

Ellingtonia



Newsletter of the Washington, D.C.

Duke Ellington Society

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Theodore R. Hudson, Editor

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Performances Culminate Annual Ellington Youth Project

by Jack Dennis

Students from DC Schools performed most impressively at the Evening Program of the Duke Ellington Youth Project's Festival at the University of the District of Columbia on April 24. The program included a choir, two dance groups, string ensemble, and two bands that demonstrated deep interest in the music and reflected results of intensive training from dedicated teachers. It was an emotionally gratifying experience.

Considering their youth and inexperience, the choir of perhaps 100 junior high school age young people sang with feeling and marvelous intensity, including "Come Sunday" and "Hit Me With a Hot Note and Watch Me Bounce."

Other Events Also Showcase Student Creativity

Two Festival activities took place earlier in the day: an art exhibit opening and a poetry session, both at the Smithsonian. The art show continues at the Third Floor Photo Gallery of the National Museum of American History through May 31.

Dance groups from Stuart Hobson Middle School and Ellington School of the Arts performed innovative routines with authority. They were followed by a string ensemble of probably 50 junior high schoolers who skillfully and fervently played "Don't Get Around Much Any More."

Two instrumental groups concluded the program. The Junior High/Middle School Band played a medley, including familiar "A-Train" and "Flamingo." It was heart warming to see these youngsters demonstrating skill by playing complicated compositions on difficult instruments. One could hardly take one's eyes from the energetic Senior High School Jazz Band.

(Continued on page 3 under "Youth Festival")

June Program: 70 Masterpieces

by Mac Grimmer, Program Coordinator

Martin Williams was one of the few authentic and authoritative jazz critics, respected for his broad cultural concerns as well as his musical insights. He participated in the first International Ellington Study Group Conference, here in 1983, and instituted the jazz program at the Smithsonian, which he directed for many years. One of his most significant accomplishments there was production of several ground-breaking albums, including the *Classic Jazz* (history) and four chronological Ellington double albums, documenting what many consider to be Duke's greatest period, 1938-41. He had also selected recordings for a collection to be titled *Seventy Ellington Masterpieces, 1926-68*. The project was never completed, but Jack Towers has the selections, and the tapes, to play at our June meeting. We can't play them all, of course—it would take about 5 hours—but we have Martin on tape to give us the complete list, and Jack has selected some of the more interesting and less obvious.

Martin selected not only the titles, but also the specific recordings. He consulted Ellington experts Gunther Schuller, Mark Tucker and Doug Richards, making this as official a designation of "masterpiece" as possible. (Doug will have his big band play next year at our centennial celebration, Ellington '99, as he did at Ellington '89.) There are 11 tunes with "Blue" or "Blues" in the title, a couple of "Dittys," and another couple usually known by initials only. One song is selected twice—different recordings—and there's even a "Mystery." We'll have a handout of the complete list, so everyone can go home and fill in the gaps with the tunes we don't have time to play.

The time is 8:00, Saturday, June 6, at our regular meeting place, Grace Lutheran Church, 16th & Varnum Sts, NW, the last before our summer break, so if you're late, you'll miss some masterpieces, but also you won't have a chance to be on time again until October 2!

Jack the Bear: Not Just Another Ellington Compilation

(Avid AMSC 573) "Audiophile Quality Re-Mastering in the Clarity and Reality of 3-Dimensional Sound"

Reviewed by Peter MacHare

Contents: Birmingham Breakdown (2/28/27), Hop Head (3/27/27), Creole Love Call (10/26/27), Black and Tan Fantasy (10/26/27), Take It Easy (1/19/28), Jubilee Stomp (1/19/28), Hot and Bothered (10/1/28), The Mooche (10/1/28), Swampy River (10/1/28), Rocky Mountain Blues (10/14/30), Big House Blues (10/14/30), It Was a Sad Night in Harlem (7/17/36), Shoe Shine Boy (7/17/36), Trumpet in Spades (7/17/36), Yearning for Love (7/17/36), Dusk on the Desert (9/20/37), Caravan (5/14/37), Jack the Bear (3/6/40), Morning Glory (3/6/40), Rumpus in Richmond (7/22/40), Chloe (10/28/40), Across the Track Blues (10/28/40), Moon Mist (1/21/42), C-Jam Blues (1/21/42), Carnegie Blues (1/4/45).

I recently obtained a complimentary copy of this CD. It's a nice selection of expected and obscure orchestra pieces from 1927 to 1945. Admittedly it is only one of many Ellington compilations begging for your dollars. What makes this disc stand out? It's in stereo.

I'm sure you remember the terrible "electronically reprocessed for stereo" LPs from the 1960s. I am pleased to report that we've come a long way since those days. This CD sounds great! The heroes involved in the creation of this disc are Dave Bennet in the U.K., who used a Cedar system noise reduction and the best masters he could find before sending digital audio tape to Richard Broadie in the U.S., who used his own "3-Dimensional Sound" system that creates stereo from mono-recordings. Richard Broadie is also a jazz musician who plays clarinet and loves Barney Bigard. You can read more about his system on his web page at <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~rwood/djml/cds/bsre.html>.

To evaluate the sound on this CD, I concentrated my listening on the three cuts which Ellington recorded on October 1, 1928: "Hot and Bothered," "The Mooche," and "Swampy River." The first two feature Baby Cox on vocal; the third features Ellington on piano solo. I chose these three because the reprocessed stereo that I remember from the 1960s was particularly bad on vocals and piano. Besides, I love Baby Cox and have spent countless happy hours with the other reissues of these recordings. I compared these closely with the reissues available on the Masters of Jazz and on Classics. The first thing you will notice about this CD is a conspicuous absence of static. "Not good," I thought to myself. If they've eliminated the static, it's possible they've eliminated some of the music as well." No problem here. Repeated listenings revealed no loss of detail when compared to the other reissues. Lonnie Johnson's guitar and Baby Cox's vocals are full of detail.

The other worry with enhanced recordings is that something was added. Remember the echo and reverberation from the old reprocessed recordings? None of that here. Neither Baby Cox's voice nor Duke Ellington's piano sounds as if recorded in Granddaddy's glass whiskey jug. In fact, these recordings are so free from the problems normally associated with reprocessed stereo that I began to suspect that they hadn't been enhanced at all. This matter was settled quite easily by using my balance control. It's stereo all right. Wellman Braud's bass is clearly on the left channel. Barney Bigard's clarinet is clearly on the right.

One more test to make. I brought the CD to the Ellington Society holiday party and played it for Mac Grimmer and Jack Towers. "Highlight of the evening," said Mr. Grimmer. "Oh, yeah, good stuff!" was Mr. Towers' opinion.

Having satisfied myself that this "3-Dimensional Sound" was the real thing, I just sat back and enjoyed the music for a few days. The stereo really projects a depth and width to the band on these recordings that you will not find on the mono originals. A fine Ellington sampler with excellent sound!

Quotation of the Month

An Ellington composition is the product of a musician who was an extraordinary embodiment, if not archetype, of the artist as playful improviser. It is in overall shape, and specific detail as well, the happy consequence of a very imaginative and highly skillful playfulness that achieves that measure of elegance that can take even the most functional activity to that special level of stylization known as fine art.

Not that the basic dynamics of the Ellington method were unique. On the contrary, the skillful playfulness so characteristic of blues idiom musicians like Ellington the Orchestrator and Armstrong the Soloist may well be the indispensable condition of the creative process as such. For in painting, literature, dance, drama, or music, it is precisely through ever more skillful playfulness or playful skill that literal reproduction (representation, reenactment, even onomatopoeia) is subordinated to considerations of design and ornamentation, and that the raw material of everyday experience is processed into aesthetic statement.

-- Albert Murray in his *The Blue Devils of Nada: A Contemporary American Approach to Aesthetic Statement*

Short Sheets . . .

Stuart Nicholson, a British biographer of Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday, is seeking information on Otto Hardwicke and Artie Whetsol. If you can help, get in touch with him directly at: Fir Street Cottage, Woodlands St. Mary, Berks RG 17 7SL, England. Or you can reach him via Annie Kuebler at the Smithsonian: kuebler@nmah.si.edu ♪♪ We have received reports that the two commemorative services for Father Gensel in April, one traditional and the other jazz-oriented, were lovingly appropriate. Sjef Hoefsmit, who traveled to New York City from Belgium to pay his respects, observed that ". . . none of the good words spoken about [Father Gensel] was in any way an exaggeration." ♪♪ The Smithsonian will be well represented at Ellington '98. All four of the Ellington Collection staffers—Reuben Jackson, Annie Kuebler, Deborra Richardson, and Scott Schwartz—known to many only by name or by mail or phone contact, are slated to attend. Deborra and Reuben are on the program. John Edward Hasse, Ellington biographer and the Smithsonian's curator of American music, is also a presenter. ♪♪ Davey Yarborough, who teaches at the Ellington School and leads its excellent New Washingtonians student band, is in a photo accompanying an article on the Hot Mustard combo in *Modern Maturity* magazine.

Degas Exhibit May Stimulate Ideas Re Duke's Painting-Music Synaesthesia

Visitors particularly fond of Duke's *Degas Suite* should find the "Degas at the Races" show at the National Gallery of Art interesting. There is much to ponder and theorize about.

Does one find in the suite qualities that reviewers perceived in Degas' art, for instance: "action [that is] disruptive, abortive, intensely contained rather than kinetic"; an unexpected modernity "telegraphed by an intentionally harsh or half-finished line"; a "fascination with the distortion of controlled movement"; and "No art of his was finished to his satisfaction; he kept working and reworking images he'd started many years before"? Or is Duke's music more an artistic reaction to rather than a musical approximation of Degas' visual art? Was it, say, an incitement or a catalyst for Duke's creativity? Or is something else going on in Ellington's suite? Or, let's face it, was Duke simply putting us on?

The show, free, runs through July 12, 10-5 Monday-Saturday and 11-6 Sunday.

Member Helps with Production of CD

In early April, Walter van de Leur attended recording sessions in Finland by one of Europe's most notable big bands, the UMO Jazz Orchestra. After recording a disc in 1997 under the title *UMO Plays Ellington*, the producers of this group felt it was time for a Strayhorn project.

Under the auspices of the Swedish speaking radio (Finland is bi-lingual), UMO recorded with guitarist Larry Corryel, singer Annika Hultman and singer-trombonist Ulf Johanson Werre. Walter helped with the selection of materials. Apart from obligatory Strayhorn stable-horses such as "Blood Count" and "Lotus Blossom," a number of new songs were cut: "Leave Me Be," "Oo!! You Make me Tingle," "Pari-maribo" (lyrics by Don George) and a vocal version of "Wounded Love" (set by Strayhorn to a poem of Federico García Lorca).

The disc will be released in May on the Naxos label. Its title: *Day Dreams*.

Youth Festival (Continued from page 1)

They were confident and totally coordinated, with maturity one might almost equate with a professional group. Their "Old King Dooji," for example, was masterful. An enthusiastic audience continuously pleaded for more as each group left the stage.

Dr. Luvenia George provided illuminating narrative commentary, and her discussion of Ellington life and music were informative, down-to-earth, and gripping. Blues authority and radio personality Nap Turner spoke nostalgically about the Washington scene during Duke's early years. All involved should be commended.

Already other communities have followed the lead of the Project and are installing similar programs. There will be another Ellington Youth Project Festival next April for Ellington's 100th birthday. Don't miss this opportunity to encourage young people to experience the beauty of his music and extent of his genius. Let each of us do what we can to ensure the continuation of this program.

Ellington Lives!

Ed. note: Too often, it seems, youngsters who are achieving get little or no attention and encouragement from the media. This year the Ellington Youth Project received some well deserved coverage. On April 25 the Washington Post published, beginning on the first page of its Metro section, a complimentary feature article on the poetry session and opening of the art exhibit at the Smithsonian.

"Dramatis Felidae"

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

Great news: **Helen Frazier** is home from the hospital and, determined to "keep up with the rest of you," is making plans to go to Ellington '98. ♪ ♪ For the *24 Years Later* (Azure CA-23) tape that **Sjef Hoefsmit** produced for Ellington '98, the recording of **Jimmy McPhail** singing "Solitude" *a capella* and on the spur of the moment, **Jack Towers** provided a recording he fortunately had made on the occasion at the first International Study Group Conference, sponsored by our Society in Washington, DC in 1983. ♪ ♪ A certain sign of spring in late April was the annual migration of **Barbara and Jerry Valburn** from Florida to their home in Massachusetts. As usual, they stopped on the way at **Rhoda and Jack Towers'**. ♪ ♪ We extend congratulations to **Luvonia George** for yet another excellent year as Director of the Duke Ellington Youth Project. As The Maestro was wont to say to one of his artists after a sterling performance, "Take a *deep* one [bow] . . . !"

Chocolate Dandy

While still working hard on his Strayhorn book, our Dutch member **Walter van de Leur** has ventured off in yet another direction. As some of us may know, his wife **Ilona** owns a specialty store for nuts, dried fruits, honeys, gingers, and (are you ready for this?) homemade Dutch chocolate. Now that their in-house chocolate-person **Annemiek** is getting ready for maternity leave, **Walter** is taking over this branch of **Ilona's** business, making dandy chocolate. "For the next 16 weeks I'll be doing the Chocolate Shake one day per week," he announces, licking his fingers. Working with this delicious stuff (which unites the best of the old and new worlds) is less remote from his musicological activities than one might think.

"You start out with Hot Chocolate, which needs to be tempered in a Mello[w]tone," he explains. "Then it has to be heated up a little, after which it requires some Settin' and A-Rockin' (all this is spelled out in his Little Brown Book).

"Most important, our chocolate comes in Black, Brown and Beige," he concludes, adding that he's not partaking in any of the other activities of **Ilona**. "I'll stay away from that nut store as much as possible, out of fear that I might end up in a shiny wrapper some day.

"She does sell Dutch Fruitcakes, you know."

Ed. note: Reported with his permission, the above was transposed from a letter to your editor from Walter.

May Meeting Is A Jack Dennis Production

by Angela Grimmer, Secretary

Tricky **Sam Nanton** and **Jack Dennis** shared equal billing at our May meeting. **Jack's** running commentary on the career of **Nanton** was a delight, illuminating the career of an important figure not only in Ellingtonia, but also one unique in the history of jazz. **Jack** examined his career from the early pre-Cotton Club days, when he was one of the pioneers of the growl brass instruments, to the later stages of his career, when he had features such as "In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree" to showcase his talent.

Concert Features "Best" of Ellington's Sacred Music

Religious compositions by Ellington continue to attract secular and clerical attention, exemplified locally by "The Best of the Sacred Concerts," for which the producers selected from his three sacred concerts for their May 15 program at Northern Community College, repeated the next day at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Washington, DC.

Noting that **Duke** regarded his sacred concerts as "the most important thing he had done," the 15-piece band, choir, vocalists, dancers, narrators, and conceivers planned this concert, conducted by **Clai Richardson**, in observance of **Duke's** 99th birthday.

Joint sponsors are the Reunion Music Society of nearby Virginia and the Northern Virginia Community College Campus Jazz Program. For information about this and other activities, their respective phone numbers are 703-978-6241 and 703-642-0862.

Calendar

June 6 - Regular Monthly Meeting

April 24-May 31 - Ellington Youth Project Art Show,
Third Floor Photo Gallery, Smithsonian's
National Museum of American History

DUKE ELLINGTON SOCIETY	
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