

Cinesound: from roller rink to sound stage



Cinesound crew in the 1930s at Ebley Street, Bondi Junction

In 1925 Australasian Films/Union Theatres bought the Centennial Roller Skating Rink site at 65 Ebley Street, Bondi Junction, converted it into a film studio and began making silent films. As they still needed the rent from the skating rink to subsidise their filmmaking business, the studio used the site during the day and the skaters used it at night.

All over the film world the 1930s was the era of the studio, and this was reflected locally in Waverley. By 1931 the film studio had become Cinesound Productions, which went on to become a pioneer Australian film company.

They set out to produce low-budget popular films which would be distributed through Union Theatres. The studio was soon in full-time continuous production of films and night-time rolling skating was no more.

Cinesound's producer-director, Ken G. Hall, was a consummate showman. Cinesound films were extensively promoted, with extravagant marketing campaigns becoming a hallmark of the studio. As well as the usual posters, media conferences and souvenirs publicising each new release, the stars of the films were taken on Australia-wide tours to meet their fans.

Hall wanted to create the perception that his actors and actresses were Australia's 'little Hollywood' and he actively created a star system based on that developed by the large U.S. studios. Cinesound's name became synonymous with cinema itself, and their actors and actresses often became major Australian film stars. This contributed greatly to their box office success.

In 1934 the studio employed 144 people permanently and 450 casuals and now operated three film studios – Bondi Junction, Rushcutters Bay and St. Kilda. The Bondi Junction site was known as Studio no. 1.

Hall believed in adopting Hollywood studio innovations, which he had observed first-hand on a 1935 study tour. Cinesound appears to have been the first Australian film studio to use clapper boards and the film technique of back projection.

Newsreels: documenting Australian life

For most Australians, until the advent of television in 1956, newsreels were the only images they saw of their country on the big screen. Before this time news was read in the papers, heard on the radio, or watched on a newsreel in a movie theatre.

Providing the only audiovisual depiction of major events such as elections, wars, local triumphs and natural disasters, they had a significant influence on Australian society. A newsreel is a documentary film containing filmed news stories. Originally created in France in 1908 newsreels became popular throughout the world and were an essential part of cinema programs in Australia.

In the 1930s Cinesound newsreels came out twice weekly, styling themselves as 'the voice of Australia'. Cinesound's producer-director Ken G. Hall boasted that Cinesound "never used a foreign story except during WW11, and all those war stories involved Australian servicemen and were made by Australian cameramen."

Cinesound Productions made feature films until the early 1940s, after which the fortunes of Cinesound started to decline. The company then concentrated on its newsreels, which had been originally created to exhibit alongside their feature films.

Despite the company's decline, when the Ebley Street building was abruptly sold in 1951 Hall and his staff were shocked. This was compounded by the arrival of television in Australia in 1956 with its news and current affairs programs - the golden age of the newsreel was over. Despite this newsreels continued, albeit in a greatly reduced capacity, until 1975 when the last newsreel screened.

The Ebley Street site was bought by a company with a franchise to produce American soft drinks and it was used as a factory until the mid-1950s. The building again became a studio from 1956-1973, this time for different film and television production companies including Ajax Films. After that it became a furniture retailer and is now home to Spotlight, a fabric and home interior store.

The earliest Australian newsreels have not survived, but the National Film and Sound Archive hold all Cinesound's existing newsreels as the Cinesound Movietone Australian Newsreel Collection. It consists of 4,000 newsreels from 1929-1975, spanning almost half a century of Australian life.

This collection is considered so significant that it is now on the UNESCO Memory of the World Register. Launched in 2003, the Memory of the World Programme identifies archive and library collections of national and international significance.

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