

SOUNDIES

Lurking somewhere to the side of film history, buried among the details of American popular culture, is the story of Soundies, a brief but fascinating phenomenon that deserves closer inspection. Soundies were an outgrowth of the juke-box, itself a relatively recent addition to the American scene. Mills, one of the country's major suppliers of juke-boxes, got the idea of marketing a machine that would provide customers with both pictures and sound when they wanted to hear a popular song.

The Mills Panoram Soundies Machine was about seven feet high, three or four feet wide, with a viewing screen approximately 16X20 inches. When not in operation, the screen showed a series of colored light patterns produced by a cylindrical mirror inside the machine, reflecting onto the ground-glass screen.

For 10 cents the customer viewed one three minute Soundie. The machine held eight different selections, but these were mounted on one reel, so if #4 had just played, it was necessary to watch (and pay for) #5,6, and 7 before viewing #8.

Inside the machine was an RCA projector mechanism with a threading set-up that perpetually rewind the film even as it was projected. The projector was on the floor of the console, and it projected forward onto a mirror at the front of the unit. The mirror was at a 45-degree angle, bounding the image to the top of the machine, into an extremely large mirror at the opposite corner, positioned so that it in turn reflected the image onto the rear of the glass screen, for viewing. Because of the number of reflections, the films were printed in reverse, so they would appear correct when finally viewed by the customer. A piece of sensor foil on the films apparently actuated and turned off the machine for each three-minute selection.

The story of Soundies is now picked up by veteran songwriter Sam Coslow. "I got in at the very inception of the thing. When I first heard about the new machine that had been invented to show musical films, I figured that with my background of writing songs for the Hollywood musicals of the 1930's, this would be something that would be up my alley, so I contacted the Mills juke-box people in Chicago, who held the patents and were manufacturing the machines. At that stage, they were at a loss as to how they could get product for the Soundie machines, and after a series of meetings with them, we formed a film production company known as RCM Productions, Inc., which held the exclusive right to produce these three-minute musical films. The RCM stood for Roosevelt, Coslow, and Mills, the Roosevelt being my friend Jimmy Roosevelt (son of FDR) who was associated with me in these productions. We leased offices and studio space at the Old Eagle Lion Studios on Santa Monica Boulevard in Hollywood, engaged a full film production staff, and I spent the next three years (the early 1940s) grinding out these three-minute Soundies at the unbelievable rate of about five or six every week.

"I acted as producer, script writer, casting director, and wrote a great many original song numbers especially for these films. I picked most of the artists myself, and let them use the same numbers that they already recorded and performed, in most cases, and in other cases writing songs especially for them. We had very few problems with song clearances,

as I made an arrangement with Harry Fox, who represented most of the U.S. music publishers, and we were allowed to do almost any number on the market for a nominal flat fee. To the best of my recollection, this averaged somewhere around \$100 per song.

"I was quite amazed to find that we were able to get a great many of the leading pop music performers of the day for reasonable fees. I think we paid Louis Armstrong \$5,000 for one week's shooting, which averaged out to only about seven or eight hundred dollars per Soundie, and similar fees were paid to people like Les Brown and his Orchestra, Skinnay Ennis, the Nat King Cole Trio, Will Osborne and his Orchestra, Gale Storm, Stan Kenton and his Orchestra, and a great many of the other big bands and singers of that era. Our roster of artists looked like a Who's Who of the popular music industry.

"When we found out that a great many of the artists were playing long engagements in the East and were not available in Hollywood, we set up a separate New York unit under Jack Barry, and acts I had signed up did their shooting in our New York studios. Don't forget, this was shortly after the big depression of the 1930s, so we were able to get all of these names at fees that were a tiny fraction of what they could command today. As I recall, it would cost us anywhere between two thousand and five thousand dollars for the complete production cost per Soundie, which was about par for low-budget shooting costs on three minutes of film in those days. Most of them were profitable, as they were rented out to several thousand different locations (mostly cocktail lounges, hotel lobbies, etc.) all over the country.

"Aside from the big stars, we had to balance out these more expensive Soundies by making a number of less expensive ones with unknowns, and we were constantly having musical auditions for new singers and bands that the agents were sending up for us to hear. Among these unknowns, I take great pride in the fact that the very first appearance on film was on our Soundies by a lot of people who made it big afterwards - people like Doris Day, Yvonne de Carlo, Marilyn Maxwell, Dolores Gray, Morey Amsterdam, Nat King Cole, Gale Storm, Cyd Charisse, Spike Jones, and dozens of others I cannot think of at the moment."

Soundies certainly ran the gamut of quality, both pictorially and musically, but considering the pace at which they were produced, and the range of budgets, this shouldn't be surprising. Some, like Louis Armstrong's "Shine", feature quite elaborate settings and ingenious visual ideas, while others look hopelessly cheap and sometimes inept. Cab Calloway's "Minnie the Moocher" is a pleasing film of his hit song, but apparently no one bothered to instruct Cab to lip-sync his own playback, an error that the film editor tried to fix in the cutting room. The results are largely successful, although there are still moments when the picture and sound simply don't match.

Some of the credit or blame for varying quality rests with the performers, as well. A personality like Fats Waller apparently relished the opportunity to ham it up for the camera, although the dance work by a group of flirtatious chorines in "Honeysuckle Rose" leaves something to be desired. On the other hand, the Mills Brothers are fairly staid performers, so their musical numbers provide more for the ear than for the eye,

although in "Paper Doll", Dorothy Dandridge plays a pint-sized cut-out who comes to life and dances during the second chorus of the song.

Some of the Soundies were played for laughs, as in Spike Jones' quartet of musicals, although it seems to this writer that adding visual mugging to the City Slickers' music really dissipates the overall results. It's more fun to listen to Jones' records and use your imagination than to watch a Soundie and be assaulted from all sides. It is interesting to note, however, that Mel Blanc puts in an appearance in Spike Jones' "Clink, Clink, Another Drink".

Other comic efforts ranged from hiring Mack Sennet comic Hank Mann to appear in a number called "The Sultan's Charms", to having diminutive Jerry Bergen hoke it up as a symphonic conductor while Jeri Sullivan sang "Mr. Paganini" from a theater balcony in "You'll Have To Swing It". Dialect comic Willie Howard filmed three-minute versions of his comic routines like "Comes the Revolution". Still other Soundies provide occasional unintended laughter in watching performers from Major Bowes' discard pile doing song numbers in front of cardboard sets - or as in "Thanks for the Buggy Ride", observing Gene Krupa pretending to play the drums, apparently more concerned with gyrating for the movie audience.

Because the Soundies could not possibly hope to be as current as records in the juke boxes, Coslow had performers do their biggest hits, or a variety of old standards. This may have cost the company some customers among young people disinterested in ten-year-old numbers, but it provides a valuable backlog- of classic performances by top musical performers. Soundies featuring Fats Waller, The Mill Brothers, and Hoagy Carmichael, among others, distill their finest moments, and occasional diversions such as Doroty Dandridge's dancing in "Paper Doll" and "Lazy Bones" are much more enjoyable than the intrusions often found in these performers' Hollywood feature-film production numbers.

It is important to note that Coslow and company turned out literally hundreds of Soundies during the wartime years with only a handful retaining any genuine value. Sitting through an evening of Soundies today, it takes stamina to get through such as "The Pumpernickel Polka" before being rewarded with Count Basie.

RCM Productions did have some competition, but none of these independents could afford the major names Coslow attracted, and their success was fleeting. One of these firms hired Larry Clinton and his Orchestra to perform eight numbers, apparently filmed the same day, on the same set, with the same angles. Other rivals tried filming musical vignettes, as opposed to straightfoward song renditions, but without big name stars, these attracted little attention, although their quality was often admirable.

In 1934 the RCM production unit was hired by MGM to film two-reel musicals, the first of which, "Heavenly Music", won an Academy Award. Then the company began making training films for the Government on a fairly steady basis. At the end of the war, Coslow

resigned as production head of the Soundies firm in order to take a position as producer at Paramount. He retained his partnership in the company, but his leadership had been responsible for virtually everything that occurred on film.

Around this time, the whole Soundies idea started to sag. The system had its built-in weaknesses. The selections were changed at least once a month, but each machine only held eight films, and since the large screen permitted a great many people to watch at the same time, the novelty of each selection wore off quickly. The Soundies also suffered in comparison to juke-boxes which, in the same bar or amusement parlor, might have the very latest hit records to attract more attention. Finally, the large number of unknown performers doing unknown songs worked against the Soundies concept.

By the end of the war, the Mills machines were apparently either pushed into a dark corner, or in the case of some penny arcades, reworked with smaller screens and eye-cups for personal viewing of girlie films. The machines themselves were sold by many camera dealers, going for as little as \$150. The price was low because their usefulness was clearly limited; Soundies were no longer being made, the machine only held an 800-foot reel, and the image was reversed to boot. To take the projection mechanism out of the console and work it into a new system would have been unfeasible.

At the same time, used Soundies were sold on the home-movie market, often in grab-bag lots where the price came down to 35 cents apiece! Many were badly battered prints, indicating that the Mills machine didn't take very good care of its films. Around 1946, Walter O. Gutlohn started offering new prints of the big-name Soundies, with a corrected image. Castle Films bought many others and incorporated them into their "Music Album" series.

To quote Coslow, in the late 1940s RCM Productions "gave up the ghost," because television was making new inroads and Soundies became obsolete. Official Films bought the backlog, however, and released many Soundies to television, as well as on the 16mm market. The Soundies production concept was adopted by Snader Telescriptions, which produced scores of new three-minute reels specifically for television use. These too had a short life, and quickly wound up on used 16mm film lists.

Some twenty years later, a reincarnation of the Mills machine appeared in Europe, and was imported to the U.S. as Scopitone. This device offered about 25 selections, which could be chosen individually, each one in color, on 16mm magnetic sound in stereo. The films were quite elaborately done, but their appeal was limited and Scopitone never enjoyed the success of Soundies and its life as a "gimmick" was brief.

Soundies' main footnote to film history is their importance as permanent visual records of great entertainers doing their most famous songs. Still widely available on the 16mm market, they have outlived their original showcase, and remain precious pieces of film for all popular music buffs.

The preceding article on "Soundies" originally appeared in "Film Fan Monthly" and was sent by Bozy White to Bob Dupuis who forwarded it to your editor.