

At the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve, as 1947 gave way to 1948, unionized musicians in the U.S. were ordered to stop making records. For nearly a year, recording studios were largely silent as the American Federation of Musicians demanded that record companies pay a percentage of sales to a union fund set up to help support unemployed musicians.

When the recording ban ended in December 1948, the union won—but the recording industry had undergone a transformation. During the dispute, a new longer-playing record for the adult market was introduced, followed by a second one that became popular with teens. Both record formats ushered in a new era in jazz and R&B and led to the rise of rock 'n' roll.

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Liberated by a strike: John Coltrane, Cannonball Adderley, Miles Davis and Bill Evans recording in 1958.

Today, in the digital age, it's hard to imagine a time when professional musicians could collectively bring the recording industry to its knees. But back in the 1940s, music and the movies dominated American culture, and the union that represented musicians ruled with an iron fist.

For decades leading up to the 1948 ban, the union had been waging a bitter battle with technology. While the phonograph, records, radio, talkies and the jukebox had made gifted recording artists wealthy, they also created mounting unemployment among everyday musicians. In the '30s, tens of thousands of musicians were displaced when talkies eliminated the need for live music during movies, and bars and restaurants began plugging in jukeboxes.

But the union's bigger problem was radio—which had been among the largest employers of professional musicians. Since the '20s, stations had hired staff musicians to perform live music for listeners. But by the early '40s, more stations were devoting airtime to records.

The musicians' union had tried to halt the trend. Pressure was put on radio stations in the late '30s to destroy records after one play and to hire more musicians. But in the years leading up to World War II, attempts to strong-arm radio led to federal wrath.

So the union changed tack in the early '40s and went after the source of its woes—the recording industry, which was dominated by Columbia, RCA and Decca. In 1942, the union launched its first recording ban, and within a year, a near-bankrupt Decca agreed to pay fees to a new union fund created to hire unemployed musicians.

As for Decca's wealthier competitors—Columbia and RCA—they held out for another year with hopes that a new business-friendly administration would sweep into Washington in 1944. But when President Roosevelt was re-elected that November, the two record giants relented and accepted the union's terms.

Congress wasn't pleased. After the 1942-44 ban, legislators passed a law prohibiting unions from controlling their own unemployment funds. Emboldened by the law, the record industry told the union in 1947 that

it wasn't going to renew its original agreement at year's end. The union prepared for a second ban.

But Columbia had learned a lesson the first time around. The company knew that the union's real beef was with radio—not records. The union had no problem with jukeboxes, since they generated revenue. But radio's repeated free airplay of records was different.

For Columbia, the solution was simple. Since the union did not object to the sale of records to consumers—only their airplay by radio—the label developed a new format aimed at the expanding home market, avoiding radio altogether.

In June 1948—halfway into the second ban—Columbia unveiled its new home product: a larger, longer-playing record that turned at 33 1/3 revolutions per minute. The vinyl LP—or "album," as it came to be known—was a big improvement over the existing 78-rpm, which offered just three minutes of coarse fidelity per side. By contrast, the new 10-inch LP could hold up to 15 minutes per side, while the 12-inch version—produced initially for classical music—could hold up to 22½ minutes per side. At first, the LP featured music already recorded on 78s.

When the second ban ended in December 1948, the union kept its fund, but control was ceded to an independent trustee, and fund assets had to be used to hire unemployed musicians for free public concerts. Radio resumed playing 78-rpm records—without union

interference, since greater sales meant higher fees paid. And the LP began to catch on.

Not to be outdone, RCA launched its own new vinyl format in January 1949—the 45-rpm. At first, the 7-inch disc with a large hole was positioned to compete with the LP. But when RCA's lucrative stable of classical artists began defecting to Columbia in the early '50s, RCA joined the LP revolution.

As for the 45, smaller record labels began using it as a more efficient alternative to the 78. Much to everyone's surprise, the 45 caught on instantly with jukeboxes and radio—especially as Washington granted more licenses to independent radio stations.

By the early '50s, small labels were using portable tape machines to record regional R&B artists, leading to their airplay on local radio stations. With the popularity of R&B came affordable portable phonographs—the iPods of their day—and teens soon were the largest consumers of the "single," paving the way for rock's rise middecade.

The LP's gains also opened new creative doors. Jazz began appearing on 10-inch LPs in the early '50s and then 12-inch albums. But jazz labels like Blue Note, Prestige and Savoy needed a way to lower their overhead. Longer records meant the number of jazz interpretations of songs by Tin Pan Alley composers had to be minimized to reduce costly copyright payments.

The solution was to publish and record more original compositions by jazz recording artists and to feature

fewer tracks on each side of an LP. This was accomplished by having jazz musicians take longer improvised solos, which not only satisfied consumers in search of an at-home nightclub experience but also helped turn jazz musicians like Miles Davis, Dave Brubeck, Sonny Rollins, John Coltrane and many others into national sensations.

With the market's acceptance of the LP and 45, record and three-speed phonograph sales soared and the industry realized that consumers will pay more for improved fidelity. It's a strategy that today's beleaguered recording industry might find useful.

*Mr. Myers is author of "Why Jazz Happened" (University of California Press). This column was adapted from his book.*