

An open letter from Mario Guarneri

*Written in response to "Around SF's Arts Scene, State of the Unions Is Strong"
by Sam Whiting, published in the San Francisco Chronicle, September 5, 2016*

As a member of the musicians union for 60 years and an active performer in the Bay Area since 1992 in both the classical and jazz worlds, I was disturbed that Sam Whiting, in his article entitled "State of the Unions Strong in S.F. arts," ignored the serious challenges faced by the large group of freelance jazz musicians who perform in San Francisco.

Although the musicians union has done a great job of helping to negotiate contracts for members of the symphony, opera, ballet and major theater orchestras, they have done little to help freelance jazz musicians. For the most part, union-paid freelance work has disappeared and along with that so have most guaranteed wages and pension benefits. Very few freelance musicians are able to make a living in the Bay Area.

Local jazz artists have never shared in the union benefits earned by "classical" musicians for a variety of reasons, most notably because they have never organized in an effective way as have their "classical" colleagues. The symphony/ opera/ballet/theater orchestras bring in much revenue to the union through work dues, and thus have a strong voice in union policies.

Unions have lost their power to support freelancers in great part due to some catastrophic legal/NLRB decisions in the early 1980's that effectively destroyed the union's ability to represent that part of the industry. Additionally, European-based music has always found support with the upper socio-economic class. Finally, there is a disturbing media celebrity culture that cashes in on high prices, and at the other end of the spectrum many consumers have come to expect "free" music.

It should be noted that there is no mention in this article of SF JAZZ, an organization that presents outstanding musicians from around the world, but at the same time offers very few opportunities to local jazz players. SF JAZZ, unlike its Civic Center neighbors, is a non-union house that underpays locals when they are hired.

Finally, most venues don't pay a guaranteed fair wage. Instead they offer a percentage of the door or ask musicians to split the tip jar — described in the article as "non-union jobs ... splitting the take in a jazz trio in a restaurant." If you do the math on a "tip jar" or "percentage of the door" gig, the hourly wages often amount to less than the S.F. city minimum wage. That is not taking into account parking, bridge tolls and travel time from places where musicians can find affordable housing. Can you imagine any other professional who is expected to work for tips? Your doctor, your auto mechanic, your plumber?

Some of us musicians are trying to do something about this, and I urge consumers to do their part by joining our nonprofit and by supporting venues that offer musicians a fair guaranteed wage.

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