

## REVIEW



Nat King Cole (with an unidentified woman) at the piano in the 1946 Soundie 'I'm a Shy Guy.'

# When Black Performers Starred in Soundies

A forgotten film technology from the 1940s offered artists a way to reach audiences on their own terms, free from Hollywood's constraints.

By SUSAN DELSON

In April 2015, a video titled "102 y/o Dancer Sees Herself on Film for the First Time" was uploaded on YouTube. Shot on cellphones in a Brooklyn nursing home, the seven-minute video shows Alice Barker, a Harlem nightclub dancer of the 1930s and 1940s, watching herself perform in vintage film clips. Old and young, Barker is entrancing—vivacious in her nursing-home bed, lissome and flirtatious on film. The video went viral immediately, and it has since been viewed more than 35 million times.

Whether they knew it or not, those millions of viewers had also discovered Soundies. A now-obscure film phenomenon of the 1940s, Soundies were three-minute films made to be shown on movie jukeboxes known as Panoram—free-standing, closed-system projection cabinets a little taller than a modern refrigerator. Located in bars, cafes, bus and train stations—the same kinds of places a music-only jukebox might be found—Panorams cost a dime per Soundie. The screen was roughly 17 inches high by 22 inches wide, big enough for a dozen or more viewers to watch together.

Soundies have been called the music videos of their day, but they're a largely overlooked chronicle of American popular culture. From 1940 to 1946, almost 1,900 of them were produced. Most significant from a historical perspective are the 300 or so Soundies in which Black performers like Alice Barker are the stars, featured players and uncredited extras. At a time when, with rare exceptions, the few roles that Hollywood gave Black actors were as servants or comic sidekicks, Soundies jettisoned the stereotypes, offering images of Black success, sophistication and trend-setting style. They depicted soldiers, subway conductors, policemen and defense-plant workers—positions that, for Black Americans in the 1940s, were often more readily achieved in movie houses serving Black audiences. Stars like Duke Ellington and

Count Basie were broadly famous long before they made Soundies, but for other Black performers such as Louis Jordan, Panoram play was a springboard for a successful crossover career.

In addition to pop-music luminaries, Soundies featured performers who are nearly forgotten today, including women musicians like the spectacular International Sweethearts of Rhythm big band, boogie pianist Lynn Albritton and gospel and blues icon Sister Rosetta Tharpe. "This music was so underrepresented on film at the time," says Los Angeles archivist and jazz film historian Mark Cantor, who began collecting Soundies in the 1970s. Compared to the 1940s recording industry, he says, "Soundies are more inclusive."

"Jam Session," set in an after-hours Harlem cafe, opens with Duke Ellington at the piano with his bass player, Junior Raglin. Other band members drift in, uncase their instruments and take quick solos before the full band swings into the close. An instant Panoram hit, it exemplifies the creative collaboration that often took place between Black performers and Soundies makers.

That collaboration was essential to the whole operation. Shoe-string budgets and breakneck schedules were the rule, and producers often counted on talent to furnish their own material. As a result, Black performers were often able to present themselves on camera with relatively little interference. From 1941 through early

proach to production. Some 45 companies made Soundies at one time or another. While almost all of the producers were white, New York became a center for Black-cast Soundies, largely thanks to SDCA executive-turned-producer William Forest Crouch. Crouch worked closely with Black football great Frederick Douglass "Fritz" Pollard, who, as an entertainment impresario in Harlem, ran the Sun Tan Studio on West 125th Street. With Sun Tan as his base, Pollard functioned as an indispensable talent scout, casting director and rehearsal supervisor on the films.

Some Black-cast Soundies, especially the ones produced by Crouch, pushed against the wartime status quo. At a time when Black Americans were still fighting for the right to enlist in the armed forces, "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" (1942) updates the old Civil War song for a neighborhood parade to welcome home Black servicemen. "We Are Americans Too" (1943) is both an expression of Black patriotism and a demand that Black Americans' contributions be recognized. In "Sleep Kentucky Babe" (1945), the vocal trio Day, Dawn and Dusk impeccably dismantles an 1896 "plantation lullaby," polishing it off with a salute to 1940s urban diversity.

The final SDCA catalog, published in 1946, foreshadowed Soundies' downward spiral in the postwar era. A section on "Dated Subjects" culled patriotic and war-related Soundies from the general listings, significantly reducing the number of films in play. The Black-cast Soundies were also moved from the general listings into a new "Negro Section"—a radical departure from previous catalogs that reflected a waning, rapidly fragmenting audience. But Soundies' greatest challenge came from commercial television, which gained momentum with the war's end. Among the first locales to bring in TV sets were the bars and taverns that had been the Panoram's home turf.

Today Soundies are widely available on YouTube and elsewhere online, and Black-cast Soundies are among the most popular. "Jam Session" tops the list, with more than 2.6 million views to date. But with videos scattered among dozens of YouTube channels and sometimes transferred from poor-quality film prints, it's easy to dismiss them as one-offs or found footage. In fact, Black-cast Soundies are a remarkably intact archive, documenting an all-but-unknown chapter of American popular culture and entertainment history. These films are too important and altogether too entertaining not to experience for yourself—beer optional, no dimes required.

Ms. Delson is a regular contributor to Review's Icons column. This essay is adapted from her new book "Soundies and the Changing Image of Black Americans on Screen: One Dime at a Time," published by Indiana University Press.



Above: A scene from 'Chatter,' a 1943 Soundie featuring dancer Alice Barker (at left). Below: Young actors with a Panoram machine in the 1944 Soundie 'Bobby Sox Tune.'



A broader cultural outlook was part of the films' appeal. There's a sense of discovery in glimpsing a Black metropolis in "Take the 'A' Train," watching a teenage Dorothy Dandridge take command of the screen in "Cow Cow Boogie," or seeing a Black performer in whiteface portraying composer Giuseppe Verdi, with comic brio, in a swing-time riff on "Rigoletto."

1947, the Chicago-based Soundies Distributing Corporation of America (SDCA), the company that commissioned and packaged the films, released a new eight-film reel every week, and the vast majority of these reels featured at least one Black-cast film.

Coming up with 400-plus Soundies a year required a decentralized, distinctly un-Hollywood ap-

SOUNDIES DISTRIBUTING CORPORATION OF AMERICA PHOTOGRAPHS: HANNAH LUBOWITZ; ALICE BARKER: JEFFREY M. HARRIS; DANCING ACTRESS: JEFFREY M. HARRIS; PANORAM MACHINE: JEFFREY M. HARRIS