A Program of forgotten oddities from the 30's

COAST TO COAST IN 48 HOURS (1931) 20 mins

This is a perfect example of the way film, often made just for the moment and expected to vanish into instant oblivion, can become a valuable tool in the post-mortem recording history. It was made purely to promote a new airline between New York and San Francisco where split-second timing, and using trains for the overland portion of the journey, would make it possible to get to Los Angeles from New York in a mere 48 hours, shaving days off the time taken by trains. In some ways it is both naive and amusing; the narrator seems inordinately proud of the "clean rest rooms" on the way, and the implication that one is likely to run across Col. Lindbergh flying in the opposite direction can't be taken too seriously either. On the other hand, in both facts - and attitudes - it is a far more valuable record. Col. Lindbergh would have been creamed of all the time. Then, for passenger travel at least, that 48-hours schedule seemed the peak of modern records in a mere three hours. Not only have the planes changed, and enlarged, spectacularly, but so have the airports. - Albuquerque for example, now a huge airport or at least a very large one for that area, is shown to be three times more than a small adobe building with Indians squatting outside to hustle the tourists. The tremendous impact of Lindbergh's achievement is certainly stressed by the tones of awe in which he is described, even to almost ignoring Amelie Earhart, who is casually brought in at the end. Interesting too is the way the film builds on the myth of the pioneering of the West ("legend" perhaps would be a better word than myth) by following much the same route as the old covered wagon trains from East to West, suggesting subliminally that passengers are in pioneers too, although presumably, and especially in the depression, the moneyed passengers would more likely be in the West seeking to come East. Rather frustratingly, there is no indication of how much this is to cost ... since the plane load is small, it was presumably uneconomical for the airline - or too expensive for the public.

MOONLIGHT AND PRETZELS (Universal, 1933) Directed by Karl Freund; story by Monte Brice, Sig Herring and Arthur Jarrett; Camera, William Miller; Dances staged by Bobby Connolly; Songs and lyrics, E.T. Harburg, Jay Gorney, Herman Humphrey, Al Siegel, Sammy Fain; 80 mins.

The "career" of "Moonlight and Pretzels" is almost as enigmatic as the film itself. When it was initially released, it was popular with both exhibitors and the public, and presumably was quite profitable. At the time, its relaxed tempo and unpretentious quality must have made it a pleasant change from the more formal giant musicals of the period. Too, Roger Pryor, making his first movie appearance, was both a band leader and a stage performer of some repute, and there was considerable curiosity value attached to his first film - although actually he was proved, in time, a much better villain than hero, as you'll see three programs hence in "Money and the Woman". Exhibitors, reporting on business in "The Motion Picture Herald", seemed very happy with the film. One, reporting on "Footlight Parade", commented that while it was good, "it's no "Moonlight and Pretzels". Sometimes, like George Armstrong Custer, the film shifted from "good guy" to "bad guy" over the years. Although available for reissue, it was always shunned. When available for TV, it was almost always turned down as being too bad as to be almost unplayable. Admittedly, perspective gives it different and sometimes lesser values. Karl Freund was a terrific cameraman and a great director of horror movies ("The Mummy", "Mad Love"). He was not a particularly good director of musicals, and moreover he had the temerity to attempt a Bacharach and Enders Berkeley-style film (even plagiarizing it for his "My Forbidden Face" for his climaxes) in a semi-Nero fiddling manner in Hollywood. Pryor and Mary Brian are no Powell and Keeler, but they try hard. But surely the film should be given credit for trying to do what Berkeley did a fraction of his budgets, and for exhibiting considerable ingenuity in the process. Moreover, it does succeed on many counts. Some of the numbers are inventive and certainly funny, and retain much of the Berkeley eccentricity, "Are you making any money Honey?" is a particularly sprightly number. Lillian Miles, in certainly the best of her few screen appearances, played a role that could have been played by Ethel Merman in a large (and off-beat) role again. I don't suggest for a moment that "Moonlight and Pretzels" is a rediscovered masterpiece, but abandoned orphan it certainly is, and thus deserving of a place in this program. Quite incidentally, I've shown it in a number of situations in recent years - the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley for example - and almost always the audience response has been positive. Whether it will fare the same in New York, or whether it will be considered the most spectacular of the Howard Hesse, we'll know in an hour or so. But it will certainly prove entertaining diversion.

-- Ten Minute Intermission --

MILLIONS IN THE AIR (Paramount, 1935) Directed by Ray McCarey; produced by Harold Hurley; Screenplay by Sig Herring, Jane Storm; Camera, Harry Fischbeck; Music & Lyrics, Ralph Rainger, Frederick Hollander, Leo Robin, Sam Coslow, Arthur Johnston. 71 mins.

With John Howard, Wendy Barrie, Robert Cummings, Willie Howard, George Barbier, Penny Baker, Eleanor Whitney, Catherine Doueiaux, Samuel S. Hinds, Elyce R. Parks, William Chace, Alden Chase, Hume Bartlett, Billy Gilbert, Ralph Malone, Frances Robinson, Irving Bacon, Ines Courtney, Harry Bradley, Russell Hicks, Harry Tenbrook, Lillian Leighton, Harry Semels, Donald Kerr, Paul Fix, Eddie Borden, D'Arcy Corrigan, Joan Davis, Jack Raymond, Paddy "Fynn". Shortage of space is here an asset, as I'd like to leave this film as a surprise. Something of an unofficial forerunner to Sturges' "Christmas in July", it got very good reviews at the time and was considered a "new" movie, unheard of then in its formula behind-the-scenes Hollywood. Despite its minor status, it's still fresh and the less said about its surprises the better, other than calling attention to the marvellous field-day of observations it gives to the usually wasted comic Willie Howard. (Incidentally, both films tonight share the same writer).

Program Ends 10:50.