

## THE JAZZ SINGER

the 30-second history

The first feature-length studio motion picture with synchronized dialogue ('talkie'), this film starred Al Jolson as a man caught between his Jewish faith and the prospects of a successful singing career. All six of Jolson's musical performances in the film featured sound using a process called Vitaphone, the dialogue and music came from a phonograph connected to the film's projector. Jolson's dynamic performances left audiences mesmerized and sometimes nearly riotous. At the film's premiere police were on hand to control the loud and boisterous crowd, who by the film's end were nearly hysterical. *The Jazz Singer's* broad success signalled the beginning of the end of the silent era and helped save a cash-strapped Warner Brothers Studios. The film, directed by Alan Crosland, won a special Academy Award the first year they were presented (1929), though it was not allowed to compete against the silent films nominated for Outstanding Picture. The film is based on the short story by Samuel Raphaelson entitled *The Day of Atonement* and was adapted into a play, which has also been made into two other feature films and for television. It helped define early Hollywood Jewish sensibilities and the conflict many had between their traditional, pious past and the modern age.

### 3-SECOND THRASH

*The Jazz Singer* brought sound to the big screen and complicated accepted racial boundaries, making it both timeless classic and subject of endless debate.

### 3-MINUTE THOUGHT

The lasting impact of *The Jazz Singer* went beyond the demise of the silent movie era. The film also brought African-American music to white audiences. Many African-Americans at the time of the film's release embraced the struggle of Jolson's character. But its use of 'blackface', a technique common to early 20th-century white performers whose performances all too often mocked rather than respected African-American culture, has remained a source of controversy.

### RELATED TOPICS

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'THE PEANUT VENDOR'  
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THE WALL STREET CRASH  
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### 3-SECOND BIOGRAPHIES

AL JOLSON  
1886-1950  
Jewish American singer and entertainer

ALAN CROSLAND  
1894-1936  
American stage actor then director of dozens of silent and sound features

SAMSON RAPHAELSON  
1894-1983  
American playwright and screenwriter

### 30-SECOND TEXT

Cary D. Harlow

*With a lead actor of Jewish heritage performing in 'blackface', The Jazz Singer examines*

