

# THE DUKE ELLINGTON SOCIETY, CHAPTER 90

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## NEWSLETTER

OCTOBER 1993

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### FELIX GRANT, 1919-1993

Felix Grant, a valuable member of Chapter 90 from its beginnings and an authority on Ellingtonia, died October 12 at his Washington, D.C. home after an extended illness. It was Felix whose labor-of-love research on Duke's birthplace led to the installation of the Commemorative Plaque on Ward Place as part of "Ellington '89" activities in Washington. At the time, he was ill and reportedly selflessly put off surgery in order to see the event through. Felix could be counted on for announcements about Chapter 90's affairs, especially in the early years when its membership was building, and he played a key role in the success of the first International Ellington Study Group Conference sponsored by our chapter in 1983, arranging for performances by local orchestras and m.c.-ing programs.

In many other ways, he promoted recognition of Ellington the artist, mainly through his decades-long "Album Sound" and, for the last several years, "World of Jazz" radio programs. Some of the records that he gave to the Smithsonian are part of its "Beyond Category" exhibit.

At a time when many station owners were leery of jazz, the *Washington Post* noted, "Mr. Grant, whose careful delivery and quiet erudition were often in contrast with the music he played, said he dealt with them in the beginning 'by never using the word'jazz. . . [His program] evolved into a kind of

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### SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 6

#### "DUKE AT WORK" IS THEME OF MEETING

We can always count on Jack Towers for a great program. For **November 6**, he has prepared a "look in on the band at several locations over the years—performances that we have in good sound quality." Given Jack's collection, it's not surprising that he found it "hard to know when to quit" the selection process.

The meeting will start promptly at **8:30 p.m., Saturday, November 6** at the usual place, **Omega House, 1231 Harvard Street, NW (corner of 13th and Harvard)**. There will be time for chit-chat and refreshments. You deserve a break—treat yourself to this meeting.

### WELCOME, JANIFERS!

At our September meeting, Elizabeth and James Janifer joined our Society. They attended our picnic at the Shells' at Lake Anna last summer as guests of Helen Frazier. We are glad to have you, Libby and Jimmy.

#### Which Reminds Us...

There are some others we hope will be at our Saturday, November 6 meeting, even if they don't join. We won't call whole names, but we are talking about the likes of: George E., John H., Donald H., Annie K., Debra M., Ben P., Glen S., Coleman (aka "Chosef") T., and Mike T.

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**BOOK REVIEWS**

Mark Tucker, ed. *The Duke Ellington Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. 536 pages. \$30.

Reviewed by  
**Reuben Jackson**

Pianist-scholar Mark Tucker continues to add to his already substantial contribution (his tome *Ellington: The Early Years* is required reading for anyone truly attempting to grasp the roots and subsequent development of Ellington's career) to the still expanding body of Ellington-related scholarship with the newly published *Duke Ellington Reader*, a scintillating assemblage of essays, reviews, articles, and musical analyses chronicling each decade of the Maestro's career.

Not unlike a collection of notable Ellington and/or Ellington-Strayhorn compositions, Tucker's anthology consistently focuses in on literature which documents substantial peaks and lulls in Ellington's life, but also intertwines the often complex socio-economic web in which Duke and all African Americans, regardless of status, found themselves. One doesn't have to be a musician to be startled by, say, an excerpt from DE's first Cotton Club Review (published in *Variety* in 1927), in which that renowned establishment's chorus girls are referred to as "almost Caucasian hued high yaller gals," or the constant reference to the Orchestra's members (primarily relegated to the chapters dealing with the '20s and '30s) as "boys."

It is also interesting to note the considerable body of criticism concerning major Ellington extended works such as *Reminiscing in Tempo* and *Black, Brown and Beige*, each of which inspired a flurry of "pro and con" bylines as passionately stated as the

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John Edward Hasse. *Beyond Category: The Life and Genius of Duke Ellington*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993. 479 pages. \$25.

Reviewed by  
**Mac Grimmer**

This long awaited book is the latest entry in the Duke Ellington biography sweepstakes; it is a valuable contribution to the Ellington literature. The quality of paper, printing, and art work surpasses many books of this kind, and this alone qualifies it for high praise. Besides this, John Hasse has written what may be the best general introduction of the "development and evolution of Ellington the musician" in a way that makes it accessible to the general public. His "personality, private life and relationships," fascinating as they are, are left largely to other writers. Organized in the traditional manner of biographies, in this book Hasse has correlated a wide range of established sources, and at the end of each chapter there is a guide to the essential recordings of the period.

This a book written with perception and that contains many thoughtful insights, for instance, how from the early touring days the recordings preserve only one facet of what was in fact a complete entertainment package which included dancing, singing, comedy, etc., both from within and without the band. Another instance is how Ellington served as a groundbreaker and role model in the pre-civil rights days.

*Beyond Category* is also a useful corrective to Collier's snide biography which, among other things, portrays Ellington's last 30 years as "one long decline." Hasse finds much to praise among the suites and other later pieces,

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**MUSICIAN-ARCHIVIST JOINS  
ELLINGTON COLLECTION STAFF**

Since the departure of Marilyn Graskowiak and Fitzroy Thomas, the Ellington Collection staff consisted of only Reuben Jackson and Deborra Richardson. Scott Schwartz recently joined as an archivist. A trained singer, guitarist, and ethno-musicologist, Scott had experience as archivist at East Tennessee State, where he taught music. One of his early experiences with Ellingtonia was as a jazz arranging student at Michigan State, where he scored Duke / Strayhorn compositions for his own vocal combo. Later, while teaching at East Tennessee, he used examples such as "It Don't Mean a Thing" to demonstrate how medieval renaissance music also "swung."

**JUMP FOR JOY RE-DISCOVERIES**

by Walter van de Leur

In 1988 the Smithsonian issued a number of recordings on LP and audiocassette that were related to *Jump for Joy*. Although many of you may already have most of this music, the accompanying well-researched 32-page booklet by Patricia Willard makes the issue a must. After an extensive and detailed overview of the show, Pat concludes with a listing of mystery songs which were never recorded: "Shhhh! He's on the Beat," "Sharp Easter," "Concerto for Clinkers," "Flame Indigo," and "Old Fashioned Waltz." The good news is that most of these songs were recently discovered in the Smithsonian Archives. "Flame Indigo," a wonderful little jam featuring Hodges in a Strayhorn arrangement, and "Shhhh!" look the most promising. I think here lies a task for those fine repertory orchestras we have nowadays to let us hear this unheard music. Loren? Gunther? David?

**NEW YORK ELLINGTON ACTIVITIES**

The recent TDES, Inc. newsletter lists a number of "New York Salutes Duke Ellington" events in connection with the "Beyond Category" exhibit that opened there this month. Among those in December are:

**Friday-Saturday, December 3-4**

Brooklyn Philharmonic Orchestra and Mercer Ellington Band in concert, Opera House of the Brooklyn Academy of Music

**Thursday-Friday, December 9-10**

*The Sacred Concert*, Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra conducted by David Berger and choreographed by Mercer Ellington - Manhattan School of Music

**December 8, 1993 - January 2, 1994 Season**

*The River* and *The Mooch*, Alvin Ailey Dance Theater

**FELIX GRANT**

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ongoing course in music appreciation, based on considerable pre-show research . . ." Reuben Jackson, chapter member who "grew up" listing to "The Album Sound," credits Felix for his "foundation" in jazz. Felix also earned praise from numerous musicians and others, for example guitarist Charlie Byrd: ("[Grant] brought the international community into jazz in a way that no other deejay did").

He left his collection of over 22,000 recordings, books, interviews, and other materials to the University of the District of Columbia, home of WDCU, his last station.

According to Felix, "The great performers . . . and Duke Ellington is a particular hero of mine—strived . . . for a kind of universal excellence. You could hear it in the way they played." Universal excellence was the way of life of our beloved Felix Grant.

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PUBLICATION HAS RARE ITEMS

The current issue of *Jerry's Rhythm Rag* reprints an anonymous "Introducing Duke Ellington" (*Fortune*, August 1933) and "Day by Day in New York" by Spike Hughes (*Melody Maker*, May 1933). Published quarterly, it specializes in collectors' articles and photographs and reviews of reissued music. Stateside subscriptions are four air-mailed issues for \$15. "No personal cheques," says publisher Carl A. Hällström, "but \$-bills are OK!" You can order directly from Carl at: Liljefors gata 85, S-754 29 Uppsala, Sweden.

TUCKER BOOK

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music itself. Despite Ellington's casual yet steadfast resolve against categories (and the term "jazz")—it is difficult to imagine him unaffected by biting essays like John Hammond's "Is Duke Deserting Jazz?" and 1935's "The Tragedy of Duke Ellington."

Of course, no book of this nature would be complete without hearing from the subject. The Maestro's "contributions" range from the always engaging opening chapter from Stanley Dance's *The World of Duke Ellington* entitled "The Art Is in the Cooking," to fascinating articles like 1933's "Ellington Defends His Music," wherein Duke steadfastly refers to his artistry as "Negro music" and 1944's "Certainly It's Music," which finds the author in an uncharacteristically defiant mood.

Tucker has also made note of several posthumous contributions to Ellingtonia, and in doing so has enriched the pages of the *Reader* with such classics as Stanley Crouch's 1986 essay on Ben Webster entitled "Rooster Ben: King of Romance," Gary Giddins' 1987 review of the LP "Duke Ellington Featuring Paul Gonsalves," and the reprint of Lawrence Gushee's compositional analysis of material

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HASSE BOOK

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although the last 30 years take up only one-fourth of the book. It is not possible to deal in depth with the many aspects of this period, half of Ellington's creative life, in any but a very sketchy manner in so few pages. One would expect, given the wealth of material in the Smithsonian collection from this period, that this would be one of the strengths of the book, but instead it is a weakness.

The final chapter, "Elevating Ellington," is on developments since 1974 and the continuing growth of the Ellington phenomenon.

Of interest to Washingtonians is a photograph of a baseball field with the Capitol in the background on the site of the current Post Office Museum and Union Station labeled "Griffith Park...where Ellington hawked peanuts." This field was not used during Ellington's lifetime; he did hawk peanuts at Griffith Stadium, not so named until 1920, but it was located near 7th St. and Florida Ave., a stone's throw from the Howard Theater.

All in all, *Beyond Category* is a worthwhile and enjoyable book and a must for Duke Ellington fans. This probably will be the standard introduction to the subject.

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originally released on the Smithsonian's two-record set *Duke Ellington 1940*.

As has been frequently noted, Ellington felt the highest praise he could bestow upon an artistic endeavor was to deem it "beyond category." Tucker's book might well be compared to an Ellington-Strayhorn work like *Such Sweet Thunder*, wherein heroes, villains, and bystanders each play a part in conveying this most exhilarating, still unraveling tale.