

HISTORY

Musicians Wage War Against Evil Robots



Matt Novak

February 10, 2012



An advertising campaign from the American Federation of Musicians September 2, 1930 Syracuse Herald

After the release of *The Jazz Singer* in 1927, all bets were off for live musicians who played in movie theaters. Thanks to synchronized sound, the use of live musicians was unnecessary — and perhaps a larger sin, old-fashioned. In 1930 the American Federation of Musicians formed a new organization called the Music Defense League and launched a scathing ad campaign to

fight the advance of this terrible menace known as recorded sound.

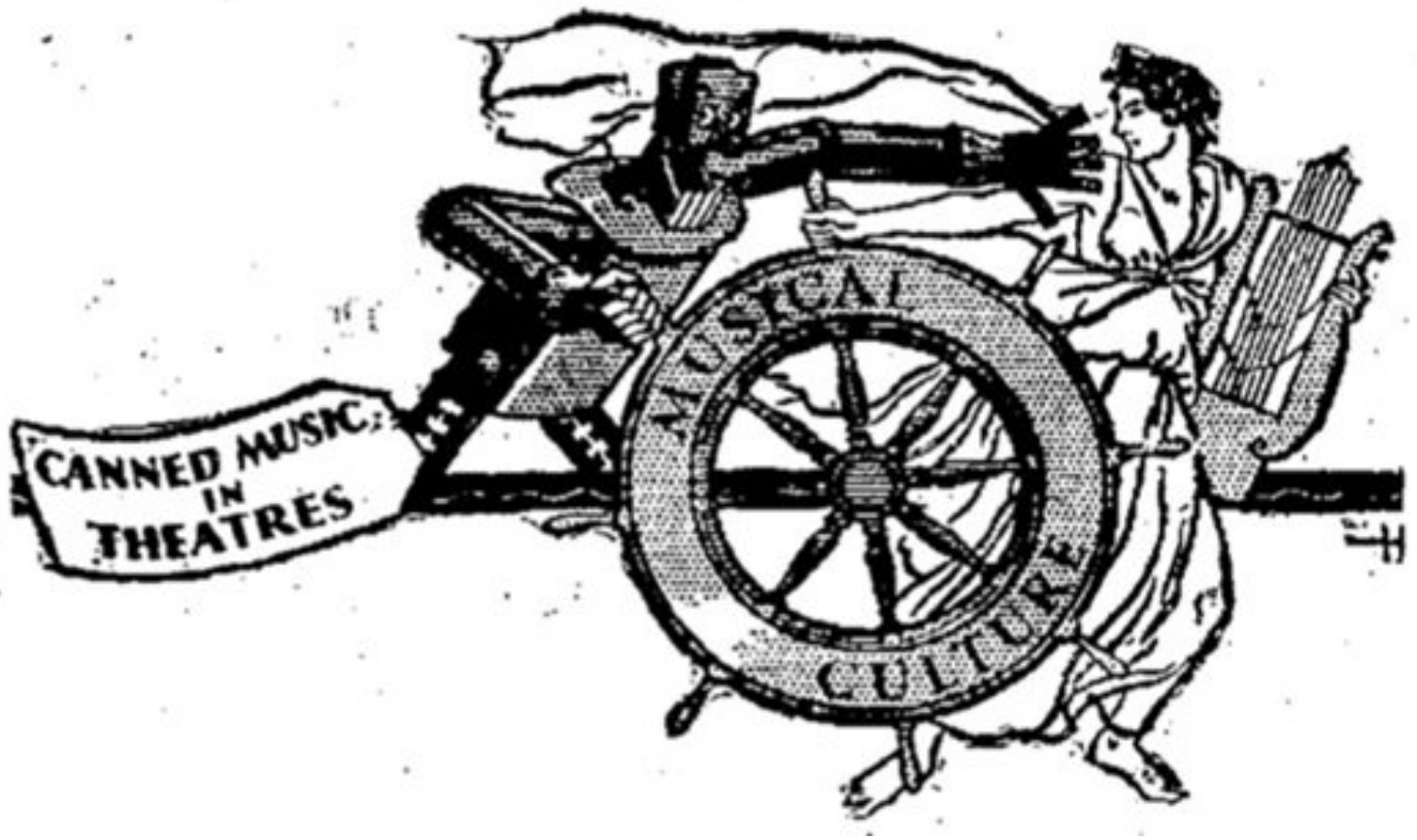
The evil face of that campaign was the dastardly, maniacal robot. The Music Defense League spent over \$500,000, running ads in newspapers throughout the United States and Canada. The ads pleaded with the public to demand humans play their music (be it in movie or stage theaters), rather than some cold, unseen machine. A typical ad read like this one from the September 2, 1930 *Syracuse Herald* in New York:

Tho' the Robot can make no music of himself, he can and does arrest the efforts of those who can. Manners mean nothing to this monstrous offspring of modern industrialism, as IT crowds Living Music out of the theatre spotlight.

Though "music has charms to soothe the savage beast, to soften rocks or bend a knotted oak," it has no power to appease the Robot of Canned Music. Only the theatre-going public can do that. Hence the swift growth of the Music Defense League, formed to demand Living Music in the theatre.

Every lover of music should join in this rescue of Art from debasement. Sign and mail the coupon.

The robot of recorded or "canned" music had many guises, all somehow destroying the best things in society. Here the robot makes a lunge in its attempt to steer "musical culture" away from a decidedly more pure course:



A robot at the helm from the March 9, 1931 Simpsons Leader Times (Kittanning, Pennsylvania) Simpsons Leader Times

Another ad claimed that musicians were being put out of work by Hollywood because recorded sound required just a few hundred musicians in recording studios. The ad even uses scare quotes around the word “music,” implying that recorded sound couldn’t even be considered as such:

300 musicians in Hollywood supply all the “music” offered in thousands of theatres. Can such a tiny reservoir of talent nurture artistic progress?



TRAMPLING ART FOR PROFITS

FOR all its virtues, modern industrialism can run amuck under the spur of greed for profits. Witness, the ruin threatening the Art of Music.

300 musicians in Hollywood supply all the "music" offered in thousands of theatres. Can such a tiny reservoir of talent nurture artistic progress?

The true function of the machine is to increase the value of the product fed into it—not to debase it. Therefore mechanical music, as a substitute for Living Music, is a spurious form of progress—Like a loom converting good wool into shoddy.

The grind organ, however operated, is a grind organ still. For music is an emotional art, a form of social intercourse, and hence dependent upon human contact.

Who profits by the elimination of genuine music from the theatre? Not

the music-loving public! Not the musician!

If you agree that theatre patrons are entitled to real music—in addition to talking and sound motion pictures, for the price they pay—**HELP SAVE THE ART FROM RUIN.** Enroll with millions of others in the Music Defense League. When the public's voice is raised its will must be served!

American Federation of Musicians
1440 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

Gentlemen: Without further obligation on my part, please enroll my name in the Music Defense League as one who is opposed to the elimination of Living Music from the Theatre.

Name

Address

City..... State.....

THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF MUSICIANS

(Comprising 140,000 professional musicians in the United States and Canada)

JOSEPH N. WEBER, President, 1440 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

Joseph N. Weber, the president of the American Federation of Musicians, made it clear in the March, 1931 issue of *Modern Mechanix* magazine that the very soul of art was at stake in this battle against the machines:

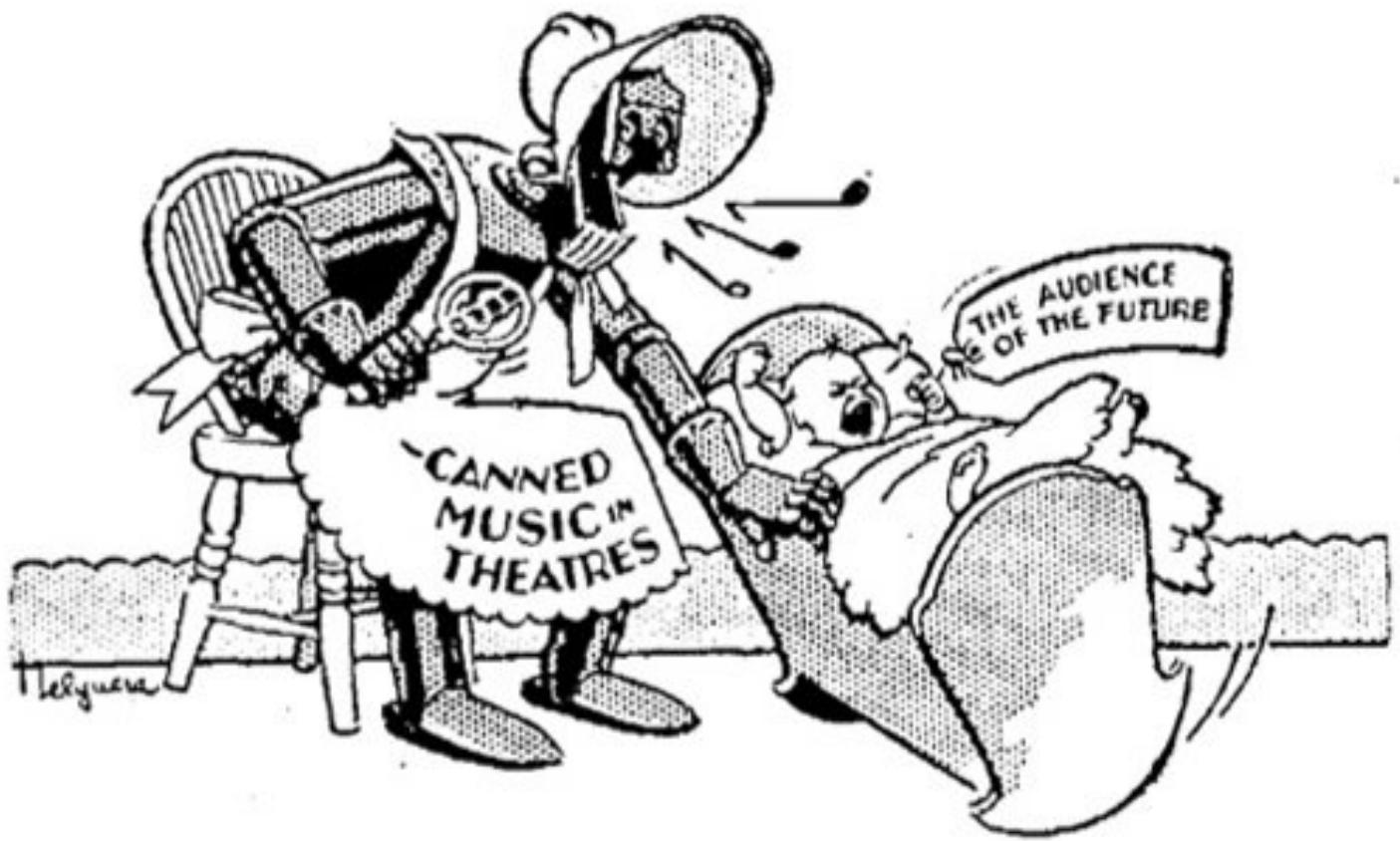
The time is coming fast when the only living thing around a motion picture house will be the person who sells you your ticket. Everything else will be mechanical. Canned drama, canned music, canned vaudeville. We think the public will tire of mechanical music and will want the real thing. We are not against scientific development of any kind, but it must not come at the expense of art. We are not opposing industrial progress. We are not even opposing mechanical music except where it is used as a profiteering instrument for artistic debasement.

That debasement came in the form of the evil robot grinding up instruments in a meat grinder, like in this ad from the November 3, 1930 *Syracuse Herald*.



A robot grinding up musical instruments (November 3, 1930 Syracuse Herald) Syracuse Herald

The robot was even shown as a new nurse ineffectively soothing a baby, which represented the audience of the future.



THE ROBOT'S LULLABY

The robot playing nurse to the audience of the future (September 15, 1930 Capital Times) Capital Times

You best hide your daughters, because this ad from the August 24, 1931 *Centralia Daily Chronicle* in Centralia, Washington shows an “unwelcome suitor” who has been “wooing the muse for many dreary months without winning her favor.”

ark Naylor, Mrs. Howard Hansen and
reet Mrs. George Sibley. A number of

company, operator of the vessel.
He asks \$7,500 damages. He suf-
fered injuries to his foot.

"When Is That Young Man Going Home?"

THIS unwelcome suitor has been wooing the muse for many dreary months without winning her favor. Patience of the household seems about exhausted.

If you, too, feel that the cause of human happiness would be better served by the return of Living Music to the theatre, you can help to hand the Robot his hat—just sign and mail the coupon.



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The robot attempting to woo your daughter (August 24, 1931 *Centralia Daily Chronicle*) *Centralia Daily Chronicle*

The robot was often shown as greedy in the ads, caring nothing of people but only of profit, like in this ad from the October 1, 1930 *Portsmouth Herald* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire).



A robot debasing music by simply playing for profit (October 1, 1930 *Portsmouth Herald*) *Portsmouth Herald*

Fundamentally, the ads were an effort to make people believe what made music so special was the musician's soul that was somehow only reflected in a live performance. This ad from the August 17, 1930 *Oelwein Daily Register* (Oewlwein, Iowa) got to the heart of it — robots have no soul.

THE ROBOT SINGS OF LOVE



THE ROBOT (singing): "O, soul of my soul, I love thee--"

BUT the Robot has no soul. And having no soul It cannot love. Small wonder the lady spurns its suit.

Now, if the Robot cuts a ridiculous figure beneath a lady's balcony, why expect IT to thrill intelligent theatre goers in the character of Canned Music?

* * *

Music is an emotional art. By means of it feeling may be translated into all tongues. The Robot, having no capacity for feeling, cannot produce music in a true sense.

You can join in rebuking the proposal that mechanical music is adequate fare for the American intellect by joining the Music Defense League. Sign and mail the coupon.

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Matt Novak is the author of the Paleofuture blog, which can now be found on Gizmodo.

MOVIES

MUSIC
