

The Negro and the Jazz Band

The question of jim-crowism in dance orchestras is discussed in terms of some recent tendencies

By Henry Johnson

SO MUCH has been written about the preëminence of Negroes in American jazz that the assumption has arisen that they have more than held their own in competition with their white contemporaries. The spectacular colored bands, such as Ellington, Calloway, Lunceford, with their gleaming tympani and flashy uniforms, have given the impression that Negro musicians are on the top of the economic ladder. Little does the public know of the tremendous odds even the greatest of colored musicians must constantly battle: racketeering managers, jim-crow unions, outright discrimination.

The white musicians of this country have been guilty of a grave injustice, to themselves as well as to Negroes, by their insistent policy of discrimination and segregation. By relegating the Negro to inefficient, insecure jim-crow locals which are powerless to maintain union standards of hours or wages, the white bureaucracy which has, until recently, been in complete power in the American Federation of Musicians has seriously undermined working conditions for all musicians, regardless of race. In northern as well as southern towns—New York is an important and significant exception—there are separate locals serving the same area, imposing double standards of work. The white folk, being the better organized, have been better able to maintain a semblance of decent working conditions, but the colored locals, lacking in capital and manned as they so often are by petty racketeers, have been unable to enforce any standards at all. As a result, the only musician who has been protected is the big-shot white, who can command from the fancier hotels and cafés a high union wage. But the rank and file of the white unions find themselves competing with the most abused of the colored musicians for the smaller jobs that constitute by far the majority in the country.

In a town such as Kansas City, for example, there are more than eight hundred night spots of some kind or other. Of these the vast majority are joints which employ either a lone piano player or a three- or four-piece "kitty" band. Kansas City has a preponderance of excellent Negro virtuosi who find the best jobs closed to them by the white local, which is interested chiefly in the protection of its more fortunate members. The Negro, therefore, finds himself reduced by economic necessity to working for whatever he can get, and what he can eke out ranges from fifty cents a night to a high of two dollars and a half. The café owner, realizing that he can get acceptable music for these outrageous prices, accordingly

refuses to pay any more for the white musician, union member though he may be, and the two races find themselves competing to work for less than subsistence wages, while the owners profit from their division. Once again, as in other forms of labor, a vicious system keeps the Negro and white in competition while the inevitable exploiters take advantage of their rivalry.

THE ACCEPTANCE of swing music, which is fundamentally Negroid, has improved the bargaining power of the black musician immeasurably. A place like the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Boston, which once would have scorned the idea of a colored band, found that people of all classes are demanding guts and swing in their music, and consequently installed a Negro orchestra in their roof garden for the summer. The white locals are going to find it increasingly difficult to hold the best of the black musicians down; public demand for Negro music will force them to follow the example of New York's Local 802, which gives Negroes the same rights and protection that it gives any other of its members.

With the presence of Negro and white musicians in the same locals there is every reason to wish for bands with both races, a common

occurrence in Europe. Benny Goodman has already pointed the way with Teddy Wilson, the brilliant Negro pianist, a permanent member of his organization, and Fletcher Henderson, James Mundy, and Henry Woods, all of them colored, regular members of his arranging staff. In New York this summer there was an excellent mixed band playing at the Hickory House, one of the better eating establishments. Neither Goodman nor the restaurant has encountered any prejudice from the public at the presence of Negroes. On the contrary, there was instantaneous praise on all sides for taking a step which has seemed obvious for many years. By putting the Negro musician on the same plane as the white, the union will not only benefit the former but protect the scale for all the members.

IN VIEW of the advantages that the Negro can attain by coöperating with whites, the campaign of Porter Roberts, columnist for the Negro paper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, for segregation in music is particularly misguided. It is Roberts's contention that the Negro must regard the white musician as his enemy, refuse to coöperate with him by arranging or playing with him, and shun his unions. Roberts advises colored musicians to accept booking only from colored promoters, who have a way of caricaturing the faults and vices of their white competitors, and withdraw into the shell of race pride.

There is but one answer to Roberts's arguments: history has proved them wrong. Segregation has been the lot of the colored worker in this country, and in no case has it proved beneficial to him. Only by unity between Negroes and whites will they both be able to survive and flourish. We hope that somebody calls the attention of Robert Vann, publisher of the *Courier*, champion of John L. Lewis and the C.I.O., to the repeated remarks of his commentator. Even his editorial page, which has by no means always been a tribune of progressivism, now espouses the unity of black and white.



"Yours is a case of the masses intruding upon the subconscious."

Serrano

Western Writers Make History

*Safeguards for political and economic independence
are on the agenda at the San Francisco congress*

By Isidor Schneider

WESTERN writers are assembling in San Francisco in a three-day conference which, however the newspapers will look upon it, will be a historic event. The Hearst press may give it falsified history as a Red menace, attacking it as it has attacked every step toward a self-justifying humanity. The stodgier press, noting that it speaks no academic passwords, may ignore it, as it has ignored so much of living history. The labor movement and progressives everywhere, however, will recognize its historical significance.

The third of such literary congresses, it is likely to be the most significant. It occurs in a section of the country where the class war is in the open and where reaction has unmasked itself by putting on its vigilante masks; and it occurs among writers, many of whom, being in the movie industry, work as writers in a more professional sense and in conditions and under hazards more closely approximating those faced by workers, than any other considerable group of writers.

What is the significance of this banding together of the traditionally most lonely figures in American society? It is the conscious seeking by the writer of his normal place in society. For generations since literature was made an exploitable commodity, too many writers surrendered or retreated—surrendered to the Curtis Co. checkbook or retreated into deliberate isolation. Self-eliminated by compromise or withdrawal, the essential status of the writer in society has been obscured both to the people and to himself.

Nevertheless, the images by which a people measures itself and guides itself have come from the writers. Dreiser was needed to show the tragedy of American life. In a sense Sinclair Lewis predicted the 1929 crash by exposing the moral bankruptcy that must, inevitably, have resulted in invalidated material assets. Even T. S. Eliot, in his isolation, made a revealing chart.

There are new images to be made. Instinctively the awakening masses of the American people have turned to writers. It is to be seen in workers' bookshops, in workers' clubs when a writer comes to speak, in the public meetings with which the congresses have opened. The writer has responded to this feeling toward him. But there has been another feeling reaching towards him to which he is also responding. American capitalism, which has made his existence a hardship, now, in its reactionary stage, threatens it altogether. The existence of general culture which is vital to him and to which writers throughout

the world have, for the most part, been loyal, even in fascist countries at the cost of imprisonment and exile, is also being threatened in America. The mobilization of writers in its defense has been one of the most inspiring things in the anti-fascist struggle.

The first considerable recent indication of this movement, now greatly broadened, came four years ago with the formation of the League of Professional Groups, in which writers predominated. This league supported the candidacy of Foster and Ford in the 1932 presidential election. A little less than two years ago, there was held in New York the American Writers Congress, which was called together on a broad and basic program of fixing the writer's social and economic status in American life and of defense of American culture against fascist tendencies. Out of it came the League of American Writers, a national organization affiliated with the International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture. Not directly traceable to it is the Writers' Union, which from a New York origin has expanded into a national organization carrying on immensely important economic activities.

Earlier this year there was a Congress of Midwestern Writers which had inspiring results.

With the Western Writers Congress, the trend to regional organization, necessary in a country so vast, is maintained, and promises through coordinated activities to give the League of American Writers or whatever unifying organization will develop from these regional groups, functions of increased national importance.

Reading the list of signers of the call to the Western Writers Congress, one is struck both by the numbers and the importance of the writers participating. They include, among others, Upton Sinclair, John Steinbeck, Dorothy Parker, Humphrey Cobb, Charles Erskine Scott Wood, Ella Winter, Sara Bard Field, Max Miller, Michael Gold, Irwin Shaw, Edwin Justus Mayer, Haakon Chevalier, Viola Brothers Shore, Martin Flavin, William Saroyan, Myron Brinig, Nathanael West, Albert Rhys Williams, Helen Hoyt. Lincoln Steffens had been one of the movers of the congress shortly before his death.

The West has always had interesting circles of writers, especially in San Francisco. To these have been added the immense migration of writers to Hollywood, which now houses perhaps the major literary industry in the nation, certainly the one with the largest public. Here we have had a remark-

able example, never adequately commented upon, of the power of technological invention to influence the arts. It is possible that the ultimate effects of the great technological changes in the transmission of ideas—the display advertisement, the cinema, and radio—will be as far-reaching as those of printing.

First came the display advertisements—especially important in America—which fixed many writers at copy desks, changed the entire nature of journalism, transformed the magazines, and, through the cheapness made possible by the advertising subsidy, added the masses to the American reading public with consequences not yet finally assessable.

Then came the movies, enlarging that public and bringing a new literary art into the world.

More recently, we have had radio, with potentialities still to be explored.

But, while the signatures to the call by their concentration of so many writers at one point illustrate an effect of technological and economic change, of more immediate importance are the factors and motives that led to the congress, and which have already been commented upon.

The program of the Western Writers Congress speaks for both the realism and the idealism of the writers involved. It dedicates itself to "democracy and creative freedom," and it seeks to evolve out of the congress a permanent organization to oppose "the forces of reaction which threaten to destroy cultural values" in America. In California, which has had its vigilante fascism, this is a close and immediate task.

The congress opens with a public session on November 13 at which Upton Sinclair will be one of the speakers, and will continue for two successive days and evenings. The sessions will include discussions on "The Writers in a Changing World," "Censorship," "Suppression," "Fascist Trends," "The Economics of the Writing Profession," "Creative Problems and Criticism," "Writing and Propaganda," and seminars on the novel, poetry, drama, stage, screen, social science, etc.

Out of these discussions will be born an organization capable of intelligent and vigorous defense against reaction. Out of it the writers will come more realistically aware of their place in the social system and their need for expression within the terms of contemporary life. Toward them will go the welcome of the labor movement, and of the progressive forces of America who realize that literature, with its powers to fructify life, has come into their fraternity.