

Dr. JOLSON

History in Song ★ By Pauline Swanson

HISTORIANS cull the most vivid pictures of older times from folk songs; if the same truth holds true when modern times are round the dial and ancient in their turn, then Al Jolson certainly must go down as one of the historians of his day.

Glance back through the song sheets that the mammy singer has imprinted upon the consciousness of his people. There are history's headlines, of American national life, in the colorful first decades of the Twentieth Century. A changing spirit in the New World? Al Jolson's songs—as surely folk songs as any music of the new century—have changed with them.

This colorful song-history of a new century is passing in review on Jolson's radio program, as the singer and his company revive and re-dramatize the hits of the past. Jolson doesn't shy away from new songs. He points a finger at as many hits today as in the days when "April Showers" flourished and "Swanee" and "Mammy" had a whole nation humming.

But his listeners won't let him sing them. Last spring Jolson sang "Make Way for Tomorrow," a new song by Gene Schwartz not yet in the hands of the publishers. The mail bags burst during the following week with demands from his radio audience that he sing the songs he had made famous a decade before. "Sonny Boy" just won't wear out with the Jolson fans, nor will "Keep Smiling at Trouble," "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime." Al says he feels a little silly about singing that dime song. It was a pretty grim thing when he introduced it in 1929. Now, he says, "they're asking for dollars."

NOT EVERY old-time hit will stand the test of revival, Al Jolson believes. Unless their rhythms are modern—"unless you can dance to 'em"—the songs are meaningless to a modern audience. Thus most of Irving Berlin's early songs, "Blue Skies," "Alexander's Ragtime Band" and Jerome Kern's melodies are still understandable rhythmically and live on and on, while

songs which shared the spotlight when they were written have been forgotten.

"Sonny Boy," "Frisolous Sal" and their like, says Al, are "just as modern as 'The Love Bug,'" despite the fact that they were written 35 years ago.

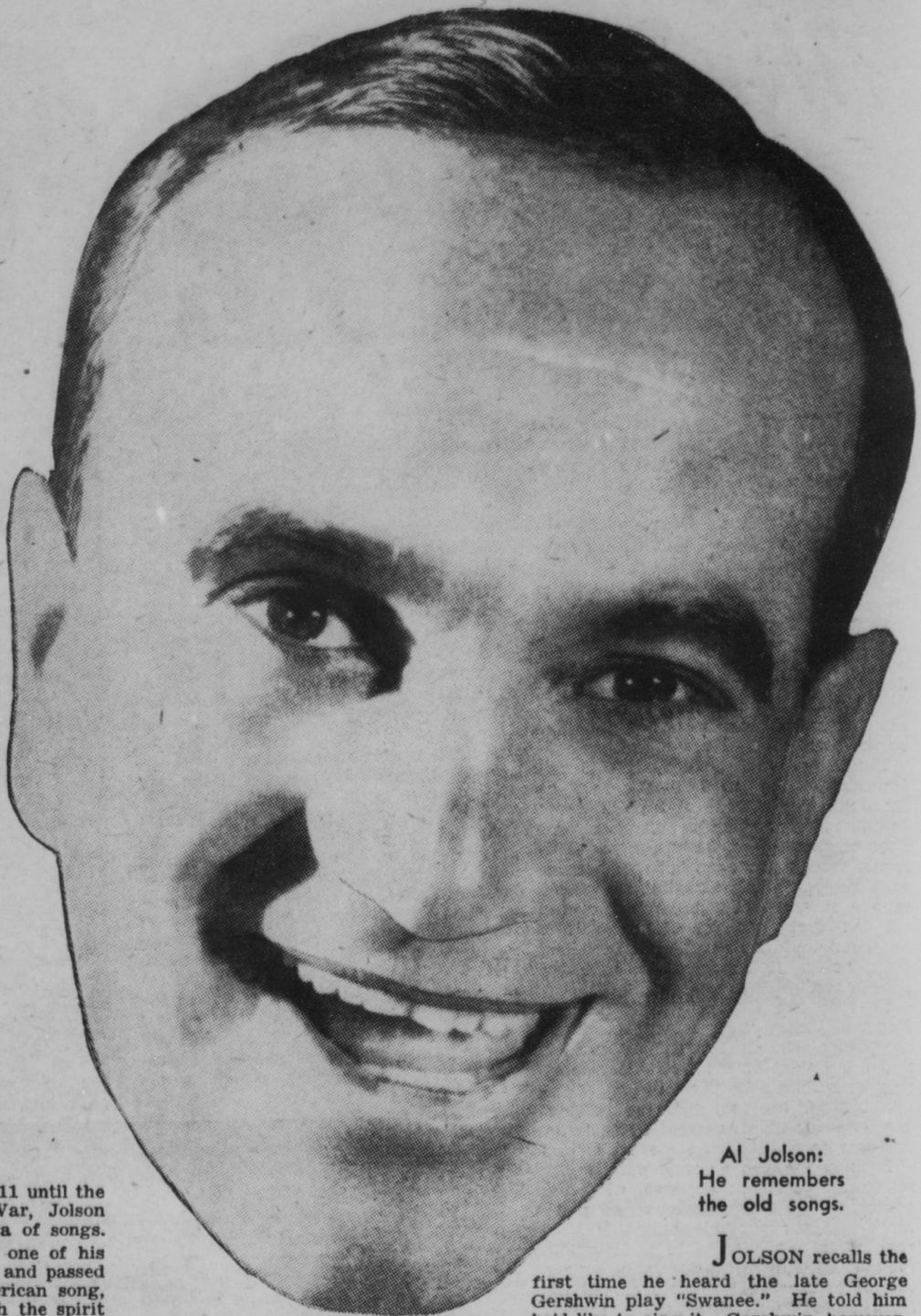
Americans have been whistling the Al Jolson favorites for 30 years, whistling gaily through the pre-war era, defiantly through the war, whistling through prosperity and depression, through the sorrows and joys of a people. And weeping and laughing alternately with Al, they have helped to record a history in song of the birth pangs of the Twentieth Century.

IT'S BEEN a long road from the Winter Garden in New York in 1911 to the Hollywood CBS Playhouse in 1937, but Al Jolson's song story of his journey along it make the way seem short indeed.

"La Belle Paree" was the Winter Garden hit which brought Al Jolson first to the stage. In that he introduced "My Sumurun Girl" and the Jerome Kern number, "Paris Is a Paradise," the latter one of his recent revivals.

During the period from 1911 until the beginning of the World War, Jolson popularized the Southern Era of songs.

In 1918 Jolson starred in one of his greatest musicals, "Sinbad," and passed the third milestone of American song, an era of melody brave with the spirit of wartime. Americans who remember the war attach special significance still to "Rose of No Man's Land," "Hello Central, Give Me No Man's Land" and "How Are You Going to Keep Them Down on the Farm After They've Seen



Al Jolson:
He remembers
the old songs.

Paree?" That was a period of whistling. Followed the Twenties, and "My Buddy," a sad, backward glance at the war years, "Swanee," "Mammy" and "Keep Smiling at Trouble."

JOLSON recalls the first time he heard the late George Gershwin play "Swanee." He told him he'd like to sing it. Gershwin, however, shrugged his shoulders and said that he'd already gone the rounds of the publishers, who had told him it was no good. Al had never been one to doubt his own judgment, so he introduced "Swanee" and watched it become one of the great successes of its time.

When the song, "Keep Smiling at Trouble," became popular Jolson says he believed he too could write a "cheerer-upper" song, so with Buddy De Sylva he wrote the hit song, "Don't Mind the Darkness, Morning Will Come." He says he got the theme melody for this number from the hymn, "Oh, Come All Ye Faithful," which he used to sing when he was at St. Mary's School, where his father sent him when he became incorrigible at home. The De Sylva-Jolson combine prospered and was responsible for "Avalon," "California, Here I Come" and "I'll Say She Does."

DURING the making of his first picture, "The Jazz Singer," produced in Hollywood in 1927, Jolson introduced the still popular "There's a Rainbow Round My Shoulder." Although there was no particular story behind the song "Sonny Boy," which he sang in his next film, "The Singing Fool," Jolson says it is still his favorite number.

There were others: "Dirty Hands, Dirty Face," which Jolson turned down as impossible only to change his mind two hours later when he saw a dirty little newsboy hawking his papers on a street corner; "O Donna Clara," "Go Into Your Dance."

The history in song is not finished. Nor is Jolson's role as its chief narrator. When his series of broadcasts recessed for the summer it was with the understanding that the entire company, Jolson, Martha Raye, Parkyakarkus and Victor Young's orchestra, should return intact in the fall. So here they are. And there are more songs: Old and new from Jolson; crackling new from Martha Raye.

Class is not dismissed.



Al Jolson and Martha Raye