

The Government's Child: the WPA Band in Memphis

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Apple pie, fried chicken, parades, brass bands, the Deep South, Americana - Memphis is a city set deep in southern tradition and culture, and the patriotic sound of a big brass band is part of that custom. The Memphis WPA band that was established in 1935 comes out of a long tradition, established in the late nineteenth century, of live brass band music in Memphis. The WPA brass band of Memphis represents a group of musicians who were crucial to the music history of Memphis. These years in Memphis between 1934 and 1941 are unique in that the Federal Music Project paid musicians in Memphis to perform, teach, and conduct. Their music gave optimism to Memphians at a time when Americans were losing hope. The WPA musicians represented the American people of the Depression. Musicians, like many other citizens in Memphis, were losing work and the government gave them a boost. Skilled Memphis musicians had to look no further for work, their savior was here. The government created and sponsored a band that would provide a steady monthly income for a handful of Memphis musicians.

Tradition of Band Music in Memphis carried on by WPA Band

A 1939 Memphis newspaper article states the history of live music in Memphis and its importance as a national practice: “Nearly half a century ago Memphis had its Municipal Band and enjoyed summer concerts in the parks- a fine, old American custom.”¹ The article also states that today, or rather June 1939, the band that is left to continue the musical tradition is the WPA brass band. “Only the WPA Band remains in Memphis to carry on the tradition of the public concert, a tradition valued to the Nation’s

¹ Hutchison, John. “Listen to the Band.” *The Commercial Appeal*. June 25, 1939.

culture. It is the band concert that keeps alive the music that is too good for swing bands and not good enough for symphonies.”² To understand the importance of the WPA band, and the tradition that it continues, one must first understand the history of live brass bands in Memphis.

The article quotes older Memphians in the community that reminisce about music in the old days of the late nineteenth century: “Old timers remember that there used to be two main types of musical aggregation—the brass band and the fife and drum corps. Every public function was attended by either or both.”³ Memphis’ town band was made up of the towns “best young men”⁴ During the summer, they practiced on Tuesday nights in the park bandstand and during the winter months, when it was cold, they practiced in the city hall meeting room.⁵ A humorous quote from the article suggests that the band varied in quality: “Sometimes the little band was fairly bad, but often it was an expert little group of true music-lovers led by some veteran and capable musician.”⁶

In 1885, band music in Memphis was led by Professor Herman Arnold who is credited with the first arranged score of “Dixie.” Band leadership then moved to Otto Bruch, who directed a band in the late 1890’s composed of mostly Germans. During their time, “East End Park was a community gathering place for all Memphis and the band was an entertainment feature of major importance.”⁷ East End Park was on Madison where today stands the Turner Dairy factory. There also was a swimming pool, and a roller skating rink in East End Park.⁸

² Hutchison, John. “Listen to the Band.” *The Commercial Appeal*. June 25, 1939.

³ Hutchison, John. *Ibid.*

⁴ Hutchison, John. *Ibid.*

⁵ Hutchison, John. *Ibid.*

⁶ Hutchison, John. *Ibid.*

⁷ Hutchison, John. *Ibid.*

⁸ Donald Bruch, interview by author. (Memphis TN, 19 July, 2007).

Then, in 1904, the Municipal Band provided live music in Memphis, directed by William W. Saxby Jr., who was also a violinist and professor at Christian Brothers College, and the leader of the Lyceum Theatre Orchestra. George Bruch and Angelo Pasquariello, one of the WPA musicians listed on the musicians' payroll in 1935 and designated "still living in Memphis"⁹ in 1939, were both in Saxby's band. From 1911-1930, leadership of the Municipal Band was by E.K. White who also conducted the nationally famous Shrine Band of Al Chymia Temple in Memphis. Harry E. Dillman was one of White's cornet players in his Municipal Band, and according to the 1939 article in the Commercial Appeal Dillman "is now the leader of the Shrine Band and of the Memphis Federal Band, sponsored by the Federal Music Project of the Works Progress Administration."¹⁰ Harry E. Dillman, as director of the WPA Band in 1939, will be discussed further in this paper.

The WPA Band was more than just one more link in the chain of bands that make up the rich musical history of Memphis. The WPA Band was a testament to the success of the WPA and government aid. With the creation of the WPA Band, the Federal Music Project continued the tradition of live concerts for the city, and gave musicians, who might have been jobless, an adequate living. The band was organized in 1935, and was made up of unemployed musicians, some of them veterans of Memphis theatre orchestras.¹¹ Relief came just in time; with technological advances, live bands were quickly being replaced for radios or phonographs, and there was little work for live musicians. The 1939 article states the drastic impact that technology had on the musicians:

⁹ Hutchison, John. "Listen to the Band." *The Commercial Appeal*. June 25, 1939.

¹⁰Hutchison, Ibid.

¹¹Hutchison, Ibid

“Probably no class of professional men has been as hard hit in this age of technological improvement as musicians.”¹² “The phonograph was first to hit the income of musicians. Time was in Memphis, oldsters recalled, when no gathering or function was considered worthwhile unless aid musicians furnished the entertainment. A dance around the turn of the century called for the service of four, five or six musicians for a dollar an hour for each one of the layers with the musician ‘getting the job’ receiving a dollar and a half an hour.”¹³

Radio was also a hard blow to professional musicians in Memphis. For dancing parties, the cost of live musicians was no longer required, and Memphians could simply turn on the radio to have dancing music. The sweeping effect on musicians of broadcasting in Memphis is made clear by John Philip Sousa, a famous American composer and conductor. Sousa’s band played for the opening of Ellis Auditorium in 1924 and the city of Memphis sponsored the concert. Although the Commercial Appeal and the mayor, Rowlett Paine, were in favor of broadcasting the concert, John Philip Sousa was opposed to the idea of public broadcasting, and for understandable reasons.¹⁴ He stated, “Radio has cut my royalties from more than \$40,000 a year to practically nothing-and as long as I live I’ll never broadcast on radio.”¹⁵

The live musicians at parties were replaced by phonographs, radios and wax disc music. Memphians, as all Americans, could also now listen to music in talking movies as they began to have soundtracks to the films. “Music and entertainment became luxuries as attendance at concerts and dances declined. At the same time, musicians lost work due to reasons as diverse as school budget reductions and innovations in theater sound

¹² Hutchison, John. “Listen to the Band.” *The Commercial Appeal*. June 25, 1939.

¹³ Hutchison, Ibid.

¹⁴ Hutchison, Ibid.

¹⁵ Hutchison, Ibid

equipment technology- as a result, as many as two-thirds of all professional musicians in the U.S. were unemployed.”¹⁶

The Federal Music Project single-handedly provided the funds to perpetuate the music culture of Memphis and protected musicians from the harsh changes of a new age:

“The WPA Federal Music Project has provided the means for a living for many of the oldtime musicians who have been hard hit by the changes of the phonograph, music on the films, and the radio have brought.”¹⁷

“Recently a writer in New York deplored the passing of the old time bands-bands of the character of ones led by Sousa, Karyl, Arthur Pryor, and others and asked ‘What has become of the Creator-Createore who so used to charm us with his aggressive, athletic conducting.’ The answer came the next day. Createore was conducting a WPA band!”¹⁸

The Rise of the Federal Music Project

The Federal Music Project was prompted by the great economic losses of the Great Depression. The Depression began on October 29, 1929 with the Stock Market crash, a day that came to be known as Black Tuesday. Over the next few years the nation felt the weight of the Depression in their everyday lives. Americans were starved for food, needed clothes, and most of all jobs. In 1935, President Roosevelt responded to America’s need for employment with his New Deal. The New Deal was Roosevelt’s attempt to revitalize America during the Great Depression by providing jobs for the unemployed.¹⁹ A primary role in this revitalization was the Works Progress Administration. In January of 1935, congress approved Roosevelt’s request for five million dollars to start the WPA as a national employment program. With the program,

¹⁶Bing, Margaret. “A Brief Overview of the WPA.” Bienes Center for the Literary Arts. <http://www.broward.org/library/bienes/lii10204.htm>.

¹⁷ Hutchison, John. “Listen to the Band.” *The Commercial Appeal*. June 25, 1939.

¹⁸ Hutchison, Ibid.

¹⁹ McCall, Sarah B. *The Musical Fallout of Political Activism: Government Investigations of Musicians in the United States, 1930-1960*. (PhD diss., University of North Texas, 1993), 1.

the government provided hundreds of thousands of jobs to Americans in many different professions; similar vocations were classified and divided into separate projects. For example, all positions pertaining to cultural activities were labeled as Federal Project Number One. Federal One was made up of five programs: the Federal Art, Music, Theatre, Writers, and Historical Records Projects.²⁰ However, Federal One, unlike most relief jobs, was not for the average unskilled worker. Margaret Bing, a cataloger and curator at the Bienes Center for the Literary Arts stated that: “Professional and white collar workers... found employment with Federal One.”²¹

Federal One was historically the Federal government’s first ever effort to financially support the arts. Thousands of dollars of federal aid went to supporting artists, musicians, and writers. Federal One also fulfilled one of the long-term goals of the New Deal: “the provision of urban amenities to rural and small-town America.”²² Originally the New Deal did not support the arts, which earned it many critics. Political conservatives and a few “people in the art world” thought that “restrictions inherent in work-relief programs necessarily conflicted with artistic merit and talent.”²³

Under Federal One, the Federal Music Project was an effort to revitalize cultural life and provide jobs in the arts for unemployed musicians; it provided government paid positions for composers, conductors, band members, and other musicians and encouraged rising musicians through government sponsored positions.²⁴ “The prime objective of the Federal Music Project (1935- 1943) ...was to give employment to professional musicians

²⁰ Netzer, Dick. *The Subsidized Muse*. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978), 54.

²¹ Bing, Margaret. “A Brief Overview of the WPA”. Bienes Center for the Literary Arts, <http://www.broward.org/library/bienes/lii10204.htm>.

²² Netzer, Ibid.

²³ Netzer, Ibid.

²⁴ McCall, Sarah B. *The Musical Fallout of Political Activism: Government Investigations of Musicians in the United States, 1930-1960*. (PhD diss., University of North Texas, 1993), 1.

registered on the relief rolls.”²⁵ “Its purpose was to employ, retrain, and rehabilitate unemployed musicians. The earlier FERA and CWA were not successful in establishing effective programs for musicians, so the Federal Music Project enjoyed immediate acceptance by an industry hard hit by the Depression.”²⁶ According to the U.S. Work Projects Administration Federal Music Project Records of the Library of Congress: “The general purpose of the Music Project was to establish high standards of musicianship, to rehabilitate musicians by assisting them to become self-supporting, to retrain musicians, and to educate the public in the appreciation of musical opportunities.”²⁷

Bing writes:

“Organized into educational and performing units, the Federal Music Project hired teachers to direct choruses, bands and orchestras, conduct classes in both vocal and instrumental music, and direct amateur community productions and group sings. The performing units formed symphonies, orchestras, concert bands, and ensembles that gave performances in schools, community centers, settlement houses, orphanages, prisons, hospitals, public parks, and rented halls in urban and rural areas... Approximately 15,000 musicians were employed during the peak of the Federal Music Project in 1936, and 10,000 musicians were still working at the beginning of World War II.”²⁸

Prior to 1930, supporting the arts was not a priority for the federal government.

This was the result of the general attitude towards the arts among politicians; the arts were considered “elitist and as such undeserving of direct public support.”²⁹ The federal government’s lack of concern was also due to the fact that upper class patrons were subsidizing their own museums, symphony orchestras, and opera companies in prominent

²⁵ The U.S. Work Projects Administration Federal Music Project, Music Division, Library of Congress

²⁶ Bing, Margaret. “A Brief Overview of the WPA”. Bienes Center for the Literary Arts, <http://www.broward.org/library/bienes/lii10204.htm>.

²⁷ The U.S. Work Projects Administration Federal Music Project, Music Division, Library of Congress

²⁸ Bing, Ibid.

²⁹ Netzer, Dick. *The Subsidized Muse*. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978), 53.

cities.³⁰ Federal One was largely successful in that it provided thousands of jobs for writers, musicians, artists and actors. In 1939, the Music Project Concerts Division report stated that it had employed over 8,000 musicians as follows:

28 symphony orchestras employing 1,970

90 small orchestras employing 2,075

68 bands employing 2,114

55 dance bands and orchestras employing 663

15 chamber music ensembles employing 114

33 opera and choral units employing 1,110

1 soloists' unit employing 10³¹

The Federal Music Project in Memphis: the WPA Brass Band

The Federal Music Project came to Memphis with the creation of the Works Progress Administration Brass Band. Established in 1935, it was a band made up of professional musicians in Memphis that were likely part of the Memphis Local Music Union. Nearly all of the WPA band members were already established professional musicians before they were paid by the WPA to be in the band. Donald Bruch, the son of WPA band director, Lester Bruch Jr., remembered that typically, non-relief workers meant that they had other jobs. Relief workers however, did not have other jobs. He states that, "They didn't have to audition for the band. They were probably all part of the Memphis local Music Union."³²

³⁰Netzer, Dick. *The Subsidized Muse*. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978), 53.

³¹Netzer, Ibid, 55.

³² Donald Bruch, interview by author, (July 19, 2007).

So who was in the WPA band? An official Works Progress Administration document, “Schedule of Non-relief Workers On Official Project No. 65-1701” for Shelby County, District Number five, dated March 8, 1936 states the following non-relief musicians that were employed by the Works Progress Administration in Memphis. This project consisted solely of musicians. The dates that they started work, their monthly salary, and whether or not their G-10 had been issued were given. A G-10 is now called a GS-10. GS stands for Government Service and is on a 1 to 15 scale. There are now 10 steps to each grade. Today a GS-10 worker would earn between \$42,755 and \$55,580.³³ A G-10 worker would have indicated a mid-range, white collar professional. See Table 1 for a replica of the Works Progress Administration records.³⁴

Table 1: WPA: Schedule of Non-relief workers 1936

Name of Non-Relief Worker	Date started to work	Rate or salary per month	Has G-10 been issued?
Joseph Bracciante Musician	2-19-36	\$82.50	No
Nichols E. Catalano Musician	2-19-36	\$82.50	No
Glen Wickliff Musician	2-19-36	\$82.50	No
Jos. A. Johnston Musician	2-19-36	\$82.50	No
John Zeran	12-13-35	\$82.50	No

³³ Salary Table, <http://www.opm.gov/oca/07tables/pdf/gs.pdf> (accessed 26 July 2007).

³⁴“1935 Personnel WPA and PWA working,” The papers of Memphis Mayor Watkins Overton,

Musician			
Angelo Pasquariello Musician	12-13-35	\$82.50	No
Harry Walker Musician	12-13-35	\$82.50	No

The monthly salaries of \$82.50 are significant in that this was a high salary for WPA positions. A 1941 report from the WPA division of Employment shows the average salary that a WPA worker would receive. In comparison, the musicians' salaries are distinctively higher. The report reads:

“Who’s on the WPA? The average WPA worker, according to Mr. Peel, is ‘over 40’ and supports a family of from four to six. If unskilled, as 90 per cent are, he gets a salary of \$40 to \$45 a month. Semi-skilled workers receive about \$60. He is not the same man he was six years ago. The West Tennessee WPA office has had a turn-over of 100,000 workers in its 21 counties since 1935, leaving 16,000 certified for the area in 1941.”³⁵

The only musician that was listed on the payrolls that was accounted for in the Memphis City Directory was Joseph A. Johnston, who in 1931, before being employed by the WPA was designated as a musician. This suggests that like most of the musicians, he was a highly skilled musician, looking for work rather than training. The nature of a few of the musicians' last names, such as Catalano, and Pasquariello suggests that they were immigrants. Prior to 1936, their names were not recorded in the Memphis City Directory.

³⁵ “WPA Division of Employment-Reports, 1941.” The Papers of Mayor Walter Chandler, Memphis Room, Memphis Public Library.

Donald Bruch remembered some of the members of his father's WPA band. He identified some of the names on the WPA payroll and their respective instruments. Glen Wickliff played saxophone and clarinet and Harry Walker played trumpet. He recalled that some of the musicians had other jobs, and some didn't. He also remembered that one of the musicians was a dentist by the name of Goldstein. He stated that some of the musicians also had private pupils.³⁶ In the winter, they played concerts in Ellis Auditorium for large audiences, and in the summer they played in the parks around neighborhoods so that they were accessible to both the wealthy and the underprivileged. "Lots of people came to the concerts. Music was the chief entertainment. You know there wasn't TV or anything." "It was fun. People would take blankets and newspapers and sit on the grass to watch the concerts. They played just about everything."³⁷

What did they play, that got Memphians feet tappin'? John Hutchison in 1939 wrote that they played "The good old marches that make Grandpa tap his foot and Johnny run into the street beside that drummer; the swooping waltzes that revive in Grandma's heart the thrills on dance floors shining from the light of kerosene lamps; the familiar arias from opera, an occasional old popular tune-these are all a part of the real America."³⁸ Instrumental sheet music from the WPA Band Library reveals that the band did in fact, play nearly everything. From patriotic festival marches to opera overtures, the WPA band had a wide range of repertoire. Listed below in Table 2 is a list of selected works from the WPA Band Library. (Archival Music is property of the Music

³⁶ Donald Bruch, interview by author, (July 19, 2007).

³⁷ Donald Bruch, Ibid.

³⁸ Hutchison, John. "Listen to the Band." *The Commercial Appeal*. June 25, 1939.

Department of Rhodes College, a gift of Donald Bruch's personal collection. The location of the former WPA Band Library is not known.)

Table 2: Sheet Music from WPA Band Library ³⁹

Title of Piece	Composer/Arranger	Type of piece
The Evolution of Dixie	Mayhew L. Lake	Overture
L'arlésienne: Suite de Concert No. 2	Georges Bizet	Suite
The Bat (the Merry Countess- Die Fledermaus)	Johann Strauss	Opera
Ruy Blas Overture	Felix Mendelssohn/Arranged by Chas. J. Roberts	Overture
Overture Light Cavalry	Suppé	Overture
Poet and Peasant Overture	Frv Suppé/ Arranged by McMeyrelles	Overture
Dance of the Hours (La Gioconda)	Amilcare Ponchielli/ Arranged by Carlo Morino	Opera
The Best Loved Irish Melody	Al. Hayes	Folk song
Our Glorious America: Festival march and chorale	Kenneth S. Clark	March
Tales of Hoffmann (Les Contes d'Hoffman) from J. Offenbach's Opéra Fantastique	V.F. Sarfranek	Opera

The WPA band in 1939 played American's old favorites and carried on the live music tradition in Memphis. There were free concerts played in the parks for Memphians all summer long, that were sponsored by the Recreation Department of the Memphis Park commission.⁴⁰ They also had many concerts throughout the year. Below is a record of the Band's concerts for the month of March in 1941.

³⁹ Sheet Music of WPA Band Library, Property of Rhodes College Music Department.

⁴⁰ Hutchison, John. "Listen to the Band." *The Commercial Appeal*. June 25, 1939.

“The Memphis WPA Band played a series of sixteen concerts to approximately 6,810 people during March. Their defense activities included a barn dance and carnival at John Gaston Community Center for the Second Army. When the draftees leave, The WPA band is on hand to give them a glad send off. Twenty-five musicians are assigned to the project, sponsored by the Memphis Park Commission.”⁴¹

The Memphis Park Commission was established in 1899 by Mayor John J. Williams and consisted of three members. “The first members of the Commission were Robert Galloway, L.B. McFarland, who served as chairman, and John R. Godwin. It is doubtful that three more dedicated and effective members could have been selected.”⁴²

The park commission was paid for by citizens’ taxes and benefited from economic growth in the early years of the city. “The City of Memphis provided regular funding of the Park Commission by the appropriation of a tax percentage. When the economy of the city grew during the first three decades of the 20th century, the available revenue for park system use continued to increase. Between 1911 and 1912, the Commission received more than \$300,000 from municipal tax collections.”⁴³

The Memphis Park Commission quickly took action after their founding in 1899. In the early 20th century, they established parks all over the city, many of which became the performing spots for the WPA Band. (All of the parks mentioned below served as performing venues for the WPA Band). In the early 1900’s, Gaston Park was donated to the Memphis Park Commission by John Gaston, a wealthy businessman in the hotel and restaurant industry. The land that would later be named Overton park was purchased in

⁴¹ “Division of Community Service Programs Report” WPA Division of Employment-Reports 1941 from the Paper of Mayor Walter Chandler, Memphis Room, Memphis Public Library, (accessed July 2007).

⁴² The City’s Best “Friends” Memphis Park System Spans 162-years of continued growth. Memphis Park Commission Folder, Memphis Room, Memphis Public Library, (accessed July 2007).

⁴³ The City’s Best “Friends” Memphis Park System Spans 162-years of continued growth, Ibid.

October of 1901.⁴⁴ “Of all the early acquisitions by the Park Commission, Overton Park was the most accessible to Memphis residents and consequently it received the most development.”⁴⁵ Fortunately, this development provided a venue for WPA band concerts. “Work was directed to the construction of ...a bandstand for summer concerts. Funded by the Park Commission, these concerts became a leading social event for large crowds who attended regularly.”⁴⁶ The new facilities in Overton Park affected where WPA Band had performances. As seen by the schedule below, there were more concerts in Overton Park, likely due to better facilities and the newly built performance shell that although well worn, still stands today.

An article from the Commercial Appeal in June 1939 shows a full summer schedule for the WPA Band with concerts in the parks all over the city:

“Band Concert Season is On in City Parks.”

OVERTON PARK: July 2, 3:30 p.m.; July 4, 3:30; July 13, 3:30; July 22, 3:30; July 30, 3:30; August 13, 3:30; August 22 to 26, 3:00; August 27, 3:30; August 29, 3:30

DAVIS PARK: July 3, 17, 31, August 14, all at 7:30 p.m.

FORREST PARK: July 6, 20, August 17, all at 7:30

FAIRGROUNDS SWIMMING POOL: July 19, August 2, 16, 30, all at 7:30.

RIVERSIDE PARK: August 5, 19, both at 7:30.

DE SOTO PARK: June 25, July 9, 23, August 6, 20, all at 3:30.

BICKFORD PARK: June 26, July 8, 10, 24, August 7, 21, all at 7:30

⁴⁴ Hopkins, John Linn and Marsha R. Oates. “Memphis Park and Parkway System.” *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*. (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2002).

⁴⁵ The City’s Best “Friends” Memphis Park System Spans 162-years of continued growth. Memphis Park Commission Folder, Memphis Room, Memphis Public Library, (accessed July 2007).

⁴⁶ The City’s Best “Friends” Memphis Park System Spans 162-years of continued growth, Ibid.

GASTON PARK: June 27, July 11, 25, August 8, all at 7:30.

BRINKLEY PARK: July 27, August 10, both at 7:30

VOLLINTINE PARK: June 29, (Carnival).

FAIRGROUNDS MIDWAY: July 1, 15, 29, August 12, all at 7:30.⁴⁷

The day after the purchase of Overton Park, the Commission purchased 427 acres southwest of the City from various owners, which soon became Riverside Park. Brinkley Park was purchased in 1913 by the Memphis Park Commission.

In the late nineteenth century, “many towns and cities did not have park facilities for their black citizens.”⁴⁸ In Memphis, the parks were heavily segregated.

“The needs of black citizens of Memphis were first met through the efforts of Robert R. Church, Sr., A black businessman. Church bought land on the south side of Beale Street in 1899 for the creation of a six-acre park. Investing \$100,000, he established a beautifully landscaped and well-equipped park which included an auditorium with a seating capacity of 2,000. Church Park and auditorium provided a location for picnics, concerts, theater, dancing and meetings. Since many towns and cities did not have park facilities for their black citizens, the park served not only Memphians, but mid-southerners as well.”⁴⁹

One park where the WPA played was designated for blacks. “In 1913, DeSoto Park was established for blacks. Segregation remained in effect in the park system for almost a half-century.” The exclusion of blacks in most city parks during the life of the WPA band is also attested to by Donald Bruch, the son of the WPA band director, Lester Bruch. Donald remembers that the WPA band was made up of all Caucasian males, and the audiences were primarily white. Donald attended many concerts in the parks that his father conducted between 1939 and 1941. He was in his teens at the time, and set up his

⁴⁷ Hutchison, John. “Listen to the Band.” *The Commercial Appeal*. June 25, 1939.

⁴⁸ The City’s Best “Friends” Memphis Park System Spans 162-years of continued growth. Memphis Park Commission Folder, Memphis Room, Memphis Public Library, (accessed July 2007).

⁴⁹ The City’s Best “Friends” Memphis Park System Spans 162-years of continued growth, Ibid.

own concession stand for concerts in the Overton Park Shell. He became friends with visiting musicians and observed the audiences. Speaking of the audiences he remembers, “There might have been a few blacks, but it was mostly all white.”⁵⁰ Racial segregation was not only seen in the concert audiences, but also in the payrolls of the Memphis WPA Band.

According to archival photographs available, all of the WPA band members were Caucasian males. Although some records suggest from the musicians’ last names that they are immigrants, there is no record of any of the Memphis band members being African American. This contrasts sharply with African American employment percentages in national WPA records which Kenneth Bindas describes in his book, *All of this music belongs to the nation: the WPA’s Federal Music Project and American Society*. He writes: “The Federal Music Project’s Administrators did recognize the value of utilizing blacks within its organization. As a profession, musicians represented a significant and respected part of the black community. According to census data, almost 10 percent of the total number of blacks involved in professional employment were musicians.”⁵¹ Memphis was not aligned with one of the goals of the Federal Music Project, racial equality. “In a larger sense, allowing blacks onto project rolls helped prove one of the central aims of the FMP- the re-discovery of American culture. Nikolai Sokoloff (National director of the Federal Music Project and former director of the Cleveland Orchestra), who took his cue from Hopkins (Harry Lloyd Hopkins, Roosevelt’s economic advisor), declared that the ‘WPA music projects are for all sexes, creeds, races, and colors... Thoroughly American in spirit, the FMP considers only

⁵⁰ Donald Bruch, interview by author, 23 July, 2007.

⁵¹ Bindas, Kenneth J. *All of this music belongs to the nation: the WPA’s Federal Music Project and American Society* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 77.

ability to perform and discriminates against no race.”⁵² “In the South, the black units also met with widespread approval.”⁵³ Memphis however, did not hold these values. The following national percentages show how distinct Memphis is in their segregation. “Within the Music Project, 1,774 blacks out of a total of 14,922 musicians were employed during 1935. The figure represents almost 12 percent of the total Federal Music Project employment rolls for the year and corresponds to general population percentages. Throughout the Federal Music Project’s existence, Black employment rarely deviated from this percentile.”⁵⁴ Memphis is significant in that it was the only city in Tennessee that created a WPA band. However, the band did not fully represent the diverse population of the city or coincide with the nation’s diverse payrolls or the stated national diversity goals of the Federal Music Project. Perhaps the city was too deeply rooted in their segregated ways to allow black musicians to perform in the WPA Band. It must also be acknowledged that there was no diversity among the leaders of the WPA Band. All of the leaders of the band were white Caucasian males.

Leaders of the WPA Band

In Memphis, Joseph Henkel was the first conductor of the WPA Band in Memphis. He was also the representative for the Federal Music Project and the state director of the Federal Music Project for Tennessee. An article from the Crosstown Chronicle on October 23, 1936 deemed that Maestro Joseph Henkel was “now state director of the Federal Music Project for Tennessee.”

⁵² Bindas, Kenneth J. *All of this music belongs to the nation: the WPA’s Federal Music Project and American Society* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 77.

⁵³ Bindas, *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Bindas, *Ibid.*

The article states a sense of high admiration and respect for the city's musical leader Joseph Henkel. "When a man is about to build a home or bridge, lay out a subdivision or erect a skyscraper, only expert guidance will do, and when from time to time symphonic groups spring up in Memphis, Joseph Henkel is the immediate and uncontested choice for conductor."⁵⁵ This admiration was not without merit and Henkel was well qualified for holding such high musical positions. He had an extensive background of rigorous musical training. Henkel studied violin at age six in Memphis and after finishing high school in Memphis continued his violin study abroad.

He spent three years at the Boehmert conservatory in Europe under the instruction of the concert master of the Berlin Royal Opera House. He also studied piano, harmony, conducting, and orchestration with the director of the Berlin Royal Opera and Dramatic Theatre. In 1907, Henkel came back to Memphis and continued his violin study with Jacob Bloom, maestro of the old Memphis Symphony Orchestra while also performing with the orchestra. (The current Memphis Symphony Orchestra claims to have been founded in 1952.)

In 1910, Henkel returned to Berlin and performed with the Berlin symphony, as it is now known, and had the opportunity to solo and conduct under the direction of famous composers such as Richard Strauss, Siegfried Wagner, son of Richard Wagner, and Oscar Fried.

Henkel returned to Memphis and directed the Memphis Symphony Orchestra from 1914 to 1915. However, He was not just limited to conducting the orchestra and had his hand in musical activities throughout the city; he was well known as a conductor, violinist, and teacher. He organized an orchestra performance in conjunction with the

⁵⁵ "Joseph Henkel-City's Favorite Band Master." Crosstown Chronicle, October 23, 1936.

Musician's Union in 1934, in Ellis Auditorium.⁵⁶ He also organized a sixty-five piece orchestra for the dedication of the orchestra shell in Overton Park, that with only six rehearsals gave a "performance which would do credit to an established organization enjoying the benefit of constant rehearsing."⁵⁷

Henkel was also involved in educational affairs throughout the city. A 1933-1934 Memphis College of Music catalog states that both Henkel and his wife were on the staff at the Memphis College of Music which, at the time functioned as the music department of Southwestern University, the former name of Rhodes College. He was also the head of the orchestra department at Memphis College of Music. His biography in the Memphis College of Music catalog of 1933-1934 states that he had previously been involved in other universities in the region such as Union University and Lambuth College, and was the Director and Dean of the Faculty at the Institute of Musical Art in Memphis.⁵⁸ A newspaper article from the Commercial Appeal, November 5, 1935 titled "Public Symphony Urged by Henkel" tells of a lecture given by Henkel at the Memphis College of Music that gives the historical background of the development of the symphony orchestra. The article headline states that Henkel "pleads for awakened interest in better music."⁵⁹ In the same lecture Henkel fought for the establishment of a strong music culture in Memphis. "He declared that still greater benefit results in the way of encouraging and inspiring young musician and raising the musical standard of a city."⁶⁰ The public's interest in music was growing during the 1930s and 40s with the help of leaders like Henkel. Joseph Henkel played a key role in furthering the

⁵⁶ "Joseph Henkel City's Favorite Band Master." Crosstown Chronicle, October 23, 1936.

⁵⁷ "Joseph Henkel City's Favorite Band Master," Ibid.

⁵⁸ Memphis College of Music 1933-1934 catalog.

⁵⁹ "Public Symphony Urged by Henkel" *Commercial Appeal*, November 5, 1935.

⁶⁰ "Public Symphony Urged by Henkel" Ibid.

development of music not only in Memphis, but also in the entire state. Henkel influenced many areas of music through his work with Memphis orchestras, colleges throughout the region and the WPA Brass Band.

Harry Dillman, previously mentioned as a member of the Municipal Band in Memphis, became the director of the WPA band, also known as the Federal Band, in 1939. Dillman was not a native Memphian; From 1902 to 1907 Dillman toured throughout the South during the summers in big cities east of the Mississippi with two different traveling bands: Patrick Conway's Band and Bohumir Kryl's Band. He came to Memphis in 1908 and played in the municipal band directed by Thomas Van Osten. In addition to directing the Federal Band, throughout his career, he directed a handful of other bands throughout Memphis including the Y.M.C.A. band.⁶¹

Succeeding Harry E. Dillman as director of the WPA band was Lester Bruch, who emerged out of a musical family. His father, George Frederick von Bruch, emigrated with his wife and four children in 1867 from Bremen, Germany. George and his 18 year old son, Otto Bruch listed themselves as "musicians" on the ship passenger list and arrived in Memphis as "practicing professional musicians."⁶² George Frederick Bruch's younger son, George Frederick Jr. also had musical training. He had studied with Edvard Grieg, a world renowned composer, at the Leipzig Conservatory. In 1873, George Frederick the elder was a victim of the yellow fever epidemic in Memphis. However, "after his death his sons continued to contribute significantly to the musical leadership of Memphis, becoming charter members of the Musician's Protective Union."⁶³ In 1895, as founding members of the Musician's Protective Union, George Bruch Jr. was a member of the

⁶¹ Hutchison, John. "Listen to the Band." *The Commercial Appeal*. June 25, 1939.

⁶² Sharp, Tim. *Memphis Music Before the Blues* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2007), 50.

⁶³ Sharp, Ibid.

executive committee, and Otto Bruch was the secretary. George's son Lester Bruch, was the supervisor for the WPA Federal Music Project in West Tennessee, and directed the WPA band.⁶⁴ On weekends and some week nights Lester Bruch would direct the band. During the week he traveled to universities in the region to outline music programs for the college. Lester was paid by the WPA to conduct the band and to give universities instruction as to how to run their music programs. His office, with his personal secretary, was in downtown Memphis in Ellis Auditorium. Lester was also a trumpet player and had a handful of private pupils. His son, Donald Bruch remembers that "people would come to our house and take lessons."⁶⁵

The Musicians Protective Union, of which Lester Bruch's father and uncle were charter members, was formed in Memphis on December 6, 1873. With the formation of the MPU, Memphis continued to set up its reputation as a musical city. Tim Sharp writes in his book, *Memphis Music before the Blues*:

"The strategic location of Memphis as a midway point between New Orleans, Cincinnati, and St. Louis made it the center of river traffic between the termination river port cities. Orchestras played on board the luxury steamer that traveled up and down the Mississippi River, and Memphis became a recruiting point for large instrument ensembles. Musicians came to Memphis from all over in search of work on board one of the floating orchestras. The Memphis Musician's Protective Union predated both the AFL-CIO and the American Federation of Musicians by several decades, making it the oldest musician's organization in America and the nation's oldest existing labor organization."⁶⁶

Thirty years after the founding of the Musician's Protective Union came the American Federation of Musicians. The patriotism and glorification of Americana that will later be reflected by the WPA band is represented in the American Federation of

⁶⁴ Sharp, Tim. *Memphis Music Before the Blues* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2007), 98.

⁶⁵ Bruch, Donald .interview by author, (19 July, 2007).

⁶⁶ Sharp, Ibid, 58.

Musicians in 1898. The certificate of affiliation for the Memphis chapter of the American Federation of Musicians is decorated with a “streaming banner circling a column containing the sheet music to ‘The Star Spangled Banner,’ and American shield of stars and stripes, a globe rotated to the side of North and South America.”⁶⁷

WPA Federal Music Project Budget and Statistics in Memphis

In the Ellis Auditorium Reports from 1934-38, the records designate that the “Show Income” for WPA Project Expenditures in April 1939 was \$953.37. Whether or not this money was paid to the actual WPA musicians performing in the auditorium is unknown. The Auditorium records also show that from January 1, 1939 to September 31, 1939, the WPA pay rolls were \$1,385.88, building materials, etc. were \$3,351.30, and the total WPA Project Expenditures from January 1939 to August 31, 1939 were \$4,917.18. The net operating expenses and WPA expenditures in excess of income were \$14,637.56. Although there is record of the figures, no details of the allotment of funds are given.⁶⁸

In an official Works Progress Administration document, 1935 Works Progress Administration Reports, “Special Projects,” it is recorded that the project 65-44-1701, labeled “Music Program” had a recorded twenty nine men employed on work and was allotted \$20,680 and designated that a work order was received.⁶⁹ However, in a letter to Mayor Overton from the Memphis Public Employment Center, July 21, 1937, it is noted that the Music Project employed only eighteen relief workers, and one non-relief worker. The discrepancy between these two numbers can likely be attributed to a cut in the

⁶⁷ Sharp, Tim. *Memphis Music Before the Blues* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2007), 59.

⁶⁸ “Auditorium Reports 1936-1938” The Papers of Memphis Mayor Watkins Overton. Memphis Room, Memphis Public Library.

⁶⁹ “1935 WPA Reports,” “Special Projects.” The papers of Memphis Mayor Watkins Overton,

number of workers on relief roles in July of 1937. The reason for the cut in relief workers is detailed in a heated correspondence over the Shelby County quota for WPA relief jobs between Colonel Harry S. Berry, the State Administrator of the Works Progress Administration, and Memphis Mayor Watkins Overton.

Colonel Harry S. Berry writes,

“I wish to go over the whole relief situation as it applies to the State, and particularly as it applies to Shelby County...I first wish to state that during the entire year ending June 30, 1937, Shelby County never filled the quota which was allocated to it, so that you had working at all times one hundred percent of all those certified for relief who were willing and able to work. Taking up only the more recent months, jobs which were not utilized were available to Shelby County to the following extent:

March	805
April	253
May	633
June	60

While these jobs were being offered and were going begging, there were certified in Shelby County as available for these jobs, in excess of relief clients at work, the following persons:

March	2,086
April	2,246
May	1,906
June	904

This in itself shows that the relief roles in Shelby County were carrying hundreds of people who were not bona fide relief clients and who should have been stricken from the rolls, and who since July 1st have been stricken from the rolls, with the exception of about 400.”⁷⁰

Mayor Overton’s reply, July 17, 1937

“In reply to your letter of July 13th I would like to make one thing clear at the outset. I am not complaining and I am not expecting preferential consideration for this City as intimated in you letter. I am expecting fair treatment for a lot of people who are hungry and want an opportunity to support their families.”

⁷⁰ Colonel Harry Berry to Mayor Watkins Overton. The Papers of Memphis Mayor Watkins Overton- WPA Quota 1937-1938, Memphis Room, Memphis Public Library.

“I would like to see everyone in the First District who needs a job have it, but I see no justification for cutting our quota to increase any other quota.”

“The record of this City in trying to cooperate with WPA and all other public work offices, I believe, is well known. Our interest in seeing that the money was wisely spent for those who needed it I trust has been demonstrated. I believe that our WPA quota has been cut entirely too drastically and unfairly. “

“I am sure you realize as I do that the size of a total certified list depends upon how strict those are who are doing the certifying, and is not the only test of the need of a community.”⁷¹

The correspondence between Mayor Overton and Colonel Harry Berry may clarify the discrepancy between the different numbers of salaried members in the band. It can be concluded that the twenty-nine workers in 1935 were cut down to eighteen on July 1, 1937 along with many other Shelby County workers who were as Colonel Berry described, “not bona-fide relief clients.”⁷²

An analysis of the 1940 census shows that “About one-third of the workers usually counted as unemployed during the late 1930s were actually employed on federal work relief programs. Some of these workers might have held regular (non-relief) jobs in the absence of relief work.”⁷³ Again, all seven of the musicians listed on the Works Progress Administration payroll were non-relief workers. The letter also states that this is a list of the “other Federal Projects which WPA does the assigning and of which we

⁷¹ Memphis Mayor Watkins Overton to Colonel Harry Berry, 17 July 1937, The Papers of Memphis Mayor Watkins Overton, Memphis Room, Memphis Public Library.

⁷² Colonel Harry Berry Mayor Watkins Overton, 17 July 1937, Ibid.

⁷³ Sundstrom, William A. *Did the WPA Displace Private Employment? Evidence from the 1940 Census*. (unpublished working paper, Santa Clara University, July 1996), abstract.

could only take their figures, as we have no records.”⁷⁴ Through this letter it is evident that the payrolls of the Federal Music Project were not documented in great detail.

Later in the life of the Federal Music Project in 1940-1941, in a letter to Mayor Walter Chandler from Betty Hunt Luck, the State Administrator and Director of the WPA, the Division of Professional and Service Projects gives a report of the progress of the Federal Music Project. The report states that the Music Project of Tennessee has employed eighty-two workers, “has put to work jobless performing musicians and music teachers. Two performing units, a concert band and a concert orchestra played for the schools, underprivileged communities, orphanages and hospitals. Children who have been unable to take music lessons are now being taught by forty-eight music teachers. Eighteen rural communities have bands for the first time and several counties are offering in their school system Public School Music for the first time. Fifty male and thirty-two female workers are employed on the project.”⁷⁵ In the Tennessee state reports for employment, performance and attendance for January, 1938, the musical statistics for Tennessee are as follows:⁷⁶

1 concert Band

Total performances: 14

Total Attendance: 4,700

Number of Musicians: 18

⁷⁴ Memphis Public Employment Center of the Tennessee State Employment Service affiliated with the United States Employment Service to Memphis Mayor Watkins Overton, The papers of Memphis Mayor Watkins Overton.

⁷⁵ “WPA: Division of Employment- Correspondence 1940-1941.” “Community Service Section Projects of the Works Progress Administration, The Papers of Walter Chandler, Memphis Room, Memphis Public Library.

⁷⁶ Canon, Cornelius. “The Federal Music Project of the Works Progress Administration: Music in a Democracy” (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1963), 289.

Although there is discrepancy among the reports, it is evident that the Federal Music Project was a chief financial supporter of music performance, education, and appreciation in Memphis and the surrounding areas during the years of the Depression. The differences in figures can be attributed to poor documentation, as stated by politicians and also due to a cut in the number of Memphians on relief roles.

Local Political Support of Music in Memphis

In a letter from the National Committee of Music Appreciation, Washington, D.C. September 21, 1939 national director Edward Ingalls wrote to Mayor Overton:

“It is my genuine pleasure to extend to you this cordial invitation to accept membership on our Committee in Memphis.”.... “Approximately twenty prominent men and women of Memphis will comprise the Memphis group of the National Committee, and in the selection of membership the committee was guided by a desire to choose those citizens whose interest in the civic and particularly the cultural welfare of their communities had been definitely established.”⁷⁷

The National Committee went on to detail their beliefs and purpose for cultivating the appreciation of music in their letter to Mayor Overton:

“Members of the National Committee believe great music belongs to everybody: that it is a part of the cultural treasure of the world; that its enjoyment should be made possible for all; that schools should be encouraged to continue courses in music education; that public spirited organizations sponsoring symphony broadcasts should be urged to continue the fine work; that newspapers and other publications should be lauded for devoting liberal attention to matters of musical importance. It is the belief of the National Committee that you, as well as other prominent leaders in cultural and civic thought in Memphis will welcome this opportunity to receive the co-operation of the National Committee. Join us in our effort to permit music to serve its great purpose. In the words of Dr. Hanson: ‘Music at last has its opportunity of ministering to the recreational and spiritual

⁷⁷ “Music Appreciation National Committee 1939.” The Papers of Memphis Mayor Watkins Overton. Memphis Room, Memphis Public Library.

needs, not of thousands but of millions of people; now it can become for the first time in its history a democratic art and a universal language.”⁷⁸

Mayor Overton’s quick response only five days later was one of sincere commitment to supporting the development of a Music Appreciation chapter in Memphis: “If I can be of any service it will be a pleasure to serve on your Memphis committee, and I have so advised Dr. Howard Hanson by letter today. Assuring you of my cooperation, and with every good wish, I am, Very sincerely yours.”⁷⁹

Memphian’s Interest in Music

At this time the public’s attitude toward music was shifting and people were beginning to recognize the importance of musical and cultural development in Memphis. A 1940 Memphis Symphony Orchestra pamphlet demonstrates this changing attitude for music that seemed to speak to all people regardless of race, class, or age, it read: “Enjoy Music, it speaks a common language.” The pamphlet, in addition to urging financial support of the Memphis Symphony Orchestra, urged leaders in the community to take responsibility for the musical development of their city: “the responsible leaders in the colleges and public schools of the nation are agreed that an appreciation of great music is an essential item in every education program. It is now an accepted maxim of civic life that a community’s general entertainment and cultural standards can be maintained only in those places where the fine arts are made available to all of our people.”⁸⁰ The

⁷⁸ . “Music Appreciation National Committee 1939.” The Papers of Memphis Mayor Watkins Overton, Memphis Room, Memphis Public Library.

⁷⁹ “Music Appreciation National Committee 1939,” Ibid.

⁸⁰ Memphis Symphony Orchestra pamphlet, February 15, 1940.

pamphlet also made a direct call to Memphians for change in the way that they view the music of their city:

“A civilization is measured by its culture and not by its material attainments. Athens, Florence, and Vienna have all left a rich heritage in literature, philosophy, art and music which far overshadows their possible fame as trade centers. Memphis is already renowned for her trade, but is only at the threshold of recognition as culture-minded, and it is the duty of every citizen to insure that her cultural development is not neglected.”⁸¹

Conclusions

The Memphis WPA band was crucial in the cultural development that the pamphlet describes. The band was a continuation of a historical music tradition of live bands that was established in the city in the late nineteenth century, while simultaneously appealing to the public’s need for hope, patriotism, and optimism in a generation that was suffering. The WPA Band kept the tradition of live performance of band music, opera, classical music, and patriotic marches; the band’s free concerts to the public gave the community a wide variety of musical selection and provided a way for citizens to get away from the troubles of everyday life. The government’s establishment of the WPA band provided relief to musicians from the hardships of the Great Depression and also the rise of technology by paying them a living wage that was higher than most other WPA workers. The government paid musicians to perform and conduct, thereby keeping music alive through this pressing time. The Federal Music Project gave authority to each state in 1939, and with the distraction of World War II looming in the distance, the program began to fade.⁸² In Memphis, the WPA band lasted until 1941, where it finished under

⁸¹ Memphis Symphony Orchestra pamphlet, February 15, 1940.

⁸² Bindas, Kenneth J. *All of this music belongs to the nation: the WPA’s Federal Music Project and American Society* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 108.

director Lester Bruch. Although the WPA band no longer existed, it left in its path a legacy of live music that lived on in the hearts of Memphians.

Pledged: Lindsey Cloud

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The Government's Child: the WPA Band in Memphis. Lindsey Cloud. 2007. Lindsey Cloud Apple pie, fried chicken, parades, brass bands, the Deep South, Americana Memphis is a city set deep in southern Expand. Is this relevant? 1997. 1997. Potentiometric surface and specific conductance of the sparta and memphis aquifers in eastern arkansas, 1995. Gregory P. Stanton. 1997. The Sparta and Memphis aquifers in eastern and south-central Arkansas are a major source of water for industrial, public supply Expand. Is this relevant? A major document of African American participation in the struggles of the Depression, The Negro in Illinois was produced by a special division of the Illinois Writers' Project, one of President Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration programs. Headed by Harlem Renaissance poet Arna Bontemps and white proletarian writer Jack Conroy, The Negro in Illinois employed major black writers living in Chicago during the 1930s, including Richard Wright, Margaret Walker, Katherine Dunham, Fenton Johnson, Frank Yerby, and Richard Durham.