The Black Musician and the White City

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By the early to mid-1970s, Harry Gray, Walter Dyett, and Charles Elgar—the three leaders of Local 208, as well as Nora Holt, the founder of the NANM—had passed away. So too had Sam Cooke, Nat “King” Cole, and Memphis Minnie, who some believe was the first to use an electric guitar to play the blues. Howlin’ Wolfe was enjoying renewed fame and European tours while fighting cancer. The bandshell in Grant Park, located in downtown Chicago, was refurbished and renamed in honor of white AFM leader James Petrillo. New York-based GRT had purchased Chess Records. And, Muddy Waters had moved to Westmont, a middle-class suburb of Chicago. A new era in the history of Chicago musicians had begun.

What was the legacy of the migration generation of musicians? It is not hard to see their impact on the music industry. They were leaders in gospel, classical, jazz, and blues. They provided the foundation of rock and roll. Their music was more than popular culture; it offered insight into and gave a voice to the troubles and thoughts of the Great Migration. Partly as a result of their efforts, modern Black musicians have access to recording contracts and a diverse audience. Black musicians are no longer attacked by white racist groups in the South or refused public accommodations. Individual musicians and musicians’ professional organizations, beginning in the early twentieth century, helped bring these changes about by bravely standing up to the long-held racial traditions in Chicago, the nation, and particularly throughout the South.

In the city, the greatest testament to the work of Black musicians is the endurance and importance of Black community organizations and Black music education. Many musicians in the early twentieth century, hoping for a classical music education, migrated to Chicago because of
the presence of conservatories willing to accept Black students. Once in the city, through the efforts of NANM, they were able to extend music training to the Black community. Walter Dyett furthered music education by bringing jazz into part of the public-school curriculum. In so doing, he demonstrated that the Black music tradition was as much a part of academic training as any other form of music.¹

Many of the founders of AACM attended DuSable High School, where they trained with Walter Dyett.² Like NANM in the realm of classical music education, AACM created outreach and mentorship programs that brought children in off the streets for the purpose of music education. These programs, which began in the late 1960s and still exist today, teach children the importance of maintaining Black music culture, discipline, and rigor.³ Though it may not be as visible to the outside world as the Stroll once was, these programs demonstrate that the Black public sphere is still alive, and constantly evolving, in Chicago.

By focusing on music education and professionalization, the community was able to help bring about the desegregation of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. In 2002, Taje Larson, trumpeter, became the first Black musician in the CSO. Since then, the CSO has hired several Black musicians trained in a school run by the orchestra for minority students. In establishing a training program for minority students, the CSO finally acknowledged that a city’s orchestra should serve and reflect its city.

The hiring of African American musicians ended more than 100 years of segregation in the orchestra. These musicians are important symbols to the Black community because, as music professors at Columbia College in Chicago have noted, if Black music students do not see Black musicians in the orchestra, then they will think that careers in classical music are an impossibility. The struggle to desegregate the orchestra, the emphasis placed on building music-education programs, and the effort to provide opportunities for young musicians, suggests the longevity of Nathaniel Dett’s argument. The Black musician is still fighting to emancipate Black music from the racist imagination of the white audience and white employers. The difference is that whereas Dett was only imagining the possibility of emancipation, now there are examples of those who succeeded at making real the dream.⁴