This working paper traces the history of the Warner brothers and their Hollywood film studio, from their hardscrabble beginnings to their famous championing of a "social realist" aesthetic in their motion pictures released during the 1920s and 1930s. The pre-presidential career of Franklin Delano Roosevelt is also featured and contrasted with that of the Warner Brothers, setting up a discussion of how the Warner Bros. Studio not only supported Roosevelt financially with fundraising events but also championed his Great Depression-combating New Deal policies in their marketing and films during 1932 and 1933.

“To [the older and more established] Hollywood [studios], Warner’s primacy is an odd and faintly distasteful fact. People in show business, by and large, are inclined to resent the Warners…[Goldman Sachs banker and film financier Waddill] Catchings describes the movies as a rat-in-the-corner industry. Developed late, its laws are rat eat rat. Under these laws the Warners have fought their way to the top against the opposition of the whole amusement world…The fight has left its mark on the brothers. They have not yet lowered their guard. They are neither in Hollywood nor of it….Their production methods, in many respects unique, are mostly self-developed. Their personnel turnover is small, their interior discipline almost grim. The Warner brothers trust few people outside their own camp, but in each other they have the most implicit confidence. ‘Warner brothers personally,’ as Harry [Warner] once put it, ‘have always construed themselves as one.’”

--*Fortune* magazine, December 1937

Like all major American movie studios in Hollywood during the 1930s, Warner Bros., Inc. possessed its own personality. Even if you were held up buying popcorn in the lobby and walked in to the theatre a few seconds late, missing the film’s initial seconds when the Warners’ corporate logo flashed on the screen, audiences then and scholars now could easily recognise the signature of a Warners picture. They were usually darker, photographically and thematically; less glamorous than the products of other studios; the characters more likely working-class, urban, striving underdogs.

1 [uncited author], “Warner Bros.,” *Fortune* (December 1937): 110-111.

Happy endings were not a given, escapism not guaranteed. The films often shared a low budget, yet a carefully considered and crafted aesthetic. The foundation for these artistic and commercial motifs lay in the personalities of the Warner brothers themselves. They boasted a collective biography quite different than that of their fellow studio moguls. To a large extent, the Warner studio’s themes and values, including those featured in *Footlight Parade*, are foreshadowed by the history of its founding brothers, and their unique way of doing business, starting from the beginning of their career, far from Hollywood.

The Warners endured a hardscrabble history in their early years, living a familiar tale of struggling immigrants in the turn-of-the-century United States. The family patriarch Benjamin emigrated from Poland in 1883, initially leaving his family behind for the vaunted promise of better economic times in America. Whatever transpired, it had to represent an improvement over the pervasive anti-semitism and pogroms Jews like Benjamin Warner (and most other Jewish families that produced the eventual first generation of Hollywood studio moguls) faced in eastern Europe, drastically limiting their financial opportunities. Benjamin bounced around the eastern end of North America for years, starting in Baltimore, heading off to Canada for a short spate in fur-trading, then back to Baltimore. Finally, aided by the labor of most of his nine children, the family found limited success and stability operating a grocery store in the then-booming industrial belt in Youngstown, Ohio. The Warners’ struggle to gain a foothold in America during these early years, according to their biographer Michael Freedland, taught the siblings “that the day was meant for working, and that you didn’t waste God’s given time doing anything else.”

The place of Youngstown in the story of the Warners’ rise is significant. Most of the other Jews who ended up running the nascent Hollywood film industry learned their entrepreneurial skills in major metropolitan areas like New York City, Boston and Chicago. As author Neal Gabler put it, “culture and class distinctions were less readily apparent” in Youngstown. The Warners were underdogs during the years they attempted to find their economic niche, operating in somewhat of a cultural backwater far from established entertainment centers. They needed to prove themselves and exhibit moxie to move into the big leagues of entertainment in urban cities. Such qualities were not learned in school, and none of the Warner siblings finished their studies; ambition and family survival loomed too large. But another quality the brothers and their father possessed that their fellow future moguls also shared was varied retail experience. Through hard experience, they learned, often after economically disastrous failures, how to sell and move product, developing a sense of what worked in the marketplace and what did not. By the time they entered the exhibition side of the film business, showing the hit short *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) in their yard in Ohio, the Warner brothers and their father had worked in shoe and bicycle repair, perishable and general goods, butchery, soap and ice cream sales, carnival barking, snake charming, and more. In his attempts to start a career as a

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child singing star, future production chief Jack L. Warner became the earliest Warner to develop a taste for show business. As a young man, he briefly pursued such ambitions, going on the road for a season billed as Leon Zuardo and doing a blackface act as the mass commercial appeal of minstrelsy was winding down in the United States. Jack and his oldest brother Harry would eventually become the two main brothers who ran the Warner Brothers studio.

The Warner reputation for scrappiness and drive emerged at these first movie screenings. Sister Rose played accompanying piano, brother Jack performed illustrated songs, and the older brothers ran the projector and took tickets. According to Clive Hirschhorn, the brothers’ new enterprise, funded by their father’s selling of an old watch chain and horse, made “more money than Benjamin Warner made in a month selling meat.” There existed little doubt where their future lay; soon thereafter, the brothers started taking their projector on the road to other film-starved communities in Ohio and Pennsylvania, eventually settling down and opening a movie house in New Castle, Pennsylvania called the Cascade. By 1907, they started a film distribution company, making it easier to get new films out to underserved communities, and eventually sending their burgeoning library of film titles as far afield as Norfolk, Virginia and Portland, Oregon.

Entrepreneurs like the Warners, and their future studio brethren like Adolph Zukor, Louis B. Mayer (and others) could see before most that movies were not being developed anywhere near their true business potential. Most investors steered clear of this art form which many at the turn of the century thought of as a smarmy fly-by-night operation catering to immigrants and blue collar uneducated workers, figures frequently exploited and demeaned in America. But these budding movie executives collectively realized that the appeal of this fledgling art form would spread and multiply exponentially, providing power and riches to those who could streamline the business and create product that would expand its audience. Though the Warners were slower to achieve such heights compared to other Hollywood studios (perhaps because of their relatively slow start in Ohio), they eventually wielded a huge influence in this process.

But first, they, and other independent film companies, needed to displace a large obstacle. The [Thomas] Edison Manufacturing Company and the other companies who held the patents that made motion picture production, distribution and exhibition possible were frustrated that independent concerns like the Warners’ film exchange were making significant money, using their inventions without paying for the privilege. The nine companies, including Edison’s, established the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) in 1910, a trust levying high license fees upon anyone buying film stock, opening a theatre venue, or using a film projector or camera. The MPPC monopoly briefly put the Warners out of business, although the brothers re-established themselves by 1916.

Edison was highly skilled at creating (or at least enabling his employees to create) much of the key technology of film production and viewing, but he had no clue how to attract a large paying audience. He possessed the same talents and blindness in the recorded music industry as well. The MPPC’s aggressive actions inspired the new indie film companies to fight against the fees in court and pack up their equipment and move thousands of miles away to Hollywood, where Trust employees in the days before easy cross-country travel found it difficult to prosecute and physically assault offenders, as they commonly did on the east coast. By the time the U.S. Supreme Court declared the MPPC’s monopoly behaviour unconstitutional in 1915, the independent film companies had established a profitable beachhead on the west coast. To the Trust’s chagrin, their business strategy, relying on legal restraints of others, unwittingly had the effect of bringing forth the birth of the modern American film industry with Trust partners frozen out of it, the names of their film companies consigned to the past by the end of the 1910s. While the Trust emphasized collecting fees, other companies and executives (such as Carl Laemmle, who would later go on to create Universal Pictures) found ways to innovate and reach mass multi-class audiences, construct superior distribution frameworks, and capture long-term economic success and influence.

Another essential division existed: the Trust partners were almost exclusively white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, while the independent producers who fled to Los Angeles and built the eventually highly profitable world-conquering Hollywood studio system (including the Warners) were almost exclusively Jews, a group still facing discrimination in business, education, social clubs and more during this period. Yet, the movie business the Jewish studio heads created became a respectable cornerstone of American life, business and culture as the twentieth century unfolded. And those Jewish outcasts, first- and second-generation immigrants to a man, got in on the ground floor by creating their own opportunities, as successful immigrants usually do.

The Warners began producing their own low budget films as early as 1910, but found limited success with such ventures until 1917. In 1918, two patriotic anti-German films with World War I themes initiated their first attempts at major features. One of these, My Four Years in Germany, grossed $1.5 million with a net profit of $130,000, the first step in the making of Warner Brothers as a major studio. A slow climb followed: they built their own studio facility in Hollywood in 1919, and in the 1921-1922 period managed to release only six feature films. By 1923, the studio introduced its first major star, the expressive and well-trained dog Rin-Tin-Tin, who significantly boosted the studio’s fortunes. “Rinty,” as his fans called him, starred in 19 lucrative films for Warners, “keeping the studio buoyant throughout the silent era and [saving] many theatres from closure,” according to Clive Hirschhorn. Thousands of pieces of fan mail arrived for the dog every week at the Warner lot, where he was reportedly known as “the mortgage lifter.” Not only that, but the studio’s legendary head of production from 1929-1933, Darryl Zanuck, the man who greenlighted Footlight Parade, initially came to the studio’s attention because of his authorship of over a dozen Rin-Tin-Tin scripts, though he admitted later that “he disliked the dog and hated writing for him.” In appreciation for enabling Warners to vastly increase profits and production, the dog received movie star perks: a small
orchestra on-set to maintain actorly inspiration, a diamond-studded collar, steak at mealtimes, as well as a $2,000 weekly salary (over $25,000 in today’s money).5

The embrace of new technology catapulted the fledgling Warner studio into the big leagues in 1927 when they became the first to embrace the commercial potential of “talking pictures.”6 One could easily argue that the brothers’ struggling second-rate status in the industry compelled them towards an innovation that revamped and rejuvenated the film world. The established Paramount and MGM studios, with their more spacious lots, higher budgets, much more tightly packed release schedules, exclusive theatre chains and superior profits had already constructed a successful business model and were loath to take chances on an unproven innovation that risked upsetting their financial projections. Many at the time viewed talking pictures as an evanescent gimmick that would demean the art of filmmaking. Besides, introducing sound into motion pictures would represent an expensive proposition for a product doing just fine without it. But the Warners at this point were underdogs, searching and scheming for a way to climb into the top tier of their profession, and aggressively moved to secure an advantage by signing a deal with Western Electric in 1925, a subsidiary of the nation’s largest company, American Telephone and Telegraph. Western Electric, which brought out the first electronic public address system in the early 1920s, had been experimenting with sound recording and film for years. With this transaction, Warners purchased access to the engineers and experience to help them develop motion pictures with sound.

Western Electric and the Warners dubbed their system Vitaphone. Sam Warner, the third son in the family line, drove these efforts over the initial objections of his brothers. He viewed the new technology primarily in terms of providing orchestral accompaniment for films, particularly musical shorts screened before Warner features. He was not thinking about recording actors’ dialogue, which represented a more difficult technical feat than presenting performing musicians. This explains why


As Gomery explains in detail, there were several antecedents for talking pictures going back at least 15 years before the release of The Jazz Singer, including some pioneered by Thomas Edison and various German scientists and companies, but none of them worked as well technologically and commercially as the Vitaphone system used by The Jazz Singer. The Fox studio also contributed to the eventual success of “talkies.” If the German economy had not been experiencing such profound problems during the mid-1920s, scientists and companies from that country may well have beat Warner Bros. and Western Electric to the international motion picture marketplace.
producers originally planned on *The Jazz Singer* featuring sound only during its musical segments. By the time *The Jazz Singer* premiered, the investments needed to jump-start Warners’ experiment with sound totalled $5 million (about $65 million in today’s dollars), a figure that inspired one of the studio’s two top investors to back out of financial commitments to the studio. The future of the studio rode on this bet—Warners veered close to bankruptcy as they were developing their Vitaphone technology, and according to *Fortune* magazine, Harry “hocked his home and his insurance policies” during this period to supply the company with cash. By the fall of 1927, Warners had produced over 100 short musical films with sound for exhibition in the 200 theatres equipped with the expensive and somewhat clunky Vitaphone sound system, with the film’s sound emanating from recorded discs instead of a magnetic strip on the celluloid. The bravery of Warners’ insistence on pursuing sound was also demonstrated when Western Electric forcefully renegotiated their original deal with Warners, stipulating that all of the movie studios, not just Warner Bros. could access, for a price, Vitaphone technology. Luckily for Warners, the other studios, save for Fox, declined that opportunity, deigning to wait until an industry standard had been established, which meant that Warners had the lead in developing “talkies.” Harry felt that the other studios purposely let his studio develop sound on their own because “they wanted him to go broke.”

The gamble paid off more spectacularly than anyone could have imagined. *The Jazz Singer*, the fourth of the Warner Vitaphone features, released in October 1927, featured the first words spoken onscreen in a major studio film, and unleashed an explosive commercial impact, selling millions of tickets, and forcing rival studios to immediately adopt sound so they could compete with and narrow the huge lead Warners established. Though corny, stilted and still silent at times, *The Jazz Singer* represents one of the few movies in history that decisively changed the film industry, along with *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which proved the viability of feature films, and *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), whose success alerted the major studios that they needed to change the content and marketing of their films to attract a younger baby boom audience.

The effect of *The Jazz Singer* on Warners itself was perhaps even more explosive: the introduction of sound dramatically increased the company’s stock price, from $9 to $132. They also made a royalty on every motion picture sound system sold to theaters by Western Electric. It paid to be the pioneers: while the top three film studios saw profits rise between three to seven million dollars from 1928-1929 as they began releasing sound pictures, Warners’ profits were up $14 million over the same period. Moreover, Warner produced 86 films in 1929, more than doubling their output in just two years. The brothers, all major stockholders, could have become incredibly rich quickly, yet, under the financial leadership and discipline instituted by Harry, smartly used their new cash resources to consolidate gains and transform their studio into one of the industry leaders, instead of lining their personal bank accounts. They upgraded their studio sound facilities, and more importantly, used the bulk of their recently arrived millions to purchase over 500 movie theatres. The studio also bought First National, a film production and distribution company whose fortunes were declining in the 1920s, but which owned a huge film studio in Burbank, a few

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7 About half of those 86 films were produced by or made under the banner of First National, which Warner Bros. took full control of in 1929: Hirschhorn, 66.
miles north of Hollywood, which would become the foundation for the Warner studios, renovated and enlarged numerous times over the decades, and still the center of Warner Bros. production today. By 1930, the brothers had marshalled a national distribution system showing exclusively Warner pictures that ably competed against the similarly massive theater chains owned by other large movie studios. Warners was now a player in Hollywood.

But they also made moves that went beyond the business vision of the time. Realizing that the prospect of sound films would bring new financial opportunities, Warners invested some of their new capital into record companies, radio stations and music publishing companies, successfully creating corporate synergy. Most 1930s hit songs emerged from films – “soundies” represented an excellent promotional device for music, especially with 60 million movie patrons per week in the United States out of a population of over 120 million. The song that alerted Warner executives to this potential was “Sonny Boy,” a DeSylva-Brown-Henderson composition sung by Al Jolson in The Singing Fool (1929). According to film historian John Kobal, the song “became one of the biggest selling hits in the history of popular music, it was sung repeatedly in the film, and sold over two million copies.” Warners ensured maximum revenue from music featured in their sound movies; when audiences heard a song in one of their films and wanted to buy a record of it or the sheet music, Warners earned extra profit on the music as a result of their investment in these ancillary firms. Music from Warner films airing on Warner radio stations helped sell movie tickets for Warner features and sheet music, all of which aided the company’s balance sheet. As Motion Picture Herald reported in 1933, a couple months after the premiere of the first Warner Bros. Great Depression musical, music publishers learned quickly that the exploitation [of songs in movie musicals] skyrocketed their earnings. Warner sold 500,000 sheets of “42nd Street” music, at 40 cents per copy, grossing $200,000. Sales of records, too, improved considerably. “42nd Street” record sales have totalled 100,000 to date at 75 cents each, representing a gross of $75,000. The average high mark for sheet music sales is said to approximate 150,000 copies. Obviously, the Warner activities more than tripled this total, with still more sales in the offing.

The studio’s embrace of radio was particularly telling since other major studios viewed the medium, which aired comedy and drama material not far removed from offerings in local movie theatres, as a threat to their business “and tried to do everything they could to discourage the listening habit” in audiences, according to Freedland. By the end of 1930, the company owned 51 subsidiary companies, their stock was valued at $200 million, they had $230 million in gross assets (up from $16 million in 1928) and they employed 18,500 people. Markets were expanding, and

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A Nashville, IL theatre owner mentioned the plugging of songs from 42nd Street on the radio as an important factor in making the film a hit at his theatre: H. R. Hisey, in “What the Picture Did For Me” [column], Motion Picture Herald (22 April 1933).

9 [uncited author], “84 Features With Music Available For Booking In The Next Few Months,” Motion Picture Herald (20 May 1933).
Warners, once the struggling underdog, was now out in front in many ways. *Footlight Parade* and the other Great Depression musicals that Warner released starting in 1933 represented another example of the studio taking full advantage of the new possibilities motion picture sound made possible, crafting a series of successful musicals before any other studio that evinced a major, if often unheralded, influence on the development of the movie musical.

However, not all the changes ushered in by the coming of sound films were viewed as advantageous by Warners and other studios. Sound brought the banks into the film business in unprecedented ways, since it made film production several times more expensive and required more extensive financing. As author Scott Eyman has argued, it also “made unions inevitable,” since so many of the elite new personnel hired for work in sound films (particularly “journalists, sound engineers and Broadway actors” and writers) had enjoyed a long history of union membership and protection and saw no reason why they could not enjoy such privileges in the notoriously anti-union environment of Los Angeles. As will be shown later in this book, the leaders of the Hollywood unions that coalesced during 1933, the Screen Writers Guild and the Screen Actors Guild, were often drawn from those demographics, and the studio moguls, particularly the Warner brothers, were dead set against any new union recognition for Hollywood employees.

Sam Warner, the force behind “talkies” at Warner, never saw how his efforts transformed his brothers’ lives and the industry as a whole. The day before *The Jazz Singer* premiered in New York, he died of a cerebral hemorrhage in Los Angeles. This served as a tragic parallel to the film itself, in which the Rabbi who resisted his son’s career in pop music dies before he sees his son’s breakthrough success. “When Sam died, and there is no doubt that *The Jazz Singer* killed him, something went out of our lives,” wrote Jack L. Warner in his autobiography. Besides losing a brother and a visionary executive, a bridge was lost between the two most volatile Warner brothers and the two most central to their business: the usually calm, pious-minded Harry who strove after respectability, and the “crude, vulgar” Jack. “There was a time when they did not see each other,” recalled Darryl Zanuck. “Harry hated Jack.” Their physically and verbally violent fights and arguments were legendary, and became worse after Sam’s passing. He seemed the only one who could bring them together at tough times for the sake of the studio and the family. As Neal Gabler wrote in his history of the Jewish Hollywood moguls, after the massive success of *The Jazz Singer* established Warner Bros. as a major studio, “the Warners would never be a family again,” a sad and frustrating situation for the only family-owned and operated major Hollywood film studio.

Even before they amalgamated into a studio, the Warner brothers showed an interest in making and distributing what later scholars would term films of “social relevance.”

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The decision to make such films was grounded not just in the brothers’ nature and history, but in the philosophies of Harry Warner, who viewed the studio’s film presentations as a responsibility, as well as a route to profit. “The motion picture presents right and wrong, as the Bible does,” he once said. “By showing right and wrong, we teach the right.” Fortune magazine, in a lengthy 1937 profile of the studio, wrote that Harry “has two major interests: business and morals…[he] has a violent hatred of human prejudice and persecution.” The move towards socially relevant films may have also served as an attempt to counter and reverse the anti-semitism that plagued American Jews at this time, especially those who headed the Hollywood studios. “Both before and after Pearl Harbor, books were published that cast suspicion upon the motives of Jewish producers and studio owners like [Harry] Warner,” reported Nancy Snow. “With titles like Hell over Hollywood: The Truth about the Movies, What Is Wrong with the Movies and An American’s History of Hollywood—The Tower of Babel, American readers were exposed to ugly stereotypes of greed and immorality surrounding Jews.”  

The Warner Bros. trend of “social relevance” usually translated into films concerned with justice broadly defined, standing against hypocrisy and exploitation, and identifying with the hard-working little guy who, in the American tradition, pulls himself up by his own bootstraps. In 1917, as America was on the verge of joining the fighting in World War I, they distributed War Brides (1916), an anti-war film depicting a woman killing herself rather than submitting to having babies by invading unnamed foreign troops. Scholar John Davis reports that the film was banned when America joined the war effort in 1917. Later that year, Warners produced and released two propaganda-laced anti-German films, including the aforementioned hit My Four Years in Germany, which featured “the American flag under a German boot, [and] a gigantic, grinning Hun with blood on his hands.” As Davis points out, the trend of anti-war films (particularly concerning World War I) released by Warner Brothers continued well into the late 1920s and 1930s, even before Universal Studios’ Oscar-winning pacifist hit All Quiet on the Western Front (1930).  

With the coming of the 1930s, as the Warner Bros. studio came into its own and the initial problems with sound on film were resolved, a house style was born that characterized the studio for decades. In 1930, Zanuck was made head of production, 

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and he, Harry and Jack Warner made the decision to specialize in low-budget production, partly because of the economic limitations brought on by the studio’s hardscrabble early years and the Great Depression, partly due to the unavoidable large cash outlays for sound film technology and studio construction, but also owing to the scrappy nature and history of the Warner brothers, their studio, and the way in which they viewed the world. The studio became known for paring film budgets to the bone. “Listen, a picture, all it is is an expensive dream,” Harry maintained. “Well, it’s just as easy to dream for $700,000 as for $1,500,000.”

Zanuck spearheaded the drive toward realism, veering away from the typical Hollywood happy ending whenever possible. According to his biographer Leonard Mosley, Zanuck ordered director William Wellman to excise all sentimentality from The Public Enemy (1931), the film that introduced James Cagney to film audiences and began the profitable and influential trend of Warner gangster films during the Great Depression. “People are going to say the characters are immoral, but they’re not because they don’t have any morals,” Zanuck said he told Wellman. “They steal, they kill, they lie, they hump each other because that’s the way they’re made, and if you allow a decent human feeling or a pang of conscience to come into their make-up, you’ve lost ‘em and changed the kind of movie we’re making.”

Throughout the 1930s, expensive prestige pictures were limited in numbers at Warners and budgets slashed. Between 1931-1932, for the most part, Harry and Jack Warner forbid musicals, because of their expense, and because the industry released a spate of them (mostly unsuccessful) in the late 1920s and in 1930 with the coming of sound. In 1933, with the advent of 42nd Street and Footlight Parade, Warner Bros. would revive the genre in spectacular and profitable fashion, but these musicals also acquiesced to the low-budget aesthetic, particularly in their non-musical sequences.

Film scholars agree that the Warner studio was a tightly run ship, implemented by firm executive control. Thomas Schatz’s research into the company files revealed a “factory-based assembly-line production system” with no room for “excess,” “a model of narrative and technical economy.” As the main music composer for the Warner Bros. Great Depression Musicals put it, “the Warner execs were obsessed with economy.” He recalled endless pre-production meetings when production costs formed the only item on the agenda. “Anyone who got over $2000 a week [Harry] hated instantly even if he never met him,” recalled Zanuck. “In Harry’s mind everybody was a thief, including Jack for condoning extravagances.” Orders came from the top, from the Warner brothers themselves or, more frequently, from Zanuck.

As was often the case at the Hollywood studios during this period, directors were usually hired only to supervise the shooting of a film, sometimes with every shot carefully proscribed in the script and no creative latitude allowed. They were often

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Various authors have cited various dates concerning the year Darryl F. Zanuck became head of production at Warners. Schatz says it’s 1929 on pg 66 and 1930 on pg 136 of Genius, David Thomson (in his encyclopedia) claims 1931, Mosley claims 1925. I think that, over the years, there has been a little confusion about job titles. Trying to piece this together, it seems that Zanuck became the senior producer at Warner in 1929, and head of production the year after. I’m basing this on David Thomson’s nomenclature, but on dates provided by Schatz, since he has made a broad investigation into studio files. Hirschhorn also lists the 1930 date.
given little input into pre- or post-production, which is why Warners’ most active directors during the period such as Lloyd Bacon, who helmed Footlight Parade, had the time to direct as many as four or five films per year, a schedule inconceivable in today’s industry. Retakes of scenes done after principal production, common at most other studios and usually expensive, were rare at Warners, only allowed if “the preview [screening was] extraordinarily sour.” Producers went uncredited onscreen for most of the 1930s and after Zanuck exited in 1933, no “producing genius” like Irving Thalberg at MGM was hired to take his place. Instead, Warners’ production slate was constructed and maintained by “jocular penny-pincher” head of production Jack, “methodical assistant Hal Wallis, and half a dozen almost anonymous supervisors” who were pointedly not referred to as producers. The strategy kept salaries low, and ensured that the focus strictly remained on the studio, its product, and maintaining profit, not artistic egos. “Many of Hollywood’s first citizens, especially over at the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio [where generous film budgets were common, even during the Depression] think that Harry’s cut-rate dreaming is the worst possible formula for making pictures,” reported Fortune. “And yet by all movie standards—Hollywood’s, the box office’s, and the critics’—Warner Bros. is conceded to make very good pictures indeed.”

These business conditions, as well as the Warner tendency toward films of social relevance, marked the Warner house style. Their films tended to be darker, with more shadows displayed within the cinematography, in the background, as well as on actors’ faces. When the mise en scène was lashed in chiaroscuro or when close-ups were used extensively, sets could be cheaper and less detailed, sometimes even nonexistent. An exhibitor in Harrisburg, IL, writing in Motion Picture Herald, appreciated the difference, noting that Warner Bros. “are making good box office pictures without spending a million doing it.” This house style also made the films seem more dramatic, personal, more like real life captured on celluloid, stripped of the usual fancy Hollywood key-lit and back-lit photography tricks. In a 1932 article from the Hollywood Reporter, Zanuck championed Warners’ successful embrace of what he called “headline films,” drawn from current events and everyday reality, a theme he introduced during his short reign as head of production. “You can’t go on telling the same story forever. The triangle is rusty,” he wrote. “That is why we originally adopted the headline type of story, and that is why we intend to continue with it.” With the coming of sound, as film journalist Nick Roddick points out, the Hollywood studios “were making a very different kind of movie [than previously]….in a word, more realistic…no studio made this shift more decisively than Warner Bros.” But Roddick’s book concentrated on gangster, prison, historical films and other dramas produced by the studio during the 1930s – the Great Depression musicals, particularly Footlight Parade, also reflected this sensibility of “social relevance,” and have often been ignored by authors attempting to tease out the character and history of Warner Bros. during this era.

The Warner films of the 1930s usually offered a unique combination of bleak realism, fast pacing and quick snappy dialogue. They were a world away from “glamorous and glossy” high-budget star-studded films such as Grand Hotel (1932) released by MGM, Hollywood’s top-grossing studio of the period. As Leo Rosten wrote in his excellent 1941 anthropological examination of Hollywood, “Warners specializes in emotions, not manners.” While other studios fashioned a fantasy world onscreen that attempted to transport audiences as far away from the misery of the Depression as
possible, one of Warner’s biggest hits of the early 1930s was *I Am A Fugitive From A Chain Gang* (1932), a film based on a true story steeped in dirt, injustice and frustration. It was directed by Mervyn LeRoy, one of the most prolific and successful directors at Warners, a man seemingly tailor-made for the aesthetic Zanuck established at the studio. He grew up amidst “life in the raw” in turn-of-the-century San Francisco. “I met the cops and the whores and the reporters and the bartenders and the Chinese and the fishermen and the shopkeepers,” LeRoy recounted in the 1970s. “I knew them all, knew how they thought and how they loved and how they hated. When it came time for me to make motion pictures, I made movies that were real, because I knew at first hand how people behaved.”

LeRoy earned the reputation of a quick director, filming twice the amount of usable footage per day as other directors, a skill deeply appreciated by a studio management team that needed to economize wherever possible during the Great Depression. Less production days equalled lower production costs, more opportunity for profit. LeRoy helmed roughly a half dozen films per year from 1930-1933, and was a studio loyalist – he married Harry Warner’s daughter Doris in 1934 (an occasion recorded by Vitaphone cameras) and their first son was named Warner. The Warner Bros. production style, in some ways, made it easier for staff directors to crank out movies quickly – most Warner footage and most of the footage in the Great Depression Musicals did not need the sheen and glitzy design of MGM spectacles like *Grand Hotel* (1932) – in Burbank, anonymous office sets and plain dingy rehearsal spaces were the norm with little set-up time required.

*Chain Gang* focuses on James Allen (played by Paul Muni, Oscar-nominated for the role), a talented, hard-working World War I veteran who upon returning home wishes to elevate his status by becoming a civil engineer. Through a series of unlucky breaks, he is wrongly accused of robbery while on the road looking for work and sent to a notorious Georgia chain gang. While Allen is on the road, we see him riding the rails like a hobo in scenes resonant of the Depression, interacting with others in the same plight. The chain gang scenes are even more wrenching, their reality underscored by the technical advice of the true life James Allen (the man’s actual name was Robert Burns), who endured the ordeal portrayed onscreen: we see the men perpetually in chains, even while asleep; how they face beatings if they do not ask for permission before wiping their brows as they break rocks in the hot sun; how the State of Georgia continually refuses to release Allen even after promises of clemency for good behaviour.

This film presents an unrelenting nightmare of struggle that does not end happily. On the run after escaping the chain gang for a second time, James has a brief reunion in a dark Chicago parking lot with his true love. He tells her he has “no friends, no rest, no peace” and is always wary of authorities wishing to apprehend him. “How do you live?,” she tearfully asks. “I steal,” he replies with a mad look on his face, and then disappears back into the night, as the film suddenly ends. Several theater owners quoted in *Motion Picture Herald*’s “What The Picture Did For Me” column felt this ending “spoil[ed]” the film. “My personal opinion is that [the film] would do 25 per cent more business if it had a happy ending,” complained an exhibitor in Montpelier,

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Idaho, adding that 50 of his patrons agreed with this sentiment. “Too depressing,” noted another exhibitor in Piedmont, Missouri. “Several women walked out.” Yet, as seen by the fact that this film enjoyed the rare distinction of playing across America for more than a year according to the Herald columns, people went to see this film in much greater numbers than other prison films that ended happily or with justice meted out; perhaps it better suited the tenor of the time. As the Missouri theatre owner further stated, the film “drew fairly well, considering [it was] Lent and rain.” Depression audiences probably needed catharsis and realism as much as escapism. The Warner brothers, as well as LeRoy and Zanuck (both of whom claimed they wrote Chain Gang’s final scene), understood that better than their competitors. Although, as Schatz demonstrates in his roundup of studio files, the legal and sales departments, a story editor and the first director assigned to the project felt it was too “morbid” and “violent” of a story for the public to embrace.

Another way in which Chain Gang reflected reality was in its pre-Production Code frankness concerning adult lives: when he returns from the Army, Allen says he’s “S.O.L.” (short for “shit out of luck”); the film portrays blacks and whites suffering together, acting as friends and equals in the chain gang even if the bosses segregate the men at night; during his first escape from the chain gang, Allen accepts the free services of a prostitute; later on, his landlady openly bites her fingers in lust looking at him and they live together without being married, a situation that depicts love as an immoral game; the Georgia state law authorities dissemble and repeatedly go back on their word, denying Allen justice and a chance at the career as a civil engineer that he has earned. Such situations of depravity, racial equality, abuse of authority and non-married sexual behaviour would not be permissible to show onscreen two years later in 1934, when the Production Code Administration mandated that all major studio films demonstrate a conservative morality onscreen. But Chain Gang, one of the hallmark Warner Brothers films, went out of its way to present an adult reality and was not alone in this effort. Many films of the pre-Code period raised the quantity of sex and violence in their movies (including Footlight Parade) to lure in poverty-stricken Depression audiences, but Chain Gang and Footlight purposely added such details to increase their verisimilitude, not just raise their titillation quotient. Warners’ efforts at verisimilitude in this case certainly convinced the state of Georgia, which brought a libel suit (ultimately dismissed) against Warner Bros. because they objected to Chain Gang’s portrayal of their penal system. According to film historian William Meyer, the Warner brothers and director LeRoy were warned not to enter the state of Georgia in the months after the film was released. LeRoy maintained in later decades that he had no intention of preaching any particular message about the Depression or prison reform in Chain Gang, he just wished to present a great story, and that this intention animated all of his work as a director, including the Warner Bros. Great Depression musical Gold Diggers of 1933, which he would helm the next year.

15 For exhibitor reaction to Chain Gang, including the columns referenced in the text, consult: [uncited authors/various exhibitors], “What The Picture Did For Me [column],” Motion Picture Herald (11 March 1933, 23 April 1933, 27 May 1933, 10 June 1933, 24 June 1933, 16 September 1933, 30 September 1933).

16 Meyer, 227-231.
Wild Boys of the Road (1933), released the same month as Footlight Parade, mined similar disturbing territory as Chain Gang. With their childhood homes about to be foreclosed upon and their parents out of work, two teenage boys decide to cease being an economic burden on their strapped parents. They leave their comfortable high school world in order to ride the rails in search of work, hoping to send money home. Numerous shots display a multi-racial group of hobos riding the rails, desperate for work. We see them avoiding the “railroad dicks” that try to roust them and throw them off the trains. In a particularly beautiful and tragic scene, the boys leap off moving trains as they get close to a station, breaking into a run to avoid the railroad police; one boy accidentally hits his head on a pole as he leaps off, and lies half conscious on the railroad tracks as his leg is run over by a train.

In another scene, the boys realize they hold a numerical advantage over the railroad dicks and fight back and win against them (unfortunately, as most boys hurl rocks and eggs against the cops, the black kids use minstrel-stereotyped watermelons). It’s a spontaneous joyful rebellion, but one careful not to display hints of communist revolution or social blame during a period when the Communist Party was gaining a small number of adherents in the United States. As screenwriter and novelist Andrew Bergman argued in his book describing films of the Great Depression, Warners’ “social consciousness films… [demonstrated] both a gritty feel for social realism and a total inability to give any coherent reasons for social difficulties.”

Certainly, stockbrokers, for example, were not indicted in these films for their encouragement of buying on margin, which allowed their clients to purchase stocks while putting down only 10% of the cost, creating a huge bubble in the market which led to the 1929 market crash that initiated the Depression’s economic dislocation. There existed no room in the plot for such detail in this or probably any other Hollywood film.

But as Wild Boys closes, it is obvious that something is wrong in the United States, that justice and opportunity is not being made available to all Americans, even the most vulnerable citizens. In a crowning speech at the close of the film, the main character, Eddie, tells a judge:

I’ll tell you why we can’t go home, because our folks are poor, they can’t get jobs, and there isn’t enough to eat. What good will it do you to send us home to starve? You say you gotta send us to jail to keep us off the streets. Well, that’s a lie. You’re sending us to jail because you don’t want to see us, you wanna forget us, well you can’t do it ‘cause I’m not the only one, there’s thousands just like me and there’s more hitting the road every day… I’m sick of being hungry and cold, sick of freight trains, jail cant be any worse than the street, so give it to me!

Eddie’s friend Tommy, the one who lost his leg in the rail yard, chimes in as well, arguing that if the banks, soldiers and breweries get “help” from government, then they should too: “What about us?” he asks. “We’re kids.” At the last second, upon hearing their story, the judge, who slightly resembles President Roosevelt and has an NRA Blue Eagle insignia hanging above his chair, relents and releases Eddie from a sentence for a crime he did not commit. Eddie is exonerated, which allows him to start a job as an elevator boy, but the two friends he has journeyed with throughout

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17 Bergman, 92-102. Quote is from pg. 92.
the film and most of the hobos they encountered along the way are clearly nowhere near as lucky and will still need to struggle.

_The World Changes_ (1933) represents another example of Warner’s “social relevance” films. It traces several decades of American history, from hard-working pioneers during the post-Civil War years who open the West to expanding populations, to the greed, deteriorating morals and over-reliance on the stock market that supposedly characterised the 1920s. In his study of 1930s Warner Bros. films, Nick Roddick maintained that “more fully than any other Warners movie, _The World Changes_ offers metaphor for the American experience of the Depression, showing its roots in the perversion of business practice into speculation, and its solution of honest business principles.”

Five Star Final (1931) represented another Warners film playing on those themes. Edward G. Robinson portrays a New York City newspaper editor pressured by the paper’s owner to include more lurid and gossipy pieces to increase circulation and profits. When his reporters unearth the whereabouts of a woman who killed a man in self-defense decades before and seek to publicize the story again, even though she has been a non-newsworthy mother and wife ever since, the editor fails to kill the story, even though he knows the ensuing publicity threatens the woman’s daughter’s wedding. When the mother commits suicide because of the shame she feels and the fact that the groom’s family wants him to back out of the wedding following the paper’s revelation, the daughter and her fiancé excoriating the editor, the owner and the reporter at length, attacking the morality of their profession: “It won’t do any good to tell you what you’ve done. You’ll go on hunting little unimportant people who can’t fight back…You’ve grown rich on filth and no one’s ever dared rise up and crush you.”

Not everyone admired the hard-hitting approach of many Warner films, as a perusal of _Motion Picture Herald_, the national magazine representing the interests of exhibitors, indicates during 1933. Similar in plot and spirit to _Chain Gang, Heroes For Sale_ (1933) left its honourable, talented and innocent protagonist wandering homeless through America at the end of the film. It drew criticism from some theatre owners: “too gruesome…aI was... a cheerful ending would have played better” (Selma, LA); “could be a wow [if it had a] a happy ending” (Lebanon, KS); and “people do not seem to care for this type of story…did not go over so good” (New York City). Dr L. D. Whitaker, a theatre owner in Farmville, VA, pleaded with Hollywood moguls to issue more “happy films”:

> God knows there is enough tragedy in the everyday life of people…For the life of me I cannot see why the producers fail to realize that they are seriously hurting the entire industry by the types of pictures they are now presenting to the public…Within the past few months I have seen picture after picture that contained tragedy and unhappiness, and left the audiences leaving the theatre

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18 Roddick, 228.

19 Sources for this paragraph, all from the _Motion Picture Herald_: Dr. L. D. Whitaker, “Wants Happier Films: Exhibitor Finds Explanation of Losses in Multitude of Depressing Pictures in These Times” (4 March 1933); “What the Picture Did For Me” [column], (28 October 1933, 4 November 1933).
with long faces that gave them the appearance that they were returning from a funeral instead of from what was supposed to be a house of entertainment.

Many other Warner titles of the period continued the “social relevance” theme as the main basis throughout a film, and even more films featured the motif in certain individual scenes. A slogan that the studio used throughout the 1930s highlighted these tendencies: “Combining good picture-making with good citizenship.” But an in-depth profile of the company published in Fortune magazine in 1937 made clear that such concerns were not of the bleeding heart variety, and that in the end the bottom line drove the “social relevance” films: “Most Warner executives are quick to disown the role of crusader for social justice; they protest that their only purpose in treating these ‘controversial’ themes is a harmless passion for gold.” The article also hinted that for Harry Warner and his moralistic sensibility this might have been somewhat less the case. The magazine noted that “Warner is the only major studio that seems to know or care what is going on in America [today].” Harry downplayed this theme in interviews since a priority of social crusading would have alienated the Republican-leaning Wall Street crowd that the studio relied on for financing, but films quickly produced based on current events evinced an immediacy that attracted audiences, and usually could be filmed for less money than films featuring lavish sets. The drive for profit was paramount, and, as will be seen in future chapters, employees were at times not treated with the kind of justice often championed in many Warner films of the decade. The “rat eat rat” ethos applied not just to the competitors of the Warner Bros. studio, but also, seemingly, to their own employees.

The brothers were ruthless in running their business efficiently. Jack Warner’s job as vice president of the Warner Bros. studio was “not to make artistic triumphs,” according to Fortune magazine, “but to make sixty pictures a year on a budget of $25 million” in a carefully organized and controlled system of “factory production.” And Jack was quite skilled at this endeavour: 85% of the 214 Warner releases from 1933-1937 more than made back the cost to produce and distribute them, a figure several times greater than Hollywood’s batting average in the present day. “This does not mean that they were very good pictures,” lauded Fortune. “It means that they didn’t cost very much to begin with and that every one of them hit the budget on the nose…a famous Jack Warner specialty.”

As the Warners made their way to the top echelon of their field, Franklin Delano Roosevelt also reached the top of his, developing a reputation for scrappiness, character, innovation and new thinking.

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20 Some further examples of Warner Bros. social relevance films in the 1929-1933 period, taken from the aforementioned Bergman, Hirschhorn and Roddick books, the Zanuck and Fortune articles, as well as my own viewing: The Gamblers, The Time, the Place and the Girl, Madonna of Avenue A, Fast Life (all from 1929); Dawn Patrol, Son of the Gods, Doorway to Hell (all from 1930); Little Caesar, The Public Enemy, Smart Money, The Finger Points (all from 1931); Silver Dollar, The Famous Ferguson Case, Two Seconds, Life Begins, Cabin in the Cotton, The Mouthpiece, Taxi! (all from 1932); 20,000 Years in Sing-Sing, The Mayor of Hell, Heroes For Sale, and of course the initial three Great Depression musicals 42nd Street, Gold Diggers of 1933, and Footlight Parade (all from 1933).

Roosevelt, born in 1882, grew up on his family’s Hyde Park estate along the Hudson River about 90 miles north of New York City. He possessed an aristocratic background. His family’s neighbors were people like the Vanderbilts and Astors -- though the Roosevelts, who traced their American ancestry to before the American Revolution, did not occupy the highest realm of wealth. They were more than comfortable however, with Roosevelt’s father leaving an estate of $300,000 (over $8 million in today’s money) while Cornelius Vanderbilt left more than $72 million. Franklin’s mother Sara wished for him to live in patrician comfort on the family estate, but this lack of activity did not interest her son. Young Franklin travelled to Europe several times, and attended upper-class schools Groton and Harvard. Biographer Frank Friedel noted that Rector Endicott Peabody at Groton served as a key early influence in Roosevelt’s life, “leading him toward Christian service to the nation and those less fortunate than himself,” in the style of the Social Gospel movement which reached its zenith during the 1890s. Like his fifth cousin President Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin believed in noblesse oblige, the notion that the well-off had a duty to give back to society in recognition of the advantages and riches they enjoyed. Historian David Kennedy noted how another experience at school may have influenced Roosevelt’s ability to see beyond his upper class background: “The one disappointment of his undergraduate years was his failure to be elected to membership in Porcellian, an upper crust [Harvard] club whose rejection stung him deeply and may have contributed something to his later animus against the American upper crust, an animus that would in time earn him a reputation in the wood-panelled clubrooms of America’s self-styled aristocracy as a ‘traitor to his class.’”

After a year at Columbia University Law School, Roosevelt passed the bar and served as a lawyer in a Wall Street firm, concentrating less on corporate and banking law and focusing more on cases where, in the words of Friedel, “he learned first hand about the problem of poverty.” Most observers, however, noted that his ambitions lay in the political realm, tracing the path of his cousin Theodore -- supposedly Franklin confided to his fellow law clerks his desire to emulate Theodore’s career. After three uneventful years in law, he did: eventually becoming Assistant Secretary of the United States Navy, involved in the New York legislature (as a State Senator), running for Vice President of the United States (and losing, unlike Theodore), and in 1928, becoming governor of New York, his eventual springboard to the presidency.

Franklin’s contracting of polio at the age of 39 also heightened his empathy for those who struggled. The disease left him incapacitated for the rest of his life, mostly residing in a wheelchair, able to walk just a few halting steps at a time, and those steps accomplished only with uncomfortable metal braces lashed to his withered legs. Roosevelt spent much of the 1920s rebuilding his body, learning how to live and thrive with his disability, and building ties with both the north and south wings of the Democratic party from his rehabilitation center in Warm Springs, Georgia, right in the middle of the Old South. Before Franklin Roosevelt’s election to the presidency in 1932, his party, the Democrats, had lost three presidential elections in a row, mostly

This pre-1932 biography of Franklin Delano Roosevelt is based on the following sources:
because of their inability to resolve the differences between its northern urban and southern rural factions. But Roosevelt was a master at bringing previously irreconcilable groups together, as seen in his ability to unite Tammany New York City voters with more conservative rural upstate New Yorkers to win the governorship in 1928, or in his eventual ability to win an unprecedented four presidential elections in a row. And he worked similar wonders in the Democratic party during his victorious 1932 presidential campaign, the roots of that victory partially forged during his convalescence.

Roosevelt successfully campaigned for the presidency during the Great Depression. It is difficult to overstate the extreme economic calamity of the period – no conditions near as dire were experienced in the United States before or since.23 When Roosevelt assumed the presidency in 1933, the national income was down 50% from four years previous. Unemployment reached 25% across the country and almost twice that in urban centers like Cleveland and Detroit. Among minorities and immigrants, the numbers were worse. And about a third of those lucky enough to have employment could only secure part-time work as the economy severely contracted. U.S. Steel, for example, had no full-time workers on its payroll as Roosevelt began his presidency, down from 225,000 in 1929. Over 5,000 banks had closed and millions of personal bank accounts were lost, wiping out at least $7 billion (over $110 billion in today’s dollars) in depositor funds between the crash and Roosevelt coming to power. Many more banks temporarily closed just before Roosevelt’s inauguration, waiting for action from the new president to shore up the banking system. As is often the case in American history, the farmers took it on the chin: farm income went from $6 billion in 1929 to just $2 billion in 1932. And there were virtually no government benefits to help those who sorely needed it. Local, state and national governments lacked the infrastructure to deal with the unprecedented amount of poverty and deficiency of opportunity and funding racking the country, especially since their tax revenues plunged along with the consequent drop in employment and consumer activity. The city of Chicago, for example, could not pay its schoolteachers during the winter before Roosevelt assumed the presidency. The anomic unleashed by the vastly reduced circumstances even reached into the personal lives of Americans, as the marriage rate fell 22% between 1929 and 1933, and 15% fewer children were born.

In historian Arthur Schlesinger’s telling of the crisis, the burden resting on FDR’s shoulders represented no less than “a matter of staving off violence, even (at least some so thought) revolution. Whether revolution was a real possibility or not, faith in a free system was plainly waning.”

Roosevelt faced a daunting job after he swore his oath of office on 4 March 1933, a job that not everyone in the country felt could be accomplished. The effects of the Great Depression made many in America wonder if such failure signalled that capitalism was untenable.24 Interest in communism and socialism spiked during this


24 Sources for this brief discussion on Communist interest in the United States during the Great Depression: Friedel, 206-207; Kennedy, 221-224; Leuchtenburg, 25-27, 111-114, 281-283, Schlesinger, Jr., 49-51, 54, 263-264.
period, especially since positive Soviet propaganda spread through the press which provided a rosier picture of life in the Soviet Union than was later found to be the case. The Communist Party gathered 102,000 votes in the 1932 election, their best showing in American history, yet statistically insignificant compared to Roosevelt’s 22 million votes, and the 15 million that his Republican Party opponent amassed. While no efforts were ever uncovered of American communists actually planning to bring down the government (although some argued it needed to be done), there existed areas of the country where beliefs of communism and socialism were paid attention to more seriously. Rural farm communities represented one of those areas, as Communists helped organise actions in several states, and another was the Hollywood film colony. In Hollywood, the numbers of those interested in communism enough to join the party were only a few hundred (out of tens of thousands working in the industry), but represented a particularly threatening prospect since the town dominated the most powerful form of the mass media during the 1930s. This circumstance inspired two decades of harsh vitriol, a “red scare,” in the Hollywood labor community beginning in 1933, just as President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal program unfolded, and Footlight Parade was being produced.

During 1932, the interests of Democratic Party presidential candidate Franklin Roosevelt and Harry and Jack Warner united, as the brothers became among the most high-profile contributors and advocates in the Roosevelt campaign. The support from the Warners was surprising; the Jewish movie moguls, including Harry and Jack, were usually reliable Republicans, the party viewed, then and now, as more friendly towards business. As journalist Ronald Brownstein reported in his history of the links between moviedom and Washington, D.C. politicians, the Hollywood studio heads, “as entrepreneurs who had scrambled up the hard way, their vague political views were anchored in an apostolic belief in hard work, bootstraps and the American dream; practically, that translated into the right of those who had scrambled so fiercely to keep what they earned without much government intrusion.” Judging from the many Warner films that reflected the suffering of the Great Depression, this general situation of the time, and President Herbert Hoover’s inability to come up with solutions for it, may have played a role in the Warners’ political switch. Jack Warner seemed to confirm this interpretation, recalling Harry telling him in 1932 that “the country is in chaos. There is revolution in the air, and we need a change.” Fortune magazine reported that Jim Farley, chairman of the Democratic National

Committee and a key force in the ascension of Franklin Roosevelt to the presidency, convinced Harry to back his man.

Another important reason for the Warners’ ticket jumping probably emanated from Harry’s unhappiness concerning “a Senate investigation of a stock sale of his during the [preceding] Hoover administration.” Though it was not yet an illegal offense, Harry and the other main three brothers in the business appear to have been engaging in what we would today term insider trading, using private company knowledge to make a profit on the stock market. Harry sold shares at $54 per share, probably knowing that they were headed for a fall, then bought them back again at less than half the price. He claimed that he and his brothers sold the shares because the company needed the capital as the failing economy kept sliding, but, as Freedland reported, “the brothers admitted making a profit of $7 million in their own share deals during 1930—not a popular thing to do while the Depression wrapped itself around America like a raccoon coat.”

The brothers were asked to help Roosevelt become better known on the West Coast and drum up support among their media mogul peers, especially William Randolph Hearst, whose nationwide network of newspapers included 20% of Sunday circulation, and almost half of California circulation. Jack embraced his new role and responsibility for the Democrats wholeheartedly, becoming the Hollywood figurehead for the party during the 1932 election much as Louis B. Mayer had done for the Republican Party starting in the 1920s. During the 1932 campaign, Mayer served as the vice-chairman of the California GOP and as chairman of the Republican State Central Committee. Mayer was a good friend of Hoover’s (as Roosevelt and Warner would never become) as well as Hearst, with Mayer providing a home at his MGM lot for Hearst’s independent Cosmopolitan Pictures company. Hearst and his papers supported Republican presidential candidates in the 1924 and 1928 elections, and the Roosevelt campaign wished to see his political affiliation change in 1932. “Jack Warner has gone in for politics on all four[s],” reported Variety six weeks before the election. “There is no train that comes in with a visiting Democrat not met by Warner and his staff.” Jack L. Warner’s reputation within the industry for not tolerating any lack of work initiative among his staff was surprisingly put on hold for two hours when he brought Boston’s fiercely Democratic mayor to Warners to let him “lace it to Hoover” before an audience of all the studio’s “stars, directors, writers and executives.” Variety reported that Jack had assumed the chairmanship of the “local motion picture division of the Democratic campaign” and had donated $50,000 to Roosevelt’s campaign in the early going.

The “Motion Picture Electrical Parade and Sports Pageant” formed the highlight of the Warners’ efforts on Roosevelt’s behalf, held at Los Angeles’ new Olympic coliseum (the city hosted the Olympics that summer) on 24 September 1932.26 While

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26 Sources for the section on the 24 September 1932 pageant: Sperling, ibid; [uncited author], “McAdoo To Join Roosevelt; Senatorial Aspirant to Fly North on Speech Tour Today and Bring Candidate Here Later,” Los Angeles Times (20 September 1932); [uncited front-page editorial], “Hearst and Roosevelt,” Los Angeles Times (24 September 1932); [uncited author], “Roosevelt’s Day Here Will Keep Him On Jump,” Los Angeles Times (24 September 1932); [uncited author], “Film Pageant On Tonight; Electrical Floats and Twenty Bands Ready for Studios’ Charity Fete at Coliseum,” Los Angeles Times (24 September 1932); [uncited author], “Brilliant Screen Floats Parade and Sports Pageant Thrill Thousands at Stadium; Notables and Charity Fete,” Los Angeles Times (25 September 1932); Doug Douglas, “Film World Pageant Goes on Air; Radio To Bring Word Pictures,” Los Angeles Times (24 September 1932).
not a formal campaign or fundraising event, it generated enormous publicity for Roosevelt’s campaign, and marshalled the resources of Hollywood, its stars and media power behind a presidential candidate in an unprecedented manner. The event featured, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, “twenty massed bands” and “a glittering procession of beautiful floats” sponsored by most of the major studios, festooned with movie stars. The Republican-leaning *Times* gave the event prominent coverage the day before and after the event, and estimated 60,000 people in attendance, though a picture of the event included in the coverage makes it seem as if that number was actually much higher, since the 100,000-seat coliseum looked packed to the rafters as Roosevelt addressed the crowd. The proceedings proved as absurd and surreal as any celebrity event of the present day: a trained horse named Redhead jumped through fire, Hollywood notables played polo on the field, and the studios’ floats paid tribute to, among others, George Washington (Fox), Cleopatra (RKO), “old Spain” (Goldwyn), the Rock of Gibraltar (Columbia), and, in Warner Bros/First National’s case, the “Goddess of Beauty” who, aided by “a moving elevator…played in a silver fountain” at the top of a “silver tower lighted with colored globes.” MGM, the studio headed by Mayer, the most famous Republican in Hollywood, did not contribute a float to the proceedings. Cars featuring luminaries such as Charles Chaplin, Claudette Colbert, Clark Gable, Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, and many others circled around the Olympic track, waving at the crowd (strangely, no Warner stars were reported present). Besides candidate Roosevelt’s brief bow and speech to the crowd, the highlight appeared to be remarks by humorist and movie star Will Rogers, whose semi-political gibes delivered with an “aw shucks” attitude appeared on the front page of the *Times* in a regular column. L.A. radio stations KHJ and KFWB (the latter owned by Warner Bros.) covered the event live.

Jack Warner claimed in his autobiography that his offering of a share of the proceeds from the pageant to Hearst paramour and movie star Marion Davies’ favourite antivivisection charity “guaranteed the backing of the Hearst newspapers.” The rest of the funds raised went to the Motion Picture Relief Fund, which supports retired and poverty-stricken film workers. But it should be noted that Jack was a notorious tale-spinner; whether or not the event inspired Hearst’s support is not known and is a boast that should be viewed with caution. But, in the days preceding the pageant, the *Times* featured stories about the growing links between Roosevelt and Hearst, and the two men met privately for 25 minutes during Roosevelt’s brief and event-packed day in Southern California. On the day Roosevelt arrived, a *Los Angeles Times* front-page editorial acutely noted that Hearst and his newspapers were vociferous opponents of Roosevelt’s bid for the Democratic presidential nomination just three months before, but now Roosevelt was appearing in Los Angeles “under the aegis of the Hearst newspapers.” No source from the period mentioned Jack Warner’s supposedly high-profile role in the Roosevelt/Hearst rapprochement. Hearst’s behaviour was not unusual in this or any other election. Foes of candidates during the presidential primary season often coalesce around their party’s eventual nomination for the office.

*Times* (24 September 1932); Kyle D. Palmer, “Campaign Issues Are Ignored By Roosevelt; Large Crowds Hear Candidate’s Appeal but Learn Little of Where He Stands,” *Los Angeles Times* (25 September 1932).

Steven Ross (pg. 71) claims that Louis B. Mayer was the “modern pioneer” of “celebrity-studded” publicity events for presidential candidates because of a MGM star-saturated evening at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles six days before the 1932 election, but the “Motion Picture Electrical Parade and Sports Pageant” was held more than a month before.
But the *Times* was probably trying to spotlight dissension and possible hypocrisy within Democratic ranks.

In any case, six weeks later, Roosevelt took California (Hoover’s home state), and the entire country, by a landslide in the general election. For the first time in 16 years, a Democratic presidential candidate took Republican-leaning Los Angeles county, a feat probably relished by Jack Warner. Variety, the most influential show business industry periodical now and then, proclaimed in a front page banner headline that the election comprised “America’s Greatest Show,” noting that it “sway[ed] the entire populace,” amid some grumbles that the “ballyhooed” occasion sent entertainment grosses downward nationwide for weeks, including an estimated $50 million loss at film box offices alone. Rumors swirled that Jack might become Roosevelt’s official government liaison to the film industry. That did not occur, but Roosevelt later invited Jack to the White House, where he stayed overnight in the famous Lincoln bed. Jack also maintained for many years, including in his autobiography, that the president offered him an ambassadorship in thanks for his service during the campaign, but he claimed that he refused it, telling Roosevelt that “I think I can do better for your foreign relations with a good picture about America every now and then.” Such boasts were apparently hyperbole. Jack Warner Jr. (as well as others) stated that no diplomatic post was broached: “I heard [Jack Sr.] say he wished it was true, but his old presidential pal never came across.”

The brothers also arranged for a “special gold-leaved Pullman” train of Warner stars, including James Cagney (the future star of *Footlight Parade*), Bette Davis and Ginger Rogers, to barnstorm across the country on the way to attending the presidential inauguration in Washington in March 1933. Jack Warner told the press that “the contingent…includes all Warner stars except those actually engaged in productions at the time of the departure.” This public relations stunt provided positive publicity opportunities for the studio as well as the new administration, one of the first of many future political and economic links between Hollywood and the White House. The train was called “the 42nd Street Special,” named after *42nd Street*, a film that premiered four days after the inauguration, the first of what would later be known as the Warner Bros. Great Depression Musicals. In her autobiography, Davis claimed that the actors aboard worried about parading such luxury across an economically devastated country, and said that she felt they should have been promoting a

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27 [uncited author], “America’s Greatest Show: Elections Sway Entire Populace,” *Variety* (1 November 1932 [top front page article]); [uncited author], “Presidential Air Ballyhoos Kept $50,000,000 Worth of Customers Home,” *Variety* (15 November 1932).

hypothesised musical called *Let ‘Em Eat Cake* instead of *42nd Street*. “Not only did we blind the poor with our glitter, we even had one whole car fitted with sand, water and suntan lamps that transformed the Pullman into a mobile Malibu beach,” she recalled. “The whole affair was fabulous—traveling in such luxury during a depression. We were afraid we might incite a revolution; but unlike the eighteenth-century Frenchmen, American love their royalty and we were welcomed everywhere with open arms, although a few did stick their tongues out at us.”

MGM also commissioned a train for the inaugural. Their Traveling Studio train car made the Roosevelt inaugural the first stop in what purported to be a four-year tour, screen-testing potential local movie stars and promoting MGM films at various whistle stops around the country. The ads and publicity surrounding MGM’s train seemed less connected to the Roosevelt administration than that conceived for the Warner train, although an MGM ad in *Motion Picture Herald* on inauguration day featured a painting of the new president alongside a short note to him about how “proud” they were to have a “place in the Inaugural Parade,” adding that their train “will carry from Washington the good-will message of the screen to the nation,” a much more vague statement than seen in the Warner ads concerning the import of the day. Contemporary publicity for the MGM train did not name the “stars” that rode on their train for the inauguration or afterwards; it seems that their biggest names were absent from the enterprise, perhaps not a surprising circumstance from the studio headed by Hollywood’s most famous Republican. In the same issue of the *Herald*, Warner Bros. also reminded the film community of their participation in the day’s events. One ad proclaimed “Saturday[,] America gets that New Deal!”, but most of the ad was devoted to promoting *42nd Street* and the inaugural train that bore its name. Another ad in the same issue, spanning two pages, bragged in huge letters about “the inaugural parade of hits” that the studio would supply to theatres during 1933.

General Electric co-sponsored the Warner train, paid most of the $60,000 expense for the trip, and provided lighting on the outside of the cars so fans along the way could see the stars even during night appearances along the route. Production chief Darryl Zanuck and Jack Warner made speeches sending off the train in Los Angeles. At 17 stops across the country, elected officials or their representatives praised Roosevelt, and twelve “chorus girls” from the *42nd Street* cast performed dance routines from the film.29 The Warner train also promoted other movies and stars as seen in a 18 March ad in the *Motion Picture Herald* picturing a beaming Bette Davis sitting amidst a pile of inauguration clippings: “The ‘42nd Street Special’ Made Her Famous – [her new film] Will Make Her A Sensation!” Warner Bros. made a short film documenting and promoting the train’s exploits, which was shown before features during 1933. As an announcer bellowed during the film, “Hollywood is on its way to Washington!”

29 Contracts for the “chorus girls” riding on the “42nd Street Special” indicate that the Warner brass were concerned about the behavior of the women on the train, perhaps worried that any potential trouble could reflect badly upon the Roosevelt administration during the inauguration, so they installed a strict morals clause into their contracts, insisting the chorus girls could not do anything that will cause “public hatred, contempt, scorn or ridicule…insult or offend public decency.” They faced immediate termination for “any infringement thereof.” Also, perhaps because lodging and food was paid for by the studio, the chorus girls were paid only $25 per week on the train, whereas their wage during filming was $66: “Dancers 42nd Street Contracts For Chorus,” and “From 42nd Street Contracts For Chorus,” (both 2803 special), *42nd Street* file, Warner Bros. Archives, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.
Warner Bros. also sponsored a float in the inaugural parade called “Better Times,” and made sure that it carried no company designation because, as Harry Warner maintained, “commercializing the inauguration would not be dignified.” This seemed at least in part a dig at rival MGM’s train in the parade, which apparently featured a visible MGM logo. Harry and Albert Warner, along with several Warner executives, attended the various inaugural balls that evening. Never before had the motion picture industry been so intimately and prominently involved with a presidential inauguration.

Warner Bros. led the way in associating itself and its products with Roosevelt and the New Deal, his legislative program that sought to solve the crisis of the Great Depression. A week prior to the inauguration and the premiere of 42nd Street, a two-page ad in Motion Picture Herald explicitly linked the two events in bold all-caps lettering: “The inauguration of our new president, the inauguration of a new deal in entertainment,” the ad proclaimed, adorned with pictures of the U.S. Capitol and lounging chorus girls. In the month after the inauguration, various Warner full-page or two-page ads adopted government and/or Rooseveltian imagery. In two different ads they boasted of their “10-week reconstruction program” featuring their “inaugural parade of hits” that they predicted would lift box office figures, while another ad extolling “the Warner spirit” included a row of white stars resembling those on the American flag. Besides the many references to Roosevelt and the New Deal in the 1933 Great Depression Musicals, Heroes For Sale featured a scene among struggling hobos where one fears “the end of America” because of the widespread misery, while the other reassures him by confiding: “Maybe [it’s] the end of us, but it’s not the end of America...you read President Roosevelt’s inaugural address? He’s right, you know it takes more than one sock on the jaw to lick 120 million people.” Other studios during the period also partook of the optimism surrounding the first weeks of Roosevelt’s presidency, with Columbia Pictures in one ad proclaiming “Happy Days Are Here Again!” (Roosevelt’s campaign song), and predicting that the administration’s opening of banks, legalization of alcohol and providing of unemployment relief would help drive up its theatre receipts. As previously mentioned, MGM featured the president’s portrait and some vague statements of good wishes in one ad. However, throughout the first ten months of 1933, more than any other studio, Warner Bros. identified publicly, repeatedly and loudly, in their films and in motion picture industry periodicals with the incoming administration – as future research will demonstrate, the content, tone and political substance of the relationship would alter drastically in late 1933 and for years afterward.