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World Cinema I

A Sound Investment:

How the Vitaphone Shorts both Killed and Preserved Vaudeville

On April 13, 1995, the long-dead theatrical tradition of Vaudeville was resurrected before a sold-out auditorium at UCLA via a screening of the newly restored 1926 Vitaphone Short, *A Plantation Act* (1926) starring Al Jolson. The picture had been considered a “lost film” since 1933 due to severely damaged and missing elements. Upon Jolson’s entrance, complete with wince-inducing blackface, he launched into the first of the film’s three songs, a spirited rendition of “When The Red Red Robin...” and quickly won the audience over with his infectious energy. Each time the UCLA crowd instinctively applauded, the onscreen Jolson responded appropriately with a grateful hand gesture and a reassuring, “Wait a minute...you ain’t heard nothin’ yet.” With each succeeding song, he proved himself right. “The packed theatre responded to this short much in the same way the October 6, 1926 audience did. Gasps of disbelief - especially after having heard an excerpt of the skipping original disc - led to rousing applause. Jolson's three filmed curtain calls which followed his performance in this short fit the audience's response perfectly” (Vitaphone Project). At the time they were made, the last thing the Vitaphone Shorts’ producers and performers had in mind was preserving America’s Vaudeville legacy for future generations (or preserving Vaudeville at all, for that matter). Their goals were to make and save money, fill theater seats, test and improve sound technology, and provide those without funds or travel means an opportunity to see and hear popular stars of the day by providing their local movie theaters with “Vaudeville

in a can.” For contemporary viewers, the shorts’ preservation and resurgence in interest and popularity has been, to say the least, revelatory.

Of the four Warner Brothers, Sam was the most visionary. Indeed, it was he who, after seeing *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), convinced his family to purchase a movie projector and open for business. In 1925, Sam Warner was shown a machine that synchronized a phonograph with a movie projector using a fan belt attached to the motors of each. The device, which greatly improved sound recording quality by using a microphone rather than the previous acoustical horn, was the result of a collaboration of Bell Telephone Laboratories and Western Electric. As he watched and *heard* a film of an orchestra playing, Sam Warner saw the future. Selling his more pragmatic brothers on the idea was a challenge, with Harry Warner famously asking, “Who the hell wants to hear actors talk?” But Sam’s notion had more to do with music than with speech. All silent films, regardless of the venue in which they were shown, were accompanied by some kind of live music and/or sound effects. Sam proposed that future Warner Brothers films be produced with accompanying orchestral scores on disc, therefore saving theater owners from hiring musicians and allowing small-town audiences to hear full orchestras rather than a solo tinny upright piano with their films. Once sold on the idea, the brothers recognized sound as a golden opportunity to pull their studio ahead of the competition.

The practice of applying the sound directly onto the film had been in the works years earlier, starting with Thomas Edison, and was still being “perfected” when the Warner Brothers named their synchronized-disc system, which they named “Vitaphone.” Sound on film had its advantages, especially with regards to synchronization. If a film with a soundtrack broke, it could be spliced together without significant effect. But a

splice in a Vitaphone film or skip in the accompanying audio disc would provide long-lasting sync issues. However, the overall sound quality of Vitaphone was so far superior to other systems, it was determined to be well worth risking occasional glitches.

For Vitaphone's August 6, 1926 New York premiere, the Warner Brothers added a pre-recorded orchestral score and sound effects to a John Barrymore vehicle, *Don Juan*. To further emphasize and herald their newest technical innovation, Sam Warner oversaw the production of seven musical acts and directed MPPDA President Will Hays in a spoken introduction extolling the virtues of Vitaphone and the Warner Brothers. To give prestige to the proceedings, the acts Warner assembled mostly featured classical and operatic performances. The printed program distributed that evening contained, in addition to biographies of the performers, numerous rapturous reviews garnered from an earlier press-only screening. Mordunt Hall of the New York Times emphasizes the impact on the 1926 audience that viewers of today take for granted:

The natural reproduction of voices and the timing of the sounds to the movements of the lips and singers was almost uncanny. The future of this new contrivance is boundless, for inhabitants of small and remote places will have the opportunity to listen to and seeing grand opera as it is in New York. And the genius, the singers and musicians who have passed, will still live. (Vitaphone Program).

The Vitaphone premiere was a hit, running for eight months in New York before touring in other major cities, but its success displayed itself in a different way than was expected. The most enthusiastic critical and public reactions were in response not to *Don Juan* with its orchestral track, but to the musical shorts preceding it.

The Warner Brothers were encouraged by their success, so Sam Warner immediately began coordinating acts for a second Vitaphone program. Since the Vitaphone studio was in Brooklyn, he had easy access to New York and its endless supply of theatre and Vaudeville acts – theatre performers accustomed to speaking and singing to large audiences. This time, he filled the program with popular music and comedy routines, including Jolson’s *A Plantation Act*. The second Vitaphone evening occurred on October 7, 1926 (almost exactly a year before *The Jazz Singer*’s October 6, 1927 opening) and, once again, the shorts eclipsed the feature, *A Better ‘Ole* (1926), starring Sidney Chaplin, Charlie’s half-brother. Today, *A Better ‘Ole* is remembered only because of its connection to the groundbreaking musical acts that accompanied it. This second program of shorts, especially the Jolson one, were even more successful than the first and showed the Warners that, to answer Harry’s question, *many* people wanted to hear actors talk – and not only in shorts, but in features. This realization eventually led to *The Jazz Singer* and the well-known overhaul of the entire film industry.

Since there was no lack of talent (albeit in various degrees of quality) in and around New York, and since theaters around the country had to be supplied with short subjects that changed weekly, almost 2000 Vitaphone Shorts were produced at the Vitagraph Brooklyn Studio between 1926 and 1932. Though they starred popular headliners of the time, only a handful of the performers’ names are familiar today. The demand for weekly footage required that the Warner Brothers occasionally be less than discriminating, so second and third-rate Vaudevillians are well represented, much to the fascination and delight of theatre history buffs.

Ironically, it is largely thanks to Vitaphone's many technical limitations that the routines are so true to the way they were originally performed. Since the camera had to be encased in a large and stifling booth to prevent its motor noise being recorded, and the microphones had just as little mobility, there was no room for bells and whistles. Therefore, the performers couldn't make their acts "cinematic" even if they wanted to. There was no "director" for most of the Vaudeville Vitaphones because the acts had already been set in stone long before they went before the camera. Since this was the epitome of "no frills" filmmaking (the only "frill" being the sound itself), the quality of the short depended entirely on the quality of the performer(s).

The Vaudeville acts presented in Vitaphone Shorts are typically proscenium-bound and often feature a curtain and minimal set dressing. The performers introduce themselves at the beginning and take bows at the end, treating the film and the audience no different than they would if they were performing live. In *Lambchops* (1929) featuring George Burns and Gracie Allen, much of the humor derives from George reminding Gracie of the audience's presence. After their song, George quips, "We're supposed to be off the screen." Gracie replies, "Aren't we off?" George answers, indicating the audience, "No, they're still there."

Most Vaudeville performers would travel and perform all over the country. Once a routine was perfected, audiences wanted to see the same material they had liked when the act passed through the year before. Therefore, many performers saw no need to change their acts and would continue to do the same ten-minute routine for years. These acts, particularly the comedy routines like Shaw and Lee in *The Beau Brummels* (1928), became so well honed, the comics instinctively knew how long to pause for laughs and

when to react to crowd response. Their impeccable timing still works, to astonishing effect, on audiences of today.

The shorts that are often the most fascinating, if sometimes the least entertaining, are those featuring novelty acts. One such film, *The Eccentric Entertainer* (1929), features Sol Violinsky who plays the piano with his right hand and does the fingering on a violin with his left hand. The bow is attached to his knee, which he moves up and down in rapid rhythm. Like many Vitaphone/Vaudeville offerings, it offers a sight one does not see every day.

While it might seem romantic to suppose that these performers leapt at the chance to capture their acts on film for the benefit of posterity, in reality, most of them were really leaping for the money. The arrival and popularity of radio had started the decline of Vaudeville attendance and, once sound movies became economic and accessible vehicles for singing, dancing, and verbal comedy, the demand for live performances of that sort were dwindling quickly. According to Princeton history professor Emily Thompson, “It’s kind of ironic because sound motion pictures contributed to the decline of Vaudeville – so some of these performers were effectively digging their own graves by being recorded on film which played a role in ending their careers in show business.” It must be remembered that, at the time these films were produced, there was no thought put to their having any staying power. With no knowledge of the television, art houses, home video, and Youtube, that lay ahead, the work was done under the assumption that, after the films had played through their engagement, neither they nor their specific performances would ever be seen again.

Those Vaudeville performers who were already established as popular when they made their Vitaphone films, Al Jolson, Burns and Allen, and George Jessel, continued their long careers into other media. Young performers, like Judy Garland and Baby Rose Marie, used Vitaphone films as a stepping-stone toward bigger and better opportunities. Most singers, dancers, and musicians, and comics featured in Vitaphone films, however, faded into obscurity. It can be safely said that none of the Vitaphone artists found popularity or stardom as a direct result of their appearances in the films – until recently.

By the middle of The Depression, like many of their acts, Vitaphone Shorts became lost to time. The movies had two separate elements – the film and the large vinyl discs containing the sound, both of which were extremely fragile. Since they were thought of as expendable, the films and discs were usually separated and were often stacked away in closets or thrown away altogether. In 1987, Leith Adams, Curator of the Warner Brothers Archive at USC, discovered hundreds of original Vitaphone discs in an abandoned Warner Brothers recording studio. He sent the discs to Robert Gitt, Preservation Officer of the UCLA Film and Television Archives, who, after cataloguing them, began the search for the discs' matching picture elements, held at the Library of Congress, The George Eastman House, and the Museum of Modern Art. Once both elements of a short were paired, they were transferred and preserved on 35mm film.

1991 saw the creation of The Vitaphone Project, dedicated to locating, restoring, and exhibiting short films from pre-1940. Shortly after it was founded by historian and preservationist Ron Hutchinson, organization began compiling and screening annual evenings of the films, which included recreations of the Warner Brothers' original programs. Now well into its second decade, the Vitaphone Project's search for archival

material is an ongoing one. “Begun at a time when the Internet was just starting, virtually any discoveries of soundtrack disks occurred through word of mouth,” says Hutchinson. “Today, barely a month goes by without our receiving an e-mail from someone with a disk, or seeking information on a relative who was in a Vitaphone.” The annual Vitaphone screenings continue to gain popularity and the shorts are now readily available on Youtube and through multi-volume DVD sets.

The shorts’ fan base continues growing as current viewers delight in discovering comedy and music that is so old, it’s new. Some of the films’ performers and material have developed a cult following in recent years, including Harry Rose’s film *The Broadway Jester* (1929) with its double entendre song, “Frankfurter Sandwiches,” and the aforementioned *The Beau Brummels* (1929) featuring comedy team Shaw and Lee. In an interview with Ron Hutchinson, following a screening of Vitaphones, interviewer William McKinley commented:

WM: My favorite act on the bill is Shaw & Lee. That is some of the hippest comedy I have seen in a long time.

RH: They are bizarre. People love them more than any of the others we’ve done. I’ve heard from their grandsons. They’ve attended the screenings and seen how beloved they are now. Who knew who those guys (Shaw and Lee) were, even three years ago? Nobody.

Nearly ninety years after Sam Warner convinced his brothers to take a chance with talking pictures, the Vitaphone Shorts’ current popularity is proof of the old Vaudeville adage, “The show must go on.”

Filmography:

The Beau Brummels (1928), No director credited. Warner Brothers Vitaphone. DVD.

A Better 'Ole (1926), Charles Reisner. Warner Brothers Vitaphone.

The Broadway Jester (1929) No director credited. Warner Brothers Vitaphone.

Youtube.

Don Juan (1926), Alan Crosland. Warner Brothers Vitaphone.

The Eccentric Entertainer (1929) No director credited. Warner Brothers Vitaphone.

DVD.

The Great Train Robbery (1903), Edwin S. Porter.

The Jazz Singer (1927). Alan Crosland. Warner Brothers Vitaphone. DVD.

Lambchops (1929). No director credited. Warner Brothers Vitaphone. Youtube.

A Plantation Act (1926) No director credited. Warner Brothers Vitaphone. DVD.

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Comment:

A very precise history of a much-overlooked topic. Most would have concentrated on *The Jazz Singer*, but your choice to look at sound through the shorts provides an interesting perspective that also makes one want to revisit the traditional notions of how sound pictures first got out to the audience. The breakdowns of the individual shorts/acts are very good and the opening really set the tone. In looking at the preservation/death of vaudeville, you caught the irony of sound. Nice job all around. Hope to see you in a future class. 20/20. Final Grade: A