

Sights and Sounds Reunited

An Exploration of Information Behavior in the Vitaphone Project Community

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Discovering a presumably lost reel of film is an exhilarating moment for moving image archivists and film historians contributing to and studying the overall preservation of cultural heritage. When discovered, one's most prominent inclination is to spread the news and communicate the finding. In some cases, this may be one reel of many that were thought to be lost. In other cases, perhaps other reels from the same film have been discovered but exist in different locations or even in various countries. The discovery also prompts a variety of questions and next steps: How can these reels be unified to piece together the film? Who else possesses components, be it reels of footage, sound discs, or stills, from the same film? Where are these components located?

Unfortunately, the answers to these questions are often not readily available, as is evident in the initial attempts to locate, reunite, and restore many different presumably lost films. The work to restore Vitaphone features, however, brings about an interesting success story; in an effort to overcome the challenges of communicating among archivists and private collectors from all over the world, the Vitaphone Project (VP) community has had many triumphs in working toward the rediscovery of Vitaphone features. Thanks to the efforts of the VP, a community dedicated to the location and restoration of Vitaphone features and matching sound tracks, audiences have been able to enjoy a multitude of feature-length and short subject films that were once thought to be lost.

The VP has worked to preserve and restore the many performances captured in Vitaphone features during the dawn of the sound era, namely, highlighting the works of performers who transitioned from live vaudeville routines to careers in the film industry. Moreover, members of the VP community have actively worked with collectors and archivists worldwide to reunite Vitaphone films with their sound tracks. Their discoveries of Vitaphone

films and their accompanying sound tracks have led to the complete restoration of several Vitaphone features. In turn, several studio-sponsored commercial releases of these features have become available for public consumption via modern media formats. Like working to complete a puzzle, the VP community has taken on the challenge of piecing together an important part of film history.

Though the VP has had much success in reuniting Vitaphone films with their corresponding sound tracks, there is a need for more effective communication within their community. While the VP community is active on Facebook and has a website, the community as a whole lacks a centralized place in which collectors can easily interact with one another; mostly fans and enthusiasts, as opposed to collectors, utilize the VP community's Facebook group. The constant postings from aficionados of the community's efforts are certainly welcome and exciting for the group but also make it difficult for collectors to share information with one another. While the website was updated in 2019, its interface is outdated and needs reimagining in terms of structure as well as updates in its content to reflect the changes and updates in the community, so that it can offer a relevant, interactive interface and stronger means of communication for collectors. Not all individuals in the VP community are active on social media or even on the internet, so it is important that a new interface or means of communication keep in mind the needs of those members.

Overall, the community would benefit greatly from an interactive platform that would allow users to share information about their Vitaphone collections to reunite film prints with their proper sound tracks and lead to their full restoration. Grounded in archival intelligence theory and social network theory, this article examines the information behavior and interactions of the VP community and proposes research designed to enhance communication between its members to advance the mission of the organization.

Community Characteristics and Literature Review

The VP community comprises “film buffs and record collectors” worldwide who work to seek out sound track discs that correspond with Vitaphone and other talkie shorts.¹ This group of individuals also includes private collectors who are willing to “partner with the studios (particularly Turner and Warner Bros.), film archives (University of California-Los Angeles, Library of Congress, and the British Film Institute), and [other] private collectors worldwide in

order to get these films restored and seen again.”² The founding members include corresponding secretary and editor Ron Hutchinson; database manager and VP website designer Patrick Picking; and co-founders John Newton, Sherwin Dunner, and Vince Giordano.³ The community also includes overseas project emissaries, including Malcolm Billingsley for the United Kingdom, Paul Brennan for Australia and New Zealand, and Jonas Nordin for Scandinavia.⁴ Contributors to the VP community can be archivists, scholars, and collectors of all ages with varying technological skills.

The reasons why these individuals possess Vitaphone films and sound tracks also vary; some individuals may enjoy the films, while others may have inherited a collection or oversee a collection regularly. Oftentimes, the family members of the actors or musicians who worked in these films have held on to copies of the films or sound tracks in which their relative appeared because they are both historical and sentimental artifacts.

A Brief History of Vitaphone

Vitaphone made its debut on August 6, 1926, as the “latest commercial sound-on-disc motion picture system” at a screening of *Don Juan* (1926) in New York City, with eight short subject films preceding the feature film.⁵ Though *Don Juan* had a “synchronized musical score and sound effects added in,” it was composed as a silent film.⁶ However, the shorts playing before the feature film attracted the audience’s attention more than the film; the shorts featured “perfectly synchronized, natural sounding talking,” which was new to filmgoing audiences.⁷ In the past, attempts at sound films were marred by “faulty synchronization, inability to fill theaters with phonograph horns and unnatural acoustic recording,” which Vitaphone sought to ameliorate.⁸

The popularity of these shorts caused a wave of additional shorts and part-talking features in the years to come, produced by Warner Bros. and its subsidiary, the Vitaphone Corporation. The sound tracks were recorded using equipment developed by Western Electric through the Bell Telephone Laboratories and distributed via one-sided twelve-inch or sixteen-inch 33 1/3 rpm shellac discs produced by the Victor Talking Machine Company (Figure 1). This allowed for recorded dialogue to synchronize with early films prior to the incorporation of sound into film technologies.⁹ Typically, the shorts were “one reel, approximately 600–1,000 feet in length (35mm), running roughly four to ten minutes” and were “photographed in one continuous 10-

minute take, using a single camera.”¹⁰ The discs were coined “Vitadiscs” and were numbered on a serial basis as “Vitaphone Varieties.”¹¹ Sounds for the shorts were recorded onto a two-inch-thick wax blank, which had to be kept at a consistent temperature in a dust-free area.¹² Next, the sounds picked up by a microphone were “amplified and fed to an electromagnetic cutting head,” causing a stylus to “cut modulated grooves in the wax blank, which was rotated on a turntable.”¹³ The newly cut and negatively impressed disc would be dusted with graphite and dipped into an electroplating bath, and would later be used to create a master positive or “mother” needed to press the final records for theatrical use.¹⁴ Vitaphone produced a multitude of sound tracks “to accompany shorts and feature films from 1926 to 1930” and later used discs “for the distribution of broadcast material to radio stations from the 1930s to the 1960s.”¹⁵

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Figure 1. Vitaphone shorts promotional ad, Warner Bros., <http://www.picking.com/vit-123-colorvitad.jpg>.

Vitaphone shorts featured a wide range of talent, including performers from vaudeville, opera, film, and radio. These shorts acted as a “necessary ‘buffer’ to the feature presentation” and ensured “the diversity of appeals necessary to sustain a mass audience.”¹⁶ Prior to Vitaphone shorts, theaters would hire live acts or orchestras to serve the same purpose. However, when Vitaphone shorts arrived, theater owners saw a chance to save on operating costs and order shorts from the Vitaphone catalog, which offered the options of travelogues, cartoons, slapstick comedies, sing-alongs, and more. At the same time, theaters enjoyed a sense of autonomy because they no longer depended on whichever local acts or performers were in town; rather, they had a wide range of talents to choose from through the Vitaphone catalog and could compete more effectively with other theaters as a result. However, many vaudeville theater owners saw Vitaphone as a threat and refused to support the medium; vaudeville theater owner B. F. Keith worked to discourage vaudevillians from signing contracts with Vitaphone and Warner Bros. “under penalty of blacklisting by the Keith circuit.”¹⁷ In response, Vitaphone and Warner Bros. offered “one-year contracts to vaudeville acts willing to appear in Vitaphone shorts.”¹⁸ Studios saw Vitaphone shorts as profitable and emphasized producing a broad range of short subject films to pique the interest of theater owners and their audiences, gradually closing the curtain on live vaudeville to make way for sound motion pictures.

Vitaphone and the Impact of Short Subject Films

Oftentimes, short subject films are only mentioned in film history courses as part of the gradual move to feature-length sound films and are dismissed in favor of discussing these feature films; however, the short subject film is an important part of film history that warrants preservation and examination. Vitaphone shorts especially shine because their pseudo-synchronous acoustic effects had the power to “announce various technological possibilities, demonstrating the range of sounds that could be reproduced and, more importantly, performing the possibility of synchronization.”¹⁹ Additionally, Vitaphone shorts acted as “a testing ground for new acting talent,” as studios occasionally experimented with potential stars by initially starring them in Vitaphone shorts rather than major feature film projects.²⁰ The presence of familiar actors also served to “obviate the perceived primitive nature of the technology.”²¹ Furthermore, the innovations exhibited in the creation of short subject films were capstones that led to the development of the Hollywood studio system, where business practices were “organized around the production and distribution of classical sound film, both as textual form and as viewing experience.”²² The short subject film “vouchsafed the standardization of film exhibition and spectatorship at the beginning of the sound era[,] functioned as a laboratory for working through the textual practices and cultural meanings of the sound film,” and “secured the film industry’s structure as a mature oligopoly.”²³

Although short subject films have unique importance in film history, film preservation in general was an afterthought for the film industry. Unfortunately, while studio moguls, producers, actors, and actresses reaped the rewards of their screen successes, little thought was given to the preservation of their work. In some cases, studios would dispose of their silent films because they believed that these films had no more commercial value. Moreover, studios actively incinerated film prints to retrieve the silver image particles and take advantage of their scrap value or had them “physically axed in two to prevent possible piracy.”²⁴ If a studio remade a film, it was typical to dispose of the earlier version. To make matters worse, in early cinema, films were captured on nitrate, a material that is notorious for being “chemically unstable” and “in a perpetual state of decomposition.”²⁵

Vitaphone shorts were no exception, as the “high silver content and rich tones” of nitrate stock were argued to be the best type of film for black-and-white photography; however, nitrate is highly flammable and can “self-ignite at 300 degrees or less.”²⁶ As a result, the storage of this

particular film stock was difficult, leading to major studio vault fires that destroyed original studio prints. Though it is nearly impossible to quantify exactly how many films are truly lost, it is “often claimed that 75 percent of all American silent films are gone and 50 percent of all films made prior to 1950 are lost.”²⁷ To date, there are “more than 100 million feet of nitrate film of American origin awaiting preservation, in American and foreign archives, vaults of producers and distributors, and in the hands of private collectors.”²⁸ Over time, Vitaphone playback equipment and discs were sold for scrap, and “hundreds of features and shorts inevitably became separated from each other.”²⁹ There was no attempt at converting the shorts or films into different formats. Over the years, collectors and archivists have “assembled a reasonable collection of the picture elements for many films of the Vitaphone era, but the sound discs are considerably harder to come by.”³⁰

The Efforts of the Vitaphone Project

Thankfully, the VP formed in 1991 by record collectors determined to “identify the location of the surviving 16-inch shellac soundtrack discs or mute film elements of early sound-on-disc films, particularly the Vitaphone shorts; research and document Vitaphone’s entire output; and work with archives and the copyright owner to get the films restored and seen again”³¹ (Figure 2). Initially, the VP communicated via Hutchinson’s newsletter as it did not have an internet presence at the time. For a ten-dollar subscription fee, VP subscribers received newsletters detailing the work of the VP and current projects. Together, the founding members of the VP bridged the gap between studios and collectors, who tended to be adversaries; in the past, there had been “raids of collectors’ holdings by the FBI, further polarizing the potential partners” and causing collectors to be all the more secretive.³² The VP established a sense of trust and ownership among collectors and studios, causing studios to welcome collector cooperation for the sake of preservation. Moreover, donors were promised “their own copy of the finished restoration.”³³ Methods of communication improved with the development of a VP website in addition to the more interactive Facebook group presence for the VP, on which Hutchinson and other founding members would participate and post regularly.

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Figure 2. The Vitaphone Project logo. The Vitaphone Project!,
<http://www.picking.com/vitaphone.html>.

Owing to the VP's efforts, more than 120 shorts from 1926 to 1931 have been restored, more than 4,000 discs have been located, and \$350,000 in funding has been raised.³⁴ The number of “‘rediscovered’ sound track discs now averages about 700 per year.”³⁵ In accordance with their aims to inventory, fund, restore, and exhibit Vitaphone shorts, the VP has supported more than ten feature restorations, with fifty-three Vitaphone shorts and two full-length scored Vitaphone features in the restoration pipeline.³⁶ Among their successes, they discovered the only copy of the Vitaphone disc for *A Plantation Act* (1926), which was considered lost until the Library of Congress located the film.³⁷ Though the Vitaphone disc was “broken into four pieces and badly glued together” when it was found in a “barn owned by the descendants of someone who worked in the movie business,” restoration through modern technology allowed for the film to be restored and publicly screened.³⁸ In 2018, a VP discovery “led to a professional restoration of a Vitaphone short featuring Jack Teagarden and a 20-year-old Benny Goodman with Ben Pollack’s Park Central Orchestra in 1929” and received further attention when it “found and released a lost early color Three Stooges short.”³⁹ Additionally, the VP has located more than 300 mute Vitaphone picture elements, while another 125 discs without their matching films have also been found. The VP is poised to restore forty additional shorts and has worked with studios to make several Vitaphone compilations commercially available on DVD.

Nonetheless, much work is left to do in the VP community. “There are scores of films for which no sound has been discovered, but might yet be.”⁴⁰ However, the VP community has had to face a number a number of difficult transitions. Twenty years have passed since the establishment of the VP, and many advances in technology and communication have occurred since then. While “tracking down these lost gems and bringing them back together was Ron Hutchinson’s magic,” unfortunately, Hutchinson passed away in 2017.⁴¹ The Facebook group has since been renamed “Ron Hutchinson’s Vitaphone Project,” in his memory, and has certainly posed challenges to the remaining members who are working to continue the VP mission in Hutchinson’s absence. The VP community’s founders are working to update the contact information for their collectors and contributors, in addition to receiving more current information about the status of these collections and any new acquisitions. During this period of adjustment, the COVID-19 pandemic has also occurred, posing challenges in travel and interaction. More than ever, a new means of communication—particularly virtual—needs to be explored to continue the important work of the VP.

Areas for Further Research

While the history of Vitaphone shorts has been turbulent and fascinating, one of the most profound gaps concerning research about Vitaphone is that sound shorts are rarely seen as “much more than the experimental steps on a teleological path toward feature-length talkies.”⁴² At the same time, conventional film histories typically touch upon short subjects to discuss the balanced program framework but do not “secure any further analysis beyond the obvious fact of the short subject’s heterogeneity.”⁴³ Though some researchers and film historians have worked to reassess the “dominant historiographic frameworks that have reduced the era’s shorts to the servant’s role in introducing sound technology,” the work of restoring and relocating these films has not been substantially researched.⁴⁴ The means of communication used to link Vitaphone films to their sound tracks includes email, phone calls, the VP website, in-person visits, and even word of mouth at film screenings. There is no unified interface in which serious VP users can both log their progress and communicate with one another, and no formal studies have been conducted in relation to the VP community and its means of communication.

At present, there is little research surrounding the VP community. Most studies and academic journals have discussed the need to restore Vitaphone shorts in general and have lauded the efforts of the VP community. However, there is a major gap in the research regarding how the VP community communicates. To fill this gap in the current research, one of the key theories on which the VP community relies is archival intelligence. The theory of archival intelligence aligns with the goals of the VP and how its community interacts because it is a theory that concerns itself with examining how users behave when conducting a search within an archival setting or when using archival databases. The dimensions of archival intelligence involve

knowledge of archival theory, practices, and procedures; strategies for reducing uncertainty and ambiguity when unstructured problems and ill-defined solutions are the norm; and intellectual skills or the ability to understand the connection between representation of documents, activities, and processes with the actual object or process being represented.⁴⁵

In the case of the VP, members of the community are faced with situations in which problems are unstructured and need to develop strategies that reduce uncertainty and ambiguity. When trying to reconnect a Vitaphone film with its sound track, members of the VP community need to develop search tactics to solve these problems and ask questions of the records themselves or

their potential owners. Archival intelligence theory's emphasis on intellectual skills is also crucial to the VP community because these skills aid in framing a search strategy and understanding how surrogates can lead researchers to the primary sources that they seek. Moreover, archival intelligence theory dictates that the "researcher has to make meaningful connections while advancing through the research process" and must "develop the ability to act effectively on those connections."⁴⁶ Members of the VP community must take many different collectors, scholars, and archivists into account to develop an informed search strategy that will ideally lead them to the Vitaphone component they need to bring them closer to the feature's restoration. Implementing the tenets of archival intelligence theory could lead to an improved and interactive user interface for the VP community.

In addition to the theory of archival intelligence, social network theory can be connected to the operations of the VP community. Much of the success of the VP community can be attributed to networking and knowledge of which individuals and organizations are the keepers of certain Vitaphone films and sound tracks. The ability to deduce which individuals own specific Vitaphone components and being able to link them to other corresponding components serve to produce the intended output of complete and restored shorts for the VP community. In short, certain resources are only available to an individual thanks to his or her social relationships. The VP community thrives thanks to the creation of fruitful social relationships, which grow especially when there is established trust among collectors. Furthermore, an increase in the visibility of the community and its work can bolster social relationships among members of the VP community and raise awareness of their work.

Though the focus of future research regarding the VP community can explore how the VP community communicates to enhance their current means of communication, the significance of such research extends beyond this specific gap. Because the collectors and their respective collections are situated all over the world, fostering a sense of community is crucial. A closer examination of the VP community could also assist individuals in revitalizing communication methods via an interactive database used for purposes beyond Vitaphone short restoration. The approach for reuniting various components of a larger whole through enhanced communication methods could be utilized in other fields of study beyond various film reunification and restoration projects, as well as in archival work and library and information studies.

Conclusion

Without question, the recovery of a film opens the door to new discussions about the feature, its players, the studios, and all of the major parties involved in its inception, production, and dissemination. When the components of a presumably lost film resurface, pieces of cinematic history are recovered as a new generation of audiences and scholars gradually rediscovers the film. Overall, the VP community has conducted important work by connecting with collectors all over the world to ensure that essential parts of film history are preserved and restored. Vitaphone shorts have been overlooked as an important part of film history, and their unique format of separate film reels and sound tracks has been a challenge to restore.

Thanks to the efforts of the VP community, audiences all over the world have been able to enjoy Vitaphone features once presumed lost. To ensure that the VP will continue to have success in locating and restoring Vitaphone features, an enhanced means of communication is necessary, through which the VP community will gain more visibility from other collectors and will be able to communicate with a broader range of audiences by more popular methods of communication. Opportunities for visibility and interactivity can surely bolster the successes of the VP community and will assist the community in carrying out its mission effectively and efficiently, while potentially paving the way for stronger communications among archivists and private collectors working on other reunification and restoration projects.

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Notes

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