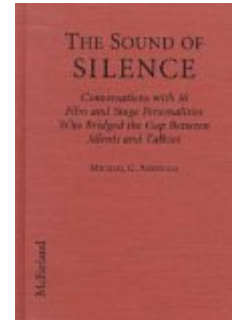


**Michael Ankerich.** *The Sound of Silence: Conversations with 16 Film and Stage Personalities Who Bridged the Gap Between Silents and Talkies.* Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1998. xii + 260 pp. \$42.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7864-0504-6.



**Reviewed by** Robert C. Sickels

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Perhaps because of the Hollywood film industry's pervasive cultural influence--both in America and abroad--it is easy to overlook that, in the larger scheme of things, motion pictures are a relatively new medium, scarcely more than 100 years old. In fact, Hollywood's first Golden Age did not hit high gear until the late 1910's. Though seemingly forgotten, some of the folks who worked in the industry as it made the transition from silents to talkies are still alive. Accordingly, in his new book, *The Sound of Silence: Conversations with 16 Film and Stage Personalities Who Bridged the Gap Between Silents and Talkies*, Michael G. Ankerich seeks to tap into these resources in order to detail this transition through first hand accounts of sixteen actors who lived through it.

Ankerich considers *The Sound of Silence* to be a companion piece to his first book, *Broken Silence: Conversations with 23 Silent Film Stars* (McFarland, 1993); hence, the book is similarly structured, with each of the sixteen chapters focusing on an individual actor. Despite the somewhat misleading title, the conversations in *The*

*Sound of Silence* are not really two way conversations. Instead, each section starts with a brief overview of the respective person being featured. Ankerich then follows with a detailed history of the subject's life and career, supported by quotes taken from interviews he has conducted with him or her.

Somewhat disappointingly, we do not get quite what we expect; the advent of sound changed forever the course of the motion picture industry and to get related insights from those who lived through it would be tremendously interesting and informative. But, for the most part, the interviewees focus primarily on their own experiences without discussing at length how their career paths were influenced by the dramatic changes in the Hollywood film industry in the late 1920s and early 1930s. As a result, for scholars who study this historical period and are looking for new information, there is not much to be had.

However, this is not to say that Ankerich's book is not pleasurable reading; it is. The histories of the actors represented in this work are notable for both their diversity and their often funny and

touching moments, as well as for the engaging period photographs and exhaustive individual filmographies. Of particular interest are the chapters focusing on two early Hollywood ingenues, Billie Dove and Anita Page. Dove, who in her day was considered by many to be the most beautiful woman in pictures, not only sheds light on her ultimately failed romance with the enigmatic Howard Hughes—who has long been rumored to have paid Dove's husband hundreds of thousands of dollars to divorce her—but also, with the support of Ankerich's detailed research, vividly recounts what it was like to be an early screen siren who—in addition to being courted by Hughes—was also a frequent San Simeon house guest of William Randolph Hearst and Marion Davies. Likewise, Page, another rare beauty and a friend of Davies, not only cheerfully tells about her experiences working along side Ramon Navarro, Lon Chaney, and John Gilbert, but offers some deliciously catty opinions about Joan Crawford as well.

Even though we ultimately do not get much scholarly insight into the historical circumstances that surrounded Hollywood's transition from silence to sound, Ankerich's book is nevertheless entertaining. Although some of the respective figures remain bitter because of their perceived failures, most recall the era in which they worked fondly and have nice things to say about many of the movie folks with whom they associated. It is hard to imagine sixteen actors working in the cut-throat world of contemporary Hollywood being interviewed in fifty years and having similarly sweet remembrances. We know that since its inception the motion picture industry has always been affiliated with debauchery and excess.

And yet, despite our knowing better, it is hard not to think of the world captured in *The Sound of Silence* as somehow more innocent and appealing than today's Hollywood. I do not necessarily completely agree with Anita Page when she says, "I think most of the films made today are terrible.

Those stars who run around with their G-strings on are awful, and I don't admire them at all. I have no wish to see them" (p. 198), but in a year as cinematically dismal as 1998 has been, it is easy to see merit in her argument and long for Hollywood to return to a Golden Age.

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