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Soundies: A Rare Musical Film History

Long before the 1980s and the era of MTV, there were short musical films that captured the public's attention. During the 1940s, when jukeboxes reigned supreme and before the era of television, there were the Soundies. These black-and-white three-minute long musical films, very similar to today's concept of music videos, were played on a machine called the Panoram, and allowed people to watch artists perform popular tunes of the day. The unique playback system of the Panoram set Soundies apart from other films being made for jukeboxes. Soundies included famous and unknown performers performing a gamut of musical genres from jazz to patriotic tunes. Over 1800 Soundies were produced from 1940 to 1946, yet their popularity eventually faded due to World War II and the limitations of the technology. Though they lasted less than a decade, Soundies have garnered their place in film history and left a legacy that continues to influence music today.

Since their invention, Jukeboxes have been a staple of many public places such as bars, restaurants, and nightclubs, especially in the 1930s to the 1950s. By placing a coin—usually a nickel—into the machine, customers could listen to a song. Similar to the drive to turn silent films into talkies, the idea of pairing music and images together in

a jukebox quickly arose. In the late 1930s, music on film was not a new idea; in fact musicals were quite popular. However, the notion of a moving image accompanying a song was new. The first attempt at creating a jukebox device that played both music and the moving image was the Cinematone. Invented in 1938, by Gordon Keith Woodard, a dentist from Los Angeles, California, the Cinematone was a combination of a movie projector and jukebox¹. Woodward, along with his partner, W.P. Falkenburg of Ray-O-Lite coin-operated novelties, continuously attempted to perfect the invention and expand their operation to other devices. The Cinematone originally played 16mm film, but Woodward tried to convert it to play 35mm film, but did not succeed². The Cinematone did not last long and never achieved much success; however, it was a pioneer that proved a jukebox could play a musical film.

In the 1930s, one of the most prolific manufacturers of jukeboxes was the Mills Novelty Company. In 1891, Mortimer Mills founded the Chicago based company after he was granted a patent for an improvement in the “coin-actuated vending apparatus³.” The Mills’ family owned business began manufacturing slot machines, vending machines, and eventually radios and jukeboxes. By 1938, Fred L. Mills, one of the grandsons of founder Mortimer Mills, was president of the company and started developing plans for a movie jukebox, which was to become the Panoram. Mills met with James Roosevelt, son of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was working in Hollywood for Samuel Goldwyn. He also worked for the Association of Motion Picture

¹ Maurice Ternzio, Scott MacGillivray, and Ted Okuda. *The Soundies Distributing Corporation of America: A History and Filmography of Their “Jukebox” Musical Films of the 1940s*. (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1991) 1.

² Scott MacGillivray and Ted Okuda. *The Soundies Book: A Revised and Expanded Guide*. (New York: iUniverse Inc., 2007) 376-377.

³ “History Of the Mills Company.” Mills Novelty Company Website. Accessed November 10, 2009. <http://www.millsnovelty.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=13&Itemid=86>

Producers to survey production problems and studio relations, which led to the start of his own company—Globe Productions⁴. Mills and Roosevelt came to an agreement and created Globe-Mills Productions in order to produce movie jukeboxes and the films to go with them. The company was in charge of making the films, which became Soundies, for the Panorams and distributing the films through a newly created chain of franchise operators. The Globe-Mills Productions set a goal of producing 30,000 Panorams and to provide a new reel of eight musical films for distribution each week⁵. The joint company between Mills and Roosevelt eventually split into two units based on their functions; Globe Productions and the Soundies Distributing Corporation of America, to help further promote the Panoram and Soundies.

Panorams featured a unique playback system that could only play Soundies and in turn Soundies could only be played on the Panoram. The Panoram was introduced to the public in 1939 and became the most successful of the audio-visual jukeboxes. It is approximately the size of a modern day refrigerator and has an 18-by-22-inch screen located at eye-level. The exterior of the panoram (Figure 1) is a wooden cabinet crafted in an art-deco fashion, which was designed by Everett Eckland⁶. The inside of the cabinet contained a somewhat complicated playback system. The system housed a 16mm RCA projector (Figure 2), which could play one reel of eight Soundies. The eight films were spliced together, which created a continuous loop, and on each film there was an aluminum or metal sensor tape to tell the projector when to start and stop⁷. In order to

⁴ MacGillivray and Okuda. *The Soundies Book*. 377.

⁵ Wally Hose. "Soundie History." Soundie.net. Accessed on 4 October 2009. <<http://www.soundie.net>>

⁶ "Companies That Made Jukeboxes in the Swing Era." Jitterbuzz.com. Accessed on 12 November 2009. <http://www.jitterbuzz.com/jukeboxes_companies.html>

⁷ *Soundies: A Musical History*, prod. and dir. Chris Lamson, 77 min., Liberation Entertainment, 2007. DVD.

start the projector, a person would place a dime (twice the amount of the nickel jukebox) into the slot below the screen and a film would begin. However, the one drawback of the Panoram was the inability to select a particular film due to the continuous loop. A customer would have to take a chance and watch whichever Soundie came on. If a customer wanted to see a particular Soundie, they would have to keep putting dimes into the machine until what they wanted to see came on. The rear-projected playback system relied on a series of mirrors to help project the film. The lens of the projector was focused onto a mirror in the bottom of the console, which threw the picture onto a second mirror that then reflected the image on the screen⁸. Since the projection relied on mirrors, the image that was seen on the screen would be backwards. As a result, the Soundies were actually printed onto the film backwards, so the only way to view them correctly was through a Panoram. When the Panoram is not in use, colored lights flash on the blank screen. Each time someone deposited a dime, the projector showed a film of theatrical curtains parting, the colored lights dimmed, and the show began⁹.

⁸ MacGillivray and Okuda. *The Soundies Book*. 378.

⁹ Ibid.

Nov. 12, 1940. E. B. ECKLAND Des. 123,473
CABINET FOR SOUND PICTURE MACHINE OR THE LIKE
Filed Aug. 26, 1940 2 Sheets-Sheet 1

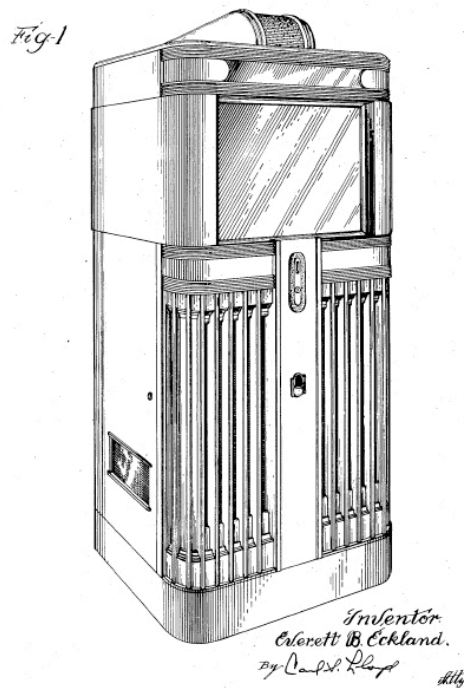


Figure 1: Sketching of Eckland Panoram design¹⁰.

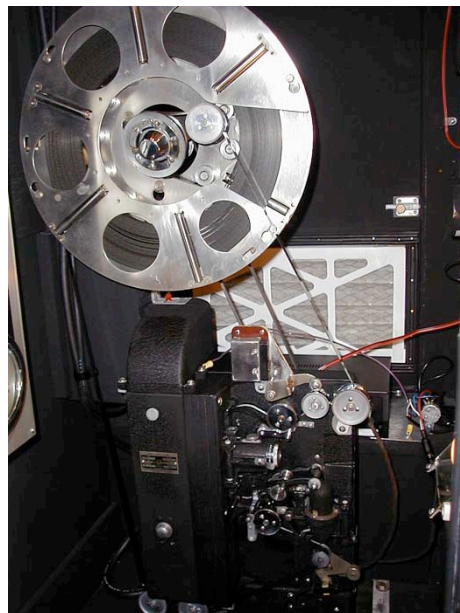


Figure 2: RCA Projector¹¹

¹⁰ "Companies That Made Jukeboxes in the Swing Era." Jitterbuzz.com. Accessed on 12 November 2009.
<http://www.jitterbuzz.com/jukeboxes_companies.html>

The Panoram was a very aesthetically pleasing device, and it fit nicely into public spaces. By the beginning of 1941, less than a year after being introduced into the market, thousands of Panorams were in bars, restaurants, nightclubs, soda shops, hotel lobbies, bus stations, etc.¹². The Panoram originally sold for \$1000, which was almost twice the cost of a standard phonograph jukebox. However, a regular jukebox would only take in approximately ten dollars a week, whereas the Panoram earned between \$50-\$100 a week, and in some cases even \$200¹³. Each week, a new reel of eight Soundies was available. According to film historian Mark Cantor as stated in the book *Some Like It Hot*,

Owners of Panoram machines were given the choice of selecting two possible formats on a weekly basis: a preassembled or a custom reel of eight films. Cantor suggests that most patrons would have likely ordered the preassembled reel, which may have included Soundies by a variety of artists including black artists, country artists, and other types of variety performers.¹⁴

Though the Soundies Distributing Corporation of America allowed for custom made reels, it was more convenient for buyers to order the pre-assembled reel, which tried to vary the genres in order to appeal to more people. The Panoram and Soundies were a big hit, especially in small towns because it gave them a glimpse of their favorite performers.

Soundies represented a new form of entertainment, which became a big hit. They were black-and-white short musical films with a standard optical soundtrack. They were printed backwards on 16mm film in order to be played in the Panoram. The playback technology and the printing of the Soundies separated them from other 16mm films made

¹¹ "History Of the Mills Company." Mills Novelty Company Website. Accessed November 10, 2009.

<http://www.millsnovelty.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=13&Itemid=86>

¹² "Companies That Made Jukeboxes in the Swing Era." Jitterbuzz.com. Accessed on 12 November 2009.

<http://www.jitterbuzz.com/jukeboxes_companies.html>

¹³ MacGillivray and Okuda. *The Soundies Book*. 378.

¹⁴ McGee. *Some Liked It Hot*. 147.

for jukeboxes. These two to three minute films gave audiences a chance to see different entertainers perform, artists whom they may never had seen before.

The concept of seeing as well as hearing popular performers had great novelty value for audiences of the day. Television was still in its experimental stage, and Soundies had the same kind of exotic appeal. In fact, several Soundie films are staged like live television broadcasts, with an offstage announcer introducing the 'program.'¹⁵

They were a novelty that introduced thousands of people to new performers and gave audiences a new way of enjoying music with images. The Soundies would showcase performers singing, playing instruments, dancing, etc. The making of Soundies was done in two parts. The music was pre-recorded at an earlier time and then the performers were filmed lip-syncing. The production of Soundies was quick due to the strict timetable of getting a new reel of eight soundies out each week. Depending on the schedule of the artists and the production companies, the music might be recorded a few days or even a few hours before filming¹⁶. Often the Soundies were simple and focused on the performances, rather than creating plotlines.

Soundies, by definition, take music as their primary element. The sound was recorded prior to filming, and the performers would lip-synch to the song as it was played back. As a result, the music does not become fielded into the visual narrative that it accompanies, but rather the visuals are conceived of as a complement to the preexisting sound¹⁷."

The focus of Soundies was first on the music and then providing images to accompany the music. The very first Soundies were much more focused on pageantry and the image, rather than the song. Though the quality of the production wavered at times, Soundies were immensely popular.

¹⁵ Terenzio, MacGillivray, and Okuda. *The Soundies Distributing Corporation of America*. 10

¹⁶ Ibid. 385

¹⁷ Amy Herzog. "Discordant Visions: The Peculiar Musical Images of the Soundies Jukebox Film" *American Music*. Vol. 22, No. 1 (Spring, 2004), 30. JSTOR. New York University Bobst Library. October 4 2009. < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3592964>>

Production for Soundies was divided up depending on region. New releases of Soundies were issued in batches of 30 titles and films were changed once or twice a week in the Panorams¹⁸. Due to the high production numbers and availability of performers, production took place either in Hollywood, Chicago, or New York. The companies that were responsible for producing most of the Soundies were Minoco, RCM, and Cameo¹⁹. In order to gain a profit, Soundies distribution had to stay on top of schedule. In order to do so, production didn't customize every song and tried to keep the films simple.

Many Soundies didn't bother with special production dress, simply pointing the camera at the musicians and capturing their performances on film. The spotlight is squarely on the artist in these reels, and the absence of gimmickry gives modern audiences a faithful, valuable filmed record of the performer in action.²⁰

Soundies entertained viewers with the added bonus of visual image but remained true to the music.

Some of the most popular genres of the 1940s were swing, jazz, and big bands. However, the Soundies that were produced ran the gamut of musical selections in order to appeal to the wider audience. Tunes ranged from vaudeville acts, hillbilly songs, to patriotic hymns, gospel songs to campfire songs, burlesque stripteases and flamenco dances. The more popular varieties were orchestras, jazz, and romance ballads.

Soundies showcased famous performers like Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Glen Miller, Stan Keaton, Cab Calloway, Nat King Cole, Fats Waller, the Mills Brothers, etc.

However, because of contracts or obligations, certain artists were unable to perform in Soundies. The small budgets of Soundies and their separation from the entertainment

¹⁸ MacGillivray and Okuda. *The Soundies Book*. 378.

¹⁹ Minco stood for Mills Novelty Company and produced Soundies out of New York, while RCM was an acronym of founder James Roosevelt, songwriter Sam Coslow, and Panoram manufacture Fred Mills, which produced Soundies in California and Chicago. Cameo also produced Soundies out of California.

²⁰ Terenzio, MacGillivray, and Okuda. *The Soundies Distributing Corporation of America*. 10

mediums of radio, variety, and the major film studios provided both obstacles but also greater leverage in the choice of performers and musical material²¹. This allowed for new artists to come on the scene and showcase their talents, particularly African-American performers and female performers, such as all-girl orchestras. “Soundies became an attractive medium for the promotion of lesser known and new musical acts, as they could be cheaply and quickly produced and widely distributed²².” Several major film and music stars got their start in Soundies and eventually went on to fame. Performers such as Doris Day, Cyd Charisse, Dorothy Dandridge, Kay Starr, Liberace, etc. were virtual unknowns when they starred in Soundies.

Prior to the Civil Rights Movement, America in the 1940s was very much segregated. However, Soundies represented diversity in music and showcased an abundant amount of African-American performers. Yet, Soundie performances kept African-American and white performers separate, or they placed the African-American performers in stereotypical roles, such as a waiter or shoe shiner²³. Despite promoting stereotypical images, Soundies really gave African-American artists a platform to reach new audiences. Author Kristen A. McGee states, “Even admitting that these were overtly racist musical presentations, the sheer diversity of Soundies’ subject matter suggested a rather bold and inclusive racial hiring practice in the context of a largely segregated 1940s American Culture²⁴.” African-American artists received an equal amount of screen time and were about to promote their music to places that would never have heard of them.

²¹ McGee. *Some Liked It Hot*. 145.

²² Kristin A. McGee. *Some Liked It Hot: Jazz Women in Film and Television, 1928-1959*. (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2009), 145.

²³ *Soundies: A Musical History*. Lamson. 77 min.

²⁴ McGee. *Some Liked It Hot*. 146.

The Panoram was the most successful and popular audio-visual jukebox, but they certainly had competition. In a September 1940 issue of *TIMES* magazine, an article states,

In U. S. bars, taverns, roadhouses are about 600,000 coin phonographs, or jukeboxes (a word which their manufacturers hate). According to an estimate by *Variety*, the jukes take in \$150,000,000 a year in nickels. Costing an average of \$300 apiece, the jukes become obsolete, or outmoded, at the rate of 150,000 a year. This week one of the biggest makers, Mills Novelty Co. of Chicago, was ready to unveil—in Hollywood—a new kind of box, which it calls the Panoram Soundies. [...] Since, as one of Chicago's Mills brothers says, "the idea is older than God," the Mills-Roosevelt peep show is not basically patented, will have competition.²⁵

Though the article notes the Mills Company's innovation, it foreshadows the rise of competitors. Some of the Panoram's audio-visual jukebox competitors included the Vis-o-graph, Phonovision, Talk-A-Vision, and the Movietrola. The Vis-o-graph machines incorporated a 16 mm Bell & Howell projectors and 20-by26-inch plastic screens; they featured different types of short films. However, after only getting 100 machines, less than a third of the Panorams in the marketplace in March of 1941, the Vis-o-graph stopped operations²⁶. The Phonovision, which then became the Theater Candy Box Corporation, was a 16mm movie machine that showed candy advertisement though the use of slide projectors. Talk-A-Vision was a similar product that used rear-projection on a 22-by-28-inch screen to show advertisements.²⁷ Lastly, the Movietrola was different from the other machines as it featured three-minute excerpts from current musical feature films. It also had the capacity to mount several reels, and thread multiple films at once,

²⁵ "Music: Soundies" *TIME* Magazine. 16 September 1940. Time Archive. NYU Library. October 12 2009. <<http://ezproxy.library.nyu.edu:11487/time/magazine/article/0,9171,764685,00.html>>

²⁶ Terenzio *The Soundies Distributing Corporation*. 4.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 5

but the jukebox never made it into the market.²⁸ As for films, Soundies had competition in the form of “Featurettes.” They were very similar to Soundies, except they gave screen credit to the composer. However, only thirty were made²⁹. Despite the competition, the Panoram and its Soundies were the first and the eventual market leader.

Within the first couple years of its existence, the Soundies became popular and seemed to thrive. However, several events occurred which placed a shadow over the future of Soundies. On December 7, 1941, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt declared war on Japan and the United States entered World War II. James Roosevelt resigned from Globe-Mills and the Soundies Distributing Corporation in order to fight in WWII. The war presented both an opportunity and a challenge for the production of Soundies. It gave Soundies another market to make patriotic films and raise spirits. Historian Maurice Terenzio states,

As the country mobilized for war, Soundies capitalized on the public’s patriotic fervor by producing a spate of flag-waving musicals.” [...] The haste in which these films were made and released suggests a feverish attempt by the Soundies producers to cash in on current events. It might be added that they had to release successful films while they could, because the war made the future of Soundies questionable.³⁰

At first, the government helped support films and productions like Soundies in order to boost morale. There was a need for escapism, and music was the catalyst for bringing people together in a sad time³¹. However, as a result of the war, certain materials and supplies were in high demand for the war effort. Metals and other materials were needed to build planes and weapons, and everything went to support the war. Items such as

²⁸ MacGillivray. *The Soundies Book*. 381

²⁹ Ibid. 5

³⁰ Terenzio, MacGillivray, and Okuda. *The Soundies Distributing Corporation of America*. 10-11

³¹ *Soundies: A Musical History*

jukeboxes were seen as frivolous, and the government controlled the use of materials needed to manufacture them.

Industries were monitored by the government's Office of Production Management (OPM), which estimated that 8,900 tons of precious metals and rubber were being used each year for Panorams alone. Because these raw materials were needed elsewhere, the OPM called for significant reductions in coin-operated machine production, encompassing jukeboxes, pinball machines, scales, vending machines, and slot machines. The use of aluminum was prohibited immediately, and jukebox production was ordered cut by 75 percent within two months. [...] Because fewer Panorams could now be built, the Soundies Distributing Corporation could no longer expand, and had to confine its activities to sustaining the machines already in use.³²

Since manufacturing of the Panoram was limited, the Soundies Distributing Corporation had to focus distributing the Soundies to the Panorams that were already on the market. Also, since the war began, the Soundies craze began to die down and people needed to conserve their money³³. However, another problem arose during this time. Musicians were growing weary of canned music and feared they would be out of a job as the recordings took away from live performances. In June of 1942, trumpeter James Petrillo, head of the American Federation of Musicians, announced that starting in August, union members would not be allowed to make recordings for public consumption until the recording industry met the musicians' various demands. Soundies did everything they could to get around the impediment of not being able to hire many of the musicians. They used un-released recordings and in new productions focused more on singers and variety acts since they were not part of the union³⁴. By the end of 1943, most of the recording industry gave into the demands of the union, and musicians would record again.

³² Terenzio, MacGillivray, and Okuda. *The Soundies Distributing Corporation of America*. 11

³³ MacGillivray. *The Soundies Book*. 392

³⁴ *Ibid.* 393

After the end of the war in 1945, Soundies were able to pick up again as the Mills Novelty Company was able to resume manufacturing Panorams with no limitations. Though Soundies would soon encounter more problems. Though there was resurgence in Soundies, the craze was nothing like it had been before the war. With the return of the soldiers after the war, many people were not as interested in watching short musical films in public spaces. Television was growing more popular and by 1946 more and more Americans were purchasing televisions and staying home. By the end of 1946, the demand for Soundies had dwindled and in the beginning of 1947, the Soundies Distribution Corporation discontinued operations. The new home-movie market allowed for Soundies to live on. The Soundies Corporation sold their film backlog to the home-movie companies, which allowed people to buy Soundies to watch without a Panoram.³⁵ Soundies were often seen on television, released on video and DVD, and now some Soundies can be watched on the Internet on websites such as YouTube.

Though Soundies were only produced for seven years, they left a lasting impression. Another musical film Jukebox was created in France in 1960. Though the concept of showing a short musical film was the same as the Panoram, everything else was different. The Scopitone had a larger screen and the films, which cost 25 cents, were in color with a high fidelity magnetic soundtrack³⁶. The Scopitone only lasted for about six years, similar to the Panoram, and it also had other Jukebox rivals, such as the Cinebox and Color-Sonic. The concept of the Soundie eventually made its way to video form and television. MTV brought back the concept of short musical films, in which viewers can watch artists perform their hit songs. Performers like Michael Jackson and

³⁵ *ibid.* 397

³⁶ *ibid.* 399

Madonna took the music video to new heights, making the videos much more like movies. The Soundies' legacy lives on as people continue to enjoy short music films. The Soundies reflect a unique representation of American culture and serves as a great reminder of how far technology and American culture has come over the 20th Century and the opportunities of the 21st century.

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