

Ellingtonia

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Theodore R. Hudson, Editor

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Notes on Arthur Whetsel

by Brian Gilmore

The man worth while is the man that can smile when everything goes wrong.

-- Arthur Whetsel, 1923 Armstrong Technical High School Yearbook

While conducting research on Washington, DC poet and lyric writer Waring Cuney at the DC Public Schools Archives, I came across a few tidbits on none other than Ellington trumpet player Arthur Whetsel. As did Ellington and Cuney, Whetsel attended the legendary Armstrong Technical High School and was a member with Cuney (who was Class President) of the 1923 graduating class.

By all indications, Whetsel made great use of his time at Armstrong. According to the 1923 yearbook, Arthur Parker Whetsel (throughout the yearbook his name is spelled "Whetsel" and not "Whetsol") was a Bugler in the school's Cadet Corps in 1921 and was a Captain in the Cadet Corps Band in 1923. At the time, being a member of the Cadet Corps was a much sought-after position by high school students. He was also a cornet player in the Armstrong school orchestra in 1923 and wrote poetry for the yearbook, *The Reflector*. He also stated that upon graduation he would attend the Boston Conservatory of Music.

All of this art and discipline, of course, prepared Whetsel to become a member of the original nucleus of Duke's early bands. Duke described him as a "great organization man" and wrote that Whetsel had a "sweet" tonal personality on trumpet that has "never really been duplicated." Whetsel was part of the famous horn trio, with Barney Bigard and Tricky Sam Nanton, that produced the unique sound on "Mood Indigo" and he also appeared in the movie *Black and Tan* with Duke. Though Whetsel left the band to attend school at Howard University (this is what has been written by Duke and others), he continued to play with the band off and on in the summers until 1937

February Video Program

by Mac Grimmer and Peter MacHare, Program Coordinators

For our February meeting Ted Shell will present an all-video program of many different artists performing the music of Ellington and Strayhorn. As you know, Ted has a wonderful collection of videos, so you can be sure you will see much that you haven't seen before. Can you think of a better way to warm a cold, winter night?

The program will be on **Saturday, 4 February 2006 at 8 pm** at our usual meeting place, the **Grace Lutheran Church, 16th and Varnum Streets, NW, Washington, DC.**

Jazzinstitut Offers Free Service

Characterized as Europe largest public research archive on jazz, Jazzinstitut Darmstadt celebrated its 15th year during 2005. Founded and supported by the city of Darmstadt, Germany, among its holdings are books, periodicals, recordings, photographs, sheet music, and a jazz index.

The Institut's exhaustive and widely-used Jazz-Index is a computer-based bibliography of publications in its archive. An internet-published announcement offers use of the index without a fee. To access the index on a given jazz musician, make a request by e-mail at: jazz@jazzinstitut.de. To learn more about Jazzinstitut Darmstadt, including its resources, programs, projects, and other services, check out its website at: www.jazzinstitut.de.

when illness forced him to leave permanently.

Though not often considered a famous Ellington alumnus, Arthur Parker Whetsel is most certainly a star in the annals of Armstrong High School and the city of Washington, DC.

From Cakewalk To Concert Halls

by Thomas L. Morgan and William Barlow (Elliott and Clark, 1992)

The Creation Of Jazz: Music, Race and Culture in Urban America

by Burton W. Peretti (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992)

Reviewed by Ben Pubols

Although both of these books have been available for quite some time now, they have only recently come to the reviewer's attention. Dealing with roughly the same time period, 1895 to 1930 and 1890 to 1940, respectively, they go beyond the typical treatise on the history of jazz or of American popular music in general. And they very nicely complement each other in their coverage. Although Duke is mentioned in both books, he is clearly not the focus of attention in either.

From Cakewalks to Concert Halls is a fascinating book on the history of African American popular music from 1895 to 1930, profusely illustrated with sheet music covers from Thomas L. Morgan's own collection. Among the topics considered are spirituals, worksongs, African American ballads (e.g., "John Henry"), black-faced minstrelsy, "coon songs," ragtime, blues, cakewalks, marching brass bands, New Orleans jass, the advent of the phonograph and the issuance of "race records," TOBA, and gospel songs (pioneered by Thomas A. Dorsey). The book includes this interesting statement: "Everything from rhythm and blues to doowop to soul and ultimately even to rap has roots in gospel somewhere along the way." In addition to narrative text there are interesting "sidebars" on some of the major figures such as Bob Cole and the Johnson Brothers, Williams and Walker, Miller and Lyles, and Sissle and Blake. For example, one learns that "Under The Bamboo Tree" by Bob Cole and J. Rosamond Johnson is derived from "Nobody Knows The Trouble I've Seen," and that George Gershwin was influenced by James Reese Europe. The book ends in 1930 with Duke's "Mood Indigo."

The Creation of Jazz: Music, Race and Culture in Urban America deals with the sociological and racial context and history of early jass and jazz. The author's name is unfamiliar to me, nor have I seen the book referenced anywhere, but it is very scholarly. It appears to be based on a doctoral dissertation, as it has more than fifty pages of footnotes. It covers the period, roughly, from 1890 to 1940, and its main thesis is that, not only could jazz only have come to be in America, but that it could only have come to be in urban America. The author starts with the migration of blacks from rural Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana to New Orleans in the 1890s and 1900s and moves forward from there in time. Among other topics he discusses: The part played by African American jazz musicians in the Great Migration to the north, including Chicago, New York, and elsewhere; the fact that southern white jass musicians (e.g., the Original Dixieland Jass Band) claimed that they invented jazz and were not influenced by any black musicians (or never even HEARD any black jazzmen), in contrast to Chicago's Austin High Gang (Bud Freeman, Jimmy McPartland, et al.) who actively sought out and were inspired by black jazz via both records and visits to the South Side; that white jazz musicians did not intentionally set out to improve race relations per se, but that the improvement was a positive byproduct of common goals and interests. His conclusion reads as follows: "I have argued that the converging African and European heritages, black freedom and migration, white middle-class socialization and the seeds of rebellion it nurtured, modern city life, and other factors gave individuals just enough space and time to create what had been impossible to create in a less urban, more segregated America." The author relies heavily on oral histories and written documents by early jazz musicians; thus people like Kid Ory, Milt Hinton, Alberta Hunter, Jelly Roll Morton, Bud Freeman and Jimmy McPartland receive a lot of attention. This does not necessarily bias his conclusions, but these individuals do receive more space than otherwise.

Both books are highly recommended.

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More on OHAM Project Book

by William Hasson

The January issue of *Ellingtonia* contained excerpts from interviews of several persons who knew or worked with the Duke Ellington Orchestra over its illustrious career and who had been interviewed for Yale's Oral History of American Music (OHAM) project. From OHAM evolved the recently released book *Composers' Voices from Ives to Ellington* by Vivian Perlis and Libby Van Cleve (New Haven, Yale Univ. Press, 2005), in which there is a chapter devoted to Duke.

The following notes about that chapter attempt some insight into and meaning in some of the interview excerpts found there. Joya Sherrill states that Duke helped shape her style by telling her to observe all aspects of other performers. Juan Tizol says that Duke took most of the credit for their collaborative compositions it, but it did put money in his pocket. In his 1992 interview Gunther Schuller says that Duke should be considered the ultimate composer using sound, music, and harmony. Ruth Ellington recalls magnificent Cotton Club days, and Sonny Greer expounds on the beautiful chorus line girls from which he selected his wife. Adelaide Hall details how "Creole Love Song" came to be sung. John Hammond explains how Duke was able to hold the band together by supporting the musicians in the band through his royalties. And Duke's devotion to Billy Strayhorn is highlighted.

While there are far too many interviews to mention in this space, I strongly recommend this book as an important reference for honest appraisal of the reverence in which Duke Ellington was held.

Only Several Identified in Photograph

Some of our readers easily identified persons in the photograph in our January issue: Mercer Ellington, third from left; Billy Strayhorn, sixth from left; and Duke at the piano. Surprisingly, only two readers without hesitation identified the lady seated next to Duke on his left as his wife, Edna Thompson Ellington. We learned little more than speculation about the others in the group.

One of our members, Catherine Gant McPhail, widow of Ellington vocalist Jimmy McPhail, confirmed that the place is the living room of Mrs. Ellington. She has a photograph of herself, Jimmy, and their daughter taken in the same room, which she remembers well. Catherine's parents, Helen and Richard Gant, were high school classmates of Duke. Mrs. Gant and Mrs. Ellington were close lifelong friends.

We continue to invite your help.

elegy for the one step down

where did the jukebox go?
(Its scratchy discs older than time.)

each song a seance
bringing billie or count back
to the clarinet narrow room
where I blew shy variations
into the holes of mulatto-colored
onion rings

darling, could you hear them
over the din of yawing cymbals?
ice cubes rattling
like the nerves of gamblers
who bet on this club's immortality?

memory is a king of jukebox
in which you took to me
like ben webster loved ballads.
and I was dapper as the evening sky
over chelsea bridge.

-- reuben jackson

(Draft) 10/25/05

Ed. Note: The One Step Down was an intimate night spot on Pennsylvania Avenue near the White House in Washington, DC.

Bellson Sacred Music CD Released

Drummer Louie Bellson's best known composition likely is "Skin Deep." However, he has written much more music over his career, including several extended works.

His latest CD, *The Sacred Music of Louie Bellson and the The Jazz Ballet*, premieres two such creations, featuring Bellson on drums and Bobby Shaw on trumpet, along with a big band, symphony, and choir.

The release may be ordered by phone at 1-800-645-6673, online at www.musicianswarehouse.com, and from Francine Bellson, c/o Remo, Inc., 28101 Industry Drive, Valencia, CA 91355.

JAM Plans Underway

"Stakeholders" met recently at the Smithsonian Institution as part of the planning process for Jazz Appreciation Month (JAM) in April. Watch media for announcements of events in your area.

For more information on this national annual event, go online to jazz@si.edu.

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

Anthony Brown

A Definition and an Accolade:

Music = Communication that exposes us to the work of great minds that were dissatisfied by the limits of the spoken language. — Martin Tolchin

If music is a language, then Berkeley percussionist and composer Anthony Brown is probably one of the most articulate men in jazz. -- The San Francisco Chronicle

Walter van de Leur

About Walter van de Leur's recent stint as Artist in Residence at the University of Indiana during its American Music Month, Prof. Scott Schwartz, his academic host, writes that "The Strayhorn concert was great! Walter did an excellent job working with . . . the jazz students and they produced some great music. The two Mary Lou Williams charts were exceptional. I hope in a couple of years we can bring Walter back for another visit and concert, possibly a program of Bop and Cool following his current research."

Jane Vollmer

"The Tale of Bennett, Ellington and Vollmer" is the title of an article by Jane Vollmer in TDES' January newsletter. From the biography of Tony Bennett by Will Friedman she quotes Tony on his friend Duke, concluding that these excerpts provide "a good description of the man [Duke] I had the honor of knowing and working with from 1968 to 1974."

Scott Schwartz

The Schwartz Family Headin' Home band, consisting of parents Sarah (piano) and Scott and children Samantha (piccolo and flute), Aaron (violin), and even 7-year-old Kitty (cello), has recently performed in New Orleans, Louisiana; Mobile, Alabama; and the Urbana, Illinois area. Scott heads the Sousa Archives and Center for American Music at the University of Illinois. During all that left-over spare time he busies himself in home remodeling, creating wood clocks, studying Spanish, and practicing on his guitar.

Dick Spottswood

Dick Spottswood contributed a scholarly Appendix to *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890-1919* by Tim Brooks (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

Though he has relocated to a different area of the country, he continues the Dick Spottswood Show over WAMU 88.5FM Sundays at 1-3 pm. Subtitled the *Obsolete Music Hour*, it can also be heard over the internet radio station BluegrassCountry.org.

New Year's Fling

Reported by Peter MacHare, subbing for Secretary Gina Rollins

The Duke Ellington Society's New Year's Fling was a resounding success. We had a splendid time enjoying the company of friends and the good sounds of Duke Ellington. The table groaned under the weight of the many wonderful dishes our members contributed. Both the bar and the conversation flowed.

Lovely Geneva Hudson passed out solo lines to individuals and then led the company in our traditional singing of "The Twelve Days of Christmas." Duke Ellington would be pleased to know that so many of us joined together to revel in this music. Several of our more athletically coordinated members and guests entertained themselves and onlookers by line dancing to "The Cha-Cha Slide" by dancing to other tunes.

!! Not to Miss !!

East Coast Jazz Festival

16-20 February, DoubleTree Hotel, Rockville, MD
Info: 301-933-1822; eastcoastjazz@earthlink.net;

TDES Sponsored Ellington Conference

11 March, Rutgers University at Newark
Info: TDES, Inc., PO Box 31, Church St Station, NYC
1008-0031; www.thedukeellingtonsociety.org

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