

United Artists Studio History

Cory Radtke

History of American Cinema

Dr. Alex Wainer

April 16, 2015

United Artists was the first independent studio, founded in 1919 by D.W. Griffith, Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks. The main purpose of their venture was to gain more financial and artistic control over producing and distributing their films. Hollywood had become run solely by the major studios of that time, and in the coming 20's the major studios were: 20th Century Fox, RKO, Paramount, Warner Bros., and MGM. The "artists" aim was to create a level of independence apart from the studio system - that didn't garner much in the way of creativity on the directors part. Producers ran Hollywood, and specifically the moguls, like Adolph Zukor and Louis B Mayer. The idea for UA originated with Fairbanks, Chaplin, Pickford, and the popular cowboy star of the time William Hart. One year before the foundation, they were traveling around the U.S. selling liberty bonds to help the World War I effort when the idea came to them. (Dream Factory p2) UA's first film was His Majesty, The American by and starring Fairbanks and it was a success for the studio. The first five years were tough for the studio. There wasn't much funding, and little by little the money trickled in, making UA only produce five films in those first five years of production. (History, United Artists Created).

After those first five years, in 1924, Griffith dropped out and the company. UA was facing a crisis; it needed to bring in others to help support a distribution system. This debacle lead to the studio finding the veteran producer Joseph Schenck, who was hired as president to help the company out of the rut it found itself in. After Schenck took over, production and distribution contracts were signed with a number of independent producers, including Samuel Goldwyn and Howard Hughes. (Britannica, UAC). After the studio was off the ground, the closest thing it had to a studio lot was an eighteen-acre property owned by Pickford and Fairbanks on Santa Monica Boulevard in Hollywood. The lot became known as the Pickford-

Fairbanks Studio. Many producers like Samuel Goldwyn and Joseph Schenck rented offices and stages on the property as UA began to lure independents away from the major studios. In the early 20's, the lot was renamed the United Artists Studio, but it was operated separately from UA the distribution company (The Lot, Archive). Also during the 20's Charlie Chaplin was in his prime and he helped the studio greatly in the early years, making *The Gold Rush* in 1925. This film helped save United Artists during this time. Douglas Fairbanks, another co-founder also greatly helped the studio, delivering *Mark of Zorro* in 1920, *The Three Musketeers* in 1921, *Robin Hood* in 1923 and *The Thief of Bagdad* in 1924. Also, Buster Keaton, a friend of the founders came out with the major hit *The General* in 1927 – the year “talkies” took over and sound came to cinema (Dream Factory8)

The 20's brought much success and notoriety for United Artists. After Schenck took over he formed the UA theatre circuit in 1926. Though a separate entity from UA, the United Artists Theatre Circuit was constructed and acquired first-run theatres in major metropolitan areas, such as Chicago and Detroit. Balaban and Katz also co-ran some of these theatres, introducing their revolutionary air-conditioning to the buildings. The theaters' accommodated UA's Pictures. The United Artists Theatre Circuit is still in existence today, operating a nationwide chain of theatres (Balio11).

Coming into the 30's the depression began, and many of the studios were in crisis. In 1933, Joseph Schenck left to organize Twentieth Century with another major producer, Darryl F. Zanuck. After they were founded 20th provided four pictures a year to UA's schedule as a distributor from '33 to '35. One such film was *Les Miserables* in 1935. Other independent producers distributed through United Artists in the 1930s including Walt Disney, who distributed many short films through UA, including *Three Little Pigs* and *Mickey's Gala Premiere* – both in

1933, as well as Silly Symphonies, which ran from 1929 to 1939. Along with Disney, Hal Roach and David O Selznick distributed through UA (Britannica²). With these successful producers releasing films/shorts through UA, the studio was reporting profits of over a million dollars a year in the mid 30s. Nearly sending UA over the top, MGM's *Gone With The Wind* was supposed to be a UA release but Selznick wanted Clark Gable as Rhett, and Gable was under contract with MGM, making a United Artists release impossible. Notable Films of the 30's that were released and produced through UA were: *Hell's Angels*, *Scarface*, *Moulin Rouge*, *City Lights*, *Modern Times*, *The Private Life of Henry VIII*. Also UA distributed John Ford's classic, *Stagecoach* in 1939. In that same year, Samuel Goldwyn did his last picture with you UA, releasing *Wuthering Heights*, which was one of the most highly admired films of the decade (DreamFactory⁴).

1940 brought in a great year for United Artists. In that year, four UA films were nominated for Academy Awards, including: *The Foreign Correspondent*, *The Great Dictator* (nominated for five academy awards), *The Long Voyage Home*, and *Our Town*. A year later, the studio's founders sought to further their independent views and change Hollywood when they formed The Society of Independent Motion Picture Producers in 1941. The founders were Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin, Walt Disney, Orson Welles, Samuel Goldwyn, David O. Selznick, Alexander Korda, and Walter Wanger. The Society aimed to advance the interests of independent producers in an industry overwhelmingly controlled by the studio system. The founding of the society and their efforts helped pave the way for the *United States vs. Paramount Pictures* antitrust case in 1948 (Boutique⁵). During World War II, the demand for entertainment by the public made UA open its doors to independent producers, most of which were far below the companies previous standards. Howard Hughes was one producer who made UA a profit

during this time. The Outlaw starring Jane Russell achieved a lot of notoriety and controversy because of the PCA revoking censorship approval and the ad campaigns focusing on Russell's breasts. The film went on to gross more than any other film UA had in release. Despite that success, United Artists was still struggling financially as either a producer or distributor (7).

As the 50's approached and UA was struggling, the lawyers-turned-producers Arthur Krim and Robert Benjamin approached Pickford and Chaplin: let them take over United Artists for ten years and if at the end of those years, UA was profitable, they would be given half the company. In 1951 the production studio was sold, and United Artists became solely a financing and distributing facility. The new administration of Krim and Benjamin established itself purchasing modestly budgeted films. After a few years, the studio was fully competitive with the major studios, releasing such films as *The African Queen* in 1951, *High Noon* in '52, *Marty* in '55, *Witness for the Prosecution* in '57, and the massive hit *-Some Like It Hot* in '59. This was the beginning of an era when UA picked up many Oscar nominations and awards (DreamFactory9,11).

The 60's continued UA's success, making them prosper - winning 11 Academy Awards, including five for best picture. Some of the films that got the awards were: *The Apartment* and *The Magnificent Seven*, which were both 1960 releases, *West Side Story* in '61, and *Midnight Cowboy* in '69. *Midnight Cowboy* was the only X-rated film to ever win an Oscar for best picture. The studio was also responsible for introducing U.S. film audiences to The Beatles by releasing *A Hard Day's Night* in 1964. By 1966, United Artists was the largest producer-distributor of motion pictures in the world (History, UnitedArtistsCreated). During this time, the American film industry entered the age of conglomerates by massive corporations. Paramount was the first to do this with Gulf Western. 1967, UA was bought out by the TransAmerica

Corporation for \$185 million, though the leaders continued to be Arthur Krim and Robert Benjamin. TransAmerica attempted new management techniques on UA, but the studio posted losses at the end of the 60's. Also during this decade, UA was the distributor of the James Bond Franchise and Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns, such as: *Fistful of Dollars*, *For a Few Dollars More*, and *The Good, The Bad And the Ugly* (9).

The 70's reigned in decade of many great films released through United Artists/TransAmerica. Among these were: *Last Tango in Paris* in 1972, *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* in '74, as well as a co-production/distribution of *Network* in '76. The Massive success - *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was released by UA in 1975, and it won the best picture Academy Award, as well as bringing in \$56 million at the box office. UA followed that success with the next two years' Best Picture Oscar winners: *Rocky* in '76, and *Annie Hall* in '77. Another UA distribution was Saul Zaentz and Ralph Bakshi's *Lord of the Rings* in 1978; it was a hybrid of traditional cell animation and rotoscoped live action footage (Britannica 12). During this time, TransAmerica expressed their desire to replace UA's name with Transamerica Films. Krim tried to convince Transamerica to spin-off United Artists, but they could not come to an agreement. In 1978, following an argument with Transamerica chief John R. Beckett over administrative expenses, Krim and Benjamin walked out. They then went on to form Orion Pictures with backing from Warner. Transamerica placed Andy Albeck in as UA's president in 1979. That same year, United had its most successful year with four hit pictures: *Rocky II*, *Manhattan*, *Moonraker*, and *The Black Stallion*. Along with these successes, UA also distributed the hits *Apocalypse Now* and *Being There* – also in 1979 (TransAmericaMerger Film Reference)

In 1980, UA released the big-budget flop *Heaven's Gate*, directed by Michael Cimino, who had just come off of the very successful *Deer Hunter*. *Heaven's Gate* Earned \$4 million at

the U.S. box office. Initially it was set to cost about \$6m, but ended up costing five times as much. This was the end of UA's golden age of many award winning, successful films. Due to the Heaven's Gate debacle, MGM bought the company in '81, later merging with UA in 1983 to become MGM/UA Entertainment. United Artists was renamed MGM/UA Communications Company (MUCC). The Company was organized into three main film units: one television production and two film units. After some years and despite having resurgence at the box office in 1987 with *Spaceballs*, *The Living Daylights*, and *Moonstruck*, MUCC lost \$88 million (Dream Factory 15). During those dark days, UA did release another Best Picture winner, *Rain Man*, in 1988. Other notable films: *Raging Bull*, *The Big Red One*, *Baby Boom*, *Childs Play*. Some hit animated films that UA distributed in the 80's were *The Secret of NIMH* and *All Dogs Go To Heaven* (imdb). The 80's morphed UA into a folded company that had lost its momentum coming off of a great thirty years from 50's to the late 70's. It would no longer be a true independent distributor bearing the United Artists name.

In the early 90's UA was essentially dormant, releasing no films for several years. In 1992, the French bank Credit Lyonnais acquired the corporation and changed its name back to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Inc., abandoning the United Artists name altogether. During this time, the James Bond and Pink Panther franchises were revived. In 1999, Francis Ford Coppola attempted to buy UA from Kerkorian, but the deal was rejected. Coppola signed a production deal with the studio instead (Britannica13). That same year, UA was repositioned as a specialty studio. MGM folded UA into Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures. There were only a handful of films during the 90's that UA was associated with. The once heaping schedule of UA films had diminished to nil. These included: *Tank Girl*, *Rob Roy*, *The Birdcage*, and *The Thomas Crown Affair* (14).

In 2000, UA was re-named United Artists Films and hired Bingham Ray to run the company. UAF produced and distributed many "art-house" films: The first art-house film to bear the UA name was *Things You Can Tell Just by Looking at Her*. Other were: *Bowling for Columbine*; *No Man's Land*, *Undertow*, *Hotel Rwanda* (co-production with Lions Gate), and *Capote* in '06, but was reassigned to Sony Pictures Classics (Boutique FilmReference). In 2005, Comcast, Sony and several merchant banks bought United Artists and MGM, for \$4.8 billion, after which MGM and United Artists ceased to function as autonomous production entities. The films UA had completed and planned for release were reassigned to Sony Pictures Classics (12). In 2006, MGM gave Tom Cruise and Paula Wagner control over production and development of UA films. Wagner became CEO of United Artists and they released *Lions for Lambs* and *Valkyrie* in '08. Since then, United Artists has served as a co-producer with MGM for two releases: the 2009 remake of *Fame* and *Hot Tub Time Machine* (Dream Factory16).

Recently in September 2014, One Three Media and Lightworkers Media were consolidated into a new film and television company, United Artists Media Group. Mark Burnett is the CEO. The UAMG is family and faith division, and they're going to be forming an Over-The-Top (OTT) faith-based channel. UAMG's current television series are *Survivor*, *The Apprentice*, *The Voice*, *The Sing Off*, *Shark Tank*. Most of these shows are very successful cable run series. Mark Burnett has also produced notable faith-based works such as *The Bible*, and *Son of God*. He also producing an upcoming *Ben Hur* remake, scheduled for release in 2016 (Guardian, UAC).

Every one of the studios that dates back to the formation of Hollywood is no longer operating as it was in the early days and golden era. United Artists was formed with the opposite intentions of the major studios: 20th Century Fox, RKO, Paramount, Warner Bros., and MGM.

It was formed with the independent producer in mind. The founders - D.W. Griffith, Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks - all left the studio relatively early in its history. Scattered in the wind, or deceased, the UA founders abandoned the studio – leaving it in the hands of people who didn't have what it took to keep it going. Among the studio's who still bear their original name today, UA is not among them. It is in the hands of veteran TV producer turned faith-based, Mark Burnett. He may take UA back to what it once was in the glory days. Tino Balio in his book - *United Artists: The Company That Changed The Film Industry* states, “Despite the impressiveness of UA’s output, the company was torn by dissension. The flaw was that those traits of independence, flamboyance, and melodramatics that characterized the owners’ work as artists could not be checked in the board room, severely handicapping the management of the company through much of its history. The crux of the matter was that the founders held on to the reins of power long after they became inactive as producers.”

The fall of UA began with the failure of *Heaven’s Gate*, leading MGM to buy UA or the company would be bankrupt. It could be that the films that characterized UA were no longer connecting with the audiences. UA had a trademark of releasing films that were totally against the studio system, audiences of the 70’s flocked to see a UA picture because of the taste in cinema at that time in American History. The 80’s brought a time when the “independent” pictures were no longer desired by the public. Blockbuster films were taking over, leaving studios like UA to redouble their efforts in finding crowd pleasers and crowd-drawers. More recently, independent films have become mainstream again, surprisingly. Like the in the 70’s independent films are getting awards. Films like *Birdman* are reminiscent of UA’s times of success with *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and *Black Stallion*. The independents are taking over again, all to the thanks of United Artists. Without this studio, there would be no

independent producer, because of what the Society of Independent Motion Pictures Producers did. They paved the way for U.S. vs. Paramount, which completely changed Hollywood and cinema forever. Independent creativity has flourished since, bringing more personal, more poignant stories to the forefront.

Without United Artists, the studio system of the 30's and 40's (vertical integration) would be still a part of Hollywood. UA also helped bring down the production code, which took losses left and right from UA pictures that poked holes in the code for years until in '67 it was completely abandoned. UA has given cinema back to the creative one's, not the producers. It has given film to the directors – which is their medium, film is a directors medium. Motion pictures have gone through many changes since the 1890's. Griffith, Chaplin, Pickford, and Fairbanks were responsible enough to create a studio where anything was possible. Through the ups and downs and eventual downfall of United Artists, it will still be recognized as the studio that changed Hollywood and gave it to the independents.

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