



Union Local 274, American Federation of Musicians Historical Marker



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Name:
Union Local 274, American Federation of Musicians

Region:
Philadelphia and its Countryside/Lehigh Valley

County:
Philadelphia

Marker Location:
912 South Broad Street, Philadelphia



Behind the Marker

There were more than fifty independently chartered black musicians' locals during the twentieth century, formed because white labor organizations in the music industry discriminated against blacks. Local 274 lasted longer than any other independent black musicians' affiliate.

The list of members reads like a "dream team" of some of the greatest jazz musicians who ever lived. **John Coltrane** and Lee Morgan, Dizzy Gillespie and Benny Golson, Nina Simone, Jimmy and Percy Heath, Philly Joe Jones, Clara Ward and Bobby Timmons, Shirley Scott, Trudy Pitts and Jimmy Oliver. No doubt it would have been an awesome band had they all played together, but this is just a partial list of musicians who were members of Local 274: the Black Philadelphia local of the American Federation of Musicians (AFM).

The AFM was founded in 1896 by working musicians who needed a union to represent their interests. When the white union locals barred African Americans, black musicians started their own local in Chicago in 1902, in Pittsburgh in 1897, and later in more than fifty other cities. For many years the AFM would be the most segregated union in the American Federation of Labor (AFL).

In Philadelphia, the black musicians did not form Local 274 until in 1935. The Philadelphia local also became known as the Clef Club, a reference to the headquarters, bar and performance space that the local ran. Despite its relatively late start, Local 274 became very important, in part because Philadelphia was such an important center for black musicians, in part because of its strength and autonomy, and in part because of its painful demise in 1971. During its thirty-six-year existence, Local 274 guided its members through major transitions in the music business, including the rise of jazz, the loss of live music jobs to recordings, the explosion of Soul and R and B music, and the commercial demise of jazz.

The Civil Rights movement, however, would present the members of Local 274 perhaps their greatest challenge of all. Having carved out their own identity in segregated America, the musicians of Local 274 were proud and determined "keepers of the flame," artists and 'cultural workers' who knew the value of their histories, where they had come from and what they had been through. They also knew the value of the contribution they were making to American culture through the music and were determined not to bow to the pressures of racism or segregation.

When the end of segregated union locals loomed on the horizon, the musicians of local 274 decided they did not want to give up what they had gained over the years to become a minority in the larger union. Local 274 became the last of the independent black musicians' locals, and their resistance to consolidate with the white Philadelphia chapter, Local 77, resulted in their expulsion from the AFM in 1971.

Eventually the musicians joined Local 77, and the Clef Club became a social club. In 1995, the Clef Club established a new facility on the corner of Broad and Fitzwater Streets, and became an official member of Philadelphia's "Avenue of the Arts." Dubbed "The House That Jazz Built," the building houses classrooms, a performance space, recording facilities, executive offices, and a gift shop.

Beyond the Marker

Diane Turner, *Organizing and Improvising: A History of Philadelphia's Black Musicians' Protective Union Local 274* (Temple University (PhD Dissertation)), 1993.

