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International Solidarity: Musicians of the World, Unite!

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Musicians of the World, Unite!
By Jay Schaffner

When you hear "globalization," do you think of music? How about media corporations taking advantage of lower-paid musicians in other countries? Globalization and global outsourcing have a very significant and unique impact on the music sector of the entertainment industry, as a result of three simultaneous developments:

- Scientific and technological revolution. Today musicians can perform in different parts of the world, in real time — and the resulting product can be edited, in real time, in a totally different location. Delays for music tracks to be copied and flown in have been eliminated.
- The revolutionary political shift that occurred in 1991 with the collapse of most socialist countries. While their political and economic systems have disintegrated, the legacy of decades of state support of the arts remains. Their highly skilled musicians, artists and actors and their developed music, film and entertainment industries are now competing in the world market.
- Competition between nationally owned and controlled industries in various countries has been replaced by competition between globally owned corporations. Loyalty to product from one's own country has given way to loyalty to the bottom line.

These developments present major challenges for the recording industry.

The United States — and Hollywood, specifically — is no longer the film center of the world. While most corporate offices are still located here, the ownership and production centers have shifted.

Film production, shooting, post production and music recording now take place globally. Countries as diverse as Canada, England, Ireland, the Czech Republic, Romania, Russia, Australia, New Zealand, India and China have developed thriving film infrastructures. The formerly socialist countries brought an infrastructure that was already in place. Other countries, including Canada, have sought to build such an infrastructure as a means of developing their national economies in the global market. Many countries have offered tax credits, and even tax rebates and production incentives, to the film industry, in exchange for the development of a new industrial infrastructure.

Today there are endless possibilities for shooting, mixing, editing and scoring a film. The bulk of post-production still takes place in the United States, but this is a transitory situation. Music can be recorded for a soundtrack in England and mixed in either New York or Los Angeles in real time. Using the Internet, music sessions can be conducted from one part of the world, while the actual session takes place in a different location.

Moviegoers are accustomed to the "Hollywood" product, both on screen and in its audio presentation, and musicians in various parts of the world are "learning and playing" that sound. Films are no longer being produced, marketed and sold with the screen image out of sync with the sound and music, as some "kung-fu" genre films were in the past. Musicians based in New York and Los Angeles are still needed to record extraordinary jazz, horn, brass and wind solos — but this is also changing.

Today, music for major films is being recorded throughout the world. "King Kong," for example, was initially being recorded in Australia and New Zealand. Because the musicians there have not had the experience of L.A. musicians, and because of the unique scoring habits of the composer, the work was not going fast enough to meet the release deadline. So, two weeks before release, the score was shifted to Los Angeles. But the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy series, the "Harry Potter" films and others have all been recorded in Europe. And during the recent labor dispute at Radio City Music Hall, a tape was made with a 55-piece orchestra to replace the 35-member Radio City Hall Orchestra. It was recorded in Ireland, two weeks before its first use.

The work that Los Angeles musicians once dominated has shifted to all corners of the world. A decade ago, it was not unusual for six to 12 different films to be scored simultaneously in Los Angeles, employing upwards of

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1,200 musicians. Today, it is lucky if three films are scored simultaneously, and no more than 300 to 400 musicians are typically working at any one time. In New York, which used to get the overflow when soundstage space was fully booked in L.A., the impact has been even more severe.

With films increasingly shot throughout the world, it seems only natural that a post-production and music industry will develop alongside that. "Cold Mountain," a film about the Civil War, had almost no African Americans pictured — even as extras! — because it was shot in Romania. If moviegoers could accept that, it seems clear that the hemorrhaging will increase.

The AFTRA-SAG jingle strike six years ago led the industry to look for alternatives to work previously done under AFTRA and SAG contracts, and scored by musicians under AFM contracts. They found alternative nonunion sources around the world — and also in New York and L.A. And, as in film, although the image may be shot and produced in the U.S., the sound can come from anywhere in the world.

Production in the recording industry has also shifted. More and more Grammy-winning material is produced outside the U.S., or produced by companies who are not signatories to AFM agreements. For example, the recording artist Shakira, who sells product worldwide (although mostly in the U.S.), records for the Netherlands-based company Sony Music Netherlands.

Jive Records and Zomba Music had a corner on one-third of the U.S. and world record sales just five or six years ago, with top selling artists such as Britney Spears, the Backstreet Boys, N'Sync, Joe and R Kelly. It opened a recording plant in Sweden, and later in Germany, and has recorded tracks for their artists from there.

Technology's greatest impact is in the recording arena, with increasing numbers of sales done virtually, through the Internet, with no actual physical product existing. Sound recordings sold in the United States total roughly \$12 billion per year, despite the tears shed by the RIAA. About \$2 billion of that — one-sixth of all music purchases — comes from Internet sales. Not included in those sales are ring-tones and ring-backs, which last year, globally, resulted in \$4 billion in sales, about \$1 billion being in the U.S. market. The centers of the ring-tone industry are Germany, Korea and Japan, but U.S.-based sales are increasing.

The amount of disposable income available for music purchases is a relative amount at any given time. Games, videos and ring-tones are now competing with CD's for those dollars. Music used in games is done almost exclusively outside the U.S., because of costs and the tradition of union recording contracts that require payments for overdubbing, doubling for playing multiple instruments, and basing payments on the amount of music that may be recorded. Today the Czech Republic, Germany and Ireland are the centers for game music.

The cost of recording music in other countries is vastly lower than in the United States. For example, recording budgets in Canada do not include the cost of health coverage, since Canada has a national health plan. The same is true in England and Ireland — and there is no direct cost for pensions in those countries, either. And even under capitalism, the heritage of socialism is still strong in Eastern Europe. Although government services have been slashed, in some respects they are still greater than in the U.S. The wage package in the United States must include benefits that are government-provided in other countries. State support to the industry also serves to keep production costs down.

What are we to do? The AFM is based in both the United States and Canada. Although we try, we do not always succeed in creating models that respect the work, traditions and economy of both countries. AFM work in Canada is still, regrettably, viewed as foreign, since it does not take place in the AFM's traditional U.S. recording centers.

I would suggest that unions begin to look at ways of taxing industry profits, without regard to the country of origin of the actual work. Since most of the industry is based in the U.S., this could help to level the playing field. We need a campaign to tax the corporate bottom line, rather than imposing tariffs on product made outside the U.S. for cost savings. This would require the cooperation of all the entertainment unions, and a reassessment of traditional "Buy American" campaigns. Such a campaign would need to be massive and would need allies from other sectors — but it has a chance of winning, because of the "star power" associated with music and films.

Similarly, unions in different countries need to work much more closely together. While national conditions may differ widely, common research and bargaining coordination could be highly beneficial when confronting the same conglomerate. However, this would require a massive education campaign by the AFM and other U.S.-based entertainment unions, aimed at redefining the "enemy" from "foreign work" to corporate profits.

We need greater global union cooperation; we need to strengthen the work of international organizations like International Federation of Musicians (FIM), of which the AFM is a member. Without a global union movement confronting global corporations, there is no solution. Musicians of the world, unite! Musicians and actors of the world, unite!

This article was based on a presentation by Jay Schaffner at Cornell's conference on "Global Companies, Global Campaigns" in February 2006. AFM International President Tom Lee, originally scheduled to speak on the panel, was unable to attend. He asked Schaffner to represent him. Schaffner is AFM Local 802's recording supervisor and an elected member of Local 802's Executive Board. This article first appeared in the March 2006

issue of Allegro, the newspaper of AFM Local 802. AFM Local 802 is the local of the musicians' union that covers musicians in New York City. For more background, see www.Local802afm.org. You may reprint this article as long as you credit the author and source.

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