THE NEW SCHOOL
FILM SERIES 42: Program #1
June 16, 1982

Two Off-beat Musicals

HAPPY DAYS (Fox, 1929; rel: 1930) Directed by Benjamin Stoloff, assisted by Walter Catlett; Story by Sidney Lanfield; dialogue by John Burke; Camera: Lucien Andriot; Production Manager, John Schmitz; J.O. Taylor; 82 mins.
With Marjorie White; Charles Evans; Richard Keene; Stuart Erwin; Martha Lee Sparks; Clifford Dempsey and; Janet Gaynor; Charles Farrell; Victor McLaglen; Edmund Lowe; El Brendel; William Collier sr.; Will Rogers; Dixie Lee; Tom Patricola; George Jessel; Nick Stuart; Rex Bell; J. Farrell MacDonald; Walter Catlett; Frank Richardson; Ann Pennington; David Rollins; Warner Baxter; Harold Murray; Paul Page; Two Plateau Indians; "Gentleman Jim" James Cagney; Dorothy Grable.

"Happy Days" was made only partially to cash in on the then-current vogue for all-star reviews; in fact it represents something of a transition in that brief cycle, harnessing the stars to a semblance of a plot. More importantly, it was a showcase for the wide-screen Grandeur Film, and opened on the world's largest screen at the Roxy. Critics were impressed by its size and magnified sound, commenting favorably on the fact that the sheer size of the picture made editing largely unnecessary - one of the "advantages" later claimed for Cinemascope when that process was unveiled. Of course in this 16mm print the Grandeur process is hardly done justice, although from the size of the sets and the concentration on numbers with massed chorines, singers and dancers, one can imagine that it was indeed visually impressive at the time. However, what is important today is that the film is still enjoyable, and even the song and dance routines are quite pretty and obvious, and most of all has brevity. Most of these revues ran for two hours and more, with a great deal of tedium and padding. This one keeps to a sensible and snappy eight reels. If it's not as good as "The King of Jazz" or the best moments of "Paramount on Parade", it's still, overall, one of the better entries in this particular cycle of musicals.

-- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION --

SYNCOPEATION (RKO Radio, 1942) Produced and Directed by William Dieterle
Screenplay by Philip Yordan and Frank Cavett from the original story "Neon Band Playa". Production Manager, Valentine Davies; Camera, J. Roy Hunt;
Edited by John Sturges; Musical Dir., Leith Stevens; 88 mins.
With Adolph Menjou; Sonita Granville; Jackie Cooper; George Bancroft; Todd Duncan; Connee Boswell; Ted North; Frank Jenks; Jessie Grayson; Peggy McIntyre; The Hall Johnson Choir, Charles Collins; Jeff Corey; Clinton Rosemond; Rex Stewart; Frank McGlynn sr.; Maurice Cass; Edwin Stanley; Bob McKenzie; Emory Parnell; Frank Barrie; Ralph Dunn; Sonny Bupp; John Hamilton; Sidney Miller; Reginald Barlow; Gordon Hart; Leith Stevens; Dewey Robinson; Earl Hodgins; Gertrude Messinger; and The All-American Dance Band: Harry James; Gene Krupa; Benny Goodman; Charlie Barnet; Jack Benny; Alvin Roy; Joe Venuti.
Note: Robert Benchley and Walter Catlett originally had good supporting roles, but were cut from the final release prints.

The early 40's saw a rather curious little sub-genre of Hollywood musicals purporting to tell the history of jazz and swing... curious because it came relatively early, before the wartime boom in big-band concerts and musicals had reached its peak. Not only did we have this film and Paramount's "The Birth of the Blues", but also the fascinating "Blues in the Night" (which had the few scenes best showing the development of swing being welded to a likewise premature film noir narrative).

William Dieterle, who had been Warners' resident "biography" director (Zola, Pasteur, Ehrlich, Juarez, Neuter, Florence Nightingale - with much later, a poor Wagner bio as a sad exit at the end of his career) here takes on a different and more abstract kind of biography. Swing and jazz purists (and authorities) may find much that is false or distorted, but to its credit, the film avoids naming too many dates, places and people and is content to be an impressionistic mosaic rather than a semi-documentary, although it credits the black contribution to swing and jazz far more than did the films of the early 40's. Consequently, its photographic compositions often self-consciously formal, but one should recall that it was made at Rko Radio in the wake of "Citizen Kane". Dieterle, with much clout and independence, had his own production unit (briefly), starting off with the impressive "The Devil and Daniel Webster" and following up with "Syncopeation" which was equally personal as a film, but was supposed to be more commercial. (Originally, Dieterle was given the body as identifying their roles or crafts). Like Welles, Dieterle found his dream of total artistic freedom to be a short-lived one, though unlike Welles he was quickly welcomed back to the commercial mainstream. However, since Rko was then a bastion of apparent independence and innovation - viz Welles, Dieterle and also the Val Lewton unit - the studio itself may have influenced the stance of the film, which is to espouse independent, individual music as opposed to the organised, symphonic jazz of Paul Whiteman, who is never referred to by name. But clearly the orchestra leader who employs Jackie Cooper can be none other! The film finishes with a marvellous free-for-all jam session which is happily prolonged by playing over the end credits.

Program Ends approx. 10.40

----- William K. Everson -----
