



HippFest

18 — 22 March 2026



Why Be Good?

Dir. William A. Seiter | USA | 1929 N/C PG | b&w | English intertitles | 1h 30m + short
With: Colleen Moore, Neil Hamilton, Bodil Rosing

Performing live: Meg Morley (piano), Frank Bockius (percussion)

Programme notes: Pamela Hutchinson

Fri 20 March 20:00 – 21:45 (doors open 19:00)

Screening material courtesy of Park Circus/Warner Bros

Colleen Moore was the epitome of flapper chic in the 1920s, and as the slang of the day would say, she had “it”. Moore is a charmer, whose charisma works instantly on the audience, like a fast-acting drug. She was a huge star in the silent era, but many of her films have now been lost, which means that most people don’t know her work at all. *Why Be Good?* (William A. Seiter, 1929) was only recently rediscovered and restored, and it provides an excellent opportunity to see Hollywood’s foremost flapper in action.

Moore’s Hollywood career began sadly, and badly. The actress spent years suffering in melodramatic roles in melodramatic movies, weighed down by Victorian ringlets. But in 1923, she bobbed her hair and won a role in a daring film called *Flaming Youth*. A flapper icon was born, and six years after arriving in Tinseltown, she became ... an overnight sensation, embodying everything that was fresh and modern and girlish. American schoolgirls flocked to the salon to copy her haircut, in part because Moore was the flapper it was safe to idolise. As in *Why Be Good?* she specialised in playing girls who were only trying on the frenzied life of a flapper for size, who underneath, all along, were wholesome, nice ... and good.

Girls such as vivacious Pert Kelly, the “department store cutie” that Moore plays in this film. At a late-night dance contest, Pert catches the eye of a dashing young man, Winthrop Peabody Jr, played by matinee idol Neil Hamilton (later to find television immortality as Commissioner Gordon in *Batman*). Winthrop is smitten, and he also happens to be the new “personnel cutie” at the store – but that’s where the problems begin. Because as you might expect, a series of misunderstandings and moral misapprehensions stand between the young couple and a happy ending. This exceedingly enjoyable film suggests that the Roaring Twenties were a complicated time to be a teenager, and love a “fine disease”. However it also makes the life of the fast set look like a whole lot of fun – from the penthouse parties of Manhattan to rowdy nightclubs all over town, where the boys and girls can dance the Charleston until dawn.



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Highlights of the film include some seriously nimble, and rapid, dance moves, Eddie Clayton and Lincoln Stedman as Winthrop's boisterous buddies who do a mean rendition of "Sweet Adeline", and some excellently funny intertitles, overbrimming with hip 1920s slang. But most of all, the film's strength is Colleen Moore's hilarious, adorable performance as Pert, whether mooning over a salesfloor mannequin or getting creative with her lipstick. In fact, Pert is far more than just a comic type, she is an empowered, but confused modern woman, who earns as much as her father and feels she has earned the freedom to wear and do what she likes – as long as she thinks it is harmless.

Why Be Good? is from 1929, when the transition to sound was in full swing. It was not what we would think of as a true talkie, but it was made to be screened with a Vitaphone soundtrack of music and sound effects. The film's theme song has the irresistible title of, 'I'm Thirsty for Kisses – Hungry for Love'. For years it was thought that only the soundtrack, and not the images, survived. But happily, a 35mm print was found in Italy in the 90s and a restoration combining the two was completed in 2014. It plays wonderfully well as a silent as you will see, with live musical accompaniment to conjure both the sound of the dancefloor, and the spirit of the Jazz Age.

PAMELA HUTCHINSON

Pamela Hutchinson is the author of The Curse of Queen Kelly (Sticking Place Books) and BFI Film Classics on The Red Shoes and Pandora's Box. Her website SilentLondon.co.uk is devoted to silent cinema.