

Ellingtonia



Newsletter of the Washington, D.C.
Duke Ellington Society

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Theodore R. Hudson, Editor
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Throngs of Friends Pay Respects at Celebration of Jimmy McPhail's Life

"If you didn't love him, you missed something out of your life," said one of his long-time friends during a tribute at the funeral of Jimmy McPhail, on March 20 at the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church.

One observer said that it seemed as if "the whole town," from all walks and stations of life, turned out to show its love for Jimmy — so many that long double lines formed at the entrance of the church, one of the city's largest, and police had to close several blocks of the street, detouring vehicular traffic.

After a lingering illness, James "Jimmy" McPhail died on Monday, March 16 at Howard University Hospital. Multi-talented, he had a rewarding life as family man, educator, singer, businessman, and, to so very many, friend.

I am so grateful and luckier than most, who have lost their loved ones, because I have hours and hours of video tapes of Jimmy performing, with microphone in hand. When I get lonesome I can sit and watch him perform forever. Later, I shall share these with many of you. I know better than all JIMMY DID IT HIS WAY. HE WAS SOMETHING ELSE!!!

Catherine McPhail

From the funeral program

In Jimmy's presence, as one speaker reminded, people would soon be smiling; thus, it was fitting that the services were as upbeat as could be under the circumstances, especially as anecdotes, accounts of his "doing it his way," and descriptions of his personality evoked memories. But an intensely emotional silence gripped the assemblage when a recording was played of Jimmy singing "Come Sunday" with the Ellington orchestra. In his eulogy, the Rev. I. Benni Singleton, a college mate of Jimmy's at Shaw University, quoted from Emerson's famous essay on friendship, showing how well Jimmy exemplified these precepts.

We extend to the McPhail family our sincere condolences.

May Program: Jack Dennis on Tricky Sam and the Growl Trombone

by Mac Grimmer, Program Coordinator

We go back (almost) to the beginning for our May program, the career of Tricky Sam Nanton. One of the earliest band members, Tricky was unique, Duke's first growl (sometimes called "talking") trombone voice. He was instrumental (with Bubber Miley) in developing the "Jungle" sound so closely identified with Ellington throughout his career. Nanton became the prototype for the later practitioners of the growl such as Tyree Glenn, Butter Jackson, and Art Baron, who growls to this day. The program will be presented by Jack Dennis, who will give us the benefit of his research and take us on a tour of Tricky Sam's contributions to the Ellington sound.

The date is **Saturday, May 2**, at our regular meeting place, the **Grace Lutheran Church, 16th and Varnum Streets, NW**, at **8 pm**. Latecomers may miss some growls!

Election Time

by Jack Dennis

It's election time again! Provisions of our By-Laws require annual elections of four officers—President, Vice-president, Secretary, and Treasurer—and seven At-Large Board members.

Members of the Society are urged to make their recommendations to any member of the Nominations Committee, consisting of Jack Dennis, Chairman, Mac Grimmer, and Ben Pubols. The Committee will present a slate of nominees at the May meeting. Elections will be held at our June meeting.

We should strive to select the strongest slate possible to enable us to meet our goals in the year June 1998 to June 1999, remembering that in May of 1999 we will sponsor Ellington '99, celebrating the 100th anniversary of Duke's birth.

JIMMY McPHAIL, 1928-1998: AN APPRECIATION

by Theodore R. Hudson

In the spring of 1983 at the first of what would become the Annual International Duke Ellington Study Group Conferences, Jimmy McPhail was a panelist. After his talk, someone asked if he would sing something. Without hesitation he sang "Solitude" *a capella* with perfect pitch and enunciation in that silky voice with which he was blessed. Several years ago at the invitation of Patricia Willard, who produced the event, he was at a Library of Congress screening of Ellington's First Sacred Concert, at San Francisco's Grace Cathedral in 1965, at which he had sung. After the film, during a discussion of one of the songs Catherine, his wife, said, "Jimmy, why don't you sing it." And he did, again in perfect pitch and clear enunciation in that silky voice with which he was blessed.

Simply stated, Jimmy loved to sing. And simply stated, Duke Ellington loved to hear him sing. Not only for his pitch, enunciation, and tone, but also for his sensitivity and emotion.

His start with Duke was a bit of luck for both. Jimmy had won a talent competition (the runner-up was Shirley Horn!), the prize being a week's appearance at the Howard Theater. It so happened that Duke was featured that week, so Jimmy sang with the backing of that great orchestra! Duke, who claimed to have the world's greatest ears, kept the young man in mind.

Jimmy's career with Duke really wasn't a career. Though he toured with the orchestra occasionally, Duke depended on him mainly for special occasions. When Duke was preparing for his *My People*, presented at the Century of Negro Progress Exposition in Chicago in 1963, he called on Jimmy. Considering the great importance that Duke attached to his sacred music, it is significant that for that First Sacred Concert he again called on Jimmy, as he did for subsequent sacred concerts.

Jimmy's Ellington-connected performances were not limited to the orchestra. In May of 1950 he recorded with a Billy Strayhorn trio, consisting of Duke and/or Billy on piano with a bassist and drummer. Jimmy also recorded with and for Duke's son on the Mercer record label. Probably his best known non-Ellington recordings were pop tunes "Sugar Lump" and "G.I. [Gee, I] Wish," done with small groups.

Jimmy was aware of the importance of being an Ellington vocalist, yet he kept his values in perspective: Most important to him were family and home. Second was his career as a teacher. He earned a masters degree and taught with distinction for many years on the secondary level, his academic disciplines being mathematics and science. These value factors influenced his declining to go on the road as a regular vocalist. Once shortly before he was to sing with Duke on some special event, he dropped by my house to ask if he could borrow a certain Ellington recording so that he could refresh himself on the lyrics Duke wanted him to sing. Wouldn't most people who had ever sung with Duke likely remember lyrics and have the recordings? But that was Jimmy—a value system that would allow a certain honor in having sung and recorded with Duke in major productions but that would not allow overwhelming pride. He was also a businessman, having a small club, Jimmy McPhail's Gold Room, for which he booked major singles and small groups and that stayed open for years after similar enterprises had fallen victim to changing tastes in music and lifestyles.

His connection with Duke was not only professional, but by extension, personal. He married Catherine Gant, one of the two graciously mannered, lovely daughters of a couple who had gone to school with both Duke and Edna Thompson, whom Duke married. The Gants remained friends of the Ellington and Thompson families over the years. Edna, at whose funeral Jimmy sang, was one of Mrs. Gant's lifelong friends. So it was not surprising, when I was for many years a neighbor of Jimmy and Catherine, to find one or another of Duke's grandchildren at their house. While they were in Washington in college, the McPhails' was sort of their home-away-from-home, a warm off-campus place where they could entertain their friends, relax, and enjoy Catherine's cooking.

Unfortunately, the *Washington Post* obituary for Jimmy characterized him as "a blues singer." Jimmy could sing the blues, including the jump blues. Yes, indeed! But in this regard Duke's admonitions about categories are applicable. For Ellington enthusiasts and even casual listeners, he has left a legacy of splendid renditions of various kinds of music—"Heritage," "Come Sunday," and "Solitude" immediately come to mind.

To say that Jimmy McPhail had a host of friends is hardly an exaggeration. They knew Jimmy as a singer, certainly. Perhaps more knew him better as a teacher and as a businessman. Above all, they loved him for the special human being he was. As Catherine says, Jimmy was "something else!" (I was privileged to know him and Catherine as friends and to have known her family even before Catherine and Jimmy were married.)

Along with Ellington-Strayhorn enthusiasts, I will cherish memories of Jimmy McPhail the vocalist, but more important, along with many, many others I will cherish memories of Jimmy McPhail the friend.

Short Sheets

Malcolm Mitchell, guitarist for the trio that performed with Duke during his 1948 England tour, died on March 9. He was a panelist and performed at Ellington '97 in Leeds. ● ● Of interest in the 1997 IAJE *Jazz Research Proceedings Yearbook*: "Harry Carney: The Evolution of His Baritone Saxophone" by John Gudmundson and "Ellington's Development as a Background Artist" by Richard Domek. ● ● The current *Tailgate Ramblings* article "Washington Wobble," anticipating Duke's 100th birthdate, mentions, albeit unevenly, our Conference and other events that took place during 1989. ● ● *Jump for Joy* will be one of the presentations at the IAJRC Convention in California in August. ● ● The True Reformer Hall, known by Ellington experts for its historical importance, will have its facade restored, thanks to federal grants. ● ● The Ellington Youth Festival's evening program, on April 24, will include a jitterbug contest by senior citizens. Come on, folks; show youngsters what you did/can do!

The New Washingtonians Perform Locally, Will Play at European Festival

by Patricia Braxton

The New Washingtonians, the 18-piece Duke Ellington School of the Arts jazz orchestra, directed by Davey Yarborough, performed at the World Bank auditorium on March 17. Our Society member Aledra Allen, co-founder of the World Bank/IMF Jazz Staff Society, arranged for the concert.

The group played for an hour, admirably handling songs such as "In a Mellotone," "April in Paris," "Quintessence," "Half the Fun," "Sweet Georgia Brown," and finished with a rousing "Cottontail." The packed audience responded enthusiastically.

Last year these young musicians were the only high school orchestra invited to the North Sea jazz Festival, and this summer the New Washingtonians, with support from the French Embassy, will perform at the Marciac Jazz Festival.



From Our Mailbox:

. . . [The last get-well message] really was overwhelming with all the nice wishes from so many people) Could you please at your next meeting say thank you to everybody who wrote on the card. . . .

This is from Monika Stratemann, widow of Klaus, who as she wrote this had been back home from the hospital for just two days.

Do We Have a De Facto Speakers Bureau, or What

Our members continue to make presentations and talks in various venues before varied audiences.

Luvenia George delivered the annual Paul Phillips Cooke lecture in April. After succinctly reviewing the history of music taught in American schools from the earliest, she concentrated on Duke as the "exemplar" for current jazz studies, the "most challenging musician" for critics, scholars, and others. She then played several Ellington and/or Strayhorn compositions, noting how they might be used in multi-disciplinary studies and pointing out aspects of his music that Ellington and musicologists have said are ethnic-based.

In February, retired neuroscientist Ben Pubols returned to his old stomping ground, the Neurological Sciences Institute in Portland, OR, to lecture on "Life Beyond the Lab: A Beltway Insider Scrutinizes the Life and Music of Duke Ellington," illustrating with recorded music, slides, and video clips. Then, last month and closer to his current habitat, Ben conducted two sessions on "Jazz Goes to the Movies" before the OASIS senior citizens group in Washington, illustrating these with video material primarily from the Smithsonian's Ernie Smith Jazz Film Collection. Duke and his orchestra were prominently featured.

She Sings, Too

Ferebee Streett, the sculptress who is creating a bust of Ellington especially for Ellington '99, is the vocalist on the recently issued *On the Sunny Side of...* by the Last Chance Band, led by her hubby, Bob Thulman. One of her selections is "Don't Get Around Much Any More." Ferebee also designed the CD's jacket.

Ellington '98

16th Annual International Duke Ellington Conference
May 6-10, Chicago

For details, contact Ellington '98 at:

6935 South Crandon Avenue, Suite 2D, Chicago, IL 60649
Phone: 773-288-DUKE; Fax: 773-643-4829

See the registration and
information sheet inserted in this issue.

♪ Ellington '98 Notes ♪

♪ Local experts Deborra Richardson, John Hasse, and Reuben Jackson will present papers. ♪ Yes, *My People* is planned as a black tie evening. ♪ See you there! ♪

"Dramatis Felidae"

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

Mac Grimmer's review "Ellingtonia Abroad," published in our January issue, was reprinted in its entirety in *Blue Light*. ♪ ♪ Upon returning home to Belgium after a holiday in Switzerland, Sjef Hoefsmit began preparing to fly to New York, stay with Ulysses LaPradde, and attend the memorial services for Father Gensel. ♪ ♪ When Yvonne and Jim Condell recently retired from Minnesota's Moorhead State University, friends established the Condell Endowed Scholarship Fund in their honor in recognition of their teaching and other good works at the institution. Recently the Fund sponsored a Mitchell-Ruff concert. ♪ ♪

Jazz Edge Big Band Tribute Praised

by George Davis, III

Our Tribute to Duke [Ellington and His St. Louis Musicians] was an artistic and financial success. S.R.O. If I could I would have changed one thing—Wendell Marshall became ill that morning and was unable to attend. C.T. [Clark Terry] was his usual self and played outstanding solo 4's on "Jeep's Blues" with one of our tenor sax men. Two former subs with Duke (but long time St. Louis buddies of C.T.) joined C.T. on stage and told of their experiences—both said neither Duke nor any of the sidemen offered any tips or suggestions although they were not unfriendly . . . I had hoped to go to Chicago in May but my schedule is too tight—every month I'm traveling someplace.

Ed. note: We thank George, one of our members, for letting us to publish this excerpt from a personal letter. For several years he led the Howard Swingmasters here, now heads an investment firm in St. Louis. As a public service and for kicks, he serves as manager and plays trumpet in the Jazz Edge Big Band, which presented the Tribute late last year.

The two sidemen he alludes to were Robert Carter, who subbed for one concert in St. Louis, and Lloyd Smith, regular alto saxophonist with Earl Hines, who "loaned" him to Duke for a week.

Calendar

- May 2 - Regular Monthly Meeting
- April 24-May 31 - "Duke Ellington Renaissance Man," the Ellington Youth Project Art Show, Third Floor Photo Gallery, Smithsonian's National Museum of American History
- May 6-10 - Ellington '98, Chicago

Ellingtonia Comes to Life On Shell's Videos

by Angela Grimmer, Secretary

Ted and Marion Shell gave another rousing video presentation of Ellington and the Ellingtonians at our April meeting at their home. Besides footage of Duke and the band at Newport in 1962 and with Ella at the Cote d'Azur, Ted focused on other musicians playing Duke's songs. Highlights included Roy Eldridge and Oscar Peterson blasting their way through "Perdido," Keith Jarrett's animated version of "Things Ain't," and Basie swinging "Mellotone," among others. Ellingtonians playing Ellington included Ben Webster, in a group with Buck Clayton and Hank Jones. Wynton Marsalis was featured on "Caravan," as well as with a Lincoln Center group that included six Ellingtonians playing the *Nutcracker Suite*.

Ted and Marion's peerless hospitality was much appreciated by everyone in what has now become an annual event sponsored by the President and First Lady.

Quotation of the Month

. . . . no matter how distinctively individual your personal identity remains, when, say, Duke Ellington supplies the accompaniment, you are very apt to sound even more rather than less like yourself than ever, to be sure, but at the same time your voice becomes Ellington music.

— From his book *The Blue Devils of Nada: A Contemporary American Approach to Aesthetic Statement* by culture theorist-critic Albert Murray

Member Dies

Just as we were about to go to the printer, we were informed that Earl Swann had passed. We have no details, only that he was in the hospital for surgery.

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