the melody with a brief but impressive impression of bird sounds (echoing the song's fifth line, "The birds are singing"). Afterward, Jolson returns to vocalizing for the song's final verse.

For all its upbeat, toe-tapping fun, "Swanee" is actually a song of longing. In it, the singer assumedly from his position in the "north" ("The folks up north will see me no more….") pines, deeply, for the South. He misses much: the birds, the banjos, his "mammy waiting for me." Yet for all the narrator's longing for the south, "Swanee" contains no promise of action, no overt sign that a trip—a hegira? an escape?—is planned. Will the singer ever return to his beloved "Swanee" and mammy or is forever to nostalgically, if joyfully, reminisce and hope?

Today, Jolson is remembered as an important but troublesome figure. He is forever famous for speaking and singing in the "first" talking movie, "The Jazz Singer," but, at the same time, he is also infamous for his occasional appearing in blackface. To some he is the "Greatest Entertainer Who Ever Lived," to others, he's a sad reminder of a more repressive and insulting time. But minstrel make-up (which many other performers of the era also adopted from time to time) accounts for only a small percentage of Jolson's output. Besides, his make-up did not reflect his politics; Jolson actually had a long personal history of working with and supporting black artists.

Along with success on the stage, Jolson introduced a plethora of other song standards, most notably "Rock-A-Bye Your Baby with a Dixie Melody" in 1918 and "My Mammy" in 1927. And though only one of his films could ever be considered a bone fide classic ("The Jazz Singer"), Jolson's appeared in a variety of star vehicles until the end of the 1930s. While continuing to record and be the subject of two big screen bio-pics, for Jolson, the 1940's were about the war effort and touring the world entertaining US troops scattered around the globe, something he continued to do even after the end of World War II. Jolson had only recently returned from Korea when he died on October 23, 1950 at age 64.

Because Jolson is so identified with "Swanee," few others have chosen to cover it over the years. One who did--and made it her own--is Judy Garland. Garland sang it (minus the bird calls) for the first time in her film "A Star Is Born" in 1954. Thereafter, it became a show-stopping staple of her concert and TV appearances.

Certainly it took someone with as big a talent as Judy Garland to rival a talent like Al Jolson's. These two megastars' mutual association with the song "Swanee," as well as the song's memorable melody and going-home sentiments, is what has helped it become such an enduring work, truly a part of the American character.

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