

Selling the Race

Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955

By Adam Green

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. Pp. xiv, 306. Illustrations, notes, index. \$35.00.)

In *Selling the Race*, Adam Green examines Black Chicago and its role in shaping a national consciousness among African Americans. Green argues that blacks in Chicago during and after World War II developed an imagination and a sense of group life that reconfigured existing views of politics and racial identity—changes that remain influential today. For Green, blacks, at this time and in this city, engaged the challenges of modernity in an unprecedented fashion.

The substance of Green's analysis is found in five chapters. Chapter one investigates the history of the 1940 American Negro Exposition in Chicago, the first black-organized world's fair. Green pays particular attention to the role of the event's principal organizer, Claude Barnett, founder of the Associated Negro Press. He points out that, although the exposition failed to attract sufficient attendees or revenue, the event offered evidence of Black Chicago's awareness of its pivotal place in American life.

Chapter two examines the centrality of Black Chicago in the nation's popular music. Green argues that Chicago blacks gained significant leverage in a music business that became more decentralized after 1940. He explores this thesis through brief investigations of Chicago-con-

nected music icons Mahalia Jackson, Louis Jordan, Muddy Waters, and Willie Dixon, and through a consideration of Chicago's role in black-appeal radio and its central progenitor, disk jockey Al Benson.

Chapter three examines the history of the Associated Negro Press, the black wire service spawned by Barnett. For Green, the press and Barnett's politics further affirmed Chicago's national importance as a bridge to broader developments in film and television and to new political strategies.

Chapter four investigates the emergence and impact of the Chicago-based, black-owned publishing company, Johnson Publications, and its *Ebony Magazine*. Green writes that *Ebony* firmly embodied the central role of Black Chicago in shaping a national black consciousness and highlighting the growing importance of race in a maturing market economy.

The fifth chapter theorizes about the impact of the 1955 brutal murder of fourteen-year-old Chicagoan Emmett Till by Mississippi white supremacists. For Green, Chicago's role in universalizing this event affirmed the city's ascendance as the cultural capital of Black America.

Though informative, Green's study has some notable flaws. His claim that events in Black Chicago

between 1940 and 1955 were unprecedented is untenable. Green's analysis is neither comparative nor significantly evaluative of relevant prior phenomena, as illustrated by the superficial chapter on music. Green ignores the nationalizing role of entertainment circuits and the leverage maintained by black unionized musicians during earlier periods when certain technological innovations in sound reproduction were not available.

While Green writes with a sense of certainty, he erroneously asserts that Chicago's Savoy Ballroom was a theater and that it and the Savoy Ballroom in New York were opened or owned by the Balaban and Katz corporation. Further, while the opening of the Parkway Ballroom in the 1940s no doubt offered some competition to the Regal Theater, Green's assertion that the structure rivaled the Regal, suggests that he does not understand the differences in the size and social function of these two institutions.

Other tenuous claims indicate that Green's book should be read with

caution. Throughout the book, Green references sociologist E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939) and *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957) as the bases of characterizations Green claims to debunk. However, Green routinely misrepresents Frazier's ideas, ignoring, for example, Frazier's positive predictions regarding the black family, and confusing Frazier's views with those of sociologist, later Senator, Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Nonetheless, *Selling the Race* (particularly chapters one and three) is a useful contribution to existing histories of Black Chicago.

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Rivers Revealed

Rediscovering America's Waterways

By Jerry M. Hay

(Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2007. Pp. 308. Illustrations, maps. \$19.95.)

When the Delta Queen Steamboat Company created the job of "Riverlorian," it made an important contribution to the field of public history. For over three decades, Delta Queen Riverlorians have entertained and edified passengers with their unique

blend of academic knowledge and hands-on expertise. Jerry Hay, a Floyd's Knobs, Indiana, river rat and longtime Delta Queen employee, has transcribed his enjoyable and respected oral presentations into this book about the role of the Ohio and