

Gus Visser and His Singing Duck

By Scott Simmon

*From the National Film Preservation Foundation (NFPF)
Treasures of the American Archives DVD program notes,
by permission of NFPF and Scott Simmon*

This early sound short, unforgettably odd, captures a certain Gus Visser singing and goosing (if that's the term) his duck in an act unlike anything since the death of vaudeville. The accommodating duck and Gus make a duet of Sidney Clare and Con Conrad's "Ma (He's Making Eyes at Me)," which had been introduced in the Broadway revue "The Midnight Rounders of 1921." The experimental sound recording and Gus's brogue make the lyrics difficult to catch, but this version seems to run as follows, with a pair of mysteriously incomprehensible lines near the end:

And little Lilly was oh so silly and shy,
And all the fellows knew, she would not bill and coo.
Every single night some smart fellow would try
To cuddle up to her, but she would cry:

Oh, Ma, he's making eyes at me.
Ma, he's awful nice to me.
Oh, Ma, he's almost breaking my heart.
I am beside him, mercy, let his conscience guide him.
Ma, he wants to marry me, and be my honey bee.
Every minute he gets bolder.
Now he's leaning on my shoulder.
Ma, he's kissing me!

Oh, Ma, he's making eyes at me.
Ma, he's awful nice to me.
Oh, Ma, he's almost breaking my heart.
I am beside him, mercy, let his conscience guide him.
Ma, he wants to marry me, and be my honey bee.
He's [-sh?] like jelly.
Why do you laugh? He shakes his shoulder.
Ma, he's kissing me!

This is where sound film had arrived by the mid-1920s. The quest for sound film had begun with the earliest movies. Experiments in combining image with sound over the next thirty years were many, but the two major practitioners by the 1920s were Lee de Forest and the producer of this short, Theodore Case (1888-1944). Case had begun experimenting with sound recording while a Yale graduate student and had demonstrated a sound-on-film system by 1917. The key to such systems was development of extremely sensitive photoelectric cells that could



Courtesy National Film Preservation Foundation.

help instantaneously convert variations in sound waves into variations in light intensity. Case and de Forest learned much from each other's inventions and refinements, but they ended up battling in court after Case sold his sound-on-film process to William Fox.

Fully refined technology for synchronization and, as important, for amplification sufficient to fill a movie palace was in place by 1924, although only a few theaters were equipped for sound. Case made a number of sound shorts in the mid-1920s at his laboratory in Auburn, New York, and showed a few in an Auburn theater, one a talk about conditions in Auburn Prison by former warden Thomas Mott Osborne, renowned for a best-selling diary about his incognito incarceration. "Gus Visser and His Singing Duck" may have been made as late as the summer of 1926, when Case and his assistant E.I. Sponable shot films at the New York City offices of Fox Films. It's unknown if the film was released commercially, and its title is a modern identification. The filmed performance seems to have been part of a more elaborate touring vaudeville act from "Visser and Company, with Elsie Gelli" that incorporated acrobatics and dancing under the title "The Original Singing Duck" — suggesting competition from other opportunistic musical ducks! By 1926, Visser's act was typically part of a live opening stage show before a feature silent film, a harbinger of the ultimate supplanting of vaudeville by the movies.

As technically sophisticated as they were, de Forest's and Case's sound-on-film shorts lacked what the industry called "showmanship." These initial sound productions were fixed-camera, single-

shot recordings of the rough edges of the vaudeville world. As entertaining and unforgettable as is Gus and his duck, such film as this did not lead anyone to predict the death of silent filmmaking.

George Eastman House preserved this film and a number of Theodore Case's other shorts and sound tests of 1924-26 from the original nitrate material found in his Auburn, New York, laboratory. This research lab, containing exhibits displaying Case's original equipment, is open to the public as part the [Cayuga Museum of History and Art](#), located in the 1836 mansion that was his home from 1916 to 1930.

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

Scott Simmon is Professor of English at UC Davis. His books include [The Films of D.W. Griffith \(1993\)](#) and [The Invention of the Western Film \(2003\)](#). Simmon's informative essays have accompanied the NFPF Treasures DVDs as well as the Foundation's free online release of Orson Welles' recently discovered and preserved film "Too Much Johnson."