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The Speed of Sound: Hollywood and the Talkie Revolution,
1926-1930 (review)

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The Speed of Sound: Hollywood and the Talkie Revolution, 1926–1930.

By Scott Eyman. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. Pp. 413; illustrations, bibliography, index. \$18.95.

We need to focus first on pedigree. This volume was originally published in 1997 as a trade book by Simon and Schuster. That crucial fact explains why the sources remain largely undocumented, why there are few footnotes, and why the author cites no articles from scholarly journals in the bibliography. *The Speed of Sound* was subsequently picked up by Johns Hopkins University Press and released as a paperback in 1999. This version is what I am reviewing here. Whether university presses should indulge in the rerelease of seemingly marketable books lacking a full scholarly apparatus for the purpose of turning a quick profit is a questionable practice, but I leave that philosophical issue for others to debate at a later date in another forum. Frankly, I think the policy sets a bad precedent.

Now on to the contents of the book itself. Scott Eyman is a careful, resourceful, and diligent historical journalist, with an extensive newspaper background, who has written several trade books on Hollywood subjects.

He is an accomplished author of nonfiction books. Given the original scope of this project, it would be nearly impossible to fault Eyman for anything related to the production of this volume for a popular audience. He is a professional writer with mass appeal, and it shows. Eyman concluded that historians had paid too little attention to the transition from silent to sound movies, and he moved forward to fill the void.

The question facing us, however, is quite different: What is valuable in this book for scholars, who are presumably required to meet a higher standard in terms of the breadth of their research and the extent of their documentation? The first three chapters, about 20 percent of the text, provide an intelligent, brief review of the competing motion picture sound systems that emerged during the first quarter of the twentieth century. For a lay audience, undergraduates included, Eyman does an outstanding job of explaining the evolution of new technologies that precisely coordinated the output of sound waves with the action on the screen. Many of the sound films in the mid-1920s were not full-scale “talkies,” but essentially silent pictures with a musical background or musical interludes; Al Jolson’s famous “Jazz Singer” falls into this latter category. Eyman also discusses the entrepreneurial responses by Hollywood moguls to the opportunities, and the potential pitfalls, of the sound revolution. These informative early chapters are probably what convinced the university press editors to proceed with the publication of the paperback version.

The last three-quarters of the text is devoted almost exclusively to Hollywood gossip about the personalities linked to talkies from 1927 through 1930. I found the author’s breezy narrative deadly boring. Undocumented quotes from famous personages abound. This material is similar to what was published in movie fan magazines during their heyday. I cringe to think that some undergraduates might find this stuff compelling, but they might.

To sum up, this volume rates as an atypical trade book because it includes a few chapters that rise above the norm and offer worthwhile material on both the emerging sound systems and the studio executives who staked their careers on the success of these new technologies in the 1920s.

EDWIN J. PERKINS

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