

Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940–1955. By Adam Green. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. xiv + 306 pp. Index, notes, photographs. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN: 0-226-30641-0.

Reviewed by Robert E. Weems Jr.

Adam Green's thoughtful book provides an incisive look at Chicago's African American community in the mid-twentieth century. This work enhances the growing number of studies related to African American urbanization and entrepreneurship. To Green, the primary research question is not "How well did African Americans adjust to the modern city?" but "How did African Americans transform the modern city upon arriving there?" (p. 10).

According to Green, from 1940 to 1955 black Chicagoans primarily sought to transform the Windy City by "fashioning institutional, entrepreneurial, market-driven, and national forms of black culture" (p. 12). The chief manifestations of this strategy were the increased commercialization of black popular music; the simultaneous (and complementary) rise in influence of both "Negro-appeal" radio and the "Negro market"; and the founding and development of *Ebony* magazine, which took the conceptual framework of "selling the race" to the proverbial next level.

Using black Chicago musical icons like Mahalia Jackson, Louis Jordan, Muddy Waters, and Willie Dixon as case studies, Green argues that these individuals were motivated by both artistic and entrepreneurial considerations. Moreover, while there is a tendency in today's society to dismiss more commercially oriented popular music as a "diluted" version of a particular genre, Green argues that the commercialization of black popular music in Chicago between 1940 and 1955 "constituted an indisputable spur to innovation and development" (p. 52).

As local African American musical performers became more interested in increasing their fan base (and their revenues), they found a willing ally in the growing Negro-appeal radio industry. These stations, which mushroomed in America following World War II, provided the perfect venue to showcase the talents of black Chicago

singers and musicians. Significantly, Negro-appeal radio stations also served as the perfect marketing venue for companies seeking to reach the increasingly important Negro market.

After Jack L. Cooper's pioneering radio program *The All Negro Hour* hit the airwaves in 1929, Chicago stood in the forefront of the Negro-appeal radio industry. Similarly, black Chicago's radio audience, through the efforts of Cooper's equally pioneering Jack L. Cooper Advertising Company, was the first African American enclave to be systematically targeted by radio advertising. Cooper's advertising firm, established in 1937, carried the motto, "When We Get 'Em Told, You've Got 'Em Sold" (pp. 83–84).

Notwithstanding the historical significance of Cooper's connection with Negro-appeal radio and his use of this venue to reach the Negro market, it was Al Benson who became the most powerful black Chicago radio figure during the period covered here. Unlike Cooper, who "projected the refined, striving black *sophisticate*, speaking with flawless precision," Benson, an ex-minister turned disk jockey, "affected an unstudied, deeply quotidian persona that quickly became a legendary exemplar of Bronzeville's identity" (p. 84).

Benson's on-air use of "folk colloquialisms and vernacular" endeared him not only to his working-class audiences but also to the growing number of companies seeking their "share" of the Negro market. By the 1950s, Benson's show attracted both local and national advertisers, many of whom entered into unprecedented yearlong marketing contracts with him.

Besides its cogent discussion of the simultaneous rise of commercialized black music and Negro-appeal radio, *Selling the Race* sheds light on the Johnson Publishing Company, perhaps the most important black enterprise established in Chicago during these years. Since its appearance in 1945, *Ebony* magazine, the flagship publication of Johnson's publishing empire, has generated vigorous debate among blacks over the appropriateness of its articles and editorials. Yet, from a business standpoint, *Ebony's* (nonthreatening) early commitment to "mirror the happier side of Negro life—the positive everyday achievements from Harlem to Hollywood" (p. 130)—subsequently

helped Johnson to attract substantial corporate advertising, which resulted in *Ebony*'s becoming the premiere gateway to the African American consumer market.

While *Selling the Race* provides pathbreaking discussions of *Ebony* magazine, Negro-appeal radio, and the commercialization of black music (a subject that should be of interest to business historians), I was struck by Green's failure even to mention "policy" as an aspect of black Chicago's economic life during this period. In Chicago, "policy" (a precursor to today's various state lotteries) was, until the late 1930s, controlled by a local (politically protected) black syndicate. Moreover, this group achieved a certain respectability by funneling portions of their multimillion dollar winnings into a variety of legitimate commercial enterprises and charitable Bronzeville institutions.

Notwithstanding my concerns about the lack of attention to the gambling enterprise in a book on entrepreneurship in black Chicago during the middle of the twentieth century, I consider *Selling the Race* to be an important addition to African American urban and business history. Moreover, Green, who is a social and cultural historian, rather than a business historian, raises some provocative questions that merit further contemplation. I conclude this review by citing one that is especially striking: "Can members of a group profitably sell when they themselves once were sold?" (p. 215).

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