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Amy Absher, *The Black Musician & the White city: Race and Music in Chicago, 1900-1967* (University of Michigan Press, 2014), \$45.00, 216 pages, ISBN 978-0472119172

The windy city is not short of attention when it comes its iconic musical heritage. Particularly when it comes to the blues, Chicago dominates as the destination of countless migrants from the South who brought with them a rich musical culture that flourished in a challenging but dynamic urban environment. This music would eventually have a huge impact on the popular culture of the 1950s and 1960s on both sides of the Atlantic. However, in *The Black Musician & the White City*, neither the blues nor indeed any other genres are the primary focus. Instead, Absher is concerned with the function and agency of musicians. They are interpreted as historical agents, not simply spokespersons that either represent or symbolise historical change through their music. Absher argues that the experiences of musicians in the city, their efforts to make a living, their encounters with race prejudice and responses to it within the city's music scene, are part of the broader story of African American migration and urbanisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Black musicians, she argues, persistently broke the colour line in their day to day lives, claimed new spaces for black music, and importantly, by their actions and encounters also revealed the continuing challenges African Americans faced in Chicago.

Over the course of five chapters, Absher examines the multitudinous responses of musicians to segregation and discrimination. Beginning in

the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the author considers the development of a black cultural sphere as racialized reactions to mass migration, such as the 1912 'vice purge', forced the emergence of a 'black belt.' By examining the manner in which black music is consistently interpreted as synonymous with vice, she explains how the influx of musicians to Chicago throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century results in the intertwining of race and space, a process helpfully illustrated by numerous maps. The geographical and spatial expression the city's racial politics is the basis of divergent and often competing responses by African American musicians. Some, seeking recognition based on integrationist notions of respectability, sought to distance themselves from the new 'folk' migrant culture that was seen as preventing 'uplift.' This was challenged by musicians that sought to harness the geographical and racial divide by promoting an autonomous cultural arena in the city's South Side. Absher looks at the formation of musician-led organisations and labour unions, particularly the National Association of Negro Musicians (NAMN) formed in 1919, and the Black local of the American Federation of Musicians (AFM). These organisations were not only useful in defending musicians from large white corporations, but importantly, promoting belief in cultural and social autonomy. Interestingly however, musicians often had to subvert union goals by scabbing to get more work, revealing the difficulties they faced in negotiating the complex racial politics of both the music scene and the city's racial order. Paradoxically, Absher also shows how the existence of black unions - while aiming to protect its members - legitimated the segregated ideology and

practices of white unionists, such as James Petrillo. The book also examines the subversion of segregationist practices in the city's music scene by covering the emergence of independent labels such as Chess Records, the growing importance of radio, DJs and juke boxes, albeit relatively briefly. The final chapter covers the struggles that eventually result in the desegregation of the AFM in 1966, which predictably comes at a price for former members of the black local.

The text is most effective in exploring the internal battles of the white and black locals of the AFM, and revealing the practical and ideological struggles that black musicians faced between black cultural autonomy, and integration. Not so inspiring is the reliance on figures such as Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf to exemplify the migrant narrative and represent the new blues forms that emerged in Chicago, which limits the scope of the book. Firstly, while these figures are central in Chicago's music history, these are the well-trodden paths of numerous blues histories. Given the main text is only 150 pages, there was ample room to explore the experiences of the scores of other musicians that 'broke the colour line' and 'claimed new spaces' for black music. Secondly, the focus on these singers also means there is not enough on the experiences of musicians during the interwar years and the boom of the 'Race Records' era, when figures like Big Bill Broonzy were so influential and successful, despite the crash of Depression-era recording. Nonetheless, Absher is convincing in her re-interpretation of musicians as agents. Like Civil Rights activists, *where* they performed and in the organisations they created, they brought to the fore issues of integration and segregation. This

is particularly significant in terms of scholarship on the role of black culture in the Civil Rights movement and in American history, as it increases the value of examining the experiences and actions black performers.

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