

The Social Context of Black Swan Records

By Ted Vincent

HARLEM-BASED Black Swan Records of Harry H. Pace, proudly owned and managed by "members of the race," pioneered in getting black artists in jazz and blues recorded during the initial years of the Jazz Age. Between its founding early in 1921 and its demise late in 1923, Black Swan produced over 180 records. The only other black-run record companies of the time produced 12 and three records respectively. And while Black Swan produced enough of the revolutionary jazz sounds to have a major impact upon jazz and blues, the company also inaugurated the recording of black performers in classical music.

Music historians, however, dutifully mention Black Swan's role while failing to give details. One likely cause of the omission is a hesitance to elaborate on the almost embarrassing social environment around the Black Swan offices. It was a company led by—for lack of a better term—"Wannabees." With filmmaker Spike Lee and others now focusing attention on this group, the full Black Swan story seems about due.

The first months of Black Swan in 1921 were followed with eager anticipation in the black press of the day. One report quoted founder Harry Pace declaring: "There are 12 million colored people in the U.S. and in that number there is hid a wonderful amount of musical ability. We propose to spare no expense in the search for and developing of the best singers and musicians among the 12 million."

The first recordings were cut in late February and early March of 1921 and released in May. Pace had started in a one-room basement office, and by the end of the company's first year he had developed a

thriving business with a three-story office in Harlem. A problem of inadequate record pressing facilities was solved in mid-1922 after Black Swan moved into a partnership with Olympic Records.

A large majority of the first "jazz records" was in the form of blues. In the summer of 1920 Mamie Smith broke through on the Okeh label to become the first black singer to release a blues record. The next two years would be a critically formative period in a decade-long musical bonanza in blues records. At the end of 1922 Black Swan had played a major part in the new phenomenon. The discographies show the company put on record 91 blues or blues-related songs, a total for Black Swan that put it in second place behind the 105 of Okeh Records, the much larger company that was a division of the German-financed General Phonograph Corporation. Black Swan blues production was well ahead of its nearest challengers—Columbia with 43, Arto with 33, Paramount with 18, and the French-financed Pathé with 14.

Competition was fierce. Between July 1920 and December 1922 at least 13 record companies recorded black blues singers; and by 1924, eight of the 13 were either out of business or had failed and been reorganized. A number of additional failures comprised many of the small companies that had leased blues record masters from the 13 that did the actual recording sessions.

The black vocalists recording blues and jazz in this period were almost always female—in part out of racist fears of a black male crooner being listened to by a white woman. Black Swan helped to break this taboo, recording two male singers in its blues record series.

In 1921 the record market was being flooded with hundreds of dance band records. All but a small fraction of the dance records were from white groups, and most

of the output was quite forgettable musically. Black Swan began business with poor facilities for recording more than one or two musicians at a time, but Pace nonetheless managed to record 23 sides of instrumental blues and jazz by black performers—in the process showing white companies that there was a commercial market to be tapped. By the end of 1922, Black Swan's 23 instrumentals by black performers were barely behind the industry leader Emerson, and well ahead of third place Okeh, which had 14.

Black Swan's instrumentals included the first recorded piano solo by "the father of stride piano," James P. Johnson, and a Black Swan piano solo by Fletcher Henderson may have been the first piano recording with a boogie woogie walking bass. The impact of Pace's records on the dance mania of the period was suggested in a *Billboard* magazine gossip column item that told of a Hollywood movie industry matron bragging that her parties were more fun because she had a collection of Black Swan records.

The musical impact of Black Swan was, however, relegated to an early experimental period of the Jazz Age. The best music was very definitely to come later, on the records of other companies. Then, too, the quality of Black Swan music is hard to gauge because the recording facilities were not the best—although one historian who commented on the studio problems did note that the records were nonetheless "well produced." Perhaps the most relevant data is in the tabulations of numbers of records produced, which shows impressive numerical strength for the one major black-owned record company as of the end of 1922. The following year would see jazz and blues recording explode—both numerically and in quality.

The year 1923 ushered many a future star into the recording end of the business, in-

cluding the two best-remembered blues singers of the era, Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey. The year also marked the first recordings of such historic jazz groups as King Oliver (with Louis Armstrong) and the first Jelly Roll Morton bands.

The number of black women blues singers recorded went from 19 in the last six months of 1922 to 38 in the first six months of 1923, and 42 in the last half of the year, these being the figures from the standard discographies of Brian Rust, Tom Lord, Robert Dixon, and other sources.

Harry Pace's Black Swan company helped prepare the way for the breakthroughs of 1923, but it would share little in the great boom year. The company made its last records in August 1923 and officially sold out to Paramount in March 1924.

For a brief time the Black Swan Record Company had exemplified the best of black effort to market black culture, the best of what "black capitalism" could offer in the United States. Harry Pace became a popular "inspirational" speaker, as in the *Chicago Defender* report of Pace giving a lecture on "self-reliance" to a group of black business people in Brooklyn.

The company's floundering, just when the big stars and big money were starting to flow through the business, was in part related to serious problems in the social setting of Black Swan. But before elaborating on those aspects of the story the economic setting needs further details.

The bottom line for Black Swan was that it was a small company in a new industry (its monthly production was about a tenth or less of the giant Victor). As in so many other new industries, when the giants get interested in a product line, the essentially unfair nature of capitalism comes to the surface—insofar as the smaller companies are concerned.

For instance, publicity on the initial financial success of Black Swan, including accounts in the *Chicago Defender* and the national show business weekly *Billboard*, on how Pace was paying top salary to his lead blues singer Ethel Waters appears to have been noticed by the big companies. As the major companies with their superior banking connections became interested in black music, the pressures mounted on Black Swan.

By mid-1923 the input from the big

companies was clearly evident in advertising in the leading black weeklies, such as the *Chicago Defender*, where Victor, Paramount, Okeh, Emerson, and other majors regularly ran ads two to three times the size of the ads for Black Swan. A year earlier Black Swan's ads had been quite comparable in size.

But beyond the economic hurdles, the story of Black Swan reflects

*Harry
Pace's Black
Swan company helped
prepare the way for
the breakthroughs of
1923, but it would
share little in the
great boom year.*

the sharp and debilitating class and cultural division within black America of the 1920s, a schism expressed in the music world as a conflict between those who felt the future of black American music lay in jazz and blues, and those who wanted the emphasis on classical and other forms of "cultural" rather than "popular" music.

In 1921 the various degrees of "hot" to "cool" black music had yet to be defined. There were style differences between the generally younger musicians who liked jazz and the older musicians in the New York area who played in a ragtime style. One segment of the younger crowd tended to hang out with or work in the offices of Clarence Williams. In August 1922, Williams founded his "Home of the Blues" the Clarence Williams Music Company, a sheet music and music copyrighting concern. Clarence Williams' songwriting associates included Spencer Williams, Fats Waller, and Porter Grainger—the author of *T Ain't Nobody's Business If I Do* and other classics. Williams marketed the blues successfully enough so that when his health began

to fail in 1943 he was able to sell two-thirds control of his company to Decca Records for a reported \$50,000—comparable to almost a quarter million in today's dollars.

Clarence Williams' blues taste stemmed from his background in Louisiana, where his father played blues guitar, and the young Clarence tap-danced for dimes on corners, when he wasn't working at sweeping floors at the local dance hall and brothel.

One of the problems for Black Swan was that the company's interest in jazz and the blues was compromised by the friendships and business connections the company had with people associated with that sizable segment in black society that was hostile to just about all the popular black musical forms, be they jazz, ragtime, or blues. Loosely representing this group was the two-year-old national Association of Negro Musicians (NANM), which included musicians of all fields but was dominated by college and school music teachers who were determined to push classical music. The classical music produced by Black Swan Records included performances by two performer/music teacher officers of the NANM, Florence Cole Talbert and Kemper Harrel. Typically, the black music teachers, like their white counterparts in this era, felt that "serious" training was essential. And while there were many sophisticated and jazz-oriented black music teachers, there were also those who seemed to share the notions of the majority of white music teachers that blues artists, who had yet to learn to read a symphony score, were not "real musicians."

It is in this context that one has to understand Black Swan Records, a company presided over by Harry Pace—a former college professor in Greek and Latin. The question around Pace's studio at Black Swan wasn't so much what kind of pop music would be recorded, but how far the company could profitably go with pushing classical music and avoiding pop.

Black Swan's difficulties were compounded by the company board of directors. Harry Pace appears to have been the only board member with any experience in the area of popular music. Pace had worked for almost a decade in partnership with the "father of the blues," W.C. Handy, in the Pace & Handy Music Company, the first sizable black sheet music concern. But for

fellow Black Swan board members, Pace was surrounded by individuals with quite high-class musical tastes. The directors' list published in the February 24, 1923, issue of *Billboard* included: Dr. W.E.B. DuBois, editor of the NAACP monthly, *The Crisis*; Dr. M.V. Boutte of Meharry Medical School; Dr. Godfrey Nurse, prominent physician and realtor; Dr. W.H. Willis, head of the Washington, D.C. medical association; Truman K. Gibson, insurance and banking executive; and among others, John E. Nail, reputedly the nation's wealthiest black realtor, with massive holdings in Harlem. Nail was brother-in-law of NAACP National Secretary James Weldon Johnson.

The input of the board is suggested in Black Swan advertising in the NAACP monthly, *The Crisis*. *The Crisis* was then a general interest monthly with much of its readership in the black colleges, the market of the young well-to-do in black America. For *The Crisis*, the ads of Black Swan had special emphasis on the company's "serious" and "classical" production (quite the opposite of the advertising in the mass circulation *Chicago Defender* and *Pittsburgh Courier*, where Black Swan featured the company's blues singers and rarely even mentioned that there were classical numbers). On the other hand, a full-page November 1921 spread in *The Crisis* divided the listings into four categories. At the top was "High Class"—classical records. Below the classical records was "Dance Numbers." Below them "Male Quartette," and at the bottom, "Blues."

The ad bias toward the classics was most strongly displayed in the January 1923 *Crisis*, and in the January through June 1923 issues of the black monthly of the cultural/left, *The Messenger*, where the following appeared:

"Colored People don't Want Classic Music!"

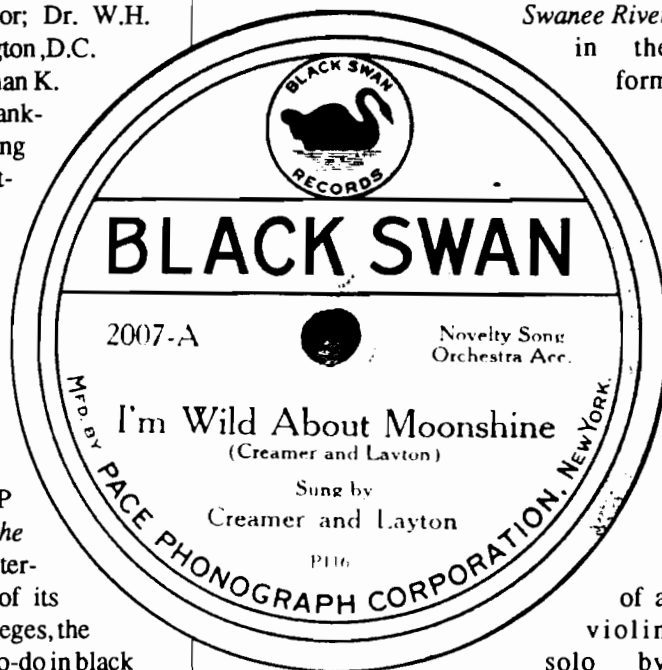
So Our Dealers write us. "Give Em Blues and Jazz. That's all we can sell."

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....

The list included classical numbers and, among others, Stephen Foster's *Swanee River* in the form



of a violin solo by Kemper Harrel.

It was quite clear within the first few months of Black Swan's record production that recordings of blues and jazz sold, while the attempts to market black recordings of serious music, including opera, failed. Nonetheless, much of the company's advertising continued to focus upon its classical singers.

Ironically, Black Swan wasn't able to sign the very top black concert stars of the time, such as tenor Roland Hayes, who began recording early in 1923 with a company in England.

The uneconomical advertising policy of pushing classics should be seen in light of the deep frustration among black lovers of the classics, music lovers who resented the reluctance of white record companies to record black performers of serious music. There were certainly good serious performers to be recorded. By the 1940s, according to historian Eileen Southern, four of the seven highest paid concert performers in the U.S. were black Americans. Until Black Swan, these performers had not been able to perform serious music on records. Then in May 1921 Black Swan's first two releases were clas-

sical numbers by Revella Hughes and C. Carrol Clark.

With the financially costly but explainable push for the classics in mind, many other decisions at Black Swan have a certain logic. For instance, when it came to choosing personnel at Black Swan, President Pace was less interested in jazz experience than in collecting musical talent that fit the definitions of talent handed down by the music teachers. So, to serve as Black Swan musical director Pace selected Fletcher Henderson, classically trained at Atlanta University. Henderson would go on to become a prominent jazz band leader and the nearest thing there was to an official father of swing music. It may be noted that swing leaned heavily toward the easy listening end of the spectrum, as opposed to hot jazz.

For the arranging of the music Pace selected William Grant Still, a not-very-jazzy individual, but certainly a well-qualified choice, considering Still's immense musical future as arranger for and writer of symphonies, scores for Hollywood movies, and the music for television shows, including the original "Perry Mason" and "Gunsmoke." Other officers of the company came out of backgrounds in music teaching, vaudeville, or musical show business.

Probably the strongest jazz influence was among the horn players and other sidemen hired to back up blues singers on Black Swan. The sidemen included a great many individuals who went on to long and illustrious careers in jazz and blues—including Don Redman, Joe Smith, Gus



and Bud Aikens, Garvin Bushell, and Ralph Escudero.

The jazz histories include scenes of debate at Black Swan over just how much jazz and blues the company should produce. Ethel Waters, the best known of Black Swan's blues singers, recalled in her autobiography her first visit to the studios. "I found Fletcher Henderson sitting behind a desk and looking very prissy and important...There was much discussion of whether I should sing popular or 'cultural' numbers. They finally decided on popular...That first Black Swan record I made had *Down Home Blues* on side one, *Oh Daddy* on the other. It proved a great success...got Black Swan out of the red." Waters went on to become Black Swan's most-recorded blues singer. The company could have used more like her, for historians Charters and Kunstadt note that Waters was one of the very few Black Swan blues singers with "the rough, earthy touch that the audience was looking for." Charters and Kunstadt explain that Harry Pace "was in an awkward position. The Negro business community felt that the role of Black Swan Records should be to show the Negro at his best, and the music that was selling records, jazz music, and the blues, was considered degrading by many of Pace's friends. He tried recording novelties, but these were more in the style of the old minstrel show walk-around than anything else." Pace also tried classical music and Broadway show tunes, even West Indian calypso and march music.

Charters and Kunstadt are but two among many jazz historians who have commented on Black Swan's role in a light and breezy manner, taking literary advantage of the foibles of youth committed by the young staff, and getting the most out of anecdotes, such as the one on how Harry Pace lost the chance to be the first one to get Bessie Smith on record. Allegedly, the fastidious Pace threw Smith out of the Black Swan studio in the middle of her first cut, after he walked by and overheard the gruff Bessie say, "Hold it a minute, boys, while I spit." Historian George Hoefer adds, sarcastically, "Bessie went on, six months later, to pull Columbia out of receivership while Black Swan went bankrupt."

One has to keep in mind that collecting star performers was only part of what was needed for success.

There were distribution problems, there

were problems of not making the right secret agreements with competitors to divide up parts of the market, and there were problems of having too many or too few records of the fast-changing dance crazes. It should be kept in mind that giant Columbia Records went broke even before little Black Swan's goof with Bessie Smith gave Columbia the chance for resurrection. That is, to understand the recording industry is to understand its basic instability.

Take the marketing problem, for example. For Black Swan to have produced records continuously from February 1921 through August 1923 has to be considered an achievement when one takes into account that Black Swan was marketing to a very economically disadvantaged population. And the distribution problems were compounded by the lack of either black-owned retail outlets, or a sufficient number of white-owned "ghetto" shops that would deal with a black company. The big white companies sold records at neighborhood "5 & Dime" stores, as seen in the Paramount ad saying its records were available at Kress Stores. Black Swan distributor lists did not show dime store ties.

Black Swan felt it had a special burden of showing "good taste" in order to fight the moral majority-type crusaders who were claiming that the "jungle rhythms" of jazz and "Negro music" in general, were turning America to a life of debauchery. "Did Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation?" asked *Ladies Home Journal* in one of its many journalistic tirades against the new music. And it wasn't only whites who were critical. Most black ministers of that time seemed to think of jazz and blues as "that devil music."

Related to wild charges that jazz music was creating "a holocaust" of illegitimate births and other improprieties, there was the stereotype of black music as "shouts" and "stomps." Black Swan musical director Fletcher Henderson's reputation for over-orchestrated jazz and blues has to be seen in light of the understandable attempt to display complex structure. In the process, musicians like Henderson helped break new ground in melding European and African musical forms—as can be seen in the complex introductions and breaks in the

classic blues that was the product of Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, Rosa Henderson, Ida Cox, Ma Rainey, and the other recorded singers of the '20s.

In the case of Black Swan, the added frills on its jazz and blues numbers tended to kill some of the intensity. The result was generally too mellow to be memorable, and consequently Black Swan's recordings fall into forgettable "easy listening" modes and few have been reissued. Ironically, there were a sizable number of graduates from Black Swan's restrictive musical environment who went on with other companies to make a great flood of hot recordings that have been widely reissued and are available today in libraries and record stores. These performers include blues singers Alberta Hunter, Ethel Waters and Eva Taylor; pianist James P. Johnson; bandleader Henderson; cornetist Joe Smith and the other aforementioned sidemen.



Had Black Swan been launched a bit later in the decade, when a semblance of order came over the record industry, there might have been room for the two goals of pushing classical music (to a black public that didn't generally attend symphonies or the opera), and trying to turn a profit by producing enough of the music that the black public was buying.

But Black Swan came on the scene at a time of cutthroat desperate competition among companies. It was necessary for survival to make deals, Machiavellian alliances of sorts. It is in this context that we

can try to understand the economic arrangement in April 1922 that put Harry Pace's Black Swan in partnership with the bankrupt white-owned Olympic Record Company. This peculiar deal opened Black Swan to the superior record-pressing facilities of defunct Olympic, in return for which Black Swan reissued old failed dance band records from the Olympic label. But the rereleased white bands now appeared on a black label, with fictitious band names, including the names of well-known black band leaders, as in "James P. Johnson's All-Stars" (without James P. Johnson or his friends) and "Henderson's Dance Players" (without Fletcher Henderson).

From the very beginning of the company Pace had advertised, as he did in the July 1921 *Crisis* monthly of the NAACP, that "Black Swan Records Are Made By The Only Phonograph Company in the World Owned and Operated by Colored People...The Only records made using exclusively Colored Singers and Musicians." By July 1922 Pace was no longer advertising exclusive black ownership and management, but the Black Swan advertisement in *The Crisis* that month still claimed, "The Only Records Using Colored Singers and Musicians Exclusively." And yet, under the heading "July Releases" were three dance band reissues of white bands.

Record companies of 1922 quite commonly switched labels on dance bands, in order to appear to be presenting a broader range, or to appear to have some "hot" group that had sold well for some other company. Since the bands themselves frequently used assumed names in order to get out from under an exclusive contract there were plenty of names of "alleged" top bands to go around.

However, Pace's blatantly fraudulent racial line had to hurt public confidence in his product, in the long run. The false labeling finally extended to having Fletcher Henderson record a dance record under a white name for a new Olympic Records series. And then, on the very last Black Swan record issued, "Pace really outsmarted himself," notes Fletcher Henderson's biographer Walter Allen. Pace released a Henderson dance record on Black Swan under one of the fictitious names he had been using as cover for the old Olympic white bands.

One of the achievements of Black Swan

NEW NEW

BLACK SWAN RECORDS

NOW ON SALE

- 7103 THE BELL SONG (Lakme)—
\$1.00 By Florence Cole Talbert
- 7104 THE KISS (Il Bacio), Arditi—By Florence Cole Talbert
- \$1.00 THE LAST ROSE OF SUMMER—By Florence Cole Talbert
- 2058 SO LONG, BERT—By George P. Jones, Jr.
- 75c NIGHT AND YOU—By George P. Jones, Jr.
- 2058 HAWAIIAN BLUES—By Haynes' Harlem Syncopators
- 75c MELODY IN "F"—By Haynes' Harlem Syncopators
- 2059 LANTERN OF LOVE—By Haynes' Harlem Syncopators
- 75c YOU OUGHT TO SEE MY BABY—
By Haynes' Harlem Syncopators
- 2061 COCONUT DANCE (Bany Solo)—By Danny Lewis
- 75c KITTEN ON THE KEYS (Piano Classic)—By George Brown
- 2064 SATURDAY (Dance)—Baltimore Blues Orchestra
- 75c DAPPER DAN (Dance)—Baltimore Blues Orchestra
- 2055 HONEY LOVE—By Marion Harrison
- 75c CARIBBEAN MOON—By Marion Harrison
- 2060 JELLY ROLL BLUES—By Excelsior Norfolk Quartette
- 75c CONEY ISLAND BABE—By Excelsior Norfolk Quartette
- 2057 JACOB'S LADDER—By Harrod's Jubilee Singers
- 75c JOSHUA FOUGHT THE BATTLE OF JERICHO—
By Harrod's Jubilee Singers



Other Recent Records

- 2053 ST. LOUIS BLUES—Handy's Memphis Blues Band
- 75c YELLOW DOG BLUES—Handy's Memphis Blues Band
- 2054 MUSCLE SHOALS BLUES—Handy's Memphis Blues Band
- 75c SHE'S A MEAN JOB—Handy's Memphis Blues Band
- HE MAY BE YOUR MAN, BUT HE COMES TO SEE ME SOMETIMES—
Lucille Hegamin and Her Blue Flame Syncopators
- 2049 I'VE GOT THE WONDER WHEREHE WENT AND WHEN HE'S COMING BACK BLUES—
Lucille Hegamin and Her Blue Flame Syncopators
- 75c
- 2039 TRIxie BLUES—By Trixie Smith
- 75c DESPERATE BLUES—By Trixie Smith
- 2044 LONG LOST WEARY BLUES—Trixie Smith
- 75c YOU MISSED A GOOD WOMAN WHEN YOU PICKED ALL OVER ME (WILLIAM)—Trixie Smith
- 2043 THE SHEIK—By Henderson's Dance Orchestra
- 75c WHO'LL BE THE NEXT ONE (TO CRY OVER YOU)—
By Henderson's Dance Orchestra
- 2052 DEAR OLD SOUTHLAND—Fred Smith and His Society Orch.
- 75c I'VE GOT MY HABITS ON—Fred Smith and His Society Orch.
- 2042 BLUE DANUBE BLUES—Sammy Swift's Jazz Band
- 75c HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN—Sammy Swift's Jazz Band



Be the first to say "Have you heard the new Black Swan Records." Go to a Black Swan dealer TODAY and hear the records listed above.

PACE PHONOGRAPH CORPORATION
NEW YORK

was to show the record industry that there was a sizable black market to be tapped, to prove that the popularity of blues singer Mamie Smith on OKeh in 1920 was no fluke.

Ironically, the Black Swan example helped get work for blues experts from the black community at the white companies, experts who made it possible for those companies to find and record the blues stars

who were swamping the market, so far as Black Swan was concerned in 1923. Generally, these black employees for the big companies came from funkier social roots than did the crowd around the Black Swan studios. There was Clarence Williams up from the New Orleans street scene. Another talent scout for the big companies was Mamie Smith's songwriter Perry Bradford, who began his music career in the tough

Black Swan

Just Out

Records



DON'T BE DECEIVED!
BLACK SWAN RECORDS
 Are the Only Exclusive
 Colored Records and
 Are Made by a Colored
 Company

AUGUST RELEASES

- 14115 { AIN'T GOT NOTHIN' BLUES (Hop. with Orch.) Mary Straine
 75c { THE FOWLER TWIST (Haritune with Orchestra) John P. Vigal
- 14116 { HONEY ROSE (Soprano with Orchestra) Mamie Jones
 75c { MANDY 'N ME (Soprano with Orchestra) Mamie Jones
- 40002 { THE DOG, THE FLEA AND THE BUMBLE BEE (Comic) Ar-
 75c { WHEN MALINDY SINGS (Dunbar) Archie Harrod (chle Harrod
- 10068 { ZOWIE (Fox Trot) Fred Smith's Society Orchestra
 75c { ARABIA (Fox Trot) Fred Smith's Society Orchestra
- 10069 { THE LAST WALTZ (Waltz) Henderson's Dance Orchestra
 75c { JANE (Fox Trot) Henderson's Dance Orchestra
- 10070 { SPREAD YO' STUFF (Fox Trot) Ethel Waters' Jazz Masters
 75c { SNUGGLE (Fox Trot) Ethel Waters' Jazz Masters
- 60002 { SOUTHERN DIXIE MEDLEY (Banjo) Joe Briggs
 75c { YANKEE JIGS (Fiddle) Tony Gray
- 25002 { DREAMY ALABAMA (Hawaiian Guitars) Keliuana & Brown
 75c { DRIFTING (Hawaiian Guitars) Keliuana & Brown
- 18047 { CAN'T YOU HEAR ME CALLING, CAROLINE? (Tenor) Har-
 75c { A DREAM (Bartlett) (Tenor) Harry A. Delmore (ry A. Delmore
- 14057 { HALLELU (Spiritual) Harrod's Jubilee Singers
 75c { LIVE HUMBLE (Spiritual) Harrod's Jubilee Singers

Ask Your Dealer to Play These Hits For You
PACE PHONOGRAPH CORP., 2289 Seventh Ave., New York City

one-night-stand touring circuit around the turn of the century.

Some comparisons of musical emphasis can be made between Black Swan and the sheet music companies of Williams, Bradford, and Pace's old partner W.C. Handy. Black Swan had about one-third of its record production in blues, or blues-related items. Clarence Williams' large sheet music company appears to have had in this period a good three-fourths of his company's output in blues numbers. Blues appears to have comprised about two-thirds of W.C. Handy's sheet music offerings in these years. And Bradford appears to have had about 90 percent of his output in blues songs.

If Clarence Williams, W.C. Handy, and Perry Bradford could see that "the classic blues" was superior music deserving of emphasis, then why couldn't Harry Pace and company see it? Pace had worked with Handy in 1919 when Handy was telling the press that he "intends...to show that these blues can be woven into beautiful symphonies and a truly higher art." Blues and jazz musicians of the '20s seemed ever ready to state flatly that their music was qualitatively the equal of anybody's, as in the October 18, 1924, issue of Marcus Garvey's *Negro World*, where pianist composer Eubie Blake declared that "we are giving the world real American folk songs and dances that will go down with the years as distinctive as the Russian or any other pronounced type of art."

Black Swan could point to its goal of elevating all forms of black music, but the argument was shallow. Pace and company had to know the "hot" new music was special. Their problem was that the most earthy and rough blues and jazz didn't fit their class prejudices. Pace and the others around the Black Swan studios were not really poor judges of talent, so much as they were too proper, too fearful of being too different from the norm. All record companies struggled with questions of taste. From 1920 through 1922 Victor brought many a blues singer into the studio for a trial, and rejected

every one of them. It may be noted that Bessie Smith had been considered a bit too different or raw for some *proper* folks at Okeh, and allegedly at Emerson, before getting rejected at Black Swan. And there were others from among the more "funky" blues singers that had to wait until late in the game to get recorded—Ma Rainey, for instance, didn't make it until December 1923.

If Harry Pace was a lesser talent scout than some others, he still should get some credit for being much more generous than the other record company executives of 1921 and 1922 in putting out a record or two for most of the singers who came into the studio for a trial. The largesse in this area is evident in the following chart:

Jan. June 1921	July Dec. 1921	Jan. June 1922	July Dec. 1922	Jan. June 1923	July Dec. 1923
5	5	4	10	8	1
Artists recorded on Black Swan					
8	13	8	10	31	42
Artists recorded on all other companies					

(the bottom number includes some singers also with Black Swan at the same time)

Harry Pace had much less success in keeping top talent at Black Swan than he did in giving the talent a start. Of the blues singers who started their recording between 1920 and 1922 there were 17 singers with 10 or more songs cut during their career. Of the 17, eight had recorded at the start or early in their career for Black Swan. But by the end of 1923, as Black Swan was about to go under, only two of the eight were still with the company.

Of the musicians who left Black Swan, some jumped quickly to another company, while others appear to have gone searching only after having waited and waited for Black Swan to take them back into the studio. Jazz and blues pianist James P. Johnson may have left Black Swan because of the choice of material he had been given to record. After getting to do one piano solo, Pace had him backing show tunes and comedy.

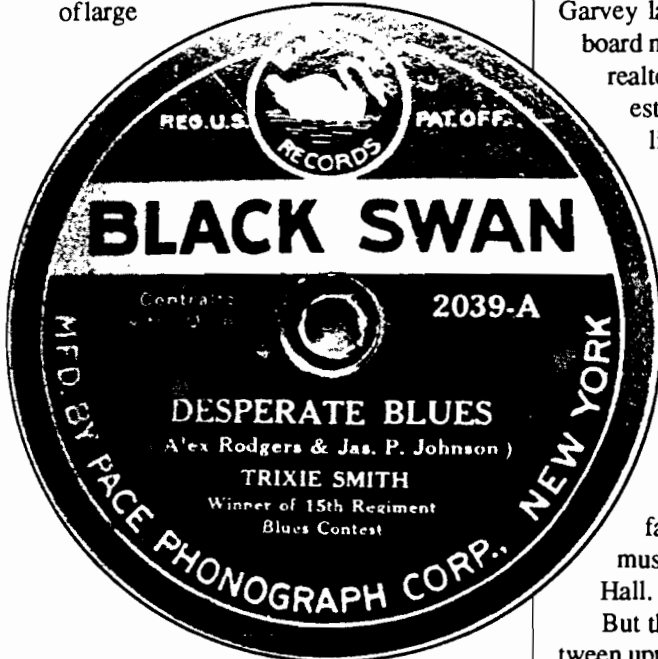
To be fair to Black Swan it is important to add to the history the social context in which Pace and company operated. With that context explained, the resulting picture is one of a group of music promoters who may have had misguided priorities (classical instead of jazz), but they were not stupid. They were members of a distinct social class and reflected its priorities—as in the *Billboard* gossip column mention that Black Swan's singer of the classics, Florence Cole Talbert, was to give a private recital for the prominent black banker in Chicago, Jesse Binga.

An understanding of Black Swan is also helped by placing its personnel in the political setting of the day.

The decline of Black Swan in 1923, for example, was no doubt influenced to some degree by the highly public conflict between the largely working class black movement of

Marcus Garvey—the Universal Negro Improvement Association, and the NAACP and Urban League officials around Black Swan.

The bitter antagonism between Black Swan board member DuBois and Marcus Garvey was a major topic of the black press of that time and the subject of large



articles and whole chapters in black history texts.

In January 1923 Black Swan president Harry Pace and board member John E. Nail also became outspoken enemies of the militant black nationalist from Jamaica. Pace and Nail were two of eight signers of a letter to U.S. Attorney General Daugherty demanding the deportation of Marcus Garvey. The widely republished letter angrily derided Garvey and insulted his followers. In one section of the letter, the membership of Garvey's million-strong organization was compared with the Ku Klux Klan and with the conclusion that the Garveyites group "is just as objectionable and even more dangerous, inasmuch as it naturally attracts an even lower type of cranks, crooks and racial bigots among whom suggestibility to violent crime is much greater."

Garvey retorted to this letter by noting that the tone was that of people who seemed

to hate their own race. Speaking of Harry Pace, specifically, Garvey called him "a business exploiter who endeavors to appeal to the patriotism of the race by selling us commodities at a higher rate than are charged in the ordinary...markets." And Garvey labeled Black Swan board member and Harlem realtor John Nail "a real estate shark who delights, under the guise of race patriotism, to raise the rent of poor colored people even beyond that of white landlords...."

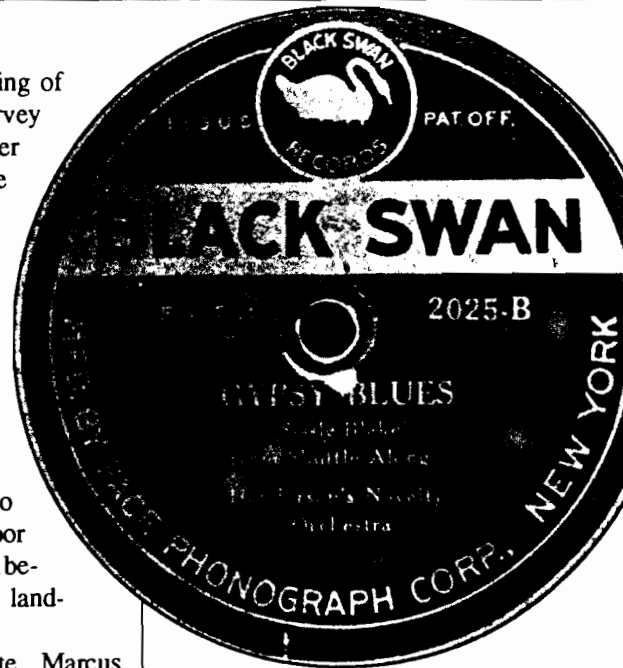
In musical taste, Marcus Garvey was known to share with Harry Pace, John E. Nail, and Dr. DuBois a preference for classical and other serious composition. Early in 1922, in fact, Pace had given a lecture on music at Garvey's New York Liberty Hall.

But the very bitter social division between upper class and working class black America of the '20s led to intense conflict between, on the one hand, the college-trained NAACP types who read *The Crisis* with its Black Swan ads for "the Better Class" of black music, and, on the other

hand, the tenement-dwelling



blues-record-buying alleged "dupes" of the "demagogue" Marcus Garvey.



While Pace and company fraternized at the annual NAACP ball, where the music was from the likes of Smith's Society Orchestra, Garveyites frequented their Liberty Hall, which featured functions like the Ethiopian Barndance, at which the music was advertised to be "American and West Indian Blues."

[Excerpted from an unpublished manuscript, *Jazz, Blues and Black Nationalism*.]

Two Decades of quality representation of Great American Bluesmen!

Bookings
Management
Record Production
Video Production and Sales

- *DUKE ROBILLARD
- *LEGENDARY BLUES BAND
- *MIGHTY FLYERS
- *JOHNNY LITTLEJOHN
- *ABB LOCKE
- *UPTOWN RHYTHM KINGS
- THE WILLIAM CLARKE BAND
- *PHILLIP WALKER

Tom Radai, Blues Management Group, 2613 South 51st St., Milwaukee, WI 52319 (414) 321-0188