



October 6, 1927 is a date that should be in every history book next to historical events as June 6, 1944 and July 4, 1776. The impact of the 6th of June and July 4th on world history is known to millions of people. However, the impact of what resulted on October 6, 1927 is enjoyed by the entire world but remembered by few. On that date *The Jazz Singer* opened at the Warner Theatre in New York City and from that day forward movies would talk.

Movies would talk so that Adolf Hitler could spread his doctrine of hate, and movies would talk so that Bob Hope could chatter through some witty dialogue and make millions laugh.

Popular singers could croon their songs of love and symphony orchestras could introduce the masses to classic music. The technology of the first talkies would be enhanced and redefined over and over and lead to the development of stereo and Dolby systems. Sound changed the way movies were made and the way people perceived the movies and everyday life. If Al Jolson had never said "You ain't seen nothing yet" millions might have never heard a talking movie.

The series of events that led to the making of *The Jazz Singer* are as dramatic and intriguing as a good movie script. The Four Warner Brothers, Albert, Sam, Harry and Jack started out helping their father with his butcher

business. Sam left home and got a job as a projectionist in Chicago and immediately saw the potential of the new kinoscope. The year was 1903 and he went back home and persuaded his father, mother and brothers that the future was the motion picture. The family sold some prized possessions and rented a copy of *The Great Train Robbery* and went on tour renting store fronts and showing the film to who ever would pay five cents to see it. They went through ups and downs but always managed to land on their feet and by 1909 they had film exchanges in several cities. In 1910 Sam Warner bought the rights to a film named *Dante's Inferno*. They took the film on tour and while counting their earnings they decided to produce their own two-reel films. They rented an abandoned foundry in St. Louis and began cranking out westerns.

By 1917 the brothers Warner were firmly settled in California and making money exhibiting trite films. Sam wanted to raise their goals and spent \$50,000 for the rights to a Civil War drama called *The Crisis*. It created a crisis for Sam and his brothers because America's entry into World War I killed the Public taste for historical dramas — they wanted to take their minds off of war. They lost their investment. They rolled up their shirt sleeves and worked even harder to stay in business. The next few years would be hard on them.



“THE JAZZ SINGER” premieres October 6, 1927 at Warners’ Theatre in New York.

The roaring twenties saw Hollywood boom with studios expanding and movie stars salaries doing the same. The Warners were holding on — just barely — to their meager studio by producing low-budget films. Sam knew that since he and his brothers couldn’t afford the salaries of big stars they would have to find a gimmick to propel them out of poverty to the big show. He had a vision of producing a sound film process to record the big symphony orchestras that appeared live in the big-city theatres. He wanted the small-town patrons to enjoy the same kind of quality sound.

Sound films were not new to the movies but earlier efforts were mostly crude attempts at sound effects rather than at music or spoken dialogue. In 1921 D.W. Griffith made a film called *Dream Street* that employed a sound process. However the public wasn’t buy-

ing and the 15,000 theatres in the U.S. had no sound equipment. Sam’s dream was going to be costly to develop and hard to sell to theatre owners who would have to spend about \$25,000 to convert their theatres to sound. Sam convinced his brothers that they should sign an agreement with Western Electric to fund research into synchronization of sound to film.

The Vitaphone Corporation was formed on April 20, 1926. To push his dream a little closer to reality Sam began to direct short films at the First National studio in Brooklyn. The Warners had purchased the First National studios in 1925 and they were ideal for Sam’s experiments. Sam had to go out on the road with his short films to convince theatre owners that the investment in sound equipment would be a sound investment. The shorts were meant to

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accompany a silent feature and be a double bill program (something new in 1925).

The shorts were not attracting much attention so Sam conceived a bold plan. When Warners bought First National they also acquired the services of John Barrymore. He had a contract with First National and had a couple movies left on his contract. Barrymore went to Hollywood to star in Warner Brothers new film — *Don Juan*. The new Vitaphone process was used to record the music and sound effects for the film. The film was a success but was not a runaway hit.

Sam was disappointed but he was no quitter. He continued to produce the short films and go around the country persuading theatre owners that sound was the next frontier to conquer. Jack Warner had purchased the rights to the

Samson Raphaelson play *The Jazz Singer*. The Broadway production had starred George Jessel and Jack wanted him to star in the film version. Sam saw this as a chance to add music to the film and fulfill his goal of a movie with music. The decision was made to add a couple songs but shoot the majority of the movie as a silent. When Jessel heard about the songs he doubled his fee and Jack said no thank you.

Sam was quick on the rebound and went right to Al Jolson. Jolson had been in one of Sam's short films and was a legend as an entertainer. Jolson wanted more money than Jessel but was willing to forsake part of his salary in order to secure a percentage of the profits of the film. All the brothers liked the arrangement and Jolson was signed.

The Warner theatre in New York was wired for sound as the film was being shot. The premier was set for October 6, 1927. All the brothers were in New



AL JOLSON, the "Jazz Singer" serenades his mother, May McAvoy in a classic scene from the now-famous "talkie."



DURING THE FILMING of "The Jazz Singer" director Alan Crosland discusses a scene with star Al Jolson.

York except Sam who stayed in California for some final editing. On October 5th he was taken to Californian Lutheran Hospital where he died of a cerebral hemorrhage. Jack, Al, and Harry rushed back to California and missed the premier of *The Jazz Singer*.

The film was a huge success, but to the Warner brothers it was a hollow victory because of Sam's death. Sam had been the one to push his brothers toward the Vitaphone process and his passing overshadowed their eventual success.

The public loved the film and the critics raved about Jolson. He was the single biggest factor for the success of the film. His presence on the screen was dynamite. Al was billed as the world's greatest entertainer and he believed it and his confidence came through in his performance. What electrified the audiences was Jolson's singing and the ad libs he threw out during his songs. The

rest of the film was silent but the Jolson chemistry was there.

For the Warners there was no turning back. They were committed to producing sound films and the other studios saw the handwriting on the wall and began to convert slowly to their own sound processes. Vitaphone was a disc system with a disc cut simultaneously with the film. It worked well but presented problems in cutting the film.

William Fox came up with a process of putting the soundtrack right on the film itself. He named it Movietone and eventually that technology was used exclusively by the studios. By the end of the decade sound was king and the studios were experimenting with music and sound to enhance the films they produced.

Sam Warner's vision was reality and the movies, and the world they portrayed would never be the same. ■