

Vitaphone

Vitaphone was a sound film process used on feature films and nearly 1,000 short subjects produced by Warner Bros. and its sister studio First National from 1926 to 1930. Vitaphone was the last, but most successful, of the sound-on-disc processes. The soundtrack was not printed on the actual film, but was issued separately on 16 inch and, later, 12 inch phonograph discs recorded at 33 1/3 rpm, a speed first used for this process. The discs would be played on a turntable indirectly coupled to the projector motor while the film was being projected. Many early talkies, such as *The Jazz Singer* (1927), used the Vitaphone process. The name "Vitaphone" was created from the Latin and Greek words, respectively, for "living" and "sound". It was later associated with cartoons and other short subjects that had optical soundtracks and did not use discs.

In the early 1920s, Western Electric researched both sound-on-film and sound-on-disc systems, aided by the purchase of Lee De Forest's Audion amplifier tube in 1913. DeForest himself debuted his Phonofilm sound-on-film system in 1923. However, due to poor sound quality, Warners decided to go forward with the disc system as the more familiar technology.

The business was established at Western Electric's Bell Laboratories in Manhattan, New York, and acquired by Warner Bros. in April 1925. Warner Bros. introduced Vitaphone on August 6, 1926, with the release of the silent feature *Don Juan* starring John Barrymore with music score and sound effects only (no dialogue). The feature was accompanied by several talkie short subjects featuring mostly opera stars and classical musicians of the day, and a greeting from motion picture industry spokesman Will Hays.

Don Juan was able to draw huge sums of money at the box office, but was not able to match the expensive budget Warner Bros. put into the film's production. In the wake of the failure, Paramount head Adolph Zukor offered Sam Warner a deal as an executive producer for the company if he brought Vitaphone with him. Sam agreed, but the deal died after Paramount lost money in the wake of Rudolph Valentino's death. Harry eventually agreed to accept Sam's demands and Sam pushed ahead with a new Vitaphone feature, based on a Broadway play starring Al Jolson. On October 6, 1927, *The Jazz Singer* premiered at the Warners Theater in New York City, broke box-office records, established Warner Bros. as a major player in Hollywood, and single-handedly launched the talkie revolution. Orchestra leader Henry Halstead is given credit for starring in the first Warner Brothers Vitaphone short subject filmed in Hollywood instead of New York: *Carnival Night in Paris* (1927).

With improvements in competing sound-on-film processes, Vitaphone's technical imperfections led to its retirement early in the sound era. Warner Bros. and First National switched to the Photophone sound-on-film recording. The Warner studio had to publicly concede that Vitaphone was being retired, but put a positive spin on it by announcing that Warner films would now be available in both sound-on-film and sound-on-disc versions.

The Vitaphone Corporation officially dissolved at the end of 1959, but Warner Bros. kept the name alive into the 1960s with Merrie Melodies and Looney Tunes cartoons. [<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vitaphone>]

