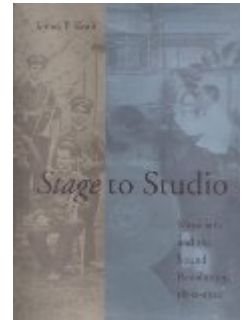




James P. Kraft. *Stage to Studio: Musicians and the Sound Revolution, 1890-1950.* *Studies in Industry and Society Series.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. 255 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-5089-9.



Reviewed by Craig H. Roell

Published on H-Business (May, 1997)

A New Sound of Music: Musicians, the Sound Revolution, and Corporate Power

"For working musicians as a collectivity, the impact of technological change was devastating," affirms James P. Kraft in this meaningful work, which engagingly explores the social impact of industrial technology--"a sharp, double-edged sword"--on American professional musicians during the first sixty years of the sound revolution (p. 200). Kraft, associate professor of history at the University of Hawaii, approaches this wide-ranging, culturally significant topic from the musician's point of view. Hence, we are taken chronologically through a critical transformation in the history of musical performance, from the ragtime era before recorded sound to the movie sound-scores and jukebox culture of the 1950s.

This is not so much a history of how technology influenced music itself, but rather, of how technology changed the way professional musicians did what they did, and how they had to adjust to, and often fight, the demands of corporations that controlled the revolutionary technology of sound recording and broadcasting. This is a finely craft-

ed labor history that shows how new sound technologies "transformed the musicians' world, turning a diffused, labor-intensive, artisanal structure into a centralized, capital-intensive, highly mechanized one [which] affected wages, working conditions, patterns of hiring, definitions of skills, and above all job opportunities" (p. 2). Kraft takes the reader through the myriad ways that these workers, largely through their union activities, sought to cope with the forces of change.

It probably escapes even those who are familiar with the turbulent story of workers facing the Industrial Revolution--a world turned upside down by labor-saving machinery, displacement of skilled employment, increasingly dynamic corporate power, and resulting industrial conflict and class violence--that similar patterns emerged in the seemingly idyllic world of music production and performance. After all, does not "Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast," as William Congreve put it so famously, "to soften rocks, or bend a knotted oak"? Yes, but this book reveals that union activities and worker solidarity aided the cause considerably. While the sound revolu-

tion (records, broadcasting, movies) clearly brought a new and exciting musical experience to consumers, and though the accompanying technologies (from management's point of view) increased efficiency and profit, nevertheless the impact on musicians was calamitous. For some, fame, fortune, and an increased standard of living resulted, "but for the majority the change meant dislocation, restricted or lost opportunity, and sustained conflict with management" (p. 2). Kraft lets us view both worlds, and in the process, shows how exceedingly complex real life really is.

Kraft gives us valuable insight into the world of professional musicians, a group regrettably overlooked in business and labor history until now. In bringing them into the historical picture, the author rightly contends that musicians are "a large but atypical group of American workers," whose "role in the nation's economy [is] larger than their numbers suggest" (pp. 2, 4). Consumers have long enjoyed recorded and broadcast music, and music at the movies, with probably little thought to the labor behind its creation. Did the sound revolution change the art and craft of music-making? The pace and skill level of work? Work opportunity and reward? Self-identity and expression? Previous studies have answered similarly posed questions regarding the Industrial Revolution in general, but Kraft convincingly demonstrates that the special case of musicians, precisely because of the wide-ranging influence and unique qualities of their art, deserves special examination. The idea that musicians had little in common with other workers (what Kraft calls the "artist-versus-worker controversy") is a strong theme throughout the book. It is to the author's credit that he successfully establishes both the ways that professional musicians were indeed different, and also how they faced similar trials and experiences too those of other industrial workers, such as in the building of a national union that embraced the skilled labor movement expounded by the AFL, including the use of the strike. Indeed, Kraft makes clear how musicians dramatically

and successfully utilized a unique concept of the strike weapon--the recording ban.

Thus, we enter into the distinctive world of professional musicians--singers, bands, and orchestras performing in supper and dance clubs, hotel restaurants, radio stations, movie theaters, and other places of mass entertainment. Kraft limits his study by excluding part-time musicians and performers in symphony orchestras. He instead concentrates on "the largest and most significant group of musicians in the country," those "who earned most of their income from performances in places of private enterprise with vested interests in utilizing sound technology to maximize profits, reduce production costs, or control labor" (p. 5).

Furthermore, this history of musicians as laborers naturally traces the development of group power through unions in reaction to technological change, politics, and corporate power, but it excludes for the most part the impact of technology on the content or form of popular music. While some readers may feel slighted, Kraft makes a good case; the result is superb history.

By necessity, this is an interdisciplinary work. Kraft extends his study to include the crucial role of government, how it affected the relationship between musicians and corporate management in particular, and social change and consumer products in general. Not surprisingly, the fate of working musicians became tied to politics. Kraft investigates the impact of antitrust laws, government's relationship with employer associations, radio ownership, injunctions against labor, and the impact of congressional elections.

Professional musicians are not treated unrealistically as a monolithic group, but rather, Kraft portrays them with all their divisions and prejudices (small town versus big city; race, ethnic, and gender diversity, etc.). This brings balance to his depiction of their efforts toward solidarity. Kraft addresses the wide experiences within the culture of work, such as dress, drugs and alcohol, pride,

stress, solidarity, unionization, and the nature of musical work itself. He also examines gender issues and race relations, and the varied working conditions ranging from film studios to nightclubs, hotels to radio, theater to traveling bands. There is a wealth of information on the American Federation of Musicians (both the national organization and individual locals), as well as on employer groups such as the National Association of Broadcasters. In dispelling the artist-versus-worker controversy that supposedly distinguished musicians from other skilled workers, Kraft shows that such artists did indeed "work" for a living and did not simply "play." But he also shows how hierarchical prejudice among musicians often stood in the way of group solidarity--the classically trained, "respectable" elite, who "performed" rather than "labored," saw collective bargaining as "working class" and antithetical to musical art and beauty.

Significantly as well, the book addresses the work and plight of black and women musicians, their effort to establish standards of professionalism, their social expectations, prejudices against them, and their experiences in trade unionism. The place of women in this story is especially ironic. Unlike men, women played a much more prominent and important role in music education than in musical performance, especially as piano teachers. As Kraft asserts instructively to historians, "This too was distinctive, if not unique, among skilled workers at the time: those who taught workers their skills were not themselves considered skilled workers" (p. 18).

This book is a boon to readers wishing to know more about the production of music in the radio industry, the film industry (both in the "silent" era and the age of sound), and the record industry (where the jukebox played a pivotal role toward establishing a recorded musical culture). The chapter dealing with movies alone is worth the purchase of the book. It is an education, for example, to learn the details of musicians' em-

ployment in (silent) movie theaters, where by 1928 about 25 percent of all professional instrumentalists worked at wages significantly above those of other skilled workers, and where orchestra leaders and organists vied for popularity. Similarly, it is illuminating to see how sound films changed this lucrative situation. Kraft portrays "talkies" as "a classic case of substituting capital for labor," for "sound films 'silenced' musicians as quickly as they ended the careers of silent-screen stars who spoke poorly" (p. 33). It was indeed a sound revolution, a consumer's delight, and from management's point of view a coup that achieved control, greater efficiency, and cut the high costs of employing orchestras. (Displacing musicians could save as much as \$3,000 a week.) But this was a tremendous crisis for musicians so quickly relegated to the "ranks of dinosaurs, dodo birds, and other extinct species" (p. 50), whose source of fairly high income eroded in the dawn of the Great Depression without regard to talent, skill, or seniority. Despite union efforts to "keep music alive," it became obvious that in the new age of sound movies, live music was unnecessary. Nevertheless, for a small minority came new and unprecedented opportunity to work as studio musicians in Hollywood.

The story was similar in radio broadcasting, as live musical performance gave way to recorded music. Local orchestras were increasingly dismissed as unnecessary, although for awhile, advertisers sponsored shows that spotlighted choice groups (the Fleischmann's Yeast Hour, for example, commercially sponsored Rudy Vallee and his Connecticut Yankees on NBC radio). Again we see the theme of how technology benefited small groups of instrumentalists to the detriment of others. In this is the rise of the "big band" era and concurrently, the rise of the jukebox culture that replaced the coin-operated player piano. Thus, Kraft pays particular attention to the interactions between the broadcasting industry, dominated by a "closely knit web of a few vertically integrated firms" (p. 82), and the recording industry, and to

how musicians had to negotiate with both. Finally, he shows how the sound revolution transformed the business of music making itself by centralizing it. Those who remained in the business were forced to relocate to the new centers of musical recording such as Hollywood and New York. Kraft endeavors to balance union ideology with corporate thinking about such technological innovation, though his heart is clearly with the musicians.

The greatest victory for musicians came through their union, the American Federation of Musicians, at the hands of the dynamic and charismatic James C. Petrillo, who negotiated his way to success through the trials of the sound revolution (wherein consumers--not just corporate power--clearly preferred recorded music to the live product of local musicians), the Great Depression, World War II, and after. Petrillo's use of a unique strike technique--the recording ban--helped to achieve royalty payment for records sold or broadcast (ultimately resulting in the Music Performance Trust Fund). "At last," Kraft writes, "musicians would have a source of income to replace, at least partially, what they had lost from the advent of talking movies, radio broadcasts of recorded music, the demise of vaudeville, and the unexpected popularity of jukebox music" (p. 155). Business and labor historians should note how this victory was significant: "No union had ever before forced employers to contribute to a fund designed to provide jobs and income for workers displaced by technology," Kraft records triumphantly (p. 160). This in turn had an impact on union negotiations in other industries after the war. Still, it was a victory limited by the Taft-Hartley Act, and one that still faced new technological challenges from FM radio and television.

Some readers may find things to fault in this book; I do not. It is solid history, well researched, broadly conceived, comfortably organized, well written, and nicely illustrated. The author's extensive and useful notes and essay on sources reveal

a labor of love that utilized a plethora of archival sources ranging from the papers of American Federation of Musicians (national and local branches) to newspapers, trade journals (many of them obscure), interviews and oral history, and government documents. Likewise, the use of the secondary literature is impressive and well-rounded, ranging from musicians' work experience to matters of race, ethnicity, and gender in musical life. Literature on film, radio, the recording industry, and on more general topics such as the role of the state in labor-capital relations and labor's response to technological change also abounds. Kraft makes an effort to maximize his reading audience by placing his subject within what might be called the rising consumer culture, or as he puts it, placing "the history of musicians within the context of the sweeping cultural changes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (p. 248).

A must-read for anyone interested in labor history, this book will bring rewarding reading to those with a wide variety of interests, especially including music and cultural history, business and economic history, social history, and the history of technology. It is appropriate for graduate and undergraduate classroom use, and deserves a wide popular audience as well. Kraft has given us a superb history that shows the complexity of how "even the most celebrated accomplishments of the capitalist market system can be, and usually are, accompanied by social dislocation" (p. 5). I am not typically drawn to labor histories, but Kraft has shown the finer side of his craft, and in so doing has preserved for the broadest audience the experiences of an overlooked yet remarkable, indeed invaluable, group of people who have brought all of us much joy through their music. They deserve our collective remembrance.

Copyright (c) 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the

author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-business>

Citation: Craig H. Roell. Review of Kraft, James P. *Stage to Studio: Musicians and the Sound Revolution, 1890-1950. Studies in Industry and Society Series*. H-Business, H-Net Reviews. May, 1997.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1010>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.