Program for February 13, 1957

1929 -- 1933

100% ALL-TALKING PROGRAM!

Starring

BETTY BRONSON

and

WILLIAM S. HART

featuring

JOHN BARRYMORE * LILLIAN GISH * WILLIAM FARNUM * LAURA LAPLANTE *
GLORIA SWANSON * DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS * MURRAY McURRAY * ERICH VON STROHEIM *
HENRY B. WALTHALL * RICARDO CORTEZ * EVA NOVAK * RALPH INCE * ALAN HALE *
EVE SOUTHERN * NOAH BEERY * ESTHER RALSTON * JOHN MACK BROWN * ROBERT BOG WORTH *
PRISCILLA LEAN * CHARLIE MURRAY * JASON ROBARDS * BILLY ELVAN *

and introducing

CLARK GABLE * EDWARD G. ROBINSON * JAMES CAGNEY * JOAN BENEDICT *
LETTE DAVIS * SPENCER TRACY * BARBARA STANWYCK

The period of the changeover from silent movies to sound is a colorful and confused one -- and much too complex a period to be comprehensively covered in one program like this. Nor are we attempting such a coverage. Instead, we are throwing the spotlight on two often-overlooked aspects of those years -- the success (or failure) of the great stars of the silents as they tried to readjust themselves to a completely changed industry; and the operations of the independent company. It is important that we stress that our films tonight are NOT typical of that period as a whole, but only typical of those two aspects. While there was a distressingly eager abandoning of the superbly visual art of the cinema, without sound, in order to add words and music -- and little else -- one cannot, and should not, dismiss all of the early talkies as being automatically inferior to the silents they were replacing. Most certainly "Hallelujah", "Vampyr", the Lubitsch films, Alan Crosland's delightful "Viennoise Nights" -- and many others -- were pure cinema. They used sound and were not dominated by it.

One of the most obvious results of the revolution was the drawing of a definite dividing line between the major studios and the independents. During the silent period, independent product was often as good as (indeed, was frequently superior to) that of the major studios. Independent producers like Chadwick and Stromberg put real production values into their pictures; top-notch camerawork, plenty of sets -- and big ones, too, careful art direction. Chadwick's "The Bells" of the mid-20's (shown by this society two years ago) is an excellent example of a minor company giving its product a veneer and expensive look equal to anything the majors were offering. MGM excepted perhaps. Nobody ever outdid Metro in sheer gloss. And, conversely, few companies ever
got away with murder as successfully as Paramount, which consistently put really shoddy and cheap production values into their pictures.

But sound presented new problems -- and the major companies, with their smoothly organized studios, were better equipped to solve them than the independents, many of which had no studios of their own anyway. Too, the market was changing: the double-feature bill was now established, and even the majors, Warners especially, were turning out more and more films. To keep their heads above water, the independents had to strive for quantity rather than quality too -- and they had to get this quantity on the market without taking time out to solve all their mechanical problems. Sound tracks were often quite poor, and camerawork below par. (Westerns were particularly afflicted on the independent market; such production niceties as running inserts, and worthwhile locations, had to be forgotten. And a further budget-paring expedient was found in the elimination of background music, which is one of the key excitement-building factors in any western. In fact, if there was any one single factor which can be said to be responsible for creating this tremendous gap between the quality of the independent and the major westerns -- a gap that had hardly existed in silent westerns -- it was this question of music. Initially, even the majors didn't exploit background music in westerns either -- but they caught on to it much quicker than did the independents).

In a way, there is a parallel between this early sound period, and that of the pre-1912 era. It was again a question of comparing technical and creative knowhow with the primitive essentials. The major companies could be considered the equivalent of Biograph, and the independents, the Selig and Nestor category.

However, despite all their shortcomings, the independents of this period tried. They had to make films quickly and cheaply, but they did the best they knew how -- and often they succeeded surprisingly well. The really unworthy independent companies were those that came later, in the mid-30's - Ajax, Puritan, Resolve etc. - the companies that turned out shoddy work almost as a matter of policy, the way that American International does today.

Two things the independents of 1922-1923 usually had to offer were: stories and stars. If they made action films, they had stories with vigorous sweep - corny if you like, but virile stuff, in the spirit of the silents. In other directions, they concentrated on really powerful original stories, or adaptations of popular novels. Quite often, the plot material was superior to the handling, and would have benefited by more careful treatment at a larger studio -- but the important thing is that the attempt was there.

The situation with the stars was something else again. A lot of nonsense has been written about the "tragedy" of the silent greats who were unable to talk for the screen. But how many actually were there? John Gilbert is frequently cited as the prime example of this, and what an unfortunate - and misleading - example this is. Certainly Gilbert's voice was adequate, even at first -- and it improved tremendously with each picture. Perusal of the fan magazines of the time shows that Gilbert's devotees frequently went into print to praise his voice! The legend that Gilbert was laughed off the screen is one perpetuated by the latter-day "historians" who probably never even saw a Gilbert talkie. The real tragedy of Gilbert was that his vogue -- and his type of movie -- had passed with the silent screen. It was a part of the romance and magic of the movies that sound, with all its advantages, destroyed forever. And while Gilbert was a good actor, he wasn't
good enough (as John Barrymore was) to carve a whole new career for himself.

Suddenly the silent cinema had become ancient history — and many of the players who had been its top stars were regarded in a similar light by the studio heads. Contracts that were coming to an end were not renewed. New stars were being created — and some of them were pretty good too. This left the "old guard" — many of whom were still youngsters, but some of whom were uncomfortably just past their prime — very much bewildered, and, more to the point, out of work.

The rise of the independent "B" film helped them. It gave them time to readjust, to prove that they could still do it -- or to prove that they couldn't. And then in their turn helped the "B" picture — an independent producer out to make a film for £20,000 or less, found that he could co-star three or four players who, only a few years ago, would have proved a formidable salary-combination even for a major studio. The big names lent prestige to little pictures, and both kept the other going during those difficult years of reconstruction and readjustment.

In our compilation tonight, we think you'll get a pretty good idea of just how the stars — and the independents — operated in those days. You'll see samples of the really rugged plot material, and of the "all-star" casts. You'll see some of the difficulties too — the occasionally awkward camerawork, including the use of silent-speed in action scenes — and the uncertain approach to background music. In many of the earlier talkies, background music was considered artificial and a distraction from realism. Thus, excuses for it had to be made — and characters were forever turning on the radio. (One concert in "Indiscreet" ran for almost a reel, minus commercials, and minus any kind of music shape, but proving to be remarkably adaptable to the moods of Gloria Swanson.)


PROGRAM, IN ORDER OF SCREENING

1329

"THE TEMPERANCE LECTURE"

This little ½-reel item is really not so different from the split-reel items and vaudeville sketches of the early days. Nothing much happens, and the final gag is pretty anti-climactic, but it's an extremely interesting little oddity. Charlie Murray is starred, with Lon Poff as the lecturer.

"PHANTOM IN THE HOUSE" (Trem Carr for Continental Productions; directed by Phil Rosen, from a novel by Andrew Soutar.

With not too much technique, but with a strong plot, some good sets, and some lively late 20’s music, "Phantom in the House" was quite a good little picture. Gentle, kindly Henry B. Walthall gave a beautiful performance, and Ricardo Cortez was at ease at the hero. These two former Griffith players certainly took to talkies far more readily than did Nancy Welford (the heroine) or Grace Valentine (as Walthall's wife) who contributed two of the most outrageously bad performances in the annals of the cinema.

"PEACOCK ALLEY" (Tiffany; directed by Marcel de Sano, written by Carey Wilson); starring Mae Murray, with Jason Robards, Georges Barrard, Billy Bevan
Since our 20-minutes of excerpts from this film contain the beginning, the end, and a good deal of the middle, it's unusually representative of the film as a whole. Here you can see the old ice-box camerawork in all its glory, while listening to some of the most overblown dialogue ever written -- dialogue that would have looked fine in subtitle form, but which, spoken, dates the film far more than technical aspects. The film is obviously quite lavish for Tiffany, and is a real showcase for Mae Murray, who emotes from A to Z, has coy love scenes, stormily dramatic ones, and sings a particularly enjoyable number. Actually Miss Murray's appeal is hard to fathom and (for me at least) doesn't extend past her "Mormon Maid" period. Certainly she was very lucky to have "The Merry Widow" to give her a real boost. William Daniels, the cameraman, tells amusing, if ungallant, stories of the problems he faced in photographing one of her early talkies. Obviously no longer a girl, and not helped too much by makeup, she had to rely on camerawork. Daniels added filters to his lens, which helped a lot. So much so, that it was decided to add more. The results were even better, so -- more filters the next day. This went on right through the picture, until, as Daniels tells it, the film looked as though it had been shot on location through clouds of mist and haze.

"THE GREAT GABBO" (James Cruze productions)

Our sequence from this is very brief -- merely Erich von Stroheim in a temper tantrum. Perhaps, after all, the most fitting scene anyway. Certainly neither Stroheim or Cruze should be left out of this program, hence this very brief scene from an extremely interesting film that we played in its entirety four or five years ago.

"LASCA OF THE RIO GRANDE"

Not to be confused with the John Macht Brown feature for Universal, this is an interesting reminder of the days when if a film talked -- that was all it had to do. Robert Bosworth, a good actor of the old school, but without the range of Bill Hart or Bill Parnum, used to pal around with Jack London and liked to picture himself as a rugged adventurer to whom acting was only an incidental interest. How he must have enjoyed reciting this old pseudo-Service poem, "Lasca of the Rio Grande".

1931

"INDISCREET" (United Artists release, produced by Feature Productions -- DeSylva, Brown & Henderson, and Leo McCarey; directed by Leo McCarey)

Although slowly paced for its slight plot material, "Indiscreet" was a well mounted production, with some good comedy bits and some lovely songs. This one reel excerpt is one of the best sequences in the film, combining comedy, strong drama and some fancy camerawork (by Gregg Toland). Gloria, who would burst into song on the slightest provocation (or even without it) sings "Come to Me" while pretending to vamp Monroe Oswey in order to save innocent sister Barbara Kent from him. Unfortunately boy-friend Ben Lyon gets an eyeful too. But everything worked out happily a reel and a half later.

"THE SEA GHOST" (Peerless; directed by William Nigh)

The really astonishing thing about this film (we are showing two sequences, for a total of 10 minutes) is how exceptionally good Laura LaPlante is. She looks as lovely as ever, has a fine speaking voice, and has all the appeal she ever had. (In fact, she still has most of it!) Just why she didn't stay a top-liner in talkies is a real mystery. Certainly Laura, looking around at her somewhat seedy surroundings, must have wondered how in heaven's name Universal's biggest feminine
star had gotten involved in all of this. However, she looks great, gives her all, and it's nice to see her again. She plays an heiress, and there's much by-play with a secret will. One of the characters at one point in the proceedings (but not in our excerpts) tells her "You have been surrounded by birds of prey all your life" — shades of "The Cat and the Canary", which Laura had done at Universal only a few years earlier!

1932

"LAW OF THE SEA" (Chadwick Productions for Monogram release; directed by Otto Brower).

Another lady in distress in the hands of a lecherous sea captain — but with somewhat different results. Chadwick made several interesting "B" talkies, but never regained the stature he had held in silents. His talkies were often built largely around obviously ancient stock footage. "Law of the Sea" was several cuts above the average though, and had a real "all-star" cast in William Farnum, Priscilla Dean, Ralph Ince and Eve Southern. Heinie Conklin was there too, with F. X. Boll and Sally Blane taking care of the romantic leads. Although Priscilla Dean was listed second in the cast, she actually had a very minor role and was killed in the first reel; this was typical independent modus operandi, getting a fairly big name for a small part, shooting all of his (or her) scenes in one day, and thus paying only a one day salary. Farnum and Ince play in the full-blooded silent tradition, and have a couple of grand scraps, one of which is included in our excerpts. And Eve Southern, whose lovely eyes helped her so much in playing the saint-like girl in Fairbanks' "The Gaucho", here does a complete about-face, and puts those eyes to more constructive and devastating effect as the vamp.

"FLAMES" (Chadwick Productions, for Monogram; directed by Karl Brown).

Not an important, or even a really good "B", "Flames" was loaded with stock footage and cheap sets, and is included only because it represents rather graphically a dual comedown — Karl Brown as director had earlier photographed "The Covered Wagon", and directed "Spark Love", while up until earlier that year, Johnny Mack Brown had been a leading man at MGM, where he had appeared opposite Garbo, Crawford and other top-liners, as well as co-starring with Mary Pickford in "Coquette" at UA. Although he was an exceptionally handsome player, and had a pleasant personality, he was certainly no great dramatic actor — especially in talkies — and from this scene with Noel Francis, it's not difficult to see why MGM didn't renew his contract. However, Johnny gives the scene his all and apparently succeeds in convincing himself that Miss Francis is a step up from Garbo and Crawford. Success as a western star lay just around the corner however, and Johnny was soon back on top again.

"MR. ROBINSON CRUSOE" (UA; directed by Eddie Sutherland, story by Douglas Fairbanks).

One of the least remembered, but one of the most enjoyable of the later Fairbanks films, was this light-hearted little frolic which discarded the pomposity and pretentiousness of most of his post-"3 Musketeers" films, and recaptured the charm and breezy sense of fun that had characterised his old Artcraft pictures. William Farnum is back on our screen again in this one too! A couple of lines of unnecessary narration intrude over our two excerpts, but to have blooped them out would have lost the original track as well, so we left well enough alone.

1933

"TO THE LAST MAN" (Paramount, directed by Henry Hathaway).
1933 can hardly be considered a year of "early talkies", but we decided to stretch a point for the sake of including some scenes of beautiful Esther Ralston in "To the Last Man", one of the best of a fine series of Zane Grey westerns made for Paramount. Noah Beery, who, whose fruity voice made him an even better sound villain than he had been in "Beau Geste" and other great silents, was a little more subdued in this one -- although he inevitably managed to start every sentence with a grimace, a scowl, and a grunt! Also in 1933, he pulled off some beautiful villainy in another Grey western, "Man of the Forest". Our short excerpt from "To The Last Man" features Noah, Jack La Rue and Esther Ralston -- all introduced by subtitles, incidentally, in a pleasing return to silent-screen grammar which never caught on again. Esther, who had been so good in "Peter Pan" and "A Kiss for Cinderella", was very active in the early 30's, drifted out of films, and then attempted a comeback under a new name in "The Spy Ring". Currently she is very busy in the Christian Science field.

"HIS DOUBLE LIFE" (Paramount; directed by Arthur Hopkins and William de Mille)

This gentle and quite charming little film, an adaptation of "Buried Alive" (remade in the 40's as "Holy Matrimony", with Monty Woolley and Gracie Fields) represents the last screen appearance of Lillian Gish as a leading lady, and she already appears as a far more mature woman than she did in her previous film, "The Swan". The role of the sympathetic, outwardly gentle and sweet, inwardly iron-willed and slightly bossy spinster, obviously suited Miss Gish down to the ground, and she did far more with it than Gracie Fields did in later years. Her neat, if severe, sense of comedy, and her sympathetic charm make one envy Roland Young's matrimonial bliss and wish, once again, that life were more like the movies. The film, made at Paramount's Long Island studios, and backed by a wistful musical score and expert photography (Arthur Edeson) is a pleasant reminder of those "civilised" little pictures of the 30's (to which we would add "Mr. Cohen Takes a Walk" from England) which are now no more -- except for, on a slightly lower level, "Fanny and the Bachelor".

- INTERMISSION -

"THE MEDICINE MAN" starring BETTY BRONSON

(1930)


Only five years after her staggering success in the Barrie adaptations, "Peter Pan" and "A Kiss for Cinderella" had made her a serious (and younger) rival to Mary Pickford, Betty Bronson was without any studio contract. The reasons for this incredible mismanagement of a brilliant and unique talent have little or nothing to do with the coming of sound, and can be traced back to the complete lack of imagination of Paramount's production heads. Her performances in the aforementioned Barrie films so firmly established Bronson as a master of pantomime and whimsy, of comedy tinged with pathos, that Paramount frankly didn't know how to utilise her. She scored in "Are Parents People?" (shown twice by this society) and other modern comedies; but most of these gave the impression of being time-killers until the next "Peter Pan" came along. Unfortunately whimsy cannot be produced to order as readily as melodrama or comedy; and in the 30's, nobody apparently really wanted it. The two Barrie films hadn't lost money -- but they hadn't really made money either. The public was flocking to see Clara Bow, rolled stockings
and jazz babies -- they didn't really care whether Tinkerbell died or not! So, Paramount wasted Bronson in trifles like "Ritzy", and even a Lane Chandler western, "Open Range". Other studios took over, and tried to create another "Peter Pan" for Betty - First National put her into a "flimsy called "Paradise", but it didn't click. With the coming of sound, Betty played in "The Singing Pool" -- but Jolson and Davey Lee were given most of the limelight.

The films in which Betty Bronson should have excelled were films which, alas, just had no audiences in the late 30's. Even Mary Pickford had milked her own specialised field pretty dry, and was moving into zippiest things. Had Bronson arrived on the scene ten years earlier - in time perhaps to appear in Tournepir's "The blue Bird" - she might well have rivalled Pickford not only in popularity, but also in durability. However, even if Miss Bronson had made no films other than the two Barrie adaptations under Herbert Brenon, her place as one of the most individual - and charming - talents of the screen would be safely assured.

"THE MEDICINE MAN", like "Paradise", tries hard to be a vehicle for Betty Bronson, to give her a typical Cinderella role. However, the land of Bronson-Pickford sentiment was now further away than ever in the hard-bitten thirties, and although a well-made film, especially for an independent, it obviously had insufficient creative talent behind it to produce very much of a stir. Even so, it is an enjoyable, nostalgic film, with evenly divided blacks and whites, and characters drawn from the typical small-town stories of the silent screen. Particularly enjoyable in this respect is the evil farmer who wants to marry Betty -- and is prepared to put off butchering his pigs until the day after the wedding so that she can learn the intricacies of the trade too!

Quite well made and photographed, "The Medicine Man" nevertheless has many "signs" of its times. The lack of background music ... except when someone turns on a gramophone; the lack of filters in the night scenes, which of course were shot in daylight ... the reluctance to cut away for unimportant action. One scene of a farmer taking his leave is done entirely by having another character wave to him off-screen, while we hear (and it's quite a long shot, with much possibly ad-libbed dialogue) a motor sputtering in the street outside.

On the whole though, "The Medicine Man" holds up surprisingly well, due mainly to Betty Bronson's sensitive and graceful playing. Incidentally, attendees at the Museum of Modern Art's special Saturday morning series of screenings can look forward to seeing Betty at her peak in "Peter Pan", just two Saturdays hence. Jack Benny shows that his style and patter haven't changed one whit in the 25 years since this film was made. Eva Novak is rather wasted in a few scenes, and E. Alyn Warren (from "The Bells", and as Grant in Griffith's "Abraham Lincoln") makes a fine tyrannical father ... the next best thing to Gustav von Seyffertitz in fact. Students of the old Griffith Biograph films may recognise Charles West in a few scenes as one of the townspeople.

Incidentally, there are a couple of rather disturbing cuts in our print, which is otherwise in fine shape. "The Medicine Man" was one of the first films to hit TV in the forties, and cuts made to get it down to a specific running time were done with supreme incelency to say the least. If the film had to be cut, there are several comedy bits with Tom Dugan that could well have been excised. But no -- Tom Dugan is left completely intact, and -- sheer heresy -- two Bronson scenes have been removed! While the film is no masterpiece, and thus not harmed too much dramatically by the cuts, the sheer insanity of the method of cutting is infuriating.
"The Medicine Man" was one of Betty Bronson's last films. When she married in 1932, she retired from the screen, returning only once - as another "Cinderella" heroine opposite Gene Autry in "The Yodelin' Kid from Pine Ridge".

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"WHEN THE TALKIES WERE YOUNG"

Bob Youngson's meticulously compiled two-reeler of highlights from five Warner films of the early 30's helps to round out our picture a little by stressing the point that we made earlier - the tremendously increased gap that the talkies created between the films of the major studios and the independents. Too, it introduces many of the newer stars who were then taking over - Cagney, Tracy, Davis -- all of whom are still much bigger names than most of the interim discoveries. The films covered are: "Sinner's Holiday", with Cagney, Joan Blondell, Lucille La Verne, Warren Hymer; "20,000 Years in Sing Sing" with Tracy, Davis and Louis Calhern; "Five Star Final" with Robinson, Karloff, Aline MacMahon, Purnell Pratt; Wellman's "Night Nurse" with Gable and Stanwyck, a rather distasteful film that looks a lot better than it really was from this excellent excerpt, and "Svengali". "His superbly-made film was dismissed quite casually at the time, but today seems quite outstanding. The sets and camerawork were magnificent. Some may see a German influence in the overall design, but there was certainly no German influence in Archie Mayo's well-paced direction. And Barrymore's performance as Svengali is still one of his best. Incidentally, was it film history or slyly sadism that caused Bob Youngson to refer to "Night Nurse" being made a quarter of a century ago JUST as the camera was panning Barbara Stanwyck across the screen?! Finally, for those who enjoy getting that "little bit extra" at the Huff Society -- this print contains four words (in the "Five Star Final" sequence) that were censored out when the short was released. We don't think you'll have too much trouble discovering the words!

WILLIAM S. HART introduces "TUMBLEWEEDS".

Hart filmed this prologue to "Tumbleweeds" on the occasion of its reissue in 1939. It was shot on his ranch at Newhall, California, and - for me at least - it is the most moving eight minutes of film I have ever seen. Hart must have been a truly magnificent actor in his Shakespearean days, and it is really a tragedy that he was never able to make a talking film. Had he been younger, he could well have captured the position that Gary Cooper soon secured for himself. Hart was an actor with a voice of tremendous power and range, and in this film we really see him in two capacities - first as a wry old storyteller, recounting tales of the West as it really was; and secondly, as an old and tired man, literally delivering his own epitaph. Hart was a sentimental man, and he almost seems to lose control of himself once or twice towards the end; certainly there is no doubt of the absolute sincerity of what he is saying as he bids goodbye to the western fans that he obviously loves so dearly. Hart was always sentimental about his own death - as early as 1917 he referred to the day when "The Boss Ranger Calls me over the Great Divide" - but here, since he did die comparatively soon after the film was made, his farewell is doubly poignant.

Program Notes & Enquiries: Wm.K.Eyerson, Manhattan Towers, 2166 Broadway, NYC 24

Next program: Thursday Feb.27 in room 3-B.
BESSIL LOVE, LEWIS STONE, WALLACE BRIAN in "THE LOST WORLD"
REGINALD DENNY in "THE KENTUCKY DERBY".