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## Classically Memphis: The Story of Classical Musicians in Memphis Recording Studios

Item Type	Other
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Publisher	Memphis, Tenn. : Rhodes College
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Download date	2026-06-11 04:05:16
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10267/26973">http://hdl.handle.net/10267/26973</a>

CLASSICALLY MEMPHIS:  
THE STORY OF CLASSICAL MUSICIANS IN MEMPHIS RECORDING STUDIOS

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Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies, 2015

I pledge that I have upheld the Rhodes College Honor Code.

“Some of the music was good,” Mrs. Ray smiles, recalling her time in the recording studios of Memphis as a session musician. “Some of the arrangements were good and that was fun. But some of them were really – ” and here she pushes the tip of her nose up with her index finger. It’s a gesture I become familiar with during my first interview with Ann Kendall Ray, and in this case it means stinky, uninspired. “We never knew what was destined to be big, or what would last.”<sup>1</sup> The music to which Mrs. Ray refers is the music that made Memphis famous, songs by Elvis, B.J. Thomas, Otis Redding. It is this music that Mrs. Ray remembers being unimpressed by as a younger woman, and she expresses her distaste for the “low brow” rock and roll music she helped bring to life with the same gesture as before, her upturned nose more self explanatory now. As for the good songs, the arrangements that she enjoyed playing? “Suspicious Minds,” she nods, “Kansas Rain. Sweet Caroline was a lot of fun. And Son of a Preacher Man, that’s a Dusty Springfield one.”<sup>2</sup> Mrs. Ray is not, by the way, a backup singer. Nor is she an organist, guitarist, or trumpeter. Ann Ray is a cellist, and she is one of a dozen or so classically trained musicians who worked the record industry in Memphis during its heyday.

The genesis of classical musicians in the popular recording studios of Memphis was not one born of a mutual love for rock and roll, but rather something that fell between convenience and necessity. In the 1960s and 70s, the recording industry was in a boom. As studios pushed down more creative and innovative paths, new sounds developed, and with them, new demands arose for a new type of

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s interview with Mrs. Ann Kendall Ray, 5:30pm, Monday, June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

session musician. Across the country, studios began to pull in classically trained musicians for sweeping orchestral accompaniments. The story was no different in Memphis where local studios regularly turned to symphony members for recording gigs.<sup>3</sup> This paper will seek to explore the relationships that were formed between the classical and popular music industries during the recording boom and how those relationships continue to affect the landscape of Memphis's music today. Although many people, both lay and professional, tend to view the music industry as a zero-sum game, in which classical and popular music are in constant competition for resources (financial or otherwise), this paper will give evidence to the contrary. All of the different musical communities of Memphis share a symbiotic relationship, working in tandem to strengthen the entire music industry. Furthermore, the success of the Memphis recording industry in the 1960s and 70s can be linked to the simultaneous rise of a permanent symphonic orchestra. Through cohabitation and cooperation, the music industries of Memphis made, and continue to make, the city a place for musicians to live and work and thrive.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

## Part I: Classical Music in the Bluff City

*“When I first came here, this was all swamp. Everyone said I was daft to build a castle on a swamp, but I built it all the same, just to show them. It sank into the swamp. So I built a second one. That sank into the swamp. So I built a third. That burned down, fell over, then sank into the swamp. But the fourth one stayed up. And that’s what you’re going to get, Lad, the strongest castle in these isles.” – King of Swamp Castle, Monty Python and the Holy Grail<sup>4</sup>*

It might come as a surprise to hear, but the city of Memphis does in fact have a long and rich history of classical music.<sup>5</sup> Tucked among accounts of war, plague, and the blues are the fiddle tunes and folk music of immigrants and white settlers from the north and east who lived and worked in Memphis. As the city transformed from a pit stop on the Mississippi to an economic and cultural powerhouse of the Mid-South region, the wealthy entrepreneurial and creative classes grew.<sup>6</sup> This growth heralded, among other things, a taste for European classical music.

The city’s first documented attempt to foster a symphony came in the early 1870s with the Memphis Philharmonic Orchestra. The MPO survived for approximately eight years before becoming a casualty of the 1878 Yellow Fever epidemic and the resultant white flight.<sup>7</sup> Next came the Philharmonic Orchestral Association of 1905. Competition and creative differences among leadership led to the association being quietly disbanded and replaced within a few years by the

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<sup>4</sup> *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Ambassador Film Distributors, 1975.

<sup>5</sup> Sharp, Timothy W. *Memphis Music: Before the Blues*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Pub., 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> "When Symphonic Music Came Back." *The Commercial Appeal*, January 16, 1977.

“New Symphonic Orchestra” in 1908. That orchestra thrived until 1925 when it, too, went the way of its predecessors, succumbing to financial mismanagement.<sup>8</sup>

Another orchestra did not take its place until 1939, when Burnet C. Tuthill, son of the famous Carnegie Hall architect and career music school administrator and director, rose to meet the challenging legacy.<sup>9</sup>

The 1939 Memphis Symphony Orchestra was a source of pride for the city, and its arrival was greeted enthusiastically by newspapers, local businesses, and social clubs across the county.<sup>10</sup> Professor Tuthill, affectionately nicknamed Papa Tut, was the director of the Memphis College of music and the Southwestern (now Rhodes) College music department. In an effort to create an orchestra at Southwestern, Papa Tut drew upon the largely untapped supply of musicians in the local community and within a semester the infant concert orchestra grew into the MSO.

For seven years, Professor Tuthill’s orchestra thrived in the Memphis community, outlasting the war economy of the Second World War and the drafting of several of its members (including Tuthill himself).<sup>11</sup> Ahead of the 1946 season, however, the symphony’s business leaders made the decision to double the number of concerts to be performed, causing not only extreme financial stress but also

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<sup>8</sup> “Music Lifts the Soul.” *The Commercial Appeal*, November 3, 1941.

<sup>9</sup> “When Symphonic Music Came Back.” *The Commercial Appeal*, January 16, 1977.

<sup>10</sup> “Music Lifts the Soul.” *The Commercial Appeal*, November 3, 1941.

<sup>11</sup> Smith, Whitney. “Vincent de Frank Remembered.” *The Commercial Appeal*, November 11, 1998.

placing an immense amount of strain upon the musicians.<sup>12</sup> On the first of April, Professor Tuthill tendered his resignation as conductor, and gave a public statement expressing his displeasure with the events of the season. He could not, he said, be the director of an orchestra so woefully unprepared for so many concerts, and he strongly believed that the decision to expand the performance season was unprofessional at best.<sup>13</sup> In the end, the symphony's final two performances of the year were canceled, and the orchestra disbanded before the 1947 season.

Throughout this series of orchestras and orchestral societies, one stalwart entity stood the test of time: The Beethoven Club. In fact, it lasted so long that it is now the oldest surviving classical music society in the South.<sup>14</sup> Formed in the 1870s by four young ladies, the organization spent most of its early life as a society club toward which educated young women could devote both their energies and funds. The Beethoven Club existed to promote classical music and promote it they did, funding many of the aforementioned chamber and orchestral societies. As the club grew in influence, it was also successful in bringing famous solo artists, like Pablo Casals, and classical music groups, like the Boston Symphony Orchestra, from around the world to perform in Memphis.

In 1953, the Memphis Symphony Orchestra rose from the ashes for the final time. Under the leadership of Vincent de Frank, who had not only been a member of

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<sup>12</sup> "Tuthill resigns as conductor, De Frank takes up baton." *The Commercial Appeal*, April 1, 1946.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Author's interview with Dr. Patricia Gray of the Beethoven Club, 3:00pm, Tuesday, June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015.

Tuthill's orchestra but was the replacement conductor for the ill-fated '47 season, the symphony made a terrific comeback as the Memphis Sinfonietta (or miniature symphony).<sup>15</sup> During the early years of the Sinfonietta, Maestro de Frank did everything, including, "sweep[ing] up the floor of the hall at the Goodwin Institute (a downtown facility where the orchestra once played) because the orchestra couldn't afford a stage hand," recalled Nancy Crosby, a former orchestral society president, in the conductor's obituary, "if a musician couldn't quite swing it paying for a Tuxedo, he would pay for it."<sup>16</sup> By 1960, the sinfonietta was transformed into the fully formed Memphis Symphony Orchestra that still exists today, growing from 21 musicians to over 50 within the first seven years.<sup>17</sup>

As soon as he achieved full Symphony status, Maestro de Frank began working toward securing a grant from the Ford Foundation totaling \$500,000.<sup>18</sup> He also continued to recruit new musicians, striving toward his dream of a professional orchestra with 80 members and a 53-week concert season.<sup>19</sup> While the vast majority of new musicians were locals, de Frank also found success in attracting people from outside of Memphis to play in his orchestra. Some commuted from as far away as

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<sup>15</sup> "Music in Memhis has Risen from the Ashes." *The Commercial Appeal*, February 4, 1949.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, Whitney. "Vincent de Frank Remembered." *The Commercial Appeal*, November 11, 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Author's interview with Shelly Sublett, 9:44pm, Thursday, June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>18</sup> "Symphony misses on Ford Grant." *The Commercial Appeal*, October 25, 1965.

<sup>19</sup> Smith, Whitney. "Vincent de Frank Remembered." *The Commercial Appeal*, November 11, 1998.

Illinois, taking the train down to Memphis for every dress rehearsal and concert.<sup>20</sup>

That Maestro de Frank was able to achieve the growth that he did in such a short span of time speaks volumes about his dedication to his job. It also says a great deal about the state of the Memphis music industry and local economy.

## Part II: Here Comes the Boom<sup>21</sup>

*“Hey, Mister, I don’t mean to be telling tales out of school, but there’s a fella in there’ll pay you ten dollars if you sing into his can.”*

– Delmar O’Donnell, *O Brother Where Art Thou*<sup>22</sup>

The record industry in Memphis started out just the way it did in every other city, with the radio. In the early days of broadcasting, radio stations played pre-recorded music, but they also regularly employed staff musicians to come up with catchy commercial jingles. Larger stations employed studio orchestras that played pieces too long to fit on one side of a record (anything longer than three minutes) such as symphonies and accompaniment to soap operas. This meant that radio stations had their own primitive recording equipment. Staff musicians grew into staff ensembles and bands, recording their own songs, or covers of popular songs, in the stations. As radio spread through the Mississippi Delta, the allure of making the journey to

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<sup>20</sup> Author’s interview with Mrs. Ann Spurbeck, 3:00pm, Tuesday, July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> This section provides a very brief overview of the recording industry in Memphis. For further information, please refer to *Respect Yourself* by Robert Gordon (Gordon, Robert. *Respect Yourself: Stax Records and the Soul Explosion*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury USA, 2013.), *Soulsville U.S.A.* by Robert M. J. Bowman (Bowman, Rob. *Soulsville, U.S.A.: The Story of Stax Records*. N.p.: Schirmer Trade Books, 2000.), and *Country Soul* by Charles L. Hughes (Hughes, Charles. *Country Soul: Making Music and Making Race in the American South*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2015.)

<sup>22</sup> *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Touchstone Home Video, 2000. Film.

Memphis in order to be on the radio spread with it. With radio came possibilities. All that was needed to become a record executive was to know somebody with a 2-track and to know somebody willing to play for you, Robert Gordon noted in his book *Respect Yourself*. For a time it seemed as though most of Memphis had been bitten by the recording bug.<sup>23</sup>

For Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton, that is how the dream of making a living through music began. The siblings were both working professionals when they decided to give recording a try, and Satellite records was founded in a family member's garage and funded by mortgages and loans. Early recordings were small-time country and rockabilly songs that Jim Stewart distributed in hopes of having a bigger name artist cover them. Within a few years, the newly minted Stax (a combination of **St**ewart and **Ax**ton that was the result of a copyright suit over the name Satellite) had done well enough to move into an old movie theater, and began to sign some of its more famous artists like Rufus Thomas and his daughter Carla.

In 1967 Chips Moman, a former producer and sound engineer at Stax, broke away from the studio, forming American Sound Studios. Already established as one of the best engineers in the business, Moman soon found himself inundated with artists.

Also bit by the recording bug was John Fry. At sixteen and in the tenth grade when he produced his very first record under the Ardent label, Fry was quite a bit younger than the founders of Stax but were equally as enterprising.<sup>24</sup> They also had

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<sup>23</sup> Gordon, Robert. *Respect Yourself: Stax Records and the Soul Explosion*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015.

a leg up on their older competition: John Fry owned his own recording equipment, given to him on various birthdays and Christmases by his parents.<sup>25</sup> Despite the apparent disadvantage of youth, Fry's studio quickly became successful. "We did an awful lot of work for Stax," in an article touting the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ardent, Fry recalled of his studio's work during the 70s at the height of the recording industry boom, "Almost all Stax artists did some recordings with us at some time or another. It's almost easier to say who didn't. Otis Redding didn't. Eddie Floyd, Sam and Dave, the Staple Singers, and Isaac Hayes were all frequent and regular folks."<sup>26</sup> Ardent also did remix work for American in the late 60s, often allowing themselves to act as overflow for other, bigger local studios.

As recording studios in Memphis continued to find success with established artists, they developed their own unique sound. The Memphis Sound came to be defined as an industrial, driving style made recognizable by unison horns and locomotive drums.<sup>27</sup> Much like their radio station forerunners, studios cultivated their own in-house bands, and each had a special style. Bands like The Memphis Boys at American Sound Studio and The Mar-Keys over at Stax played on nearly every track ever recorded in their studios<sup>28</sup> and, for a time, they provided all the

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<sup>24</sup> "10<sup>th</sup> Graders Have Own Company." *The Commercial Appeal*, January 29, 1960.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> "Ardent Heralds 25 Years of Music." *The Commercial Appeal*, August 21, 1991.

<sup>27</sup> "Relaunch Showcases the Soul of Stax Records." *USA Today*, December 17, 2006.

<sup>28</sup> For more information on the Mar-Keys, please refer to *Respect Yourself* by Robert Gordon. For further information on the Memphis Boys, please refer to *Memphis*

groove a solo artist could ask for. Eventually though, the music industry began pushing forward into new territory and with that territory came the need for a new type of session musician.

### Part III: The Symphony Players in the Studios

*Elwood: "What kind of music do you usually have here?"*

*Claire: "Oh we got both kinds. We got Country and Western."*

– *The Blues Brothers*<sup>29</sup>

If a producer in Memphis during the boom wanted violins, violas, and cellos to flesh out an artist's track, he called Noel Gilbert.<sup>30</sup> A farm boy from Scotts Hill, Tennessee, Gilbert came to Memphis in 1925 at the age of sixteen in order to study the violin.<sup>31</sup> Like most young men who traveled to Memphis for the sake of music, Noel cut his teeth performing on Beale Street, but he also worked as a staff musician at a local radio station, WREC. In the 1940s he lead WMC radio's staff orchestra in addition to playing in Papa Tut's Memphis Symphony Orchestra.<sup>32</sup> By the time the recording industry had sprung up, Noel Gilbert had known and worked with most producers in the area and earned a reputation for churning out quality work at a reasonable price. If you needed a session violinist, Noel Gilbert was the go-to man in town.

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*Boys: The Story of American Studios* by Roben Jones (Jones, Roben. *Memphis Boys: The Story of American Studios*. N.p.: University Press of Mississippi, 2010.)

<sup>29</sup> *The Blues Brothers*. Universal, 1980. Film.

<sup>30</sup> Harty, Rosalynne. "J.S. Bach to Issac Hayes – He's Played them All." *The Commercial Appeal*. July 29, 1973

<sup>31</sup> Holbeck, Lloyd. "Noel Gilbert Remembered." *The Commercial Appeal*, June 12, 1991.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

In the early days of the industry, Noel was creative with his ensembles and often showed up at the studios with his children, who also played instruments, in tow.<sup>33</sup> Together they would lay down tracks. As the boom really got going however, demand for instrumentalists surpassed the capabilities of the small Gilbert clan. Noel, who by then had achieved the status of assistant concertmaster in Vincent de Frank's orchestra, began to call on fellow members of the Memphis Symphony to fill recording studios' needs.<sup>34</sup> Side by side, the classical and popular recording industries rose to new heights.

For professional musicians to earn a living wage, they had to be willing to wear many hats. In 1961, The Symphony paid its musicians \$7.50 per rehearsal and \$10 per concert,<sup>35</sup> leaving much to be desired by way of income. Most symphony players maintained private studios, played at churches on Sundays, and formed "wedding quartets" to play at a range of social gatherings.<sup>36</sup> With the addition of a thriving recording industry where classically trained musicians were in demand, Memphis presented a good opportunity for a hard working musician to make a decent living. Furthermore, the low cost of living and centrality of location made the Bluff City the perfect spot for a musician's home base. From Memphis, a musician

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid

<sup>34</sup> Author's interview with Mrs. Ann Kendall Ray, 5:30pm, Monday, June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> "Symphony Budget Increase." *The Commercial Appeal*. April 9, 1961

<sup>36</sup> This information was provided by every musician that I interviewed during the research process. The experience of taking up a large number of small supplemental work in order to create a livable income is one that is shared by most musicians regardless of education or specialty.

could easily travel to play in community orchestras across Arkansas, Tennessee, and even in the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra.

Memphis didn't only serve as a city to commute *from* though, as the symphony drew its fair share of musicians traveling from other cities across the Mid-South and Mid-West. One particularly large contingent was made up of a group of professional musicians who regularly took a train from Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, in order to perform with the MSO.<sup>37</sup> One of the couples in that group, Peter and Ann Spurbeck, eventually made the permanent move to Memphis when Peter was offered a professorship at Memphis State University.<sup>38</sup> Together, the Spurbecks made quick work of settling into regular Symphony positions and becoming part of Noel Gilbert's group of session players.

"What you've heard is true," Ann Ray tells me, later on in our first interview, "we did our recording in the middle of the night, sometimes all night long."<sup>39</sup> It's not something I had heard before, and I ask her why that is. Sessions often took place late at night, she tells me, because Orchestra rehearsals were in the early evening.<sup>40</sup> "Symphony rehearsals ran from 8pm to around 10," Mrs. Spurbeck elaborates, "in order to accommodate the everyone's day jobs. Bob and Mary Ann Snyder, Noel, and Pete all had regular day jobs as professors at Memphis State, and most of the rest of the orchestra were in a similar situation. So rehearsals were in the evening and

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<sup>37</sup> "Making the Journey from Illinois to Tennessee." *The Commercial Appeal*. August 23 1976

<sup>38</sup> Author's interview with Mrs. Ann Spurbeck, 3:00pm, Tuesday, July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>39</sup> Author's interview with Mrs. Ann Kendall Ray, 5:30pm, Monday, June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

sessions were scheduled right afterward, going from as soon as we could arrive at the studios until around midnight.”<sup>41</sup>

The Spurbecks, along with Ann Kendall Ray, Joshua Langford, Bob and Mary Ann Snyder, and a collection of others, made up the core group of musicians gathered by Noel Gilbert.<sup>42</sup> Sessions lasted, on average, three hours each and in the beginning paid between \$30 and \$50 per hour, depending on the studio and artist.<sup>43</sup> Standard procedure gave the musicians a hand-written part to play, and each instrument was given a microphone so that volumes could be adjusted individually as needed, but there was no guarantee that they would have any music to accompany during recordings. “Often we worked with click tracks,” Ann Spurbeck remembers. “And they were just about the most frustrating things you can imagine.”<sup>44</sup> The click track, which was essential for properly lining up the beginnings of takes post-production, had only a click at the beginning, and wasn’t very helpful to the session musicians attempting to play the accompaniment to a song they couldn’t hear. “You couldn’t tell if you were ahead or behind. If, later, when an artist was recording their own parts, they decided to speed up or slow down, there was no way of knowing. There was no telling what kind of expression you needed... emotion, feeling, you kind of had to guess about all of it and at the end of a take all you could do was sit back and say ‘okay, hope that was what they

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<sup>41</sup> Author’s interview with Mrs. Ann Spurbeck, 3:00pm, Tuesday, July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>42</sup> “Master & Session” [www.elvisrecordings.com](http://www.elvisrecordings.com). Accessed July 24, 2015.

<sup>43</sup> Author’s interview with Mrs. Ann Kendall Ray, 5:30pm, Monday, June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Author’s interview with Mrs. Ann Spurbeck, 3:00pm, Tuesday, July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

wanted.”<sup>45</sup> Mrs. Spurbeck much preferred recording after the artist had already done his bit, though she supposed that that just wasn’t how Elvis and his producers liked to work.<sup>46</sup>

The frustrations of the click track were not the only complaints to be had over life in the recording studios. Mrs. Ann Kendall Ray in particular remembers Chips Moman of American Sounds being unpleasant to work with. “He was rude! Sarcastic, oh just constantly sarcastic toward any women in the studio, and very foul.”<sup>47</sup> In stark contrast was Isaac Hayes, who Mrs. Spurbeck speaks of with a smile in her voice. “Isaac Hayes was just about my favorite artist to work with. He always greeted us in the studio with a smile on his face, letting us in through the front door like we were the big deal on the record! And he was so kind and down to earth. I used to see him in the grocery store sometimes and he’d say ‘There’s my friend Ann, hi Ann! How are you?’”<sup>48</sup> Hayes was also a constant presence in the recording studio, working with musicians to get the perfect vibe for a song and circumventing all of the frustrations of a click track.<sup>49</sup>

As the recording industry grew stronger, session fees increased to the point where experienced musicians were receiving somewhere between \$100 and \$200 per session, not including any royalties received. Mrs. Spurbeck humorously

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>47</sup> Author’s interview with Mrs. Ann Kendall Ray, 5:30pm, Monday, June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>48</sup> Author’s interview with Mrs. Ann Spurbeck, 3:00pm, Tuesday, July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid

describes getting a check in the mail about once a year for two pizzicato notes she played on a macaroni commercial in the 80s. “We showed up to Pepper Tanner (the studio where all the commercial jingles were recorded) and they had the parts all written out for us. The page was just eight measures of whole rests and one measure with a half rest, a quarter rest, and two measly eighth notes! And for those two eighth notes I got a check for about \$30 once a year all the way up until the macaroni company went under!”<sup>50</sup> Bob and Mary Ann Snyder built themselves a swimming pool with the money from Elvis’ 1969 Back in Memphis album. They called it the “American Sound Pool,” Mrs. Spurbeck told me with a chuckle, to pay homage to the studio that provided them with the work.<sup>51</sup>

Throughout my interviews with the musicians who lived and worked in Memphis during the 1960s and 70s, many echoed the same sentiments. The availability of jobs with the Symphony and Orchestra and supplemental income from studio work and wedding quartets, in combination with the a low cost of living and centrality of location, made Memphis an ideal city in which to set down roots. Not only did the city’s economy provide a place for musicians to live and work, it allowed them to flourish and that is why, when the money from recording studios dried up, the musicians stayed in town.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

#### Part IV: The End an Era

*Marty DiBergi: What would you do if you couldn't play music anymore?  
Mick Shrimpton: Well, as long as there's y'know, sex and drugs, I could do  
without the rock & roll.*

- *This is Spinal Tap*<sup>52</sup>

In late June of 1973, the Memphis Commercial Appeal reported on an incident between Stax executive Johnny Baylor and airport security on a short regional flight from Memphis to Birmingham. Upon touching down in Alabama, Mr. Baylor's briefcase (and the \$140,000 it contained) was confiscated, kick-starting a series of in-depth investigations into tax evasion and resulting in \$1.8 million in IRS tax liens.<sup>53</sup> Eventually, Stax would become central in a federal Payola investigation into illegal kick-backs in the recording industry.<sup>54</sup> A series of suits filed by CBS over a distribution deal gone south contributed to the financial crisis.<sup>55</sup> The death knell of the industry giant finally came when Union Planters Bank foreclosed on the loans staving off bankruptcy and insolvency.<sup>56</sup> Bit by bit, Stax's tapes, rights, and properties were auctioned off to help pay debts.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *This Is Spinal Tap*. Embassy Home Entertainment, 1984.

<sup>53</sup> "Stax Probe Began After Cash Siezed." *The Commercial Appeal*, June 20, 1973.

<sup>54</sup> "Federal Government Launches Payola Case." *The Commercial Appeal*, August 26, 1973.

<sup>55</sup> "Stax, CBS Reach Agreement in Distribution Dispute." *The Commercial Appeal*, March 27, 1975.

<sup>56</sup> "Dispite Threats, Stax Firm Sold without Rift." *The Commercial Appeal*, December 13, 1975.

<sup>57</sup> "Bankruptcy Judge Okays Sale." *The Commercial Appeal*, November 25, 1976.

The end of American Sound Studios was not nearly as cinematic, but was no less instrumental in the decline of the Memphis recording boom. It has been speculated that lead engineer and producer Chips Moman felt that he was not receiving the recognition he deserved on local and national levels.<sup>58</sup> Whatever the reason though, by 1972 the studio was closed and Moman had moved his remaining operations out of Memphis.<sup>59</sup>

While studios like Ardent and Royal remained in Memphis, and the commercial king Pepper Tanner continued recording jingles, recording jobs for classically trained musicians largely dried up. Those who were well known amongst producers and studios like Peter and Ann Spurbeck continued to do recording work for both popular music and commercial jingles into the 1980s,<sup>60</sup> but the industry was certainly in decline, and eventually even those few jobs ceased to exist. Old musicians, who had been working the studios since the beginning, also priced themselves out of the market, Mr. Spurbeck observed once to his wife.<sup>61</sup> And it was true, hiring an experienced session musician could cost a studio upwards of \$200 per session<sup>62</sup> and as the industry slumped, the advantage of experience was soon outweighed by the cost. Young, wet-behind-the-ears freelancers and university students could certainly play a simple jingle as adequately as the Spurbecks, but for

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<sup>58</sup> Manchester, John. "Stranger in My Own Hometown." *Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies*, 2014.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

<sup>60</sup> Author's interview with Mrs. Ann Spurbeck, 3:00pm, Tuesday, July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid

<sup>62</sup> Ibid

half the price. Additionally, with the evolution of technology, studios no longer needed to hire multiples of every instrument. With very little fanfare, the age of classical musicians in the recording studio came to an end.

Long past the end of the recording boom, though, the Memphis Symphony continued to thrive. Maestro de Frank's exhaustive efforts toward securing the Ford Foundation grant in 1965 paid off, providing the orchestra with massive funds for programming, salary, and growth.<sup>63</sup> Following in the footsteps of many of the orchestras that had come before, the MSO made education in the community one of its top priorities. Musicians regularly visited public schools in order to teach children about their instruments and gave free community concerts for students and their families.<sup>64</sup> In addition, many smaller community orchestras were started by symphony members in order to give concerts during the off-season; Noel Gilbert's Memphis Concert Orchestra performed regular concerts at the Overton Park Shell for more than thirty years.<sup>65</sup> Though the MSO was smaller and less renowned than big city counterparts like the New York Philharmonic, Boston, and Chicago Symphony Orchestras, it managed to hold its own, drawing a steady stream of esteemed soloists and visiting conductors. In 2010, in a League of American Orchestras publication funded in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Memphis Symphony Orchestra was named as one of the top five most innovative

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<sup>63</sup> Author's interview with Shelly Sublett, 9:44pm, Thursday, June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid

<sup>65</sup> Holbeck, Lloyd. "Noel Gilbert Remembered." *The Commercial Appeal*, June 12, 1991.

orchestras in the country.<sup>66</sup> When faced with declining attendance and a lack of interest, the publication states, “MSO leadership decided to confront the indifference of the Memphis Community body and with a new sense of civic activism. It would no longer be a passive onlooker but an active stakeholder and participant in the city’s future.”<sup>67</sup>

#### Part V: Moving Forward in Music Today

*“I believe our adventure through time has taken a most serious turn.”  
– Ted, Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure<sup>68</sup>*

The last decade has seen every corner of the national economy in the grips of major financial crisis. While other organizations have attempted to adapt and evolve their policies in order to better serve a market in distress, orchestras have been hobbled from doing so by a variety of factors. Major symphonies have long relied on the donations of a few wealthy patrons, not only to pay the bills, but also to create new programming. The core audience of classical music, however, is one that is rapidly aging. More troubling still, the new generation of symphony-goers is simply not as robust. Consequently, orchestras have struggled to adapt their programming to appeal to a more diverse audience base while maintaining wealthy, elderly patrons. The Memphis Symphony Orchestra, even with its new, exciting programming, is no exception. The Orchestra managed to survive the 2014 season only by decreasing

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<sup>66</sup> Tepavac, Lela. "Fearless Journeys: Innovation in Five American Orchestras." 2010, 26-39. Accessed July 24, 2015.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid

<sup>68</sup> *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*. MGM, 1989.

salaries by a dramatic 10%, radically slashing extra programming, and reducing the length of its performance season.<sup>69</sup>

One solution that has arisen is an increase in smaller chamber groups. Memphis has a large array of these ensembles, ranging from groups like the Eroica Ensemble, Iris, and Prizm, to larger community orchestras like the Germantown Symphony. With lower overhead costs brought about by smaller numbers and fewer rehearsals and performances, small community-based orchestras can specialize the types of programs they present in order to reach out to different types of audiences and connect with the communities where they are located. Additionally, shorter performance seasons allow musicians to play in multiple groups.

Meanwhile, the recording industry of Memphis is fighting to make a triumphant return to the national spotlight. With the documentary “Take Me to the River,” which highlights the generations of successful and upcoming Memphis and Delta area artists,<sup>70</sup> and the Bruno Mars hit “Uptown Funk,” which was recorded at Royal Studios and spent 31 weeks on Billboard’s Top-Ten list,<sup>71</sup> Memphis recording appears to be making a comeback. Studios like Royal, which has continuously operated in the city of Memphis since opening in 1956, have recently been able to take advantage of the trend toward perceived authenticity in the recording process. “It’s something about the studio that inspires people. It’s got a vibe to it,” Boo Mitchell, producer at Royal said recently in an interview with the Memphis Flyer. “A

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<sup>69</sup> Author’s interview with Mrs. Ann Spurbeck, 3:00pm, Tuesday, July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>70</sup> *Take Me to the River*. EGBA Entertainment, 2014.

<sup>71</sup> Davidson, Amy. “Mark Ronson’s ‘Uptown Funk’ has matched a LeAnn Rimes record.” *Digital Spy*, June 5, 2015.

lot of studios don't have a vibe. More modern places, you kind of have to take your inspiration with you. This one still has all of the charm from the 1960s. We haven't touched anything since 1969. We've updated the bathrooms and the green room. But when you walk into Royal, it has this magic quality to it."<sup>72</sup> Like an insect preserved in amber, the Memphis recording industry has managed to corner a special portion of the market simply by having missed out on a large amount of technological advancement.

The question remains then, whether or not Memphis's classical music community will be able to reap the same benefits from the future success of the recording industry as they did during the boom on the 60s and 70s. Simple theory behind positive-sum games states that yes, a stronger recording industry should result in an overall stronger local economy and therefore stronger classical music organizations. The truth of the matter, however, goes deeper and is more intricate.

Since the 60s and 70s, technology has progressed in leaps and bounds. A modern MacBook contains higher quality equipment than a standard professional studio at the height of the industry boom in Memphis. Many artists even choose to set up home studios rather than bother with hiring professional space. And though Memphis studios are currently capitalizing on the trend of musical integrity and authenticity, technology is still far ahead of where it was when musicians like Mrs. Ray and the Spurbecks were participating in late night sessions. In the age of digital recording, a single violinist can lay down enough tracks to sound like a symphony,

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<sup>72</sup> Boone, Joe. "All About That Uptown Funk." *The Memphis Flyer*, February 19, 2015, [www.memphisflyer.com/memphis/all-about-that-uptown-funk/Content?oid=3823319](http://www.memphisflyer.com/memphis/all-about-that-uptown-funk/Content?oid=3823319). Accessed July 24, 2015

and he can do so from across the country almost as easily as from the next room over. Moreover, more advanced synthesizers can mimic the sounds once created by professional musicians, foregoing the need for musicians at all.

It is very possible, however, that Memphis's claim to authenticity and vibe can be extended to the classically trained musicians who were once in such high demand. Studios in California and Nashville are able to compete in the national market through their cutting edge recording technology, sleek and modern studio designs, and infrastructure. In order to be considered a top city in the recording industry, in order to compete at the same level as California and Nashville, Memphis must play to its strengths, namely its claim authenticity and realness. If "vibe" and "charm" and "magic" are what reinvigorate the Memphis recording industry, the solution to classical music's problem is to demand credit for a share of the Memphis experience and Memphis sound. After all, isn't a studio full of MSO violinists, violists, and cellists part of the vibe? Aren't the soaring orchestrations on tracks like "In the Ghetto" and "Suspicious Minds" iconic? Isn't that, at least in part, what the Memphis Sound is all about?

## Part VI: Conclusions

*Hedley Lamarr: My mind is aglow with whirling, transient nodes of thought  
careening through a cosmic vapor of invention.  
- Blazing Saddles<sup>73</sup>*

The city of Memphis is known for many things. It is a city that was decimated by plague and ravaged by urban renewal. It is the city where Martin Luther King, Jr.

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<sup>73</sup> *Blazing Saddles*. Crossbow Productions, 1974. Film.

was murdered, and where Elvis and B.B. King made their names. Memphis is the Bluff City and the Delta is the birthplace of the blues. There is a staggering amount of history in this place, the lion's share of which has yet to be explored. My research sought to examine the relationships formed between the classical and popular music industries during the recording boom of the 1960s and 70s. Although prevailing thought tends to view the music industry as a zero-sum game, in which classical and popular music are in constant competition for resources, the opposite is true. The music industry of Memphis is comprised of a multitude of genres and communities, all of which share in a symbiotic relationship; the success of a single part results in the strengthening of the whole. This is evidenced in part by the simultaneous rise of a permanent symphonic orchestra with the nationally recognized success of local recording studios such as Stax, American Sound, and Ardent. When the boom came to an end and the recording industry retreated to other cities, Memphis was left not only with the legacy of the Memphis Sound and hundreds of famous records, but the Memphis Symphony Orchestra and a strong musical presence in the community.

Although the music industry of Memphis has changed quite a bit in the wake of the recording boom, the lives of musicians have largely remained the same. Symphony members still wear many hats in order to earn a living wage.<sup>74</sup> Professional musicians will still tell you that they're not in it for the money or the glory, but for the love of music (as most would tell you, there is very little money or

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<sup>74</sup> Author's interview with Daniel Gilbert, 3:00pm, Sunday, June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2015.

glory to be found as a classically trained musician).<sup>75</sup> Still, the classical music community of Memphis has far-reaching effects on the rest of the country. Noel Gilbert's son, Michael Gilbert, is a former violinist for the New York Philharmonic where his son, Alan Gilbert is now the music director.<sup>76</sup> Much of the rest of the Gilbert family are active in the Memphis music community as teachers, symphony members, and freelance musicians.<sup>77</sup> Meanwhile, Peter Spurbeck's legacy lives on in students such as Joshua Roman, the former principal cellist of the Seattle Symphony Orchestra now pursuing a successful solo career.<sup>78</sup> Despite recent financial difficulties, the Memphis Symphony Orchestra has been hailed on the national level for years as an especially innovative orchestra dedicated to being active in its community.<sup>79</sup>

At the end of our interview, I ask Ann Spurbeck if she's ever considered leaving Memphis. We'd spent most of our time talking about our mutual love of music. "When you've got that spark, that desire," she tells me, "well, you just can't imagine yourself doing anything else. The only thing you can do is play music and you'll do anything – take up any job, play any part – to keep on going."<sup>80</sup> Inevitably

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<sup>75</sup> Author's interview with Mrs. Ann Kendall Ray, 1:00pm, Thursday, June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015

<sup>76</sup> Blank, Christopher. "Gilbert Clan of Musicians never forgot their Tennessee Roots." *The Commercial Appeal*. May 22, 2009

<sup>77</sup> Ibid

<sup>78</sup> "Joshua Roman, Cello." Home [www.joshuaroman.com/](http://www.joshuaroman.com/). Accessed July 24, 2015.

<sup>79</sup> Tepavac, Lela. "Fearless Journeys: Innovation in Five American Orchestras." 2010, 26-39. Accessed July 24, 2015.

<sup>80</sup> Author's interview with Mrs. Ann Spurbeck, 3:00pm, Tuesday, July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

though, the conversation shifts to the difficulties of pursuing a career as a musician, especially in a city that doesn't quite know what to do with the classical portion of its musical heritage. Wouldn't it have been easier for her to find somewhere more classically, well, classical? Ann Spurbeck doesn't have to think about her answer. "I can't imagine leaving Memphis. I've lived here for so long, raised my boys here, all of my friends are here.... So many of my former students still live here. People here know me, recognize me from community orchestras and performances and such. And it's nice, to be able to live in a community that recognizes you for what you've accomplished. This is where I've built my life and this is where I feel like I've been able to make a difference."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

Special Thanks To:

Dr. John Bass, the faculty of Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies 2015, Ann Kendall Ray, Ann Spurbeck, Joshua Langford, Daniel Gilbert, Jane Schranze, Dr. Vanessa Rogers, American Federation of Musicians Local 71, Shelly Sublett and the Memphis Symphony Orchestra, Dr. Patricia Gray and the Beethoven Club, the staff of the Memphis Room, Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library, Mr. Bill Short, and Barry and Susanna Johnson.