

Sideline Musicians Photo Collection

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This unique collection of photographs of musicians, presented to the Archives of Local 47 of the American Federation of Musicians on August 20, 2008, documents a special moment in Los Angeles's music history. From the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, these pictures were used by individual instrumentalists in hopes of securing work as "sideline musicians" in Hollywood films. Sideline musicians are members of Local 47 of the American Federation of Musicians (and sometimes, also the Screen Actors Guild), who appear on camera performing on musical instruments, but most often are not heard on the soundtrack.

Negotiations between the Hollywood studios and the American Federation of Musicians resulted in the development of certain union rules and policies about live music recording for films. Eventually the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) became involved, requiring that musicians on camera who spoke dialog also become SAG members. In those days, Local 47 only approved certain of its members as being eligible for such specialized motion picture work.

The project of organizing, alphabetizing, and inventorying this collection, funded by The Shana Alexander Foundation, has developed out of Dr. Jeannie Pool's work in documenting the life and career of jazz saxophone player/bandleader Peggy Gilbert (1905–2007), who worked at Local 47 from the late 1940s until 1970. She was a sideline musician in Hollywood films in the late 1920s and '30s (also again in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s), and often contracted women musicians for sideline jobs. In the early days, the musicians were often filmed and recorded simultaneously. As new technologies developed for more precise synchronization of sound to film (1928–34), recording live music on the set yielded to musicians (sideline musicians) being filmed as they played along with "pre-records" (recorded music tracks).

During this period, Peggy Gilbert's friend and colleague, Phillip Kahgan, was one of the leading contractors in Los Angeles for several studios (including MGM, Fox, and Paramount). He often asked Peggy to help contract the women musicians for his gigs. Kahgan, a violist and music contractor, died in 1986 at the age of 93 and left his principal archives of concert programs, photographs, and memorabilia in a collection of 36 boxes to the UCLA Performing Arts Special Collection. Many of the photographs in this sideline collection were submitted to Kahgan and to Gilbert.

In 1928–29, with the advent of talking pictures, and the discontinuance of pit orchestras in movie palaces, many music jobs across the country were eliminated. Some of the unemployed musicians relocated to Los Angeles, a growing media center in the late 1920s and '30s, where a completely new job environment was developing for musicians. Although there were some live orchestras in theaters as late as 1933, many Los Angeles theater owners also installed sound systems and let the pit musicians go. However, by the early 1930s, Los Angeles had become the principal center for film, radio, and record production. The eight major motion-picture companies in Los Angeles produced 85% of American films. The nation's major radio stations and recording labels relied on Los Angeles's flagship stations.

By 1935, 1,000 musicians were working in entertainment industry studios in Los Angeles. Local 47 tried to save the theater jobs, while attempting at the same time to create new opportunities in radio and film. It was the fastest growing AFM local between the two world wars. The membership quadrupled in the 1920s to 4,000 members; by the end of the 1930s, there were more than 6,000 members. By 1940, Local 47 was the largest trade union in Southern California and third largest local of the AFM, only behind New York and Chicago, the other two major media centers in the country. There were so many musicians applying to transfer into Local 47, that there was a one-year moratorium on transfers in 1929–30. In order to qualify, a musician had to be in Los Angeles for one entire year before seeking work from studio contractors. Because contractors were so powerful, those in favor enjoyed great wages and working conditions. A sideman in a studio orchestra averaged about \$10,000 per year in the late 1930s.

The term “sideline musicians” or “sideliners” began when musicians worked on film jobs during the silent days, playing music that would inspire the actors and create the appropriate mood on the set. They played “on the side” (often behind the cinematographer and director, etc., but easily heard by the cast) and they played “mood music on the set.” Sideline work sometimes led to acting jobs for musicians. Union rules required that union musicians be used for music-playing roles. Many musicians disdained sideline work, because they were not heard on the soundtrack of the film. But the pay for sideline musicians was comparable to that of studio musicians. In the late 1930s, sideliners made \$15 to \$40 a day, mostly sitting around and waiting; not very demanding work.

The photographs in the Sideline Musicians Photo Collection range from highly professional, movie-star quality studio shots, by some of the leading Los Angeles photographers of the day, to casual snapshots in front of homes, gardens, automobiles, and other interesting backdrops. The snapshots show Los Angeles in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, offering rich “slice-of-life” vignettes. Many of the photographs reveal special characteristics or talents; most of them were taken with the musicians holding their musical instruments. The photographs are labeled with names, musical instruments played, suit and dress sizes, height, weight, eye and hair color, and some background information, including other films in which the pictured musician had appeared.

There are references on the photographs to draft status, military service, and military band affiliations—one photo indicates that the musician was “killed in action.” Some of the musicians were photographed in their military uniforms. From this pictorial fact, it can be assumed that, when handing out jobs to sideliners, the studios may have given preference to returning World War II veterans.

Although the musicians are overwhelmingly male, there were nearly 200 photographs of women instrumentalists, some who are mentioned in Peggy Gilbert’s biography. This photo collection, including approximately 1,500 photographs of some 1,300 musicians, is being presented to the Archives of AFM Local 47. The complete inventory of the collection will be available online at www.afm47.org/archives. For a nominal charge, Local 47 will provide a digital copy of a photo. Although there are no restrictions on the use of these photographs in publications, a photo credit will be required.

Among the interesting features of this collection:

- Many of the photographs are 8” x 10” black and white prints, either glossy or matte finish, in excellent condition; some are printed as postcards for easy mailing
- Various ethnic music specialists are represented in this collection, including Native American, Gypsy, Russian, Greek, and Pacific Islander
- The collection includes many Latin and South American musicians
- Fabulous photographs of a wide variety of drum “trap” sets from the period are in the collection
- Many photographs are taken in front of private homes, apartment buildings, or other architectural facades
- Some photographs show musicians in front of period automobiles
- Many of the musical instruments shown in the pictures are interesting in and of themselves, particularly the keyboards, double basses, and guitars
- A few of the photographs show a musician in front of a tantalizing display of multiple musical instruments

*Composer/musicologist **Jeannie Gayle Pool** is an expert on film music history and serves as a consultant to Paramount Pictures Motion Picture Music Department, where she has preserved and catalogued the studio's extensive music collection. She is the author of *Peggy Gilbert & Her All-Girl Band* (Scarecrow Press, 2008), about the Hollywood saxophone player and bandleader who worked professionally into her late nineties. Dr. Pool's documentary of the same title, narrated by Lily Tomlin, has been screened across the United States. She served as executive director of the Film Music Society (formerly the Society for the Preservation of Film Music) from 1990 until 2002. Her compositions for orchestra and chamber ensembles have been performed throughout the United States, Canada, Europe, and in China.*