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Discordant Visions: The Peculiar Musical Images of the Soundies Jukebox Film

In September 1940 the Mills Novelty Company premiered its Panoram “movie machine” in Hollywood: a jukebox cabinet containing a screen on which patrons could watch three-minute musical films, one number for every ten cents deposited.¹ “Soundies,” as these films came to be known, were distributed to Panorams in bars, restaurants, transit stations, and hotels throughout the United States. One of several coin-operated image and sound devices being developed in the early 1940s, the Panoram’s success, while limited, far exceeded that of its competitors.² The Soundies catalog featured a range of musical styles: big-band swing, country-and-western and “hillbilly” acts, romantic ballads, and “exotic” Hawaiian and Latin numbers. Perhaps most significantly, a large number of African American artists and jazz orchestras created Soundies at a time when the circulation of these performances on film was exceedingly rare. The distribution of film reels for the Panoram was exclusive to the Soundies Distributing Corporation of America, which released nearly two thousand Soundies during the company’s seven years of operation.

Yet even early press lauding the Panoram as the next sure thing expressed some reservations about the quality of the product. “If early ‘soundies’ are on the monotonous side,” *Look* magazine commented, “they will probably get by on their novelty.”³ Indeed, novelty and topicality were the primary operatives of the Soundie, with vaudeville-style acts, burlesque numbers such as Sally Rand’s “The Bubble

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Dance," a flurry of World War I-related numbers, and comedy titles such as "Who Threw the Turtle in Mrs. Murphy's Girdle?"

Certainly the fusion of image and popular music was not what made the Soundie new. Musical features dominated the box office in the 1940s, and there was a tradition of musical shorts dating back at least to the Vitaphone. The visual aesthetics of the films were also far from innovative. Limited by extremely small budgets and resistance from both the film and recording industries, the producers of Soundies created shorts that were often formulaic, stilted, and riddled with clichés. Despite attempts to engage viewers with comedic acts and even sexually suggestive material, the Soundies Distributing Corporation was never able to build or sustain a consistent audience.

The novelty of the Soundies, therefore, appears to be tied to the unusual format of the medium: the integration of moving images with musical jukeboxes, the location of the machines in nontheatrical public spaces, the reliance on exclusively musical subject matter, and the visual documentation of artists outside the Hollywood studio system. These material conditions resulted in image-sound combinations that did, in fact, differ significantly from more traditional musical films. Soundies were never intended to be miniature musicals. Experienced by audiences of the 1940s as a phenomenon that closely echoed that of popular recorded music, the Soundie required a new kind of image, one not dictated by narrative but by the affectivity of song. Unlike feature-length musical films, Soundies contain no surrounding narrative. The visual structure of the jukebox film is set by the music, and the emotions expressed are native to the song alone; even in those Soundies with a rough story line, one cannot truly speak of character development. Although some shorts might mimic the tropes of Hollywood production numbers, they share little else in common.

Such factors render Soundies curious cases for the study of the relationship between film and sound. Falling outside the realm of traditional cinema and featuring material that is often obscure and unsophisticated, the Soundie might be easily dismissed as a historical curiosity. Largely critically ignored, Soundies are only occasionally cited as records of rare performances or as failed precursors to the music video, fleeting anomalies not substantial enough to maintain more than a passing interest.⁴ Yet I would argue that Soundies provide a significant field for research into music and film precisely because of their anomalous nature. Ungainly and often disjointed, Soundies nevertheless maintain a deeply affecting presence. Their impact, in fact, seems to emanate directly from those stuttering moments. Although the woodeness of many of these productions might counteract the intentions of their creators, the films' awkward gestures highlight the mechanisms by which they operate—structures

that would be much less obvious yet no less prevalent in more sophisticated works.

My interest in Soundies centers on several key issues. The first is the unique experience of viewing jukebox films. As a format founded on sound, musical shorts may have more in common with other aurally based media than with more traditional filmic or televisual works. The jukebox as an apparatus underscores the links between the jukebox film and the record album—Soundies and Scopitones are, in effect, illustrated songs following similar paths of distribution and consumption as recorded music. These material circulations greatly influenced the films' visual construction, as did the location, size, and operation of the jukebox.

Second, in focusing on the relations between popular music and image, jukebox films provide a particularly salient example because they are entirely music based. Much of the literature on film music looks either at music's role as a supplement to the image or, in the case of musicals, at the interactions between musical numbers and narrative. Freestanding musical shorts, because they contain no overarching narrative framework, allow us more fully to explore the function of music in its own right. The Soundie must be considered as part of a regime in which the preexisting song takes precedence over the image.

Finally, Soundies' circuits of movement are incredibly complex, profuse, and at times contradictory. These flows include not only the films' unusual material circulations (in terms of both distribution and presentation), but also the reproduction of familiar songs and the recycling of culturally coded images and modes of representation—all contributing to the mobile ways in which the films construct meaning. The seemingly obvious or literal nature of the images chosen to accompany songs becomes complicated when one considers the functions jukebox films performed and the snared collisions between their various aesthetic and social elements. Soundies are therefore best understood not as individual, fixed texts but through an examination of the larger tensions between these shifting elements. Even the most cliché-ridden musical short can provide us with vital information about its aspirations (however unsuccessfully it meets them), goals that are invariably more complex than the film's means of expression.

The development of the Soundies' display and distribution system was influenced by a combination of technical, economic, and social concerns. Unlike traditional jukeboxes, the design of the Panoram did not allow listeners to choose individual songs. The cabinet contained a 16mm projector holding an 800-foot loop of film. The film was projected onto a mirror, which in turn reflected the image onto an eighteen- by twenty-two-inch ground-glass screen.⁵ Because the loop was continuous, patrons could only watch and listen to whichever song

was next on the reel. Producers were therefore anxious to include a range of musical genres to attract as many customers as possible. Each week, the Soundies Distributing Corporation provided Panoram owners with a new reel of films. According to Soundies expert, Mark Cantor, these eight-song preassembled reels adhered to a loose formula, which included a variety of set genres. It became common practice, for example, to include an African American number in the eighth position on the reel. Although the Soundies catalog offered the option of customized reels, they provided a “general outline of what a reel should look like (one vocalist, one novelty number, one ethnic number, one dance number, etc.).” Renters certainly could, however, choose to tailor their reels according to more specific demographic tastes. That shorts by African American artists were listed in a separate “Negro” section suggests that racial divisions might have affected the distribution of these Soundies, although little data regarding actual distribution patterns has survived.⁶

Many Soundies were set in barrooms and addressed their audiences in ways that suggested a continuity between the diegetic space and the space of the viewer—with an invitation to sing along or even to make a request.⁷ Others relied on the scenario of a nightclub performance or the barest sketch of a narrative based on the song’s lyrics. The stars of Soundies shorts covered a broad spectrum, from well-known artists such as Louis Armstrong and Hoagy Carmichael to unknowns who went on to greater fame: Gale Storm, Cyd Charisse, Nat “King” Cole, and Liberace. The location of the Panoram machines seems to have had some bearing on the selection of images: many, like Spike Jones’s “Clink! Clink! Another Drink,” featured drinking as an explicit theme. Soundies also contained an inordinate amount of “cheesecake”—nearly every number, regardless of genre or lyrical content, included a parade of pretty girls (often the same six pretty girls) in revealing outfits vaguely related to the song’s theme.

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 folded into the visual narrative that it accompanies, but rather the visuals are conceived of as a complement to the preexisting sound. This hierarchy becomes painfully obvious the more Soundies one views. Filmed at breakneck speed and on a shoestring budget, most performances were starkly set and costumed, and it was not uncommon for the performers to occasionally stumble out of synch.

In many ways, the Soundie can be likened to the record album. The two industries were closely linked, and their products moved along similar paths of distribution and consumption. Critical to an understanding of both the cinematic jukebox film and the musical jukebox



Like many Soundies, "Clink! Clink! Another Drink" (1942), by Spike Jones and His City Slickers, features drinking as an explicit theme. The Panoram machine makes an appearance in the film, inviting patrons to sing (and drink) along.

is the experience of time that each evokes. Popular recorded music has a unique and multifaceted temporality. The record is portable, reproducible, and can be played repeatedly at will. Yet pressed into its grooves is the indexical mark of the voice, the strains of the instruments, an indelible reference to a particular instant. Murmurs of that irretrievable past reemerge, anachronistically, in the present of each listening. In addition to its temporal manipulations, the recorded popular song unleashes new configurations of space. There is a continual pull between proximity and distance, the closeness of the recorded performance belying, or at times highlighting, the remoteness of its point of origin. These temporal and spatial relations become even more involved when music is paired with the filmed image. Film is similarly imprinted with the mark of the past and is experienced in the ephemeral, temporal, and repeatable duration of the projection. Both mediums bear a distinct emotive force that circulates beyond the moments they capture.

Like the record player or sound-only jukebox, the Panoram affords the viewer a strange amalgam of intimacy and longing in a public setting. The prurient nature of some of the images might lend an intimate tone, but the size of the screen would as well, since it required that viewers stand in close proximity to see the image. The familiarity of many of the artists and tunes could only heighten the sensation of proximity, as would the individual control over repeatability that the jukebox provided (though one would have to spend eight dimes and a good portion of time waiting for the desired number to work its way around the reel). The limitations of recording and playback technology, however, only serve to reassert the remoteness of the originary performance. The affectivity of the Soundie seems to arise from this incongruity, the continued rehearsal of an instant that can never be fully grasped.

The images of the Soundie, even at their most uninventive, appear tailored toward this somewhat conflicted viewing experience. Despite the range of musical genres and shooting styles embodied by the Soundie, several common tensions persist. One of the most obvious exists between the prerecorded soundtrack and attempts to visually mime a live rendition. Soundies commonly act as a document of a singular performance, especially in the case of well-known, more expensive performers such as Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, or Stan Kenton. The scenarios for these Soundies are extremely simple and straightforward. Positioned on decorative stages before audiences in a club, the musicians are the primary focus of the camera. More often than not, these films contain no narrative elements and are accentuated only by occasional shots of dancing couples or chorines. In these performance-based Soundies, one is aware of the artists in

an intimate, bodily sense. Removed from the inaccessible sheen of the glitzy, big-budget numbers found in the typical feature-length musical, these performances seem more spontaneous and sincere. Since many of these musicians had not been filmed previously, the impact of such Soundies, displayed in a small format and controlled by the viewer, cannot be overestimated. Yet, at the same time, the clumsiness of the production, the clear distance between the poorly synched and separately recorded tracks, opens a fissure that makes the viewer's distance from the performance painfully felt. Moreover, these factors throw into question the authenticity of that performance itself; faced with the evidence of its existence, the performance remains uncannily detached.

A second tension emerges between the nonrepresentational status of music and fumbling attempts to represent it quite literally. Soundies functioned not only as documents, but also as enhanced visual illustrations. This role is most evident in comedy numbers or lower-budget filler numbers, which impart a cute visual twist on what would otherwise be an uneventful rendition. Whereas more established or dynamic musicians were able to hold the viewer's attention within the simplest of scenarios, lesser-known performers needed additional visual emphasis. Stock musicians and comedic vaudeville acts were employed to fill out the shooting schedule during extended periods of dispute between Soundies producers and musicians' unions.⁸ Many of these songs relied on humorous lyrical content or generic themes (wartime propaganda, traditional Irish songs, and so on) rather than on inherent musical interest. The directors faced the challenge of translating these often-mediocre numbers into a visual format as quickly and inexpensively as possible.

The solutions to this challenge range from the mundane to the utterly bizarre. The images in these films frequently correspond directly to the lyrics. In "The Wise Old Owl," Sylvia Froos's straight rendition of the swing ballad is punctuated by the hoots of a stuffed owl jerking back and forth on a branch over her head. Comedy numbers usually consist of rough narrative reenactments. Cindy Walker's "Seven Beers with the Wrong Man" depicts Walker in an Old West-style jail cell, intercutting slapstick scenes of her seduction. Soundies that fall within distinct musical subgenres employ the most obvious locations and tropes as a backdrop. Countless country-western shorts, for instance, take place in barnyard settings. Other Soundies use the visual component of the medium as fodder for one-liners. "The Biggest Aspidistra in the World" depicts singers with the Johnny Messner Orchestra lauding the features of their aspidistra plant. As they emphasize the first syllable of the word, however, the camera pans to a row of girls with watering cans, who bend over to reveal their ruffled



"The Biggest Aspidistra in the World" (1942), by Johnny Messner and His Orchestra, makes use of a crude visual-sonic pun.

panties. Such scenarios encapsulate the often-dissonant humor of the Soundie, which results from the desire to interpret the song absolutely literally, excessively so. The image becomes a comic, or perhaps even a monstrous, illustration of the lyric.

In his writings on film and sound, Michel Chion develops the idea of "added value" to describe "the expressive and informative value with which a sound enriches a given image so as to create the definite impression . . . that this information or expression 'naturally' comes from what is seen, and is already contained in the image itself."⁹ Although the concept of added value is useful in exploring the function of music in narrative film, it is a relation that does not exist in musically based visual formats. Discussing the music video, Chion writes:

This is yet another way in which the music video leads us back to the silent cinema—seemingly a paradox, since we're talking about a form constructed on music. But it is precisely insofar as music does form its basis, and none of the narration is propelled by *dialogue*, that the music video's image is fully liberated from the linearity normally imposed by sound.¹⁰

Charges of musical cliché are levied against narrative film when sound and image exist in a direct and obvious relation to each other. Abstraction and autonomy are cited as the best means of complicating these relations. Yet, as both Chion and Claudia Gorbman suggest, in musically based works all visual movements are in a sense abstractions in that they are dictated by the logic and temporality of music rather than narrative. The elements within the film frame, set in motion by the music, become mobile, freed, at least to a certain degree, from the burdens of signification, motivation, and logical development.¹¹

The musical logic Chion and Gorbman point to, I would argue, dictates the Soundies' visual construction. Instead of reading Soundies as linear constructions, it may be more productive to view them as constellations of images. The Soundies' images in fact obtain their emotive affectivity through the tensions between their irrational and anachronistic juxtapositions. The images, melodies, and ideas that constitute meaning within Soundies circulate in ways that are always fluid and multifaceted. Each element within the Soundie works as part of this mobile assemblage, but the overall effect is rarely one of harmonious synthesis. Instead, each component (the culturally charged scenario, the poorly timed performance, the familiar tune) seems to reverberate disparately, leaving the impression of discordant refrains that are always somehow out of time.

Although the producers of Soundies might have designed imag-

ery in a literal and linear manner, the overall effect of the Soundies' sonic and visual couplings is a viewing and listening experience that is hardly straightforward. Indeed it is the very failure of the Soundie to recreate an integrated, convincing illustration of a performance that exposes the conflicts at the core of that project. Moreover, the often politically troubling imagery of the Soundie, which seems to stoop to the most obvious and stereotypical portrayals of gender, race, and ethnicity at every opportunity, points to the prevalence of such representations within the twentieth-century cultural imagination. The glaringness of such depictions, surely amplified by historical distance, suggests the possibility that these perspectives are more subtly embedded in the songs themselves. The uncomfortable melding of abstract and representational elements in the Soundie opens the musical-image to multiple, critical interpretations, readings that perhaps would be foreclosed by more slickly produced or narrative-based works.

The Mills Brothers' Soundie for their hit "Paper Doll," for example, opens with the brothers seated in a garden set. Three of the brothers have smiling women seated on their knees, while the brother singing lead cuts out a picture of Dorothy Dandridge with a pair of scissors. He sings of a paper doll "to call his own," wishing for her affections rather than "a fickle-minded, real-life girl." As he places the cutout paper Dandridge on the ground, however, she dissolves into a live image and begins to dance energetically in a short, frilled, girlish dress. The brothers look down as they sing over her miniature, ghostly figure superimposed before them.

"Paper Doll" is composed of two distinct sections. In the first half, the camera's attention is divided between documenting the singers' performance and enacting the song's lyrics. Though adequate attention is paid to the real "dolls" adorning the brothers' laps and the cutting of the photograph, the center of action is each singer's face: the "column of air" leaving the mouth that constitutes, for Chion, the visual essence of the vocal performance.¹² Both the imagery and the musical rhythm shift dramatically, however, when Dorothy Dandridge's paper cutout comes to life. The focus, too, shifts from an enhanced documentation of the Mills Brothers' performance to a surreal visualization removed from the actions of the singers. The relationship between image and sound at this point is significantly transformed. Our perspective on the singers is now the back of their heads looming over Dandridge, an uninviting composition lacking a clear visual reference to the sound source. Dandridge's spastic movements have little relation to what is happening musically, or perhaps only seem out of time because her tapping feet are silent. In combination with her girlish frock, Dandridge's choreography seems to



The Mills Brothers' "Paper Doll" (1942), featuring a silent Dorothy Dandridge.

reflect less the delicate steps of a breathing paper doll and more the gesticulations of an invention gone awry.

To say that Dandridge appears as a projection of the Mills Brothers' fantasy of femininity is nearly beside the point. Although such a reading would correctly highlight the problematic, sexist premise of the song and film, it leaves unexamined the uneasy excessiveness of Dandridge's pasted-on figure, a presence that resists any obvious critique. The image is in fact so literal that it exceeds or even defies the meaning of the original lyric. Dandridge's disquieting presence, however spectral, makes the desire for "the truest doll in all this world" too palpable, too real. And this, to me, is where the discomfort lies. The stolid framework of the scenario gives rise to an image that is surprising and unsettling, for it confronts us with an impossible embodiment. What we see laid bare is the very structure of the fantasy.

Music, as a nonrepresentational medium, is itself visually unrepresentable. Chion compares attempts to film an instrumental performance with pornography's attempt to capture the sexual act: no matter where you train the camera, what you are looking for always seems to be elsewhere.¹³ Soundies do not succeed in this impossible task. Yet where these representations falter, a different framework becomes apparent, one that imbues these images with their haunting affectivity. This is where the primacy of music, and a musical logic, is essential. What would otherwise remain a stereotypical or prosaic image becomes abstracted, exaggerated, immoderate. That which is threatening need not be resolved or punished as it often is in narrative forms. Soundies may make use of oppressive images, but they also in many ways interrogate them. Within Soundies there is room for irrationality, transformation, eruption—even a joy in difference. Surely the threat of the irrational never exceeds its containment within the song, but its mere existence hints at a nascent potential, the seeds of a new truly musical image.

NOTES

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1. "Personal Report on Movie Premiere," *Billboard*, Oct. 5, 1940, 34. For the corporate history and complete Soundies filmography, I am indebted to Maurice Terenzio, Scott MacGillivray, and Ted Okuda, *The Soundies Distributing Corporation of America: A History and Filmography* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1991).

2. Other companies promoting cinematic jukeboxes included Vis-o-Graph, Featurettes, Phonovision, Tonovision, Metermovies, Phonofilm, and Talkavision. See Terenzio, MacGillivray and Okuda, *Soundies Distributing Corporation of America*, 4–5, and "The Buyers Guide," *Billboard*, Jan. 18, 1941, 80. In addition to the official "Soundies" films, I will also be considering shorts produced by rival companies during the same period. For the most part, these films do not differ widely in terms of their structure, tone, or execution, and I will group them under the general name of "Soundies" (a practice that has become commonplace among collectors and other Soundies enthusiasts).

3. "Jimmy's Got It Again," *Look*, Nov. 19, 1940, 14. The "Jimmy" in question is James Roosevelt, son of Franklin D. Roosevelt, one of the partners and principal promoters of the enterprise.

4. There are several notable exceptions to this trend. Gregory Lukow presents a well-researched discussion of the format in his article, "The Antecedents of MTV: Soundies, Scopitones and Snaders, and the History of an Ahistorical Form," in *The Art of Music Video: Ten Years After*, ed. Michael Nash (Long Beach, Calif.: Long Beach Museum of Art, 1991), 6–9. John Mundy links Soundies to other film and television formats in *Popular Music on Screen: From Hollywood Musical to Music Video* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 93–95. For discussions of Soundies in relation to the history of jazz and jazz on film, see Klaus Stratemann, *Duke Ellington Day by Day and Film by Film* (Copenhagen: Jazz Media, 1992) and Krin Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

5. The reflected nature of the Panoram mechanism causes the image to be reversed from left to right. Thus original Soundies reels, when projected normally, are flipped, including all titles and credits. After the Panoram became defunct, several companies purchased the rights to distribute existing Soundies for the home market. Often the backwards titles were snipped from the originals, and either replaced by new titles or left out altogether. This presents great problems for researchers and collectors in attempting to identify obscure artists and songs.

6. Mark Cantor, e-mail correspondence with author, Oct. 22, 2002. See also Terenzio, MacGillivray, and Okuda, *Soundies Distributing Corporation of America*, 15.

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

8. On the conflict between the Soundies Distributing Corporation and the American Federation of Musicians, see *ibid.*, 12–13.

9. Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 5.

10. *Ibid.*, 167.

11. See Claudia Gorbman's discussion of "orchestration" in a scene from *Nights of Cabiria* in *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 24–25.

12. Michel Chion, *Le Son au Cinema* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinema / Editions de l'Etoile, 1985), 183–84.

13. *Ibid.*, 191.