
THE DUKE ELLINGTON SOCIETY, CHAPTER 90

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NEWSLETTER

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**European Conservatory
Project Celebrates Duke**

Contributed by Walter van de Leur

The Hilversum Conservatory, the largest jazz institute in Europe, will spotlight the music of Ellington in a year-long project for students and staff. Special events are scheduled for the school's orchestras and ensembles, culminating in an Ellington weekend next April. One of the highlights is a visit by Gunther Schuller, who will direct the Conservatory big band. Nationwide coverage of the event is secured through the collaboration with NOS and VPRO radio stations. Your reporter teaches a course in Ellingtonia and has prepared a special program of unreleased *Jump for Joy* and *Anatomy of a Murder* music for the school's orchestra.

Treat Yourself This Holiday Season

Put aside some of that holiday money for a gift to yourself: your 1995 membership in Chapter 90. Another idea: Ask Santa to leave a membership in your stocking. But why be selfish—give someone else a membership, a gift that will keep on giving as you renew in 1996, 1997, and on, coda after coda!

Quoted without Comment

After you've been in this group [the Ellington orchestra] for so long, the sound and the style wear off on you. You stand out like a sore thumb when you play in other groups.

-- Lawrence Brown as quoted in "Duke at 70: Honor from the President..." by Hollie West, the *Washington Post*, April 27, 1969.

**See Rare Videos and Films
In Comfort at December 3 Meeting**

Our now annual video and film presentation meeting will be **Saturday, December 3** at the home of Ted and Marian Shell, our president and first lady. Come out and see and hear superb performances on an oversized screen and superb audio system. Bring a friend (especially a potential member).

As before, the selections will be from Ted's great collection of foreign and domestic, public and private films and videos.

The address is **4326 Westover Place, N.W.** (off the south side of Massachusetts Avenue just east of Ward Circle and American University). Last year we had excellent attendance and anticipate the same this year. Remember, we start our meetings promptly at **8:30 p.m.** You don't want to miss a minute of this rare treat.

DESS Membership Grows

We received a kind letter from Gören Wallén, president of the Duke Ellington Swedish Society (DESS), in which he thanks us for our *Newsletter's* coverage of "Ellington '94." So all of you contributors to the article, as Our Man used to say, "Take a deep one!"

"One result of [the] conference," he writes, "is that we have today 70 members Who would believe that 2 years ago." Now, Gören, if you would only tell us your secret, in two years we'll give you a report of our results.

DESS is now preparing texts of conference speakers' presentations and will tell us more about them later.

Herb Jeffries as "The Bronze Buckaroo" and "The Singing Cowboy"

Contributed by John ("Jack") Dennis

The little known acting career of Herb Jeffries, well known vocalist with the Ellington band in the early 40s, was one of the subjects covered in *The American Experience* television presentation *Midnight Ramble* on Channel 26 on October 26. Herb appeared as a cowboy in the so-called "race films" made between World War I and World War II, using the stage name Herb Jeffrey. Known as the "Bronze Buckaroo" and also as the "Singing Cowboy" (actually, he was the first Black singing cowboy), Herb was quite a popular figure with his audiences.

The "race films" referenced previously were made for Black audiences by Black filmmakers, especially those by the legendary Oscar Micheaux, and were designed to counter the demeaning stereotypes that appeared repeatedly in mainstream movies. Two of the movies in which Herb appeared were *The Bronze Buckaroo* and *Harlem Rides The Range*.

Herb was interviewed briefly in this TV presentation and stated that he decided to appear in the movies as a cowboy when he was on tour in Europe with Earl Hines. An incident involving a young boy who had been told by some white youths that there were no Black cowboys convinced Herb that the extensive presence of Black cowboys in the West needed publicity to correct erroneous impressions resulting from omission of any references to Black cowboys in our history books.

Herb also spoke of the hardships and small budgets available for these movies. The troupe on location would sleep on the ground in their clothes, get up the next day and resume shooting. He mentioned that "race films" disappeared when integration led to the disappearance of Black movie houses; there were no more houses in which to show these movies.

The documentary was reviewed favorably in both the *Washington Post* (Oct. 26) and the *New York Times* (Oct. 25); both spoke of Herb Jeffries' role in these films. The *Times* article commented, "Maybe it's time for an Oscar Micheaux retrospective or a tribute to Herb Jeffries, the first black singing cowboy."

Dutch Orchestra Preparing a CD of Unknown Billy Strayhorn Works

Contributed by Walter van de Leur

Probably the most thrilling aspect of research in both the Ellington and Strayhorn Collections is the surfacing of many hitherto unreleased scores. One of these, *Portrait of a Silk Thread*, had its world premiere at the Ellington Conference in Sweden this year, and the enthusiastic responses convinced both Gregory Morris and myself that this music needs to be made available to a wider audience. Apart from being completely satisfying musically, these scores are of great historic relevance since the evolution of certain pieces can be followed. *Tonk*, for instance, was initially conceived by Strayhorn as a concerto for piano and big band, and in the pre-1942 extended *Pentonsilic* certain themes from the later *Perfume Suite* show up.

The Dutch Jazz Orchestra (DJO) is working on a CD that will present twelve of these unknown Strayhorn pieces. Directed by big band veteran Jerry Van Rooijen, the orchestra boasts topflight European jazz musicians. Altoist Albert Beltman, artistic director and for this project in Hodges' chair, explains the idea behind DJO: "...we do special projects only, music that may not necessarily be interesting from a commercial point of view, but that we believe needs to be played and recorded for purely artistic reasons. The Strayhorn project exactly fits that concept."

Director Van Rooijen—composer of 1972 Olympic Games music—is excited by the Strayhorn materials: "Strayhorn emerges as a tremendous imaginative composer who clearly didn't shun experiments. Even today some of this music sounds very progressive." Recording music written for Ellington's orchestra is complicated, though. Says Van Rooijen, "We have to be careful to be true to Strayhorn's intentions without reducing ourselves to some second rate imitation of the Ellington band. That's a challenge, but with this group I'm sure we'll succeed."

Not all the music on the CD will be new. In addition to the aforementioned *Tonk*, the original version of *Absinthe*—from *Afro Bossa*—composed 20 years earlier as *Lament for an Orchid* will be included as well. *Love Has Passed Me by Again*, recently released as a duo version, can be admired in its full orchestral splendor. But most titles on this CD will be heard for the first time.

During the first rehearsals the musicians [Continued under "Dutch Group's Strayhorn CD," page 4]

Notes on Our Society's

"*Dramatis Felidae*"

(To Use Our Man's Term in *MIMM*)

Chapter member **Scott Schwartz**, an archivist in the Ellington Collection at the Smithsonian, is the subject of an article in the current issue of *Computer Training News*. Scott, it reports, "...although an archivist by trade, has leveraged the skills he learned in several computer training courses to become sort of a super user for his department, acting as the first line of support for the department's computer headaches." His troubleshooting skills make it possible to solve some problems on the spot, thereby avoiding downtime while waiting for help from the institution's overworked computer services office.

Teddy Hudson's chapter in *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*, ed. Charlie Reilly (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1994) contains previously unpublished material. Among books by the subject Baraka (earlier known as LeRoi Jones) is *Blues People*, an influential theoretical treatise on jazz and related music. Among Jones-Baraka's statements in it about Duke is that his music was ". . . a music that *could* for the first time exist within the formal boundaries of American culture."

In the Summer 1994 issue of *American Music*, Teddy has a brief review-article on Willie Ruff's autobiography, *A Call to Assembly* (NY: Viking, 1991). Ruff, a French hornist (bassist, too), conceived and inaugurated the Duke Ellington Visiting Fellows Program for "world class artists" at Yale University. Also, it was for the Ruff-Mitchell Duo that Billy Strayhorn wrote *Suite for Horn and Piano*, which became part of their permanent repertoire.

Ben and Lillian Pubols recently returned from a wonderful vacation in Italy. Before going, Ben's attention was called by **Reuben Jackson** to a advertisement in an Italian magazine for a Ellington CD available there. Of course, attending to first things first, Ben searched and found a copy. He will review it in our next *Newsletter*.

In response to requests by some of Ben and Lillian's Italian friends, he prepared and sent back a tape of jazz. You can be sure he included a lot of selections by Duke.

Members' Choices:

Jimmy Hamilton and His Music (and Two Birthdays)

Contributed by Angela Grimmer

Our November meeting was a warmhearted celebration of the life and music of Jimmy Hamilton. Members' selections spanned time—from Jimmy's early years with Duke to his later years with his own group at the Buccaneer Hotel on St. Croix. Ted Hudson shared highlights of an oral history in which Jimmy spoke of his early musical education and his early years with Duke's band, and that ended with his words of affection for life in St. Croix. Musical selections included Jimmy on tenor as well as clarinet and came from members as far away as Pittsburgh.

During intermission, we were pleased to celebrate two birthdays! Patricia Willard composed and we all joined in a birthday greeting to Willie Cook, which she will fax to him at his home in Sweden. All of us surprised Jack Towers with a triple chocolate birthday cake and sang our affectionate tribute to him.

New Publications about Duke

"Nothin' Without God: Duke Ellington's Prayerful Music" is the title of an article by the Rev. Janna Tull Steed in the October 12 issue of *The Christian Century*. Some of our members will recall Janna at "Ellington '94" in New York. Her masters thesis at Yale was about his spiritual music: "Duke Ellington's Jazz Testament: The Sacred Concerts."

Duke Ellington: Un Genio, Un Mito (Firenze: Ponte alle Grazie spa, 1994) is the title of a new biography by Antonio Berini and Giovanni M. Volonté, with a preface with Leonard Feather. The work is enhanced by pictures, selected bibliography and discography, name register, and list of compositions. Unfortunately, it is available only in Italian. We can hope that it will be translated into English and other languages.

A cursory look suggests that the slim volume *Duke Ellington: A Life of Music* by Eve Stwertka (NY: Franklin Watts, 1994) may be good for young readers. [Ed note: Can we get a member to review it for our Newsletter?]

Finances, Dues To Be Discussed

During a brief interlude at our December meeting, members will be presented an overview of the Chapter's finances and anticipated budget and will be encouraged to express their ideas about a possible dues restructuring.

Willie Smith Materials Catalogued at Smithsonian

Contributed by Scott Schwartz

The Archives Center at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History [same center that has the Ellington Collection] has completed processing the Willie Smith Collection of programs, correspondence, black-and-white photographs, and music arrangements documenting his career between 1945 and 1958. The Collection was donated to the Archives Center in 1990 by Fischella Smith.

A leading swing period alto saxophonist and arranger, Smith played with Jimmie Lunceford, Charlie Spivak, and Harry James. He was with the Ellington orchestra from 1951 to 1953, joining along with Louie Bellson and the re-joining Juan Tizol.

The music consists of parts to some of the James orchestra's stock tunes. The photographs include in addition to numerous images of Smith, pictures of the James, Basic, and Ellington orchestras.

Dutch Group's Strayhorn CD

Continued from page 2

came across many surprises. Said tenor Ab Schapp: "I never played anything like this in my entire career. The scoring is totally unconventional . . . Compared to this music I wonder what kind of colorless, uniform stuff we've been playing over the last couple of decades."

Recording is set for the end of 1994 since Dutch Radio World Service producers intend to have the CD on the shelves by the time "Ellington '95" kicks off. Needless to say, the disc will be titled after the stunningly beautiful piece that more or less started the whole project: *Portrait of a Silk Thread*.

[Ed. note: It was Chapter 90's own Walter van de Leur who discovered and prepared "Portrait of a Silk Thread" for its premiere at "Ellington '94" in Stockholm.]

13th Annual International Duke Ellington Conference May 24-28, 1995

CELEBRATING THE ELLINGTON & STRAYHORN COLLABORATION

For Further Information, Write To:

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PO Box 10285, Pittsburgh, PA 15232

Call or FAX:

1-800-209-9696 (USA)

412-681-3538 (Outside USA)

Jean Bach Documentary Praised

In 1958 a photographer named Art Kane photographed 57 jazz musicians for *Esquire* magazine. This photograph and the artists in it are the premise for *A Great Day in Harlem*, a documentary film by Jean Bach, a friend of Duke, a regular at the annual Ellington Study Group conferences, and according to Gary Giddins in the *Village Voice*, "Greenwich Village's great jazz hostess." Jean can be heard posing questions for her subjects, but (what a shame!) stays off camera herself.

The artists in the photograph are a all-time all-stars (Diz, Mingus, Mary Lou, Pee Wee, Rushing, The Lion, Hawkins, Red Allen, Eldridge, Pres, Stuff Smith, *et al*). Among the Ellington-connected are Oscar Pettiford and Rex Stewart.

The film has drawn raves from those fortunate to have seen it, including at a viewing sponsored by New York's TDES in October. According to a review in the *Village Voice*, "...she and her editor and director convey not merely her own affection for the music and its musicians, but a kind of meta-affection, a universal jazz camaraderie that reduces audiences to tears, even though nothing in the film is mournful except the passing of time. Indeed, it's a very funny picture." Hopefully, Jean Bach's *A Great Day in Harlem* will become available nationally.