

printed in NY newspapers and stories often are forthcoming. This in addition to our members consisting of film specialists, programming directors for civic organizations, TV programs, etc.

Of course, there should be no prior showing in the NY area either nontheatrically, theatrically or on TV. Since the programming deadline for our spring programs is only a few days off, I shall need your confirmation by return mail.

I also need a description—however brief—of the film that we can use as raw material for the printed brochure announcing the programs. This, too, I need by return mail. This can be 20 words or 200 words, just as long as it takes to cover the subject and intent of the film. Also include full credits, stills (if any).

Please continue sending us your films; we will always be interested in seeing them.

Sincerely,

Amos Vogel



### Transcript of Tape Recording Made by King Vidor and Played at Cinema 16 on 2/1/55 at Screening of *Hallelujah*

This is King Vidor speaking, and I send greetings to the audience at Cinema 16.

I had hoped to be with you tonight as I felt it would be an inspiration to be in close contact with those I knew to be interested in the possibilities of the motion picture as an art form; as a medium of education; of documentation or just one of pure experimentation. I regret that my assuming of the directorial chores of the Italian-American version of the three currently projected film versions of Tolstoy's *WAR AND PEACE* has made this impossible. It seems strange that after all these years *WAR AND PEACE* should suddenly evolve into a contest as to which of three similar films reaches the motion picture theatres first, but that is one of the enigmas of the business which had better be left unanswered here. It reminds me of the time Samuel Goldwyn gave me a story about U-Boats which he hoped to make into a film. While I was reading the book over the week-end, I ran into three other producers who were contemplating pictures about U-Boats. On Monday morning I told Mr. Goldwyn about the parallel stories that were being put into work. He surprised me when he said, "If three other fellows want to make the same story, that proves I am right."

I suppose it is that way with *WAR AND PEACE*, but it was certainly not like that with *HALLELUJAH*. There never had been an all-negro film made before, and no producer was receptive to the idea when I proposed it to them. It took the cataclysmic advent of sound to start the ball rolling, or rather to start me rolling with sufficient impetus to convince an executive to let me go ahead with the project. In the years preceding 1929, I had repeatedly presented the outline of the film to the studio executives. It had always met with a definite refusal. When synchronous sound recording dramatically invaded the industry in 1928, I was in Paris, but I took the first boat home and sought out a top executive of Loew's in New York. My



**Illustration 54.** *Hallelujah* (1929) by King Vidor. Courtesy Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive.

idea was still greeted with a flood of objections, but when I told them I would risk my contracted salary with their production funds the executive replied, "If that's the way you feel about it, I'll let you make a picture about whores if you want to." (Pause)

We had no portable sound equipment in those early months, and the cameras were confined to huge sound proofed booths that were completely immobile. Through the use of four wheel perambulators and counterweighted booms the American camera had only recently arrived at a state of flexibility. This sound problem was a regressive blow to this freedom of movement. The camera was being frozen because the whir and grind must not be audible to microphones. Big, icebox-like insulated booths were improvised to contain the camera and two or three operators. The lens looked through a plate glass window at the action. Cinematography had retrogressed to the nailed-down tripod of the early days. Whenever a scene could be shot silent and an open camera used, we emerged from the stuffy booths with delight. It was a period of quiet despair to those of us brought up to love the lucidity of silence. As time went on, technicians rose to the occasion and devised soundproof cases that enclosed only the camera itself.

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When we started production on HALLELUJAH in Memphis in 1929 we didn't know whether it was to be a silent film or a sound film or half of each. We had no recording equipment with us during the weeks we worked on location in and around Memphis. The dialogue, if it can be called by that name, was mostly made up on the set as subtitles had been. We thought then in terms of subtitles and not in dialogue. This perhaps explains why this film is not overburdened with talk.

We tried to operate the camera at even speeds so that later sound synchronization would fit the action, and this too was a complete innovation. I won't recite here the difficulties that were encountered when this wedding between sound track and action was later accomplished. Accomplished without benefit of moviola—and fixed camera speeds, and all the appurtenances employed in present day editing of sound track and action film.

My first interests in movie direction have always been in experimenting with tempo, rhythm and music expressed in movement and dynamic composition, subject, of course, to the confines permitted by the rectangle of the flat screen. The relentless pursuit through the swamp, as I remember, seemed to accomplish some of these objectives. The scenes were staged with the use of a metronome amplified by the beat of a base drum to keep the movement of the actors precise and under control. Nina Mae McKinney, who played one of the leads, was discovered in the chorus of BLACKBIRDS, then running at a Broadway theatre. Daniel Haynes was an understudy for Jules Bledsoe in SHOWBOAT, then running at the Ziegfeld.

At the time the picture was released, we ran into a mass of resistance from the large theatre chains. In Chicago, when we could not secure a booking in a first run theatre, I was asked to go there and show the film to the local critics, who in their enthusiasm, might write reviews which would aid in getting the picture into one of the large theatres. This method uncovered a willing exhibitor who operated a small theatre on a side street, and after HALLELUJAH played for some weeks at this small theatre to capacity houses, the picture was then booked into one of the large Chicago first-run theatres. As far as I know, this is the first time that a first-run theatre has booked a film after it had played at a small second-run house.

I had hoped in appearing before you that a series of questions and answers could be developed which would bring out details in the making of this film which might prove interesting. Alas—WAR AND PEACE has come between us and it appears that we must wait until Napoleon has retreated from Moscow before this meeting can be realized. Thank you.

*[Vidor seems unaware of the history of "race films"—films made exclusively or primarily for African-American audiences, sometimes by African-American producers/directors (Oscar Micheaux, for example) and production companies. Vogel is unsure when he himself became aware of this history.]*



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