The Black Musician and the White City

Absher, Amy

Published by University of Michigan Press

Absher, Amy.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/32739
Introduction

By the mid-twentieth century, Chicago was a city that drew African American musicians by the thousands from throughout the American South. For many of them, Chicago was an obvious destination. After all, they knew it was a hub for the music industry, and they had purchased their recordings through the Sears, Roebuck and Co. catalog, which was published in Chicago. They received news of the city from the Pullman Porters, who spread Chicago’s Black-owned newspapers throughout the South and in so doing helped to create an unbreakable link between the rural and the urban African American populations. In addition, Chicago was the home of professional organizations such as the National Association of Negro Musicians, classical-music training was available at the Chicago Conservatory and the University of Chicago, and there were high-quality Black-owned venues such as the Pekin Theater and the city’s churches.¹

All of this was seductive to African American musicians, but none of it changed the fact that Chicago was a “city of neighborhoods.” This was a polite way of saying that it was a segregated city. The reality of Chicago’s pigmentocracy was such that African American musicians were assured membership in the segregated American Federation of Musicians local, and that jobs in the city’s symphonies, radio stations, and clubs outside of the “black belt” were largely off-limits. Therefore, migrating to Chicago meant that they would have to live in a segregated city. For many, living in the city required them to make choices regarding segregation. Some chose to dedicate themselves to undermining the racial system through performances, recordings, and professional organizations. Others sought to create an autonomous cultural sphere that could insulate musicians from the city’s racism.
The musicians were not afraid of facing segregation because segregation was a reality for them wherever they went. However, once in Chicago, they quickly came to understand that, although segregation was common in the United States, each place had a slightly different system. Therefore, they would have to adapt the responses they developed in the South and develop new techniques for negotiating and resisting segregation in the urban center. These techniques included playing outside the “black belt,” uniting with European ethnics to challenge the music industry, organizing unions, participating in the city’s higher-education facilities, and writing political compositions. Ultimately, many of the Black musicians emerged as activists responding to the limits placed on their ability to work throughout the city, to perform on the radio, and to record.

In the end, there was never just one form of segregation in Chicago, and there was never just one recourse against the oppression of segregation. Rather, the varied responses of the musicians illustrate that African Americans in Chicago held dynamic, and, at times, conflicting views. Daily, they had to make choices ranging from open resistance, to self-sufficiency, to negotiation. They had to modify their strategies as forms of segregation changed over time. Their choices suggest that African Americans, on the ground, were not stuck in the dualisms of W.E.B. Du Bois versus Booker T. Washington or the choice between Black activism fueled by an optimistic faith in democracy versus a pessimistic historical consciousness born of unbearable injustice. Instead, Black musicians needed diverse and complicated strategies for dealing with segregation because racism in Chicago was an outgrowth of the city’s politics, which manifested itself at every level of life. In this way, the history of African American musicians is central to understanding the challenges to racial segregation in Chicago, and to demonstrating that the contest for control of the city between 1900 and 1967 concerned not only physical and political territory but also cultural space.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that Chicago musicians were part of larger Black historical experiences such as urbanization, segregation, and the Black Freedom Movement. In addition, industrial restructuring, redevelopment and urban renewal, and the construction of highways shaped them just as these infrastructure changes shaped Black communities in other cities, as Robert Self argues in American Babylon and Derek Hyra explains in The New Urban Renewal: The Economic Transformation of Harlem and Bronzeville. They saw the failure, as described by Arnold Hirsch in Making the Second Ghetto and Alexander
Polinkoff in *Waiting for Gautreaux*, of local, state, and federal officials to ensure civil liberties and economic opportunities. They also saw Black leaders acquiesce and compromise over these same issues. For these reasons many scholars, beginning with St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton in *Black Metropolis*, contend that once one understands the history of African Americans in Chicago, one understands the history of African Americans in nearly every other city.

It is easy to see why there are those who make a case for the essential nature of Chicago history to Black history. The city was an industrial giant that developed into the nation’s production and distribution hub, which made it central to everything from economics to culture. The counterargument is that many other Black metropolises, such as Harlem or Detroit, could boast of the same thing. What Chicago had that the other cities lacked were the political and business leaders—including Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Oscar DePriest, John Johnson, Robert Abbott, and William Dawson—who inspired and built key Black institutions, such as the Urban League, the *Chicago Defender* newspaper, and *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines. By the 1930s, Black Chicago’s intellectual scene—with Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Burroughs, and Archibald J. Motley Jr.—had surpassed all contenders.

Adding the musicians’ participation in and perspective on historical events strengthens the argument for the importance of Chicago and its history. No other “Dark Ghetto,” as Kenneth Clark would say, had a gospel scene as influential or well developed as that in Chicago. The city was also the home of all of the major music publishers, numerous conservatories that accepted Black musicians, and Mayo Williams—the artist and repertoire man for Paramount Records, the first major blues label—who brought performers like Ma Rainey, Charley Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Son House, and Alberta Hunter to Chicago. The revolution in music encouraged and strengthened the musicians’ sense of racial pride and cultural achievements. They took their sense of dignity and importance born in the city to Black communities throughout the nation, in much the same way that the Pullman Porters and Black baseball players did. What distinguished the Black musicians from the other cultural ambassadors is that the musicians also influenced and changed, forever, white America. Therefore, the history of Black musicians in Chicago is more than a case study. The musicians’ story is as inseparable from the national historical narrative as it is from the community-focused social history of the city.
In exploring musicians’ experiences and perspectives, I take an unconventional line: this book is not one type of history. Like Derek Vaillant’s examination of the conjunction of musical progressivism and urban history in Sounds of Reform, I interweave several bodies of scholarship to create a historical framework that seeks to forge connections between the history of the musicians, the city, and the nation. The musicians’ work lives mandate a labor history approach. Since a large part of their experience was as participants in the Great Migration, I knit together social history sources and methods with cultural history. I offer an examination of the sociopolitical history of the city as well as urban spaces—whether defined by notions of property, political wards, demographic lines, violence, or music. Also, there is the institutional history of the music business (Chicago venues, recording enterprises, radio and jukebox technologies, and touring activity). When appropriate, I bring in music theory and lyric analysis. The two things that tie these different approaches together are my concerns with change over time and with Black musicians’ multiple responses to white supremacy.

In examining sources and constructing my arguments, I draw on Christopher Small’s Music of a Common Tongue and Musicking. Small asserts that the act of making music “creates the public image of our most inwardly desired relationships, not just showing them to us as they might be but actually bringing them into existence. . . .” In other words, making music structures the relationship between people and their understanding of space by articulating the rules that make certain relationships valid and others unsettling. Small understands music as a language or a grouping of symbols that makes rituals and myths visible. His ideas have guided me toward understanding music as an action and placing significance on studying the performance, the venue, the professional and amateur musicians, and the audience as manifestations of the role of music and musicians in society.11

Whereas Small provides an interpretive foundation for this project, Scott DeVeaux’s The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History offers a method. As DeVeaux points out, it is common to read histories of jazz, or blues, that treat the music as a living thing. But music is not a living thing. It has no motivations and makes no choices. It cannot plan a revolution, nor can it evolve. In short, music does not have agency. Rather than writing a history using metaphors, scholars would do better to look for the points where music and social movements collided. In that nexus are the musicians. DeVeaux argues that for musicians, social issues and
music were not exclusive of one another; they were both important parts of musicians’ lives. Therefore, a historical narrative should emphasize the musicians’ choices. I diverge from DeVeaux in one major way. His work is concerned with the origins of a musical style and with understanding the relationships between the musician’s stylistic choices and the larger musical developments. My work, in contrast, focuses on the musician as historical actor.\footnote{12}

Like other studies based on DeVeaux’s method, such as Patrick Burke’s “Come in and Hear the Truth”: Jazz and 52nd Street, I seek to understand how musicians interpreted, negotiated, and resisted major historical moments during the mid-twentieth century with their music acting as a system of articulating their ideas. By emphasizing the network of musician relationships, as Burke does, it is possible to displace the mythology surrounding the musicians that has for decades obscured the scholar’s understanding of the place of Black musicians in American history. For this reason, rather than focusing on the development of genres and instrumentation, in this book I examine the role of the musician in the history of migration, the musician experience in the segregated urban environment, and the building of a musician-led labor movement.

Certainly, there have been numerous studies of music in Chicago, such as Mike Rowe’s Chicago Breakdown, Howland William Kenney’s Chicago Jazz: A Cultural History 1904–1930, and David Grazian’s Blue Chicago: The Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs. While these books provide excellent music histories and focus on the musicians’ perspective, beyond the Great Migration of African Americans to the city, they do not present the musicians as continually part of historical movements and conflicts in the city. Nor do these books take into consideration the diversity in musical training and life experience among the musicians.

In addition, there is a noticeable gap in the historiography of African American musicians in Chicago. Whereas the 1920s and post–1960s have been well examined by scholars, the 1940s and 1950s are less well understood. I am positioning my project historiographically between Kenney’s Chicago Jazz and George Lewis’s A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music. The strength of Kenney’s work lies in his ability to tie musicians to the Great Migration and in his descriptions of the musician community. I carry the links Kenney pioneered forward by arguing that later migrants built on the strengths of the community developed in the early twentieth century. The significance
of Lewis’s work regarding the AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians) is that he emphasizes the musicians’ experiences with race in Chicago and how these experiences shaped the radicalism of the AACM. In my research, I examine musician-led organizing from the first years of the twentieth century through the 1960s. In this way, my work examines the foundations of what became the AACM platform by demonstrating that musician radicalism was not born in the 1960s and Black musicians did not have just one strategy for surviving and resisting racism in the city. In the end, my research provides the connections between the first waves of musicians to arrive in Chicago from the South and the development of various political perspectives among musicians in the 1960s. Viewing the presence of musicians in Chicago’s racial and cultural politics as a continuous and cumulative history makes it possible to understand how the musicians built a community, as well as what the results of their actions were.

A crucial part of understanding musicians as active historical figures is realizing that music is a result of musicians’ discourse concerning aesthetic visions and cultural politics, not the inspiration for the discourse. Even if musicians were not recognized as intellectuals by the society at large, they functioned as intellectuals because they engaged in the work of challenging social orders, such as segregation in Chicago, creating social movements, and articulating the needs and motivations of the underclasses. Consequently, many of them grappled with the concepts of political and cultural power. To not understand musicians as intellectuals, or to ignore their music as evidence of their conscious examination of their social situation, would render an entire group of people historically inarticulate. In formulating these ideas, I am drawing on Eric Porter’s arguments in What is this Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists, Elijah Wald’s detailing of how music concepts and musicians traveled between Chicago and the rural South in Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues, Burke’s argument that the music was kept alive and innovative by a network of musicians in “Come in and Hear the Truth,” and Samuel Floyd’s presentation of the creation of tropes and lexicons in African American music in The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History From Africa to the United States.

Seeing the musicians’ movements and lives as being formed and informed by Chicago’s history has required that I understand the connections between segregation, labor, and leisure activities in the city. I have
situated my work between histories focused on the creation of institutional segregation, such as Arnold Hirsch's *Making the Second Ghetto* and Thomas Sugrue's *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, and the growth of the African American community, as examined by Christopher Robert Reed's *The Rise of Chicago's Black Metropolis, 1920–1929* and Adam Greene's *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940–1955*. Also important to my work are the histories of leisure, such as Robin Bachin's *Building the South Side: Urban Space and Civic Culture in Chicago 1890–1912*, that understand areas such as the city's public beaches as sites of conflict. These authors attempt to appreciate how the city's power relationships played out in urban space and how conflict defined identities. The authors accomplish this by focusing on the history of urban planning, development, and involvement of community activists. I am building on their work by examining how social movements, as wide ranging as Progressives and white supremacists, purposely used segregation to regulate Chicago and how the culture created by musicians challenged the city's racial traditions.

To this end, a major goal of this book has been to map the spread of music spaces—such as nightclubs, street performances, and record stores—and to create a data set that could explain and elucidate the demographic makeup of the musician community. I compare the music landscape to the historical city, census, and Urban League maps that present the population in terms of ethnic and racial densities, thereby marrying music history to urban history. The many charts and statistics used throughout the study stem from a census of 1,983 musician death certificates—1,618 white musicians and 267 Black musicians—collected by the American Federation of Musicians Union between 1940 and the 1970s. In these visual and statistical representations of Chicago's musicians, it is possible to observe the origins and characteristics of the musician community, as well as how the boundaries of the “black belt” became less distinct over time.

Understanding history in this way presents the possibility of thinking of Chicago as more than a city of neighborhoods or as a dialectical conflict between the natural environment and urban planning. Chicago is a city of people. Above all else, the history of African American musicians demonstrates how individuals remade the city and challenged the idea of the inevitability of neighborhoods, racial differences, and labor divisions. The sharp tensions that emerged from their affront to the established social order stemmed from battles over racial propriety and the emerging cultural influence of the laboring classes in Chicago at mid-century.
This study takes up the relationship of segregation to musicians from the beginning of Chicago’s strident system of physical segregation in the early part of the twentieth century to the development of a civil rights-style protest among Black musicians in the 1960s. Chapter 1, beginning with the emergence of the first Black-owned music venues in 1904 and the vice purge of 1912, argues that from the early years of the century through the start of the 1940s, the musicians resisted the daily humiliations and limitations placed on their work by creating an autonomous cultural sphere in the city centering on the importance of community and racial pride. The building of the Black cultural sphere—defined by physical territory, Black leadership and ownership, collaborative cultural exchange, and a citizenry engaged in social criticism—in the early twentieth century was a break with the previous generation of Black leaders in Chicago who would have found separate institutions abhorrent and accommodationist. Pragmatically, Black leaders in the 1920s and 1930s argued that the community needed hospitals and schools that would welcome them, as well as newspapers that would promote the values of the community—what historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham termed “The Politics of Respectability,” and agitate against racism. Leaders among the Black musicians mirrored the larger community’s move toward resistance through self-sufficiency by establishing and strengthening the Black musicians’ union local, the National Association of Negro Musicians, music education in Black churches and schools, and the emerging Black-owned music theaters.

At the time, recent migrants from the American South populated the Black neighborhoods in Chicago. They were part of a the first waves of a century-long migration pattern that diminished the southern Black portion of the nation’s total population of African Americans from 90 percent in 1910 to 85 percent in 1920 and increased Chicago’s Black population fivefold by 1930. Many of the musicians discussed in this book were part of this migration. Generally, the classically trained were from southern cities, such as Memphis, and the blues, jazz, and gospel musicians were from rural areas, such as the Mississippi Delta.

It is important to note that although they may have differed in place of origin, class, and education level, the classically trained musicians and the blues, gospel, and jazz musicians did not see themselves as entirely separate groups. Racial segregation in Chicago was pernicious. The fact that the classically trained musicians lived and performed under the same conditions as the blues musicians because class, education, and genre were
all trumped by the perceived physical manifestations of race, illustrates this reality. It was common for the classically trained to play in blues and jazz bands, and the members from the two groups united in the 1960s to confront the segregation of the musicians’ union. In addition, classical, gospel, jazz, and blues all coexisted in the same Black entertainment areas of Chicago. All Black-led genres were simultaneously commercially viable and enjoyed the same audience, at least until the 1950s when the white teenage and college student audience began to grow. It was not unheard of for African Americans to attend an evening performance of classical and faith music in a church before going to hear jazz and blues in a club. The blending of genres and audiences was another manifestation of the influence of so many different types of people and musicians all migrating to and sharing a small piece of urban space, as both Guthrie Ramsey argues in *Race Music*, and George Lipsitz contends in *Time Passages*. Therefore, when thinking about Black musicians in Chicago, it is better to look beyond genres toward understanding the musicians as part of a community defined by vocation, artistic endeavor, and segregation. Furthermore, I am following the lead of Bakari Kitwana by choosing to capitalize “Black” throughout this book. I contend Black constitutes a group and is equivalent to African American, Polish American, Chinese American, and so forth. Conversely, I have generally placed “white” in lowercase when I use it as an adjective, such as in discussions of power structures, and prefer the terms European American, Italian American, or Jewish American, for example, when describing familial, national, or ethnic groups.

Like the majority of African American migrants, Black musicians in the 1920s and 1930s made their homes in the narrow strip of land known as “the black belt.” It was located between the southern tip of downtown—known as the “South Loop”—and the Hyde Park neighborhood, home of the University of Chicago. This section would almost double in population from 44,000 in 1910 to about 80,000 people in 1920, and it would increase another threefold to 234,000 by 1930.

Chapter 2 fills in the spaces between these statistics by considering the lives of musicians as migrants during the 1930s and 1940s. Their oral histories, song lyrics, and memoirs suggest that in this period they went through a personal transformation in which they came to understand themselves as being musicians as opposed to having a sense of self defined by their labor as plantation workers, for example. The choice to migrate to Chicago was a subversion of the southern racial system that tried to
Figure 1. The above graph, based on a study of 266 African American musician death certificates, shows that the largest groups of migrants, for whom a place of birth was known, were coming to Chicago from elsewhere in Illinois—possibly as second-generation migrants whose parents moved to Illinois from the South. Chicago-born musicians make up the second largest group. The balance of the ten places that ranked the highest in terms of African American musicians’ origins were Mississippi, Missouri, Alabama, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, and the cities of Los Angeles and New Orleans. For 1,573 white musicians for whom records exist, the breakdown by most common places of birth differs significantly, with more than 16 percent from those born in the ten most popular places coming from abroad: Italy, Russia, Brazil, and the former Czechoslovakia (includes the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Bohemia) taking the last four places. The balance of the most common places where white musicians came from were Indiana, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Missouri.
control where they lived and the type of work they did. Once in the city, they would have to adapt the survival skills honed in the South to the urban racial system. On the plantations, the blues musicians resisted by becoming bootleggers and using their illegal drinking establishments to promote their music. These skills would serve them well in the city because they would have to develop a practical disregard for the physical barriers of discrimination, just as they had ignored prohibition in Mississippi, to make a living and to find housing in the city. The classically trained musicians resisted in both the South and Chicago by demanding a place in higher education and by bringing African American folk traditions to their classical compositions. They also used their professional organizations to demand anti-lynching laws and equality in public accommodations. While the efforts of the classically trained added to the Black cultural sphere in Chicago, still these men and women ached to play in the city’s symphonies.

This discussion of the musicians’ efforts to survive in Chicago builds on the history of the Black cultural sphere begun in chapter 1. Musicians arriving in the 1930s and 1940s found a well-established music tradition and African American leadership in Chicago. New arrivals slowly changed that system, and called attention to the conflict that arose between those in support of the old system, those who wanted to ignore it, those who wanted to imagine improvisational social organizations, and those who wanted to challenge it continues throughout the book. This conflict did not follow generational or genre lines.

As this conflict unfolded, the demographics in the city continued to influence the course of African American life. At the start of the twentieth century, the foreign-born were the majority in Chicago. This fact was obvious in the street names, in the prevalence of Catholic churches, and in the city’s political leaders. Following World War I, a shift began: the population of European-born Chicagoans began to decrease by one-fifth each decade. By 1950, the foreign-born population in the city and the African American population were equal in number if not in treatment. By mid-century, only New York had a larger Black population than Chicago. Urban League and census maps indicate that the African American population had by this point outgrown the Bronzeville neighborhood and was spreading out into the South Side (for example, into the Woodlawn and Englewood neighborhoods) with pockets located on the West Side and North Side (particularly in the Little Hell neighborhood). When combined with the increased wages and employment opportunities brought
on by World War II, this growth in the Black population of Chicago was an indication that African Americans were becoming an economic and political force in the city.

With the demographic increase and subsequent growth in cultural visibility as its backdrop, chapter 3 argues that in the late 1940s and the early 1950s, a small group of Black blues musicians turned toward “the market” as a means of resisting segregation in the music industry. In cooperation with South Side independent music producers, the musicians recorded and released music during the 1948 ban instituted by the American Federation of Musicians’ union on recording new music. The musicians were members of the musicians’ union, but they did not obey the strike because they realized that the lack of any competition in the market place, due to the ban, meant that Chicago’s South Side music briefly was the market. By 1953, these musicians had come to thrive. Chicago musicians—namely, the blues musicians—were positioned to have this impact on the nation because Chicago was a leader in the recording, distributing, and broadcasting of popular music.

Latino and European American youth, from California to New York, began buying Black recordings in such large numbers by 1953 that Chicago’s music transformed from a regional phenomenon that united the Midwest with the South into a national music trend. White disc jockeys began adopting Black urban syntax and slang to better align themselves with the emerging importance of Black culture. The success of the South Side’s music sent the large music corporations scrambling to understand the shift in the music and to find a way to regain control of the audience as well as the market. The national rise in the popularity of Chicago’s Black music was the most successful challenge to segregation undertaken by the musicians since their arrival in Chicago.

Nevertheless, as chapter 4 argues, there was a downside to fame. A National popularity meant that Chicago’s Black musicians had broken through the physical barriers of segregation that had prevented them from playing or distributing music beyond the Black neighborhoods in the urban centers and in the South. As they toured promoting their music, they took with them the racial pride they had built up in Chicago and found themselves less willing to acquiesce when faced with the old-time traditions of southern racism while on tour. Many considered their tours a purposeful intervention into southern racism. When their racial pride was combined with the fact that they were drawing European American teenagers in larger and larger numbers to their performances, Chicago’s
Black musicians found themselves under the constant threat of violence, arrest, and censorship.

Chapter 4 focuses on the mid-1950s debate concerning the musicians’ success by discussing what happened when the tried-and-true physical barriers of segregation were no longer effective. Black music was perceived as a threat to American culture, according to the segregationists, because white teenagers were actively seeking out Black music; radio stations were broadcasting it across neighborhood, city, and state lines; and previously white venues were booking Black musicians. Southern segregationists fought back by physically attacking the artists, raiding interracial venues, and vandalizing radio stations. Throughout the country, community groups pressured radio stations and jukebox owners to limit Black music. The ire over the rise in national popularity of Chicago’s Black culture was even addressed by Congress, which held hearings regarding the perceived corruption of independent music producers and disc jockeys. The controversy over the appropriate audience and place of Black music in the 1950s was similar to the Progressive-led “vice crusades” of the 1910s and 1920s (discussed in chapter 1) that conflated race, crime, and music. Two differences between the 1920s and the 1950s spread of Black music was the role of technology in the wider distribution of Black music in the 1950s and the growing influence of the civil rights movement on both the musicians and the audience. As the musicians’ popularity grew, so did the segregationists’ violence against the Black musicians.

African American musicians in Chicago knew that destroying segregationists’ attempt to control Black cultural power was not just about demanding artistic freedom. There were strict limits placed on where they could play in the city, what jobs they could hold, and with whom they could perform. Recording companies, broadcasting companies, and the American Federation of Musicians union supported these inequalities. Therefore, as the 1950s ended, it was apparent to many in the musician community that there would have to be an organized assault on the foundations of segregation.

In 1963, as explained in chapter 5, a group of about 200 African American musicians, a minority within the Black local, responded to the system of segregation by questioning the existence of segregated union locals and the importance of there being an autonomous African American cultural sphere in Chicago. The union locals had been supporting the practice of segregated locals since 1902, whereby part of the city was designated for white musicians (the North Side, downtown, the radio stations, and the
symphonies) and the other part (the “black belt” and South Side) for Black musicians. The 200 hoped that by dismantling the decades-long tradition of segregated union locals, they would destroy the cultural and economic segregation of the city. They believed that if the union demanded that broadcasters and venue owners employ them, and if the union would fight for equal contracts with recording companies, then they would advance economically and enjoy greater creative freedom. Their rhetoric accused the Black local’s leadership of supporting and promoting segregation in the union to secure its own power in the community.

The musicians wishing to end segregation had opponents in the Black union local. Among them were the local’s leaders who embodied the early twentieth-century idea that autonomous and self-sufficient Black institutions were an attribute and a necessity to supporting and protecting Chicago’s Black community. The union leaders believed that in insisting on segregation, whites had inadvertently created Black spaces, such as nightclubs, that fostered the development of the Black community’s identity and culture. The position held by the Black union leaders stood in striking contrast to that held by the 200 who believed that an all-Black leadership could be as dissatisfying as an all-white leadership.

For the entire history of the Black local—and for that matter, the musician community—there had been those who pushed more for autonomy and those who pushed more for integration. Yet, there were other choices, such as leaving the city or being pragmatically autonomous by following union rules when they were advantageous. The 1960s, and the civil rights movement and legislation, forced the discussion of integration and eliminated discussion within the union hall of the indirect methods of resisting, such as ignoring all union and civic rules by creating new music spaces or exploiting the chinks in the lines of segregation, which defined the daily life of the rank-and-file members of the Black local. Instead, the fight became about who would author integration and whose interpretation of the history of musicians in Chicago would win out. In this 1960s context, those who had built the union local saw themselves as having done so as a response to racism in the white local. They were standing their ground as a bulwark of the community, and as the African American musicians’ only chance for representation in the union and in the city. The 200 disagreed and demanded immediate integration. The subsequent debate illuminates the major themes of this history, including the links between physical and cultural segregation in the city, because it was as much about where the musicians were allowed to play as it was about
bandleaders having the freedom to hire musicians regardless of skin color and to record music of their choosing. The musicians’ discourse also articulated the larger issues of integration in Chicago, such as the possible loss of distinct identities and communities, which they had been building since the first migrant musician arrived in the city, the lack of representation in a white-dominated union and city, and the very real possibility that integration would be just a new form of oppression.