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**QUALITY THEATRE SOUND:
THE INDISPENSABLE KEY
TO A HEALTHY FUTURE**

BY

JOHN F. ALLEN

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FIRST IN DIGITAL STEREO

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QUALITY THEATRE SOUND: THE INDISPENSABLE KEY TO A HEALTHY FUTURE

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Where do you want people to be watching their movies five years from now? In the 1950's, when the film industry was faced with growing competition from television, it responded. New technologies such as 35 MM Cinemascope, 70 MM Todd-AO and Cinerama, each including discrete multi-channel stereophonic sound, were developed. These innovations dramatically enhanced the motion picture experience. The presentations were outstanding and in some ways even superior to the presentations of today.

In recent years, the growth of home entertainment equipment has been substantial. The Electronics Industries Association reports that consumers will spend some \$30 billion for home entertainment equipment in 1985, roughly eight times what they will spend at the nation's movie theatres. Even more telling is the growth in sales and rentals of prerecorded video cassettes - \$3.3 billion in 1985, according to a study commissioned by National Video, Inc. This represents a 39 percent increase over 1984, and equals about 75 percent of current boxoffice grosses. At this rate video sales and rentals will TOP the boxoffice in 1985.

A NEW HOME VIDEO FORMAT:

Home entertainment systems have become very sophisticated as we all know. But a real technological threat to theatrical exhibition results from the combination of digital stereo and home video. Simply put the sound quality available is much better than that found in most theatres.

This year a new 8 MM video cassette format complete with both Hi-Fi and digital stereo has been introduced. These cassettes are a bit larger than the familiar audio cassettes and are viewed with a player about the size of a hard cover book. Such advances can only give people fewer reasons to attend theatres.

Of course the continuing expansion of home viewing for motion pictures is more complex than just a question of sound. Indeed the issues of cost per view, convenience and the

comfort of a living room seem to be just as important. While theatre owners have responded by building theatres with larger screens and, in some cases, stereophonic sound, have they done enough? Is the theatre going experience of today good enough to attract increasingly sophisticated audiences? As the time shrinks to less than six months between theatrical and home video releases, exhibitors must redouble their efforts to compete for the entertainment dollar.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOUND:

My specialty is sound. While I agree that seating comfort and picture clarity are equally as important, for the purposes of this article allow me to focus on the sound element for modern theatres. The situation is not entirely bleak, but it's fair to say that many theatre sound systems need all but total replacement. Others fall far short of state of the art. In my opinion, the theatre industry has not done nearly enough to equip theatres with readily available components for high quality stereophonic sound or market this advantage as effectively as possible.

Newspaper advertising and marquee often fail to mention stereo presentations. Beyond that there are not enough stereo equipped theatres. Not long ago I witnessed the opening of a very attractive seven screen complex. All seven houses were showing stereo films but only two screens were stereo equipped. The other five were mono. Do these practices constitute good marketing? How do they motivate people to leave their digital stereo equipped homes and drive to a theatre in their stereo equipped cars? All too often, exhibitors are just plain missing the boat on theatre sound. The public wants an experience. They are paying big dollars for quality sound everywhere and theatre owners should be going all out to provide it. Some are.

THE DAWN OF THE DIGITAL AGE:

This year Walt Disney's 1940 classic film FANTASIA made history once again when it became the first motion picture ever presented in full digital stereo. To their credit, these presentations were brought about at the behest of two forward thinking exhibitors who wished to improve their business. The stunning success of the Los Angeles premier was followed by a second digital opening in Washington D. C. In each case, the fact of digital sound sold more tickets. The public recognized that these were quality presentations. In Los Angeles, the Plitt Century Plaza Theatre grossed \$36,000.00 during the opening weekend. This was more than double the next highest grossing theatre and about seven times the average of all the theatres playing the film. At Circle's Avalon Theatre in Washington D. C. the exclusive digital presentation of FANTASIA came in third behind the multi screen openings of RAMBO II and A VIEW TO A KILL. Grosses were still climbing when the engagement had to be completed due to another booking.

In both cases the theatre owners mounted a marketing campaign to promote the sound quality of their theatres. Film critics and reporters were invited to special screenings to show off the new HPS-4000™ sound systems which had been installed. All the reviews were exceptionally positive. None were negative. And of course, the public response was superb.

THEATRE OWNERS MUST EMPHASIZE MARKETING:

The lessons seem clear enough. Being serious about sound is darn good for business. More than just a place to “see” a movie, theatres must be created as a fun place visit. The theatre experience can still have a lure and an excitement if the necessary elements are put into place. Such quality theatres can and should be marketed on their own merits regardless of the film product. It seems fitting to remember the Theatre Equipment Association survey of 1982, which found that after choosing a film, sound quality was the MOST IMPORTANT thing people considered when selecting a theatre to attend. An equally interesting finding was the large percentage who would drive past a monophonic theatre to attend a stereo presentation. Sadly, this survey seems to have received less attention than it deserved.

Obviously if you want the public to be thinking of your theatre, you should be thinking about crystal clear high quality stereophonic sound. Even more basic is the question which began this article: Where do you want your customers to be watching movies five years from now? Or, in other words, whose customers will they be five years from now?

Over the past five years we have seen a true revolution in the audio industry; the changeover from the venerable analog recording systems to digital recording systems. The reason is simple, superior quality. To exploit this technology effectively exhibitors will need to educate themselves and do a far better job with sound installations than they have generally done with stereo.

The motion picture production industry is now slowly beginning the massive conversion to digital. Fortunately, kits will soon be available to convert some sprocketed analog recorders to digital, saving millions of dollars for the studios that might otherwise face having to purchase all new digital recorders. This development will surely accelerate the use of digital recording in the production of films.

DIGITAL SOUND IS WELL UNDER WAY IN HOME ENTERTAINMENT:

The digital revolution has already caused fundamental changes in the way consumers purchase stereo systems. Sales are stronger than ever for the more powerful loudspeakers

and amplifiers needed for reproducing the wide dynamic range digital affords.

Motion picture theatres will be the last to convert to digital. This is because storing the digital information on the release prints is taking time to accomplish. But once this work is completed in the next year or so, theatre owners will have a new, absolutely magnificent entertainment and marketing tool. The unprecedented sound quality, that few people have ever heard, will surely bring new life to the theatre world if properly implemented. While it is certainly possible to achieve the kind of sound quality I'm speaking about in a home stereo system, it costs almost as much as some theatre systems. For example, my own home system is worth over \$10,000.00 and doesn't even include surround speakers.

Even so, we are beginning to see "Home Theatre Systems" advertised. And indeed it is true that these systems do out perform many of today's theatres.

PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE:

How does the exhibitor prepare for the future? Basically by doing what should have been done all along: Install high quality, full fidelity, no compromise sound systems. Theatre owners and technicians seem to almost automatically build compromises in their systems, sometimes knowingly, sometimes not. Whether in the area of processors, amplifiers or loudspeakers, compromising cost cutting will have to stop.

The problem with a statement like that is that it scares people into thinking no compromise sound means no end to its cost. This however is NOT the case. Full fidelity digital ready sound systems can, of course, vastly improve all current presentations. In most situations they can be installed for the cost of present theatre sound systems. It's a matter of allocating the money differently and spending more on the speaker systems and, in some cases, different amplifiers.

As far as the actual digital equipment is concerned, the electronics are less expensive. For instance, today's analog noise reduction costs between \$600.00 and \$1,000.00 per channel. Recently, 16 bit digital-to-analog converters became available for about \$300.00 per channel. No matter when digital films are widely played in theatres, more and more productions will be mastered digitally. This is due to the fact that there are virtually no rerecording losses and distortion buildup during the soundtrack production process. Digital mastering is already improving the sound in current analog releases for this very reason. Beyond that, if films are to be played digitally in the growing home market, it makes sense to make them that way.

Exhibitor education is necessary because too many are not acquainted with this kind of

full fidelity sound. This is not to criticize, there have been only a few opportunities to hear it. This lack of experience will likely impact on getting the job done well.

And yes I am still amazed to hear some say that the public doesn't hear the difference. It is really these exhibitors who can't or don't want to hear the difference. The public not only hears the difference but wants it. The enormous sales of home high fidelity equipment over the years proves this.

I believe those who say that theatre owners are at a critical point, are correct. While home viewing and other entertainment alternatives will continue to increase, theatres must become the place above all others to genuinely experience motion pictures. Whether digital or not, distortion free, full fidelity stereo systems with full frequency and dynamic range are an **INDISPENSABLE** part of the presentation and theatre going experience revolution which, in my opinion, must occur if this industry is to be as healthy and vigorous five years from now as we would all like it to be.

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