

# Lambchops

By Ron Hutchinson

*"Who the hell wants to hear actors talk?"* ---  
Harry Warner, 1927

In 1925, when the brothers Warner decided to partner with Bell Laboratories to use the Vitaphone disk system to present movies with synchronized sound, talking wasn't part of the plan. The brothers envisioned marketing their features with full orchestral scores and limited sound effects. Actors that talked from the screen were an afterthought. But a quick one.

When they premiered "Don Juan" in 1926, it boasted a synchronized symphonic score with sound effects that enhanced the John Barrymore swashbuckler. There was no dialog in this otherwise silent film. The sound was on 16-inch shellac disks, turning at 33 1/3 rpm and synched to the picture. As long as the film didn't break or the needle didn't skip, everything matched.

Audiences applauded, but were more impressed with the short subjects which preceded the feature. These WERE talking pictures, with opera stars, a ukulele player and Will Hays of the Motion Picture Producers Association actually *speaking and singing* in perfect synchronicity. The audience's reaction to the shorts was not lost on the Warner Brothers. They quickly expanded Vitaphoning plans to begin production of a series of talking and singing shorts with vaudeville, opera and Broadway stars. With their second synchronized silent feature, "The Better 'Ole" starring Charlie Chaplin's half-brother Syd, the accompanying synchronized shorts boasted top stars like Al Jolson, Willie & Eugene Howard, Martinelli and George Jessel.

While other studios played catch-up, Warner Brothers forged ahead with their all-Vitaphone program of synchronized silent features and talking shorts. The shorts were dubbed "canned vaudeville". Top performers could now appear at the smallest theatre, shipped there in a film can with accompanying Vitaphone disks. For a \$5 daily rental fee, a theatre in, say, Peoria, could offer its patrons Al Jolson, who routinely got over \$7000 a week.

The sound revolution ultimately became supercharged with the studio's release of "The Jazz Singer" (1927), a mainly silent feature with several synchronized sequences with star Al Jolson. While not the first feature with talking and singing, it was



*Gracie Allen examines George Burns' tie in a scene from "Lambchops."*  
Courtesy Ron Hutchinson.

the first *successful* one after decades of technically failed attempts. That year the studio ramped up production of its short subjects, sometimes making three a week to meet the increasing demand. Top vaudeville, classical and Broadway performers were hired to ensure Vitaphone's boast of offering the biggest names in show business was maintained.

The hiring frenzy heavily relied on vaudevillians. It was serendipitous that Warners selected Bryan Foy to oversee production of its sound shorts. Foy had been one of The Seven Little Foyes and knew many of the performers personally. Hundreds of shorts were made at Warner Brothers' Hollywood studios. Meanwhile the silent studio in Brooklyn, which was part of the brothers' acquisition of the pioneering Vitagraph Company was renovated to make talkies. Its location not far from Manhattan gave ready access to stars of Broadway and vaudeville.

By early 1929, the Brooklyn Vitaphone studios were wired for sound and producing two to three shorts

weekly. Vaudevillians needed little rehearsal since they'd polished every line and nuance over hundreds of performances. The shorts produced that year starred a Who's Who of performers, including "Baby" Rose Marie, Rudy Vallee, Willie & Eugene Howard, Bert Wheeler, Georgie Price, Bert Lahr, Ruth Etting, and Burns and Allen.

Teaming in 1925, George Burns and Gracie Allen enjoyed a relatively fast ascension in vaudeville. Burns had been toiling in the small time for nearly two decades, but Gracie turned out to be the catalyst he needed for success. He hired writer Al Boasberg to craft a new "Dumb Dora" routine, and they debuted it as "Lambchops" in Syracuse, New York just a month after their marriage in January 1926. The skit ran 18 minutes, and served to solidify the team's persona. By August, Burns & Allen were performing "Lambchops" at the ultimate destination of every vaudevillian: the Palace.

Fast-forward to August 1929 and the recently wired and soundproofed Brooklyn Vitaphone studios. Warner Brothers were now cranking out as many as four shorts a week, Burns and Allen were signed to perform "Lambchops", which after three years they had honed to a razor's edge of hilarity.

Upon their arrival at the studio, they were shown a living room set on which they would perform. "Lambchops" had always been done on stage either in front of a curtain or on a street corner set.

Years later, George Burns wrote that the living room set had been constructed for a pending Fred Allen Vitaphone short. Director Murray Roth and Burns tailored the unfamiliar set to suit the routine, now opening with the team searching the set for their audience. They finally discover them when looking into the camera and George tells Gracie "There they are, right there. That's them. Say hello to everybody." Then the act starts. Problem solved.

It might be sacrilegious to quote lines from "Lambchops," as it's George and Gracie's delivery

and interaction that makes the short so delightful. Restored by UCLA in the 1980's, the short vividly recreates what it must have been like to see the team at the Palace. As crafted by Boasberg, Gracie's 'illogical logic' flows beautifully, and almost makes sense...

George: *You're too smart for one girl.*

Gracie: *Oh, I'm more than one.*

George: *You're more than one?*

Gracie: *Yes, my mother has a picture of me when I was two.*

Or

George: *What do you like?*

Gracie: *Lamb chops.*

George: *Could you eat two big lamb chops alone?*

Gracie: *Oh no, not alone.... with potatoes I could.*

We now know that "Lambchops" was really the template for the Burns and Allen persona and the film, radio and television career that followed for the remaining 28 years. Not just the crazy gags or George's speaking directly to the audience.

"Lambchops" also confirmed that George really loved Gracie no matter how nutty she was.

And so do we.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

*Ron Hutchinson is the founder of The Vitaphone Project. Begun in 1991, the Project seeks out soundtrack disks for early talkie shorts and features, and to date has uncovered nearly 600 in private hands worldwide. Working with UCLA, The Library of Congress, and George Eastman House, the Project has brought archives, studios (primarily Warner Brothers) and private collectors together to restore nearly 150 sound shorts and a dozens features. Their website is at [www.vitaphoneproject.com](http://www.vitaphoneproject.com) and they also*