



# The ORIGINS of SOUND FILM



From the beginning, sound and music have been part of the movie-going experience. Although originally films did not have dialogue or soundtracks as movies do today, theater owners hired organists, pianists or full orchestras to play along with the “silent” film. At times, they even hired people to create sound effects on the spot. Other filmmakers recorded music and sound effects on phonograph records and distributed these with their films. On October 6, 1927, Warner Bros.’ 90-minute film *The Jazz Singer*, starring Al Jolson, was released with a few recorded songs and lines of dialogue. Although Jolson was not the first person to speak or sing in synchronization with a film, audiences raved when

they heard and saw him say “You ain’t heard nothing yet!” “Talkies” brought new audiences into the movie theaters, and by 1931, only a few years later, the last silent feature-length film was released.

Although audiences loved sound, it created new problems for filmmakers. To make a clear recording, noisy cameras were enclosed in soundproof boxes. Actors had to stay close to microphones hidden on the set and could not move around freely. Thick accents or unpleasant voices ended the careers of many popular silent film stars. Before long, however, improved microphones and portable devices that muffled camera noise were developed; sound became an integral part of every movie.

Oscar-winning sound designer and mixer Randy Thom has quoted director Francis Ford Coppola’s statement that sound is 50 percent of the film experience. Listen to the movie scene your teacher has chosen without looking at the picture. Write down what you think is happening in the scene.

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Is the film a comedy or drama? Is it scary or sad? What sounds make you think so?

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How many characters are there in the scene? Are they male or female? Young or old? What are their personalities like?

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Where is the scene set? Is it indoors, outdoors, in a home or office? Is it contemporary or historical? What do the sounds tell you about the setting?

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Now watch and listen to the scene. What information did the combination give you that the sound alone did not?

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W.S. Van Dyke directs Nils Asther and Raquel Torres in a love scene, while cameraman John Arnold films the action from a sound-proof glass booth.

Are there times when the picture and the soundtrack are giving different or conflicting information at the same time? Why do you think the filmmaker chose to do that?

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Do you agree that sound is 50 percent of the film-going experience? Why or why not?

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## TERMS

**DUBBING:** Adding dialogue and sound effects after filming is completed, in post-production.

**SOUND-ON-DISK:** An early method of recording movie sound on phonograph disks that were played simultaneously and in synchronization with the picture. Techniques developed at the same time to transfer sound directly onto the film strip became the industry standard.

**SYNCHRONIZATION:** Correctly aligning the visual and audio portions of a film so that the image and sound are heard and seen simultaneously.

**TALKIES:** The nickname given to the earliest sound films because the actors spoke out loud rather than acting without sound as they had done in the movies of the “silent” era.