

Philadelphia History - Black Musicians' Union, Local 274

PART II/IV: Mass Unemployment, the Great Migration, and the Rise of Big Bands

By Diane D. Turner

By the 1920's, Black urban workers sought opportunities in the music industry as an alternative to high unemployment which plagued their community. With the continuation of Black migrations from the South to the North, there was a rise in African-American urban populations. These increases resulted in a demand for Black entertainment, which meant an increase in jobs in the music field. William Randle, Jr. confirms the availability of jobs during this era. He states that "Blacks worked in cabarets in such cities as Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, New York and Los Angeles. There were a great many black bands working as dance orchestras during the 1920's. It is in these cities that entertainment centers for black audiences developed during the 1920's."¹ Baylor recalled, "Big bands were all over the place....We find out you could make a few more dollars with entertainment if you would break in - the era was prohibition - speakeasies were available and dances were in vogue. There was St. Peter's Clavier's, 12th and Lombard, the only Catholic Church for our folks; Waltz Dream on Broad Street. Musicians were needed..."²

Black workers preserved various elements of Black folk life in cities, resulting in the development of uniquely American musical art forms such as blues, gospel and jazz. The popularizing of Black musical forms gave the Black musician a certain amount of prestige inside of their communities. Although blues, gospel and jazz originated in the Black community, they would also be adopted in the larger White community as forms of entertainment. Philadelphia had its share of big bands in the 1930's. With the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment which banned the manufacture, sale and transport of alcohol by the Twenty-First Amendment in 1933, there were more employment opportunities for musicians in nightclubs, cafes and restaurants serving liquor.³ This helps explain why the music industry thrived in Philadelphia during the Depression (1929-1939).⁴

There were theaters where Black musicians were hired in the city such as the Gibson Theater, S. Broad and Lombard Streets; the Royal Theater, South Street near S. 16th Street and the Standard Theater, South Street near S. 12th Street.⁵ These factors might account for the rise in Black bands and orchestras that Mr. Baylor recalls in Philadelphia. In the city during the latter part of the decade, they included names such as L. Johnson's Jazz Orchestra, Mrs. I.O. Keene's Orchestra,

¹ William Randle Jr., p. 69.

² Owen A. Baylor, Oral History Interview, 9/20/86.

³ Leiter, *The Musicians and Petrillo*, p. 64.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Ralph William Nixon, *Nixon's Classified Directory of Negro Business and Professional Interests of Pennsylvania*, Philadelphia Issue, 1928, p. 36.

Bobby Lee's Orchestra, the Lomax Trio, and the Pioneer Symphony Orchestra.⁶

There were also other social functions held during the 1930's which provided outlets for "live" music and jobs for musicians. Speakeasies remained popular from the 1920's throughout the 1930's. Fraternal organizations, such as the Quaker City Elks, 20th and Christian Streets held various social affairs which included dances and parades, accompanied by music. Bandleader, composer and trumpeter Charlie "old Devil" Gaines' and Joe Smalls' orchestras played at the O.V. Catto Elks Home, 16th and Fitzwater Streets for a Thanksgiving Day Matinee. The admission was thirty-five cents.⁷ On February 16, 1936, *The Philadelphia Tribune* wrote about Charlie Gaines that he wrote a new song which was a "smash-hit 'Can't Dance Got Ants in Pants; swept the country a few years back, will soon release a new number "The Stroller Man" which he expects to be another smash-hit."

A number of other social organizations existed in the Black community, for example, a group known as the Pleasure Pirates held its anniversary dance on Labor Day night, Monday, September 3rd, 1934 at the Strand Ball Room, Broad and Bainbridge Streets, featuring Doc Hyder and his Southernaires. Their added attraction was Rhythm "Skates" Brown, who resided in Philadelphia, known as "Harlem Dancing Sensation." The dance was from 9PM to 2AM with the admission of fifty cents.⁸ Another employment outlet for Black musicians was teas sponsored by various men's and women's clubs on Sunday afternoons. Local swing bands performed on these occasions. There was also the Colored Kiddie Hour which was created by Sam and Harry Kessler of Parisian Tailors at 1413 South Street. It was held at the Lincoln Theater at Broad and Lombard Streets on the weekends and a number of musicians were hired to perform there. Helen Page, a jazz vocalist, was chosen to appear in the first show of Parisian Tailors' Colored Kiddie Hour in 1932. She became the signature girl for the show.⁹

⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 5 and 6.

⁷ *The Philadelphia Tribune*. (11/22/37). p. 13.

⁸ Charles L. Blockson, Afro-American Collection, Moses "Rhythm" Brown, scrapbook, a flyer.

⁹ Helen Page (9/11/87), Oral History Interview,