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THE VOICE OF AUSTRALIA: *CINESOUND REVIEW*

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INSERT: Opening sequence from *The Australian Image* – episode ‘Hot from the spot to the screen’ 1.15

1 Welcome. Personal introduction.

I’m delighted to be participating in “Orphans III” and to have the opportunity to talk about one of my favourite subjects – the *Cinesound Review* newsreel, the Voice of Australia.

The segment you’ve just seen comes from a television series called *The Australian Image* which I co-produced in 1988, and I must confess to having written the lines you’ve just heard Bill Hunter speak. That very theatre, in the heart of Sydney, was a great haunt of my own as a kid – and it’s where I learned to love the newsreels. The musicologists among you might note the *Cinesound Review* signature fanfare – instantly recognizable and memorable because it doesn’t resolve.

My narrative starts in 1929, the year the talkies began to make their presence felt in Australia. Theatres began converting to sound, and Australia’s small film production industry had to face up to fundamental change. After some 20 years the national weekly newsreel, the *Australasian Gazette*, its market vanishing, died in March 1929. That was the year Fox Films began distributing the international edition of *Fox Movietone News* in Australia, and by October it had established a small unit in Sydney to produce local items for addition to the reel. The first item featured Prime Minister James Scullin, boosting Australian morale at the onset of the Great Depression.

In 1931, the Depression notwithstanding, local sound newsreels began in earnest. In January a full scale weekly edition of *Australian Movietone News* began, with Fox being guaranteed distribution through the Hoyts theatre chain, which they owned. In September, Keith Murdoch (Rupert’s father), publisher of the Melbourne *Herald* newspaper, launched the weekly *Herald Newsreel*. Consequently, Union Theatres – the other major chain of movie houses, and parent company of Australasian Films, had no option but to come up with a replacement for the defunct *Australasian Gazette*. In November it launched the weekly *Cinesound Review*.

The name came from its sound system. With one exception, Australian producers decided they could not afford imported sound systems and were compelled to invent their own. Several sound on disc and sound on film systems were devised. They all had short lives except one. The Cinesound variable density system was invented by a radio engineer named Arthur Smith, without infringing any patents. Constantly improved over the years, it was so good that it was still used up to the final newsreel issue in 1975.

INSERT: Arthur Smith sequence from *The Australian Image – episode ‘Wonders of the Age’* 3.15

In their early days, sound newsreels retained silent-era narrative titles and just added location audio, shot single system, to the images. The idea of a studio-added commentary wasn't immediately obvious, but when it did come, it gave a particular flavour to Australian newsreels because, as far as I know, we were the only country to consistently use name comedians as principal narrators. Jack Davey supplied the words for *Movietone News*, and Charlie Lawrence was the voice of *Cinesound Review*. Their personalities were the competitive edge of the two reels, and underlined the fact that newsreels were conceived as entertainment, as well as information.

Despite the quality of their system, Cinesound could not mix sound until 1935. The limitation was cleverly disguised. Splices in the sound negative were covered by making a triangular punch which would print as black, providing a rapid fade out/ fade in transition. Longer fades were accomplished by dipping the sound negative in peroxide.

Budgets, of course, were very tight. Film stock was all imported, and expensive: it was used sparingly and cameramen developed an amazing sixth sense about when to turn the camera on at sporting events, like football and cricket. The editor projected the negative, did an initial cut and only then was a workprint made for a fine cut.

You couldn't always believe what you saw. Like other newsreels Cinesound indulged in coddling – “staging” its news, sending in an actor to liven up a scene, because the news *had* to move, *had* to be entertaining, and if real life wasn't cinematic enough you gave it a helping hand. Bushfire scenes would be enlivened by staged close-ups of exhausted firefighters – actually staff members sitting dazed in the smoke from an off-camera incinerator. One story about devastating floods used a model shot of a collapsing bridge lifted from a feature film.

Unlike *Movietone News*, Cinesound never used an imported story: its content was always created by Australians. And it had a point of view: it was not shy about taking an editorial position. Strongly nationalistic, it was also fiercely anti-communist in the 1950s. In the 1940s, it proselytized about the environment, before that was a fashionable topic, and as early as the mid-1930s it even gave aboriginal Australians their own voice – a decidedly courageous act at the time.

Have you ever wondered why newsreels begin with arresting music and memorable main titles? They were designed as curtain openers: the first film on the program. You were meant to sit up and take notice. When you see the Cinesound main title again, imagine the curtains opening behind it, and the kangaroo hopping out at you from the already revealed white centre of the screen. It's perfectly timed.

Let me illustrate all that with this montage of both Cinesound and Movietone material of the 1930s, again taken from *The Australian Image*:

INSERT: Montage from *The Australian Image* – episode 'Hot from the spot to the screen' 6.10

The 1930s ended, of course, with the horrors of World War II. In 1939 Australia's declaration of war on Germany was simultaneous with Britain, and the film industry was immediately enlisted into the war effort. The footage now came from official cameramen at the front, passed through the hands of government censors, and the same material was issued by the Government to both Cinesound and Movietone who prepared their own – sometimes quite different – stories from the same source material.

During the war *Cinesound Review* reached its peak of sophistication. Its best reels are superbly crafted productions, as well as being highly effective propaganda. And it mattered, because once the Japanese invaded New Guinea, Australia was directly threatened – in fact the Japanese Government had prepared its occupation currency and its own propaganda films to release in Australia once their planned invasion from the north began.

Cinesound Review 568, is the quintessential war newsreel for three reasons. It was shot by an outstanding cinematographer, Damien Parer, who was later killed in action; it shows the skills of the Cinesound team at their peak, led by producer/ director Ken G Hall, and it won Australia's first Oscar. It remains the only newsreel from any country ever to win an Academy Award. Here it is:

INSERT: *Cinesound Review 568: Kokoda Front Line* 9.43

The skills honed during the war stood Cinesound in good stead in the era of post war reconstruction. In the decade following 1945 Australia changed dramatically as the old bonds of empire loosened and a vast migration of displaced persons from Europe began to change the ethnic makeup of the nation. It was the era of the cold war; and of big ideas and big developments, such as the vast Snowy Mountains Hydro Electric Scheme. But it was also the era of what Australians later called the "cultural cringe", a time when, paradoxically, we began to lose faith in our own identity and cultural achievements, and see ourselves as inferior to the British and the Americans.

Australia lays claim to be the inventor of the feature film concept – back in 1906 – but by the 1950s its once flourishing feature industry was dead and largely forgotten. When you

went to the movies the only Australian presence you were likely to see on the screen was the newsreel. But it was always there. And as the only Australian-owned newsreel, *Cinesound Review* became a kind of flag bearer for a diminished industry. Every time the kangaroo hopped out at you to that fanfare, it was almost a defiant gesture: a promise of revival that ultimately came.

The post war era saw the first colour items in the reel. It also saw special issues which showed the nation to itself in spectacular ways. The 1950s were the vogue years of rugged car reliability trials, and the Redex trials – Redex was a gasoline additive which claimed to make your car run better – were legendary. In this reel – number 1185 from 1954 – you might catch Cinesound taking a none-too-friendly poke at their rival, Movietone’s Jack Davey:

INSERT: *Cinesound Review 1185: RedeX Trial* 7.00

Two years after this reel, in 1956, television came to Australia. *Cinesound Review* shared the common fate of cinema newsreels: it became a news magazine, gradually shrinking in length and increasing in sponsored content to prop up a diminishing budget. Eventually, in 1970, it combined with its rival Movietone to become *Australian Movie Magazine*, a venture which quietly faded out in 1975. The night that last weekly release went out to the cinemas I was privileged to share the “wake”, as old Cinesound and Movietone hands reminisced and ran favourite reels in the dubbing theatre. It’s a night I’ll never forget.

And it wasn’t quite the end. Later, the Phil Noyce feature film *Newsfront* would faithfully and memorably capture the essence of Australia’s newsreel era. And later still, Australia’s National Film and Sound Archive would acquire the surviving Cinesound and Movietone libraries and, in 1988, commence a mammoth preservation and cataloguing project called *Operation Newsreel*, largely sponsored by Rupert Murdoch – does that name ring a bell?

Interestingly, none of the three reels – *Cinesound Review*, *Australian Movietone News* or *Australian Movie Magazine* – had ever had an official last issue: they had simply stopped appearing. So as part of *Operation Newsreel* we corrected that omission, and students from the Australian Film, Television and Radio School, with the blessing of Fox and the Greater Union Organisation, made *Cinesound Review 2032: The last newsreel*. In 35mm black and white, it received wide theatrical distribution. It was laden with symbolism, especially in its closing treatment of Australia’s best known horse race, the Melbourne Cup.

I should explain that this event literally brings the country to a standstill every November. It has been filmed every year since 1896. Before television, Cinesound and Movietone engaged in a highly publicized race of their own, to be first to get their coverage on the screen in Sydney only hours after the Cup had run in Melbourne, processing and editing the film in flight. And, as I mentioned earlier, you couldn’t quite believe what you saw.

With that cryptic comment, I'll bow out as we pick up the race and you witness the Australian newsreel era coming to an end.

INSERT: *The Last Newsreel: closing part* 3.30