

**AMERICAN FILM SHORT SUBJECTS  
AND THE INDUSTRY'S TRANSITION TO SOUND**

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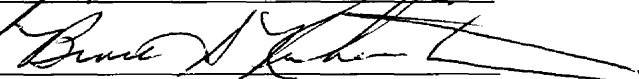
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First Reader



Second Reader



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## **INTRODUCTION: SHORTS SHRIFT**

His name has been lost in the mists of time, but one day in that tumultuous year of 1929, an aging vaudevillian was on a movie set, nervously enduring his first appearance before the new and intimidating sound camera. So tentative was the trouper that he required seven rehearsals and three takes before finally settling down to present his comedy act the way he had for years in the comfort of live audiences. During the fourth take -- the one that the director figured would be the keeper -- the vet, somehow still shaky despite his smoothed delivery, stopped without warning to ask the man behind the camera, "How am I doing -- all right?"

A lot of movie performers were asking a lot of movie directors that question in 1929. The above account was presented as a blind item in a prominent Hollywood trade publication, which means it may be less an actual incident than a parable of the uncertainty of the few short years in the mid to late 1920s when scientists and technicians teamed with creative talents to effect a revolution that would carry the cinema down new avenues of appearance and artistry. The movies could always be seen; now they could be heard! We can look back now at the sound revolution in the motion picture and marvel at how fast, in relative terms, the cinema adapted to its important new element. The halting,

stagebound earliest “talkies” paled in comparison to the fluid, lyrical silents they replaced in the favor of audiences, but within five years of the first official foray into sound by a Hollywood studio, filmmakers had become unencumbered of the limitations imposed on them by the unrefined earliest audible technology. The outstanding artistic achievements of 1931 were visually on a par with those of 1926 -- and the later pictures had the added benefits of dialogue, song and sound effects.

However, five years was long enough for careers to have ripened or been ruined, and studio fortunes to have been made or lost. The transition from silent to sound films is perhaps the most fascinating period in the history of mass entertainment, although scholarship in earnest on the era has only recently begun to emerge. Only a handful of books published prior to the mid 1990s dealt with the period in detail, but since then there have been at least four. What has been missing from this impressive burst of research has been a study specifically dealing with the early sound short subject as opposed to its feature-length counterpart. Then again, the short frequently has been overlooked. Most general film histories touch on a few key moments in the transition to sound -- from “Don Juan” (1926), the first Hollywood-produced feature with sound elements, albeit only a synchronized music score and sound effects, to “The Jazz Singer” (1927), the first feature with song and dialogue sequences, to “Lights of New York” (1928), the first all-talking feature, and on into the flowering of the sound medium during the early 1930s.

The truth is that the short subject -- defined for purposes of this study as a film presentation of four reels (roughly 45 minutes) or (usually) fewer -- played an important role in the pursuit of sound. When “Don Juan” premiered in New York on August 6, 1926, the attention devoted to it was eclipsed by that for the program of singing

and talking shorts that preceded it on the bill. Before even one paying customer heard Al Jolson exclaim, "You ain't heard nothin' yet!" in "The Jazz Singer," the studio that made possible his revelation had already made scores of audible short subjects. Months prior to the unveiling of "Lights of New York" by that pioneering studio, Warner Bros., the company had produced its first plotted all-dialogue shorts. In the period between the debuts of "Don Juan" and, in July 1928, "Lights of New York," the short subject achieved a rare primacy over the feature-length film in public curiosity, if not in mass viewership.

Because of their very nature -- they could be produced more quickly and cheaply than features -- shorts had to begin the overall transition to sound. Between the premiere of the "Don Juan" prologue and the end of 1929 -- when the transition to sound features was virtually complete -- nearly 2,000 sound shorts were produced by Hollywood-based companies. These included musical performances, comedy sketches, dramatic playlets, monologues, newsreels, documentaries, travelogues, and animated cartoons. In comparison, only about 300 features containing some degree of synchronized dialogue and music were issued during the same period.

Mere quantity aside, why should we care enough about the early sound short subject to devote a study to it? The answer is that, like its feature-length counterpart, the short reveals significant information about America and the world, historically and culturally, in the second half of the third decade of the 20th Century.

-- **The nature of show business.** The sound revolution brought hundreds of performers into the medium of motion pictures who had not previously participated in it. The need for aurally-oriented artists prompted Hollywood studios to employ singers,

dancers, comedians, dramatic actors and monologists who came from the competing mediums of vaudeville, the legitimate (Broadway) theater and radio (but primarily vaudeville). Some of these performers went straight into feature films, but a wide majority of them either began in shorts before “graduating” to longer works or performed exclusively within the short-subject domain. As we examine the incredibly wide range of talent in shorts alone, we get an idea of what kind of diversions amused us in the late 1920s. It was not just song and dance, and -- especially in terms of current attitudes toward race, ethnicity and gender -- not always politically correct.

-- **Unearthing the obscure.** In collecting information about shorts, we recognize the efforts of scores of personalities who rarely, if ever, have been included in film histories. Al Jolson, Jack Benny, Ginger Rogers and the little girl who became Judy Garland appeared in early sound shorts, but so did “Oklahoma” Bob Albright and His Rodeo Do Flappers, Leo Beers (billed as the “World Renowned Whistling Songster”), Carl Emmy and His Pals (a man and his dogs), and the female impersonator Karyl Norman, whose many admirers called him “The Creole Fashion Plate.” Moreover, many sound shorts gave exposure to minority performers -- like Bessie Smith, Duke Ellington, Eubie Blake, and Chief Caupolican (“The Indian Baritone”) -- that they would not have received in features of the era.

-- **The state of journalism.** The newsreel is an especially interesting kind of early sound short. The recording of politicians, entertainers, athletes, and other notables brought the non-fiction short a new vitality. To analyze the subjects of stories within the newsreel is to determine the priorities of late 1920s news gathering, and by extension, publically held values. For example, why would Fox Movietone, the first sound newsreel

series, devote so many shots to marches by West Point cadets or Columbia-Yale rowing matches? We will also examine the balance between news and entertainment in the early sound newsreel -- which, we'll find, mirrors the balance of seventy years later in the traditional news media.

-- **Media wars.** In a sense, the coming of sound affirmed the status of the motion picture as "the people's entertainment." Hollywood was able to turn back the formidable challenge of the radio industry to public predominance and doomed the much older but already struggling medium of vaudeville to a slow death. One could call the American sound film a synthesis of four major avenues of popular entertainment: the silent movie, radio, vaudeville and legitimate theater. The state of each of these entertainment mediums before and after the advent of sound will be analyzed, especially vaudeville, which was most affected by the talkie revolution in general, and which had a particularly contentious relationship to the sound short.

The first sections of this study will document and explain the development of sound motion pictures in Hollywood by such influential companies as Warner Bros. and Fox, with an emphasis on short subjects, leading up to the first few months when all of the major studios were capable of producing them. Then it will deal with specific aspects of the pre-1931 sound short subject -- its impact on vaudeville and other mass entertainments, the flowering of newsreels and other non-fiction shorts, and the development of sound animated subjects. The author has viewed a representative number of shorts, researched contemporary accounts such as trade publications and newspapers, and examined secondary sources such as books and magazine articles.

## **GOLDEN SILENCE**

It is difficult to exaggerate the impact on the cinema of sound, both as a medium of entertainment and as a force in the larger American (and, eventually, worldwide) culture. Initially, the talking picture was considered a mixed blessing. At the outset of the sound revolution, the silent film was reaching new heights of artistry and pantomime, not only because of creative advances in the United States but also from foreign influences. Directors such as Ernst Lubitsch and F. W. Murnau of Germany, Paul Fejos of Hungary and Victor Seastrom of Sweden were inspired by expressionist theory, inventive visuals and heightened cinematic realism. All four of those men came to Hollywood to work during the 1920s, and even such well-regarded American filmmakers as John Ford and King Vidor would be influenced by their methods.

Silent films required a certain level of emotional participation by patrons to “fill in the blanks,” to imagine the sound and tone of voices and other acting nuances that were externally unintelligible, but the moviegoing experience changed when the “talkies” arrived. It had been acceptable for members of the audience to audibly express their observations about what was occurring on screen, but the need for patrons to hear as well



as see talking films required silence. The talking audience for silent pictures became a silent audience for talking pictures.(Sklar 153) As closely related as the sound film was to its silent predecessor, it was a uniquely different form of entertainment, and more distinctly a different form of art. A small but not insignificant illustration of the impact of the sound film was the reaction to it by those impaired in hearing and sight. The silent film was a godsend to the deaf because it contained no barriers to their enjoyment, but after talkies arrived, deaf people flooded movie studios, as well as newspapers and other publications, with letters protesting the new medium.(Schuchman 42-43) Meanwhile, the studios were received letters of gratitude from the blind, who could now appreciate movies by hearing them.(Geduld 257)

The first sound shorts presented a wide variety of fare, some elements of which may have been viewed by their audience for the first time. For example, a moviegoer who was not in the habit of attending vaudeville shows could see and hear the vaudeville style of verbal comedy or music. Although the specific content of short-subject programs was more frequently advertised on theater marquees during the transitory period between the silent and talkie eras -- when shorts often were considered greater attractions than the silent features that played with them -- such advertising was not always common practice, and depending on the booking whims of his or her local theater distributor, one could view a kind of entertainment -- say, a female impersonator or a playlet or comedy skit with unusually sophisticated content -- to which a viewer, as part of a captive audience, had not been exposed. The content of feature-length films was more widely advertised, so this surprise would be less likely to be the case with features. The addition of sound added greatly to the entertainment value of short subjects. In a survey published by the trade

periodical The Film Daily in April 1930, exhibitors stated that shorts were responsible for saving a program when the accompanying feature was weak, that not having a short with featured attraction(s) was like a main course with no dessert, and, according to some respondents, features should be made uniformly shorter to allow for the scheduling of more shorts.

The first sound films -- shorts as well as features -- could be described as more “American” in content and flavor than their silent counterparts. Even those silents with foreign locales, and which showcased foreign-born stars such as Rudolph Valentino and Greta Garbo, were imbued with a universal quality through the use of English-language subtitles. Not so with the sound film; that the speakers in Hollywood talkies uttered English made it more of a plausibility for them to be inhabiting American society. As the film historian Alexander Walker has written, “[O]nce the society was shown, its way of life had to be audible as well as visible. The accent of fascination was inevitably put to the American character of people, speech, scenes, and events.”(199) Just as important to the American film industry, the sound revolution placed artistic and commercial dominance of world cinema firmly into the possession of the United States. This country had the technology that, at first, other nations did not, and the pantomimic artistry of foreign directors such as Lubitsch and Murnau was, albeit temporarily, reduced in significance as the public forsook silence for talk, talk, talk. In many ways, the new American character of the sound film made especially possible the development of the genres of the gangster film and the musical. (There were gangster shorts and musical shorts, too.)

In many ways, early sound shorts reflected the “culture wars” that were as

prevalent in the United States seven decades ago as they were in the society of Bob Dole and Snoop Doggy Dogg. As cultural historian Lawrence Levine noted, the “Roaring” ’20s cannot be dismissed only as “an age of materialism in which the American people turned their backs on idealism and reform” when, in fact, furious struggles were raised in many avenues of society.(195) The battles in the society at large pitted such big-city intellectuals as H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis against small-town “babbits,” progressive Catholics and Jews against fundamentalist Protestants, and, on the Prohibition front, rural “drys” against urban “wets.” In the world of arts and entertainment, high-culture music and drama critics who championed works of European origin or influence railed against the rise of more earthy, more “national” popular entertainment that was more likely to appeal to the great unwashed, of the young and of emerging ethnic (immigrant) and racial groups. For example, “jazz” -- a term that in the 1920s was used to describe the pop music of Jolson, Rudy Vallee and Paul Whiteman as well as the less syncopated, African-rooted music popularized by Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway and others -- was viewed with horror by sedate traditionalists. As the show-business observers Abel Green and Joe Laurie, Jr., wrote years later about the 1920s: “There was little doubt in anyone’s mind, including the minds of its practitioners, what the jazz dance was intended to interpret. The word ‘jazz,’ in fact, rapidly became an opprobrious synonym. ... The public ... danced to saxophone-shrill foxtrots, in cheek-to-cheek, body-to-body clutches.”(228) A Harper’s magazine article of 1924 noted that various critics had decided that jazz bore the same relationship to classical music as a limerick did to poetry, or a farmhouse to a cathedral, or a burlesque show to legitimate drama.(Levine 179)

It is no accident that the first program of Vitaphone shorts, the one that accompanied “Don Juan” and more or less began the sound revolution, consisted of seven musical acts but only one outside the classical realm. This first program was a great success, running for nearly eight months in theaters, but the second Vitaphone prologue, which debuted on October 5, 1926, with the comedy feature “The Better ’Ole,” was an even greater popular triumph -- and arguably more important in the acceptance and development of the sound film. Although the bill did boast an appearance by the operatic baritone Reinald Werrenrath, the remainder of the acts -- among them Al Jolson, George Jessel, and the Jewish-dialect comedy brother duo of Willie and Eugene Howard -- were more proletarian. The performance from that program which had the most impact was Jolson’s. In what was titled “Al Jolson in ‘A Plantation Act,’ ” he appeared in his customary blackface guise and, dressed in tattered overalls before a painted farmhouse tableau, complete with a couple of real chickens strutting around the set, delivered three of his biggest song hits. In the short, which survives today, Jolson precedes his rendition of “Rock-a-Bye Your Baby with a Dixie Melody” with a quip: “We’ll sing a little mammy song ... like John McCormack sings ‘Mother Machree’; that’s a mammy song.”

To a historian of the cinema, the “Plantation Act” short is of great interest, for its resounding popularity helped to prompt Warner Bros. to cast Jolson in “The Jazz Singer.” To a cultural historian, it has worth because of the symbols therein. Jolson is a Jewish performer appropriating African-American customs (with his blackface makeup and slang) while making fun of another white ethnic (McCormack was a famous Irish tenor) and, as a representative of low culture, taking a swipe at European high culture (McCormack was a

concert-hall performer who occasionally sang opera). The early Hollywood sound shorts did a service to high culture by exposing many of its performers, mainly opera singers, to a wide audience, but many more of the shorts took the low road, and they were the ones most frequently revived. An interesting example is the 1926 Willie and Eugene Howard entry "Between the Acts at the Opera." As the short begins, the two presumably Jewish men are walking out of a concert hall during the intermission of an opera and engaging in comic banter about the artists they have been watching. The jokes are straight out of the low comedy of vaudeville, then they are followed by voiced parodies of the likes of John McCormack (again) and Alma Gluck, but not sung unpleasantly. Patrons were made to respect the high culture but revel in the more "American" style of humor.

The widespread ethnic and racial humor of the early sound shorts reflected a time when respect for non-WASP and non-heterosexual segments of the population was deemed less important than the promotion of widely acknowledged stereotypes of them. A late 20th Century inhabitant would be dismayed by the portrayal of African-Americans in blackface by real blacks as well as whites, but all kinds of minority groups were parodied as well. A person unfamiliar with early 20th Century social history might be surprised to see 1920s shorts containing stereotypical Dutch, Scottish, Italian and Oriental humor. Contemporaries of "The Crying Game" and "The Birdcage" might be nonplused by the existence of both male and female artists specializing in gender impersonation, although that tradition was practically as old as the theater itself. Animals, the so-called lowest beings, were not beyond rough treatment in a society lacking Humane Society influence. A 1928 Fox short starring the comedian Will Mahoney consisted of his performance of the song "My Mammy" while apparently pinching a kid goat he was

holding to enable the beast to emit a “ma-a-a” squeal every time the title was sung. Even the hardened New York audience that first heard the short responded, according to a reviewer from the industry periodical Variety, with a “couple of hisses at its conclusion. Had Mahoney been able to tickle the goat to make it holler it would have been a corking laugh.”(August 1, 1928)

Through these unadulterated presentations -- which influenced revue-style television series such as “The Ed Sullivan Show” and “Hollywood Palace” -- of comedians, singers, dancers, dramatic actors and other celebrities, the early sound shorts gained popularity not only by entertaining people but by reflecting the broader cultural experience of their era.

## BEGINNINGS

In 1926, the average moviegoer in a large- to medium-sized city could sit down to a varied theatrical program that his counterpart at the dawn of the 21st Century could only imagine. He could see, in some configuration, a feature-length film, maybe a coming-attractions trailer or two, and two or more short subjects (a newsreel, a cartoon, or a two-reel comedy) -- plus, especially in the bigger houses, a handful of live -- and, unlike the celluloid fare, very audible -- acts from vaudeville. For example, look at the first week of July, 1926 -- a month before the unveiling of "Don Juan" and the first Vitaphone shorts. At the Strand Theatre in New York City, the feature attraction was the Paramount comedy "The Old Army Game," starring a woefully voiceless W. C. Fields, preceded by a passel of flesh-and-blood acts: "Charlotte," the ice-skating marvel from Berlin; the Hemstreet Singers, a female vocal quartet; and Borrah Minevitch, the Russian-born wizard of the mouth organ who was then performing numbers both as a solo and with the ensemble that would become his famous Harmonica Rascals. One might have shown up at the grandly reopening Missouri house in St. Louis to view the new juvenile star Charles "Buddy" Rogers in the Paramount feature "Fascinating Youth," but

not before watching the conductor Charles Previn lead that city's symphony through Victor Herbert's "American Fantasie," and seeing an abridged production of John Murray Anderson's "Alice in Wonderland," a Technicolor fashion-show reel, and a two-reel comedy featuring the actor Ralph Graves. At the Harding Theater in Chicago, a sixty-five-minute musical tabloid show, "Hello Bill" -- boasting two acts, sixteen chorus girls and the comedy stylings of a corpulent Englishman named Billy House -- overshadowed the accompanying seven-reel First National feature, "Sweet Daddies," an ethnic comedy with George Sidney and Charlie Murray. Presentations similar to these could be routinely had for a mere 50 cents in many areas, and only a dollar or two in the very largest houses.

Within a couple of years, however, many live acts like the above would be supplanted by short subjects with dialogue and song -- pre-recorded vaudeville performers replacing themselves in the flesh. In the summer of 1926, the renowned female impersonator Karyl Norman packed East Coast theaters with his live "flapper numbers" and popular songs such as "Daisy Days" and "Five Foot Two, Eyes of Blue." In the summer of 1928, Norman would enter a sound stage and be filmed singing those same songs in a Vitaphone short that could be transported to any movie house, large or small, that was wired for sound. This was a development that benefited the performer in the short run -- promotional value, primarily -- but maybe not for the long haul. It certainly was a boon for movie theater owners. With the advent of synchronized sound in features like "Don Juan," exhibitors could hear a symphony orchestra playing live to their product without having to pay for live musicians. With the beginning of sound in short subjects, they could stint on hiring the live acts that accompanied their features. Movie houses



could have many of those performers for the rental cost of a reel or two.

Shorts had always been essential to the motion picture viewing experience. Before the medium expanded its productions to feature length in the early 'teens, all films were essentially shorts, from "Fred Ott's Sneeze" (1894) through "The Great Train Robbery" (1903) and the first directorial efforts of Mack Sennett and D. W. Griffith. But, as Leonard Maltin points out in his book The Great Movie Shorts, short subjects lost their primacy once audiences could see longer films.

Gradually, the short films, which had been the main item on film programs, became merely an extra added attraction on the bill. One notable exception was the silent comedy, for the greatest clowns of the era -- [Charlie] Chaplin, [Harold] Lloyd, [Buster] Keaton, [Fatty] Arbuckle -- worked primarily in two-reelers until the early 1920s, and, for many audiences, they were still the drawing card at the local theatre. Any feature accompanying the shorts was incidental.(1)

Although audience expected, and applauded, short films on any theater program, they were clearly secondary in the minds of exhibitors and studios. They were a necessity to the former for the filling-out of program schedules and to the latter for their profitability, for shorts were not generally expensive to produce. Shorts were often promoted separately than features, and many studios produced them in special autonomous units that were allowed to operate as long as the product remained profitable. Until the advent of sound changed existing priorities, studios issued many hundreds of shorts -- comedies, newsreels, cartoons, and others -- but most companies considered them to be poor cousins to features. Still, short subjects suited the abilities of some talents

better than full-length fare. This was especially the case with comedians, whose repertoire of gags could be performed within a few minutes, without the narrative padding that would be required to fill out the running time of a feature film. In fact, the most prominent production company for comedy in the 1920s was the Hal Roach Studio, which made shorts (and, before the 1930s, very few features) for very profitable distribution by Pathe and, later, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Roach boasted such popular comedies as Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy -- who, once paired, became the greatest of comic duos -- Charley Chase, and the pint-sized "Our Gang" contingent. For studios who made features with their own resources, the short-subject field was a training ground for young performers, as well as starring vehicles for players who were assigned supporting roles in full-length films. Such future stars as Carole Lombard, Bebe Daniels, Mickey Rooney and Jean Harlow got their starts in 1920s silent shorts.

As the first motion pictures were shorts, so were the first attempts at giving them a voice. Attempts to synchronize dialogue and music with action had been attempted almost continuously in American and European laboratories since before the turn of the century. Beginning in 1904, the future producer Leon Gaumont experimented with one-reel performance films starring British stage headliners, among them Harry Lauder and Vesta Tilley. In 1907, the American J. A. Whitman's Cameraphone format was used to capture the likes of Blanche Ring, Anna Held and Eva Tanguay (singing "I Don't Care") in performance, and to bring "The Mikado" and "H. M. S. Pinafore" to film for the first time. However, the action on screen had to be synchronized with a separate phonograph record -- like the future Vitaphone system -- and the quality of the presentation varied widely from theater to theater and was panned by critics. The French

inventor Eugene Lauste, a former employee of Thomas Edison, developed the first “sound-on-film” format in 1907. His was the earliest combination of visual images and a photographically recorded sound track -- a concept that would eventually become the industry standard -- although in this case, the sound was on a different piece of film than the picture. What Lauste initially called the Photocinematophone was partially demonstrated in London in 1913, but its creator’s efforts were hampered by the outbreak of world war and by his own financial reverses.(Eyman 31)

Despite having more resources, and much more clout, Edison himself was not much more successful than Lauste. His off-and-on quest to integrate sound peaked in 1913 when his company unveiled its Kinetophone, sound-on-disc system. It debuted with a program of talk and music -- a minstrel show -- in eleven theaters, four of them in New York, where the Times commentator noticed that although the Union Square Theatre projectionist failed to synchronize the film and disc properly at times, “[t]he audience ... knew what had happened, and the mishap did not serve to lessen their tribute of real wonder.”(February 18, 1913) With the backing of the sizable Keith and Orpheum vaudeville circuits, which booked them as star attractions, the Edison shorts were initially popular. Mainly dramas (“Faust,” “Julius Caesar”) and musical numbers (“The Last Rose of Summer,” “Swanee River”), their content was familiar and thus easily accessible to audience tastes. The system soon began to founder as both patrons and exhibitors complained about an inability to hear the performers, or that the film was projected at an inappropriate speed for the voices. Soon, Variety would be calling Kinetophone “The Sensation That Failed.”

Edison backed off, but no less a film luminary than the great director D. W. Griffith made a stab in adding sound to his work. For his 1921 drama "Dream Street," Griffith recorded a prologue in which he explained "The Evolution of Motion Pictures." He also had his leading man, Ralph Graves, record a love song that would be matched to an appropriate scene in the picture. The system used was the sound-on-disc Photokinema, developed by Orlando Kellum a decade before. "Dream Street," a trilogy of moralistic tales based on the writings of Thomas Burke, had opened in New York to disappointing grosses, and Griffith hoped the aural auditions would draw customers. The revamped film played briefly at New York's new Town Hall in the spring of 1921, but the recording and synchronization were so clumsy that Griffith dropped the sound material before the picture began its national release.

## DE FOREST AND CASE

By the time New Yorkers first saw “Dream Street,” one of the two most important figures in the pre-1926 development of cinematic sound would be well on his way to making it a practical concept. Lee De Forest was already well known as the “Father of Radio” for founding the amplifier tube, which made possible the amplification of radio signals. De Forest hoped the ideas behind that concept could be used in the motion pictures. His system used standard film with a variable density soundtrack that ran alongside visual images; the sound waves were transformed into light waves and then recorded photographically on film. De Forest made his first test in 1913, but his first talking movie (of himself) did not come until 1921. A year later, with the influential backing of Dr. Hugo Riesenfeld, the composer and musical director of the Rialto and Rivoli theaters in New York City, the De Forest Phonofilm Corporation was established. Riesenfeld helped De Forest secure a studio facility, as well as personnel and production equipment.

On March 13, 1923, De Forest demonstrated Phonofilm to select members of the press in his studio on East 48th Street in New York. Many of the critics wrote about the experience with indifference, but the representative of the New York American was

impressed enough to file this report:

I sat in the dim New York studio of Lee De Forest, inventor, today and heard music on the silver sheet. As I watched the movie of an orchestra performing, I heard the music it made.

Piano, flute, clarinet, cello -- I could distinguish the notes from the several instruments. The music played came from out of nowhere, from the direction of the screen. Measure by measure, it harmonized exactly with the movements of the shadow players.

... It was the talking picture perfected at last.

In a few weeks the Phonofilm, after four years [sic] in the making, will be introduced to the public in a number of the metropolitan motion picture theaters.(Carneal 283-84)

On April 12, a preview of the public premiere of Phonofilm was held before the New York Electrical Society in the auditorium of the Engineering Societies Building. The audience saw short films of Henry Cass describing the operations of the De Forest system, Eddie Cantor singing "Oh, Gee, Georgie!" and "The Dumber They Come, the Better I Like 'Em," and one Lillian Powell performing a bubble dance to a Brahms melody. "Other numbers, exquisitely beautiful or of rollicking comedy, followed in unbroken succession," the inventor would write in his autobiography.(De Forest 370) Riesenfeld's two key theaters debuted Phonofilm three days later. At its peak, between 1923 and 1925, several short Phonofilms per week were being produced in the De Forest studio, and although the company was undercapitalized, it wired for sound no fewer than thirty-four theaters, mainly on the East Coast.

For his company's output of some 1,000 shorts issued before 1927, De Forest's roster of subjects was similar to the quantity hired by Warner Bros. for its later, and better

known, Vitaphone shorts. He recruited non-entertainment figures -- such as Charles William Eliot, the Harvard president, who awkwardly read a speech in tribute to a colleague, and Chauncey Depew, the aged former head of the New York Central Railroad, who contributed his recollections of Abraham Lincoln. The writer George Bernard Shaw offered his greetings to America (a few years later, he would reappear more noticeably before the cameras). Some of the show-business types were performers from highbrow diversions -- grand opera was represented in scenes from "Lakme," "Rigoletto," and "Lucia di Lammermoor," for example. However, most of the entertainment was supplied by personalities from vaudeville, the legitimate theater and the recording studio. The famed vaudeville comic duo of Joseph Weber and Lew Fields presented their famous poolroom scene, which they had first done way back in 1889. The veteran comedian DeWolf Hopper recited "Casey at the Bat." Stage actors Raymond Hitchcock, Elsa Lanchester, and Frank McHugh appeared in sketches; Hollywood stars Gloria Swanson engaged in a battle-of-the-sexes dialogue. More than anything else, however, there was music, comic and serious, performed by the likes of George Jessel; Sophie Tucker; Harry Richman; Harry Lauder; the team of William Frawley (the future "I Love Lucy" co-star) and Virginia Smith; the bands of Ben Bernie (performing "Sweet Georgia Brown"), Roger Wolfe Kahn and Paul Specht; and even the actress Una Merkel, singing "Love's Old Sweet Song" in the days before she would be typecast as a dizzy, and often tone-deaf, Hollywood comic player. De Forest also produced the first sound series of newsreels -- it began in 1924, three years before Hollywood's first attempt. The newsreels included such figures as the current president, Calvin Coolidge, who gave a speech about the virtues of

economy in government; Coolidge's 1924 electoral opponents, Democratic nominee John W. Davis and Progressive Party candidate Robert La Follette; and future presidential candidates Franklin D. Roosevelt and Al Smith.

More than 100 of the De Forest shorts survive in the Maurice H. Zouary Collection housed in the Library of Congress. Among them is the aforementioned 1923 production "A Few Moments with Eddie Cantor," which, as one of the earliest De Forest studio efforts, is particularly primitive in appearance. Cantor, wearing a suit and bowler hat, is photographed throughout the reel in a single long shot of body length, against a black background. There is a primitive sound effect, the noise of an instrument mimicking laughter as the comedian kids about being mistaken for the matinee idol Thomas Meighan, recites a short poem, sings his two songs to an unseen orchestral accompaniment, and tells a handful of jokes, mainly Jewish. Another 1923 short, "Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake Sing Snappy Songs," allows a rare look at the black vaudeville team. At least this time there is a background (albeit a curtain), but aside from Blake's piano work and some animated gestures by Sissle as he sings, the two are filmed in stationary positions as they perform "Affectionate Dan" and "All God's Children Got Shoes."

Blake and Sissle would be the among the first in a long list of performers who would wince a little at their baptism in sound. Nearly 100 years old in the late 1970s, Eubie Blake recalled his first motion picture:

Now this was the first time we worked in front of a camera, and in those days they couldn't move the camera around on wheels or turn it every way, so naturally it couldn't follow you. That didn't bother me too much because I'm sittin' at the piano anyway, I ain't goin' nowhere.



But Sissle, he's all over the stage, see. If he has to just stand still and sing, it's just real hard for him to do that. He's an *actor*, and that cramps his style. So ... you can see he's not up to his best.

... So me and Sissle don't look natural in that film. We sound *real* good. There ain't nothin' fake about the sound. At the time I didn't think too much about the whole thing, but then as time when on I realized that we made show-business history that day. The first Negro act in talking pictures! The first film music!(Rose 88-89)

Although the effects of future litigation would make him a virtual non-factor in the sound revolution after 1927 or so, De Forest eventually would be considered the most important figure in the development of talking pictures in the period prior to the "Don Juan" premiere, and, in 1960, he would receive a special Academy Award for his achievements in sound technology. The irony is that an similarly crucial contributor -- one who is only now being recognized on an equal level -- was not only instrumental to De Forest being able to exhibit his films but was also key in bringing sound-on-film to Hollywood. Theodore W. Case has his supporters and detractors in the debate over who was first to create a workable system for motion picture sound on film, but such a thoughtful historian as Scott Eyman lays out a convincing argument for Case. Eyman has noted that De Forest and Case, an independent engineer based in Auburn, New York, were corresponding as early as 1916, and that as early as 1920, De Forest was using the photoelectric Thalofide cell and AEO light developed by Case and his chief assistant, E. I. Sponable.(Eyman 45) De Forest leased the device in 1923 and eventually attempted to interest Case in investing in his work, but the engineer declined. Soon after the successful debut of Phonofilm, Case realized that De Forest was going to receive the major credit for sound-on-film, and the under-capitalized De Forest began to encounter difficulty paying

rental fees for Case's equipment. By 1925, the two men had parted ways, and not amicably. Case and Sponable began work on their own sound system, which, Eyman contends, was enough of an improvement on De Forest's to attract the interest of a major Hollywood studio: Fox.(47)

When Case allied with mogul William Fox and his firm to form the Fox-Case Company in 1926 for the purpose of producing sound-on-film motion pictures (see Chapter 2), the embittered De Forest filed a lawsuit for patent infringement, starting a court battle that would last for years. By 1935, De Forest's patent rights had been upheld by American courts, but by then his victory was hollow, for legal fees had eaten away the resources needed for the inventor to continue and promote his work.

To the moviegoing public in the mid 1920s, the De Forest-Case competition mattered not at all. They were perfectly content to attend, and enjoy, silent films, and the studio moguls -- whom De Forest retroactively accused of having "stone walls of indifference, stupidity, and stolid negativity" when they turned up their noses to Phonofilm -- were generally willing to maintain the status quo.(De Forest 370) Until the "Don Juan" premiere changed everything, Hollywood was more focused on mounting a battle against a competing entertainment medium -- radio -- than undergoing a costly internal technological revolution. The rapid growth of radio during the '20s kept a good deal of potential movie customers sitting home in front of their crystal sets, especially when there was an excuse -- bad weather, say -- to do so. Hollywood attempted to counter its box office losses with innovations such as color and widescreen formats, although these were used somewhat infrequently, considering the cost factor. Radio became king because it could offer the one attraction -- sound -- that motion pictures could not. Lee De Forest

and Theodore Case -- and other researchers were providing the kind of ammunition Hollywood could counter with, even if the film world of 1926 hardly seemed to care.

## THE WARNERS TAKE A CHANCE

Historians often discuss the artistic heights to which the silent feature had risen by the beginning of the transition to sound, but it is little noted that short subjects had also reached a peak, at least quantitatively, in the mid 1920s. Most of the Hollywood studios -- Paramount, First National, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and (ironically) Warner Bros. excepted -- were regularly issuing shorts as the fateful year of 1926 began, and MGM would be assuming distribution of the popular and well-made Hal Roach Studio comedy shorts within months. Most shorts were one- or two-reel knockabout comedies, and because the field's biggest mirthmakers -- Chaplin, Lloyd, Keaton and Langdon -- had graduated to features, these films featured scores of now-forgotten names: Lloyd Hamilton, Walter Hiers, Charlie Bowers, Snub Pollard, Max Davidson and Alberta Vaughn, as well as the destined-to-be legendary new duo of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. There also were silent newsreels, mostly produced by Fox and Universal; cartoons, created by independent producers like Max Fleischer, Paul Terry and the soon-to-be-famous Walt Disney; featurettes, such as the "Blue Streak" Westerns made by Universal; travelogues, and serial installments. Variety conservatively estimated that at midyear, there would be more than 1,000 short subjects available for exhibitors, an impressively greater number than

features.(July 14, 1926)

On May 26, perhaps in reaction to the flood of short subjects, Variety began what initially would be a sporadic series of reviews under the column heading “Short Films” as an adjunct to its regular evaluations of features. The periodical, probably the most influential in the business, likely was being more practical than prescient in giving this small extra space to shorts, but the timing was interesting, considering the cinematic happenings of that year. This would be the first really important year of the sound revolution, the first accurate shots of which were fired with the double-barreled attraction of a feature film bolstered by a synchronized score and -- more important -- its accompanying program of shorts with the novelties of audible talk and music. The weapon, however, would be fired by neither Lee De Forest nor Theodore Case, whose research in combining sound with film elements would eventually prove so important to the industry. Instead, the first smoke would arise from the impact of an unlikely gamble taken by a minor movie studio, bolstered by the resources of one of the nation’s largest communications companies, with a system that did not so much point toward the future of sound in pictures as borrow from its futile past. The studio, of course, was Warner Bros. Pictures, a mere family operation. The communications entity was American Telephone and Telegraph, or what one might have called the “phone company” in 1926. The format was an update of the late, unlamented teaming of sound and disc, on what was not a whole lot different than a record that might be slipped onto a home phonograph.

Even as Lee De Forest was showing off his early talkie shorts and Theodore Case was pondering whether to set off on his own, engineers at A.T.& T.’s research arm,

Western Electric's Bell Laboratories, were developing said record. Theirs was a sixteen-inch, one-sided wax disc, which, when played at thirty-three and one-third revolutions per minute, the speed at which the sound was recorded, supplied enough sound for a standard 1,000-foot reel of film (about ten or eleven minutes). The discs were synchronized with the accompanying film because the projector and turntable were run off a single motor with appropriate gearing ratios and a mechanical filter system to screen vibrations that might interfere with playback.(Hochheiser 26) Western Electric was interested in this research because it could garner A.T.& T. new outlets for its newly refined sound system, which had improved the quality of telephone conversations nationwide and made it possible to fill a stadium with loudspeaker noise. For this reason, the idea of a workable sound-on-disc format was considered more commercially practical than sound-on-film, despite the former's poor track record. Practicality of use was another thing, however. The wax discs lacked the chemical abrasions necessary for long life, so after repeated playings, they were inclined to develop a surface hiss and other noises, and would break easily. They also would skip grooves, thus fouling up the synchronization.

In 1925, Western Electric exhibited its test shorts to all of the major Hollywood studios, and nary a one was impressed enough to take advantage of them, save for Warners, a midsized company run by four immigrant brothers, Harry, Jack, Sam and Albert. The quartet had begun as small-time film exhibitors before building up their resources to establish a full-fledged studio by 1923. At its young age, Warners had two major assets on its talent roster -- the Broadway star John Barrymore and the famously popular canine Rin Tin Tin, the latter slated to star in no fewer than four programmers

during 1925 alone. The brothers were in an expansion mode, having upped their release schedule from seventeen films in 1924 to thirty-one the following year. To publicize its product, the company established a radio station, KFWB, in Los Angeles. It also bought the moribund, Brooklyn-based Vitagraph Studio, with its North American theater exchanges -- Warners had lacked a distribution system -- and future recording facility.

Sam Warner was finalizing the Vitagraph deal in New York, where -- at the behest of Major Nathan Levinson, the West Coast representative of Western Electric -- he viewed a demonstration of synchronized sound at the Bell Labs in April 1925. He was sufficiently impressed enough to want to convince his siblings about the possibilities of sound. Next to be won over was Harry Warner, who watched a Bell test of a twelve-piece jazz band, and, as he recalled later:

I could not believe my own ears. I walked in back of the screen to see if they did not have an orchestra there synchronizing with the picture. They laughed at me. The whole affair was in a ten-by-twelve room. There were a lot of bulbs working and things I knew nothing about, but there was not any concealed orchestra.(Kennedy 320)

The “presence” of an orchestra provided inspiration for Harry. With its many recent acquisitions, the studio needed to save money, and the use of synchronized sound as orchestral scoring to its features seemed practical. This would save the expense of hiring musicians to play live in the Warners’ own theaters and others, especially in small markets.

Warner Bros. allied with Western Electric in June, 1925, and on April 20, 1926, the studio signed a contract giving the new Vitaphone Corporation an exclusive license to

produce sound pictures using, and to equip theaters with, the Western Electric system. By this time, the Warner brothers had realized that the music they could use to save money on theater orchestras could also be performed in front of the camera; talking and singing shorts would save exhibitors the cost of hiring talent for live vaudeville. Actress Lina Basquette, the new wife of Sam Warner, recalled in the 1990s that her then-husband was dedicated to “his Holy Grail. He was determined to change the business to sound. He was thinking of transposing operas and concerts and vaudeville, singers and musicians. He really didn’t give too much thought to anything else.”(Eyman 87)

Even prior to signing its agreement with Western Electric, Warner Bros. was making shorts as sound tests. Under the supervision of Stanley Watkins, who had headed the experimental sound crew at Western Electric, the studio initially set up shop at the old Vitagraph facility in Brooklyn. It was stymied, however, by the hiss given off by the arc lights used for silent pictures and the roar of elevated trains that ran close to the building and were picked up by the sensitive microphones. The deserted Manhattan Opera House was leased as a replacement studio, then hastily renovated to meet the filmmakers’ needs. Bright, incandescent blubs replaced the arc lights, necessitating the switch from orthochromatic to panchromatic film because the latter was more sensitive to the lights. The sound gear was sheathed in metal to block out stray radio waves from local broadcasts that were occasionally, and inadvertently, recorded. Because the motorized cameras made noise when operated, they had to be enclosed in tiny soundproofed booths that limited the movement of the camera and bathed their operators in stifling heat. (Ed DuPar was the overcooked man in the booth to shoot most of the early shorts.) Worse for the sound technicians, their mixing equipment had to be installed on the sixth floor (in



a room otherwise used for Masonic lodge meetings), which meant long journeys for the technicians to the ground-floor stage and back.

The first Vitaphone short produced by a Hollywood studio for public consumption -- by definition, the first "Hollywood" sound short -- may have been "The Song of the Volga Boatman," filmed in Brooklyn in May 1926 and reputedly directed by Sam Warner himself. This was a one-reel experimental short, but it eventually was made available to exhibitors as Vitaphone No. 178 (the Vitaphone numbering system having started at 100). The 1931 Vitaphone release index describes it as "a vital picture of the toilers along the Volga River front, towing the heavily laden boat as they sing their weird song." Actually, the "heavily laden" boat was a mere quarter of a hull, made of canvas, for that was all which was needed to fill the frame. Two male quartets of "Russian singers" provided the voices as they slogged through imported loads of salt to simulate snow. The men pretended to drag the boat by yanking a large hidden rope; one hefty member of the crew held the other end and braced his feet against a wall off stage so the "boatmen" could have something to pull on. (Green 57-59)

Another early short, "An Evening on the Don," issued as Vitaphone 183, was described by Warner Bros. publicity as "a presentation consisting of singing, dancing and playing in an outdoor Russian Holiday Frolic" by a "Russian aggregation of 11 performers and a Balalaika Orchestra." Both "An Evening on the Don" and "The Song of the Volga Boatman" were to have been part of the initial program of Vitaphone shorts, the one that debuted with "Don Juan," but they were postponed from release at the last minute by the studio despite being shown in press previews days before the program's public debut. A

Variety reviewer got around to seeing “An Evening on the Don” more than two years after its making, and predictably wrote that it reflected “the uncertainty in technique then existing as compared with the easier tempo and style of the more current subjects. ... A gathering of peasants sing, dance and twang the mandolin in regulation vaudeville fashion. Not good, but there’s been worse.”(August 22, 1928)

For the Warner brothers, these earliest shorts were mere warmups for what was to be the formal introduction of Vitaphone to the world. Harry Warner was hiring acts for the opening program of the debut of the Warners Theatre at Broadway and 52nd Street in New York City. He had to pay the Metropolitan Opera Company a \$1,000-a-week fee to gain exclusive rights to negotiate with its performers. The great tenor Giovanni Martinelli was induced to record two numbers for \$25,000; most of his musical colleagues, operatic or not, fell in line for significantly less.(Green 7)

The chosen feature attraction was “Don Juan,” a flamboyant romantic adventure vehicle for Warners’ biggest human star, John Barrymore. William Axt, David Mendoza and Major Edward Bowes wrote the synchronized score, which was recorded in July 1926 by the New York Philharmonic under the baton of Henry Hadley, who rehearsed the music by viewing the soundless film on a large screen. The score also included sound effects, so audiences could hear as well as see the clash of swords during the exciting climactic duel between Barrymore and villain Montagu Love. But the bigger attraction was the prologue of short presentations that would accompany “Don Juan” at its much-ballyhooed opening in New York on Friday, August 6, 1926. Tickets for the opening night at the Warners Theater cost up to \$10 at a time when the average admission for a first-run movie was about a dollar.

Will H. Hays, president of the Motion Picture Producers & Distributors of America, began the hour-long prologue of shorts with a brief speech that gave the proceedings the industry's blessing. Captured in a single medium shot standing uncomfortably beside a table in front of a curtain showing the initials "VC" (for Vitaphone Corporation), Hays was seen and heard welcoming Vitaphone to the screen with sincere but awkwardly phrased praise:

No story ever written for the screen is as dramatic as the story of the screen itself. Now we write another chapter in that story. Far, indeed, we have advanced from that first few seconds of shadow of a serpentine dancer thirty years ago when the motion picture was born -- to this public demonstration of the Vitaphone synchronizing the reproduction of sound with the reproduction of action. ... In the presentation of these pictures, music plays an invaluable part. The motion picture is a most potent factor in the development of a national appreciation of good music. That service will now be extended as the Vitaphone shall carry symphony orchestras to the town halls of the hamlets.

Were it not for the Warners' implied intent to save money on talent expenses (on orchestral and prologue-type personnel) one might surmise from Hays that the goal of Vitaphone was a lofty one: to bring high culture to the masses. The rest of the first Vitaphone program did nothing to refute this conclusion, for only one of the seven acts that followed Hays' speech was of the standard pop variety. Roy Smeck, billed on screen as "The Wizard of the String," put his throbbing Hawaiian guitar, banjo, ukelele, and mouth organ through "His Pastimes," four numbers for which Warners saw fit to pay the artist a mere \$350.(Eyman 87) Positioned in the middle of the talent lineup, Smeck was surrounded by more culturally prestigious classical and operatic artists. The 107-member New York Philharmonic followed the Hays speech with the Overture from Richard

Wagner's "Tannhauser," the jerky camera moving halfheartedly among the musicians before conductor Hadley, in a final shot obviously filmed separately, bowed in response to the expected live applause. The celebrated concert violinist Mischa Elman played Dvorak's "Humoresque" and Gossec's "Gavotte" to the piano accompaniment of Josef Bonime. The soprano Marion Talley, a youthful star of the Metropolitan Opera stage, sang the "Caro Nome" aria from "Rigoletto." Violinist Efrem Zimbalist and pianist Harold Bauer teamed for theme and variations from Beethoven's "Kreutzer Sonata." Giovanni Martinelli put his impassioned tones to good use on "Vesti la giubba" from "I Pagliacci." Finally, the soprano Anna Case performed a "Spanish Fiesta" with backing from the Metropolitan Opera Chorus and the dancing Cansinos (from the family that produced the future Rita Hayworth) in an elaborate hacienda courtyard set.

Although reviewers generally praised the realistic use of the music in "Don Juan," they reserved more of their comments for the talking and singing prologue. Predictably, the critic from the august (or stuffy, depending on your social status) New York Times, Mordaunt Hall, weighed in with an appreciation of the Warners' emphasis on high-class musical fare in the prologue.

They sought world-renowned musicians and singers, instead of presenting subjects with low comedians. Was it not far better to hear the strident tones of Giovanni Martinelli ... than to hear a dubious entertainer rendering to the full of ability that well-known classic, "Yes, We Have No Bananas"? Was it not infinitely more edifying to listen to Mischa Elman's rendition of Dvorak's "Humoresque" than to have to sit through a squeaky fiddling of "Yes, Sir, That's My Baby"? ... The program selected immediately put the Vitaphone on a dignified but popular plane.(August 15, 1926)

In the same commentary, Hall opined, too optimistically, that Vitaphone could

contribute to education as much as entertainment, and that “it may also ... do much to discourage silly moving pictures, which even now are produced in far too great a number.”

Fairly or not, a hero and a goat emerged from the critical consensus. Martinelli’s performance was mainly adjudged the hit of the show. “When he completed his solo, the house vertiably rose to its feet and cheered him. It was tremendous,” wrote Variety in a commentary headlined “Vitaphone Bow Is Hailed as Marvel.”(August 11, 1926) The same reviewer was not so effusive about poor Marion Talley, who “failed to register and looked to be grimacing her way through.” The fan magazine Photoplay was even less kind: “Long shots -- and good, long ones -- were just invented for that girl.”(August 1926) Actually, the quality of Talley’s voice -- as opposed to the way she looked when she sang -- could be attributed to the film being projected out of sync with the sound, or to her coloratura soprano registering out of the range of the primitive sound reproduction system.(Koszarski 19) Although she appeared in a few of Vitaphone’s early opera shorts, Talley -- the sound revolution’s first failed act -- was not meant for the movies. Meanwhile, the “Don Juan” program played at the Warners’ New York house for eight months, grossing, at a lofty top ticket of \$3, nearly \$800,000.(Geduld 141)

It was becoming clear that Vitaphone was bigger than any grumpy actor or faltering diva. Warners was already preparing a second program of sound shorts, one that would take a back seat to its predecessor in the history books but that would prove, in the long run, to be more representative of the kinds of films that would capture the public imagination.

## **JOLSON SINGS (AND TALKS)**

Marion Talley's failure may have been the public's gain, and not only because her segment of the inaugural Vitaphone program was dropped in many locales when the show took to the road. Her short was alternately replaced by two of the earliest Vitas, "An Evening on the Don" and "Song of the Volga Boatman." These tended to lighten the overall presentation, and it is very possible that Warner Bros. sought to compensate for the "heavy" nature of the music on the initial bill. By this time, the second Vitaphone program was being prepared, and the studio already knew of the positive patron response to (as opposed to Mordaunt Hall's grouching over) the Roy Smeck sequence. Warners had triumphed by employing "respectable" artists in the "Don Juan" program; with such highly regarded names involved, few could doubt the legitimacy of Vitaphone. Now it was time to cater to a wider audience, and this would be achieved by a program that leaned more significantly to vaudeville and to the popular domain of music, as the widening menu of Vitaphone acts would eventually do. The choice of performers for the follow-up program was fortuitous, for one of them -- the unforgettable Al Jolson -- would play an undeniable primary role in the sound revolution.

The second Vitaphone presentation preceded the World War I comedy “The Better ’Ole” in its world premiere at New York’s Colony Theater on October 5, 1926. “The Better ’Ole,” which starred Sydney Chaplin (Charlie’s brother) in an adaptation of a play written by Bruce Bairnsfather and Arthur Eliot, was, like “Don Juan,” outfitted with a synchronized score and sound effects. Appropriately, the Overture, played off camera by the New York Philharmonic, was titled “The Spirit of 1918,” setting the reflective mood of many of the shorts to follow as well as the feature film. Next came the Met baritone Reinald Werrenrath, but he eschewed the usual operatic suspects in favor of “The Long, Long Trail” and “The Heart of a Rose” while dressed as a lumberjack amid a woodland setting. The Four Aristocrats, “Vitaphone’s Popular Vocal and Instrumental Group,” followed by warbling “I’d Climb the Highest Mountain,” “Gotta Know How to Love,” “Talking to the Moon” and other selections.

The fifth presentation on the program was Elsie Janis, the beloved vaudevillian and “Outstanding Entertainer of War Days,” in a vaudeville act called “Behind the Lines.” Janis sat atop a piano atop a prop Army truck at the faux front and offered a nostalgic quartet of Great War songs -- “When Yankee Doodle Learns to Parley Vous,” Madelon,” “You’re in the Army Now” and “Good-bye-ee” -- accompanied by a soldiers’ chorus from the 107th Infantry. Her jovial comraderie with the boys -- with whom she conversed in seemingly improvised talk between numbers -- lent a certain charm to the short, which has been restored in recent years. While singing “Madelon,” she forgets the words as a joke, which is a cue for a fellow in the crowd to emerge and sing the tune in French. Then she hoofs during the chorus of “You’re in the Army Now” as the men take the spotlight by singing about the “Jews, Wops, husky Irish cops, all in the army.” After the Janis short

came Eugene and Willie Howard, duplicating their “Between Acts at the Opera” vaudeville routine, previously described in these pages.

The other two acts on the program would figure prominently in the well-documented search for the star of the first part-talking feature film, “The Jazz Singer.” George Jessel -- who a year later would not get to star in the role he had made famous on stage -- sang “At Peace with the World and You” and presented a comic monologue between the Four Aristocrats and Janis numbers. Jessel’s antics included a burlesqued discussion of his latest film, “Private Izzy Murphy,” then one of his trademark “conversations” with his “mother” once an on-stage phone rings. “When Martinelli was here, there wasn’t one sound -- and now they have to ring a bell,” he grumps to the audience before explaining his whereabouts to mom: “I’m doing a turn here for Vitaphone. ... Sure, I’ll get paid.”

Jessel was proving that Vitaphone could talk as well as sing, but it was the colleague who came seventh and last on the program who would mesmerize both audiences and the Warners brass with his “Al Jolson in ‘A Plantation Act.’ ” Many considered Jolson to be America’s greatest entertainer -- and he, having been paid an impressive \$25,000 by Warners for his sound debut, very much believed the claim. Besides forceful renderings of three of his greatest hits -- “April Showers,” “When the Red, Red Robin Comes Bob, Bob, Bobbin’ Along” and “Rock-a-Bye Your Baby with a Dixie Melody” -- Jolson mesmerized viewers with his heady chatter. The trio of pre-recorded curtain calls he took didn’t seem excessive at the time. The first-night audience, noted the New York Times, was silent, “so keen was everybody to catch every word and note of the popular entertainer, and when each number was ended it was



obvious that there was not a still pair of hands in the house.”(October 8, 1926)

Considering the audience-friendly music selections for the prologue, and its increased amount of talk (from Jessel, Jolson and Janis), it was no surprise that the chatter in the lobby of the Colony during the intermission preceding “The Better ’Ole” produced -- as a reporter from Variety alleged -- the first substantive debate over the potential impact of this Vitaphoned vaudeville on its live counterpart. The reporter wrote that he heard a lobby patron wonder if vaudevillians ought to refuse motion-picture contracts unless per-performance royalty payments as well as flat salaries were included, such as they were for the recording or publishing of music, for the protection of their acts. “It will be pretty soft [for the artist] to get up about an act or two every year and then sit back in the old homestead and collect the royalties,” read an article ominously headlined “ ‘Better Than Vaudeville’ Is Verdict on Vita’s \$40,000 Bill.”(October 13, 1926)

The \$40,000 referred to the writer’s estimated cost of the talent on the “Better ’Ole” prologue -- a figure that small-town vaude houses would not only be hard-pressed to match but a quality of talent that could be brought into the same small market’s competing movie theater.

How much business the average vaudeville show that plays a town like Schenectady, N. Y., Akron, O[ho], Richmond, Va., or Providence, R.I., would do if it stacked up against a bill of Vitaphone entertainment of the proportions of this coming along weekly ... was one of the lobby comments. ... Those same vaudeville magnates who were 15 years behind the times in getting into the picture business [by showing films in their facilities] are behind the times right now with the advent of Vitaphone, for they have let it slip away from them into the hands of the picture people.

Confident that its foray into sound was a success, Warner Bros. set out to expand

production operations. In October 1926, the company announced that it would begin construction of a Los Angeles facility for Vitaphone “programs and accompaniments”; by this time, “Don Juan” and friends had just opened in that city. The use of the terms “programs and accompaniments”(Variety, November 3, 1926) only hints that the studio wasn’t thinking out loud about full-length talkies yet. The West Coast building was to replace the Manhattan Opera House, which Warners shuttered in the summer of 1927, glad to be rid of its high rent and already outmoded equipment. The studio brass also believed it would be cheaper to pay to send selected vaudeville or opera stars West, where the company was based, instead of recording a larger number of them for the expense of maintaining an Eastern recording base. This reasoning eventually would be considered faulty, but Warners would not resume production of shorts in New York until the fall of 1928.

The new facility, on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood, boasted four stages of felt-lined, specially soundproofed walls of 90 to 150 feet. Fifteen feet above the floor was a glass-enclosed room for monitoring the recording, and the camera was placed in a movable soundproof booth.(Gomery 164) A “playback” room would allow the wax records to be played back as soon as they were made. Sam Warner moved to Hollywood to take charge of the new facility, with Arthur Kay and Herman Heller heading the music department, Murray Roth and Grant Clarke brought West as full-time writers -- and, most significantly, twenty-nine-year-old former vaudevillian Bryan Foy as the new primary director and production manager. Foy, son of entertainer Eddie Foy and one of his clan’s touring “Seven Little Foys,” possessed the connections to vaudeville that would aid in

attracting top talent to the new shorts. In Hollywood, the Vitaphones were practically produced around the clock.

By the time the studio moved West, the Vitaphone issues numbered in the 400s, although many of the early tests were never released and the company occasionally skipped numbers. Some of those that were issued became replacements within earlier prologues; for example, when the non-synchronized Louise Dresser comedy “White Flannels” replaced “The Better ’Ole” at the Colony Theater in March 1927, the Al Jolson and Howard brothers shorts were retained, but the others were supplanted by newly filmed performances by the juvenile singer Sylvia Froos, touted as “The Little Princess of Songs”; Roger Wolfe Kahn and his orchestra; the Vitaphone Symphony, again conducted by Herman Heller; and John Barclay, who was dubiously billed in both of his Vitaphones as “The Tallest Baritone in the World.”

The third all-Vitaphone program debuted with “When a Man Loves” -- another synchronized Barrymore entry, this one with his real-life wife, Dolores Costello -- at the Selwyn Theater on February 3, 1927. The six-segment prologue did nothing to impede the progress of Vitaphone, although Variety chief “Sime” Silverman thought the placing of the acts misguided. Fred Waring’s Pennsylvanians opened with a trio of tunes that befitted their billing as “The Famous Collegian Orchestra,” but then came three operatic personalities in a row -- the lovely Met soprano Mary Lewis, albeit with the familiar “Dixie” and “Carry Me Back to Old Virginy”; the Chicago-based tenor Charles Hackett, with solos from “Rigoletto”; and the Quartet from the same opera, with the Beniamino Gigli, Jeanne Gordon, Guiseppi de Luca and the previously maligned Marion Talley. A humorous short by Van and Schenck, billed as “The Pennant Winning Battery of

Songland,” rounded out the program, but Silverman warned, “If Vita programs become loaded up with heavy stuff, the lack of relief will assert itself.”(April 30, 1927)

Meanwhile, Mordaunt Hall, in the New York Times, again deplored the presence of pop numbers at the expense of high-class music. “It seemed rather a mistake ... for Warner ... to stoop to selections such as ‘She Knows Her Onions,’” referring to a song by Van and Schenck, “which, although it possessed an element of humor, was rather a sharp contrast.”(February 4, 1927) Warners would take better care to position its acts like vaudeville, in which the traditional order of a bill conformed to audience tastes and viewing patterns.

## **SLY FOX**

Bryan Foy's Vitaphone unit was making four shorts a week by the summer of 1927, but by this time Warners was well aware of its first major competitor in the sound derby. There had been no hint in comments by William Fox about the "Don Juan" program that the studio bearing his name was thinking seriously about talkies.

I don't think that there will ever be the much-dreamed-of talking pictures on a large scale. To have conversation would strain the eyesight and the sense of hearing at once, taking away the restfulness one gets from viewing pictures alone.(Geduld 146)

Nonetheless, Fox's company -- in terms of resources, arguably the third-biggest in Hollywood behind Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and Paramount -- was not a participant in December 1926, when representatives of five of the largest studios -- M-G-M, Paramount, Universal, First National and Producers Distributing Corporation -- met secretly and pledged not to adopt talking pictures until all the others did, and if they did so, to investigate ways to make talkies that would not require sub-licenses from Warner Bros. (Green 79-81) Instead, Fox bought the rights to Theodore Case's sound-on-film system

and, on July 23, 1926, two weeks before the “Don Juan” premiere, created the Fox-Case Corporation. This would make for a strange alliance, for because Fox-Case needed equipment patented by Western Electric to amplify its films, it was forced to sub-license the system from the Vitaphone Corporation, which held an exclusive license. Case’s key assistant, E. I. Sponable, left the Case Research Labs to become head of research and development for the new company.

With the help of the studio’s chief enthusiastic colleague, Courtland Smith, Case and Sponable had been attempting to convince William Fox to purchase their system for months before the contract was signed. Fox initially watched a Case test film in the spring of 1926 in a New York projection room, where the matched sight and sound of a canary singing in a cage and “a Chinaman who had a ukelele and ... sang an English song” had the studio chief exclaiming, “This is revolutionary!”(Sinclair 63) Fox requested that another demonstration be made at his home, where he would be absolutely certain that there would be no ventriloquist in the projection booth. A sound-proof stage was hastily built at the Fox newsreel studio at 53rd Street and Tenth Avenue, where Case and Sponable made further test shorts, some of them outdoors. “Shortly thereafter,” recalled Fox,

they [showed] the various things they had photographed outside. One was a rooster crowing and it sounded exactly like a pig squealing. Another was a dog barking which sounded like a cow. They recognized that they didn’t have it, because of the confusion of sound. About thirty or forty days later they said, “Here, this time we have it.” On the screen there came rushing before me a train photographed on the Jersey Central tracks, and I heard the whistles blowing and the wheels turning just as though the train were with me in that room. I said, “Now you have it.”(Sinclair 64)

Whether or not they took seriously the “advice” by their powerful colleague, Case

and Sponable made plenty of tests for the system christened Movietone. Some were of “name” performers, among them the stage notables Gertrude Lawrence and Beatrice Lillie, the humorist Charles “Chic” Sale, and Ben Bernie and his orchestra. Another famous subject, the Scottish singer-comedian Harry Lauder, distrusted Fox enough that he, as Sponable recalled decades later, “stopped in the middle of a refrain of ‘Roamin’ in the Gloamin’” to announce in his delightful brogue, ‘This is a tist.’ The canny Scot did not realize that we could easily have edited out his disclaimer if we had wanted to show this film in a theater.”(Allvine 73-74)

The enjoyment of other Case-Sponable tests, whether made before or after the Fox pact, required more unusual tastes. An obscure vaudevillian named Gus Visor was filmed singing “Ma, He’s Making Eyes at Me” while holding a duck whose rear he squeezed on cue to produce a noteful squawk. Case himself was unafraid to sit before the camera, as indicated by a test unearthed for a 1997 cable television documentary, “20th Century Fox: The First 50 Years.” In a high bark, a tuxedo-wearing Case tells the intended audience, “Most of you probably have never seen a piece of moving-picture film,” then attempts to describe the pictures on a piece of sound-on-film footage without so much as a single close-up. The same documentary revealed a snippet of a test by an Oriental ukelele player -- likely the one seen by William Fox -- rapidly strumming and singing “That’s My Baby Now” before halting abruptly with the admission, “I got no more wind.”

“Fox with his Movietone could have been ahead of Vitaphone if Fox had let us go ahead with theater demonstrations, but he kept me doing tests,” Sponable claimed.(Allvine 73) Fox-Case finally unveiled its first efforts in a demonstration for the trade press on January 5, 1927, at the 53rd Street facility. William Fox himself was on hand to introduce

the embryonic Movietone program, which included Frieda Hempel singing “The Last Rose of Summer” and Raquel Meller vocalizing “The Wife of the Toreador,” “The Procession” and other songs. The very first sound heard by the few invited guests was that of a baby crying, followed by a canary singing. Mordaunt Hall, on hand for the New York Times, observed that the synchronization was sometimes imprecise, but that “those who heard Miss Meller’s numbers found that the artistry of the discourse was extraordinarily well preserved.”(January 6, 1927)

At the nearby Sam H. Harris Theater on January 21, the first Movietone program appeared for public view, although it consisted only of the Meller songs as a prologue to the silent feature “What Price Glory?”, the popular Great War comedy that had been in release since November 1926. On February 24, members of the press were invited to the Harris to have their vocal and physical likenesses recorded by Movietone, and to watch a longer program, a mix of old and new shorts, including (again) the one by Meller.

May 1927 was a particularly noteworthy month for Fox’s sound campaign. On the second day of the month, preceding the new silent feature “The Yankee Clipper” at New York’s Roxy Theater, the first significant public Movietone program debuted. It included what is perhaps the first commercially exhibited outdoor sound movie: a few minutes of cadets marching at West Point. The choice of the Roxy was significant, for William Fox had just assumed operating control of the struggling uptown house, his first deluxe location in the nation’s most important city. The fare was also important, for that band of cadets constituted the first subject in what became the first widely seen sound newsreel series. A commentator for Variety noticed the possibilities of a regular sound current-events program: “Movietone is a surety from an interest angle in being spliced to



screen news. ... [It] can't help but enhance a newsreel from a presentation angle."(May 4, 1927)

Four more Movietone films began on May 25 at the Harris in a simultaneous premiere with the ambitious romantic drama "Seventh Heaven." Raquel Meller was back, singing "Corpus Christi" and "Flor Del Mal." With her usual drawing-room unction, Gertrude Lawrence offered a song, "I Don't Know How It Happened," from one of her London revues, about a woman's flirtation in a subway. Balancing Lawrence's high-class image were a couple of numbers by Ben Bernie's band (including "My Castle in Spain Is a Shack in the Lane") and a comedy sketch by Chic Sale, "They Are Coming to Get Me," possibly the first Movietone with dialogue. In it, Sale presented his well-known preacher character. "A comedy sexton is also included and a squalling infant, as well as a black cat," Variety noted in a later review of the Sale short that hinted at the range of sounds the first-nighters thrilled over.(July 11, 1928) Meanwhile, "Seventh Heaven," directed by Frank Borzage, made permanent stars -- and a highly profitable starring duo -- of Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell. It was, in time, fitted with its own Movietone element, a music-and-effects score that highlighted its theme song, "Diane."

"Seventh Heaven" made film history, but Fox's most important accomplishment in sound for 1927 was tied to the nation's story. On the overcast morning of May 20, Charles Lindbergh's "Spirit of St. Louis" airplane took off from Roosevelt Field on Long Island for its landmark trans-Atlantic journey to Paris. That evening, Fox was showing Movietone footage of the departure of the "Daring Young American" at the Roxy in support of a tepid action melodrama called "Fighting Love." "The roar of the propellers is heard and when the gallant aviator leaves the earth, the cheers of the throng on the field

come to the ears of the spectators in the theatre,” enthused the Times on May 23.

“Yesterday afternoon this short feature not only stirred up enthusiastic applause, but in all sections of the theatre many persons shouted and hurrahed.” A look at the footage in retrospect reveals a primitive presentation in one single panning shot showing onlookers milling about on the grounds before the roaring plane suddenly appears from the right and zooms across the screen to loud cheers and blaring horns of unseen automobiles. Fox hedged its bets on the reception of the “Seventh Heaven” program by including the takeoff footage, and shots of Lindbergh arriving at the field, in the aforementioned twenty-six-minute prologue at the Harris starting on the 25th.

Fox soon made another splash with its coverage of Lindbergh’s triumphant return home, the June 12 reception in Washington by President Coolidge, who was shown awarding the hero the Distinguished Flying Cross “for what he is and what he has done” in a lengthy (for “Silent Cal”) speech. The address, accompanied by Lindbergh’s brief recorded reply and even shots of the dignitaries leaving the speaking area, was filmed with a single head-on camera placement, but most Americans who saw this footage were thrilled enough to both see and hear a Chief Executive on film for the first time, and in a naturalistic setting. By now, it was clear that although other studios could provide the visual excitement and immediacy in their noiseless newsreels -- Pathe, Kinograms and the International Newsreel Company all covered the Lindbergh welcome, for example, and Pathe’s footage beat Fox’s to theaters -- only Movietone could land the aural punch. Lee De Forest’s sound cameras covered the D. C. reception, too, but Fox’s much larger distribution network made Phonofilm a mere afterthought.

Fox, which had been issuing news shorts since 1919 (as Fox News), combined its newsreel operations with its now-regular series of "Varieties" vaudeville shorts in a single department on the West Coast. Marcel Silver directed most of the early vaude programs. Truman Talley, a former reporter with the New York Herald, was now supervising the entire short-subjects division. During the summer of 1927, Fox provided wired theaters -- which, by October, would be a majority of the studio's major-city houses -- with a variety of sounded images. J. Harold Murray, star of the Broadway musical "Rio Rita," sang that show's "The Ranger's Song" to the camera. The polar explorer Richard E. Byrd was shown taking off in his own airplane.

One of the most talked-about Movietone subjects of 1927 was the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, who was filmed declaring, in English, that sound pictures -- Movietone, specifically -- could "bring the world together ... settle all differences ... become the international medium, educator and adjuster ... prevent war." The Mussolini talk, which premiered with the F. W. Murnau-directed prestige feature "Sunrise" at New York's Times Square Theater on September 23, was the result of the labors of Jack Connolly, a former newspaper editor and Washington representative of the Will Hays office, who was hired by Fox at midyear to secure world-class personalities for the Movietone microphone. The Mussolini footage, interestingly enough, was taken in early May, before Fox's successes with Lindbergh's flight and, also thanks to Connolly's production, the post-flight reception.(Fielding 164)

Reviewers hailed the clear reproduction of Mussolini's voice, albeit one heavily accented (and coached by Connolly, who reportedly wrote out the speech on a large placard that was held just out of camera range). In a commentary that led off Variety's

usual space for feature-film reviews, Sime Silverman clearly alluded to the drawbacks of the competing Vitaphone.

Here is the perfect talker. ... Movietone employs no needles. It is not a matter of synchronization here; that is forgotten; you are listening to a natural voice that has lost none of its melody, that has not had its tone strained by the recording process; is not mechanical or metallic. ... There is not the least bit of distance between the speaker and his voice. (September 21, 1927)

Another early Connelly coup for Movietone was the filming of the famed author of the Sherlock Holmes detective stories. Made in the summer of 1927, the twelve-minute “Sir Arthur Conan Doyle” showed the aged Scotsman talking on two familiar subjects: how he created Holmes and his experiences in spiritualism. It would be clear to audiences which of the two topics he would be more interested in. The Fox short survives as the only sound film of Conan Doyle, who died at age seventy-one in 1930.

Conan Doyle, solidly built with graying hair and a moustache, speaks warmly while sitting in the garden outside his home in England. He first deals with Holmes, whom he created forty years before, he says, because he wanted to write a story about a fictional detective who solved crimes by scientific means instead of by chance.

From that time, Sherlock Holmes took root. I’ve written more about him than I’d intended to do, but my hand has been forced by kind friends who continually wanted to know more, and so it is that this monstrous growth has come out of a very comparatively small seed.

As much affection as Conan Doyle seems to have for Holmes and his “stupid” partner, Dr. Watson, he shows even more enthusiasm for his support of spiritualism,

which, according to an opening title, has made him “one of the leading advocates of the existence of spirit life and communication with the beyond.” The author firmly states that he has no plans to write any more Holmes stories, that he intends to devote more of his time to spiritualism than literature. With great sincerity, he says he must make people understand that spiritualism

is not the foolish thing so often represented ... but that it is a great philosophy, the basis of religious improvement in the future of the human race. ... When I talk on this subject, I’m not talking about what I believe, I’m not talking about what I think, I’m talking about what I know.

With shorts like “Sir Arthur Conan Doyle,” Fox’s emerging strategy to emphasize non-fiction content was filling a niche in the sound market while avoiding direct competition with Vitaphone. As stated above by Sime Silverman, Movietone was already being perceived as the better system because the quality of sound in Vitaphone depended so much on how carefully it was projected. An all-sound Movietone newsreel seemed imminent, and the first one, ten minutes long, premiered on October 28, 1927, with views of an Army-Yale football game, the “Iron Horse” locomotive, a New York rodeo and Niagara Falls. “In composite, it’s a whale of a novelty,” wrote an impressed scribe from Variety.

The Niagara Falls’ shots catch the roar and the music of the falling cataract in so realistic a fashion it left [the] theatre damp. ...

The Yale Bowl festivities with the marching [West] Pointers entering the enclosure, the cheering squads, bands, student body singing, actual gridiron plays and attendant fan reaction, distinguishes this as the best and most interesting of the scenes.(November 2, 1927)

Six weeks later, on December 3, the newly christened Fox Movietone News became a regular feature in wired theaters nationwide, the first issue with that title being comprised of three items: the Vatican Choir singing at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Washington, D. C.; the dynamiting by engineers of the obsolete Conowingo Bridge in Maryland; and the annual Army-Navy football contest.(Fielding 163-64) On December 6, Fox made another splash in Washington by recording the opening of the 70th Congress, Connolly having made sufficient arrangements with Speaker of the House Nicholas Longworth and other key leaders. Longworth was shown taking the oath of office, and William Tyler Page, the clerk of the House, read President Coolidge's annual message to the assembled representatives. The footage appeared in the second Movietone News issue, which came out four days later.

## **“THE JAZZ SINGER” AND MORE**

However, the days were numbered that the recording or issue of a talking short could make the front page of Variety, as had both the Mussolini speech and Congressional debut. On October 6, 1927, the landmark “first” talkie, “The Jazz Singer,” premiered at the Warners Theater in New York with eight Vitaphoned singing interludes, five voiced by Jolson. “The Jazz Singer” also yielded the first talking trailer, described in the Vitaphone Release Index (No. 2228) as beginning with the introduction of actor John Miljan, a Warners contractee who did not appear in the feature film, as announcer. Miljan was seen as well as heard in the trailer, which offered “outstanding scenes from ... Warner Bros. Supreme Triumph” and views of the opening-night festivities with “many notables of motion picture fame.” The coming of the “Supreme Triumph” was not totally joyous for the Warner clan, for Sam Warner died the night before the New York opening. At age forty-two, having worked furiously to see “The Jazz Singer” completed, he succumbed to pneumonia complicated by a brain abscess.

The remaining studio heads realized that it was not the musical numbers sung by

Jolson -- "Toot Toot Tootsie, Goodbye," "Blue Skies," "Dirty Hands, Dirty Face," "Mother (of Mine), I Still Have You" and the finale of "My Mammy" -- that really captured audiences. It was the star's occasional spurting of dialogue -- as in "Wait a minute! You ain't heard nothin' yet!" -- that was the real attraction. Warners would soon expand its West Coast sound stages from four to six, and announce a program of twelve feature-length "talkers" for 1928, although most (there ended up being more than twelve) were like "The Jazz Singer": silents with dialogue sequences. One of those part-talkies, a "crook meller" called "Tenderloin," was marketed with what *Variety* called the most entertaining trailer in the history of the picture business."(March 14, 1928) The male lead, Conrad Nagel, appeared as himself in a smoothly voiced talk boasting that "Tenderloin" would surpass any previous Vitaphone production, whereupon fade-ins showed the leading lady, Dolores Costello, in a variety of clips underscored by the film's Vitaphone accompaniment. Nagel, whose engaging voice would make him one of the early sound era's busiest players, was the only person heard in the eight-minute trailer. Warners cagily kept Costello's less impressive tones under wraps.

The first all-talking feature, "Lights of New York," premiered on July 8, 1928, although the fifty-seven-minute gangster story was initially planned as a two-reeler. Bryan Foy, who had long wanted to direct a feature-length talkie, went ahead and did so in February 1928 without the knowledge of his bosses. The film, about a pair of small-town barbers (Cullen Landis and Eugene Palette) hoodwinked into fronting for a gang of Broadway bootleggers, was written by Murray Roth and vaudeville comic Hugh Herbert and produced at breakneck speed -- in seven days and nights. Derided by reviewers -- one of which famously agreed it was "100 percent crude" as well as 100 percent talking,



“Lights of New York” racked up \$1.2 million in grosses from a novelty-hungry audience.

Through year’s end, Warners issued three more all-talkie features: “The Terror,” a mystery-horror thriller based on an Edgar Wallace story; “The Home Towners,” a comedy adapted from a popular George M. Cohan play; and “On Trial,” taken from the courtroom drama by Elmer Rice. However, the film that made clear once and for all that feature-length talkies had triumphed over silents -- and sublimated their short-subject counterparts as well -- was the second Al Jolson part-talkie, “The Singing Fool,” which premiered on September 19, 1928. It boasted dialogue, effects and musical numbers -- most notably the instant De Sylva-Brown-Henderson hit “Sonny Boy” -- for only about two-thirds of its 101-minute running time, but it became the first sound film seen by many patrons in newly wired theaters nationwide. “The Singing Fool” grossed \$5.9 million worldwide, and its \$3.8-million tally in the United States was unsurpassed until Walt Disney’s “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” (1937). Meanwhile, Movietone provided Fox its first all-talkie feature in the Cisco Kid tale “In Old Arizona,” which opened at the Criterion Theatre in Los Angeles on Christmas Day of 1928.

Now that there were films that could talk nonstop for an hour or more, the novelty of a reel or two of song or talk was fading. Yet there was great optimism about the future of short subjects. By mid-1928, many big-city theaters were booking shorts not as fillers but an integral parts of each “de luxe” show. Several Broadway houses that had stopped booking silent comedy shorts were beginning to reintroduce them once they had sound. E. W. Hammons, president of the small Educational studio, echoed many sentiments in Hollywood when he wrote:

Until pictures-and-sound devices are in universal use ... the short subject is going to be the most fertile field for development of pictures-and-sound entertainment. ... From the commercial angle ... -- the line-up of companies handling short subjects -- the industry should have much to interest it in the coming months. (The Film Daily, June 3, 1928)

Indeed, these were interesting times.

## VOICES CARRY

The first wave of audible short subjects sang and danced and joked -- but they didn't really move. Most of the United States, much less the world, had not been exposed to talkies through wired theaters, but people who had watched sound movies for long enough would begin to tire from the novelty of static stand-up presentations, the seemingly monotonous output of comic monologues, concert house-style song renditions and repetitious, noisy jazz bands. The makers of sound shorts had to come up with stories to make their product fluid, and personalities to make those stories work -- even if other media had to be plumbed for such. In this chapter, we will examine how the sound short expanded, both in ambition and in competition.

A way for the sound film to establish itself was to rely on traditional movie plots. One of the most-used themes, rife in the silent era, was the Hollywood self-parody, and one of the first Hollywood sound films made fun of the doomed silent cinema. "Twinkle, Twinkle" -- Vitaphone No. 505 from April 1927 -- was comprised of a scene from a successful stage comedy of the same title. It also marked the introduction of Joe E. Brown to the talkies, as the kind of likable rube that would make him one of the most commercially popular comedy stars of the 1930s. As the film begins (the first seconds exist archivally only in audio, as the video portion has decomposed), a director is guiding a

stereotypical Dumb Dora ingenue through a melodramatic scene on a small set. "Your husband is dead -- you're in shock -- the phone drops to the floor! ... 'My God, dead!' ... Bow your head -- collapse!" The lady does. "You know, tears certainly wreak havoc with one's mascara," is the woman's first remark off camera. The director and cameraman depart, leaving the actress (played by Perquita Courtney) to fend off Brown's character when he enters. He produces a business card: "P. T. Robinson -- Plain and Fancy Detective -- sideline: Acting." He says that he has come West from Holgate, Ohio (Brown's real hometown), for a good reason: "The screen is screaming for me."

Now, in this impromptu tryout, he will display for the dumbfounded actress the array of emotions he has learned in an instructional book on emoting. "Passion is m'best," he claims. Indignation ... remorse ... joy -- all earn the same nebulous facial expression.

"Now, how about love?" the actress dares to ask. He awkwardly takes her in his arms.

"Now what?"

"Didn't it say in the book?"

P. T. decides to go ahead and pash, but when he begins to paw at the woman's dress, she walks away. He bows his head in contrition at the fade-out, but because the Vitaphone people have not learned to distinguish the sound-film sketch from a live vaude skit, the fade is followed by the final bow found in the earliest talkie shorts. "Don't go away," Joe E. quips to his partner, "those people are still screaming."

The Brooklyn-filmed "Twinkle, Twinkle" was little more than a test reel, but Warner Bros. found the public screaming for sketches just like it, even if the premises

were slight -- and for voice-gifted personalities like Brown. The studio had another of the latter for its comedies in William Demarest, whose work as a lead in early short talkies has long been overshadowed by his career as a character actor in feature films -- most memorably in Preston Sturges' stock company and in his Oscar-nominated sidekick role in "The Jolson Story" (1946), not to mention his tenure as gruff Uncle Charley on the 1960s television sitcom "My Three Sons." However, Demarest can arguably be called the first prolific performer of the sound era.

Demarest (1892-1983) had been a vaudevillian, as a single or two-act, since the century's first decade; his best routine involved slapstick pratfalls as he played the cello. In 1927, he was signed to a contract by Warner Bros., which assigned him to mediocre comedy features like "Finger Prints," "The Gay Old Bird" and "The Bush Leaguer," and, in a foreshadowing of his future, cast him in support of Al Jolson (but then left most of him on the cutting-room floor) in "The Jazz Singer." Almost as soon as Bryan Foy began shooting short subjects at Warners' Hollywood sound facility, he put Demarest's voice to good use. The actor was first heard as the master of ceremonies in a revue, "A Night at Coffee Dan's" (August 15, 1927). The locale depicted was the real Los Angeles actors' club shown in Jolson's landmark opening number from "The Jazz Singer"; the short was filmed on the same set two months earlier than the feature.(Eyman 136)

Demarest's second outing for Vitaphone was in another cabaret-type reel, "Amateur Night" (October 10, 1927), in which he presided as a theater manager who was ultimately dumped through a trap door from the stage on which he'd introduced such subpar "talent" as an off-key soprano and an effeminate reciter of verse. Demarest was adjudged by far the best asset in both of the aforementioned films, the reception to which

was tempered by the lack of quality performers surrounding him. He continued to appear as an exasperated or wise-guy type in original one-reel comic playlets written by Murray Roth. In "The Night Court" (November 28, 1927), Demarest was a lawyer who hauled a nightclub troupe into the after-hours tribunal, then asked the judge to see the show so he could win the case at hand. "Papa's Vacation" (March 31, 1928) sought to answer the question of what a sore-footed letter carrier does on his day off, which in this case was to allow his wife (Patricia Caron) and children to talk him into taking a mountain hike.

Another Demarest domestic sketch, "When the Wife's Away" (November 28, 1927), gained extra attention because it debuted in New York as part of the prologue to "The Jazz Singer." Abel Green, in fact, opined that "When the Wife's Away" foretells "the ultimate in screen entertainment, that of the silver sheet performers speaking their lines and doing away with subtitles." (*Variety*, December 7, 1927) Demarest was a husband whose wife is leaving town to visit her mother -- with the admonition that hubby lay off parties and women. After leaving his wife off at the train station (where, noted Green, the "choo-choo whistling, the bells clanging, and all attendant noises ... are caught on the Vita"), the husband ignores the advice, but without knowing that his mate has only pretended to go away. Amid a bash filled with hot jazz, pretty girls and a shrieking cello, the wife returns to exact revenge. The clincher found the husband wrapped in bandages in a hospital bed. "Where am I -- in Heaven?" the poor soul asks out loud. The wife, sitting nearby, offers a daunting reply: "No, dear, I'm still with you."

Demarest's work in shorts did not lead to bigger opportunities in features, and he returned temporarily to the stage. However, Foy continued to develop the sound playlet,

in the dramatic realm as well as in comedy, well before his landmark elongation of “Lights of New York.” Warners’ first all-Vitaphone drama was the 10-minute “The Lash” (November 3, 1927), in which the stage actor Hal Crane reprised the lead role of the playlet he’d written about a remorseful killer and a clever police inspector. In New York City’s Tombs prison, the lawman (played by William B. Davidson) tells an attorney (Richard Tucker) that he wants more information about the death of a man whose wife has been imprisoned pending a trial for murder. When the woman’s son (Crane) shows up to visit his mother, the inspector grills him about the case to no avail, then makes an offhand remark about the killing to the lawyer that sets the younger man off. In a frenzy, the son confesses that he had committed the murder because his father had beaten his mother with a whip, which happens to be lying on the inspector’s desk as evidence.

The inspector prepares to make out a warrant for the son’s arrest for murder, but the boy graps the whip off the table and strikes the inspector on the face, crying, “What would you do if a man struck your mother like this with a whip?”

“By God, I’d kill him!” is the reply. The warrant is torn up.

Variety, reviewing “The Lash” some months later (the above description is from that article), found that it had lost none of its impact in the transition from the stage: “Every word of dialog [is] clear and penetrating. The story gets and holds attention. ... The field for playlets of this type appears unlimited but a steady source of good material does not seem to be so certain.”(June 6, 1928)

Indeed, two notable early Vitaphone one-act dramas featured actors performing self-penned, moralistic works they had popularized on the stage. In “Non-Support” (December 4, 1927), Burr McIntosh played a savvy old judge who lectures an inattentive

wife on the moral virtues of fidelity. More historically significant was “Solomon’s Children” (December 27, 1927), the first talking two-reeler made anywhere. It was written by Hugh Herbert, an actor and writer who began to figure prominently in Warners’ short-making efforts (and in features, with his co-authorship of “Lights of New York”). Herbert went on to become known for comedic roles as the excitable “Woo-woo!” guy of scores of ‘30s and ‘40s features, but in 1927 he was just another stage import. Exploiting the long-held stereotype of the Jewish bent for financial reward, his story concerned a wealthy and wise Semitic widower who decides to test his children’s affection for him but finds they like his money better. After realizing the sad truth through trickery -- he had told his son and daughter that he had lost money in the stock market, but without saying that it was only a small sum -- Solomon ultimately announces his impending nuptials with his landlady! “Plausible, typical, human, this is one of the best talker subjects produced to date,” announced Variety.(June 13, 1928)

Succeeding Vitaphone playlets attempted, perhaps over-dramatically, to deal with weighty matters. “The Question of Today” (March 15, 1928), a “problem play” written by Walter Montague and directed by Lloyd Bacon, featured Warners starlet Audrey Ferris as a debutante whose suggestive dress and actions motivated a sex-starved sailor to mistake her for a loose woman. A complaint filed by the girl against the seaman (Arthur Belasco) set up the narrative of the short, a lengthy discussion of the incident by the principals and a philosophical police chief (Landers Stevens). The esteemed veteran actor Hobart Bosworth was top-billed in “A Man of Peace” (April 21, 1928), about a quiet mountain man embroiled in a feud that has resulted in the shooting and hanging of his



brother. In the script penned by Warners staffer Joseph Jackson, the erstwhile pacifist enacted revenge on his brother's killer, one "Trigger-Eye Hargis" (Charles Middleton), by tossing him out a window on his own noose.

Foy used stage-trained actors like Bosworth because they could talk, and so could the longtime film player Henry B. Walthall, the "Little Colonel" of D. W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation" now reduced, through alcoholism and other personal setbacks, to character roles. Walthall made his Vitaphone debut in "Retribution" (June 14, 1928), a curious mix of drama and comedy written by Hugh Herbert and directed by Archie Mayo. The skit began with a tense meeting in a legislative chamber, where a senator (Tom McGuire) is accosted by a drug-addicted former colleague (Walthall) who asks for money. The senator declines, reminding his fallen friend of his bad behavior in better times and implying that the law of retribution has worked to even the score. When the addict draws a gun, the screen goes blank, except for a flash of flame in the dark. The play resumes with the two men in a dressing room removing their makeup, and Walthall loans McGuire money to bet on a horse named ... Retribution. Two other notable Vitaphone dramas produced during the first half of 1928 were "Ten Minutes," with legitimate theater actor Robert T. Haines as a prisoner who uses the short time before his walk to the electric chair to reflect on his life's mistakes and become spiritually purified through prayer, and "The Death Ship," a suspense thriller set against a raging storm, with Mitchell Lewis (billed by Warners as "The Heaviest Villain in the Movies") as a captain threatening to murder his first mate (Jason Robards) over the affections of a young woman (Elizabeth Page).

Despite these dramatic efforts, Vitaphone was better known as a supplier of musical and comedy shorts. Hugh Herbert was involved with many of the first plotted

comedies, as a performer, author and/or co-writer with Roth. Among them were “The Lemon” (1928), in which Herbert played an attorney outsmarting an unscrupulous salesman played by the humorist Walter Weems; “On the Air” (1928), a radio spoof in which he was a lawman extolling his crime-fighting virtues over the airwaves as his home was being robbed; and “Realization” (1927), a drama-tinged Roth original with Herbert as a businessman who is talked out of divorce by a female attorney (Anita Pam). Herbert also wrote skits for other actors, including “Miss Information” (1928) for contractees Lois Wilson and Edward Everett Horton, “Hollywood Bound” (1928) for Gladys Brockwell, and “Sunny California” (1928) for May McAvoy, the “Jazz Singer” ingenue who would prematurely retire just as the talkies took hold.

In the middle of 1928, the Vitaphone Corporation would take out trade ads boasting “two years of continuous production” with “the foremost stars and entertainers from every branch of the amusement field.” Its cumulative roster at that juncture included the usual suspects -- Jolson, Martinelli, Conrad Nagel, the Howard brothers, Sissle and Blake, and Fred Waring’s Pennsylvanians -- but also many acts even the devoted film fan of today might strain to recognize, much less to tell apart. The Happiness Boys, one of the most popular acts of radio and the recording studio, made two one-reelers in 1927; they were joined on film by The Admirals, The Revelers, The Croonaders, The Rollickers, The Diplomats, The Ingenues, the Four Aristocrats, the Four Buddies, the Two Doves, the Record Boys, the Sunshine Boys, the Yacht Club Boys and the Three Bad Boys -- all within the first two years of Vita. There were also the blues singer Florence Brady, the Broadway comedienne Florence Moore and the Florentine Choir of Florence, Italy.

Youth was served by the Loomis Twins (billed as “Darlings of Songland”), the Merle Twins (“Syncopating Songsters”), the Bennett Twins (“Little Bare Knee Syncopators”) and the Hearst Newspaper Radio Kids, among others. Karyl Norman was a man who impersonated women; Kitty Doner was a woman who dressed like men.

Warners also made the first Hollywood shorts designed specifically for foreign audiences. In 1928, the team of Ann Codee and Frank Orth appeared in “Zwei und Fierzigsti Strasse,” which was recorded mostly in German but which offered a musical number in French along with a pair in German. *Variety* reported that the studio was to issue the subject in the United States as well as abroad, but as a novelty, “believing the pantomime accompanying the foreign lingo will be funny by comparison.”(November 7, 1928) More multi-linguistic films followed in 1929, as the folk singer Isa Kremer was recorded in French and German as well as English that spring. Don Albert and His Argentines made a Vitaphone in Spanish around the same time.

Future Hollywood stars Jack Benny, Joe E. Brown and Winnie Lightner were introduced to the cinema in pre-1929 Vitaphones, but other recognizable showbiz names who made them might not necessarily be associated with the era. Jay C. Flippen, a blackface vaude comedian who would become a grizzled character actor in Hollywood a quarter-century later, made his sound debut, sans cork, in a 1928 single-reeler, “The Ham What I Am.” Leo Carrillo, the future Pancho of the “Cisco Kid” television shows, in 1927 was “The Italian Humorist” presenting a monologue called “At the Ball Game” and also a “Star of the Dramatic Stage” reciting a poem about the Great War, “The Hell Gate of Soissons.” Near the turn of the century, Joseph E. Howard had composed “Good-Bye, My Lady Love” and “I Wonder Who’s Kissing Her Now”; in 1928, he was prevailed upon

to sing those songs for Vitaphone's sake. The resulting film turned out to be little more than an exercise in nostalgia, as Howard vainly tries to animate the songs with an old-fashioned trilling style. His opening comment, "I'm awfully glad I'm not forgotten," would turn out a tad premature, given his lack of future on-screen opportunities.

The West Coast shorts did provide Foy with most of Vitaphone's early novelty acts, hired mainly from vaudeville. One of the first shorts he filmed in Hollywood -- No. 2110 in a series that began at 2000 -- was "Hjlan Birds, Cockatoos at Their Best" (September 13, 1927). The title was self-explanatory. In 1928 alone, among those who attempted to prove that conventional singing, dancing and joking weren't necessary to entertain were one Chaz Chase ("The Unique Comedian"), who swallowed fire, paper, flowers -- even a violin -- on camera for Vitaphone; the duo of Lipton and Terrill, who offered vocal imitations of musical instruments in "The Human Music Box"; and a fellow named Johnny Hyman, who in "Playing Pranks with Webster," wrote words on a blackboard, broke them down into syllables and wound a story around each, then erased some of the syllables to create new words for which to spin yarns. In another Vita, "trick golfer" Alex Morrison hit a ball off a man's forehead and one off a watch, then struck picture-perfect drives, all with the "hindrance" of a blindfold to shield his eagle eyes.

Bryan Foy, ever on the lookout for novel subjects, even decided to showcase his six brothers and sisters in two 1928 single-reelers. He had something more than just nepotism in mind, for long before their father's death in February of that year, the Foy children had developed their own vaudeville act. "The Foys for Joys" and "Chips of the Old Block" (both July 1) verified the troupe's talent. In "The Foys for Joys," Charley

Foy, the oldest of the bunch, acted as master of ceremonies with an unusual monologue in which the camera followed him walking across the stage and back between jokes. Most of the film consisted of a burlesque, adapted from the Foys' vaude act, of Hollywood moviemaking in which the performers imitated various film luminaries. The even more bizarre "Chips of the Old Block," restored in 1999 and shown to great acclaim in New York that fall, shows Charley introducing each of the other Foys, all of whom are in motion for the full reel. The two sisters, Madeline and Mary, sing "We Just Roll Along" to brother Richard's ukelele accompaniment, then Eddie, Jr., does an eccentric dance and comedy -- including a sea lion imitation -- while wearing an outlandish set of false teeth. Madeline tells a comically horrible children's story, in which Little Red Riding Hood's journey through the woods culminates in her limbs being torn off, before an ensemble "hot" dance finish. Audiences ate up this stuff -- which Variety called "one of the best Vita shorts turned out so far ... an interesting turn for the body of any talker bill."(August 15, 1928) The two shorts were the extent of the six Foys' film experience together, but Eddie, Jr., headlined an early Vitaphone two-reel comedy, "The Swell Head" (July 14, 1928), a reworking of his own vaude routine, and went on to a noteworthy career in films as well as on the stage.

Ever more ambitious, Warners reopened its Brooklyn Vitagraph facility in the fall of 1928 with the idea of doubling its shorts output to ten per week. (The familiar "Vitaphone Varieties" shorts label would not become official for another year, however.) The studio had released more than 400 Vitaphones by now and had the availability of more than 400 wired theaters. Those houses needed new material; that was the major reason for the expansion. Another factor was contractual, for nearly all of the

Metropolitan Opera artists pacted to Warners were committed with the provision that their performances be produced in the East. Many of those artists refused to go West to be recorded, thus accounting for a dearth of new Vitaphone opera shorts during 1928. There was a third reason, not officially cited by the studio: Vaude talent on the West Coast had just about dried up.

Warners found lots of bodies anyhow. In his book "The Speed of Sound," Scott Eyman cites an account of filming a Vitaphone short that was left to posterity by the vaudeville comedienne Irene Franklin, who made two single-reelers for Murray Roth in late 1928. She recalled that being "mike-wise" was the most valuable asset to making a talkie. This, she said, was the "knowledge of how much lung-power *not* to put into the microphone, how much to pause and time a supposed joke for the laughter of the invisible audience."

Still, Franklin worried as she sang a song in the unyielding solitude of the recording studio.

The quiet hurt my ears, the heat was frightful. I swallowed. Heavens, I had an Easter egg in my throat ... then a tiny sound, the husky grind of the recording machine ... good Lord, my throat began to tickle. I must clear it or I would cough. It was getting worse. At the end of the chorus there was a smothered cough. Had anyone else noticed it?

Our little army marched ... to [a different] room to hear the playback. ... The muddled words were a bit overstressed, the boys were laughing; I could feel my head swelling. Suddenly a bloodhound barked from the machine. The crowd roared. I turned to Roth, bewildered.

"That was your little smothered cough," he said. "Without it, this would have been a perfect record. We'll do it again, and try not to cough. ..."(218-19)

## MOVIETONE ON THE MARCH

Fox was not nearly as busy as Warners in the vaudeville-style shorts field, choosing to focus more on its popular Movietone newsreels. However, a Fox playlet, "The Family Picnic," represented a milestone -- even if reviewers could not agree on the reason. Written and directed by vaudevillian Harry Delf, the film debuted at the Carthay Circle Theater in Los Angeles in June 1928. However, it attracted scant attention upon its original issue, partly because it accompanied the much-talked-about sound debut of George Bernard Shaw during its New York run. Variety (June 20, 1928) favorably reviewed "The Family Picnic" as "the first all-talking picture," although the earliest Vitaphone playlets had preceded it. The similarly impressed scribe from The Film Daily cited it as "the first two-reel comedy to be made completely with dialogue." (July 1, 1928) Mordaunt Hall of The New York Times called it "the first Movietone comedy" (June 26, 1928) -- another inaccurate description, although it may have been the first Movietone two-reeler. Much of "The Family Picnic" was filmed -- and recorded -- outdoors; that is likely its true distinction. The now-lost film followed a married couple, played by Raymond McKee and Kathleen Key, through bouts of mutual discord, contrary kiddies and Sunday drivers en route to a supposedly placid outing. The punch line was that the

titular feast never got to happen, the crucial basket of food having been left on the curb outside the clan's dwelling.

In the early months of 1928, Fox was focusing more on the production of newsreels than performance shorts or sketches, but Movietone was featuring some notable names of vaudeville and the stage. The actress Nina Tarasova appeared in one of the more unusual selections, a melancholy two-reel drama called "The Hut" (copyrighted March 1, 1928). She played an aged Russian woman who sings a song, "There Were Once Happy Days," as she recalls her lost lover, who years before killed a man who had attacked her and was sent to Siberia for the crime. The Russian Cathedral Choir provided accompaniment. After his "They're Coming to Get Me" short of 1927, Chic Sale showed off more of his homespun humor in "The Star Witness" (July 16, 1928). Sale played a railroad watchman called into court as an observer of an auto accident, but reviewers were more likely to praise the short for its opening Movietone effect of the rush and roar of a train passing a rural crossing than for its ensuing content.

Before the year was out, Sale would plumb his vaudeville repertoire for two more Movietones, "The Ladies' Man" and "Marching On." For the latter, Sale's patriotic stage sketch about an aged Civil War veteran remembering his friendship with Abraham Lincoln was expanded into a two-reeler that became one of the most acclaimed of early sound shorts. Director and co-scenarist Marcel Silver expanded the sketch, which was derived from the Ida M. Tarbell story "He Knew Lincoln," to emphasize the generational differences of 1920s society, in which the memories of the country's great internal conflict were passing as quickly as its participants were aging and dying. In a house in a small Illinois town, old-timer Billy Brown is relegated to the shadows of his upstairs room as



snooty younger relations enjoy an evening dinner party below. (Silver's use of light and shadow gives the early scenes an almost Gothic feel.) Billy's loud horn playing rankles his daughter-in-law (Blanche Friderici), who dismisses him as "an old nuisance." Billy looks at a dog-eared old photograph on his dresser. "Did you hear what she said about us, Mr. Lincoln?" he says. Billy finds solace with his little grandson, who also is excluded from family activities, and the two slip out unnoticed to the town train station, from which Billy will head for the old soldiers' home. Meanwhile, at the party, a local newspaper reporter (Ben Holmes) is told that Billy knew the great president, and he resolves to make the old man a good human-interest story in connection with the next day's unveiling of a Lincoln statue in town.

Billy and the little boy end up spending the night at the train station, then meet up -- and march -- with a service band that has come to town for the statue ceremony. The reporter eventually finds Billy and invites him to sit with the dignitaries at the big event, but the older man pooh-poohs the pomp, "What would seeing a statue mean to me? Look what I've got?" He shows the scribe the old photo of Lincoln -- on the back is inscribed, "To my friend Billy Brown. A. Lincoln." The old man's boasts were true. Billy relates that he knew Lincoln when he, Billy, ran a store in Springfield, that the two reunited by chance in Washington near the end of the war, and that he sorrowfully watched the president's coffin come home to Illinois. He stands up the photo on a nearby wall. As the strains of "Glory, Glory, Hallelujah" start up in the background and the emotion is heightened, Billy, followed by the reporter and then the boy, salute the photograph as Lincoln's head, and then shots of Union soldiers marching, are superimposed above the

tableux.

With its potent mix of drama, humor and patriotism -- plus its still-novel audible ingredient -- "Marching On" was a smash, "questionably the best talkie ever made," opined the Los Angeles Evening Herald. A trade-dailies ad by Fox trumpeted Sale -- a well known show-business figure for fifteen years (but who, despite the aged characters he played, was only in his early forties) -- as a "Sensational Movietone Film Find." "The Sale number," according to the Los Angeles Times,

is one of the best staged short subjects that has ever been dialogued. It points a way to the much-heralded new technique in sound-film production. It has almost the Chaplinesque mingling of humor and pathos. There is no scene no charming than the one where the old Civil War veteran and his little grandson both set forth from their home together in the night. (Film Daily, October 15, 1928)

The Film Daily's own review emphasized how the Sale short reflected the approaching artistic equality between the sound and silent film.

The picture is important because it indicates the marvelous advances made in sound production. You hear locomotive effects, see double exposure, dialogue in outdoor traveling shots and interesting camera angles, in other words, all the trappings of a modern, silent feature with the added embellishment of sound. (October 7, 1928).

Despite his good work on Marching On, Marcel Silver was not the only behind-the-camera notable of early Movietones. Unlike Warners, which relied heavily upon Bryan Foy and Murray Roth, Fox chose to diversify its roster of shorts writers and directors. Among them were Andy Rice, Harry Delf, Paul Gerard Smith, Charles Judels (who was also an actor) and Hugh Herbert, whom Fox spirited away from Warners in the

summer of 1928. Some of the performers associated with 1928 Fox Movietone entries were the comedian and dancer Pat Rooney, Jr., and his wife, Marion Bent, who went before the microphone with some of their performing family; the Chicago-based baritone Richard Bonelli, with selections from “The Barber of Seville” and “I Pagliacci”; the Broadway tap dancer Ruby Keeler (five years before “42nd Street”); the comedy team of Bobby Clark and Paul McCullough; and the humorist and critic Robert Benchley. The last two acts would be sighted frequently in the studio’s one- and two-reelers through the end of the decade.

Clark and McCullough, as Leonard Maltin has pointed out, are little remembered, but they rivaled the Marx Brothers in popularity among New York audiences of the late '20s. (Movie Comedy Teams 65) The energetic duo toured in vaudeville and burlesque for two decades before getting a shot on Broadway in 1922 with the second of Irving Berlin’s “Music Box Revue” shows. A wildly successful starring debut in the 1926 musical comedy “The Ramblers” helped bring the team to the attention of Fox talent scouts. Clark and McCullough began on film in “The Interview” (June 4, 1928), the first in a series of reproductions of their sure-fire stage routines. This one had Clark, the cigar-chomping clown with painted-on eyeglasses, and McCullough, the moustached straight man, as moss-back senators chattering with a luckless female reporter, then beginning a closing tune with the warning, “We don’t sing so good, but we sure sing loud.” “The Interview” was a one-reeler, as was “The Honor System,” released later that summer with the pair as robbery suspects creating disorder in a police station.

The team’s first two-reeler, “The Bath Between,” directed by Ben Stoloff, was based on a sketch the comics first performed in the “Music Box Revue.” Clark and

McCullough played vaudevillians who argue over the occupancy of a hotel room before McCullough is relegated to the bathtub to sleep. When a female (Carmel Myers) is heard in the bath, Clark decides he wants to switch places, but then the woman's husband shows up. The Film Daily hailed "The Bath Between" as "a sure-fire laugh number that can't miss anywhere. ... Just one laugh after another."(December 2, 1928)

Clark and McCullough were very busy at Fox during 1929, when they made ten short comedies, some of four and five reels, and some with original scripts. Fox assigned the team quality directors (Norman Taurog, James Parrott, Harry Sweet) and its own set of writers, and spent relatively lavishly on their productions, with none said to have cost less than \$50,000; by comparison, the most costly Vitaphones came in at about \$15,000. One of Clark and McCullough's 1929 subjects, "The Belle of Samoa" (February 25), teamed them with one of the studio's top leading ladies, Lois Moran. Her exotic song-and-dance number, "Samoa," had been deleted from Fox's first big-budget musical, "William Fox Movietone Follies of 1929," but augmented with newly shot material from the co-starring comics for the short. The future director Sidney Lanfield, who collaborated with Clark and McCullough on the writing of some of the Fox shorts, told Leonard Maltin the two were "both gentlemen ... a pleasure to work with -- no temperament, and most cooperative."(Movie Comedy Teams 70) Still, Clark and McCullough left Hollywood near year's end to appear in the 1930 Broadway show "Strike up the Band." Between 1931 and McCullough's death in 1935, they appeared in a series of two-reelers for R-K-O that are highly regarded (if not seen frequently enough) by buffs today.

Robert Benchley's satirical shorts -- the first two of which, "The Treasurer's Report" and "The Sex Life of the Polyp," survive today -- are of particular interest because they preserve sketches penned and presented by one of the century's great comic writers. Benchley, a member of New York's famous Algonquin Round Table, was the drama critic for Life magazine in 1922 when he first presented "The Treasurer's Report" in "No Sirree!", a one-shot revue organized by him and his colleagues from the "Vicious Circle." A parody of small-town customs as illustrated by a talk by a nervous after-dinner speaker, the "Report" proved so popular that Benchley took it to the Broadway stage in the "Music Box Revue" of 1922-23, and on tour to vaudeville houses. In 1928, Fox executive Thomas Chalmers, after some prodding, convinced the thirty-eight-year-old Benchley to reproduce his talk on an East Coast sound stage.

Despite its visually static presentation, "The Treasurer's Report" (March 12, 1928) shows what movie audiences would come to expect as trademarks of Benchley's faux lectures -- perfectly timed stammering, throat-clearing, tie-twiddling and nervous giggles. "Mr. Benchley" is the assistant bookkeeper of a Kiwanis-type civic organization who unexpectedly is called upon to present a financial summary at a meeting. After fidgeting through a number by a screechy hometown soprano, he takes the dais and tries to break the ice with a story about two Irishmen, but finds he cannot relate the anecdote in the correct order. He discloses that the regular treasurer is "confined at his home with a bad head cold," then is corrected with information whispered to him by a colleague. "Heh-heh, well, the joke seems to be on me," Benchley announces, attempting vainly to ingratiate himself with his listeners. "Mr. Rossiter has pneumonia, heh-heh-heh." The banter is capped with the actual report, which shows the group operating firmly in the red

and having misplaced two months of balance sheets, although Benchley says he is confident that each of his fellow clubbers will “look deep into his heart ... and pocketbook ... and put this thing over with a bang” and, in a reference to the troubled people abroad, “to make this just the best year the Armenians have ever had!”

The top brass at Fox were not enthusiastic about “The Treasurer’s Report” prior to its release, but they were won over by glowing reviews -- Variety noted that the film “has scored more laughs than anything ever turned out in talking shorts”(June 27, 1928). The studio signed Benchley to do five more shorts at a lucrative \$5,000 apiece, to be filmed during two three-week stretches in California, for which Benchley would receive an extra \$500 weekly to cover his lavish living expenses.(Altman 248) The follow-up to “Treasurer’s Report” was deemed even better. “The Sex Life of the Polyp” (July 25, 1928) was an apt commentary on the sexual modesty of the era that was based on a Benchley essay for Vanity Fair, “The Social Life of the Newt.” At a women’s luncheon, “Dr.” Benchley attempts to tell about the miniature undersea creature’s reproductive habits without blushing or giggling. He uses a blackboard to exhibit nonsensical animated pictures of the unisex being, supposedly taken on a research trip to Bermuda, a favorite “hangout” for his mating subjects. The good doctor’s conclusion is that for his next experiment, he must find “some animal which takes its sex life a little more seriously.”

Robert Sherwood, reviewing for Life, hailed Benchley as the “John Bunny of the talkies,” a reference to the influential comedian of early silents, and a quarter century later -- in 1953, eight years after Benchley’s death -- a national poll of film critics selected “The Sex Life of the Polyp” as one of “the 10 funniest film sequences” ever produced by the

American movie industry. Benchley made four more shorts for Fox; “The Spellbinder” (1928) was a political parody, but “Lesson No. 1” (1929), “Furnace Trouble” (1929) and “Stewed, Fried, and Boiled” (1929) were more conventional plotted short comedies. Benchley returned East to devote himself to other activities, most notably to become theater critic for The New Yorker. He returned to films as a writer and occasional actor in features, and as a familiar personality in short subjects, including the Academy Award-winning “How to Sleep” (1935) for M-G-M.

Perhaps the most historically significant Fox short of 1928 was “Napoleon’s Barber,” the first foray into sound by the great director John Ford. “Napoleon’s Barber” began as a play by Arthur Caesar about a country barber who brags to a customer about what he’d do to the Emperor given a chance, without knowing that his customer is the man himself. In 1927, Georges Renavant appeared in a New York production of “Napoleon’s Barber,” which was lauded by Moving Picture World as a “screen laugh-maker that would be almost certain to go big with a star like Buster Keaton or Harry Langdon.”(February 26, 1927) Caesar adapted his play for Ford, who began filming at the end of September, 1928, not with Keaton or Langdon but with Otto Matiesen as Napoleon and Frank Reicher (best remembered as Captain Englehorn in “King Kong”) as the haircutter. Four decades later, the ever-salty Ford told interviewer Peter Bogdanovich that he was inspired to take the Movietone cameras outdoors against the advice of Fox sound technicians.

They said it couldn’t be done, and I said, “Why the hell *can’t* it be done?” They said, “Well, you can’t because --” and they gave me a lot of Master’s Degree talk, so I said, “Well, let’s try it.” We had Josephine’s coach coming across a bridge and the sound men said, “That’ll never do -- it’s

too loud.” But it was perfect -- the sound of the horses and the wheels -- perfect.”(Bogdanovich 50)

We do not have much more than Ford’s word to take for the success of the exterior recording, for his thirty-two-minute film is unfortunately lost. His was not the first outdoor use of Movietone, which was already proving more cinematically flexible than Vitaphone. However, “Napoleon’s Barber” was highly regarded by those who saw it. Fox premiered the film at the Roxy in New York during Thanksgiving week of 1928, as part of an innovative bill comprising two talking shorts -- the other was Clark and McCullough’s “The Bath Between” -- a newsreel and a live stage show. Variety called Ford’s film “a strong and satisfying feature short,” complimenting the two scenes with exterior dialogue and the entrance and departure of Napoleon into the barber’s village. The reviewer also pointed out the “novelty in the thought of a barber holding the fate of nations in his hands.”(November 28, 1928) A critic for The Film Daily bluntly thought it too lofty for general sensibilities, with “a lot of subtlety that is a little too finely spun to be caught by a lot of the grown up mental infants.”(December 2, 1928) The unknowing haircutter did not, on stage or film, act on his anarchist intentions; instead, Napoleon walks out of the shop, declaring that he can tolerate a poor barber and a revolutionist but cannot put up with the man’s bad poetry!

Fox was flourishing at this point, enough that the studio unveiled a new Movietone studio facility -- an investment of \$10 million -- in the Westwood area of Los Angeles on October 30, 1928. Not quite complete at the time of the opening, it would be ready for operation by December. Not including its Fox Movietone newsreels series, Fox produced more than fifty sound subjects as of March 1929, at which point the studio announced it



would end all production of silent shorts. By 1930, the company's non-newsreel shorts production was halted altogether, and the void was not filled until 1933, when Fox began to release short comedies made by the Educational company. Still, even if it did come in second among the major studios in the contest to bring sound to the screen, Fox's contribution to the early short subject remains vital.

## KEEPING UP

As 1928 progressed, Hollywood's other major companies had submitted to public demand and begun their own transitions to sound -- beginning mostly with short subjects. On May 14, M-G-M, Paramount and United Artists contracted with the Electrical Research Products, Incorporated (ERPI), the licensing subsidiary of Western Electric, for the privilege of making sound motion pictures. Universal followed with a similar deal. All four companies acquired the rights to use the Movietone name, by special arrangement with Fox-Case. First National, another of the majors, announced earlier in the year that it would ally with the Victor Talking Machine Company for a sound-on-disc format called Firnatone, but a merger with Warner Bros. would bring the studio under the Vitaphone banner by the end of the summer. By this time, some big-city theater patrons were seeing combinations of Vitaphone and Movietone shorts on the same program, and this variety would continue as more parties entered the fray.

The following is a summary of the transition to sound, with an emphasis on short subjects, by Hollywood's other major companies and selected others:

-- **Paramount.** Unlike most of its competitors, the studio began its sound

endeavors in a feature film. "Warming Up," a baseball comedy starring Richard Dix, was hastily (within a week) fitted with music and sound effects -- sans dialogue -- produced by a Victor recording device shortly before being released in June 1928. The New York Times criticized the haphazard effort: "The synchronization is ... not well-timed in spots ... the result being that the cheers for a good play can be heard some time before the play itself."(July 16, 1928) Thereafter, Paramount relied on Movietone's sound-on-film recording, although disc versions of its films were sent out to picture houses that could exhibit only in that mode.

The studio filmed its first audible shorts in its reopened facility at Astoria, New York, in the late summer of 1928, with Robert Florey and Broadway import Joseph Santley as resident directors under the general supervision of Walter Wanger and Monta Bell. James R. Cowan and Larry Kent were the first two production managers. The eight-year-old Long Island base once had been a prime part of the company's operations, accounting for 40 percent of Paramount's 1926 releases before it closed the following year as part of an internal consolidation effort.(The Astoria Studio 8) Astoria's proximity to New York City made it an ideal location for filming acts from vaudeville and radio, and many Broadway actors appeared in shorts on their off hours from the stage.

Three of the first voices recorded for release by Paramount were among the most well known: Eddie Cantor, Walter Huston and Ruth Etting. All were well-known from the stage and, in the cases of Cantor and Etting, radio. Cantor, who had appeared in one of the earliest Edison experimental shorts and at least one for Lee De Forest, headlined "That Party in Person" (copyrighted January 8, 1929), the first sound short released by the studio. The one-reel comedy was shown with Paramount's initial

all-talking feature, the society melodrama “Interference,” in selected theaters in late 1928; in fact, a Variety reviewer (erroneously listing the film as “That Certain Party”) noted that there was a “telephone gag” in which “Interference” was parodied, and in which Cantor indicated that said feature was to follow.(November 14, 1928) The pop-eyed comic appeared as himself in “That Party in Person,” first phoning Paramount (“Hello, is that you, Parry?”) to ask for a job and haggle over salary, then singing a song, “Hungry Women,” then telling a few more stories, and finally performing the title song with the assistance of dancer Bobbe Arnst.

Cantor’s second Paramount short, “A Ziegfeld Midnight Frolic,” opened as one of a trio of two-reelers in a prologue preceding the world premiere of Paramount’s prestige drama “The Letter” at New York’s Criterion Theater on March 7, 1929. The other two shorts in the prologue were “The Carnival Man” with Walter Huston (see below) and a comedy, “Meet the Missus,” featuring the husband-and-wife team of James Gleason and Lucille Webster. In his “Frolic,” Cantor appeared on a nightclub set approximating Florenz Ziegfeld’s famed New Amsterdam Roof; in blackface, he sang two songs and introduced notables from the surrounding tables, including Richard Dix, Oscar Shaw and Peggy Hopkins Joyce. This was an example of what would be called “synergy” 70 years later, as Dix and Shaw were then shooting Paramount features, “Nothing But the Truth” and “The Cocoanuts,” respectively, at Astoria. During this time, Cantor was spending his evenings starring in Ziegfeld’s Broadway musical hit “Whoopie!” Cantor would become a feature-film star with the celluloid version of “Whoopie!” for Samuel Goldwyn in 1930, but not before he made three final shorts for Paramount: “Getting a Ticket” (1929) and “Insurance” (1930), based on familiar sketches, and “The Cock-Eyed News” (1930),

an ill-received parody of the “Ripley’s Believe It or Not” newspaper feature.

Unlike Cantor, Walter Huston was known as a dramatic actor, but he could also tell a good joke and sing and dance a bit. Huston came to Paramount in late 1928 to reprise his Broadway dramatic success, “Gentlemen of the Press,” in a 1929 feature. While filming “Press” in Astoria, he took time to appear in a trio of two-reelers: “The Carnival Man” (copyrighted February 23, 1929), “The Bishop’s Candlesticks” (February 25) and “Two Americans” (June 20). The first two were directed by Broadway notable George Abbott shortly before he went to Hollywood for his first stab at features. “The Carnival Man,” made first, was described by reviewers as a sentimental look at a carny veteran; as such, Huston got to sing a couple of songs and give a recitation.

“The Bishop’s Candlesticks” dramatized the episode from Victor Hugo’s “Les Miserables” in which Jean Valjean (Huston) is forgiven by the holy man whose items he has stolen out of desperation. The most notable aspect of the production was the experiment by Abbott to make audible Valjean’s thoughts as they are expressed, a device notably used on the stage in Eugene O’Neill’s “Strange Interlude.” Josephine Hull, the future Oscar winner for “Harvey,” was in the “Bishop’s Candlesticks” cast; the extras employed were direct from the Broadway company of “Gentlemen of the Press,” including the playwright Russel Crouse. Early in 1929, Paramount would use “Bishop’s Candlesticks” as part of an eight-reel all-shorts program emulating Fox’s Thanksgiving experiment at the Roxy. The other two offerings, both directed by Robert Florey, were themselves curious. “Night Club” was a three-reel revue of sorts with performances by Broadway notables Fanny Brice (singing “Sasha, the Passion of the Pasha”), Bobbe

Arnst, Pat Rooney, Jr., Ann Pennington, Tamara Geva and others. Its staging was described by multiple reviewers as remarkably primitive, even for its time. The third short, "Pusher-in-the-Face," a three-reeler based on a story by F. Scott Fitzgerald, boasted the donated services of New York actors -- Lester Allen, Estelle Taylor, Raymond Hitchcock, Reginald Owen and many more -- on behalf of the Actors' Fund and Authors' League.

The last of Huston's Paramount shorts, "Two Americans," found the actor portraying both Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant. The future director John Huston, who was given an eight-line bit part, recalled his father playing Grant "in kind of a crouch, blowing cigar smoke at the camera. As Lincoln, he stood tall and straight and spoke in measured cadences. It was a *tour de force* unabashed in its theatricality."(Weld 114) Despite his appearances in early sound features as well as shorts, the elder Huston did not really click cinematically until his much-lauded performance in "Dodsworth" (1936) and his 1940s work as a character player.

Ruth Etting had a singing voice better than either Cantor's or Huston's, but as an actress she hardly had their charisma or moxie. The answer to that problem was to not have her act at all in her first Hollywood shorts. The unpretentiously titled "Ruth Etting" (first shown in late 1928) and "Favorite Melodies with Ruth Etting" (February 1929), were straight singing shorts, filmed mainly in close-up, highlighting such familiar tunes as "My Mother's Eyes" and "Because My Baby Don't Mean 'Maybe' Now." An attractive but not beautiful woman with a flat, Midwestern speaking voice, Etting appeared frequently in shorts over the next few years but never made the transition to speaking dialogue in features, her contributions to the likes of "Roman Scandals" (1933) and "Gift of Gab" (1934) being little more than walk-on musical numbers.

Given the success enjoyed by Fox with Robert Benchley, it made sense for Paramount to seek its own erudite humor man. Both monologists tried by the studio were among the genuine Benchley's past and future best friends, but neither registered. Charles Butterworth, a dryly comic New York actor, was signed to appear in "Vital Subjects" (copyrighted June 7, 1929), in which he posed as a professor making a nonsensical after-dinner speech of several themes, some "laugh-inducing; others go to a gentle death," opined The Film Daily.(June 16, 1929) Paramount gave more of a chance to the writer Douglas Ogden Stewart, who appeared in two one-reelers, "Traffic Regulations" and "Humorous Flights" (April 13, 1929) but no more. At least Butterworth went on to a prolific Hollywood acting career; Stewart was more comfortable with penning plays and films, among them "The Philadelphia Story."

Despite the misfires with Stewart and Butterworth, Paramount generally was much more selective than Warner Bros. in hiring talent for its shorts, and many top stars gained early film experience in Astoria-filmed subjects. Among them were Jack Benny, Lillian Roth, George Jessel, George Burns and Gracie Allen, Ethel Merman, Helen Kane and Fred Allen (who directed "Vital Subjects" and other shorts). The rough-house Jewish comedy team of Joe Smith and Charlie Dale revived its best vaude material in films such as "Dear Teacher," "Knights in Venice" and "The False Alarm Fire Company." Broadway song-and-dance man James Barton strutted his stuff in "It Happened to Him," "Moonshine" and the otherwise almost all-black revue "After Seben." By winter's end in 1929, Paramount had turned out some fifty sound shorts.

This total did not include a handful of shorts that had been made for Paramount

release by veteran comedy producer Al Christie. Christie had been making shorts for various entities at his own studio since 1916. His distribution agreement with Paramount for sound films -- and the talent he would attract for them -- enabled him to boast in ads of "The Real Class Product of the Short Feature Field." His roster of performers included Lois Wilson, James Gleason, Louise Fazenda, Raymond Hatton, Marie Dressler, sissy comic Johnny Arthur and the former silent star Raymond Griffith, whose sound career would be cut short by chronic voice trouble.

Christie's first sound film for Paramount was "The Dizzy Diver" (copyrighted August 11, 1928), written by Hal Conklin, directed by William Watson and featuring vaude headliner Billy Dooley as a highly unseaworthy sailor. There was no dialogue, only some questionable sound effects, as an unimpressed reviewer for Photoplay noted:

Politically, the first [sic] comedy sound film, is making movie history. Confidentially, 'tis a pain in the neck. Billy Dooley gives a fairly accurate characterization of Billy Dooley imitating a sap sailor who tries to dust the ocean on scrub day. Everyone throws chocolate pudding, as usual, but the gooey sounds are frightfully artificial, and occur at just the wrong places. Orchestras can't make noises like chocolate puddings. All you need is the can-opener!(October 1928)

The first Christie-Paramount talkie to be filmed was "When Caesar Ran a Newspaper" (May 10, 1929), based on a famous vaudeville travesty in which Marc Antony (played in the film by Sam Hardy) is a press agent chatting up the dancer Cleopatra to scribe Julius Caesar (Raymond Hatton). Despite the familiarity of the material, the filming spawned its own set of problems, as production supervisor Albert A. Cohn told Photoplay.



We learned something about firearms in talkies. ... In the last few feet [of the short], Marc commits suicide by shooting himself. We knew that an actual revolver-shot would ruin the sensitive microphone, so [we] used a toy cap pistol. When the cap exploded it sounded in the monitor room like a sixteen-inch gun and in retaking the scene the mere click of the hammer provided the desired effect.(April 1929)

Christie produced shorts for Paramount until the studio, faring well enough with its in-house sound short subject production, declined to renew the distribution deal with the smaller company for the 1930-31 season. Christie moved on to the much less prestigious Educational studio.

-- **M-G-M.** The studio of Leo the Lion began construction on its first four sound stages in June 1928 at the rear of its lot in Culver City, California. A month later, the studio leased the Cosmopolitan (Hearst) Studios in New York for the purpose of utilizing Eastern stage talent, as Paramount had done with Astoria. Metro's earliest sound shorts originated from either of the two coasts, but operations in New York ceased in the summer of 1929. In-house production of shorts was not much of a priority at this point for the company, which relied on outside producers like comedy specialist Hal Roach for the bulk of its subjects.

By September 1928, M-G-M had readied for release its first twenty-six in-house sound shorts, almost entirely brief musical performances. Most were directed by Nick Grinde under the general supervision of Lawrence Weingarten. The first batch, issued on September 29, consisted of song numbers by Johnny Marvin, Marion Harris, and the duo of Gus Van and Joe Schenck, billed as "The Pennant Winning Battery of Songland." Many of the early Metro acts were recruited from the studio-affiliated Loew's vaudeville houses and, after making one or two numbers, most retreated to live performing. Among

the acts associated with 1928-29 Metro shorts were vocalists Frances White (singing her familiar ditty “M-I-S-S-I-S-S-I-P-P-I”), Odette Myrtle, George Dewey Washington, Yvette Rugel, Joseph Regan, the Ponce Sisters, the Locust Sisters and Fuzzy Knight (the future sidekick of cowboy films was then a novelty singer-pianist), pianist and bandleader Vincent Lopez, the band Walt Rosener and the Capitolians, and a male impersonator, Ella Shields. Some of the shorts were grouped into one-reel Metro Movietone Revues, with Jack Pepper (Ginger Rogers’ first husband) and Harry Rose as emcees cracking not-too-subtle jokes between songs.

Van and Schenck, who had made two Vitaphone shorts in 1927, were the busiest among the first M-G-M sound acts, with no less than seven subjects through early 1930. Their teaming was abruptly ended in 1930 -- shortly after the release of their first feature, “They Learned About Women” -- when Schenck died of a heart attack at thirty-nine. The vaudeville-trained pair specialized in cheerful song parodies, often self-written, of ethnic groups, including their own (Van was of Dutch extraction; Schenck was Jewish). In four numbers from two extant 1928 shorts, they cover a small variety of targets as Van sings the melodies and Schenck provides harmonies and piano accompaniment. In “Pasta Vazoola,” Van employs the fervent hand gestures of a stereotypical Italian as he sings, “What makes Ty Cobb get the umpire’s goat/And Isabella say, ‘Columbus, take a boat.’/What made Lindbergh fly across the sea?/What makes a wop raise a big family?” The duo’s “Hungry Women” finds Van touching on the Jewish stereotype of miserliness as he complains in a broad accent about his female dates. “Feed ‘em and weep -- they make me dig deep,” he sings as he reaches into empty pockets. He describes a restaurant visit with a Miss Cohn on Yom Kippur: “She should’ve fasted, but just my luck -- she

changed her religion and ate like a horse.” In “Chinese Firecracker,” Van sings with arms folded and a constant grin. “Way Down South in Harlem” finds him performing in a robust, black-accented baritone with a soulful tone.

Yet it did not necessarily take a white performer to make white audiences comfortable with their preconceptions of blacks. A “Metro Movietone Revue” of 1929 presents the African-American bass-baritone George Dewey Washington, whose powerful, distinguished voice is at odds with his customary appearance in the tattered clothes of a presumably shiftless hobo. Washington is billed, as he typically was, as “The Gentleman Tramp,” and as he sings “Ready for the River” and “On the Road to Mandalay,” he finds a way to rise above both the material and the demeaning look.

One of the more noteworthy talent acquisitions by M-G-M was that of “The Star Maker” -- the famed vaudeville and nightclub impresario Gus Edwards. Edwards, who was also a composer and performer, was known for bringing to light many showbiz notables -- Eddie Cantor, George Jessel, Ray Bolger and the Duncan Sisters among them -- through the kiddie shows he produced for vaudeville. Having signed a three-month experimental contract with Metro, Edwards arrived in Hollywood in the late summer of 1928 with the idea of transferring his “School Days” and “Baby Follies” skits to the screen.

Edwards stayed longer than three months, leaving in early 1930 with Metro having repeatedly exploited his dual reputations as songwriter, promoter, director and singer. “Gus Edwards’ Song Revue” (copyrighted January 21, 1929) was a one-reel Technicolor retrospective of his most famous tunes -- “By the Light of the Silvery Moon,” “School

Days,” “Sunbonnet Sue” and the like -- sung by himself and a company of (according to reviewers) too-obviously voice-doubled actors. “Gus Edwards’ International Colortone Revue” (March 5, 1929) packed Russian dancers, a balalaika orchestra, Dutch cloggers, Japanese Geisha girls and the Spanish tango dancer Armida into eleven minutes. “Climbing the Golden Stairs” (March 11, 1929), also in color but more ambitious at two reels, was a musical comedy revue written and produced by Edwards, who remained off screen as stage actor Charles King -- lately the leading man of M-G-M’s first all-talkie feature, “The Broadway Melody” -- played a New York wiseacre who must convince St. Peter that denizens of the Great White Way are worthy of the Great Hereafter. The New York Times believed “Stairs” to be “a good entertainment, far better than some of the longer singing and talking films.”(April 25, 1929) “Mexicana” (June 10, 1929) was a Technicolor south-of-the-border extravaganza with numbers like “I’m a Terrible Toreador,” “Wrap Me in a Spanish Shawl” and “Let’s Tango in the Moonlight.” Edwards’ final Metro short was a “Kiddie Revue” of 1930, with a little fellow publicized as “the world’s youngest master of ceremonies,” three-and-a-half-year-old Douglas Scott. The “Kiddie Revue,” which has survived, plays today like one of those late ’30s-early ’40s “Our Gang” musicals, but without a semblance of their charm.

Edwards’ biggest contribution to M-G-M’s transition to sound grew out of a planned two-reeler of his called “The Minstrel Man.” In February 1929, the studio decided to expand the short into what became a 130-minute feature, “The Hollywood Revue of 1929,” which spotlighted almost all of the major talent on the Metro lot. Edwards contributed five new songs and sang some of them himself, including the novelty “Lon Chaney’s Going to Get You, If You Don’t Watch Out.” The story of “Hollywood

Revue” came full circle when musical numbers deleted from it were grouped into a two-reeler, “Gems of M-G-M” (May 19, 1930), with performances by the Brox Sisters, Marion Harris and Belcher’s Kiddie Ballet hosted by Benny Rubin.

-- **R-K-O.** Film Booking Offices, a minor studio along the lines of the pre-“Don Juan” Warner Bros., became a major when it merged with the estimable Keith-Albee-Orpheum circuit of vaudeville houses in October, 1928 to create the Radio-Keith-Orpheum Corporation. David Sarnoff, president of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), became chairman of the new company’s board of directors and pointed the way toward making the studio (trade-named “Radio Pictures”) into an industry leader, although that never quite happened. Sarnoff wanted an outlet for RCA’s Photophone sound-on-film system, which in an industry dominated by Vitaphone and Movietone, was finding few takers.

Shortly after the merger, the company produced a handful of sound shorts that were issued as prologues to musically synchronized, non-dialogue features bearing the FBO name. These low-comedy shorts featured, and were frequently written and/or directed by George LeMaire, who was considered one of vaudeville’s most valued straight men. LeMaire teamed with his ex-stage partner, Joe Phillips, for “Joy Riding,” in which they were two genteel bums attempting to date up a pair of showgirls on a broken-down flivver and a bankroll of \$7, which even in 1928 wasn’t much to entertain with. Even with its overly familiar premise, “Joy Riding” was initially designated to precede “Taxi 13,” a crime drama, upon the latter’s New York opening in November, although later it would be distributed on its own merit. The week of December 14, LeMaire reappeared as a jittery

sharpshooter in “Sure-Shot Dick,” which easily upstaged its companion feature, the melodrama “The Circus Kid.” A Variety scribe noted that FBO’s pairings of all-talking comedies with music-only features -- which by then were already losing their novelty -- was a “cute trick for making brass look like gold ... entertainment quite out of proportion to the quality that went into the can for delivery to the sound factory.”(December 19, 1928)

RKO’s first sound shorts, produced at the RCA Gramercy Studios in New York and directed by Dudley Murphy, Richard Currier and Joseph Santley, weren’t seen by audiences until the second half of 1929. One of the first subjects was a performance by violinist Godfrey Ludlow with the National Broadcasting Corporation Orchestra, NBC being under the control of RCA at the time. Marc Connelly, the Algonquin Round Table-sitting playwright and journalist, wrote and acted in two early two-reel comedies, “The Burglar” (August 11) and “The Traveler” (August 18), beginning a series that would grow to seven films. In “The Burglar,” Connelly played a fellow beset by a gentlemanly household intruder; in “The Traveler,” he was a pompous commuter too well versed in the art of small talk for his fellow passengers to bear.

Meanwhile, at the RKO facility in Hollywood, independent producer Larry Darmour was making his first twenty-six all-talking comedy shorts for Radio release. Half of those were adapted from the popular “Record Breakers” stories by H. C. Witwer, with starlet Alberta Vaughn and veteran comics Al Cooke and Louis Sargent in the regular cast. The other thirteen two-reelers continued Darmour’s profitable “Mickey McGuire” series, based on the “Toonerville Kids” newspaper cartoons by Fontaine Fox. The series’ titular actor himself was named Mickey McGuire, but his name had been Joe Yule, Jr., and

within a few years would be changed permanently to Mickey Rooney. The first talkie McGuire film was "Mickey's Midnite Follies," released on August 18, 1929.

Radio's first talkie feature release was the Morton Downey/Waring's Pennsylvanians musical comedy "Syncopation," which premiered on April 6, 1929, after having been produced under FBO auspices. The new studio's first "official" talkie was another musical, "Street Girl," which premiered in New York on July 30 with the Godfrey Ludlow short and Connelly's "The Burglar" preceding.

-- **Pathe.** In the later years of the silent era, Pathe was the releasing organ for comedy shorts by such notables as Hal Roach and Mack Sennett. As talkies dawned, however, the ascending Roach had departed for M-G-M and the declining Sennett was pacting with Educational for his initial sound fare. No wonder talent-shy Pathe introduced its sound product via the first audible version of its popular newsreel series, the Pathe Sound News, in November, 1928 (see Chapter 6).

Pathe's first fictional sound short, issued in March, 1929, was "At the Dentist's," which began a new series of talking subjects for the versatile George LeMaire. Directed by Basil Smith, "At the Dentist's" showed LeMaire as the titular tooth puller removing all of the usable chompers of a prizefighter at the behest of the pugilist's angry wife.

"LeMaire has set a high standard," chortled a reviewer for The Film Daily. "... It looks like a model ... for all the rest of the sound slingers to shoot at." (March 10, 1929) A follow-up, "The Plumbers Are Coming" (May 29, 1929) had LeMaire and his most frequent film collaborator, Louis Simon, as would-be burglars of a plumber's office who are unexpectedly called out to repair a water leak in a mansion cellar. For "What a Day!"

(August 26, 1929), LeMaire wrote the bulk of the dialogue for Simon, who played a befuddled dad on a family outing, but he allowed himself to be present only as an off-screen voice continually yelling at the clan to hurry up. In "Dancing Around" (September 12, 1929), LeMaire and Joe Phillips revived their vaude routine -- perhaps also recycled from FBO's "Joy Riding" -- about two pals on the make at a street cafe.

Pathe also had Grantland Rice, one of the nation's top sportswriters, as a short-subject attraction in the "Grantland Rice Sportlights." A notable early sound example was "Three Aces" (copyrighted February 18, 1929), in which Rice audibly introduced action shots of a trio of athletic champions -- boxer Gene Tunney, golfer Glenna Collett and polo player Tommy Hitchcock. The Tunney section created somewhat of a stir, as it contained the only known talking footage of the boxing promoter Tex Rickard, who had recently died. The Rice one-reelers often departed from the traditional sports format for subjects of more general interest. For instance, "Rhythm" (July 16, 1929) showed a series of shots of various kinds of dancers, from a group of children toe dancing in a Hollywood school to a stunt skier in the waters of Florida.

Pathe had the distinction of designating the first official theme song recorded to introduce its short subjects -- comedies, specifically, the studio announced in early 1929. The tune, "When My Pretty Steps Out," was said to be inspired by a sextet of bathing beauties called "The Pretties," who appeared in a two-reeler called "Thanksgiving," which featured the vaude comic Frank T. Davis.

Pathe's production of short subjects suffered a pair of tragic setbacks within a few weeks in late 1929 and early 1930. On the morning of December 10, 1929, the company's East Coast facility, at Park Avenue and 134th Street in New York, was gutted by fire.



The blaze reportedly was caused when a piece of glowing carbon arc fell into a scenery curtain. Ten employees were killed, and among the twenty or more injured was the bandleader Eddie Elkins, whose ensemble was filming at the time. Then, on January 20, 1930, Pathe lost one of its most prolific performers when George LeMaire suffered a fatal heart attack in his New York home at age forty-six. LeMaire had starred in and/or written and produced seventeen short comedies for the studio, which had renewed his contract for two more series. Pathe found names to fill the void left by LeMaire, but after a few months of leasing New York studio space, the company moved all of its shorts production to its West Coast studio in Culver City, California. By 1931, Pathe's struggling operations had been assimilated by R-K-O.

-- **Universal.** Carl Laemmle's mid-major studio, which prided itself on fiscally conservative production methods, showed its sense of economy from the day it entered the sound business. In August, 1928, the studio borrowed a Movietone sound truck from Fox, ostensibly to make audible tests for its upcoming prestige release "Show Boat," but in nine days secretly turned out a \$30,000 feature film, the eighty-eight-minute embryonic musical "Melody of Love," and added dialogue sequences to three other features, "The Last Warning," "Lonesome" and "It Can Be Done." This flurry of activity -- which abruptly ended when Fox angrily recalled its equipment -- also apparently included at least one short subject, "An Alpine Romance," featuring the yodeling duo of Zimmerman and Grandville. Reviewed by Variety upon its release in December, the eight-minute film was criticized for its hastily constructed background of an Alpine cottage, against which Z&G performed such standbys as "Sleep Baby Sleep" and "Home Sweet Home." Another short

that probably was made during the truck caper was “The Three Brox Sisters,” which featured the harmony trio in select theaters by the first week of October.

As the new year progressed, Universal’s audible shorts were making trade-paper news in additional dubious ways. A March item, obviously studio-generated, described the awarding of a part in a Pat Rooney-and-family short, “The Royal Pair,” to a sixteen-year-old chorister, Helen Ruth Mann, after she had been given a mental analysis by a studio psychiatrist. At the end of April 1929, the studio could “boast” of the rehearsing and making of a one-reel Benny Rubin subject, “Pop and Son,” within three-and-a-half hours at a cost of less than \$4,000. Rubin reportedly wrote the dialogue -- as he usually did for his series of 1929 shorts at Universal -- and directed rehearsals. In fact, “Pop and Son” (October 14) does look as if it could’ve been filmed in half an afternoon. The setting -- a sidewalk outside a clothing store owned by Benny’s “Pop” (Otto Lederer) -- never varies, and the camera is rarely aimed at anything other than a medium shot. Rubin and Lederer converse in jokey dialogue, mainly parodying the stereotype of the tight-fisted urban Jewish merchant. When a black customer underpays Benny for a pair of shoes and promises to return the next day with the rest of the money, Pop is angered, only to change his tune when Benny says he knows the man will return because he’s been sold two left shoes. When Benny requires an explanation of the meaning of the word “ethics,” his father provides a workplace example.

Lederer: “Today a man came into the store to buy a pair of shoes for ten dollars. He gave me a brand-new ten-dollar bill. As he was leaving, I noticed two ten-dollar bills were stuck together. ... So ethics is this ... ”

Rubin: “What?”

Lederer: "Should I, or should I not, tell my partner?"

"Pop and Son" concludes as a customer who has tried on a suitcoat and vest tries to run away without paying. Benny draws a gun. "Shoot him in the pants -- I own the coat!" yells the thrifty father as his son takes chase.

Rubin was a first-rank vaudevillian who could capably tell jokes (mainly in dialect), tap dance, play the trombone and throw in a trademark laugh that sounded like a bar or two of "Yankee Doodle Dandy." He hoofs a little in "Pop and Son," but does greater footwork in a marginally more entertaining short, "The Delicatessen Kid" (August 24, 1929). Here, again, Rubin is the dutiful but resourceful son to Lederer's papa, whose lack of knowledge about show business and other concerns of his progeny reflects the generational and cultural gulf between first-generation American immigrants of the period and their second-generation offspring. Into Pop's deli comes a succession of famous customers that Benny has to explain to his father; they, of course, are a collective excuse for musical interludes. The appearance of one "Freddie Leonard" in the deli prompts a Rubinesque song-and-dance to "(Roll Dem) Roly-Boly Eyes," the trademark of real-life stage star Eddie Leonard. After "Patsy Mooney" (a ringer for Pat Rooney, Sr.) comes in to buy ten chicken sandwiches, Benny taps to "The Daughter of Rosie O'Grady." Later, Benny does stair-step hoofing in the presence of "Max Robinson," a Bill "Bojangles" Robinson stand-in. Rapidly smitten with the new-culture showbiz, the father joins Benny in a closing Russian "jazz" dance.

As was the general priority at Universal, the unassuming studio fare was tailored to small markets, meaning that few of its relatively small output of pre-1930 sound subjects

were reviewed in Variety's "Talking Shorts" columns, which were focused upon New York and Los Angeles releases. One that did make the pages of the showbiz bible -- and in the regular review section at that -- was "King of the Campus," the talking debut of Universal's popular "Collegians" comedy shorts series. None other than Carl Laemmle, Jr. himself was credited with the script for the two-reeler, in which series regulars George Lewis, Dorothy Gulliver, Eddie Phillips, Hayden Stevenson and Churchill Ross made the transition to talk. "Plenty of action, a lot of laughs, and more than enough plot" was the verdict of Variety.(April 24, 1929)

Considering its loyalty to unwired rural picture houses, Universal was relatively slow in making a complete transition to talkies. Its announced product for the 1929-30 season included a mix of audible and silent shorts, among them six talking two-reel specials by the Pat Rooney family and six more talkies from Benny Rubin, but also ten silent two-reel comedies apiece from eternal juvenile Arthur Lake and pretend drunk Sid Saylor, sound and silent versions of ten two-reelers starring a child billed as "Sunny Jim," plus the staggering total of fifty-two two-reel silent Westerns. To play safe further, Universal was also issuing both silent and sound versions of all of its features, among them "Show Boat," "King of Jazz" (the much-ballyhooed debut of bandleader Paul Whiteman) and "College Love," the first full-length picture by the "Collegians" kids, which debuted on April Fool's Day of 1929.

-- **Columbia.** Before Frank Capra's ambitious '30s comedies boosted its status, the company run by Harry Cohn in lowly Gower Gulch was practically a Poverty Row outfit. There was little activity in sound there compared to many of its competitors. Columbia's first sound subjects, issued in the first months of 1929, were installments of

“Screen Snapshots,” an ongoing Hollywood-behind-the-scenes one-reel series produced by Harriet Parsons.

Columbia had a deal with the Victor Recording Company for a series of twenty-six sound acts to be released as “Victor Gems.” Vocalist Frank Crumit was the first artist featured from the Victor ranks, in a seven-minute subject called “The Gay Caballero.” Crumit appeared in a burlesque of a Spanish cavalier making merry with dance, song and girls in a cafe before he is throttled by the husband of one of his “conquests.” “Falls very flat,” went the summation of The Film Daily (June 9, 1929).

Other early Columbia-Victor Gems artists included baritone Jules Bledsoe, from Ziegfeld’s hit musical “Show Boat,” who sang “Old Man Trouble”; singer-pianists Lucy Marsh and Lambert Murphy, performing a program of “Memories”; and falsetto blackface singer Buddy Doyle, in a skit called “In a Talkie Studio.” Jimmie Rodgers, the pioneer “yodeling” country music singer, filmed a Gem in 1930. These subjects were directed by Basil Smith at the Victor studio in Camden, New Jersey. On the more offbeat side was one Boyce Combe, who enacted his vaudeville routine, an English-accented sneezing fit, in “The Parlor Pest” (1929).

-- **Educational.** The low-budget company run by E. W. Hammons liked to bill its fare as “The Spice of the Program.” In 1928, the prime purveyor of said spice was former comedy wunderkind Mack Sennett, lately brought in from Pathe to make his first, and Educational’s initial talkie. Quoted for the record about the inevitable transition to talk, Sennett said that comic talkies were “irresistibly funny” and then attempted a clever explanation:

These sound and talk pictures are fine. We have five senses and now we are able to use four when attending a picture show. The talkers have added sound to sight; touch and smell always depend upon who sits next to you and what perfume she's using. (*Variety*, June 20, 1928)

The film that followed Sennett's analysis of the senses was "The Lion's Roar," released on December 9, 1928. As the first foray into sound by a moviemaker who had built his reputation on non-verbal funny business, it derives no small measure of its humor on the aversion to noise. The first sound heard in the first Sennett talkie is the roar of the king of beasts (a rather fakey one at that) as the credits roll. The narrative begins with a title: "The biggest thing about the big city, is its noise." We see an urbanite, played by comedian Johnny Burke, sitting at a desk with a telephone, trying to connect to an operator over the cacaphony outside his window. The sounds -- accompanied mainly by stock footage -- include a builder's riveter, honking car horns, ringing trolley bells, and a soprano being given lessons by a rotund music teacher across the alley. Barely heard over this din, Burke pleads to be connected to a telegraph office. "What the ... hello?" he yells, the two separate thoughts uttered close together enough to sound naughty. The raucous city-vs.-placid country idea was a popular cultural theme of the time, but one suspects that a Hollywood in-joke is at work here.

After Sennett resorts to more prosaic laugh-getting by having Burke toss a custard pie at the offending music teacher (Vernon Dent), we see him escape to the arms of his girl (Daphne Pollard) in the lazy hamlet of Hemlock Hills, where, a transitional title confirms, there is "No maddening throng. Only ... a birdie's song." Which we then hear, along with some increasingly distracting frog and mosquito noises to remind us that the

outdoors has its own constant rhythms. Once the romantic couple is reunited, “The Lion’s Roar” becomes a less interesting, more typical Sennett two-reeler, with Burke and a hapless hunter (Billy Bevan) temporarily being forced up a tree by the titular animal, one of Sennett’s trademark stunt-comedy devices. Still, the piping-in of the beastly roars creates a sense of menace not found in Sennett’s silent works, and the film uses sound again to its advantage when an errant bullet from Bevan’s shotgun appears to strike Burke’s rear with a loud clang, the actor then jumping aside to reveal that the alleged marksman has actually struck a gong conveniently placed beside him. “Either it was a shot or it’s dinner time,” exclaims Burke in a lame attempt to cap the gag. Later, Sennett and his cadre of writers throw in another mistaken-profanity bit, with the Bevan character yelling from the treetop, “Go for hel-l-l-l-p!” toward Pollard in the distance. “Don’t you swear at me!” is the reaction of the misunderstanding miss.

“The Lion’s Roar” was well received, although it would have been enough for the film to fill the void caused by the dearth of double-reel sound comedies. “It shows that slapstick, bells, pies, etc., can register with talk and sound and get over,” wrote a Variety reviewer (January 23, 1929). The ever-prolific Sennett, months away from losing much of his fortune to the fickle stock market, set to work on more sound pictures, completing twelve by October 1929, a year to the month after “The Lion’s Roar” began production. They displayed the talents of Sennett’s company of comic actors: Bevan, Burke, Dent, Pollard, Andy Clyde, Harry Gribbon, Marjorie Beebe and others.

By the end of the year, Educational was serving the filmgoing public with no fewer than six more series of comedy one- and two-reelers. Edward Everett Horton, lately an overaged Warners juvenile, starred in the Coronet Talking Comedies, the first of which

was a drawing-room romance, "The Eligible Mr. Bangs" (February 23, 1929). The talented Britisher Lupino Lane, a fixture in silent comedies for Educational, bowed in sound with a seafaring short, "Ship Mates" (April 21, 1929). The declining funster Lloyd Hamilton and independent producer Jack White respectively lent their names -- and in Hamilton's case, his countenance -- to sets of shorts, and the "Mermaid" and "Tuxedo" series featured the likes of Franklin Pangborn, Raymond McKee, Monty Collins and Eddie Lambert.

The antics in the Educational films helped to verify that the sound film was something to laugh to, not laugh at, and that the silent short was all but dead. Although unwired theaters were still in the majority nationwide by mid 1929, they were having trouble finding new shorts material. If that wasn't a signal for those exhibitors to wire promptly, this was: By the end of the summer, Hollywood companies, by the calculations of the The Film Daily, had announced 2,058 non-newsreel shorts -- and only 142 of their silent counterparts -- for release in the 1929-30 season. (September 1, 1929) Was there any doubt that silence was no longer golden?



## **GIVING 'EM WHAT THEY WANT**

The incredible demand for sound shorts in the months after “Don Juan” only increased the tension between the major forces of vaudeville and the motion picture. Already reeling from the presence of the silent movie and the rapid early growth of radio, vaudeville seemed a shadow of the American institution it had been since the mid to late 19th Century. The silent film enabled patrons only to view the talent they could see in a vaude theater; the radio format allowed users to hear their voices, but no more. Once Vitaphone and its like dynamically combined those sensations, the future of vaudeville seemed as short as that of its aging czar, E. F. Albee, who, through his control of the B. F. Keith circuit -- which had become Keith-Albee-Orpheum -- and the company union, National Vaudeville Artists, Inc., he had created, determined the fate of practically every vaude player in North America. By 1927, “straight” vaudeville had become the least of the plugging channels for pop music, having been passed by radio, the phonograph record and even the silent motion picture, the last through the use of specially written theme songs played by live musicians to the action on screen.

In contrast to Albee and his ilk, the pioneering Warner Bros. company was young

and visionary, eager to succeed with or without the cooperation of vaudeville. It became apparent early that the studio's goals would be met with resistance. In 1927, during a lecture at Harvard, Harry Warner summed up the conflict that would find no easy solution in the months to follow.

The people in the amusement business have developed mammoth enterprises and they have built them along certain lines. Some [facilities] give just motion pictures and some motion pictures and vaudeville and some vaudeville alone. Now they say: "We have built these institutions, and they are successful. Why should we discard any part of that which is successful to try something new?" ... I read in a magazine only yesterday that the Keith-Albee people have put a clause in their contract forbidding any actor that works for them to appear on the [V]itaphone. I have gone around to the heads of various companies and tried to persuade them to participate and become a part of our company, but as yet I must admit we have not succeeded.(Kennedy 323)

It is difficult to blame the vaudeville people, who knew well of the threat the sound microphone posed for duplicating -- or even making obsolete -- material previously savored on live stages. Vaudeville theaters adapted to the change in the industry by running films as well as live acts, and many motion picture houses used live vaude acts as prologues, thus blurring the line between which theaters were which, especially in smaller markets. Still, the number of theaters playing any kind of vaudeville act declined from 1,500 in 1925 to 300 at the beginning of the 1929-30 vaude season.(Gomery 342) Just six theaters played straight vaudeville, and of those, only the Riverside in the Bronx, played the traditional two-a-day performance schedule. In most medium-sized cities, there was no vaudeville in any form, and even Chicago could support only one straight vaudeville house. By the end of 1929, the old vaudeville companies were subsisting by making their own shorts. The Loew's circuit placed its artists in shorts through its subsidiary, M-G-M.

Publix did so through Paramount, Keith's through the new R-K-O company.

The immediate result, for the vaudeville artist turned picture performer, was a sense of freedom. "Vaudeville acts see a much brighter future now than they have for years," wrote Variety at the end of 1926. "No longer are they ground by a monopoly nor do they stand in fear of one."(December 29) Despite attempted restrictions by major vaudeville chains, artists flocked to the talkies. Those we remember the most -- those who made the transition to films permanently or who achieved enough success to excel in both entertainment mediums -- were a small minority of the total captured on camera for at least a few fleeting minutes. For every Eddie Cantor or Jack Benny or Burns and Allen, there were twenty chatty comedy acts who could do little more than audition for King Mike. Maybe Lillian Roth could find an audience as the headliner of shorts and a supporting player in feature-length musicals, but not so lucky were fellow chanteuses Jane "The Melody Girl" Green or Ann Grey, who in her lone Vitaphone was flatly dismissed by a critic for a prominent trade publication as having "a pleasing crooning voice but doesn't photograph well."(Variety, September 19, 1928) Perhaps we should salute Cantor, Benny or Burns for being as good as they were, but the fate of some personalities may have rested on the resources made available to them.

The going rate for a standard vaudeville performer for an initial short subject was between one and two weeks of his/her stage salary. For this compensation, they had to decide, or have determined for them, what material to use. This was not always an easy question. The biggest mistake, at least in the eyes of reviewers, was for an act to use its current stage fodder, thus making itself redundant. Many comic performers could, at least

for a first effort, rely upon well-established material, reminding audiences of why they were popular in the first place. Even better would be the creation of gags specially for a short. The prevailing wisdom was that an appearance in a short was more likely to hurt an act than help it. "Showmen argue," it was written in Variety, "that at the most a comedy act can do four good acts in a career."(August 1, 1928)

Still, this was not an exact science. For example, shortly after the playing of a Vitaphone short featuring Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake nationwide, the duo -- which had split in the meantime -- found itself showered with demands, through the managing William Morris Agency, for live bookings. An even more obvious remedy to the argument about shorts leading to over-exposure was the reaction to "Sharps and Flats," a 1928 Vitaphone one-reeler by the low-comedy pair of Jimmie Conlin and Myrtle Glass. The film was practically a rehash of the "Morning, Noon and Night" vaudeville act the duo had used since 1925, with some comic piano playing, vocalizing and "business" on a parlor set. A Variety reviewer praised the short profusely following its debut at the Strand Theatre in New York, but, mindful of the presumed familiarity with the material, warned that it might hurt the act's popularity as a live draw.

... If Warners charges [a theater owner] \$100 weekly for this ... record, how about the manager playing it and [being] satisfied, [but] when offered Conlin and Glass for \$700 a week, saying: "Tell them to make another record and I'll play that instead."(July 11, 1928)

Fortunately, this was not the general reaction to "Sharps and Flats." Conlin and Glass ended up converting a one-shot job that would have paid them about \$500 -- slightly less than their per-week pay in vaudeville -- into per-week salary demands of

between \$1,350 and \$1,500.

In reaction, Variety asked if the development of “perhaps mediocre” talent on celluloid could happen because of its visual differences between the new sound medium and the live performance domain.

The revolutionary possibilities of the talking shorts in that direction are almost boundless. A player who would flop in one of those 5,000 to 6,000 cinema cathedrals because his expressive right eyebrow or quiet style of talk couldn't offset the distance handicap, might suddenly find himself popular with millions of picture fans who never heard of him before, just because the close-up camera of the screen and the amplification qualities of the electric projector would recreate him on the silver sheet and register him into the hind rows of the gallery.(August 1, 1928)

Some performers hoped the opposite would be true. Cast aside by Hollywood in its quest for seasoned sound talent, many silent-picture players went to vaudeville to sing, dance, speak and rejuvenate their careers. At the end of 1929, for example, the Keith circuit roster included such familiar names as Leatrice Joy, Ben Turpin, Irene Rich, Olga Baclanova, George K. Arthur, Viola Dana, Estelle Taylor, and the ill-fated married couple said to be the inspiration for “A Star Is Born,” John Bowers and Marguerite de la Motte. Few of these people lingered in vaude for any length of time; many of them journeyed back to Hollywood, thinking they had reinvented themselves for the talkies, only to be disappointed for good.

Vaudeville -- hobbled also by competition from radio and, soon, from the effects of the Depression -- easily was the major entertainment medium most damaged by the sound revolution, but it was not the only one. The legitimate theater also lost a sizable amount of business -- not to mention talent -- to the talkies. “Talkers Butcher ‘Road,’ ” screamed

one Variety headline (October 23, 1929). Road companies of Broadway shows found that patrons would rather shell out sixty cents for a big-city talkie theater bill instead of the \$6.60 or so for a top stage musical or the \$3.50 average price (in 1929) for a quality stage drama. In many top markets, it was not uncommon for three or four hit talkies to play at once, which made decision-making difficult for the once-a-week theatergoer. The outlook on Broadway itself was no better. Most of the shows doing decent business in New York by the end of the decade -- after the Wall Street crash but before the most drastic effects of the Depression would be apparent -- were getting by through cut rates or other ticket-selling devices concocted by management. In some stage houses, as many as four tickets were being given out for one regular price.

Radio was the medium least affected by the changes in the motion picture; after all, its continuing popularity was one of the reasons Hollywood turned to sound in the first place. Many top radio performers did sound films -- including Rudy Vallee, perhaps the most popular of "ether" personalities as the '20s ended -- but the appearances in the two media -- unlike, say, radio vs. vaudeville -- seemed to complement, not contradict, each other. Radio had the live element and a variety of options; the movies had the advantage of visuals, but at a lesser cost than the legit theater and with a greater availability of talent than vaudeville, especially in smaller towns where vaudeville's bigger names were less likely to appear. The movies did surpass radio in one important category: A consensus of music publishers agreed in late 1929 that the talkers had surpassed radio as the most effective medium to exploit popular songs. Feature-length musicals, which had begun to dominate the movie marketplace, could "plug" a tune through repeated airings within a short period of time, although radio could promote a wider variety of music, but without

concentrating on a certain group of numbers. Vaudeville exploitation, which only a few years before had been considered the ideal method of plugging for song publishers, had fallen to fifth place in the publishers' eyes, behind, in descending order, films, radio, bands and recordings. (Variety, November 27, 1929)

## THE EYES OF THE PUBLIC

The average weekly attendance for motion pictures rose substantially in the late 1920s, from 46 million in both 1925 and 1926 to 110 million by 1930.(Kann 43) Clearly, patrons were pleased with what they were getting out of feature-length fare, but what about the short subject? A national poll of exhibitors, published in The Film Daily on April 6, 1930, indicated much of what customers liked and disliked. And they didn't like it when shorts weren't a significant part of a theater menu.

Comedy, novelty and variety shorts are to a film program what the dessert is to dinner ... and when the "dessert" is left out for any reason, the patrons, particularly the children, complain about it. Sound shorts have created more comment by patrons than ever was aroused by either shorts or features in the silent era, and the remarks heard now about the talking comedies, cartoons and some other subjects even exceed the comments elicited by talking features, several exhibitors declare.

When asked if they had increased their bookings of shorts since the advent of sound, 58 percent of 560 responses were in the affirmative. Much of this was because shorts were booked to replace the live prologues in theater houses in many a city, and a good number of respondents who answered the question negatively indicated that it was



the length of features that was keeping them from taking more shorts. When a feature was unusually long, or cost too much because of its length, an exhibitor might not have time to attach more than a newsreel with it. "In many instances the short shorts actually are responsible for the success of the feature," wrote an exhibitor from Georgia.

Remarked a theater owner from a Pennsylvania city: "Talking shorts must be good because they are more critically received than the silents."

Short subjects were good enough for business that many theater owners didn't hesitate to announce their presence. All but 77 of 566 respondents to the Film Daily question "Do you advertise your short features in all of your [newspaper] ad layouts?" indicated affirmatively, further illustrating the importance of shorts as more than mere fillers. In many cases, the acts on a bill's shorts program matched or exceeded the marquee billing of performers in the full-length attraction. Robert Soffer, who ran the Hollywood theater in New York City wrote in:

I booked a short starring Eddie Cantor, another with Clark and McCullough, and a Disney cartoon on the same bill with Clara Bow. I featured Cantor, Clark & McCullough and Miss Bow on the marquee, and had to stop selling tickets five times. In the past it was pretty difficult to get such names on one program.

As for a comparison of canned shorts with live vaudeville acts, the latter, as one could have predicted, came up short. When asked "To what extent have short film features replaced vaudeville or stage presentations?" the exhibitors answered strongly to the fullest, with 218 of 296 responses answering "100 percent" and the rest at "five to 75 per cent." This, by 1930 at least, did not necessarily translate to exhibitors wanting to see the same vaudeville acts on the screen as they had live, for when asked "Are good

comedies or the vaudeville act type of short subject most [sic] successful?”, the theater people picked the “good comedies” by a 439-to-sixty-seven margin. Of course, the wording of the question may have betrayed a bias toward comedies, but what it really verified was the lack of patience with the static type of performance act shorts that were so common in the early days of sound.

The Film Daily poll verified the conventional wisdom about the kind of material patrons wanted from the movies, and not just short subjects. For the majority of the country, low comedy remained most in demand (and still does so, as any fan of Jim Carrey or Adam Sandler could tell you in at the dawn of the 21st Century). The kind of broad slapstick comedy pioneered and popularized by the likes of Mack Sennett was number one on the wish lists for many respondents to the poll.

One J. M. of Los Angeles asserted that

Sound, or no sound, has no bearing on the absolute necessity of good old-fashioned comedy with real “belly” laughs. Our patrons yell more and more for true low comedy. People are still kids.

A showman named Howell from Coleman, Texas, agreed:

Give us the well-directed slapstick comedies. People, lowbrow and highbrow, want to laugh, belly laughs, and lots of them. They have enough worries. The highbrows spend a lot of time maintaining a highbrow attitude and they like to laugh it off at times.

The nature of cinematic comedy was changing even as these gentlemen made their reports. The sound revolution introduced comics -- the Marx Brothers, W. C. Fields, Eddie Cantor -- who, schooled in big-time vaudeville and on the radio -- relied more on

clever dialogue than visual pratfalls to draw laughs. The Marx Brothers, for example, were especially popular among big-city audiences, partly because of the ethnic nature of their appearance (Chico's accent, Groucho's moustache, et al.) and the "hip" nature of their rapid-fire, mainly verbal gags. This was not so much the case in the heartland, where the simplistic type of comedy continued to reign. Not only did the participants in the Film Daily poll list the comedy as the top kind of short subject desired -- the tally was 341 votes for comedies, 107 for newsreels, eighty-seven for cartoons -- but, when asked which kind of sound comedies were most popular with their customers, they awarded "slapstick" 239 responses, "farce" with 128 and "situation comedy" with eighty-one. "Satire," a category that showed up occasionally in other poll questions, showed up not at all here.

If sophisticated comedic fare was low on the priority list, the musical short was faring not much better. The glut of musical performance shorts, so prevalent in the earliest months of sound, had given way to non-musical fare with comedy or other kinds of action. (This was also beginning to happen to musical features, which fell out of audience favor by the second half of 1930.) Indeed, in the Film Daily poll, musical shorts were far down the line of desired product by exhibitors, with only forty-seven positive responses.

Another interesting, if predictable, question posed by The Film Daily concerned the tastes for comedy by women viewers. In asking "What type of comedy appeals most to women?" the results were: "Situation Comedy," 157 votes; "Farce," 118; "Slapstick," 81; "Satire," twenty-six; "Domestic," fourteen; "Kiddie," fourteen; "Musical," thirteen; and "Sophisticated," six.

Many of these categories would seem to overlap, which might be explained by the trade daily's accompanying explanation that "an unusually large number of replies expressed inability to fathom the desires of feminine film patrons. Several intimated, in different ways, that women as a rule prefer comedy of the more refined type." This infers that all the poll respondents were male. It also implies that exhibitors were not using much of their time to find out what women liked, although given the preferences of women for more gentle kinds of comedy in the present day, it is not a stretch to presume that female viewers were less disposed to the knockabout brand of comedy at the dawn of the 1930s.

## UNEQUAL OPPORTUNITY

A survey of exhibitors today might ask about the viewing tastes of racial-minority audiences, but no such question would be found in the 1930 Film Daily study. Still, for African Americans of the early sound era, the short subject became an avenue for exposure that could not be afforded for them in the feature-length picture. Shorts could be made cheaply and quickly for exhibition in segregated black theaters; they also played all-white houses in select cities. For example, Pathe signed the vaudeville duo of Buck and Bubbles for a series of comedies with music that played in late 1929 and 1930. The six two-reelers were made when the duo was at the top of the vaudeville field, having headlined at the prestigious Palace in New York in September 1928 and December 1929. Produced and often directed by comedy specialist Monte Brice and adapted by Nat Nazarro and Sidney Lazarus from Hugh Wiley's "Wildcat" magazine stories, the films placed the performers Ford Lee Washington (Buck) and John Sublette (Bubbles) in standard comedic situations augmented by song-and-dance numbers. The first short in the series, "Black Narcissus" (copyrighted August 17, 1929), found "Wildcat" (Bubbles) in female trouble via a money-hungry widow, with "Demmy" (Buck) getting into his own

romantic predicament while trying to help his pal. "In and Out" (November 8, 1929) showed the two as accidentally jailed deliverymen singing and dancing to "The Prisoner's Song," one of the biggest hits of the '20s. "Darktown Follies" (February 4, 1930) provided the barest of plots, with the broke and hungry Wildcat stumbling upon the rehearsal for a stage revue and getting to strut their stuff. The Buck and Bubbles shorts were well received by the Hollywood trades. "This short convinces that Buck and Bubbles are a bet," stated a Variety reviewer after seeing "Black Narcissus." "Two-reeler[s] bring them out as able to handle lines."(November 20, 1929)

Another series based on magazine stories about African Americans -- and a precursor to the Buck and Bubbles series -- was based on the "Darktown Birmingham" tales penned by the popular white writer Octavus Roy Cohen for The Saturday Evening Post for more than a decade. These two-reelers, with all-black casts, were produced for Paramount by Al Christie. Christie cast his all-black shorts with members of the esteemed Lafayette Players Stock Company of Harlem, who were on an extended run in Los Angeles during late 1928 and early 1929. One of the players was Evelyn Preer, who understudied a white actress, Lenore Ulric, in the Broadway show "Lulu Belle." Christie also hired such acts as Curtis Mosby's Dixieland Blue Blowers and the Dixie Jubilee Singers for musical support. The white filmmakers had as much confidence in their black players as could be had, if a Photoplay interview with Christie associate Al Cohn is to be believed.

Perhaps the most interesting experiment, in our studio at least, has been the making of the first two Octavus Roy Cohen "Bummin'ham" stories, with all-negro casts. We discovered very early that the usual colored screen actor was practically useless because it was next to impossible for

him -- or her -- to memorize long speeches. Of course there are exceptions, but very few of them. We went to the legitimate stage for most of our principals -- the colored legitimate stage. ... The colored stage players are remarkably "quick" studies and seldom "go up" in their lines. (April 1929)

Christie and Paramount issued four of the black shorts, comedies with musical elements, during the first half of '29, then followed them up later in the year with "The Lady Fare," an "all-colored" musical revue written by Cohen, and "Brown Gravy," adapted from a Cohen story about a scheme by a fake fortune teller. The first four of the Christie all-black series, adapted by Al Cohn and directed by Walter Graham and Arvid E. Gillstrom, survive for perusal due to a 1997 videotape issue by the Shanachie Entertainment Company. Although of varying quality, the shorts demonstrate the ample talents of the players despite their being saddled with exaggerated dialect -- a sign on a restaurant wall in one short reads "Barbycue Evry Day" (sic) -- and stereotypical situations. Still, Cohen's colorful characters flourish in a middle-class atmosphere, among the black elite of Birmingham, Alabama. The first of the shorts to be produced was "The Melancholy Dame" (copyrighted February 5, 1929). Directed by Gillstrom, the film is also the best of the series. Nightclub owner Permanent Williams (Edward Thompson) hires a song-and-dance duo that happens to include his ex-wife, Sapho Dill (Roberta Hyson) -- without the knowledge of the entrepreneur's possessive current spouse, Jonquil (Preer), or Sapho's beefy piano-playing beau, Webster (Spencer Williams). Sapho promises to keep quiet about the former union, but only with a salary hike from her ex. Jonquil confronts Sapho, who announces that she's Permanent's first wife and that "you're perfectly welcome with what is left." Meanwhile, Webster, who now knows of

Permanent's connection with Sapho, wants to have a talk with his boss. A jittery Permanent flees to his home, with Webster in pursuit. Once he's found his quarry, Webster provides a final twist with a serious, if unexpected question: "Say, listen here, boy, what is the best way for a man to go about gettin' divorced from that Sapho?"

The other three extant Christie all-black shorts are "Music Hath Harms" (May 15, 1929), "Oft in the Silly Night" (June 10, 1929) and the worst of the group, "The Framing of the Shrew" (April 27, 1929). A short like "The Melancholy Dame" might work for a modern viewer because the characters are no more buffoonish than whites might be in a typical low-comedy film, but "Framing of the Shrew" plays more overtly to the white stereotype of the shiftless black male. The jobless, aimless Privacy Robson (Thompson) schemes to jettison his wife, Clarry (Preer), because she wants to make him earn a living. With advice from his conniving friend Florian Slappey (Charles Olden), Privacy decides to go on a hunger strike to make his good-cooking spouse miserable, but he can't resist sneaking the chicken leftovers he'd rejected at dinner. Privacy gets his way in the end; in the last shot, Clarry is serving him breakfast to begin what will be another carefree day. Preer provides a nice rendition of "No Fool Man Can Make a Fool out of Me" over the opening credits, but the short goes downhill from there. Williams, who portrays a shyster lawyer in "Framing of the Shrew," was a valuable member of Christie's ensemble. He was a sound technician for the producer before Christie tabbed him to act and polish the dialogue. Williams would go on to write, direct and act in several black-cast films of the 1940s, then to portray Andy Brown in the "Amos and Andy" television series of the 1950s.

Vitaphone displayed its share of African-American artists, but rarely outside of the



performance-act realm. A notable exception was the one-reel "Yamekraw" (June 9, 1930), described in its opening title as "a negro rhapsody which expresses the moods and the emotional side of negro life." The ambitious pantomime story, written by Warners staffer Stanley Rauh and directed by Murray Roth, used the familiar city-vs.-country theme to evoke stylized, impressionistic images staged to a musical composition by the well-known black composer James P. Johnson that set the peaceful spirituals of Georgia against the brassy jazz of Harlem. A young man (Jimmy Mordecai) leaves his rural home, family and sweetheart, takes the train to the big city and its alluring nightclubs, is coveted and betrayed by a woman, then returns to the place where he can truly love and be loved. Although some of the visions of black life are stereotypical -- as when a little boy placidly eats a watermelon in the yard of the country cabin -- and the wrapup is predictable and abrupt, the presentation carries some power. Its resemblance to the plot of "Hallelujah!" -- the landmark M-G-M all-black feature of the previous year -- is probably due less to a desire to mimic as to the prevailing majority view that blacks were not necessarily equipped to handle the complicated urban life. However, the short must have made a connection to African-Americans of the day, for many of them were migrating from the South for industrial job opportunities in Northern cities. As cynical as ever, Variety (April 30, 1930) dismissed "Yamekraw" as "too great an effort to be futuristic and overdo the Murnau art in photography and setting," referring to the artistically minded German director. The Motion Picture News reviewer was more open-minded, calling the reel "imaginative, photographically and musically." (April 26, 1930)

The ambition of "Yamekraw" aside, the two most artistically striking

black-oriented shorts of the early sound era both emerged from Hollywood's newest studio, R-K-O, and showcased the talents of two now-legendary musical artists. Filmed within a few weeks of each other in the summer of 1929 at the Astoria studio, "Black and Tan" introduced Duke Ellington -- conducting his legendary Cotton Club Orchestra -- to motion pictures; "St. Louis Blues" survives as the only cinematic record of the blues singer Bessie Smith. Dudley Murphy, a social activist as well as a film maker, wrote and directed both two-reelers, which melded racially cliched situations with an unusually dramatic and sensitive use of music.

"Black and Tan" (the copyrighted title) is also known as "Black and Tan Fantasy," the title of the haunting, funereal work recorded by Ellington and the orchestra in 1927 and even then cited by critics as a superior example of the art of early jazz. In the film, the piece becomes a dirge for a nightclub dancer played by Fredi Washington. Washington is Ellington's lover, having bailed him out of a bad-debt situation with the money advanced to her for a new job in a nightclub. Duke warns her that her bad heart will not stand the strain, but Fredi goes on anyway, gyrating to Ellington's "Black Beauty." She begins to falter, her fading strength shown by the subjective camera with blurring multiple images of the orchestra. Then she collapses and is carried off; the unconcerned club owner tries to go on with the show before Ellington disgustedly stops the music.

Now bedridden and in delirium, Fredi cries out to hear "Black and Tan Fantasy," which is delivered by Ellington and his men, with the moans of the Hall Johnson Choir in the background, gathered around her, instruments raised in silhouette. The ebbing of the dancer's life is represented by the camera's view -- her last, loving view -- of Ellington's face, which fades out with her death at the end of the short. The music historian

David Meeker has called “Black and Tan” “a rare example of a film which uses jazz both organically and dramatically, with stunning effect.”(Hasse 119) With the help of the manager-impresario-songwriter Irving Mills, whose efforts led to Ellington’s alliances with R-K-O and the Broadway musical “Show Girl,” the bandleader’s career was beginning to soar in 1929, and “Black and Tan” represented the first opportunity for many blacks and whites to either be exposed to Ellington or to put a face to his music.

“St. Louis Blues,” named for the W. C. Handy-written standard, is less thematically interesting than “Black and Tan,” but the beefy Smith’s imposing presence carries much more than novelty value. Murphy falls back on the unfaithful-male stereotype in the tale of a singer who is betrayed by her wandering lover, but neither he nor Handy, who recommended Smith for the part, could have realized how much art imitated life. Smith plays a woman named Bessie who is driven to drink by her unfaithful, opportunistic boyfriend, Jimmy (Jimmy Mordecai, who also appears in “Yamekraw”). She catches Jimmy making love to a rival (Isabel Washington, soon to be the first wife of the activist politician Adam Clayton Powell) in Bessie’s own dingy rooming-house quarters; he throws her to the floor during a brief struggle. Bessie begins to sing the verse to “St. Louis Blues” *a capella* as the scene shifts to a smoke-filled saloon, where she leans against the bar while continuing the song (at times in close-up shots rarely viewed in early talkies). Amid what Variety would approvingly call “tenseness and action and ... Aframerican local and other color,” Jimmy re-enters to Bessie’s happy embrace. The two begin to dance, but he sneaks a small bankroll from her stocking. His goal met, he walks out again, his taunts leaving Bessie at the bar to sing until the final fade-out.

## NEWS OF THE WORLD

If Warner Bros. was the Mecca for the short playlet and the novelty act single-reeler, and Paramount was the purveyor of the talents of the best pop singers and comedians, then Fox was the studio where reality -- or at least Hollywood's vision of it -- took hold. With William Fox's company phasing out production of vaudeville-type shorts as 1929 progressed, the studio could devote even more time and resources to its specialty: the sound newsreel. Other studios began to produce their own talking newsreels during the final year of the '20s, but Fox Movietone News remained the model for how Hollywood would cover current events in the sound era. This meant presenting a mix of national and international stories covering a range of topics -- politics, lifestyles, sports, show business -- with a mainly upbeat, soft tone, without the serious analysis that might distract a movie house patron from enjoying his day or night out. Given its existence as a facet of one of American society's most consumed entertainment media, newsreel coverage firmly reflected majority values more than newspaper or radio news gathering of the time. Those values were pro-government, pro-business and pro-religion. The studio newsreel was not design to offend the typical viewer; it included little of the really sensational coverage of the newspaper tabloids, for example, or the slant of politically

or socially partisan radio stations.

With few exceptions, the depth of sound newsreel coverage in general did not increase as time passed, unfortunately, as Raymond Fielding noted in his book The American Newsreel, 1911-1967:

Instead, newsreel producers were satisfied to provide what was really only a continuation of the same sort of novelty celebrity footage that had filled the silent newsreels of previous years. At stake was a journalistic challenge and potential which was not to be met and exploited until the introduction of television.(167)

If there was debate over the depth of newsreel substance, there was no denying that the sound newsreel, with its senses-heightening meld of audio and video that gave new dimensions of humanity to its subjects, was an improvement over its silent predecessor. The purists who quibbled over the demise of the artistic silent film in favor of the static early talking feature had to admit they could not complain about the new type of newsreel, as an editorial writer for the New Orleans Times Picayune pointed out in analyzing a Fox Movietone News report about Benito Mussolini:

There is still a division of opinion regarding the worth of the speaking film play. ... But in the matter of film news reels we believe there will be little difference of opinion as to the vast superiority of those items in which essential sounds are presented.

As a special instance, we cite the recent review of the Fascist soldiery and applauding masses when reviewed by the Italian dictator. This scene when seen as a silent spectacle was impressive, and the glitter of the battle knives ... whetted against the air in honor of their mighty leader quite blood-curdling. But when in the more modern way, this scene was accompanied by the roar of the Fascist cheer from a hundred thousand voices ... [and] by the clash of myriads in movement, one felt as never

before the reality of the marvelous historic thing that is happening in modern Rome.

And, most of all sensational was it, when 'mid a deathlike silence, Mussolini's own voice came clearly ... as he in brief, sharp words responded to the cheers. ... And Mussolini's voice was the surprise of surprises ... authoritative in its own way, but it is a resonant tenor. ...

We cannot think of Patrick Henry delivering his Richmond address of 1775 in other than a baritone voice, nor Lincoln his on the field of Gettysburg, but in Italy the tenor timbre is more normal and there was something unusually stirring in the high-pitched command of the Duce's that floated out over his ten times ten thousand willing subjects.(June 8, 1929)

Although the majority values that late-1920s newsreels reflected did not extend to great substance in coverage, they were reflected in the sometimes sensationalistic quality of newsreels at the end of the silent era. In 1927, the four companies -- Fox, Pathe, the William Randolph Hearst-run International News Service and the independent Kinograms -- that made newsreels were joined by a fifth, Paramount. The furious competition in a glutted market led to the use of sometimes questionable "tabloid"-type material in the way that many newspapers of the time did. In early 1928, no less an authority than Will Hays ordered newsreel producers to, according to Variety, stop "fostering yellow screen journalism" or "he would be compelled to bring pressure to bear on the heads of the respective companies."(February 22, 1928) Hays called the conference of newsreel makers after International used shots of a California man convicted of the brutal murder of a 12-year-old girl. Under the film czar's plan, which was not implemented, the newsreel makers were obliged to call regular meetings at which a vote by the majority could veto the use of an item by one of their ilk. This was an unwieldy concept in the deadline-oriented atmosphere, but it symbolized the displeasure with news organizations

by segments of the public in an age of journalistic ballyhoo, of Leopold and Loeb, Floyd Collins, Peaches Browning, the Scopes trial and Aimee Semple Macpherson.

An item on the same front page of Variety portended the year's most conspicuous accomplishment for Fox Movietone News. Under the headline "Shaw Favors 'Talker' for Lectures in U. S." was a story relating that an admirer wrote to esteemed Anglo-Irish author George Bernard Shaw asking if he would consent to speak over the radio when arrangements were made for broadcasts between England and America. From Shaw's home in London came this reply, signed by Shaw's secretary, Blanche Patch, and reflecting her employer's well-known crotchiness.

Mr. Bernard Shaw desires me to say that he sincerely hopes that Movietone will supersede the present plan of dragging lecturers around the States from one town to another and shaking hands with them, finally returning them to their homes in a badly damaged condition. If he ever lectures in America, it will be on the screen.

And he would. In fact, Shaw summoned Jack Connolly, the Fox Movietone News producer, and declared that he would consent to speak before the camera, provided that he would be allowed to direct the production.(Fielding 166) Connolly eagerly agreed -- to let Shaw think he was in charge, at least -- and the resulting five-minute novelty, "George Bernard Shaw," debuted on June 25, 1928, as part of a program preceding the Fox feature "The Red Dance" at the Globe Theatre in New York.

After an opening title that proclaims the introduction of "The World's Outstanding Literary Genius," Shaw's own "script" begins with a joke, the motion-picture camera "surprising" him in his garden -- with the scrunching of Shaw's footsteps and the

tweeting of birds audible in the background. White-haired and bearded, Shaw goes on to ramble about a variety of subjects, but not before he reminds his public that, unlike a certain well-known Movietone subject in Italy, he is really a “very harmless fellow”:

Of course, I can put on the other thing. I -- for instance [looking stern] -- now that is what I call my Mussolini stunt. ... But now just watch; [changes expression] I can take it off. Now, Signor Mussolini cannot take it off. He is condemned, although he is a most amiable man ... to go through life with that terrible and imposing expression which really does a great injustice to his kindly nature. But I -- I can put it on and I can take it off [changes expression again] and do all sorts of things.

Given the rarity of Shaw’s face being seen Stateside in any fashion -- Shaw had refused to come to these shores in person -- it was no surprise that commentators fell all over each other in praising the charming filmed address. “This picture is the wow of the talkies,” exalted a reviewer for the fan magazine Photoplay.

What a voice and what a face! Although over seventy year old, Shaw is built like an athlete. He moves as gracefully as Jack Dempsey. And he has so much sex appeal that he leaves the gals limp.(September 1928)

“Con.” Conrad of Variety was just as effusive in his praise of Shaw:

It’s too bad if none of his royalty payers cable him he’s a hit as an actor, or even ask him to come over to act in some of his plays or do a Lon Chaney character opposition for Fox. ... Whoever induced or seduced George into this Movietone subject ought to get on the Fox honorary list for life.(June 27, 1928)

Shaw’s speech was an exception to the bulk of more predictable Movietone



coverage, but this did not mean that the practitioners of newsreel coverage lacked drive, energy or invention. Fox Movietone News -- based in a single, self-contained facility on West 54th Street in New York under the supervision of Courtland Smith -- was aggressively building upon the leadership in the sound genre that it had created with the likes of the 1927 Lindbergh and Mussolini clips (discussed in Chapter 2). Connolly led an ambitious campaign to photograph international celebrities for Movietone. Between 1927 and 1929, Connolly's crew traveled throughout Europe, capturing the faces and voices of King George V, the Prince of Wales, David Lloyd George and Ramsay MacDonald of England; Marshal Ferdinand Foch and Prime Minister Raymond Poincaré of France; President Paul von Hindenburg of Germany; King Victor Emmanuel of Italy, and many others.

Most of these men were happy to have such a forum, and those who made a good impression gained some quality diplomatic public relations. Thanks to the know-how of Connolly and his men, even the most reticent of royalty could be documented for the camera. King Gustav of Sweden believed it was beneath his dignity to talk for the movies, but in 1929 he did allow Fox's crew to set up next to his tennis court; he then played a match that was captured for sound, without a word or a look at the camera from the king.(Fielding 165) Then there was King Alfonso XIII, the youthful monarch of Spain, whose glib talk in the December 15, 1928, issue of Fox Movietone News made a very favorable impression in the United States. The king was in hot water at the time for his propensity to speed on the roads, and he made no pretension about this in a brief, surprisingly informal speech in which he chided himself for his mishaps and then invited Americans to come to Spain, "where there are no speed laws." The interview begins

seriously enough, as the king is introduced to U. S. audiences by the American ambassador to Spain, then he begins a straight-forward reply before breaking down to laughingly admit that this is a “political” event. A monarch with a public sense of humor was hard to find in 1928.

American politics was a prime subject for all newsreels, not just Movietone’s, but Fox did bring to the most of the public their first video-with-audio hearings of the voices of President Calvin Coolidge (his DeForest short not having been widely seen) and his successor, Herbert Hoover; Hoover’s 1928 election opponent, New York Governor Al Smith; and Smith’s successor in New York, the future President Franklin D. Roosevelt. A Fox trade advertisement of November, 1928, right after Hoover’s election victory, touted the appearance on an upcoming issue of three future, current and former Chief Executives: Hoover, Coolidge and William Howard Taft, now the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. “You’ve *heard* them on the radio --. You’ve *seen* them in other newsreels --. You *know* them on Fox Movietone,” bragged the ad.

Many names from the realms of show business and sports were captured by Movietone at work and play. Marilyn Miller, the Broadway musical star, sang “Who?” in 1928, two years before she did so in a feature film (Warner Bros.’ “Sunny”). The theater impresario David Belasco “coached” champion boxer Jack Dempsey for a love scene with actress Estelle Taylor. Baseball great Walter Johnson gave his son lessons on playing the National Pastime. Babe Ruth kissed his new wife after one of his mammoth home runs. Robert Benchley carved a Thanksgiving turkey. Annette Kellermann, her generation’s Esther Williams, swam. Knute Rockne led one of his fabled Notre Dame

football teams through spring drills. Texas Guinan opened a nightclub in New York City; Emily Post gave lessons on etiquette. Billy Sunday weaved one of his hellfire sermons; his contemporary in the pulpit, Aimee Semple Macpherson, chatted about her trip to Europe.

Not just celebrities populated Fox newsreels. As 1929 began, the company could boast of having some fifty Movietone trucks throughout the world. Fox had such a dominant position in the newsreel field that it was demanding, and getting, five-year contracts from theater chains. (Variety, September 12, 1928) The once-weekly schedule of releases that had begun in late 1927 was expanded to two per week in October, 1928. In December, Fox began sending out three issues (reels) of newsreel material per issue; at midyear of 1929, the total climbed to four. Extra special items, such as King Alfonso's speech, might appear on more than one or even all the reels. Theaters ran as many reels as they wished.

## **HAZARDS OF THE TRADE**

With four reels per week, Fox was providing about 4,000 feet per week to its clients. This was culled from nearly 200,000 feet shot, with the unused footage stored in the Fox Movietone News in-house library. Each of the sound truck crews included a camera operator and a “contact man” to expedite the dispatch of the footage to the New York office. There, the film was viewed by E. Percy Howard, a former newspaperman who, as Fox Movietone’s chief editor, decided with his group of assistants which stories were to run. As sound experts checked the quality of the recordings, a musical accompaniment for each story was being chosen and titles written for transition between reports. The studio was quick to assure audiences that the “natural sound” of the early audible newsreels was exactly that -- with no effort made to doctor it prior to release.

As if to magnify the novelty of the natural sound -- and, to the modern eye and ear, its dullness -- the early Fox Movietone News release contained no on- or off-screen narrator, only a brief audible introduction to each reel, and no underscoring other than snippets of music played during the transitional titles. A typical offering is Volume 2, Number 33, which opened the third week of May, 1929. The showpiece of its three nine-minute reels, which was shown at the start of the first reel, was a five-minute feature

meant to depict a day in the life of master inventor Thomas Edison. The opening reel was completed by shots of a horse race at Pimlico Downs in Maryland, an item about the signing of a contract by German heavyweight boxer Max Schmeling, and a feature about little girls dancing ballet and singing at a party in San Antonio, Texas. The second reel consisted of a Navy submarine demonstration, views of a dirt track auto race in Pennsylvania and appearances by two celebrities: the Italian composer Mascagni, shown leading a 3,000-piece band at a stadium in Rome, and the American birth-control advocate Margaret Sanger, outlining her platform for “intelligent treatment” of sexual relations. The third reel began with clips from the Joan of Arc memorial celebration in Orleans, France, then continued with brief speeches by members of the U. S. Davis Cup tennis team, a semi-comic talk by a Texas armadillo breeder about his specialty, views of air gun practice in San Antonio, a flying lesson by the manager of Curtiss Field on Long Island, and highlights of a winning regatta in New Jersey by the Columbia University rowing team.

The typical issue represented a major daily newspaper not only in the deadline concerns that marked its production, but also in the required balance of national and international happenings, hard news and human-interest fare, public personalities and obscure names, and entries representing spot news coverage -- the rowing contest, the air gun practice, the Joan of Arc celebration -- and others that represented reality but were created for the issue, such as the tennis players’ comments and the armadillo man’s spiel. The editorial bite of the presentations was as minimal as their running times, except for the Sanger talk, which, warned Variety in its review of the issue, is “apt to be resented in some communities.”(May 22, 1929)

The still-extant Edison footage is an example of what the newsreel could do that could not be duplicated by newspapers or radio. The brief happenings in the piece seem obviously to be staged for the camera, yet the essence of the aged inventor's final years is captured more than sufficiently. The "great wizard" is sent off to work by his wife on the steps of their home in Fort Myers, Florida; her reward is a clumsy handshake. He is then shown inspecting his experimental rubber plants and informing an aide about the difference between some of the plants. Levity intercedes as Edison spends part of his lunch hour telling a story of a Scotsman rushing into a telegraph office during a solar eclipse to send a (cheaper) night message. (One can imagine a viewer in Peoria, sitting in the dark, noticing Edison's wide smile and thinking, "The old man isn't all business, after all.") One of the requisite connecting title follows: "An historic picture -- [the] 82-year-old inventor at his work bench," before he returns home, fulfilled enough to give Mrs. Edison a smooch on the cheek this time. Of course, much of the same message about Edison's professional perfection and personal humanity could have been conveyed in a silent newsreel, but the portrait would seem unfinished without the hearing of the lunch-time anecdote or the evidence of Edison's profound deafness -- the screams that his wife and colleagues must hurl within inches of his damaged eardrum just so he could understand them.

Fortunately for the Movietone news gatherers, technology was easing their work. The load of ultra-heavy equipment lugged by newsreel camera operators in silent days was being lightened by new, portable, single-system, lightweight cameras.(Cohn 75) On May 7, 1929, the first aerial sound photography unit -- Fox Air News No. 1 -- was christened at the airport in Newark, New Jersey. The airplane was equipped to take sound pictures

from the air or on the ground, and the sound photography apparatus could be removed from the plane for greater freedom of action when necessary. (Exhibitors Herald-World, May 11, 1929). Among the plane's first assignments were that spring's Kentucky Derby and Indianapolis auto race. Even with these developments, it didn't take much to foul up the filming of news, by Fox or anyone else. When sound crews showed up at a location where newspaper still photographers were also congregated, the filming often would be sabotaged by a well-placed profanity uttered within recording range by a print wiseguy. A troublemaker might suddenly thrust his face before a talker camera and ruin footage, or cat-call into an open microphone. Thousands of feet of costly sound film was wasted through these bugaboos, the numbers of which were diminished somewhat after the movie people began to hire more burly camera operators and assistants.

Then there were the hazards of location shooting. For instance, newspaper headlines in July 1928 told of the trials of a dirigible suspended in midair before being forced to crash-land near Williamsburg, Virginia. A three-person Movietone crew inside the craft had arranged for its flight over the city as part of a report on the historic sites in the area, including the then-under construction Colonial Williamsburg attraction. The filmmakers had to sweat out a wild ride after the air became choppy and began forcing some of the airship's fabric to tear. The craft was brought down in the middle of a cornfield without property destruction or serious human injury, and throughout the ordeal, the three crew members -- a camera operator, a sound technician and an assistant (the "contact" man) -- stayed at their posts, grinding out material that would be viewed in theaters within days. The drama of near-disasters such as this inspired Fox, ever seeking ways to promote its work, to devote two feature films to the glorified lot of the newsreel

cameraman. "The News Parade," released in the spring of 1928, featured Nick Stuart as a likable lens jockey who somehow ended up (temporarily) dangling by one hand from the top of a skyscraper. The public response to the silent "News Parade" was favorable enough to spawn a part-sound sequel, "Chasing through Europe," released in 1929 with Stuart and plenty of scenic photography culled from Movietone News. By the end of 1929, the first all-newsreel theater, the Embassy, opened in New York City.

Of course, Fox's monopoly of the sound newsreel market could not last, and during 1928, its studio competitors formulated plans to convert their news operations to sound. In the case of Warner Bros., this would have meant starting from scratch, but the studio did briefly consider a Vitaphone News series before deciding that the cost, and the resources a newsreel operation would divert from its popular vaude shorts, wasn't worth the trouble. The increase in cost for producing sound newsreels over silent ones was considered to be between fifty and 100 percent; Fox was reportedly spending a lofty \$30,000 weekly -- at the least -- for its two-issues-weekly product by the fall of 1928.

Paramount, which had been producing a silent newsreel since 1927, and M-G-M, which began its first newsreel in 1928, announced plans to make the transition to sound, but the first actual competitor to Fox was Pathe, its former archrival for supremacy in newsreels. Pathe launched its first sound newsreel in the second week of November, 1928. Recorded on the RCA Photophone system, the first one-reel installment crammed in twelve clips, the longest of which included a demonstration of bulletproof glass; an assembly of state militia bands in Texas; views of the New York City-New Jersey bridge over the Hudson River; recitations of Mother Goose rhymes by children; a vintage clip



(played to a baritone's off-camera solo of "Auld Lang Syne") of Theodore Roosevelt receiving the Nobel Peace Prize; and a discussion of American submarine policy by Secretary of the Navy C. D. Wilbur. The second issue of Pathe Sound News came out a fortnight later and included footage from a Salvation Army meeting in New York City's Chinatown district; a turkey farm in Massachusetts; a practice session by the New York Rangers hockey team in Springfield, Massachusetts; and an American Legion parade in Hoboken, New Jersey.

Pathe's sound newsreel began twice monthly but expanded to two reels per week midway through 1929. The offerings lacked Fox's big-name kick and variety of locales -- Pathe began with only two sound trucks -- but the smaller company did have the advantage of a large archive of old-time clips that were frequently used as fillers. There were some growing pains, as evidenced by the fourth issue of Pathe Sound News, which included a talk by the English novelist William J. Locke. The print of the issue seen in Toledo, Ohio -- if not elsewhere -- had Locke speaking about his intended subject, the future prospect of releasing novels as talking pictures instead of printed books, when he suddenly leaped forward and gestured wildly, muttering, "My God, my God -- that's not right! We'll have to do it all over again!" The outtake apparently had been released in error -- one wonders how many other picture houses received the bad print -- but the theater operator in Toledo did not immediately withdraw it. Instead, thanks to a newspaper item that mentioned the snafu, patrons went to see the film and were primed to laugh so hard at Locke's gaffe that whatever impact there was in the remainder of the speech was lost. (*Variety*, January 2, 1929)

Terry Ramsaye, Pathe's chief of newsreel production (and author of the early

movie history tome “A Million and One Nights”), gave his sound news operation some early prestige when he produced and edited Pathe’s first “talk special” -- “Lincoln,” in which George Billings, an actor then well-known for his impersonation of Abraham Lincoln, presented a recital of the Gettysburg Address. The ten-minute film, issued in time for Lincoln’s 120th birthday in February, 1929, saw Billings’ powerful baritone recorded on RCA Photophone, with Josiah Zuro’s musical direction figuring into the singing of a Civil War soldier’s song, “Tenting Tonight,” by a male quartet. Authentic historical shots of Lincoln’s early days in Illinois and views of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington rounded out the reel. Motion Picture News hailed the short as “splendidly put together ... a pictorially effective review of the landmarks of Lincoln’s career ... an ideal special attraction for any theatre program.”(February 2, 1929)

Ramsaye also had some good ideas for his studio’s regular sound newsmagazine, the Pathe Audio Review (which in time supplanted the Pathe Silent Review). The sound version debuted in April, 1929, with little more than a recorded vaudeville act of two juvenile trick ropers. Newsmagazines like this one and its counterpart, the Fox Movietone Magazine, were more reliant on “soft” news and scenics than the weekly newsreels. Pathe’s used more traditional entertainment devices -- such as marionette shows -- than Fox’s, but Ramsaye gave the Audio Reviews their own personality with unusual ingredients such as trick photography and semi-comic song numbers.

During the second half of 1929, the newsreel market exploded, with three studios instituting sound operations. The first of the three companies to make the transition was Paramount, which, after six months’ delay created by the lack of available equipment,

launched Paramount Sound News in the first week of August in both disc and film recordings. The reel's introduction effectively conveyed the impact of sound, as silent news footage was succeeded by an official announcement of the transition, followed by shots captured by studio microphones. President Hoover was shown wishing Adolph Zukor, the president of Paramount, success in the new venture. Then came four news subjects: endurance fliers in St. Louis; a horse race at Saratoga, New York; a masque parade in Belgium; and the flight of a U. S. Army dirigible to Washington. The latter flight, which carried a U. S. Senator to the Capitol Building, was an exclusive for the studio. Emanuel Cohen, who had supervised Pathe News for five years, headed the staff at Paramount, which would continue its silent Paramount News series (renamed Paramount Silent News) through June, 1930.

Not to be upstaged by Paramount, the other claimant to the title of Hollywood's most prestigious studio, M-G-M, announced a teaming with the sizable and influential news organization headed by media mogul William Randolph Hearst. Hearst's people would produce both the silent M-G-M News -- renamed the M-G-M International Newsreel -- starting in July, 1929, and, more significantly, the sound Hearst Metrotone News, twice weekly beginning in September on both disc and film. The alliance gave heft to Metro because of Hearst's newspaper presence, which could promote the newsreels in almost every key city in the country. It benefitted the Hearst camp as well; Hearst's International News Service had been turning out its International Newsreel for Universal, but M-G-M was owned by the substantial Loew's, Inc., chain of movie houses.

Universal was left to establish its own cooperative. It signed up more than sixty dailies -- among them the New York Evening World, Chicago Daily News, Los Angeles

Times, Philadelphia Inquirer and Atlanta Journal -- to continue the rechristened Universal Newspaper Newsreel, advertised as providing "The World at Your Door!" The newspapers advertised Universal's newsreel, and in larger cities, the affiliates actually assigned their employees to movie camera duties; in return for the localized footage, Universal promoted the dailies in the issues going to their respective areas. In the first week of 1930, the Newspaper Newsreel became a sound product, twice weekly on disc. The initial sound entry was highlighted by dramatic silent shots of a British racing driver being killed when his car overturned during a race, and of a fire at the White House. But the real attraction for Universal's series was implied by its nickname: the "talking reporter" newsreel. NBC announcer Graham McNamee did the honors as the first regular narrator in a sound newsreel, dramatically building up (or exaggerating) the impact of each impending shot. "Sime" Silverman of Variety was impressed with the novelty of the offscreen "presence" of McNamee.

He has made it interesting enough and holds sufficient attraction without distracting from the pictured scenes, to make you almost forget this reel is without actual sound attached. ... If Mr. McNamee can do that at the outset, he is limitless when grasping the full scheme and its opportunities for kidding, which will often arise.(January 15, 1930)

Fox reacted to Universal's idea by adding its own narrator to Movietone, thus making its newsreel 100 percent sounded. However, Fox's operation was changing in other ways, as a result of William Fox's ill-fated attempt to merge his company with Loew's and M-G-M. The studios did not come together, as mogul Fox hoped (and, unfortunately for him, had gambled his personal Hollywood future), but the Hearst

Corporation did ally with Fox Movietone News so that Fox and M-G-M could save money by sharing equipment. Most of the equipment, groused some at Fox, was Movietone's, but, in any case, Movietone and Metrotone would share the East 54th Street facility that Fox had run by itself. Fox trimmed its weekly release schedule to two reels, to go with Metrotone's two. Through Hearst, Fox and M-G-M shared footage but not the presentation of it, so the Hearst Metrotone News was, as far as theater patrons were concerned, a totally separate entity from Fox Movietone News. Fox's alignment with Hearst would last until 1934, and the cost savings helped the former through tough times in the depths of the Depression.

## **MAKE ROOM FOR MICKEY**

The sound revolution caused incredible tumult for the makers of live-action films, but there was not much less of a shake-up for the companies that produced animated movies. Because Hollywood's major studios did not maintain animation facilities, either because of economic concerns or lack of interest (then as now, cartoons were considered primarily for children), animated films came from smaller-scale entrepreneurs who distributed their fare on a states-rights basis; these reels were sold to brokers who made them available to theaters within a specific territory. These brokers would become a little less necessary after Walt Disney's "Steamboat Willie" changed the face of the American animated film in 1928. What had been the smallest of the cartoon companies a few years before would become the commanding leader within months. The previous leader in the field, unprepared for and uninterested in sound, soon ceased to exist. Although animation companies continued to copy each other in terms of characters and plots -- and especially from Disney as Mickey grew in popularity -- the best sound cartoons were more clearly delineated from the rest by the importance sound had to them.

What was the first sound cartoon? There is more than one claimant. Evidence indicates that the short cited in general histories as the first sound animated film,

“Steamboat Willie,” was not -- at least in chronological terms. “Steamboat Willie” was, however, the most essential film in the transition of the American animated film to sound. Other filmmakers had produced cartoons with sound elements, but the audio was matched to the video in rudimentary fashion, if at all. In his exhaustively researched history Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in Its Golden Age, Michael Barrier noted that “Disney’s insistence on marrying sound and image as tightly as possible paid off in what was instantly recognizable as a real sound cartoon, rather than a silent cartoon with an added soundtrack.”(55) Disney’s landmark seven-minute reel not only gave the animated film its touchstone in the sound revolution, it introduced most of its viewers to the most successful character in the history of the film cartoon, and it set in motion the transformation of a two-bit independent studio into the leading company in the animation field, and later, into a multimedia conglomerate.

Just as “The Jazz Singer” was not precisely the first sound film, “Steamboat Willie” was not the first sound cartoon. Like its live-action counterpart, the animated sound film was originated by a company outside the Hollywood mainstream, and with the technology created by that forgotten pioneer of audio, Lee De Forest. In 1923, the independent Max Fleischer studio allied with De Forest to produce the first cartoons with synchronized sound. Overseen by brothers Max and Dave, the New York-based Fleischer company was tiny (with a staff of nineteen in 1923) but disproportionately creative. Its “Out of the Inkwell” cartoon series was especially well received commercially and artistically, and the Fleischers were not averse to pushing the creative envelope with a cheeky, subversive humor and inventive special effects such as the “rotoscoping” technique of character movement. Their first sound subject was “My Old Kentucky

Home,” the latest in the company’s Song Car-Tune series. In previous series entries, a small animated ball would bounce on the projected words of lyrics as the theater organist played a popular song and the audience sang along. However, in “My Old Kentucky Home,” an animated dog plays the “Anvil Chorus” on his disembodied teeth with a mallet, rends the title song on a trombone and then awkwardly but distinctly mouths these words: “Follow the ball, and join in, everybody!” The song then continued as performed by the Metropolitan Quartet, with Jimmy Flora at the organ. Several other Song Car-Tunes were made with sound at this time, but these seem to have been “scored” with an add-on musical background only, which made it easier for Fleischer to distribute the cartoons to silent-only theaters.(Cabarga 34) In any case, few patrons saw these cartoons in synchronized form.

By the time the Vitaphone-Movietone competition was in full swing a few years later, the quest to infuse the cartoon with sound was renewed, and by more than one party. One company, Van Beuren Enterprises, actually beat Disney to the punch with a synchronized one-reeler called “Dinner Time,” which premiered in the late summer of 1928. “Dinner Time” was the brainchild of Paul Terry, who would become better known for founding the studio that created Mighty Mouse in the 1940s. Terry, a standout animator at the pioneering Bray studio in the ’teens, formed his own Fables studio after World War I and built followings for his comic character Farmer Al Falfa and the Aesop’s Film Fables series, first with the backing of the Keith-Albee theater chain and then Van Beuren Productions, which distributed Terry’s cartoons through Pathe. Terry was more of a businessman than a creative genius, and his goal of adding RCA



Photophone post-synchronized soundtracks to his Aesop's Film Fables likely had less to do with expanding the vistas of the animated genre than with taking advantage of the growing number of theaters wired for sound. Terry himself directed "Dinner Time," a barnyard tale filled with his trademark animals with human characteristics. It opened at the Mark Strand Theatre in New York City on September 1, 1928. The response in the trades indicated that viewers were seeing nothing less than the "Jazz Singer" of the animated field. "Here it is, the first cartoon in sound," wrote the reviewer from The Film Daily. "... Sound effects ... enhance the entertainment values of what is ordinarily a right diverting reel." (September 2, 1928)

An unnamed scribe from Variety referred to the "first sounded cartoon" (which is now unfortunately lost) in stating:

The sound employs music and noises, the latter of almost every variety of dumb animals, while the dialog is limited, with its most and perhaps only force the whiskered driver of a rickety horse and shay hollering, "Giddeap, gol darn yer."

No doubt the sound enhances the comics. It gives zip to the action, and the Fables are always full of their own style of action. Here it is mostly dogs, and plenty of them. (August 22, 1928)

The Fleischer studio, by now issuing its reels through Paramount, made a permanent transition to sound with "The Sidewalks of New York," a Screen Songs entry (a successor to the Song Car-Tune series) reviewed by the trades in October, 1928. "Here," stated the Motion Picture News, "is one of the cleverest cartoons we have seen in a long time." (October 20, 1928) In 1929, the Fleischers issued seventeen sound cartoons, including the debut entry in their long-running Talkartoons series, "Noah's

Lark” (October 25, 1929). Fleischer historian Leslie Cabarga has described “Noah’s Lark” as looking

very much like a Paul Terry production. Noah even resembled Farmer Al Falfa. The cartoon was done in black and white with very little gray tone. The sound was predictably crude, consisting of various sound effects and copyright-free songs such as “No Place Like Home” and “Yo Ho Ho and a Bottle of Rum.”

In the cartoon, Noah’s animals desert ship to enjoy Luna Park, leaving him to sing “Oh where oh where have my animals gone?” After much amusement ... the animals pile back on ship which sinks from their weight. Noah is then seen underwater, swimming after some very sexy topless mermaids.(47)

The Fleischers had a strongly indentifiable style of animation -- its sexual envelope-pushing would continue with the creation of Betty Boop in “Dizzy Dishes” (1930) -- but a much greater impact would be made by a determined Midwesterner with ambitions as large as his resources were small. Walt Disney had opened his own tiny West Coast studio in 1922. He began by mimicking the methods of his better-capitalized rivals: the economy and fast pacing of Terry, the live-action component of the Fleischers (seen in Disney’s early “Alice” comedies, based on the Wonderland heroine). For his popular Oswald the Lucky Rabbit cartoon series, Disney gained a valuable distribution deal with states-rights purveyor George Winkler, but in 1927 Winkler’s company, presently run by his brother-in-law, Charles Mintz, claimed the rights to Oswald and took away most of Disney’s animators. Disney would not repeat the mistake of not owning his own characters. He and his key assistant and chief animator, Ub Iwerks, discussed the creation of a new character. By this time, the hubbub over sound would gave Disney the inspiration that the rodent, who was christened Mickey Mouse, would bring something

special to American animation. Disney headlined Mickey in two silent reels, “Plane Crazy” and “Gallop in’ Gaucho,” but, after failing to find anyone to distribute them, he delayed their release as he began to experiment with synchronization in mid 1928. A test was made of a scene for a third Mickey Mouse cartoon -- “Steamboat Willie.”

“When the picture was half finished, we had a showing with sound,” Disney would recall. He had gathered a tiny crew -- including his brother Roy, Ub Iwerks and animators Wilfred Jackson and Johnny Cannon -- to produce the background noise for the audience of studio workers and their wives.

A couple of my boys could read music and one of them could play a mouth organ. We put them in a room and arranged to pipe their sound into the room where our wives and friends were going to see the picture. The boys worked from a music and sound-effect score. After several false starts, sound and action got off with the gun. The mouth organist played the tune, the rest of us in the sound department bammed tin pans and blew slide whistles on the beat. The synchronism was pretty close.

The effect on our little audience was nothing less than electric. They responded almost instinctively to this union of sound and motion. I thought they were kidding me. So they put me in the audience and ran the action again. It was terrible, but it was wonderful!(Maltin, Of Mice and Magic 34-35)

Heady with the promise of a breakthrough, Disney commissioned composer Carl Stalling to write a musical score, which was timed to the beats Iwerks had marked on the film. In September, Disney went to New York to find a party to record “Steamboat Willie.” Spurned by Fox, he went to RCA and watched one of its experimental Aesop’s Fables, quite possibly Paul Terry’s “Dinner Time.” After seeing it, he confidently wrote back to his colleagues:

MY GOSH -- TERRIBLE -- A lot of racket and nothing else. I was terribly disappointed. I really expected to see something half-way decent. BUT HONESTLY -- it was nothing but one of the rottenest fables I believe that I ever saw. ... It merely had an orchestra playing and adding some noises. The talking part does not mean a thing. It doesn't even match. We sure have nothing to worry about from these quarters.(Thomas 92)

RCA did not offer enough money, and Western Electric would not bite either, so Disney allied with producer P. A. "Pat" Powers and his independent Cinephone sound-on-film system. Disney's troubles continued, as the initial recording session was marred when conductor Carl Edouarde matched the action by watching the screen instead of following the prepared cues on paper. After the recording of music, sound effects and rudimentary dialogue was redone, Powers booked "Steamboat Willie" for a two-week engagement at New York's Colony Theater, where it opened on November 18, 1928. It was a sensation. Audiences that came to see the main feature, the FBO talkie crime drama "Gang War," walked out talking about the jaunty animated mouse in what Variety called "a peach of a synchronization job" (November 21). A few days later, The Film Daily was praising "a clever and amusing treatment ... worthy of bookings in any house."(November 25)

The title of "Steamboat Willie" was a play on that of the currently popular Buster Keaton comedy "Steamboat Bill Jr." Mickey is the vessel's industrious first mate, who endures physical punishment by the nasty cat captain, puts up with the jibes of a pesky parrot, and joins with his sweetheart, Minnie, to play a nautical symphony of sorts by cranking the tail of a goat who has eaten Minnie's sheet music for "Turkey in the Straw." The "dialogue," supplied by Disney himself, is limited to a few utterances by Minnie

(“Wait! ... Wait!”) and the parrot (“Man overboard!”); Mickey and the cat do nothing more than squeal or grumble audibly. (Mickey would not speak an intelligible word until “The Karnival Kid” in 1929.) True to Disney’s insistence on making something other than “Dinner Time,” “Steamboat Willie” is full of sound-specific gags, either complementary to the visuals or totally dependent on sound.

The latter is evident in the opening seconds, as a shot of the boat moving in the water is accompanied by the noise of its three whistles, the robust wails of the first two being followed by the light, tinny toot of the smallest of them. This kind of joke could not be conveyed in a silent picture. Mickey is then shown at the wheel of the boat, whistling a song, “Steamboat Bill,” and, true to Disney’s intended precision in the synchronization, the abrupt starts and stops of the music as whistled are timed perfectly to the movements of Mickey’s mouth and his simultaneous, rhythmic turns of the wheel. Even more clearly sound-dependent is the reel’s final gag: Relegated to peeling potatoes by the musically unappreciative captain, Mickey is taunted by the parrot, and responds by throwing a potato at the bird, who falls from his porthole perch and out of the screen picture, his cries of pain then heard off screen as Mickey -- hardly the sweet-natured sort he would become within a few years -- laughs in delight. Still, the showpiece of “Steamboat Willie” is, of course, its musical production number of sorts to “Turkey in the Straw.” The cranking of the goat’s tail begins the rendition of the song -- with a second or two of unnecessary visual notes, in case you’re wondering where the notes are coming from -- but each succeeding gag threatens to top those before it. Mickey moves along to banging kitchen utensils -- pots, pans, a washboard -- then to squeezing a duck’s abdomen

to produce the necessary squawks, to pulling of the tails of nursing piglets, and finally to playing, xylophone-like, on the teeth of a bull.

After the tremendous reception to “Steamboat Willie,” Disney was convinced by Powers that he should remain independent and distribute his films himself, with Cinephone sound. He and Stalling added sound to “Plane Crazy,” “Gallopín’ Gaucho” and a newly completed fourth reel, “The Barn Dance,” and all were just as impressive to patrons and reviewers. Within weeks, Disney was ready to make a non-Mickey short. Released in the summer of 1929, “The Skeleton Dance” launched Silly Symphonies, a series of shorts without continuing characters.

“Steamboat Willie” had catapulted Disney into the first rank of cinematic animators in terms of the use of sound, but “The Skeleton Dance” assured the company’s place in the vanguard for artistry. An enormously clever cartoon animated mainly by Ub Iwerks, it begins arrestingly with simultaneous fits of thunder and lightning, then the closeup of the wide-open eyes of an owl fearfully perched on a dark and stormy night, a tree branch above him curling down in the shape of a bony human hand. In this creepy cartoon of dancing skeletons who emerge from their cemetery graves to frolic before the sun rises, sound -- but no dialogue -- is used every bit as much as visuals to evoke dread and terror, scares somewhat allayed by a comic tone. The rustle of bats from a belfry immediately precedes the emergence of the bony bodies, whose limbs click and clack in rhythmic mischief to Greig’s sardonic “March of the Dwarfs.” Their antics include the kind of offbeat symphonics found in “Steamboat Willie,” as one skeleton plays on the back of another like a xylophone. The crow of a rooster signals the players to dash back into their graves to cap an inventive five-and-a-half minutes described by The Film Daily as

“one of the most novel cartoon subjects ... a howl from start to finish.”(July 21, 1929)

Variety warned prospective patrons, “Don’t bring your children.”(July 17, 1929)

Unhappy with Powers’ accounting methods, Disney broke with the producer and in February, 1930 signed a distribution agreement with Columbia, which already had been issuing the Silly Symphonies under a subcontract with Powers. This gave Disney’s reels worldwide entree. Despite losing Iwerks to Powers that same year, Disney expanded his staff and facilities as Mickey’s popularity skyrocketed. The impact of Disney’s success was remarkable. Within months, theater marquees were advertising his cartoons as primary attractions. In 1932, Mickey Mouse received a special Academy Award for his creation.

Disney’s ascension to the top of the cartoon world was simplified by the strange reluctance of the previously recognized leader, Pat Sullivan’s Felix the Cat studio, to embrace sound. Sullivan, an Australian-born former newspaper cartoonist, created the popular feline character in 1920, but the real force behind it -- despite Sullivan’s lone billing on screen and in the complementary comic strip -- was his main animator, Otto Messmer. Messmer’s clever gags and emphasis on development of a consistent character marked the popularity of the Felix reels, and by 1926 or so, Donald Crafton has written, the cat was perhaps the most popular of all screen characters, human or animated, except for Charlie Chaplin.(Before Mickey 317). Sullivan cannily licensed Felix’s image for items as varied as cigars and baby oil, and he approved the writing of popular songs about the feline. However, the producer seemed unprepared for the advent of sound, and he believed that a transition to talkies would be too burdensome in time and money. Within a

year of the commotion over “Steamboat Willie,” Felix was mutely obsolete, dropped by the Educational company, which had insisted that the cat become a sounded creature. In 1930, Sullivan sold a few already finished cartoons to the small-time Copley Pictures, which hastily fitted them with poorly post-synchronized musical scores. Sullivan’s declining health (he was an alcoholic) stymied future efforts to reactivate his studio, and the company fell into disarray. Sullivan died in 1933, and subsequent attempts to put Felix over in talkies failed.

Other cartoon producers did successfully make the jump to sound, and not long after Disney, the Fleischers, and VanBeuren. Disney’s former charge, Oswald the Lucky Rabbit, was ushered into the talkie era by his new mentor, Charles Mintz, with “Hen Fruit” (January 8, 1929), but the Winkler studio’s distribution deal with Universal was severed in the spring of 1929 by Universal’s announcement that it would make its own Oswalds. Thus, Mintz was supplanted by Universal as he had supplanted Disney in 1927. As the first Hollywood studio of the sound era to establish its own in-house animation facility, Universal brought in a young animator and former Mack Sennett gag writer named Walter Lantz to make its cartoons. Lantz added sound to six unreleased Winkler reels, among them “Alpine Antics” (February 13, 1929) and “Stripes and Stars” (April 19, 1929). The baptism was hardly high-tech, as Lantz told Leonard Maltin:

It was funny how we did it. We’d project a cartoon on the screen and all of us would stand in front of the cartoon. We had a bench with all the props on it -- the bells, etc. As the action progressed on the screen, we’d time to it and make the sound effect, dialogue and all. Nothing was prescored. We did it as we watched the picture. (Of Mice and Magic 158)

Assisted by Bill Nolan, Lantz made eleven of his own reels in 1929, and more than



twice that number in 1930. Lantz also holds the distinction of producing the first animated sequence in a live-action talkie, as a short cartoon was included in Universal's 1930 Technicolor musical blockbuster "The King of Jazz." Presented at the beginning of the film, the animated short claims to explain why the movie's central figure, bandleader Paul Whiteman, got to be the "King of Jazz." In the African jungle, the artist's rendering of Whiteman soothes the savage beasts with "Music Hath Charms." Oswald is strangely among the menagerie, perhaps to lend his some of his purported luck to the movie. The rotund Whiteman is plunked on the head by an errant coconut that raises a bump which takes the shape of a king's crown. Despite this amusing contribution, and that of a pre-stardom Bing Crosby (then a vocalist for Whiteman), "King of Jazz" turned out to be a financial flop as weighty as Whiteman's bulk.

Meanwhile, Charles Mintz's Winkler studio found a home with Columbia for a series of Krazy Kat cartoons, based on the popular comic strip, thus putting old adversaries Mintz and Walt Disney under the same roof for a time, and Mintz also branched out to R-K-O for a short-lived series of Toby the Pup one-reelers. Paul Terry broke away from Van Beuren to create his own long-running series of Terrytoons starting in 1930 via Educational release. Ub Iwerks' Flip the Frog cartoons began with "Fiddlesticks" in August of 1930; the animation and characterization shortcomings of these Pat Powers-produced reels were partly offset by the lofty imprimatur of their distributor, MGM. Still, Flip would last only until 1933, and within three more years Iwerks' days as an independent force in the animation industry would be over.

Two other former Walt Disney animators would produce better results elsewhere,

and the result was the genesis of the Warner Bros. cartoon legacy that would come to match, if not surpass, Disney in decades to come. In 1929, however, Hugh Harman and Rudolf Ising were just tired of working for others -- most recently, Charles Mintz, before Mintz lost the Oswald series -- and wanted to create their own character. That character, a black boy (or something resembling a boy) named Bosko, had been developed by Harman as early as 1928, and he became "flesh" a year later in a four-and-a-half-minute test cartoon prepared by Harman and Ising to interest prospective distributors into hiring them to make a series. "Bosko the Talk-Ink Kid," as the test short is known, shows a live-action Ising, sitting at an easel, allowing the little fellow to emerge from his pen to introduce himself, in a clearly Southern black dialect, with "Well, here I is!" Bosko gets to sing (a bit of "Sonny Boy"), dance and show a little of his rubbery form before being retired to the inkwell by Ising, but not before exiting with a hopeful "See ya all later!"

Fortunately for Harman and Ising, there was a "later," Leon Schlesinger, then the head of Pacific Art and Title, which provided title cards and artwork for motion pictures, was impressed enough with the "Talk-Ink Kid" short that he proposed to Warner Bros. that he produce a Bosko series for the studio. Warners agreed to a two-year contract for Schlesinger, on the condition that each cartoon should include at least one full chorus of a song from a Warner Bros. feature film. (Maltin, Of Mice and Magic 220) The studio owned its own publishing company, and cartoons seemed a good device to promote its hit songs. In what was either a tribute to or a goof on Disney's Silly Symphonies, Harman and Ising dubbed their series Looney Tunes, promising to produce one reel per month.

The debut reel, "Sinkin' in the Bathtub," debuted in April 1930 at the Warners Theatre in Hollywood, on the same bill as the full-length Warners musical "Song of the

Flame.” The title of the cartoon was a burlesque of a popular song, “Singin’ in the Bathtub,” which Warners debuted in its 1929 all-star revue “The Show of Shows.” “Sinkin’ in the Bathtub” would show that the frequent promotion of music was integral to the early Warners cartoons. Everything that happens in the tale of Bosko’s tumultuous outing with his sweetheart, Honey, is an excuse to play a lately popular WB-owned song, and not just the title tune. The reel begins with Bosko bathing in his boudoir, playing the streams of water like guitar strings in time to “Singin’ in the Bathtub.” He goes for a car ride to pick flowers for his jazz baby, so we hear “Tip-Toe Thru the Tulips” in the background. He brings the tulips to his gal’s house, but a hungry goat eats them (“Lady Luck”). Bosko begins to cry, but Honey consoles him from her balcony (“Painting the Clouds with Sunshine”). Bosko creates a saxophone out of parts from his car and serenades Honey (“Tulips”). Playing coy, Honey dumps a bucket of soapy water on the horn, which begins to play “I’m Forever Blowing Bubbles” so Honey can dance on the rising bubbles. Honey glides to the ground and skips along her sidewalk, playing “Tulips” like a xylophone before hopping into Bosko’s jalopy. The reel ends as Bosko and Honey, having faced numerous calamities, end up in a bathtub/car hybrid on a river, playing and humming to “Singin’ in the Bathtub” and playing reeds like drumsticks. Patrons of “Sinkin’ in the Bathtub” had to be pleased with the infusion of currently hot pop songs, not the public-domain fare typically heard in animation, and Warner Bros. executives had to be thrilled with the cross-promotion. Adding to the name value in the first WB cartoons was that their songs were played by noted bandleader Abe Lyman and his Brunswick Recording Orchestra. No wonder that, halfway through the first in-house

screening of “Sinkin’ in the Bathtub,” Schlesinger would recall a few years later, an immediately impressed “Jack Warner ordered 12 more” cartoons.(Barrier 158) Four of the first six Looney Tunes had titles that played off songs owned by Warners, “The Goose Hangs High” (recast as “The Booze Hangs High”) and “Hold Everything” (burlesqued as “Hold Anything”) among the spotlight tunes.

Before long, Harman and Ising began work on the first issue of a second series; Merrie Melodies; like Disney’s Silly Symphonies, it would not include recurring characters. “Lady, Play Your Mandolin” established the Merrie Melodies motif of showcasing a single song hit, indicated by the title. “Lady, Play Your Mandolin” actually did introduce a character, Foxy, who -- save for his pointed ears and bushy tail -- was a look-alike of Mickey Mouse. This first adventure had Foxy out West, partaking in south-of-the-border revels and singing a duet with his soubrette sweetheart. Mischievously, a pint-sized mouse pops in and out of the action, providing a closing laugh punch after Foxy’s sarsparilla-crazed horse burns himself to bones.

Foxy lasted for only two more Looney Tunes, “Smile, Darn Ya, Smile” and “One More Time,” as one of the many knockoffs of Disney’s superstar creation. At least this was Walt Disney’s opinion. The main target of his discontent was not Warners, but Van Beuren and its Aesop’s Fables, which included a pair of amorous mice among a menagerie of farm animals. In 1931, Disney obtained a preliminary injunction against the Van Beuren company and its distributor, Pathe, claiming, according to The Film Daily, that “Mickey’s alleged double is doing all sorts of things Mickey wouldn’t think of doing and has brought down a flood of irate letters and complaints.”(April 1, 1931) Amedee J. Van Beuren shot back that Aesop’s Fables had “created the characters Milton and Mary Mouse

at the inception of the company in 1921 ... . If there has been any imitation, it would appear to be at the door of Walt Disney Productions, whose characters of Mickey Mouse and Minnie Mouse are so similar to ours.”(The Film Daily, April 3, 1931)

Van Beuren had a point. Disney himself would admit (much later) that, when his studio was new and struggling, he had used Paul Terry’s Fables as an inspiration for character design. The animated companies constantly copied from each other in terms of plots and gags. A perusal of the animated titles prepared for 1929 and 1930 release shows frequent repetition of stock settings, which was reflected in the titles. Van Beuren’s “The Barnyard Melody” (1929) predated by a few months Disney’s “The Barnyard Concert” (1930). Van Beuren’s “Singing Saps” entertained audiences in 1930; so did Universal’s “The Singing Sap.” Also, what was with all those comic-safari shorts? Warners’ “Congo Jazz” was preceded by Van Beuren’s “Jungle Jazz,” Universal’s “Jungle Jingles,” and Disney’s “Jungle Rhythm.”

Even the first Mickey titles presented the mouse as a naughty rascal little different than Milton or Oswald the Rabbit. In “The Karnival Kid” (September 1, 1929), for example, the Mick is a lowly hot dog seller in a seedy carnny. He speaks dialogue for the first time -- “Hot dogs! Hot dogs!” -- but his voice is not the familiar, innocuous squeak that would soon become so familiar but the nasal bark of a street tough. Mickey insults the show’s nasty feline barker and has his nose pulled out of joint; he responds with a raspberry, avoids the barker’s lunging attack, and then steps on his prone adversary’s head and stomach. Mickey courts Minnie, a shimmy dancer (!), by showing her how the dogs on his grill perform on command, and when one balks, the mouse pulls down the

frankfurter's skin, revealing a posterior crack, and gives it a spank. That night, Mickey brings out his guitar to serenade Minnie, the shadow of whom he spies through the shuttered window of her wagon. He enlists two cats to sing "Sweet Adeline"; they bicker between verses and make enough of a row to awaken the barker, who is sweet on Minnie and attempts to halt the noise by throwing objects from his abode. Finally, a bed hits Mickey on the head, ending the song and the cartoon.

That was 1929, though. Two years later, when Disney took action against Van Beuren, the Mickey character had changed significantly. His popularity prompted censorship concerns, and the mouse cartoons' edges were softened from the days of outhouse humor. The Milton and Mary characters had changed, too; they were being drawn significantly larger in size than in the silent Fables, so they did look significantly like the Disney pair. The new Mickey was the one Disney was attempting to protect from Aesop's Fables such as "The Office Boy" (November 23, 1930). "The Office Boy" is actually a rather charming romantic comedy, cheerfully risqué for its time -- although not much more bawdy than "The Karnival Kid." The titular Milton is sweet on the boss's private secretary. The boss, with the persistence (as well as the look) of a bulldog, summons his gal Friday behind the closed door monitored by Milton for a ... uh, conference. Mary doth protest the inevitable advances (shown in silhouette as Milton stewes outside), but when the big man's wifey shows up, she is granted instant, untimely entree. The boss out of his way, Milton and Mary escape to a train for a happy ending.

The Van Beuren cartoons were not Disney, either in animation or creativity. Neither were anybody else's cartoons. What separated the best of these reels from the worst, in the eyes of the public and of the critics, were the quality of the humor and the

inventiveness of the presentation. Here Disney was becoming a cut above, which was a distinction that didn't take litigation to establish. Disney understood earlier and better than anyone else the possibilities that sound could bring as an equal partner to the visuals, and that cartoons could tell stories that people wanted to see and hear. As early as "Steamboat Willie" and "The Skeleton Dance," these shorts demonstrated that cinematic cartoons could be much more than collections of vulgar antics.

## **CONCLUSION: A “NEW” SHORT**

By 1931, the personality of the American short subject had changed irrevocably from what it was in the first months of sound. The charming but simplistic grin-and-play-it performance reels had passed out of favor, and with the temporary decline of filmed musicals, plotted comedies and non-fiction shorts were mostly what audiences were digesting. The non-fiction shorts field was being glutted by travelogues and sports films. In the latter subgenre, the storied golfer Bobby Jones came first with a series of cleverly produced shorts for Vitaphone. Knute Rockne, the famed head coach at Notre Dame, sparked a yen for football reels with a series at Universal that lasted only a few installments before his death in a plane crash. There was less of the vaudeville influence and more of the so-called real world in the shorts of '31.

The short subject would be a staple in the movie theater program for a generation more, but its general importance would not be the same after the first few years of the 1930s. As a result of the economic downturn created by the Depression, theater owners sought to give their audiences more for their money, so the standard presentation of one feature film being supported by various shorter films was gradually replaced by the format of the double feature. Because of the decreasing demand for live-action shorts -- as opposed to cartoons, which were cheaper to make and shorter in running time -- they



began to become too expensive for studios to produce in bulk. By 1936, comedy king Mack Sennett was no longer making any films, much less shorts. As Hal Roach pointed his studio toward features and away from the short comedies that made his reputation, Laurel and Hardy were displaced from the shorts realm after 1935, and the rights to Roach's beloved "Our Gang" series were sold to MGM three years later. In 1939, Warner Bros. closed the Brooklyn studio where so many of its popular Vitaphone shorts were made. (The studio continued production on the West Coast.) Meanwhile, vaudeville continued its slow decline, and fewer of its performers were given the option of appearing in shorts. It was becoming clear that the importance which short subjects held to the Hollywood mindset in the first years of sound would not be duplicated.

In summation, we can say that the depth and breadth of the early talking and singing shorts provides us not only with a microcosm of the sound revolution in general, but also with windows on the worlds of entertainment and news. The rich tradition of vaudeville was mirrored in the variety of artists -- singers, dancers, comedians, dramatic actors and novelty acts -- in performance-only shorts. The employment of these performers and others in early sound shorts intensified "media wars" of the day as other fields of entertainment (radio, theater, etc.) were impacted by the changes in the motion picture. Perhaps most significantly for the modern observer, many sound shorts brought opportunities to racial minority performers who were not deemed employable in silents or were thought too risky to cast prominently in sound feature films.

In the domain of the newsreel, the recording of celebrities such as entertainers, politicians, athletes and others brought a new vitality to the non-fiction short and a new dimension to the coverage of news happenings. The advent of the sound cartoon widened

the audience for the animated film and marked a creative milestone for the company that would not only dominate the cartoon field but would become one of the world's largest entities in entertainment and culture.

The likes of Lee DeForest, Theodore Case and Sam Warner could hardly have foreseen the impact of the work they did to establish and further the sound film, but American culture is the better for it.

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