

The King of Jazz

By Jonas Nordin

Universal Pictures had contracted Paul Whiteman and his orchestra for a movie project as early as October 1928. The band was one of the most popular in the world by then and to feature Whiteman in an all talking musical picture built around his band simply had to be done.

Director Wesley Ruggles was signed and the studio immediately sent out Paul Shofield, a staff writer on tour with the band, culminating in filming the band's entire concert at Carnegie Hall December 23, 1928. This footage however, was never used and is not known to have survived. Filming was planned to start January 15, 1929 but was immediately delayed as no script existed.

The band left the east coast for Hollywood and reported to Universal Studios for the filming of the movie on June 28th, 1929. The musicians included Bix Beiderbecke, The Rhythm Boys with Bing Crosby, violinist Joe Venuti and guitarist Eddie Lang.

When Whiteman and the band arrived in Los Angeles to begin filming, director Wesley Ruggles had been replaced by Paul Fejös who had made "Lonesome" and "Broadway" prior to this assignment. From the very beginning the studio had difficulties building a story around the orchestra, after all a musical movie about an orchestra had never been done before. While waiting for the completion of an agreed-upon film script, the band featured in weekly radio shows and also had the time to play at private parties held by several Hollywood celebrities.

After two months waiting for a working script, on August 27, 1929 the band went back to New York until a script was ready and filming would begin. After some time it was agreed that the film would be a revue, along the lines of a vaudeville or stage production. The 1929-30 season had seen several big, lavish all talking, all singing, all dancing revues. All major Hollywood studios made at least one, at least partly shot in color, no expenses saved. The biggest success of them all was MGM's "Hollywood Revue of 1929" that opened in the summer of '29 and it paved the way for the other studios contributions to the genre.

At this point, early fall 1929 The Hollywood Revue was a big success, so the decision to make the



Bing Crosby harmonizes with Rhythm Boys Harry Barris and Al Rinker on the lively ditty "Happy Feet." Courtesy Universal Pictures.

Whiteman movie a revue is very understandable. Once this was decided the studio replaced Paul Fejös with Broadway stage director John Murray Anderson at the suggestion of Paul Whiteman. This was to be Anderson's first attempt at directing a motion picture. Fejös initially stayed on, working as an assistant director under Anderson, but left this position soon afterwards, and was replaced by Robert Ross who had worked closely with Anderson on Broadway.

When the news of a revue arrived, Whiteman and the orchestra left New York and arrived in Los Angeles on October 25th, 1929. Filming began shortly after the band arrived. Unfortunately Bix Beiderbecke did not make the trip due to illness, so unfortunately we do not have a filmed record of Bix playing the cornet in a featured solo in the movie.

"The King of Jazz" was to be one of the ten first talking pictures that was shot entirely in color using the Technicolor two-color process. The movie also included the first Technicolor animated cartoon segment by animators Walter Lantz and William Nolan. Once filming had begun the band worked really hard with almost no time off. The revue format made it possible to employ the unusual practice of writing the script after the shooting of each sequence as filming went along.

Another quite unusual practice at the time was miming to a pre-recorded soundtrack. Whiteman wanted his band to sound as good as possible and wanted to avoid the common practice of live recording while

filming to gain control over the band's sound. A wise decision as it made it possible to film the sequences silent with greater freedom and more elaborate camera work as a result.

In November 1929, just after filming had begun, Bing Crosby was involved in a drunk driving car accident, in which his passenger was injured. A strict prohibition judge sentenced him to 60 days in jail. Crosby was transferred to a jail near the studio, and an arrangement was made for him to be escorted to and from the studio as often as possible. It's because of this Crosby lost the lead role in the "Song of the Dawn" production number to John Boles (Crosby did the lead vocal on the studio recording of the song). However, Crosby did appear with the Rhythm Boys, as well as singing for the opening credits and the cartoon.

The Los Angeles premiere of the film was held on April 20, 1930 at the Criterion Theater. Receipts for the first two weeks were below expectations. The grand premiere of the film was held on May 2, 1930 at the Roxy Theater in New York. Universal also produced at least nine different foreign language versions of the film, each with a different master of ceremonies. Bela Lugosi was hired to present the Hungarian version, Nils Asther, hosted the version intended for Scandinavian audiences.

The initial budget for "The King of Jazz" was \$1.5 million dollars. Because of the delays in developing a script, weekly salaries and living quarters of Whiteman and the musicians while they waited, lavish sets built and torn down unused, about half a million dollars had been spent before actual filming even begun. The final cost of the movie was nearly \$2 million, a staggering amount in 1930. During its national release, "King of Jazz" cleared less than \$900,000. Overseas, it fared better and eventually made a profit after its edited re-release in 1933.

The movie won an Oscar for Herman Rosse in the category of Best Art Decoration/Set Decoration in 1930.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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