

## “They’ll Be Dancing in the Aisles!”: Thirties Swing Audiences, Film Exhibition and the ‘Jitterbug Film’ Cycle

**Tim Snelson**

In his introduction to *Explorations in New Cinema History*, Richard Maltby makes a distinction between film history – a dominant history of films and their production – and the new cinema history – an emergent interdisciplinary field of study focusing on the history of cinema-going across a range of national, regional and historical contexts. This paper will argue that focusing upon the serial production, exhibition and consumption of cross-media cycles allows the cinema historian to analyse the complex relationship between these two processes whilst neither side-lining nor overstating the significance of film and other media texts. Reversing the linear trajectory through these processes, this paper will utilise a case study of the mid-1930s ‘swing boom’ to demonstrate how programming and production can be demonstrably led by audience conduct and demand. In the mid-1930s, the subcultural consumption of swing kids and jitterbug audiences encouraged cinema exhibitors to reintroduce and prioritise live music programming as swing bands were declared ‘the most sought after theatre attractions’. This elevation of ‘name’ bandleaders to cinema programmes’ ‘A’ attractions undermined Hollywood’s ‘one programme for one audience’ policy and challenged the studios’ hegemony in controlling top product. The major studios attempted to reclaim this youth market in the late-1930s by incorporating the big swing stars and opportunities for tactical consumption into an emergent cycle of ‘jitterbug films’, which offered opportunities for audiences to sing or dance along to propriety songs and dances created for the films. Drawing upon a historical reception study of trade and mainstream presses, this paper will demonstrate how approaches attuned to the study of seriality and cyclicity reveal the complex, reciprocal, at times intimate, negotiations enacted between processes of production, exhibition and consumption.

### **Biography**

Tim Snelson is a lecturer in media history at the University of East Anglia (UK). His research addressing the relationship between media and social history has been published in journals including *Media History*, *Cultural Studies*, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* and *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, and in edited collections including

*Explorations in New Cinema History: Approaches and Case Studies* (Wiley-Blackwell: 2011) and *Gendering the Recession: Media Culture in an Age of Austerity* (Duke: 2014). He has a monograph titled *Phantom Ladies: Hollywood Horror and the Home Front* (Rutgers, 2014), and is a member and regular contributor to the international research network of the History of Movie-going, Exhibition and Reception (HoMER).