

# Anything Phonographic

by **STEVE RAMM**

I ended up with a short deadline this month – with summer still in its prime as I write this month's column – but I think I've got some fabulous items you may not have heard about. So let's get started!

**Jolson sings again! ... and again! ... and again!** – Only days after submitting my August column and mentioning that I had not yet received any of the new *Warner Archive Collection* DVDs, I received six of the seven Al Jolson films being released this year. (*Mammy* will hopefully arrive by the end of the year.) That Warners is taking a chance on releasing these films on home video for the first time is a historic moment and George Feltenstein – the Warner VP in charge of reissues – should be highly applauded. The films were available for a limited time in a highly collectible Laser Disc box back in

the last century, but most collectors haven't seen them. To reiterate, the WAC is a series of custom-pressed DVDs, available from Warners, of films that may not be popular enough for full commercial release in stores. (Of course many of us would argue that, with the success of the fabulous *Jazz Singer* box set, there is a market for these rare Jolson films.) Each film comes in a nice DVD case and some – not all – contain the film's trailer. There are no bonus features and the discs

are not indexed by scene. Instead there are chapter stops every 10 minutes. (This was the only weakness I found in these releases, as I wanted to revisit the many musical numbers.) Some of these films are said to be "restored" but, from my research, these are probably the same prints used for the laser disc set, and are all in more than acceptable condition. For the moment, the Jolson discs are being sold individually, rather than as a collection. Therefore I'll cover each briefly in the order in which I, personally, enjoyed them. I should say, in advance, that this was the first time I have seen any of these films starring *the world's greatest entertainer*.

At the top of my list is the final film Jolie made for Warner Brothers: ***The Singing Kid*** (1936). This is entertainment at its best. With many songs

by Harold Arlen with incisive (and satirical) lyrics by Yip Harburg, and two duets with Cab Calloway and his band, you can't help but have a great time. It even starts with a montage of all his "blackface" songs and then goes right into the upbeat "I Wanna Singa". Jolson keeps his ego in check here and he's in top vocal form. Like four of the other releases, Jolson performs a few politically incorrect numbers in "blackface" – one with Calloway



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and a black cast and the reprise of “Singa” with anti-“Mammy” lyrics. The print is sharp and the sound is perfect. This one is essential! Next in line is **Wonder Bar** (1934), in another beautiful print. It was directed by Busby Berkeley, so you get those fabulous production numbers. (One features over 100 beautiful girls!). Dick Powell is the bandleader and singer and gets three songs on his own. This was a “pre-code” film and there are many risqué jokes. Jolson plays a nightclub singer and so gets to use all his showmanship talents. While his “blackface” numbers are often controversial, this film really pushes the button. The finale, not only features tap dancer Hal Leroy in “blackface”, but makes fun of every racial stereotype there is. If you can watch this with an understanding of the time when it was filmed, you will love this film! **The Singing Fool** (1928) was Jolie’s first “all talking” film, coming a year after *The Jazz Singer*. It actually starts with an orchestral score and “titles” for the dialogue, before Jolie starts to sing and talk. Later in the film, they revert to titles again. While the story is full of pathos, and Jolie overacts as a naïve entertainer who is smitten by a pretty nightclub singer, there are enough upbeat numbers (“Sitting on Top of The World”, for one) to keep you entertained. This is the film that made the song “Sonny Boy” a mega-hit. The print is not as crisp as the others in the series – and there is five-minute section in the middle where you can hear the surface noise from the soundtrack disc – but this film is still a classic and “must see”. **Go Into Your Dance** (1935) was Jolie’s one film with his wife, Ruby Keeler, and also features torch singer Helen Morgan in a small role performing one song. The print is gorgeous and lots of Jolie’s hits are included. **Big Boy** (1930) is the shortest film, at 67 minutes, and the print has some wear. Jolie plays a black stable boy so he’s in “blackface” throughout much of the film. There is a “story within the story” where he plays his own grandfather singing spirituals! This is one of his quirkiest films. The “surprise” ending is totally bizarre. But it’s still worth seeing. The weakest of the films, and one I struggled to sit through, is **Say It With Songs** (1929). Trying to capitalize on the pathos of *The Sing-*

*ing Fool*, this is an overacted melodrama with no upbeat songs, and no songs for its first 27 minutes. The “hit” from the film, “Little Pal” is sung three times! The script was written by future director and studio head Daryl F. Zanuck. This was the only “dud” in the bunch.

You won’t find these DVDs in stores but they can be ordered on-line at [www.wbshop.com/warner-archive](http://www.wbshop.com/warner-archive) or by phone at 866-373-4389. This is a rare opportunity to experience Jolson and, hopefully with big sales, more wonderful Vitaphone gems will be released for us to enjoy!

**More GREAT DVD finds** – In the past I’ve recommended the volumes in the DVD series *Hollywood Singing and Dancing*. Obviously going out of chronological order, the newest volume **The 1920s** was released in August. This is as entertaining as the others, though the documentary portion is only an hour this time. There are sections on Jolson, Cantor, and Rudy Vallee. Maurice Chevalier is discussed by Gloria Stuart and Shirley MacLaine, both of whom starred with the Frenchman – though 40 years apart. There are also some wonderful short clips from obscure Vitaphone musicals. Almost two hours of bonus features are here this time including the common *St. Louis Blues* and *Black and Tan Fantasy* and the rarely seen 1913 Edison Kinetoscope *Nursery Favorites*. If you don’t have the *Jazz Singer* box, you’ll also enjoy the 30-minute *Voice from the Screen* (1926) that explains the Vitaphone process of sound films. The visual quality of the bonus films could have been better but this is still a DVD you will want to see.

Over the years a number of companies have released DVD compilations of Soundies or Snader Telescriptions – three-minute music videos made for video jukeboxes or television in the 1940s. Many contain the common ones seen by most collectors. The first volume in a new series on the British Charly label (which has always done high quality CDs), imported in the US by Music Video Distributors, is different. **The Swingtime Collection – volume 1** packs 40 (!) shorts on to one two-hour DVD with great video and sound quality and containing many obscure – but talented – performers. Ellington and Calloway are here (but not the common films). But so are Vanita Smyth, Mabel Lee



and Dallas Bartley, all of who had only one or two commercial recordings. Meade Lux Lewis and Henry “Red” Allen are here for the jazz fans. The package includes a nice illustrated booklet with bios of all the performers. This one’s a winner and I’m looking forward to future volumes in this series. Available at most music outlets.

**Rare Blues for your wall and CD player –** I almost forgot it was August until the mailman delivered the latest edition of John Tefteller’s annual **Classic Blues Artwork From the 1920s** calendar. The 2010 version (the seventh one issued) is even better than previous ones. Not only does it reproduce those great ads for the rare Paramount label, but the included CD contains the recording to go with each month. Unlike previous years in which there were four additional tracks on the disc, this time there are SIX, for a total of 18 songs. There are a couple of unreleased sides and both sides of a Henry Townsend disc, transferred from the only known copy! With a price of under 20 bucks this package is a steal. Because he doesn’t skimp on quality, Tefteller is concerned he may not be able to afford the next one. So check out the web site ([www.bluesimages.com](http://www.bluesimages.com)) to order, or get one from your local record store. Give some as gifts. This is surely a project of love, which should be supported.

**A timely tribute to an old-time music band –** The timing couldn’t have been better – or worse. Last month I received a DVD released by Chris Strachwitz’s Arhoolie Foundation containing a new documentary – **Always Been A Rambler** - by Yasha Aginsky, about The New Lost City Ramblers, who were celebrating their half-century performing old-time music. As Bob Dylan says, “they carry on the tradition of those old records you find in a barn”; music from ‘20s and ‘30s. Two of the members, John Cohen and Mike Seeger, were in the band for 51 years. Original member Tom Paley, left for other interests and was replaced by Tracy Schwarz. Cohen was a filmmaker and we are treated to his interviews with the Carter Family and others. The 57-minute film (unfortunately not indexed into chapters) is a loving tribute. As a bonus there are eight more performances from 1969 and 1959 footage of Paley performing. The sad news is that on the eve of their farewell concert in August, Seeger, suffering from

cancer, went into hospice care and died a few days later. The traditional music world lost one of its biggest supporters. The DVD is highly recommended and is available in stores or at [www.arhoolie.org](http://www.arhoolie.org)

**Two more oddball DVDs (you’ve probably never heard of) –** This may be the only place you’ll read about these two “discoveries”. As I mentioned earlier this year, cylinder collector Martin Fisher loves to record live folk music performances on brown wax cylinders. He does this for the love of the history and to see the reactions of musicians upon hearing their performance come out of a large horn. In 2005 the Grand Old Dulcimer Band, a group of 40 strummed-dulcimer players in Nashville, engaged Fisher to make a recording of them at a historic mansion. Music Director David Schnauffer filmed the session and created a 30-minute documentary titled **Wax**, which turned out to be his last project before his death. As we watch Fisher set up his equipment and record each of the four “takes” of an old Uncle Dave Macon song, he explains the process to the musicians, most of whom had never seen an Edison phono. The camera work is superb with extreme close-ups of the recording head. The film could have used a bit more editing since we hear the SAME complete song played by the musicians FOUR times, as well as the full song on playback from the recording chosen to keep. Still, it is fascinating to watch and anyone interested in seeing a modern cylinder recording session will learn a lot from this DVD. You can see the trailer and order at [www.muddysunshine.com/waxdocumentary](http://www.muddysunshine.com/waxdocumentary).

Another oddball hour-long documentary arrived that shows us there is a specialized group for nearly every instrument. **Songs Inside The Box** documents those who make, and play, cigar box guitars! Yep, going way back to the 1800s, musicians were crafting both banjos and ukuleles from wood and cardboard cigar boxes. In the 1920s they started making guitars and, in the 1960s, these players added electric amplification to their “boxes”. The film concentrates on the annual Extravaganza held in Huntsville, Alabama and the often-eccentric musicians who gather to “show their stuff”. Most play early guitar blues though some play rock. None of them have voices that one would call

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“melodious”. The film and DVD, directed by Max Shores, was produced by The University of Alabama and you can find more information at [www.songsinsidethebox.com](http://www.songsinsidethebox.com)

**So much sound from a small band** – This month’s lone CD is a swinging centennial tribute to the great Cab Calloway by the retro swing band Big Bad Voodoo Daddy: ***How Big Can You Get?*** (*Vanguard*). The band itself is celebrating 20 years since leader and vocalist Scotty Morris founded the group in Los Angeles. While Calloway took three times as many musicians to create the big band jive music, BBVD uses just seven members. The two saxes and one trumpet drive the drums, bass, piano and guitar through Calloway classics like “Minnie The Moocher”, “The Call of The Jitterbug” and “Calloway Boogie”. They dig even deeper into the “Cab”-inet for the more obscure “Tarzan of Harlem”. The 11 tracks fly by and you’ll find yourself going along for the ride. The album graphics mimic the great Jim Flora illustrations on RCA and Columbia jazz albums of the 1940s. Available at most major music outlets.

Well that wraps up this month. Go check out the Jolson DVDs and other items that peak your interest and I’ll see you here in October.

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**MAPS Swap Shop**, *continued from page 21*

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