

Flow Position Paper: Listening to the Old Cultural Intermediaries: Talent Scouts as Managers in the Recording Industry, 1920-1935

In Response to the “From Suits to Talent: ‘Management’ in the Cultural Industries”

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To rethink the relationship between management and creative labor, I’ve chosen an era not usually referenced in such debates, but will hopefully challenge any easy distinctions. In the years following World War I, hundreds of new record labels entered the phonograph business to compete with the “Big Three”: Victor, Edison, and Columbia. These new labels quickly realized they could not compete with material the Big Three were already recording. In response, the new labels experimented with a variety of new musical styles, which led to their key role in defining the three foundational genres of American music: what we now call jazz, blues, and country. For labels to move into new genre niches, the industry hired talent scouts to negotiate a dizzying number of social, cultural, and economic divides within the context of everyday business.

Studying these talent scouts in an era before such intermediate roles were defined allows a glimpse into how their day-to-day tasks blurred managerial and creative roles in a media industry undergoing great change, as the nascent record companies for which they worked relied heavily on their expertise. The managerial work of recording industry talent scouts came to redefine an expanded mid-level managerial role at emerging and established recording companies, through managing talent, audience, and genre. Scouts’ roles were not well defined. Recording industry talent scouts moved through wildly

divergent segments of society, working with ignored, ridiculed, or vilified people as a matter of course. Talent scouts were key figures in this stylistic and economic expansion, recording huge swaths of the American musical vernacular.

To do their jobs, scouts were constantly working in at least three general registers: 1) managing the production, distribution, and sale of recordings for both their own profit and those companies for which they worked, 2) managing audiences, via gauging tastes and participating in the construction of genre categories, and 3) managing a range of socio-cultural differences in a variety of changing contexts. In their management of both everyday business and cultural differences, scouts had to articulate their own understandings of genre and audience. Their roles were malleable in the cultural authority the scouts asserted and the occupational tendencies that defined their everyday work.

The scouts' work responsibilities disallowed any simple distinctions between management and creative labor. The recording industry's historically low barrier to entry has long set it apart from other traditional media industries, and newly formed labels of the era had small staffs that performed numerous tasks we might now understand as managerial (organizing recording or sales trips) or creative (writing or choosing material for artists, determining the best take from a given recording session). It is clear from what historical evidence remains that recording industry scouts had a high degree of autonomy from their employers, many of whom knew little about the music they were recording or the social milieus from which they came. Those scouts that worked within record companies regularly performed tasks that bridged managerial and creative roles within their companies. With many of the new record companies that launched in the years

during and after World War I, their staffs were too small for them not to be called upon to function in a variety of managerial roles.

Talent scout Art Satherley's work for the fledgling Paramount label confirms this approach: "Well, at that time, I was doing three things: I was selling, I had the eastern seaboard from Boston to the Florida Keys, on the race and country, and I had the studio in New York, recording. So therefore, I was looking for talent at the same time, you see."ⁱ For scouts to convince stores to carry their records, they also had to explain the value of the largely unrecognized music they had begun to record. This need to convince prospective customers to consider what seemed like strange, even risky recordings for which shopkeepers had little understanding, bridges the scout's managerial tasks: to produce, distribute, and sell recordings, one also had to manage how these recordings were understood across a variety of contexts. Scouts like Satherley had to make the pitch that customers would want this music even if retailers didn't always understand the music they were hearing or the people making it.

The larger implications of this particular case may also suggest a site for which distinctions between management and creative labor are often readily and necessarily crossed: media industries on the rise or in the midst of dramatic redefinition. The next task would be to draw a broader picture of the overlap between creative and management labor, both in terms of the creative aspects of management as well as the managerial tasks of artists.

ⁱ Art Satherley interview, 14 June 1969. Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill.