"THE KING OF JAZZ" (Universal, 1930) Directed by John Murray Anderson
Sketches by Harry Buskin; Songs by George Gershwin, Mabel Wayne, Milton Ager, Jack Yellen; Musical Score, Ferde Grofé; Arranger, James Dietrich; Dance Director, Russell Markert; Settings and Costumes, Herman Rosse;
10 reels. Length 69 minutes. Color sequences (the 1st. in color) by Walter Lants

As the big all-star revues of 1929-30 have one by one become available again, we have all wondered whether or not "The King of Jazz" could live up to its reputation - or be as spectacular as its stills indicated. Warners' "The Show of Shows" had the best star roster; MGM's "Hollywood Revue" was abysmal; Fox's entry the weakest of the lot. "Paramount on Parade" seemed to be the best of all, probably because its employment of diverse directorial talents did at least result in variety and many sequences that were real genuine cinema, and not just photographed vaudeville. Now, the long-lost "The King of Jazz" can be seen again; if it's not quite the entertainment block-buster we might have hoped for, it's still quite easily the best of the whole group, and one can well understand the impact it must have had at the time.

Its pastel two-color Technicolor is a major asset of course, ensuring that it is always pleasing and often fascinating just to look at, even when the entertainment being paraded is not exactly breath-taking. Its spectacle naturally suffers by comparison with the later Busby Berkeley material, but even so it's still impressive how much more impressive it must have seemed in 1930, when its huge and often imaginative sets were contrasted with the limited theatre-stage environs of "The Show of Shows". Possibly some of its spectacle was accidental; reportedly, John Murray Anderson was unfamiliar with all technique, and not knowing that the cameras could move around the sets, he constructed the sets to move around the camera! But quite apart from its size and its color, it has far more filmic flair and imagination than any of the other big revues of the period; the Rhapsody in Blue and Melting Pot numbers use color really creatively, and at least one other number - with chorus girls descending on a meticulously constructed large-scale miniature of New York - anticipates the design of Berkeley's 42nd Street number, Music, it must be admitted, holds up rather better than comedy. Some of the songs are delightful, all of them enjoyable - even John Boles ultra-stiff rendition of "Honorey". But the comedy is something else again; mostly it is limited to blackout sketches, so brief and anti-climactic that it is hard to believe that they have come and gone, yet alone that the talents of Laura La Plante and other good names have been squandered on them. But perhaps it is a mercy that the comedy is so brief - one prolonged comedy routine with a long-drawn out story about a goldfish just doesn't hold water (no pun intended). Curiously enough, these weak comedy sketches seem to gain with repeated viewings - they hardly get funnier in themselves, but they do have the determination and sheer guts of traditional vaudeville, and somehow become rather endearing after a while; even that dreadful goldfish story! But at least the film is well-paced and well-constructed, and gets decidedly better as it progresses. Visually it's a delight, and it's a pleasure to see a young Bing Crosby - to say nothing of a young and leggy Neil O'Day, a decade before she became Johnny Mack Brown's team-mate and stunt-riding cohort in Universal westerns. Curiously, there is comparatively little "jazz" in the film - none at all of the Dixieland variety and it's an interesting reminder that jazz was once a term for purely popular, non-classical music. With the cacophony that passes for music today, the statelier musical style of this film almost seems classical in itself at times! Whitman of course was always famous for his "for mal" jazz, and Dieterle's film "Syncopation" took quite a swipe at him - by proxy - in condemning such organised, unspontaneous music. Whitman himself has rather an endearing personality however, and in mugging it up for the camera, fully exploits his facial resemblance to Oliver Hardy.

A purely technical note on preservation: tonight's print is a good new reversal made from an original 35mm print found in Europe. Apart from the brief dance wrap-up to "Sagamuffin Romeo", it's apparently fully complete, much more so than the Czech print which is down to 6 reels. This reversal was made to discover the flaws in the original; since it was made, and using it as a guide, some of the bad sound has been re-recorded from the original discs. (Sound-track hum in this print is caused by the printer picking up the noise of the sprocket-holes from the shrunked original). So this quite acceptable print was a guinea-pig used to help correct and restore the original.

-Wm. K. Everson-