



[Home](#)



The Sounds of Silents

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David Drazin - PO Box 267831 - Chicago, IL 60626-7831 carseymour@aol.com

[Back to
News -
Events](#)

The sounds of silents

At the end of a silent-movie screening last week at Evanston's Block Cinema, someone in the audience asked pianist Dave Drazin what music he'd been playing during the films.

With a modest shrug, Drazin said he'd made it all up.

Improvisation is one of the keys to success for this Chicago resident, who often plays piano when silent movies are shown at the Block, Chicago's Gene Siskel Film Center, the Northbrook Public Library and festivals around the country.

Drazin first played with a silent movie at the age of 17. A library in his hometown of Cleveland was about to show "The Mark of Zorro" without any music, so on the spur of the moment, he volunteered to play piano.

At first, Drazin really did make up everything. But Drazin, a collector of 78 rpm records who has listened to Jelly Roll Morton since he was 7, began researching the music that was popular during the heyday of silent films.

"It something hot came up on the screen, I could fall back and be a jazz musician -- which is what I say I am," Drazin said. "When they start whipping out 'The Charleston' or dancing like a fiend, I can stomp it down."

He added, "I equate hot jazz of the '20s with a punk mentality."

When Buster Keaton sees the words to "The Prisoner Song" on a jailhouse wall in "Steamboat Bill, Jr.," Drazin plays that tune, which was one of the first popular country songs, back in 1927. For a Chinese dance scene in the film "Piccadilly," Drazin learned how to play a Chinese song from an old 78.

That film also gave Drazin the opportunity to play one of his favorite tunes, "Doin' the New Low-Down," to his heart's content during a long dance scene.

"This is great -- I'm in heaven," he said. "Anywhere else that I've tried to play that, people have told me to shut up. They want me to stop doing that." (That's hard to believe.)

Drazin also plays piano at four dance schools in Evanston and gigs with blues bands. At

the movies, he draws on blues, tender ballads and classical airs as he sets all the various moods, carefully matching the music to each scene.

"The less I think about it, the easier it is to do," he said.

Dave Drazin will accompany a screening of nickelodeon movies from the early 1900s at 7:30 p.m. today (Thursday) at the Block Cinema, 40 Arts Circle Drive, Evanston; admission is free. He will play with films of George Méliès at 8 p.m. Aug. 12 at the Block Cinema; admission is \$6. Call (847) 491-4000. Drazin will also play with free silent movies at the Northbrook Public Library, 1201 Cedar Lane, Northbrook, all shown at 1 and 7:30 p.m. Sept. 1: "The Playhouse" and "Steamboat Bill, Jr." Sept. 15: "He Who Gets Slapped." Sept. 22: "Blood and Sand." Sept. 29: A Mary Pickford film to be determined. Call (847) 272-6224.

-- Robert Loerzel

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