

## Favourite Moments of Film Sound

# The Return of Silence

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By Claudia Gorbman

Something about the second talking interlude of *The Jazz Singer* (1927) compels me to show it to film studies classes whenever possible. I like to start the film running a good ten minutes before that scene so students can get the feel of the silent film with recorded scoring. Jakie Rabinowitz / Jack Robin finds out that after years of exile, he's been hired to star in a show back home in New York. "New York!" the titles exclaim for him. "Broadway! Home! MOTHER!" Crosscut between Mama (preparing for father's birthday) and Jack excitedly striding through the pushcart-filled Jewish neighborhood towards home. Move to the tearful reunion with dear mother, where there is a pointed absence of Jakie's childhood portrait from the wall. The live microphone turns on, and the irrepressible Jolson takes over. Sitting down at the piano, Jack sings "Blue Skies" to his beaming mother. Then, the mic still on, he vamps with one hand on the piano:

Jack: Did you like that, Mama?

Mama: Yes.

Jack: I'm glad of it. I'd rather please you than anybody I know of. Oh, darlin' - will you give me something?

Mama: What?

Jack: You'll never guess. Shut your eyes, Mama. Shut 'em for little Jakie. I'm gonna steal something [he kisses her and then laughs]. I'll give it back to you someday too - you see if I don't. Mama darlin', if I'm a success in this show, well, we're gonna move from here. Oh yes, we're gonna move up in the Bronx. A lot of nice green grass up there, and a whole lot of people you know. There's the Ginsbergs, the Guttenbergs, and the Goldbergs, oh, a whole lot of bergs. [...] And I'm going to get you a nice pink dress that will go with your brown eyes.

Mama: Oh, no, Jakie, no. I - I...

Jack: What do you mean, no? Who, who's tellin' ya? What do you mean no? Yes, you'll wear pink or else. Or else you'll wear pink...

How much of this Jolson improvised is almost beside the point. Eugenie Besserer, the mother, is thoroughly flustered in such a lovely way, gurgling with confusion and laughter at Jolson's dotting logorrhea. This is by no means the first time the public heard recorded dialogue: sound shorts had showcased famous people like George Bernard Shaw and Calvin Coolidge and performers both sublime and ridiculous (e.g., one Gus Visser and his singing duck). But Jolson of the gigantic ego, long known for show-stealing on stage, was treating this feature movie like yet another live revue. His riffing about the Bergs in the middle of his song must have proved exciting for audiences indeed: after over thirty years of a

certain cinema, this avalanche of chatting felt like a new form of life itself. Mordaunt Hall marveled in his *New York Times* review of *The Jazz Singer*,

possibly all that disappointed the people in the packed theater was the fact that they could not call upon him or his image at least for an encore. They had to content themselves with clapping and whistling after Mr. Jolson's shadow finished a realistic song. (10/7/27).

The “Blue Skies” monologue still stuns, eighty years later, in its contrast to the silent-film-with-music baseline regime of the movie. Not only had the cinema been voiceless, Jolson’s voice, when it springs forth, is such a *specific* one—playful, melodic, elastic, as Jewish as pastrami on rye. The scene becomes increasingly silly when he reprises “Blue Skies” as “jazzy”: his eyes bug, his hands slap the piano keys, and his voice lets loose with hepped-up tempo, ever more rubato, sliding, syncopation, lyrics spoken and sung, and added syllables.

But this isn’t all. As Jack sings his jazzy “Blue Skies,” the stern bearded father enters in the background—a creepy use of deep space to be reprised in *Psycho*’s shower murder by Norman’s mother. The Cantor sees the transgressive spectacle of mother and son. His shout of “Stop!” indeed stops the song dead. Talk about the *non-du-Père*. The synch microphone cuts out, and no fewer than seven shots follow in a total silence dominated by the father’s castrating stare—Jack, Mama, Jack and Mama, father, and so on—before the film returns to its

“silent” regime with canned orchestral music. The child was caught with his pants down, kibitzing with mom in the playground of sound.

Already, in this first step into the talkies, silence has become a powerful weapon.

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**Bio:**

Claudia Gorbman is professor of film studies at the University of Washington, Tacoma. She is the author of *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Indiana and BFI, 1987), and has translated several books from French, including three by Michel Chion and another in the works. She is also currently working on a book on the films of Agnes Varda for the University of Illinois directors series under James Naremore.