Abstract

Playing in the Gray Area:
Black Baseball and Its Jewish “Middleman” Economy

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As has been well documented, prior to the desegregation of the major leagues, and for a very short time thereafter, Negro baseball was a successful and occasionally lucrative business enterprise. Along with the ethnic beauty industry, black-owned insurance companies, and the policy rackets, baseball played a central role in the business of urban African America.

But even as part of the backbone of the African-American ethnic economy, black ball, both in the loosely organized Negro Leagues, as well as outside their purview, was never solely black owned and operated. In almost every case, it was subject to the incursion and often predatory practices of white booking agents and promoters, sometimes also owners, the vast majority of whom were Jewish. Both part of the black ethic economy and outside it, Jewish promoters formed what may be defined as an ethnic middleman economy, often providing mediation between the insular economic world of African America and the mainstream economy, of which they were neither a wholly part nor wholly outside.

In addition to their visible presence in black baseball, ethnic Jewish middlemen also had a large presence in urban African America as retailers, for example, selling the products of the mainstream economy in segregated neighborhoods. As owners of large retail establishments such as Blumstein’s Department Store on West 125th Street in Harlem, they were also the objects of Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work campaigns. While, at first, glance, the retail sector would
seem to be only tangentially connected to baseball and ancillary businesses like hotels, taverns, and restaurants in predominately African-American communities, large retail establishments and baseball, were intimately related parts of the same larger ethnic economy. As such, it is instructive to compare the position occupied retailers to that of the position occupied by promoters and booking agents, both playing necessary but often disputed roles in the economy of the community.

Indeed, the often fraught relationship between black baseball’s entrepreneurs and white promoters and booking agents is the subject of our paper. In it, we will focus on the multiple roles played Nat Strong, Ed Gottlieb, and Abe Saperstein, among others, not only as booking agents, but also as owners and publicity agents, both official and unofficial, of the segregated sport. We will also pay brief attention to the activities of Syd Pollack, owner of the Indianapolis Clowns, who operated in both spheres, both as an enfranchised Negro League owner and a white promoter, simultaneously, though never entirely comfortably. Furthermore, and as a means of looking at the relationship between the African American economy and the Jewish middleman economy, we will also pay brief attention to other Jewish middlemen, with particular emphasis on retailers.