Film and Television Stardom
Film and Television Stardom

Edited by

Kylo-Patrick R. Hart

Cambridge Scholars Publishing
For Apollo Hart

The brightest star who ever walked with me
through the streets of Hollywood
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Having taught several courses and conducted research pertaining to film and television stardom over the past decade, I have consistently been amazed with how comparatively compact the academic stardom literature is in relation to that of other areas and film and television studies scholarship. In my experience, four academic books stand out as the most essential stardom texts in historical and theoretical terms (and several of them, unfortunately, are currently out of print): (1) *Stars* by Richard Dyer (originally published in 1979); (2) *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* by Richard Dyer (originally published in 1986); (3) *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, edited by Christine Gledhill (originally published in 1991); and (4) *Star Texts: Image and Performance in Film and Television*, edited by Jeremy Butler (originally published in 1991). With regard to reality television specifically, a fifth book arguably must be added to this list: *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, edited by Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (originally published in 2004). Additional noteworthy contenders include Jackie Stacey’s *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (originally published in 1994), Steven Cohan’s *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties* (originally published in 1997), and Paul McDonald’s *The Star System: Hollywood’s Production of Popular Identities* (originally published in 2000), among others.

The two influential books by Richard Dyer are essential scholarship with regard to the study of film stardom, and Dyer’s earlier theorizing is both incorporated and significantly expanded upon in the film-related chapters contained in this anthology. Similarly, Gledhill’s text is devoted entirely to film stardom, as are eighty-five percent of the contents of the Butler text (despite its title, Butler’s anthology contains only three essays that address television stardom, and they are all focused on the early development of television as a new medium). As such, there has been a substantial need in recent years for a comprehensive anthology that not only expands the intellectual space that has been devoted to exploring the historical and theoretical aspects of film stardom, but also one that

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**INTRODUCTION**

**KYLO-PATRICK R. HART**
explores the differential cultural realities of television stardom (beyond those pertaining primarily to reality television) in relation to film stardom.

This anthology is intended to meet that need. In addition to providing numerous new insights and approaches to exploring the phenomenon of film stardom (past and present), several of its chapters effectively challenge John Ellis’ early notion that stars are an exclusively cinematic phenomenon. As such, their contents significantly expand the comparatively nascent body of academic writing that has been devoted to exploring the historical and theoretical aspects of television stardom by focusing on traditional television programming genres in addition to the more recent phenomenon of reality-television programming.

From start to finish, therefore, this anthology features a variety of noteworthy critical essays that explore film and television stars as a collectively complex, intriguing social phenomenon from the early twentieth century to the present day. The book is divided into three sections: Film Stardom, Television Stardom, and Dynamics of Celebrity and Stardom. The range of topics explored throughout those sections include (but are certainly not limited to) the emergence and historical development of the star system, silent-film stardom, stardom and media spectatorship, stardom and consumption, stardom and the paparazzi, reality-television “stars,” stars in the news, and studies of individual stars.

**Part I: Film Stardom**

The essays in Part I historically and theoretically investigate the phenomenon of film stardom from the silent era onward in relation to a wide range of particularly noteworthy stars (including Ingrid Bergman, Bette Davis, Jodie Foster, Jerry Lewis, Carmen Miranda, Anita Page, and James Stewart), filmmakers-as-stars (including Ingmar Bergman, Stan Brakhage, and Maya Deren), and films (including *The Accused, Artists and Models, The Broadway Melody, Cinderfella, Dark Victory, The Man from Laramie, Navy Blue and Gold, Persona, Voyage in Italy, and Wild Strawberries*).

In Chapter One, Robert Davis explores the career of Anita Page, which serves as a unique case study in motion-picture stardom because it provides an outstanding example of the challenges and complexities for the industry and its players that resulted from the technological transition from silent cinema to talking pictures.

In Chapter Two, I demonstrate how Warner Bros., in response to audience feedback throughout the 1930s, utilized the 1939 star vehicle *Dark Victory* to intentionally transform Bette Davis’ star persona from
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platinum blonde coquette into the fiery, independent, undomesticated woman that audience members embraced over the next few decades.

In Chapter Three, Dana Turner demonstrates how the U.S. government’s establishment during the World War II era of the Good Neighbor Policy, which was intended to improve the nation’s political and economic relationships with Latin-American countries, had a devastating impact on the careers of several well-known Latin-American performers in Hollywood (including Lupe Vélez and Dolores del Rio) while simultaneously catapulting Latin-American actress Carmen Miranda to new heights of stardom.

In Chapter Four, Tim Palmer illustrates the process by which film star James Stewart underwent a critical process of rupture and reinvention of his star persona in the postwar era, substantially revising the types of characters he played and the terms of his stardom as a result.

In Chapter Five, David Smit explores the aftermath of actress Ingrid Bergman’s 1949 decision to travel to Rome—leaving behind her husband and daughter in the United States—in order to engage in a romantic relationship with director Roberto Rossellini, including the resulting efforts to distance the star from her “scandalous” past when she finally returned to the States eight years later to receive a prestigious acting award.

In Chapter Six, Ethan de Seife examines the substantial retooling of comedian Jerry Lewis’ star persona in the films of Frank Tashlin during the period in which he became a solo performer, after his professional partnership with Dean Martin came to an end.

In Chapter Seven, Liza Palmer investigates the phenomenon of stardom within the avant-garde by analyzing the various strategies that Stan Brakhage and Maya Deren, two of the most successful avant-garde filmmakers to date, utilized effectively to promote both their cinematic creations as well as themselves.

In Chapter Eight, by focusing on the life history and key films of famed Swedish director Ingmar Bergman, I demonstrate how an auteurist analytical approach can be utilized to read the various films of an accomplished auteur director as autobiographical acts that foster a vision of the auteur filmmaker as star.

In Chapter Nine, Gabriel Wettach delves into the relationship between actress Jodie Foster and her trademark Armani fashions with the goal of more fully understanding and articulating Foster’s status as a Hollywood fashion icon who has nevertheless been successfully able to retain a high degree of sexual ambiguity in a celebrity culture that prefers conveniently fixed star images and personae.


**Part II: Television Stardom**

The essays in Part II explore the historical and theoretical similarities and differences between film stardom and television stardom from the 1950s onward in relation to noteworthy television performers and personalities (including Roseanne Barr, Tim Beggy, Gertrude Berg, Sonny Bono, Cher, Sacha Baron Cohen, Abbie Hoffman, Omarosa Manigault-Stallworth, and Jessica Simpson) and television programs (including *The Apprentice, Da Ali G Show*, *The Goldbergs*, *Newlyweds*, *Road Rules*, *Roseanne, The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour*, and *Survivor*).

In Chapter Ten, Caren Deming explores the phenomenon of television stardom in relation to *The Goldbergs*’ star Gertrude Berg and a popular program that advanced the consumerist mission of television using a nostalgic mode of representation.

In Chapter Eleven, Craig Peariso investigates, with primary emphasis on Abbie Hoffman, the most effective approaches utilized by male “movement celebrities” of the late 1960s and early 1970s in order to obtain adequate television airtime for their causes by enacting various forms of “acceptably unacceptable masculinity” that were both appealing and simultaneously threatening to mainstream viewers.

In Chapter Twelve, Melissa Williams outlines the central factors contributing to Roseanne Barr’s rapid rise to stardom amid the changing political economy of U.S. television in the late 1980s, with particular attention devoted to the impact of Barr’s own politics and personal agenda.

In Chapter Thirteen, in her investigation into star marriages, Charisse Corsbie-Massay identifies the blueprint that Sonny and Cher utilized to effectively achieve married-couple television stardom in the 1970s and further demonstrates how, three decades later, it was employed with equal success by Jessica Simpson and Nick Lachey in MTV’s *Newlyweds*.

In Chapter Fourteen, J. Martin Favor explores the strategies by which British comedian and actor Sacha Baron Cohen has, in recent years, achieved a level of stardom that has simultaneously caused quite a stir around the world with his HBO series *Da Ali G Show* and its continual incorporation of postmodern minstrelsy.

In Chapter Fifteen, Amber Watts, by citing numerous examples from recent reality-television programs including *The Apprentice, The Real World, The Surreal Life*, and *Survivor*, reveals the comparative emptiness of reality-TV stardom in relation to more traditional forms of media stardom.
In Chapter Sixteen, Hugh Curnutt picks up from where Watts leaves off by exploring the phenomenon of reality-celebrity via an in-depth ethnographic study of reality performer Tim Beggy of MTV’s Road Rules fame and the generational constraints of MTV’s reality-celebrity that have become evident over the past decade and a half.

**Part III: Dynamics of Celebrity and Stardom**

The essays in Part III historically and theoretically elucidate additional noteworthy dynamics of celebrity and stardom from the days prior to the advent of film and television to the early twenty-first century.

In Chapter Seventeen, with her pre-film and television case study, Denise Tischler Millstein provides an important historical context for contemporary notions of celebrity and stardom by demonstrating how Lord Byron was among the first Western celebrities forced to deal with the challenge of maintaining a solid sense of self while being continuously inundated with notions from others about the kind of person that he was (or should be), how he should live his life, and even the kinds of things he must (continue to) write.

In Chapter Eighteen, Simon Dixon explores the complex dynamics of Hollywood stardom by contrasting the body of the extra with the figure of the star using carefully developed examples from a variety of well-known films, including *Annie Hall*, *Casablanca*, *Citizen Kane*, *Gosford Park*, *The Great Train Robbery*, *Mildred Pierce*, *Shane*, and *Singin’ in the Rain*.

In Chapter Nineteen, Aaron Barlow compares and contrasts contemporary notions of stardom with those of the past by exploring the career trajectory of Yakima Canutt, “the greatest cowboy star you’ve [likely] never heard of,” who made invaluable contributions to more than two hundred films over the course of four decades.

In Chapter Twenty, using the manifest and latent narrative strategies of the 1942 film *Now, Voyager* as the primary example, I reveal how the (Hollywood) culture industry has trained audience members to construct their individual identities through various types of star- and celebrity-inspired consumption that ultimately result in startling forms of consumer disempowerment, rather than any true sense of consumer empowerment. In doing so, I demonstrate how the lifestyles and culture predicated on such consumption practices have produced a false consciousness about the empowering potential of widespread consumption while simultaneously and continuously concealing its more devastating, ultimately disempowering effects.
Finally, in Chapter Twenty-One, Donna Rockwell and David Giles examine contemporary realities associated with living in the spotlight by presenting a comprehensive overview and in-depth analysis of intensive interview findings provided by fifteen celebrities and stars, including a movie star, a talk-show host, a late-night television personality, and a former child star.

**Works Cited**


Part I
Film Stardom
Motion-picture stardom is seldom a simple journey for any actor or actress. Rather, it is often a journey through which an individual transitions over the span of a career and lifetime. In examining an individual’s stardom, career transitions can be categorized by the progression from one career stage to the next precipitated by diverse catalysts, many of which are economic in nature. Potential reasons for career transitions include box-office returns, executive decisions, audience responses to individuals and specific roles, and the timing with which a performer undertakes certain roles. For stars in the 1920s, an additional catalyst resulted from technology and the conversion from silent to sound films.

Anita Page is a unique example in the study of motion-picture stardom. She made her first film in 1924, left the screen in 1936, returned to the screen in 1996, and made her most recent film in 2004. In 1977, journalist Robert Laurence described Page by writing, “She had the warm, glowing, expressive face needed in silent movies, and the outgoing, effervescent personality demanded in the sound era” (E1). The career of Anita Page provides a case study of stardom that can be carried out most effectively by reviewing the transitions through which her work evolved from its beginning through the present. All of the catalysts mentioned in the preceding paragraph played a role, at one point or another, in the evolution of Page’s stardom.

**Transition One: Model to Actress**

Anita Page, the daughter of the vice president of an engineering firm and the granddaughter of the El Salvadoran consul in New York, was born Anita Pomares on August 4, 1907 in Flushing, New York. As a teenager, Pomares was trying on hats with her mother in a shop on Fifth Avenue in New York City when she was spotted through the window by the
legendary John Robert Powers, a pioneer of the modeling industry and founder of the first modeling agency. Powers went into the store and asked Pomares and her mother if the girl could do some modeling work for him at his studio. Her mother was opposed; however, Powers assured Mrs. Pomares that she could accompany her daughter to the sittings. He also stated that he felt the girl would have a short modeling career as she had what Powers termed “the look for the movies.” Therefore, the first transition in the evolution of Pomares’ stardom was the beginning of her career, stemming from a “chance” spotting by a top modeling agent.

Powers’ assertion about a movie career gave credence to Anita Pomares’ own dreams of becoming a movie actress, dreams that had formed early in her childhood when she first began going to the movies. Powers used Pomares constantly in modeling jobs, and hardly a day passed without her appearing in one of the New York newspapers. Additionally, Powers arranged for Pomares to study dance with Martha Graham, which provided instruction in expression as well as movement. In fact, perhaps expression was the more important lesson for a future film career; silent star Louise Brooks once stated, “I learned to act while watching Martha Graham” (Brownlow 358).

Just as Powers had predicted, the movies became the next step in the career of Anita Pomares when Paramount Pictures signed her as a contract player at their Astoria Studios on Long Island. Her first part was as an extra in *Monsieur Beaucaire*, a 1924 film starring Rudolph Valentino. She continued doing extra work at Astoria, where one day she met silent-screen legend Betty Bronson. As it happened, Bronson’s family lived near the Pomares family on Long Island, and their mothers knew each other. It was Bronson who suggested that Pomares be given a part as a “lady of the royal court” in the film *A Kiss for Cinderella*, made in 1925. Her work in this film led to another small role in the 1926 film *Love 'Em and Leave 'Em*, starring Evelyn Brent, Louise Brooks, Lawrence Gray, and Osgood Perkins. Though a small part, this role would prove to be the catalyst for the next transition in the career of Anita Pomares.

**Transition Two: New York to Hollywood**

After watching *Love 'Em and Leave 'Em*, Harry K. Thaw, owner of Kenilworth Productions, offered Pomares a two-picture contract, and she appeared in an uncredited part in a short film titled *Beach Nuts*. Thaw’s next plan was to leave New York for the West Coast, where he hoped to sell an independent feature film starring Pomares to a Hollywood film company, and he insisted that Pomares join him on the trip west. Mrs.
Pomares had significant misgivings about her daughter working for Harry Thaw, for he was a controversial figure, having been involved a well-known scandal that “rocked old New York to its foundations” (Park, par. 1). The scandal centered around Broadway showgirl Evelyn Nesbit, known as “the girl in the red velvet swing,” who, after marrying Thaw, divulged a previous relationship with noted New York architect Stanford White. In a jealous rage in June 1906, Thaw murdered White at Madison Square Garden’s roof theater. At his initial trial, the jury was deadlocked; however, another jury found him insane. In 1913, he walked out of the asylum where he had been living and, in 1915, he was declared sane, at which time he divorced Nesbit. Because Thaw was always interested in the entertainment industry, it is not surprising that his attention turned to the motion-picture industry in the 1920s.

What is also not surprising is the trepidation Mrs. Pomares felt about her daughter entering into a business relationship with Thaw. Page recalls the situation by noting that her mother never wanted her to be alone with Thaw and, despite the legitimacy of his movie business, her mother remained leery of him. Nevertheless, Anita Pomares, her mother, and her brother joined Thaw on the cross-country train trip. Despite the fact that Mrs. Pomares wanted the family to leave the train at one point in Arizona and be rid of Harry K. Thaw, the whole group continued on to Los Angeles, where they arrived at the Pasadena train station and proceeded to the legendary Ambassador Hotel.

Thaw arranged a meeting at MGM to pitch his movie idea, and Anita Pomares accompanied him to the studio. Although MGM was not interested in producing a film with Thaw, Irving Thalberg, the studio’s production chief, saw star potential in Anita Pomares and offered her a standard option contract with the studio. During her initial days in Los Angeles, Pomares also met with executives at Paramount and was offered a contract with that studio as well; however, the MGM contract offered immediate starring roles, and that was the contract she decided to accept.

One of the first items of business at MGM was to rename Anita Pomares, in order to avoid using her Spanish-sounding real name. Studio executives offered numerous suggestions and the name finally presented to Thalberg was Ann Page. However, Thalberg was opposed to this choice as there was a popular bakery at the time known as Ann Page and he wanted no possible confusion with his new star. He decided to combine the fictitious last name with the new star’s real first name and, thus, Anita Pomares became Anita Page, a name the star herself found agreeable and even liked.
Anita Page began her MGM contract in 1928 as a leading lady to William Haines, one of the studio’s major stars of that era. The film was titled *Telling the World*, and the casting of Page in a leading role opposite such a major star in her first MGM production is evidence of Thalberg’s perspective on her potential as a film star. For Page, starring with Haines was a great thrill, as she had enjoyed watching him on-screen.

In *Telling the World*, Page was cast as an actress with an American theatrical troupe traveling in the Orient. In the film, she becomes innocently involved in a political situation and her life is endangered. Haines, playing a reporter who is covering the Chinese war frontier, learns of the actress’ fate and sends out a call for aid via cable and wireless, ultimately saving the woman’s life. The film was released at a time when there was substantial interest in stories with a journalism theme or connection. In an article about the film in *The New York Times*, Mordaunt Hall wrote, “Whatever good work there is seems due to Anita Page, the pretty and attractive leading lady” (“Hollywood” 93).

Haines and Page became fast friends; he introduced the actress and her mother to other stars at MGM and had them to dinner at his home. They would go on to make three more films together as co-stars in addition to both being cast in *The Hollywood Revue of 1929*. In 1932, while making their last picture together, *Are You Listening?*, Haines proposed marriage to Page (Mann 202). This was at a time when his own star was on the decline and he was under pressure from MGM to get married in an effort to disguise his homosexuality. Although she turned down his proposal, Page and Haines remained friends until his death in 1973.

**Transition Three: Acting to Stardom and the Studio Star System**

By the late 1920s, MGM had firmly realized the economic benefits of the star system and had gone so far as to describe its talent pool as including “more stars than there are in heaven” (Balio 341). In examining Hollywood in the 1930s, Tino Balio has written, “A star’s popularity and drawing power created a ready-made market for his or her pictures, which reduced the risks of production financing. Because a star provided an insurance policy for a studio, the star system became the primary means of stabilizing the motion picture business” (144).

Following positive reviews and good box office for *Telling the World*, Page began to receive the MGM star treatment. She attended acting classes with friend Joan Crawford, to whom she had been introduced by Haines, and she was indoctrinated into the studio’s publicity machine,
posing for countless photographs, including multiple sessions with George Hurrell and Ruth Harriet Louise. One of the more interesting publicity photos involved illustrating how Anita Page was “the ideal screen type” of 1928. Studio artists drew “the ideal screen type,” utilizing various body parts from thirteen leading ladies. This composite star was then positioned next to a full-length portrait of Anita Page, with numerous comparisons illustrating that Page was the human equivalent of the composite due to such attributes as her ankle size being the same as that of Marion Davies, her calf size matching that of Norma Shearer, her waist being the same size as Gloria Swanson’s, her arm length being the same as that of Clara Bow, her chest being the same size as Greta Garbo’s, and her eyes being the same as those of Mary Pickford (Dance and Robertson 129).

Because Page was so readily identified as a composite screen type rather than a single type so early in her career, studio executives may have been influenced, consciously or unconsciously, to not typecast her and use her in a variety of roles. While this was good training for Page, and initially did not detract from her growing fan base, it was counter to the “norm” of the studio star system of the 1920s. Perhaps in the case of Anita Page, it was the ability to undertake diverse roles and her “composite” body type that would penalize her later in her career.

In analyzing the studio system, Janet Staiger has written, “The star became a means to differentiate product to achieve monopoly profits, and only lower-budget films would not have had stars” (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 101). In Page’s case, her composite type made it possible for her to not necessarily be used for monopolistic reasons until she had been cast in diverse parts and audience reactions had been measured. Even in publicity campaigns, Page is presented in diverse characterizations ranging from a “tomboy” playing football to glamorous and sensual images similar to those that were later used to promote Mae West and Jean Harlow. Kristin Thompson has noted that, in the 1920s, “Stars were to a considerable degree the basis for the personae they played” (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 179). With regard to Anita Page, the executive view of her “composite type” was the most likely reason why she was promoted through diverse images and cast in diverse roles.

The second film assignment for Page under her MGM contract was *Our Dancing Daughters*, a story designed, according to a 1928 newspaper article, “with the idea of catching the ultra-modern spirit of the young men and women of today” (“Modern” X7). Page recalls that it was studio chief Louis B. Mayer who insisted director Harry Beaumont cast her in the picture, even though Beaumont’s preference was an actress with more screen experience. By the end of the production, Beaumont was pleased
Page received a number of excellent notices for her work in *Our Dancing Daughters*, and, in his 1959 book, *Classics of the Silent Screen*, author Joe Franklin described Page’s performance as “quite the best in the film” (qtd. in Drew 149).

*Our Dancing Daughters* opened on October 7, 1928, and *New York Times* film critic Mordaunt Hall described the opening by stating, “Hundreds of girls and young women were attracted yesterday to the Capitol Theatre and their presence probably was due chiefly to the title of the film feature, *Our Dancing Daughters*, a chronicle concerned with the wild young people of this generation” (“Mad” 14). The film proved so popular that co-stars Anita Page and Joan Crawford were re-teamed in two more pairings designed to play off the success of this film, *Our Modern Maidens* (1929) and *Our Blushing Brides* (1930). Following the success of *Our Dancing Daughters*, Page asked for a pay raise at MGM. Studio boss Louis B. Mayer was reluctant, insisting that Page was “not quite a star”; however, Page recalls that she was determined to get more money and Mayer ultimately gave her the raise, although not without suggesting it warranted a romantic entanglement, a situation Page refused.

Page’s next two films found her co-starring with two of MGM’s most durable leading men. In *While the City Sleeps* (1928), she appeared with Lon Chaney in a film whose box-office returns have been described with the statement, “Business was good” (Eames 52). In *The Flying Fleet* (1929), Page was cast opposite Ramon Novarro in a drama that found Novarro playing a Navy Air Corps pilot-in-training vying with a fellow trainee for Page’s affections. The story was written by former Navy pilot Frank Wead and produced in cooperation with the United States Naval Academy. On February 13, 1929, *Variety* reviewed the film and stated, “In many ways MGM’s opus has serious claims to the distinction of being the most successful, technically and dramatically, of all the navy pictures” (qtd. in Berumen 36).

As Page’s star rose at MGM as a result of her films and positive reviews, so did the amount of publicity that focused on her both on and off the screen. As her popularity increased, so did her fan mail, and she found herself the object of affection of a member of one of Europe’s royal families. Prince Louis Ferdinand of Germany was visiting Hollywood and asked MGM if he could escort Page to a film premiere. Although her parents were not initially enthusiastic, Page ultimately did accompany the prince to a premiere—chaperoned by her mother—and he became one of her steadfast admirers. Today, nearly eight decades later, Page still counts gifts of jewelry from the prince among her most cherished possessions.
relating to her screen career. Page was also part of an elite group on September 18, 1929, when Winston Churchill and his son, Randolph, visited MGM and were guests of honor at an elegant banquet hosted by Louis B. Mayer and newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst (Berumen 37). Only twenty-five of MGM’s stars were invited to attend the banquet; Anita Page was one of them.

**Transition Four: Silent to Sound**

Sound had been present in Hollywood from the moment of Page’s arrival. While Warner Bros. had launched the Vitaphone sound-on-disc system in 1926 and Fox was pioneering the Movietone sound-on-film system, MGM and other studios waited patiently to gauge the public’s reception of this technological innovation as well as to give themselves time to study the two methods and determine which system was ultimately going to be preferred. While Page’s early films often included synchronized music and effects tracks, MGM was reluctant to produce a film with spoken dialogue. However, the public’s enthusiastic and consistent response to “talking pictures” meant the studio’s procrastination could not continue.

By the middle of 1928, MGM began requiring its contract players to undergo an evaluation to determine whether their voices were suitable for sound films. The evaluation, utilized by a number of studios, was composed of a six-page speech worksheet and a one-page speech diagnosis sheet that had been developed by William Ray MacDonald, a speech professor at the University of Southern California (Eyman, *Speed* 185). Page herself underwent a three-hour evaluation to determine if her voice would “photograph” on July 7, 1928, during which time she was tested and graded in seventy-one categories such as “prosodic-accent” and “kinesophonic-inflection”; the overall comments on her performance noted, “Very good material, hard worker, intelligent, ambitious, learns quickly” (Eyman, *Speed* 186). MGM quickly issued a publicity still featuring Page and the newest Western Electric motion-picture microphone.

Page’s excellent voice evaluation and her growing popularity with audiences represented two important factors in MGM’s decision to cast her in the studio’s first all-sound film, *The Broadway Melody* (1929). The story centers around a vaudeville sister act from the Midwest (the sisters being played by Page and Bessie Love) who travel to New York in search of fame and fortune. In the process, they both fall in love with the same song-and-dance man, played by Charles King.
The casting of the film represents an interesting mixture among the leading players, with Page being the new star whose fame is rising (and seems destined to rise even further, given her passing grade on the studio voice test). Love, on the other hand, was a film veteran who had started making movies in 1913 and had worked with D.W. Griffith on *Intolerance* and other films. By 1929, Love’s film stardom was waning; however, she had just completed a successful tour in a stage show which proved she had a suitable voice, and which convinced MGM to cast her in *The Broadway Melody*. For the male lead, MGM settled on a strategy employed by many of the studios at this time, which was to recruit an actor from the Broadway stage—King was a veteran of many stage musicals when he was cast in *The Broadway Melody*.

In addition to being MGM’s first sound film, *The Broadway Melody* was “the first movie to use songs both within a story and as part of a Broadway show being performed, and it was the first to have an original score created for its use” (Balio 212). The songs for the film were supplied by lyricist Arthur Freed and composer Nacio Herb Brown. Because this was still the dawn of the sound era, the musical numbers were not prerecorded; rather, they were recorded at the time of filming with an on-set orchestra accompanying the players. Numerous problems were encountered in recording the sound during production. For example, Page recalls filming a scene with a constant swishing noise on the playback (which turned out to be from her taffeta petticoat) and another during which a constant tapping turned out to be her unconsciously tapping her foot while doing her nails (Drew 163). Love also recalled difficulties with the sound recording and described the production by stating, “Mind you, at this period, sound equipment was being improved almost week to week, so that the end of *Broadway Melody* sounded much better than the beginning” (qtd. in Kobal 39).

Audience response to the film was enthusiastic; *The Broadway Melody* cost two hundred eighty thousand dollars to make and earned four million dollars by the end of 1929, at a time when the average price of a movie ticket was thirty-five cents (Kobal 36). *Photoplay* said of the film, “The picture is most notable, however, because in it the talkies find new freedom and speed. The microphone and its twin camera poke themselves into backstage corners, into dressing rooms, into rich parties and hotel bedrooms” (qtd. in Kobal 36). In addition, *The Broadway Melody* went on to become the first sound film to win the Academy Award for Best Picture.

The success of *The Broadway Melody* changed Anita Page’s life in many ways. Following the film’s release, Page was named one of the
Wampas Baby Stars of 1929 (the Wampas organization was a group of publicists who identified thirteen young women each year who were likely candidates for stardom; the Wampas class of 1929 also included Loretta Young and Jean Arthur) (Ridgely 122). Upon seeing The Broadway Melody, Italy’s dictator, Benito Mussolini, declared Page to be his favorite star. He sent numerous letters to the actress—sometimes more than one per day—and Page recalls that he made multiple requests to MGM for her photograph. In addition to the accolades from the Wampas organization and Mussolini, there were Anita Page paper dolls; a perfume named for her; an announcement from England that moviegoers there had named Page, Evelyn Brent, and Joan Crawford as their three favorite stars; and an announcement from theater owners in the United States that they considered Page as one of her studio’s highest drawing cards (Ridgely 130). Page’s popularity with audiences can also be gauged from her fan mail, which soared in volume such that it was second only to that of Greta Garbo (Williams 2).

**Transition Five: Star Build-Up to Promotional Plateau**

While there were many positive changes for Page as a result of Our Dancing Daughters and The Broadway Melody, these films simultaneously contributed to negative changes in MGM’s promotional strategy on her behalf. Page’s agent decided that the success of The Broadway Melody warranted another pay raise for his client. Studio chief Louis B. Mayer did not feel the time was right for an additional raise, but he consented, according to Page, when Irving Thalberg, who had once described Page as “another Bernhardt,” championed her cause. The raise came with a warning from Mayer that he intended to do nothing to help her become a bigger star. Page recalls pointing out that she had several years remaining on her contract, to which Mayer replied that she could “stay if she wanted to.” Following this incident, the studio continued to capitalize on Page’s popularity and cast her in “A” pictures; however, their promotion of her leveled somewhat.

In analyzing this period in Page’s career, it becomes apparent that the studio made no effort to develop her into a “brand” for the company as her roles alternated between drama and comedy. This lack of attention to typecasting Page is probably the result of her “composite type,” which permitted her to be cast in a variety of roles, as well as the studio’s desire to profit from her audience appeal while doing little to promote her as a specific type of star. The absence of typecasting certainly played a detrimental role in Page’s stardom. While many stars complain about
similarity of roles, it is often this “branding” that enables them to remain popular with audiences and maintain their stardom for long periods. Richard Schickel has written, “Many of them [stars] search all their lives for ‘different’ parts, complaining bitterly about typecasting, never comprehending that for a star—each of those roles is only a single episode in the larger drama of his entire career—gross novelty is likely to be disastrous” (16). By being “off cast” in diverse screen parts, Page’s star status was vulnerable from the standpoint that audiences never knew where they would next see her.

To capitalize on Page’s popularity immediately following Our Dancing Daughters and The Broadway Melody, MGM cast her alongside many of the studio’s major stars from 1929 to 1932. She completed Speedway with William Haines in 1929, in which she played a daredevil who drove a roadster and flew a plane. Speedway would be her last silent film, and that same year she would co-star again with Haines in his first all-talking feature, Navy Blues. She made two films with Buster Keaton, Free and Easy (1930) and Sidewalks of New York (1931). Page recalls Keaton as a wonderful co-star and a “genius at ad-libbing comic gags” (qtd. in Jett 1). However, she also noted MGM’s reluctance to give him creative control of his sound films and his growing dissatisfaction with the studio as a result. In addition to the Keaton films, Page was also cast in three comedies with Marie Dressler and Polly Moran: Caught Short (1930), Reducing (1931), and Prosperity (1932). Prior to Caught Short, MGM had made other Dressler and Moran comedies with what has been described as “so-so results”; however, with the addition of Page, the studio “suddenly hit the jackpot” as the film scored a huge success at the box office (Eames 70).

Some of Page’s dramatic films included War Nurse (1930) with Robert Montgomery, Gentleman’s Fate (1931) with John Gilbert, and Skyscraper Souls (1932) with Warren William. She was Clark Gable’s leading lady in The Easiest Way (1931), his first MGM film, which also starred Robert Montgomery, Constance Bennett, and Adolphe Menjou. In Night Court (1932), Page was cast as an ordinary housewife framed on a prostitution charge by a crooked judge, played by Walter Huston. The film was a strong box-office success.

From 1928 through 1932, MGM loaned Page to other studios on only two occasions: in 1930, when she made Little Accident at Universal; and in 1931, when she made Under Eighteen at Warner Bros. This strategy is typical of MGM’s treatment of its prized stars and serves as evidence that Louis B. Mayer and Irving Thalberg knew the value of Anita Page and the benefit of keeping her working in MGM pictures.
By 1930, the eight major studios had been subdivided into the “big five” (MGM, Paramount, Warner Bros., Fox, and RKO), which were vertically integrated companies that owned their own theaters, and the “little three” (Columbia, Universal, and United Artists), which were not completely vertically integrated companies in that they were not engaged in film exhibition in company-owned theaters. The Universal loan-out came within a year of Page’s last pay raise and was likely orchestrated as a punitive measure given Universal’s lower status, at that time, among the eight major studios. Page’s loan-out to Warner Bros. two years later was likely for MGM’s economic benefit, given that Warners, like MGM, was a vertically integrated company. In this case, it is quite likely that Warner Bros. paid MGM a sum in excess of Page’s salary, which MGM retained as profit. While MGM continued to economically benefit from Page, they began to limit their publicity of her and withhold a major build-up of her career. This strategy essentially placed her on a promotional plateau.

Transition Six: Promotional Plateau to Private Life

After appearing in “A” pictures through 1932, Page was summoned to a meeting with Louis B. Mayer, at which Mayer again proposed a romantic liaison, with Page again refusing. The studio chief proclaimed, “I can make you the biggest star in the world in three pictures,” and then he snapped his fingers and said “and I can kill Garbo in three pictures” (Eyman, Lion 194). Despite MGM’s strategy of “off casting” Page, she was still popular with audiences, and Mayer’s comment to her, while evidence of his ability to “make” or “break” a star, is also indicative of his belief in Page’s potential as a major star. Page asked Thalberg to again intervene on her behalf and smooth things over with Mayer, but he told her there was nothing he could do this time around.

In 1933, her last year at MGM, Page made four films, all on loan-out to other companies. She was loaned to Columbia for Soldiers of the Storm (1933) and to Universal for The Big Cage (1933). However, loaning her to two of the “little three” companies must not have seemed severe enough punishment to Mayer, for she was also loaned to companies of lesser stature, such as Chesterfield, where she made I Have Lived (1933), and Monogram, where she made Jungle Bride (1933). These “Poverty Row,” low-budget film companies were thrilled to have someone with her audience recognition, and the posters for I Have Lived and Jungle Bride featured Page exclusively in their artwork. When Page recalls this phase of her career, she states, “I didn’t want to make these pictures. That made me
a little upset because I didn’t go to Poverty Row. Metro sent me there” (qtd. in Drew 166).

These loan-outs to Poverty Row companies were obviously for punitive purposes. In writing about major studio loan-out policies and why majors deferred from loaning to the Poverty Row companies, Balio states, “Clearly, the majors believed that loan-outs could easily impair the value of their properties, either because the overall production standards of the company would suffer or because the picture might not be handled properly” (158). Balio points out that Poverty Row companies could not afford to borrow the talent under contract to the major studios and goes on to write, “Furthermore, the majors knew that pictures produced outside the mainstream could rarely find first-run theater outlets and therefore had to be consigned to the low end of the market, which could ruin a star” (158).

When Page’s MGM contract came to an end, the studio announced that she was retiring from motion pictures; this message was sent out over the Associated Press and announced on an international radio hook-up at the Chinese Theater in Hollywood. Page felt she would wait a year or so and then announce that she was coming out of retirement and returning to the screen. In the interim, she accepted an offer from theatrical producer Billy Rose to go on tour with a musical production titled *Billy Rose’s Crazy Quilt of 1933*. Dancer Eleanor Powell was also in the production, and Page’s co-star was Charles King, with whom she had worked on *The Broadway Melody*. The show was grueling with Page in sixteen musical numbers, each with a costume change. Rose’s wife, Fanny Brice, accompanied the tour and helped Page with her hair and wardrobe. The tour lasted nine months, and the schedule usually called for five shows a day. When the tour ended, Billy Rose offered Page another show, but she declined and went to visit Marion Davies for a brief rest at San Simeon, the estate Davies shared with William Randolph Hearst; Page remained there for thirteen months.

In an attempt to revive her movie career, Page did a screen test at Fox that involved a dramatic scene in which she shoots her lover. Page felt quite confident she would get the role and was surprised when Fox executives failed to call her back to do the picture. In a 2000 interview, Page recalled that when she contacted the studio she was told, “We can’t take you—all of the studios have been told by L. B. Mayer you are one property we’re not to touch.” Page would go on to make one additional film in the 1930s, *Hitch Hike to Heaven*, completed for a Poverty Row studio in 1936.

In 1934, Page married Nacio Herb Brown, whom she knew from her *Broadway Melody* days when he co-wrote the songs for the film. He had
always insisted that he wrote “You Were Meant for Me” for Page. Their marriage lasted only a short time before it was annulled.

Page was playing golf in 1937 when she met Hershel House, a captain in the U.S. Navy. He had never seen an Anita Page film at the time of their meeting but was impressed with the beautiful young lady. They were married after a short courtship and Anita Page House transitioned into a private life that included raising two daughters and becoming a prominent member of the society circles in Washington, D.C. and San Diego, California. Captain House eventually became Admiral House, and Page worked tirelessly on behalf of such organizations as the American Red Cross. Their marriage lasted fifty-four years until the death of the admiral in 1991.

**Transition Seven: Private Life to Rediscovery**

Following the death of Admiral House, Page decided to move back to Los Angeles to be close to family members and friends. Frances Malone had been a close friend to Page for many years in both Washington and California. Mrs. Malone’s grandson, Randal, had completed a series for MTV and was working on an independent horror film in 1996 titled *Sunset After Dark*. He suggested that Page take a role in the film as a means of staying busy and returning to the career that she had enjoyed prior to her marriage. After a retirement from the screen that lasted exactly sixty years, Page returned to work before the cameras. Horror films had been the genre that many actresses, including Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, Miriam Hopkins, and others, turned to late in their careers. In those instances, working in the horror genre was a means of simply continuing to work. In the case of Page, the genre was the source of a screen comeback that continues to the present.

Following *Sunset After Dark*, Page made four more independent films, including *Bob’s Night Out* (2004), the first movie produced by the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company in eighty years and the first sound movie ever produced by the company. Biograph, as the company is commonly known, was founded in 1896 and launched the careers of D.W. Griffith, Mary Pickford, and many other screen pioneers prior to Page ever making her first film. As Page returned to the spotlight, she began to be acknowledged for her film achievements and as a valuable historical resource on early film topics, including the conversion from silent to sound films at MGM. She was recognized by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences at a screening of *The Broadway Melody*, where Randal Malone recalls it was noted that her career is a unique entity in the