Two Lost Films

The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society

"THE SWEETHEART OF SIGMA CHI" (Monogram, 1933) Director: Edwin L. Marin
Screenplay: Luther Reed, Albert deMond and George Wagner, from an original story by George Wagner; camera, Gilbert Harren; Songs by Edward Ward, Victor Schertzinger; 6 reels.

With: Mary Carlisle, Battle Corbett, Charles Starrett, Florence Lake, Sally Starr, Eddie Tamblyn, Burr McIntosh, Franklin Parker, Tom Dugan, Grady Sutton, Ted Fio Rito and his orchestra with Betty Grable and Lief Erickson.

Not only important, innovational and "milestone" films can get lost — quite a few lowly "B"s are among the missing too. Despite its having been reissued in the early 40's to cash in on the fame of Betty Grable — a mere singer with the band in this 1933 film — it seemed to disappear totally once Monogram's can rekake (quite a pleasant film, with Ross Hunter and Clyde Kown) hit the market. When I went to work for Monogram in 1951, all every-day work took second place to a massive search for two lost Monogram films — the original "Sweetheart of Sigma Chi," and Betty Bronson's "Midnight Patrol." East and West coast offices and vaults were turned upside down without there being a trace of either, and it took another 20 years for this single 16mm print to materialize. It's not complete at that, and thus is possibly of the 40's reissue; some ten minutes have been deleted, but so smoothly that one would never be aware of the cut were it not for dialogue references to a presumably quite long comedy sequence in which Buster Crabbe is involved in some girls' dormitory antics. Nobody expected the film to be a rediscovered masterpiece — in fact, the chances are that nobody other than our own Dick Kraft, a long-time and staunch advocate of the film, ever gave it a second thought. But it's good to note that it does stand up extremely well; it's a pleasant, brisk and tuneful film that is the very essence of 30's collegiate movies. Moreover, it has none of the vacuity of talent and production corners-cuttings that one normally associates with Monogram; it's a little production but a good-looking one which could easily pass muster as a Paramount.

"THE BIRD OF PARADISE" (RKO Radio, 1932) Directed by King Vidor
Executive Producer, David O. Selznick; adapted by Wells Root, Vanda Tuchock and Leonard Franklin from the play by Richard Walton Tully; Music by Max Steiner;
Camera, Clyde de Vima, Edward Cronjager and Lucien Andriot; 6 reels.


Coming right after Vidor's "Street Scene" and "The Champ," "The Bird of Paradise" must have seemed like a wonderful opportunity to get back to the lyrical pictorialism of some of Vidor's silents — and in that sense, it almost succeeds, helped no little by the combined talents of three superb cameramen. One of them, Clyde de Vima, also photographed "White Shadows in the South Seas," and many of the smooth lateral tracking shots are clearly copied from that film. By any standards this Bird of Paradise is a vast improvement on the entertaining but garish color version from Fox in the 50's, with Louis Jouvet and Reina Togot also at as momentarily miscast as Courrèe Tchouart, who, fine actor though he is, seemed as out-of-place as the native chieftain as a matzah ball among all the Hawaiian pineapples and baked coconuts! However, it is still a property that belongs to the silent era, where lyricism and larger-than-life emotions can dominate, and where the dated dialogue (and trite comic lines) of this version would not intrude. Don't expect to be moved by the film — but as a piece of glossy and handsome schmaltz, it certainly has its moments and, surprisingly, some good melodramatic thrills too, especially a rather unlikely escape from the murderous whirlpool. Miss Del Rio's beauty is still quite breathtaking and one gets some extremely generous helps in of it — although the casual garland of flowers that adorns her upper torso represents one of the greatest engineering feats since the pyramids, since it never once loses either discretion or decorum and remains steadfastly in place all times. Nevertheless, it still represents a decidedly pre-Code costume. In a recent printed interview, Buster Crabbe referred to having doubled for Joel McCrea in some swimming scenes in a 1932 film that, though un-named, basically a rather unlikely escape from his description — "The Most Dangerous Game!"

We wonders whether he perhaps didn't double for McCrea in this film too, since it was made practically at the same time, and offers far more need for athletic doubling in swimming and other action scenes than "The Most Dangerous Game." Our print is fully complete, and a beautiful new print made from an original studio preservation print.

**— W.R. Peterson —**