

Why Is It Offensive?

History of Blackface, Modern-Day Cultural Appropriation

Handout Six: Famous Blackface Performer Al Jolson



- Al Jolson, a Jewish immigrant from Lithuania, was one of the most popular blackface performers of the 20th century.
- He had an over-the-top performance style in which he was completely caught up in all his songs and characters.
- Jolson believed that Black and Jewish Americans had shared experiences as survivors of discrimination and hate, and this belief enriched his performances in a way that singled him out from other White blackface performers.
- He performed in blackface in the first full-length talking movie, *The Jazz Singer*, in 1927.
- His performance in *The Jazz Singer* is credited with popularizing African American music and generating new interest in certain Black artists. For example, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Fats Waller.
- He was also the highest paid entertainer of his generation.

Source: [University of South Florida](#)

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