In 1904, Joe Jordan composed “Pekin Rag,” a work dedicated to the dance hall that would over time become Chicago’s Black-owned Pekin Theater. The cover of the sheet music for “Pekin Rag” features a photograph of the crowds inside the theater. Filling the foreground are the musicians, dressed in matching uniforms. The audience stretches out behind the orchestra, filling the floor and the balcony of the theater. All of the men are in dinner jackets and the women are dressed in gowns. Chandeliers hang from the ceiling and mirrors adorn the walls.

The sheet-music photo only hints at the early grandeur of the Pekin, which owner Robert Motts remodeled and reopened in 1905 and 1906 as a large-scale theater. Eventually, the Pekin, located on the 2700 block of South State Street, housed a touring company and orchestra capable of supporting operas as well as popular music performances. Its significance as a venue grew as the Black neighborhoods surrounding it grew. It became so important to the community that Black leaders endorsed the Pekin as a shining example of African American art and culture. Further endorsement of the Pekin, and the music culture that emerged around it, came from Catholic nuns who brought orphaned African American children to the Black theater district to watch the performances so that the children could see their community in the most positive possible light.

A photo of the outside of the Pekin suggests a different perspective on the theater that was a jewel of the Black community. In an era when Chicago was becoming defined by skyscrapers and architectural filigree, externally, the Pekin was a stark brick building with storefront windows. Like nearly every other building on the South Side, the Pekin had only
two stories. There were no trees lining the street in front of the theater, nor was there a line of cars. The emptiness of the exterior photo, in contrast to the photo of the interior, reveals that the Pekin’s neighborhood had access to few of the civic services or comforts common on the city’s North Side.

The neighborhoods surrounding the Pekin were home to a growing population of 44,103 African Americans in 1910. By 1920, there were 109,594 African Americans in Chicago. The growth in the Black population represented a significant demographic shift in the city—which had a total of 2,701,705 residents in 1920. City commissioners concluded in 1922 that the increase in the African American population was staggering, but it was not a citywide phenomenon. Rather, it represented an increase in population density that pushed at the borders of the existing Black neighborhoods south of the downtown business district.

The two photos of the Pekin captured the dual reality of the South Side. It was an area of the city disregarded by civic leaders in terms of development while simultaneously being a site of civic pride for African Americans. The reason for this contact was that African Americans were slowly building an autonomous cultural sphere on the South Side where they could be the venue owners, the musicians, and the audience—which is the essence of the photo capturing the interior of the Pekin.

The conscious use of self-sufficiency as a way to resist segregation was at the heart of the complex relationship African Americans had with Chicago. The Black cultural sphere ensured the promotion of African American culture, but it ran the risk of legitimizing the city’s racial politics. It also necessitated that the Pekin’s owners, ignored by city leaders and banks, turn to the city’s crime syndicates to underwrite the theater. By the early 1920s, the onetime jewel of the community became infamous as a resister of Prohibition laws and a venue for gang violence. In the minds of many Chicagoans in the 1920s, the Pekin was an example of the connections between crime and African Americans. The Pekin illustrates that it was impossible to resist segregation without being shaped by segregation.

In the forefront of the conflicts and contradictions born of the African American struggle against segregation in Chicago, as the photos of the Pekin demonstrate, were the musicians. African American musicians began to arrive in Chicago in considerable numbers in the early 1910s. They were attracted to Chicago in part because of the Pekin and what it represented. The musician migration collided with a political movement
in which Chicago leaders were turning more toward using physical segregation as a tool to contain the city’s booming “vice” businesses and the growing African American population within the same area of the city. Rather than ending vice, civic leaders pushed brothels, saloons, dance halls, and gambling establishments into the least politically powerful part of the city: the emerging South Side “black belt.” Because much of Chicago’s popular music was performed in the venues of vice, such as bars and brothels, the majority of the city’s popular music clubs also relocated to the “black belt.” By the end of the 1930s, African American musicians had seen a transformation of Chicago in which the legitimacy of venues, like the Pekin, slowly eroded under the pressure of the vice purge until they, too, were venues of vice.

The history of the growth of segregation in Chicago stands side by side with the history of the growth of African American culture in the city. Black musicians were caught between these two historic forces. To survive, all Black musicians would have to defend their music and their profession from the social stigma resulting from the vice purge that pushed
vice into the South Side, which threatened to reduce their music to an element of crime. The Black musicians’ opponents included both white social crusaders, seeking to drive out popular music venues, and African American leaders, striving to build a “respectable” Black cultural sphere on the South Side.

THE PLACE OF VICE AND MUSIC IN CHICAGO

Three forces shaped the musicians’ reality in Chicago in the early twentieth century. The first was the 1912 vice purge. Around the turn of the century, before the creation of the “black belt,” pulp novelists and religious leaders described the places of vice in the city as the Customs House in the Loop, the Chinatown neighborhood south of the Loop, the Levee of the near South Side, and the Little Hell neighborhood north of the Loop. These areas were the “slums of vice,” characterized by dice games, prostitutes, opium, and ragtime that “grated on sensitive ears.” None of the pulp descriptions of these places referred to African Americans. The only descriptions of racial mixing concerned Chinatown and focused on the relationship between opium, Asians, and European Americans. These early descriptions of Chicago suggest that there was a connection between popular music and vice before African Americans started to arrive in Chicago in large numbers.

The process by which African Americans became tied to notions of vice was a historical process rooted in the policing of the Levee. As Chicago’s red-light district, the Levee emerged in the 1870s on Wabash Street close to the downtown business district—the Loop. It was a red-light district notorious for its saloons, dance halls, brothels, and displays of sexuality that were often interracial, cross-class, public, and commercial. It was a place of social experimentation where people from different backgrounds could mix and touch one another without concern for social propriety.

In the early 1900s, the police began to focus on the Levee. The surveillance and prosecution caused the district to begin to creep further and further south, from the downtown commercial area to 18th and 22nd Streets between State and Armour. Though the drift had been underway for awhile, it was not until 1911 that the conscious plan to force vice into the Black neighborhoods began with the Vice Commission’s report.
At the core of its arguments was the Levee. The commission viewed this section of Chicago as a vice bacillus branching out into the city. In the report, the Vice Commission observed that vice was always “within or near the settlements of colored people. . . . Where ever prostitutes, cadets, and thugs were located among white people and had to be moved for commercial and other reasons, they were driven to undesirable parts of the city, the so-called colored residential sections.” Underlying their words was the growing idea that vice in the Black neighborhoods was natural in an urban space.

Chicago civic leaders were not alone in the war on vice. In Seattle, the city’s women pushed for the recall of Mayor Hiram Gill, charging him with corruption because he supported a legal vice district in the city. In the Arizona and the New Mexico territories, the public debate concerned Prohibition, the need to recall corrupt judges, and women’s rights. Throughout Ohio, the police and city leaders blamed Black communities for vice and refused to distinguish between criminals and law-abiding African Americans, which resulted in violence and an increase in the incarceration of Blacks.

Chicago civic leaders were also not alone in looking to segregation as a way of controlling the ever-increasing African American population in the city. This was the age of Jim Crow. Between 1900 and 1911, there was a marked increase in residential segregation laws throughout the South, and the residents of Atlanta took things a step further by segregating elevators. In Harlem in 1912, white residents were calling for “Jim Crow” cars in the city trains because they disliked the striking growth in the number of Black residents in the neighborhood. Furthermore, large-scale race riots marred each presidential election. The 1912 election reflected the growing tension in the nation when Theodore Roosevelt’s Bull Moose Party refused to seat duly elected Black delegates, suggesting that the Progressive movement was for whites only.

Chicago’s vice crusade and turn toward segregation stands out in this moment of social reform because it was legitimized and endorsed not only by city and civic leaders but also by social scientists at the University of Chicago, which gave the vice purge the auspices of a city-planning measure. Their rationalizations illustrate the divided nature of their plan for the city. On the one hand, they were attempting to apply the progressive ideals for which the city had become famous. On the other, their inconsistencies and the uncertain terms regarding vice and race reveals
that in 1912 they were starting down the path of creating two Chicagos dominated by different political and cultural ideas. In the end, the Chicago commissioners, politicians, and police did not succeed at preventing or eliminating vice. Instead, they pushed vice further into the “black belt.” The physical segregation of vice in the racially segregated “black belt” became the answer only after it was apparent that the reformers could not eradicate vice any more than they could stop the growth of the African American population. Once in the Black neighborhoods, the vice areas would comprise the borderland between the neighborhoods of the Black elites and the areas controlled by poor European American communities.

The vice purge resulted in two significant developments. First, the purge designated the South Side as the neighborhood of vice. Following the purge, the majority of the musicians playing jazz and blues in Chicago, and those who would migrate to the city over the next few decades, relocated to the South Side because the music venues were economically tied to the “pleasure palaces,” “resorts,” and “dives” controlled by crime syndicates. Black music—and, by extension, the Black musician—were seen as the accomplice of vice. The purge created a situation in which even the classically trained African American musicians found it difficult to perform beyond the South Side. The type of music the musician played was unimportant. The musician’s physical appearance became the determining factor rather than class, genre, or education. Second, the vice purge was a manifestation of the growing need to control the city through segregation. Civic leaders knew that they could not end vice, and so they turned to segregation as a way of managing the city. The choice to physically segregate African Americans and vice from the rest of Chicago, therefore, inextricably linked race and vice in the minds of the majority of Chicagoans.

The vice “crusade” did not so much destroy the Levee as shatter it. Its pieces reassembled in the predominantly African American neighborhood on the South Side, where the vice district gained a new name and a new social significance as the geographic center of African American music and business in Chicago. This area, between 26th and 39th Streets, encompassing South State Street and including the Pekin, came to be known as the Stroll.

Orchestra leader and composer Duke Ellington described the Stroll of the 1920s as a place of racial unity without “hungry negroes” or “uncle Tom negroes.” He described the population by saying:
It was a real us-for-we, we-for-us community. . . . It was a community of men and women who were respected, people of dignity—doctors, lawyers, policy operators, bootleggers, bankers, beauticians, bartenders, saloonkeepers, night clerks, cab owners, cab drivers, stockyard workers, owners of after-hours joints—everything and everybody, but no junkies.16

While Ellington celebrated the diversity of classes and businesses, the Stroll was a place of concern for the Black business leaders wishing to cultivate a respectable image of the community.17 To the white press of the 1920s “the ghosts of the long gone days of Chicago’s roaring levee” haunted the Stroll, where “the society man, the chorus girl, the gangster, the lawyer, the jazzbo” could all be found.18

The concepts of community, lawless vice, and respectability were all present on maps of the area. This is because the Stroll was a place where Chicago’s world of vice and crime overlapped with the businesses of the industrious middle class. It was well-known that the city’s crime syndicates, such as that ruled by Al Capone, controlled the nightlife.19 Capone’s neighbors in the Stroll were banks and insurance companies. Further complicating things, the theater and cabaret proprietors of the Stroll, such as the owner of the Pekin, purposefully worked to distinguish themselves from the Levee by attempting to establish a high level of décor and entertainment that rivaled the stylish theaters and halls that served white clientele downtown.20

Despite the furnishings, the area remained a challenge to propriety because owners and visitors to the area mixed vice with amusements by creating a space of racial integration.21 Both whites and Blacks took part in the music, dancing, theater, prostitution, and other entertainments available in the area, making the Stroll, just as it had made the Levee, a target of both Black and white reformers. In this way, during the period between World War I (when jazz musicians migrated to the city following the closing of the red-light district in New Orleans) and 1927 (when the Savoy Ballroom, which was the first high-class establishment to not be built on the Stroll, opened), the Stroll quickly became the embodiment of all of the complexities of African American life in Chicago.

There were also music venues in Chicago outside of the Levee and the Stroll, including downtown clubs like the Royal Gardens, which welcomed a mixed audience in the late 1910s. This situation would change quickly.22 At the time, it was becoming more and more common that
African American audience members were refused tickets or sold tickets for the balcony. It was also increasingly customary for African Americans to be sold tickets only to have ushers refuse to seat them. Often, African Americans sued the theaters for damages on the grounds that such treatment violated the state’s antidiscrimination laws. In the 1910s, African Americans were successful in court, but by 1925 these kinds of suits were struck down, signaling a change under way in the city. These court cases represented the growing contradiction between Illinois state laws banning discrimination in public spaces and the lived experience of African Americans in Chicago.
THE PROBLEMS OF VICE AND RACE

The second force that shaped the Black musicians’ experience in Chicago was the rise of the “social myth” conflating race and vice, which was solidified by the vice purge and fed by the increasing racial tensions in the city. African Americans came to Chicago during World War I to work in the growing number of industrial jobs created by war demand. Throughout the war, there were few new buildings constructed in Chicago, which resulted in African Americans living in conditions “lacking” in the “conveniences, considered necessities by the average white citizen.” The housing disparities included the absence of bathrooms. If there was plumbing, then there was no hot water. Also, Black families had gaslights rather than electricity and wood stoves rather than furnaces.

As the numbers of African Americans increased they pushed at the boundaries of the “black belt” and moved into areas along the periphery of the segregated zone that at the time ran from the southern end of the Loop to the edge of the Kenwood neighborhood north of the University of Chicago. Purchasing a house in the Woodlawn neighborhood, south of the University of Chicago, for example, meant that families could live in homes free from rat infestations in conditions “much as whites do.” However, the expansion of the “black belt” put African American migrants in direct conflict with the whites in those areas.

Nowhere was the racial conflict more evident than in the Kenwood and Hyde Park neighborhoods nestled between two predominantly African American neighborhoods—what would become known as Bronzeville to the north and Woodlawn to the south—and the University of Chicago. In 1910, Blacks comprised only 11 percent of the Bronzeville population and 6 percent of Woodlawn. However, by 1920, African Americans comprised 25 percent of Bronzeville and 14 percent of Woodlawn. The growth of the African American population frightened the non-Black residents of Kenwood and Hyde Park. Simply put, they felt surrounded by the racial other whom they believed were synonymous with moral declension.

Motivated by fear, white residents looked to homeowners’ associations to guarantee that Kenwood and Hyde Park remain “white-only.” Indeed, one homeowners’ association declared that “Any property owner who sells property anywhere in our district to undesirables is an enemy to the white owner and should be discovered and punished.”

Dozens of African American homes in the former white neighbor-
Map 4. This map indicates the geographic relationship of the “black belt” and the ethnic neighborhoods. For a young Black man, such as Langston Hughes, drifting beyond the boundaries of the “black belt” was an action fraught with danger, as large numbers of white street gangs patrolled the perimeters of the neighborhood. For the music venues, running a business meant negotiating the political landscape that arose from the crime and vice of the city. The above is based on maps that appeared in Frederick M. Thrasher’s *The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs of Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936). From the Map Library, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago. Created by the author.
hoods were bombed in 1919 and 1920 in response to the breaking of the segregated housing lines.\(^{31}\) In addition, white street gangs patrolled the borderlands between the Back of the Yards neighborhood—home to the meatpacking plants and a large number of immigrant families—and the western edge of the “black belt.” These gangs frequently attacked and brutalized African Americans in this area. One of the victims of the attacks was young Langston Hughes. In his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, the leading African American writer recalled accidentally walking beyond the boundary of the “black belt” in the spring of 1918. A white street gang attacked him. He returned home with “both eyes blackened and a swollen jaw.”\(^{32}\) Hughes was one of the lucky ones because a year later, during the spring of 1919, the gang attacks on Blacks climaxed with two murders. This led the chief of police to send several hundred extra officers into the area to prevent racial violence.\(^{33}\)

The increase in the African American population had consequences for the political system as well. Mayor “Big Bill” Thompson worked with African American politicians to ensure that Black Chicagoans were part of the ward system. The result was a reelection victory for Thompson and the Republican Party in 1919. Black support for Thompson was conspicuous and contributed to whites’ fear that African Americans had gained too much political power in the city’s patronage system. It did not help matters that Thompson accepted payments from vice operators and was a frequent patron of the very clubs that the Vice Commission had decried. The mayor’s corruption further stigmatized African Americans.\(^{34}\)

White fear of the increase in the African American population, political power, and physical territory in the city was a contributing cause of the 1919 race riot. The riot began when an African American youth swimming in Lake Michigan drifted to the white side of the swimming area. Whites on the beach began to throw stones at the youth, and they did not stop until they had drowned him. A beat cop at the scene allowed whites to throw the stones and prevented anyone from entering the water to aid the boy. Word of the murder spread quickly. A group of African Americans marched toward the line of segregation. They converged on the beat cop, who summoned other police officers. A group of angry whites joined the police. These events set off thirteen days of violence, which included seven days of rioting and nearly an additional week of police raids and mass arrests, in which nearly all elements of civil society were abandoned. There had not been a riot in Chicago since the Haymarket Riot of 1886.\(^{35}\)

If civic leaders wished to forestall future race riots, they would need
to know what caused this violence and how to control racial tensions. Immediately following the 1919 violence, the city government created the Chicago Commission on Race Relations. Its study, published in 1922 as *The Negro in Chicago*, concluded that there existed a powerful “social myth” that confused being African American with being a supporter of vice.

The commissioners noted the prominence of this “social myth” in the Chicago newspapers’ reporting on vice. Examples included the exaggeration of arrest rates of African Americans and the promotion of the belief that riots began in dance halls and other venues of racial mixing. The press fed the public outrage with provocative descriptions of the clubs.

The crowd began to arrive. In came a mighty black man with two white girls. A scarred white man entered with three girls, two young and painted, the other merely painted. . . .

Seven young men—they looked like back o’ the Yards—came with two women. . . .

Two fur-coated “high yeller” girls romped up with a slender white man. An Attorney gazed happily on the party through horn-rimmed glasses. . . .

At one o’clock the place was crowded . . . a syncopated colored man had been vamping cotton fields blues on the piano. A brown girl sang . . . All the tables were filled at two o’clock, black men, with white girls, white men with yellow girls, old, young, all filled with abandon brought about by illicit whisky and liquor music. . . .

Terms such as “brown girl,” “high yellers,” “yellow girls,” and “syncopated colored man” were phrases used by the papers to characterize African Americans in the club by their shade of skin color, which was an indication of racial mixing in their genetic past. The description of the African American patrons, paired with the descriptions of the “slender white man” and the seven men who looked like “Back O’ the Yards,” suggests many of the couples were racially mixed and that the club was mixed in terms of class. From musicians’ memoirs, it is also known that the bands were mixed racially and that young European Americans constantly traveled to the South Side to watch the African American musicians in hopes of learning to play.37
The dance halls, known as “black and tans” because of the racial mixing, presented a variety of social problems, according to the commission. They sold liquor, offered liquor as prizes, encouraged women to drink to excess, and kept windows closed to create a hot environment to encourage drinking. The customers expressed themselves with “coarse and vulgar dancing.” All of this, according to the commissioners, made the clubs “highly dangerous to morals and established law and order, and a nuisance to the neighborhoods in which they are located.”

The commission was very clear that the public, and not the commissioners, saw the “black and tans” as dangerous because of racial mixing, rather than the sundry other activities that went on in the clubs.

The existence of the racial mixing in the “black and tan” cabarets, where musicians such as Louis Armstrong played, caused “frequent and heated protests,” according to the commission. “Although mixed couples constitute somewhat less than 10 per cent of the patronage,” the study reported, “this mingling is used” by critics “to characterize all of the association there.” Both whites and Blacks frequented the clubs and the commission reported that members of these groups would leave their local areas and travel throughout the city to visit the establishments. The public encouraged the police to arrest customers engaged in racial mixing. Unable to raid clubs to arrest interracial couples, because mixed couples were not breaking the law, the police used liquor violations instead to shut down the cabarets. When police raided the clubs, they arrested the mixed couples and allowed white-only groups to go free. The injustice of the arrests incensed African Americans in the city.

White Chicago believed that African Americans condoned the racial mixing and eagerly accepted “vice” clubs in their neighborhoods. However, the commission study concluded that African Americans lived near vice districts not by “choice” or because of “low standards,” as the Vice Commission had contended in 1911, but because of being unwelcome in the “white residence localities.” The low-income levels among African Americans forced them, according to the commissioners, to seek out inexpensive housing that had been reduced in quality and price because of its proximity to vice. Contributing to this perceived problem was the insufficient political and social power held by African Americans, which left them unable to combat the “encroachments of vice” and the “gradual drift” of prostitution southward into the “black belt.” Furthermore, the commission offered evidence that the proprietors of the brothels, cabarets, and gambling halls were not African American. The proprietors chose to
live among African Americans, the commissioners argued, not because they believed this was the customer demographic; rather, the proprietors knew that living in the “black belt” provided protection from police and public authorities.\(^4\)

The vice industry also took advantage of the reality of African American life in the city. Having been denied benefits by unions, victimized by the police, and crowded into unsuitable jobs and housing, African American men found that the one area where they were able to work freely was in the vice establishments. It was estimated in the 1920s that 12 percent of African American men ran bars, pool halls, and gambling rooms. The reason for the large number of African American-run venues of vice was that liquor and ice distributors were willing to front the money for the businesses. It was easy for the vice industry to bribe the city government for business licenses and protection from raids. Without equal treatment by unions or support from banks, the vice industry offered African American men the best chance at being entrepreneurs. Their businesses had a high rate of failure, contributing to family and economic issues in the larger community.\(^4\)

African American women had fewer employment options than men. However, jobs in the vice industry were numerous. African American women could be found in the ladies’ restrooms and dressing rooms in the cabarets and dance halls. The women paid a concession fee and were then permitted to sell necessities to women in the clubs. Club proprietors forced young white girls working as waitresses to “lure men.” Fearful of the men, the young girls often fled into the dressing rooms. There, the African American women comforted the girls and explained the realities of life. Social workers portrayed the African American women as contributing to the downfall of the white girls, but there is another way of interpreting the situation: the African American women were telling the girls the truth about the life of poor women in Chicago.\(^4\)

The social reformers who studied the links between African Americans and vice recognized the human disaster awaiting Chicago if action were not taken to alleviate the injustices of racial segregation; however, they were unable to escape believing the “social myth.” Leaders in the social-reform movement attributed the behavior of African American patrons in the clubs to the fact that “all colored people are especially fond of music, but almost the only outlet the young people find for their musical facility is in the vaudeville shows, amusement parks, and inferior types of theatres.” They were “pulled down,” the reformers argued, by their “love
of pleasure” and “drawn toward the vice districts, where alone the color line disappears.” In these arguments, the reformers portrayed musical ability and participation in vice as being part of the same destructive urge and thereby naturalized the presence of African Americans in the clubs. In the end, the social workers had done case studies showing that African Americans were working in the vice district because of inescapable poverty; yet, the reformers still quoted from the Vice Commission’s report, saying:

The history of the social evil in Chicago is intimately connected with the colored population. Invariably the larger vice districts have been created within or near the settlements of colored people. In the past history of the city, nearly every time a new vice district was created downtown or on the South Side the colored families within the district moved in just ahead of the prostitutes.

Despite the insights and information the social reformers had, they were unable to see beyond the idea that vice and race were symbiotic partners. The adherence to the “social myth” was the pervasive problem for European Americans who wanted to help end the segregation of African American life in the city. It demonstrates how consequential the vice crusade was for African Americans in Chicago.

For the creative politician or policeman, it was not hard to benefit—both financially and politically—from the “social myth.” The sometimes mayor, Bill Thompson, built his economic base on bribes from the Stroll’s club owners. Thompson protected his power by instructing the police chief to ignore vice in the protected area, the Stroll. Then Thompson removed officers from the task force, fired the commissioner in charge of policing vice, and finally made sure that the City Council Finance Committee failed to appropriate money for anti-vice police measures. This led the state attorney in 1919, after the mayoral election, to declare that the citywide vice resorts operated under the wing of certain city hall favorites. Through the efforts of someone connected with the city prosecutor’s staff, numerous cases against gambling joint owners and operators of disorderly houses were dropped if the defendants were “in right” with the powers that be in their districts. Eventually, in the summer of 1928, the Chicago Daily News and Herald Examiner exposed the operations of the political machine and reported that graft payments came from a wide variety of contributors—including 2,000 brothels, as well as crime
bosses Al Capone and Jack Cusick, and beer “joint” owner Joe Saltis. The newspaper exposés did not disturb Thompson’s system because it was a publicly recognized fact that politicians were indeed corrupt: Chicago remained “wide-open.”

Though syndicate bosses did not have to fear city hall, the pressure from Prohibitionists did bring the federal police to Chicago in the 1920s. They were more interested in the production and transportation of alcohol and less concerned with its distribution and consumption. Consequently, the resorts and clubs were able to exist because of federal indifference, local corruption, and the lengthy system of appeals. The legal limbo in which the clubs managed to exist would change in 1926 when a federal judge ruled that the Volstead Act applied to both places where alcohol was sold and to places where patrons provided their own liquor. A month later, twelve clubs had padlocked doors. In the raids that followed, the most prominent cabarets of the jazz era closed.

Racial mixing and music performances continued on the South Side in the remaining venues. These clubs were smaller than the resorts and cabarets had been. The change in club size forced a reduction in the size of orchestras, which gave the small blues combos greater access to audiences. Prohibition would end in 1933, but the perception of African American music as the soundtrack of vice would continue in the imaginations of many Chicagoans.

WHAT THE BLACK COMMUNITY LEADERS SAW

The third force that shaped the musicians’ experience was the response of the Black community leaders to the vice purge and the creation of the “social myth.” In the eyes of the Black elites, the vice purge, the rants of the homeowners’ associations, and the race riots were all ways that white Chicago reacted to the arrival of the African American migrants. This does not mean that the Black elites were eager to defend or support the recent migrants or their culture. On the contrary, the African American community’s traditional leaders—churchmen, clubwomen, community organizers, newspaper editors, and intellectuals—saw the migrants’ music culture as an accomplice to both urban and social decay.

The Black elites’ discomfort with the new migrants shaped their descriptions of the Black migrant neighborhoods from the late 1920s. These areas were noisy with life. The ice deliverymen and street vendors con-
stantly sang to advertise their goods from early in the morning until night. From the tenement apartments could be heard laughter, Victrolas, radios, and the occasional piano. The elites feared that “gambling, bootleggers and what-not will take the neighborhood away from decent people, and run them out of their homes. . . .” All of the music of daily life and of the illicit nighttime world were detriments, in the minds of the Black elites, to the “health” of the neighborhoods. The culture of the nighttime world was also, according to the Black elites, dragging down the public image of African Americans, which made the migrants a threat to the community the elites had created.

So strong was the association between vice and music that the Black migrant class and the working class found that they were unwelcome in established Black churches. For the musicians, the reaction of the Black church leadership was as damaging as being banned from the radio, because churches were central to the music culture of Chicago. In fact, the tension between the established African American middle class and the lower classes was so high that the Black elites attempted to close their churches to the migrants. Members of St. Thomas Episcopal Church actually vacated their building to avoid allowing the migrants to join their church, but the reordering of Chicago by the Great Migration was inescapable. The migrants (including the musicians) and their music cultures were going to change the city.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the Black elites had built a class-based pecking order in the African American community, which gave them both social and political control. The class structure rested on the notions of “refinement” and “respectability.” Those at the top of the social structure maintained their positions not because of their wealth, but because of their membership in social institutions such as churches, the YMCA, and the Masonic lodge. These institutions became symbols of “refinement.” In addition, the established community leaders were generally not new migrants, but rather came from the “old settler” class—a group of African Americans who had, or whose parents had, migrated to Chicago in the nineteenth century. The elites distanced themselves from the working class through social clubs, choral societies, and annual events such as formal balls, demonstrating that they were not opposed to music in general and saw certain types of music as a force for community-building. However, to reinforce community standards the elites were using a different kind of music than the majority of new migrants used to build their community.
The problem with music performances on the Stroll, as African American reformists saw it, was that they brought a white audience from throughout the city to the area and led to racial mixing in the music venues. Their reticence regarding the presence of whites on the Stroll was not an issue of racial hygiene, as it had been for European American reformers. Instead, they saw mixing as a corrosive force in the Black community because it introduced European American entrepreneurs, white patrons “slumming” in Black culture, and corrupt white politicians to the area. The Black elites blamed the presence of whites in the clubs, dance halls, and theaters for violence, police raids and brutality against African Americans, and the struggles of Black businesses. For example, clubs that had been the pride of the African American community in the early 1920s, such as the Black-owned Pekin and the Dreamland, were closed by the end of the decade because of Prohibition violations. The African American leadership blamed white patrons and white investors for the downfall of the Black-owned venues.

For the Black elites, the presence of white Chicagoans on the Stroll led to the slow erosion of their leadership role. After all, the Black elites had been powerless to stop the police and politicians from pushing the brothels, saloons, gambling halls, and dance halls into the Black neighborhoods following the vice crusade in 1912. They could not prevent the police raids focused on mixed-race couples in which African Americans were arrested while whites went free. Similarly, the Black elites lacked the power to force the integration of the middle-class neighborhoods of Kenwood and Hyde Park in the 1920s.

Black elites were unable to coordinate a strong opposition to white supremacy, the power of white business owners, and the corrupt white officials in the “black belt” until the 1930s. At that time, they organized around the idea that African Americans were being cheated and discriminated against by white business owners, which was an argument rooted in the numerous court cases in the 1920s that protested the treatment of African American patrons in theaters. Their boycott movement followed the advice of W.E.B. Du Bois, a founding member of the NAACP, who argued that a race consciousness could be formed around economic strategies. Drawing on this argument, the Black elites sponsored the “Don’t Spend Your Money Where You Can’t Work” campaign, which began in Chicago’s Stroll area. Black leaders in the NAACP, the Black press, business leaders, and Black gambling concerns all united to bring more Black jobs and businesses to the South Side. The result was the creation of 2,000
new jobs, such as bank and drugstore clerks, in the “black belt,” and the campaign quickly spread to other cities. The presence of the Black gambling operators in the coalition of leaders suggests that if there was going to be vice on the Stroll, it would be Black-controlled vice. Similarly, the elites did not oppose the Black-owned clubs and theaters, because a Black-owned system would have expanded and buttressed their control of the area.

The second element of concern about the Stroll’s culture was what the Black elites saw as the sordid and low behavior of the migrant class. The middle-class reform movement responded by attempting to force the migrants to adhere to middle-class behavior and values. This proved impossible despite leadership from the Urban League of Chicago, which, in the 1920s, began a campaign to prevent the new migrants from drifting into the dance hall world of the Stroll. The League urged the migrants not to make themselves a “nuisance” and advised, “Don’t congregate with crowds on the streets. . . . Don’t encourage gamblers, disrespectful women or men to ply their business any time or place. . . .”

The Urban League’s efforts to reform the migrants were part of a complex campaign to “uplift” Black culture and the Black working class. Black leaders recognized that whites intended that segregation would have to be both physical—such as in housing spaces, and cultural—such as in music. To that end, the segregationists turned their attention to the emerging importance of broadcast radio in the early 1920s. The radio posed a threat to segregated Chicago because sound waves could cross the physical dividers of the city and create a new urban landscape in which African American culture could reach anyone anywhere. Not surprisingly, Chicago’s radio industry grew in and around the debate between both white and Black urban reformers and entrepreneurs concerning the control of urban space. White middle-class stewards of Chicago led this uplift movement. They demanded radio educate the masses as to the values of Americanism, which did not include elements of Black culture. Broadcasters were willing to meet these demands because of the need for advertisers. The result was that all the announcers and radio performers, including orchestras, despite the fact no one could see them, were European American. The determination to segregate the airwaves demonstrated that civic leaders were aware that music could reaffirm or destabilize “community values.”

Though African Americans were unable to acquire broadcasting licenses until 1928, audiences did experience jazz and blues through late-
night simulcasts from the “black belt” clubs. These broadcasts allowed the audience to listen to Black culture without having to travel to the “black belt” or understand the socioeconomic realities behind the music. However, in-studio performances of blues and jazz were by non-African American orchestras because sponsors preferred European American performers. Announcers were also European American. In addition, “black-face” broadcasts, such as *Amos and Andy*, were commonplace.62

Black middle-class leaders also regarded the emerging popular music as being a powerful tool in their “uplift” campaign. Central to this movement was the creation of the first radio program in Chicago hosted by an African American in 1928. WSBC’s The Negro Hour, hosted by Jack L. Cooper, a syndicated journalist and editor of the *Chicago Defender*, which sponsored the broadcast, was an aural intervention into the representation of African Americans in the metropolis. Cooper became a hero for the Negro Civic League, which had pressured the radio station owner into creating a program by and for African Americans. By presenting a wide variety of performances, from church ministers, choirs, and the occasional jazz record, while providing a platform for community fundraising and public affairs, the program advanced the Black elites’ middle-class agenda of reform and uplift. Cooper reached out to the new migrants by creating a missing-persons program that reunited families separated during migration. It is for this reason, and not the cultural elements of the broadcast, that The Negro Hour received support from the migrants and became the voice of the community.63

The “uplift” campaign reveals an important difference between this generation of elites and their parents. In the late nineteenth century, the Black middle class enthusiastically cultivated white clientele and patrons. In the 1910s and 1920s, the Black middle-class leaders began to form organizations that resisted white control, such as Black-owned newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* and the civil rights-focused Urban League. Like leaders of the Harlem community,64 they also created institutions that were African American branches of white-only organizations, such as the YMCA. The idea of separate institutions would have been abhorrent to nineteenth-century leaders. They would have seen the formation of such institutions as evidence that they supported segregation. But from the 1910s through the 1930s, as leaders such as Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois argued, the establishment of Black organizations seemed essential to building the social infrastructure of the South Side. Those
creating these organizations saw themselves as fighting against the white community’s attempt to cast Blacks as the racial other incapable of self-rule by making a visible stand through the creation of institutions that had long been the hallmark of cultured communities in America. Those supporting these institutions saw themselves as opposing segregation and the racism that justified it by demonstrating the power and worth of the Black community. 

The “uplift” campaign, articulated by Cooper on the radio and propagated in the pages of the Chicago Defender, extended into the nightclubs. The promotion of “uplift” was in part due to the activism of Ida B. Wells-Barnett. She represented the old guard of intellectual leaders and the “old settler” migrants in that her arrival in the city predated the mass migration of African Americans starting with World War I. In short, she was a member of the vanguard of post-Reconstruction intellectuals and advocates. In Chicago, she was a leader in the city’s women’s groups and in the NAACP’s anti-lynching campaigns. When it came to music, she supported “culture,” which she defined as being anything that improved the condition of African Americans in the city. She loathed vaudeville theaters, gambling halls, and saloons, as well as the entertainment found in these establishments. However, she was excited about the founding of the Pekin Theater. In it she found the realization of her dream of a theater in which African Americans could sit anywhere they desired, where the décor was tasteful, and where the performers and audience rivaled those in the palaces in the downtown area.

Church leaders supported the Pekin at Wells-Barnett’s cajoling. Reviewers heralded it as the “greatest sign of progress . . . found among us.” Eventually, the Pekin played a significant role in the elites’ attempt to separate themselves publicly from the lower strata. Take, for example, the fact that the most prized seats in the audience, much like the most prized pews in the churches, were for sale at the high price of $2 apiece. This price made “progress” and “uplift” the benevolent territory of the elite classes. Attending the Pekin was a demonstration of rank and social order that debased, rather than uplifted, the poor because at its center was the intentional erasure of the working class from public representation in the “black belt.” The migrants were laborers and performers in these clubs. They served the elites, which strengthened the social hierarchy. The migrants and the elites may have enjoyed the same musicians, but the elite at the Pekin did so under the guise of propriety.
The Pekin also represented the building of an autonomous Black cultural sphere on the South Side. Like the “Don’t Buy” campaign and the effort to teach rules of propriety to the migrants, the Pekin disproved stereotypes of African Americans as lazy, artless, and inarticulate because the theater was an expression of the Black entrepreneurial spirit. It employed African Americans and provided a venue for performers as varied as opera singers and jazz musicians.

Promoting the Black-run venues were Black clubwomen, such as Wells-Barnett, who tirelessly worked to promote and arrange cultural events. As in Black communities throughout the United States, Black women were acting as brokers and activists, seizing on the politics of the Progressive era and remaking them despite the fact that they lacked political power and financial support. Middle-class women, dedicated to the idea of “uplift,” started the first Black art museum in the nation and based it in Chicago. They created Black History Month, brought Black literature into school curricula, amassed a public-library collection dedicated to Black arts and letters, and forced white city officials, such as the superintendent of schools, to accept their programs. In addition, they transformed community centers, churches, public libraries, and, in later decades, housing projects into performance spaces for Pan-African intellectual endeavors. It was Black middle-class women who created the spaces where the Chicago Renaissance could flourish, and in so doing they created spaces where African American leaders could come together and build a community capable of resisting white oppression.

The existence of so many Black venues encouraged more musicians to migrate to Chicago, feeding the city’s cultural and intellectual renaissance.

So powerful was the cultural sphere that, by the 1930s, Black Chicago was home to a growing group of literati. In part due to the work of these intellectuals, both the self-educated and those emerging from the University of Chicago, a view of the working classes as hopelessly mired in their social situation began to take the place of the optimistic idea that the lower classes could be uplifted. Black musicians increasingly were, in the minds of the leading Black authors and sociologists, purveyors of the folk culture that prevented African Americans from becoming modern men and women. In this emerging intellectual tradition, Black music became the metaphor for, as well as the cause of, what they perceived to be the “paradoxical cleavage” of migrants’ daily lives: they worked all day in “one civilization” and then went home to the “black belts,”
where they lived “within the orbit of the surviving remnants of the culture of the South, our naïve, casual, verbal, fluid folk life.”

In this sense, the music, like the churches and burial societies, supposedly held the migrants back by tethering them to the past. These intellectuals argued that neither “hot music nor gospel hymns,” neither “prayer nor rot gut,” neither “jitterbugging nor shouting” could banish the “tormenting devils of poverty, ignorance, and racial discrimination.”

This critique offered little understanding of the place of music in African American life, how it was remaking Chicago, and how it challenged segregation. Instead, the intellectuals saw the migrants as standing at a “crossroads.” Until that day when the migrants joined the progressive march forward, they would stand and watch the parade go by without understanding its significance.

WHAT THE MUSICIANS SAW

Though most of the migrants were illiterate, they were neither as uneducated nor as unconscious as the scholars’ and civic leaders’ portrayals suggested. What the absence of literacy did was create an environment in which the scholars and civic leaders could discuss the migrants in terms of vice, “uplift,” and the “social myth,” but the migrants could not generally answer back. The migrant musicians were an exception to this rule of public discourse. In their music and in their professional organizations, they had a forum that other migrants lacked.

Where Chicago’s Black elites had W.E.B. Du Bois’s writings to guide their resistance movements, the musicians had composers such as R. Nathaniel Dett providing the philosophical foundation for their discourse. As a leader in the classical community and a transient figure in the Chicago Black music scene, Dett argued, in the early 1900s, that the growth in the popularity of Black secular music among the European American audience was due in some degree to the popularity of minstrelsy—a form of music in which white performers mockingly pretended to be African Americans. He doubted that white audiences had ever considered the serious “utility” of Black music because of the “almost slavish devotion of the American composer and musician to European ideals and standards.”

He could see the possibility of a growing appreciation of the “worth” of Black composers, but he also saw the African American com-
munity as embarrassed by Black popular idioms because of the long tradi-
tion of white interest in minstrelsy. For Dett, the solution was clear: there
had to be a movement actively engaged in the

emancipation of Negro music from the chains of false and often low
ideals set upon it by popular minstrelsy, and in the establishment of it
as a wonderful thing, a gift, an art, a glorious contribution to this nation
and to the world, which though from a despised source, might yet be
respected, used and even loved for its own sake.75

Black artists could only accomplish emancipation, Dett argued, if
Black composers and performers reclaimed their music and took away
the markets and public interest in minstrelsy. He demanded that musi-
cians and composers dedicate themselves to dislodging the “disposition
on the part of some of the current newspapers and magazines to credit the
American Jew with being the originator of ‘ragtime.’”76

The emancipation of music required activism. Though Dett had ar-
ticulated what needed to happen, he lacked the organizational skills to
bring the movement into being. His fellow composer Clarence Cameron
White attempted to bring Black music teachers throughout the United
States together into a professional organization, but his efforts were inter-
rupted by World War I. It was not until 1919, when Dett, White and fellow
composers Florence Price joined a movement, led by composer and Chi-
cago Defender music columnist Nora Holt, that the classical composers,
music teachers, and singers were brought together to found the National
Association of Negro Musicians (NANM). Like the “Don’t Buy Where
You Can’t Shop” movement led by the African American middle class on
the South Side during the 1930s and the African American version of the
YMCA founded in the 1920s, NANM sought to create race consciousness
through community building and organized resistance. Holt believed that
if musicians were going to travel freely without harassment and work
freely in any venue, they were going to have to work together toward
those goals.

Specifically, Holt was interested in using NANM to create opportuni-
ties for Black musicians. Holt combined her demand for activism on the
part of Black musicians with Dett’s push for Black musicians to have a
share in the profits of their music traditions, but they also wanted Black
musicians to focus their innumerable talents toward creating operas, art
songs, concertos, and suites.77
It is important to remember that, at the time, classical music was still popular and commercial. By focusing on this form of music, Holt, Dett, White, and Price were imagining broad market and intellectual opportunities for Black musicians—both male and female—but in so doing they neglected the importance of, and did not work to develop, the jazz and blues market. In choosing classical music, they did not intend to devalue blues and jazz. Rather, they wanted the traditional music of the Black community to be combined with and to transform the classical traditions. Dett and other African American composers saw great worth in traditional Black music because it presented a way of vitalizing classical music and building an art unique to the United States. In Dett’s imagination, the secular and spiritual traditions were not an end. Instead, they were a beginning that, when combined with the expansive possibilities of classical training, afforded the opportunity to develop a music-based nationalism. Black music, according to Dett, was an innovation, “a new trend of thought, a new and indigenous art in this country.”

If African American musicians would compose in this way, as the leaders of NANM thought, then they would be creating an American music tradition that rivaled the European tradition, which was a stance that contrasted sharply with that held by leading Black elites and intellectuals.

NANM held its first convention in the summer of 1919 in Chicago as the city became a cauldron of racial violence. The historic riot disrupted the convention but did not stop it. NANM chose Chicago because its Black population, while smaller than New York’s or Washington D.C.’s, seemed to have a higher proportion of musicians. The high quality of musicianship in both popular and classical venues, such as the Pekin, which had a stock company and staged Sacred Concerts, and the growing number of churches and choral groups, both secular and religious, were attractive to NANM. In addition, Chicago was the headquarters of the *Chicago Defender*, which boasted a national readership, and the Associated Negro Press was also in Chicago. However, the city’s dedication to music education was the deciding factor. The Chicago Conservatory and the music schools at the University of Chicago all offered classical training to the African American community on the South Side. Holt chose Chicago as the home of the new organization because of the Black cultural sphere. By 1929, NANM had seventy-eight locals. In only ten years, NANM had created a viable music community, centered in Chicago, dedicated to the improvement of Black education, combining the folk traditions of spirituals and jazz with classical traditions, and improving the conditions for
traveling performers. All of this suggests that Chicago was having an arts renaissance that rivaled the developments in Harlem.80

The music teachers and classical composers who founded NANM were also central to founding the Black local of the American Federation of Musicians,81 which originated in 1902 but did not begin to grow significantly in membership until the 1920s and 1930s. Both NANM and Black Local 208 leaders were responding to white oppression: the union local formed after white musicians refused Black musicians membership in the city’s existing local, while NANM formed to promote African American composers and performers, as well as to provide a platform for resistance against racial violence and discrimination in public accommodations. The two organizations complemented each other well. NANM promoted Black cultural achievements, while the union fought for Black jobs and worked to defend the South Side from the white local’s leaders who were working to prevent Black musicians from playing throughout the rest of the city. These organizations reflected the experience of musicians in the 1910s and 1920s in that they both grew from the idea that African Americans could only depend on support and guidance from other African Americans. The development of these organizations went hand in hand with the wider Black community’s efforts to build a separate cultural sphere on the South Side. Though they were motivated by many of the same ideas, events, and needs as the “uplift” campaigns, the union and NANM focused on defending the rights of Black musicians, the value of their music, and cultural and physical territory.

Though the classically trained musicians and the union organizers were successful in organizing and in articulating the needs of Black musicians, they were not representative of the majority of the musician community. Jazz musicians were the largest group of musicians migrating to Chicago in the 1910s and 1920s. Due to economic shifts in agriculture in the Deep South, blues musicians began to arrive in larger numbers in the 1930s and 1940s. Moreover, the demands of the migrant audience for jazz and blues would overshadow the market for the classical performers. Nevertheless, these different groups of musicians and their audiences would exist together in Chicago’s “black belt.” They would have similar experiences with discrimination and segregation because in the racial system of the city, what mattered was not the genre of music but the physical appearance of the musician.

The majority of the jazz musicians entering the cultural discourse in Chicago in the 1920s were from New Orleans. They left the South in part
because the U.S. Navy had closed “Storyville”—the famed New Orleans red-light district—in 1917. As the vice businesses migrated to Chicago, so did the musicians. Among this generation of musicians was trumpeter Louis Armstrong. Armstrong played in both the New Orleans and Chicago vice districts, and in his personal writings he noted that a stringent segregation governed the New Orleans music scene. The “Creole” musicians could work in “places with ease because of their light skins. Places we Dark skinned cats wouldn’t dare peep in.” Working in the New Orleans district meant acquiring permits, but Armstrong argued that it was worth the hassle because the area had the best jobs. Once in the clubs and cabarets, physical segregation was the rule, in that the musicians could not mix with the audiences.

Chicago differed from New Orleans, according to Armstrong, because white musicians in the 1920s played in the “black belt.” “There weren’t as many white bands as the Negro bands in the District, but the ones who played there sure was good,” he wrote. As an example, Armstrong recalled visiting the Fiume, a “black and tan” where he saw an “all white” Dixieland combo play nightly. The presence of whites in Chicago’s “black belt” music scene surprised Armstrong because he had never seen “such a beautiful picture before. I had just come up from the South, where there weren’t anything as near beautiful. . . .” In New Orleans, he had heard white musicians playing in the Mardi Gras parades, but he recalled, “I did not get to know any of the White Musicians personally, because New Orleans was so Disgustingly Segregated and Prejudiced at the time—it didn’t even run across our minds.” In Chicago, he counted himself fortunate for befriending such white musicians as Wingy Manone and the New Orleans Rhythm Kings. Armstrong even bought the white musicians’ recordings and sat in with the Dukes of Dixieland in Chicago and New York.

Eddie Condon’s memoir supports Armstrong’s view of the racial mixing in clubs and uses a similarly celebratory tone to describe it. Condon, himself European American, recalled there being “white boys” around the bandstand at the Dreamland and the Lincoln Gardens before Prohibition. He described the young men as learning to play from watching African American performances and listening to African American records. These young men were high-school students who transformed their school bands into jazz bands. “Jazz was not considered a proper profession for well-bred young white men,” Condon wrote. In a sense, they were choosing to submerge themselves in the “black belt” and rebuking the European American culture of their Chicago suburbs. More than that,
they were migrating across racial lines to learn music on the South Side because they were looking for themselves. Their relationship with the music was not much different from that of other musicians playing in Chicago in the late 1910s and early 1920s.

Sidney Bechet, an African American saxophonist and clarinetist who migrated to Chicago with the first waves of New Orleans musicians, characterized the music as “a lost thing finding itself.” Most articulately, he described the musician as a lost man, a stranger to himself, who crosses through the doorway and finds a home.86 For musicians like Bechet, making music was an act of migration, whether it was white youths traveling to the South Side, musicians sojourning from the southern United States, or a racially mixed couple moving across a dance floor. Each act of migration was a challenge to the accepted notions of racial propriety and notions of place because it entailed crossing racial boundaries.

Jazz bassist Milton Hinton painted a less rosy picture. Hinton, whose family migrated from Mississippi to Chicago beginning in the 1910s, recalled the racial situation in the 1920s and early 1930s as one in which white musicians could travel anywhere in the city, but black musicians could not. The white musicians would visit the South Side and learn styles and techniques from watching and sitting in with the African American musicians. Then the white musicians would record what Hinton termed “a reasonable facsimile” of the music. Recording was not an option for many Black musicians. In this way, white musicians rose to prominence and made money. Hinton did not resent the white musicians because it was common for musicians to study together and learn from one another. Instead, he resented the “establishment” for limiting his career.87

Hinton went on to explain that the majority of Black musicians worked day jobs and non-union music jobs to feed their families and survive in a city that was at once a mecca for musicians and a destroyer of musicians. He was right. They worked in the steel mills, meatpacking plants, rail yards, and drug stores. Trumpeter William Samuels was an elevator operator and a mail carrier. Big Bill Broonzey, guitarist, was a Red Cap bag handler, and Doug Suggs, pianist, worked as a porter. It is not a surprise that musicians would struggle to make a living—historically, this was the reality for musicians in any era or city.88 However, the jobs they had were as much controlled by race as their work as musicians was.

Indeed, though in after-hours clubs and in an ever decreasing number of the legitimate venues outside of the South Side, musicians such as Armstrong, Bechet, and Hinton may have played with integrated groups
and for integrated audiences, racial separation governed the other aspects of their lives and careers. Louis Armstrong, for example, met his greatest collaborator, pianist Earl Hines, in the Black musicians’ union hall. When Hines and Armstrong began to record in the spring of 1927 and into 1928, they did so with other Black musicians. Their record label, Okeh, by that time a subsidiary of Columbia Records, was a “race label,” meaning it was white controlled and dedicated to recording Black music that would be sold almost exclusively in Black neighborhoods. Audiences and critics would eventually tout the songs that came from these first sessions, “West End Blues” among many others, as remaking American music. However, it should be remembered that the performers were members of a segregated union, played in illegal clubs, and recorded for a racist music industry that labeled their art “race music.” It was a segregated America that was being remade.

What the jazz musicians could not see was that the racially mixed and lucrative world of the Stroll in the 1920s and the early 1930s was a dying world. Each police raid that arrested mixed couples and each club closure brought about by Prohibition violations fed cultural segregation in Chicago. When combined with the dehumanizing realities of substandard housing and the crushing physical stress of labor in the Chicago factories and meatpacking plants, the circumscription of African American lives was becoming seemingly inescapable. It is no wonder that the African American musicians who migrated to Chicago in the 1940s found that Blacks in Chicago “weren’t really free.” All they had done by migrating was move from the “inhuman south to the more cleverly inhuman north.” It was clear to African American musicians in the 1940s that if they were to emancipate their music from the “social myth,” as Nathaniel Dett demanded, then they were first going to have to emancipate themselves from the confines of the South Side and the city’s racial system.