

**Spring, Katherine, Wilfrid Laurier University. “‘To sustain illusion is all that is necessary’: Voice-Doubling in Early Sound Cinema”**

In July 1929, *Photoplay* magazine reported that a number of stars were using voice doubles, or “dubbers”, in the industry’s newly synchronized sound films. One of these performers was Richard Barthelmess, whose portrayal as a pianist and singer in the star’s first sound film, *Weary River* (1929, First National, WCFTR collections), was exposed by the *Photoplay* article to be the voice of Johnny Murray, a cornetist who played regularly at Los Angeles’s Cocoanut Grove. The article incited outrage among fans, who, as Don Crafton has observed in *The Talkies*, sent a flurry of letters to fan magazines and rebuked the infringing actor; several fans vowed to never again see a moving picture in which Barthelmess was cast. The historical significance of fan reception notwithstanding, my original, archival research of reports published in newspapers across the United States suggests a more nuanced story: the public adopted a more ambiguous stance toward the practice of voice-doubling, one which illustrates what James Lastra has identified as the debate over sonic fidelity and authenticity that accompanied the arrival of synchronized sound technology. The public’s verdict against dubbers was not issued immediately but rather played out for several weeks in the pages of dozens of syndicated newspapers, from the *Portland Oregonian* to the *Greensboro Record*. These reports were clipped and compiled into scrapbooks by a press service (allegedly financed by Barthelmess’s mother), and they are now housed at the Margaret Herrick Library in Los Angeles. An examination of the reports enables today’s historian to trace distinct responses to the practice of voice-doubling during the coming of sound, long before a scene from *Singin’ in the Rain* rendered the practice legendary -- and disdainful.

**Katherine Spring** (PhD, UW-Madison) is Assistant Professor of Film Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Canada. She has published essays on subjects of film sound and music in *Cinema Journal*, *Music and the Moving Image*, and edited anthologies. She is currently working on a monograph about popular songs in Hollywood’s earliest sound films.