

The Power of Workers' Stories:



Leveraging member personal narratives to attract media coverage, garner public support, and build solidarity in our locals

Presented by:
Megan Elk, Director of Organizing & Communications,
AFM Local 10-208, Chicago, IL



"Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize."



– Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
from the TEDx Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story"



**"If you don't tell your
story, someone else will
tell it for you."**

– Ancient Public Relations Proverb

When arts
orgs
experience
financial
turmoil, they
will try to
own the
narrative.

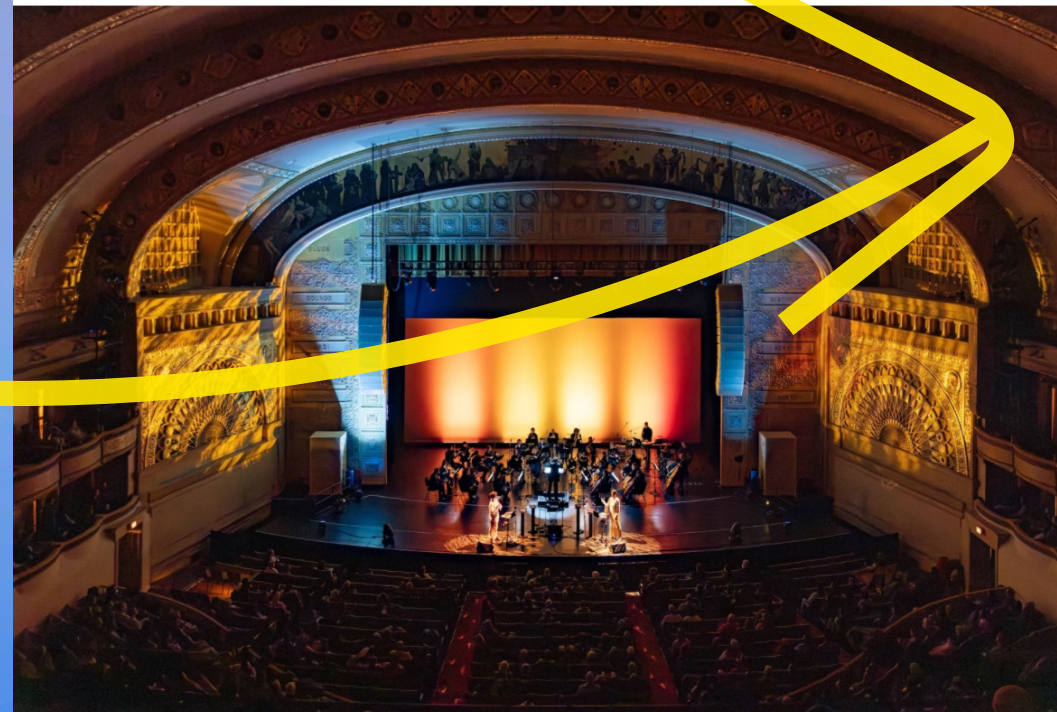


CLASSICAL ARTS AND CULTURE CHICAGO

Chicago Sinfonietta to pause programs until 2027 and lay off staff amid financial challenges

As the orchestra struggles to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, it will take a break to stabilize finances until next year.

By Erica Thompson | May 7, 2026, 3:06pm CDT



The Chicago Sinfonietta said it will pause programs until 2027 as it stabilizes its finances. | Courtesy of Kyle Flubacker

CS★T

Donate

Concert attendance and audience contributions have not returned to pre-COVID-19 pandemic levels, according to a statement. As a result, the organization will focus on fundraising and sustainability planning during a “strategic renewal period.” Patrons can visit chicagosinfonietta.org/give to make donations, which will be matched up to \$25,000 by an anonymous donor.

“While we have made significant mission-driven and programmatic progress in recent years, we cannot be sustainable if we don’t make changes to our operating model,” said Chicago Sinfonietta CEO Sidney Jackson in a release. “This strategic pause will allow us to reimagine future artistic and educational programs that will also be financially positive. Future seasons and programming may look different but will be rooted both in our mission and a growth mindset, operating from a position of strength and sustainability.”

* Centering our members' stories lets *us* in on the action.



[Classical](#) [Music](#) [Arts & Culture](#)

Chicago Sinfonietta musicians say pause in programming came as ‘shock to everyone’ and amid audience declines

Members of the orchestra expressed concern about the financial hit to musicians and about the direction of a group that champions diverse musicians and composers.

By [Erica Thompson](#) | May 8, 2026, 3:49pm CDT



Musicians contracted by the Chicago Sinfonietta said the group offers an important platform for diverse performers and composers. They are concerned about the impact of a pause in programming until 2027. | Photo by Kyle Flubacker



Bobby Everson, of Elgin, who has played timpani with the orchestra since its inception nearly 40 years ago. “There have been rumors floating for months that the orchestra had financial problems. But management never said this is a problem.”



“I don’t know if it was the pieces we were playing or the marketing or the fact that our venue kept changing,” said Chicago Sinfonietta timpanist Bobby Everson, who has played with the orchestra since its inception nearly 40 years ago. “I don’t know why audiences didn’t come back, but they didn’t. The sinfonietta hasn’t found its spot yet.” | [Jamel W](#)

Also a board member of the Chicago Federation of Musicians, Everson said



of Evanston, who has played with the orchestra for more than 25 years. “It’s so great to play for an orchestra that looks like the city of Chicago. The diversity that you find in the city, you find with us.”



“We’re all devastated about this,” said Chicago Sinfonietta violist Vannia Phillips, who has played with the orchestra for more than 25 years. “This just took us by surprise.” | [Courtesy of Vannia Phillips](#)

Phillips said she will try to supplement the loss of income with teaching



HOW to contact the Media:



chicago.suntimes.com

CS★T [Donate](#)

Send us your news tip.

Email

First Name

Last Name

Share your news tip with us.

Phone Number

Contact Preference

- By sending press releases that tell clear, compelling workers' stories
- By targeting local journalists who cover the arts and labor unions specifically
- By developing personal relationships with members of the media*
- By reaching out on social media
- By "calling in a tip"

* Press Releases 101 *

- **Bolded heading- clearly announces topic, date, location, organization.**
- **Statement from principal leader/ concerned party- tells us what the significance of the event is.**
- **Name and contact information for the person responsible for coordinating media inquiries.**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 25, 2026

**CHICAGO FEDERATION OF MUSICIANS
ANNOUNCES HISTORIC ELECTION OF
DR. KAREN SUAREZ FLINT AS FIRST
WOMAN INTERNATIONAL VICE
PRESIDENT OF THE AFM**

CHICAGO, IL — June 25, 2026 — Chicago Federation of Musicians (CFM), Local 10-208 of the American Federation of Musicians of the United States and Canada (AFM) announces the historic election of Secretary-Treasurer, Dr. Karen Suarez Flint to the office of International Vice President of the AFM at their 103rd International Convention in Ottawa, Ontario. Dr. Suarez Flint becomes the first woman in the nearly 130 year history of the Union to hold the office of Vice President, and the first Chicagoan to serve as an International officer since James Petrillo famously served as President from 1940 -1958.

Expressing joy and gratitude at the opportunity to lead the AFM into a bold new era, Dr. Suarez Flint remarked:

“Representation matters. I hope that there are many members of this union who will now feel more seen and included in our work, as a result of my historic election. I am humbled and honored to represent all of the members of the AFM, but I feel it is my special responsibility to make space at the table for the many voices who have traditionally gone unheard. Building a broader, more diverse coalition of musicians is the most effective way to strengthen our union, and create the kind of transformational policy change necessary to protect the live performances, recorded media, and intellectual property of 21st century working musicians.”

MEDIA CONTACT

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labortribune.com

St. Louis/Southern Illinois
Labor Tribune 90 YEARS

🔍 ☰

Chicago, IL — Chicago Federation of Musicians (CFM), Local 10-208 of the American Federation of Musicians of the United States and Canada (AFM) has announced the historic election of Secretary-Treasurer Dr. Karen Suarez Flint to the office of International vice president of the AFM at their 103rd International Convention in Ottawa, Ontario. Dr. Suarez Flint became the first woman in the nearly 130-year history of the Union to hold the office of vice president, and the first Chicagoan to serve as an International officer since James Petrillo famously served as president from 1940 -1958.

PROGRESSIVE POLICIES

Suarez Flint rose to prominence within the union at the 102nd Convention in 2023 as a champion for progressive policies intended to make the AFM a more equitable and inclusive organization.

* Press Releases 101 *

The more specific you can be about what you would like a media outlet to publish, the better. A press release should be able to function as its own article that is **READY TO PUBLISH.**

That means **YOU GET TO WRITE THE ARTICLE!**

The article was essentially the **VERBATIM press release I sent.**





Workers' stories matter.

And not ***JUST*** in the news media.

Where do we tell our stories?



In Print
in newsletters,
magazines, or
dedicated direct
mail pieces



**In Digital
Spaces**
on our websites
and in our e-blasts



On Social Media
Whether image,
text, or video
based



In Person
at forums, panels,
town halls, and
member meetings



**At Press
Conferences**
where you have
gathered select
media to hear a
specific message



On the Picket Line
Labor actions bring us
into immediate contact
with media and our
community

✱ Quick Exercise:

Articulate *your* story.

in 3-4 sentences (or about 30 seconds of speaking) tell us:

- Who you are
 - Why you're here today
 - Something you care about that others can empathize with
 - What you hope to have happen as a result of being here today (call to action)
-

* Learning to tell our own stories helps us
to better tell the stories of *others*

One of the
most
accessible
places
to do that
is SOCIAL
MEDIA.



Follow us
on Facebook



Follow us
on Instagram

* Once you have a story and a strong image, you can use it ANYWHERE.

So what SOCIAL MEDIA platforms should you use?

- No right or wrong answers, but you have to be *somewhere*
- Choose between 1-3 platforms to build a presence
- Go where your audience is
- Prioritize platforms where you have the SKILLS and RESOURCES to show up CONSISTENTLY





Share the load

Social media can be a labor-intensive endeavor, and many locals and ensembles lack a dedicated administrator.

Designate responsibilities that match the capacity and interest of your members:

- **Someone to steward content-creation**
- **Someone to moderate the comments, tag requests, etc.**
- **Someone to work on engagement, feed curation, etc.**

* Best Practices for Posting

- Aim to post at least **WEEKLY**
 - Post several times a week during **ACTIVE CAMPAIGNS**
 - Share/repost at least one **REEL** weekly
 - Make sure you're sharing more than just official announcements
- 

"At this time, no formal notice or briefing has been provided to the unions of arts workers whose labor sustains the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. We only know of public statements issued by President Trump and an internal message to some Kennedy Center employees that reiterated the President's social media remarks.

A pause in Kennedy Center operations without due regard for those who work there would be harmful for the arts and creative workers in America.

Should we receive formal notice of a temporary suspension of Kennedy Center operations that displaces our members, we will enforce our contracts and exercise all our rights under the law. We expect continued fair pay, enforceable worker protections, and accountability for our members in the event they cannot work due to an operational pause.

Our members remain steadfast in bringing to life theatrical, music, opera, dance, and other live artistic performances in the nation's capital that speak to and resonate with all Americans."



*Unless your organization has the cache of the Kennedy Center, this probably isn't the best kind of post to make

Graphic Design 101 *

You don't have to be *EXPERT* to make something *IMPACTFUL*



- Choose 2-3 brand colors
- Use Canva (for free!) to make a simple logo
- Make quick photo edits right on your phone

Phone photo best practice: *



- First, clean your lens
- Ditch the flash
- Zoom with your feet, not your fingers
- Shoot wide, crop later

DON'T USE GENERATIVE AI *

(We can tell, and we hate it.)

Research shows that "people value art labeled as AI-generated 62% *lower* than identical works labeled as human-made. Knowing an origin is artificial consistently diminishes perceived craftsmanship and emotional value"

from: "Algorithmic aesthetics: Cognitive perspectives on AI-generated visual art" by: Ionela Bara , Kohinoor M Darda, Richard Ramsey , and Emily S Cross

iScience. 2025 Oct 24;28(11):113826. doi: 10.1016/j.isci.2025.113826



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& FORMER CBS NATIONAL
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 **THURSDAY
JULY 16**

 **7:00 PM**

 **FREE
ADMISSION!**

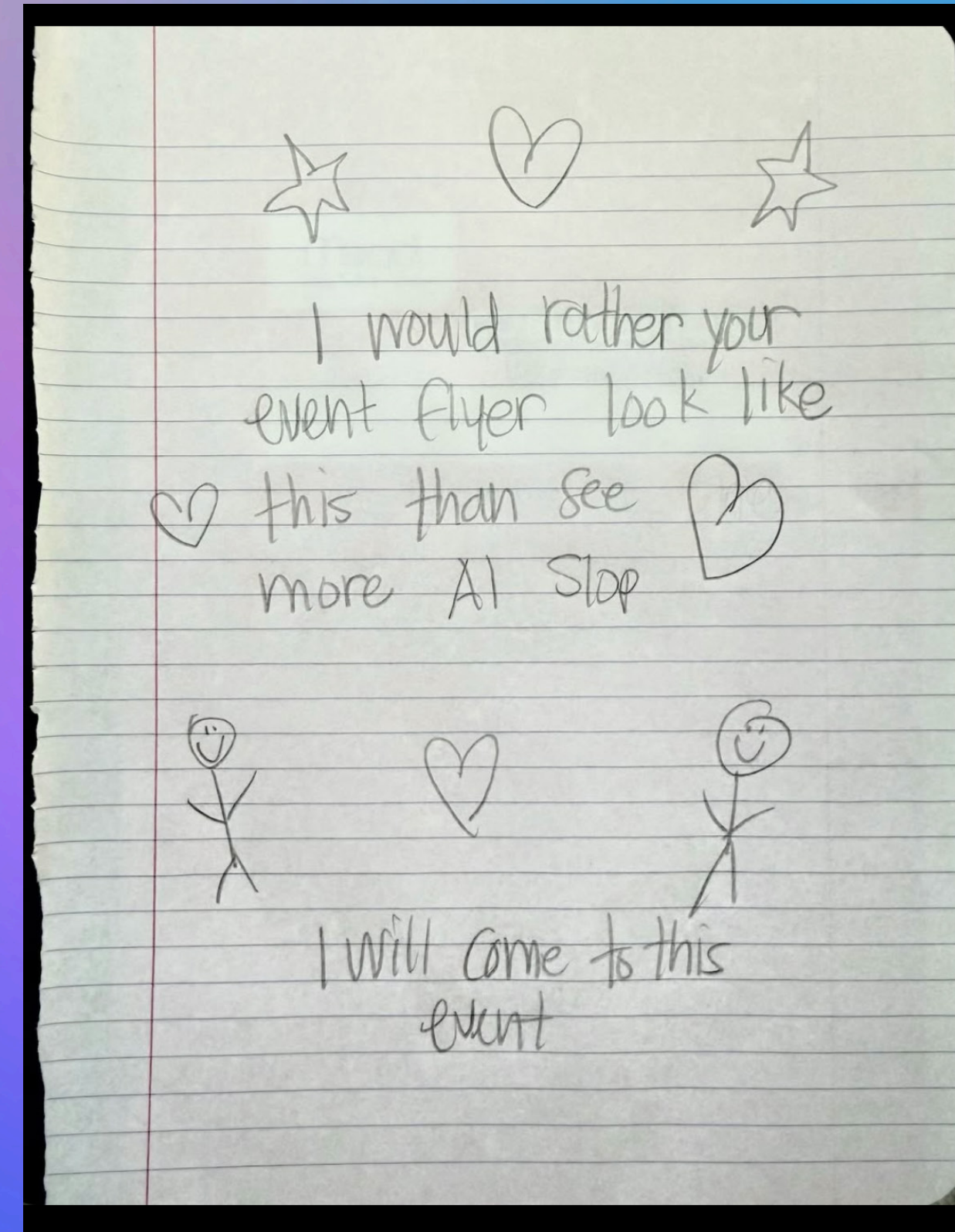
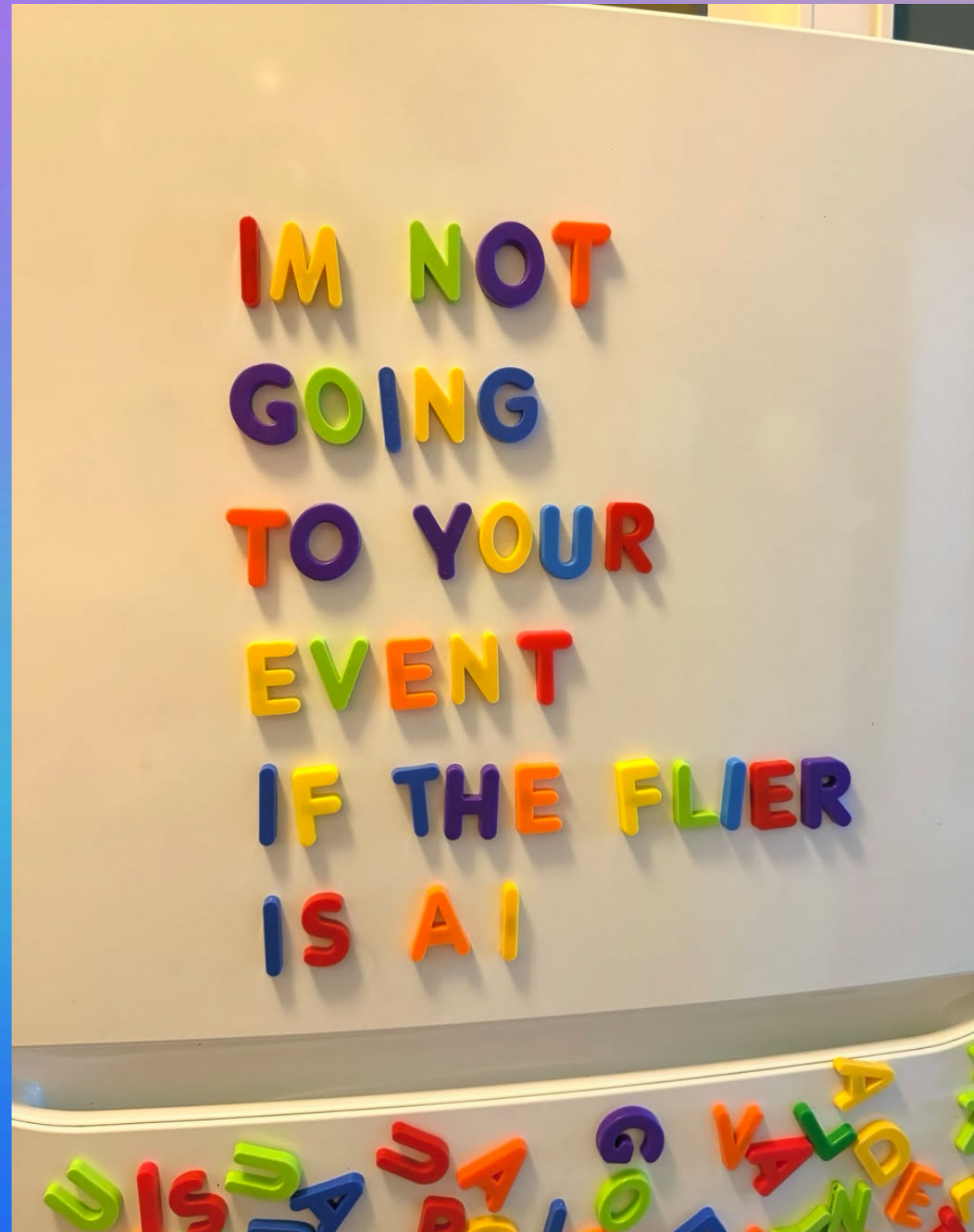
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SERIOUSLY, DON'T USE IT *





Posts should do one of 4 things:



1. INFORM
2. MOBILIZE
3. TELL A STORY
4. CELEBRATE

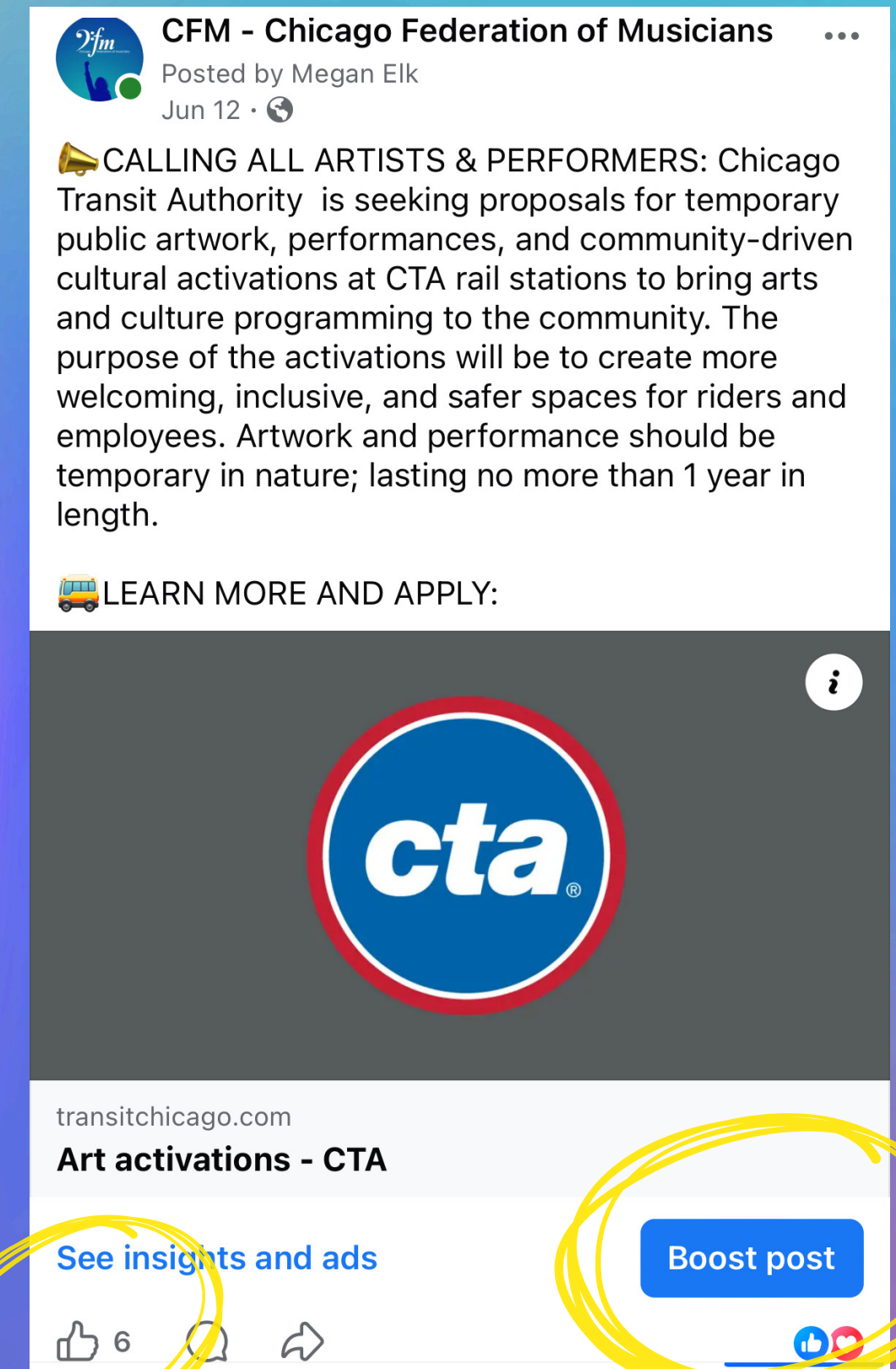
* But know that not all posts are created equal.

Posts that:

- Try to get followers to engage with external links
- Try to steer followers to attend live events
- Espouse a particular political viewpoint (like being pro-union)

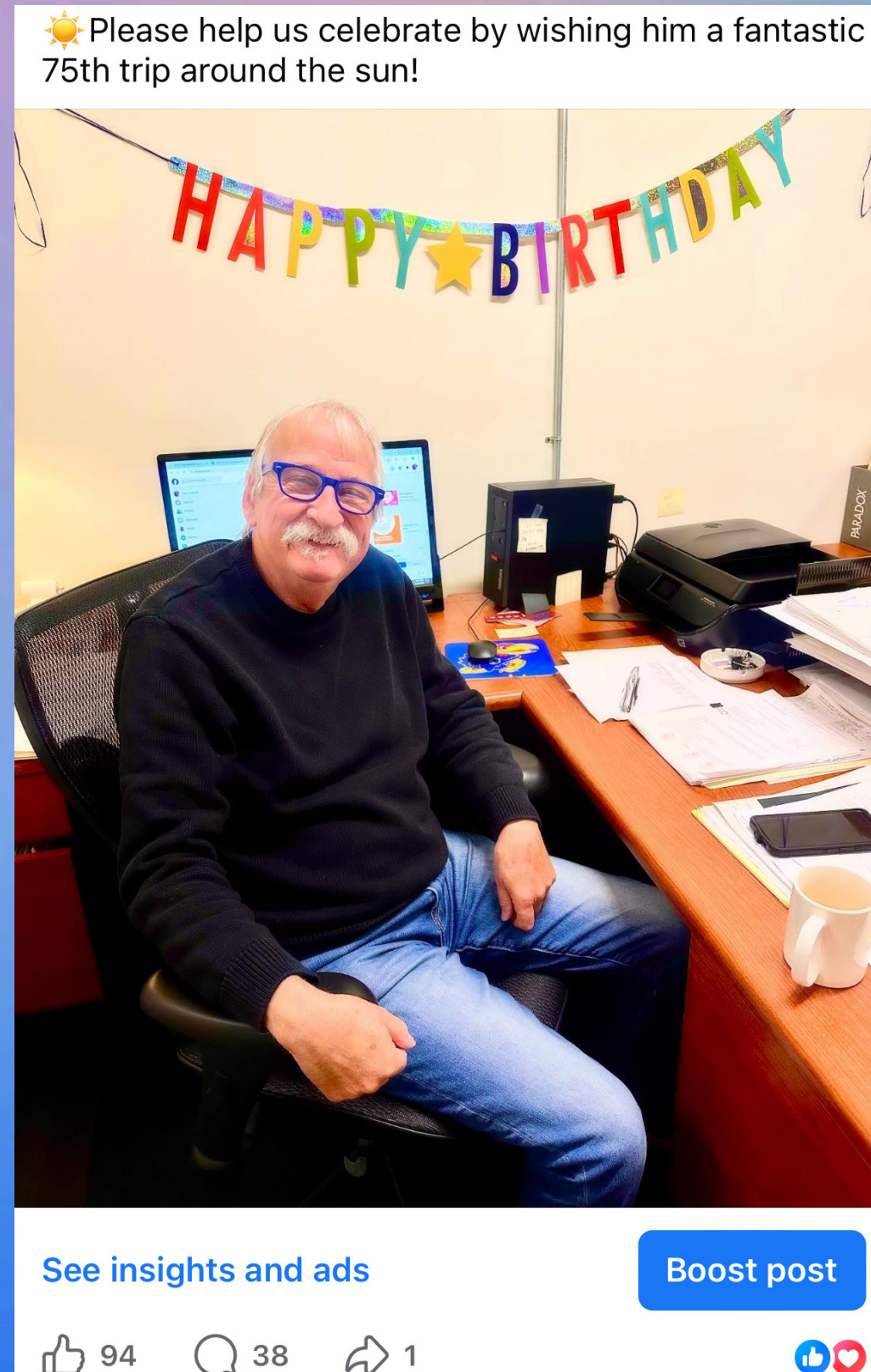
Are less likely to achieve organic reach and may, in fact, be suppressed outright

*Unless you pay to "boost" your post. What a racket.



*Cue sad trombone.

Algorithms change, good content doesn't



Meta prioritizes
posts that contain
PEOPLE'S FACES.

Which is a great way
to return the
narrative back to
the workers and the
members of your
local.

*We're not sure if it's the glasses or the amazing smile or what, but the algo LOVES Dean Rolando



How do you choose **WHICH** stories to tell?

Focus on human interest by literally asking what **YOU** as a human find interesting!

Things like:

- Winners of major awards or auditions
- Extracurricular achievements, like new publications or recordings
- Folks making a difference in their community
- Choose cover/featured content that speaks to other initiatives that are important to you

Welcoming the Freelance Musicians Association: The AFM's Newest Players' Conference

The 103rd Convention of the American Federation of Musicians marked an important milestone for one of the largest (and often least visible) segments of our membership. **For the first time, the Freelance Musicians Association (FMA) was recognized as a Players' Conference, giving Freelance Musicians a voice in the Federation's convention proceedings.**

For many AFM members, freelancing is more than just a stepping stone between full-time engagements, it is the entirety of their career. From club dates and weddings to recording sessions, theater productions, houses of worship, educational work, festivals, and independent touring, Freelance Musicians make up a substantial portion of the profession. Their careers are built by balancing multiple employers, multiple contracts, and an ever-changing marketplace, often requiring entrepreneurial skills alongside musical excellence.

While these musicians have always been represented by their local unions, the creation of a dedicated Players' Conference recognizes that freelance work presents challenges distinct from those faced by musicians employed by a single orchestra, theater, or record label. Contract enforcement, fair wages, pension contributions, streaming issues, workplace safety, and the increasing role of technology all affect Freelance Musicians in unique ways. The new conference provides a forum for members from across the United States and Canada to share ideas, develop policy recommendations, and advocate collectively on issues that directly affect freelance careers.

Players' Conferences have long played an important role within the AFM by bringing together musicians who share common professional experiences and concerns. Their work helps inform Federation policy, develop educational resources, and ensure that the voices of working musicians are represented as the industry continues to evolve. The addition of the Freelance Musicians Association expands that tradition by recognizing their growing importance in today's music economy.



L to R: AFM Freelance Services Director Wages Argott, FMA Secretary-Treasurer Milton Salazar, FMA Vice President Leni Kreienberg, and FMA President Nate Omdal; photo: Kris Durlen

For delegates attending the 103rd Convention, the FMA's inclusion represented an acknowledgment of the changing realities of professional music making by the AFM, that has traditionally prioritized musicians working under a cba. Now, the FMA joins the ranks of the AFM's established players' conferences: the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians (ICSOM), the Regional Orchestra Players Association (ROPA), the Organization of Canadian Symphony Musicians (OCSM), the Recording Musicians Association (RMA), and the Theater Musicians' Association

(TMA) as a players' conference dedicated to the concerns of Freelance Musicians who produce their own creative projects. Representation that reflects those realities strengthens the Federation's ability to advocate for *all* of its members.

The work of the FMA intends to foster greater communication among freelance musicians from different regions, encouraging the exchange of successful organizing strategies, contract language, educational initiatives, and approaches to emerging challenges. As the profession continues to adapt to changes in technology, audience engagement, and the economics of live performance, that collaboration will become increasingly valuable.

The inclusion of the Freelance Musicians Association at the 103rd AFM Convention demonstrates a new investment in the artistic diversity of our membership. Whether you perform in theatres, with a symphony orchestra, make recordings under the SRLA, or play in a weekend wedding band, every musician deserves strong representation, fair working conditions, and a meaningful voice in the future of our profession.

For freelance musicians across the United States and Canada, that voice now has a permanent seat at the table. **If you are one of the many freelancers in the CFM, please pull up a chair and join the FMA.** ■ -Megan Elk

For more information: visit afmfreelance.org, or scan the QR →

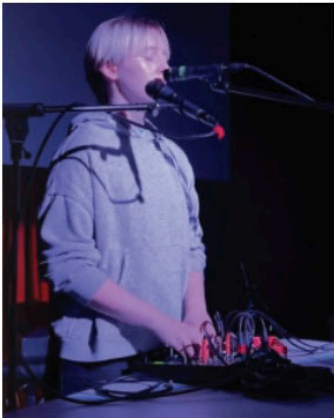
Meet the leadership of the FMA:



Nate Omdal, photo courtesy of artist

FMA President Nate Omdal also serves as President of Local 76-493 in Seattle. He is an adopted Korean-American jazz bassist, who grew up in the middle of nowhere in Washington State. There was a cow pasture across the street from the high school he went to. There was no orchestral program, but there was a lot of small town music to be played, including a lot of big bands with retirees, which is how he got his start. Currently, he plays in bars, restaurants and the always fruitful wedding gig.

Nate says of the FMA, "I personally have been inspired by campaigns that other unions utilize to make an impact in their members' lives, such as Justice for Janitors from SEIU. I hope that the FMA becomes an organizing tool for musicians to make an impact on affordability, social justice and race/gender equity. Our voices are indeed stronger together, but as musicians we are also able to bring some of the fun that is so important to any organizing. I hope that together we can create new pathways for collaboration, enforcement and the improvement of our whole industry." ■

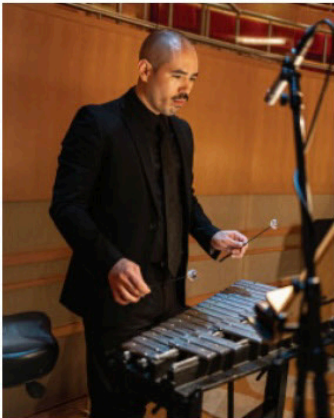


Leni Kreienberg, photo: Alexa Letourneau

FMA Vice President Leni Kreienberg is originally from Albany, NY, but now makes their home in New York City. Formerly an international organizer for the AFM, they currently work as a freelance vocalist, composer, and improviser in the free improvisation, experimental, and DIY scenes.

They hope the FMA can be both a hub for resource sharing and organizing strategy, and a catalyst for national and international campaigns that raise labor standards for independent musicians. Speaking from the dais at the convention, Leni remarked:

"Independent musicians across the US and Canada are demanding that the AFM meet this moment and truly represent us as our union, the only musicians union in the US and Canada. It's time for the AFM to put effective, modernized material support behind independent musicians. But, our leadership can't wave a magic wand. Our movement will only be successful if we commit to member-driven, grassroots organizing that puts the rank-and-file in the driver's seat." ■



Milton Salazar, photo: Christian Amonson

FMA Secretary-Treasurer Milton Salazar is a First Generation Mexican-American freelance percussionist living in Southern California. Mostly playing in orchestral settings; he subs frequently with Pacific Symphony and is principal with Orchestra Santa Monica. Milton drives all over SoCal to teach, perform, and make a living. He is a proud board member of Local 7, Orange County, and is also a member of Local 47, Los Angeles.

Milton sees the FMA as a place where all musicians can come together to meet, trade ideas, and support one another in the struggle that is building a career as a freelancer, saying that,

"Sometimes, you need to hear someone else say the thing you are thinking to encourage you to step up. Organizing is all about communication and understanding, and we are building the space for that here at the FMA." ■



The FMA meets the first Wednesday of every month and annual membership dues is only five dollars.

Join the FMA today!

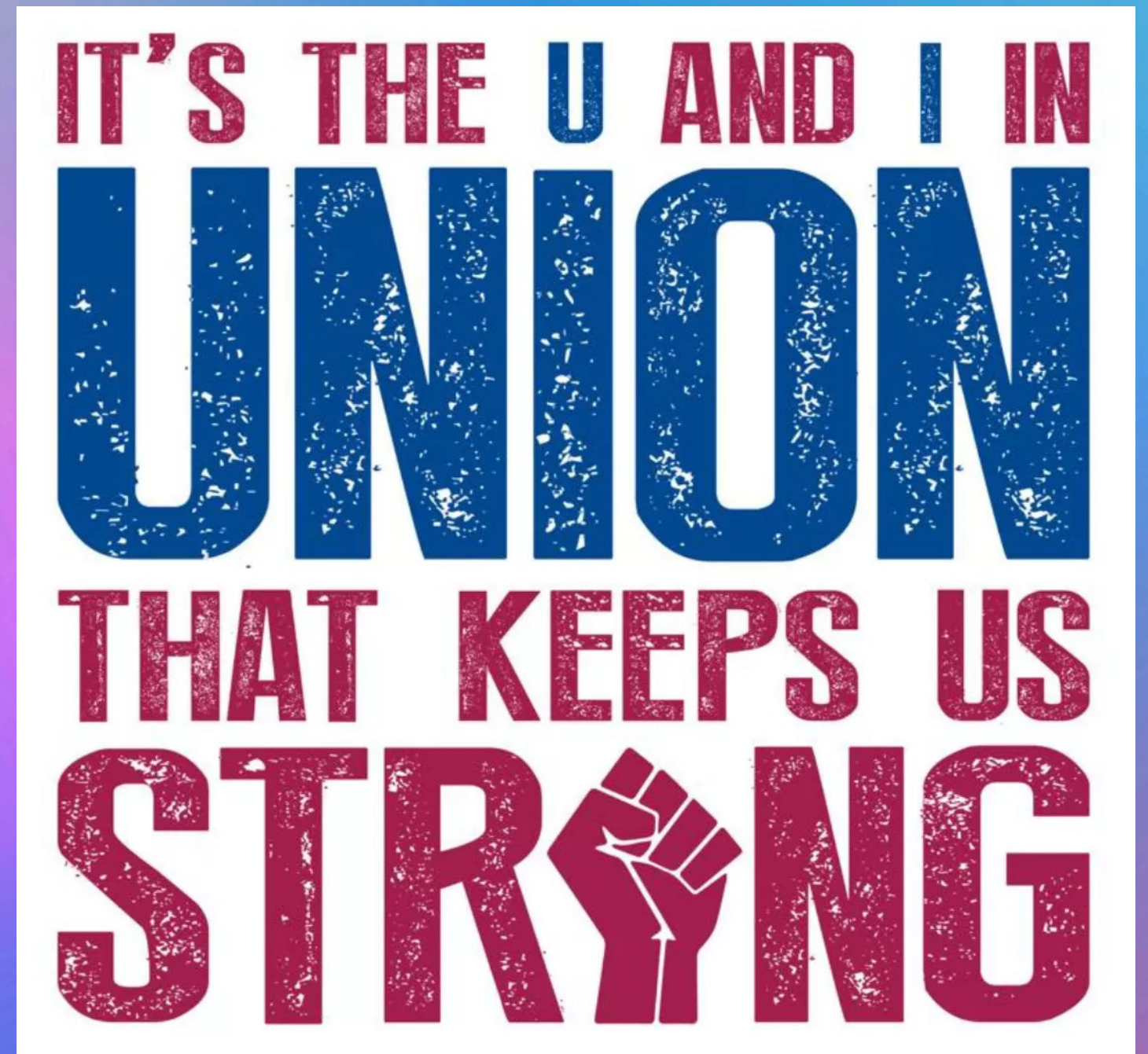
A goal for this issue is to get folks excited to join the FMA.

Telling the individual stories of FMA leaders allows other Freelance Musicians to imagine themselves as belonging in the players' conference. *

* No matter the medium, storytelling serves to build empathy

When we share our stories, we share our humanity. Collecting and retelling stories about the challenges we face in the workplace helps us to better understand each other, recognize our common struggles, and foments an environment of shared ownership and identity that builds **SOLIDARITY!**

By sharing workers' stories, we can not only pique the interest of the media and win the support of our communities, but also BUILD A STRONGER UNION!



Thank you.

I truly love this work, so don't hesitate to reach out if you have questions, or are in need of additional communications support.

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