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**The Warner Brothers Make Noise**

**By Stephen Schochet**

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Hollywood was an attractive place for the early filmmakers to settle, full of good weather, orange and lemon trees. For producers who owed money on borrowed camera equipment if a creditor came after them, they could hide among the trees. It was a hard business full of causalities and took a pirate's mentality to survive. Most of the studio heads were from poor backgrounds, with limited English skills and never forgot their childhood or a personal slight. Included were Jack, Harry, Albert and Sam, the four Warner Brothers from Youngstown, Ohio. They had begun with showing movies off the side of a tent in Youngstown, borrowing all the chairs from the local undertaker. Every time there was a funeral in Youngstown, they had to give all the chairs back and the film patrons were forced to stand.

As a boy Jack Warner wished to be a singer and a comedian. His brothers, recognizing his lack of talent instructed him to sing in the tent when they wanted the audience to leave. He was later advised that the money was not in performing, it was in paying performers. Among the stars that would be under contract to him would be Betty Davis, James Cagney, Humphrey Bogart and Errol Flynn.

The silent days were a struggle for Warner Bros. Rin Tin Tin, a German shepherd that according to his publicity was born in a foxhole in World War I, was their biggest star. Heroic as he might have been on the screen, he proved to be, like many stars, cantankerous in person. Jack Warner took the dog on a publicity tour. As he introduced him to the crowd, his ungrateful employee bit him on the behind, leading to the dog's dismissal. It proved to be a prelude to Warner's many future battles with stars.

Trying to make a name for themselves, the four brothers got great publicity by announcing that the renowned opera tenor Caruso would be arriving from Italy to make a film for them. They paid him 25,000 dollars and then put him in a silent movie.

The movie studios had the technology to make talking films years before they made them. One of the reasons why they resisted the idea was that they didn't want to risk losing their overseas market. Stars like Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford rarely ever had a flop as their films were

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shown around the world and knew no language barriers. But in 1926 the silent films faced their biggest competition with a new device called the radio. As movie attendance dwindled the studio heads shut their eyes and pretended the radio was not there. But the Warners lead by the ambitious Sam, decided to push the envelope and try to save their sinking studio by experimenting with movie sound.

Sam purchased an experimental sound system called Vita–phone. They then acquired the rights to *The Jazz Singer*, a popular play about a young man who had a beautiful voice and is offered a Broadway career against the wishes of his Old World Jewish father. In the play the son gave in to his father but the Warner's, wishing to reach a wider audience, Americanized the story by having the son follow his own dreams. Star Al Jolson adlibbed the dialogue, " Wait a minute, wait a minute you ain't heard nothing, yet!" The Warner's were only intending singing but at the last minute they impulsively kept the line in the film. *The Jazz Singer* received a standing ovation when it premiered in New York in 1927 and went on to make three and half million dollars at a time when admission costs 20 cents. The sound revolution was under way!

Movie audiences had often been loud and noisy while watching silent films. Now the theater's got quiet as people strained to hear every word. Movie Theater's had to be rewired for sound, costing major studios like Paramount and Fox millions of dollars. Movies now had to film mostly at night as any passing truck noise could ruin a sound recording. " How boring!" said Mary Pickford. "At first we moved! Now everyone is standing around talking!" One enterprising actor was hired for one day's work. When the director wasn't looking he let a bunch of crickets loose on the set. It was five days before the crew could round up the chirping crickets, and the actor kept on hold received five times the paycheck.

Stephen Schochet is the author and narrator of the audiobooks *Fascinating Walt Disney* and *Tales Of Hollywood*. The *Saint Louis Post Dispatch* says, " these two elaborate productions are exceptionally entertaining." Hear realaudio samples of these great, unique gifts at

### **Tales Of The Warner Brothers**

#### **By Stephen Schochet**

The four Warner Brothers, which included the womanizing Jack, the conservative Harry, the quiet Albert and the visionary Sam, had risen from obscurity with *The Jazz Singer* (1927) the first famous and financially successful talking movie ever made. Tragically, Sam Warner, the real brains behind the whole project, died of a brain tumor two days before *The Jazz Singer's* debut. Jack was thrilled by the film's success, but crushed by his brother's death. He became difficult to deal with for the rest of his life. His older and more conservative brother Harry and he fought constantly over money and Jack's womanizing ways. One time Harry chased Jack through the studio with a two by four threatening to kill him. The feud became so bitter that Jack opted to play tennis rather than attend Harry's funeral in 1958. One time Jack met Albert Einstein, " Mr. Einstein, I have my own theory of relativity. Don't hire them."

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Warner was fascinated by Einstein especially the physicists detailed descriptions of stars. After he left Jack told a staff member, "Sign this Betelgeuse guy to a contract. Einstein think he has potential."

Despite or maybe because of his aborted singing career, Jack Warner seemed to resent similar ambitions in others. One day he was strolling through the studio lot when he heard a young man singing with a beautiful voice. It was coming from the security guard shack. Curious, the mogul walked up to question his startled employee.

"Young man, was that you singing?" "W-why yes Mr. Warner." "Young man you have a beautiful voice." "Oh thank you Mr. Warner." "MM. Tell me, young man, what would you rather be? A security guard or a singer?" "Oh Mr. Warner, I dreamed of being a singer." "Ok young man. You're fired!"

Jack Warner treated all of his employees with derision, but none worse than the writers. Many of them although better paid at the studio than they ever were writing novels, resented the nine to five routine they were forced to adhere to at the Warner's factory. Where the actors were free to leave the studio at lunch the writers had to be "chained" to their typewriter. One time Warner called a writer into the studio screening room for his suggestions on how to fix a weak script. "I'm sorry Mr. Warner. I have no ideas after five."

Another time Jack called in a writer to his office. "Look pally, I got to fire you because I heard you were a communist." "Mr. Warner, please! I'm not a communist, I'm an anti-communist!" "I don't care what kind of commie you are! You are out of here!"

Well after *The Jazz Singer's* success, Jack remained sensitive to religious matters. When he hired a stage actor named Jules Garfield, he told him, "Ok, we have to change your name. How about James Garfield?" "Mr. Warner I don't want to change my name. Anyhow James Garfield was a President. Why don't you change my name to Abraham Lincoln?" "Forget it Garfield. Abraham's too Jewish. We're not going to give the wrong impression." After much arguing they compromised with John Garfield.

Warner's actors gave as well as they got. Humphrey Bogart called him a creep. Errol Flynn actually

threatened to kill him. James Cagney, after driving down the road and seeing Pat O'Brian's name billed above his on a movie marquee sued him for breach of contract and won. Betty Davis, constantly complaining about the films she was cast in, fled to England to perform on the stage only to have Warner track her down and legally compel her to return. But perhaps the toughest of all his battles was with actor George Raft. Raft, who hung out with gangsters like Bugsy Siegel in real life, was loath to be cast as a thug on the screen. He turned virtually every role he was offered. Finally, Jack decided to buy George out of his contract. "Will \$10,000 do it?" He asked George wearily. To Jack's astonishment, George pulled out his own checkbook, promptly paid his boss \$10,000 and stormed out of the office!

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