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## Stage to Studio

James P. Kraft

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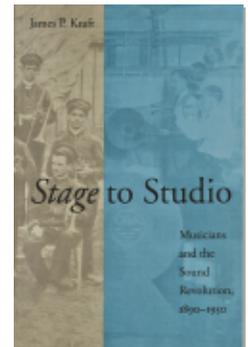
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# Introduction

THE STORY OF the harnessing of sound waves by entertainment industries is less a tale of glamour and personalities than one of new technologies, business enterprise, and workers riding roller coasters of boom and bust. Modern sound technology originated in early developments in telegraphy. In 1877 Thomas A. Edison made the first phonographic recording when he recited a nursery rhyme into a telephone diaphragm fitted with a needle that carved grooves onto a cylinder covered with tinfoil. Edison and others soon made recordings of higher fidelity using spring-driven motors, jeweled needles, flat discs, and other technological contrivances. The recording process reached new heights in 1915, when Edwin S. Pridham and Peter L. Jensen connected a power transformer and a twelve-volt battery to existing electrical circuitry, thereby dramatically increasing the volume of recorded sound.

This development—the loudspeaker—ensured the success of phonography and thus of radio. Radio enthusiasts had been sending broken messages in Morse code without telephone lines since the turn of the century, when inventors first captured the power of electromagnetic waves. The resulting “wireless” primarily served maritime interests until 1906, when Reginald Fessenden demonstrated that more powerful alternators could make “continuous wave” transmissions. By the early 1920s broadcasters were running telephone wires from radio stations to football stadiums to provide new sources of entertainment, and telephone lines were carrying

programs from one station to another, and thus to audiences far removed from the original broadcast. As a result, broadcasters in small and remote communities began hooking up to powerful stations in large cities to gain access to news and entertainment programming.

As radio networks crisscrossed the nation, parallel advances in sound technology revolutionized the motion-picture industry. Inventors first tried to mesh the phonograph and the camera in 1894, when William K. L. Dickson introduced a coin-operated Kinetoscope on Broadway. Problems of synchronizing sounds and photographs, however, delayed the marriage of technologies until 1923, when Lee de Forest, drawing on the work of Theodore Case, copied recorded music onto a narrow filmstrip. By 1926 Western Electric and Warner Bros. had coupled film technology with high-quality amplifier tubes and slow-turning phonographs to produce sound movies. The instant popularity of these movies persuaded industry leaders to abandon silent films in favor of “talkies.” Over the next two decades these developments and others that built onto and sometimes superseded them contributed to the rise of television, frequency-modulation (FM) broadcasting, and other forms of new and improved mass communication and entertainment.

*Stage to Studio* describes and assesses the impact of this sound revolution on one large but atypical group of American workers—professional musicians—during a particularly stressful time of economic and social upheaval, the second quarter of the twentieth century. The deployment of new sound technologies into the mainstream of commercial activity transformed the musicians’ world, turning a diffused, labor-intensive, artisanal structure into a centralized, capital-intensive, highly mechanized one. Technological change affected wages, working conditions, patterns of hiring, definitions of skills, and above all job opportunities. It brought higher incomes and improved standards of living to many, and fortune and fame to a few; but for the majority the change meant dislocation, restricted or lost opportunity, and sustained conflict with management.

Disaffected musicians did not stand passively by while the revolution capsized their lives. On the contrary, in myriad and clever ways, and largely through their union, they sought to control the forces of change. In the decade following the introduction of sound movies, change was so rapid and overpowering that instrumentalists, in the words of one of their union officials, “did not know how to cope with this gigantic problem.”<sup>1</sup> But once a sense of stability settled over the “music sector” of the economy, the union resisted the direction of industrial development or, more specifically,

management control of new production technologies. In the 1940s, under the leadership of James C. Petrillo, musicians won major concessions from industry and in the process pioneered new patterns in labor relations. By midcentury, however, their campaign to “keep music alive” had suffered major setbacks, and they and their union were in retreat.

At the heart of this study, then, are two perennial concerns of historians of labor and technology during and after the Industrial Revolution: What impact did technological change—especially change that increased worker efficiency and productivity and thus benefited employers and consumers—have on workers? And how successfully did workers cope with that impact?

Not surprisingly, definitive answers to these questions are elusive. In one industry after another new methods of production revamped labor processes and capsized the traditional “world of workers.” In many industries labor-saving machinery simplified work tasks and thereby reduced skill levels to the detriment of workers, while in others it generated demands for new skills and talents and increased the challenge of work as well as labor’s bargaining power. In still other industries mechanization created new and highly skilled jobs that paid exceedingly well but fragmented the new craftworkers in ways that undermined labor solidarity and thus union effectiveness.<sup>2</sup> In all of these industries workers struggled, with uneven success, to control the pace of change in the workplace in order to preserve as many of their traditions, privileges, and jobs as possible.<sup>3</sup> The experience of musicians speaks pointedly to all of these scenarios, especially those that illustrate the ambiguous and ironic nature of the changes that technological innovation has so often produced. It suggests too that workers and their unions generally accepted innovation as inevitable, even as they tried to channel its impact to their own advantage.

The musicians’ experience also illuminates the crucial role of government in shaping the impact of technological innovation on industrial development. It thus speaks to larger issues in American history: What is the actual as well as the proper relationship among government, business, and labor, especially as that relationship affects basic matters of social change? Should, can, or must the state be relatively neutral in matters affecting business, labor, and consumers, or should it intervene in those matters in behalf of one or another of the interested parties? And if it should intervene, when and in whose behalf should it do so?<sup>4</sup> The role of the state in industrial relations has never been static. In the 1940s business forged a closer relationship with the federal government than had been the case

during the 1930s; one result of the shift was that the fate of working musicians became closely tied to politics. In this instance, at least, government policy evolved in ways that eroded labor's bargaining power generally and the ability of musicians specifically to control the impact of new technology on their employment.

The story of the resulting struggle of musicians against technological displacement is largely unknown. Labor historians have not ignored musicians, nor have they ignored the impact of technological transformation in the workplace. But they have neglected, dramatically so, the impact of technological change on musicians in their distinctive workplaces—movie and legitimate theaters, supper and dance clubs, radio stations, entertainment pavilions, and the like. Similarly, social and cultural historians have traced the emergence of mass culture in modern America, but their works invariably overlook musicians as workers in the new realm of leisure. Historians of business and technology have only begun to investigate the leisure business and have ignored altogether the conditions of its workforce. The experience of the vast majority of musicians remains distorted in romanticized accounts of popular bands, bandleaders, and singers in the glamorous and too easily glamorized early years of radio, recording, and Hollywood.<sup>5</sup>

This distortion is understandable. Most of us think of musicians as artists who “play” rather than work. The distinctiveness of musical labor obscures the fact that musicians work for a living and have a role in the nation's economy larger than their numbers suggest. The prominence of stars further complicates the story of the rank and file, fostering misconceptions about employment trends, especially the impact of broadcasting and recording on working musicians. It is similarly difficult to study the workplaces of musical workers, which between the 1890s and the 1950s varied too widely to encourage confident generalization. Then, too, musicians as workers had no meaningful apprenticeship and no standard for evaluating skills other than what the public would pay to see. In addition, their work was far more intermittent than that of most workers, often, even regularly, restricted to a season of no more than several months. Finally, the lines between labor and management among musicians were not always clear; indeed, instrumentalists often worked for each other.<sup>6</sup>

For all of these reasons the study of musicians as laboring people is necessarily interdisciplinary, drawing upon the varying perspectives and insights of business, social, and economic history as well as the histories of technology and politics. Yet no history is all-encompassing. This history of musicians as laborers is largely unconcerned with the impact of technology

or social change on the content or form of popular music. It does suggest, however, that changes in popular musical styles coincided with and are related to technological and institutional changes in entertainment industries. In addition, this study is not concerned with all musicians, but with working musicians in mass-entertainment industries under the capitalist mode of production. Its object is instrumentalists who earned most of their income from performances in places of private enterprise with vested interests in utilizing sound technology to maximize profits, reduce production costs, or control labor. This was the largest and most significant group of musicians in the country, but not an all-inclusive category. The study thus ignores the thousands of part-time musicians who typically supplemented their income from other sources with occasional musical performances. It also excludes musicians in symphony orchestras and other groups whose operating costs, including wages, were funded by taxation, endowments, or public donations.

The book is also interested in the development of worker institutions among musicians. Unlike workers in most mass-production industries who confronted the sudden introduction of labor-saving machinery, musicians faced the threat of mechanization *after* they had built a strong national union. Throughout the years covered by this study, that union—the American Federation of Musicians (AFM)—represented the collective voice and power of working musicians, and the union’s response to technological change is thus an important part of the story told here. As large entertainment corporations used new technologies to effect greater efficiency through economies of scale, the role of institutions in the lives of musicians grew larger; not only unions but corporations, courts, and government agencies increasingly influenced their work and their well-being. The tale of musicians and sound technology is thus a story of institutions as well as of individuals and groups of people.

The story speaks to the expansive and paradoxical nature of capitalism. This dynamic mode of production, a driving force in history for more than half a millennium, has produced remarkable economic growth and innumerable examples of success. But it has also brought new and unexpected forms of uncertainty and catastrophe. In the view of Robert Heilbroner, capitalist development has been a “two-sided affair,” its very dynamism having “a built-in insecurity, a self-endangering changefulness.”<sup>7</sup> The experience of musicians testifies to the truth of this observation. It shows that even the most celebrated accomplishments of the capitalist market system can be, and usually are, accompanied by social dislocation.

Although a materialist perspective shapes this study, “nonmaterial” things also affected the lives of working musicians. The values and outlooks of musicians and their employers were so different that they precluded a mutually beneficial compromise of differences over the issues created by technological change. By the 1940s musicians and their employers were contesting more than material interests. On both conscious and subconscious levels they were competing for the moral high ground, and with it the authority to shape public perceptions of their contest. They fought their battles with rhetoric and symbols as well as with shows of economic or organizational muscle, and they did so in the press and the courtroom as well as in union halls and corporate boardrooms.<sup>8</sup>

To the extent that the musicians’ experience is representative, it bodes ill for workers in our own age of rapid technological and institutional innovation. It suggests that the benefits of new technology will be distributed unevenly, and more or less according to power relationships between the major groups affected by technology. The story thus ends on a cautionary note. Is technological change liberating? The only realistic answers to that question would seem to be both yes and no, and it depends. Experience varies and will no doubt continue to vary. But the experience of musicians between the 1890s and the 1950s certainly challenges the uncritical assumption that advancing technology means social and material advancement, or more satisfying work.