

# Distance and Connection. Phonograph Records as Narrative Objects in 1940s Cinema

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Volume 10, numéro 1, juin 2023

Du disque à l'oeuvre  
The Recording at Work

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1101787ar>  
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1101787ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Observatoire interdisciplinaire de création et recherche en musique (OICRM)

ISSN

2368-7061 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Straw, W. (2023). Distance and Connection. Phonograph Records as Narrative Objects in 1940s Cinema. *Revue musicale OICRM*, 10(1), 36–52.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1101787ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cet article examine un corpus de comédies musicales américaines des années 1940 pour observer l'utilisation qui y est faite des disques phonographiques. Mon hypothèse est que, dans ces films, le disque phonographique devient un gage clé dans la structuration des relations au sein des récits. Les enregistrements fonctionnent comme des objets reliant les gens et les lieux ; ils deviennent des médiateurs des liens interpersonnels et des porteurs d'expression culturelle. L'article s'intéresse en particulier aux relations de genre qui se forment autour des disques phonographiques, à une époque où les disc-jockeys de radio, les opérateurs de juke-box et autres agents du monde de la musique étaient souvent représentés par des personnages féminins.

# Distance and Connection. Phonograph Records as Narrative Objects in 1940s Cinema

Will Straw

## **Abstract**

This article examines a corpus of American musicals of the 1940s to observe the use made within them of phonograph records. My hypothesis is that, across these films, the phonograph record becomes a key token in the structuring of relationships within narratives. Records function as objects connecting people and places; they become mediators of interpersonal connection and carriers of cultural expression. The article is concerned, in particular, with the gender relations that form around phonograph records, during a period when radio disc jockeys, jukebox operators, and other agents in the world of music were often represented by women characters.

Keywords: cinema; gender; media; phonograph; race.

## **Résumé**

Cet article examine un corpus de comédies musicales américaines des années 1940 pour observer l'utilisation qui y est faite des disques phonographiques. Mon hypothèse est que, dans ces films, le disque phonographique devient un gage clé dans la structuration des relations au sein des récits. Les enregistrements fonctionnent comme des objets reliant les gens et les lieux ; ils deviennent des médiateurs des liens interpersonnels et des porteurs d'expression culturelle. L'article s'intéresse en particulier aux relations de genre qui se forment autour des disques phonographiques, à une époque où les disc-jockeys de radio, les opérateurs de juke-box et autres agents du monde de la musique étaient souvent représentés par des personnages féminins.

Mots clés : cinéma ; genre ; média ; phonographe ; race.

This article is about the use of phonograph records (and associated technologies, such as the jukebox or turntable) as objects of narrative interconnection in a corpus of low-budget American films of the 1940s. Records, as we shall see, often function in these films as tokens of interconnection which cross the boundaries of gender and race in ways both stereotypical and unexpected. The spinning record, in films of this period, very often served to initiate a film's movement between spaces whose relationship to each other might be one of intimate familiarity or of radical social alterity. Across several films, as I hope to show, records play pivotal roles in the staging and differentiation of identities. Even in the fictional worlds dominated by men in these films, it is very often women who select, handle, and play records. As objects that sometimes trigger entry into filmic spaces disconnected from those of a film's main narrative, records can authorize glimpses of racialized populations who otherwise play no role in a film's dramatic action.

## FRAMEWORK AND METHOD

The corpus of films discussed here was built by first identifying a large sample of American films of the 1940s in which phonograph records or turntables were visible and played key narrative roles. I fast-forwarded through some 300 films of the 1940s which, because of their titles, available descriptions, or my own memories of previous viewings, held out the possibility that they would feature phonograph records or associated playback technologies. The films chosen for examination here were those in which phonographs and phonograph records were most prominent, as pretexts for the presentation of music or as objects playing important roles in the unfolding of narrative. (I did not include the many films in which phonographs were simply seen as house furnishings or as sources of background music.) With one exception, all the films chosen were musicals, structured to accommodate the presentation of musical performances. That exception is a crime film, *Shanghai Cobra*, whose narrative centres on the use of a wired jukebox system to commit murder.

My decision to focus on films of the 1940s rests on four observations. The first is that as Hollywood cinema moves from the late 1930s into the 1940s, the dominant framework for imagining the social circulation of music shifts. Until the late 1930s, Hollywood musicals typically envisioned the passage of music in terms of radio signals and waves which carried the sound of live performance to audiences distributed across space. In the 1940s, I would argue, an imaginary of airwaves emanating from a space of live performance is more and more displaced by one in which the phonograph becomes the key carrier of music. Radio will continue to play a role in the transmission of music, but the record, rather than live performance, will increasingly serve as the source of music.

A second observation is that the transition just described, from airwaves to records, is most evident in low-brow and inexpensively produced films of the 1940s. Many films from this decade draw attention to the mobility of records, exploiting the novelty of jukeboxes in public places, of records exchanged between fans, and of records carried, displayed, and sold in specialty retail shops. These films were often produced by minor studios, like PRC, Monogram and Republic, or by those companies, like Columbia and Universal, considered to constitute the lower rung of the Majors. While musical films produced by these studios regularly featured

live bands, orchestras, and solo singers—the expected features of any Hollywood musical—it is within those produced at the lower end of the Hollywood studio system that the uses and meanings of the phonograph record were most often explored.

A third observation is that while narrative cinema has always acknowledged the emergence of other media—dreaming of its rivals, in the words of Paul Young (2006)—the 1940s represent a particularly chaotic period in cinema's absorption of other media technologies within its own narratives. In this decade, the overlapping of what Raymond Williams called the emergent, the dominant, and the residual in relation to media systems is perhaps at its thickest (Williams 1977, pp. 121–127). Radio broadcasting, whose dominance was confirmed in so many films of the 1930s, found itself both transformed and partially reduced in importance by the expansion of the record industry in the 1940s. In turn, both radio and the phonograph record adapted in various ways to the consolidation and rise of the jukebox industry. Television, whose rise was anticipated in many films made prior to the United States' entry into World War II, found its growth interrupted by the conflict, but it would appear in film narratives during this decade as a technology of confusing purpose.

Finally, as a fourth observation, I would note that the use of records and playback technologies as key narrative pivots contributed to a distinctive configuring of social identities within these films. In many of the films discussed here, women occupy professional roles that involve the selection and playing of phonograph records. These roles undermine the longstanding claim, on the part of music and film scholars, that an attachment to phonographic objects and technologies has largely been associated with masculinity. They also invite us to revisit more recent, revisionist treatments of the gendered character of phonography, which have focused on cinematic representations of women listening to records in contexts of solitude or intimate friendship—contexts very different from those public arenas in which male expertise and authority concerning music were displayed and performed. (See, for summaries of these arguments, Stilwell 2017 and Robertson 2001.) In fact, in a great many Hollywood films of the 1940s, we find women characters actively engaging with phonograph records in public, professional contexts, as radio disc jockeys addressing large audiences of listeners or as the custodians and operators of jukebox systems.

## CINEMATIC JUKEBOXES

Jukeboxes are rare in Hollywood films of the 1930s. A German website maintained by jukebox aficionados lists only six films from that decade in which a jukebox may be seen, almost all of them from 1932 and 1933, early in the decade. While this list is certainly incomplete, its yearly totals nevertheless suggest that, in the 1940s, the number of films featuring jukeboxes would triple relative to the previous decade, then double again in films of the 1950s ([Jukebox World](#)). On some level, the increasing visibility of jukeboxes in films over these three decades is obviously tied to their expanding presence in the world outside films (in the wartime dance clubs of the 1940s, for example, or in places of teenage socializing in the 1950s). I want to suggest, however, that the growing frequency of jukeboxes in films of the 1940s both reflects and reinforces a cultural shift by which the phonograph record, more than

the live musical performance, came to serve as the recognized token of popularity for popular songs.

As both a technology of musical playback and a piece of installed furniture, the jukebox was not gendered in any consistent way in Hollywood cinema. In two early 1930s films, *Two Against the World* (1932; dir. William C. McGann) and *Union Depot* (1932; dir. Alfred E. Green), a man inserts a coin and selects a song to create a romantic atmosphere for the woman in his company. Female characters carry out similar actions in *Midnight Mary* (1933; dir. William A. Wellman) and *Central Airport* (1933; dir. William A. Wellman and Alfred E. Green). The gendering of the jukebox would become more complicated in cinema of the 1940s, when the frequency of its appearance within films increased significantly, and as the variety of jukebox designs and modes of operation expanded. My focus here is on two films of the 1940s that use an eccentric version of the jukebox marked by a novel ordering of gender relations. This variation was the “wired jukebox” system, in which jukeboxes located in bars, restaurants or dance clubs received their music over the wires from a central control room.

The best known of the “wired jukebox” systems was made available after 1940 by the Shyver Company and known as its Music Phone (later Multiphone) system. Using telephone lines, the Multiphone systems required that customers request a song by number while communicating through the jukebox speaker with a remote operator. (A list of songs and their numbers was printed in a catalogue available in the bar or café in which the jukebox had been installed.) The record was then played on a turntable in the operating station. Its sound was transmitted by wire to the distant jukebox, through whose speakers it could be heard (Bennett 2022, p. 35).

The “wired” or “telephone jukebox” occupies a minor place in the history of jukeboxes; Segrave’s 350-page social history of the jukebox devotes only two pages to this variation (2002, pp. 153–154) and a self-published book telling the story of the MultiPhone and other systems was published only in 2021 (Bennett 2021). These wired systems offered multiple advantages over conventional jukeboxes. Because the latter could offer only as many selections as it could contain in its own physical structure, the repertory of available music was limited. In contrast, a remote system serving several jukeboxes could function with much larger record libraries. Moreover, a remote system did not require the painstaking, frequent travel of record suppliers to update stocks in each place where jukeboxes were installed.

In the two Hollywood films of the 1940s that make use of the “wired jukebox” as a plot device, we find conflicts over authority and musical expertise mapped onto the terrain of gender. In the low-budget film *The Shanghai Cobra* (1945; dir. Phil Karlson), a late entry in the Charlie Chan series released by Monogram Pictures, a woman in a café moves toward a “wired” jukebox, coin in hand, preparing to request a song. A man approaches her and pushes her aside, before telling her “This one’s on me, honey,” and inserting his own coin. We hear a woman’s voice off-screen utter “Number, please,” to which the male customer replies, “Number 10, The Blue Danube.”



*Video excerpt 1: The Shanghai Cobra (1945; dir. Phil Karlson), 00:03:50–00:04:24.*

Immediately, the film cuts to a dark space, with the dimensions of a large room, in which we see a woman sitting at a table looking at a screen on which the two customers in the diner are visible. It is obvious, at this point, that the jukebox is being controlled from a remote space, and that it is equipped with a camera that allows its human operators to see everything transpiring in the café in front of the machine. After receiving the instruction to play “Number 10, the Blue Danube,” the female operator asks another man, unseen within the dark space, “Is that him?” “Yes,” he answers, indicating that he, too, can see the customers.

The woman operator places a record on a turntable in front of her, but, as it begins playing, with a jazzy rhythm, it is obvious that this is not “The Blue Danube,” the record requested. Speaking into the jukebox’s microphone (and seen from the perspective of the hidden woman controlling the music) the male customer tells the operator that she has played the wrong record. She informs him that the system does not have the record he desired. As the film progresses, it becomes clear that this jukebox set-up is the basis of an elaborate murder scheme, which uses the coin return mechanism to kill targeted customers by injecting them with poison as they reach for their refunded payment.

Outside of *Shanghai Cobra*, none of the “wired” or “telephone” jukeboxes introduced in the real world had a video element, a means by which operators could see customers. *Shanghai Cobra* imagined a device that joined the capabilities of the remote jukebox to those of the television screen and video surveillance. Indeed, we might see the set-up in *Shanghai Cobra* as a peculiar reversal—because it is the machine doing the looking—of those jukeboxes of the 1940s that contained small screens showing short films (so-called “Soundies”) with musical accompaniment (see, for a lengthy history, Kelley 2018).

Much of the narrative work of *Shanghai Cobra* is devoted to establishing and clarifying the relationship between two spaces—the coffee shop in which murder takes place and the jukebox control room from which the crime is carried out. *Shanghai Cobra* respects a key imperative of the wired jukebox system—that the operator be a

woman—but the plot requires that she share the space of her darkened control room with the male criminal who is the real perpetrator of the crime.

In the other 1940s film featuring a “wired jukebox” system, *Swing Hostess* (1944; dir. Sam Newfield), the gendered space of the control room is absolute. The film is about a woman attempting to break into the music business, who finds that the only work available is as one of dozens of women playing records on request for a wired jukebox system. The unusual modifications of the wired jukebox system we saw in *Shanghai Cobra* (the video screen and criminal conspiracy) are gone, but *Swing Hostess* offers greater insight into the real-world functioning of this system and, especially, the gendered relationships on which it depended. The clip included here takes us into the jukebox system’s control room, where the film’s central character has just begun working. The control room’s workforce is entirely female, made up of women selecting records from shelves and playing them on any one of a series of turntables connected by wire to jukeboxes far away. Here, it soon becomes clear, the work of women operators combines the traditional female labours of the telephone operator and the librarian. Indeed, the supervisor, possessing all the stereotypical features of the spinster-librarian, reprimands the new employee (Judy) for her sloppy filing of records.



*Video excerpt 2: Swing Hostess (1944; dir. Sam Newfield), 00:15:15–00:16:27.*

An undated list of “Do’s and Don’ts” for women operators of the Multiphone wired jukebox system included, alongside its detailed list of actions to be performed, the requirement that operators avoid sarcasm in conversation with customers and refrain from “making dates” with the men requesting records (Bennett 2021, pp. 61–62). In *Swing Hostess*, these rules are violated, as the male customer argues with the female operator over her apparent ignorance of contemporary jazz music, and their hostile banter, communicated through the wired system, eventually leads to a romantic connection. The jukebox apparatus itself, we may note, is designed in anthropomorphic fashion, with the image of a women’s head at its top.

## RECORDS AND THE MEDIATION OF SPACE

Films of the 1940s show a discernable transformation in the ways the circulation of music is being imagined. As suggested, it was common in American films of the 1930s for radio signals to appear to carry music to audiences distributed across space. In the 1940s, however, an imaginary based on airwaves originating in live performance would be more and more displaced by sequences in which the phonograph record was shown to be the key diegetic source for music. Radio would retain its importance as a means of transmission, but the record itself would become central as an object mediating between spaces and technologies.

This centrality of the record is manifest in a kind of sequence that was rare in American films of the 1930s, but became much more common in the 1940s. This is the sequence in which the image of a spinning record becomes the pretext for a film's transition into a space of live performance by musicians. The film *Reveille with Beverly* (1943; dir. Charles Barton) contains several examples of such transitions. The title of the film is also that of a radio show initiated by a woman (Beverly) who, working in a radio station, manages to replace the male host of an early morning program devoted to classical music. Beverly transforms the program into one featuring swing music, aimed at us soldiers receiving their training on military bases.

In the two excerpts included here, the physical record is the pretext for the film's shift into a space of performance, but, in fact, at least three spaces are joined together: the space of the radio station, the abstract space of performance, and a space of reception. In the first clip, the film cuts from the radio studio to an automobile whose passengers turn the radio dial in search of music. The sequence then returns to the studio, to show us Beverly placing a record on a turntable. As it begins to spin, the centre of the disc opens to reveal a clock with spinning hands. This initiates the transition to performance footage of the Count Basie Band playing "One O'Clock Jump," in a space clearly outside the film's own diegesis.



*Video excerpt 3: Reveille with Beverly (1943; dir. Charles Barton), 00:14:19–00:14:58.*



In the second example, we watch as Beverly announces that she will play the Duke Ellington Orchestra's "Take the A Train." The film then cuts to a scene of Black servicemen in a military barracks, visibly excited by the announcement. Back in the radio studio, we see Beverly set the record on the turntable. Rather than the hole in the centre of the record expanding to reveal a performance (as in the first example), the record appears to shrink before entering another visual field where it appears to merge with the turning wheels of a train. The film then cuts into a space within the train, wherein we see the Duke Ellington Orchestra performing the song. In both clips, the record gives way to other circular technologies (the clock, the wheels of a train), which naturalize the film's movement into an alternate space that, we presume, is outside the film's own narrative world.



*Video excerpt 4: Reveille with Beverly (1943; dir. Charles Barton), 00:36:50–00:37:29.*

Two broader aspects of these scenes are worth mentioning. One is that, in musical films of the 1940s, the circular form of the revolving disc at least partially displaces the movement of radio signal through space as an evocation of music's circulation. The spinning record, rather than the wave-like radio broadcast, becomes the dominant geometric metaphor for the transmission of music. During this decade, we find a predominance of what Helmut Muller Sievers, writing of 19th century technologies, called a cylindrical imagination. In reference to such phenomena as the phonograph, the steam engine, and the rotary printing press, Sievers identifies what he calls the "translational" motion by which cylinders act upon each other to set in motion sequences of effect and output (2012, p. 104). In *Reveille with Beverly*, the spinning of records is doubled by the movement of a clock's hands or of a train's wheels, in metonymic sequences that naturalize the movement between radio studio and performance space.

Something else is going on in both these clips. Each takes us to a space of African-American musical performance. This is a space we can imagine as contiguous with other spaces in the narrative, but it is never localized in any discernable way. These sites of performance (a club setting in the first clip, a train in the second) are

abstract, almost phantasmatic spaces conjured up by the spinning record, rather than places that the film's narrative will visit. Several of the films discussed here engage in the fabrication of spaces of listening and performing, which are connected through graphic transitions and mediated by physical recordings, but which remain in a position of absolute alterity relative to each other in social terms. We are confronted, here, with one version of what Arthur Knight has called the racial "disintegration" of the American musical film, the tendency for Black musicians to "turn up, play a song or two, and disappear" (Knight 2002, p. 1). The confinement of African-American performers to a space outside the imagined boundaries of the film's narrative is made easier by the use of the phonograph record as the technology that momentarily summons their presence. These performers appear as an effect of the records' own magical capacity to imagine other worlds rather than requiring that white characters "visit" the spaces of Black musical performance, as they did in the *films noirs* whose production was roughly contemporary with that of the films discussed here (Miklitsch 2011).

## RE-GENDERING DJ HISTORIES

While in 2023 the act of DJ-ing refers most often to those playing music in night-time dance clubs, earlier uses of the term included those who played records over the radio or other mediated systems. Arguing against a set of histories and canonical reference works that construct a mostly masculine genealogy of the disc jockey, the work of Maren Hancock (2022) encourages us to look at these films of the 1940s in search of materials for an alternate lineage. We find images of women playing records as a profession in a film such as *Reveille for Beverly*, or of female turntablists spinning records over wired jukebox systems, such as those featured in *The Shanghai Cobra* and *Swing Hostesses*. In all three films, we find a world divided between women who provide the music and men who are its audience. Even when women figure as subservient operators of "wired jukeboxes," subject to the demands and complaints of male consumers, they are nevertheless privy to the secrets of a technological system that remains obscure to each film's male characters.

In the 1940 film *Hit Parade of 1941* (dir. John H. Auer), a key dramatic moment involves one of the female characters engaging in something like the mixing work which, three or four decades later, would be associated with club DJs. Like many of the films in the corpus discussed here, *Hit Parade of 1941* involves the sorts of mistaken identity made possible by technologies of microphony, sound mixing, and broadcasting. A talentless singer, Anabelle (played by Ann Miller), manages to achieve success on the new medium of television by appearing to sing in a studio while a talented vocalist, Pat (Frances Langford), provides the voice that goes out over the airwaves. Pat sings into a microphone positioned offstage, while Anabelle's imperfect singing is audible only to the studio audience. Fed up with the deception, the good singer's close friend Judy takes over the mixing console and flicks switches up or down after each line of the song. The audience hears a performance that is alternately pleasing and awful. In the constant moving back and forth between the two, a scam is exposed.



Video excerpt 5: *Hit Parade of 1941* (1940; dir. John H. Auer), 01:00:15–01:01:01.

In its use of a key plot device involving the exposure of one voice substituting for another, the scene in *Hit Parade of 1941* anticipates the famous sequence in *Singing in the Rain* (1952; dir. Gene Kelly, Stanley Donen), in which the opening of a stage curtain at a movie premiere reveals the real voice behind the presumed star of the film. In *Singing in the Rain*, the fraud exposed is a symptom of an epochal transformation in film history (the so-called “coming of sound”). In *Hit Parade of 1941*, this substitution of voices is merely one possibility among many in a media environment marked by the overlaying of technologies and ongoing experimentation with their combination and interconnection. I don’t wish to exaggerate the extent to which the character of Judy, in switching back and forth between vocal “tracks,” might be engaging in a practice of mixing which anticipates that of the late twentieth-century club disc jockey. (Phonograph records do not appear in this scene.) Nevertheless, across a series of film sequences in which women manipulate the technologies of sound and phonography, like those discussed in this article, a differently gendered history of the disc jockey might find its grounding.

As Maren Hancock (2022) suggests, it is entirely possible that the first person to play records on multiple turntables—the characteristic activity of the late twentieth-century DJ—was French cabaret singer and nightclub impresario Régine Zylberberg—known simply (and internationally) as “Régine”—who died in 2022. Hancock argues, as well, that identifying “firsts” in a given domain is less important than elaborating new, inclusive histories which problematize the biases and absences of those that exist. The earliest cinematic image I have found of anyone using multiple turntables to play records in a nightclub comes in the French-American co-production *Goodbye Again* (1961; dir. Anatole Litvak). In a nightclub sequence, we see a woman, apparently serving as bartender, casually remove the record from one turntable as the disc on another turntable begins to play. The DJ work here plays no role in the narrative, nor is it offered as anything more than an atmospheric detail, a quick glimpse of one among the many mundane tasks of those who work in a nightclub. This brief scene is, nevertheless, one more entry in a possible history of phonograph records in the

cinema, and of the gendered character of their use, which might challenge longstanding presumptions.



*Video excerpt 6: Goodbye Again (1961; dir. Anatole Litvak), 00:18:43–00:19:07.*

In two films from 1946, both part of a cycle of “teenage” films produced by the low-budget studio Monogram, we find more examples of records serving as the pretexts for scenes of musical performance transpiring outside the dramatic space of the film itself. In *Junior Prom* (1946; dir. Arthur Dreifuss), a young man in a youth club chooses a record (Eddie Heywood’s recording of “Loch Lomond”), announces its title to an excited group standing by, and places it on a turntable. As the disc begins to spin, its centre opens up to reveal a performance in a place whose location and boundaries are all unclear. The record—the object of collective, fetishistic interest on the part of the youthful group—is performed by a Black performer in an unidentified space.



*Video excerpt 7: Junior Prom (1946; dir. Arthur Dreifuss), 00:10:49–00:11:27.*

This sequence assumes additional significance when set alongside another from the same studio's "teenage" film series. In *High School Hero* (1946; dir. Arthur Dreifuss), a young woman excitedly puts a coin in a jukebox and selects a record, "Southpaw Serenade," by the white performer Freddie Slack. The woman steps to the side of the jukebox, to gaze at a publicity photo of Slack affixed on the wall. As she lovingly contemplates his image ("Isn't he terrific?"), the photo dissolves into a space in which we see Slack perform. In *Junior Prom*, the record itself was the object of collective fascination on the part of the teenage group, and its own spinning conjured up the image of the Black performer. In *High School Hero*, which uses a jukebox as musical source, the wall photo of the (White) performer, rather than the record, is the object of phantasmatic longing and desire. The record as fetish object in *Junior Prom* summons a performance by a Black musician, absolving the film of any requirement to make the artist himself an object of desire. In *High School Hero*, a portrait-photo absorbs fantasies that are more clearly directed at the white performer himself.



Video excerpt 8: *High School Hero* (1946; dir. Arthur Dreifuss), 00:04:34–00:04:56.

By the late 1940s, the conjuring of performance from the image of a spinning disc was both highly common and on the verge of obsolescence in American cinema. In *Make Believe Ballroom* (1949, dir. Joseph Santley), the well-known real-life radio disc jockey Al Jarvis introduces a series of performance clips against the backdrop of a very thin narrative. By that point, this type of film, which was little more than a string of performance clips, had stabilized as a form, though the formula (and Al Jarvis' *Make Believe Ballroom* format itself) would soon move to television (Kelley 2018, p. 119).



*Video excerpt 9: Make Believe Ballroom (1949; dir. Joseph Santley), 00:14:52–00:15:18.*

A more unusual example of performances conjured from media may be found in the opening sequence of another film from 1949, *Square Dance Jubilee* (dir. Paul Landres). Made by the independent company Donald Barry Productions for the low-budget Producers Releasing Corporation, this film uses a television receiver within the film's diegesis as a medium for presenting a series of musical performances. In a key scene, a television industry executive looking for country music talent instructs his assistant to turn on the television. As the screen lights up, a performer in a television studio begins to sing and the camera moves in to allow the television screen to take up the entire frame of the film. In its conjuring of a faraway image of performance and in the expansion of one screen to fill another, this scene replicates those sequences discussed earlier, in which the centres of phonograph records or publicity photographs take us into performance spaces.



*Video excerpt 10: Square Dance Jubilee (1949; dir. Paul Landres), 00:05:13–00:05:43.*

In *Square Dance Jubilee*, however, this transition feels contrived. In an unlikely coincidence, the television set is turned on at the precise moment at which the televisual broadcasting of the song begins. In musical films that depict records being played, like *Reveille for Beverly* or *Make Believe Ballroom*, the placing of the disc on the turntable, a deliberate action, sets a performance in motion. The clumsiness of the sequence in *Square Dance Jubilee* rests on the fact that it attempts to adapt the phantasmatic conjuring of performance imagery—a procedure familiar to us from these earlier films which use records—to a medium that operates based on a flow of programming over which the user has no control.

## BREAKING RECORDS

Records, in several films of the 1940s, are magical, spinning surfaces that can transport us to alternate worlds in which charismatic celebrities perform. They are also, during this period, material objects whose abundance and fragility are sometimes exploited for comic effect. Two scenes in *Reveille for Beverly* take place in a record store to which Beverly goes in search of discs for her radio show. Both feature an incompetent male assistant (Doodles Weaver) whose job involves transporting large piles of records from one place within the shop to another. He inevitably drops some. Each sequence sets up the inevitability of the records' destruction, though this happens off-screen, signalled only by the sound of records breaking as they hit the floor.



Video excerpt 11: *Reveille for Beverly* (1943; dir. Charles Barton), 00:03:20–00:03:56.

The RKO musical *Radio Stars on Parade* (1945; dir. Leslie Goodwins) further exploits the notion that a man carrying a pile of records will inevitably drop (and break) these. In films of this period, a sense of records as plentiful and disposable existed alongside other ways of imaging them, which made them precious objects of fetishistic attachment. Such instances foreshadow later art projects by Christian Marclay and others, in which the excessive destruction of huge numbers of records

would serve as a commentary on the excessive abundance of commodity production or the brute persistence of material artefacts faced with their cultural obsolescence (Caleb 2009).



*Video excerpt 12: Radio Stars on Parade (1945; dir. Leslie Goodwins), 01:02:04–01:02:13.*

## CONCLUSION

Phonograph records in the cinema are many different things and carry out a broad variety of functions. As part of the material culture of narrative worlds, records give human bodies something to do: they are handled and broken, filed and inspected. They may highlight the expert dexterity of human bodies, as when a record is removed from its sleeve and carefully placed on a turntable, or betray such bodies' clumsiness in the moments in which records are dropped. As objects of sharing and exchange, records serve to build connection in narrative worlds, even though, as media which carry textual expression far from those who create it, they allow that expression to be consumed in the absence of physical or social proximity. We find all these uses and meanings of the phonograph record in the small corpus of low-budget films discussed here.

These films are also marked by the over-laying and interconnection of technologies. In this overlay and in the passage of music between technological supports, we find confirmation of Georgina Born's description of music, as "perhaps the paradigmatic multiply-mediated, immaterial and material, fluid quasi-object, in which subjects and objects collide and intermingle" (Born 2007, p. 7). Musical performances in the films discussed here often unfold along efficient sequences joining playback technologies to media of reception. This is the case, for example, when a spinning record on a radio station turntable gives way to the image of a clock's rotating hands or dissolves into the image of an automobile whose passengers search a radio dial for music. In other moments, media might interfere with each other—"collide and intermingle," in Born's words—as when a jukebox functions as both a tool of surveillance and a source of musical entertainment.



What Born says of music in general is often typical of phonograph records in these films. The fluid immateriality of music is clearest in those moments in which records dissolve into spaces summoned and imagined but kept at a social distance, like those in which we see African-American musicians perform. The films discussed here are forever revising our sense of how music and image may summon each other, in either direction, as when the sound of a record carries us to a performance space or when the photograph of a performer dissolves into the sounds and image of his performance.

As he develops his notion of cinema's musicality, Cardinal observes that rather than offering us access to music in any kind of pure form, film is constantly discovering principles of association that simultaneously reconfigure the world of sounds and images and the causal relationships between them (Cardinal 2018, Kindle location 164). In the dense thicket of media technologies we find in the films examined here—turntables, microphones, jukeboxes, surveillance cameras, television studio cameras, radio and television receivers, mixing board switches, and so on – this reconfiguration seems ceaseless.

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