Swingin' the Color Line: African American Musicians and the Formation of Local 802, 1886-1946

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Introduction

In late February of 1936, three musicians representing New York's American Federation of Musicians Local 802 arrived at a Chicago convention center for the first annual National Negro Congress. The Congress denounced lynching, called for black and white worker solidarity, and established local councils that would fight discrimination against black Americans throughout the country. Its participants included the spectrum of those committed to early civil rights. The congress, noted one journalist, drew "negroes of every walk of life," and they came from organizations "committed to a militant fight for the Negro."[1] Businessmen and ministers, mechanics and farmers, Communists and some NAACP members joined together to demand Ethiopian independence, equality for all African American women, and unemployment relief for black families.[2]

Of the musicians, only Jacob Rosenberg was white. A classically trained percussionist, Rosenberg had helped lead a movement to reform Local 802 and had won election as the union's secretary the previous December. Maurice Hubbard and Harry Stevens were African Americans. Hubbard, a jazz bandleader, worked as an official for a growing Harlem musicians' organization called the Rhythm Club that booked engagements and served as a social forum for Harlem's burgeoning jazz community.[3] He too had joined Rosenberg's movement and, shortly after, helped lead a drive to unionize Harlem theatres.[4] Harry Stevens, a classical musician, was president of a long established

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[1] Lester Granger, "The National Negro Congress—An Interpretation," *Opportunity* 14, May, 1936, 151 and Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press,1983), 187.
[2] Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, 181-83.
[3] "Bert Hall's Rhythm Club, Inc. Important Factor in Harlem," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 18, 1939, 20.
[4] "Harlem Theatre Drive Report," *Local 802 A.F. of M., Official Journal*, November 1936, 15.

Harlem musicians' association called the New Amsterdam Musical Association that, like the Rhythm Club, provided job support and a social space for Harlem musicians. He had also recently become more involved in the local union, and that fall he ran unsuccessfully for a position as union officer.[5]

Together, Rosenberg, Hubbard, and Stevens took an active role in the Congress. As a delegation, they addressed the importance of interracial unionism. They helped chair a 'labor committee.' And they authored two resolutions that were quickly adopted: one to change the location of the 1936 American Federation of Labor conventions from Florida to a state that opposed segregation and another demanding a federal program of equal educational opportunity for African American children.[6] But most importantly, proud of their accomplishments and hoping to build on it, the delegation returned to New York to the welcome of about three hundred union members and supporters. In a Harlem brownstone, on a chilly February night, the three men stressed the unity of black and white musicians within Local 802 and pledged to continue their fight against discrimination.[7]

The presence of the three musicians at the National Negro Congress (NNC) came at the beginnings of a progressive and anti-racist period in Local 802's history. For the next ten years, musicians representing Local 802 made many similar appearances and took many similar actions, but few moments illustrated so well the forces that acted upon and within the musicians' union in those years. Black labor leaders, community leaders,

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[5] New Amsterdam Musical Association, *New Amsterdam Association Minute Book, 1935-1937*, Samuel E. Heyward Papers, Box 3, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York.
[6] "Delegates Report on Negro Congress," *Local 802 A.F. of M., Official Journal*, April 1936, 7.
[7] "Executive Board Minutes, Regular Meeting, February 27," *Local 802, A.F. of M. Official Journal*, April 1936, 11; "Musicians Get Confab Report," *The New York Amsterdam News*, February 29, 1936, 8; "Temperature Yesterday—Max 42, Min 30," *New York Times*, February 29, 1936, 1.

and organizations like the National Negro Congress cooperated with Local 802 and pressured the union to fight discrimination. White liberals, like Jacob Rosenberg, took a sincere interest in fighting racism. African American musical organizations, like the Rhythm Club and the New Amsterdam Musical Association, and their leaders, like Hubbard and Stevens, became engaged in Local 802 politics and policies. But most of all, a substantial body of black musicians, those who made up the three hundred person crowd on that Harlem night, had worked their way into union membership and political power within it.

This thesis examines the lives of these men and women, African Americans who became musicians and who joined Local 802. It explains how they gained importance within their organization and how they made Local 802 into an instrument for civil rights expression and activism. It shows, in short, how Local 802 sent a delegation to that Chicago congress in 1936. But while the effects and results it explains occurred in the 1930s, the story begins in the late nineteenth century.

White New York musicians formed their first local union in 1860, the Musicians' Mutual Protective Union. They joined a national body called the American Federation of Musicians in 1902 as Local 310, and then, after a dispute with the Federation, became Local 802 in 1921. Throughout this history of changing names and after it, the New York local was the largest local musicians' union in the world and included a wide array of members. World-renowned classical soloists, orchestra members, and theatre musicians; Jewish vaudeville performers and Irish folk fiddlers, budding jazz musicians and popular entertainers—these musicians all called Local 802 their own.

Starting in 1886, African Americans also joined the union. At first, they did so only in small numbers. Before the end of World War I, only black musicians playing classical and popular dance music for white audiences, only those deemed most 'professional' became union members. After 1920, through a gradual process, this changed. As jazz, blues, and black Broadway show music gained popularity, as black musicians dipped more heavily into the folk forms, as they gained stable long term employment, these musicians changed conceptions of professional music to include their own. Accepted as professionals, African American became union members. Positioned as union members, African Americans took political action. In the early 1930s, black musicians joined a movement to improve work conditions, to bring democratic administration to their union, and to gain equal representation and respect in their organization. After several decades of black musicians' integration and agitation, Local 802 declared itself a union that "opens its doors to all regardless of color," that pledged to "fight every evidence of bigotry," and, in most ways, lent support to developing civil rights struggles.[8]

This thesis begins with the integration of the union in 1886 and ends at the conclusion of the union's most progressive administration in 1946. Throughout this period many factors—changes in the market, expanding government, community leaders—all aided or contributed to the rising importance of black musicians in Local 802. But, ultimately, New York black musicians gained their place in the union and made it a political vehicle through their own initiative. In creating popular and innovative music, New York African American musicians not only made great art, they also

[8] "Reflections on the Election," *Official Journal, Local 802, A.F. of M.*, January 1939, 3.

affirmed their status as individuals and won respect within the profession. When economic depression threatened this status, they took collective action to win a place within their labor movement. They, no less than steelworkers or mineworkers or, say, New Yorkers, helped make the 1930s and early 1940s labor's most progressive period.

For social and cultural historians writing about the United States in the 1930s, the story of black musicians and their local union should sound familiar. The late 1930s and early 1940s marked the emergence of civil rights as a national political issue and within the labor movement. In detailed monographs and broad syntheses, historians have demonstrated how anti-racism emerged as a cause on the Left and how the Left emerged as more powerful force in American culture and politics. Historians, to take a couple well known examples, have shown how Chicago industrial workers became politicized and organized across racial and ethnic lines; how African American Alabama sharecroppers joined the Communist Party and made it their own; how anti-racism became part of the national political agenda; and how the period marked a leftward shift in American culture.[9]

But neither music writers nor labor historians have paid much attention to the place of New York black musicians as union members. For most music scholars, the omission is particularly glaring. Few professional groups have been quite so studied as New York's black musicians in the early twentieth century, many of them the men and women who made jazz. Musicologists, cultural critics, jazz aficionados, and some social historians have produced reams on the men and women who made up the "New York

[9] Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Robin Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe* (University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* (New York: Verso, 1998).

scene." They have written biographies and musicological studies, histories of streets and clubs, and of record companies and specific records. They have even written social histories of musical genres and broad cultural studies on the meaning of black musicians' music.[10] But, more often than not, musicians appear in our history and our public consciousness as almost superhuman celebrities, as odd artists, or as those engaged in "play" not work. [11] As a result, jazz music and musicians often emerge cut off from the social and political world they inhabit, and social historians have begun to wonder: "How do we take jazz out of the scholarly ghetto to which it has been consigned by historians to trace some of the deepest issues of American culture?"[12] One solution is to recognize that musicians' lives are far richer and less isolated than most music writers tend to admit. Musicians, no matter the importance of their art or the idiosyncrasies of their lives, make up a professional class, find themselves subject to the ups and downs of the economy, and, as they did in Chicago in 1936, engage in political activism.

In a way, though, New York musicians' did so uniquely. While New York musicians organized across the color line in Local 802, musicians in most other cities formed segregated American Federation of Musicians' locals. Some of these musicians' efforts have received attention as part of a small body of scholarship on the Federation.

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[10] The literature on music in New York is vast. For an example of musicology see Carol Oja, *Making Modern Music* (New York: Oxford UP, 2000). For cultural criticism, Leroi Jones, *Blues People*. (New York: William Morrow, 1963); For social history see Burton Perretti, *The Creation of Jazz* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992); Kathey Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989). For New York see Samuel Charters, *Jazz: a History of the New York Scene*. (Garden City, NY, Double Day and Co., 1962). In recent years, scholars interested in the music business have written about employers. See Gary Mamorstein, *The Label: the Story of Columbia Records* (New York, Thunder's Mouth Press, 2007). Biographies of New York musicians are too numerous to mention.

[11] Robin D.G. Kelley, "Without a Song: New York Musicians Strike Out Against Technology," in *Three Strikes: Miners, Musicians, Salesgirls, and the Fighting Spirit of Labor's Last Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 126.

[12] Lewis Erenberg, *Swinging the Dream*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), xii.

Following most work in the 'old labor history,' the first work in this field consisted of histories that examined the administration of the international rather than its locals and paid only scant attention to black musicians.[13] But, more recently, out of a growing interest in African American history, a number of historians and musicologists have written about segregated all-black locals. In dissertations and journal articles, scholars have explored how black musicians in Philadelphia, Chicago, Buffalo, San Francisco, and Los Angeles all created separate union locals, sometimes struggled against white musicians' locals, and resisted integration into the 1960s.[14] Even if New York was the largest local in the Federation and had more black members than all of these locals and more than some combined, historians have overlooked the presence of black musicians within the local.

In doing so, they reflect a prevailing view on race and the labor movement. Until very recently, historians have cast the relation between black workers and organized labor as one of exclusion, if not outright antagonism. Indeed, national unions of construction workers and railroad workers, moving picture operators and stenographers,

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[13] George Seltzer, *Music Matters: the Performer and the American Federation of Musicians*. (Metuchen, NJ: the Scarecrow Press, 1989); Robert Leiter, *The Musicians and Petrillo*. (New York: Bookman Associates Inc., 1953); Vern Countryman, "The Organized Musicians," *University of Chicago Law Review* 16, no. 1 (1948): 56-85. One exception is James Kraft, "Artists as Workers: Musicians and Trade Unionism in America, 1880-1917," *The Musical Quarterly* 79, No. 3 (Autumn, 1995): 512-543

[14] Clark Halker, "A History of Local 208 and the Struggle for Racial Equality in the American Federation of Musicians," *Black Music Research Journal* 8, No. 2 (Autumn 1988): 207-222; Richard McRae, "Paying their Dues: Buffalo's African American Musicians Union, Local 533, A.F.M." *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 20, No.1 (Jan 1996): 7-70; Leta E. Miller, "Racial Segregation and the San Francisco Musicians' Union, 1923-1960," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 1, No.2 (2007): 161-206; D.D. Turner, "Organizing and Improvising: a History of Philadelphia's Black Musician's Protective Union Local 274, American Federation of Musicians," (PhD. Diss., Temple University, 1993); Donald Spivey, *Union and the Black Musician: the Narrative of William Everett Samuels and Chicago Local 208* (Lanham, MD, 1984); L.D. Dickerson, "Central Avenue Meets Hollywood: the Amalgamation of the Black and White Musicians' Unions in Los Angeles." (PhD. Diss., UCLA, 1998).

boilermakers and machinists, and a slew of other skilled and less skilled workers kept African Americans out of unions and often out of jobs.[15] On this evidence, Herbert Hill concludes that unions have functioned as "white jobs trusts," Phillip Foner sees them as instruments of "outright exclusion and segregation," and historians continued to see African Americans and the labor movement in pessimistic and single-minded terms.[16]

They have overlooked the fact that even within international unions that encouraged exclusion, local unions could behave quite differently. In their local unions, waterfront workers in New Orleans, garment workers in New Jersey, and even mine workers in Alabama organized across the color line.[17] The history of race and the labor movement has not only been a simple story of white unions and black scabs, of simply antagonism and racism. It also includes African American victories to win respect and, sometimes, interracial cooperation. But to truly understand these overlooked stories in labor history and to more clearly understand race and labor in American history, more work needs to be done on local unions, on the complexity and contradictions of their administrations, and on the activism of black workers themselves.[18] Before we conclude that unions have always upheld the 'wages of whiteness,' we need more histories of

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[15] Sterling Spero and Abram Harris, *The Black Worker*. (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1966), 57.

[16] Herbert Hill, "The Problem of Race in American Labor History." *Reviews in American History* 24. No. 2 (1996) 189-208; Phillip Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker* (New York: International Publishers, 1981), p.ix. For a recent example of this thesis, see Paul D. Moreno, *Black Americans and Organized Labor: a New History*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2006)

[17] Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers* (New York: Oxford UP, 1991); Herbert Gutman, "The Negro and the United Mine Workers of America," in *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 121-208; Daniel Letwin, *The Challenge of Interracial Unionism: Alabama Coal Miners, 1878-1921*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); "The Cloakmakers' Strike," *The Messenger*, December 1921, 298.

[18] See Eric Arnesen, "Up From Exclusion: Black and White Workers, Race, and the State of Labor History," *Reviews in American History* 26, No. 1 (1998), 146-174 for a similar argument and for a survey of historiography on race and labor.

unions like Local 802, histories that show the pluralism of organized labor as much as its bigotry. Once accomplished, we will certainly see the history of race and organized labor as more nuanced and, maybe, as more optimistic. We may move beyond traditional notions of trade unionism and bring music out of its 'scholarly ghetto.' And, perhaps, we may see more fully how the best African American cultural accomplishments have political implications.

I began the research for this project at the mid-town office of Local 802 where I read through the union's *Official Journal* of the 1930s and early 1940s. Here, I found stories like that of the National Negro Congress, instances when the musicians' union cooperated with civil rights organizations, articles it ran denouncing racism, and black officials and members who took an active role in the union's affairs. From there I worked backward. How did black musicians first join this union, I asked? And what accounted for the anti-racism I encountered in the 1930s?

I have attempted to answer these questions from an array of sources. Most importantly, I examined the local's governing board minutes during the 1920s on microfilm at the Tamiment Library at NYU. Recorded about twice a week, these minutes capture the day-to-day workings of the union and the complaints of its members. But black musicians often seemed invisible, their stories overwhelmed by the wage disputes and daily concerns of the union's white majority. To find black musicians relation to their union, I began reading in the black press, especially the *Messenger* and the *New York Amsterdam News*. At the Schomburg Library in Harlem, I found the papers from the New Amsterdam Musical Association and the Negro Labor Committee, organizations that cooperated with Local 802. Last, I began to search out black musicians' memoirs.

Through these sources, I began to see black musicians' activism, efforts to enter and become a central part of Local 802, and discovered cast of black organizations and individuals who supported and lead New York black musicians' political action.

The result is a story told in four parts that proceed in a roughly chronological fashion. The first two chapters explore the rising importance of black musicians within the New York music scene. Chapter one shows how black musicians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century established themselves as professionals and integrated the local union. Chapter two shows how a cultural shift regarding African American music had political consequences for musicians. African American musicians of the 1920s became musicians in greater numbers than before, gained popularity, changed conceptions of professional music, and became a more substantial presence in the union. The last two chapters show how this rising importance allowed black musicians to take action in union politics. Chapter three looks at the disintegration and political changes that rocked the union in the early 1930s and shows how black musicians became part of an interracial, multi-ethnic mass movement to change the union's administration. Finally, chapter four shows how these developments culminated in the late 1930s and early 1940s and intersected with the broader social, political, and cultural climate to make anti-racism one of Local 802's chief concerns.

Chapter 1: Making Professional Music, Breaking the Color Line

In 1886, Walter Craig, a black violinist residing at 103 West 29th Street, quietly joined the otherwise all white New York musicians' union, the Musicians' Mutual Protective Union (MMPU).[19] Others followed. By 1910, about three hundred black musicians had joined the MMPU, comprising a small but not insignificant segment in the roughly eight thousand member union. By 1920, their ranks had swelled to about six hundred.[20] Integration alone, while no immediate benefit to the musicians who joined, represented a notable accomplishment. Many American Federation of Labor unions barred black members entirely, and musicians' unions, in most cities, proved no overwhelming exception. Many maintained segregated locals or exclude black members entirely even into the 1960s. [21] But New York black musicians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries ensured that their union drew no strict color line.

They did so with two strategies and in two phases. Until around 1910, musicians established themselves as professionals in the same way that white musicians did. They learned classical music, developed musical skills, and established financial solvency through their art. Since the union organized professional musicians, and these musicians proved themselves as professional as any other, the union had no choice but to accept

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[19] Musicians Mutual Protective Union, *Directory of the Musical Mutual Protective Union*, 5, Records of the American Federation of Musicians Local 802, Box 2, Tamiment Library, New York; Eileen Southern, *Music of Black Americans* (New York, W.W. Norton, 1983), 248.
[20] Charles Franklin, *The Negro Labor Unionist of New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), 53.
[21] On the AFL's racial policies during this period see Foner, 94-102; For musicians' unions see James Kraft, "Artists as Workers: Musicians and Trade Unionism in America, 1880-1917," *The Musical Quarterly* 79, No.5 (Autumn, 1995): 519.

them as individuals. After about 1910, musicians increasingly joined the union by doing the very opposite. They drew on black vernacular music to create popular music, organized themselves, threatened to undercut the power of the union by creating their own union, and, essentially, forced the union to accept them as members.

But despite their differing strategies, the end result was the same. African American musicians became professionals, joined the union, and, then, distanced themselves from younger, less established musicians. They comprised a vanguard, opening union membership to future black musicians but did not reach much more than a token presence within the union. Many less established or less connected black musicians remained barred from union membership. Many well established and well connected black musicians did little to help those outside the union become union members. Until the 1920s, MMPU membership, in short, 'stratified' black musicians along musical class lines. A small musical elite could become union members; a larger class remained excluded, and, elite black musicians, to protect their status, made a conscious effort to disassociate themselves from this musical lower class.[22]

I.

The origin of the MMPU, and through it Local 802, dates almost to the beginning of organized labor in the United States. In 1860, a number of German speaking New York musicians banded together to form the first musicians' organization that could be called, in any modern sense, a trade union. The Aschenbroedel Club intended to further "the promotion of good feeling and friendly intercourse among the members of the

[22] Social theorists have identified this class-based approach to race in other contexts. See Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*. (New York: Routledge, 1986), 28-30.

profression, and relief of such of their members as shall be unfortunate," but it also, more practically, set uniform wages and created professional standards for musicians.[23] It was as much a social and cultural institution as it was political and economic. It aimed, at least in New York, to make music 'high art' and musicians, an elite class. The Club, wrote its members, would facilitate "the cultivation of the art of music in all its branches."[24] Soon, outside New York, the idea caught. Musical trade unions, now titled Musicians' Mutual Protection Unions, sprang up in cities around the East Coast and Mid-West. By 1886, several of the unions federated into a loose organization they named the National League of Musicians.[25]

The League was an exclusive and highly protective organization. In its founding convention, it recommended, "a rigid examination of application for membership…[to stop] imposters and impecunious musical quacks from practicing their knavish arts and infirm capacity in public."[26] More so, it disdained association with the working class. Musicians, it rigidly declared until its demise, were artists not laborers. Despite whatever resemblances the League may have had to the growing trade union movement, the League eschewed any alliance with the rapidly assembling House of Labor. Both the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor petitioned the League to join their organizations. The League refused. Musicians, said the head of the New York union, Alexander Bremer, would never "cast their lot" with "stovemakers" and

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[23] Musicians' Mutual Protective Union, *Constitution and By-Laws of the Musical Mutual Protective Union Local 310* (New York: M. H. Green, 1885), Records of the American Federation of Musicians Local 802, Box 2, Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, Tamiment Library, New York, 4; Selzter, 3; Vern Countryman, "The Organized Musicians." *University of Chicago Law Review* 16, no. 1 (1948): 57.
[24] Musicians' Mutual Protective Union, 4.
[25] Seltzer, 5
[26] Selzter, 6

"shoemakers."[27] Bremer might as well have spoken for the whole organization. The New York MMPU, the first and largest of the League's unions, dominated its conventions, its policies, and its stringent disassociation of musicians with workers. Through a crooked proxy system, the MMPU gained the most votes out of any in the League's conventions, practically disenfranchised smaller locals, and set to ensuring a class status for musicians far different than laborers in any other industry. New York musicians, notes the historian James Kraft, saw themselves not merely as a kind of artistic elite, set above most workers, but also a musical elite, the most highly respected and successful of a noble, artistic profession.[28]

But if the New York union had high artistic and social standards, it became at least tolerant to black membership. No provisions in the by-laws of the Musicians' Mutual Protective Union ever prohibited black members even as it excluded recent immigrants. In 1885, the union was open only to "all instrumental performers, who have been residents of the United States for the period of six months previous to application."[29]But it ensured that, otherwise, "all efficient and capable professional Instrumental Performers shall be eligible for membership."[30] Nominally, then, the MMPU was open to black membership and remained so even as it changed names and affiliations.

In 1902, the MMPU joined the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) and became the American Federation of Musicians Local 310. The Federation had emerged six years before from a need to unify musicians' unions. When the NLM refused to join

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[27] Kraft, 527.
[28] Kraft, 526
[29] Ibid., 10
[30] Musicians' Mutual Protective Union, Local 310, *Constitution and By-Laws of Musicians Mutual Protective Union,* (New York: Machauer and Schmetterling,1905), 8.

the Knights of Labor and the AFL, both expanding federations took it upon themselves to organize musicians. Both created their own musicians' unions, and dual unionism often became the result. Some cities had three or four or many more musicians' unions all competing for members and undercutting each other for jobs. The situation, to say least, became intolerable for musicians' unions, and so, in 1896, organized musicians from the AFL, the Knights, and some in the NLM founded the American Federation Musicians, merged most of the competing locals into single unions, and established a governing body to oversee all locals. The Federation received an immediate charter from the American Federation of Labor and elected a rather bureaucratic former musician named Owen Miller as its leader.[31]

More importantly, the Federation made some dent in the pervasive notion that musicians had no common cause with workers. The AFM's premise, far more modest than that of the League, was that "all men and women playing musical instruments and receiving pay therefore from the public must, in order to get just wages and decent working conditions, form a labor organization."[32] From its formation, the Federation functioned on the philosophy that musicians were workers, not elite artists, and that trade union practices benefited musicians. New York musicians, the most talented and highest paid in the country, resisted. As the Federation expanded and engulfed practically every union in the NLM, the New York MMPU remained stubbornly outside it. Only in 1902, with only three locals left in the League, did New York's musicians catch hold of the trends in their industry and join the American Federation of Musicians as Local 310. It was a tenuous commitment. For many years, the New York local maintained a strained

[31] Kraft, *passim*.
[32] Seltzer, 9.

relationship with the Federation, often uneasy with the Federation's association between musicians and laborers.

So far as black musicians were concerned, however, the new affiliation had little effect. Membership qualifications did change, becoming more open to women, and less open to immigrants. "All professional musicians of either sex," Local 310 declared, "and have declared their intention to become citizens, and are of good character, shall be eligible for membership."[33] But, throughout, black members were never explicitly barred from membership, and they joined in small numbers. By 1910, 362 black musicians had entered the union and made up roughly four percent of the membership.[34]

African Americans' entrance into Local 310 reflected the initial purpose and values of the union. Simply put, the union protected the professional status of musicians, enlisting those it deemed professionals and excluding those it did not. To become a 'professional' musician entailed two criteria. First, like any professional group—doctors, lawyers, or clergyman—musicians needed to acquire a set of skills and knowledge. In order to join the union, musicians had to pass an examination of musical proficiency. Second, at least in the early years, professional musicians needed to earn a stable income from playing music. No matter his ability, a musician who played music part time and worked a menial job at others could scarcely be called a professional. The union enforced this provision through a practical arrangement. Musicians had to pay an initiation fee and monthly dues. For a musician who made less money playing music than the union demanded he or she pay, the union could only have been a burden or, even, an unattainable burden, and in New York, the union took pains to make it unattainable for

[33] Musicians Mutual Protective Union, 25.
[34] Franklin, 53.

all but the most successful. The MMPU set the initiation fee at one hundred dollars, a fee so exorbitant that it exceeded most other local unions' initiation rates by seventy five to ninety five dollars.[35] In doing so, New York musicians ensured that musical professionalism also connoted a vague class status. Union members were 'professionals' not workers. They were dignified and respected, and, as Bremmer noted, set above the average trades and certainly above 'amateurs.' For its entire history, the union and its members would guard the professionalism of their craft and make the 'professionalization' of musicians among its central concerns.

In Local 310, black musicians who became undeniably professional entered the union. That no black musician joined the union prior to 1886 seems less a result of overt prejudice or exclusion and more one of numbers. Prior to the 1890s, blacks made up only a small percentage of New York's population and only a handful of New York's musicians.[36] In the 1880s, remembered the performer Tom Fletcher, "There were only a few colored musicians around New York City because most of those who lived in New York were on the road with various shows."[37] Though they faced certain prejudice, black professional musicians could integrate into white society and become union members. The challenge for black musicians was to become a professional. How to overcome that challenge became the focus of their activities.

II.

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[35] John Commons, "Types of American Labor Unions.—the Musicians of St. Louis and New York," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 20, (May 1906): 433.
[36] Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: the Making of a Ghetto, 1890-1930*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 3-16.
[37] Tom Fletcher, *100 Years of the Negro in Show Business*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1984), 49.

Two factors hampered black musicians from becoming professional musicians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. First, black musicians did not have the same access to musical education and organization as white musicians. Though African Americans were admitted in small numbers to conservatories, they were barred from playing in many white orchestras and often refused lessons from white teachers. "White musicians," remembered the clarinetist Barney Bigard, "had a better schooling on their horns. The old white teachers wouldn't teach Negroes."[38] Black musicians were given no advertisements in musical journals, and they lacked access to networks that provided employment.

Second, and more importantly, the substance of professional music itself discriminated against black musicians. Into the 1910s, musicians defined professional music as European classical music. As historian Lawrence Levine has argued, the period marked the "sacralization" of European music among musicians and audiences and also a hardening of professional lines. Professional musicians, even if they performed popular music, were expected to play with European techniques, to read music, and to have some familiarity with the European repertoire. All else was "amateurism," and "amateurism" meant bad taste. "The work of an amateur, the touch of the amateur, a mere amateur," reported one newspaper, "these are different current expressions which all mean the same thing, bad work."[39] European classical music, like all musical genres, had racial and ethnic overtones. Even white American musicians sometimes struggled to prove that they

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[38] Barney Bigard, *With Louis and the Duke: the Autobiography of a Jazz Clarinetist* (New York: Oxford UP,1986), 70.
[39] Quoted in Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: the Emergence of a Cultural Hierarchy in America*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1988), 140.

could play Beethoven or Brahms with the authenticity of European performers.[40] But racial stereotypes made it especially difficult for black musicians to become successful classical musicians. A black pianist, notes the protagonist in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, "could never learn like other people, never acquired any finish. He was always a Negro prodigy who played barbarously…as piano playing, it was perhaps abominable."[41] "People didn't believe," remembered the pianist Eubie Blake, "that black people could read music."[42] Assumed to be barbaric, wild, or un-teachable, black musicians became professional classical performers in the smallest numbers.

The African American musicians who did join the union, then, proved their professional abilities beyond the norm. They learned European classical music and popular music, and they had the business sense to develop a wide following. The man who broke the color line in the New York union seems a case in point. In 1886, Walter Craig applied and was accepted for membership in the Musicians' Mutual Protective Union. Craig had grown up in a solidly middle class family from the North. He was born in Princeton, New Jersey and moved to New York City at an early age. He attended a private grammar school and excelled. He took up the violin, studied with a German composer and, before long, had achieved professional status as a concert violinist and orchestra leader. Craig played both classical and popular music. As a classical musician, he played in 'highbrow' venues, performed European music, and gained the respect of

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[40] Levine, *Highbrow/ Lowbrow*, 104-140; Paul Lopes, *The Rise of a Jazz Art World* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 11-14; Barbara Tischler, *An American Music* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986), 1-8; Southern, 249-250.
[41] Willa Cather, *My Antonia*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1994),142.
[42] Qtd. in Robert Kimball, "Shuffle Along," Liner Notes for New World Records Mono 260.

music critics and musicians.[43] Craig, wrote one contemporary critic, "is well known to New York audiences as a perfect master of his instrument. His performances of the 'Fantasie of Faust' and 'De Beriot's Seventh Air Vaire' were marked by exquisite harmony, firm yet delicate."[44] As a popular musician, he found financial success. He led orchestras that performed at white society dances and even employed white musicians. "There was no segregation in New York so far as music and art were concerned," said Tom Fletcher, himself a performer at the time, "With Craig as the leader an orchestra of 50 pieces was formed…All of the musicians with the exception of Craig and the other three mentioned were white."[45] Craig may have been the first and most successful black musician to gain a professional reputation, but, in the late nineteenth century, he was not the only one. William Tyers, William Carle and John Montgomery, all black classical musicians, all middle class, joined the Musicians Mutual Protective Union.[46]

These men played at fancy hotels, at restaurants, clubs, and summer resorts. They played at Ivy League reunions and at vacation spas on the Jersey shore and in the Adirondacks. Wherever they played, though, these musicians blended their sounds into white bands and orchestras, playing popular music and light classical compositions, and they gained respect from white musicians. "Colored musicians were playing such a large part in their world of music, and blending their artistry so effectively with that of their white contemporaries," said Tom Fletcher, "that they were finally accepted into

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[43] William J. Simmons, *Men of Mark: Eminent, Progressive, and Rising*. (Cleveland: George M. Rewell and Co.,1887), 452-454.
[44] Ibid., 453
[45] Fletcher, 49.
[46] Ibid.

membership in the Musicians' Union, which was then Local 310 and is now Local 802."[47] Established as professionals, these elite musicians joined the union as individuals.

But while these select musicians 'made it' among white audiences and mastered European music, a larger group of black New York musicians performed in quite a different style: the black vernacular. From the moment Africans arrived in the Americas, they brought music and developed it. Throughout slavery and long after it, music proved to be one of the most lasting African cultural heritage. African American folk music, notes one historian, "remained closer to the musical styles and performances of West Africa and the Afro-American music of the West Indies and South America than to the musical style of Western Europe."[48] In gospel choirs, in work gangs, in ring shouts, and as solo singers, black Americans developed this African music into a powerful artistic form. "The Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave," wrote W.E.B. DuBois in 1903, "stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas." "It remains," he continued, "as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the great gift of the Negro people."[49] This 'heritage' existed practically everywhere that black workers lived. Popular conceptions of African American music have stereotyped black folk music as a Southern music, one that only after World War I made it north to New York City and its surroundings. But black workers sang the 'Blues,' a singular musical genre whose origins and development make up a long story in itself, just as surely in Northern cities as Southern fields even in the late nineteenth century. The piano player Willie 'the Lion' Smith, for instance, recalled that he "first heard the blues sung while I was still a barefoot

[47] Fletcher, 201.
[48] Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture, Black Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), 6.
[49] W.E.B. DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1997), 186.

boy out of New Jersey" and on groups playing on barges in the Hudson River in the 1890s.[50]

Whatever the richness of this vernacular music, New York's first professional musicians like Walter Craig often set themselves apart from black folk musicians more than in collaboration. Craig, himself, seems to have had practically no experience playing black vernacular music, and he was not alone. Into the 1910s, said the pianist James P. Johnson, "Blues had not come into popularity at that time—they weren't known or sung by New York entertainers."[51] This avoidance of black folk music was not a passive or apolitical choice. Black musicians and, more broadly, the black middle class consciously and, sometimes, passionately rejected vernacular music. The violinist and composer Will Marion Cook, for instance, remembered his mother's reaction at his playing vernacular music. Late one morning around 1898, he sat at the piano in his parent's house and began "trying to learn to play my most Negroid song, 'Who Dat Say Chicken in Dis Crowd?'" His mother was reviled. With tears streaming from her face, Cook's mother, lamented, "Will, Will, I've sent you all over the world to study and become a great musician, and you return such a nigger!'" She reflected the attitudes of many in the black middle class. "My mother," remembered Cook, "was a graduate of Oberlin in the class of 1865 and thought that a Negro composer should write just like a white man. They all loved the Dunbar lyrics but weren't ready for Negro songs."[52] For middle class African Americans, entrance into the American mainstream music scene and becoming professionals required

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[50] Willie 'The Lion' Smith, *Music On My Mind* (London: MacGibbon and Lee, 1965), 4.
[51] James P. Johnson, "Conversation with James P. Johnson," in *Jazz Panorama*, Martin Williams, ed., (New York: Cromwell-Collier Press, 1962), 47.
[52] Will Marion Cook, "Clorindy, the Origin of the Cakewalk," in *Readings in Black American Music*. Eileen Southern ed., (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983), 228.

separation from black folk musicians. Until around 1910, these musicians defined how black musicians became professionals and made up the union's black membership.

African American professional musicians took pains to protect their status. In the 1900s and 1910s, black musical organizations proliferated in New York City. Some were informal, some formal. Some lasted only a short time, others remain in existence to this day. But most had a common goal: to ensure the respectability of black musicians and the music they played. In doing so, more often than not, they established a rigid line between musicians who played vernacular music and those who did not, and, just as surely, a line between which black musicians could join the New York union and which could not. At first, these groups developed informally, growing naturally out of musicians' social interaction in select spaces. At the Marshall Hotel, for instance, musicians made contacts, found employment, and, often, hoped to attract the interest and meet with established white performers. "A good many white actors and musicians," noted the composer and writer James Weldon Johnson, "also frequented the Marshall, and it was no thing for some of the biggest Broadway stars to run up there for an evening."[53] Musicians at the Marshall used their social organization to advance their careers.

By the turn of the century, black musicians had begun to see these organizations as essential and make them formal. In 1904 a group of classical musicians organized the New Amsterdam Musical Association (NAMA) and received a charter from the state. It was a solidly middle class organization. The meetings started with the Lord's Prayer. The members hosted picnics. Like the Musicians' Protective Union, the Association had high standards for black musicianship, and like the downtown union, the Association rejected

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[53] James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 119.

black vernacular music as a professional music. To enter the union, each member paid a modest initiation fee, five dollars, and passed a test of musical proficiency. After observing one especially bad examination session, an officer, one Mr. Prime, said of the association, "This is the first time in 30 years that such an organization as this existed and it would be decidedly a backward step to let the barriers down and take in faluirs [sic]." The NAMA, insisted Prime, should distinguish between the professional and the non-professional and keep membership open only to the former. "The Town [New York City] is full of so called musicians," he insisted, "let them keep their way and we ours." [54] The NAMA admitted only musicians who could read music and only musicians who played classical music.[55] It rejected vernacular music or even popular music as professional music, and so, even as it promoted black musicians, in its early years, it discouraged the development of vernacular music.

In part, elite African American musicians rejected vernacular music in hopes of combating stereotypes and generally to uphold the "respectability of their race." They became performers, said Tom Fletcher, "to make money to help educate our younger ones, and second, to try to break down the ill feeling that existed toward the colored people."[56] Much of this ill feeling permeated most attempts to turn black vernacular players into professionals. Up to the 1880s, black vernacular music only became commercial through minstrelsy, and even after its slow death, strong remnants of minstrel styles lingered in most any attempts to create a black popular music. When black

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[54] New Amsterdam Musical Association, *New Amsterdam Musical Association Executive Board Minutes*, December 28, 1913, Organizational File, Box 3, "Samuel E. Heyward Papers," Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York.
[55] Christopher Hall, interview by author, Harlem, New York, January 11, 2008; Samuel Charters, *Jazz: A History of the New York Scene*, 25.
[56] Fletcher, xvii

vernacular musicians began creating their own musical theater, much of it came straight out of minstrelsy. In 1898, Bob Cole and Billy Johnson premiered *A Trip to Coontown*. In 1903, Bert Williams and George Walker wrote and starred in *In Dahomey*. In 1906, Ernest Hogan wrote and played in *Rufus Rastus*.[57] In these shows and in what came before, black performers drew heavily on stereotypes, on the efforts of white actors and performers to denigrate black people, and out of self-deprecating, morbidly humorous exaggeration of black folk styles. They wore black face, used racist slurs, acted wide grinning and shiftless, and, often, appeared obsessed with food, especially watermelons, ham, or fried chicken.[58] The most popular song to emerge out of these shows was Ernest Hogan's "All Coon's Look Alike to Me," a tune Hogan lifted from Chicago barroom pianists and rewrote the words. Its success generated a slew of imitators. For a time, 'coon' songs, ragtime music with offensive, minstrel lyrics, became the most popular form among many black musicians.[59] 'Coon' songs and blackface shows may have opened up the musical profession, but they horrified the black middle class. "It goes without saying that minstrels were a disreputable lot in the eyes of uppercrust Negroes," said W.C. Handy, "but it was also true that the best composers, the singers, the musicians, the speakers, the stage performers—the minstrel shows got them all."[60]

But coupled with this criticism, black musicians perpetuated definitions of professional music as opposed to vernacular music out of a class anxiety. By the 1910s and 1920s, middle class black New Yorkers, of any occupation, rejected association with black workers. "All Negroes are not alike," said one middle class black man in the 1910s,

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[57] Allen Woll, *From* Coontown *to* Dreamgirls. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP,1989), .xi-xii.
[58] Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1971), 244-301.
[59] Huggins, 276-77.
[60] qtd. in Kathy Ogren, *The Jazz Revolution*, 41.

in words that echoed the NAMA's insistence on 'keeping their way.' "There are various grades of colored people…We [the black middle class] are not to be judged by the street loungers and drunkards of our race."[61] Especially as black migrants began to move into the city and even innovate new music based on black folk forms, middle class opposition to vernacular music hardened. Probably fearful of losing their own professional status or perhaps of reinforcing racist stereotypes, black musicians and critics made every effort to separate professional music from vernacular music.

In time, among some musicians, this attitude only intensified. For Lucien White, a columnist for the respectable black *New York Age* and a musician himself, New York's black professional musicians lacked decorum and social grace. "The Negro musician," he wrote in a statement tinged with class prejudice, "has never seemed to take his work seriously. He has been content to acquire a certain digital mistakes along social lines. There would have been no mistaking liberty for license…resulting in the closing of doors to the artist because his actions as a man were not agreeable."[62] For White and for others, New York's musicians had suffered a dramatic fall in social standing in the early 1920s. "The average Negro family," wrote Willie Smith, "did not allow the blues, or even the raggedy music, played in their homes [in 1920]." It was, quite simply, unrespectable. "Many of the New York City colored folks," he continued, "including quite a few musicians, did not go for the blues music."[63]

Of course, this movement against black vernacular music did not originate or even perpetuate only among black people. It had roots and grew through prejudices of

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[61] qtd. in Osofksy, 6.
[62] Lucien H. White, "The Decline in Popularity of Jazz and Dance Orchestras," *New York Age,* July 23, 1921, 5.
[63] Smith, 101.

white musicians and critics. To them, black music was primitive, immoral, even dangerous for the musical profession. In 1921, William Mayers, a union official outside New York, stated this position most clearly. The practice of musicians who adopted black vernacular forms, he wrote, is "like a bunch of intoxicating clowns, indulging in all sorts of physical gyrations, making movements that took me back to 1893 when at the Chicago World Fair I saw in the Dahomeyan village on the 'Midway' a dance by about 40 African females clad mostly in a piece of coffee bagging…In the interest of conserving a little dignity for the musical profession, I would ask contractors to minimize what I believe will eventually prove a detriment to all of us, by instructing their players to at least refrain from the antics I have described."[64] Though Mayers wrote outside New York, this general sentiment probably permeated the country, and so, black professional musicians had good reason to warily play popular music.

III.

While older classical musicians avoided folk forms, newer arrivals in the city and younger players began to develop it. Their music, called ragtime or syncopated music, proved the first to break the mold, to make a black vernacular music into professional music. Ragtime had developed on the roof top parties and among black piano players throughout the country. At first, its players, notes a character in James Weldon Johnsons' contemporary novel *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, "knew no more of the theory of music than they did of the theory of the universe, but were guided by natural musical

[64] William Myers, "Jazz Maniacs," *International Musician*, December 1921, 30.

talent and instinct."[65] In spite of their lack of training or perhaps because of it, they played in a jaunty, highly rhythmic, and seemingly virtuosic style, which was both innovative and entrancing. "The barbaric harmonies, the audacious resolutions often consisting of an abrupt jump from one key to another, the intricate rhythms in which the accents fell in the most unexpected places, but in which the beat was never lost," notes Johnson's character, "produced a most curious effect."[66] Unlike early popular forms, ragtime made rhythm not harmony its essential element, and, unlike earlier groups of black folk musicians, ragtime players began to organize and to formally enter the profession.

The bandleader and composer James Reese Europe did more to promote this process than any other musician of the period. Europe had arrived in New York sometime in late 1902 or early 1903 from Washington D.C. Like Walter Craig or William Tyers before him, Europe came from a solid middle class background. His father had a stable job as a post office employee, and Europe attended the famous M. Street School, a black private school whose alumni and teachers would define the 'talented tenth' for the first part of the twentieth century. Europe spent his first years in New York playing cabaret piano and mandolin in black shows. But by 1910, this work had begun to dry up. Undeterred, Europe organized a group called the Clef Club and began to notate and orchestrate ragtime. His organization did more than perform. It functioned as a booking agency, as a social club, and as a sort of trade union. It began to secure work for black musicians in society bands, playing for private parties and high social events. As a result, Europe provoked a profound change in how black musicians became professionals. Black

[65] James Weldon Johnson, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 46.
[66] Ibid., 46.

musicians would perform vernacular music, make it popular music, and, then, make it professional music. The importance of this achievement cannot be underestimate. Europe, said the pianist Eubie Blake, "did as much for [black musicians] as Martin Luther King did for the rest of the Negro people."[67]

Europe made everything about this transformation deliberate. The Clef Club musicians dressed professionally, performed punctually, and practiced persistently. In performance, they wore suits and military costumes. At one concert in 1910, one audience member observed, "Some of the musicians were dressed as French cavaliers, others as Hessians, and others as English students."[68] They drew white audiences. After a concert in October of 1910, a *New York Age* reporter noted, "In the gathering was noticed a sprinkling of white citizens, and they were quite a study, appearing very much surprised, with eyes, mouths and ear wide open so absorbed were they in the work of the musicians….The Clef Club further distinguished itself by performing a feat that has not been 'pulled off' in New York at a colored entertainment for a long, long time, that of starting the entertainment at the hour advertised."[69] Europe ran a tight ship in rehearsals. His music was not improvised. "I have to call a daily rehearsal of my band to prevent the musicians from adding to their music more than I wish to….I have to be continually on the lookout to cut out the results of my musicians," he told the *Literary Digest* in 1919.[70] In short, Europe made ragtime into a professional music by carefully controlling his musicians.

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[67] Qtd. in Jeffrey Magee, *The Uncrowned King of Swing: Fletcher Henderson and Big Band Jazz*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 13.
[68] Qtd. in Charters, 28.
[69] Untitled, *New York Age*, October 27, 1910, 6.
[70] James Reese Europe, "A Negro Explains Jazz," in *Readings in Black American Music*, ed. Eileen Southern, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983), 239.

He also had a strong belief in the importance of black expression and organization. He became convinced that the best music black musicians could produce was music that drew on black folk forms and lived experiences, not one that aped white styles. “Negroes,” said Europe, “should write Negro music. We have our own racial feeling and if we try to copy whites we will make bad copies.”[71] And he was more convinced that with proper organization and agitation, black musicians could force employers to recognize them as respectable professionals. His organization got quick results. Before the creation of the Clef Club, a black musician might show up at a job and learn that, instead of playing music, he would have to work as a dishwasher or janitor. His employer would then require him to play music only for tips and pay him only for menial labor. Europe set a fixed salary and stipulated that the Clef Club receive employment only as entertainers. For engagements outside of the city, he demanded that musicians get room, board, and transportation, as well as a salary. He told his musicians to receive engagements as ‘Clef Club’ musicians, thereby increasing the visibility of his organization and the clout it held.[72]

Europe and other African American musicians benefited from a rising leisure culture and especially from the emergence of social dancing as a prevalent form of entertainment. In the 1890s and 1900s, as historians Lewis Erenberg and Kathy Peiss have shown, social dancing became less formal, more accessible, and commercialized. By the 1910s, over five hundred dance halls coexisted in New York City, and over

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[71] Ibid, 240.
[72] Reid Badger, *A Life in Ragtime*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1995), 59

100,000 women and men learned social dancing at dancing academies.[73] With its rhythmic emphasis and steady beat, ragtime was the perfect dance music, and ragtime musicians began taking dance jobs until by the mid-1910s, these musicians controlled much of the dance business. "The Negro musician is to-day engaged at most of the functions given by society, especially its dances," lamented one white New York musician in 1915, "It will not be long before the white musician will be obliged to blacken his face to make a livelihood or starve."[74] His union, Local 310, also confronted a serious crisis.

Soon after Europe organized the Clef Club, black musicians had enough popular and organizational success to begin to challenging Local 310 and agitating for a separate black union local. The Clef Club, noted Tom Fletcher, had "every amusement place outside of the legitimate theaters sewed up. Very few of the musicians were members of the musicians' union however."[75] And, rather than join as individuals, the Clef Club musicians attempted to turn their own organization into a formal union. The tactic had been tried before. In 1909, the New Amsterdam Musical Association agitated briefly for a local charter from the American Federation of Musicians. It secured the consent of several black members of Local 310 and applied to the board of the local. The board refused consent but sent notice, reported the NAMA secretary, "that the next board might possibly grant us a concession by taking us in as a body," and then, from all evidence, the

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[73] Kathy Peis, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-Of-The Century New York*. (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1986), 88; Lewis Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightclubs and the Transformation of American Culture*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 146-175.
[74] Qtd. in James Weldon Johnson, "The Poor White Musician," in *Writings* ed. William L. Andrews (New York: Library of America, 2004), 617-618.
[75] Fletcher, 261

NAMA ceased agitation.[76] But Europe took more aggressive action. As Tom Fletcher reported it, Europe "decided to write to the governor of New York State to see if he could get a charter for a colored local in New York," and learned that as long as Local 310 existed, he had to organize through the present local.[77] Like the New Amsterdam Musical Association he found the union unwilling to allow a separate charter, and the chance that black musicians might form their own union in New York, rather than join the existing one, never materialized.

Outside New York, black musicians had more success. In 1915, black Boston musicians broke off from an integrated AFM local to form their own segregated black local.[78] From 1916 to 1922, black musicians in San Francisco, some members of an integrated AFM local, agitated for a separate black union and finally won charter.[79] And though sources have been hard to locate, it seems reasonable to assume these actions were duplicated elsewhere. In the 1910s and early 1920s, black musicians formed stable, longstanding unions in Cleveland, Columbus, Kansas City, Seattle, and New Haven.[80] By 1925, black musicians had formed forty-three union locals across the country, all affiliated with the AFM.[81]

But, ironically because of the extent to which they controlled the business, New York's black musicians never managed to form a separate local. In order to gain a

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[76] New Amsterdam Musical Association, *Minute Book, 1906-1915*. Samuel E. Heyward Papers, Box 3, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York.
[77] Fletcher, 262.
[78] Sue Ellen Hershman, "What's in a Number? The History and Merger of Local 535," *Interlude* (Jan-Feb, 1993): 4.
[79] Leta E. Miller, "Racial Segregation and the San Francisco Musicians' Union," *Journal of the Society for American Music* (2007) 1, No.2: 168.
[80] American Federation of Musicians, *List of Locals*. July 1951. Vertical File, American Federation of Musicians, Institute for Jazz Studies, Rutgers, NJ.
[81] Miller, 166

separate union, black musicians would have had to secure permission from Local 310's white leadership. American Federation of Musicians' rules stipulated that in order for a new union to gain a charter it had to receive permission from the nearest local. But a separate black local union would have severely undermined the purpose and power of the Local 310. "The Clef Club," wrote James Weldon Johnson, "for quite a while held a monopoly of the business of 'entertaining' private parties and furnishing music for the dance craze, which was then just beginning to sweep the country. One year the amount of business done amounted to $120,000."[82] Moreover, through its business success, the Clef Club began to break down lines between classical and popular performers. Walter Craig and William Tyers, the classical members of Local 310, began to perform with Clef Club musicians at exclusive parties.[83] And so, almost by necessity, Local 310 began a heavy campaign to recruit Clef Club musicians into their organization. When they found that they could not organize individual musicians fast enough, Local 310 officials convened a special meeting with Clef Club musicians. The union, noted Tom Fletcher, "offered the assembled colored musicians a 'special dispensation' which waived all examinations and accepted them as a group for an individual fee of $100, payable, if desired, at the rate of $25 a quarter. Most of those present promptly joined."[84] Black New York musicians never again seriously attempted to form their own AFM union, and the Clef Club, though still in existence into the 1920s, ceded many of its major functions to the downtown union.

It is not clear exactly why the Clef Club gave up on forming its own local and integrated into Local 310. For some musicians, it seemed treachery and a poor business

[82] Johnson, 123
[83] Badger, 260, 265
[84] Fletcher, 261-262

decision. “The Clef Club at the time had New York locked up, with the key in their possession, and there wasn’t any ofay jazzband aroun’ until Local 310 (now 802) tricked the brothers into joining their organization,” said the composer Perry Bradford.[85] And perhaps, in a sense, it was treachery. After the mid-1910s, the Clef Club became as exclusive and elitist. They too distanced themselves from other black musicians. “In the early 20s,” said a trumpet player Rex Stewart of the black music scene, “The Clef Club clique were the aristocracy, with fellows such as Luckey Roberts, Chris Smith, Ford Dabney, Will Vodery and Tim Brymn. They were the bigwigs who played Miami Beach, Piping Rock, Bar Harbor and all the other posh resorts where society gathered to follow the sun.” These musicians practically ignored those less cultured or less established. “The hierarchy or top rankers had little to do with fellows lower down the scale,” remembered Stewart.[86] Perhaps some of the new Clef Club orientation had to with its changing leadership. In 1919, a deranged drummer murdered James Reese Europe in a Boston bar-fight, and the Clef Club turned to older musicians as its leaders. But, more importantly, in the years after World War I, a new wave of black musicians moved to New York, and wary of being dragged into lasting association with these migrants, the Clef Clubbers choose to keep their own way.

As a result, the general importance of black musicians within Local 310 remained relatively minor and remained so into the mid-1920s. By 1920, about six hundred black musicians had joined Local 310. But, from all evidence, they received only slight attention. The union employed no black delegates, and it did little to protect black jobs.

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[85] Perry Bradford, *Born with the Blues*. (New York: Oak Publications, 1965), 31.
[86] Rex Stewart, *Boy Meets Horn*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 91.

The governing board minutes made no mention of black musicians or even the Clef Club until 1924. The Clef Club integration into the MMPU spelled only nominal membership with little representation and only slight benefit.

But whatever the failings of the union and of black musicians' efforts to make it work on their behalf, the period that began with Walter Craig's entrance into the MMPU and ended with the Great Migration in the post-war years, established an important precedent in the New York musicians' union: interracial unionism. Through the efforts of Walter Craig and other classically trained musicians, Local 310 and Local 802 after it included black musicians as nominal members. Through the efforts and actions of the Clef Club, they joined in greater numbers rather than creating their own union.

In 1920, then, black musicians had become professionals as classical musicians. They had created organizations to support black music. They had made some black music into popular and professional music. Local 310 had accepted more black members than ever before. But a majority of black musicians, especially newer arrivals, still had no place in the union. "There was no union for us in the early 1920s," said the trumpeter Rex Stewart, speaking for a group of popular black musicians recently arrived in the city.[87] But in the coming years, Stewart and others would change that model.

[87] Stewart, 45.

Chapter 2: Making Music Professional, Becoming Union Members

In the fall of 1926, New Yorkers gazing over the *New York Amsterdam News* might have come across an exciting proposition. "Be Popular, Earn More, Play in a Jazz Band," advertised the Christensen Schools of Popular Music to the paper's almost exclusively black readership. "You can master your favorite instrument and let it gain you Popularity and Financial Independence," the ad continued. The school made sure to advertise appropriately appealing music. Its students learned "ragtime and jazz playing," not classical music.[88] In doing so, the school reflected the new position music took among black New Yorkers. By the mid-1920s, music had become an accessible, socially desirable, and financially lucrative profession, and it attracted African Americans across class lines. Working class African Americans, as much as the middle class, now 'made it' into the musical profession in increasing numbers, gained popularity and financial success, and affected a profound cultural shift in the music industry. Black vernacular music, in different forms, became a professional music and black vernacular musicians, professional musicians.

This shift transformed the position of black musicians in the union. In 1920, 610 black musicians belonged to the nine thousand member union. In 1930, with no substantial increase in total membership, there were 1,608.[89] African American members appeared at the union headquarters: paying dues, paying fines, and settling disputes. Labor leaders from the Trade Union Committee for Organizing Negro Workers to the

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[88] Advertisement, *New York Amsterdam News*, October 13, 1926, 10.
[89] Franklin, 53.

Communist American Negro Labor Congress contacted the union for support.[90] And, in 1926, an enterprising ex-saxophone player named Henry Minton became the Local's first and, until 1931, only black delegate, a Sergeant-at-Arms for the Harlem district.[91] Black musicians, in short, had won a substantial place in the union and had begun, in small steps, to win recognition.

This chapter explains how this transformation occurred. After a brief discussion of the union's reorganization in 1920 and 1921, it moves to larger developments in African American history. It shows how the Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance affected black music in New York, how African American music rose in popularity, and how African American musicians found more jobs and long-term employment. It shows how long-term employment made unionization of African American musicians possible and how these musicians joined a pluralistic union, establishing themselves in a position similar to white ethnic musicians. Finally, it describes the limited efforts union officials made for African American musicians and how African American musicians became a visible group within the union. In all, this chapter argues that black musicians changed the definition of professional music to include black vernacular music and, by doing so, established themselves within the union.

I.

From the spring of 1920 to the summer of 1921, Local 310 fell into open conflict with the American Federation of Musicians. At surface, the Local and the Federation

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[90] Governing Board Minutes, May 19, 1926, American Federation of Musicians Local 802 Records, r.7438, Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, Tamiment Library, New York [hereafter GBM]; GBM, May 20, 1925

[91] GBM, September 29, 1926

fought over a wage negotiation. At base, they split on the larger question of the status of musicians as artists or workers. By the summer of 1921, the American Federation of Musicians had replaced Local 310 with a new union, Local 802. The conflict began the previous spring. In 1920, Local 310 entered a wage negotiation with theatre managers and, like other radicalized workers of the post-war era, New York musicians demanded a substantial wage increase. The theatre managers refused. Local 310 threatened to strike, and the president of the Federation, a slight German man named Joseph Weber, rushed to New York anxious to avoid a surely costly dispute. Over the heads of Local 310, Weber contacted New York theatre managers and negotiated a settlement that raised musicians' wages, though not as substantially as the Local would have liked, and brought several non-union theaters under a union contract, though not as many as the Local demanded. Whatever the advantages of this settlement, the Federation's subversion of local authority incensed the New York musicians. Local 310 took the opportunity to attack a longstanding grievance it had sheltered against the Federation.

For many years, musicians outside of New York had come to the city and, through the Federation, gained 'transfer' membership in Local 310, a work permit that allowed Federation musicians temporary membership in the New York union without dues payment. The transfer policy worked against New York musicians. As the entertainment and business center of the nation, musicians from elsewhere were far more likely to come to New York than New York musicians were to travel elsewhere. Transfer membership, then, allowed Federation musicians from outside the city to take jobs from New York musicians with no recompense. Now, in conflict with the Federation, Local 310 began denying transfer membership to Federation musicians. For Weber and for

some musicians, the open disrespect for the transfer policy appeared pure insurgency. The refusal to accept transfers, Weber told the press, was "inhuman and wanton action," and he promptly suspended Local 310 from the Federation.[92]

A month later with the support of some 1200 musicians Weber created a new AFM union, local number 802. To attract members from Local 310 and from outside of it, Weber temporarily lowered the initiation fee to two dollars and opened union membership to more part-time musicians. Local 802, noted a former member of the MMPU, "has accepted a street car conductor as a member" and learned only that "if a musician happens to be also a street car conductor it does not disqualify him from membership in the Federation. The Federation does not hold a man's decent occupation or employment no matter what the same may be as lowering the standard of the profession of music."[93] But most importantly, Weber put in place an administration to ensure that the Local would never again challenge the Federation or its provisions. The governing board would be appointed by the A.F.M., not elected by the membership. Local 802 would have little autonomy. Its members had almost no say in union policy. The Board, a committee of nine, had little accountability and virtual lifetime protection. Edward Canavan, a fluteplayer and longtime organizer, took over the reigns of the Local and remained in unchallenged control for the entire decade.[94]

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[92] "Ousted Music Union Says It Is Pleased," *New York Time*, July 10, 1921, 18; Joseph Weber, "Report of the President, 1920-1921," *International Musician*, July 1921, 28-41.
[93] Joseph Weber, "Report of the President, 1921-1922," *International Musician*, July 1922, 20-26.
[94] Joseph Weber, "Report of the President 1919-1920," *International Musician*, July 1920, 26

Historians have sometimes assumed that this re-formation of the union sparked the unionization of New York musicians.[95] In truth, it marked mostly a change in name, not leadership, nor membership. The men who took over as Local 802's administrators were stalwarts of the old union. Canavan had worked as a business agent for Local 310. The secretary M. S. Rauch, the treasurer George Schroeder, and most other officials had all worked for Local 310 or had been active in its affairs.[96] At first, the membership increased to twelve thousand—a result, no doubt of the lowered entrance fee—but these members, many of them part time musicians, ceased dues payments, broke from the union, and returned membership to around nine thousand members within five years.[97]

For black musicians, the reorganization and renaming of the local had even less effect. The creation of Local 802 received no coverage in the black press. The new local's governing board minutes made no mention of black musicians. And even Joseph Weber's long, tiresome polemics against the New York union never mentioned its African American musicians. Some black musicians, like many white musicians, may have taken advantage of the lower entrance fee to join the union, but a substantial number probably remained oblivious to its existence and the local's leaders itself did little, if anything, to change their opinion. "There was no union for us in the early 1920s," the trumpeter Rex Stewart had said, but regardless, African American musicians made

[95] See, for instance, Clark Halker, "A History of Local 208 and the Struggle for Racial Equality in the American Federation of Musicians," *Black Music Research Journal* 9, No. 2 (Autumn, 1988): 209

[96] Musicians Mutual Protective Union Local 310 Executive Board Minutes, February, 1904, r.7437, Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives. Tamiment Library, New York.

[97] Franklin, 53

enormous strides in the period.[98] They got jobs, created new music, and entered the profession.

II.

They did so, first, through a demographic shift. Black Americans had moved to New York since the Civil War. A steady stream, at least eighty thousand each decade, moved to the city between 1870 and 1890. An avalanche followed. By 1900, an additional hundred thousand blacks had joined the city, by 1910 200,000, and by 1930 nearly a million.[99] In the spring of 1920, the columnist Madeline Allison reported in *The Crisis*, "More than 200 Negro women and girls enter New York every week; the number of colored men coming here to seek employment and higher wages amounts to 300 a week."[100] These newly arrived women and men changed where black New Yorkers lived. Originally they settled on Manhattan's West Side, in a run down neighborhood called the Tenderloin, but, as their numbers increased, they moved north to Harlem. And within three decades, they had transformed the neighborhood. By 1930, Harlem, said James Weldon Johnson in a much-quoted line, "is the recognized Negro capital. Indeed, it is the Mecca for the sightseer, the pleasure-seeker, the curious, the adventurous, the enterprising, the ambitious, and the talented of the entire Negro world."[101]

Out of this migration and the development of Harlem came a cultural and political movement that both contemporaries and historians have called the Harlem Renaissance. Fundamentally, the Renaissance signaled the growth of formal African American culture

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[98] Stewart, 45
[99] Osofsky, 18
[100] Madeline Allison, "The Horizon: Industry," *The Crisis*, May 1920, 19.
[101] James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 3.

with a political purpose. Black New York writers turned out a steady stream of novels, poetry, and plays; black intellectuals unearthed black history; black painters and sculptors created plastic arts. They did so with anti-racism in mind. In 1926, Langston Hughes, poet and New Yorker, expressed the growing intellectual and political sentiment of Harlem artists best in an essay he penned for the *Nation*. There is, wrote Hughes, a "mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—the urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible." Hughes fought this urge, and he asked other black artists to do the same. "We younger Negro artists who create," he declared, "now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame."[102] Black Americans would self-consciously create a 'black art,' and through this cultural advance, they would make political strides. The movement, notes one cynical but apt historian, was "civil rights by copy-write."[103]

The Harlem Renaissance was never a separatist movement. Its leaders, the educated and talented of Afro-America, advocated the creation of a distinctly black art. They professed pride in their racial identity and asserted the political value of their culture. But almost always, as the culture historian Anne Douglas has shown, they saw black culture as a bridge to white America, not a point of separation. "We want to be Americans," wrote W.E.B. DuBois on the aims of the Harlem Renaissance, "full-fledged Americans with all the rights of other American citizens."[104] African American leaders choose culture do this political work because they found other avenues—legislation,

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[102] Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," in *The Harlem Renaissance: a Brief History With Documents*. Jeffrey B. Ferguson ed. (Boston: Bedford Books, 2008), 149, 154.
[103] David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), xxiii.
[104] W.E.B. DuBois, "The Criteria of Negro Art," in Ferguson,161

education, violent agitation—closed to them. They turned to culture as a wedge to change the hearts and minds of white Americans and open up opportunities for African Americans.[105]

Among musicians, the Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance were amplified. Of the African Americans who came North, few felt quite so strongly drawn to New York City as did musicians, and they proved the Harlem Renaissance's most successful participants. The music industry surged forward in the 1920s. Technological and cultural transformations spelled the dramatic rise of the New York music business. Music became marketable in wide array of contexts. Piano manufacturing, sheet music publishing, vaudeville theatre, Broadway shows, and recorded music took off in the 1920s, became centered in New York, and employed a growing host of musicians.[106] Radio disseminated the sounds of New York bands across the country. Record studios proliferated. Cabarets, nightclubs, and speak easies sprang up in an underground economy and employed musicians.

New York soon became the Mecca of musicians. Musicians traveled to the city to establish their artistic reputations, meet their heroes, and follow job opportunities. New York took on an almost spiritual, fantastic quality. "It was New York," said Duke Ellington speaking for musicians in Washington D.C. in the early 1920s, "that filled our imagination. We were awed by the never-ending roll of great talents there, talents in so many fields, in society music and blues, in vaudeville and songwriting, in jazz and theatre, in dancing and comedy…Harlem, to our minds, did indeed have the world's most

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[105] Ann Doulgas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995), 322.
[106] Douglas, 377, 62.

glamorous atmosphere. We had to go there."[107] No exact numbers exist to convey the influx of black musicians into the city. Yet, it is almost impossible to read of an upwardly ambitious black musician who did not, at some point, make it to New York City. Many remained in New York, and, in doing so, siphoned off the most talented musicians from the rest of the country. After World War I, noted Willy Smith, "there was more real talent in Harlem than in all of the rest of the country put together."[108]

In a variety of contexts, a demand for African American vernacular music developed. This demand owed itself to three sources: to a rising black consumer power, to white audience's sudden interest for black culture, and, finally, to the innovations of musicians themselves. In the 1920s, New York, along with the rest of the United States, experienced qualified economic growth and with it an expanding leisure culture. Dance halls that had opened in the 1910s remained in operation, nightclubs sprang up, and popular culture became big business. Working people began to pay for music on both sides of the color line. In working Northern industrial jobs, black workers gained a modicum of disposable income and spent some of it on music made by African Americans. White workers too began to pay for black culture. The 1920s marked the era when "Harlem was in vogue," when black music either infiltrated or dominated American popular music. And black musicians, now more concentrated in urban centers, took advantaged. They capitalized on markets when they developed and opened up new opportunities. They made blues, jazz, and black musical theater into stable, long-term work.

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[107] Duke Ellington, *Music is My Mistress*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1973), 35-36.
[108] Smith, 94

Blues became professional music through the emergence of black consumer power and the recognition on the part of record companies that this market could be exploited. The 1920s saw the rise of "race records," as both consumers and corporations called blues recordings targeted at black audiences, and their influence extended throughout the country and for several decades. But their origins can be traced to a single session. In February of 1920, a piano player named Perry Bradford convinced executives at New York's Okeh Records that "There's fourteen million Negroes in our great country and they will buy records if recorded by one of their own."[109] He brought Mamie Smith, a singer from Cincinnati, into a recording studio and by November the company had released Smtih singing one of Bradford's compositions called "Crazy Blues." Consumers flipped. "Crazy Blues," wrote Willie Smith who played piano on the date, "took off like a prairie fire…In no time at all it was selling like hot cakes in Harlem." [110] Sales exceeded all expectations, reaching, some estimated, nearly a million copies.[111] Pullman porters carried the record from city to city, from black neighborhood to black neighborhood, and black consumers bought the Blues by the bundle. But, importantly, record companies targeted these recordings almost exclusively at black consumers. "Recordings by black people (Race Records)," recalled one white fan, "were simply not sold in 'respectable stores.'"[112] Black consumers alone could sustain a growing industry.

Companies needed little more encouragement. In 1921, OKeh began a blues series for black consumers. In 1922, Paramount recorded Alberta Hunter. In 1923, Columbia recorded Bessie Smith and began a similar series. And, in the spring of 1921,

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[109] Bradford, 117
[110] Smith, 104
[111] Levine, *Black Culture, Black Consciousness*, 225
[112] Arnold Shaw, *52nd Street*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), 16.

Harry Pace, a black music publisher and entrepreneur, founded Black Swan Records, the first record company that employed, recorded, and marketed exclusively to African Americans.[113] All advertised heavily in the black press, and they often advertised in hopes of capitalizing on black pride. Black Swan Records advertised itself as "the only phonograph company in the world owned and operated by colored people."[114] "We will give opportunities to our singers," it announced, "such as they can get from no other companies. Every record you buy means encouragement to some Negro singer and some Negro musician to continue their work and to develop their talent."[115] The same attitude that permeated the Harlem Renaissance made 'race records' possible. Blues music became a commercial music, and blues musicians became professionals.

Following a different path, jazz music made the same transformation. Unlike the blues, white musicians as well as black musicians played jazz, and the music attracted a large white following. In fact, the first group to record jazz in New York and bill itself a 'jazz' band was a group of second generation Italian Americans called the Original Dixieland Jazzband. In 1917, the band arrived in New York from New Orleans and turned out a novelty record called "Livery Stable Blues." They played music they had learned from imitating black vernacular performers in their native city. Syncopated, fast, and humorous, the record took off among black and white consumers, and the Original Dixieland Jazz Band initiated a craze for what seemed a new, exciting music. Jazz, noted the critic J.A. Rogers, "has nonchalantly gone on until it ranks with the movie and the

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[113] Southern, 366
[114] Advertisement, *The Crisis*, July 1921, 4.
[115] Advertisement, *The Crisis*, May, 1921, 41.

dollar as a foremost exponent of modern Americanism."[116] And, with some opposition, 'jazz' became a legitimate, professional music. The Original Dixieland Jazz Band joined the musicians' union shortly after arriving in the city, and, by 1922, was making its contracts through Local 802.[117]

But what was jazz? In the early 1920s, no one seemed to know. At first, "jazz" referred to some light symphonic music, to show music, to big brass bands, and to the improvised music of small combos from the South and Mid-West. White musicians, black musicians, musicians who read music, and musicians who read no music all, at various times, played music called jazz. But despite this confusion, jazz, thought most listeners, had something to do with black Americans. "Jazz proper," wrote J.A. Rogers expressing the dominant view of the day, "is in idiom—rhythmic, musical and pantomimic—thoroughly American Negro."[118] Most black bandleaders agreed, and by the early 1920s, they picked up the term to describe their own art. James Reese Europe called his music jazz, as did Will Marion Cook and any number of older, established, and professional black musicians who played music that scarcely resembled that the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. In the confusion and the resulting breaking down of clear lines of professional and unprofessional music, jazz expanded the lines of professional music.

Established African American bands began to hire "jazz specialists," improvising soloists schooled in a black vernacular style, and hoped to cash in on the craze. In the early 1920s, the best improvising musicians in the country—Jelly Roll Morton, Sidney Bechet, Louis Armstrong, and a host of other more or less well known musicians—all

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[116] J.A. Rogers, "Jazz At Home," in *The New Negro*, ed. Alaine Locke. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 217.
[117] GBM, February 11, 1922.
[118] Rogers, 221.

moved to New York and tried to make it as professionals in established bands. These musicians scarcely fit the old mold of professional musicianship. Many came from poorer backgrounds, could scarcely read music, and got by and often succeeded wildly by improvising their performances.[119] Many did non-musical jobs during the week and performed only on the weekends. "My first year in New York [1919]," recalled Garvin Bushell, who played clarinet and bassoon, "I was a clerk, drove a truck, and was an elevator operator. On Sundays I rehearsed with a band from Florida."[120] But when they performed 'jazz' music, they had impressive financial and popular success. Milt Hinton, a jazz musician from Chicago recalled that by playing violin, "I'm a superstar. Got nice clothes, you know, everything…Instead of taking girls to the cafeteria, I took them across the street to the restaurant and buy them a steak."[121] His union's scale, that of the black Chicago Local 208, rose dramatically from $25.00 a week in 1920 to $52.50 in 1922. By 1928, the scale was $75.00 a week, a salary that placed Hinton and other black musicians within the highest ten percent of all American workers.[122]

Black musical theater also surged forward. In May 1921, Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle premiered *Shuffle Along*, a musical comedy composed and performed by black New Yorkers. It was an instant and wild success and soon did for New York black musical theater what "Crazy Blues" had done for recorded music. The show ran for 504 performances. Many in its cast, including Paul Robeson, Josephine Baker, and Adelaide Hall, were rocketed into stardom. As one historian has put it, the show "legitimized black

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[119] Burton Peretti, *The Creation of Jazz*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 102.
[120] Garvin Bushell, "Jazz in the 1920s," in Williams, 74.
[121] Qtd. in Peretti, 49.
[122] Peretti, 49.

musical comedy on Broadway," and a host of imitations followed in its wake.[123] For New York's black musicians, success on Broadway was a crucial step. Unlike recordings, where musicians played once, received only a small salary and no royalties, and could be easily moved elsewhere, theatre work was stable, long-term employment. It created a base of work attracting black musicians to New York, and, for some, assuring financial solvency throughout the decade. "1921," recalled trumpeter Rex Stewart, "was a momentous year for us members of Ollie Blackwell's Ragtime Clowns because we were actually part of a show!"[124]

Like the marketing of the blues, the music and staging of these shows reflected the values of the Harlem Renaissance. *Shuffle Along* asserted a humanity of black performers hitherto unseen on Broadway. It became the first show to portray unburlesqued black romance. In the show's most memorable song, a ballad called "Love Will Find a Way," over a ragtime piano accompaniment, Roger Matthews, the show's lead male, sang of the perseverance of love against at all odds. "Love will find a way," he sang, "Love like ours can never be ruled."[125] Prior to that moment, shows had always portrayed black romance as humorous or lewd, and so, the song marked a significant challenge to cultural conventions, leading some of the show's producers to fear for their own safety. "We were afraid that when Lottie Gee and Roger Matthews sang it," remembered Noble Sissle, "that we'd be run out of town. Miller, Lyles, and I were standing near the exit door with one foot inside the theater and the other pointing north

[123] Allen Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: from* Coontown *to* Dreamgirls. (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State UP,1989), 75.
[124] Stewart, 1.
[125] Sissle, Noble and Blake, Eubie, *Shuffle Along*. New World Records, 260.

toward Harlem."[126] The show also challenged the segregation of the audience. For the first time, blacks and whites sat together in the orchestra, and with each successive show, desegregation became more the rule and less the exception on Broadway. By 1930 James Weldon Johnson could write, "At the present time the sight of colored people in the orchestras of Broadway theatres is not regarded a cause for immediate action or utter astonishment."[127] In all then, black blues recordings and black musical shows upheld the dignity of black performers and audiences. Unlike earlier black popular music, they aimed to eliminate stereotypes.

Perhaps even more importantly, in order to compose and perform this music, black musicians took inspiration from their identity. "I have the feeling," said W.C. Handy, a blues composer and trumpeter, "that real blues can only be written by a Negro, who keeps his roots in the life of his race."[128] And so, when black musicians marketed the blues, they reversed the paradigm. In order to become a professional and authentic blues musician, one had to be connected to a black identity, not distanced from it. A professional status and a black consciousness were one and the same. As black music became more and more popular and professionalized, being black and being a professional were no longer at odds.

III.

Still, despite financial success, musicians only changed the meaning of professional music through conscious efforts. The emergence of new black popular music

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[126] Qtd. in Kimball, 3.
[127] James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 201.
[128] W.C. Handy, "The Heart of the Blues," in *Readings in Black American Music*. Ed. Eileen Southern, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983), 216.

drew a storm of criticism from many sides and splintered the New York music scene. Many black intellectuals and older musicians looked down on jazz musicians as somehow not quite sophisticated enough. "The AfraAmerican," declared an unidentified "distinguished Negro composer" in 1927, "has produced no creative musical geniuses." New York black musicians, he wrote, were "only a handful of clever arrangers and song writers with a sprinkling of writers for choir."[129] No 'true,' serious artist, by which he meant a classical artist, had yet emerged. Perhaps more significantly, many musicians faced challenges of their 'seriousness' from those around them, from friends and family members who doubted their abilities. In 1924, for instance, Clyde Bernhard, a trombone player out of Pennsylvania, quit his job at a Jones and Laughlin Steel Mill and attempted to make it as a musician. He moved in with his cousin and faced immediate criticism. "The moment I walked in," he recalled, "she [his cousin] started giving me a hard time. 'You think you gonna be a musician…you ain't never gonna learn to play nothin',' she say…'He [Bernhard] ain't gonna go no further than right now.'"[130] His experience was, no doubt, replicated in many small interactions between New York musicians and workers, and it reflected the remaining stratification in the New York music scene.[131]

While jazz and blues musicians may have played more frequent jobs, they remained socially below older musicians. The black music scene of the early 1920s had become more splintered than ever before. Musicians played in large pit bands, small blues bands, cabarets, and restaurants, and they often played vastly different styles ranging from the highly orchestrated to the entirely improvised. They came into the

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[129] "Why has the AfraAmerican produced no creative musical geniuses?," *The Messenger*, November 1927, 319.
[130] Clyde Bernhard, *I Remember: Eighty Years of Black Entertainment, Big Bands, and the Blues*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 41-42.
[131] See for instance W.C. Handy, *Father of the Blues* (New York: Collier Books 1941), 60.

profession with wide class and cultural differences. In the early 1920s, the trumpeter Rex Stewart described a four-tier "hierarchy," based largely on how long a style of music had been in vogue and how long its musicians had been in New York. Clef Club musicians were on top. Show musicians came next. Then came big jazz bands, and, at the bottom, were jazz musicians, like Stewart, who played in small clubs, neighborhood joints, and dance halls.[132] Skin tone may also have proved an element in establishing a musicians' place in the hierarchy. Dark skinned musicians found it more difficult to get work, and light skinned musicians could be wary of hiring them. In the mid-1920s, a booking agent told the trombonist Clyde Bernhardt to fire several of his musicians because their skin was too dark. "Even the coloreds don't like too many black faces," the agent told Bernhardt, "You put in more light ones like yourself, and you be surprised the jobs I can get for you." Bernhardt complied.[133] Women found instrumental jobs entirely closed to them, and the union, whether by discrimination or tradition, refused to organize singers, the only area in which women could often attain musical success.

In response, black New York musicians quite consciously tried to prove their commitment to their art and their professionalism. Nothing represented this striving for respect more fully than the style and relationship to clothing that blues and jazz musicians developed in the early 1920s. Dressing well, sometimes to the point of absurdity, became an obsession among black musicians. "Everybody in the entertainment business," wrote the pianist Willie Smith, "made it a point to dress sharp."[134] Smith was no exception. In an autobiography, written in 1964, Smith spent four pages recalling his dress during the

[132] Stewart, 91
[133] Bernhardt, 179
[134] Smith, 46

period alone and, in a passage that warrants attention, described what seems a compulsive relation to his clothes:

> I usually paid around a hundred dollars for my suits at Bromberger's. It was customary for entertainers to have at least twenty-five suits—you couldn't wear the same suits too often. I sometimes would go home and change my suit during our short intermissions. You saw all kinds of suit material with fancy tailoring….My pants were tight with long, peg-topped fourteen-inch cuffs. I liked to have my suit jacket single-breasted so I could show off my gold watch fob and chain. For an added touch we had the tailor make a pair of spats from the same material.[135]

Women musicians were little different. On seeing the blues diva, Ma Rainey, a young pianist. Mary Lou Williams, remembered, "Ma was loaded with real diamonds—in her ears, around her neck, in a tiara on her head. Both hands were full of rocks, too. Her hair was wild and she had gold teeth. What a sight!"[136]

Music followed suit. Jazz musicians synthesized older and newer styles and played with musicians of all class backgrounds,. Starting the in the 1920s, jazz reached a technical brilliance and an impatient tendency for innovation beyond any American popular art form. As the sociologist Paul Lopes has argued, jazz musicians of the 1920s began an unceasing project to gain respect for their music as high art. Year after year, jazz became more technical, more complex, and more professional. As it hurdled forward, from traditional styles to swing styles, to bebop and beyond, jazz musicians were forever searching for respect for their craft.[137]

In the 1920s, no musician had quite the influence on this development or typified the transformation of the New York scene as did the pianist and composer Fletcher

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[135] Smith, 48
[136] Qtd. in Arnold Shaw, *The Jazz Age: Popular Music in the 1920s*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1987), 70.
[137] Paul Lopes, *The Rise of a Jazz Art World*.

Henderson. The son of a Georgia minister, Henderson had come to New York in 1920 in hopes of earning a master's degree in chemistry. Instead, he found music a far more socially possible career than any in science or business. As he struggled to find work as a chemist and pursue his studies, Henderson began getting musical jobs. Through friends and contacts, he made a name for himself playing behind blues singers on Black Swan Record sessions and in Harlem nightclubs. But his big break and that of a number of other musicians who played with him came in 1923. That fall Henderson and his group auditioned in a mid-town, white owned nightclub. Recently having changed its décor from a Russian to a plantation theme, the Club Alabam needed a noticeable 'black' band with a tame sound. Henderson, light skinned and college educated, proved the perfect choice. He began to rework and amalgamate the sounds of black music in New York City. He took the precision of the black dance bands epitomized by James Reese Europe and merged it with the Blues. His music was sophisticated, orchestrated, and, sometimes virtuosic. It could be smooth and melodious, easy listening for a generation of white New Yorkers weaned on light opera. But it was also infused with the blues and the jagged syncopations of migrant black musicians.

By the late 1920s, Henderson's sound had come to dominate black music in New York. Younger bandleaders, like Duke Ellington and Luis Russell, took Henderson as their model and created equally professional and widely appealing music. Older musicians studied to learn Henderson's arrangements. And a slew of other musicians played with Henderson, assimilated his style, and then set out to form bands of their own or to disseminate his sound and attitude throughout the New York music scene. By 1926, a distinct 'New York sound' modeled on Henderson's arrangements had developed. "New

York had its own style of music," said Doc Cheatham, a Chicago trumpeter. "It was more sophisticated. They [New York musicians] had bandstands, music stands and books all full of stock arrangements."[138] Henderson's big band sound became New York black music.

IV.

The rise of big band jazz, the commercialization of the blues, and the rise of black musical theater formalized musicians' work. African American musicians now played in bigger venues. On Broadway, in midtown restaurants, and in Harlem clubs, black musicians began playing overwhelmingly for white patrons and for white employers. In March 1925, *The Messenger* reported,

> How did *Shuffle Along*, *Running Wild*, *Chocolate Dandies*, *Dixie to Broadway*, *Alabam Fantasies*, *Liza*, manage to stay on Broadway from ten weeks to fourteen months? Not of Negro patronage, because in no one of the large cities—New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, Chicago, St. Louis, Kansas City, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Indianapolis—in no one of these do Negroes maintain a full house for a show two weeks. The only reason these shows live, pay hundreds of actors and musicians, is because of their white patrons. The Negro musician is also dependent upon white patrons to employ him frequently and to pay him high.[139]

The same was true of Harlem clubs. White men owned the largest, most lucrative, and famous Harlem nightspots—the Cotton Club, Connie's Inn, the Lafayette Theatre, and the Apollo. White patrons paid to attend to these clubs, at prices far beyond the means of many Harlem residents.[140] But black musicians provided the entertainment.

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[138] Qtd. in Thomas Hennessey, *From Jazz to Swing: African American Jazz Musicians and Their Music, 1890-1935*. (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1994), 95.
[139] "The Next Black Step," *The Messenger*, March 1925, 125.
[140] Lewis Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930*. (Chicago, 1981), 249-257.

In playing in these clubs and shows, labor arrangements among black musicians changed. Rather than playing informally and sporadically, rather than earning their pay bit by bit, Harlem musicians began to get steady, long-term work. Henderson, for instance, took up residency at large, white-owned ballroom in mid-town, the Roseland. Other bandleaders also began getting more steady employment in cabarets and dance halls. Duke Ellington played two long, productive stints, first at the Kentucky Club and later at the Cotton Club. Charlie Johnson led a band that played at Small's Paradise from 1925 until the mid-1930s. After 1923, a number of different bands took up year-long residencies at Connie's Inn, perhaps the most lucrative of Harlem nightspots.[141] "There were all kinds of clubs in those days—nightclubs, cabarets, bars, bistros," said the trumpeter Rex Stewart.[142] "By the mid-twenties, New York City was getting jazz-band minded," recalled Willie Smith, "Every hole in the wall featured a jazz band of some kind…Jobs for jazz musicians were getting more plentiful and things were set to jump uptown."[143] Cabarets flourished and employed musicians for long stretches.

Long-term work led to formal contracts. Formal contracts led to unionization. A bandleader would sign a contract with the location owner. The location owner would pay the leader who would then divvy up funds among his musicians on a weekly basis. Salaries varied based on the talent and specialties of the instrumentalists. Henderson, for instance, paid a weekly salary of $80 to most musicians, but he gave special dispensations to the most talented or specialized musicians. Coleman Hawkins, the star tenor saxophonist, made $125, and Don Redman, the band's arranger, pocketed $25 for

[141] Hennessey, 95-100
[142] Stewart, 75
[143] Smith, 162

every arrangement his produced.[144] This growing formalization of the black music industry made unionization possible. One union official out of Chicago, William Everett Samuels, described the importance of steady employment in organizing musicians:

> The musician is not like the electrician, the carpenter, the plumber. You start building a building down on, like the State building there. How long will they be building that? It won't be ready for the next three years. Whoever is working on that has got a chance to work for three years! So, if they join the carpenters' union, or the brick layers', and get on this job, they know they're goin' to work; so at the end of the year, or end of the month, they've got to join the union. But a musician comes in and works one night and he don't come back until next month and he works another night or he works a week or two weeks and goes back or never comes back. Well, he never has to join the union. Never. That's the disadvantage to us.[145]

Samuels' observation applied to New York musicians. Local 802 made union contracts in jobs that were most visible and lucrative. Broadway theatres, classical music, and high profile clubs drew the attention of Local 802 officials. Small ethnic theatres often did not. Thus, throughout the 1920s, musicians playing in Yiddish theatre, street musicians, or musicians playing only for tips were rarely members of Local 802. But to play on Broadway or to play in a high profile club, musicians needed union membership. Often contractors, booking agents, or employers themselves forced musicians to become Local 802 members. Rex Stewart remembered when he gained a contract and saw, as a bandleader, he had "to furnish from 10 to 15 musicians, in good standing with local 802 A.F. of M."[146]

Local 802 enforced these rules compulsively. When the Jolson Theatre of Harlem fired two black members of Local 802, the union sent a delegate and a threat. "Anyone playing an instrument on the stage or in the pit," the union's governing board notified the

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[144] Hennessey, 93
[145] William Everrett Samuels, *Union and the Black Musician*. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 69.
[146] Stewart, 126

Theatre, "must be a member of the A.F. of M."[147] When a Romanian bandleader applied to the union and asked that non-member cymbal player be permitted to play an audition, the union denied the request.[148] If employers failed to comply to union regulations, the union placed them on an 'unfair list.' If they failed to pay musicians, the union place them on the 'defaulters list.' The local circulated these lists in a union newsletter, posted them at its offices, and sometimes picketed in front of businesses. Union musicians boycotted these locations, and the union enforced its boycotts through a collective morality. To cross picket lines and play in 'unfair' locations could undermine the reputation of a musician and, in an industry of tenuous employment, reputation could be everything. "An experienced performer just can't afford to have his reputation hurt," said Willie Smith, "and that is what happens when you try to buck the current."[149] That was what happened when musicians ignored union by-laws. A musician who failed to abide by union regulations lost his union card, faced trial before the union board, and faced the disapproval and ostracism from other musicians. He lost jobs throughout the city. For stable working musicians, then, unionization often became a point of survival and membership a sort of cohersion. Employers, contractors, and other musicians forced musicians to join.

Musicians did get union benefits. The union maintained wage scales, arbitrated disputes, and ensured musicians' payment. But foremost, membership served as credential without which musicians could be hard pressed to find work or hire other musicians. As union members, musicians passed a test of musical proficiency. They gained a union card, a badge of professional status, and they became attached to an organization that

[147] GBM, October 12, 1927
[148] GBM, August 3, 1927
[149] Smith, 2

represented their heroes. The most well known and respected classical musicians, jazz musicians, and popular musicians joined Local 802. Membership in the union became a sort of initiation into the 'professional' world of music—a signal that a musician had completed his training period, could count himself among the best in the business, and a small proof that her or his work was serious.

Without membership, musicians faced industry-wide disapproval. When the blues musician Maron Smith defaulted on some payments and lost his union membership in the winter of 1929, for instance, he found it out first hand. Smith soon repaid the debt, but he received bad press. A broadside distributed among black New York musicians noted Smith's expulsion from the union, and Smith hurried to the Local 802 office to set the record straight. Loss of membership in the union, said Smith to Local 802 officials, was "detrimental to his reputation."[150] He persuaded the union to issue a statement on his reinstatement in the Local. Like other musicians, without a union card, Smith found it difficult to hire sidemen and even more difficult to get jobs. The union card was a ticket to professionalism and a stamped proof of reliability.

But the New York union, unlike other smaller locals, also allowed black musicians to maintain separate organizations and ethnic ties while still members. Partly, it allowed black musicians to maintain their organizations because many white musicians did the same. From the start of the twentieth century, the New York musicians had organized a wide array of ethnic groups, but by the 1920s, ethnic pluralism had come to dominate and define its ranks. In July 1921, Joseph Weber, the president of the AFM, wrote of the New York union, "we have an Italian, a Russian, more especially a Russian Hebrew, an Armenian, a Greek colony, and so ad finem until most all of the more or less

[150] GBM, July 24, 1929.

civilized races of the world are represented. In our profession, this condition finds its expression by the members of a nationality, more or less segregating themselves into factions, each of which, of course, has its opinions reflected through its activities in the affairs of the organization."[151] For the American Federation of Musicians, ethnic pluralism was the essential challenge and defining feature of the New York local. Unlike smaller locals, Local 802 contended with language and cultural barriers, with segregated segments of the business, and with a plethora of ethnic associations. "The executive work of the local," reported *International Musician*, the AFM periodical, a year after Local 802's founding, "is moving along in a smooth manner, consistent with its own laws and those of the American Federation of Musicians, and the almost impossible task of successfully handling the many thousands of men of all nationalities is being accomplished."[152] Musicians who had recently arrived in the United States and spoke no English; musicians who traveled between Europe and New York all joined Local 802.

For African American musicians, the pluralism and ethnic composition of the local must have seemed promising. Through the 1920s, black labor leaders seemed convinced that some immigrants, especially Jews and Italians, were allies. "It is a matter of common knowledge that the Jewish labor unions," reported the *Messenger*, "are the most liberal of any to the Negro workers."[153] In a 1921 cloakmakers' strike, *The Messenger* identified the ethnic origins of the strikers as one of its chief assets. Black and white women workers, it stated, could achieve solidarity because "the strikers belong chiefly to three races—Jews, Italians, and the Negroes." And Jews and Italians evinced far less prejudice than native, Anglo-Americans; "Jews are the freest of all from race and

[151] Joseph Weber, "Report of the President, 1920-1921," *International Musician,* July 1921, 28.
[152] "New Home of Local 802," *International Musician,* August 1922, 1.
[153] "Ku Klux Klan Wants Negroes to Join," *The Messenger,* April 1925, 156.

color prejudice. Italians, they bear with them that traditional Latinic absence of race prejudice."[154] Black workers, then, perceived these groups as possible allies. They would be far more likely to trust a union consisting and dominated by Jews and Italians than one run by white Anglo-Saxons.

A sort of pluralism sprang up within the union. Unlike other smaller AFM locals, Local 802 exhibited a great degree of tolerance to internal division. Within Local 802 a baffling array of ethnic interests and groups coexisted more or less peacefully. Irish musicians maintained an Irish organization. Jewish musicians maintained a Jewish organization. Flautists maintained a flautists organization.[155] Pluralism and division was the rule not the exception in Local 802. Ethnic minorities or instrumental minorities could retain their own identities and voice their own concerns and, at once, belong to the union.

So it was with black musicians. Membership in Local 802 never spelled the end of independent black music organizations. Deacon Johnson, a former bandleader, took it upon himself to provide jobs for black musicians. He operated and heavily advertised a "clearing house for entertainers, orchestras, singers and players" in upper Manhattan.[156] The Clef Club and the New Amsterdam Musical Association remained in existence and continued to provide bookings, a social forum, and tenuous job protection for black musicians. The New Amsterdam Musical Association also shifted its exclusionary policies, and, by the mid-1920s, it accepted and supported jazz musicians as much as classical musicians.[157] Like other ethnic group organizations, these independent black organizations contributed to membership in Local 802. The Clef Club, which remained

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[154] "The Cloakmakers' Strike," *The Messenger*, December 1921, 298.
[155] GBM, June 2, 1926
[156] Advertisement, *The New York Age*, September 24, 1921, 6.
[157] Author's interview with Christopher Hall, January 11, 2008, Harlem, NY.

operational throughout the 1920s, preached full loyalty to the union. In August 1924, one A. Fennar, in charge of the booking office of the Clef Club, reported to the Governing Board. "All of the instrumentalists [of the Clef Club]," he said, "are members of the Local. Should any non-members enroll they are instructed to become members of the Local.…the members of the Clef Club are fully acquainted with the laws governing the same, and that the members of the Clef Club do not perform with non-members."[158] Fennar's statement and appearance revealed that independent black organizations actually served to increase union membership and loyalty. Black musicians who wanted to maintain a separate black commitment could do so. Black musicians could retain control over whatever segments of the business remained in their hands through independent black organizations. But, because of Local 802's structure of ethnic pluralism, they also became members of the integrated union and pushed the Local limited action on their behalf.

Most notably, Local 802 made brief alliances with Harlem labor organizations. In the spring of 1925, the union received a letter from the Trade Union Committee for Organizing Negro Workers (TUC). The creation of the Harlem labor leaders, A. Phillip Randolph and Frank Crosswaith, the TUC conceived itself as an umbrella organization, one that would advance the interests of black workers in the same way the United Hebrew Trades, organized a few years prior, protected the interests of Jewish workers. It encouraged black workers to join unions, forced unions to accept black workers, and then protected the interests of black union members within their organizations. It appealed to New York City's local unions through common sense. "Many industries in New York City," it stated, "have already a large number of Negro workers. Many more are fast

[158] GBM, August 24, 1924

coming in. Eventually, this task of organizing these workers will have to be done."[159] For Local 802, the TUC's logic evidently held some appeal. Edward Canavan attended the TUC's first conference, and impressed Frank Crosswaith so much that the labor activist cited the musicians as an example for other unions.[160] As he struggled to integrate a notoriously racist motion picture operators' union, Crosswaith noted soon after the conference, "the tragedy of this particular case [the motion picture operators] will be more easily grasped when we bear in mind that the strength of Local 306 Moving Picture Operators of America is derived from the well organized Musicians' Union, a large percentage of whose membership are negroes."[161] But despite this recognition, membership in the TUC spelled no dramatic shift in union policy. The Committee struggled financially and even *The Messenger*, the most pro-labor of black periodicals, expressed little faith that the Committee could achieve much at all. The magazine noted, "It is not apparent that this committee has anything as yet save the moral good will of some of the local unions of New York City."[162] By all evidence, Local 802 paid the Committee no dues, sent no permanent delegates to its body, and, generally, did little to build off its initial foray into black labor activism.

While Local 802's involvement with the TUC sputtered to the ground, black members began to assert a more visible presence within it. In September 1926, Henry Minton, a saxophone player, became the first black delegate to the union. At first, noted Edward Canvan, "Minton was engaged to act as Sergt.-at-Arms for one month at a

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[159] "Communication, Trade Union Committee for Organizing Negro Workers to About 125 Unions," May 18, 1925, Negro Labor Committee Records, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York. [Hereafter NLC Records]
[160] GBM, May 20, 1925
[161] "Communication, Frank Crosswaith to the American Fund for Public Service," June 19, 1925, NLC Records.
[162] "Negroes and the Labor Movement," *The Messenger*, July 1925, 16.

weekly salary of $50, for which he services are to be subject to call." The board seemed wary of the employment, and somewhat hesitant to accept Minton as a full delegate. Canavan said, only "If he makes good he will be continued." But Minton needed little more encouragement. He immediately alerted the board to black musicians scabbing from Philadelphia and sent a letter the next week stating, "he would do his utmost to secure good results."[163] In part, Minton may have been motivated by personal ambition and financial considerations. As sergeant-at-arms, he dictated where musicians could play and opened up an avenue for illicit contracting. But more likely, Minton genuinely determined to support black musicians from within their union. Years later, he opened a club to serve as a meeting place and practice location for younger jazz musicians, and, from all accounts, he seemed genuinely concerned with their well being. Minton, remembered the writer Ralph Ellison, "was generous with loans, was fond of food himself and, as an old acquaintance recalled, 'loved to put a pot on the range' to share with unemployed friends."[164]

In the coming months after Minton's employment, black musician appeared more frequently at the Local's headquarters. Most often black musicians were called up in violation of union by-laws, for owing money to the board, or in employing non-union players. In 1927, the board reprimanded Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, and Chick Webb, for example, for failing to file weekly reports and fined each five dollars.[165] But even reprimanding African American musicians represented an improvement. Most musicians, white or black, came before the union board in violation of its provisions, and

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[163] GBM, September 29, 1926; GBM, October 6, 1926
[164] Ralph Ellison, "The Golden Age, Time Past," in *Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* ed. John C. Callahan (New York: the Modern Library, 2004), 244.
[165] GBM, April 6, 1927; GBM, April 13, 1927

so the very interest that the union indicated in relation to black musicians' work demonstrated a viable interest on their behalf. By the late 1920s, black musicians had become a visible, if not politically powerful group within the union.

In the 1920s, then, New York's African American musicians actualized the ideals of the Harlem Renaissance. When they played blues, jazz, and Broadway musicals, New York black musicians asserted the merits of African American culture. They gained white and black audiences, made their music formal, and became professionals. By playing long-term jobs, they joined Local 802 and maintained an ethnic identity. In all, black musicians in the 1920s changed the meaning of professional music. They made black vernacular music into popular music and professional music. They overcame some of the stratification that had limited their numbers in the 1910s and became an important group in Local 802. By drawing on black culture, musicians made political strides.

The 1920s, then, marked the pivotal moment when black musicians became central players in the New York music industry. But the union, itself, remained only a marginally effective body. Handicapped by an administration imposed undemocratically from the Federation and ethnic loyalties that superseded union identification, Local 802 had only limited impact on its membership. Writing on the poor musicianship and employment of theatre organists, the journalist Ulysses Chambers, concluded in 1926, "The most advantageous procedure for the musical betterment of all is solid organization of the profession. While it is true that many [musicians] are already members of locals affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, this alone is not enough. It does not

link musicians of color into close enough contact to be of any great value."[166] When musicians faced a real crisis with the onset of the depression, members would find their union entirely ineffective. They would need to create a more cohesive and functional body. They would need to make it more democratic. When insurrection developed in the union after 1929, black musicians had positioned themselves at the center of union politics and as possible leaders.

[166] Ulysses G. Chambers, "Musical Accompaniment in the Church and Motion Picture Program," *New York Amsterdam News,* October 27, 1926, 10.

Chapter 3: The Musician as Proletariat and the Making of a Democratic Union

On November 10, 1930, a loud commotion shocked the offices of Local 802. A crowd of members had assembled in the foyer and drew chairman Edward Canavan up from his desk. They had become "very boisterous," said Canavan, "and attempted to storm the office." Canavan could only offer the meekest concessions. Fearful for the well being of the office and, perhaps, of himself, Canavan met the members in the foyer and promised to address their concerns at a special meeting the following Monday. Unsatisfied, the crowd of members returned on Wednesday, equally disgruntled and violent. Threats mounted, tempers flared, and the officers of the Local became increasingly fearful for their safety. "Information had previously been to the effect," said Canavan, "that the offices were to be wrecked." His first concern was for his protection. For the rest of the week, policemen surrounded the building, bringing a kind of martial law to the typically humdrum mid-town office building. [167]

The riot reflected both the desperation of the times and the discontent of the membership. The depression rocked the music industry in the early 1930s. Musicians lost work in nearly every field: by 1933, 12,000 out of the 15,000 members of Local 802 were unemployed.[168] Many of those few who kept their jobs found them less satisfying and more demanding than in years past, and black musicians often suffered the worst. Meanwhile, the early 1930s saw the beginnings of a radicalized political culture in New

[167] GBM, November 14, 1930
[168] Erenberg, *Swinging the Dream*, 12.

York City. The labor movement expanded; the Communist Party drew support; grassroots political action developed in different contexts, and many musicians took some part. But most of all, the union became more of a burden than a resource for its members. In the tightest of job market, the union restricted where musicians could play, who they could play with, and how much they could charge. It forced musicians to pay dues and proved remarkably inept at providing relief. Morale declined, and political opposition developed.

From the beginnings of the Great Depression until the members gained the right to elect their officers in December of 1934, a mass movement struggled to bring a new administration to Local 802. African American musicians actively participated in this movement. They increased the importance and effectiveness of black independent organizations, sent petitions to the administration, and allied themselves with white musicians who strove to change Local 802. Because black musicians had established themselves as an important part of the union in the 1920s, because the crisis called for immediate reform, and because the leftist political culture of the period engaged New York musicians, New York musicians made alliances across racial lines to reform their union.

I.

The stock market crash and the Great Depression had an immediate effect on the lives of New York musicians. After mid-1929, jobs evaporated in the New York music industry and sent many musicians into a sort of tailspin. Union membership declined as musicians found it more and more difficult to pay monthly dues. Nearly everyone

suffered. Many musicians who had been stars in the 1920s, took the hard fall from the top. The 'average' musician all but abandoned the profession. Calls for help and stories of calamity came to Local 802 by the bundle. Joseph Rosenberg, a violinist and member since the Local's inception, informed its officers that, in October 1929, for the first time, he could not pay his dues. Rosenberg took work driving a taxi cab for a living, and, by 1931, had lost his membership in the Local and stopped playing.[169] Samuel Green, probably a theater musician, appeared before the board in April, told the officers that he had been "out of work for some time," and asked to borrow money.[170] The sick and unemployed Clarence Williams, a composer who had been at the forefront of early jazz, applied again and again for reinstatement in the local and found, each time, he could not pay.[171] Their stories were repeated countless times in the early 1930s. Musicians, of all genres and ethnicities, of all ages and talents, lost work and looked for help.

African American musicians, like other black workers, often fared the worst. Sources of black employment dried up quickly. The Theatre Owners Booking Association, an agency that booked black musicians in about eighty theatres around the country, went out of business in 1932.[172] Many of the musicians who made quick gains on the blues craze of the twenties became insolvent. Jelly Roll Morton, Bessie Smith, and a host of others lost work, status, and financial solvency. For a brief period, jazz music seemed on the brink of extinction. In the early 1930s, said the composer Hoagy Carmichael, "jazz was dying and at a fast clip. The stock market crash had sent millions of jazzbos to the ranks

[169] GBM, October 23, 1929; GBM, December 31, 1931
[170] GBM, April 3, 1929
[171] GBM, February 4, 1930, GBM July 23, 1930, GBM, July 11, 1930.
[172] Lopes, 100

of the unemployed."[173] Black audiences simply had no money to attend concerts, and white audiences turned to more accessible sounds.

'Sweet' band music and musicians replaced jazz in dance halls and cabarets. Most identified in the 1920s with the white bandleader Paul Whiteman, sweet music was characterized by heavy string arrangements and a tendency, as its name suggested, towards the saccharine. Its bandleaders discouraged improvisation and avoided the rhythmic vitality that made jazz exciting. The music had flourished alongside Fletcher Henderson's innovations in the 1920s, a tamer alternative to even Henderson's sophisticated sound. But in the early 1930s, sweet music sustained the fading popular music industry. In 1930, most firms eliminated their 'race record' catalogues and relied on sales from songs like Johnny Marvin's "Little White Lies," the most popular song to emerge on Victor Records in 1931.[174] African American bandleaders found it difficult to gain acceptance as sweet bandleaders. "It has been musical suicide for the average large Negro orchestra," reported the *New York Amsterdam News*, "to even think about sweet music as a trade-mark."[175] White sweet bandleaders almost never employed black musicians, and when black musicians (or any musician, for that matter) found the rare 'sweet job,' they found the music stifling. Don Redman, an arranger for Fletcher Henderson, remembered that in the early 1930s, "we did a lot of traveling on the road and were almost always playing for white dances." "We had a terrific band," lamented

[173] qtd. in Lopes, 98
[174] Erenberg, *Swinging the Dream*, 14.
[175] Dan Burley, "He'll Play His Music 'Sweet,' Not Hot!" *New York Amsterdam News*, April 13, 1940, 20.

Redman, "but I wasn't able to do the kind of jazz things I might have in the places we were playing."[176]

Instead, Redman and others began traveling across the country at a grueling pace. Some musicians worked seven days a week. Many played all night, slept little, and played again in the afternoons. Their schedules could be as exhausting as those of any industrial worker. "The period of time starting from Saturday night, 9 p.m., to Monday morning, 11 or 12 noon, was about as grueling as anything one can imagine," said Rex Stewart. "It's not to surprising that, with this exhausting pace, some of us didn't make it into middle age."[177] Some played the same insipid music night after night until, as one musician said, "I couldn't play anything else."[178] Musicians of the 1930s worked harder with less job security and less money than they had ever done.

On top of these troubles, technological innovations in sound had matured, and the musician, like the cotton picker or the carpenter, entered the age of mechanical reproduction.[179] Music had become "a thing" in 1877 when Thomas Edison invented the phonograph, and its commodification only increased in the coming years. At first, as we have seen, recorded music proved a boon to the musician, disseminating work and invigorating or instigating the careers of many just entering the profession. In the 1910s and 1920s, recordings and radio had complimented live performance, and, while consumers had the time and money, recordings drew audiences to shows and provided

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[176] Don Redman, "Don Redman, Jazz Composer-Arranger," in Williams ed.,101.
[177] Stewart, 88
[178] Author's interview with Murray Rothstein, June 21, 2007, Hilsboro, NJ.
[179] For a broader view of this process see Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Available at http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm.

employment. As a form that was for all intents and purposes color blind, recordings, moreover, had proved especially valuable for black musicians.[180]

But by the late 1920s and early 1930s, recorded sound had become so easily accessible and so widely distributed that musicians found themselves displaced by recordings and their professional value greatly decreased. As James Petrillo, the president of the Chicago Local 10 put it powerfully, "Nowhere in this mechanical age does the workman create the machine which destroys him, but that's what happens to the musician when he plays for a recording. The iceman didn't create the refrigerator. The coachman didn't build the automobile. But the musician plays his music into a recorder and a short time later the radio station manager comes around and says, 'Sorry, Joe, we've got all your stuff on records, so we don't need you any more.' And Joe's out of a job."[181] In the early 1930s, musicians lost work on radio, in department stores, and in dance halls.

But the most visible example of this process came in movie theatres. Movies had come to New York and to popularity in the 1910s. The first silent film aired on a summer night in 1912, and, despite skepticism, New Yorkers, like all Americans, had flocked to movies ever since.[182] In those early years, they not only saw silent films but listened to house musicians who provided background and entertainment between showings. Movie theatre musicians played in large orchestras, in bands, and as solo pianists or organists. In Harlem in the 1920s, black professional musicians had often worked as theatre musicians, and, when they did, they joined a large sector of the musical profession nation-wide. In 1926, movie theatres across the country employed 26,000 musicians, local men and

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[180] Douglas, 420
[181] Quoted in Seltzer, 40
[182] Sanjek, *American Popular Music Business in the 20th Century* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987), 4-5.

women who made up the heart of the AFM. But in 1927, sound movies arrived and movie theatre musicians lost out. Movie theatres added sound systems and synchronizing machines. They showed talking movies, and put their musicians out on the street. In 1930, 14,000 musicians worked in movie theatres. By 1934, there were only 4,100.[183]

The displacement of work particularly affected black musicians. Recorded film or radio music often came out of California from sweet bands and orchestras of all white men who played stock written arrangements. The new division of labor undermined the enjoyment of performance. Composers, arrangers, and performers rarely saw the piece transformed from start to finish and gave up what control they had to the producers.[184] Local musicians outside California suffered as a result, and Harlem's local musicians proved no exception. In October of 1929, for instance, Alice Jackson, probably a pianist or organist, appealed to Local 802 for help. She had lost her job playing at the "colored" Odeon Theatre, had been out of work for five or six weeks, and found it nearly impossible to find new employment. "The theatres in Harlem," she told the Board, "are employing boys to work the nonsynchronizing machines at $12 and $15 per week."[185] Jackson never recovered her job and joined a chorus of black New York musicians scuttling for work.

While musicians lost jobs, the political climate around them shifted leftward. With the onset of the Great Depression, radical politics, dormant through the 1920s, made an impressive comeback. Communist Party membership expanded. Democrats gained control of national and local government and began to institute progressive reform. Unions became more aggressive. But the leftist shift was not just the result of

[183] Kelley, "Without A Song," 133.
[184] Ibid., 132.
[185] GBM, October 30, 1929.

intellectuals and politicians. The rank and file, the community member, the civic citizen began to take far more interest and action in politics. Workers joined unions in larger numbers, voted in elections, and became involved with progressive politics.[186] Even traditionally apolitical realms became sites for activism. In 1931, for instance, when an underground boss threatened to centralize the Harlem numbers racket and send small hustlers out work, racket runners called a strike and Harlemites a boycott. The boss relented and gave black number runners their jobs back.[187]

More so, civil rights for black workers and unity across racial lines emerged as a central program on the Left. In 1928, the Communist Party defined black Southerners as an "oppressed nation" and put the 'race problem' on its agenda. The Party fought evictions and for rent controls in Harlem.[188] It defended a group of black boys falsely accused on trumped up rap charges and made the 'Scottsboro boys' a rallying call. But most importantly, in the early 1930s, it was 'fun' to be a Harlem communist, and musicians played an important role in making it so. Along with rallies, marches, and petitions, the Party began organizing social events that drew whites and blacks together. There were Communist summer camps, social gatherings, dances, parties, concerts, and marches, and many enlisted the support of black members of Local 802. The campaign on behalf of the Scottsboro boys demonstrated the importance of entertainment for Communists. In early May of 1932, the Scottsboro Unity Defense Committee formed. In mid-May, as their first order of business, they hosted a party at the Rockland Ballroom featuring a virtual who's who of the New York music scene at the time. Fletcher

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[186] See Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1940*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), 251-260.
[187] Cheryl Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode: Black Harlem During the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford UP, 1991), 102.
[188] Greenberg, 97

Henderson, Duke Ellington, Fats Waller, and the entire house band of Small's Paradise, one of the largest Harlem clubs, all Local 802 members, played their upbeat swinging music for a crowd of interracial dancers in solidarity and celebration of nine black boys in an Alabama penitentiary.[189] In this context, musicians mixed in radical circles, absorbed radical rhetoric, and brought some new sense of workers' rights to their union.

Other musicians joined the Party directly or, at least, frequented Party meetings. Albert Walters, a clarinet player, remembered that in the early 1930s, "as a Negro, I was asked to participate in discussions about the economic and social betterment of my people as well as of musicians in general." Walters attended. "At first these discussion were informal; later I was invited to attend meetings for the same purpose," he remembered. He found that some meetings specifically targeted black musicians: "Most of the time was devoted to discussion of how to get better working conditions for musicians, how to break down discrimination against the Negro, etc."[190]

With the Communist upsurge or, perhaps, in spite of it, interracial trade union activism also rekindled in New York. In 1933, the Internal Ladies Garment Workers' Union mounted a large campaign to organize black workers. It raised these workers' wages, and then, several black women even made onto the executive board. In 1932, Harlemites began the first "The Don't Buy Where You Can't Work," essentially a boycott movement to increase black employment as clerks in Harlem businesses. The movement reached outwards and downwards, drawing support from churches, labor unions, and every day people who had rarely picketed in their lives. Before long, it had extended from clerks towards gaining benefits for all black workers, cultural workers no

[189] Naison, 71-72
[190] "Executive Board Minutes, April 18, 1957," *Allegro,* April 1957, 3.

different than the rest. In December of 1933, editors at *New York Amsterdam News* alerted its readership that, "In many communities of this country Negro actors and musicians are being used and exploited" and urged Harlem residents to take action: "Patronize the theatres in your neighborhood and make them strong, so that you can demand the same consideration as they are forced to vie elsewhere."[191] During depression and political upheaval, community leaders had begun to see musicians' struggles as part of labor's cause.

Whatever the changing politics around Local 802, the union's administration took only token measures to remedy the crisis engulfing its membership. After the 1930 riot, the union rescinded a five percent 'tax' it levied on leaders. It established a ten thousand dollar relief fund.[192] For the first time since its formation, the Local 802 gave all its members an extension on their dues payment.[193] But, by any standard, the union's efforts had only the smallest impact on its members. In 1935, one black musician who had worked in New York for sixteen years but only joined Local 802 five years before said bitterly, "Did just as good as a non-union man…the union is no good to me—it hasn't helped me one bit."[194] In face of the Depression, Local 802 was all but worthless.

As it struggled to support it own members, the union's half-hearted commitment to African American labor struggles turned to total apathy. In November 1929, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, then the leading black labor organization, contacted the Local perhaps for financial support. The Directors postponed looking at the message

[191] "A Happy New (Deal) Year," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 27, 1933, 5.
[192] GBM, November 14, 1930; GBM, November 19, 1930
[193] GBM, March 17, 1932.
[194] Franklin, 252

until the next meeting and never addressed it.[195] When the Savoy Ballroom, in a gesture of what historians might call "welfare capitalism," offered to host a benefit dance for needy Local 802 members in Harlem, the union procrastinated and never responded.[196] But, while the union ignored the struggles of black workers, it purchased tickets for "The Woman's International Union Label League" and took out a one hundred dollar, full page add in the journal of the United Hebrew Trades.[197] As the union faced a crisis, support to African Americans outside the union was the first to go.

Worse, the late 1920s and early 1930s saw a rising corruption among union officials, to which African American musicians often proved the easiest and least defensible victims. The 'kick-back' racket had long plagued Local 802. In the complex and sometimes seedy business world of black musicians, payments, often in cash, could be notoriously unreliable. Musicians gave payments to other musicians, to contractors, or to union officials and saw the money never reach its intended destination. In 1928, for instance, the banjo player Elmer Snowden became perplexed that he had not received a union card despite punctual due payments, and learned that he owed an additional forty dollars. Snowden had given the money to one Charles Lewis, likely a union delegate, and told Lewis to pay the union treasure. The payment never reached the office.[198] Because Snowden had paid in cash and in small payments to various sources, corrupt union officials took easy advantage.

No doubt the kickback racket had sprung up in the 1920s, as musicians played in speakeasies and money ran fluidly. But when jobs became scarcer and union officials

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[195] GBM, November 7, 1929.
[196] GBM, February 5, 1930; GBM, February 13, 1930.
[197] GBM April 30, 1930
[198] GBM, April 6, 1928

themselves seemed to struggle, corruption became an open and invidious fact in Local 802. Union officials, sometimes, took no pains to disguise their criminal methods. In 1933, for instance, when trumpeter Rex Stewart had begun to lead his own band and had acquired a regular contract at a mid-town club, a union official stopped in the first week of the gig. Stewart recounted the story in full:

> While I was back in the dressing room, sure enough, the union man came in as I was paying the fellows. He said, 'I guess you had better let me do this for you, Rex.' I replied that I knew how to handle it and thanked him, but I wondered why this chap was being so helpful. I kept on paying the musicians their money, being very careful to keep the union portion in a separate pile. When I finished, I handed the correct amount of tax to the union man. He took it, gave me a receipt and then asked, 'Where's the rest of the money?' I had no idea what he was talking about and said so. Then I had a real eye-opener as he explained, 'Do you mean to tell me that you don't know? Nobody told you about the arrangements? Why everybody knows that X number of dollars are to be handed to me. Regardless of the contract, a certain percentage goes to the association—never mind who they are. And I get something for my time and trouble. Ask anybody. That's the way business is done. Now you can call it anything you want—insurance, kick-back or whatever. But if you don't take care of business. You're going to be out of business!...I told him, nothing doing, and he replied, "Okay, if that's the way you want it. That's what you'll be doing—nothing.' I never could be positive, but after that hassle a lot of things went wrong enough to break up the band."[199]

Stewart's experience was far from unique. Black musicians often received more pay in cash than white musicians. They often had less experience dealing with legal contracts and with white businessman, contractors, or booking agents. They found themselves at the mercy of an increasingly corrupt union, and, in response, they developed tactics of survival and of resistance.

II.

Efforts to reform the union took two forms that paralleled those of working people everywhere in America. "The Depression affected people in two different ways. The

[199] Stewart, 128-129

great majority reacted by thinking money is the most important thing in the world. Get yours. And get it for your children. Nothing else matters. And there was a small number of people who felt the whole system was lousy. You have to change it," said the civil rights activist Virginia Durr.[200] The musicians of Local 802 felt little different.

Many members, perhaps the majority, became disillusioned and disgruntled. They played jobs below the union's wage scale and making secret deals with employers to undercut the union wages. No doubt, this "chiseling" reflected the desperation of the times. Any work, even low paying work, was good work for musicians. In playing on lower wage scales, a sort of scabbing, musicians gained more employment by undercutting competition competition. But it also probably reflected a vaguely political response to the union's sheer ineptitude. When the union provided no substantial relief, when it served as a vehicle for corruption, while it reflected no democratic initiative from the members, many musicians circumvented its wage scales intentionally and with some sense of retribution. Chiseling required will, a collusion between employer and worker against the union without which both sides could suffer heavy consequences. If musicians were found chiseling, they were fined or expelled from the Local. If employers were found paying beneath scale, they were picketed. Musicians who chiseled, then, did so in secrecy and willfully, and, probably, they did so in great numbers. By the mid-1930s, chiseling had made the union all but irrelevant in many fields. A black musician who had been in the union for nine years said in 1935, "The morale of the members has been so broken down by chiseling in and underbidding union wages by both Negro and white members that to be a union man means about nothing to me now."[201] Disgruntled with

[200] qtd. in Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*, 139.
[201] Franklin, 252

the inactivity, corruption, and sheer uselessness of their union, many members, black and white, fought back through chiseling and made reform a necessity.

A smaller, but significant number took direct political action. Often, they did so along ethnic lines. In 1931, over the objections of the local's governing board, Irish musicians formed a separate Irish association to protect their interests.[202] In August 1933, Jewish musicians, "elected a committee to devise ways and means for bettering conditions in the Jewish business."[203] From the start of the Depression, Italian musicians organized a "Fiesta" committee and staged large brass band concerts to aid unemployed members.[204] For white musicians ethnic organization sometimes replaced union organization.

African American musicians also supported each other as an ethnic group. As early as January of 1928, black musicians sent a petition to the governing board. Its content remains unknown, but the board perused it over, acknowledged the political activities of its "Colored members" and, then, from all indications, never responded.[205] No doubt black musicians voiced some of the same complaints that white musicians or, for that matter, all workers did: they too wanted jobs, shorter hours, and better pay. But black musicians probably also demanded specific redresses. They probably protested against the failure of the union to employ more than one black delegate, against the corruption of its officials, and against the union's apathy when club owners refused to play black musicians. They probably protested against sweet bands' refusal to hire black musicians and the decreased job opportunities they found for recording sessions.

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[202] GBM, October 29, 1931.
[203] "Regular Meeting of the Governing Board," *Local 802 A.F. of M. Official Jounral*, September 1933, 9.
[204] Murray Rothstein, "The Origins of Local 802," *Allegro*, November 1996, 21.
[205] GBM, January 25, 1928

And when the union proved intransient to their demands, black musicians formed new organizations and established a base for continued agitation against the union administration. The Clef Club died out sometime in the mid-1920s, but more inclusive organizations for jazz musicians became more active. The Colored Artists Bureau, established in 1934, made contacts, generated jobs, and strove to keep black artists working.[206] More importantly, the Rhythm Club, of 168 West 132nd Street and established around 1930, emerged as the meeting place and safety net for newly arrived and established black musicians and became, for all intents, the center of the black music community. "As soon as you'd get up in the morning, and you want to go for socializing in the afternoon, you'd go to the Rhythm Club," recalled the guitarist Lawrence Lucie. "It was the greatest musician's club in Harlem. All the musicians used to go there every day and exchange ideas and talk and get gigs. That was where you'd get your club dates."[207] Before long, the club's owner Bert Hall had become a leading activist among black musicians and a vocal presence at Local 802.

Hall had arrived in New York from Chicago in 1928. Born in Maryland in 1893, he learned the trombone and began a peripatetic career in the business. In Philadelphia, he led a group called Bert Hall and His Jungle Band.[208] In Chicago, he played freelance jobs. But when he got to New York, at the outset of the Depression, he found work less reliable as a player than a hustler. He worked as a gambler and as a booking agent until somehow gathering the funds to purchase a club underneath the Lafayette Theatre then called the Hoofer's Club after the dancers who spent their after hours on its premises. He

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[206] "Colored Artists Bureau Doing Well," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 22, 1934, 10.
[207] Qtd. in Todd Weeks, *Luck's In My Corner* (New York: Routledge Press, Forthcoming), 113.
[208] D.D. Turner, "Organizing and Improvising: a History of Philadelphia's Black Musician's Protective Union Local 274, American Federation of Musicians," (PhD. Diss., Temple University, 1993), 65.

renamed it the Rhythm Club, and it quickly emerged as the first and most respected stop for many black musicians newly arrived in the city. As he assumed more power among black musicians, Hall began to take an active role in Local 802.[209]

Around 1930, Hall had run unsuccessfully for the Governing Board twice. The first time he lost outright; the second time, though he won enough votes, members of the local's Board refused to serve under him out of racial prejudice. But Local 802 needed support from black musicians and needed someone willing or capable of controlling the Harlem business or, at least, bring chiseling under control. Henry Minton, the black sergeant-at-arms appointed in 1926, remained on the union payroll into 1932, but whether through his own activities, the sheer exasperation of the Harlem scene, or the bankruptcy of the union leadership, Minton fell out of favor with the governing board. By the end of 1932, the board let Minton go and, after a last ditch petition to regain his job, Minton lost his union employment entirely.[210] He spent the remainder of his career, more profitably and notably, as an official with the New Amsterdam Musical Association and as the owner of an important Harlem nightclub called Minton's Playhouse.[211]

Bert Hall proved an able replacement. In 1931, chairman Canavan employed Hall as business agent for the Local, and Hall became the first African American ever to hold such position.[212] By October, he had proved his worth. Hall submitted reports on dancing schools in Harlem, made suggestions on how to improve working conditions, and brought delinquent employers to the attention of the Local.[213] "Bert," said the guitarist Danny

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[209] "Bert Hall Dies Here: Sick 1 Day," March 2, 1932, *New York Amsterdam News*, 1.
[210] GBM, February 24, 1933
[211] New Amsterdam Musical Association, *Minute Book, 1935-1937*. Samuel Heyward Papers, Box 3, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York.
[212] Percival Outram, "Activities Among Union Musicians," *New York Age*, December 3, 1932.
[213] GBM, October 22, 1931

Barker, "introduced many reforms in Local 802 that were for the protection of its Negro members who, lots of times after working in clubs owned by racketeers, were doubtful of getting paid until the money was in their hands."[214] But just as Hall began to bring reform, he died a sudden and untimely death. Sick for only day, Hall, barely forty years old, succumbed to a heart attack and left his work incomplete.[215]

In his short time in the New York music scene, Hall initiated several important changes. With the Rhythm Club, he established a central, cohesive African American musicians' organization—a forum from which black musicians could organize their complaints. As the first black business agent to the Local, he combated racial prejudice in its administration and provided a model for black representation in the union. Following Hall, a few committed black musicians played a more central role in the union. They allied themselves with an incoming administration and represented Harlem musicians. They would alerted the governing board to problems in Harlem, make suggestions for how to improve jobs, and guide black musicians' through the unions' complicated loopholes. These men supported struggling black musicians and sustained the careers of those who flourished. But Hall provided the model and the precedent. After him, black musicians could not simply be ignored.

After the 1930 riot, reform movements gathered speed within the Local crossed ethnic and racial boundaries and began to force the union into a more democratic organization. Recall that since the 1921 reorganization of the union, members had had little opportunity to elect their representatives, and the American Federation of Musicians had appointed its governing board. As musicians' became more disgruntled with their

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[214] Danny Barker, "Jelly Roll Morton in New York," in Williams ed., 13.
[215] Outram.

organization, they attacked this provision and sought control over their Local. Given the crisis of the profession and the radicalized environment around the local, it was almost inevitable that some reform movement would develop in the local.

That local autonomy emerged as the reformers central cause resulted from a growing rift between the New York local and the rest of the country. While Local 802 musicians had an integrated membership, AFM unions outside New York uniformly opposed interracial cooperation and, often, acted through outright racism. In 1932, the national body of the Federation stipulated that black locals could only exist as subsidiary locals. The Federation ruled that black musicians could only "mingle for professional purposes with consent of both locals" and that the white locals could bring black musicians up on trial. The Federation's provision drew the attention and attacks of the NAACP, which called every self-respecting musician to fight the AFM's provision.[216]

The NAACP had good reason. Most AFM locals drew a strict color line. Only one other AFM local besides Local 802, Detroit's Local 5, had an integrated membership, and white locals outside of New York often forced black musicians off the job.[217] In the summer of 1933, for instance, when the Local 802 trombonist Clyde Bernhardt tried to play a job with a black band in Atlantic City, white union delegates forced him out. ""On the first day, the union delegate came in and gave Tebbet [the bandleader] a bad time," remembered Bernhardt, "Didn't want no black band in Convention Hall, he said. The union was all-white, the management was white, the production was white, and the walkers [patrons] didn't take to blacks walking alongside of them, either. So, I was not

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[216] "American Federation of Musicians Draws Color Bar," *The Chicago Defender*, May 14, 1932, 13; "Ruling of the Musicians' Union Called Unfair," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 11, 1932, 7.

[217] David Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big Band Jazz in New Deal America*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1994), p. 127.

surprised."[218] For black musicians to gain some authority in New York, then, they would need more separation from the Federation.

For white musicians, sentiments were little different. Facing the deepening crisis of the depression, all members demanded some change. Calls for autonomy and, with it, overarching reform of the union spread throughout the membership. In April 1932, 2,100 members signed a petition to discuss local autonomy at an open meeting.[219] In May, one hundred musicians staged a protest band to give Local 802's delegates to the annual AFM convention a surely politicized and probably intimidating send-off. [220] In October, 274 musicians sent a petition requesting a reduction in price scales.[221] In December, members organized the "musicians' welfare league," probably an organization aiming to provide more unemployment relief.[222]

Through these efforts, shortly after Bert Hall's death in 1932, musicians opened several positions on the Local's governing board and trial board to a democratic process. Candidates now competed for six governing board positions, for the nine trial board positions, and for representation as delegates to the American Federation of Musicians and the Central Trades and Labor Council. Though the Federation still appointed the Chairman and many on the Board, a number of reformist political parties sprang up within the union, and, importantly, campaigned across ethnic lines.

At first, the most aggressive and successful of these parties was the Original Ticket or the Original Yellow Ticket. Their leader was a longtime Jewish member named Louis

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[218] Bernhardt, 113
[219] GBM, March 17, 1932
[220] "Special Meeting of the Governing Board," *Official Journal of Local 802, A.F. of M.,* April, 1932, 4; GBM, May 26, 1932.
[221] GBM, October 27, 1932
[222] "Regular Meeting of the Governing Board, December 8, 1932," *Official Journal of Local 802, A.F. of M.*, January 1933, 5.

Weissman, and their platform focused on the continued push for Local autonomy. Weissman's group ran against two other parties: a conservative party whose name remains unknown and a more radical group called the Blue Ticket. But Weissman was the first to actively seek out black members' support. On a Monday night at 2:30 A.M. in December of 1932, Weissman convened a campaign rally at a Harlem social club, Carey's Democratic Club, enlisted the support of the black press, and put the ragtime composer Joe Jordan on his ticket.[223]

Born in 1882, Jordan had grown up playing ragtime and classical piano in the St. Louis area. He was a contemporary and friend of the legendary ragtime pianist and composer Scott Joplin and the older man's influence clearly showed in Jordan's playing and writing—in formal two-beat arrangements and a heavily syncopated piano style. Like Joplin, Jordan came from a middle class family. He was well educated, and well traveled. He graduated from Lincoln Institute (now Lincoln University) and made the inevitable journey north soon after. In 1903, he settled in Chicago and within two years had become a leading figure in black musical circles.[224] There, Jordan became exposed to musicians' trade unionism.

Chicago had the oldest black musicians' union in the country, Local 208 of the A.F. of M. The union had formed in 1902. It grew quickly, swelled by Southern migrants and the increasing popularity of black music. By 1918, Local 208 had become prosperous enough to purchase a three story building on the South Side. By the late 1920s, Local 208 had become an important, if not powerful union within the Federation. The Chicago local had a core of longtime black union officials, and Jordan probably knew all of them in

[223] GBM, April 27, 1933
[224] Southern, 324

passing and some of them intimately. Henry Gray, for instance, who became Local 208's president in 1938 and had served as an official for years before, played in Jordan's bands.[225] From Chicago, then, Jordan imported musicians' trade union tactics, leadership, and a firm belief in musicians' organization to New York. He became one of the founders of the Clef Club and even composed one of its hit songs, a jaunty, if stilted piece, he called "Teasin' Rag," and probably joined Local 310 along with the rest of the Clef Club in 1910. He was in New York and outside of it a well-respected and long established leader among black musicians.

And so, when Weisman enlisted Jordan's support in December of 1932, he expected to receive the black vote as a bloc. When the Blue Ticket also ran a black member, Bill Conway, Weisman declared it a "political trick" and urged black members to vote for Jordan as the first in the field. The results were, perhaps, disappointing. When the *New York Age* reporter and musician Percy Outram arrived at the ticket's rally in Harlem, he found "there was a great preponderance of white members to colored," a group that consisted only of some ten whom he recognized and some half a dozen he did not.[226] Still, Jordan seems to have drawn at least sufficient support from the fifteen hundred black members of the local. In the winter election, he became the first black member ever elected to a union leadership position. From his election onward, white musicians seeking to change the administration made alliances with black musicians and included them as representatives.

As a result, black musicians had their first serious chance to reform the union from within. As a trial board member, Jordan was expected to judge disputes between sidemen

[225] Clark Halker, "A History of Local 208 and the Struggle for Racial Equality in the American Federation of Musicians," *Black Music Research Journal* 8 (Autumn, 1988): 212 and *passim.*
[226] Outram.

leaders. He went far beyond his duty. For the year 1933, Joe Jordan *became* Local 802 in Harlem. He contacted employers and set up meetings with Local 802 officers.[227] He asked about conditions, learned about agreements and helped individual members, like the singer Adelaide Hall, receive permission from the union to work. By July, he had devised a plan to increase employment. Black house bands from the Washington D.C., he found, would play at the Harlem Opera House and leave the Howard Theatre, in Washington, either unoccupied or with Washington musicians. Jordan arranged for the Howard Theatre to employee New York musicians when the Howard musicians' came to New York. And then he considered pushing it further, employing New York musicians in Philadelphia when Philadelphia musicians came to New York.[228] The plan, however effective or not, demonstrated the importance of black musicians' networks outside the city to its black musician leaders inside of it. Jordan could never arrived at such an idea or made such a compromise without communication and support from black A.F.M. locals in Washington and elsewhere.

But whatever Jordan's efforts, the Yellow Ticket administration had little success in gaining autonomy. In June of 1933, several delegates from Weissman's administration petitioned the Federation for self-governance of the local. The Federation roundly dismissed their appeal, claiming that the Local had functioned well enough without self-government, and, mostly, that the local would descend into "destructive factionalism" and "violations of the laws of the Federation."[229] And Weisman returned to New York to face an increasingly political membership.

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[227] GBM, February 2, 1933.
[228] GBM, July 20, 1933.
[229] GBM, July 6, 1933

After the 1932 election, agitation for autonomy and reform grew. The men who had run on the Blue Ticket began an aggressive campaign to politicize the membership and make more militant calls for autonomy. A group of these musicians called "the Committee of Fifteen" took over the insurrection and radicalized its demands. They called for unemployment insurance from the union as well as autonomy and an end to corruption.[230] Overwhelmingly, they drew support from leftist political groups in New York. The dissenters, wrote trumpeter Murray Rothstein, himself an activist years later, "had help from other trade unions, labor lawyers, the American Civil Liberties Union, and even the Socialist Party."[231]

They included a broad spectrum of different musicians including Bill Conway, an African American. Conway had forged a career as a performer as part of a now mostly forgotten "Conway brothers radio team," but he had risen in black musical circles at the Rhythm Club where he served as its main booking agent.[232] He was, so far as Local 802 was concerned, Bert Hall's chosen replacement and in allying himself with the fifteen would emerge as the first black executive board member in the local's history. He joined with musicians of wide experiences. The oldest was the violinist Henri Conrad, born in 1870, who had served as president of the MMPU.[233] The most vocal was William Feinberg, who would later serve as secretary for many years. Some may have had ties to the Communist Party. They hired Joseph Brodsky, a Communist lawyer, who would serve on the team that defended the Scottsboro Boys several years later, and they may

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[230] GBM, April 27, 1933
[231] Rothstein, 21
[232] "Rhythm Club to Pay Honor to Bert Hall," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 22, 1933, 16.
[233] "Henri Conrad Dies at 65-Pioneer in Dance Field," *Official Journal, Local 802 American Federation of Musicians*, May and June 1935, 1.

have printed some of their leaflets on Communist stationary.[234] But whatever their true political beliefs, and probably they ranged from the moderately leftist to the radical, the fifteen worked for autonomy and reform almost tirelessly.

They built support through most of the membership. In April of 1933, a membership meeting passed a resolution calling for self-government. The members argued on grounds of power, of precedent, and internal grievance. Local 802, said the members, made up fifteen percent of the AFM. Every other local had the right to self-government through election of officers. Since New York musicians lacked such a right, the union had ceased to function effectively. Thus, "we, the members of Local 802," they said, "protest against the present form of government of this Local and demand the absolute right of Local Autonomy now enjoyed by every other Local of the A.F. of M."[235] In response, the Federation made small concession. It allowed the Local to hold monthly rather than quarterly membership meetings, and, by doing so, speeded insurrection.

At the second monthly meeting in February of 1934, the committee of fifteen managed to push through a resolution calling for a secret vote to determine whether members favored autonomy or opposed it. On March 12, the administration tallied the vote and found the response near unanimous. Of 3,855 who voted, 3,728 voted for autonomy and only 127 against it. The fifteen pushed forward. On March 19, the membership passed another resolution to elect a committee of eleven to draft revised by-laws for the local ensuring self-governance and to elect another committee, also of eleven, to make plans for free elections to the governing board positions then appointed by the federation and for the secretary, treasurer, and president of the local. The fifteen

[234] GBM, April 27, 1933.
[235] GBM, April 13, 1933.

almost all won election to these committees. Conrad and Feinberg won seats on the by-laws committee. Conaway was elected to the election committee. A special membership meeting was scheduled for April 2 for members to ratify the new by-laws. The election was planned for April 13.[236]

The administration resisted. On March 28, the Federation refused to allow the meeting to take place and threatened the local with expulsion. If the April 2 meeting went ahead, the Federation threatened to revoke the Local's charter, much as it had done in 1921. When the committee of fifteen tried to organize the meetings without the consent of the administration, the administration decided to expel the fifteen musicians from the Local. The fifteen brought a lawsuit to the Bronx Supreme Court and before Justice Ernest Hammer. Hammer proved a liberal ally. In his decision, he defended the activities of the fifteen, reinstated their position in the union, and called for labor solidarity. It was time, he wrote in his decision, for "workingmen and labor unions to hold close their ranks in these trying days of depression and labor difficulty…the knowledge of the present lack of employment and the low state of the funds of workers should be to union tribunals a guiding influence to leniency rather than severity in decision and sentence."[237]

Beat in the vote of membership and in the courts, the Federation had little option but to accede to demands for autonomy. At the annual convention in June of 1934, the Federation at last granted self-government to Local 802. It was not cart-blanche. The Federation reserved the right to appoint its chairman for another two years. The first election for union president would come only in 1936. In a stab at the fifteen, the Federation protested the "un-American communistic propaganda among its members"

[236] Koukly v. Canavan, 154 N.Y. Misc. 343, 277 N.Y. Supp. 28 (1935)
[237] Ibid.

and put in a provision that the local would need to vote as to whether it approved of "communistic agitation within the union or that communists be members of the union."[238] But, in most ways, the membership and the committee of fifteen had won an important political battle against the administration of the Federation. Members had forged a coalition across ethnic and racial lines to take control over their union. They took their first efforts to address the crisis engulfing their industry, and they brought their first democratically elected administration into office.

Immediately, the character of Local 802 changed in two ways. First, the local became more politicized. It called for members to be more involved and more committed. In January 1935, *The Official Journal*, the union's newsletter, reported, "Brother Members: You now have the opportunity to create and regulate the policies of your Local. This right was achieved after a long and bitter struggle. Newly won rights bring new responsibilities….Your greatest safeguard and your greatest strength is your voice and your vote at monthly membership meetings…Attend the MONTHLY MEETINGS of your local."[239] It became involved with politics outside of the limited concerns of its own. The older leadership had pleaded strict political neutrality. "As long as we are members of 802," said Louis Weissman, "absolutely no political organization or anybody is going to inject politics into this organization, either Democrats or Republicans bringing in an outside group."[240] But the group of fifteen seemed to take clear political sides. They supported Franklin Roosevelt, drew members attention to broader political issues, and

[238] GBM, July 5, 1934
[239] "A Message from the Executive Board," *Local 802, A.F. of M., Official Journal*, January 1935, 1.
[240] GBM, April 27, 1933.

would support and even run candidates for civic office. But, perhaps more importantly, the new leadership imbued the Local with an energy and effectiveness it had not seen since before the 1920s. The leaders pledged to stop kick-backs. They campaigned against chiseling. They converted the union periodical, a dry, slim fact sheet, into an effective voice. They editorialized and advertised, gave accounts of their actions, and made connections with other activists throughout the city. And, for the first time in over a decade, Local 802 became truly accountable to its membership and committed to the musicians' cause.

For African American musicians, the fight for autonomy cemented their place in the local and its administration. When the Local had undergone political changes before—when it had joined the Federation in 1902, when it became Local 802 in 1921—black musicians had been at its periphery. When the Local gained autonomy on December 20, 1934, they joined in the movement at its center. Members elected Bill Conaway as the first black executive board member. The new, interracial administration appointed two black business agents, a saxophonist named Ralph Redmond, and a former bandleader named Jimmy "Peekabo' Davis.[241] And within, the year the administration began lending support to Harlem community organizations. In August of 1935, the Harlem Labor Committee asked the Local to donate money and members to its relief fund. The local bought five tickets for a relief raffle and gave them to several black members.[242] It was a small act at the time but a harbinger of things to come.

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[241] "Bosses Harlem Musicians," *The Chicago Defender*, November 17, 1934, 9.
[242] "Minutes of Executive Board Meetings, Regular Meeting, August 29, 1935," *Local 802, Official Journal*, October 1935, 11.

Chapter 4: Unity and Agitation in the Swing Era

The ten-year period, from 1936 to 1946, was, at once, the 'age of the CIO,' of swing music, and of the Popular Front. It marked the largest surge forward in the American labor movement, a Renaissance of American popular culture, and a leftward shift in the political culture of the nation.[243] It also marked a heyday for Local 802. The union expanded in size and scope. The membership increased to over twenty thousand, and the union's control over public performance of music reached a zenith. In 1939, for instance, the union had become so powerful that a boy scout who played "a few bugle calls" on a radio station had to contact the union for permission to play without pay.[244]

As the union expanded so to did the place of African American musicians within it. About a month before the boy scout's appearance on the radio, the union's administration released a statement expressing its commitment towards ending racial discrimination: "The administration appeals for complete tolerance and equal treatment of all members of our Local, whatever their race, their color, their religion, their sex, or their political opinion…today as never before we must we expose and resist every attempt to inject bigotry and race discrimination into our ranks."[245] Local 802 protected the jobs of black members within its ranks, allied itself and lent support to black freedom struggles developing in New York City and the nation at large, and spewed forth a

[243] Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* (New York: Verso, 1998).
[244] "Executive Board Minutes, January 17, 1939, *Local 802 Official Journal, A.F. of M.*, February 1939, 25. [hereafter, I refer to executive board minutes as EBM, and the official journal as OJ]
[245] "Reflections on the Election," *OJ.*, January 1939, 3

rhetoric of anti-racism—at once defining itself as an organization that drew no color line and mounting a propaganda campaign to end racism at every juncture.

What had changed? What pushed black musicians concerns from the periphery of the union in the 1920s to the center in the 1930s? In part, cultural, political, and social developments of the era directly impacted Local 802. With the emergence of swing music, black musicians became more respected in the profession. Changes in government brought new power to the local. The labor movement became more pluralistic, and community and labor leaders in Harlem began to make alliances with Local 802 and support its black membership. But more importantly, black musicians expanded their own activism from the roots laid by James Europe, Bert Hall, and others into consistent agitation for their rights within the Local. In this sense, then, the period marked a culmination of black musicians' efforts in the previous decades. Black musicians had established themselves as professionals, had forced the union to acknowledge black music as professional music, and had allied themselves with insurgent groups. When the Local committed itself firmly to a civil rights agenda during the swing era it was a change chiefly in degree not direction: the result of expanding cooperation and longstanding agitation.

I.

The content of popular music shifted in the late 1930s. Historians typically date the 'beginning' of the swing era to Benny Goodman's successful concert at the Pallomar Ballroom in Los Angeles in August of 1935, and for the next ten years, Goodman, a white clarinet player from Chicago, emerged as the most popular of American

bandleaders. There was little new about Goodman's music. He played the same arrangements and styles that Fletcher Henderson had premiered almost ten years before. In fact, Goodman employed Henderson as an arranger and sometime as a pianist. But through Goodman's polished, white image, the emergence of a powerful youth culture, and some undefined national yearning for the optimistic, the same music, popular under Henderson, became almost pervasive. Swing musicians played at college dances, on the radio, and in revitalized dance halls throughout the country. Bands sprouted up, gave back employment to jazz musicians, and toured the country. And importantly, swing integrated American audiences and bands. Swing transcended ethnic and racial boundaries. Black and white audiences patronized the music and often did so in integrated venues. Black musicians and white musicians played in the same swing style, and sometimes they played in racially integrated bands.[246]

With the rise of swing music, the composition of the union changed, and swing band musicians became its most numerous and vocal members. "I can well remember the time when no official of the Musicians' Union concerned himself with the problems of members playing dance music for a livelihood," noted William Feinberg the local's secretary in 1940, "Such a period is a far cry from our present situation….the great bulk of our members are today making a livelihood in the dance music field."[247] The shift in composition and the pluralism that swing seemed to represent intensified the previous decades' developments. New York musicians had been creating an integrated sound since the early 1920s. New York union musicians had made cross ethnic and racial alliances after 1930. And all musicians, unlike unskilled workers, have always shared a common

[246] Stowe, *Swing Changes*; Erenberg, *Swinging the Dream*.
[247] William Feinberg, "The Secretary's Report," *OJ*, August 1940, 13.

ground in their profession—in their highly skilled and often idiosyncratic dedication to their art. But swing music made cross-racial unity a dominant theme.

Black musicians who had suffered during the Depression emerged at the center of the profession. Bandleaders like Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Chick Webb became household names. Among musicians, prominent black artists gained unprecedented recognition at all levels. Musicians appreciated swing as a musical, racial, and national achievement. Swing music shattered any remaining ideas of the illegitimacy of black music. "Its about time we recognize that the Negro musician is no longer the minstrel of 25 years ago," noted William Feinberg in 1944.[248] The union now recognized black musicians' place within the industry and the political meaning of swing. At Chick Webb's death in 1939, for instance, Local 802 ran an obituary and a tribute to this bandleader and drummer. His death, noted the administration, "shocks the entire membership." Chick Webb, "like so many other Negroes," it continued, "such as Marian Anderson in opera, Paul Robeson in song and acting, W.C. Handy, Coleridge Taylor and William Grant Still, in composition, have made a genuine contribution to the art and culture of the polyglot races and nationalities which is America."[249] For the union, swing had political implications, affirming a multi-culturalism, which the union itself aimed to represent.

More so, black swing musicians slowly became more politicized and several activists emerged from their ranks as leaders in Local 802. At first, many took dim note of their union. In March of 1935, the sociologist Charles Franklin, then in the process of assembling a study on black union membership in New York City, interviewed Local

[248] "N.Y. Musicians' Union Blasts at Jim Crow Locals," *The Chicago Defender*, January 22, 1944, 2.
[249] "Chick Webb, An Appreciation," *OJ*, July 1939, 14.

802's official Ralph Redmond on the status of black musicians within Local 802. "I feel that the musicians' union," said Redmond, "has done more toward unionizing Negro workers than any other unions, but we still must do much toward making the Negroes in Harlem more union conscious."[250] In May, Redmond deemed the situation severe enough that he visited the New Amsterdam Musical Association, gave a full report of the union's activities, and asked the NAMA members "to become more interested in their local."[251] For the next year agitation continued. In 1936, another representative of Local 802 named Samuel Taback also made it to the NAMA meeting, and made a broader statement on the Local's activities on behalf of black workers. The union found it important enough to publicize its commitment to civil rights. "Mr. Taback representing Local 802 to the meeting," noted the NAMA secretary, "endorsed non racial discrimination."[252] The following year, whether out of these entreaties or otherwise, the Association unsuccessfully ran its president, Harry Stevens, for a position in Local 802.[253]

Other black musicians of the 1930s and early 1940s involved themselves in a baffling array of community organizations and political causes, volunteered their services, and pushed their Local to lend its support. In June 1937, two members arrived at the union and convinced the executive board to sign a resolution in favor of the Wagner-Van Nuys Anti-Lynching Bill.[254] In 1943, Duke Ellington, rarely though of as a political activist, wrote a letter to the union "requesting the Local to contribute funds to the

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[250] Franklin, 198
[251] New Amsterdam Musical Association, *New Amsterdam Musical Association Minute Book*, May 24, 1935, 49. Samuel E. Heyward Papers, Box 3, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York.
[252] Ibid., September 25, 1936, 113.
[253] Ibid., February 28, 1936, 101.
[254] EBM, June 3, 1937, OJ, July 1937, 19.

National Committee to Abolish Poll Tax."[255] The Local responded. For two years, the Local condemned the poll tax and advised its members to write in support of an anti-poll tax bill.[256] In 1945, it supported the Fair Employment Practice Commission. It argued for the desegregation of the military. "Local 802," noted its Executive Board, "has placed itself squarely on record in support of this bill [the state FEPC], without reservation and without amendment. Without reservation," it continued, "because we recognize the urgent need to stamp out group prejudices and discriminations, which have been increasingly manifested in our country."[257]

More frequently, the members themselves volunteered their service for political causes. Members donated services to the NAACP and to the United Aid for Peoples of African Descent.[258] In just the winter of 1940 and 1941, Local 802 musicians performed twice for the NAACP, for the Harlem Big Brother Association, and for the Negro Actors Guild. Members played charity events for the *New Amsterdam News*. They donated their time and made money for underprivileged children in Harlem, and to support 'Negro Week' at the New York world's fair.[259] They sponsored their own events and were contacted to help others. Indeed, from the preponderance of requests that flowed into the local, it seems that by the 1940s, an established black musician was expected to contribute some time and effort in support of political causes.

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[255] EBM, January 25, 1944, OJ, February 1944, 17.
[256] OJ, July-December 1943
[257] "Local 802 Supports State FEPC. Urges Passage of Bill Outlawing Discrimination in Employment," OJ, March 1945, 4-5.
[258] EBM, January 28, 1937, *OJ*, March 1937, 16; EBM, June 10, 1937, *OJ*, 19.
[259] EBM, January 24, 1941; February 13, 1941; February 18, 1941, OJ, April 1941, p.21-25; EBM, November 19, 1940, OJ, January 1941, p.21; "Negro Week at World's Fair," OJ, September 1940, 6-7.

Some members did bring direct protest to the union. The trumpet player Dizzy Gillespie, for instance, recalled protesting after a union job at the World's Fair in Queen's in 1939. Gillespie had found work with the pianist Teddy Hill, playing in a pavilion for a 'Lindy Hoppper Show.' The employer was Moe Gale, the manager of the Savoy, and the contract came through the Local's chief business agent Sam Suber. Local 802 had lobbied hard to include music in the fair and had negotiated union contracts in every place musicians played, bringing steady, unionized employment to over three hundred musicians.[260] Sometimes, though, white union officials might negotiate contracts that benefited white employers more than black musicians. Dizzy Gillespie's employment was one such instance. For Dizzy, "this is *some* shit," he explained:

> Moe Gale and Sam Suber were related in some way…They got in cahoots and made the pay scale at the World's Fair third-class scale, instead of first class, which it should have been. We were doing about 'eighty' shows a day; on-off, on-off, so the whole band, all of us, went down to the union to protest against this.[261]

There, the band's tenor saxophonist, Bob Carrol, became so incensed that "Bob went at Suber and we had to restrain him." The protest was ineffective, the union intransient. The band lost its job.[262]

But their protest was not an isolated event. Black musicians of the swing era, even more than in the late 1920s, agitated for fair treatment from the Local. They did so following the path laid out by Bert Hall and Joe Jordan in the early 1930s. In the elections of 1938, for instance, black members campaigned loudly against racial discrimination in the music industry. A party called the United Membership Committee ran a slate against the incumbent Rosenberg administration and included four African Americans on its

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[260] Feinberg, "The Secretary's Report, 1940," OJ, August 1940, 18.
[261] Dizzy Gillespie, *To Be or Not to Bop: the Memoirs of Dizzy Gillespie*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1977), 88-89.
[262] Gillespie, 89

ticket, a larger number of black representatives than ever before in the union's history. The Committee attacked the administration's general complacency towards black members and its more subtle displays of racism. They protested directly against Moe Gale's mistreatment of Harlem musicians and that "the administration has failed on numerous occasions to recognize just claims made by Negro members for back money."[263] They attacked the local's administration because it relegated black officials to working in Harlem and paid its black employees lower wages than white employees.[264] And, while they lost the election in 1938, they sustained their protest throughout the administration.

By 1944, a group of Harlem musicians circulated a magazine titled *Music Dial*. The magazine kept musicians informed about unfair working conditions and agitated for increased participation in Local 802. Its editor, Ray Parker, had a long-standing commitment towards fighting for equal writes in Local 802: "For the past nine or ten years a few militant boys, the writer included, who are conscious of the need for progressive unionism which recognizes no color or racial bars have been waging a ceaseless campaign for better conditions in Local 802 for all minority groups." By the 1940s, Parker and those like him recognized that black musicians had established themselves so thoroughly within the union that they could control many of its policies had they become more involved. "We have fought, and will continue to fight for the elimination of all unwritten racial or color barriers in our profession," noted Parker, "But it is, and will continue to be a waste of time, unless the Negro musician realizes that he must become more than just the holder of a union card. He must become an integral part

[263] "Hit Blue-Ribbon Leadership in Musical Union," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 10, 1938, 17.
[264] Ibid., 1,17

of his union." But black activists could scarcely have called their work unsuccessful: "Through our efforts we have made a few gains, won a host of friends and created a feeling of animosity among a small minority of old die-hards who are satisfied in maintaining the *status-quo*." [265]

Others not connected directly with the union voiced the same sentiments. The popularity of swing music and the industry that developed around it brought significant attention to the black members of the local. A curious group of mostly white men, a 'jazz left,' drew political inspiration from swing music and began to take an interest in the well being of black jazz musicians and in the racial politics of the union. This jazz left included critics, club owners, booking agents, and producers. Many had close or circumspect ties to the Communist Party and believed that swing music had transformative political potential. The most important of these was John Hammond. Born a New York socialite and heir, Hammond had attended Yale, dropped out, and, supported by his parents' trust fund, embarked on a shifting career as political activist, journalist, and swing enthusiast. He wrote about jazz in music magazines, produced concerts, and promoted the careers of some of jazz' biggest stars—Count Basie, Bennie Goodman, and Billie Holliday. He was, notes the historian David Stowe, "the most influential person in the swing industry."[266] And throughout his career, he saw the promotion of jazz musicians as intimately linked with civil rights, and their struggle to gain equal recognition at the center of ending racial discrimination in the nation at large. "The fact that the best jazz players barely made a living, were barred from all well-paying jobs in radio, and in most night clubs, enraged me," he once wrote. "The was no white pianist to

[265] "Opinion: Negro Musicians Guilty of Self Segregation," *Music Dial*, March 1944, 3.
[266] Stowe, 54

compare with Fats Waller, no white band as good as Fletcher Henderson's, no blues singer like Bessie Smith, white or black. To bring recognition to the Negro's supremacy in jazz was the most effective and constructive form of social protest I could think of."[267]

Hammond advocated for the cause of black musicians within their labor movement. In 1942, Hammond organized a short-lived campaign to attack discrimination in the AFM from an editorial perch at a swing magazine called *Music and Rhythm*. "As long as the AFM tolerates discrimination and segregation in its ranks," he wrote, "discrimination and segregation will prevail." More poignantly, he called on Local 802 to take action against employers: "New York's Local 802, which includes both colored and white members has done nothing to change the prejudices of employers or contractors."[268] He petitioned members to fight prejudice in their union, contacted the NAACP to look into the AFM, and, generally, drew attention to racism in the music industry and the policies of the musicians' union.

While swing music made black members more visible, changes in government greatly expanded the local's power and scope. In 1932, Franklin Roosevelt became President and inaugurated a wide-reaching social program he termed the New Deal. Government expanded and allied itself with labor. Workers won the right to collective bargaining, gained employment from the Federal government, and saw a host of relief programs instituted for their benefit. The legal right to collective bargaining strengthened all unions. When the government replaced the private sector as a significant employer, it strengthened them even further. Unions could now exert political pressure on the

[267] John Hammond, *John Hammond on Record*. (New York: Ridge Press, 1977), 68.
[268] John Hammond, "John Hammond Says," *Music and Rhythm*, May 1942, 23.

employer and could take a more substantial role in setting wage scales and arbitrating working conditions.[269] Local 802 did so effectively.

New Deal programs directly affected the membership. In 1935, Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (WPA) began employing musicians through the Federal Music Project, and soon the project had become a mass hiring. In 1936, the Project employed 15,000 musicians nationwide, the most of any Federal Arts Project, and between 1935 and 1940, the Project spent upwards of $50 million for some 36,000 performances.[270] The union intervened in nearly every capacity of the Federal Music Project. It brokered deals for the Project to hire members. It protested when the WPA undercut wages, and lobbied continuously and vigorously for the continuation of the project and increased financial support. Using political leverage, the local managed to protect its members in full. Local 802, boasted Jacob Rosenberg in 1939, "has obtained for our members the highest prevailing wagescale and the lowest number of services on the entire Music Project throughout the country."[271] And Rosenberg probably had much to do with it. Rosenberg became so effective a negotiator that he won a position on the advisory committee to the WPA.

For African Americans, the WPA proved an especially valuable employer. One contemporary called the WPA a "godsend" for black Americans and, perhaps, with good reason.[272] The WPA provided employment to one million black families, musicians

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[269] see Joseph E. Slater, *Public Workers: Government Employee Unions, the Law, and the State, 1900-1962*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2004)
[270] Derek Vallaint, *Sounds of Reform*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 273.
[271] Jacob Rosenberg, "The President Sums Up," *Local 802, A.F. of M. Official Journal*, May 1939, 3.
[272] Robert Weaver, "New Deal and the Negro," *Crisis*, November 1936, 200.

included.[273] In 1935, the Federal Music Project employed 1,744 black musicians or approximately twelve percent of its total, a figure far above the 109 black writers it employed for the more celebrated Federal Writers' Project.[274] And more so, the Project employed black musicians across genres. It sponsored concerts from artists as diverse as the classical violinist Clarence Cameron White, the blues composer W.C. Handy, and a group of folk musicians called the Juanita Hall Melody Singers.[275] Historians have typically credited New Deal officials, like the WPA head Harry Hopkins, with overcoming discrimination in the WPA, but, among New York musicians, fair treatment came from direct agitation.[276]

In New York, Local 802 forced the Federal Music Project to hire black musicians on equal footing and grant them equal respect. In the fall of 1935, the Local assembled a WPA committee and made countering discrimination its first priority. Two white representatives, the secretary William Feinberg and a newly active member named David Freed, attacked segregation in the WPA. They protested, the *Official Journal* reported, "against a policy of transferring Negro musicians out of the major symphonic units and segregating them into an all-Negro concert orchestra." "Individual Negro musicians were entitled, as American citizens, to play together with white musicians in the various units and," they wrote, "no Negro musicians should be compelled to accept a position with an all-Negro unit if he qualified for and wished to be placed in one of the larger symphonic units."[277] For weeks, the committee staged pickets outside the WPA offices, engaged the

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[273] Sitkoff, 70.
[274] Kenneth Bindas, *All of This Music Belongs to the Nation: the WPA's Federal Music Project and American Society*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 75
[275] Bindas, 76-77.
[276] Sitkoff, 71.
[277] "W.P.A. Committee Protests Negro Discrimination," *OJ*, October 1935, 4.

support of many members, and within the year had ended segregation in the Federal Music Project. This was notable action. Few AFM locals had made any communication with the WPA and fewer were willing to challenge it. The musicians' actions was a model for many in the labor movement. The "victory," noted Local 802's journal, "has won Local 802 favorable comment from the entire labor movement."[278]

II.

The Harlem labor movement revived during the swing era and impacted Local 802. Starting in 1935, a number of African American labor organizations and activists outside Local 802 prodded the Local towards action against racism. The most important of these was Frank Crosswaith's Negro Labor Committee. Crosswaith, a West Indian immigrant, had come to New York in the early 1920s. Working as an organizer for the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union, he had absorbed socialist ideas, had befriended the black socialists who wrote for *The Messenger* magazine, and, in sporadic bursts, became one of Harlem's labor leaders. In 1925, Crosswaith had organized the Trade Union Committee for Organizing Negro Workers (TUC), and, in the same year, had crossed paths with Local 802 when Edward Canavan had come to early meetings for the umbrella group. But by the 1927, the TUC faced such daunting financial difficulties and unions and workers proved so unreceptive that Crosswaith had let the organization deteriorate and cease operation. For the next six years, Crosswaith had lent his efforts towards organizing the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

In that period, from 1927 to 1933, the labor movement became far more open to black workers and black workers far more amenable to unions. In 1930, African

[278] "Local Autonomy…Year 1," OJ, March 1936, 10.

Americans comprised only four percent of union members in New York and only two percent of organized labor in the nation. Nearly half of these union members belonged to the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.[279] But only in 1934 did the American Federation of Labor recognized the Porters and admit them as members. It was part of larger a trend. In the following year, dissidents in the AFL under the president of the United Mine Workers, John L. Lewis, created the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), split from the Federation, and mounted the largest organizing drive in American history. The split transformed the place of black workers in the labor movement. Notions of union exclusion gave way to inclusion. Racial, ethnic, and professional biases in the labor movement gave way in the CIO. For the first time, black workers joined unions in large numbers and with relative equality. The CIO organized industries and factories that had seemed all but impervious to unionization, and it generated a political enthusiasm among many American workers.[280]

Harlem labor leaders kept pace. In 1934, emboldened by the success of the Sleeping Car Porters and the CIO, labor activists created the Harlem Labor Council and a year later, under the direction of Frank Crosswaith, the Negro Labor Committee.[281] The Committee had two essential aims: to help black workers join unions and to break down racism within the labor movement.[282] And, unlike the Trade Union Committee, the Negro Labor Committee achieved strong financial footing and tenuous success. By December of 1935, the Committee had purchased and established headquarters at the Harlem Labor

[279] Greenberg, 11.
[280] Denning, 8.
[281] John C. Walters, "Frank R. Crosswaith and the Negro Labor Committee in Harlem, 1925-1939. *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 3, No. 2 (July 1979): 35-49
[282] Walters, 41.

Center on 125th Street.[283] Supported by CIO unions and the Sleeping Car Porters, the Negro Labor Committee began to enlist the consistent support of New York locals.

In a short time, Local 802 developed into one of the most important affiliates. In 1935, Local 802 started sending delegates and paying dues to the Negro Labor Committee. In 1937, Crosswaith hosted a conference of local unions with high black membership. The aim was to achieve some sort of solidarity and to speed measures to make labor unions more open and more responsive to black workers. The results, however, were disappointing. Of some 130 local eligible for the assembly, only 33 attended, but among them was Local 802. "Efforts," the Assembly promised, "are to be made to secure the affiliation of the other unions," and, perhaps with this aim in mind, Local 802 published some of the meeting minutes in its official journal.[284] More cooperation ensued. Local 802 sent both black and white delegates to the bi-monthly meetings of the Committee, and the Committee encouraged the Local to become active in black politics. In 1936, Frank Crosswaith encouraged Local 802 to send representatives to the National Negro Congress and three delegates went on the union's behalf. By the 1940s, Local 802 developed a close partnership with the Negro Labor Committee.

Perhaps no better indication of the alliance between these organizations exists than the relationships between the men who worked for them. Crosswaith developed personal and professional friendships with Local 802 employees and officers. He found Ralph Redmond, the local's Harlem delegate, dedicated and trustworthy. "If all the other locals affiliated with us had a Ralph Redmond," he wrote in 1946, "we would have far less to worry about. Out of all the many representatives of unions affiliated with us,

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[283] "Dedication of the Harlem Labor Center," December 15, 1935, NLC Records.
[284] "Meeting of the Negro Labor Assembly of New York," *OJ*, April 1937, p.8

Brother Redmond is the one that I would not hesitate to entrust with the interest of organized labor."[285] He expressed deep respect for the local's president Jacob Rosenberg. At Rosenberg's fiftieth birthday, what became a sort of testimonial for the Local's president, Crosswaith took a seat of honor at the dais. He wrote to Rosenberg soon after, "Everyone who spoke praised you highly for all the golden like qualities that we know you possess…but nobody," said Crosswaith, "said a word about your Dad and Mother, who, after all, I think deserve most of the credit for giving to the world a Jack Rosenberg. May you live long enough to rival Methuseleh."[286] For men like Crosswaith, the administration and officials of Local 802 were consistent allies, and often, these activists encouraged the Local to fight discrimination against its members.

For instance, in 1935, Local 802 organized a sustained theatre drive to unionize many unorganized theatres. No previous local activity had been so visible. In March 1935, the Local convened a meeting of delegates and about thirty-five men who played single engagements in Harlem. This committee generated a report on the "poor conditions prevailing in Harlem."[287] It also generated enthusiasm and increasing visibility as members picketed Harlem clubs. "Pickets," the sociologist Charles Franklin observed in late 1935, "Negro and white, can be seen around these clubs every night."[288] By the next year, the Local had made allegiances with other Harlem theatre workers, like the Colored Performers' and Actors Club, and it became headquarters for a drive that had increasingly become the province of black activists. In November, volunteers from the Harlem Theatre Drive met at the Local, organized a leadership committee, made plans for

[285] "Communication from Frank Crosswaith to Charles Iucci," November 13, 1946, NLC Records
[286] "Communication from Frank Crosswaith to Jacob Rosenberg," February 15, 1946, NLC Records
[287] EBM, March 12, 1935
[288] Franklin, 199

a ‘motor parade,’ and readied themselves to hand out leaflets. The local thought their meeting and actions important enough that it ran a story in its official journal covering the campaign.[289]

Soon, the campaign had become a community issue, picked up by Harlem musicians and politicians. In December of 1936, an unidentified “young man” from the New Amsterdam Musical Association and a member of Local 802 appeared at the Harlem Labor Center, asked for a list of affiliated AFL unions, and informed Frank Crosswaith that he would circulate the list at a meeting of the ‘Elks Hall’ in Harlem. Crosswaith, himself, had also become marginally involved in the campaign. He alerted the Local that, in his speeches before labor groups, he often “referred to the drive.” And he offered the Local his support. “If there is anything we can do to contribute to this success,” he said speaking for the Negro Labor Committee, “we shall be happy to do so.”[290] In this instance and others, the Harlem labor establishment put its weight behind Local 802 and encouraged the politicization of its black membership.

Partly in response, many members did not tolerate a complacent administration. As Local 802’s new leadership settled into their offices in 1935, they confronted a host of problems. The union was on the point of financial and moral bankruptcy. Debts had accumulated. Local 802 had a paltry $3,047.95 in the bank and owed almost $30,000.[291] Certain segments of the New York music industry, like the burlesque theatres, had become sites of rampant corruption. Musicians were overworked. A seven-day-week, and

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[289] “Harlem Theatre Drive Report,” OJ, November 1936, 15
[290] “Communication Frank Crosswaith to Jacob Rosenberg,” December 26, 1936, NLC Records.
[291] William Feinberg, “Ten Years of the Present Administration of Local 802,” OJ, February 1945, 10.

often excessive travel, was the norm not the exception.[292] For the first time, though, the union became the place to find redress. Having achieved self-government in the early 1930s, musicians began to look for results. "During the past fourteen months," the administration noted in 1936, "a substantial majority of the local membership came to union headquarters for various purposes; to talk to our officials, to seek information and to procure aid in solving problems affecting them."[293]

In the elections of 1936, the first for presidency, the membership elected many of the fifteen musicians who had fought for autonomy in the previous years. A percussionist named Jacob Rosenberg became the local's president. Born in Austria, the youngest of eleven children, Rosenberg had come to the United States as a child. His father worked only sporadically as a violin player, and Rosenberg spent most of youth in poverty. He studied percussion, began playing around Lower East Side Jewish weddings, and, quickly, built a successful career. He performed with the Philharmonic and as a studio musician for NBC, the largest radio conglomerate. But, whether out of the poverty of his youth, the socialist climate of the Lower East Side, or some other factor, he developed a firm belief in trade unionism and in the alliance of musicians and workers. "There was a time, not so long ago, when the average musician did not like the idea of being classed as a worker. He looked upon himself as a professional, or artist, who had little in common with workers as a class," he wrote upon assuming office. "Fortunately, that time is past. The musicians today is still the professional and the artist, but he has

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[292] Ibid.
[293] "Local Autonomy Year 1," *OJ*, March 1936, 1.

learned that he is also a worker…To put it very simply, the musician has become working-class minded."[294]

His administration followed form: the leadership of Local 802 of the late 1930s and early 1940s took on a left leaning, if not socialist character. Joseph Brodsky, a Communist lawyer who had represented the union in its bid for autonomy, remained the union's attorney, and Harry Sacher, another lawyer affiliated with the Communist International Labor Defense, became its second lawyer.[295] The administration vowed to "keep pace with the progressive forces in the United States dedicated to the preservation and extension of the rights of labor and of our civil liberties."[296] And they recoiled at anti-communism when they encountered it. In 1937, for instance, Samuel Taback represented Local 802 at the American Federation of Musicians' convention. He found fellow delegates reactionary and anti-communist. One of the delegates, reported Taback, "took occasion to make a typical 'red-baiting' speech; he attacked the CIO movement as 'Red' and 'Communist,' and called for war without quarter against it." Taback rose in opposition. He defended the CIO, condemned red-baiting, and extended the argument for inclusion and anti-prejudice in the AFM: "He urged that in our union we shall never make any tests of race, sex, color, creed, or political opinion."[297] More tellingly, Jacob Rosenberg emerged as a marginally important figure in leftist politics. He became friends with many of the leading New York liberals: the garment workers' leader, David Dubinski, the politician, Fiorello Laguardia, and, the women's rights activist, Rose

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[294] Jacob Rosenberg, "Notes Major and Minor," *Local 802, A.F. of M. Official Journal,* April 1941, 3.
[295] George V. Harvey, "How Communists Run the Union," *Music and Rhythm,* January 1941, 93.
[296] "Reflections on the Election," *Local 802, A.F. of M. Official Journal,* January 1939, 3.
[297] "Report on the A.F. of M. Convention," *OJ,* July 1937, 3.

Scheindermann.[298] Twice he ran for office on the American Labor Party ticket, for congress in 1938 and for City Council in 1941.[299]

This leftist swing in the leadership impacted African American musicians. The leadership of Local 802, following many on the American Left, sheltered a belief that African American struggles for civil rights were tied up in other left wing causes. For organized labor to gain advantage, for America to beat Hitler, and for anti-semitism to be eradicated, anti-black racism would need to be challenged. For the leaders of Local 802, racism was only the worst offensive of a long string of reactionary forces confronting labor or even, human progress. The Local opposed the Ku Klux Klan and vigilante organizations, for instance, because they were "counter-checks to the enormous progress of labor" not simply because of their anti-black activities.[300] It opposed the poll tax, not merely because the tax disenfranchised black workers, but because the tax undermined the political involvement of many workers and gave the South undue representation. As World War Two intensified, the local administration increasingly linked discrimination against Jews with discrimination against African Americans. "Our Local administration," wrote William Feinberg in August 1944, "also is of the view that democracy is indivisible; he who advocates anti-semitism is generally an advocate of Jim-crowism as well; he is almost always anti-labor and a breeder of discrimination because of national origin."[301]

The administration acted in kind. By 1939, the Local established a program of what it called 'stand-bys.' The goal was to protect musicians' jobs, and to encourage

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[298] "Testimonial Dinner to Jack Rosenberg," OJ, February 1946, 4.
[299] "Labor Figure Dies," *New York Times*, August 1, 1946.
[300] "The Vigilantes," OJ, August 1937, 3.
[301] William Feinberg, "Secretary's Report," OJ, August 1944, 8.

employers to hire members. When musicians lost jobs, the Local would collect a 'stand-by' charge, a sum equivalent to what the non-employed member would have received. The Local would then distribute the stand-by money to its members. The creation of stand-bys was almost remarkable. It implied that the employer should bear responsibility for the loss of jobs and increased the importance of the Local, taking on the role of a quasi-welfare state as well as one that established wage scales.

Throughout the stand-by program, the local assured black musicians that union officials would not discriminate. William Feinberg explained. "Occasionally," he wrote, "there are some stand-by charges collected from the Apollo Theatre in Harlem; such monies are confined to the use of our Negro brothers in Harlem…This does not mean, however, that our Negro brothers are excluded from participating in the stand-bys that come from the Strand and the Paramount. We know that our Negro members are super-exploited and therefore entitled to extra consideration. The distribution of stand-bys in Harlem is administered by our colored delegates in Harlem."[302] The provision signaled several important efforts on behalf of black musician. It acknowledged that black musicians were more exploited that whites, and it ensured that black musicians, through their delegates, controlled their own earnings.

More notably, the local hired black staff and delegates in more substantial numbers and for more important positions. By the late 1930s, the Local had hired three black delegates, a black trial board member, and a black executive member. Its staff, those responsible for the daily work of the union, also included many African Americans. In a photograph of the treasury department, for instance, two out of seven workers were

[302] William Feinberg, "The Secretary's Report," OJ, August 1939, 10.

African American.[303] And, by every indication, it treated these men as equals. John Long's election to the governing board represented an increasing commitment to racial equality. Not only was Long elected to this body, but he took part in activities involving all members. He was not merely a token representative who worked only for black musicians. In 1940, for instance, Long served on the Medical Committee, on the Law Committee, on the Band Committee, and on the Symphonic Committee.[304]

Local 802 also promoted the individual careers of some African American members. The union's support for conductor Dean Dixon was noteworthy. The Local ran a short profile on Dixon, "the first Negro," as it put it, "ever to conduct a symphony of high rank."[305] And then, more significantly, the local hired Dixon to conduct a series of summer orchestra concerts that it funded. Dixon appears in one photograph leading an all white orchestra, playing for a mostly white audience.[306] Promoting Dixon should be noted on several counts. For one, the Local applauded and gave attention to a black musician. But most importantly, the Local seemed intent on breaking down race barriers in music genres. Blacks, it seemed to assert, could work as classical musicians and lead classical orchestras. They would not be confined only to traditionally 'black' music.

Local 802 spoke out against discrimination in various instances. In 1939, Marion Anderson, one of the great opera singers of her decade, had attempted to stage a concert at Constitution Hall. The Daughters of the American Revolution, the scion of Washington ruling families who operated the hall, refused Anderson permission to sing because they barred blacks from the hall. The discrimination rocked the press and the music world.

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[303] Photograph. OJ, September 1939, 13.
[304] William Feinberg, "The Secretary's Report," OJ, August, 1940, pp. 11, 14-15, 19.
[305] Henry Beckett, "Youngest of Them All. Dean Dixon Negro Composer Will Lead N.B.C. Symphony," OJ, July 1941, 9.
[306] Photograph. "Summer Band Concerts," OJ, August 1944, 10.

Calls went up in support of Anderson. Denunciations were wrought on the Daughters of the American Revolution. And Local 802 joined in full. It praised Anderson. It pronounced the hypocrisy of the Daughters of the American Revolution. And, rather militantly, it asserted its own stand on race. "Local 802," reported the *Official Journal*, "considers that the American Constitution includes the Bill of Rights and all subsequent additions, including the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. In our organization we draw no color line. Membership in our organization is open to all, regardless of race, sex, color, or creed."[307]

When a similar controversy sprang up around the pianist and singer Hazel Scott six years later, the local responded with more militant rhetoric. "Hazel Scott," said Jacob Rosenberg, "may not be suitable for appearance before the D.A.R. but she is entirely acceptable as a member of Local 802."

> In our Local she has held a membership card for many years and in our midst she has been accorded every right and opportunity afforded without discrimination to all members, regardless or race or color or creed. Our constitution provides that 'all instrumentalists' who meet our formal requirements 'shall be eligible for membership.' And by 'all' we do mean all; we do not except those whose skin happen to be black, or brown, or yellow. Discrimination because of race or creed or color is always reprehensible; it is particularly outrageous when directed against an artist…Discrimination against the artist, then, is a double offense; it offends against human dignity and liberty, and offends again against human genius and creativeness.[308]

In defending Scott, Rosenberg protected a member, reaffirmed the union's membership qualifications without regard to race, and asserted the position artists could take as a vanguard against racial prejudice.

Throughout the swing era, Local 802 constantly proclaimed itself a union that drew no color line. It defined itself as a union open across race and operating to ensure

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[307] "Americanism Versus D.A.R.," OJ, March 1939, 5.
[308] Jacob Rosenberg, "Notes Major and Minor," *OJ*, October 1945, 3.

racial equality and did so with notable consistency. In March 1936, the journal described the Local as one "which opens its doors to all workers in our industry regardless of race, sex, color, creed, social, economic or political opinion."[309] In January 1939, the administration defined itself little differently. Asking, "What is Local 802?" it responded, "Local 802 is a trade union organization composed of men and women of many nationalities and religions and colors. I our ranks are to be found Gentile and Jew; Catholic and Protestant; Negro and White; Americans, Germans, Italians, Spanish, and many other nationalities."[310] Rosenberg launched occasional tirades against racism. In 1943, for instance, he wrote: "Jim Crowism must be outlawed everywhere; acts of brutality against Negroes should be severely punished."[311] Anti-racism stood at the center of Local 802's objectives.

Finally, the local protected its African American members against discrimination. In the fall of 1944, for instance, Paul Baron, a popular white bandleader, secured an engagement to play on the Chesterfield Radio Program. The employer, MCA records, advised Baron against bringing several black sidemen to the date, and Baron fired four black musicians from the job. The union responded. "Since our constitution and by-laws definitely provide that no member of the Local can be discriminated against because of race, creed, color or political opinion," William Feinberg telegrammed Baron, "we hereby are ordering you to take steps to employ the four following members: Teddy Wilson, Speck Powell, Charles Shaves, Al Hall." The next day, whether through the union's efforts to publicize the story or the attention the swing musicians generated, the *New York Amsterdam News* drew attention to the event. Under an article called "Local

[309] "A Rare Honor," OJ, March 1936, 3.
[310] "Reflections on the Election," OJ, January 1939, 3.
[311] Rosenberg, "Notes Major and Minor," OJ, July 1943, 3.

802 Asks Why 4 Crack Harlem Musicians Are Barred" the paper quoted Feinberg's telegram to Baron and attacked the employer. "Blame for the Jim Crow tactics was placed on both MCA (Music Corporation of America) and the Liggett and Myers Tobacco Co," noted the paper. [312] Under pressure from Local 802 and the media, Baron and MCA consented and reemployed the four Harlem musicians.[313]

Even in the swing era, African American musicians never entirely eliminated discrimination in the music industry or even in the union itself. Black musicians fought for several more decades to win integration into white Broadway pit bands.[314] Many black musicians remained exploited by club owners and booking agents, by leaders and record companies. Many found it difficult to get the highest paying employment, in theatre pits, hotels, and radio stations, and the union insensitive to their exclusion.[315] Some still perceived the union as the corrupt organization it had been in the early 1930s. But, by any measure, black musicians of the swing era took their place in Local 802. They became a more important part of the membership and pushed the union to respond to their concerns.

It might be tempting to see this change as just that of the leadership or only a result of the cultural and political world of the swing era. But many black musicians had long agitated for increased representation in the union, and they continued to do so during the swing era. The popularity of swing, the progressive politics of the leadership, and reforms in government that brought more power to the union magnified this activism,

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[312] "Local 802 Asks Why 4 Crack Harlem Musicians Are Barred," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 4, 1944, p.1A.
[313] "EBM, November 21, 1944," OJ, January 1945, 10
[314] Gayle Dixon interviewed by author, August 21, 2007, Bronx, New York.
[315] "Opinion," *Music Dial*, September 1943, 1-2

bringing the political struggles of black musicians to wider attention and fueling further action. And in doing so, these factors allowed black musicians to more fully assert their place in Local 802 and more successfully demand it give them their due. Having become professionals, black musicians became full members.

CODA

After 1946, many of the conditions that had made Local 802 powerful and progressive quickly pealed away. In 1946, Jacob Rosenberg died a sudden death while in office, and William Feinberg, the secretary, quit his post on account of failing health. Swing music lost popularity, and musicians lost jobs. The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 severely limited the power and rights of labor unions, and anti-communism, a mellow undertone in the 1930s and early 1940s, became a shrill, invidious fact in the labor movement and in Local 802 itself. Most importantly, Local 802 officers took jobs as life long administrators rather than musicians and lost touch with the membership. For nearly forty years, from 1946 to 1982, Local 802 reverted to the sometimes corrupt, often complacent, and generally ineffective body it had been in the early 1930s. A number of the remaining fifteen musicians who had agitated for autonomy and had served as officials under Rosenberg—Richard McCann, Al Manuti, Sam Suber, and finally Max Arons—became successive presidents and successively less responsive leaders.

By the 1960s, many members felt ambivalent towards the union and, often, outright contempt. The administration of the union through the 1960s galled some of the more active membership. "They [the officers of the Local] didn't do anything for anybody," said the trumpeter John Glasel who would help spearhead a reformist movement to change the administration. "All they wanted to do was collect the freakin dues."[316] Corruption sometimes took hold. Carline Ray, a bass player who joined at the very end of Rosenberg's administration, said, "In all the administrations since I've been a

[316] John Glasel interviewed by author, August 22, 2007, Hoboken, NJ

member, there have always been dirty politics."[317] From the late 1950s into the 1980s, noted Bill Moriarity, a former president, "working musicians felt powerless and frustrated when dealing with their union."[318] It began to represent leaders more than sidemen, established musicians more than those newly arrived, and part time musicians more than full time players. It was, recalled the trumpeter and insurgent Murray Rothstein bitterly, "company unionism."[319]

But despite the union's many failings in those years, black musicians and their concerns remained at its center. The Local remained a committed member in the Negro Labor Committee. New black members rose to leadership positions within the local and took even more active roles. And as the modern civil rights movement grew and developed, Local 802 threw its weight behind the movement much as it had done for progressive organizations during the 1930s.

In January of 1950, A. Phillip Randolph, the labor and civil rights leader, visited the Local's offices to meet with its executive board. The Local had donated money to Randolph's campaign to end segregation in the military, had encouraged its membership to support legislation against segregation, and had publicized Randolph's efforts widely. Randolph wrote to the board some weeks later: "It was indeed a pleasure to meet recently with the Executive Board of Local 802 and to see once again how persons in the artistic world take such a firm stand against racial discrimination and segregation."[320]

He expressed a growing sentiment. In the 1950s, Local 802 became a model for other musicians' unions struggling to integrate their membership. In 1951, black and

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[317] Carline Ray interview by author, August 14, 2007, Manhattan, New York.
[318] Bill Moriarity, "A Matter of Trust," *Allegro*, November 1994, 6.
[319] Murray Rothstein interview by author, June 21, 2007, Hilsboro, New Jersey.
[320] A. Phillip Randolph, "Communication to Charles Iucci," *Allegro*, February 1950, 14.

white Los Angeles musicians merged into a single local and began the dismantling of segregation in the AFM. It was a sensitive process. For some black unionists, integration meant, mostly, the loss of black leadership, the sidelining of black musicians' interests, and white union control of black musicians' negotiating power.[321] For some whites, it meant a leveling of the playing field and increased competition. But as the civil rights movement progressed, as the national labor movement through the AFL-CIO lent its support to the evolving black freedom struggle, segregated unions became an embarrassment to the Federation. And so, in 1964, after the passage of the civil rights act, the AFM at last eliminated the segregation of black and white musicians into separate locals. In Chicago, New Orleans and Atlanta, Brockton, Massachusetts and Buffalo, and nearly fifty other cities and towns across the country, organized musicians gradually folded together into integrated union locals.[322]

Local 802 proved to many unsure musicians that it could work. Asked, "Must there be segregation in the union?" in one swing magazine, the bandleader Abe Lyman asserted, "Sure the locals should be combined, look how successful 802 has been." The manager Allen Best concurred, "Sure. Local 802, New York is a combined local…If the combined local is successful in New York I see no reason why it shouldn't be equally as successful in other cities."[323] But perhaps the most telling compliment came from the Chicago trumpeter and union official William Everett Samuels. In 1964, Samuels had helped negotiate the merger of his Chicago Local 208 with the all white Local 10, and, frustrated with the obstacles he encountered from white union officials, he reflected

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[321] "Negro Musicians Want Segregated AFM Locals," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 22, 1957, 13.
[322] Richard McRae, "Paying their Dues: Buffalo's African American Musicians Union, Local 533, A.F.M." *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 20, No.1 (Jan 1996): 50-52
[323] "Must There Be Segregation in the Union?" *Music and Rhythm*, July 1942, 43.

admirably on the history of the New York union. “New York never did have a colored local,” he said. “They [the city’s musicians] didn’t need a colored local because they could join the regular local. The musicians’ local there would take ‘em. You could go down there and join local 802. New York was more liberal. They were. They were. New York had class.”[324]

Whether he knew it or not, Samuel’s statement reflected a long tradition. From the day Walter Craig joined the Musicians’ Mutual Protective Union in 1886 to the admission of the Clef Club to the appoint of Henry Minton as sergeant-at-arms to the elections of Joe Jordan and Bill Conaway and, of course, through the activism of Bert Hall and those who followed, black musicians had struggled for and won their place in Local 802. At the end of nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth, New York African American musicians established themselves as professionals, organized associations, and ensured that the New York musicians’ union would draw no color line. In the 1920s, African American musicians made popular vernacular music into formal, professional music. They gained long-standing jobs, joined Local 802 in greater numbers, and emerged as a substantial ethnic interest in a pluralistic union. In the 1930s, these same musicians faced the worst of the depression and took political action. They expanded their own organizations and joined a movement to reform Local 802’s administration. Finally, aided by the success of their music, by the support of labor leaders and swing enthusiasts, by more sympathetic government and Local 802 officials, African American musicians made Local 802 accountable to their concerns. They, not the city they lived in nor the men they cooperated with, made Local 802 their political instrument.

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[324] Samuels, 67.

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