

Ellingtonia

Newsletter Of
The Duke Ellington Society



Courtesy Carlyle Productions

Volume IX, Number 9
DECEMBER 2001

Theodore R. Hudson, Editor

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On November 25

Gratefully Listen To Some

Billy Strayhorn

Music In Celebration Of His Birthday

Forthcoming Book on Strayhorn by Van de Leur Praised in Previews

Something to Live For: The Music of Billy Strayhorn by our member Walter van de Leur, published by Oxford University Press, is scheduled for release in January. Major preview services for readers, libraries, and the book industry think highly of its intelligence, thoughtful analysis, and ultimate significance. *Kirkus*, for example, describes it as a “dense and closely argued” study and finds “a real intellectual hunger in this exploration.” *Publishers Weekly* calls the book a “scholarly evaluation of Strayhorn’s compositions.”

We understand that while Walter van de Leur shows that Strayhorn and Duke did have certain technical and artistic affinities, his research and analysis show that Strayhorn was a distinctive composer and arranger with his own creative gifts, technical ideas, and artistic vision.

We joyfully look forward to this awaited book!

TDES Symposium Is Substantive

The papers presented on November 10 at the third annual one-day conference on Ellington and Strayhorn by TDES (New York’s Ellington society), and this year co-sponsored by the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University where it was held, was marked by informed research findings, thoughtful analysis and synthesis, and evocative hypotheses.

Gil Evans biographer Stephanie Crease drew “Fine Lines: Duke Ellington, Billy Strayhorn, Gil Evans, and the Jazz Arranger’s Art.” Another comparatist paper was by Bill Saxonis, this one likening Bob Dylan to Duke as “Two American Originals.” In his “Duke and

December Holidays Start With Smithsonian Program

by Mac Grimmer and Peter MacHare, Program Coordinators

Again this year our December meeting will be at the epicenter of Ellingtonia, the Smithsonian Archives Center. We will have an opportunity to see some of the fascinating photos, music manuscripts and documents in the collection, and there will be program presentations by Scott Schwartz and Reuben Jackson, members of the Archives Center staff.

The Archives Center is in the National Museum of American History, on Constitution Avenue between 12th and 14th Streets, NW. Please use the Constitution Avenue entrance and arrive between 7:30 and 8:00 pm, when the guards and staff will be on hand to escort you to the Archives Center, since the museum will be closed to the public, except for us, at this time. The program starts at 8:00 pm on Saturday, December 1 – don’t miss this chance to hear this unique program and see the home of the Ellington Collection!

the Avant-Garde,” John Szwec wittily concluded that in relation to so-called modernists and futurists, Duke’s “is a permanent avant garde.” A.H. Lawrence, by profession a clinical psychologist, gave an exposition of the psychological processes involved in the composing of and the performing of “Reminiscing in Tempo.” Columbia University professor Farah Griffin, in her “Ellington and the Female Voice” began with impressions of black women’s voices by writers such as DuBois, Toomer, and Dunbar, suggesting that the history and truth expressed by such voices cannot necessarily be apprehended in the words they sing. She claims that Duke gives “access” through instrumentation as well as words, making black women’s voices central rather than representative of their history and truth. The conference concluded with a Dick Katz piano recital of music by Ellington and by Strayhorn.

Ben Webster: His Life and Music by Jeroen de Valk

Berkeley, CA: Beverly Hills Books, 2001

Reviewed by Reuben Jackson

Outside of British film maker John Jeremy's documentary entitled *Ben Webster: The Brute and the Beautiful*, far too little has been written about the life and artistic contributions of the tenor saxophonist jazz critic Whitney Balliett accurately described as a "huge-toned, airborne marvel."

Though occasionally marred by the author's well-meaning but overwrought assessments of Webster recordings, de Valk's book is a solidly written and much needed first biography of the Kansas City native's relatively short, eventful and bittersweet life.

Like a Webster solo, de Valk is especially adept at presenting a wealth of material within the space of a few paragraphs. The subject's stints with Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington and post-Ellington years as a bandleader and lyrical "gun" (or should I say sax?) for hire are succinctly but clearly compiled, as is his artistic metamorphosis into a balladeer par excellence.

Those previously unaware of Webster's "darker side" will also find that aspect of his life within the book's pages. To his credit, however, the author never exploits these events for the sake of selling more volumes. He wisely chooses to let every facet of Webster's life (and legacy) speak for itself.

A Composed, Rehearsed Improvisation

by Theodore R. Hudson

One of the pleasures of being a Behind-the-Scenes Volunteer in the Archives Center is discovery, as illustrated by an experience while identifying tunes on tapes in the Duke Ellington Collection.

In 1958 sacred singer Mahalia Jackson recorded with Duke Ellington and his orchestra "Come Sunday" from his *Black, Brown and Beige* and a new music version of the Twenty-third Psalm.¹ Received history is that deeply religious Ms. Jackson had reservations about performing with a "jazz" orchestra but was persuaded by a reassuring Ellington, especially because the music would be religious. Since "Come Sunday" had been in the orchestra's repertoire for a number of years, it was just a matter of her learning and interpreting it. As to "23rd Psalm," it generally has been accepted that the tune for this recording was a result of almost on-the-spot invention. The album's jacket notes state that on the last day of piano-vocal rehearsals by the two, "Duke asked Mahalia to bring her Bible with her. He opened it to the Twenty-third Psalm, played a chord, and asked her to sing. . . . Seldom in music has such an *improvisation* been accomplished. Seldom, even in Duke's career, have composition and performance been so *simultaneous*." Another account speaks of its being recorded in "a *spontaneous* setting,"² while still another calls it an "*improvisation* of a tune."³ [Emphases added.] Ms. Jackson, herself, is supposed to have said during a conversation at Ellington's 70th birthday celebration at the White House, "He didn't rehearse me nothin' He said, 'Just open the Bible and sing!'"⁴

Accordingly, it was a surprise to come across in the Ellington Collection a tape of a rehearsal in which the two artists patiently work out "23rd Psalm" music.⁵ It is an example of conscious and deliberate creative process. Assuredly, they are not in a studio, for one can hear traffic and other ambient sounds. As well as expected starts and stops, one hears the two cooperatively try, discard, and retain notes, phrases, rhythmic patterns, inflections, and intonation. At one point Ellington plays a figure after which Ms. Jackson remarks, "I don't know how you had that." He replies, "I just give a suggestion. What I do don't mean a thing." She then goes on to pretty much create the line for herself, with Ellington following her on piano. At another part of the session she says, "Tomorrow we will get it better." About midway on the tape, his trumpeter-violinist Ray Nance enters and is introduced to Ms. Jackson by Ellington. She exchanges brief pleasantries with Nance and then good-naturedly remarks, "Duke's got me singing opera." Nothing further is heard of Nance on the tape, who was to play a wonderful obligato and solo on the LP.

Based on the discovered tape, their "23rd Psalm" was neither spontaneous nor simultaneous nor improvised as these terms can be applied in the musical worlds of Duke Ellington and Mahalia Jackson. No matter—the finished product as recorded for the LP is moving musical theology that suggests compulsive if not impulsive inspiration.

Notes

¹ *Black, Brown and Beige: Duke Ellington and His Orchestra Featuring Mahalia Jackson*. Columbia Records CL1162.

² Gary Giddins, *Riding on a Blue Note* (New York: Oxford UP, 1981), 168.

³ Robert D. Crowley, "Black, Brown and Beige after 16 Years," *Jazz 2* (1959). Rpt. in *The Duke Ellington Reader*, ed. Mark Tucker (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 181.

⁴ Stanley Dance, *The World of Duke Ellington* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 286.

⁵ Tape ELL-815, RTC301.1629, Box 132.

This article was originally published in Daybreak Express (Fall 1996) and reprinted in Blue Light (Vol. 4, No. 2, Fall 1997).

Officers, At-Large Board Members Elected for Year 2002

At the Society's November meeting, the candidates presented by the Nominations Committee were elected for one-year terms, beginning January 1, 2002.

Together comprising the Board of Directors, they are: Peter MacHare, president; Theodore Hudson, vice-president; Ben Pubols, treasurer, and Francis Arnold, co-treasurer; and Theodore Shell, Olivia McMillan, Joseph McMillan, Bill Hasson, Mac Grimmer, Luvenia George, and Patricia Braxton, at-large board members. (The position of secretary is open.)

Previously the one-year term for the Board of Directors members ran from July 1 to June 30; now, in accordance with our revised by-laws, their terms coincide with the general membership and fiscal calendar year, January 1 to December 30.

We thank each officer and at-large board member for agreeing to serve our Society in their respective capacities.

CD by Member Anthony Brown's Asian-American Orchestra Awaited

Dear Editor:

I received and read the November issue of *Ellingtonia* and wanted to express my gratitude for your publishing Patricia Willard's review of *Monk's Moods* by the Asian American Orchestra — Madam Willard doth flatter me too much, and we here all love her madly!

I also wanted to inform Society members about the current status of the *Monk's Moods* CD which, despite concerted personal and legal efforts, is as yet unreleased. Without going into too much detail, co-producer Orrin Keepnews had originally planned to release it in March 2001 along with two others (a live Lee Konitz recording and a new studio date by Eric Reed) to launch his new label with EMusic, Keeper Records. Unfortunately, he never completed the other two projects (*Monk's Moods* was ready last November) before the Universal/Vivendi conglomerate buyout of EMusic this June, and now the projects are in limbo. My lawyer and I have been trying to negotiate for the rights or license to release it, but so far to no avail.

In the meantime, I will post the original liner notes intended for the official release that provide many of the details about the project that Patricia mentioned would be helpful. Please look for that to appear at: < anthonybrown.org > by year's end. *Monk's Moods* is available as a download at EMusic.com, and I will be happy to send pre-release promotional CD copies to Society members for \$15, which includes postage.

Thank you again for your interest in and support of Anthony Brown's Asian American Orchestra.

Hope to see all of you in Honolulu!!

Most sincerely yours,
Anthony Brown, Ph.D.
Director, Asian American Orchestra

"Previously Unreleased" CDs Redux

No unexpectedly, several of our members responded to the item "'Previously Unreleased' CDs" about J-Bird's *Duke Ellington, Volume 1 - Live* and *Volume 2 - Private Collection* in our last issue, regarding advertisements claiming them to contain selections discovered by Mercer Ellington's son Paul among Duke's "stockpile" recordings. Further, the advertisement for *Volume 2* contains a quotation attributed to a major newspaper reviewer speculating about an "unknown guitarist . . . remarkably like Wes Montgomery, which would be a historic collaboration."

By e-mail, our member Sjef Hoefsmit writes, "I am not sure whether you were serious or not about the Wes Montgomery like guitarist." And in a letter, another member, Joe Ames, says, "...I can only hope that the item was written with tongue in check." To which we respond, yes it was, but for an ultimately serious purpose.

As to the mystery guitarist, still another member, Don McCathran, by phone, joins Sjef and Joe in identifying the guitarist as none other than Django Reinhardt, recorded with Duke at the Civic Opera House in Chicago on 10 November 1946, and previously released.

Sjef had reviewed both of these CDs in *DEMS Bulletin*, Issue 5 of 1999, judging that because *Volume 1 - Live* has four completely "fresh" selections, it "is still a 'must' for fanatic collectors." As to *Volume 2*, in describing it a "mish-mash of material," he quotes Richard Ehrenzeller: "These are about the worst recordings in terms of production values I have ever seen from a legitimate record company." In his review, Sjef wishes that Paul Ellington's name had not been connected with this release and that he had been better informed by those in the know.

The CDs are notably misinforming. For example, Joe points out, among other things, that the selection identified as "Things Ain't What They Seem To Be" is "...a portion of the *Deep South Suite* called 'There Was Nobody Looking.' Mercer's 'Things Ain't What They used To Be' is on the disc, but is identified as 'Red Ride Red,' an apparent screw-up on 'Ride, Red, Ride' which is actually performed as the second of the three numbers featuring the 'unknown guitarist.'" There's more, but as he says, "But why go on? Real Ellington fans, if they waste their money on this thing, will recognize the numerous errors."

Such factual errors are compounded by regrettable typos such as "The Deep South Sweet" and "Blue Skys" [emphases added]. Moreover, there are no liner notes.

There is an obvious moral and caveat emptor here for music lovers to keep in mind when they read record jackets, advertisements, and reviewers.

[Ed. Note: For information about the selections on these CDs, including corrections, and for discographical data about previous releases of the music, one should see the *DEMS Bulletin* issue cited above.]

**As We Receive Updates
We Will Keep You Informed About The
Ellington Festival In Hawaii Next April**

"Dramatis Felidae" (To Use Our Man's Term in MIMM)

About Our Members

Sjef Hoefsmit

In reference to the "Anecdote of the Month" in our November issue, we thank Sjef Hoefsmit for informing that there are indeed recordings of Tony Scott with the Ellington band, but not commercially released.

Jane Vollmer

Jane Vollmer has been actively supporting on the internet the upcoming Hawaiian Ellington Festival. By all means, see her "Working with Duke, 1968-1974" eclectic photo-essay on the Festival's internet site.

Scott Schwartz - Jack Ladd Carr

Accomplished guitarist Scott Schwartz is putting to good use the autographed copy of Steve Hancock's Duke Ellington for Fingerstyle Guitar that Jack Ladd Carr bought and presented to our Society.

Harold Gray - Ted and Marion Shell

We extend heartfelt condolences to Harold Gray on the loss of his wife and to Ted and Marion Shell on the loss of his younger brother.

Don Rouse

Don Rouse has continued a series of interviews of Freeman Murray, Highland Beach, Maryland's most senior citizen, which was interrupted by the temporary illness of both last spring.

Having grown up in the U Street neighborhood and having worked in the family's printing business on the first floor of the building, Mr. Murray has keen memories of Duke Ellington and other luminaries as well as of the day-to-day (and night-to-night, we hasten to add) activities of particular interest to culture historians.

As were a number of Washington edifices such as True Reformers Hall, the Murray Building, housing the Murray printing company and Murray Casino, was designed, financed, constructed, and owned by blacks before the advent of the so-called Harlem Renaissance.

The MURRAY CASINO



Legend: Barrage Five Space Any Hall on U Street Beautifully Decorated

Dancing Events - Week Sept. 24th
Monday Evening "FRIVOLITIES" G. Frank Jones Snowden's and Mayo's Jazz Bands
Tuesday "MI-DEARS" Snowden's Band
Wednesday Open for Booking
Thursday Reception
Friday Open for Booking
Saturday "BEAUX ARTS" Snowden's Jazz Band
A Few Desirable Dates are open for booking. Apply at Office, 929 U St.

Washington Bee advertisement Courtesy Don Rouse and Tailgate Ramblings

Bill Hasson Brings Back "Poetry and Jazz"

by Angela Grimmer, Secretary

After an absence of many years, "poetry and jazz" emphatically returned to scene at our November meeting. The evening was conceived and engineered by Bill Hasson, the poetry being (mostly) the lyrics of Duke's songs, read by various members of the Society, followed by the music of each selection.

Bill was the voice for several pieces, including "In the Beginning," "Jack the Bear," and "Drop Me Off In Harlem," as well as being one of the three voices, along with Don Rouse and Joseph McMillan, for "Mood Indigo." Other highlights included Gina Rollin's sympathetic reading of "Day Dream," and Ben Pubols' reading and explication of "Do Nothin'." Teddy and Geneva Hudson col-laborated on "Prelude to a Kiss," and Olivia McMillan in-sisted that "It Don't Mean a Thing." Peter MacHare found some blues lyrics to fit with Duke's first composition, "What You Gonna Do When the Bed Breaks Down?" Patricia Willard let Duke speak for himself on "Monologue," or "Pretty and the Wolf." Skipping "Duet," she played "Threesome," all compositions from the same recording session. ("Threesome," too long to fit on one side of a 78-rpm record, was divided into two pieces, and became "V.I.P. Boogie" on one side and "Jam With Sam" on the other side of the record.)

To close the meeting, Brian Gilmore read some of his own poetry, inspired by Duke, from his recently published book Jungle Nights & Soda Fountain Rags.

We have to thank Bill Hasson for a fascinating evening. He's already promised to do it again!

Great Idea for the Gift Giving Season!

Start the year 2002 for a special someone with a gift membership in The Duke Ellington Society. And in like manner, be nice to yourself. Send your check payable to The Duke Ellington Society to PO Box 15591, Washington, DC 20003-0787, USA. Dues remain a bargain— Member, \$30; Couple, \$50; First-Time-Ever Member, \$20; Student, \$5. Note: If you have a star ☆ on your mailing label, you are being invited by an associate or friend to become a member.

THE DUKE ELLINGTON SOCIETY
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