

Ellingtonia

Newsletter Of
The Duke Ellington Society



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Theodore R. Hudson, Editor

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Web Site: depanorama.net/desociety/

Bill Berry Passes

William Richard "Bill" Berry, who played trumpet and cornet with the Duke Ellington orchestra, died in Los Angeles in October. He is quoted as saying, "My time with Ellington changed my life in every respect, not only musically but socially, philosophically, everything."

Berry was an accomplished musician, having studied at Berklee and other institutions and having played with first-rate musicians and bands. His conception and execution were imaginative, versatile, and articulate. In an appreciation in a London news-paper, critic Steve Voce wrote, "He claimed to have drawn his style from elements in those of all the leading trumpet players from Bunny Berigan to Miles Davis. It was perhaps because he took so little from each that his own playing sounded so fresh and original."

Before joining Ellington in 1961, Berry had extensive experience, with the Woody Herman, Maynard Ferguson and other popular orchestras. After leaving Ellington in 1964 he taught and continued performing. For a time he toured with fellow Ellington alumnus Louie Bellson. In 1965 he began an extended stint on the Merv Griffin television show.

Later, Berry relocated to the West Coast, where, in addition to other music activities, he formed and led the highly regarded, swinging L.A. Big Band. This band performed at the Annual International Ellington Study Group Conference in Hollywood in 2000. He was a featured artist at the 1997 Conference in Leeds, England. For several years, he was music director of the Monterey Jazz Festival.

A memorial service was held for Mr. Berry on November 24 in Los Angeles. We extend to his family and other loved ones our deep sympathy. Individual expressions may be sent to his widow: Mrs. Betty Berry, 10620 Landale Street, #4, North Hollywood, CA 91620-2325.

Ed. note: We thank Charles Stewart, president of the Southern California Duke Ellington Society and one of our members, for notifying us of Mr. Berry's passing and for supplying us with several obituaries, the source of this admittedly too brief article.

Pot Luck Holiday Party

by Mac Grimmer & Peter MacHare, Program Coordinators

Our holiday party will be held at **8 pm on Saturday, 4 January 2003 at Grace Lutheran Church, 16th & Varnum Streets NW**. Use the entrance on the side of the church on Varnum Street since the party will be in the big hall downstairs rather than in our regular meeting room. We also encourage those wonderful folk at the Archives Center of the NMAH who host our December meetings to come. Members and Archives staff may bring two guests each.

We again ask our members to bring some food or drink to contribute to the fun. We have never coordinated what everyone brings, and we always have a nice variety of snacks. We also need a few people to volunteer to come early to set up and a few people to stay late to clean up. If you want to volunteer, get in touch with Peter MacHare at 301-982-4249 or at spmachare@yahoo.com. I already have a couple of volunteers and need only a few more. Thanks!

Thanks for the Thanks, Jerry

In our November issue, Mac Grimmer and Peter MacHare announced the upcoming program of music from the collections of and/or produced by Jerry Valburn and Jack Towers; in the next issue Gina Rollins gave an account of the program. Jerry writes:

Many thanks for the many nice things you wrote about Jack and me in the recent DES newsletter. HOWEVER, one very important point was overlooked. I am first and mostly proud to be a member of this outstanding Ellington chapter and will continue supporting it in any way that I can.

Jerry Valburn

Memberships

First-Time-Ever Member, \$20
Renewing Member, \$30 Couple, \$50 Student, \$5

Send Check Payable to
The Duke Ellington Society, Inc. at
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A Response

by Lois Moody

In our November issue we published "What Do You Think?" in which we culled key thoughts from discourse on Duke-LYM about the possibility of an in-depth, comprehensive analytical study of Ellington's compositions, and we invited responses. We thank our Ottawa member Lois Moody for her following thoughts on several of the issues raised in the article.

1) Because Strayhorn produced completed compositions in manuscript form—in contrast to Ellington's more fragmented approach of sketched ideas to be worked out on the bandstand—shouldn't lead to the assumption that he cared any less than Ellington about hearing his work performed. Why write, if not for performance? Nor should there be any implication that a fully composed piece is any less original, vital or capable of evolving through performance. The bottom line is *not* how each man wrote but the lasting impact of the work, both in live and recorded performances.

2) As for the questionable quality of published analyses of Ellington's work, perhaps one quoted source had it right when he suggested "patience." With all due respect to analysts and musicologists, the important thing is not another book on Ellington, let alone one that tries to provide "definitive" summation of his work. "Definitive" in such contexts usually tells you more about the biases of the author of the opinions than the creator of the art.

With new archival material still being found and analyzed, there are still possible surprises and delights in store for both researchers and listeners. Let's be patient, enjoy the discoveries and insights as they emerge, keep absorbing the vast body of music that already brings us so much pleasure and not be distracted by the state of commentary on the music.

International Sweethearts of Rhythm: America's Hottest All-Girl Band

A 30-Minute Video – Jezebel Productions, 1986

A Review by Ben Pubols

The International Sweethearts of Rhythm was a prominent "all-girl orchestra" established in rural Mississippi in the late 1930s, continuing through World War II and disbanding in 1949. Geneva Perry, late member of our Society, played alto and tenor sax with the group during the summers of 1947 and 1948. Regrettably, the group has been all but ignored by many of the "standard" books on the big bands, including Leo Walke's *Great Dance Bands* (1964), and George Simon's *The Big Bands* (1967). Nor are they cited in Gunther Schuller's widely read *The Swing Era* (1989). However, they are mentioned in Annie Kuebler's sidebar on "Women In Jazz" in John Hasse's *Jazz: The First Century* (2000), and there is a full book devoted to the group by D. Antoinette Handy (1998), available from Scarecrow Press (which, as we all know, also publishes Timne's *Ellingtonia*). A fairly thorough perusal of the web turned up only three available recordings by them, all radio transcriptions, part of the three-CD set, *The Jubilee Sessions, 1943-1946*, on the Hindsight label (well worth having!).

This short video, which was produced in 1986, goes a long way toward giving the Sweethearts the lasting recognition they clearly deserve. The video is a mix of reminiscences by members of the band and live performance clips. The interviewees include Anna Mae Winburn, leader and vocalist, Rosalind "Roz" Cron, lead alto sax, and Helen Saine, alto and baritone sax, one of the originals from Mississippi's Piney Woods Country Life School. There were of course several changes in personnel through the years: early film clips show a four-member sax section, with one member doubling on alto and baritone, while later clips show five saxophonists, two altos, two tenors and one baritone.

Although primarily African-American, the group also included Sweethearts from Mexico, as well as Native-American, Asian-American and white members. Thus, the group was both international and interracial, pioneering in both respects. And therein lies a major reason for their historical importance. The group was subjected to double prejudice, being both female ("They're playing OK for girls," "She played drums like a man.") and interracial. This ethnic/racial mix led to some interesting, if not startling, stories relating to their travels in the US South, where the white members had to darken their faces in order to avoid trouble with the law; several of these stories are detailed in this video.

And the music. . . Yes, the band swung. Listen in particular to Vi Burnside on tenor sax and Tiny Davis on trumpet. Not only did Winburn swing the band, but she was right up there with the best of the other big band canaries of the day in her vocals. During their day, the Sweethearts achieved a fair amount of recognition and appreciation among black musicians and audiences; their professional admirers included Count Basie and Louis Armstrong. Because the group was interracial, they played mostly for black audiences, including a stint at the Howard Theater in 1941, where they set a new box office record of 35,000 patrons in one week, and a six-month tour of US military bases in Europe at the close of World War II.

The video, produced by Jezebel Productions, New York City, is available through the Cinema Guild at (212) 246-5522, and at amazon.com. It belongs in the library of every serious jazz video collector.

Short Sheets . . .

Eagerly Awaited CD Is Available

Anthony Brown's latest CD, *Monk's Moods*, with the Asian American Orchestra and guest saxophonist Steve Lacy, finally has been "officially" released and is available at: < www.cdbaby.com/anthonybrown >.

In her review in our November 2001 issue, Patricia Willard wrote, "This CD demonstrates that music is indeed the wellspring of international language. Dr. Anthony Brown is one of the truly original voices in jazz."

For more information on the making of *Monk's Moods* and about his previous release, the Grammy nominated *Far East Suite*, go to: < www.anthonymbrown.org >.

Bad News

National Public Radio has cut out new programming of jazz. However, the network will repeat programs from its previously broadcast Jazz Profiles series.

Any Comments from Our Readers?

Neatwork has released a series of *Alternate Takes* CDs, volumes 7 and 8 of which are Ellington recordings (Neatwork RP 2048 and 2051). We haven't heard any of the music in this series. We welcome your comments, whether brief or full critique.



The party in Dupont Circle was hosted by Mitchell and Christiane Wade, who donated \$50,000 to the school, plus another \$20,000 in instruments. Entertainment was provided by students including, from left, Bridget Ellsworth, guest guitarist Jeff "The Skunk" Baxter, and Ozier. Our grade: A (trains) for everybody.

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Sax in the City

Davey Yarborough was beaming like a proud parent at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts fundraiser Thursday night. "He checks up on us, and looks out for us like a dad," said saxophone player and senior **Randell Ozier**. "He's the best teacher I've ever had."

Yarborough, musician and founder of the school's renowned jazz orchestra, calls teaching a "labor of love." But he's far more than just a mentor. "He's an amazing talent," gushed **Chuck Brown**, top left, with Yarborough. Said Washington's esteemed father of go-go, "When I watched him play, I wanted to be in his band." Now there's a Showtime movie about Yarborough's life in the works and actor Louis Gossett Jr. is interested in playing the lead.

Member's Dissertation Examines Duke Ellington as Pragmatic Artist

A central thesis of *Improvising Across the Lines: Duke Ellington's America*, Harvey Cohen's doctoral dissertation, is Ellington's handling, or manipulating if you will, of the music business, a unique difficulty for him as an artist because of America's racial presuppositions and practices. As a basis for much of his analysis of Ellington the businessman-artist, Cohen examined extensively for the first time the business records in the Ellington Collection at the Smithsonian Institution.

Having begun learning from Irving Mills' example, Cohen says, Ellington himself became an entrepreneur. He was a master of "brand recognition," staying true to his original vision. Yet by always offering a mix of technically challenging and artistically daring as well as commercial works, he proved over time that great popularity and great art can coexist.

A full study, there is much new material in the dissertation to inform and delight. For example, there are whole chapters on the 1963 State Department tour, with unearthed State documents as sources, and a chapter about the Sacred Concerts.

A trained historian, Cohen contends that Ellington lived and created in a way that undermined racial stereotypes,

New Cultural Center Poised To Offer Varied Arts Experiences

The brand-new Black Rock Center for the Arts that opened in December is an impressive home of an exhibition gallery, live arts education classrooms, and three performing arts stages ("Not a Bad Seat in the House!"). Its inaugural season programming includes drama, dance, and classical, jazz, folk, world, gospel, and bluegrass music. Settings will be conventional concert and stage, coffee house, cabaret, and family settings. Various ticket series are available.

The center is in Germantown, in northern Montgomery County, Maryland, convenient to Washington and to areas of Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia. For performance schedules and other information, the center may be contacted at 12901 Town Common Drive, Germantown, MD 20874; 301-528-2260; and at < www.blackrockcenter.org >.

and because his significance went far beyond the musical realm. Duke Ellington's achievements and contributions make him, says Cohen, "a rich figure in American history as in American music."

We hope that Harvey Cohen's informative and insightful study will become available in book form.

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

About Our Members

Anthony Brown

Our Berkeley-based member Anthony Brown has been busy spreading the Ducal gospel way out West. He and hand-picked trios presented "A Salute to Duke Ellington" and "Overview of Jazz" in Kansas City and San Jose during 2002. A Smithsonian Scholar, he conducted lecture-demonstrations that focused of the Institution's Ellington Collection.

Anthony was recently elected president of the San Francisco Chapter of the National Recording Academy. Last month there were some fleeting excerpts of an interview of him on National Geographic's television program "The Skin We're In."

And as we were preparing this issue, we received a note from Anthony from Hong Kong, where he is on tour and performing at the New Vision New Arts Festival.

Janna Steed

United Methodist Communications has created a profile of The Reverend Janna Steed, with emphasis on her Ellington work. The profile includes excerpts from her recent lectures and a sermon at Scarritt-Bennett Center in Nashville. Janna's recent travel schedule called for a weekend concert and worship service, "A Swingin' Season" of Ellington music at the Quapaw Quarter United Methodist Church in Little Rock.

Annie Kuebler

As we prepare this issue we have not seen a review but suspect that Annie Kuebler's Mary Lou Williams Conference at Rutgers University was a big success. Scheduled topics and presentations included the Williams religious masses, recollections of conversations with friends, a documentary film, her 1930s and 1940s compositional style, and live music.

John Edward Hasse

On Sunday, January 19, John Hasse will present a guide through 60 years of jazz history, an illustrated piano concert, at the spanking new Black Rock Center for the Arts (see page 3).

Jerry Valburn, Jack Towers, Ken Steiner

From an *IJRC Journal* review by Russ Chase of the *Duke Ellington: Carnegie Hall, December 11, 1943* CD produced by Storyville: "The sound quality is very good and hearty approbation in the direction of Jerry Valburn is in order. He provided his original 16-inch glass acetate discs . . . Jack Towers and Djörn Almsted waved their respective wands and a splendid set is the result. Add excellent notes by Ken Steiner and the package is complete."

Volume 6 of the D.E.T.S. Treasury Shows, produced by Jerry and for which Jack supplied the digital master, is now out. Jack says one may be surprised by the reverb put in by Storyville, "but the music sounds good in spite of the treatment."

A Jazzy Evening at the Archives

by Gina Rollins, Secretary

Our annual meeting at the Smithsonian Archives Center was all Scott Schwartz's show. Archivist Schwartz first presented a talk he gave last August at the Society of American Archivists. The paper, "Ellington's IRS Blues: The Business of Music Isn't Black and White," outlined the harum-scarum financial practices of Duke Ellington, Inc., and indeed the entire jazz musician world. Noting that 1964 "capped a decade of personal and professional triumphs," it also started a protracted dispute with the IRS that wasn't resolved until after Duke's death a decade later.

Schwartz explained that for the most part, Duke had only gentlemen's agreements with his band members and their pay varied from performance to performance. They often owed Ellington more than what they were paid. Duke assiduously stayed out of their private lives until they impacted the band's performance.

Duke's financial difficulties "were compounded by his inability to involve himself in business matters and the complex corporate relationships [of Duke Ellington, Inc.]," he concluded.

During the second half, Schwartz dissected Billy Strayhorn's "Day Dream," one of the band's signature pieces. Through six arrangements, he demonstrated the evolution of the band's artistic expression and improvisation. Importantly, he included in his presentation the Dutch Jazz Orchestra's recent version of the song, with a vocal by Marjorie Barnes that he in a review described as one of his favorites among her "elegant performances" of Strayhorn music with that band. The evening concluded with a 1964 live recording of Strayhorn playing and singing "Lush Life."

Once again, our colleagues at the Smithsonian came through with a most informative and entertaining program.

Yours for the Asking

For back copies of *Ellingtonia*, send a self-addressed and stamped envelope and indicate the specific issue/s you want. We have at least several copies of most editions.

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