



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Stage to Studio

James P. Kraft

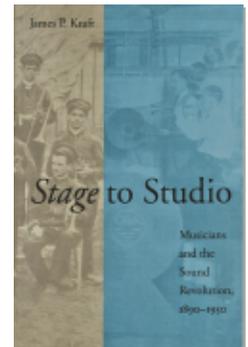
Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Kraft, James P.

Stage to Studio: Musicians and the Sound Revolution, 1890-1950.

Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003.

Project MUSE.[muse.jhu.edu/book/60326](https://muse.jhu.edu/book/60326).



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/60326>

---

Access provided at 19 Oct 2019 01:33 GMT with no institutional affiliation



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

## Conclusion

THIS STUDY HAS EXPLORED aspects of the history of American musicians from the 1890s to 1950. It has focused on how the advent of new technologies in rapidly succeeding generations of greater complexity, higher quality, and increased productivity in several mass-entertainment industries gave rise to gigantic vertically integrated, capital-intensive, geographically centralized business enterprises. It has focused too on how those technologically driven developments transformed the working world, and thus the social and economic well-being, of musicians. More specifically, the study has tried to show that the introduction of sound movies, network radio, and high-fidelity recordings turned diffused, labor-intensive job markets and workplaces into more centralized and mechanized ones; and it has tried to describe and assess the social and economic costs of this transformation for working musicians. These final pages offer a chance to reflect on these changes and on how the musicians' experience of them illuminates points at which labor history and the history of business, technology, and society intersect. Specifically, they speak to the relationship between work and technology, the response and counterresponse of labor and management to technological change, and the varying roles of government and the market as ultimate arbiters in regulating the consequences of that change. This is also an opportunity to reflect on the implications of continuing technological change for American workers.

THE STORY OF musicians and the sound revolution began in an age before recorded music became a serious threat to the careers of instrumentalists playing before live audiences. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the demand for skilled instrumentalists grew rapidly and sometimes exceeded the supply. Working almost exclusively for small enterprise, musicians found lucrative, steady employment across the nation. In addition, they, unlike their employers, were effectively organized, which meant that employers were often incapable of resisting their collective demands. The problems musicians faced in this age were insignificant compared with those confronting other groups of skilled workers, many of whom were locked in bitter, even deadly disputes with employers over the course of industrial and technological development.

In the 1920s capitalist development, and more specifically the use of new technology under capitalist control, began reshaping the lives of musicians much as it had long been affecting workers in many mass-production industries. In music, however, mechanization did not speed up the pace of work or make work more routinized or monotonous, as it did in other industries; nor did it reduce the skill levels of employed musicians. Instead it eliminated major sources of employment with no regard to seniority and little regard to skill. More than twenty thousand musicians—approximately a quarter of the nation's professional instrumentalists and half of those who were fully employed—lost their jobs within a few years of the advent of sound movies; additional thousands lost jobs with the perfection of recording and radio technology and the industrial changes that such perfection permitted and even dictated. Unlike bookkeepers, copyists, and other workers displaced by innovations in office machinery, for example, musicians could not retrain themselves or transfer into new jobs that to one degree or another utilized their old skills. Displacement meant for them, more than for most workers, rapid devastation on a grand scale.<sup>1</sup>

Widespread job loss was only the direct effect of mechanization. As the labor shortage of the turn-of-the-century years became a surplus after 1928, the mood and outlook of working musicians changed. Mounting numbers of them found life more stressful, as they worried about their future and that of their craft. Some lost their sense of identity and self-control and retreated into social alienation. "We formerly owned and controlled our lives and profession by taking our instruments out of the cases and playing music," one of them said in 1942. "Now this ownership and control has been taken away from us . . . by these several mechanized systems."<sup>2</sup> Faced with these circumstances, many musicians, including most of those in cer-

tain types of employment, had no choice but to look for different lines of work. The fact that most of them had no other comparable work skills made their search the more difficult and poignant, especially during the Great Depression.

Although technological change eliminated musical jobs across the nation, it created new opportunities for musicians in media centers, where entrepreneurs took advantage of the business as well as the artistic “advances” the new technologies permitted. Thousands of instrumentalists, pushed by real economic pressures and pulled by potential employment opportunities, flocked to these centers to advance or even to save their careers as musicians. The fortunate few of them who secured jobs in film and radio studios found the work lucrative but the work environment constrained by novel patterns of hiring, definitions of skill, and divisions of labor. Through the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) they exercised meaningful control over this environment for a while, but the competition for jobs and the insecurities consequent upon that competition generated new anxieties for them as well as new problems for their union.

Musicians responded variously to these new circumstances. Some accepted the changes as inevitable consequences of progress; others struggled to adapt to or otherwise overcome the challenges those changes posed. Individual accommodation, however, was less important than collective reaction. In the late 1920s and 1930s, when innovation was most rapid and overwhelming, even the AFM was unsure how to respond to the problem of technological displacement. Under the leadership of Joseph N. Weber the union pursued largely unsuccessful tactics of accommodation, which gave way to a much more aggressive stance under the leadership of James C. Petrillo after 1940. Weber and Petrillo generally agreed that technological innovation was a fact of life in the music industry; but they differed radically in the ways they tried to influence conditions in the workplace itself.

The musicians’ response to technological change cannot be gauged solely from their activities. On an unconscious as well as a conscious level, musicians sought to control the language of the discourse concerning their future. In trade papers, press statements, and union halls, they struggled to establish the legitimacy of their interests and perspectives, and thus of collective bargaining, union solidarity, and the strikes and bans that inconvenienced or otherwise adversely affected the public. In this battle for the high ground their leaders and spokesmen drew on longstanding American ideals as well as more immediate social fears. By the middle of the twentieth

Table 4 AFM Membership in Selected Locals, 1928–1942

City and Local	1928	1934	1936	1942	Growth during Period (%)
New York (802)	15,654	15,078	15,744	21,036	+34
Chicago (10)	7,146	7,084	7,026	9,685	+36
Los Angeles (47)	3,494	3,340	3,899	6,465	+85
Cleveland (4)	1,458	1,263	1,311	1,409	-3
San Francisco (6)	2,700	2,260	2,550	2,825	+5
Boston (9)	2,459	1,670	1,533	1,431	-42
Newark (16)	1,442	1,070	1,113	991	-31
Denver (20)	784	427	495	506	-35
San Antonio (23)	335	188	160	248	-26
Kansas City (34)	952	459	533	680	-29
Baltimore (40)	1,239	770	770	899	-27
Racine (42)	171	129	168	217	+27
Omaha (70)	581	339	331	345	-41
Memphis (71)	250	172	215	236	-6
Minneapolis (73)	1,148	569	757	1,195	+4
Philadelphia (77)	2,846	2,133	2,201	2,702	-5
Atlanta (148)	333	144	149	173	-48
Yonkers (402)	195	182	139	163	-16
Miami (655)	407	278	305	578	+42
Tampa (721)	190	127	102	138	-27

Source: *Official Proceedings*, 1928–42.

Note: This table sheds light on the decline and centralization of musical opportunities between 1928 and 1942. It indicates that the number of professional musicians in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago increased significantly while the number in many other cities declined. In 1928 about 17 percent of total AFM membership lived in these three large media centers; by 1942 that figure had risen to 28 percent.

eth century this effort had largely failed. “The huge profits from mechanized music,” as one musician noted at the time, “have gone not to the performing musicians, but to the middlemen controlling electronic transmission.”<sup>3</sup>

That was not the entire truth. In the fight to mitigate the worst effects of technological change, musicians had in fact had a measure of success. After the disappearance of theater orchestras, their union protected their jobs in radio far longer than one might have expected; and the result of the effort amounted to much more than delaying disaster or stringing it out over a long period of time. In media centers like Los Angeles and New

York, the AFM's voice in labor relations was long-lasting, and the most long-lasting of its accomplishments was the royalty trust fund. In a period of political reaction and rising antiunionism, musicians forced upon management a revolutionary institutional arrangement for sharing the benefits of "modernization"; the Music Performance Trust Fund, which embodied that arrangement, has proved an enduring achievement. It is still an important source of income for AFM locals across the country. "Petrillo did some wonderful things for the music profession," one musician said with the fund in mind.<sup>4</sup>

All of those things met employer resistance. Through associations of their own, employers of musicians waged generally effective campaigns against the AFM. Petrillo may not have been exaggerating when he characterized the National Association of Broadcasters' public relations blitz during the first recording ban as "the strongest ever used to arouse the public against union officials."<sup>5</sup> To win public support for their position, employers manipulated symbols and slogans of their own. Through the media they, more effectively than the union, appealed to popular notions of progress, patriotism, and democracy, and in doing so they convinced the public that the musicians' demands were excessive, even irrational. What was truly irrational, however, was to expect musicians to stand passively by as their jobs disappeared.

Employers in mass-entertainment industries saw their situation much as their counterparts in other industries had seen theirs when they had earlier confronted technological transformation. Theirs, they believed, were the usual prerogatives of ownership and management, including control over production. To them new technology meant increased efficiency and thus progress. It meant better control of production processes and thus higher quality and more uniformity in the product they produced. More important, it lowered labor costs, sometimes fabulously so. Musicians, employers believed, had to adapt, as artisan shoemakers and other craftsmen had earlier had to adapt, to the social change dictated by technological innovation. Such change was the cost of progress. "The cold facts are that motion picture production had to change to meet the public demand for sound movies," film producers explained, "or else the industry would have gone backward with unpredictable consequences to both labor and management."<sup>6</sup>

These attitudes reflected more than greed and insensitivity. Technological innovation in fact presented businessmen with challenges of their own, and those without adequate financial resources or managerial skills them-

Table 5 Employment of Staff Musicians in Radio, 1946–1957

Year <sup>1</sup>	Staff Musicians <sup>2</sup>	Earnings	Stations
1946	2,433	\$12,056,653	292
1947	2,230	11,110,457	292
1948	2,193	10,789,841	300
1949	2,073	10,277,052	301
1950	1,929	10,073,272	305
1951	1,739	11,326,028	248
1953	1,610	10,247,406	213
1954	1,267	9,374,776	171
1955	1,164	9,126,656	151
1956	1,011	6,084,972	120
1957	576	3,483,946	98

Source: *Official Proceedings*, 1946–57.

<sup>1</sup> Figures for 1952 were not available.

<sup>2</sup> These musicians worked fifty to fifty-two weeks a year. Several hundred more instrumentalists each year worked under contracts guaranteeing employment for thirty to fifty hours a week.

selves fell by the wayside. In the highly competitive entertainment business, innovation created tensions between firms and encouraged predatory behavior as well. Those things encouraged competing businesses to displace workers in order not just to prosper but to survive. The Great Depression added to these pressures.<sup>7</sup>

Yet the triumph of recorded music was possible, in the final analysis, only because consumers came to prefer, and then to demand, the superior product it made available to them at an almost nominal cost. Like moviegoers who lined up for talkies, radio audiences tuned in to the music of big-city bands, regardless of whether it was transcribed or live. Consumers were indifferent to the concerns of musicians, and even hostile to them when they threatened the supply of recorded and broadcast music. The issue, then, was largely decided by marketplace forces.

Nonetheless, political interference with those forces was an important influence on the final outcome. In the postwar years a Congress intent on reducing labor-management conflict outlawed a number of trade union practices that musicians had relied upon to protect themselves in the marketplace. “When they passed those laws,” union representative Phil Fischer said of the Lea and Taft-Hartley acts, “we lost our club. We could no longer demand employment.”<sup>8</sup> The course of events testified to the truth

Table 6 Single-Engagement Commercial Broadcasting Employment, 1946–1957

Year <sup>1</sup>	Number of Sponsored Programs <sup>2</sup>	Earnings of Leaders and Sidemen <sup>3</sup>
1946	337	\$8,213,787
1947	370	7,695,699
1948	323	7,177,246
1949	248	5,372,483
1950	194	4,733,574
1951	181	4,651,152
1953	179	2,605,518
1954	158	2,089,758
1955	250	2,684,690
1956	101	849,718
1957	63	452,659

Source: *Official Proceedings*, 1946–57.

<sup>1</sup> Figures for 1952 were not available.

<sup>2</sup> The vast majority of these programs originated in New York and Los Angeles; others originated in Chicago, Boston, Nashville, San Francisco, and a few smaller cities.

<sup>3</sup> The total number of musicians earning wages in commercial radio is unclear because instrumentalists often worked for more than one sponsored program.

of those words. In the 1950s, when competition from television and tape recording presented new incentives for displacing musicians, job opportunities in radio all but disappeared. By the end of the decade radio employed barely 350 full-time musicians and tendered less than \$1 million from single-engagement employment.<sup>9</sup>

Government-business relations suggested that lawmakers and industrialists had more affinity for each other than either had for musicians. This affinity stemmed partly from the financial investments some legislators had in media industries, but it also stemmed from common ideological assumptions about economics, technology, and the public interest. All lawmakers no doubt sympathized at some level with the problems of technologically displaced workers, but they also accepted the legitimacy of what they ultimately regarded as the rights of property. It was probably the latter consideration that best explains the actions of legislators.

Musicians, on the other hand, believed that lawmakers' actions did violence to their rights as citizens and their interests as workers. The "object of a true democratic form of government," Weber said back in 1938, is to "protect against unemployment and its resulting misery," especially to protect victims of technological displacement. "Government cannot shirk its

duty to care for the worker who is unemployed against his will.” Petrillo shared that view. In 1942 he told senators that if employers would not “share the profits” of technological innovation, he as leader of a union of workers displaced by such innovation had a right to use the collective bargaining process to encourage them to do so, and a right to do that without government interference. Insofar as government had a legitimate interest in this process, he added, it was to help musicians save their livelihood and their contribution to American culture.<sup>10</sup>

FOR WORKING MUSICIANS as a collectivity, the impact of technological change was devastating. In the new world that emerged from that change, only the most mobile, talented, and well-connected musicians prospered. Indeed, that group prospered as few musicians had ever prospered. This experience speaks to familiar patterns in the history of American workers. Over and over American capitalism has achieved economic growth and increased material consumption by devaluing the skills and bargaining power of specific groups of workers while advancing the well-being of other, often much smaller, groups of workers.

This pattern raises troubling questions for us today. Technological change is one of the overriding realities of our times; its economic and social potentialities, good and bad, are part of our socioeconomic reality. Unfortunately, corporate America has convinced the general public that technological change is inherently emancipatory, not enthralling. “Automation is the magical key to the creation,” the National Association of Manufacturers pronounced in 1955. “[With] the smooth, effortless workings of automation [and] the cooperation of Americans in all walks of life, our standard of living will skyrocket, prices drop, markets expand and the tempo of prosperity accelerate. More workers will be needed in the fields of recreation and amusements [because] the work week will shorten, the hours of leisure lengthen.”<sup>11</sup> But the fate of musicians in the wake of the technological changes that displaced them on a massive scale suggests an alternative scenario, one in which innovation ravages the lives as well as the livelihoods of masses of people, even highly skilled members of a profession.

As long as industrial technology is designed and used primarily for increasing productivity at the lowest possible price, it will remain a sharp, double-edged sword. Though it will generate demands for new skills and talents and increase the status—and pay—of workers who fill those demands (even if it slots those workers into narrow, task-oriented jobs), it will leave others, in the words of one historian, “to vegetate in the backwaters of

the stream of progress.”<sup>12</sup> Those prospects will continue until society comes to view technological change as a social problem as well as a matter of labor productivity. This is not to say that businesses must retain obsolete jobs, or that government should stop supporting research and development. It is to say, rather, that our well-being as a society depends in part at least on spreading the effects of mechanization more evenly among employers, investors, consumers, and workers. We must find better ways to cope with the negative implications of technological change. Change inevitably means that some workers lose their jobs, but it need not mean that they lose their pride and power as well, and it certainly should not reduce their stake in society. By insisting that those who benefit from new technology help those who do not, perhaps we can find new ways to ease the transition from one workplace to another, and even increase our leisure time.

*This page intentionally left blank*