

Discovering Ink: A Mentor for an Historical Ethnography

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“Historical Ethnography”

This article offers an example of how it is possible to reexplore specific scenes and places in a city like Chicago during the 1920s jazz era and to construct a sociologically plausible version of what might have occurred.

- In recapturing what it would have been like to do a dissertation under sociologists Park and Burgess in the 1920s we may gain a better understanding of culture and race relations when Chicago was the “shock city” of American urbanization and the crucible of interracial contact.
 - In the early 1920s jazz was emerging in Chicago as a powerful, but still disreputable popular cultural form, just as an empirical sociology of urban life was developing at Chicago University – unfortunately no sociologist of the time produced a dissertation about any aspect of jazz as a new urban phenomenon.
 - An accurate rendition of what it would have been like in the early Chicago jazz community requires a combination of historical research and retrospective ethnography – “historical ethnography.”
 - Innumerable examples of ethnographies in sociology use historical material to show that the past continues to shape contemporary events and social processes, but that does not automatically qualify them as historical ethnographies.
 - Historical ethnography:
 1. Is based on exhaustive social scientific research.
 2. Successfully reconstructs the time and the cultural complexity.
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The Research

This research is a historical ethnography of the jazz scene in Chicago in the 1920s.

- The possibility of finding living informants was absent, but their descendants can still be interviewed and the places where they performed can, in some instances, offer fresh perspectives on the emergence of jazz as the nation’s premier contribution to world musical culture.
 1. The idea was to use jazz history documents and books along with the author’s personal knowledge of the places and people of Chicago’s southside.
 2. The jazz history is located in Chicago’s Bronzeville section and in the industrial zones between Chicago and the small towns on the Indiana-Illinois border.

- More specifically, this research delved into the race relations aspect in the social world of jazz and blues in Chicago in the summer and fall of 1924.
 1. Jazz was something of a deviant cultural movement, associated in “respectable society” with the taboos of race and race mixing, and the life of the cabaret, prohibition alcohol, gangsters, loose women and everything that was on the moral edge of the city.
- The author began by writing a set of field notes of some jazz experiences that were based on reading original sources and his own field trips to the actual places where remnants of the twenties still existed.
 1. His field notes brought a fresh perspective to the scene – he was very much in the moment as a participant observer viewing the scene without using the benefit of hindsight to create a historical ethnography of jazz in its local contexts.

**Ink Williams –
the Man and
Possible
Mentor**

The racial segregation of the era created its own methodological problems. To be introduced into the black jazz scene, to hang at the clubs, the author needed a mentor who would become his guide, his Virgil into the Black Metropolis.

- He found such an ethnographic mentor in the person of Mayo “Ink” Williams – a “race record” producer for the Paramount label of Chicago in the early twenties who was demeaned by the racist practices he had to deal with in his work at Paramount.
- Ink was a rather shrewd intuitive sociologist who became an expert on the trends in musical taste in the black community, but seems not to have cared much about the music – he liked opera.
- Ink graduated from Brown University after a football career and returned to Chicago in 1921 to be close to his mother.
- In his early days in Bronzeville, among his own people, he was a man about town with offices in the heart of what locals called “the stroll,” and what the Chicago sociologists termed, “the bright light zone.”
- Ink liked high-level conversations, wrote for a militant newspaper and even conducted some research about musical taste among black Chicagoans.
- Ink knew and recorded musicians of the Great Migration like Charlie Jackson whose music was the best tap dancing accompaniment. This led to the discovery that Ink was a devoted tap dancer.

Note: The author got to know Ink Williams better by talking with people who knew Williams or who had interviewed him. One of these being Studs Terkel, who helped put detail on the exciting picture of Chicago during the jazz age.

- By listening carefully to the songs Ink's artists performed, the ethnographer can "hang out" with the musicians.
 - Tracing their lyrics and melodies to other musicians who influenced them brings the network of musicians, and the ideas about their social world they expressed in their lyrics, vividly to life.
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**Ink Williams –
the Politician**

In the North the world of politics had opened up to African Americans.

- Ink's knowledge of local politics would have been essential in a world in which there were many hard drinking and carousing figures who had to be kept out of trouble or rescued when they fell afoul of the law – he had to be at least "moderately connected."
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**Reluctant
Mentors**

Most graduate students feel the opposite of connected when they first enter a field research situation.

- Feeling the intruder, we seem to have little to offer and limited ways to reciprocate.
 - Why would some want to take the time to bring a younger stranger inside his community?
 - Gradually the ethnographer learns that he has something important to offer in return for a mentor's time and attention – above all else we are educated and sympathetic listeners who sincerely care about the social world the potential mentor is best equipped to explain.
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**Ink Williams –
the Mentor**

From everything the author learned about Ink Williams and his role in the early days of jazz and blues recording, he believes that an appeal to his intellect and his sense of adventure would make him extremely likely to be willing to mentor a white graduate student.

- His interest in philosophy and social justice, and his personal views about the music and musicians never had adequate outlets.
- In becoming a mentor, Ink has a chance to tell his side of what it was actually like, as one of the rare African American pioneers in the popular music field, to work with the musicians who were playing jazz and blues in Chicago at a time when "race music" was about to change the world.