

“The Illinois Central brought the Blues to Chicago”

Leonard Chess, President Chess Records

In February of 1980, Coen Solleveld the chief executive officer of a Netherlands based music conglomerate announced the reorganization and realignment of his company’s assets in a press release written in an argot only CEO’s and MBA’s could possibly understand: “consolidate Polygram’s current U.S. market-share, enhance future growth prospects and profitability, maximize its management talent and integrate its pending acquisition of certain of Decca LTD’s music activities...” The translation of the corporate palaver about consolidating current market-share was that the company which purchased the company that purchased Chicago-based Mercury Records was closing Mercury Records’ Chicago headquarters and moving the retained staff to New York. At its height, Mercury Records had been the fifth largest record company in the United States and with its departure, Chicago a city that once possessed a large community of music companies was now bereft of any major music companies. Yet there was very little notice much less protest or outrage in Chicago. No citizens with pitchforks and torches assembled in the public square seeking vengeance on the Dutch monster that had done Chicago wrong. Chicago’s daily newspapers ignored the news leaving the analysis to the music trade journals. It was as if no one in Chicago even knew that a major music company actually existed in their city much less that it had any import to Chicago’s cultural well-being.

Of all the sundry American arts, music is the one in which Chicago has had the greatest success over the longest period of time and with the greatest influence on the American culture. Until rap music started in a Brooklyn, New York housing project in the late 1970’s and then spread across the nation, every other single genre of music considered solely American in origin - Minstrel music, Ragtime, Jazz, Blues, Country, Folk, Gospel - was born and nurtured between the two mountain ranges, popularized in Chicago and then spread across the nation to the two coasts. The American songbook was written in the American heartland not on the coasts.

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Victor Kremer and Will Rossiter published the early songs of a number of Chicago-based composers some of whom decided to self-publish their own music

following the path Charles K. Harris, Anita Owen, Carrie Jacobs-Bond and Will Rossiter himself had taken. The one who had the greatest lasting impact was Tell Taylor who published his own song *Down By the Old Mill Stream* in 1910. The song became one of the bestselling popular songs of the Tin Pan Alley era and has always remained a beloved chestnut of harmonic a cappella groups. It is a rare barbershop quartet competition where someone doesn't sing *Down By the Old Mill Stream*.

Tell Taylor was born and raised near Findlay, Ohio and with an appealing tenor voice as his meal ticket, Taylor went on the Vaudeville circuits. In 1907, Mort Singer cast Tell Taylor in *The Girl Question* at the LaSalle Theater and he would find additional work in other musical comedies including *The Kissing Girl* in 1908 at the Cort Theater and *Lower Berth 13* at the Whitney Opera House in 1910. Shortly after arriving in Chicago, Taylor married a nineteen year old Chicago girl and settled down, or perhaps, it would be more accurate to say he took up residence as Taylor wasn't the type to live a settled life. Tell Taylor seemed to be the prototypical hard-driving, fun-loving Chicago entertainer. After a show was over, Taylor seemed to enjoy late night libations with his friends. He was more often in the newspapers for early morning altercations than for stage achievements. On one occasion he made the *Chicago Tribune* police report for not paying his cab fare while intoxicated. Taylor felt it important to inform the desk sergeant that he was talking to the man who wrote *Down By the Old Mill Stream* and was good to settle later. An unimpressed constable told Taylor that he should have stayed down at the old mill stream where he could have remained sober and if he didn't pay up now, he would be spending the night in jail. Taylor paid up.

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Dave Kapp found many commercially viable Country music musicians performing in Chicago on the radio and in the theaters but he wasn't limited to Chicago. There were radio variety programs similar to the WLS *Barn Dance* produced in other cities such as Cincinnati, Nashville, Memphis and Dallas. In late 1934, Dave Kapp found a group, Milton Brown and his Brownies, performing Western Folk music in a Jazz or hot music style on a radio station in Dallas, Texas. Brown had recorded before for Victor's discount label Bluebird but afterwards Brown added a steel guitar player and more wind instruments which gave his music a Jazz-like quality. Brown would record some 36 songs for Decca in Chicago early in 1935 which was a fusion of Western music and Jazz and which most musicologists

of the genre consider to be the start of Western Swing music. The mid-1930's with a healing national economy was the start of the Swing Era with credit usually given to Benny Goodman but Milton Brown's Decca records predates Goodman's Swing debut by several months.

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"George Silver, famed saloon keeper, diesSilver launched a saloon of his own in a basement on the east side of Dearborn. Here he installed a piano and the instrument was the beginning of his troubles with the authorities. Mayor Carter Harrison passed the Silver saloon late one night and heard the discordant notes of the piano...The next day Silver's license was revoked."

Chicago Tribune obituary for George Silver, January 15, 1925

The discordant notes that nettled Mayor Carter Harrison late one night in 1903 was actually Ragtime and Silver's customers seemed to be enjoying the divertissement. Carter Harrison, the son of an earlier Mayor, was a man of high rectitude and genteel tastes. He wrote novels, collected art, some of which is still on display at the Art Institute of Chicago, and his wife was a well-known author of children's books and fairy tales. Apparently Mayor Harrison didn't much care for the Ragtime melodies and ribald songs that were often heard in George Silver's establishment. Of course, there is always more to a good political fight in Chicago than differences in musical preferences. George Silver as a recently arrived immigrant to Chicago started working in a bathhouse whose owner soon entered politics as an alderman and George Silver became one of his most trusted political operatives. Bathhouse John Coughlin was Harrison's nemesis described by some of the newspapers as a "grey wolf" of the City Council. Mayor Harrison's primary political struggle was with the traction magnate whom Harrison believed was trying to suborn the City Council to gain a trolley monopoly. Harrison no doubt had an antipathy towards Silver and his entertainment palace because of Silver's association with the notorious Bathhouse John Coughlin and when Silver announced that he was opening another larger saloon on South Wabash, the wealthy residents along Michigan and Prairie Avenues feared that the entertainment district known as the Levee, which went no further east than State Street, would be migrating towards their peaceful and very exclusive neighborhood. There was a political movement of citizens pushing Harrison to address the depravity in Chicago's saloons especially south of the Loop in the Levee but it just seemed to be a vendetta against George

Silver as he was never considered among the most notorious tavern managers in Chicago.

Harrison's battles with Silver and the other Chicago saloonkeepers went on for months. The City's law department discovered an old ordinance that prohibited a saloonkeeper from owning more than one liquor license so Harrison tried to close Silver down because he operated more than one saloon but no Judge wanted to touch this. Not only did many Alderman own more than one liquor license but in this era Chicago's large breweries were vertically integrated which meant that several local breweries owned hundreds of saloon liquor licenses. Some of these brewery-built and operated saloons are still among the most popular music venue destinations in Chicago in the early 21st century but under different ownership. Harrison was ordered by the Court to give Silver his license back. Harrison tried a different tack. He pressured the City Council into passing an ordinance that prohibited the serving of alcoholic beverages in the same room where music was presented. That would do no damage to the Civic Opera Company or the Chicago Symphony Orchestra but every saloon with a Ragtime piano player had to expand their facilities into two rooms or hire a carpenter to put a wall between the bar and the piano player. Carpenters as well as lawyers were making money if the musicians and the saloonkeepers weren't. Harrison pressured the police to check that Silver closed at midnight, the legal limit, and he told newspaper reporters that he would testify in Court himself that he had heard the sound of a "brassy piano" coming from Silver's saloon. The battle continued but by the end of 1903 Carter Harrison had greater concerns caused by a different sector of the entertainment industry: the Iroquois Theatre burned during an afternoon matinee killing hundreds of people mostly women and children.

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