

# THE SILENT TREATMENT

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## Re-DISCovered: The Restorations of "Why Be Good?" and "Synthetic Sin"

By Ron Hutchinson, exclusive to TST

The coming of talking pictures after decades of failed attempts really began with Warner Brothers' release of their silent feature *Don Juan* in 1926. This was a silent film starring John Barrymore, completed as such, but then having a synchronized musical score and sound effects added in the new Vitaphone process. This system was licensed by the studio from Western Electric, whose Bell Laboratories developed it. The system had the film's soundtrack on a separate 16 inch shellac disk which turned at 33 1/3 rpm. A single motor on the projector ran both the turntable and the film. There was a precise starting spot for both the needle and the film, so in theory everything stayed in synch.

Originally, the Warner Brothers, spearheaded by visionary brother Sam, saw Vitaphone as a way to supply full orchestral scores with their silent pictures, thereby allowing theatres to get rid of their own expensive musicians. But at *Don Juan's* premiere in September 1926, it was

the shorts preceding the feature that started the revolution. Audiences had never before heard perfectly synchronized, natural sounding talking pictures before. Previous attempts at sound films, starting with Edison, failed miserably due to faulty synchronization, inability to fill theatres with phonograph horns, and unnatural acoustic recording. Vitaphone solved all those issues.

Warner Brothers was riding high with the success of Vitaphone, and in September 1928 bought First National Pictures along with all of the star contracts that studio owned. Colleen Moore was First National's top star, and so her pictures got the full Vitaphone treatment.

When *Synthetic Sin* and *Why*

*Be Good?* were completed, a print of each film was sent to the Victor Talking Machine Company in Camden, NJ. There, an original musical accompaniment drawn largely from popular tunes of the day was created to match each scene. Judicious sound effects (like door knocks, horns honking, etc.) were also added. As the musicians watched the film, they played from the original score which was recorded on a 16 inch wax master. Metal stampers from the finished recordings were used to stamp hundreds of Vitaphone disks, one for each reel of the film.

Noteworthy for the Colleen Moore feature disks is that the musical performances are jazzy, toe-tapping and highly reflective of the late 1920's. This is especially true of the soundtrack for *Why Be Good?* Jazz historians have identified such legendary musicians as Jimmy Dorsey, Phil Napoleon, Joe Venuti and Eddie Lang on the disks.

Until the 1990s, both *Synthetic Sin* and *Why Be Good?* were thought to be lost pictures. There is an extremely high mortality rate for films released during the 1927-29 transition period. A large fire at Warner Brothers in the 1950's destroyed the then-known prints.

Fast forward to 1994 and New York's Film Forum. This wonderful venue screens vintage, independent and foreign films to appreciative city audiences and plays host to an annual program of restored Vitaphone short subjects from the



1926-30 period.

On one of these evenings, the audience was updated on latest activities of **The Vitaphone Project**. As the founder of the project, I casually mentioned that I recently acquired all the soundtrack disks for *Why Be Good?* and said something to the effect that “unfortunately, this is a lost film.” In the audience was film historian Joe Yranski, who ran the Donnell Media Center and was a friend of Colleen Moore, who quickly replied “No it’s not! I know where it is!”



Thus began a decade long effort to negotiate the loan of both films for full restoration and synchronization with their Vitaphone disks. While the entire soundtrack to *Why Be Good?* survives, only the disk for the last reel and exit music is known to exist for *Synthetic Sin*. Fortunately, a full list of Vitaphone music cues survives and it will be used to recreate the soundtrack.

Warner Brothers Chief Preservation Officer Ned Price personally interceded with the Bologna Archive and negotiated an agreeable arrangement to have both films restored and copies of both finished efforts given to the archive. Work began late in

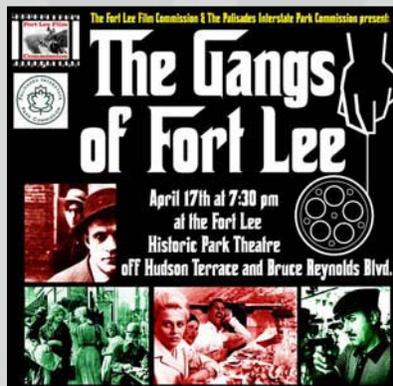
2012, with the professional transfer of the *Why Be Good?* disks and the lone disk for *Synthetic Sin*.

The restoration effort represents a true partnership between Warner Brothers, UCLA Film & Television Archive, Joe Yranski, and The Vitaphone Project. Restoration on these pictures will likely not be completed until 2014, and both films will be screened, for the first time in over 80 years, in 35mm and with sound. ([www.vitaphoneproject.com](http://www.vitaphoneproject.com))

## THE GANGS OF FORT LEE

Fort Lee, NJ. The Fort Lee Film Commission & The Palisades Interstate Park Commission present a one-night film festival on April 17th that celebrates the origins of the gangster film genre that started in Fort Lee, New Jersey, with D.W. Griffith's *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912), shot on Main Street in Fort Lee.

The Film Commission's Tom Meyers and Palisade Park Interpreter Eric Nelsen will discuss the seminal role Fort Lee played in the birth of the gangster film. The Biograph short *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* will be screened followed by a rare public screening of the classic 1962 Italian film *Mafioso*, directed by Alberto Lattuada and starring Alberto Sordi. Part of this film was shot in Fort Lee, Union City and West New York, NJ.



Admission is free at the Fort Lee Historic Park Theatre and audience members are welcome to dress in period “gangster” fashions from 1912. ([www.fortleefilm.org](http://www.fortleefilm.org))

## Sunday Nights at the Heights Theatre

Columbia Heights, MN. **Silent Sunday Nights** returns to the Heights Theatre as we present four outstanding silent films over the summer with a live organ score performed on the Heights Mighty Wurlitzer.



The schedule kicks off on May 12th with the 1925 silent version of *Stella Dallas*, a definitive telling of the classic story of mother love and sacrifice. Minnesota native Belle Bennett gives one of the great performances of the silent screen as the good hearted but crass Stella Dallas, who sacrifices all so her daughter Laurel will have a chance at a better life than the one she could give her.

June 9th features *The Bedroom Window* (1924), a breezy who done it directed by William C. DeMille. Things go awry for young lovers Ruth (May McAvoy) and Robert (Ricardo Cortez) when her father is murdered and Robert is accused of committing the crime.

July 14th breaks out with *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924), one of the most visually stunning of all silent films. With trick photography, sumptuous sets and a sense of style that

makes this Arabian Knights fantasy a lavish movie going experience, this is perhaps Douglas Fairbanks' greatest production made even more exciting in a new digital restoration.



**The Bedroom Window**

The series draws to a close on August 11th with *Chicago*; the sordid tale of jazz and booze loving Roxie Hart first hit the silver screen in this highly entertaining 1927 silent pre code film. Based upon a true life crime story, Phyllis Haver does a spectacular job as Roxie and really shows what made the 1920's roar! ([www.heightstheater.com](http://www.heightstheater.com))

**COMIQUE:  
MANHATTAN'S FORGOTTEN STUDIO**

By Charles Simic, excerpted article

In March 1917, while walking along Broadway, Buster Keaton bumped into a friend from vaudeville who happened to know Roscoe "Fatty Arbuckle," the famous silent movie comedian. Asked if he had ever acted in motion pictures, Keaton said no, and was invited to drop by Arbuckle's studio on 48th Street the following Monday. Keaton first declined because Arbuckle had stolen one of his vaudeville routines, but then changed his mind because his curiosity was piqued by the opportunity to see how movies were made and especially how gags are filmed.

The **Comique Film Studio** was located in a warehouse at 318-320 East 48th Street, in the tough neighborhood west of the elevated subway tracks on First Avenue. On the

first floor, the Norma Talmadge Film Corporation was in full swing filming *Poppy*. Near the precariously built sets, a violinist was attempting to put Norma in the proper mood for a love scene with her leading man. On the second floor, Norma's sister Constance, who first gained attention in D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance*, was making a new comedy. On the third floor Fatty Arbuckle, who was the first of the silent film comics to also direct, was at work on a film called *The Butcher Boy*. There was no script—the director, the actors, and the crew talked over what they were going to do in the next scene and then did it. Keaton, with his elegant laid-back air, improvised a routine with a broom and was instantly hired.



**The Butcher Boy**

On April 23, 1917, *The Butcher Boy* opened in two hundred theaters across the country, including the Strand in Times Square, and it soon became a big box office success. Following that, Arbuckle and Keaton made two other films in the same building—*A Reckless Romeo* and *Rough House*. The company then moved to the Biograph Studio on East 175th Street where *Coney Island*, *His Wedding Night*, and several others films were made before relocating to Long Beach, California in October 1917.

Along with Arbuckle and Keaton, they feature Al St. John, Arbuckle's second banana (and nephew), a gangly, loose-limbed acrobat dressed like a scarecrow who played country bumpkins and various kinds of

villains. Beyond the slapstick and roughhouse typical of the times, the number of thoroughly original and brilliant comic ideas found in these shorts is staggering.



To my astonishment, the building that held the studio once run by Joseph Schenck was still there. It would be interesting to find out its history and that of the neighborhood over the decades. I loved the idea that the garage was just three blocks from the United Nations, and that over the years many world leaders and high diplomatic officials must have ridden past it in their bullet-proof limousines, throwing a casual glance at the entrance through which, almost a century earlier, Arbuckle, Keaton, and St. John went—if they were not already in the studio whacking each other over the heads with pillows, making feathers fly out of windows.

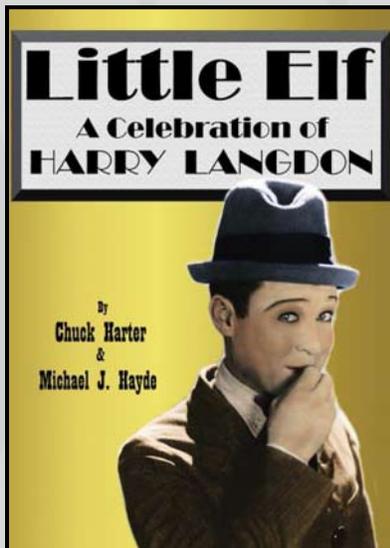
I took a stroll one recent lunch hour past nail salons, stores selling cell phones, and pizza joints to take a second look at the building, thinking the only familiar establishments in the neighborhood that the members of the Comique Film Corporation would still recognize are the Irish pub and the funeral parlor. The garage was there, but to my surprise and horror I discovered that the wing of the old warehouse that contained the studio had recently been torn down and the government of Singapore was raising some kind of building in its place. (Full article at: <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2012/dec/07/manhattans-forgotten-film-studio/>)

## TST BOOKCORNER

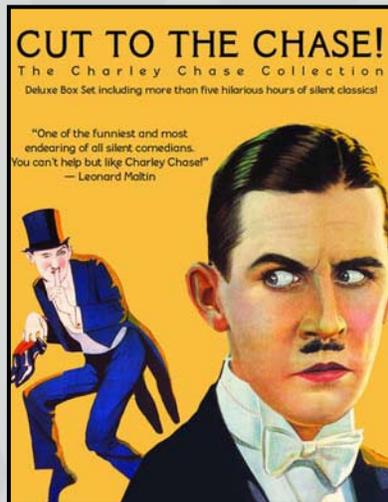
### **Little Elf: A CELEBRATION OF HARRY LANGDON**

By Chuck Carter & Michael J. Hyde

**Little Elf: A Celebration of Harry Langdon** is the legendary comedian's definitive life story, coupled with the most comprehensive Langdon filmography ever compiled, presented within 692 pages and illustrated with over 500 images. The authors combed through paper, microfilm and digital archives, plus the films themselves, to put together the most complete and accurate summation of Langdon's life and career imaginable, from his earliest stage appearances to his final day in a movie studio.



As a bonus, **Little Elf** also contains five of Langdon's vaudeville scripts, an illustrated full synopsis of *Heart Trouble* (1928), Langdon's lost silent feature, and ten vintage profiles pulled from various movie magazines between 1925-33. ([www.bearmanormedia.com](http://www.bearmanormedia.com))



## HOME ENTERTAINMENT

### **Cut to the Chase: THE CHARLEY CHASE COMEDY COLLECTION**

Charles Joseph Parrott of Baltimore, Maryland started out in vaudeville during the rough and tumble days in the first decade of the 20th century. This young man, fresh off the stage, eventually found himself employed at the Christie Film Company and through the next decade worked as a juvenile lead, a gag writer & a comedy director. When he changed his name to Charley Chase and was featured in Hal Roach short comedies, he became one of the great geniuses and stars of Hollywood's golden era of silent comedy. The always-dapper Chase specialized in portraying the common man with very common skills placed in the most uncommon of circumstances.

Years in the making, this amazing two disc Charley Chase collection features more than five hours of comic masterpieces from the height of Chase's career. *The Uneasy Three* (from a 35mm print at the Museum of Modern Art) and *Charley My Boy* (from a 16mm print from the John

Hampton Collection, courtesy of the Stanford Theater Foundation) are exclusive to this release. ([www.milestonefilms.com](http://www.milestonefilms.com))

### **Buster Keaton Collection**

All of the Kino Classics Ultimate Edition releases are now together in one super-sized high definition boxed set. This Blu-ray exclusive collection includes all the films Keaton made during the prime of his career—authorized by the Keaton Estate and supplemented with a trove of bonus features in a whopping 14 discs.

It includes the following Ultimate Edition releases of: **Buster Keaton: Short Films Collection: 1920-1923**, *The Saphead* (1920), *Our Hospitality* (1923), *Sherlock Jr. / Three Ages* (1923 / 1924), *The Navigator* (1924), *Seven Chances* (1925), *Go West / Battling Butler* (1925 / 1926), *The General* (1926), *College* (1927), *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928) and *Lost Keaton* (1934-1937). ([www.kino-orber.com](http://www.kino-orber.com))



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