

# Going to the movies

"Gala Audience Witnesses First Showing of Talking Pictures in Wilmington"  
*Wilmington Star*, February 26, 1929.

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## As you read...

In 1929, for the first time, the Carolina Theatre in Wilmington screened a “talkie” — a movie that synchronized music and recorded voices with moving images.

Motion pictures were invented in the early 1880s, but they consisted only of images, with no sound. The first films were shown using a Kinetograph machine, developed by Thomas Edison. Only one person could watch the film at one time, as projection machines were still to be invented. The viewer looked through a lens into a large, lit box and watched a series of sequential photographs move rapidly across the field of view, which created the illusion of movement.

By 1900, movie projectors had been invented, and by 1907 there were 4,000 movie theaters in the United States. Local theaters hired an orchestra to play music while the audience watched the silent movies. Usually the orchestra played an official score sent by the movie producers, but sometimes the musicians improvised and played recognizable classics.

As early as 1894, inventors began to grapple with the problem of linking sound to moving images. During the 1890s and early 1900s, inventors experimented with different techniques to use the phonograph (early version of the record player) to record and play back sound while projecting images. There were several problems with this system: It was difficult to manually synchronize the sound recording with the film, and it was also difficult to amplify (make louder) the sound from a phonograph. Until electrical amplifiers were invented in the 1920s, it was impossible for a large audience to hear sounds from one phonograph.

By 1925, Warner Brothers introduced the Vitaphone, which linked the phonograph to the film projector. The projectionist lined up the needle on the phonograph to the exact spot marked by the studio and then start the projector. The phonograph and the projector were connected and the sound played to accompany the film. The Vitaphone system was also the first system to amplify the sound, so that large audiences could watch and listen. The Vitaphone was not a perfect machine, because phonographs often skipped and the sound and image became disjointed. Phonographs could only be played twenty times before they wore out, and theaters had to purchase replacement records if they wanted to keep showing the film.

In 1927, Warner Brothers released *The Jazz Singer*, the first film to include the voices of actors. It was the first time American audiences witnessed something we take for granted today — moving pictures linked with sound and recorded voices.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Who attended the screening of the film?
2. What words did the reporter use to describe the quality of sound?
3. What were some of the features of this new sound system?
4. What did the president of the RCA Photophone company believe would be the impact of the introduction of sound to film?

## First Showing of Talking Pictures in Wilmington

### Hundreds Viewing and Hearing Sound Pictures Declare System at Carolina Is Unusually Good

Wilmington *Star*, February 26, 1929.

A gala audience, filling every nook and corner of the house, sat enthralled yesterday at the opening program of sound motion pictures introduced for the first time at the Carolina theatre. The performance marked the premier of the RCA system of sound reproduction,<sup>1</sup> for the first time demonstrated to an audience in Wilmington.

Musical critics, acoustical experts, and engineers, including Michael Fritz, engineer in charge of the Carolina installation, present at the demonstration, were united in their praise of the new system of sound reproduction, developed by the joint efforts of the Radio Corporation of America, the General Electric company, and the Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing company.

The feature sound picture chosen for the opening night's entertainment under this program was George Jessle in "Lucky Boy" which was one of the finest entertainments ever screened in Wilmington.

A congratulatory message was received by the Carolina theatre from E.E. Bucher, executive vice president of the RCA Photophone Inc., reading as follows:

"The installation of the RCA Photophone system in Carolina theatre marks, I firmly believe, a new era of entertainment for the people of Wilmington. You are to be congratulated on your vision. Sound reproduction, as developed by the leading factors in the electrical and radio industries of the United States, will bring to the motion picture a wider field of dramatic action, to music a greater popular appeal, and to the audiences of Carolina theatre constantly growing enjoyment and diversion."

Judged by the impressive demonstration witnessed yesterday, the outstanding features of the RCA Photophone system of sound reproduction are:

1. Remarkable volume as well as magnificent tonal quality, which gives reproduced music and speech absolute naturalness. It is difficult to determine under the RCA Photophone system a reproduced orchestral selection for the original;
2. The "fan beam" system of sound distribution, an exclusive feature of this system, by means of which the sound actually seems to come from the lips of the screen characters, and not from all parts of the house:

3. New methods of achieving acoustical perspective so that sounds are not only given the relative tonal values, but all the richness of the original music and speech;
4. A wider range of sound effects made possible by the improved electro-dynamic loud speakers.

From the roar of thunder to the chirping of a bird, the new system reproduces all sounds with extraordinary fidelity. So perfect is the synchronization that one almost forgets that the characters on the screen are not real actors on the stage. There are no unpleasant mechanical or other extraneous noise to interfere with the enjoyment of the performance.

About eight miles of wire were used in the installation of the RCA Photophone system in Carolina theatre. A battery of 12 dynamic loud speakers that “Sprayed” the theatre with a veritable barrage of sound and music is included in the equipment. The result is that the spectators and listeners in the back in the galleries are able to hear just as well as the occupants of front seats and loges.

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## Notes

1. The RCA system of sound reproduction used a Photophone, which was the same type of technology as the Vitaphone, but a different brand name. Both machines connected the phonograph with a film projector so that the records played as the film was shown.