

“You Oughta Be In Pictures”

**The History of Jews in American
Cinema**

The Day We Heard Them Talk

October 6, 1927, audiences line up outside the Warner Bros. flagship theater to see the first full length movie with audible dialog: *The Jazz Singer* starring Al Jolson. Other movies had sound effects and D.W. Griffith's short film *Dream Street* had a singing sequence, but *The Jazz Singer* broke new ground featuring **synchronized dialog**.



The Most Jewish of Movies



A Warner Bros. Production.

"I'D WALK A MILLION MILES FOR ONE OF YOUR SMILES, MY MAMMY!"

The Jazz Singer.

- Based on the short story *The Day of Atonement* written by Samson Raphaelson. Al Jolson was the inspiration for the story.
- Originally a B'way play (1925) that starred George Jessel
- The movie opened the day before Yom Kippur, 1927.
- Jolson performs Kol Nidre; Cantor Yossele Rosenblatt sings Kaddish.

The Studio – Warner Brothers

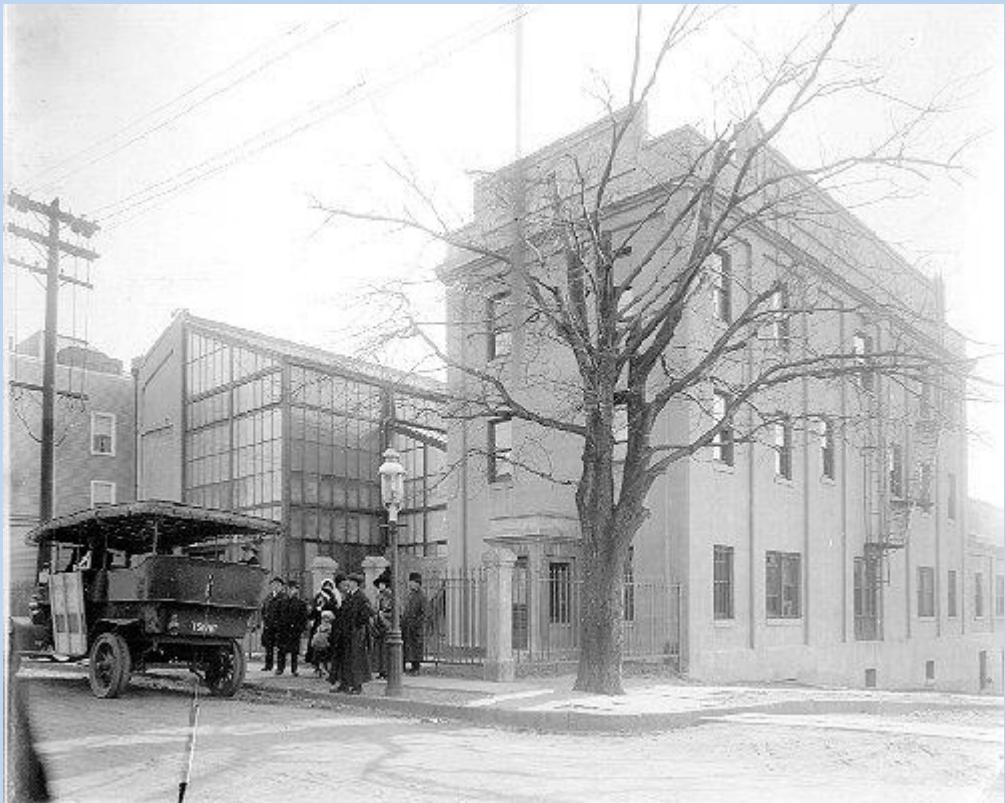
- Born Wonskolaser – Harry (Hirz), Albert (Aaron), Sam (Szmul), Jack (Itzhak) – in Poland.
- Emigrated to London, Ontario, Canada.
- In 1903 they acquire a movie projector and begin showing films in Ohio and Pennsylvania.
- By 1912, they are distributing films across 4 states. By 1918, they start producing films and open Warner Bros. Studios in Hollywood.



How It All Started

- First use of projected images dates back to the the "magic lantern" in the 17th century by Athanasius Kircher in Rome.
- First motor powered camera is developed in 1890 by William Kennedy Laurie Dickson, a young British assistant working for Thomas Edison.
- In 1894, the Edison Manufacturing Company opens, which includes Edison Studios.
- The motorized camera is called the *Kinetograph*, used 35mm film, which could be shown on the *Kinetoscope* projector, setting the standards for today's film industry.

Edison's Movies



Edison Motion Picture Studio, Bronx NY 1907-1918

- Early films included: 34-second *Blacksmith Scene*, three people pretending to be blacksmiths; and *The Edison Kinetoscopic Record of a Sneeze* (aka *Fred Ott's Sneeze*) Edison's assistant sneezing for the camera.
- Other films featured magic shows, plays, vaudeville performances with dancers and strongmen, acts from Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, various boxing matches and cockfights, and scantily-clad women.

“Put another nickel in, in the nickelodeon..”

- In April 1894 the first commercial place to watch movies the Kinetoscope Parlor at 1155 Broadway in New York City, opened. The first movie was *Young Griffo v. Battling Charles Barnett*, a 4-minute long fight film. Soon Kinetoscope parlors opened across the country.
- The term “nickelodeon” was first used for Austin’s Nickelodean, a museum in Boston. It later came to mean any place that showed movies
- By 1896 it became clear that more money could be made projecting movies onto a screen. Edison “adapted” a projector made by Armat and Jenkins called the “Phantascope” and renamed it the “Vitascope.”
- Films were now being shown to audiences as large at 500 people at one showing. Movies had become big business.

First Movie Theaters



- The first movie theaters were converted from stage and burlesque houses, many of which were owned by Jews. The Princess Theatre was a converted vaudeville house.
- In 1907, young **Louis B. Mayer** converted the Gem Theater in Haverhill, Massachusetts into a “nickelodeon” renaming the theater The Orpheum.
- In 1896, Jewish brothers **Mitchel** and **Moe Mark** opened *Edison's Vitascope Theater* in Buffalo, New York, one of the first theaters built specifically to show movies. In 1914, the brothers opened the Strand Theater in NYC. As the brothers expanded their business they would partner with young **Adolph Zukor** and **Marcus Loew**.
- The projection technology was licensed from Edison.

“Go West Young Man”

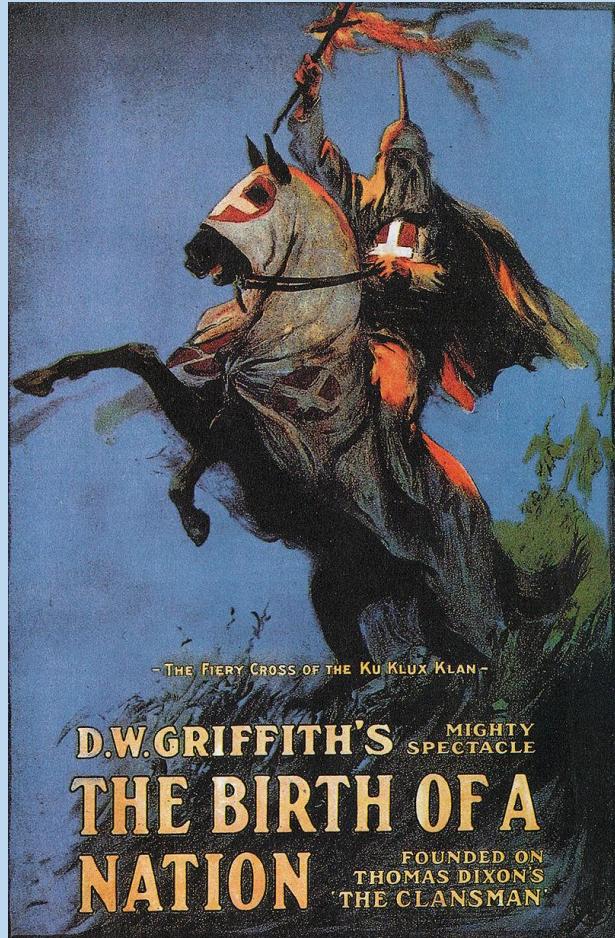
- Many reasons for moving the film industry to California, one was Edison's use of patents and lawsuits to control the industry
- Starting in 1898, Edison sues the American Mutoscope Company, claiming infringement on his patent for the Kinetograph movie camera. This began a series of suits that lasted until 1908.
- In 1908 Edison aligns with the Biograph Company to form the Motion Picture Patents (MPP) Company, AKA “The Authority.”
- In 1909, the Independents ignore the deadlines for compliance with The Authority and carry on making movies with “adult content.”
- They moved to So. California to maximize distance from Edison and to be close to the Mexican border.

Theda Bara – The Screen’s 1st Sex Symbol

- Born Theodosia Burr Goodman in 1885 in Cincinnati. Took drama lessons at Walnut Hills High School in Ohio.
- Her father was a Yiddish-speaking tailor from Poland.
- Given the name “Theda Bara” to make her more exotic.
- Also known as “The Vamp” she made 40 movies for indie filmmaker William Fox.



Harry Aitken and D. W. Griffith



- Harry Aitken and his brother Roy began with a makeshift movie theater in Waukesha, Wisconsin. Opened their first real theater in Chicago, soon had a string of five theaters.
- Opened Western Film Exchange in 1906 to distribute movies.
- Moved to Santa Barbara to avoid Edison, called the company the Sales Co.
- In 1911, the Sales Co. signed Little Mary Pickford, Aitken is removed from Sales Co. and Carl Laemmle renames it **Universal**.
- In 1913, Aitken's new company, Mutual Film, lures D.W. Griffith away by offering freedom and control.

Carl Laemmle

- Came to America from Germany when he was 17, living in Wisconsin. Met Harry Aitken, joins in partnership.
- He challenged Edison's monopoly using the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. To attract talent, he began advertising individual performers, creating the "Star" system.
- In 1915, he moved his studio (formerly Aitken's) to San Fernando and renamed it **Universal**.
- As a producer he worked on hundreds of movies including *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) and *The Phantom of The Opera* (1925), both with Lon Chaney and *Dracula* with Bela Lugosi.



Harry Cohn



- Born into a Jewish family in NYC, Harry worked as street car conductor, a sheet music printer, and other jobs before his brother Jack Cohn got him a job at Universal working for Carl Laemmle.
- Harry, Jack, and Joe Brandt left to form CBC (Cohn, Brandt, Cohn) Film Sales.
- When Brandt wanted out, Harry bought his shares and renamed the company Columbia Pictures Corp.
- In 1934, the Columbia produced Frank Capra film *It Happened One Night* swept the Academy Awards.

Adolph Zukor

- Born to a Jewish family in Hungary, came to America at 16.
- Worked in an upholstery shop, then opened Zukor's Novelty Fur Company.
- Asked to lend money to Mitchel Mark, he insisted on becoming a partner.
- Once in the movie industry, he established the Famous Players Co.
- Moving to the West Coast he changed the name to **Paramount** Studios.



Marcus Loew



- Born into a family of poor Jewish immigrants in NYC Loew was an early investor in nickelodeons along with Adolph Zukor and the Schenck brothers.
- He built up the chain of Loew's theaters expanding out from NY to Washington DC, Boston, and Philadelphia, eventually going nationwide.
- He needed content (movies) for his theaters, so in 1920 he purchased Metro Pictures Corp. Later he added Goldwyn Pictures. He would hire producer **Louis B. Mayer** and **Irving Thalberg** to run **Metro-Goldwyn**.

David Sarnoff

- Born in Russia in 1891, early education at a Yeshiva, comes to America in 1900.
- Begins working selling newspapers. At 15, he must go to work full-time, works at a telegraph company. He sees a demonstration of the “new” wireless technology and recommends the building of a “radio music box.”
- By 1925 he is part of the Radio Corp. of America (RCA) and acquires Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO) as the film subsidiary.

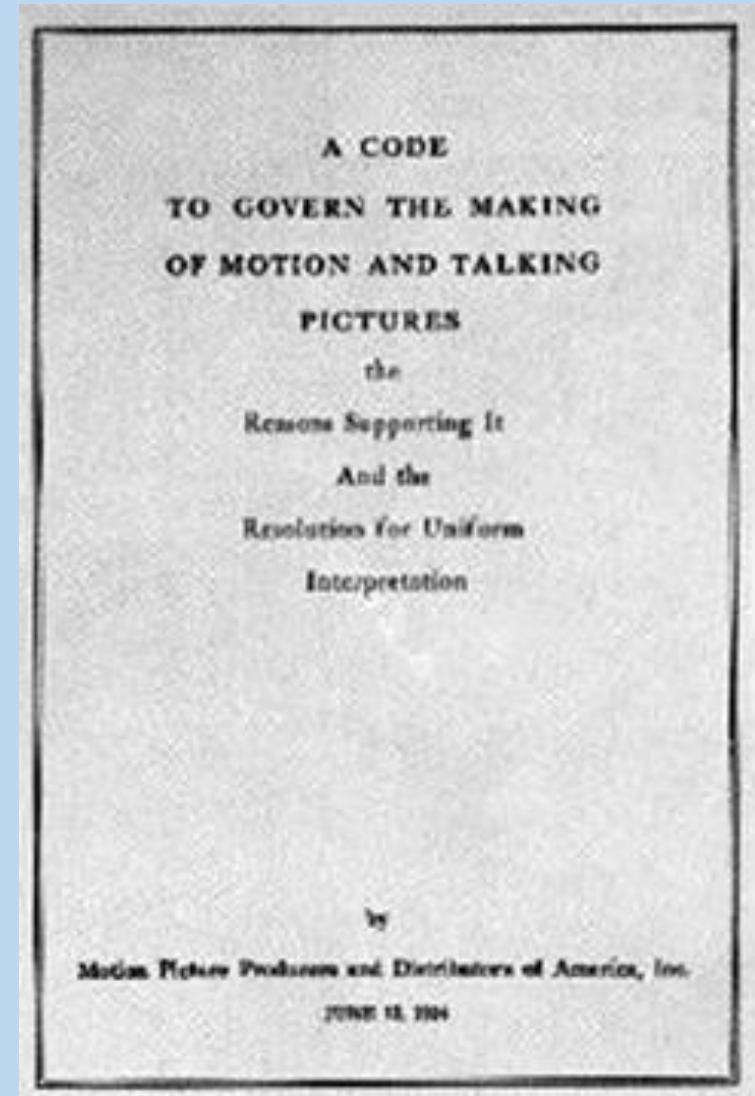


Theater Owners to Studio Owners

- Carl Laemmle > **Universal Studios** (1912)
- Adolph Zukor > **Paramount Studios** (1912)
- Harry Cohn > **Columbia Pictures** (1919)
- Harry, Albert, Sam, and Jack Warner > **Warner Bros.** (1923)
- Marcus Loew > Metro-Goldwyn (1924), becomes Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer also known as **MGM**
- David Sarnoff > **RKO** (1925) David is an exception in that he did not come into the film industry from the nickelodeon business.
- The studios wielded tremendous power over the new medium.

That Dirty Business

- As far back as 1910, Pastor Wilbur Fiske Crafts complained of “foul shows and corrupt literature by which our youth are chiefly seduced.” Tried for Federal censorship.
- In 1921, Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle, the highest paid actor in the world, goes on trial for the rape and murder of Virginia Rappe. Despite two hung juries and one acquittal, many Americans are convinced of his guilt..
- In 1926, the Motion Picture Producers (“the Authority”) creates the Hays Code for films.

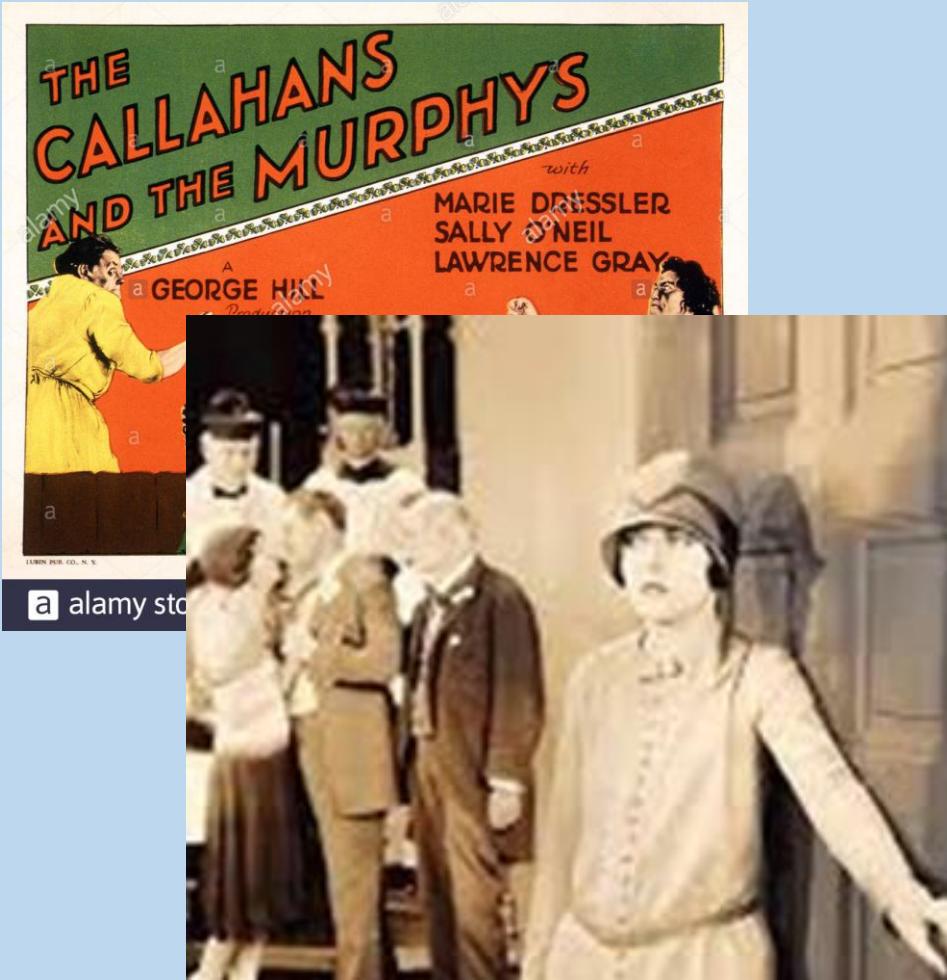


What Hays Meant



- Hays banned nudity, even suggested nudity like the 1932 publicity poster of Joan Blondell.
- In 1943, the Western movie *The Outlaw* was banned for focusing attention on Jane Russell's cleavage. Howard Hughes challenged and won.
- Hays banned homosexuality.
- Hays banned miscegenation, racially mixed couples.
- White racism, as in *Birth of a Nation*, was fine.

Portrayals of Ethnic Groups in Movies



- In 1927, Warner Bros. released *Irish Hearts* and MGM released *The Callahans and the Murphys*.
- Both films are criticized for attacks on the Irish and on Catholics.
- “Jewish producers specializing in attacks on the Irish.”
- Hays Code expanded to bar religious, ethnic or national groups from being portrayed in an unfavorable light.
- 1930s Warner Bros. banned from reporting on Nazi Germany.

Partial List of Jewish Actors

Ed Wynn	Leslie Howard (Father)	Danny Kaye	Peter Sellers (Mother)
Erich von Stroheim	Eddie Cantor	Lorne Greene	Paul Newman (Father)
Douglas Fairbanks (Father)	Jack Benny	Hedy Lamarr	Tony Randall
Cecile B. DeMille (Mother)	Otto Preminger	John Garfield	Walter Matthau
Broncho Billy Anderson	Peter Lorre	Zsa Zsa and Eva Gabor	Jerry Lewis
Edward G. Robinson	Lee Strasberg	Kirk Douglas	Werner Klemperer
Molly Picon	Cornel Wilde	Lee J. Cobb	Tony Curtis
Paul Muni	Eli Wallach	Abe Vigoda	Mel Brooks
Sam Jaffe	Zero Mostel	Rod Serling	William Shatner

HUAC and the Blacklist

- The first to testify about alleged Communist infiltration of Hollywood were Walt Disney and Ronald Reagan, president of the Screen Actors Guild.
- The Hollywood 10 included 6 Jews: John Howard Lawson, Alvah Bessie, Herbert Biberman, Lester Cole, Albert Maltz and Samuel Ornitz.
- As the lists of blacklisted figures grows, you can see how many were Jewish: Leonard Bernstein, Lee J. Cobb, Luther Adler, Edward G. Robinson, Lillian Hellman, etc.
- The Jewish executives (Warner, Louis B. Mayer, Harry Cohn) issue the Waldorf Declaration: they will not hire Communists. Only Samuel Goldwyn refused to sign.

Comparing Jewish Identity

Kirk Douglas

Born December 9, 1916

Birthname: Issur Danielovitch
Demsky

Active in the Anti-Defamation League; accompanied by his Rabbi at his 100th birthday; embraces his Jewish identity.

Harrison Ford

Born July 13, 1942

Catholic father, Jewish mother (Dorothy Nidelman)

Active in the Boys Scouts

In an interview with GQ, "As a man I've always felt Irish, as an actor I've always felt Jewish."

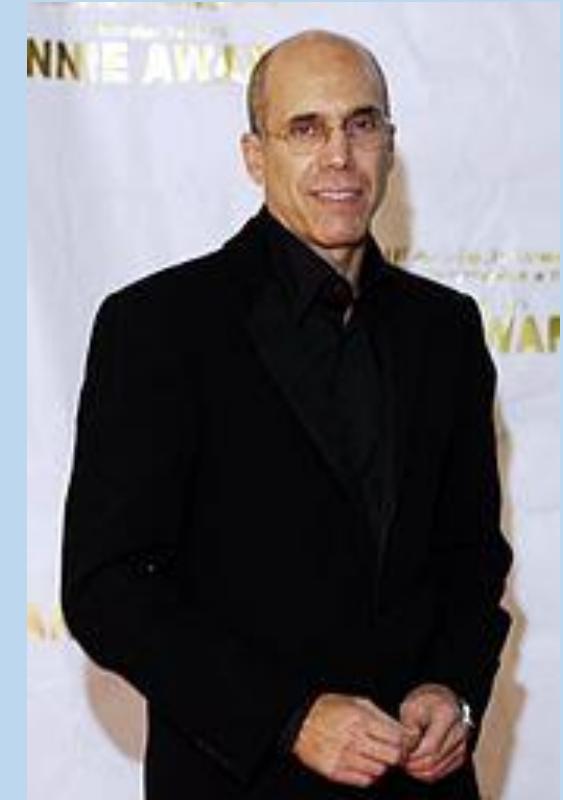
The Next Generation - Michael Eisner



- Born into a Jewish (Secular) family in Mt. Kisco
- Mother's family owned the American Safety Razor Company; his father was a lawyer for HUD.
- Eisner worked at NBC, CBS, then was hired by Barry Diller at ABC. He followed Diller to Paramount.
- Became CEO at Disney in 1984.
- First movie made at Disney under Eisner was *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*.
- Eisner would become the presenter of The Wonderful World of Disney, giving him public exposure.

Jeffrey Katzenberg

- Born into Jewish family in NYC in 1950
- Worked as an Asst. to producer David Picker; then to Barry Diller, Chairman of Paramount. Became President of Production at Paramount under Michael Eisner.
- Followed Eisner to Disney, took charge of the motion picture division.
- Titles produced at Disney include *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), and *The Lion King* (1994).
- Co-Founder of DreamWorks Animation for titles including *Shrek*, *Madagascar*, *Kung Fu Panda*, *Monsters vs. Aliens* and *How to Train Your Dragon*.



Stephen Spielberg

- Born into an Orthodox Jewish Family in Cincinnati in 1946.
- Made his first movie as a Boy Scout.
- Hired at Universal while still a student, became the youngest director ever hired at a major studio.
- Worked for Rod Serling as a director for *Night Gallery*.
- Hired as the director for *Jaws*(1975); again partnered with Richard Dreyfuss on *Close Encounters* (1977).
- Other films include: *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *E.T.*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Color Purple*, *Jurassic Park* and *Schindler's List*, and *Ready Player One*.

Conclusions

- The American film industry as we know it today was started by outsiders, outlaws, that were in fear of legal repercussions: that is to say by Jews.
- Fleeing Edison's prohibitions on sex, they would adopt their own moral code, the Hays Code.
- Wanting the freedom to make their own movies they later invented the studio system which limited the freedom of theaters and indies.
- For further reading, please see ***An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*** by Neal Gabler.