

That Toddlin' Town: Chicago's White Dance Bands and Orchestras, 1900–1950. By Charles A. Sengstock Jr. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004. xv + 244 pp. Index, notes, appendices, bibliography, illustrations, photographs. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN: 0-252-02954-2.

Reviewed by Kenneth J. Bindas

When considering the rise of American business in the first half of the last century, music rarely gets a mention. The primary focus has been on businesses that were in some way connected to the heavier industries, such as steel and oil. Over the last decade however, business historians have begun to turn their attention toward the roots of one of today's more dominant industries—culture—and have produced some excellent work on the emergence of the radio and film industries. There have also been some pathbreaking investigations of the emergence of the modern recording industry and its interconnection with radio and film. *That Toddlin' Town* seeks to explore the grassroots development of popular white dance music in Chicago, one of the centers for the emerging culture industries, and to speculate on the possibility that it served as a model for the whole music industry.

Sengstock's dance bands mirror other business successes during the early third of the twentieth century. The prosperity of Chicago's white dance bands was closely linked to their success in adapting to new technology (radio) and to the introduction of new booking methods. Their acceptance of "radio remotes" (in which non-studio performances were broadcast live) in the mid-1920s as a means to disseminate their commodity allowed for a tremendous expansion of their audience, which led to the construction of larger and more profitable dance halls throughout the city. In much the same manner that Hollywood and the radio encouraged network consolidation for more efficient distribution of their product, the dance bands in Chicago came under the control of a booking network developed by Jules Stein, called Music Corporation of America (MCA), during the 1920s. Stein dominated the live booking business by the end of the decade, and he did so by eliminating the carnivalesque features of live booking from the earlier era and introducing a more "refined and tempered style of doing business" (p. 22). MCA created an efficient network of dance bands that played in the city's best venues,

like the Trianon, the Aragon, the College Inn, the Morrison, and the Congress Hotel, as well as in smaller beer gardens, converted ice-skating rinks, and the growing numbers of suburban roadhouses, like the Lincoln Tavern. Only organized bands operating under their leaders' (brand) names, like Guy Lombardo, Isham Jones, Coon-Sanders, or Vincent Lopez, would be booked, as MCA viewed them as "commodities . . . and made its money on volume" (p. 33).

Central to the expansion of the dance bands in Chicago was their close connection with the radio. Booking agents and bandleaders quickly recognize the power radio had in increasing the audience base at the ballrooms where they played. Initially stations like WGN used the live-band remotes as a cheap way to fill time, but as the 1920s wore on, it was clear that the audience preferred popular music on the airwaves. While still inexpensive—bands were rarely paid either for their live performances or their remotes, which they used to publicize their other shows—the dance band's popularity also allowed for increased advertising in the form of sponsorship. Whether it was face cream, cream of wheat, Ritz crackers or Lucky Strikes, product tie-ins became a regular feature of Chicago dance-band radio performance during the halcyon days of the 1930s and 1940s. After the Second World War, sponsorship diminished as many companies switched their advertising money over to television, and while some larger orchestras made the move to the new technology, by and large television left the dance bands in its wake.

Sengstock also discusses the rise of the American Federation of Musicians, and its dynamic leader James Petrillo, and the many dance halls, ballrooms, roadhouses, and other venues that featured white dance bands during the last century. These sections focus on the prolific nature of the business in Chicago, as it created a variety of jobs and provided some stability for the musical workforce. The industry nearly collapsed, like the rest of the country, in the early part of the 1930s, but thanks to the repeal of Prohibition and the creation of a world's fair—the Century of Progress—in 1933, Chicago and its dance-band industry rebounded and emerged from the crisis more vibrant and organized than before. This meant that the surviving venues had fewer competitors and were more cognizant of the necessity to create multiple business connections to ensure profit. The drive for name-brand association for the band, the venue, the radio station, and the sponsor became almost a trademark as the industry consolidated its power in Chicago.

This synergy would continue until after the Second World War, when changing demographics, cultural tastes, and costs led to the decline of the dance-band business. Venues like the Aragon and the Paradise were still featuring dance bands in the early fifties, but “dancers weren’t clicking through the turnstiles like before” (p. 179). The Trianon closed in 1954 rather than integrate its facility, and the other ballrooms and dance venues were finding that most of their traditional clientele had moved outside the city and were reluctant to drive into the city for dancing. The 1950s represented the nadir of the dance bands; although several venues would continue to showcase dance music well into the seventies, for all practical purposes, the dance-band era was dead.

That Toddlin’ Town is an interesting and quick read. Sengstock has an encyclopedic knowledge of the dance bands, their leaders, and the many venues in which they played, and he uses his scholarship to introduce the multilayered story of the white dance bands in Chicago. There is hardly a name or a venue that is missed, and scholars or other interested persons will find a wealth of information about bygone bands and the venues in which they played. Sengstock’s close attention to details makes this work a significant contribution to the study of the business of music in America. However, he does not offer a sophisticated analysis of the material, which is often reduced to synopses of particular people, bands, or venues. He also says very little about the impact of the dance bands on the white musicians themselves. Instead, Petrillo and the AFM serve as a lens through which to observe the workers’ experience. His decision to limit the presentation to white bands, based on his view that “any further discussion [of black dance bands] would be redundant” (p. 1), doesn’t quite satisfy, as a comparison of the two groups’ experiences would have been helpful in understanding the power and influence of the radio, booking agencies, sponsors, venues, and even of the musicians themselves. Obviously this was not Sengstock’s goal, but the story he has told in *That Toddlin’ Town* nevertheless represents an interesting perspective on the rise and fall of the dance bands in Chicago.

Kenneth J. Bindas is professor of history at Kent State University—Trumbull. He is the author of numerous articles and books concerning popular music in American life,

including Swing, That Modern Sound (2001). He is presently researching a comparative study of the rise of swing and country music during the 1930s and 1940s.