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**DO YOU REALLY EXPECT PEOPLE
TO LEAVE THEIR STEREO LIVING ROOMS,
GET IN THEIR STEREO CARS
AND DRIVE TO A **MONO** THEATRE?**

BY

JOHN F. ALLEN

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FIRST IN DIGITAL STEREO

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Let's face it, many theatres are way behind the times. They offer a sparse, obsolete, low tech image in comparison to the sleek home electronic marvels with which modern Americans have surrounded themselves. If you take away the attraction of a particular film, what does a theatre have to offer? Well, a theatre can offer luxury and excitement. Yet sometimes theatres fail to fulfill even these requirements? Popcorn too is special. But this is not enough. Theatres must be a transport to another reality as defined by the motion picture. They must offer a genuine sight and sound experience of unprecedented quality. (Sound familiar?)

While some in exhibition have been doing things in the same old way, the window between theatrical and video release has closed to only six months. The trend for viewing motion pictures is currently moving away from theatres in favor of cable television and home video. In July, National Video, the nation's largest video store franchiser, released a Fairchild Group study that they commissioned. The study projected that sales and rentals of prerecorded video cassettes would reach \$3.3 billion in 1985, up 39 per cent from 1984. They projected a further increase of 28 per cent in 1986 to about \$4.2 billion. If these forecasts hold, boxoffice totals will come in second to home viewing in 1986.

What these figures seem to show is an increased demand for motion picture entertainment. But as home viewing rapidly overtakes box-office grosses, I think the figures also indicate the failure of the theatre industry to maximize its own considerable potential. A theatres monophonic low tech image can actually encourage people to seek alternatives. Electronics companies have recognized this and begun marketing stereo home theatre systems.

If you are a theatre owner with modern, attractive and comfortable theatres, if all your screens are large with pictures bright and sharp, if all your sound systems are full fidelity

stereo with all out dynamic range and you are aggressively marketing these features to your public, then you're in fine shape. You should be writing this article, except that you are probably too busy selling tickets.

Unfortunately, too many theatres remain relics of a bygone era. This is not to say that the newer theatres aren't handsome and pleasant. I simply believe that a pretty new building is not enough in the face of home video, digital stereo and other entertainments. Theatres must be more competitive. How competitive are they?

Sound is at least half of the show, in some cases three fourths, And yet, incredibly, only about 25 per cent of US movie screens are equipped for stereo. In 1985, the year broadcast stereo TV was born, the year when home video sales and rentals closed in and nearly topped boxoffice receipts, the year when consumer electronics sales ran \$30 billion, the year when boxoffice grosses declined, in 1985 about 75 per cent of our motion picture theatres are still playing glorious 1950 grade MONO! Can there be any doubt that this factor is hurting business? If your sound systems fail to thrill an audience, then the theatre will fail to maximize its marketing potential.

Only full stereo will do. For motion pictures, a stereo equipped theatre is one with at least four separate channels of sound, left, center, right and surround. Two channel systems using only left and right stage speakers while also stereo, are not in the class of a professional theatre sound system. Synthesized stereo systems and the monophonic systems with surround speakers are NOT stereo.

While it is true that a first rate stereo synthesizer can indeed transform a mono soundtrack into a rather spectacular presentation (see *Boxoffice*, September, 1981, page 34), I am puzzled that there is any interest at all in the systems using only a mono stage speaker with surrounds. These systems do not deliver the width and depth of stereo. They are, after all, mono systems. What possible place do they have in a stereo world?

While some point out that adding surround speakers to mono systems is at least "better than mono", I think that the question which really ought to be asked is whether theatres with less than four (or six) full channels of stereo, are marketable anymore. I think not. Others often say that stereo doesn't work in long narrow theatres. Actually, it does work if the speakers have the proper radiating patterns.

Last year, I successfully installed just such a system. The theatre is 45 feet wide and 115 feet long. The stage speakers are no more than 30 feet apart. There is absolutely no problem recognizing a stereo image while sitting in the last row. A narrow image for sure,

but stereo none the less. The theatre, which had gone out of business, is now doing well with its stereo system and new owners.

In short, for all practical purposes, there is no reason why all theatres cannot be stereo theatres. Full stereo sound is one of the basic building blocks of a successful modern theatre. After all, how many people do you know who do not own a home stereo system? How many patrons are parking cars with \$1,000.00 stereo systems in your parking lots? The answer to that question may be “not enough of them.” Those customers are probably watching the film at home.

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