

The Reader's Digest

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NOVEMBER 1940

¶ The tough boss of a gentle art makes the headlines — and gets results

Petrillo, Dictator of Music

Condensed from *The American Mercury*

Geoffrey Parsons, Jr., and Robert M. Yoder

JAMES CAESAR PETRILLO was born in the slums of Chicago, 48 years ago, the son of Italian immigrants. Now he draws salaries which total \$46,000 a year, maintains offices in Chicago and New York, and holds a public post on the side.

Petrillo's story is pure Horatio Alger — with a modern twist. He is that most modern of Big Business tycoons, the head of a powerful labor union. He is the highest paid labor leader, earning more than William Green and John L. Lewis combined. And he gets his money and his power from one of the gentler arts — music.

Jimmy Petrillo has been president of the Chicago Federation of Musicians for 17 years. Since last June he has been president also of the American Federation of Musicians. As autocrat of 750 union locals in the United States and Canada, with a total membership of 158,000, he controls almost all the music we hear. The musicians in the celebrated dance orchestras, in Hollywood, in the theaters and on the radio, are all union men. Small-town saxophone players and great

conductors like Toscanini, Stokowski and Stock are equally Petrillo's "boys."

For running Chicago Local No. 10, Petrillo got \$26,000 a year. His recent promotion to the national presidency made him the most powerful man in music, but meant a salary cut of \$6000. The Chicago musicians saved Petrillo from this sacrifice. They asked him to remain head of Local No. 10.

"Why the hell shouldn't a guy get paid for two jobs if he's doing two jobs?" asks Jimmy.

In addition to his town house he has a \$25,000 summer home in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, a gift from Local No. 10, which also provides the boss with a bulletproof Lincoln car and a bodyguard and chauffeur. Further to relieve him of worry, the union pays the income tax on his Chicago salary. It irks Jimmy that the government calls that additional sum part of his income and taxes it also.

Jimmy agrees that the boys do well by him. All he says is that he does well by them, too. "I give the boys service," Petrillo says. He does.

Appointed a Chicago park commissioner — an unsalaried job — in 1934, Jimmy spent \$53,000 of the union's money to put on free concerts in Grant Park. Their popularity was so great that the next year he was able to persuade the park board to appropriate \$65,000 of public funds for concerts.

"The public pays to feed the animals in the zoo," he argued; "why can't they pay something to feed my boys?"

Band music in outlying parks and a nightly "Music Under The Stars" concert in Grant Park are now summer fixtures. Some 4,000,000 people attended them in 1940. The union engages top-notch soloists at its own expense, paying as much as \$3000 for a Jascha Heifetz or a Lily Pons. The Park Department's fund, now \$80,000, pays Petrillo's union boys — jobs every night in the slack season at \$10 a head.

Combatting the onslaught of the robot musicians — radio, phonograph and talking picture — Jimmy has been tough and ingenious in finding jobs for his men. He forces Chicago's legitimate theaters to hire a minimum of five union musicians every night they are open, whether they play or not. He also invented the "pancake turner" — a new kind of musician. You've heard him perform. When the radio began to use phonograph records on a wide scale, Petrillo served notice on Chicago stations that only

union musicians would be permitted to put records on and take them off. Today there are 49 union pancake turners in Chicago.

Jimmy can detect what he considers an unfair invasion of his jurisdiction a mile off with the wind against him. When he heard that five non-union musicians would appear before a convention in a Chicago hotel, he demanded that the interlopers be replaced with union men. It was explained that the musicians were star pupils playing for a convention of music teachers. This put a different light on the affair. They could play, Petrillo ruled. But the hotel must hire five union men to stand by.

He feels the same way about radio amateur hours. Whether the performer is a housewife who plays the kettledrums or a four-year-old piccolo player, Petrillo makes the sponsors hire a union standby for each amateur. Because Jimmy showed the way, the standby is now standard in most cities.

One kind of music Petrillo can't bear to hear — free music. Posing for pictures after a sponsored radio broadcast, Alec Templeton, the pianist, struck a few chords. Tommy Dorsey joined in on the trombone. Petrillo sent the radio agency a bill for \$33 overtime.

For years musicians had relaxed after a night's work by dropping into some musicians' hangout, usually a frowsy little café, to play in "jam sessions." It was a frolic

for the musicians, but the cafés were getting better music than they paid for, and capitalizing the fact. Out went a Petrillo command. The boys jammed no more.

In Chicago, each of Petrillo's 12,000 men pays dues of \$16 a year and a tax based on his earnings. Nationally, a per capita tax, bolstered by three percent of the base pay of name dance bands when they are traveling, provides money for Petrillo's pay check from the big federation. Members pay or they don't play.

All orchestra bookings must clear through Petrillo's office. No orchestra would dare to hold an extra rehearsal without Petrillo's authorization. Petrillo even decides whether a stringed bass player may double on the xylophone. He runs the whole show; there is no Number 2 man.

Jimmy's iron rule benefits employers in certain ways. He insists that his boys play the very best they know how. Employers all agree that Jimmy's word is good. His boys don't break contracts. Nor will he tolerate a musician who arrives drunk or late. A word from the employer is enough; Jimmy will fine an errant musician, no matter how big.

Petrillo is a man of strong enthusiasms. In 1936 he was pro-Roosevelt. "I contributed \$8000 to his campaign," he says, meaning that the local did. "I threw anybody out of the union who said anything

against Roosevelt." When the President came to Chicago a 300-piece union band headed the welcome.

He went to the opposite extreme with John L. Lewis. The CIO chief was mentioned in two shows playing in Chicago last year. "Take it out," Jimmy told the managers. "He can't be mentioned." The offending lines were censored — with unexpected results. Public and press roared. Jimmy lifted the censorship.

"They said it was dictatorial and un-American," he says innocently. "I never intended anything like that. I just thought I'd push Lewis around a little."

The tough boss of America's music-makers is strictly West Side Chicago, where in his day they had to be tough to survive. Jimmy sold papers and peddled peanuts before he was old enough for school. Then he took advantage of free music lessons at nearby Hull House. He played the cornet and drums. Later he took out a union card and played professionally.

One night a union brother said to Petrillo, "You make a good speech, Jim. You ought to run for president."

"I knew what he was getting at," Petrillo explains. "I was so lousy the boys would rather have me president than playing with them."

Chicago employers were soon aware of Jimmy's talent as a go-getter. Loud and scrappy, he won successive wage increases and shorter

hours. He got the first musicians' contract with a radio station when he signed up WMAQ almost 15 years ago. At that time a union man got \$8 for two hours of radio work. Today he gets \$25. In many other branches of the business wages have more than doubled under Petrillo's leadership.

Jimmy insists that his career has been as peaceful as a July afternoon. One frequently printed report annoys him. "There isn't any gun in my desk," he says. "Go look." Yet Jimmy did not get to the top and stay there without a struggle. There is money in music, and in Chicago's prohibition days there were people who eyed Jimmy's job and its graft possibilities with envy. Back in the '20's an unexplained bomb damaged his house. In 1932 it was rumored that he had been kidnaped and ransomed for \$100,000. And once Jimmy traded in his armored car, with sinister cracks in the glass. Reporters were told, "We fired a couple of shots at it to see if it worked."

Jimmy Petrillo no sooner had become the union's national president than typical Petrillo remarks fell on some cultivated and unaccustomed ears.

"They're through," said Jimmy, referring to the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the only major non-union orchestra in the United States. "We've taken them off the radio and off the records." He threatened Jascha Heifetz, José

Iturbi and Efreim Zimbalist with a similar fate unless they gave up membership in the American Guild of Musical Artists — a fellow A. F. of L. union, largely of singers — which he claimed had invaded his jurisdiction when it signed up instrumentalists. "They're musicians and belong to me," said Jimmy. "What's the difference between Mr. Heifetz and the fiddle player in a tavern?"

Petrillo's battle with AGMA was still being fought in the New York Courts last September. AGMA had obtained an injunction temporarily restraining Petrillo from enforcing his drastic edicts against its instrument-playing members. Lawrence Tibbett, the famous singer of the Metropolitan Opera and AGMA's president, announced a plan for a concert by the greatest collection of musical genius in history as a protest against Petrillo "dictatorship."

Accounts of the legal battle made the front pages of the New York newspapers, despite heavy competition from war and a presidential campaign. And Petrillo, according to his custom, promptly demonstrated again that there is nothing too good for Petrillo or "his boys" — never mind the price! For counsel he hired Samuel Seabury, distinguished president of the Association of the Bar of the City of New York, whose investigation of New York graft forced Jimmy Walker out of City Hall.

Petrillo's chief worry is the

nickel-in-the-slot phonograph which in the last five years has blossomed by the hundred thousand in saloons, restaurants and roadhouses. A billion-and-a-half nickels a year go into the juke boxes without appreciably increasing the amount of work for Jimmy's musicians. "People want music — and they ask us to make it for them and play ourselves right out of a job," he says bitterly.

Leave it to Jimmy Petrillo some-

how to prevent such a calamity.

Chicago grumbles about his high-handed ways. Other cities will grumble in the future. But Jimmy shrugs it off. "With conditions like they are," he once remarked, "we got to be a little mercenary."

With candor America's best-paid labor leader says, "I don't steal. When I want anything I ask for it and the boys get it for me. They take care of me and I give them service."



The Log Cabin Myth

THE LOG CABIN, pictured in otherwise accurate histories as dotting early American villages from Virginia to New England, actually had no more existence there than it had in England; neither Captain John Smith, Governor Bradford, nor any of the founding fathers ever saw one. The earliest English colonists first built temporary shelters of tents, Indian wigwams or huts covered with bark, turf or clay, replacing them as soon as possible by frame houses such as they had in England. The only early log buildings were a few forts and blockhouses.

The log cabin, common in Scandinavia, Russia and Germany, was introduced by the Swedes who settled on the Delaware River in 1638, and there it stayed, except for a few sporadic transplantings, until well into the 18th cen-

tury. It was not generally used by the pioneers pushing westward until the time of the Revolution.

The tradition of the log cabin originated in J. G. Palfrey's *History of New England*, published in 1841 — the year after the ballyhoo of William Henry Harrison's Tippecanoe Campaign for the Presidency, when the log cabin and hard cider were used as symbols of simple living to discredit Martin Van Buren's Wilton carpets and maroon coach. Thence it invaded the textbooks, and the log cabin, then universal on Western frontiers, became an American symbol, identified with democracy, the pioneer spirit and the dream of the common man.

— Adapted from Roger Burlingame's *March of the Iron Men* (Scribner) and *The Log Cabin Myth*, by Harold R. Shurtleff (Harvard University Press)