Co-workers in the Kingdom of Culture: Black Swan Records and the Political Economy of African American Music

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In London in 1923, W. E. B. Du Bois addressed the third Pan-African Congress on the topic of "The American Negro." In his talk he jumped from familiar themes such as voting rights and lynching to one topic that stood out: attempts by a large American phonograph record corporation to bankrupt Black Swan Records, a small, black-owned company that produced records for African American consumers. Why would a large phonograph corporation launch such a campaign? And why would it merit Du Bois's attention in that heady forum? By way of answering those questions, this article investigates the rise and fall of the small record company and explores the complex political economy in which it operated. Black Swan was established by a former protégé of Du Bois, Harry H. Pace, who saw the company as a powerful means to respond to the hostile conditions African Americans faced, both in the entertainment business and in American society at large. At stake was not merely entertainment but access to, and control of, material resources that could cultivate and boost African Americans' creative spirits, support and encourage African American business development and economic self-sufficiency, and, it was believed, help shape popular opinion to produce tangible social, political, and economic benefits for African Americans.[1]

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[1] On W. E. B. Du Bois's speech and reactions to it, see David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919–1963* (New York, 2000), 113. Lewis mistakenly identifies the company as "Pace and Handy."

When music functions as a commodity, as it often does in American consumer culture, who makes it and on what terms are important questions of cultural and economic power. In the early twentieth century, the manufacturers and merchants of printed music and musical instruments (including phonographs) grew rapidly in size and prestige, and tremendous sales of pianos, sheet music, and phonograph records established music as an essential component of the growing consumer economy and national mass culture. By the end of World War I, the U.S. music industries produced goods worth more than $335 million; never before had those industries exerted such cultural authority or financial influence in American life. In the trenches and on the home front, music had been hailed as morally uplifting, and singing was widely promoted as a national duty. Pianos were exempted from the wartime luxury tax as a social necessity. Phonographs and records were not exempted, but the phonograph industry nonetheless thrived: the industry-leading Victor Talking Machine Company enjoyed its highest record sales to date in 1917 and 1918 and ended the war with back orders for some five million additional discs.[2]

The music industries were not an equal opportunity employer, however. Despite the disarming popularity of the singer-comedian Bert Williams, the nation's widespread (though not universal) embrace of ragtime, and the popular acclaim for the bandleader James Reese Europe, African Americans found their opportunities in the music industries tightly restricted. While phonograph manufacturers appealed to immigrant groups by issuing hundreds of titles in every language from Czech to Chinese, they all but refused to issue records by African Americans and paid no attention to African American consumers. When African Americans did make records, the recordings were limited to comedy or novelty styles, which established "coon songs" and minstrelsy as the paradigm of African American culture within the industry. (Coon songs were a popular style of comic songs based on caricatures of Negro life, usually sung in "dialect.") Minor exceptions to the pattern included records by the concert vocalist Carroll Clark, a few vocal jubilee groups, and the band of James Reese Europe, which had famously accompanied the dance pioneers Vernon Castle and Irene Castle as well as the armed forces' Harlem Hellfighters regiment, but those exceptions did nothing to alter the industry's low valuation of African American talent, its reluctance to depict African Americans as performers of so-called quality music, or its general pattern of marginalizing or excluding African American musicians.[3]

[2] David Suisman, "The Sound of Money: Music, Machines, and Markets, 1890–1925" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2002), 131–46; Edmund E. Day and Woodlief Thomas, *The Growth of Manufacturers, 1899 to 1923: A Study of the Indexes of Increase in the Volume of Manufactured Products* (Washington, 1928), 173–74. On the promotion of patriotic community-based singing groups, see Edward B. Marks with Abbot J. Liebling, *They All Sang: From Tony Pastor to Rudy Vallee* (New York, 1935), 189–90; and Mark Katz, "Making America More Musical through the Phonograph, 1900–1930," *American Music,* 16 (Winter 1998), 461.

[3] Ronald C. Foreman Jr., "Jazz and Race Records, 1920–1932: Their Origins and Their Significance for the Record Industry and Society" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, Urbana, 1968), 11–54; William Howland Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory* (New York, 1999), 65–87, 109–34; American Folklife Center, *Ethnic Recordings in America: A Neglected Heritage* (Washington, 1982); Howard Rye,

When the United States entered World War I, many African Americans lent their support only reluctantly, with the hope that they could leverage the fight for democracy abroad into a renewed commitment to democracy at home after the war's end. This heightened sense of entitlement combined with the bloody race riots of 1919 to radicalize large numbers of African Americans. African Americans' political assertiveness took many forms across the country, but they shared, as the *Chicago Defender* put it, "new thoughts, new ideas, new aspirations" as the postwar years unfolded.[4]

It was in this environment that a bright, charismatic businessman named Harry H. Pace launched the first major black-owned record company. Conceived as a venture to produce a broad range of music *by* and *for* African Americans, the company that became known as Black Swan Records was an audacious didactic project designed to utilize the combined power of music and business as vehicles of uplift and racial justice. Musically, Pace sought to issue all kinds of records—not just blues, ragtime, and comic records, but also opera, spirituals, and classical music—in order to challenge stereotypes about African Americans, promote African Americans' cultural development, and impugn racist arguments about African American barbarism. The company would also be a model of economic development, inspiring and instructing African Americans in capital accumulation and the potential for economic self-determination.[5]

Black Swan Records, then, was a radical experiment in the political economy of African American culture in the guise of musical entertainment and small-business development. Its distinct but connected priorities—music and business—were at once practical and symbolic, designed to effect real change in African Americans' condition in the United States. The diversity and quality of its musical products would uplift and empower African Americans, as well as challenge (white) public opinion about African Americans' qualities and capabilities. Its business aims brought together many competing strains of African American political activism to form a solid consensus on black economic self-determination. Closely, though unofficially, aligned with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Black Swan also benefited from the direct support and guidance of Du Bois, who invested the project with heavyweight political credibility. The record company was about more than selling records, and the one-two punch of its uplift through music and business makes its brief history an important, revealing event in the African American political struggles of the twentieth century. By the time the company collapsed in the mid-1920s, however, the potential for achieving racial uplift through the commercial music industries was down for the count.

"Afterword," in *Yonder Come the Blues: The Evolution of a Genre,* ed. Paul Oliver et al. (Cambridge, Eng., [2001]), 331–32. On coon songs, see James H. Dormon, "Shaping the Popular Image of Post-Reconstruction American Blacks: The 'Coon Song' Phenomenon of the Gilded Age," *American Quarterly,* 40 (Dec. 1988), 450–71. For technical reasons most of James Reese Europe's recordings were not playable on most phonographs; see Foreman, "Jazz and Race Records," 19–21.

[4] David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York, 1981), 3–24; Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York, 1971), 6–7; *Chicago Defender,* May 31, 1919, p. 20.

[5] For most of its existence, the company name was Pace Phonograph Corp., and the label name (that is, the trade name) was Black Swan. Eventually the two were combined as the Black Swan Phonograph Co. For the sake of simplicity, I use only the Black Swan name.

Despite the peculiar and intriguing nexus of music, politics, business, and racial uplift, scholars have done little to understand the Black Swan experiment. With the exception of Ted Vincent, few have devoted more than a sentence or two to the topic, although many have mentioned it in passing. More than a minor historiographical lacuna, the oversight belongs to historians' more general and serious neglect of African American business initiative, stemming perhaps, as Robert E. Weems Jr. has suggested, from the perception of this topic as an antiprogressive backwater in the otherwise progressive tide of African American political movements. Alongside Suzanne Smith's recent work on the Motown Record Company, this analysis of Black Swan shows how complex the political motivations of an African American–owned business could be and how deeply they spoke to the dominant political struggles of their time.[6]

As an experiment in the political economy of music, Black Swan reached out in several directions. First, despite African American leaders' political, ideological, and programmatic diversity, they were unified in their support for black-owned business development, which gave Black Swan a broad political foundation on which to build. Although support for African American business development is sometimes associated narrowly with the political leadership of Booker T. Washington and his National Negro Business League (NNBL), that pioneering business organization grew out of an idea hatched by Du Bois at an 1899 Tuskegee Institute conference, "The Negro in Business," and Du Bois continued to champion black business development in succeeding years, even as he focused greater attention on African American civil rights. Washington's death in 1915 and the effects of World War I changed the political landscape dramatically, but by the time Black Swan was established, support for African American economic development was as strong as ever. Most notably, the political vacuum left by Washington's death was largely filled by the Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey, whose Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) upheld business development as a fundamental goal.[7]

[6] Ted Vincent, "The Social Context of Black Swan Records," *Living Blues,* 20 (May–June 1989), 34–40; Ted Vincent, *Keep Cool: The Black Activists Who Built the Jazz Age* (London, 1995); Robert E. Weems Jr., "Out of the Shadows: Business Enterprise and African American Historiography," *Business and Economic History,* 26 (1997), 200–212; Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999). Record companies have received more attention than many kinds of black-owned businesses, but writing about them has focused more on personalities and musical output than on politics and business. Exceptions include Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York, 1988); Nelson George, *Where Did Our Love Go? The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound* (New York, 1986); Norman Kelley, ed., *Rhythm and Business: The Political Economy of Black Music* (New York, 2002); Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race* (Berkeley, 1998); and Russell Simmons with Nelson George, *Life and Def: Sex, Drugs, Money, and God* (New York, 2001). For a theoretical approach, see Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music,* trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1985).

[7] Du Bois proposed the establishment of a Negro Business Men's League at the Tuskegee conference and in the months that followed drafted a list of proposed members. When political wrangling forced Du Bois out of the project, he surrendered his work to Booker T. Washington, who used it as at least part of the foundation of the National Negro Business League (NNBL). Louis R. Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader, 1856–1901* (New York, 1972), 266–67. On Du Bois's continued support for black business development, see W. E. B. Du Bois, ed., *The Negro in Business* (1899; New York, 1968); W. E. B. Du Bois, ed., *Economic Cooperation among Negro Americans* (1907; New York, 1968); W. E. B. Du Bois, ed., *Efforts for Social Betterment among Negro*

While many small African American businesses appeared (and disappeared) in the early twentieth century, the bedrock of black business was in insurance and banking. With mainstream channels for economic development closed to them, African Americans formed a shadow economy whose basic financial institutions derived from nineteenth-century cooperative organizations such as mutual aid societies. African American banks and insurance firms were not organs of altruism, but as the historian Walter B. Weare noted of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company, their guiding principles "merged business with benevolence." In the early twentieth century, those two industries claimed the country's most prosperous and prominent black-owned businesses, and they continued to operate with a high degree of race consciousness and social commitment. For the principals in those companies, responsible business leadership was one of the most potent means of serving "the race," for it fostered community and economic development, reduced African Americans' reliance on white institutions, and countered white stereotypes that portrayed African Americans as profligate ne'er-do-wells. Debates over the "race question" raged in those years, dominated by social Darwinists who believed African Americans genetically inferior to whites and biologically unfit for full social citizenship. African American businessmen were highly attuned to such issues and referred to them explicitly when articulating their social and fiscal vision.[8]

African Americans' involvement in the music industries was more complicated. Images of African Americans and ideas about African American music had been central to the nation's musical entertainment since the rise of minstrelsy in the mid-nineteenth century. By the turn of the twentieth century, the popularity of coon songs and ragtime placed African Americans at the center of American musical culture. But African Americans themselves exercised little control over the terms of their employment or the kinds of music they could produce professionally, and by the late 1910s they were even being displaced as the primary interpreters of the musical styles they had originated.[9] Despite the commercial success of numerous African American songwriters, New York had only one significant music publishing company run by African Americans before the late 1910s, and its modest, short-lived success may have depended on consumers' ignorance of its African American ownership.[10] At best, the business opportunities open to African Americans were narrowly con-

Americans (1910; New York, 1968). On Marcus Garvey and business development, see Judith Stein, *The World of Marcus Garvey: Race and Class in Modern Society* (Baton Rouge, 1986), 61–88.

[8] Juliet E. K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship* (New York, 1998), 187; Walter B. Weare, *Black Business in the New South: A Social History of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company* (Urbana, 1973), esp. 7; Merah S. Stuart, *An Economic Detour: A History of Insurance in the Lives of American Negroes* (New York, 1940); Robert E. Weems Jr., *Black Business in the Black Metropolis: The Chicago Metropolitan Assurance Company, 1925–1985* (Bloomington, 1996); Alexa Benson Henderson, *Atlanta Life Insurance Company: Guardian of Black Economic Dignity* (Tuscaloosa, 1990); Robert C. Puth, "Supreme Life: The History of a Negro Life Insurance Company" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1967).

[9] Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), 45–52.

[10] The firm was the Gotham-Attucks Music Publishing Company, described in Wayne D. Shirley, "The House of Melody: A List of Publications of the Gotham-Attucks Music Company at the Library of Congress," *Black Perspective in Music,* 15 (Spring 1987), 79–112. A Memphis music dealer reported that his customers would not purchase Gotham-Attucks sheet music if they knew the company had black owners. See W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography,* ed. Arna Bontemps (1941; New York, n.d.), 108.

strained (for example, blackface comedy), while at worst, as in the rapidly growing phonograph business, African Americans were almost wholly absent.[11]

In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois asserted that the end of the Negro's striving was "to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture." But how could African Americans become such co-workers when the culture industries did not welcome them as employees? As early as 1916, the *Chicago Defender* had encouraged its readers to write to phonograph companies demanding releases by Negro artists, but the companies were either indifferent or overtly hostile to the idea. A series of events broke this impasse in the phonograph industry. First, a number of lawsuits, court decisions, and expirations of patents ended the oligopolistic control that Victor and the Columbia Graphophone Company had over the phonograph business, and those developments made it possible for new, "independent" record companies to enter the market. Second, after years of African Americans' pressuring phonograph companies, one of the new labels, OKeh Records, issued two records by an African American vaudeville singer, Mamie Smith. Those landmark recordings from 1920 were the fruit of a dogged campaign launched by the African American songwriter and publisher Perry Bradford after lengthy discussions with Bert Williams, Rosamond Johnson, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, and other leading musical figures. In his memoirs, Bradford recounted that he "walked out two pairs of shoes" and faced "many insults and wise-cracking" recording engineers before securing an agreement with OKeh's Fred Hager. Hager had allegedly received letters threatening a boycott of OKeh products if he had "any truck with colored girls in the recording field," but Bradford convinced Hager to take a chance on Mamie Smith. When the two records appeared, in February and August 1920, they sold phenomenally well among African Americans and heralded the possibility of a new era of African American music.[12]

The distinct but overlapping developments in business, race politics, and music formed more than the backdrop of the founding of Black Swan. They were also complexly written into Harry Pace's own biography. When he began to organize the company in late 1920, he brought both years of experience and an array of talents as a teacher, banker, insurance executive, political organizer, songwriter, and music publisher, and this breadth and depth directly informed his expectations and aspirations.[13] Born the son of a blacksmith in rural Covington, Georgia, in 1884, the

[11] On the professional opportunities that African Americans did secure, see David A. Jasen and Gene Jones, *Spreadin' Rhythm Around: Black Popular Songwriters, 1880–1930* (New York, 1998); Thomas Riis, *Just before Jazz: Black Musical Theater in New York, 1890 to 1915* (Washington, 1989); and Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York, 1997).

[12] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York, 1989), 3; Robert M. W. Dixon and John Godrich, *Recording the Blues* (New York, 1970), 8; Foreman, "Jazz and Race Records," 11–16, 34–41, 55–65; Roland Gelatt, *The Fabulous Phonograph, 1877–1977* (New York, 1977), 189–90; Perry Bradford, *Born with the Blues: Perry Bradford's Own Story: The True Story of the Pioneering Blues Singers and Musicians in the Early Days of Jazz* (New York, 1965), 114–29, esp. 114, 116, and 118.

[13] Harry H. Pace to W. E. B. Du Bois, Dec. 27, 1920, *The Papers of W. E. B. Du Bois* (microfilm, 89 reels, Microfilming Corp. of America, 1980), reel 9. My account of Pace's personal life and business and political activities is based on Joseph J. Boris, ed., *Who's Who in Colored America* (New York, 1927), 152; Miriam DeCosta-Willis, "Du Bois' Memphis Connection," *West Tennessee Historical Society Papers,* 42 (Dec. 1988), 30–38; Paul G. Partington, "*The Moon Illustrated Weekly*—The Precursor to *The Crisis*," *Journal of Negro History,* 48 (July 1963), 206–16; John N. Ingham and Lynne B. Feldman, eds., *African-American Business Leaders: A Biographical Dictionary* (Westport, 1994), 501–17; W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing*

ambitious and energetic Pace enrolled at Atlanta University, where he came under the tutelage of W. E. B. Du Bois. Graduating valedictorian of his class in 1903, he accepted Du Bois's offer to become the business manager of Du Bois's new journal of African American ideas and culture. The magazine, which was based in Memphis, became the groundbreaking *Moon Illustrated Weekly,* the main precursor to the *Crisis,* the NAACP organ that served as Du Bois's main outlet from 1910 to 1934. It also initiated Pace into the business of cultural politics.

When poor funding forced the *Moon* to cease publication after eight months or so, Pace pursued ventures in education, politics, and the bedrock of African American business: banking and insurance. For two years he taught Latin and Greek at the Lincoln Institute in Jefferson City, Missouri. He returned to Memphis in 1912, secured a position at the black-owned Solvent Savings Bank, and became active in Republican politics. Through his connections in business and politics he developed relationships with many of Memphis's most important African American leaders, and those connections soon led Pace to Atlanta where he worked for six years as secretary-treasurer of what was probably the most prominent and respected black-owned business of the era, the multimillion-dollar Standard Life Insurance Company. Meanwhile, as Pace gained valuable experience in community-based business leadership, his involvement in race politics deepened. He and several other employees established Atlanta's first chapter of the NAACP—a particularly notable event during a period when most black-owned businesses, especially in the South, were closely aligned with Booker T. Washington and Washington's more oblique approach to political activism. Pace served as the Atlanta chapter's first president; the secretary was a young man Pace had recently hired named Walter White, who later became executive secretary of the national organization.

Remarkably, those events represented only one side of Pace's activities. While he was working at the Solvent Savings Bank in Memphis and at Standard Life in Atlanta, he was also involved in a music-publishing partnership with Beale Street's favorite son, W. C. Handy, the self-proclaimed "father of the blues" who pioneered written arrangements and formal publication of the blues. Pace penned some "first rate song lyrics," Handy remembered, and together the two men composed and published several successful songs. They also established their own publishing firm, the landmark Pace & Handy Publishing Company, with Pace as president. In 1918 Pace convinced Handy to move their growing business to New York, where, despite continued commercial success, they confronted repeated indignities from what Handy, who was normally tempered in voicing his opinions, called "the beast of racial prejudice." Pace remembered, "I ran up against a color line that was very severe" when the firm relocated to New York.[14]

My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century (n.p., 1968), 251–52; David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* (New York, 1993), 324–28; George W. Lee, *Beale Street: Where the Blues Began* (1934; College Park, 1969), 290; Herbert Aptheker, ed., *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois,* vol. I: *Selections, 1877–1934* (n.p., 1973), 179; *Chicago Defender,* July 31, 1943, p. 5; and Walter White, *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White* (New York, 1948), 30–32.

[14] Handy, *Father of the Blues,* 125–27, 186–200, esp. 199; [Harry H. Pace], "The Black Swan," Nov. 17, 1939, in *The Negro in New York: An Informal Social History,* ed. Roi Ottley and William J. Weatherby (New York, 1967),

In Handy's recollection, one recording manager refused to record a Pace & Handy blues number performed by a white singer, while another refused to issue records of songs published by Pace & Handy because he did not want the black publishers to earn royalties from the phonograph company's records. Meanwhile, like Perry Bradford, Handy and Pace were also trying to get recording dates for African American singers. Handy wrote, "In every case the managers quickly turned thumbs down. 'Their voices were not suitable.' 'Their diction was different from white girls.' 'They couldn't possibly fill the bill.'" When Pace tried to persuade phonograph companies to record African Americans performing non-blues material, he was told that white prejudice made it commercially impossible; company representatives, he reported, claimed "it would ruin their business to have a colored person making records of high class music."[15]

Pace and Handy were attuned, therefore, to the racial politics of production and consumption in the music business. When they published the songs on Mamie Smith's first record, their advertisement urged consumers to use their purchasing power to send a message to record companies: "Lovers of music everywhere, and those who desire to help in any advance of the Race should be sure to buy this record as encouragement to the manufacturers for their liberal policy and to encourage other manufacturers who may not believe that the Race will buy records sung by its own singers."[16] This style of activist advertising foreshadowed Pace's later promotions for Black Swan.

A short time later Pace split with Handy to start the record company that combined Pace's commitment to black-owned business and his belief in the social importance of music. All of Pace's experiences to this point—his relationship with Du Bois; the personal contacts he developed in Atlanta, Memphis, and New York; his business experience in banking and insurance; and his music business experience with Handy—converged and came to bear on his new venture.

The nature of the record company as a vehicle of racial uplift was clear from the outset. To some contemporaries the name "Black Swan" may have echoed the Black Star shipping line that Marcus Garvey was organizing as the base of his economic program. In fact, Pace chose the name, at Du Bois's suggestion, after the stage name of the most accomplished African American concert singer of the nineteenth century, Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield (c. 1824–1876). Similarly, in the late 1920s, another short-lived black-owned record company was named Black Patti by its founder Mayo

232. The Handy compositions for which Pace wrote lyrics include "In the Cotton Fields of Dixie," "The Girl You Never Have Met," "In the Land Where Cotton Is King," and "Thinking of Thee."

[15] Although Handy's memoirs appeared years later and may have been heavily modified by his editor, Arna Bontemps, the substance of his recollections is corroborated by Perry Bradford and others. Handy, *Father of the Blues,* 199–200. For Pace's 1921 statement, which was part of a speech, "The Pace Recording Company," before the National Association of Negro Musicians, see Willis C. Patterson, "A History of the National Association of Negro Musicians (NANM): The First Quarter Century, 1919–1943" (Ph.D. diss., Wayne State University, 1993), 79–81, esp. 79.

[16] *Chicago Defender,* July 13, 1920, p. 4, quoted in Foreman, "Jazz and Race Records," 66. The two songs on Mamie Smith's record were "That Thing Called Love" and "You Can't Keep a Good Man Down."

Williams after the nickname of the African American concert vocalist M. Sissieretta Jones (1869–1933), whose epithet was a play on the name of Adelina Patti, the leading prima donna of the Gilded Age.[17] In both cases, the companies' names echoed a moral and spiritual conception of music that had been powerfully promoted in the nineteenth century by the critic John Sullivan Dwight, editor of *Dwight's Journal of Music,* the era's standard-bearer of high musical culture. Influenced by American transcendentalists, Matthew Arnold, Continental philosophers, and the writings of Richard Wagner, Dwight articulated a vision of music that was both individualistic and social: that music, as an art and a language of communication, could both *ennoble* and *unite* people. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that idea underlay everything from the public mission of symphony orchestras to the music programs of schools and settlement houses.[18]

In many iterations musical uplift was linked exclusively with the great works of European concert music, but in others it encompassed a unique African American musical tradition as well. As the historian and musicologist Ronald Radano has noted, *Dwight's Journal of Music* published some of the first accounts of the singing of slave spirituals—alongside its more orthodox celebrations of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Ludwig van Beethoven. Du Bois structured *The Souls of Black Folk* in a way that emphasized the counterpoint of European and African American culture: the pair of epigraphs at the head of each chapter juxtaposed a literary excerpt, mostly European poetry, with a musical transcription of a strain of African American music, mostly slave spirituals. He then devoted the book's final chapter to the transcendent, redemptive power of African American spirituals.[19]

Particularly important among African Americans, however, was the dual character of musical uplift—its orientation both inward, toward other African Americans, and outward, toward the rest of society. For example, the Music School Settlement for Colored People, which included Du Bois on its board of directors, fostered music education as a means of personal edification and a way of breaking down social barriers. It was founded in Harlem in 1911 by David Mannes, concertmaster of the New York Symphony Society and instructor at the Music School Settlement in New York's Lower East Side (and the son-in-law of Walter Damrosch). Unlike most other music school settlement projects, this one included a specifically racial agenda, for Mannes believed that "through music, which is a universal language, the Negro and the white man can be brought to have a mutual understanding."[20]

[17] Pace to Du Bois, Dec. 27, 1920, *Papers of Du Bois,* reel 9. See also Len Kunstadt, "Black Swan, Part 2," *Record Research,* 1 (no. 5, Oct. 1955), 5; Southern, *Music of Black Americans,* 103–4, 246; and Kenney, *Recorded Music in American Life,* 111.

[18] Joseph Horowitz, *Wagner Nights: An American History* (Berkeley, 1994), 5, 24–25, 30; George Willis Cooke, *John Sullivan Dwight, Brook-Farmer, Editor, and Critic of Music: A Biography* (1898; New York, 1969); Joseph A. Mussulman, *Music in the Cultured Generation: A Social History of Music in America, 1870–1900* (Evanston, 1971), esp. 84–103; Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow, Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 104–46; Shannon L. Green, "'Art for Life's Sake': Music Schools and Activities in U.S. Social Settlements, 1892–1942" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1998).

[19] Ronald Radano, "Denoting Difference: The Writing of the Slave Spirituals," *Critical Inquiry,* 22 (Spring 1996), 516–17; Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk.*

[20] David Mannes quoted in Reid Badger, *A Life in Ragtime: A Biography of James Reese Europe* (New York, 1995), 61.

The school was greatly aided by several annual benefit concerts organized by James Reese Europe, whose outstanding music and career linked African American popular music with order and respectability. By the time of his death in 1919, Europe's synthesis of musical talent, organizational deftness, and social respectability made him the avatar of racial uplift through music. In "Jazzing Away Prejudice," the *Chicago Defender* wrote, "The most prejudiced enemy of our Race could not sit through an evening with Europe without coming away with a changed viewpoint. For he is compelled in spite of himself to see us in a new light. . . . Europe and his band are worth much more to our Race than a thousand speeches from so-called Race orators and uplifters."[21] Such a statement exemplified the outward dimension of uplift—its active, self-conscious projection of African American dignity, creativity, and control.

Harry Pace pushed the idea further: in his view, the shaping of public opinion was an actual prerequisite for effecting meaningful change for African Americans. In a 1921 speech "Public Opinion and the Negro," which predated Walter Lippmann's landmark book *Public Opinion* by several months, Pace argued that "unless we take hold vigorously of this matter of creating and shaping Public Opinion itself, all other efforts we may put forth in any line will be useless so far as our status among the races of the world is concerned." The speech did not explicitly refer to music or to Black Swan, but coming in the middle of Black Swan's first year, it may be taken as an expression of Pace's broad strategy. He did not naïvely believe that bad public relations alone caused racial violence or other problems—"The Problem of the Races in this country is Economic," he asserted flatly—but control of public opinion was a powerful tool. Summarizing his ideas on the subject, Pace explained that there were two ways to regard public opinion, one passive and retrograde, the other active and full of promise: "One [way] is to think of it as it already exists, to deplore it if it happens to be unfavorable, to watch it run its course, and to take the consequences if it does not react favorably to you. The other way is the present day idea which we as a people are just beginning to learn, and that is to anticipate Public Opinion and to help mould it and shape it so as to be sure that it does react the way we want."[22]

Du Bois apparently concurred, for he used his position at the *Crisis* to stage a subtle, multipart endorsement of Black Swan. In February 1921 he published an editorial, "Phonograph Records," that condemned the white demand for "'comic darky songs' but nothing else" for restricting the opportunities open to African American performers. With a supportive Negro audience already in place, he argued, "we must now develop a business organization to preserve and record our best voices," for such an effort "will reveal the best music, not only of [our] own race but of all races and ages." He ended, "We are pleased to learn that such a company is now forming with adequate capital and skilled management of guaranteed integrity." One month later Du Bois published a profile of Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, which ended with another glancing appeal for the new record company (and which called attention to the company's allusive name). Like Black Swan itself, those articles represented a

[21] *Chicago Defender,* May 10, 1919, quoted *ibid.*, 211.

[22] Harry H. Pace, "Public Opinion and the Negro," typescript, June 29, 1921, pp. 1–2, 9, box 5, *Papers of the NAACP* (microfilm, 1,428 reels, University Publications of America, 1982–), series B, group 1, reel 8.

belief in the convergence of art and business for the purpose of race progress. Du Bois forcefully articulated his position on the politics of art and public opinion a few years later in an address before the national conference of the NAACP. After acknowledging that some members might question how art pertained to the political gathering, he made a strong appeal for art's political relevance, concluding with the statement:

> I do not doubt that the ultimate art coming from black folk is going to be just as beautiful, and beautiful largely in the same ways, as the art that comes from white folk, or yellow, or red; but the point today is that until the art of the black folk compels recognition they will not be rated as human. And when through art they compel recognition then let the world discover if it will that their art is as new as it is old and as old as new.[23]

In organizing the record company, Pace tapped a rich vein of African American talent and experience. He assembled a board of directors (an action unusual for a small phonograph company) whose members included a wide range of business and professional leaders. At different times the board included John E. Nail, the Harlem real estate pioneer (and the brother-in-law of James Weldon Johnson, the general secretary of the NAACP); Truman K. Gibson, an insurance and banking executive; Godfrey Nurse, a doctor and real estate developer; Viola Bibb, a Chicago society figure and the daughter-in-law of the Yale- and Harvard-educated co-founder of the *Chicago Whip;* the pharmacist Matthew V. Boutté; the businessman W. H. Willis; and the accountant John P. Quander. The most notable board member was Du Bois, whose eminence and personal connections were an invaluable asset to the company and whose ideas about culture and activism informed the enterprise in many ways.[24] Pace also brought to Black Swan several outstanding employees from the publishing company he shared with W. C. Handy. They included Fletcher Henderson, soon to be one of the leading bandleaders of the 1920s and 1930s, who was enlisted as the phonograph company's recording manager, and William Grant Still, later an eminent composer, who became Black Swan's in-house arranger. Most of the company's financing came from or through its board of directors, although when the comedian Bert Williams died in 1922, Pace reported that Williams had invested heavily in the company and had pledged to make records for it when he completed his contract with Columbia.[25]

[23] Pace to Du Bois, Dec. 27, 1920, *Papers of Du Bois,* reel 9; "Phonograph Records," *Crisis,* 21 (Feb. 1921), 152; "The Black Swan," *ibid.* (March 1921), 212–13; W. E. B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," in *The New Negro Renaissance: An Anthology,* ed. Arthur P. Davis and Michael W. Peplow (New York, 1975), 496.

[24] Pace to Du Bois, Nov. 10, 1925, *Papers of Du Bois,* reel 14; Vincent, "Social Context of Black Swan Records," 36; Vincent, *Keep Cool,* 99; Boris, ed., *Who's Who in Colored America,* 14, 19, 148.

[25] W. C. Handy, "A Brief History of Black Swan," typescript, 1948, box 1, W. C. Handy Collection (National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.); "Bert Williams," advertisement for Pace Phonograph Corporation, *Crisis,* 23 (April 1922), 284. Pace's company became the first full-scale operational black-owned record company, but it may not have been the first such attempt. In October 1919 George W. Broome of Medford, Massachusetts, established the first known black-owned label, Broome Special Phonograph Records, which may have lasted until 1923. It is unclear if Broome did any recording or simply reissued records from masters obtained elsewhere. See "Broome Special Phonograph Records," *Mainspring Press: Research in Historical Recordings* <http://www.mainspringpress.com/lom1299.html> (May 15, 2003).

Public reaction to the announcement of the new company cut in two directions. Among African Americans there was an outpouring of support: enthusiastic articles on the company appeared in a wide range of periodicals, and Pace was inundated with letters from well-wishers and people requesting commissions as sales agents. Some personnel in the music industry were overtly hostile to the African American initiative, however, and tried to intimidate Pace. Pace & Handy received threats of a boycott, which forced Pace to sever all ties with the publishing firm. Then, according to Handy, his songs were boycotted by people who falsely believed that he had some formal connection with the record company. Opposition continued after Black Swan became operational; most disturbing of all, in September 1922 a bomb was found in a coal shipment bound for the furnace in the company's manufacturing facilities.[26]

Such hostility notwithstanding, Black Swan issued its first title in May 1921. The record was the sentimental, inspirational song "At Dawning," backed with "Thank God for a Garden," sung by the concert vocalist and pianist Revella Hughes. Commanding a repertoire of both popular and "serious" music, Hughes was a prominent activist for Marcus Garvey, performing regularly at Garveyite functions ranging from the annual UNIA convention to informal weeknight gatherings at Liberty Hall on 135th Street in Harlem. While Black Swan was certainly not a Garveyite business—and Pace later had a bitter falling out with Garvey—this beginning for Black Swan's recording catalog reflected the affinity that non-Garveyites such as Pace felt for the Garvey movement at the time.[27]

Following "At Dawning," Black Swan made good on its promise to issue "music of the better sort" recorded by African Americans. Black Swan's second record consisted of two ballads by the concert vocalist Carroll Clark, one of the only African Americans who had already recorded serious music. He made his first discs for Columbia Records in 1908, but, tellingly, that company refused to associate photographs of Clark with anything other than popular music.[28] Black Swan recorded and issued at least forty-five sides of serious music, both sacred and secular, performed by African Americans, for whom no other recording opportunities existed. The serious component of Black Swan's output laid claim to a wide range of musical territory, including African American spirituals; the first recording of "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," the so-called Negro national anthem; arias by Giuseppe Verdi and Charles-François

[26] "Record of Our Own Singers," *Competitor,* 3 (Jan. 1921), 6; *Norfolk Journal and Guide,* Jan. 15, 1921, p. 1; untitled photograph with caption, *Crusader,* 3 (Feb. 1921), 15; *Chicago Broad Ax,* May 7, 1921, p. 1; *Chicago Defender,* June 4, 1921, p. 6; *Washington Bee,* June 4, 1921; Patterson, "History of the National Association of Negro Musicians," 80; Vincent, *Keep Cool,* 98–99. Sources reveal little about the perpetrators of the "boycotts," but orchestra leaders, theater directors, recording managers, and individual performers all made decisions about repertoire and could have exerted pressure on a music publisher.

[27] Doris Evans McGinty, "Conversation with Revella Hughes: From the Classics to Broadway to Swing," *Black Perspective in Music,* 16 (Spring 1988), 81–104; Vincent, *Keep Cool,* 134–37; Robert A. Hill, ed., *The Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers,* vol. II: *27 August 1919–31 August 1920* (Berkeley, 1986), 322, 471, 583. After Garvey's notorious entente with the Ku Klux Klan, Pace joined other African American leaders in an appeal to U.S. Attorney General Harry M. Daugherty to have Garvey incarcerated, which he was. See, for example, Richard B. Moore, "The Critics and Opponents of Marcus Garvey," in *Marcus Garvey and the Vision of Africa,* ed. John Henrik Clarke with Amy Jacques Garvey (New York, 1974), 228.

[28] *Chicago Defender,* June 6, 1921, p. 6; Tim Brooks, *The Columbia Master Discography,* vol. I: *U.S. Matrix Series 1 through 4999, 1901–10, with a History of the Columbia Phonograph Company to 1934* (Westport, 1999), 26.

Gounod; Christmas carols; and the first recording of a work by the composer R. Nathaniel Dett.

The point of the serious music recordings, noted one early article in the *Norfolk Journal and Guide,* was not to demean "the commercial value of comic songs, 'blues' and ragtime songs," but to supplement those styles with "every type of race music, including sacred and spiritual songs, the popular music of the day, and the high-class ballads and operatic selections." In short, commerce and art were understood as discrete but interdependent domains. But as the reference to the "commercial value" of popular music anticipated, Black Swan came to depend overwhelmingly on its blues, jazz, and other popular recordings for revenue. All its best-selling records were blues records; and jazz, blues, popular songs, and dance music made up two-thirds of its total releases. (Blues, in this context, referred to the style now called "classic" or "vaudeville" blues, meaning individual singers, usually women, accompanied by a piano or a small syncopated band. Recordings of male-oriented "downhome" or "country" blues were still several years away.)[29]

To maximize available capital, Black Swan used an informal system of triage. The singer Ethel Waters recalled in her autobiography that when she first entered the company in 1921, she had a lengthy discussion with Pace and Henderson about "whether I should sing popular or 'cultural' numbers." At the conclusion the two men decided she would sing popular blues material and agreed to pay Waters the sizable sum of one hundred dollars for two songs. (She was then performing for thirty-five dollars a week plus tips.) Underlying the exchange between Waters, Henderson, and Pace were significant class tensions. Waters recalled, "Remember those class distinctions in Harlem, which had its Park Avenue crowd, a middle class, and its Tenth Avenue. That was me, then, low-down Tenth Avenue."[30] The fact that Waters did not fit the middle-class social profile for a singer of "cultural" songs may well have influenced where the men placed her in the company's recording roster, regardless of the fact that she, like Revella Hughes and most other musicians, had a repertoire encompassing a variety of styles.

Whatever the explanation, Waters proved a good investment for Black Swan: her first record—featuring "Down Home Blues" and "Oh Daddy"—became so enor-

[29] *Norfolk Journal and Guide,* Jan. 15, 1921, p. 1. My evaluation of Black Swan's best-selling titles is based on advertisements and Fred W. Boerner & Co., "Selected List of Most Popular Black Swan Records," dealer's list, n.d., record catalogues collection (Recorded Sound Reference Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.). The percentage of popular recordings among all Black Swan releases was estimated by categorizing every record listed in Helge Thygesen, Mark Berresford, and Russ Shor's discography. While more antiquarian than analytical, this discography is the richest, most detailed source on Black Swan's catalog, music, musicians, and history. Helge Thygesen, Mark Berresford, and Russ Shor, *Black Swan: The Record Label of the Harlem Renaissance: A History and Catalogue Listing Including Olympic Records and Associated Labels* (Nottingham, Eng., 1996). Where possible, I have listened to recordings, either original 78 RPM records or compact disc reissues, at the Library of Congress, Rutgers University's Institute of Jazz Studies, the New York Public Library, or in my personal collection. I classified all titles into one of six categories—blues/jazz; popular/vaudeville vocal; serious or sacred vocal, including spirituals; dance instrumental; novelty; and Hawaiian—based on information about the artist, composition, composer, or other label markings given in the discography. For more on the distinction between "classic" and "downhome" blues, see, for example, William Barlow, *"Looking Up at Down": The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia, 1989).

[30] Ethel Waters with Charles Samuels, *His Eye Is on the Sparrow: An Autobiography* (Garden City, 1951), 141–47, esp. 141–42.

mously popular that it reversed the company's economic fortunes. Pace exaggerated when he later claimed that it sold half a million copies in six months, but the record did sell briskly and, as Waters noted, was popular among both black and white audiences. By the end of 1921, Black Swan turned a small profit of $3,100 on revenues of over $104,000, and with a genuine hit on the market, Pace signed Waters to an exclusive one-year contract that allegedly made her the highest salaried African American recording artist in the country. By spring 1922, after twelve months in business, the company may have sold as many as four hundred thousand records.[31]

While the blues was hardly the centerpiece of Black Swan's musical uplift, the musical style was not entirely at odds with the idea of uplift either. Reflecting a widespread concern in the postwar years over the "respectability" of African American culture, a full-page Black Swan ad in the *Chicago Defender* asserted that Ethel Waters "changed the style of Blues singing overnight, and brought a finer interpretation of this work. She dignified the blues." Although many African Americans scorned the blues as profane, lower-class, or culturally backward, Black Swan's promotion of the blues illustrates how such music had become, within limits, respectable and even fashionable. On Friday January 20, 1922, Harlem held its first widely publicized blues contest at the Manhattan Casino. Sponsored by a group of singers and entertainers from Harlem who had served in France during the war, the evening began with a performance by Will Vodery's sixty-seven-piece regimental band and featured the famed ragtime songwriter Noble Sissle as master of ceremonies. The audience included Gov. Nathan L. Miller, the former alderman and future mayor Fiorello La Guardia, the social dance pioneer Irene Castle Tremaine, Dorothy Caruso (Enrico's widow), and the socialites Mrs. Oliver Harriman, Mrs. H. Payne Whitney, and Mrs. G. C. Fairchild. The four contestants performed in elegant satin gowns with musical accompaniment from James P. Johnson, master of the complex, ragtime-inflected piano style, know as "stride," then in ascendance in Harlem. The competition was decided by audience applause, which declared newcomer Trixie Smith the evening's champion. Black Swan signed Smith to a recording contract several days later, and by February the company had released Smith's first two sides, "Desperate Blues" and her self-penned contest winner, "Trixie's Blues." When Black Swan's monthly quarter-page advertisement in the trade journal *Talking Machine World* appeared, it boasted, "We Announce that we have ready for delivery the first recordings by Trixie Smith[,] Winner of the NATIONAL Blues Singing Contest Held at Manhattan Casino, New York (The Winner's Cup was presented by Mrs. Irene Castle)."[32]

[31] Waters with Samuels, *His Eye Is on the Sparrow,* 141; Dixon and Godrich, *Recording the Blues,* 13–14; Pace, "Black Swan," 233; *New York Age,* Jan. 28, 1922, p. 6; Len Kunstadt, "The Black Swan Story," *Record Research,* 1 (no. 4, Aug. 1955), 4–5; *Chicago Defender,* Dec. 24, 1921, p. 7, quoted in Walter C. Allen, *Hendersonia: The Music of Fletcher Henderson and His Musicians* (Highland Park, 1973), 26; undated and untitled press release, typescript, 1924, folder 28, box 144-29, Percival Leroy Prattis Papers (Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.).

[32] "Second Anniversary Black Swan Records," advertisement, *Chicago Defender,* June 2, 1923, p. 7; "The Golden Age of Blues-Recording," *Record Research,* 2 (no. 5, Jan.–Feb. 1957), 3–4; Samuel B. Charters and Leonard Kunstadt, *Jazz: A History of the New York Scene* (1962; New York, 1981), 101–2; "We Announce That We Have Ready for Delivery," advertisement for Black Swan, *Talking Machine World,* Feb. 15, 1922, p. 149.

To promote the blues and the company, Black Swan organized a remarkable music and vaudeville tour called the Black Swan Troubadours, which included singing, dancing, and comic skits. Headlined by Ethel Waters and led musically by Fletcher Henderson, the tour lasted from fall 1921—little more than a year since Mamie Smith's breakthrough recordings—until July 1922. It began in Washington, D.C., and traveled through Philadelphia, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, West Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky, St. Louis, and Indianapolis before arriving in Chicago in late January 1922. From Pittsburgh on, the tour was managed by Lester Walton, whose multifaceted career also included work as a journalist, theater manager, and civil rights activist. At the end of the Chicago stint, the management announced that the troupe would tour the South. Four musicians refused to go and quit, but Ethel Waters held fast. Despite the hostility that the band would face in the South, the *Chicago Defender* reported, Waters "felt it her duty to make sacrifices in order that members of her Race might hear her sing a style of music which is a product of the Southland." Thus the tour itself was cast as a form of uplift. (For Lester Walton, traveling through the South marked a turning point, ending his involvement in the entertainment business and laying the groundwork for his full commitment to the fight for civil rights. Later in 1922, he and Robert Russa Moton of Tuskegee Institute held meetings along the Troubadours' route.) The troupe traveled through Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana, Alabama, North Carolina, and South Carolina before returning to the North for the tour's finale.[33]

On the road the troupe experienced a mixture of fear, intimidation, and path-breaking success. In Paris, Texas, a lynching took place shortly before the group's arrival, but the troubadours still received a warm welcome there, and both black and white dancers attended and enjoyed their performance. In another town, according to the Black Swan singer Alberta Hunter, who was not on the tour, a young black boy was lynched after he "talked back to a white man," and when the troubadours arrived, the boy's corpse was thrown into the lobby of the theater where the group was to perform. Later on the tour, the *New Orleans Daily Item* arranged for the troupe to perform on the radio when they passed though Louisiana—perhaps the first radio performance anywhere by African American musicians. The radio concert, the *Savannah Tribune* reported, was heard in five states and Mexico.[34]

The vigorous promotion of popular music never completely muted the class tensions in Black Swan's musical program. On the one hand, the blues was commercially and culturally valuable, and as a former songwriter and popular music publisher, Pace himself had deep roots in popular music. On the other hand, no matter what style of music the company was producing, the music was oriented around middle-class standards of dignity, refinement, and self-restraint—standards that lay at the core of the

[33] Pace and Walton had political, professional, and social connections. See, for example, Pace to Lester A. Walton, Oct. 13, 1916, folder 2, box 6, Lester A. Walton Papers (New York Public Library, New York, N.Y.). Allen, *Hendersonia,* 24–35; *Chicago Defender,* Feb. 11, 1922, p. 7, quoted *ibid.*, 27; Vincent, *Keep Cool,* 45–46.

[34] Frank C. Taylor with Gerald Cook, *Alberta Hunter: A Celebration in Blues* (New York, 1987), 52; "Black Swan Artists Broadcast," *Talking Machine World,* May 15, 1922, p. 43; *Negro World,* May 13, 1922, p. 3. See also *Chicago Defender,* April 29, 1922, p. 7, quoted in Allen, *Hendersonia,* 29; and *Savannah Tribune,* April 27, 1922, p. 1, *ibid.*

idea of uplift. In religious music, for example, Black Swan favored formal arrangements of concert spirituals over syncopated gospel music, which was still associated with the Pentecostal, "holiness," and "sanctified" churches frequented by poorer, less educated African Americans. Despite Black Swan's policy of casting as wide a musical net as possible, one famous anecdote suggests the company rejected singers and songs that diverged too sharply from its refined, urbane aesthetic. Before Bessie Smith recorded for Columbia Records and became one of the most important and commercially successful singers of the 1920s, she auditioned for Black Swan. Her style was coarse and boisterous—"blacker," according to the racial taxonomy of the period—quite unlike the lighter, more lyrical singing of most Black Swan singers. When she stopped curtly in the middle of her first test recording and said, "Hold on, let me spit," she thrust herself outside the "respectable" model of musicianship that Black Swan endorsed, and the company declined to add her to its roster. At the other end of the blues spectrum, Black Swan did record the singer and actress Isabelle Washington, whose bluesy renditions of popular songs sounded "white"—that is, the mannered warble of her voice conformed to stereotypes about white singers' thin, controlled, trained voices, in contrast to the muscular, roughhewn singing style ascribed to African Americans.[35]

With titles such as "He May Be Your Man (But He Comes to See Me Sometimes)" and "My Man Rocks Me (With One Steady Roll)," a few Black Swan numbers were more explicitly risqué, but musically the company's recordings celebrated polish more than passion. Fletcher Henderson, for all his talents, was criticized for being refined to a fault. Ethel Waters, for example, bristled under Henderson's efforts to keep the music from getting too "hot." "Fletcher, though a fine arranger and a brilliant band leader, leans more to the classical side," Waters recalled. "I kept having arguments with [him] . . . [because he] wouldn't give me what I call 'the damn-it-to-hell bass,' that chump-chump stuff that real jazz needs." The clarinetist Garvin Bushell added that Henderson left little room for improvisation on the recordings, with almost everything being played according to his arrangements. Contrasting Henderson's style with that of Bessie Smith, whose voice was once likened to "a flamethrower licking out across the room," the historian David Levering Lewis wrote, "Instead of a flamethrower, Fletcher Henderson held a torch. It dazzled and warmed but it did not leave audiences blind and scorched."[36]

Pace and Black Swan Records celebrated blues music as long as it did not conflict with the overall uplift project. While they esteemed popular music in many forms, they also remained committed to middle-class ideas of refinement and self-control. Before the National Association of Negro Musicians (NANM), a group that favored classical music education for African Americans, Pace explained that his company was "dedicated to racial service along a new line." His speech depicted Black Swan's endorsement

[35] Handy, "Brief History of Black Swan"; Paul Oliver, *Bessie Smith* (London, 1959), 1; Chris Albertson, *Bessie* (New York, 1972), 37. Isabelle Washington's recording of "I Want To" (1923) can be heard on *Fletcher Henderson & the Blues Singers, Vol. 1* (compact disc; Document Records, DOCD-5342; n.d.). She later married the minister and congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr.

[36] Waters with Samuels, *His Eye Is on the Sparrow,* 146–47; Garvin Bushell as told to Mark Tucker, *Jazz from the Beginning* (Ann Arbor, 1988), 31; Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue,* 172.

of popular music as a strategic, temporary concession that would lead to a higher cultural end. He explained, "We have had to give the people what many of them wanted to get them to buy what we wanted them to want." Such a disavowal of popular music may have been somewhat disingenuous, given Pace's extensive involvement in it, but cultivating a taste for high musical culture was central to Black Swan's musical mission. He concluded his speech, "I believe that we [Negroes] want every kind of music other people want[,] and it behooves some of us to undertake the job of elevating the musical taste of the race. . . . Black Swan Records are trying to do their part."[37]

Although Pace struggled to balance Black Swan's social, economic, and cultural agendas, he maintained steady focus on all of them. To an African American business group, he promoted his ideas about economic self-determination. At an Eastertime music celebration at Garvey's Liberty Hall, he was welcomed as a featured speaker.[38] Pace worked to expand the business and to stabilize it, and he paid close attention to the potential of advertisements to communicate Black Swan's multifaceted character to a broad audience. Many ads featured the tongue-in-cheek slogan: "The only genuine colored record. Others are only passing for colored." In a few artful words, Black Swan promoted a cultural politics of race pride and, in playing on the notion of racial passing, mocked the superficiality of the commercial interests of white-owned record companies.

An aggressive businessman, Pace tried to make Black Swan records available wherever and however people might acquire them. Pace found sales outlets in drug stores, furniture dealers, newsstands, barber shops, beauty shops, pool halls, and even speakeasies—any place that might conduct business with a heavily African American clientele—not to mention Black Swan's sizable mail-order sales.[39] One Black Swan ad in the trade monthly *Talking Machine World* suggests that Pace tried to integrate vertically by going into wholesaling. On a list of ten jobbers distributing Black Swan records regionally, three had names suggesting a possible affiliation: the Black Swan Sales Company of Boston, the Pace Phonograph Corporation of Virginia, and the Black Swan Music Company of Pittsburgh. (Unfortunately, no other information on that component of Pace's activities as a wholesaler appears to have survived.) Advertisements for a Black Swan "Swanola" phonograph indicate an attempt at a horizontal integration of the business into machines sales. The Swanola name was a play on the Victor Company's industry-standard "Victrola," which by the 1920s was a virtual synonym for phonograph. A Black Swan catalog from 1923 shows the Dunbar model of the Swanola, named for the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, while a *Crisis* ad promoted the L'Ouverture model, named for the Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture.[40]

[37] Pace quoted in Patterson, "History of the National Association of Negro Musicians," 80–81.

[38] Vincent, *Keep Cool,* 93.

[39] Thygesen, Berresford, and Shor, *Black Swan,* 7; Kunstadt, "Black Swan Story," *Record Research,* 1 (no. 4, Aug. 1955), 5.

[40] "The Following Have Been Appointed Jobbers of Black Swan Records," advertisement, *Talking Machine World,* May 15, 1922, p. 128; Thygesen, Berresford, and Shor, *Black Swan,* 74; "The Swanola, a New Phonograph," advertisement, *Crisis,* 22 (Oct. 1921), 284.

Figure 1. Although not all advertisements for "race records" relied on racist caricatures, some companies used such imagery regularly in the early 1920s, even in the nation's most widely read African American newspaper. Here, the spelling of "mamma" with a double *m* reinforced the visual link to the stock "mammy" stereotype. *Courtesy* Chicago Defender, *June 24, 1922.*

In the expanding consumer culture, print advertising was one of the most powerful tools at Pace's disposal to promote his program of musical and commercial uplift. Appearing in the trade press, black newspapers, and black political periodicals, Black Swan's advertisements varied widely and served different purposes. In *Talking Machine World,* Black Swan ads (usually filling a quarter page) appeared every month from August 1921 to October 1922, with each ad highlighting new records in the catalog, almost always blues. Such ads, in that industrywide organ, amplify Ethel Waters's comment that her records appealed to both black and white audiences. Similar in content were the ads Black Swan placed on the entertainment pages of the nation's many African American newspapers, where they appeared adjacent to advertisements for theatrical productions, sheet music, other record companies, and sundry cosmetic products. Usually the ads focused on new releases and on keeping the label's name in the public eye, sometimes with bold, eye-catching pronouncements such as "The Best BLUES SINGER In America Is ETHEL WATERS" or "Every

Figure 2. Advertisements such as this one from 1924, showing two blackface-style characters being berated by an angry woman and pursued by a policeman, stood in marked contrast to Black Swan's advertisements, which promoted both the company's music and its mission as a black-owned enterprise. *Courtesy* Chicago Defender, *October 25, 1924.*

Time You Buy A Black Swan Record You Buy the Only Record Made by Colored People."[41]

Such straightforward advertising was not to be taken for granted. During the 1920s, many of Black Swan's rivals occasionally used advertising that revealed their

[41] "The Best BLUES SINGER In America Is ETHEL WATERS," advertisement, *Chicago Defender,* Nov. 5, 1921, p. 7; "Every Time You Buy A Black Swan Record," advertisement, *New York Age,* Jan. 21, 1922, p. 6; "Black Swan Records," advertisement, *Negro World,* May 20, 1922, p. 6.

underlying contempt for African American artists and consumers. Racist caricatures appeared in ads for works by both black and white artists, and some record catalogs included text in Negro "dialect," such as a "race records" catalog issued by OKeh around 1924 that declared: "Every smilin', teasin' brownskin gal in dis book of Greatest Blues has jes got it natchely, the dawggone Blues." (See figures 1 and 2.) Jeff Todd Titon has argued that the record companies' discomfort with images of black, urban respectability may have helped induce greater recording and marketing of rural, "downhome" blues in the late 1920s and 1930s, and that ads depicting blues fans in urbane, well-appointed environments often used "white" or "indeterminate" figures.[42]

It is notable that Black Swan advertised regularly in the radical black press as well, frequently featuring polemical statements that invoked Black Swan's social mission. In magazines such as the *Crisis* and A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen's socialist monthly, the *Messenger,* Black Swan's full-page ads often looked beyond artists and record releases. They exhorted readers to patronize black-owned businesses and to support Black Swan's effort to create an autonomous alternative to white-owned record companies. Suggesting that Black Swan was on the front lines in the struggle for the social and economic betterment of "the race," the ads recast support for Black Swan as a question of political solidarity.

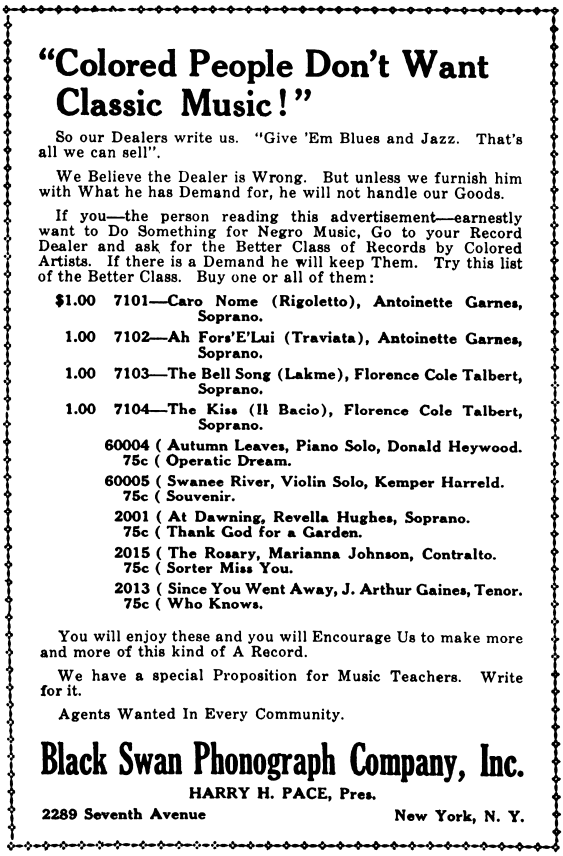
When rival labels began to issue increasing numbers of records by African American musicians, for example, one Black Swan ad charged that a few white-owned record companies had established "a Jim Crow annex" to their businesses and that they were dumping records by "a few short-sighted colored people" on the market in order to wipe out such companies as Black Swan. A more aggressive ad challenged readers who paid lip service to the idea of black-owned business but who "in private" patronized white-owned companies. Other advertisements focused on the political economy of musical uplift. The most notable, reproduced in figure 3, appeared in the *Crisis* in January 1923 and ran six straight months in the *Messenger.* "Colored People Don't Want Classic Music!" its headline read, and then it continued:

> So our Dealers write us. "Give 'Em Blues and Jazz. That's all we can sell".
>
> We Believe the Dealer is Wrong. But unless we furnish him with What he has Demand for, he will not handle our Goods.
>
> If you—the person reading this advertisement—earnestly want to Do Something for Negro Music, Go to your Record Dealer and ask for the Better Class of Records by Colored Artists. If there is a Demand he will keep Them. Try this list of the Better Class.

There followed a list of records that included performances by Antoinette Garnes, the only African American member of the Chicago Grand Opera Company, and two leaders of the classically oriented NANM, the soprano Florence Cole-Talbert and the violinist Kemper Harreld.[43]

[42] Jeff Todd Titon, *Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis* (Urbana, 1977), 225–69; Foreman, "Jazz and Race Records," 211–64.

[43] "Everytime You Buy A Black Swan Record," advertisement, *Crisis,* 23 (Jan. 1922), 137; "Do You Belong To That Class of Men," advertisement, *ibid.*, 26 (July 1923), 140; "Colored People Don't Want Classic Music!," advertisement, *ibid.*, 25 (Jan. 1923), 130; "Colored People Don't Want Classic Music!," advertisement, *Messenger,* 5 (Jan. 1923), 564.



"Colored People Don't Want Classic Music!"

So our Dealers write us. "Give 'Em Blues and Jazz. That's all we can sell".

We Believe the Dealer is Wrong. But unless we furnish him with What he has Demand for, he will not handle our Goods.

If you—the person reading this advertisement—earnestly want to Do Something for Negro Music, Go to your Record Dealer and ask for the Better Class of Records by Colored Artists. If there is a Demand he will keep Them. Try this list of the Better Class. Buy one or all of them:

$1.00 7101—Caro Nome (Rigoletto), Antoinette Garnes, Soprano.
1.00 7102—Ah Fors'E'Lui (Traviata), Antoinette Garnes, Soprano.
1.00 7103—The Bell Song (Lakme), Florence Cole Talbert, Soprano.
1.00 7104—The Kiss (Il Bacio), Florence Cole Talbert, Soprano.
60004 (Autumn Leaves, Piano Solo, Donald Heywood.
75c (Operatic Dream.
60005 (Swanee River, Violin Solo, Kemper Harreld.
75c (Souvenir.
2001 (At Dawning, Revella Hughes, Soprano.
75c (Thank God for a Garden.
2015 (The Rosary, Marianna Johnson, Contralto.
75c (Sorter Miss You.
2013 (Since You Went Away, J. Arthur Gaines, Tenor.
75c (Who Knows.

You will enjoy these and you will Encourage Us to make more and more of this kind of A Record.

We have a special Proposition for Music Teachers. Write for it.

Agents Wanted In Every Community.

Black Swan Phonograph Company, Inc.

HARRY H. PACE, Pres.

2289 Seventh Avenue New York, N. Y.

Figure 3. Black Swan promoted its political program in regular advertisements in the black radical press, especially the *Crisis,* the monthly journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Pushing readers to think about—and act on—the relationship between cultural achievement and market relations, this ad appeared in January 1923 in the *Crisis* and ran for six straight months in the *Messenger,* the socialist journal coedited by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen. *Courtesy* Crisis, *January 1923.*

More than simply trying to sell records, the advertisements pushed readers to understand the connection between cultural achievement and market relations. They positioned Black Swan, not as an alternative force to consumer culture at odds with the rest of society, but rather as a progressive force within it. By buying classical records and thus shaping what dealers stocked, the advertisement argued, "you will Encourage Us to make more and more of this kind." Conversely, in his speech before the NANM, Pace analyzed possible implications of *weak* classical music sales.

> If through lack of patronage for our higher class numbers we are compelled to discontinue that phase of activities and record only "blues" and "ragtime" the public critics and the white companies will join in a chorus of "I told you so" and the dictum will go forth that the Negroes will not buy good music and the chance of our artist ever recording his voice for any white organization will fade into the realm of chances lost and not to be regained.

Earlier in the century activists against child labor had pioneered consumer campaigns to shape conditions of production. Now, Black Swan was attempting something similar for African American musicians by linking consumer buying habits with the reality of cultural production.[44]

In historical perspective the different components of the project—business leadership, musical uplift, and popular entertainment—appear completely integrated. In May 1923 in the *Crisis,* Black Swan advertised a record of two comic monologues by Charles Winter Wood, "Honey You Sho' Looks Bad" and "When De Co'n Pone's Hot." Lest such humor strike a sour note with the high-class crowd, the description of the record noted that Wood was financial secretary of the Tuskegee Institute as well as an expert elocutionist, exemplifying "a rare combination of business and artistic ability." The ad also indicated the breadth of Black Swan's political base. While some African American leaders may not have approved of "Negro dialect" humor, few could object to the upstanding credentials of the top financial officer of Booker T. Washington's flagship.[45]

Yet Black Swan was pulled in different directions by its dedication to race business, its promotion of cultural uplift, and its need to respond to changes in the musical marketplace. Although tensions between Black Swan's goals and the exigencies of the market had existed from the beginning, Pace initially succeeded in keeping them in check. Then, in 1922 and 1923, three factors upset the delicate balance: poorly timed capital investment, the surging popularity of blues and jazz, and the introduction of radio. Those events revealed latent contradictions among the different aspects of Black Swan's mission and ultimately contributed to the company's demise.

The first problem lay in an ill-timed capital expansion. In the wake of the enormous success of Ethel Waters's first record in fall 1921, the company moved out of its basement office in Pace's apartment in the elegant residential neighborhood in Harlem known as Strivers' Row and relocated to a brownstone on Seventh Avenue just south of 135th Street. Within a few months' time, Black Swan had grown to comprise a fifteen-person office staff, an eight-man orchestra, and seven district managers in cities across the country. It was shipping twenty-five hundred records a day to dealers and agents throughout the United States and in the Philippines and the West Indies. Then in spring 1922, to reduce nagging uncertainty about recording and manufacturing facilities, Harry Pace purchased the Olympic Disc Record Corporation, a recently bankrupted record company and pressing plant in Long Island City, New York. With a recording studio, pressing plant, and printing press (for labels and sleeves), Black Swan could cut marginal costs and stabilize production. It would be a model of economic self-sufficiency, and the new facilities could generate additional income by producing goods for other companies.[46]

[44] "Colored People Don't Want Classic Music!," *Crisis,* 25 (Jan. 1923), 130; Pace quoted in Patterson, "History of the National Association of Negro Musicians," 81. On consumer campaigns against child labor, see Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Florence Kelley and the Nation's Work: The Rise of Women's Political Culture, 1830–1900* (New Haven, 1995).

[45] "Black Swan Records," advertisement, *Crisis,* 26 (May 1923), 42.

[46] *Chicago Defender,* Oct. 29, 1921, p. 7, quoted in Allen, *Hendersonia,* 31–32; Carl Kendziora Jr. and Perry Arma[g]nac, "The Labels behind Black Swan," *Record Research* (nos. 221–22, April 1986), 1, 4; Len Kunstadt,

Table 1

Number of African American blues artists recorded by Black Swan and other labels, 1921–1923

	1921		1922		1923	
Company	Jan.–June	July–Dec.	Jan.–June	July–Dec.	Jan.–June	July–Dec.
Black Swan	5	5	4	10	8	1
Others*	8	13	8	10	31	43

* Note: Includes some singers also recording for Black Swan at the same time.

Black Swan faced challenges around 1923, including a sharp increase in competition. In the second half of 1922, the company issued records by as many blues artists as all the other labels combined. But in the following six months, Black Swan's artists were outnumbered almost four to one. *Reprinted from Ted Vincent,* Keep Cool: The Black Activists Who Built the Jazz Age *(London, 1995), 96.*

The *Chicago Defender* hailed the acquisition, noting proudly that Olympic's erstwhile owner, the Remington Phonograph Corporation, was founded by a scion of one of America's great manufacturing families, makers of rifles and sewing machines. Significantly, however, Black Swan's large investment reduced the capital available for other vital needs, such as promotions and artist development, and even required a public stock issue to stabilize the company's capital base. Other musical and economic developments put new pressure on Black Swan's resources, and the company's high level of activity obscured the more important issue of profitability. "We went into the factory purchase just at the wrong time," Pace later recalled, "but who could tell that it was the wrong time, at the rate we were making and selling merchandise then[?]"[47]

One factor that made the timing poor was the surge in the popularity of blues and jazz records. Across the market, blues and jazz records soared in quality and increased in quantity from 1922 to 1924. Following the success of Black Swan, OKeh, and several other early labels, a host of new companies jumped into the field, including Columbia, Aeolian, Ajax, Gennett, Brunswick, and Victor. As late as the second half of 1922, Black Swan recorded as many African American blues artists as all the other labels combined, yet within six months Black Swan's artists were outnumbered almost four to one. (See table 1.)[48]

"The Labels behind Black Swan: The Black Swan/Olympic Connection," *ibid.* (nos. 229–30, June 1987), 4–5; "Now the Fletcher Record Co.," advertisement, *Talking Machine World,* July 15, 1922, p. 57, quoted in Allen, *Hendersonia,* 32. Pace acquired the pressing plant in partnership with a white record business veteran named John Fletcher, who had worked for Olympic. See *ibid.*; Barry Kernfeld, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* (New York, 1988), 112–13; and Thygesen, Berresford, and Shor, *Black Swan,* 91. See "John Fletcher: From Sousa's Band to Black Swan and Beyond," *Mainspring Press: Research in Historical Recordings* <http://www.mainspringpress.com/fletcher.html> (May 20, 2003).

[47] *Chicago Defender,* April 29, 1922, quoted in Thygesen, Berresford, and Shor, *Black Swan,* 10; "To the Investing Public," *Crisis,* 24 (Oct. 1922), 282; "To the Investing Public," *ibid.*, 25 (Nov. 1922), 44; Pace to the Board of Directors of Black Swan, Oct. 21, 1925, p. 4, *Papers of Du Bois,* reel 14.

[48] Vincent, *Keep Cool,* 96.

Some of the decade's most popular and influential stars made their recording debuts at the time (on white-owned labels), including Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Louis Armstrong (in King Oliver's band), and Jelly Roll Morton. As Black Swan preferred to maintain a safe distance from those "hotter," rougher-edged artists, their soaring popularity made it more difficult for Black Swan to promote its program of musical uplift and increased the economic power of Black Swan's rivals. The vexing irony was that its own success helped victimize Black Swan. As one of its *Crisis* ads reminded readers, Black Swan's commercial success encouraged other companies to produce records targeted at African American consumers, sometimes remaking the very songs that had attracted people to Black Swan. (See figure 4.) With deeper pockets and bigger advertising budgets, those companies could easily woo away Black Swan's blues singers with higher paying contracts.[49]

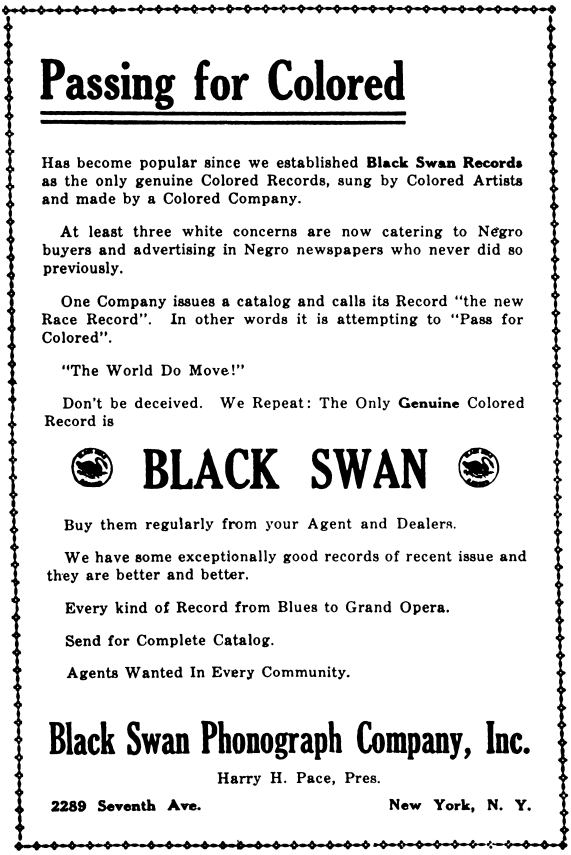
The third factor precipitating Black Swan's demise was the introduction of radio, which took the industry by storm. In January 1922 the *New York Times* reported optimistic projections for the growing phonograph industry, but half a year later the *Times* reported a sharp drop in sales—15 percent in some places, more in others—compared to the same time a year earlier. As the reversal continued over the following two years, the popularity of radio emerged as the clearest explanation. Although radio programming had not yet become standardized and was still erratic in many areas, the popularity of the technology was clear. Initially the phonograph and radio markets stimulated each other; both were part of a broader cultural expansion in commercial entertainment. By 1924, however, the rapidly expanding public investment in radio equipment—$60 million in 1922, $136 million in 1923, and $358 million in 1924—had become serious competition for the phonograph industry. The industry-leading Victor Talking Machine Company, for example, saw its sales drop by more than 50 percent from 1921 to 1925. To make matters worse for Black Swan, the advent of radio coincided with the purchase of expensive custom-made record presses for the Long Island City factory. "Before [the machines] were up and running, radio broadcasting broke and this spelled doom for us," Pace later recalled. "Immediately dealers began to cancel orders that they had placed, records were returned unaccepted, [and] many record stores became radio stores."[50]

Black Swan's problems were emblematic of those affecting the entire industry. That was evident in an emotional letter Pace wrote to the board of directors after the company's fate was sealed:

> Does it mean anything to you to know that Columbia went bankrupt, that Pathé [Frères] did also, that the Aeolian Company sold its magnificent building on 42nd

[49] Vincent, "Social Context of Black Swan Records," 35. For example, Black Swan's "Blind Man Blues," sung by Katie Crippen, inspired copycat versions issued by Columbia (by Mary Stafford) and by OKeh (by Sara Martin), two companies with much bigger advertising budgets than Black Swan. Thygesen, Berresford, and Shor, *Black Swan,* 7. "Passing for Colored," advertisement, *Crisis,* 25 (Dec. 1922), 91.

[50] *New York Times,* Jan. 22, 1922, sec. 2, p. 13; *ibid.*, June 18, 1922, sec. 2, p. 10; "How Retailers Are Merchandising Radio," *Talking Machine World,* Dec. 15, 1923, p. 20; Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel: A History of Broadcasting in the United States,* vol. I: *To 1933* (New York, 1966), 125; Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (New York, 1999), 86; B. L. Aldridge, "Confidential History," typescript, p. 70, B. L. Aldridge Files, RCA Victor Division, Radio Corporation of America Collection (Hagley Museum and Library,



Passing for Colored

Has become popular since we established **Black Swan Records** as the only genuine Colored Records, sung by Colored Artists and made by a Colored Company.

At least three white concerns are now catering to Negro buyers and advertising in Negro newspapers who never did so previously.

One Company issues a catalog and calls its Record "the new Race Record". In other words it is attempting to "Pass for Colored".

"The World Do Move!"

Don't be deceived. We Repeat: The Only **Genuine** Colored Record is

BLACK SWAN

Buy them regularly from your Agent and Dealers.

We have some exceptionally good records of recent issue and they are better and better.

Every kind of Record from Blues to Grand Opera.

Send for Complete Catalog.

Agents Wanted In Every Community.

Black Swan Phonograph Company, Inc.

Harry H. Pace, Pres.

2289 Seventh Ave. **New York, N. Y.**

Figure 4. Consumers and African American newspapers benefited from the increasing number of companies producing records of interest to African Americans, but for Black Swan the increase meant an incursion on the market that the company had cultivated. This 1922 advertisement mocks Black Swan's rivals for trying to "pass for colored." *Courtesy* Crisis, *December 1922.*

> Street to the Schulte Cigar Stores, and practically gave away its record business to the Brunswick Company, whose chief business is the making of pool tables? Does it indicate anything that when we began business there were 24 record making concerns and today there are only seven? . . . How could we survive with a meager capital of about $40,000 and a limited market when concerns with millions . . . either died or were mortally wounded?[51]

But the problem of radio symbolized deeper conflicts between music and the market, and the strain it placed on the industry exposed the fundamental illogic of approaching music through racial categories. The intense economic pressures under which Black Swan was operating pushed the company to take a step completely at

Wilmington, Del.); "Who Is Your Competitor?," *Voice of the Victor,* 20 (Aug. 1925), 6; [RCA] Record Accounting Department, "Record Unit Sales, Domestic and Export, 1901–45," Hit Records, Etc., folder, Victor Talking Machine vertical files (Camden County Historical Society, Camden, N.J.); Pace, "Black Swan," 234.

[51] Pace to the Board of Directors of Black Swan, Oct. 21, 1925, *Papers of Du Bois,* reel 14. See also Du Bois, John E. Nail Jr., and Matthew V. Boutté to Stock Holders of the Black Swan Phonograph Company, [1925], *ibid.*

odds with its stated musical mission, namely, to reissue records by *white* artists with their identities hidden behind generic pseudonyms in Black Swan's ostensibly all-black catalog. The white stage singer Aileen Stanley became "Mamie Jones," while Lindsay McPhail's Jazz Band became "Fred Smith's Society Orchestra." Different groups might be given the same pseudonym, as with Black Swan's releases of the "Laurel Dance Orchestra," which was really the Tivoli Dance Orchestra or the Wallace Downey Dance Orchestra, depending on the recording. The practice began as early as November 1921 and increased considerably after the purchase of the factory in Long Island City, which provided a ready supply of free material from the bankrupted Olympic label.[52] Over the course of Black Swan's existence, approximately a third of the titles in its catalog—including both vocal and instrumental records—were reissues of records made by white musicians for other companies.

It was not uncommon for small record companies to issue discs—sometimes under pseudonyms, sometimes not—that other companies recorded. But other companies did not repeatedly insist that they employed "Colored Singers and Musicians Exclusively." Here then was Black Swan's conflict between staying solvent and promoting its racial agendas: However disingenuous the company's "all-black" claims were, the records by white performers were an attempt to keep the cash-starved company in business. Acknowledging publicly that Black Swan was issuing records by white performers would have been tantamount to conceding that the whole Black Swan project was untenable. All evidence suggests that Pace considered the issuing of records by white performers a temporary measure necessary only until the record company was on stable fiscal ground.[53]

Ironically, the deception demonstrated the contingent, extrinsic character of racial categories in music, which had been one of Black Swan's basic goals. What is most striking about Black Swan's marketing sleight-of-hand is that people apparently did not detect anything awry; there were no indignant editorials, no boycotts, no letters of protest. The silence suggests that people either did not care or could not perceive any difference. Racial difference was not audible; rather, it was artificially and arbitrarily assigned. Black Swan's high-minded program of musical uplift and its deceptive, desperate reissuing of recordings by white musicians were less at odds than they appeared, for both demonstrated the speciousness of racial boundaries in music. By rejecting musical categories based on race, Black Swan showed that racial distinctions were neither natural nor fixed. Likewise, that records by black and white performers

[52] Thygesen, Berresford, and Shor, *Black Swan,* 17, 53; Allen, *Hendersonia,* 33; Kendziora and Arma[g]nac, "Labels behind Black Swan," 1, 4; Kunstadt, "Labels behind Black Swan," 4–5.

[53] Black Swan also reissued records by African American artists, and it leased its *own* masters to other companies. Many of the pseudonymous records were in styles such as popular dance music, Hawaiian, and comedy, which did not compete directly with the high-class music Black Swan was trying to promote or with the vocal blues records that provided the company its bread and butter. The pseudonymous records made up a large percentage of the *titles* in the catalog, but advertisements do not suggest that they played a big part in promotions or sales. See Thygesen, Berresford, and Shor, *Black Swan,* 9, 90; Robert M. W. Dixon, John Godrich, and Howard Rye, comps., *Blues and Gospel Records, 1890–1943* (Oxford, 1997), xxxvi–xxxvii; Kendziora and Arma[g]nac, "Labels behind Black Swan," 4; and Len Kunstadt, "Black Swan Records," *Record Research,* 3 (no. 4, Jan.–Feb. 1957), 11.

could be interchanged without anyone noticing proved how unstable musical categories based on race actually were.

Black Swan issued its last records in summer 1923, and its last advertisements appeared around the same time. The company that had sought to be a lodestar, a strong guiding light, was instead a flare, shining brightly for a moment but falling as soon as it had risen. However short its life, the company accomplished many of its stated goals, if only temporarily. It issued 180-odd records, sold hundreds of thousands of units, and distributed its products around the country and abroad. It was particularly notable that Black Swan was a manufacturer, for control of manufacturing capital was especially rare among African Americans, even among business leaders. Musically, its program was a definite but qualified success. Black Swan launched the recording careers of such important blues and jazz figures as Fletcher Henderson, Ethel Waters, Trixie Smith, and Alberta Hunter, and it issued records by many musicians who probably would not have had other opportunities to record. Such artists include Essie Whitman, the singing member of the celebrated Whitman Sisters song and dance troupe; Eddie Gray, who starred in the 1923 musical *Runnin' Wild,* which introduced the Charleston; Henry Creamer, the songwriter and co-founder of the Clef Club, the pioneering Harlem-based music association and booking agency; and Georgette Harvey, whose remarkable thirty-five-year stage career included a twelve-year stint in Russia (1905–1917), several years in Southeast Asia, and a role in the original stage production of *Porgy,* the dramatic play on which the milestone opera *Porgy and Bess* was based.[54]

The company's records also reached some unlikely destinations. To the west, a Hollywood society hostess boasted her parties were improved by her Black Swan record collection. To the east, Black Swan records left a strong impression on the French composer Darius Milhaud, who wrote in his memoirs that he "never wearied of playing, over and over, . . . Black Swan records I had purchased in a little shop in Harlem." The avant-garde composer Edgard Varèse was so struck by Black Swan records that he wrote to the company to ask if any young African American composers were interested in studying with him in Paris. The invitation was seized by the company's arranger, William Grant Still, who studied with Varèse from 1923 to 1925, after which he returned to the United States and enjoyed a career as, in the conductor Leopold Stokowski's words, "one of our greatest American composers."[55]

With political and economic opportunity tightly constrained, music represented one of the only media through which African Americans could challenge the barriers

[54] Monthly advertisements for Black Swan in the trade journal *Talking Machine World* ceased even earlier, in October 1922. Thygesen, Berresford, and Shor, *Black Swan,* 7. On the scarcity of black manufacturers, see Walker, *History of Black Business in America,* 201–8.

[55] *Chicago Defender,* Nov. 4, 1922, quoted in Vincent, *Keep Cool,* 93; Darius Milhaud quoted in Jervis Anderson, *This Was Harlem: A Cultural Portrait, 1900–1950* (New York, 1982), 179; Catherine Parsons Smith, *William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions* (Berkeley, 2000); Robert Bartlett Haas, ed., *William Grant Still and the Fusion of Cultures in American Music* (Flagstaff, 1995), 5; Leopold Stokowski quoted in Southern, *Music of Black Americans,* 431.

to social and economic equality. Yet, Black Swan's focus on a racialized niche market helped make it a victim of its own success. Once bigger white-owned companies saw the success of Black Swan's advertisements and marketing, it was relatively easy for them to create their own better-financed models of race marketing, which were not based on programs of economic or cultural uplift for African Americans. Even as that chain reaction undid Black Swan's market standing, however, it had beneficial effects for African American musicians (though generally limited to blues and jazz musicians) and especially for black newspapers, which benefited greatly from the large advertisements taken out by the white-owned companies.

In May 1924 Pace announced that another firm, the New York Recording Company, would begin to lease the Black Swan catalog and reissue it through its own label, Paramount Records, for a fixed monthly fee. Pace claimed it was the best deal he could arrange under the circumstances, but others condemned this so-called merger. The outspoken activist Chandler Owen, for example, mocked the arrangement as comparable to the merger between the lion and the lamb who had lain down together, with the lamb winding up in the lion's belly. That the analogy exaggerated Paramount's strength in the phonograph industry—it was no lion compared to Columbia or Victor—was beside the point. Pace countered that he would have sold out to a black-owned company if another one had existed, and that he had maintained the integrity of the Black Swan project by retaining ownership of the master recordings and leasing them out, rather than selling them outright. What he refused to concede was that without the financial and organizational capital to produce and market records, ownership of those masters amounted to little. The arrangement with Paramount lasted little more than a year, and despite Pace's hopes to revive Black Swan, nothing ever happened.[56]

As the exchange between Pace and Owen suggests, Black Swan's problems as a race business went beyond individual decisions; they reflected the predicament of black-owned business in general in the 1920s, even before the onset of the Great Depression. By the 1960s, the poet-critic-activist LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), in *Blues People,* dismissed the Black Swan experiment as "one of the . . . most cruelly absurd situations to develop because of the growth and influence of a definable black middle class in America." More broadly, Harold Cruse, in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual,* analyzed the long shadow cast by the failure of black-owned business in Harlem in the 1920s, which he attributed to the inability of black business leaders to establish markets "beyond . . . [what] white businesses passed up." Cruse's analysis extended that of James Weldon Johnson, who had concluded in the final chapter of *Black Manhattan* (1930), "It is idle to expect the Negro in Harlem or anywhere else to

[56] *Chicago Defender,* May 17, 1924, sec. 1, p. 7, sec. 2, p. 14; Chandler Owen, "Problems of Black Business," *Messenger* (1926), in *Voices of a Black Nation: Political Journalism in the Harlem Renaissance,* ed. Theodore G. Vincent (1973; Trenton, n.d.), 256; *Baltimore Afro-American,* Jan. 16, 1926, p. 3; Pace, "Black Swan," 232–33, 235. On Paramount and the New York Recording Laboratory, see Dixon, Godrich, and Rye, comps., *Blues and Gospel Records,* xxxvi–xxxvii; Rick Kennedy and Randy McNutt, *Little Labels—Big Sound: Small Record Companies and the Rise of American Music* (Bloomington, 1999), 20–37; David Luhrssen, "Blues in Wisconsin: The Paramount Records Story," *Wisconsin Academy Review,* 45 (Winter 1998–1999), 17–21; and Sarah Filzen, "The Rise and Fall of Paramount Records," *Wisconsin Magazine of History,* 82 (Winter 1998–1999), 104–27.

build business in general upon a strictly racial foundation or to develop it to any considerable proportions strictly within the limits of the patronage, credit, and financial resources of the race." Such a conclusion flew directly in the face of the optimism about race business that so many leaders had felt at the decade's beginning. Johnson was doubtless aware of the details of Black Swan's collapse through his work with the NAACP and through his brother-in-law, who sat on Black Swan's board of directors. His words read like a direct response to those events: Black Swan's original niche in the music industry derived from white phonograph companies' indifference to black musical capital, and when that indifference changed, Black Swan lacked the economic resources to survive direct competition.[57]

Black Swan was further handicapped by the contradictions and competing priorities of uplift. As the historian Kevin K. Gaines has shown, the concept of uplift contained numerous goals and agendas, which sometimes worked at cross-purposes.[58] In Black Swan's case, the company was committed to propagating a gospel of serious music, while its mission was to record and promote as wide a variety of music by African Americans as possible. For the sake of liberating cultural production from the shackles of race and for the sake of promoting race business, it strived to be a model of economic self-reliance, but that end heightened the company's focus and dependence on its most commercially successful music, usually blues and popular music. Each of those three goals—propagating serious music, promoting all varieties of music by African Americans, achieving economic self-reliance—implied a different direction for Black Swan's musical development, and the company's inability to reconcile its conflicting priorities eliminated any possibility of overcoming the financial challenges it faced.

As the case of Harry Pace demonstrates, black entrepreneurs saw no contradiction between being race men and businessmen. Rather, they saw business as a tool to promote race progress—by creating jobs, economic autonomy, and models of black respectability, as well as responding to community needs that were not otherwise met. After the Black Swan experiment fell apart, Pace returned to the insurance business, where he enjoyed a long and prominent career. He remained active in the NAACP and other organizations and retained his deep commitment to service to the race. Du Bois changed his course. For a few more years, however, he maintained a steely optimism about business as a tool of uplift, but by the 1930s he was permanently disenchanted with the potential for market solutions to African Americans' social, political, and economic problems.[59]

After Black Swan went out of business, attempts at uplift through music or art took many forms, but none was as multilayered or grounded in issues of material production as Pace's company. Instead such programs tended to focus on composi-

[57] LeRoi Jones, *Blues People* (New York, 1963), 128; Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967; New York, 1984), 25–26. For the statement by James Weldon Johnson, see *ibid.*, 25.

[58] Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, 1996).

[59] On Pace, see *Chicago Defender,* July 31, 1943, p. 5; "Largest Black Business," *Ebony,* 2 (Aug. 1946), 42; and Ingham and Feldman, eds., *African-American Business Leaders,* 511–15. On Du Bois, see, for example, Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century,* 302–48, 496–553.

tion or performance, based on an implicit belief in the autonomous power of art to change how people thought and acted.[60] Harry Pace was never so credulous, for he understood that influencing material conditions depended on control of material resources. The Black Swan project, however, showed that reconciling the lofty and the mundane was much more complex than even Pace had anticipated. Black Swan's burden was to chart a course between elite culture and popular culture, between the color blindness of music and the racism of the music business, between ideologically based enterprise and the impinging realities of capitalist markets. The hazards of such a course were evident; how to navigate safe passage was not.

[60] Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925; New York, 1997); Samuel A. Floyd Jr., ed., *Black Music in the Harlem Renaissance* (Westport, 1990); Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Durham, 2001).