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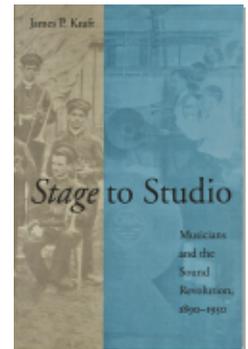
## Stage to Studio

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# One

## Working Scales in Industrial America

RAPID INDUSTRIALIZATION in the late nineteenth century revolutionized the way Americans spent their leisure time. By separating work and play, concentrating populations in urban settings, and raising real wages for millions of workers, industrialization transformed traditional ways of leisure and recreation. Americans abandoned old customs and patterns of socializing as entrepreneurs applied new technologies to leisure-time pursuits. In the Gilded Age, entrepreneurs built lavish hotels, gaudy cabarets, and intricately adorned amusement parks to lure leisure consumers. Mocking Victorian values of thrift and sobriety, these ostentatious structures distracted Americans from the realities of industrial life.

The expanding leisure market meant unparalleled opportunities for musicians. In this era before recorded music, theater owners routinely hired orchestras, sometimes for seven days a week, to perform concerts or enliven vaudeville acts and burlesque shows. Similarly, places of entertainment from skating rinks and dance halls to hotel restaurants and fashionable watering holes featured live music on a regular basis. In addition, many instrumentalists traveled around the country with circuses, minstrel companies, and concert bands or, alternatively, found work close to home. These multiplying opportunities for musicians contrasted notably with the fortunes of skilled artisans in many other trades and professions. Throughout this era the rise of giant corporations, strong employer associations, and new labor-saving machinery undermined the status and power of mil-

lions of skilled laborers in the workplace. Like carpenters in the building trades of the late nineteenth century, musicians benefited from working for small businesses whose successes or failures depended on the performances of their employees. The threat to musicians was not mechanized factories in faraway places but their own reluctance to recognize and act on their common concerns as workers in an industrializing America. Only slowly did they come to recognize their common problems, but once they did so, they built a union strong enough to protect their rights and interests through a generation of change.

LIKE OTHER EXPRESSIONS of American culture in the late nineteenth century, music mirrored the changing times. Musical styles broke with tradition and became more complex in melody, harmony, tonality, and form. The ragtime songs of Scott Joplin, with their syncopated beats and alternating octaves and chords, like the orchestrations of John Philip Sousa, the March King, contrasted sharply with the folk, church, and classical music that embodied older but persisting musical tastes. Blues singers who slurred melodic tones no less than jazz musicians with their unorthodox chords and other improvisations reflected this upheaval in musical culture. New styles of music, with greater emphasis on rhythm, freedom, and energy, characterized the new world of cultural innovation.

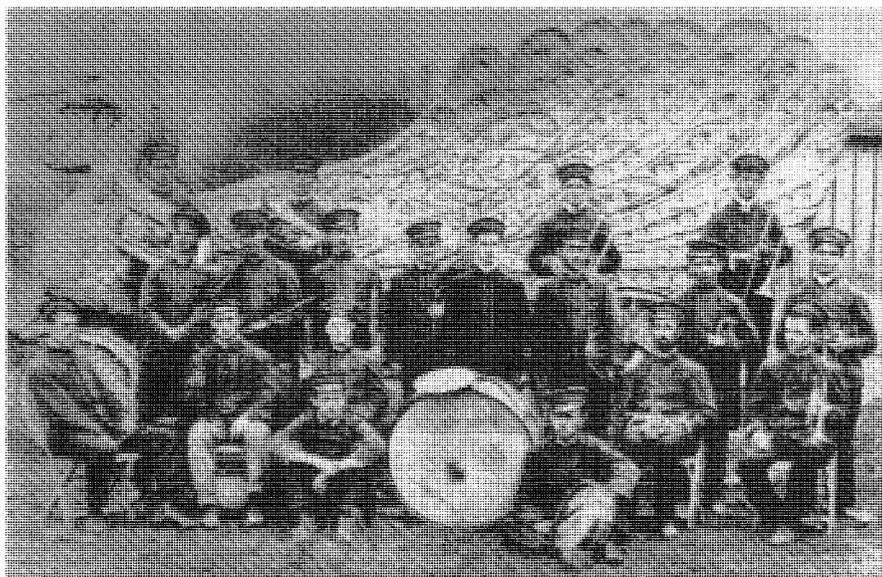
As a group, instrumentalists in the late nineteenth century were as varied and discordant as the music they played. The orchestras they formed transcended age, gender, race, and ethnic differences, and skill levels as well. Many bands that played in city parks and town parades on weekends consisted entirely of amateur musicians who made their living as carpenters, clerks, or upholsterers. Fraternal lodges, schools, churches, and even extended families had orchestras of their own whose members played only “for the experience.” Many businesses, including cigar, typewriter, and watch manufacturers, organized bands from among their own employees. Advertisements for musicians in local newspapers in those years testify to the high demand for workers with musical skills. In Merrill, Wisconsin, cigarmakers advertised for a “cornet man, cigar maker by trade.”<sup>1</sup> Such advertisements were an essential feature in organizing and sustaining bands and were not unlike those by which baseball teams at the time found and held on to new players.

Many employers thought of music in the workplace as therapeutic; it soothed workers’ nerves, they believed, and thus spurred production. Industrialization, as it sped up and simplified work tasks, sparked tension

and thus the possibility of unrest among workers, and more and more industrialists came to see a relationship between music in the workplace and worker discipline. Such industrialists encouraged employees to organize musical groups to perform at lunch breaks, work stoppages, or other times of the day. In the early twentieth century some industrialists even established music departments to help workers form bands and acquire instruments. These developments were part of a growing effort to minimize labor conflicts by improving worker morale. Company-sponsored sports teams, pension plans, and English-language classes were other manifestations of a kind of “welfare capitalism” that eased industrial relations without affecting relations of power.<sup>2</sup>

The proliferation of musical groups in the workplace further blurred the distinction between amateur and professional musicians. In the late nineteenth century many “amateurs” played for wages, and “professionals” often held nonmusical jobs. But the social profile of those who made their living in music and looked upon it as a livelihood rather than a hobby differed considerably from that of amateurs. Professionals had higher skill levels, usually attained through private lessons, institutional training, work experience—or sheer talent. Most also had higher career ambitions, greater commitment to music as an artistic as well as a professional enterprise, and a better sense of music as a business. These traits were of course necessary in a trade in which workers frequently changed employers and just as frequently faced prolonged periods of unemployment. The hardships of travel as well as the poor working conditions under which musicians often labored undoubtedly kept some instrumentalists from pursuing professional careers.

The experiences of Nels Hokanson, a seventeen-year-old trombonist who worked in Bosco’s Traveling Circus at the turn of the century, illustrate why some instrumentalists shied away from musical careers. In the days before automobiles Hokanson traveled by horseback from town to town, often encountering bad weather and poor accommodations along the way. The young musician played two shows six days a week and in each new town marched in a public parade to advertise the circus. Between performances he helped set up the tents and distribute publicity notices. Such a schedule discouraged all but the most dedicated—or needy—instrumentalists.<sup>3</sup> The working conditions of those who stayed closer to home were not necessarily better. In Chicago, for example, where annual earnings of professional musicians equaled those of other skilled laborers, the conditions of work were often far from ideal. Musicians in vaudeville



Musicians traveling with a circus during the 1890s pose in front of their ornate bandwagon. (*Bettmann Archive*)

theaters had arduous schedules, performing as much as two matinées and a nightly show six or seven days a week. “Fiddling or drumming or sawing a big brass [instrument] may not look like hard work when viewed from the comfortable balcony chair,” one Chicago musician said, “but it is hard work, monotonous as well, and exacting.” Those who worked in dance halls, hotels, and ballrooms also complained about their working environment. “You will usually find the orchestra,” a Chicago trade paper complained of such places, “stuck up in some gallery or loft, ill-ventilated, where [musicians] are continually taking into their lungs the heated vitiated air which creates thirst, and from this musicians are accredited with being a drinking set.”<sup>4</sup>

Yet poor working conditions affected musicians much less than they affected other skilled workers. The sheer love of performing and the desire to improve their skills led musicians to make full-time commitments whenever possible, regardless of the conditions under which they worked. As job opportunities rose, this dynamic helped boost the ranks of full-time instrumentalists. Census takers recorded a dramatic rise in the number of musicians performing for a livelihood. In 1870, when the nation’s popula-

tion was under forty million, sixteen thousand men and women listed their occupation as “professional musician” or “teacher of music.” In the ensuing decade, while the nation’s population increased 30 percent, the number of musicians and music teachers doubled. By 1890 the figure had doubled again, to over sixty-two thousand, and it reached ninety-two thousand in 1900.<sup>5</sup>

ONE YARDSTICK OF the resulting increase in professionalization was the extent of unionization. Worker cooperation for purposes of protecting wages and working conditions can be traced back to colonial times, when “benevolent and protective” associations of printers, carpenters, and other craftsmen endeavored to regulate prices and apprenticeship programs. With the rapid triumph of the market in the Jacksonian era and the subsequent organization of industry on a national scale, workers formed the first modern trade unions to bargain with employers and protect employment conditions. In 1865 about two hundred thousand workers, 2 percent of the nonfarm workforce, belonged to such trade unions, whose leaders generally accepted the capitalist order but were prepared to act collectively in behalf of what they considered the vital interests of their members.

Unionization among musicians dated back to the late 1850s, when musicians in Baltimore and Chicago formed fraternal organizations for self-protection as well as mutual assistance. Similarly, musicians in New York City in 1860 established the Aschenbroedel Club to promote “the cultivation of the art of music . . . good feeling and friendly intercourse among the members . . . and the relief of such of their members as shall be unfortunate.”<sup>6</sup> The New York club assumed something of the nature of a trade union in 1863, when it changed its name to the Musical Mutual Protective Union (MMPU) and received a state charter limiting its legal liability as a public corporation. Following this example, musicians in Philadelphia organized their own musical association in 1863, and those in Washington, St. Louis, Boston, Cincinnati, and Milwaukee soon did likewise.<sup>7</sup>

These early organizations were more labor exchanges or hiring halls than unions per se. Like inside contractors in factories at the time, musicians met in their own “union” halls to buy and sell their services. Through the agency of the union, buyers, known as leaders, purchased the services of sidemen—musicians who accompanied a leader in a band, ensemble, or whatever. A musician became a leader by contracting the proprietor or manager of an entertainment facility for the employment of a group of musicians. Given the informality of such arrangements, it was not unusual

*Table 1* List of Prices for Musical Services, Cleveland, Ohio, 1864

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1. To play in front of a hall for one hour \$1.50
  2. Saloon Concerts \$2.00
  3. Serenades for one hour \$2.00, each subsequent hour \$1.00
  4. Funerals to Erie Street Cemetery \$2.50, to Woodland or West Side Cemeteries \$3.50
  5. Escort of any corpse to or from different depots \$3.00
  6. Parades \$3.00
  7. Banquets \$4.00
  8. Weddings \$4.00
  9. Private Parties \$4.00
  10. Moonlight Excursions \$4.00
  11. Political Meetings for one hour \$2.00, whole evening \$3.00
  12. Picnics on weekdays—all day \$5.00, half a day \$3.00
  13. Political Excursions for one day \$6.00, for several days \$5.00
  14. Balls \$5.00, on holidays \$6.00
  15. German Kraenzehen till 1 o'clock \$3.00; each subsequent hour \$.50
  16. Fairs with dance till 2 o'clock \$4.00, if longer \$5.00
  17. Public Concerts with one rehearsal \$4.00, extra rehearsal \$1.00
  18. Masses with one rehearsal \$3.00, extra rehearsal \$1.00
  19. Dancing till 12 o'clock for Scholars \$3.00, till 2 o'clock \$4.00
  20. Opera per Evening \$3.50, per week \$18.00
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*Source:* "The Musical Association, 1887-1912," pamphlet in Bagley Collection.

*Note:* These prices, established by the Cleveland musicians' union in 1864 and printed in the local's handbook for members, reveal the unique and varied nature of the musicians' work environment and show how local unions carefully controlled wages and the length of performances. Prices are for the services of one musician.

for individuals to shift back and forth from leader to sideman. In addition to supplying the mechanism for bringing leaders and sidemen together, these early unions acted as fraternal support systems, providing members with modest pensions, credit arrangements, health insurance, and death benefits.<sup>8</sup>

The most important objective of the unions in the late nineteenth century was to establish and maintain uniform wage scales. To establish the desired uniformity, local unions created price lists specifying acceptable wages for various types of work. The prices depended on the kind as well as the duration of the work involved. For steady employment in circuses, vaudeville, cabarets, and the like, the unions generally prescribed weekly wages. For one-time occasions such as weddings and private parties, fees were lump-sum. In 1865, to illustrate, members of the Washington [D.C.] Musical Protective Union charged concert saloons \$30 a week for leaders

and \$16 for sidemen, while the charge for a single masquerade ball or town parade was \$6 per musician. A generation later, in 1891, the Columbus [Ohio] Musicians Protective Association prescribed wages of at least \$2 per musician per engagement at skating rinks, baseball games, and funerals, with an additional dollar for bandleaders.<sup>9</sup>

Like other wage earners, union musicians established their own customs concerning the pace and duration of work. Price lists carefully specified the hours of work. Musicians working on steamboats in Washington in 1865, for example, received \$6 each for "Moonlight Excursions" that lasted from "8 until 4 o'clock." For excursions that went beyond four o'clock, they received extra pay by the hour. As in all trade unions, many workplace customs were left unstated in union rules. Periodic breaks, for example, punctuated the schedules of all musicians and allowed them as well as their audiences to converse and refresh themselves. In Columbus the union price list for string performances specified, "Refreshments to be served in all cases."<sup>10</sup>

Local unions organized themselves democratically. They vested executive power in elected officials, whose numbers and titles varied according to the size of locals but who usually included a president, a vice president, and a secretary-treasurer. Officials typically served one-year terms but were often reelected. Presidents generally appointed business agents, who recruited new members and policed the activities of members and their employers. Membership meetings, which convened monthly, quarterly, or annually, constituted the principal instrument of governance. Such meetings, however, were not typically well attended, and small groups of dedicated members often dominated union affairs. Most members attended union meetings only when special problems or opportunities arose. Between sessions executive boards exercised the powers otherwise reserved for the membership meetings. The boards also had power to discipline and expel members.<sup>11</sup>

Not all musicians joined a union. Some made their own terms with employers without regard to union rules or pay scales. To combat this, union officials in large cities negotiated all-union hiring agreements with proprietors, who came to terms because they needed regular access to popular musical groups whose members belonged to the union. Unions pressured professionals to join their ranks by fining members for performing with nonmembers, a practice that fostered union solidarity and closed-shop hiring contracts. As a result of such strategies, by the late nineteenth century most musicians found it necessary to join a local union. Some instrumen-

talists, of course, needed no pressure to do so. Many of them came from families with union backgrounds, and joining a union was for them a natural thing to do.<sup>12</sup>

For perhaps half of all union members in the late nineteenth century, music was not the sole source of income. Some musicians joined unions because doing so facilitated the earning of supplementary income, while others joined in order to meet other musicians in professional settings. Unions accepted marginally talented members, because ambitious, nonunion amateurs could undercut union price lists. A few of the oldest unions in large eastern cities required professional competence for membership, but most locals did not. In the latter, applicants for membership might have to play a song or answer a few questions, but most had only to pay an initiation fee and agree to abide by union rules.<sup>13</sup>

This disregard for professional standards diminished union credibility in the sense that it ran counter to general trends among other skilled workers. But it was a reasonable response to a unique problem: musicians' unions were in no position to certify the professional quality of their members. On the job market, sight-reading aptitude might prove less important than improvisational skills, individuality of interpretation, or even stage presence. Diverse and changing tastes in popular music also made it difficult to justify any policy of exclusion. Appraising marketable entertainment skills was a highly subjective art, and that fact among others set musicians' unions apart from professional organizations or artisans' unions, which used internally imposed standards to protect themselves in a competitive market economy.

UNIONIZED MUSICIANS generally shared the social prejudices of other turn-of-the-century Americans; these prejudices discouraged solidarity among musicians. Despite the impressive contributions of African Americans to musical culture, to illustrate the problem, black musicians generally could not join white unions. This of course caused problems on both sides of the color line. In Cleveland, for example, white union officials complained that "unschooled" black instrumentalists controlled a large share of the local "dance and party business." Like workers in other segregated unions (or trades), white musicians in Cleveland saw their black counterparts as "industrial competitor[s]" and "treated [them] as such."<sup>14</sup>

To protect themselves, African Americans in large cities often organized their own musicians' unions, which maintained loose contacts with their white counterparts, but had their own union halls, officials, and arrange-

ments with proprietors. In 1875, for example, black musicians in Boston formed the Progressive Musical Union and established price lists roughly equal to those already established by white musicians. In many cities without black unions, African Americans created musical agencies that served as union stand-ins. Many of these agencies evolved from informal contacts at music stores, dance clubs, or even poolhalls. One such agency was the Clef Club in New York City, where black instrumentalists met and contracted for each other's services.<sup>15</sup>

The difficulty of forming unions did not prevent African Americans from distinguishing themselves as professionals in the late nineteenth century. Some black musicians attained national and even international fame as concert musicians; others were prominent in commercial music. During the 1870s and 1880s many African Americans received musical training in army bands and made the best of it afterward in theaters and nightspots. New Orleans became famous for its unsurpassed brass bands made up entirely of black musicians. Minstrel troupes were another source of revenue for black musicians, especially banjo players and guitarists. The male-dominated black minstrelsy became one of the nation's favorite forms of entertainment, especially in the South, where minstrel companies traveling by rail made seasonal tours performing comedy, dance, and musical acts under big canvas tents. Among the popular touring groups were Brooker and Clayton's Georgia Minstrels, Silas Green, and the Rabbit Foot Minstrels. Their accomplishments are all the more impressive because they were made against the backdrop of pervasive racism in the "the age of segregation."<sup>16</sup>

The professional achievement of black musicians rose following the exodus of African Americans from the South that began in the 1910s and accelerated until the Great Depression of the 1930s slowed it for a time. Aspiring black instrumentalists were among the first to abandon the South, where musical jobs were few, employment uncertain, and income generally too low to sustain a musical career. In the 1870s and 1880s, before the exodus began, black musicians congregated in southern towns along railroad trunk lines, like Memphis (Tennessee) and Jackson (Mississippi) on the Illinois Central. By 1900, when nearly a quarter of all African Americans lived in urban areas, most of them still in the South, many of these musicians had moved to Chicago, Detroit, and other northern cities, where larger audiences supported their music. The musicians often worked in the saloons or vaudeville theaters in red-light districts known for gambling, prostitution, and other illicit activity. Some worked not for wages but for

tips from the audience and for food and drink from the proprietor. The fact that black musicians brought their own styles and repertoires to southern and then northern urban centers left a deep imprint on popular American music. Their folk songs and blues and rag styles, and especially the unique improvisations of their jazz, became popular across America, among black and white audiences alike.<sup>17</sup>

The experience of Henry Thomas, a self-taught guitarist from Upshaw County, Texas, illustrates these general patterns. Thomas left home around 1890 and began playing guitar in train depots in east Texas. With rousing, foot-stomping songs like “Alabama Bound” and “Old Country Stomp,” Thomas made a name for himself locally and enough money to survive. By 1893 he had traveled as far north as St. Louis, working wherever he could along the way.

Thomas was known for the unique style he created by pounding his thumb on the guitar to produce hard beats while he picked melodies high on the guitar neck and ran a knife blade along the strings to produce a distinctive twangy, bluesy sound. He also played the quills, a predecessor of the harmonica made of cane reeds cut to different lengths and tied together in a row. Thomas blew across the top of the reeds to produce his signature high-pitched melodies. The opening lyrics to one of his songs, “Railroadin’ Some,” speaks of his work experience:

I leave Fort Worth, Texas, and go to Texarkana  
And double back to Fort Worth  
Come on down to Dallas,  
Change cars on the Katy  
Coming through the Territory to Kansas City,  
And Kansas City to St. Louis  
And St. Louis to Chicago  
I’m on my way but I don’t know where.<sup>18</sup>

Women musicians faced their own set of challenges in the male-dominated world of turn-of-the-century America. Social custom discouraged female instrumentalists from performing in public or for wages, and those who did perform faced prejudices that limited their career opportunities. Bandleaders and proprietors alike considered women performers less ambitious and less reliable than men, and more likely to cancel performances and quit orchestras. Many also thought women lacked the physical stamina to travel and perform every day; those who did so, it was believed, needed special attention and were thus more trouble than male

performers. Union locals, especially those that grew out of all-male marching bands, did not always accept women either.

The exclusion of women from musicians' unions paralleled the general trends in unions at the time, especially unions of skilled laborers. Throughout the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, far fewer women than men belonged to trade unions. In 1900, for example, only 3 percent of women working in industry were union members, compared with nearly 20 percent of men. Trade unions at that time made little effort to organize women, and women who did join unions were unable to participate in union meetings and governance on an equal footing with men. Most trade unionists believed that female workers drove down wages and robbed male workers of "dignity" and "backbone." In matters of gender equity the record of musicians' unions was thus better than that of labor organiza-



California Women's Symphony, Los Angeles, 1893. Despite being relegated to the margins of the profession, all-female orchestras at the turn of the century often played at public recitals and private parties. (*Hearst Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Southern California*)

tions in general. The constitution of the Columbus local reflected the general attitudes of male musicians: "Whenever the word 'man' occurs," the charter stated, "it shall be so construed as to mean 'woman,' 'musician,' or 'member,' and when 'he' or 'him' occurs, it shall also mean 'she' or 'her.'"<sup>19</sup>

Despite their marginalization in musicians' unions, women played musical instruments and otherwise contributed to musical culture as well as the business of music. Some women played for wages alongside men, while others performed alone or only with other women in public recitals, or in socially sanctioned settings such as church or at home. A few joined all-women orchestras, which occasionally performed in public. The twenty-one-piece California Women's Symphony, for example, performed regularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The role of women in music education was much more prominent and important than in musical performance. According to the 1890 census, about 60 percent of the nation's sixty-two thousand musicians and music teachers were women. Since men dominated the union membership lists of performance musicians at that time, that figure suggests that women were much more involved in music education than were men. This too was distinctive, if not unique, among skilled workers at the time: those who taught workers their skills were not themselves considered skilled workers.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the instrument played most frequently by women was the piano. Many women apparently believed that the piano was physically easier to play than stringed instruments and horns, and they and others seemed to agree that it was a "proper" instrument for women. Popular magazines and mass-circulation newspapers, as well as ladies' journals, told women that the piano was intimately linked to "true womanhood," that is, to notions about women's proper place in society. Pianos helped women fulfill their natural roles as ornaments of the home and the family. Playing the piano properly also solved women's "posture problem." While playing, women kept their backs straight and their knees and feet together, and thus looked "feminine" and "cultured." "There she could sit," one handbook on etiquette explained, looking "gentle and genteel, . . . an outward symbol of her family's ability to pay for education . . . of its striving for culture and the graces of life, of its pride in the fact that she did not have to work and that she did not 'run after men.'"<sup>21</sup>

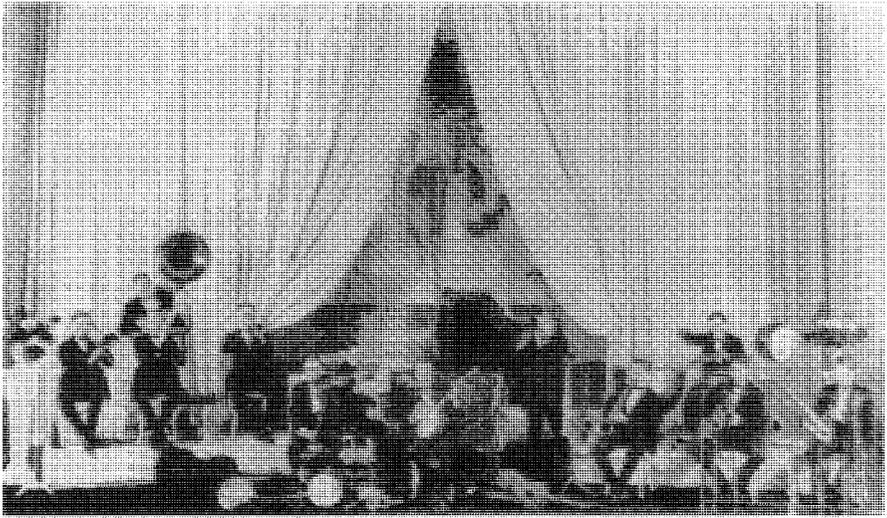
There were still other signs of division among musicians. Language and ethnic barriers impeded worker solidarity, even cooperation, in the music business just as they did in other trades during the Gilded Age. Census reports and obituaries in union trade papers indicate that while most musi-

cians were native-born, a very large minority—perhaps a third—were not. Substantial numbers of instrumentalists in many urban centers spoke German, while many others spoke a Scandinavian or an eastern European language.<sup>22</sup> In the 1880s, a time of heavy migration from eastern and southern Europe to the United States, union officials in Cleveland noted that the city's musicians were divided between "those who spoke English and those who spoke German." This statement reflects the fact that a recent influx of immigrant musicians from Bohemia had made communication difficult between instrumentalists in the city. Even Bohemian musicians, labor organizers discovered, were split into factions.<sup>23</sup>

This lack of solidarity affected all musicians negatively. In Cleveland, white union officials complained that competition between ethnic groups had caused wages to drop "almost out of sight." "Employers were the only ones who gained," one official explained, "in [this] merry war betwixt tweedle dee and tweedle dum." White locals encouraged European immigrants of all nationalities to join their ranks, but despite their efforts, ethnic diversity undermined union power in Cleveland and elsewhere throughout the late nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup>

Beyond these divisions and tensions within the workforce lay looming problems of an even more intractable nature. Throughout the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, the movement of musicians from one locality to another as well as the hiring of amateur, immigrant, and military bands meant growing competition for local professionals. In addition, periodic economic downturns disrupted the demand for musical services and encouraged musicians, like other workers, to undercut each other's wages. At the same time, new musical styles and new generations of musicians and music consumers put constant pressure on instrumentalists to retool, as it were. To attract new customers or increase the sale of food and drinks, proprietors had few qualms about dismissing established groups when more stylish, innovative, or newly popular groups became available. Such practices showed musicians the advantages of organizing nationally as well as locally.

MANY SKILLED WORKERS had already learned those advantages. Printers had formed the first national labor union as early as 1852. Twenty years later, when nearly three hundred thousand workers belonged to trade unions, no fewer than thirty artisanal groups boasted of national organizations. National organization helped local unions deal with the structural and legal problems of unionization. At the same time, the full-time offi-



Joe Sheehan's Orchestra, circa 1910–20. Dance bands such as this one played music in theaters and dance halls in the early twentieth century. (*Ohio Historical Society*)

cialists who ran the national unions gained valuable experience in dealing with employers, courts, and legislators.

The first call for a national organization of musicians came in November 1870, when the Philadelphia Musical Association, concerned about the growing presence of immigrant and nonunion musicians, proposed a “general union” of local “musical protective associations.” Acting on the proposal, delegates from associations in New York, Boston, Baltimore, Chicago, and Philadelphia met in June 1871 and established the Musicians’ National Protective Association (MNPA). Essentially a loose confederation of independent locals, the MNPA lacked both the power and the resources to accomplish much. Despite the enthusiasm of its leaders and the apparent strength of some of its affiliates, the MNPA was unable to sustain the momentum that had given it birth. In the depression of the 1870s it disintegrated, as did twenty other national labor organizations.<sup>25</sup>

When the economy rebounded at the end of the decade, so too did national labor organization. A second, more successful union of musicians emerged in 1886, when the members of a Cincinnati local contacted locals in other cities and proposed the formation of a national union. In March of that year delegates from musical societies and union locals in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, Cincinnati, and Milwaukee met

at the Grand Hotel on Broadway in New York City and established the National League of Musicians (NLM). The league was another federation of local groups designed to promote fraternal relations as well as to protect wage levels and improve working conditions. Its first president, Charles M. Currier, was an accomplished musician who had once worked in the well-known Gilmore Band in Boston and in other groups from New Orleans to Chicago and Cincinnati. Currier and others in the league hoped that a national organization would persuade Congress to pass legislation prohibiting musical proprietors from hiring foreign orchestras or military bands for performances for which local groups were available. They argued that proprietors hired such groups to avoid paying union prices, and they promised to expose “the theatrical landsharks and managerial swordfishes” who exploited musicians.<sup>26</sup>

For a while the NLM grew rapidly. Ten years after its founding, it had more than one hundred affiliates, but its strategies as well as its structure were ill suited for the changing times. The depression of the 1890s, competition from foreign and military orchestras, and growing numbers of nonunion musicians put downward pressure on wages and compromised NLM price lists. Local unions could not remedy the situation, and the NLM had no independent power of its own. In fact, its structure as well as its purposes generated dissent, especially among smaller and newer locals in midwestern states. By an unusual proxy system, delegates to its annual conventions from large and well-established locals in the East voted on behalf of locals too small or poor to send delegates of their own. In this way the New York local, whose leaders were mostly insensitive to the needs of working musicians in small cities, came to dominate the conventions.<sup>27</sup>

The attitude of prominent NLM officials toward trade unionism in general was an even greater problem. Since the 1860s organizations of skilled workers had tried to forge a national association of unions to represent the common interests of unions and workers. They finally did so in 1886, when a convention of trade union representatives in Columbus founded the American Federation of Labor (AFL). This umbrella federation had little power relative to its strongest national affiliates, yet it offered them distinct advantages. AFL leaders promised to promote organizational drives, mediate jurisdictional disputes between rival unions, and keep track of legislation and legislators of interest to member unions. Unlike its predecessors, the AFL embraced the basic premises of capitalism; its goal was to help skilled workers secure larger shares of the material rewards of capitalism than they had secured in the past. The federation therefore focused

its attention on the issues of wages, hours, and working conditions rather than on larger matters of social reform. Federation president Samuel Gompers wanted affiliates to attain their goals by collective bargaining, but he was ready, when necessary, to support strikes with whatever resources he had available. Gompers hoped to make the AFL the most inclusive confederation of unions in the nation and accordingly met with leaders of all national unions, including the musicians.

In 1887 Gompers addressed the NLM convention, urging musicians to join the trade union movement. Despite the evident interest of musicians in doing so, league leaders rejected the offer. When Gompers reiterated the invitation in subsequent years, they continued to rebuff it. NLM officials from large East Coast locals were no doubt worried about losing their own power and privileges as leading spokesmen for musicians, but they also believed that musicians were artists and not workers and had little in common with members of the AFL. In any case, they argued that affiliation might cause musicians-as-artists to suffer a loss of dignity.<sup>28</sup>

The league's response must be viewed in the context of the times. The late nineteenth century was a chaotic, truculent era in industrial relations, a time of sweeping innovation, unrestrained competition, and unbridled industrial growth. It was also a time of reactive labor militancy and class violence. In industry after industry, new methods of production revolutionized the labor process and capsized the traditional world of workers. When labor responded to management heavy-handedness with strikes or other forms of protest, management countered with lockouts, strikebreakers, and even organized violence. Many strikes ended with the intervention of local police, state militia, or even, occasionally, federal troops. In 1887, the year Gompers invited the league to affiliate with the AFL, there were, according to imperfect figures, 1,436 strikes in America involving 273,000 workers. Over the next ten years, according to the same imperfect sources, there were another thirteen thousand strikes involving 2.5 million workers. From the steel mills of Homestead, Pennsylvania, to the silver mines of Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, organized and unorganized workers resisted the new industrial order, only to discover in the process that local, state, and even federal authority protected it. This turbulent world of dynamic corporations, labor-saving machinery, displacement of skilled workers, and industrial conflict was largely removed from the experience of musicians before the turn of the century, and that fact nurtured the conviction among them that they had little in common with other workers as workers.

But the NLM response to Gompers's invitation reflected widening divi-

sions among musicians, growing concerns about group identity, and even emergent class consciousness. Musicians in societies in several large East Coast cities had traditionally thought of themselves as an elite, a highly creative group of artists. They distanced themselves not only from industrial workers but from other musicians as well. Those among this elite who performed works of classical composers in symphony halls and well-to-do neighborhoods not only had years of formal training as well as highly developed skills, but like their audiences, they believed that classical and even semiclassical music was better, more culturally enriching than popular music performed in less sanitized places. In other words, a self-validated elite proclaimed and perpetuated a hierarchy in musical culture that had implications for the labor history of musicians, sustaining as it did a division between “refined” music and musicians on the one hand and folk, country, and black music and musicians on the other. Unlike cigarmakers and machinists, elite and “respectable” musicians reasoned, musicians did not labor; rather, they performed. True, musicians already had local unions and work rules, but their lives seemed, to most musicians as to most economists, largely removed from the world of labor economics. Collective bargaining no less than collective activity like strikes seemed antithetical to matters of musical performances, to say nothing of musical art and beauty.

A new generation of musicians in the 1880s and 1890s began to feel differently about these matters. In contrast to the established elite, many young musicians, especially those in popular or mass forms of music, had working-class backgrounds and depended on wages and on the business of music to earn a living. If they recognized a musical hierarchy, as they probably did, they did not therefore discredit, or even discount, the value of their own activity as musicians. They preferred the music they performed, as did their audiences. As that suggests, art and aesthetics were to them things mediated by popularity and market demand. They wanted to capitalize on those things and saw in the organization and tactics of skilled trade unionists models of self-protection and advancement they might use to advantage.<sup>29</sup>

Responding to these developments, Owen Miller, the president of the NLM, told musicians in 1895 that they must reorient themselves and the league toward trade unionism. Only in that way, Miller insisted, could the league and its members respond meaningfully to the challenges that threatened their economic well-being.<sup>30</sup> Miller’s call for radical change, however, fell mostly on deaf ears. A year later a new president, Alexander Bremer, who was also head of the New York City local, sounded a much

different note. Seeking alternately to obscure and to trivialize Miller's concerns, Bremer insisted that musicians would not "cast their lot" with "stovemolders" and "shoemakers." The differences exemplified by the conflicting positions of Miller and Bremer were fought out in the councils of the league. Bremer proposed in 1896 that league conventions meet biennially rather than annually, and that between conventions the executive board be empowered to exercise "a general supervision of all matters pertaining to the League." This would of course entrench the eastern elite at the expense of the younger dissidents, who were already convinced that Bremer and his supporters wanted to mute their voices and ignore their protests. The dissidents concluded that league leaders—whom they derisively called "Silk Hats" and "Prince Alberts" because of the fancy clothes they wore—would never change.<sup>31</sup>

One immediate consequence of this division was strengthened ties between some league locals and the American Federation of Labor. In 1895 Gompers announced his willingness to support a new union of musicians if the NLM refused to affiliate with the AFL. At the same time, he renewed his offer to make a reformed league an autonomous affiliate of his federation. The league convention rejected this offer by a tie vote, whereupon Gompers scheduled his own convention of musicians to meet in Indianapolis in October 1896.<sup>32</sup> A total of twenty-six locals, including seventeen affiliates of the NLM, sent delegates to Gompers's convention. There, C. H. Ruhe, chairman of the league's executive board and one of the delegates, persuaded some of the delegates to withdraw from the convention. But those who remained represented approximately three thousand musicians, and out of their deliberations came the American Federation of Musicians (AFM). The structure of the AFM was like that of other affiliates of the AFL. National and local organizations shared powers. At the national level there were nine elected officers—president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, and five executive committee members—who oversaw the affairs of the union. As was generally the case in unions, the president had considerable power, including the power temporarily to "annul and set aside" provisions of the union constitution except those dealing with finances. Ultimate authority in the AFM as in other AFL unions, however, rested in the annual conventions, at which delegates from locals set national policy and elected national officers for terms of one year. Each local had one vote at the conventions for every one hundred members, but to limit the power of large locals, no one of them had more than ten votes. The conventions and national officers had joint responsibilities in resolving disputes within

the federation, for which purpose the executive board acted as an appellate court.<sup>33</sup>

THE FIRST PRESIDENT of the AFM was Owen Miller, who had earlier sought to bring the NLM into the AFL and, when that failed, had taken the lead in forming the AFM. The choice of Miller, who was forty-five years old in 1896, was thus appropriate. He was a widely respected figure in politics and labor, having once served in the Missouri state senate and as a leader of the Missouri Federation of Labor. His lack of formal education he compensated for by breadth of experience and astuteness of judgment.<sup>34</sup>

Miller immediately found himself and his new union in a power struggle with the NLM. Embracing the goals and methods of other AFL unions through a relatively democratic organizational framework, Miller sought to make his new union the organized voice of working musicians. Representing instrumentalists who were more likely to work in dance halls, saloons, or other places of popular entertainment than in ballrooms or symphony halls, and who belonged disproportionately to small locals outside the urban Northeast, Miller and other AFM leaders nevertheless saw the immediate need to establish the union in large eastern cities, where employment opportunities as well as sources of union power were disproportionately concentrated. Placed on the defensive by the appearance of the AFM, leaders of the NLM sought to parry the union's appeal by appeals of their own to musicians as artists.<sup>35</sup>

The choice of Kansas City as the site of the AFM's second convention, in 1897, was shrewd, for the NLM had announced its intention to hold its own convention at the same time and in the same hotel as the AFM. This had the ironic effect of putting delegates to the AFM convention in a position to disrupt the NLM convention, both of which convened on May 4. More than forty delegates to the league convention were members of the AFM, compared with perhaps twenty delegates who belonged solely to the NLM. Recognizing the threat these figures posed, league officials hastily revoked the charters of all its locals affiliated with the AFM and stationed policemen at the doors of its convention hall to make sure no one entered as a delegate without credentials signed by league officials bent on excluding delegates who also belonged to the AFM. This strategy collapsed when a group of excluded delegates obtained a court order directing league officials to admit them to the convention. The frustrated president of the league promptly adjourned its convention.<sup>36</sup>

Revoking the charters of locals affiliated with the AFM effectively killed

the NLM. When the adjourned convention reassembled a year later only nine locals sent delegates, and that number declined to three in 1902, when delegates from New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore were the only ones to appear. The following year the league's New York chapter merged with the city's growing AFM local, and the chapters in Baltimore and Philadelphia followed suit. What remained of the league following these actions quietly disbanded in 1904.<sup>37</sup>

The rise of the AFM was basically a restructuring of the national musicians' union, since many leaders of the new AFM had been prominent, if often dissenting, members of the NLM. But the rise of the AFM also signified an important change in the social outlook of working musicians. Impressed by the methods other skilled workers were using to protect or better their interests, musicians began discarding the image of themselves as artists or performers and replaced it with a growing consciousness that they were skilled laborers with interests and circumstances of their own as working people. They came to believe, in other words, that only a powerful, assertive union committed to labor solidarity and willing to challenge management when necessary could protect and advance their collective interests as musicians.

While not denying that musicians were artists and professionals, the AFM embraced the strategies and tactics of skilled trade unions in pursuing its objectives. More aggressive and confrontational than the NLM had been, the AFM was more willing and able to challenge entrepreneurs who employed musicians. Its democratic structure and policymaking processes helped the federation maintain the loyalty of its members, and its activist style and pragmatic purposes facilitated rapid growth. Absorbing most NLM affiliates at the Kansas City convention in 1897, the AFM then boasted 72 locals; the number reached 114 in 1900, when the union began absorbing Canadian locals. At the outset of the twentieth century the union had more than ten thousand dues-paying members and was the undisputed voice of working musicians.<sup>38</sup>

The artist-versus-worker controversy persisted, however. Indeed, the idea that musicians had little in common with other workers remained strong and functioned to limit the union's strength throughout the period of this study. But by 1900 the controversy no longer prevented the building of a national union that embraced the philosophy of the skilled labor movement represented by the AFL.

The rise of the AFM cannot be understood simply in terms of pragmatics, however. Like worker organizations in the building trades, the

AFM succeeded chiefly because it confronted literally thousands of small, unorganized employers who had neither the resources nor the know-how to unite and resist union demands. Most trade unions at the time, even those of skilled workers, were less fortunate, for they emerged—when they succeeded at all—in the face of monopolistic or relatively unified employers with formidable power in the marketplace and influence in local if not national political councils. The economic power of unified musicians was relatively strong, in contrast, and their unionization campaigns met little effective opposition. The AFM took advantage of this circumstance to tighten its grip on musical services by imposing price lists and regulating working conditions. By the end of the first decade of the new century, the ability of the AFM to deal effectively with employers was as impressive as that of any union in the AFL.<sup>39</sup>

IN 1900 MILLER stepped down as president of the AFM to become its secretary as well as editor of its trade journal, the *International Musician*. The fact that the secretary's salary was \$750 a year and the president's only \$100 apparently caused the first of these switches. Though Miller was president of the union for only four years, his tenure was significant. The forceful, self-taught leader from Missouri played an important role in solidifying the union's position among musicians, just as he had in eliminating the NLM.<sup>40</sup>

On Miller's recommendation, delegates to the 1900 annual convention elected Joseph N. Weber president of the union, a position Weber held for forty years. Born in 1863 in the village of Temesvár in present-day Hungary, Weber migrated with his parents to New York City as a boy. He learned music from his father and as a young man made his living as a clarinetist in touring bands that took him to Chicago, Kansas City, New Orleans, and elsewhere. In 1891 he married a violinist, Gisela Liebholdt, and together they traveled and worked in cities on the West Coast from Los Angeles to Seattle.<sup>41</sup> Apparently Weber's first significant union activity occurred in Denver in 1890, when he helped organize what became Local 26 of the NLM. On the West Coast he served for a time as vice president of the Seattle local. In 1895 he moved to Cincinnati, where his father operated a saloon. There he continued his union activity, this time as president of the Musicians' Protective Union, Local 3 of the NLM, which under his leadership played a central role in organizing the AFM. Weber represented the Cincinnati local at the AFM conventions in 1899 at Milwaukee and in 1900 at Philadelphia, at the latter of which he became president of the organi-

zation.<sup>42</sup> His elevation was significant in part because he had no patience with those who debated the artist-versus-worker question. “We musicians are employed under the same conditions as any other workers,” he told Denver musicians in the late 1890s. “We may be artists, but we still work for wages. . . . [We] are exploited by our employers in the same manner as any other wage-earners who stand alone. Therefore we must organize, cooperate and become active in the economic field like other workers.”<sup>43</sup>

The years following Weber’s accession to the presidency of the AFM were years of growing opportunity for musicians. Industrialization continued to draw people into urban centers and to increase the demand for entertainment once they were there. As a result, the demand for talented musicians often outstripped the supply, and union locals struggled not against unemployment but against what they and their members called “unfair competition” from nonunion musicians who undercut union prices and took jobs away from unionized musicians. The national union necessarily gave locals considerable freedom in handling these problems, while it acted as vigorously as it could against such nationwide problems as competition from military bands, foreign orchestras, and musical groups traveling from one local jurisdiction to another. It also did what it could to address the intractable problem of race relations.

The use of military bands in performances for which civilian musicians would otherwise have been used—and paid—was a problem of long standing. Musicians objected to the practice because military bandmen were paid by the military and thus worked for lower wages than civilian musicians. The competition was doubly unfair because military musicians received their instruments and uniforms at taxpayers’ expense.<sup>44</sup> How much military bands undermined the wages and employment of union musicians is difficult to determine, but in 1888, instrumentalists in New York compiled a list of over one hundred instances of military bands performing in circumstances in which civilian bands would have otherwise been employed. An instructive example of how military bands undercut civilian musicians involved the hiring of a band for the Pure Foods Show in Washington, D.C., in 1895. A civilian band offered to play at the show for the union price of \$24 a week, only to be underbid by the Fourth Artillery Band, which offered to perform for \$18 a week. To get the job the civilian band then agreed to play for \$14 a week, but after three weeks the management of the show dismissed the band and replaced it with the artillery band, whose members agreed to perform for \$8 a week, one-third of the union scale.

As this incident suggests, the low pay of service musicians encouraged them to seek outside work. AFM officials, who were fully aware of this situation, accordingly worked to raise the wages of military bandmen. The union urged Congress and the Departments of the Army and the Navy to prohibit military musicians from competing with civilians. Perhaps in response to union efforts, in 1908 Congress increased the pay of enlisted musicians and prohibited army and navy bands from competing with the “customary employment” of their civilian counterparts. The act proved to be ineffective, however, because enforcement was left to local commanding officers, who continued to allow bands to accept outside employment. The attorney general further weakened the law by exempting the best military band of them all, the Marine Band, from the provisions of the law on the grounds that it was not an army or navy band. Not until 1934, when the navy alone had over 150 musical groups in its service, did the military, under pressure to help alleviate the nation’s unemployment problems, end the practice of allowing service bands to compete with civilian musicians.<sup>45</sup>

Foreign bands were another source of competition the AFM worked to eliminate. Contracting with foreign orchestras, often for extended engagements, not only was less expensive than hiring union musicians, but the exotic names and music of such groups often had wide public appeal. Advertisements of the Royal Imperial Band of Wilna (Russia) as the “Special Favorite of the Czar,” to cite an example, made the group sound far more interesting than familiar local bands. Local unions fought this practice by prohibiting members from performing for employers who imported foreign talent, but only the strongest locals challenged the practice successfully. The national union sought therefore to persuade Congress to extend the provisions of the Alien Contract Labor Law, passed in 1885, to musicians and musical groups. That law prohibited foreign workers with pre-arranged labor contracts from entering the country. However, it exempted “professional actors, artists, lecturers, or singers.”<sup>46</sup> This exemption allowed contract musicians to enter the country and touched off a protest by American musicians that lasted fifty years.

Congressional debate over an 1899 tariff bill, which proposed a new tax on imported “implements of tradesmen,” including musical instruments, provided the AFM an opportunity to renew its attacks on the policy of allowing foreign musicians to be contracted to work in the United States. The AFM demanded that Congress amend the contract labor law to cover foreign musicians. To fail to do so, union leaders said, would allow “men with instruments and gaudy uniforms on their back . . . to be classified as

'artists,' while simultaneously declaring that the materials these artists use are 'workingman's tools.'" Congress ignored AFM demands, and the inconsistency the union pointed to remained in the law until 1932. In belatedly making the change at that time, Congress finally accepted the union contention that musicians were workers first and artists second. After 1932 only "virtuosos of the first rank" were excluded from the restrictions of the contract labor law.<sup>47</sup>

The AFM also addressed the issue of peripatetic instrumentalists working outside the jurisdiction of their own union local. Unlike other craft guilds and protective societies, musicians' unions had always permitted their members to travel far and wide in pursuit of work. The 1872 constitution of the New York musicians' union, for example, authorized the issuance of "traveling cards" that extended the rights and protections of the union to members working in other jurisdictions, provided the traveling member paid dues to and abided by the rules of the local in whose jurisdiction he or she worked. It also extended the same privileges to members of other locals working in New York.<sup>48</sup> The AFM handled the issue of traveling musicians by instituting a "transfer law" that gave musicians the right to work in the jurisdiction of locals but allowed locals to prohibit the work of outsiders who came into their jurisdiction as a result of strikes, lockouts, or breaches of union contracts. In a nutshell, the union tried to keep musicians geographically dispersed without compromising their need or desire to travel.<sup>49</sup>

Racial matters were also a problem for the young AFM. Although some locals, such as Boston Local 9, accepted African Americans on an equal basis, many did not admit black musicians at all. The result was "colored" locals, the first of which seems to have appeared in Chicago in 1902, after a majority of whites in Local 10 voted for a segregated union. In response to the vote, black musicians quickly organized themselves and asked the AFM for a separate charter. According to William Everett Samuels, an early member of the black union, president Weber wanted to exclude black musicians from the federation. "[Weber] was so prejudiced," Samuels said, "that he didn't want [black musicians] either, but he couldn't keep them out, so he said all right, you [can] join the AFM but you'll be the colored local." The recognition of Local 208 set a precedent, and over the ensuing two decades separate black locals appeared in approximately fifty cities, including Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Washington, as well as most southern cities. Some of these locals, however, were not autonomous. Until 1944 many operated under subsidiary charters from white locals.<sup>50</sup>



“King” Oliver’s Jazz Band, Chicago, circa 1922. Oliver’s was one of many professional groups that introduced and popularized jazz in the first two decades of the century. (*Bettmann Archive*)

Not all segregated locals resulted from the exclusion of black musicians from white locals. Many African Americans preferred their own organizations to those dominated by whites. In 1915, for example, several black musicians withdrew from Boston Local 9 on their own initiative and organized what became Local 535. Black musicians, explained one of the organizers, “wanted to have their own identity.” No doubt they also wanted to ensure their own control over nightclubs and other workplaces catering to black customers. In any case, Local 535 was as aggressive as its white counterpart in asserting and defending the interests of its members. At a time when the demand for leisure activities was rising more rapidly than the supply of skilled instrumentalists, black as well as white musicians benefited. Despite a certain instability in its formative years, Local 535 protected wages and working conditions for black musicians in such popular Boston nightspots as the Royal Palms, Little Dixie, Louie’s Lounge, the High Hat, Handy’s Grille, the Old Savoy, and the Paradise Café. As one of

its members, Ernie Trotman, said later, Local 535 “had certain kinds of work tied up.”<sup>51</sup>

THE CHALLENGES MUSICIANS and their unions faced around the turn of the century contrasted sharply with those confronted by most other workers and unions. In that era of rapid industrialization and mechanization of manufacturing processes, skilled workers in many trades lost power and privileges in the workplace. New machinery divided previously skilled jobs into simple, repetitive tasks that semiskilled or even unskilled workers could perform, and in the process reduced not only skill levels and wages but workers’ autonomy and bargaining power. Efforts to resist these developments and the new management techniques they spawned were more often than not futile, but the very futility of the efforts forced desperate workers across the nation, in eastern factories as well as western mines, into deadly acts of protest and resistance.

Musicians and their unions escaped these kinds of displacement and desperation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They faced no innovative job-threatening machinery, no strong employer associations, and no efficiency experts speeding up the pace of work. Their union therefore was distinguished by its successes. It protected wages and income and facilitated the expansion of job opportunities. Although white males dominated the union, other groups carved out their own places in music and found ways to benefit from national organization. This was the Golden Age, the “good old days,” which musicians and their union later looked back upon nostalgically.