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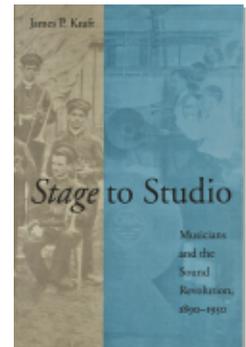
Stage to Studio

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Playing in Hollywood between the Wars

WHILE THE SOUND REVOLUTION eliminated musical jobs across the nation, it did create opportunities in a few media centers, where highly mechanized business firms produced the products that displaced live local talent. As the Great Depression reduced the spending power of the public, scores of ambitious instrumentalists moved to these centers to advance, or often to save, their careers. A fortunate few were able to benefit from capitalist development by relocating to Los Angeles, a growing media center, during the late 1920s and 1930s. Technical innovations in entertainment industries created a completely new work environment there, in which musicians assumed new roles and faced new challenges.

THE BRIGHT LIGHTS of Los Angeles reflected the changing world of working musicians. In the early 1930s theater owners across the city installed new sound systems, thereby displacing pit musicians. As late as 1933 the Paramount, Pantages, Chinese, and Mayan theaters in Hollywood still had sixteen- to eighteen-piece orchestras, while smaller houses such as the Orpheum, Manchester, and Million Dollar employed four- to eight-piece bands. But the popular Loew's State Theater in downtown Los Angeles as well as the houses of Warner Bros., United Artists, and several smaller chains had gone "straight sound."¹

As old avenues closed, new ones opened. In the early 1930s Los Angeles was a principal production center for the film, radio, and record industries. The city's eight major motion-picture companies produced 85 percent of

American films, and the nation's major radio networks and recording companies relied heavily on flagship stations in Los Angeles. Anomalies in an era of severe depression, these expanding entertainment enterprises created many new jobs. By 1935 perhaps one thousand musicians were working in media industry studios in Los Angeles, the number varying at any one time according to production schedules and other factors. Almost all of these jobs were in the glittering suburb of Hollywood at the foothills of the Santa Monica Mountains, a few miles northwest of downtown.²

There, Local 47 of the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) struggled to save theater jobs while trying to exploit new opportunities in film and radio. Organized in 1894, the Los Angeles local had long enjoyed a position of strength in the city's labor movement. In a citadel of anti-unionism, and long before the advent of network radio and the talkies, Local 47 had negotiated closed-shop hiring policies in theaters, clubs, and other places that hired musicians. This success was largely attributable to the fact that before the era of recorded music, employers suffered irretrievable losses when musicians went on strike. The union's power in Los Angeles was not unlike that of AFM locals in other big cities.³

With the coming of sound movies, Local 47 joined carpenters, painters, electrical workers, and stagehands to bring uniform wages and all-union hiring practices to production sectors of the film industry. The 1926 Studio Basic Agreement recognized five unions of skilled workers and set up a joint labor-management committee to air grievances and settle disputes. Local 47 also worked closely with other unions to secure satisfactory working conditions in other fields of employment. The Los Angeles Central Labor Council, which coordinated union activity in the city, recognized the key role of Local 47 in these and other activities. "All of the labor movement of this city," the council's secretary-treasurer wrote the union's board of directors in 1936, "is conscious of the very splendid co-operation that Musicians No. 47 has rendered to the rest of the movement on every occasion when it has been called upon, and all of the movement has been anxious to find the opportunity to return in some measure at least, the co-operation that you have rendered."⁴

The growing entertainment business in Los Angeles, coupled with the nationwide decline of theater work, made Local 47 the fastest-growing affiliate of the AFM in the interwar years. The local nearly quadrupled in size during the 1920s, to about four thousand members, and over the next ten years, while AFM membership in most large cities dropped notably, the ranks of Local 47 swelled to more than six thousand. The increase should be understood in the context of general population trends in Los

Angeles, one of the nation's fastest-growing cities throughout these years.⁵ But the number of AFM musicians in Los Angeles grew at an even faster rate than the local population. Even New York, which supported more band members than any other city in the nation, had fewer union musicians than Los Angeles on a per-capita basis. By 1940 Local 47 was the largest trade union in Southern California and the third largest branch of the AFM, behind only the branches in New York and Chicago, other major media centers.⁶

The influx of musicians from across the nation created problems for the Los Angeles local. Officials realized that the union's future depended on keeping the supply and demand of musicians in equilibrium; the AFM, however, had always recognized the right as well as the need of musicians to travel freely between union jurisdictions. Transfer members therefore expected easy access to local jobs, while resident musicians demanded protection against outsiders. In 1929 Local 47 appealed to the national union for help in dealing with the problem.

In response to the appeal, Joseph N. Weber, president of the national union, addressed the problem at the 1929 annual convention. "Members of the Federation have gone to Los Angeles by the hundreds and have been disillusioned," Weber told the convention, and were now "subject to misery and want." More important, Weber placed the Los Angeles motion-picture studios, and eventually the radio networks too, under the jurisdiction of the national executive board. He also empowered officials of Local 47 to bar transfer members from movie studios for a year, and he put J. W. Gillette, a former president of Local 47, in charge of enforcing the restriction. Gillette filled a new position, international studio representative, the responsibilities of which were independent of Local 47. He soon became known as the "czar of the studios."⁷

The yearlong ban on employment of newcomers in studios discouraged some instrumentalists from moving to Los Angeles. Yet hundreds of depression-worn musicians made the sacrifice for a chance to secure studio work at a later date. They moved to Los Angeles even though union rules prohibited newcomers from accepting full-time work as musicians for three months after their arrival. Many newcomers found part-time work in clubs, hotels, or private engagements. Many also worked outside the music business.⁸

AFTER A YEAR in Los Angeles, instrumentalists could seek work from studio contractors. The contractors, often men with limited musical skills,

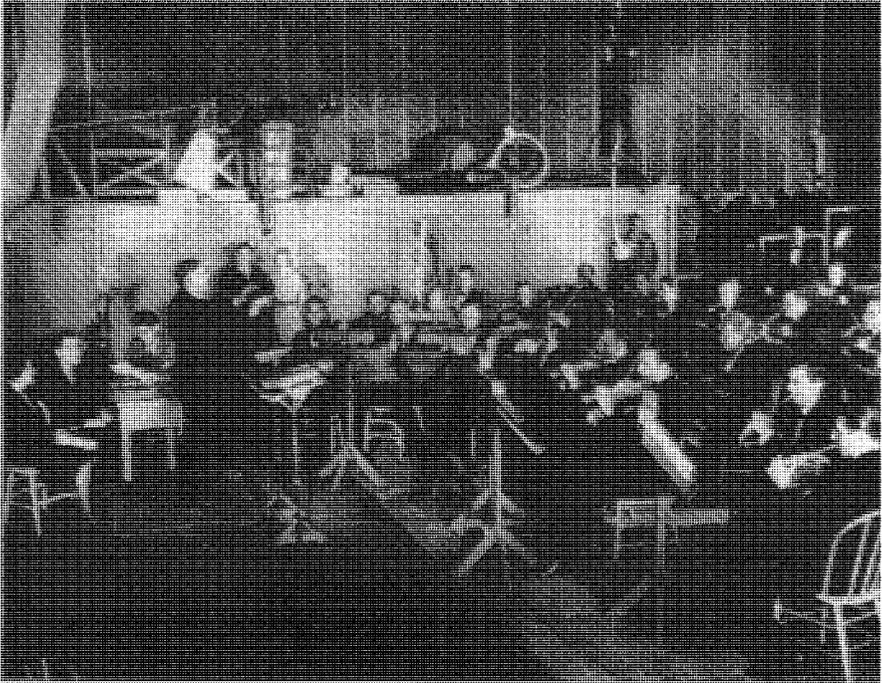
had agreements with studios to supply orchestras for film production. Through the kind of favoritism this system encouraged, a handful of contractors dominated the market, and the musicians they favored had regular employment. To facilitate the hiring process, contractors kept lists of telephone numbers of available sidemen. For each position in an orchestra, they arranged the names of instrumentalists according to first-, second-, and third-call rank. By the early 1930s, when each of the major motion-picture companies maintained thirty- to forty-piece orchestras, contractors employed about three hundred musicians who worked twenty-five to forty hours a week. They used another one hundred to two hundred instrumentalists on a part-time basis, chiefly when studios augmented their orchestras for major productions or when regular members were absent.⁹

The contractors' control over hiring was a major source of dissatisfaction for instrumentalists, whose employment and income depended on a small clique of insiders. Even when composers or conductors requested individual musicians, as they sometimes did, contractors might ignore the requests. Musicians therefore carefully nurtured relationships with contractors and kept their complaints about the hiring process to themselves. As one instrumentalist put it, "You stand a chance of losing a quarter or half the income for a year if a big contractor, like X, becomes cool to you." Another explained, "You're on a contractor's list and you can be removed from it in a minute." Attitudes toward the contract system might also depend on one's own skill and reputation. Al Hendrickson, a Texas-born guitarist who worked on five thousand films during a remarkable forty-year career, had few complaints about the hiring process. Hendrickson suggested that contractors hired the most capable and dependable musicians. "The guys who did the work over the years," he recalled, "did the job right."¹⁰

Instrumentalists who benefited from this structure enjoyed some of the best wages and working conditions in the profession. Seated behind music stands with their backs to movie screens and surrounded by hanging microphones and busy soundmen, motion-picture musicians were the envy of other instrumentalists. (In the late 1930s, when public-school teachers earned less than \$3,000 a year, sidemen in movie orchestras might make \$10,000.) Illustrative of this pattern is the career of Art Smith, a clarinetist and saxophonist who moved to Los Angeles from Caldwell, Idaho, in the 1930s. In 1938 Smith got a job at Disney Studios, but for several months he worked only two days a week, earning a minimum of \$30 for each of two three-hour sessions. In 1939, however, he secured steady work at Paramount Pictures, earning \$200 a week for five consecutive days of work.

Smith clearly preferred this to other lines of musical employment. "Motion picture work," he later said, "was a marvelous way to make a living."¹¹

The experience of violinist Eudice Shapiro provides a different perspective on the character of film work, since among other things it speaks to the status of women in film orchestras. A graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia and a former student of renowned violinist Efrem Zimbalist, Shapiro moved to Los Angeles as a young woman whose solid reputation had already made connections for her in the film industry. After enduring Local 47's one-year clearance period, she freelanced at Paramount, Universal, United Artists, RKO, and other studios. World War II created new opportunities for her as for many women in other occupations. In 1943 she replaced the outgoing concertmaster at RKO, a job that utilized her ability to solo and to help conductors and composers commu-



Leo Forbstein conducting the Vitaphone Recording Orchestra at Warner Bros., 1930. Early in his career Forbstein had been a violinist with a St. Louis theater orchestra; at Warner Bros. he headed the music department and pioneered in scoring sound films. (*Hearst Collection, Cinema-Television Library, University of Southern California*)

nicate their ideas to instrumentalists. Shapiro was the only female instrumentalist in such a prestigious position in the industry. But in that position she received, in accordance with union rules, twice the wages of sidemen and earned approximately \$10,000 a year. Aside from her higher pay, however, Shapiro was treated “just the same as everyone else.”¹²

The work was stressful. Producers paying for every wasted minute insisted that instrumentalists perform precisely and efficiently. That fact put a premium on sight-reading skills, for musicians received even the most complicated scores only when they were scheduled to play them. Al Hendrickson admitted that even the best sight-readers worried on some jobs. Hendrickson remembered arriving at one early-morning recording session “just in time for the downbeat” and finding a complicated opening passage written especially for him. “The first cue was a solo that started on the highest fret on the classical guitar.” After an uncomfortable delay, he recalled later, “I worked it out, some way. Things like that happened to all of us.”¹³

Hard-to-read charts and difficult musical passages put special strains on newcomers struggling to establish reputations. “There’s a lot of pressure for the guy just breaking in,” one studio musician reported; “the clock is going and you’re sitting with a 50-piece orchestra.” And if “you can’t do it,” he added, “there are 50 other guys waiting to have a shot at it.” Indeed, making it in the studios required far more than reading charts under pressure. Musicians had to build and maintain intricate webs of informal contacts not only with contractors but with composers, conductors, and an inner circle of leading musicians who could influence contractors’ decisions. As one instrumentalist said, “Getting into this jungle is very, very difficult. You have to be very smart.”¹⁴

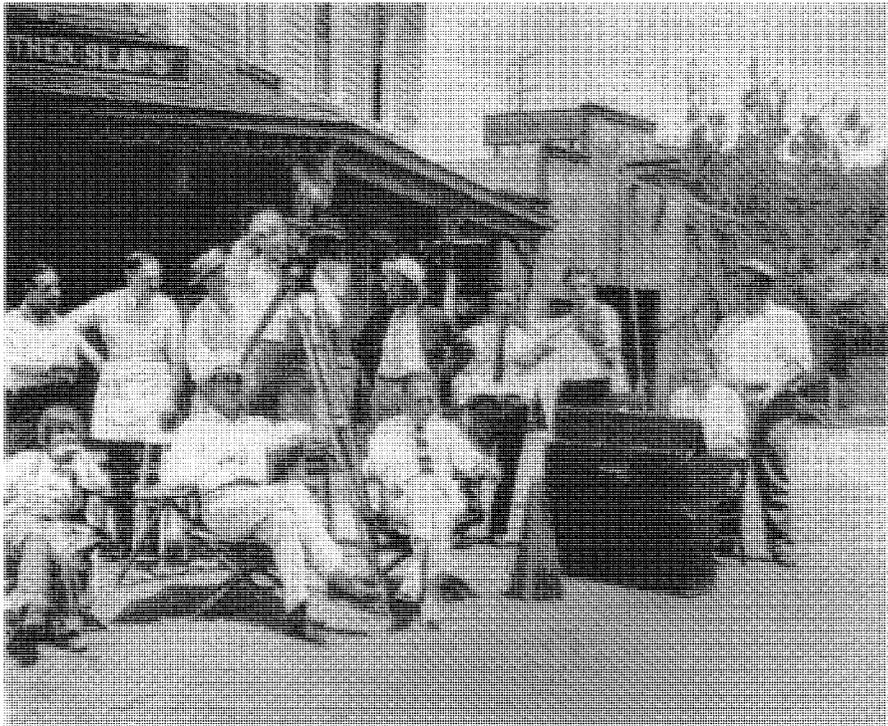
These and other problems affected the lives of studio musicians in the depression decade. Violinist Louis Kaufman, who began working in Los Angeles studios in 1934, has offered insights into how technology altered the playing techniques of instrumentalists. Studio microphones, he explained, pick up noises that audiences in concert halls do not hear. As a result, Kaufman said, “You have to be a little bit more careful with the bow pressure, you do not dare press and get the extremes of forte that you could get in a hall in which the airspace swallows up a lot of the surface noise.” Kaufman noted another difference as well. “The vibrato,” he stated, “has to be somewhat heightened, it has to be somewhat faster than you really need for a public hall.” He also suggested that playing to microphones made it difficult for musicians to transmit emotion: it was “something of a

trick getting around the surface and yet getting the intensity at the same time.”¹⁵

In addition to instrumentalists like Kaufman who worked in large, indoor studio orchestras, a coterie of “sideline” musicians worked in jobs that required them to go wherever scenes were filmed. Their task was to play atmosphere or mood music that inspired actors to accomplish the emotive scenes necessary for successful melodrama. Silent-screen star Blanche Sweet, whose career was apparently ended by the talkies, said that sideline musicians had a major role in the production of her movies. Their music, she recalled, “seemed to help everyone from the stars to the technicians, stage hands, carpenters, electricians, everybody.” Colleen Moore, who starred in the film *Irene* in 1926, agreed: “We always had mood music on the sets. I had a three-piece orchestra that played continually, not only to put us in the mood but to amuse us between scenes, since I was making comedies and needed to keep in high spirits.” But not all moviemakers used sideline musicians. Moore recalled that the renowned director D. W. Griffith, who made films until 1931, “never used any music while he was filming. He always said that he would never employ actors who could not feel the role enough to weep at rehearsals.”¹⁶

Sideline work occasionally led to acting jobs, since union rules encouraged moviemakers to use union musicians in music-playing roles. In such cases producers sent musicians to local costume companies to be dressed appropriately. Civil War uniforms, Roman armor, and western clothes were among the outfits musician-actors wore. Despite the possibility of bit-part appearances in motion pictures, many musicians disdained sideline work, since the music sideliners played seldom appeared in film soundtracks. Yet union pay scales for sideline musicians were comparable to those of studio musicians. In the late 1930s sideline instrumentalists made \$15 to \$40 a day for work that was intermittent as well as undemanding. “On sidelines,” one musician recalled, “I spent most of my time playing cards and reading books.”¹⁷

Closer to the top of the music hierarchy in the film industry were composers, whose positions were not unlike those of staff employees of the studios themselves. Composers usually worked frantically for several weeks after the end of filming, matching music and film scenes. In doing so in the early 1930s, they used small machines called Movieolas that showed the film and a “click-track” that helped them coordinate music and movie sequences. However glamorous it seemed to outsiders, the task of putting film to music was tedious and nerve-racking. In 1945 Ernest Gold recalled



Sideline musicians on location, 1927. Movie producers often hired instrumentalists to inspire actors and actresses during the filming of emotional scenes. Here musicians await cue during filming of *Johnny Get Your Hair Cut*, a Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer production starring Jackie Coogan. Seated left to right are Coogan, Coogan's father, and MGM executive Joel Engel. Director B. Reeves Eason stands to the right of the cameraman. (*Bison Archives*)

his first experience as a film composer. “When I arrived at the studio that afternoon I was given a stopwatch, pencils and paper, and the cue sheets,” he said. “I was also told I was only allowed nineteen men in the orchestra since it was a picture with a small budget.” After completing the score—twenty-five minutes of music—in five days and nights, Gold learned that new footage had been added to the film and that he must revise the music within a limited time. “I do not intend to work at this breakneck speed again,” he said of the experience, “nor do I recommend anybody to do so.”¹⁸

Composers typically had musical assistants called orchestrators, who

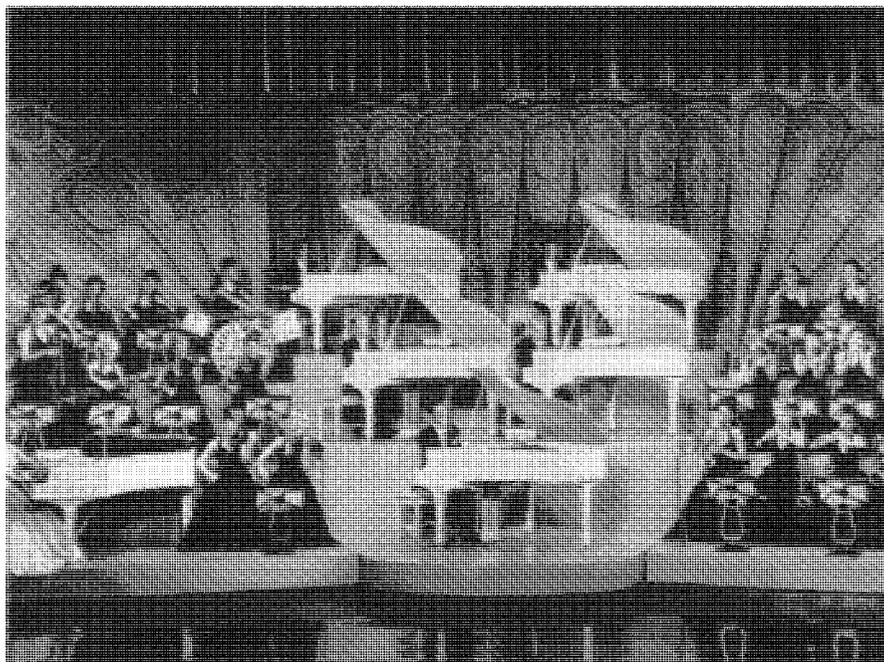
were seldom bound to a single studio but worked instead for composers, writing and rewriting scores for individual instruments. Copyists made legible scores of their writings for orchestra members and in doing so altered particular passages as problems arose in the final stages of production. A separate musical director might coordinate all of this activity, though some composers acted as their own musical directors and even as orchestra leaders. In the 1940s such major composers as Max Steiner, Adolph Deutsch, Alfred Newman, and André Previn filled several of these roles and earned several thousand dollars per film.¹⁹

The early career of Austrian-born Max Steiner, head of RKO's music department in the late 1920s and 1930s, personalizes the experience of film composers in these years. In 1929 this former New York vaudeville pianist turned theater bandleader was conducting an orchestra in Boston when the production chief of RKO offered to make him musical director of the entire studio at a weekly salary of \$450. Steiner did an outstanding job. His best-known work at RKO, the now-classic film *King Kong*, starring Robert Armstrong and Fay Wray, appeared in 1933. Working night and day for eight weeks, Steiner achieved a sense of realism in this highly unrealistic movie about a prehistoric beast struggling to survive in a modern urban setting. With simple themes distinguishing the leading characters and musical passages that heightened the drama at critical moments, Steiner's music added tension and intensity to the experience of seeing the film. It underscored the emotions of terror, loneliness, anxiety, and love that the film's director sought to evoke. The eerie melodies of harps as the boat approached Skull Island, the descending three-note motif that identified the monster, and the frenzied crescendos of strings, cymbals, and drums that accompanied his fall from the Empire State Building showed the power of music in film. Even the producer, Merian C. Cooper, agreed that much of the movie's popularity was due to Steiner's music.²⁰

Ironically, movies made during these years, even those with musical themes or subjects, concealed the crisis facing musicians. Many films made in Hollywood's Golden Age gave the impression that musicians were a fully employed, happy-go-lucky group. The many musicals of the early 1930s gave an especially deceptive image of instrumentalists. *King of Jazz*, a 1930 Universal film about Paul Whiteman and his forty-piece orchestra, for example, showed musicians working in lavish settings and wearing the finest clothes. Audiences heard singer Bing Crosby speak of the "higher, finer things of life" while they watched band members in white tuxedos and top hats playing grand pianos in the most opulent of settings. Members of

Whiteman's orchestra may have enjoyed what Crosby called the "silver lining," but the average musician was more likely to be down and out.²¹

THROUGHOUT THE 1930s all three radio networks—NBC, CBS, and Mutual—broadcast programs from Los Angeles. Their stations there provided lucrative full- and part-time work for a few hundred talented, and fortunate, instrumentalists. A half-dozen smaller stations in the city, each of which occasionally carried network programs, also employed orchestras for live broadcasts. Altogether, in 1935 the industry employed perhaps four hundred musicians in Los Angeles. The executive board of the AFM handled labor negotiations with the networks, but Local 47 regulated the conditions of work.²²



Scene from *Out of This World*, Paramount Pictures, 1944. Hollywood filmmakers typically portrayed musicians as happy-go-lucky and fairly well paid at a time when growing numbers of them were down and out. Here an "orchestra" of "glamour girls"—only two of whom were professional musicians—played accompaniment to the famous pianists Carmen Cavallaro, Ted Fiorito, Henry King, Ray Noble, and Joe Reichman. (Courtesy of Jerry Anker)

The local classified network orchestras as “sustaining” or “commercial.” Sustaining orchestras, typically of eighteen to twenty-five pieces, contracted to work five or six days a week for forty or fifty weeks a year on “nonsponsored” programs. Their members were known in the industry as staff musicians. Sustaining orchestras apparently became more and more versatile during the 1930s. They played classical as well as popular music, often backed up by well-known singers, and even played “bridges” and “cues” for dramatic programs or comedy shows. One study of music in early radio notes that staff musicians “might be called upon to accompany a classical singer, to glide through a lilting Strauss waltz or to perform a rousing Sousa march.”²³

Violinist Lenny Atkins later recalled his work in a sustaining orchestra in Los Angeles during this period. “Every day was different,” he remembered; “sometimes we worked twelve hours a day, sometimes we worked three.” He might be called to work anytime between eight A.M. and four P.M., and he spent most of his time rehearsing for live broadcasts. Although instrumentalists often tired of playing familiar songs, they seldom complained about their work.²⁴ The federation required radio stations to hire staff orchestras of a minimum size on a yearly basis. This meant that musicians in sustaining orchestras enjoyed the security of guaranteed incomes and two weeks’ vacation as well. Their weekly earnings of \$100 to \$120 meant annual incomes of \$5,500 to \$6,500, compared with an average of \$1,500 for skilled factory workers at the time.²⁵ Commercial orchestras worked differently. Usually fifteen- to twenty-piece groups hired to serve weekly sponsored programs, they played for several shows each week. They also played “intros” and “themes” for talk-oriented programs and provided music to back up well-known singers and musicians. Some commercial programs featured celebrity traveling bands stopping in Los Angeles for weekly shows. The Kay Kyser Orchestra played in cities coast to coast, for example, but returned to Los Angeles once a week for NBC’s *Lucky Strike Program*.²⁶ The experience of Henry Gruen, a saxophonist who moved to Los Angeles in 1938 from San Antonio, shows one side of the life of musicians who worked part-time in network commercial orchestras. In 1941 Gruen secured a job in Ozzie Nelson’s fifteen-piece band at NBC. He arrived for work at five P.M., then spent an hour and a half rehearsing for a live broadcast that lasted from seven to seven-thirty. At a time when a pound of good steak cost 15 cents and a loaf of bread 10 cents, Gruen earned \$25 to \$35 per program.²⁷

Local 47 required small network-affiliated stations to hire musicians on

a full-time basis. The union yardstick for orchestra size was still station wattage: the more powerful the station, the larger the orchestra must be. Thus, KFWB had to have an eight-piece band while KMPC got by with only four musicians. Wages at these stations were 10 to 30 percent below those at network stations, and the musicians they employed performed in sponsored as well as nonsponsored programs.²⁸

Hierarchy among musical workers in radio varied according to the size and value of the stations they worked for. In all stations the orchestra leader occupied a position of authority over other musicians. Leaders often contracted for instrumentalists as well as conducted the orchestra, and they earned at least twice as much as the highest-paid sidemen. Their responsibilities justified the differential. Leaders decided the arrangement and orchestration of songs as well as the tempo and moods, and they performed various administrative duties. At some stations they dealt with sponsors and program directors in planning musical shows, and everywhere they provided sidemen with musical scores, which meant they worked with copyists and arrangers as well as union stewards. Larger stations employed orchestra managers or musical directors to assist the leaders, though leaders sometimes hired their own assistants. Popular bandleaders like Fred Waring, Guy Lombardo, and Paul Whiteman worked in several capacities and received especially high salaries.²⁹

Program directors had final authority in matters of production. These were men with the technical skills and knowledge necessary to oversee the production of various kinds of programs. Some had backgrounds in music; others, in acting, writing, or radio announcing. The general responsibility of program directors was to ensure that shows had unity, balance, and quality. The directors worked closely with studio performers, especially orchestra leaders. During rehearsals they timed the parts of programs, arranged the position and volume of microphones, and otherwise worked to make certain that the live performances succeeded. When programs aired, it was their job to see that they began and ended on time, "on the nose." During performances directors relied on standardized hand signals to communicate with bandleaders. An outstretched arm with pointed finger, for example, told leaders to begin the program, while a finger rotating clockwise meant to speed up the tempo. Other signals instructed the leaders to move closer to the microphone, fade out the music, or stand by for upcoming cues.³⁰

The program director gave these signals from inside a control booth, the nerve center of the production. These small rooms, found in all Holly-

wood studios, varied in size and shape but not in function. The booths housed many of the technologies that enabled broadcasters to regulate what went on the air. Sound flowed into and out of the booths via electrical circuitry, though they were thought of, paradoxically, as soundproof because their design blocked out the sounds of the performers. The most prominent feature of every booth was the control, or mixing board, equipped with volume controls for each microphone, a master volume control, and various dials measuring volume levels. Large overhead clocks helped the director and engineers check the timing of the show, and glass windows, loudspeakers, and microphones helped them see, hear, and communicate with studio performers. In large stations live performances flowed from these control booths to a master control room, which distributed the programs to transmitters and network lines.³¹

The language of the studios throws light on more than the production process, for it graphically illustrates what had happened in the musicians' world. Control over music production had shifted from the stages of theaters and the floors of dance halls to small enclosed booths in industry studios. The shift created a much more absolute control by transferring power from workers to management. In the old work setting, direction of music was in the hands of "leaders," men who by virtue of their own musical skills "led" other musicians in the production process. In the automated studios, in contrast, control of production was centralized in aptly named "control" booths, where men who were not themselves musicians signaled commands to musicians according to the measurements of technological instruments. The language they used no doubt affected the self-perceptions of both management and labor. If "master" controllers directed performances from "control" booths, what did that make of musicians? Had they become minions, or even automatons?

FILM AND RADIO orchestras in Los Angeles between the 1920s and early 1940s included very few African Americans or Hispanics. Reedman Art Smith, who worked in both film and radio at that time, said later, "I would have been shocked to have seen a black musician in the studios." One historian has suggested that the studios were hesitant to employ black band-leaders, and thus the sidemen in their bands, for fear of offending white audiences. In fact, Cab Calloway, emcee of a prime-time network radio show in the early 1940s, and pianist-composer Duke Ellington, whose music graced several Paramount films, were two of the few African Americans who worked in radio or film on a regular basis. Among the few Mexican Americans who found work in studios were the members of Los

Madrugadores, a musical group that performed during early-morning hours, from four to six A.M., on stations KMPC and KELW (Burbank). Minorities generally found studio jobs only in productions made specifically for minority audiences.³²

Like the rest of America before the civil rights movement of the 1960s, Los Angeles was racially segregated during the interwar years. African Americans lived and worked mostly in the southern parts of the city, Mexican Americans in the east. In fact, black musicians in Los Angeles had organized their own union by 1920. A decade later, the all-black Local 767 had about two hundred members as well as its own headquarters and its own staff of business agents to police clubs and restaurants in which black instrumentalists performed. To protect each other, the white and black locals had a common wage scale. According to John TeGroen, vice president of Local 47 in the 1940s and president when the two locals amalgamated in 1952, relations between the two unions were always amicable. Local 767, he said, never demanded greater access to studio work, though the absence of civil rights laws no doubt encouraged this reticence.³³ One place where African Americans might have complained about segregation and its consequences was the national conventions of the AFM, but in fact few black locals, including Local 767, sent delegates to the conventions before the 1930s. Race relations, especially in the Deep South, made things difficult for those that did.³⁴ The lack of influence at national conventions that these relations created weakened the voice of black musicians within the AFM and thus helped perpetuate some of the problems they faced.

If the near absence of black and Hispanic musicians in film and radio work was largely a matter of racial discrimination, the fact of the absence shed light on basic matters of musical skill. Producers and directors in film and radio placed far less value on improvisation and individuality of interpretation, musical qualities commonly attributed to black and Hispanic instrumentalists, than on sight-reading skills. In other words, the technical changes that gave rise to new opportunities in media centers also encouraged specific definitions of virtuosity. Skills that worked to advantage in club or theater work, or even in record production, did not have the same advantage in film and radio work. Still, the paucity of minorities reflected the importance of social acceptability in studio employment. The oversupply of instrumentalists allowed bandleaders to be highly selective in staffing film and radio orchestras. With so large a pool of available talent, they could and did use personal and social factors, including race, as a basis for hiring or refusing to hire individual musicians.

Minorities were more visible in the city's expanding recording industry.

Los Madrugadores made dozens of recordings during the depression decade; one member of the band estimated that the group recorded over two hundred discs for seven different companies, including industry leaders RCA-Victor, Columbia, and Decca. Black musicians found recording work as well, mostly in fledgling independent companies specializing in blues recordings. The deepening pool of talented entertainers in Los Angeles combined with technological developments in record production to spur the growth of the city's recording industry throughout this era.³⁵ Locals 47 and 767 had strict guidelines for the employment of instrumentalists at record companies. The companies hired musicians not on a staff, or full-time, basis, but by the recording session. In the late 1930s instrumentalists earned at least \$24 for a two-hour session and at least \$6 for each additional half-hour. For radio transcriptions, which were often simply recordings of live broadcasts, they earned \$18 an hour.³⁶

Regardless of race or ethnicity, most musicians who worked in studios supplemented their incomes by working in clubs and hotels. Some studio players, especially part-timers, earned the bulk of their income in such places. Many instrumentalists worked on Sunset Boulevard in clubs like *Ciro's*, the *Mocambo*, and the *Trocadero*. The *Venice Ballroom* in nearby Santa Monica, the *Biltmore Bowl* in downtown Los Angeles, and other such places hired house bands of eight to ten pieces to perform six or seven nights a week. The city's largest dance clubs were the *Palomar Ballroom* on Vermont Avenue and the *Palladium* on Sunset Boulevard, where the biggest bands played. Dozens of cozier places featured trios or quartets.³⁷ Musicians typically secured casual work through bandleaders who had agreements with proprietors. Although bandleaders actually paid their sidemen, Local 47 enforced minimum wage scales and maximum hours for casual musicians. Proprietors who violated those standards found themselves labeled unfair and denied the services of union musicians, while musicians who violated the union sanction were fined or suspended from the union.

During these years broadcasters, using microphones and telephone wires, began to pick up musical performances at hotels and dance clubs and transmit them across the country. One example was the popular broadcasts from the *Coconut Grove* at the luxurious *Ambassador Hotel* on Wilshire Boulevard, where the bands of Artie Shaw, Ben Bernie, and Anson Weeks played regularly. The management of such locales were eager to permit the broadcasts in return for the free advertising, while the musicians did not complain of the free exposure. Yet instrumentalists saw such

broadcasts as a threat to their jobs, and their union sought to control them. Thus, Local 47 required hotels, theaters, and dance clubs to pay their instrumentalists 25 to 35 percent above union scale when they permitted remote broadcasts. It waived the surcharge, however, if the station carrying the remote broadcast employed a staff orchestra.³⁸ Such union-imposed rules reflected the balance of power between the union and management in the music business. They also reflected the fact that workers as well as managers could use technological innovations to advantage.

Much of the music that played in Los Angeles during the 1930s was the energetic and lighthearted tunes of the swing era. Orchestras filled dance floors with the rhythmic beat of Glenn Miller's "In the Mood" or Benny Goodman's "Stompin' at the Savoy." After a few upbeat songs couples often requested soft ballads such as Hoagy Carmichael's "Stardust" or Jerome Kern's "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes." At the Ambassador Hotel, pianist Gus Arnheim and his band opened each performance with a smooth rendition of Irving Berlin's "Say It with Music." Other bands introduced the melodies of Cole Porter, George Gershwin, and Rodgers and Hart. In other nightspots such as the Cotton Club in Culver City, audiences preferred the less structured improvisations of jazz played over the chord progressions of Duke Ellington, William "Count" Basie, and Earl "Fatha" Hines. Across the city, music pulled much of the public into a lively nightlife. Los Angeles became a city oriented toward entertainment—as business as well as pleasure.³⁹

A closer look at the character of casual work underscores the uniqueness of the workplace of most musicians. Casual bands usually worked in dimly lit, crowded places late at night. They performed before live and sometimes rowdy audiences who expected a wide variety of popular songs played with a traditional sense of sequence, unity, and finality. This contrasted notably with the situation of studio musicians, who typically performed in bright, spacious settings during daylight hours. In addition, the latter often played for people hundreds of miles away and even further removed in time. Also unlike casual bands, studio orchestras performed disjointed strains of music designed to match the changing scenes in films or the unfolding plots of radio programs. Differences in work environments, in other words, went far beyond matters of wages, hiring patterns, or divisions of labor.

The contrast in work settings had important implications for the culture of the workplace. Many places where casual musicians worked, even before the end of Prohibition in 1933, encouraged the consumption of

alcohol. One result of this was that musicians often drank on the job. The permissive underground atmosphere of some clubs and dance halls also encouraged the use of narcotics. Some casual musicians drank or used drugs to be sociable with customers or proprietors; others did so to relieve stress and enhance their performance. After smoking marijuana, one musician explained, "I felt I could go on playing for years without running out of ideas or energy. . . . I began to feel very happy and sure of myself." For a variety of reasons, however, the use of alcohol and drugs was unusual in studios. Daytime hours of operation and the absence of bars partly explain this. But trumpeter Bob Fleming, who worked at MGM in the late 1930s, suggested that alcohol and drugs were incompatible with the nature of studio work. "Musicians who were drinking or on drugs," Fleming explained, "were not apt to be great sightreaders. We couldn't just go into a jam session, or go into jazz." The fact that studio musicians had substantial income at stake if they fell out of favor with contractors also encouraged sobriety in the workplace.⁴⁰

The technologies that gave rise to high-paying jobs made possible a distinctive lifestyle for the most affluent musicians. While instrumentalists in casual bands typically rented homes in low-income neighborhoods and drove inexpensive automobiles, growing numbers of fully employed studio players purchased large houses in posh neighborhoods and new cars to match their surroundings. Many also developed a fondness for golf, and their numbers were sufficiently large to lead the trade paper of Local 47 to cover city golf tournaments and keep readers informed of how well, or poorly, union members played. How musicians lived, as one instrumentalist explained, "depended on each one's attitude, and [on] their good or bad habits."⁴¹

MUSICAL EMPLOYMENT in the Los Angeles radio industry increased notably after 1936, when AT&T altered a longstanding pricing policy. Previously the phone company had billed broadcasters for use of telephone lines that connected network affiliates in a way that encouraged the production of network programs in or near New York. Under that system the company calculated fees on the assumption that radio signals went first to New York, whence they were relayed elsewhere, as had indeed been the reality when radio began. By charging networks by the mile from the point at which a radio program originated to its transmission facilities in New York City and then adding a mileage fee from New York to the point of reception, AT&T made it costly to produce programs on the West Coast.

Labeling this “double rate” pricing procedure an “unnatural” trade barrier, President Franklin D. Roosevelt authorized a federal investigation of AT&T in 1935. The company promptly eliminated the procedure, and the number of radio shows produced in Los Angeles increased. This political intervention against a monopolistic business practice had important implications for Los Angeles musicians.⁴²

The new opportunities it generated brought with them new problems. The incomes of those in position to seize the opportunities rose impressively, but more and more musicians were frustrated by their inability to get studio work. The growing disparity between rich and poor musicians divided instrumentalists into quarreling factions. Underemployed instrumentalists, the larger of the factions, complained that a few contractors monopolized the work and fixed orchestra performances so that a handful of sidemen and bandleaders worked around the clock. A single contractor, they pointed out, managed eighteen commercial radio shows. They also complained of the practice of paying overtime wages to fully employed musicians while so many others were unemployed or underemployed. Contractors justified overtime wages by explaining that production problems arose suddenly and required quick fixing; they could not, they insisted, predict when, or how long, their employees might need to work overtime. Yet there was more to the problem than that. Musicians as artists were not interchangeable entities. Regularly employed musicians were known quantities, highly skilled and dependable. Replacing them on short notice with musicians of unknown quality and reliability was a risk most businessmen were unwilling to take when they did not have to.⁴³

Another source of grievance for unemployed and underemployed musicians was broadcasters’ growing practice of inviting well-known bandleaders and their bands from outside Los Angeles to come perform on network commercial programs. To help make their invitations more alluring, broadcasters worked with talent agencies to book the outside bands in clubs, hotels, and cafés during their stay in Los Angeles. When Jimmy Dorsey and his orchestra were in Los Angeles to perform on NBC’s *Kraft Cheese Program* in the mid-1930s, for example, they also played at the Palomar Ballroom. That engagement deprived thirty-three local musicians of at least one night of employment.⁴⁴

As outside groups grabbed more and more business, local musicians proposed that employers who hired outsiders pay the union a “standby” fee equal to the wages of the musicians displaced. In June 1936, after bands from New York replaced local orchestras on the weekly shows of Jack

Benny, Bing Crosby, and George Burns and Gracie Allen, officials of Local 47 asked the national union for help in resolving this problem. Cliff Webster of the local told the president of the national union that the anger of local musicians at the influx of outsiders had grown “to the point of actual threats of personal violence. . . . When men see their bread and butter taken away from them by outsiders, they do not reason things out.”⁴⁵

To quiet the rising tide of protest, Local 47 and the international executive board acted to stem the influx of outsiders. In July 1936 the executive board ruled that conductors entering a jurisdiction to work at one establishment could work at no other establishment in the jurisdiction. A month later the federation ruled that studio orchestras must be composed of local musicians, and that orchestras under contract to play regularly for the networks could engage in other work only if they paid the union half of their earnings from the other jobs.⁴⁶

In 1937 the international studio representative of the AFM in Los Angeles adopted additional measures to prevent a handful of instrumentalists from monopolizing studio work. Musicians employed in sustaining bands could no longer play on commercial radio programs, and those who made more than \$77.50 a week in one studio could not work in other studios. Like the federation’s earlier efforts to spread the work in theaters and radio stations, these rules caused constant headaches for local officials. “It’s hard to tell a man he can’t make a buck,” said John TeGroen, vice president of Local 47.⁴⁷ Clearly the new rules penalized full-time musicians, and musicians in heavy demand protested it. But the union insisted on the new rules, which shaped patterns of studio work until the courts outlawed them in the early 1950s.

THE RISE OF studio musicians and the elimination of theater orchestras were two parts of the same process. Mechanization in the music business drastically reduced total musical employment but created unprecedented opportunities for some instrumentalists in Los Angeles and a few other media centers. The fact that business firms depended heavily on the skills and reliability of the musicians they employed gave Local 47 considerable clout in industrial relations, but the influx of outsiders saturated the market and undermined job security. The resulting competition splintered instrumentalists as workers, and their union could only meliorate, not eliminate, the resulting discord.