

Ellingtonia

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Courtesy Carlyle Productions

True Reformers Hall Has a Proud History

During the time Edward Kennedy Ellington was growing up in Washington, DC, it was earning the title of the "Culture Capital" of Negro America. It was known, as well, for its leadership in education, business enterprise, and civic endeavors. In this ambience young Ellington assuredly saw palpable evidence that negated the pervasive negative stereotypes and categorizations of the Negro so common in racially segregated and discriminatory United States.

The True Reformers Hall is an example. The teenage pianist, who as an adult was proud of his heritage and exceptionally knowledgeable about what became known as "Negro history," certainly would appreciate that this building was conceived, designed, constructed, paid for with cash, occupied, and managed by Negroes. As its architect said, "And being in Washington, it stands out to the civilized world as a sample or example of what the Negro can do and has done with his brain, skill, and money."

The Hall was built in 1903 for the Grand Fountain of the United Order of True Reformers, a mutual benefit society. Such fraternal groups served a vital purpose, for white insurance companies generally preferred not to issue policies to Negroes.

In the ensuing years the Hall served as home, among others, of the Washington Conservatory (where Henry Grant, Duke's teacher, earned a diploma and where Duke's contemporaries Gertie Wells, Claude Hopkins, and Louis Brown gave piano recitals), Colored Men's Business League, a Police Boys Club, and before its current re-gentrification, a paint company's distribution center. Its rooms had been meeting places for literary, art, music, social, and civic organizations, and its ballroom had been a venue of choice for banquets, large meetings, and prestigious social and cultural affairs.

Today, the building is a National Historical Landmark because of its architectural ingenuity and historic significance.

Now proudly displaying the iconic mural of Ellington on its western wall, True Reformers Hall, in addition to being the place of his early if not first professional performances, certainly could have been

February Program: Early Ellington Videos

by Mac Grimmer and Peter MacHare, Program Coordinators

In February, Peter MacHare will present in chronological order all the Duke Ellington that is available on video. We will start at the beginning and keep going until we run out of time. If you like seeing Duke's videos this way, we can certainly continue at a later date.

If you have not had a chance to see Ellington's early videos, we encourage you to attend this program. These old movies were made with care and still seem very modern in concept. Almost without exception, there is nothing corny about them. They didn't call that first decade of Ellington the "roaring twenties" for nothing. We'll see famous films like *Black and Tan* and *Symphony in Black*, as well as Ellington clips from feature-length films and new reel "soundies." Rumor has it that Louis Armstrong will also make a guest appearance.

The program will be at our usual meeting place, **Grace Lutheran Church, 16th and Varnum Streets, NW** in the city of Ellington's birth, **Washington, DC, at 8 pm on Saturday, 5 February 2005.**

All of our programs are open to the public and members are encouraged to bring a friend (or two)!



a factor in the nurture of native son Edward Kennedy Ellington's ethos, an ethos that valued achievement beyond category.

Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams, by Tammy Kernodle

Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004. \$30 cloth. 348 pages.

Florence Mills: Harlem Jazz Queen, by Bill Egan

Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004. \$29.95 paper. 327 pages.

by Reuben Jackson

These recently published books are welcome additions to the jazz canon—but not just because of the still undervalued contributions of vocalist Florence Mills and composer-arranger-pianist-bandleader Mary Lou Williams.

For far too many jazz biographies provide the reader with factual information (which is important)—but we often find ourselves bereft of the subject's persona—a real irony when you consider the importance of same in the music. Happily, both Tammy Kernodle and Bill Egan avoid this trap the way saxophonist Johnny Hodges sidestepped wrong notes.

Kernodle's volume consistently balances Williams' musical achievements with her subject's often poignant struggles with finances, and other roller coaster aspects of the music business. *Soul on Soul* is especially riveting when describing what has often been referred to as Williams' "dark night of the soul," which (in part) led to her conversion to Catholicism, and some of the most compelling sacred music written in any genre.

Yet we also get a sense of Williams' toughness. According to Kernodle, she clearly understood her value as a musician. Williams was not haughty, but her lack of wider recognition clearly rankled her throughout her life.

Probably best known to Ellingtonians as the inspiration for the composer's memorable "Black Beauty," Washington, DC native Florence Mills' artistic contributions come to life again in Bill Egan's prose. In addition to meticulously documenting this entertainer par excellence (who, in addition to making important contributions to the art of jazz singing, had a love for classical music).

Egan also provides the reader with an always important historical context. The rich African American community of her hometown is documented, as well as the theater circuit which was so much a part of vaudeville in the United States and abroad. Egan also richly describes the impact Mills had on European audiences, and the output of poems and songs which were produced after her death in 1927.

Both books will certainly appeal to individuals interested in Mills and Williams, but I think the stories and writing are compelling enough for even non-jazz fans.

Read these volumes, then pass them on to other deserving lives.

Ellington 101

Duke Ellington: The Centennial Edition

RCA Bluebird 82876-60090-2

by Mac Grimmer

At last! For the beginner, a perfect introduction to the world of Duke Ellington. In this combination CD/DVD package, not only can one hear a representative sample of the early Ducal masterpieces on the CD, but one can see some of it on the DVD. All covering, more or less, the first third of his career. It's called *Duke Ellington—The Centennial Collection*. And all for less than \$20!

And now for the connoisseur. The CD, after playing 13 of the classics from the late 20s, 30s and early 40s, has significant new material from the Blanton-Webster band—seven cuts from two 1941 nightclub broadcasts. These were unearthed by Steven Lasker, who also produced the CD/DVD, wrote the informative liner notes, and is responsible for the excellent sound. These location recordings can take their place alongside Jack Tower's "Fargo" recordings as documentation of what that famous early band sounded like on the road. All the usual suspects are featured: Ivie, Ben, Barney, etc., but especially Jimmie Blanton, whose solos alone are worth the price of admission.

The DVD has virtually all the film of the band from 1935 to 1943, movie clips where we get to see and hear exciting playing from many of Duke's stars in their prime. Included are the famous *Symphony in Black* with the young Billie Holiday and all five of the "Soundies" from 1941. (Soundies were short movie clips made for juke boxes. It didn't catch on.) After this feast for the eyes and ears there is an 11-minute audio-only interview of Duke from 1941, in which he shows how to handle a clueless questioner. Also worth the price of admission.

This excellent package could be called "Ellington 101, Miley through Blanton," but there is plenty of Ellington left after that. When will we get "Ellington 102," and "103?"

Short Sheets . . .

Well, There Was No "A" Train Then

According to *Family Times*, a publication of a New Jersey genealogical society, in 1658 African workers built the road from Park Row in lower Manhattan to 110th Street in Harlem, later known as the Boston Post Road.

Author Plans Visit

Bill Egan, author of *Florence Mills: Jazz Queen*, intends to include the Washington, DC area during a trip to the United States from Australia in early spring. He plans to visit the Archives Center of the Smithsonian, repository of the Ellington and related collections and, hopefully, attend a meeting of our Society.

Good News for Your Bookshelf

Copies of Brian Gilmore's *Jungle Nights & Soda Fountain Rags* (Hyattsville, MD: Karibou Books, 1999) are available at the publisher's stores, (internet address: kariboubooks.com (at a very good price, we hasten to add). Very favorably reviewed when published, the book is one long, unique "poem for duke ellington & the duke ellington orchestra," divided into seven "suites." In his Acknowledgments, Brian includes special thanks to our Society; of which he is a member, and to Reuben Jackson, who wrote the Introduction; to Ted Shell, whose photograph of Duke graces the cover; and to Ted Hudson.

More good news: Called a "landmark volume in jazz criticism, and a kaleidoscopic portrait of Duke Ellington's creative world" in a press relief, *The Duke Ellington Reader*, edited by Mark Tucker, has been reprinted in paperback by Oxford University Press, price, \$19.95. His indispensable *Duke Ellington: The Early Years*, published in 1990, remains in print and available, as well it should.

Humor(?) on the Internet

Occasionally we inflict on you some humor—and on rare occasions, wit. Here's some we culled from the internet:

♯ Signs That a Jazz Fan Is Getting Old

You can differentiate between the sound of the clarinets of Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw, but you can't tell what instrument's taking a solo on the new CD by the latest band the critics are raving about.

When you look through your collection of CDs, and find several you don't remember buying, and several more you can't remember ever playing.

When you look at a list of re-releases on CD and find that you've got them all on the LPs you bought to replace your 78s (which you still have).

You don't go to the local jazz club anymore because it's too far and doesn't finish until 11:30.

♯ Things You Won't Hear on the Band Bus

No, I could hear the monitor just fine; I screwed up.

Ladies, I'll need some proof of age, please.

I can't wait to get to my private hotel room so I can have eight hours' uninterrupted sleep, a swim in the pool and a couple of margaritas with my complimentary steak dinner before the gig!

I walked her home, kissed her goodnight, and came straight back to the bus.

Jazz Festival Offers Great Music and Other Benefits

The East Coast Jazz Festival, 16-21 March (Presidents' Weekend) at the Double Tree Hotel in Rockville, MD, is an opportunity to enjoy music by established jazz artists and at the same time support various Fish Middleton Jazz Scholarship (FMJS) activities and community outreach programs. We are proud that one of our members, musician and educator Ronnie Wells, is producer of this worthy annual event.

According to promotional material aptly titled "Keeping Straight-Ahead Jazz Alive," "Established in 1992, the primary purpose of the . . . Festival is to provide a venue at which to hold the final selection round for FMJS Jazz Scholarship Awards to emerging Jazz artists. . . . [The Festival] also offers a full agenda of live Jazz Music and Education Programs for the community (encouragement of the attendance of youth). . . . In addition to the scholarship competition, the event features performances by world renowned Jazz artists, who generously network with emerging jazz artists. It introduces free and open to the public concerts by school bands and dance troupes, and professional and emerging artists.

"Other festival activities include two days of free and open to the public workshops and seminars, an integral part of FMJS' Education Program, and the Annual Senior Citizens' Appreciation Luncheon (Another FMJS Outreach Program is the Annual Summer Jazz Camp for high school through freshman students, held in July . . .)"

As well as about the music itself, regulars at these Festivals have frequently spoken glowingly about the emphasis on student participation; the plethora of free clinics, seminars, and performances; and the relaxed and wholesome ambience.

Among attractions listed on the preliminary schedule, you won't want to miss *Brooks Tegner Big Band's Tribute to Duke Ellington* on Thursday, 17 February, 9-11:30 pm; and performances by our members *Davey Yarborough Quartet with Esther Williams* on Friday, 18 February, 8:30-9:30 pm; and *Ronnie Wells with Ron Elliston and Friends*, Sunday, 20 February, 11:30-12:30 pm.

For ticket, lodging, and other information, contact FMJS by mail at PO Box 1768, Silver Spring, MD; by phone at: 401-933-1822; by fax at 301-933-1151; by e-mail at eastcoastnaz@earthlink.net; and at the website, www.fmjseastcoastjazz.com.

Quotation of the Month

Contributed by Mac Grimmer

During the summer of 1969 . . . Roy and his quintet played for a gathering of the Duke Ellington Society, where Roy was amused to note that the audience clapped only for numbers that had been written by the Duke.

- from *Roy Eldridge: Little Jazz Giant* by John Chilton, p.256

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

Brian Gilmore

In the current issue of *JazzTimes*, Brian Gilmore reviews the book *Dvorák to Duke Ellington: A Conductor Explores America's Music and Its African-American Roots* by Maurice Peress.

Ben Pubols

An article about Ben Pubols, his OASIS classes, and his long-standing interests in Ellingtonia and jazz appears in the current issue of *Northwest Senior News*, published and distributed mainly in the Pacific Northwest.

Dick Spottswood and Rusty Hasson

Rusty Hasson's "Jazz and More" show continues to draw listeners every Tuesday from 7:30 to 9 pm on WPFW-FM (89.3). He also continues teaching classes on jazz at American University.

Music scholar Dick Spottswood highlights many facets of United States folk culture each Sunday on WAMU-FM (88.5) from 1-3 pm on his show subtitled the "Obsolete Music Hour." His eclectic show includes, among others, string bands, jug bands, gospel choirs, and swing groups—selections from original cylinders, discs, and other sources.

Rob Bamberger's "Hot Jazz Saturday Night" on WAMU-FM, 7-10 pm, is another rewarding listening experience.

Lois Moody, Joseph McMillan,

Gerry and John Hornsby, and Jack Towers

In our October issue we published impressions, musings, and commentary by some of our members on the Ellington Conference in Sweden in May. Those by Gerry and John Hornsby, Joe McMillan, and Lois Moody are reprinted in English in the Duke Ellington Society of Sweden's *Bulletin* Number 4, December 2004. Along with theirs is an item in Swedish in which Jack Towers is quoted, but our phrase book didn't help enough for us to translate it here.

Ken Steiner

The fourth installment of the "Duke Ellington for Beginners" series in TDES' newsletter bears a Ken Steiner byline.

Looking Ahead

10-12 February

All School Musical: We Love You Madly, Duke Ellington and Museum Studies Opening Reception:

We Love You Madly, Duke Ellington
Duke Ellington School of the Arts
3500 R Street, NW, Washington, DC

For performance times and other information:

Phone: 202-333-2555 Web: www.ellingtonschool.org
16-21 February 2005

14th Annual East Coast Jazz Festival

To benefit the Fish Middleton Jazz Scholarship Fund
PO Box 1768, Silver Spring, MD 20915-1768

Phone: 301-933-1822 Fax: 301-933-1151

E-mail: eastcoastjazz@earthlink.net

Web: www.fmjseastcoastjazz.com

Holiday Party a Blast

by Peter MacHare

We held our annual Holiday Party on Saturday, 8 January in our usual meeting room at Grace Lutheran Church. It was well attended and members brought a wide variety of food and drink to sample. We all had a wonderful time.

Ted Hudson, our esteemed Vice President and Editor of *Ellingtonia*, presented certificates of appreciation to all those people who wrote for it this past year. Why not spend a minute or two right now thinking about an article you could write for *Ellingtonia*. Ted received the loudest ovation of the night when our President asked members to thank Ted for all his work on preparing *Ellingtonia* every month.

One of our international friends, Göran Wallén of Sweden, sent greetings and reported that he is spending two months at the beach in Brazil. Göran, we wish we were there with you!

Mrs. Inez Tolbert celebrated her birthday by coming to our party. Her daughter Yvette Bradbie brought a cake and her son-in-law Brad Bradbie got us all to sing "Happy Birthday."

Geneva Hudson led us all in singing "The Twelve Days of Christmas," in what has become an annual tradition for us. I am pleased to report that some of our members have a very fine voice.

Everyone pitched in to help set up the party and to clean up afterwards. Special thanks go to Nat Moore who came 45 minutes early to arrange the chairs and tables.

To Join or Continue Membership in Our Society

Simply send a check payable to

The Duke Ellington Society, Inc. to

PO Box 15591, Washington, DC 20003, USA.

Dues remain a bargain:

Renewing Member, \$30; Couple, \$50; Student, \$5;
and a special rate for a Brand-New-Member, only \$20

Remember:

Our Memberships Are by the Calendar Year,
So Please Take Care of Your Dues Right Away!
Thank You.

THE DUKE ELLINGTON SOCIETY, INC.

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