

Jam Session

By Mark Cantor

In 1940, anyone in the habit of reading the entertainment trade publications – “Variety,” “Hollywood Reporter,” “Billboard,” for example -- would be aware that something very new and unique was on the horizon: an audiovisual jukebox, a jukebox with a screen! The vision was quite simple: If people were willing to pay a nickel to hear a current hit recording on a jukebox, then they could be enticed to spend a dime to hear and see a musical performance.

Throughout 1940 and 1941 a large number of entrepreneurs and corporate interests attempted to position themselves as the leaders in this new entertainment medium. But when the dust settled by mid-1941, there was a clear winner in the race. The Mills Novelty Company of Chicago, manufacturer of slot machines and other entertainment devices, was producing and selling the projection machine of choice, the fabulous Mills Panoram. The films to be shown in the device, Soundies by name, were being distributed by a Mills subsidiary, the Soundies Distributing Corporation of America.

The individual, three-minute films were ultimately produced by close to fifty separate concerns, only a handful directly connected to Mills Novelty Company. Those who purchased a Panoram machines -- owners of bars, restaurants, hotels, pool rooms, recreation centers and so forth -- received eight musical shorts each week, or nine during the war years, when a propaganda piece was added. There were more than 1,850 shorts released over a period of six years, and “Jam Session,” featuring Duke Ellington and his Orchestra, was one of the best.

While not the first black band to appear in Soundies (Count Basie and Lucky Millinder preceded him by a few months), Duke Ellington and his Orchestra was, without question, the preeminent jazz orchestra of its time. Its series of five Soundies are superior in every way! Ellington was the finest of jazz composers, often arranging his own works. His orchestra was instantly recognizable, and Ellington was able to utilize the individual sounds of his sidemen to produce music that was distinctive and unique. Whether playing for floor shows or dancers, or in a concert hall setting, Duke Ellington’s music was the most important to come out of the Swing era.

The visual element of a Soundie ranged from straight, no frills presentations by a band or combo,



A frame enlargement from “Jam Session” features Duke Ellington.

often with vocalist in hand, to what was called a “song story,” with the lyrics acted out on screen for the viewers. “Jam Session” falls somewhere in between, and here is part of the charm and importance of the film. Yes, we get a story setting: It is a bar in Harlem, signs on the wall proclaiming, “Harlem Cats Eatery,” and “No credit to strangers. Welcome stranger.” And in the bar it just so happens that we are going to see and hear a jam session featuring members of the Ellington band.

While it might not be appropriate to assign an “auteur” status to any Soundie director, surely Josef Berne, who is responsible for all five Ellington Panoram shorts, was a competent filmmaker. Berne was one of the most prolific director Soundie jukebox shorts, and he put his stamp on an astonishing 289 films. Earlier he had made shorts for MGM, and in 1942 he would direct a 15 minutes short subject, again for MGM, that would win the Academy Award for Best Live-Action Short. This film, “Heavenly Music,” may seem like an expanded Soundie, but that fact did not deter Academy voters from giving it the Oscar. Berne’s five-year association with Soundies would yield many fine, well-focused and entertaining shorts featuring such talent as the Mills Brothers, Dorothy Dandridge, The Hoosier Hot Shots, Sally Rand, Wingy Manone and Les Paul.

While the entire band is heard on the soundtrack of “Jam Session,” only the soloists can be seen screen. This brings up a peculiar aspect of the production of not only Soundies, but also most filmed musical numbers during this period. The Ellington band recorded the soundtracks for five Soundies at the Columbia Records studios in Los Angeles (Studio B, 6624 Ro-

maine Avenue, Los Angeles) the week of November 24, 1941. They returned to another studio, perhaps Fine Art Studios, sometime later, perhaps only a matter of days, for what was termed "sideline photography" -- that is, photography with musicians miming for the cameras to the pre-recorded soundtrack. In the case of this Soundie, the synchronization between sound and action is particularly good, and it would be difficult to notice that none of the musicians was playing "live."

The title "Jam Session" was chosen by someone in the Soundies organization, describing as it does the action of the short. But the composition is actually an Ellington standard titled "C Jam Blues." The Soundie version, produced ca. November-December 1941, actually falls in between the initial recording by a Barney Bigard small group drawn from the Ellington band (September 29, 1941, with the recording released as "C Blues"), and the recording by the full band (January 21, 1942). The tune remained a part of the band's "working book" until Ellington's death, and was even performed with lyrics added by Bill Katts, Bob Thiele and Ruth Roberts, retitled "Duke's Place."

The composition is a 12 bar blues, but make no mistake: This is not the classic Mississippi Delta blues, but rather hot jazz, straight from Harlem, played in a blues form. The initial small group recording is a delight, but the later versions are even better, in part because a four bar break has been added before each solo chorus. This break adds to the tension of the solo, providing an introduction to each musician's individual sound, with the blues chorus that follows a musical catharsis of sorts.

As mentioned above, only the soloists are seen on screen, some already seated at the bar or in booths, others arriving through a door, and down the stairs. To add to our delight, and in something rather rare for a Soundies short, most of the musicians are identified by name on screen: Duke Ellington (piano), Ray Nance (violin), Rex Stewart (trumpet), Ben Webster (tenor sax), Joe "Tricky Sam" Nanton

(trombone), Barney Bigard (clarinet) and Sonny Greer (drums). The only member who appears anonymously is the string bassist, the very talented and underrated Junior Raglin.

One might quibble about the setting, and the stereotyping of jazz as music played only in bars and other seedy locations. But the truth of the matter is that jazz was indeed played in such settings, along with theaters and concert halls. (This Soundie is balanced just two years later by "RKO Jamboree No. 7" in which Ellington appears with his band on the concert stage. In any case, the bar here, clean and perhaps antiseptic, provides the setting for some stunning music. Comparison to the later band recording for RCA Victor is similar to comparing alternate takes of a recording: the structure is the same, but the solo work, energy level and nuances of interpretation make this something unique and special.

"Jam Session" is a superior Soundie in all regards, the setting appropriate for the music, the "backstory" of the film fascinating and of historical importance. The significance of this film is clear, and its placement on the Registry well warranted!

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

Mark Cantor operates the Celluloid Improvisations Film Archive, one of the largest collections of jazz, blues and popular music on 16mm film worldwide. The Archive is concerned with preserving not only musical performance on film, but also information about the performances as well: who do we hear on soundtrack, who do we see on screen, who are the solo artists and so forth. Mr. Cantor regularly presents programs from the Archive, and contributes articles to magazines and institutions dealing with the history of jazz music. Films from the Archive have been seen in many documentaries, including Ken Burns' "Jazz," and the Academy Award-nominated "A Great Day in Harlem."