



COVER STORY

Sidney Hopson

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Percussionist and labor activist Sidney Hopson of Local 47 (Los Angeles, CA) is heavily involved in coalition building with SAG-AFTRA and the Writers Guild of America.

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In This Together: Sidney Hopson Advocates for More Equitable Music Spaces

Talking to Sidney Hopson of Local 47 (Los Angeles, CA) on a Sunday afternoon, he's slightly groggy and recovering from a marathon gig in Orange County playing Danny's Elfman's show "From Boingo to Batman to Big Mess & Beyond!" "For the percussionists, it's basically wall-to-wall playing for about one hour and 40 minutes," says Hopson.

As with most artists, his career has evolved in ways that he never could have predicted. Hopson's father died when he was just 8. His single mom homeschooled him and his brothers, and ensured they were exposed to a wide range of musical styles and cultures.

"My mom used to make mixed tapes that we called peanut butter and sriracha sandwiches. There was everything, Brooks & Dunn, followed by Tito Puente, Liza Minelli, Earth Wind and Fire," says Hopson, whose surroundings were equally eclectic. "We grew up in a very diverse neighborhood. By age 7, I had friends from Afghanistan, El Salvador, Oklahoma, and Korea. Picking one style of music was like picking one type of person; it just didn't make sense."

Saturday mornings were for music. Hopson and his brothers began their formal music education at the Saturday Conservatory of Music at California State University. Hopson's first instrument was the violin, which he describes as "traumatic for everyone involved." He fared better on piano—which he still plays professionally.

One Saturday, his mom took him by the hand and marched him into the percussion studio in the basement. She walked up to percussion teacher Melvin Lee and said, "My son has too much energy. Will you help me?" Like that, Hopson began percussion lessons and Lee became his first mentor. "No one was more surprised than I was that I actually fell in love with it," says Hopson.

At age 12, Hopson's mom enrolled him full-time

at Long Beach City College. There, he studied alongside adults in their 30s, 40s, and 50s—from all walks of life. "Community College was this massive oyster for me to learn and grow," he says.

By 15, Hopson had earned an associate degree in music performance, and was enrolled full-time in the University of Southern California (USC). There he earned bachelor's, master's, and graduate certificate degrees in percussion performance.

Though Hopson always had a profound interest in film music, when he entered USC he initially thought he would become an orchestral musician. "In time, I realized there is no orchestra that curates the range of music that I needed to make in order to feel gratified as a full-time performer," he says. "So, I set out around grad school with the intention of doing both, in addition to composing, arranging, and producing."

A Call Out of the Blue

After graduating from USC in 2012, Hopson struggled to launch his career. "I considered dropping out of the industry altogether to pursue more stable financial opportunities," he says. Then came a call out of the blue that would change everything.

Danny Elfman's assistant phoned and a percussion session was quickly set. Though they'd scheduled a couple hours, they were done within one. As Hopson was leaving, Elfman said, "Great, I guess I can write something even harder next time."

Which he did. "About a week or two later, I did something that was harder, and it also went well. We've been working together ever since," says Hopson.

The show "From Boingo to Batman to Big Mess & Beyond!" spans Elfman's entire career, of which Hopson's been a part for the past 10 years. The show premiered at Coachella in 2022. "Before we hit the downbeat, I remember sitting there and taking it all in," says Hopson. "That first session fundamentally turned my career around for the better. It was critical for me professionally, personally, and mentally. It kept me in the field."

"There's a moment where it stops feeling hypothetical and you begin to reassess your place in the room," he says. For Hopson, it was the first time he heard himself in a movie theater on the Burton film *Big Eyes*, scored by Elfman. "From there, you have to figure out how to build and maintain momentum, refining your process as well as maintaining your mental health and perspective."

Since then, he's performed for many live shows and recorded for more than 100 television shows and movies. Among the many films he's been a part of, Hopson has enjoyed the nostalgia of playing sequels. "I came into the industry at a time where the biggest properties in production were routinely sequels. There's something beautiful about the experience of continuing a film's tradition. I remember how the original films and the music affected me," he says.

"The last gift my father bought me before he passed away was the *Men in Black* soundtrack," says Hopson. "Fast forward to 2018, and I was able to play on *Men in Black International*. As soon as we started the opening credits, I felt myself tearing up in the studio."

Making Spaces Equitable

"How I navigate my art making is a direct result of how I see the world," says Hopson. Much of his focus is on making performance spaces more equitable, safe, and pluralistic. He thinks deeply about the projects he's involved with and often reflects on how they fit into his world view.

From 2011 to 2022, Hopson was involved in the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina, where he served as principal percussionist, percussion coordinator, and orchestra operations manager. Last year was exceptional, as the festival premiered the opera *Omar*, composed by Rhiannon Giddens and Michael Abels of Local 47, which has since won a Pulitzer prize. Hopson worked with Abels in crafting the percussion parts and performed in the premiere.

Omar is based on the autobiography of Omar Ibn Said, an enslaved man from Senegal who lived in Charleston. "It is a stunning and critically important work," Hopson says. "I've played in a lot of premieres—great works with great composers, but *Omar* holds a special place in my heart. It tells the story of people who are often left out of the conversation and sheds an unflinching light on the history of slavery in the US. But it also finds a very powerful way to compel the viewer to claim your agency, acknowledge the cognitive dissonance in our history, and not forfeit the power of telling your own story."

Last year at the Oscars, Hopson recalls standing with colleagues near the red carpet before the broadcast began. They shared stories of their early jobs, coming into their own, and beginning to see their worth differently.

Hopson says, "For me, it was important as an artist, human, and labor activist, to ask, how can I make sure that more people who have never had a fair shot to be here, get a shot? How can we eliminate the scarcity mindset that often plagues our freelance workspace and create opportunity for more people to participate? How can we make sure it's truly reflective and representative of the people?"

Labor Advocacy

One of Hopson's current passion is labor advocacy. He's become a delegate for Local 47 to the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor policy; he's involved with coalition-building with SAG-AFTRA and the Writers Guild of America. He's also on the board of the Recording Musicians Association (RMA) and was a delegate to the AFM Convention.

When first approached about joining the RMA board, Hopson says he had some reservations. He knew he wanted to be involved but didn't want to promise more than what he could deliver. "I saw the grassroots organizing that's happening and it's inspiring, it's impressive," he says.

It's been a learning process, he concedes, "but it's one of the most profound educations you can get." He adds, "I also came to understand the role the AFM plays in the larger labor dialogue in our country. That is one reason I decided to immerse myself in labor."

"There's a bigger picture here and a bigger set of precedents that deserve my focus, attention, and commitment. We're in this now and we're in this together," he says. "This is where I've planted my feet for the last year and a half because I realized it affects everything else."

"Our steering committee and board are exceptional in their ability to strategize, empathize, and understand our diverse locals and other RMA chapters. We recognize that we do not exist on an island and there's no world where we can fully survive if we aren't invested in each other's success. I've seen my cohorts build beautiful relationships across different sides of the industry and different conferences. It's just inspiring!"

Hopson stands with the musicians Fair Share for Musicians campaign as they gear up for negotiations with the AMPTP and support writers and actors on the picket lines to fight disruptions caused by streaming, corporate greed, and artificial intelligence (AI).

While there may be more work with streaming, there's a reason the more successful players don't want any part of it. "The cost of the expansion of the franchise and increased diversity has been financial inequity. We haven't seen a correlation between diversification in the studios and social mobility, and that is the same for writers and actors. The new media contract fundamentally crippled the concept of financial equity across race, gender, and other identities," he says. "A lot of us got here just in time to find ourselves on the edge of a knife. The business is on track to become truly unsustainable for workers—if we don't correct it."

Assessing Your Influence

Hopson understands the profound unfairness of the "gig" economy. "When Uber and Lyft launched, it was kind of the same thing—anyone with a car can work," he says, adding, "but the good parts fall apart from there."

For younger musicians eager to launch their careers, Hopson cautions them to evaluate each gig carefully before accepting work. First, they should do a full breakdown of the project: What is the employer offering? How many hours per service? What's the commute? What's the prep time? He recently did the math for a player who had reached out to him for advice on accepting a gig, and the young musician was going to clear \$3.40 per hour.

"That's usually enough to make people reconsider," says Hopson, but there's also this: "Every person who says yes sets the precedent for the next person; the longer people agree to do these gigs, the more companies believe they can get away with it."

As far as technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) for music, Hopson says it needs to be a more nuanced conversation. "Technology is not going to stop advancing. While AI-based composition, mixing, and editing software poses an existential threat to jobs across our industry, it also further democratizes music-making and reflects a populist reckoning against arts institutions that considered large-scale composition an exclusive practice of the elite and highly educated. There's a fundamental issue of access to the means of artistic expression that we need to separate from its application in the economy and workplace," he says. With that said, it's essential that we establish and secure updated contractual protections against companies' abuses of AI to plagiarize and illicitly exploit the labor and likeness of musicians (studio and sideline) without appropriate and fair compensation."

As he strives to make performance spaces more equitable, Hopson has advocated for *(continued on page 17)*

Meet the EMSD Staff

As we so frequently get caught up in day-to-day business and the pursuit of agreements and payments, it can be difficult to make time to get to know each other. The following EMSD "who's who" puts faces with names and summarizes job responsibilities for our EMSD staff.

New York Office



John Painting: Director of EMSD, John joined the AFM in May 2019 after working eight years in contract administration and bargaining at Local 802 (New York City). He provides oversight on all EMSD collective bargaining agreements and creates content to educate musicians, local officers, and employers about how the agreements function.



Maria Warner-Dowrich: Contract administrator for EMSD, Maria administers commercial announcements including commercial new use, commercial new use research, commercial assumption agreements, sound recording low budget, theme park, limited pressings, and CD research and ordering from the record labels. She's worked for the Federation for 15 years, almost 14 of those years in EMSD.



Natalia Barham: Natalia works on the billing and collection of sound recordings and motion picture scores into commercial announcements. She has been working with the Federation in this capacity since spring of last year.

West Coast Office



Aksinia Dintcheva: Aksinia is part of the Sound Recording to Theatrical and Television Film New Use Department and works to create B-7 and B-8 contracts and billings. This is her 23rd year working in the EMSD.



Andie Childs: Andie does research and payment calculations for commercial new use. She collects and disburses payments for film-to-film clip use and other theatrical and television film music uses. She also provides record labels with musician credits for historical soundtracks and assists with research and calculations for other projects as needed. Andie has been with the AFM since 1995.



Andre Shavers: Andre oversees collections for the Sound Recording to Theatrical and Television Film New-Use Department. He pursues payment for billings generated by the researchers. He also oversees notices for work dues payments.



Chris DeLeon: Chris is the manager of the Sound Recording to Theatrical and Television Film New-Use Department. He also handles the management and storage of data for the office. He has been with the AFM for nine years.



John Hung: John is a researcher for the Sound Recording to Theatrical and Television Film New-Use Department. He views TV shows, documentaries, and films to identify the tune used and make sure it matches the one licensed. He also creates billing packages by gathering licensing amounts, tune recording information, finding B-4s/album jackets, and reaching out to production companies for the correct information to invoice. He has worked in the West Coast Office for a year.



Matt Allen: Matt is the contract administrator who handles motion picture and television film, as well as low budget, student, festival, and industrial films. Matt initially worked at Local 47 (Los Angeles, CA), administering the Sound Recording Labor Agreement. After he came to work at the Federation in 2001, he managed commercial new use before making his move to the film agreements.



Michael Stogner: Michael is a researcher in the Sound Recording to Theatrical and Television Film New-Use Department. He identifies the use of AFM Sound Recordings in film media and prepares the billing packets used for invoicing. Additionally, he assists with preparing theatrical and television film low budget approval letters. He has been with the AFM for over five years.

Canadian Office

Carl Schilde, Recording and Licensing Manager
cschilde@afm.org 416-391-5161 ext. 224



Carl has worked in the Canadian Electronic Media department since 2018. In October 2022, Carl was promoted to the position Recording and Licensing Manager. He handles all aspects of New Use requests sent to the Canadian electronic media department and has recently been assigned to the bargaining team for Canadian agreements. Carl also administers the Canadian Commercial Announcements Agreement. Together with Electronic Media Assistant Chau, Carl has streamlined both the collections process and filing system for Canadian contracts, which has brought continued efficiency to this department.

Carl Schilde, coordonnateur des contrats et des licences

Carl travaille pour le Bureau canadien depuis quatre ans à titre de coordonnateur des contrats et des licences. Il est également le coordonnateur principal en matière d'utilisations nouvelles pour le Canada, s'occupant de tout ce qui a trait aux demandes de licence que reçoit quotidiennement le service. Carl a épuré le processus de perception et le système de classement pour les contrats canadiens, assurant ainsi une efficacité continue des opérations.

Kirk Chau, Electronic Media Assistant
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Kirk joined the electronic media administrative team in April 2022. In his short time on staff, he has initiated improvements to our electronic filing and media agreement payroll systems. He assists Susan Whitfield in new use payment processing to members and locals, and assists Carl Schilde as needed in determining which songs qualify for new use residuals. He also maintains the adherence and contract databases.

Kirk Chau, adjoint, médias électroniques

Kirk s'est joint à l'équipe administrative des médias électroniques en avril 2022. Depuis son arrivée, il a lancé des améliorations à notre système de classement électronique et à celui de la paie relative aux ententes sur les médias. Il assiste Susan Whitfield dans le traitement des versements aux membres et aux sections locales pour les utilisations nouvelles et, au besoin, prête son concours à Carl Schilde pour déterminer quelles chansons donnent lieu à des droits de suite pour utilisation nouvelle. Il maintient également les bases de données relatives aux adhésions et aux contrats.

Susan Whitfield, Director of Administration
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Susan has worked for the Canadian Office in various capacities for 19 years. In addition to many other administrative responsibilities, She oversees the remittance process of new use and other residuals generated under the provisions of Canadian collective bargaining agreements (CBAs). Susan is also an integral member of all Canadian agreement bargaining committees.

Susan Whitfield, directrice de l'administration

Susan a occupé diverses fonctions au sein du Bureau canadien depuis 19 ans. En plus d'un grand nombre d'autres responsabilités administratives, elle supervise le processus de versement des droits de suite prévus aux termes des ententes collectives canadiennes, notamment pour les utilisations nouvelles. Susan fait également partie de tous les comités de négociation des ententes canadiennes.

Liana White, CFM Executive Director
lwhite@afm.org 416-391-5161 ext. 232



Liana has worked for the Canadian Office in various capacities for 28 years. Since mid-2020, she has taken on the additional responsibility of point person for producers, locals, and members on all matters of electronic media. She primarily administers inquiries for original recordings, variety/award show programs, and streaming. Liana is a member of the electronic media agreement bargaining committees.

Liana White, directrice générale de la FCM

Liana travaille au sein du Bureau canadien depuis 28 ans, y occupant diverses fonctions. Depuis la mi-2020, elle assume aussi le rôle de personne-ressource pour les producteurs, les sections locales et les membres relativement à toute question se rapportant aux médias électroniques. Elle administre principalement les demandes qui ont trait à des enregistrements originaux, à des émissions de variétés ou de galas de remise de prix et à la diffusion en continu. Liana est également membre de tous les comités de négociation des ententes canadiennes.

ELECTRONIC MEDIA CONTACTS

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Theatrical film, TV film new use	Chris DeLeon, New Use Manager Ext. 218 cdeLeon@afm.org

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In This Together: Sidney Hopson *(continued from page 15)*

transforming the financial side of arts events and organizations to match. When people talk about diversity, equity, and inclusion, they often focus on three areas: performer demographics, audience demographics, and the diversity of programming, he explains.

“There’s a fourth category that gets left out, which is fertile ground for activism and engagement—and that is assessing the financial equity of the company itself,” he says. “Is the organization regularly accepting funds from banks that continually exercise redlining practices and predatory lending in the community?”

“There is nothing more insulting than to be invited to see a program that is supposed to be for people who look like you but is financed by people who refuse to let you live in their congressional district,” he says.

Hopson says this is an area where AFM locals and individuals can make a difference by volunteering to help development teams. Take a grant writing course, help cultivate donors, and find grants that can free the institution from unjust dollars, he suggests. “Communicate to your community, especially people who don’t think of themselves as part of your target audience.”

“It can help build and scale up your organization, and it increases our ability to get off-con-

tract work on contract,” he adds.

Next up for Hopson is a session for a new Eddie Murphy holiday movie, *Candy Cane Lane*. He’s performing with the LA Philharmonic at the California Festival and co-curating some upcoming concerts in Ojai where he’ll be performing in a trio. A good part of September will be dedicated to his first album, while he continues his labor activities.

The work will cross multiple genres and speak to both self and socially enforced restrictions on expression. “I think so much of the recording industry is rooted in the false conception that there’s only a handful of exceptional artists out there; we don’t realize that’s an economic device of the record labels.” He says, “There’s a real human cost for that—convincing generations of people not to express themselves.”

Inspired, in part, by the story of Omar Ibn Said, Hopson wanted to create something that told his story. “One challenge that marginalized groups face in the workplace is having their story hijacked and having to constantly redefine or re-explain your presence in the room.” He says, “I’ve set out to create an album that represents me as an artist, my full journey. I aim to express myself and represent my experience in the fullest way possible—and I hope to empower others to do the same.”



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When the sets went dark;
When the scoring stages were silenced;
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