Larry Parkes Talks About Al Jolson

For nearly fifteen years Al Jolson bestrode the New York stage as king of America's blackface entertainers. Then came the first talkie, and the whole world heard him say that impromptu line: "Hey, ma, listen to this." The film had found its tongue—in Jolson's mouth.

Al Jolson, in the words of one of his favourite songs, was "sittin' on top of the world." From **The Jazz Singer** onwards he made film after film, until a fresh load of talent swept him off the screen in the middle thirties.

For ten years he was a has-been. During the war he went overseas to entertain the troops, but neither Hollywood nor Broadway would look at him twice writes Leonard Samson in "Answers."

A Memory Revived

And then, in 1946, Jolson rocketed back to fame—and has stayed there ever since. Last June he was sixty-five, but the voice that sang "Sonny Boy" in 1928 is still twirling round on millions of new records; records that he made since the war.

These bare facts on his life are familiar to anyone who went to see that fabulously successful Hollywood musical called "The Jolson Story." In Britain alone, 30 million picture-goers saw it, and thousands more are watching the Techni-colored follow-up called "Jolson Sings Again."

Yes, Jolson still has his voice. And the world sings again with him the songs he made famous more than thirty years ago, songs such as "Mammy," "California, Here I Come," "April Showers," "Rock-a-Bye," and dozens more.

The memory of a great entertainer has been revived. And the man who did it was a young actor called Larry Parks who impersonated Jolson in both screen biographies—and borrowed his voice for the songs.

The old Mammy singer is once again perched on top of the world, but he'd never have made the grade if Larry Parks hadn't hoisted him up there.

A little while ago the London Palladium gallery shouted: "Give us Jolson!" but Larry Parks—now playing in Glasgow—just smiled and went into a duet with his commedienne wife, Betty Garret.

Afterwards, Larry said to me as we had supper in his dressing-room: 'I'm not Jolson, so why should I do his songs? It'd be like telling Bob Hope's jokes." And Betty added: "So if the audience gets restless I tell them that Larry can't do Jolson because I can't imitate Ruby Keeler."

After all, Larry had played in nearly forty films before the Jolson histories came along to give him real fame, and he hopes to make at least forty more.

Even so, a great many people still identify him solely with the Al Jolson characterizations. In fact, his portrayal seemed so credible and sincere that one would imagine that "the man and his memory" knew each other inside out.

When "The Jolson Story" was presented in 1946. Hollywood gave out the news that "many were tested before the part was finally given to Larry Parks, who had impressed his studio heads with fine performances in smaller productions, and endeared himself to Jolson almost immediately.

But Larry makes no bones about the fact that Jolson never wanted him to play the part. James Cagney was the actor he had asked for, but after a number of tests the contract was handed to Larry.

"No, No, No!"

"I guess they finally picked on me because I was already on the payroll and would cost less," he remarked with a smile. "But as for Jolson, I can hardly tell you anything about him, except that he's very rich. Maybe even richer than Bing Crosby. But then I don't know. He's never been to my house, and I've never been to his."

An interesting scene in "Jolson Sings Again" shows Larry Parkes as himself, and Larry Parkes as Al Jolson, rehearsing together in front of an enormous mirror, but that shot was more interesting than accurate.

"When I was assigned the part," Larry said, "I got very worried about how I was going to make out. I was a straight actor, not a song-and-dance man, and I wasn't sure that I could synchronize with Jolson's voice. So I got together with him in a small room and sang 'Rock-a-Bye' the way I thought he'd do it. At the end, he said: 'No, no, no, not like that! You're moving around too much. This is the way to do it.'

"Well, by the time he'd finished he was practically hanging from the chandelier, and he said to me: 'See? I didn't move a muscle."

"From then on I decided to work things out my own way."

So Jolson recorded the numbers and Larry Parks rehearsed by himself. Although Larry's singing voice wasn't heard once on the screen, he sang so many duets with Jolson's records that he suffered badly from laryngitis.

"You see," he said, "I had to be perfect. Either I was synchronizing or I wasn't. There's no in-between."

The two films were before the cameras for a total of fifteen months, and in that period Larry sang Jolson's numbers more times than the Mammy singer did in half a century of show business. But not once has Jolson complimented him on the way he handled the part.

Facing the Crowd

"I can understand it, of course," said Larry. "It can't be very pleasant for Jolson to have to watch someone else play his part because he's too old to do it himself. I know I'd feel the same way.

"For a long time Jolson was known as 'the world's greatest entertainer,' and he went through a hard school to qualify for that title. Thirty years ago there was no such thing as being groomed for stardom. You had to fight every inch of the way. And if you weren't filled with a colossal ego and untiring driving force you couldn't make it. Then the entertainer was on his own, with a backcloth behind him and a rowdy audience in front."

Larry is beginning to have an inkling of what it feels like to stand up and face the crowd. Although he has appeared in several plays, this is only the sixth week that he has faced an audience as Larry Parks, and not as a character in a story. But Betty helps him along.

When the couple return to Hollywood they plan to co-star in a film to be made by their own newly-formed company. But Larry is still under contract to Columbia, and the latest reports indicate that he will make yet a third Jolson musical.

Well, why not? The first two were successful enough for Jack Benny to say: "If I had my life over again I'd get Larry Parkes to do it for me!"

Sign in shop window: Evening Gown Cut Down Ridiculously Low.

"What are you planning to do, Labor Day?"

"A Little Wider, Please!"—While a nearby elephant chortled and a crowd of children chuckled, this chagrined hippo permitted keeper Franz Eck to give his bicuspids the brush-off. The dental doings took place at the Frankfurt, Germany, zoo, where this two-ton and toothsome giant makes his home.

War-Weary And No Wonder.—Utterly exhausted United States soldiers fall asleep on the ground after one of their many discouraging retreats in South Korea.

6 Men—4300 Miles of Ocean On A Carpet-Sized Raft

Six men camping on a 30 ft. raft the size of a large carpet crossed 4,300 miles of Pacific ocean in just over three months! Huge whales nosed under and around them, sharks dogged them and were caught and hauled aboard. Storms buffeted them. In the end they were battered on a reef and all but drowned!

A boy's adventure story? No, a man's—and a true one. Thor Heyerdahl, a Norwegian, lived in the South Sea Islands studying native life before the war. Local legends convinced him that the original Polynesians came not from Asia but from America. In Peru he discovered another legend which claimed that some of the original natives, fleeing from the Inca invasion to the coast, sailed westwards on rafts, led by a high priest named Kon-Tiki.

Experts Only Laughed

After serving in the Free Norwegian Air Force, he went to the U.S.A. to try out this theory on experts, but they only laughed. "The Indians," they said, "had no boats, only rafts, and there are more than 4,000 miles of open sea between South America and Polynesia. You try crossing that on a raft!"

To their astonishment he said he would. And named his raft the **Kon-Tiki.**

Four other Norwegians and a Swede joined him in the crazy venture; the Washington and Lima governments supported it. The raft was built of nine giant Balsa logs from the Ecuador jungle—because the Indians used this light-as-cork wood for their rafts—and lashed with hemp rope. Amidships was a small cabin of bamboo and banana leaves to give shelter from the sun. Steering was by a 19 ft. oar at the stern, so heavy that it would sink if it fell overboard.

This oar gave them their first headache when they sailed from Callao into roaring seas swept by a trade wind. It swung the steersman round like a helpless acrobat: not even two men could hold it steady as the seas poured over. Its movement had to be limited with ropes run from the blade to each side of the raft.

Terrors of the Deep

When a big sea came the helmsmen left the steering to the ropes and hung on to a bamboo pole from the cabin roof, flinging themselves at the oar again before the raft could turn round and the sail thrash about. In the struggle arms and chests were sore with pressing; the oar knocked them green and blue in front and behind.

"Terrors of the deep" were no figment to these raftmen. Sometimes at night they would be scared by two round shining eyes glaring at them from the sea with hypnotic stare—it might have been the Old Man of the Sea himself!"

Often these were big squids with devilish green eyes; sometimes the eyes of deep water fish which only came up at night. Several times when the sea was calm the black water round the raft was suddenly full of round heads two or three feet in diameter . . . motionless . . . staring. Or 3 ft. balls of light would flash at intervals down in the water.

Some of the monsters—possibly giant ray-fish—looked bigger than elephants in the glimmer of the raft-light. One daylight visitor had the ugliest face they had ever seen—broad, flat head like a frog's, with two small eyes at the sides and a toad-like jaw four or five feet wide, with long fringes drooping from the corners of the mouth. The huge brownish body ended in a long, thin tail with a straight-up pointed fin. It came swimming astern, grinning like a bull-dog. In front swam a crowd of zebra-striped pilot fish, and large remora fish and other parasites sat firmly attached to its body.

"Walt Disney himself could not have created a more hair-raising sea monster than that which thus suddenly law with its terrific jaws along the raft's side," Mr. Heyerdahl writes in his vivid account of the voyage, "The **Kon-Tiki** Expedition". It was a rare whale-shark, the world's largest known fish, which weighs 15 tons and may reach 65 ft. in length.

Another menace was the octopus or squid, which could board the raft or feel about ever corner of it with its long tentacles. Not liking the prospect of groping cold arms about their necks, dragging them out of their sleeping bags at night, the raftmen slept with long machete knives at their side. Young squids were actually found aboard: one with its arms twined round the bamboo by the cabin door, another on the palm-leaf roof.

Sharks Aboard

Many times they were visited by whales larger than the raft. One headed straight for the port side, with seven or eight following, then glided right underneath and lay there, dark and motionless, while the men held their breath. One mighty heave, and . . . but, to their intense relief, it slowly sank out of sight.

Sharks, six to ten feet long, were baited and hauled aboard. Sometimes the captive would jerk itself round in great leaps and thrash at the bamboo wall of the cabin, using its tail like a sledge-hammer, with its huge jaws opened wide, its rows of teeth snapping at the men's legs as they tugged with all their might, jumping nimbly aside.

Occasionally, for a diversion, two or three of them would row out in a rubber dinghy to photograph the raft or just laugh at it—for it looked so ludicrous in that waste of water. Once, when wind and sea were higher than they thought and the **Kon Tiki** was moving more quickly than they reckoned, the dinghy party had to row desperately with their toy oars to regain it and avoid being left behind. "Those were horrible minutes out on the sea before we got hold of the runaway raft and crowded on board to the others, home again." From that day it was strictly forbidden to go out in the rubber dinghy without having a long line made fast to the bows.

One there was a frantic cry of "Man overboard!" as Herman, trying to save a sleeping bag from slipping into the sea, fell in himself and was soon far astern, swimming frantically after the raft but losing way. Knut dived in after him with a lifebelt and just managed to reach him in time, while the others hauled on the line and dragged them both to safety.

Last Desperate Fight

Their worst ordeal came at the end, when they reached an island east of Tahiti and crashed on a reef pounded by massive rollers. As a mighty sea came over, Heyerdahl clung to a masthead stay, the others to lashed boxes, guy ropes, anything that offered handhold.

"I determined," he says, "that if I was to die, I would die in this position, like a knot on the stay. The sea thundered on, over and past, and as it roared by it revealed a hideous sight. The **Kon-Tiki** was wholly changed, as by the stroke of a magic wand. The vessel we knew from weeks and months at sea was no more; in a few seconds our pleasant world had become a shattered wreck."

The cabin itself was crushed like a house of cards. They had a desperate fight to reach the shore of the small uninhabited atoll, but they managed it, and after a brief Crusoe existence were rescued by natives from another island and eventually reached Tahiti.

Mr. Heyerdahl had proved that those original natives fleeing from the Incas could have reached the islands by raft. His story, translated by F. H. Lyon, with excellent photographs of the life aboard, is worthy to rank with the classics of sea adventure.

Crazy and Dangerous

This crazy and dangerous fad of cluttering up the windshield of car or truck with a lot of swaying doodads brings well merited criticism from the Saskatoon Star-Phoenix. It was time something was said about this.

Driving today on any street or highway is a job that calls for constant concentration and unobstructed vision. That is why windshields are made of glass or other transparent material. For the safety of others, all others who use the highway, as well as the occupants of any car, these windshields should be kept clean and clear. Even a small sticker adds some hazard but these imitation birds and dolls which dangle in front of the driver's eyes are a standing invitation to suicide and manslaughter.

The other day a magistrate fined a motorist who was attempting to comb his hair and also drive. In the interests of common safety most people will approve of that magistrate's decision and they would also approve of a similar action against those responsible for these windshield puppet shows.

LOTS LIKE HIM

The lecturer was ranting on his favorite subject—the evils of tobacco.

"Carefully compiled statistics," he asserted, "demonstrate that every cigar a man smokes shortens his life by a week, and each cigarette by three days."

A man in the audience rose to inquire, "Are those statistics accurate?"

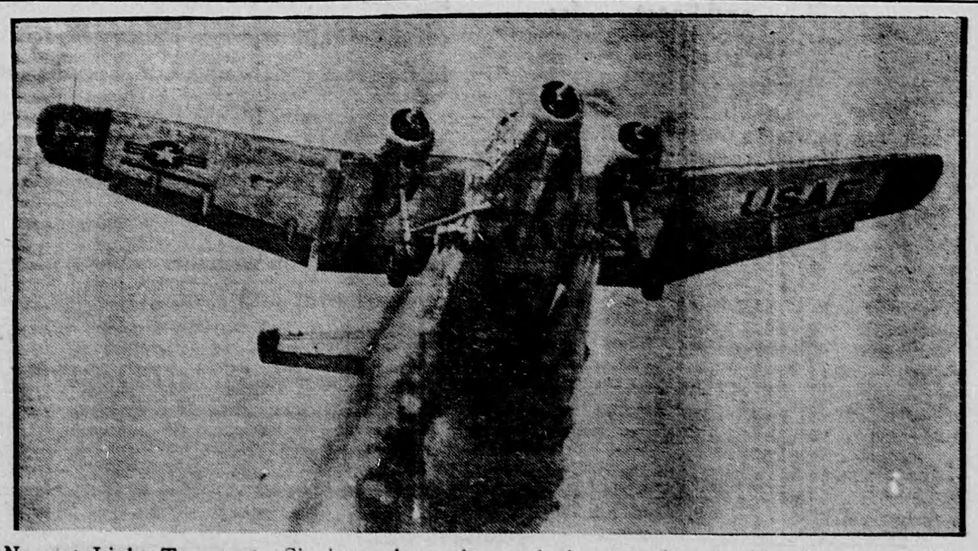
"Absolutely accurate, sir," declared the lecturer. "Why?"

"It's quite important to me," replied the man, "for if they're accurate, I've been dead some 287 years."

Tasteless

Entering a drugstore a girl asked how to take a dose of castor oil without tasting it. The assistant said he would look up some suggestions, but meanwhile would the young lady like to try a new lemonade powder they had just got in. The young lady would, and when the glass was finished the assistant asked, with a smile: Well, did you taste it?"

"Good Heavens!" gasped the girl. "Was the castor oil in that lemonade? I wanted it for my small brother."



Newest Light Transport—Six jet rocket units and three engines enable the newest light assault transport to take off in a space of less than 500 feet. Weighing 20 tons, the Northrop Raider C-15 was designed to transport heavy loads in and out of small ,unimproved clearings. The photograph was made during one of the ship's test flights.

JITTEK — **By Arthur Pointer**