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MUSIC & ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY  
EDUCATORS ASSOCIATION

Journal of the  
Music & Entertainment Industry  
Educators Association

Volume 11, Number 1  
(2011)

Bruce Ronkin, Editor  
Northeastern University

Published with Support  
from



MIKE CURB COLLEGE of  
ENTERTAINMENT and MUSIC BUSINESS

**BELMONT**  
UNIVERSITY

# Cautionary Tales from the Changing World of the Hollywood Film and Television Studio Musician<sup>1</sup>

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As an educator of undergraduate music students at a small liberal arts college in Los Angeles, I am occasionally asked by my students for advice on becoming a studio musician in the Hollywood film and television industry. As I have had a relatively fleeting career in that profession prior to my career in academia, I feel that I can advise them from the perspective of someone who has “been there.” However, I am obligated to tell them the truth about their pursuit, warts and all, so as not to mislead them. It is with these truths in mind that I present this paper.

Since the late 1970s when I began as a working musician in Hollywood, the landscape has changed significantly. Both the workplace and the product have constantly evolved in response to outside stimuli such as technology, economics, and musical aesthetics. As my research into this arena unfolded, it became apparent that the music industry in Hollywood is still strong but it has become a very different environment than I experienced. Fewer performers are utilized and different skill sets are now required in order for studio musicians to make a living. This paper will examine the careers and current working situations of several working Hollywood musicians and how their careers have changed over the years. I will also give some recommendations for students and others hoping to make a career as a Hollywood film and television musician.

The study of the work of studio musicians has previously been documented by a small group of scholars (Bakan 1988, Burlingame 1997, Faulkner 1971 and 1983, Kraft 1993 and 1996, Neuman 1990, Pollack 2002), as well as in a recent article in this journal by Alan Williams (2010). While the latter’s emphasis was on freelance musicians in the field of popular music, specifically, on recordings by Steely Dan, my focus is on the studio musicians who make their living in the film and television scoring sessions of Hollywood. This article addresses some of the technological and social challenges faced by fledgling, and even veteran, studio musi-

cians.

## Introduction

Less than a year after arriving in Los Angeles in 1977, I got my first job as a Hollywood film and television studio musician playing electric bass on Mae West's final film, *Sextette* (1978, dir. Ken Hughes). The film's soundtrack by Van McCoy, (best known for his hit disco song "Do the Hustle") was recorded with a studio orchestra that seemed enormous to me: a full string section, brass, woodwinds, and percussion, supplemented with a funk/disco rhythm section featuring two pianists, Sonny Burke and Joe Sample, James Gadson on drums, at least one electric guitarist (Dean Parks), and me on electric bass. I felt as if I had reached the pinnacle of my career; there I was recording with people whose names I had read on so many records, on a soundtrack to a film—in Hollywood!

Two years later, I participated in a different kind of recording session. As I unpacked my double bass, I asked who the drummer would be. The reply was that a click track would be used and that electronic drums would be overdubbed later. While I chatted with the producer, the recording engineer was auditioning "string" sounds on a bank of electronic keyboards. To my ears, these sounds did not come close to sounding like a real string section, but in mid-sentence, the producer shouted to the engineer, "That's it! Now you've got it!" The engineer grinned in agreement. I had never heard a string section sound so unnatural. There was no air in the sound, and the attack and decay were truly artificial. I hoped that the synthesized strings were a temporary track until the real string players arrived. Later that day, however, my fears were realized. That *was* the string section. I was filled with questions. How has it come to pass that musicians are being replaced by digital binary zeros and ones? What has become of the musicians who have been displaced?

Years later, my questions lingered and more questions surfaced as I watched the landscape of the Hollywood studio continue to change more quickly and drastically. How do musicians remain viable workers in the studio workplace? Where does the American Federation of Musicians stand on the issue of technology versus live musicians? What role does the Recording Musicians Association play in protecting the work of its members, and is it necessary to join this organization? How does a musician enter into the realm of established session players today? What is the current work status of studio musicians in Hollywood? My questions led

me initially to Robert R. Faulkner's work (1971, 1983), which inspired my work and methodology. Following his lead, I used the interview as the primary mode of information gathering so that we "hear" the voices of those most directly involved in the recording industry: present and former studio musicians, heads of music departments of major film studios, composers, music editors, music contractors, and musicians' union officers. In addition to interviews and participant observation, analysis of statistical data provided by the musicians union offers a better understanding of hiring trends of musicians in the production of film and television programs.

My firsthand experience, along with the experiences and insights of my interviewees, helps to frame the discussion. Due to my good fortune of working as a musician in the Hollywood studios, I attained—for however brief a time—the unique cachet of the Hollywood insider. This status allowed me access to a relatively closed culture and the opportunity to interview people who are typically reticent to speak frankly about their work.

## Deskilling and Reskilling

It is a given that working musicians must retrain themselves in order to keep up with the changing trends in musical styles and music technology to create their own opportunities, or find new alternatives if they are to remain viable in the industry. The terms "deskilling" and "reskilling," as used in Marxist theory, refer to the proletarianization of work (Braverman 1974, Agnew, *et al.* 1997). Herein, the term "technical reskilling" signifies the re-education, retraining, or *reinvention* of musicians with new skill sets. In some cases, the reinvention is still within the field of film music or other aspects of the profession, while in others, the musician may leave the industry altogether.

Some of the musicians I interviewed found that their instrument of choice was becoming outmoded and had to make changes in order to survive in the business. Some of them began to compose, aided by newly developed skills in computer and synthesizer technologies. In some cases, the displaced studio musicians stayed within the field of film music or other aspects of the profession such as becoming music editors or copyists.

In a classic example, Timothy Taylor illustrates how the process of creating music for film and television has changed from the 1970s to today when music for various media is often produced in home studios. It is an example of the most extreme form of deskilling—the replacement of a number of jobs by a single individual made possible due to advancement

in technological capabilities.

In those days (1970s) and earlier, television, film, advertising, and, indeed, all music was written by a person, perhaps orchestrated by another; parts were copied and distributed to orchestral musicians, often employed by the major television and film studios, and the music was recorded for each program and edited to fit the specific program. Now, however, this music can be realized by a single person with a home studio consisting of a computer and a few electronic musical instruments, and much of it is. No additional performers are required; indeed, there is no 'performance' in a conventional sense (Taylor 2001: 4).

In my research, I met numerous musicians whose stories demonstrate the ways in which television and film music workers have been both deskilled and technically reskilled. They include composers, drummers, guitarists, copyists, orchestrators, and music editors.

Ron Aston, for example, was a soundman and drummer before he became a composer and electronic drum programmer. His work as a drummer included touring and recording with Seals and Crofts, the Hues Corporation, Melissa Manchester, Minnie Riperton, Tom Scott, Mac Davis, Paul Anka, and Helen Reddy among others. As a studio drummer, he worked primarily on records and TV shows including *Simon and Simon* and *In the Heat of the Night*. Around 1985, Aston noticed that things were changing for drummers as electronic drum systems became more popular.

Author: How did work change for you in the mid-1980s?

RA (Ron Aston): The work started sliding away for drummers; people were just using Linn drums; then Simmons drums became the trend. I didn't know what to do after being replaced by a drum machine on *Solid Gold*, and things were getting worse and worse for drummers. So I decided I'd learn to program Linn drums, when they did make it so that you could use triggers for drums. I started combining sounds. But still, I didn't really know what I

was doing, but I was using this system and I was getting paid extra, a “double,” to use those things. It wasn’t until I saw an article in *Modern Drummer* magazine that had a picture of this drummer, Steve Schaeffer. He was the number one studio drummer for TV and film especially. He had this electronic rack behind him while sitting at a drum kit. That was the light bulb that went off in my head. I’ve always been electronically inclined and decided, “This is it. This is what I want to do.” So, I put together a small rack with a mixer...[then] Bob Zimmitti (a major studio percussionist and drummer) asked me to put one together for him. That was the beginning of my reinvention of putting together racks for studios.

Author: Did you do this type of work for musicians other than drummers?

RA: If you didn’t have all the synthesizers and all of that stuff, you weren’t going to work that much. That’s because [producers and directors] wanted all those sounds, the big DX7<sup>2</sup> sounds, and things like that. I started by putting together systems for drummers and percussionists and eventually for keyboard players as well, and all these studio guys. I started being known as “The Guy” to put your system together with multi-pin cables, etc....I put these things together so that a monkey could set their gear up easily...I did that kind of work for a long time, but pretty much ruined my music career as a drummer.

Author: What did you do about that?

RA: I had to figure out how to get back into my playing career. A friend of mine introduced me to a composer named Nan Schwartz, who was one of the first successful female TV composers in L.A. I put a system together for her. She was doing *In the Heat of the Night*, so she hired me to play drums and percussion as well as programming on the show. She liked being able to have different sounds

and she liked that I could do much of my programming ahead of time at home. It got to be where we were doing one-third drums, one-third hand percussion, and one-third programmed stuff, or programmed and drums together. The composers and film production companies realized that they didn't have to pay extra by hiring someone to play tambourine, someone else to play shaker, and stuff like that. I was self-contained" (Personal communication, 2006).

Aston recognizes that he is one of a lucky few who made the transition from traditional drums to programming synthesized drums:

Because of the way the business is now, with soundtracks being done in places other than L.A., it's hurt everybody. I've been really lucky because during the time that all my drummer friends didn't know what to do with themselves, I was still able to make a living by doing this programming and creating drum parts, etc. For the last four or five years, I haven't even had to leave the house. I know this one guy who tried to get into drum programming, but he hated every minute of it. He went down that road kicking and screaming. He's a great drummer, but I know that he's not making a living at it anymore. I think he's selling real estate now (Aston, personal communication, 2006).

He mentions other drummers who have expanded their repertoire in order to survive in the business. These drummers play an occasional session, teach private lessons, or join tours. A few have found work playing on new television shows like *Dancing With the Stars* and *American Idol* which use live musicians.<sup>3</sup> Some have managed to stay busy in their home studios, with synthesizers and ProTools, one of the more popular brands of composing and recording software for this type of work.

Aston notes that drummers are not the only musicians affected by these changes. "I would think that bass players have suffered a lot, as well. I personally don't need a bass player for most of the stuff that I do. You can always use a keyboard bass or computer for most things these

days” (personal communication, 2006). Another studio musician, guitarist George Doering, concurs with Aston’s statement, especially regarding work in television:

At the moment, the way TV is done, they’d almost never hire a bass player or drummer. They’d use a sample instead because the TV budgets are so much lower than they used to be. With movies, most times the kind of music that’s written is not drum set oriented and definitely not electric bass oriented. Both those groups that I used to see have consistently thinned out. I’ll go weeks and weeks without playing with a drummer or bass player. I’m playing with bass and drums today because it’s *The Simpsons*. That show’s been around for nineteen years, so it’s kind of a throwback to twenty years ago. But it’s a shame that those musicians are out of work, because it had nothing to do with how they play. It’s just that the job has become obsolete for the moment. I don’t know if they’ll ever come back. Those guys tend to do other things or get jobs on one of those TV talk shows, or they play Broadway shows, but I don’t see them at sessions anymore. I guess the bass players and drummers are kind of like buggy whip manufacturers when the car came along. You could be the Rolls Royce of buggy whip makers, but nobody wants that anymore (Doering, personal communication, 2009).

As for drummers in studio work, Doering points out that even the best of them have difficulty in finding studio work that is not record-based:

Greg Bissonette, for example, is a great drummer but he’s got to go out of town to do drum clinics because he barely works in the studios anymore. I think it’s because there just aren’t any sessions. And he was one of the top guys when there were sessions. He, Vinnie Colaiuta, Bernie Dresel, and John Robinson were the top four drummers, but they can’t get studio work (Ibid.).



It is important to note that in 2011, the most lucrative studio work is in the field of film and television. Until relatively recently, recording (CDs, LPs, etc.) was still a field in which a studio musician could make a respectable amount of money. With the advent of modern electronic media, self-contained and self-produced bands, and the demise of many record companies, this option has declined considerably.

George Doering has had to reskill in order to make a living in the world of changing music technology. He is a guitarist whose ample resume is filled with film and television credits (including most of composer Thomas Newman's scores) as well as working as the music director of the popular but now defunct show *Star Search*. Doering's work still keeps him in the studios, but his focus is no longer solely on the guitar. He has taught himself to play stringed instruments of other cultures such as the Middle Eastern *oud*, the Chinese *pipa*, the Andean *charango*, and other "exotic" instruments. Though he has never formally studied these instruments, he is self-taught and has managed to reinvent himself as the main person in Hollywood who is called upon to provide these sounds and textures to the film composer's musical arsenal. He found that there was limited work in film for the guitar, and like some other guitarists, had to reskill.

Author: What kind of instruments are you asked to play today?

GD (George Doering): I mostly do movies and I tend to get hired because I play almost anything that has strings, like most ethnic kind of stringed instruments, even some that don't have frets. I also play bowed instruments, although I play them badly, but the composers are mostly looking for flavors, and I can do that. I can get by with just about anything you can imagine that has strings, except for violin, viola, cello, and double bass. Everything else is fair game. I've got about 200 different instruments at home. So that's different from most people. Most people make a career out of one instrument. I had to diversify.

Author: Approximately what percentage of your work is guitar oriented versus other string instruments?

GD: Maybe half of each. On TV stuff, I still get called for guitar. But for movies, unless it's a western where they want acoustic guitar, people don't seem to use guitar. I work a lot with Thomas Newman; in fact, I worked on all his movies except for one when he recorded in England. I've only played acoustic guitar on one of his films, *The Horse Whisperer*, I think. All the other times, I played other stuff that doesn't sound like guitar.

Doering was resourceful and tenacious enough to reinvent himself (one could also use the term "reskilled") to a changing work situation.

Another musician forced to adapt was Don Peake, formerly a top Hollywood studio guitarist. He began his career at age twenty-one as the guitarist for the Everly Brothers, and later was the first white musician in Ray Charles' orchestra. His track record with producer Phil Spector is long and impressive, and is a former member of "The Wrecking Crew."<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, when his work diminished because of the changing trends in pop music, he tried to become a film and television studio guitarist. Like George Doering, he found that there were relatively few opportunities for this type of work on his instrument, so Peake decided to reskill. After twenty-five years in the record and film industry as a player, he decided to build his own recording studio where he now composes music for television, and when business is slow, he rents out his studio and equipment to other composers.

## Social Reskilling

Carol Axtell Ray discusses the concept of social reskilling, arguing that, in many cases, managers and supervisors have been reskilled socially to instill the corporate values into their subordinates (1989: 67). In examining the elements that influence work relations, one must not underestimate the importance of social skills and networking as it relates to who goes and who stays in the studio orchestras. The way in which a musician becomes one of the elite studio musicians in Hollywood (and remains in this community) is a complex and sometimes serendipitous process. The old axiom, "It isn't what you know, it's who you know," is only partly true in this situation. In reality, the saying might better be stated, "It isn't simply what you know, it's *also* who you know." For example, my own experience as a studio musician began with a fortuitous encounter. I had been touring

the U.S. as the bassist in a Broadway musical that made a three-month stop at the Pantages Theater in Hollywood. The rhythm section traveled with the show, and a percussionist, and woodwind and brass players were contracted by each theater in every city that we played. Jules Chaikin was the musical contractor for the Pantages at that time. I mentioned to Mr. Chaikin that I was considering leaving the show and remaining in Los Angeles after my contract ended. Within a few days of our conversation, he offered me a job on a film he was contracting, the aforementioned *Sextette*. Once I had proven myself on that initial film date, he called me for a few television shows, commercial jingles, and even recommended me to Burt Bacharach for a three-week stand in Las Vegas. I became part of Chaikin's stable of musicians on whom he could rely to do a good job.

Being young and eager at that time, every opportunity seemed to be coming my way and I was ready to accept each one of them. I took gigs with many jazz musicians as well as doing some rock gigs around town. Several people contacted me about a European tour with jazz singer Al Jarreau. I had never been to Europe, the tour would be first class, and the salary was good, so I auditioned and accepted the job with Jarreau. I had a good relationship with Jules Chaikin, so I assumed that he would have work for me when I returned from the nine-week tour. As I mentioned, I was young and eager, but I should have added the word *naïve*.

Upon my return from the tour, I called Jules to notify him that I was back. He was warm and friendly, as always, and he welcomed me home; however, he had no work for me at the time. I called him periodically to check in, with the same result. I began to hear through the proverbial grapevine that another bassist had been quite busy for Jules while I was gone and had become his "main guy." I was out because I did not know the rules of the game. Custom (at least in Hollywood) dictated that I should have declined the tour with Jarreau and remained available to the person who had opened a door for me into the studio world. In this case what you know includes not only mastery of your instrument but also the etiquette of the Hollywood studio community.

Percussionist X (he prefers to remain anonymous) has a different story to tell. His work in the film and television industry was at its peak in the early to mid-1990s, but his work has been steadily diminishing since then. One of the reasons that he cites for his decline in studio work has to do with his inability to fit in on a personal level because he is introverted by nature. It seems that part of being successful in this field requires being

able to fit in and get along with the rest of the studio musicians. He states in his interview that he feels his mentors who had ushered him into the studio scene somehow cheated him. “They taught me how to perfect my sight-reading skills, how to be a versatile percussionist, even talked to me about the importance of punctuality, responsibility, and all the rest, but the one thing that was missing was how to behave” (personal communication, 2005). He has often felt like an outsider in the professional culture of the studio musician. There exists a jargon and standard of behavior that do not come easily to Percussionist X.

Another percussionist (I will call him “Percussionist Y”) believes that the real reason for Mr. X’s ostracism was because “he’s just too good a musician.” He continued, “They just don’t like it when players are better than the established section leaders. That can work against you” (personal communication, 2007). It is not uncommon to find superior musicians relegated to the sidelines of the studio scene if the established studio musician has a strong reputation and a good working relationship with the contractor. One way to avoid the threat of replacing the established musician is to find reasons other than musicianship to keep the perceived interloper on the fringes.

Richard Peterson and Howard G. White (1979) have written about the self-protective, interpersonal workings of studio musicians in Nashville, New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. They provide a functional model of session musicians in which they find social networks to be key for getting steady work. The authors refer to the dynamics of these interpersonal relations among studio musicians as *the simplex*. The unspoken purpose of the simplex is to maintain a monopoly in the studio scene, thus creating an exclusive club for these musicians. As Peterson and White have noted, “The simplex...seems to operate to guarantee that only a few union members earn a high and stable income” (1979: 244). I discussed the realities of this situation with then eighty-six-year-old veteran Hollywood studio musician and jazz great Buddy Collette.<sup>5</sup> He talks about his impressions of the social climate among Hollywood studio musicians:

Everybody has their own social clubs and things like that. Some guys do pretty good with golf, and if they see their own guys there (in the studio) and on the golf course, then you’re part of the crowd. This is the way they get along. I got along pretty good with that. I always felt

pretty good. I think they liked me okay 'cause I could play to the point where they would say, "Man, you're something else!" So it worked for me. You know you have to be able to hang with them, sometimes being the only one in there to go out and have a drink with them or whatever. You've got to play well, and at least seem like you're a pretty nice person. My thing is that you've got to play well. I was the ideal person at the time because I was always on time, I could hold a conversation on almost any subject over dinner, and I made good money. I tried to be a team player. Sometimes it wouldn't work out so great and I wouldn't get the work calls (Collette, personal communication, 2006).

An example of what Mr. Collette refers to as not "working out so great" and not "getting the work calls" is exemplified in this scenario:

One time a contractor, Marty Berman, who worked with the Groucho Marx show, kept taking me aside and telling me who was a nice guy and who wasn't, and what to do in the business because I was new, you know? "Watch out for this guy," and stuff like that. One night, I told him, "Man, stop telling me what to do. Let me find out for myself." He took it another way and we kind of fell out. I remained busy though, even though I didn't work with him much after that (Collette, personal communication, 2006).

DeeDee Daniel, Director of Music Operations for Entertainment Partners, an organization that handles residual payments and payroll services for studio musicians, has heard anecdotal evidence of this type of interpersonal dynamic referred to by Mr. Collette.

I've had people tell me how they'd had to be careful who they even smile at because if they smile at the wrong guy, they won't get hired again. You have to play the game. Playing the game is the hard part, not playing the music. You have to learn who is on the "Okay List"

and who isn't, from what I hear (Personal communication, 2006).

Studio violinist Peter King echoes the perception of peer pressures and atmosphere among studio musicians mentioned by Buddy Collette and DeeDee Daniel. In our interview, he went into great detail about which social factors are valued by various instrumental sections. Though speaking in generalities, it is obvious that cliques, personality traits, and hobbies tend to go hand-in-hand with success in the studio profession. The exchange that follows gives a clear picture of this.

Author: Are there personality issues or common hobbies that you have to share or have in common with one another?

PK (Peter King): It's all over the place. Usually the guys are into the football-betting thing, what is it called... "Fantasy Football?" For the women there are other interests, I'm sure.

Author: One of the things that I noticed during one of the last film sessions I worked was that all of the other members of the bass section were skiers and they had a habit of going out and skiing together. During a lunch break, I was asked if I was a skier, and I told them that I'm a novice. That ended that conversation, and I felt I like I was out of the section from that point on.

PK: Yeah, the cellists have a baseball thing going on.

Author: Is this sort of camaraderie a form of behavior that one needs to be aware of?

PK: Oh yeah, definitely.

Author: When I was doing this type of work, you had to be able to tell jokes. And of course, you had to be able to

play and read.

PK: Yeah, definitely. The most successful guys tell the best jokes.

Author: Is it still cliquish in that regard?

PK: Yes, though, you still have to be able to cut it, musically speaking. You still have to blend. You don't want to stick out in the section. You have to be perceived as a team player. However, one of the things that I did when I was younger, that I am sure pissed off a lot of concertmasters, was that if you find a wrong note, you don't want to be the guy to announce it. Or say things like, "Shouldn't we phrase this differently?" The team player doesn't ask questions unless they absolutely have to, even though there may be a very pressing question musically that would be very valid, you just don't go there because you let the first chair do that because that's why he's there.

Violinist Irma Neumann, who has been a studio musician since the early 1950s, with a career that spans from *A Night to Remember* (1958, music by William Alwyn) to *Titanic* (1997, music by James Horner) and beyond, concurs with Peter King regarding inappropriate voicing of opinions. She tells me that the best advice she received early in her studio career was, "Keep your mouth shut!" (personal communication, 2005).

The Hollywood film and TV musicians' community has no written rules of etiquette, yet breaking an unspoken rule can mean loss of elite status and loss of jobs. One of the skills necessary to retain a position among the stable of working studio musicians is the ability to uncover and follow the unwritten rules, and the ability to harmonize socially with the rest of the community. It is clear from the examples above that possessing or cultivating the appropriate social skills is as important as having the appropriate musical skills, and one of the most important aspects of these social skills is knowing when to be quiet and how to "play well with others."

## The Recording Musicians Association

As often happens in many labor unions, voices of discontent arise

among certain members of the rank-and-file because they feel that their issues are not adequately addressed by their officers and representatives. Occasionally these voices unite to create splinter groups within the whole. This has occurred among Hollywood studio musicians in the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) several times throughout its long history. Because of certain practices that were deemed unjust by them, these members created a protective league within the AFM called the *Recording Musicians Association* in 1962. By the 1970s the organization, now known as the *International Recording Musicians Association*, was in its early stages as a unified party. However, despite this perceived “unity,” there persisted a degree of jealousy and suspicion between the New York City and the Los Angeles chapters because the musicians in both cities had been competing for the same jobs in records, film, television, and jingles.

### Divergences Between the RMA and the AFM

A great deal of disharmony exists between those musicians who are members of the elite circle of Hollywood film and television studio musicians, and those who are outside that circle. The members of the RMA feel that they are being abused by the AFM’s rank and file and officers—because of their higher financial status as studio musicians, they pay a higher percentage of work dues which helps keep the union afloat. David Ewart, violinist and former Executive Publisher of the RMA newsletters and other publications points out, “It is important to note that while recording musicians constitute only a small percentage of the entire AFM membership, they carry by far the heaviest burden in the form of AFM work dues. Since the AFM is the only guild without a work dues cap, the disparity is often severe, e.g., in Los Angeles, 10 percent of the members pay nearly 90 percent of the dues!” (in Burlingame 1997: xiii). This issue still rankles today. RMA President and violinist Marc Sazer explains this further:

The anti-RMA rhetoric they use is a great vote-getter at the AFM Convention, where politicians get elected by promising to raise dues on recording musicians and spare everyone else the obligation to financially support the union; it’s an old story gone amok in recent years. As a result of dues increases on our community placed on us by the 2007 Convention, L.A. will be obligated to send in almost a full one third of all AFM revenues, mostly in the



form of work dues on recording musicians. It's no surprise that RMA has fought that, and that this has placed RMA in opposition to AFM leadership and their allies here in L.A. (Personal communication, 2008).

The RMA has been fighting this perceived inequity since its inception and only recently (December, 2010) struck a deal to raise their dues in order to support the survival of the AFM.

Beyond the issue of parity, there is disagreement about the state of work opportunities within the Hollywood film and television scoring system. My interviewees who are members of the RMA paint a very favorable picture of the working conditions and see a very healthy environment in Los Angeles. Marc Sazer proclaimed:

I can say that working musicians and recording musicians in Los Angeles have a good friend in Local 47; there is no division or factionalism. While the work flow and distribution of production have changed in film scoring, the industry in L.A. is currently very successful. In 2006 the Film Musicians Secondary Markets Fund (our residuals fund) entered more titles than any year in history, and 2007 is on track to up that. What that means is that more separate films were scored here than ever before. Judged by wages, number of projects or union density, film scoring in Los Angeles (and in the AFM) is incredibly healthy—whether those individuals who aren't working believe it or not! (Personal communication, 2008).

This statement must be considered with a grain of salt. Both the AFM and the RMA have many detractors as well as supporters, both factions being adamantly vociferous. As evidenced by the following exchange, although contractor Jules Chaikin has negative feelings toward the RMA, he does not discount the benefits of the organization:

Author: From your experience, what are your thoughts about the RMA?

JC (Jules Chaikin): It benefits only the members of the RMA, which numbers about a thousand members, but fewer than three hundred of whom are actually doing film scoring work. It's a very political situation. In my opinion, they started out as a threat to the AFM and I suspect that they eventually want to break away from the musicians union and form their own guild or association separate and apart from the musicians union. The musicians union has done a yeoman's effort in keeping them very close to them in order to not allow that to happen, which would threaten a lot of stuff including pension funds, and work dues, and things like that. I'm not a member of the RMA. I was, and I resigned under protest over a couple of their actions, and that's fairly well known in Los Angeles. They do some good things. They help negotiate some of the national contracts because they're involved in those things intimately. Many of the members of the RMA are very good negotiators, or at least they have the suggestions and the experience to know what points are important as far as what should be in a negotiation and how it should be handled. The musicians union does take their input and often utilizes their suggestions. And basically, that's what the RMA is. They issue their own directory of members, separate and apart from the standard Local 47 directory. The RMA's directory also contains the location of studios, various services that are available to them such as cartage companies, rental companies, scales of all the national contracts, and the like. It seems to be working for those people who are members. But the problem is that the AFM has much broader issues than the RMA. The RMA is concerned only with the recording musicians and the AFM deals with not only recordings, but live orchestras, casuals, and the like. The AFM deals with anybody who considers himself a professional musician doing whatever.

Author: So, we're dealing with an elite group then?

JC: Oh yes, and with an elitist attitude. I mean, they have every right to feel elite because they do the most lucrative work, the most noticed work, probably the widest heard work, so they're affected more so than your run-of-the-mill musician.

Author: Is there a middle class? (Both laugh.)

JC: There is no in-between, just like the rest of the country.

Chaikin's assessment is consistent with that of most of the interviewees who are either disgruntled former members or who had never been associated with the RMA.

RMA member and studio violinist Peter King holds a different view on the chasm between the RMA and the AFM:

PK (Peter King): In my mind, the RMA started off as kind of a power play. There were certain recording musicians who didn't like what the federation was doing as far as their scales and negotiations with the major companies went. But over the long haul for the RMA, I have to say, I think it has generally been a positive outcome. There is a lot of bad stuff, abuses of power and that sort of thing. But over the long haul, the RMA helps keep the salary bar high. I think that's a good thing.

Author: But isn't that what is driving the work out of LA?

PK: Well, yes. There are projects that won't be done in LA for two reasons: money and money. But there are sub-reasons under that. One is the straight cost (of scoring sessions) and the other is that some film companies will refuse to hire a composer who won't take the work out of town. There are only about seven composers who can pull that off; you know, your John Williams, James Howard, James Horner, a few of those guys. They are the ones who can say, "No, I am doing it in LA and I am doing it by

union rules, and that's the way it's got to be." 99 percent of all of the other guys go to Seattle, go to Prague, go to Bratislava on the internet so somebody can work the musicians in whatever country at 4:00 in the morning and somebody can be watching at 10:00 am in Santa Monica with a studio link-up.

Mr. King blames the trend against recording in Hollywood on "money and money." Even his so-called "sub-reasons" are about money. From his perspective, the RMA must maintain its integrity by not backing down from its economic demands, a position that non-RMA members and other AFM members feel has diminished work opportunities for them.

One of the fears held by members of the RMA is that by granting too many concessions to the film companies and producers, they will tend to expect more concessions from the musicians, thus making it more profitable for the producers, and less profitable for the musicians. Hollywood film musicians receive a fee for their time in the recording process, plus health and welfare benefits, overtime (when necessary), and special payments, which are administered by the Film Musicians Secondary Markets Fund. This fund is a non-profit organization that collects and processes residual payments from producers and distributes them to film and television musicians.

The Film Musicians Secondary Markets Fund was established as part of a collective bargaining agreement negotiated between the American Federation of Musicians, and the Alliance of Motion Picture & Television Producers (AMPTP) in 1972. The producers make payments to the Fund equal to one percent of their gross receipts from the films into the ancillary or supplemental markets. These obligations last as long as the film generates a profit, regardless of how many times the ownership and/or distribution rights are transferred. The Fund makes an annual distribution of residuals received throughout its fiscal year to participating musicians each July. There had been an effort by the AMPTP to rescind this stipulation in its contracts, but due to the vigilance of the RMA, the AMPTP has backed away from this approach.

In March of 1994, a concession was made by the AFM to create a multi-tiered pay scale in order to accommodate various levels of low budget films. For example, one level of pay applies only to motion pictures whose final costs do not exceed \$40 million. The musicians would receive

a rate appropriate for that level. A level beneath that is for films produced specifically for basic cable (USA Network, Lifetime, etc.) and films that are ninety minutes or more in length that are budgeted at \$5 million per program hour. Those musicians receive a lower level of pay. The next level down, for films sixty-one minutes or longer that were released directly to video, is \$7.5 million per program hour. Motion pictures produced for pay cable (Showtime, HBO, etc.) also fall into that category. The AMPTP has been trying to renegotiate this arrangement even further, but the RMA continues to stand its ground. Peter King notes:

I think if we had lost those special payments, lost the high price for those movies, everything else would have gone down with it. Rates would have gone down to your basic \$100 to \$150 cash price for the date. I think it is just a slippery slope from there. You know, they have already made concessions. Consider, you go in and do what is considered a “low budget” picture and you are making \$60 to \$65 an hour, no benefits, no special payments, but you still get your residuals. But you are working for a lesser fee, and they can do this with movies made for \$40 million. You know that there are actors on this movie making five million, maybe ten million dollars, and you are there working for \$60 an hour. It was a little less noticeable when we were working at full fare even though the full fare was \$80 an hour or whatever the waiver was at the time. So they have made these concessions, they have low budget motion pictures; they have low, *low* budget motion pictures, that is \$50 or slightly less. They have made all sorts of concessions to keep the high bar for the high profile movies. Consider somebody like me who is not in that A-team crowd but I have composers who ask for me. Just from enough of those movies, it is worth it to me that the RMA is in business keeping the bar high with the fees and residuals. My residual checks are about a third of my income (Personal communication, 2007).

King’s perspective is interesting because he sees the need to keep “the bar high with the fees and residuals,” yet he also understands the need

to keep other pay options for those musicians who are not as fortunate as the top-tier studio musicians.

Many of the non-RMA members would like to abolish the RMA because they feel RMA members have monopolized the film scoring industry and the elite positions that the members enjoy. Non-members do not agree that enough concessions have been made so that recording could remain in Hollywood and potentially create job opportunities for more musicians other than just the elite group. According to Peter King:

I know that there are a lot of players in town who want to do away with the RMA, they want to do away with residuals, they want to do away with the high costs and have everybody working. But in my opinion, it wouldn't pan out in such a positive way. In my case, I am not with the A-team; I am not making seven figures a year. That's fine, but I make enough to make it worthwhile. I think if we lose that, all the scales will go down for everything. Some people will still individually do well but I don't think the musician pool as a whole will do as well. I should add that if the RMA wasn't successful at keeping fees and residuals high, because there is so much bad stuff going on with the RMA and people taking advantage of it politically, I would do away with it (Personal communication, 2006).

From the ranks of the non-recording musicians arose an organization within Local 47 that views the positive and optimistic view of the RMA as favoring the few who do studio work while other equally talented musicians are left out. This group calls itself *The Committee for a More Responsible Local 47*. For several years, this group has sent e-mails to all members of Local 47 to counter the claims of the RMA and other studio musicians. The *Committee* has a blog ([www.responsible47.com](http://www.responsible47.com)) on which musicians can share their opinions and observations about the work situation in Hollywood. Below is an example extracted from January 13, 2009:

If you plan to go to the RMA's rose-colored glasses fantasy evening this Thursday, here are a few things to keep in mind as the brainwashing is attempted:

1. If the RMA is and has been so successful, then WHY on their watch have:
  - a. Nearly HALF of our precious recording jobs originating in Los Angeles being (sic) completed in Seattle and Europe. Daily, Weekly.....Monthly and Yearly
  - b. TWO major scoring stages (Paramount and TODD-AO) CLOSED in the year 2008 - because recording is SOOOO healthy in LA??
- II. FEW BIG FILMS BEING DONE OUTSIDE LA? Here are (sic) just a fraction of the many, not including the union work in San Francisco:

THE DARK KNIGHT (London);  
 ABOUT SCHMIDT (Seattle);  
 W (Prague);  
 BROKEBACK MTN (Seattle);  
 THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT (Prague);  
 CLOVERFIELD (Bratislava);  
 PRINCE CASPIAN (London);  
 EASTERN PROMISES (London);  
 THE EYE (Bratislava);  
 THE GOLDEN COMPASS (London);  
 HAPPY FEET (Australia - some songs produced in Los Angeles);  
 IRONMAN (London);  
 JUMPER (Sydney);  
 KUNG FU PANDA (London);  
 LAST CHANCE HARVEY (Prague);  
 MAMMA MIA (London);  
 THE MUMMY: TOMB OF THE DRAGON EMPEROR (London);  
 THE OTHER BOLEYN GIRL (Prague);  
 P.S. I LOVE YOU (SYDNEY);  
 ROCKY BALBOA (Seattle);  
 SECOND HAND LIONS (Bratislava);  
 TWO FOR THE MONEY (Bratislava);  
 THE WATERHORSE (London)- (with RMA President Pete Anthony CONDUCTING -oops!)  
 3:10 TO YUMA (LONDON)

There is no question that recording work in the aggregate in Hollywood has been hurt badly. Until approximately 1992, the area of recording known as *TV Film* paid wages comparable to those of feature films. Now TV Film wages are a fraction of what they were in the past. Work in sound recording (records) and commercial jingles were once viable ways for more musicians to work in the studios, but most of those jobs have disappeared. Some say that the main reason for this depletion was the inaction of the AFM. Violinist and RMA President Marc Sazer describes the situation this way:

I, among hundreds of other musicians, began our recording careers doing cartoons, episodic TV shows, and movie-of-the-week projects, building relationships with composers and colleagues. We earned health care coverage and good wages. That employment has all but disappeared. *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy* are just about the only shows left that use a live studio orchestra. As far as jingles go, now they're done either by a jingle-house owner and an engineer, or by non-union musicians. These things have occurred because of an AFM that was unwilling to organize (Personal communication, 2008).

Jingle-house owners are not the only self-contained enterprises working from home studios. As recording technology has progressed, musicians' workplaces have become increasingly diverse. The AFM leadership believed that all musicians should be represented by the union, regardless of the workplace or the technologies used. Studio musician and drum programmer Ron Aston discussed a contemporary evolution of this situation. Over the course of his career, his workplace changed from the traditional recording studio to his home as his skill set transitioned from traditional drums to drum machines and synthesizers. He states:

The fact that I was doing this work at home led to a change in the union rules; in fact, I was responsible for the change, where these TV shows and companies would have to pay [me] at least the equivalent of a union session while working at home by myself. Actually, I got paid double because, technically, there's got to be a leader on



each session so I was paid as leader and musician (Personal communication, 2006).

Many television composers now use their home studios as the only place to work because they rarely use live musicians.

One aspect of the contract to consider is wages. The most recent contract between the AMPTP (Alliance of Motion Picture & Television Producers) and the RMA was signed in June 2005 when the film-making industry was busy and lucrative. These contracts are incredibly detailed and cover a wide array of situations and payment schedules. The now-expired contract guaranteed the feature film musicians \$251.86 for a three-hour recording session. Most sessions, however, go “double,” meaning that instead of being paid for three hours musicians would be paid for six hours per day.<sup>6</sup> Figures for scale wages for motion pictures and television films (2006–2008), as published by the RMA in 2008, are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Motion Picture							
Sidemusician scale as of:		2/19/06	2/18/07	2/17/08	2/19/06	2/18/07	2/17/08
#	Basic Theatrical Motion Picture	\$251.86			\$503.72		
*	Low Budget Motion Picture (40 million or less)	\$180.55	\$181.63	\$187.99	\$361.10	\$363.26	\$375.98
*	Indie Motion Picture (12 million or less)	\$155.25	\$156.18	\$161.65	\$310.50	\$312.36	\$323.30
# Plus 10% Pension and 4% Vacation on all scale wages and an H&W payment (vacation pay already included here)							
* Plus 11% Pension on scale wages and an H&W Payment (No vacation pay)							

Table 1. Musicians’ scale for theatrical motion pictures (source: Recording Musicians Association Los Angeles, www.rmala.org).

According to Burlingame’s article in the *Los Angeles Times*, “Scale wages for musicians performing on film scores in 1999 declined by more than 30% from the previous year, from \$24.1 million to \$16.3 million... Numbers for the first five months of 2000 are running about 10% below 1999” (Burlingame 2000: 5). That does not represent a decline in the wage

Television Film							
Sidemusician scale as of:		2/19/06	2/18/07	2/17/08	2/19/06	2/18/07	2/17/08
#	5 or more musicians (including playing leader or contractor)	\$207.00		\$241.25		\$414.00	\$428.50
#	4 or fewer musicians (including playing leader or contractor)	\$260.68		\$269.80		\$521.36	\$539.60
#	Shows on air prior to 7/15/05 (except when 4 or fewer musicians are employed)	\$251.86		\$503.72			
#	Optional TV Film 2-Hour Session	\$197.92		\$204.85	\$395.84		\$409.70
*	First Season Episodic TV Film (when 15 or more musicians are employed)	\$180.55	\$181.63	\$187.99	\$361.10	\$363.26	\$375.98
*	Low Budget TV Film	\$180.55	\$181.63	\$187.99	\$361.10	\$363.26	\$375.98
# Plus 10% Pension and 4% Vacation on all scale wages and an H&W payment (vacation pay already included here)							
* Plus 11% Pension on scale wages and an H&W Payment (No vacation pay)							

Table 2. Musicians' scale for television motion pictures (source: Recording Musicians Association Los Angeles, www.rmala.org).

scale for each individual musician but reflects an overall decline in the number of domestic feature film productions scored under AFM jurisdiction. There was a continued decline from 1996 until 2006, which was followed by a significant increase (almost 50%) from 2006 until 2008 (Dreith 2008: 10). But even as domestically-scored films were on the rise, related figures show that from 2006 to 2008, recording wages comprised only 73% of all music-related wages, a decline from 89% during the recording period of 2003-2005 (see Table 3).

For some Hollywood film and TV studio musicians, the changing nature of work has necessitated learning new instruments and musical techniques. New techniques have been developed to take the place of older skills. Some musical instruments have been altered to correspond with changing aesthetics, new instruments have been created, and some have

	2003–2005	2006–2008
Recording wages (percentage of total expenditures)	89%	73%
Music prep wages	6%	23%
New use wages	4%	3%
Sideline wages <sup>7</sup>	1%	1%

Table 3. Comparison of wage distribution, 2003-2005 with 2006-2008 (Dreith 2008:13–14).

been eliminated altogether. Musicians will adapt—reskill—or find new careers. Synthesizers and computers will continue to improve but as noted composer Dana Kaproff says, “You can’t replace the musician.”

However, two issues arise here. One is whether musicians will be able to get any work at all. Most of my sources agree that they probably will, if they are willing to adapt to the changing environment. The second question is whether there will be work for studio musicians in Los Angeles or have other cities encroached on this mode of musical employment. On that issue, the jury seems to be out.

## Recommendations and Final Thoughts

When advising my music students on the pros and cons of working in the film and television industry, I offer these bits of advice, in no particular order:

- Join the American Federation of Musicians (AFM). Unless it is a non-union recording (which is extremely rare), you will not be able to work on professional projects.
- Perfect your sight-reading skills. One of the primary and most important skills is to read and perform the music perfectly with next to no rehearsal. Mistakes are considered to be unforgivable.
- Entrance into the field often occurs with the recommendation of a mentor or teacher who vouches for your abilities, usually beginning as a substitute for that mentor. Once you have proven yourself, the contractor *may* hire you for further work.
- Learn the ins and outs of wage scales and the Film

Musicians Secondary Markets Fund in order to clearly understand what monetary compensation you should receive for your work.

- Learn as many musical styles as possible. Robert R. Faulkner points out: “Despite the assembly-line nature of motion picture, television film, and phonograph record dates, each score is unique. Melody, rhythm, orchestration, length of individual takes, and difficulty of parts vary with each film. This inherent variety in studio work requires musicians to be prepared for uncertainty. They always have something new to play, someone new to play under, and they must be on top of their musical skills all the time” (Faulkner 1971: 7).
- Remain dependable for your contractor. This includes being absolutely punctual to the recording session (arriving early enough to warm up and to get comfortable), having your instruments in tip-top condition, and remaining focused. If called to work for another contractor, it is advisable to remain faithful to your original contractor.
- If you are the new member of the recording ensemble, study the musicians’ social interaction and behaviors to see how you might fit in, and to reiterate Irma Neumann’s admonition, “Keep your mouth shut!”
- Historically, the film and television recording industry has gone through many changes, and continues to change. As has been shown, there have been times when certain instruments and musical styles have gone out of favor. If working in this industry is your passion, be prepared to reskill by learning the electronic software used for music preparation (to orchestrate, arrange, copy, program, or compose).

The world of the Hollywood studio musician is a small insular one which only rarely opens its doors to outsiders. Trying to establish and maintain a successful career in this business depends on the precision, talent, and flexibility of the performer, loyalty to employers, and an ability to “play the game” with established studio musicians, along with a healthy

dose of luck. Students would be well-advised to prepare themselves exceptionally well to pursue their goal, but always to be cognizant of the changing nature of the Hollywood recording studio. They should keep up to date with changing technologies and styles and be willing to adapt to new situations. The Hollywood recording industry will no doubt continue to change as the film industry's economy and aesthetic environments evolve in response to world events and trends, and prospective studio musicians will have to adapt to survive.

## Endnotes

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1. This article is based on a portion of my dissertation “Invisible Virtuosi: The Deskillling and Reskilling of Hollywood Studio Musicians” (UCLA 2009).
2. The Yamaha DX7 was probably the most popular digital polyphonic synthesizer that was built between 1983 and 1986. It was capable of reproducing the sounds of various pianos, organs, voices, and many percussive sounds.
3. Other shows (2007–2009) that employed live musicians include *The Singing Bee*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, and *Don't Forget the Lyrics*.
4. The Wrecking Crew was a group of Los Angeles studio musicians who became prominent in the 1960s and 1970s playing on many Phil Spector recordings, as well as on records by The Byrds, The Carpenters, The Mamas and The Papas, and The Beach Boys. Members included Glen Campbell, James Burton, Tommy Tedesco, Howard Roberts, and Barney Kessel (guitar), Hal Blaine, Jim Gordon, and Earl Palmer (drums), Carol Kaye (bass and guitar), Leon Russell, Mac Rebennack (Dr. John), and Mike Melvoin (piano).
5. Mr. Collette was a guiding force in integrating the Los Angeles Musician's Union Local #47. He was one of the first African-American studio musicians in Hollywood beginning in the 1950s, and was the first African-American to appear regularly on a national TV show, Groucho Marx's *You Bet Your Life*. He passed away on September 19, 2010.
6. Double sessions are often called for the convenience of the studio or when the composer knows in advance that the amount of work to be done cannot be completed in a standard three-hour session.
7. Sideline wages are paid when musicians are hired to pantomime the playing of a musical instrument on camera, such as in a wedding reception scene.

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