

Ellingtonia

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Courtesy Carlyle Productions

Do Something Creative On



April 29

Florence Mills: Harlem Jazz Queen

by Gina Rollins, Secretary

Australian author Bill Egan graced our March meeting with an elegant presentation about Florence Mills, the great jazz-age entertainer and outspoken advocate for racial equality. Egan's groundbreaking book *Florence Mills: Harlem Jazz Queen* was recently published, and he and his wife Jean joined us in the final legs of their US book tour.

Egan's meticulously researched book draws Mills out of the shadows of history and brings to life the world of African American showbiz in the first three decades of the 20th Century. Egan's 10-year odyssey to find Mills started when he heard "Black Beauty," which Duke wrote in tribute to Mills in the months after her untimely death at age 31 in 1927. "Music like Ellington's can change people's lives, and I had a road to Damascus conversion [after listening to 'Black Beauty']," he explained. He wanted to learn about the woman whom Duke had dedicated the piece to and "couldn't find anything about her."

Egan noted that his presentation in Washington was especially fitting because this is where Mills was born (in 1896) and experienced her first success before becoming a super star in Harlem. Born in the Goat Alley slums, Mills attended the Patterson School at 10th and U Streets and started her singing career as a teenager. She became a favorite at soirees of the Washington diplomatic set and formed a trio with her sisters Olivia and Maud. Before the word "jazz" was ever coined the Mills Sisters sang cake walks, ragtime, blues and gospels in Harlem in the years 1910 to 1913. In 1913 she had her first starring role

April Program: Member's Choice Featuring Composers in the Orchestra

by Mac Grimmer and Peter MacHare, Program Coordinators

Recently we have had several member's choice programs featuring the compositions of either Duke Ellington or Billy Strayhorn.

At our April meeting let's feature all the other composers in the band, great names such as Louie Bellson, Johnny Hodges, Juan Tizol, and all the rest. Bring any performance by any artist (whether in the Ellington fold or not) of a composition by an Ellington band member (but not Duke or Strays). Doesn't that sound like fun? Tell us a little about your selection, so we learn a little more about our heroes as we enjoy their music.

Please keep your selections relatively short, so everyone gets a chance to participate. We'll hear one selection from everyone and then, if there's time, listen to second selections if you bring another.

The program will be held on **Saturday, 2 April at 8 pm** at our usual meeting place, **Grace Lutheran Church, 16th and Varnum Streets, NW**. Our meeting is open to the public, so please come if you are curious to see what we are all about.

This is a Jazz Appreciation Month event.

in *School Days in Dark Town*, and traveled in the same circles as Willie "The Lion" Smith and James P. Johnson. By 1915 she had moved to Chicago, performing alongside Alberta Hunter in the black and tan cafes run by black heavyweight champion Jack Johnson.

Mills' first breakout role came as the star of *Shuffle Along*, a Eubie Blake-Noble Sissle production that ushered in a new era of black theatre, according to Egan. As incredible as it seems today, the show was considered scandalous because it included a love scene between two black actors. Apparently it was risqué to show black people as fully human. Controversy aside, *Shuffle Along* catapulted Mills to fame and glory. She became the star of her own show, *Plantation Review*, and rightfully held a place
(Continued on page 4 under "Egan and Florence Mills")

McElroy's Ballroom and Happy Birthday Duke!: April 29th Birthday Sessions

In the 1940s and 50s, in Portland, Oregon there was little social mixing between whites and the relatively sparse black population. In this atmosphere, integrationist Pop McElroy and black business leader Stanton Duke founded McElroy's Ballroom, where Ellington, Gillespie, Armstrong, Hampton and other luminaries would play. The venue was soon considered iniquitous by some. Their reason, according to a local historian quoted in a December 2001 looking-back feature in Portland's *Willamette Week*, was that "White people were picking up these so-called 'primitive' black dances there." Custom "deemed that the two should rarely meet—until the music and dancing became just too good to pass up. . . ." The article's author goes on to say that the founders' "alliance made the commodious ballroom, with its crystal ball shimmering above a springy, ball-bearing mounted floating dance floor, the only place where black and white Portlanders regularly reveled together" and makes the point that "Today's cultural treasures were often yesterday's taboos."

Now to our Birthday Boy: The article continues, "[In 1952] Ellington's appearance caused a national stir, when DownBeat . . . gave Duke's show a scathing review. . . Undeterred, Ellington celebrated his next two birthdays at McElroy's. Those two performances were recorded by legendary Oregon-born recording engineer Wally Heider . . . and compiled in *The Birthday Sessions* [sic], a five-volume CD set. . . . These are the only professional recordings to come from McElroy's Ballroom."

So, on April 29 celebrate the confluence of McElroy's, Heider, dancers, and our artistic hero and his famous orchestra by enjoying *Happy Birthday, Duke!* (Laserlight 15785). Hint: Start with Volume 3, Track 7 to get the feet patting and the body swaying, and then join in the singing of "Happy Birthday" on Track 8, substituting Duke's name as appropriate. Next, pick any of the CDs and hear the band and its leader obviously having fun on two very special occasions. Happy listening!!!

(Grace ♪ : In 1954, Johnny Hodges and his group played the ballroom, his tenor saxophonist being a youngster named John Coltrane.)
Ed. Note: We are grateful to Ben Pubols, who discovered the cited article and sent a copy to us.

Strayhorn: A Mitchell-Ruff Interpretation, by the Mitchell-Ruff Duo

Commentary by Yvonne C. Condell

Many times I think that I have heard the most definitive, creative, innovative works of a well-known composer. Occasionally I am surprised that there are further definitions and interpretations of the works of a well-known composer. The occasion of my present surprise is the recent release of *Strayhorn: A Mitchell-Ruff Interpretation* (Kepler CD MR-2421). It is the 50th Anniversary Reissue featuring the last seminal work of Billy Strayhorn: "Suite for the Duo." My friends Dwiki Mitchell and Willie Ruff sent me a copy of the CD as soon as it was available.

The Mitchell-Ruff Duo interpretation of Billy's work is moving, inspiring and does provide further definition of Billy's work that is, as Duke would say, "beyond category." The Duo lived with the music, listened to it many times and conferred with Billy throughout the process of planning for the recording of it.

The CD is a gem and yet another treasure in the Ellington-Strayhorn archives. The liner notes by Willie Ruff are further explanation of what it was like to work with Billy and to experience a genius at work. The superb musicianship and talent of the Mitchell-Ruff Duo were tested and they come through with flying colors!

Ed. Note: We thank Dr. Condell for this contribution. When she dropped us a note about this CD, we invited her to send a brief commentary about it for Ellingtonia. The CD can be ordered online at: www.willieruff.com/recordings.html.

Nostalgia in Rockville

by Brad Bradbie

In this world where many, many talk about Jazz, and hardly any walk with Jazz, we should be glad there is the East Coast Jazz Festival, which presented four days of straight-ahead Jazz in February at the DoubleTree Hotel.

One of the highlights of the festival occurred on the opening night, as the audience was treated to a big band tribute to Duke Ellington. Imagine two hours of the master's best interspersed with a few Billy Strayhorn gems. The band was lead by drummer Brooks Tegner out of Baltimore, whose father, John Tegner of WEAA-FM at Morgan State University, served expertly as narrator, dispensing anecdotically historical comments on each composition. Most memorable were Duke's descriptions of the sounds and sometimes pungent culinary odors emanating from his apartment's "Harlem Airshaft," and the poignancy of the circumstances attending the writing of "Blood Count" by Strayhorn, who died of cancer.

This bit of melancholy was quickly dispelled by the happy realization that the arrangements being played sounded so authentic; the characteristic, eloquent harmonies were unmistakable. This was puzzling, for it is well known that full and complete arrangements by Ellington are practically non-existent, and rarer still are copies of the hastily-written sketches he was prone to pass around during recording dates. When asked about these arrangements after the concert, the senior Tegner stated that many of them had been transcribed from original recordings by Scott Silbert, a musician once associated with the US Navy Commodores Jazz Band. Not an easy task, even with a good ear.

More could be said about the tribute (which included tunes seldom heard in live performances, e.g., "Warm Valley," "Jack The Bear," and "Pyramid") and other versions of Ellington and Strayhorn melodies throughout the festival, but the editor's scissors must be avoided. One last comment: This rewarding fete deserved a much larger audience. For shame!

***The Single Petal of a Rose* by Steve Hancock Earning Critical Praise**

In *DEMS Bulletin* 04/3, Sjeif Hoefsmit writes about why Steve Hancock's Ellington CDs are so special to Ellington aficionados: "We recognize every note of the recorded selections because we know them by heart. It is as if you meet an old friend and his name is on the tip of your tongue. We should be grateful to Steve that he has produced these CDs especially for us. They may be too difficult for others, but for us they are a real treat. What Steven wrote about Ellington is also applicable to himself: 'He is less concerned with popularity and more intent on expressions of universal human experience.' . . . Especially since you know these tunes, they will give you an exciting experience."

In *Rambles*, Tom Schulte writes: "Hancock has gotten right into Ellington's works and reincarnated them from the inside out as elegant guitar pieces. . . . The CD of beautiful instrumental guitar comes with a thick booklet of photographs and notes on the origins of each of the 18 pieces presented. Interestingly, Hancock never felt it necessary to record any of the obvious choices. Such Ellington hits as 'Sophisticated Lady,' 'In a Sentimental Mood,' and 'Take the A Train' are not found . . . and are not necessary."

Hancock has also written a book, *Duke Ellington for Fingerstyle Guitar*. For information about his creations, go to www.stevهانcock.com.

Members Offered Special Price For My Unforgettable Jazz Friends

Society members who live in the United States may get a personally autographed copy of Claire Gordon's latest book, *My Unforgettable Jazz Friends*: Address an envelope to her at PO Box 225, Oceano, CA 93475 and enclose a check for \$31.50 for first class mail or \$27.50 for media mail and a note with the name of the Ellington society to which you belong.

Canadians should pay through the web site <http://myjazzfriends.com> (where money will be automatically converted into US \$\$) and at the same time e-mail Ms. Gordon at jazzbook@charter.net stating that they have purchased a book. She will alert the mailers about such Ellington enthusiasts so that they too can have a personally autographed book.

Claire Gordon, who for a time served as the band secretary for Duke Ellington, devotes a chapter to him.

It is early yet for print media reviews, but a critic writing on the *JazzNow.com* internet site says, "The first impression given by this book is a sense of intimacy. . . [It] makes for very interesting reading. . . . Nicely done, Claire!"

Jazz Appreciation Month Wherever You Are

To find out what's happening during Jazz Appreciation Month where you live or travel, check the JAM calendar at: www.smithsonianjazz.org/jam.



East Coast Festival Notes

Over the years patrons have grown accustomed to excellence at the Annual East Coast Jazz Festivals. This year's production seemingly effortlessly continued that tradition, a sign of superb organization and dedication. Proceeds benefit the Fish Middleton Jazz Scholarship Fund, a notably worthy cause. Vocalist and music educator Ronnie Wells, one of our members, is founder and president of the Fund, which among other things sponsors the Festival.

♫ The attractions were varied and plentiful: vocal and instrumental workshops and clinics; media-enhanced lectures; heartening performances by students and other aspiring musicians; open jam sessions; a complimentary annual "appreciation" concert and luncheon for senior citizens; numerous free presentations by lesser-but-should-be-better-known musicians; and, of course, major concerts featuring internationally respected vocal and instrumental artists – all in a congenial, wholesome ambience..

♫ Among highlights for many was a unique Gospel Matins on Sunday morning featuring, among others, the EMS Gospel Choir, a small supporting instrumental group, and "Word" by the Rev. Loretta Johnson that might be described as an ecumenical homily about love based upon Paul's summary characterization of it in the Bible. Especially for Ellington and Strayhorn enthusiasts, another highlight was "Brooks Tegner Big Band's Tribute to Duke Ellington" with John Tegner as narrator.

♫ Among young performers based locally were the Duke Ellington School of the Arts Jazz Ensemble; Blues Alley Youth Orchestral; Washington Jazz Arts Institute Community Jazz Orchestra; Fish Middleton Jazz Scholarship Jazz Camp Alumni; and middle-school and junior and senior high school bands.

♫ Winner of the Scholarship in 2004, vibes player Tim Collins, with his Quintet, had an engagement at Blues Alley in late February.

♫ The FMJS/Ron Kearns Productions Jazz Camp will be held at two different locations next summer, one at Olenka School of Music in Columbia and the other at Walter Johnson HS in Bethesda. Interested parties may contact Mr. Kearns at ron@ronkearns.com.

Looking Ahead

21 April

Eddie Ellington "Legacy" Orchestra

7:30 pm, \$10 Donation

To support New Washingtonians' Summer Travel

Duke Ellington School of the Arts

3500 R Street, NW, Washington, DC

Details: 202-333-2555 and www.ellingtonschool.org

25 April

Duke Ellington Goes to the Cotton Club

30th Anniversary of the Duke Ellington School of the Arts

6:30pm, Reception - 7:30pm, Dinner and Performance

Marriott Wardman Park Hotel, Washington, DC

Questions: Alison Tullis at 202-237-0090, Ext. 14



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

Ronnie Wells

Highest congratulations go to Ronnie Wells for this year's East Coast Jazz Festival! She is president and founder of the Fish Middleton Jazz Scholarship, the beneficiary of this annual event.

In addition to handling countless on-site administrative responsibilities, she performed in the Sunday evening concert with Ron Elliston and Friends and that morning directed and sang with one of the vocal groups in the Gospel Matins.

Davie-Celeste Yarborough

"That young Davie Yarborough 'tore it up'" was one attendee's summary evaluation of Davie Yarborough's unscheduled and apparently impromptu vocals during her parents' set at one of the major concerts at the East Coast Jazz Festival. Backed by dad Davey's Quartet, in a duo with her mother, Esther, she sang "Teach Me Tonight" and soloed on "Autumn Leaves" in both French and English. She also sang during one of the open jam sessions. For Davie it's fun, for her major activity now is her studies in her freshman year of college, which she says she is enjoying immensely.

Harvey Cohen

An informative and lucidly written feature essay by Harvey Cohen, "In His Own Words: Ellington's Ode to Black History," was published in the Outlook section of the *Washington Post*, Sunday, 20 February. We look forward to publication by the University of Chicago Press of his book, *Duke Ellington's America*, from which the article was adapted.

Davey Yarborough, Ronnie Wells,

John Mason, Mark Harvey, Anthony Brown

Among those for whom nominations were submitted for the Jazz Journalists Association's Jazz Awards for 2004 are: Dr. Anthony Brown, leader of the Asian American Orchestra, for Musician as well as Percussionist of the Year; The Rev. Mark Harvey, founder-director of the Aardvark Jazz Orchestra and composer, for Musician of the Year; Ronnie Wells for Jazz Events Producer of the Year; Davey Yarborough for Alto Saxophonist; and John Mason, for Best Photo.

Reason for the Repose? Pick One.

Last month we ran a photo of Duke at the piano, head down on his arms, over the keys, and asked for captions. Here are three. From Ferna Schneidmill: *Music is my mistress and the piano is my pillow.* From Ben Pubols: *Oh, no. Benny Goodman's recording of "In a Sentimental Mood" has sold more copies than mine.* From Alan Schneidmill: *What is the next note? I can't find that next note. Help me. I can't find the right note. Strays, help me!*

Egan and Florence Mills (Continued from page 1) alongside others like Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters. She also claimed a new theme song, "I'm a Little Blackbird Looking for a Bluebird." Mills' rendition was widely "recognized as her passionate anthem against racial injustice," according to Egan. She spoke out frequently about the ills of bigotry and prejudice in speeches and newspaper columns and was a "staunch supporter" of the NAACP.

In the strict segregation of the era Mills believed her show was the only avenue of employment for many of its black entertainers, and her dedication to them clearly contributed to her death, Egan contends. She refused a lucrative offer to appear in the Ziegfield Follies because it would put the black performers in her show out of work, and even when symptoms of the tuberculosis that ultimately claimed her life became severe she refused to take time off.

When Mills succumbed to her illness, there was a total outpouring of grief, and commemorative tributes came from all quarters. Duke wrote "Black Beauty" shortly after her death, but it was not publicly associated with Mills until Duke's 1943 Carnegie Hall concert. Thus there has always been a question of whether Duke really wrote the piece in tribute to Mills at the time of her death or merely claimed so under the pressure of trying to complete *Black, Brown, and Beige* for the concert. Egan built a strong case for and concluded that the piece Duke wrote in 1928 "was fully intended as a tribute to Florence Mills."

Egan shared with us several of the two-dozen or so versions of "Black Beauty" from his collection. We also heard Eva Taylor's 1924 recording of "I'm a Little Blackbird . . .," as well as pieces from *Shuffle Along*. Sadly, to the best of Egan's knowledge, there are no extant recordings or films of Mills. However, his thorough research and documentation of Florence Mills' life restores her luster as Harlem's Jazz Queen for generations to come.

To Join or Continue Membership in Our Society

Send a check payable to The Duke Ellington Society, Inc.
to PO Box 15591, Washington, DC 20003, USA.

Calendar-year dues remain a bargain: Renewing Member, \$30; Couple, \$50; student, \$5; Brand-New-Member, only \$20

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