

Ellingtonia

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**Make April 29
An Official Personal Holiday**



Happy Birthday, Duke!

No Bellson Concert in April Event Now Projected for Spring of 2008

The concert of Louie Bellson's *Sacred Music* and *Jazz Ballet* scheduled for April 15 at Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Washington, DC will not take place. Neither will a similar concert planned for later in New York City. After a re-convening and assessment, the Bellson Project Committee at Duke University made the announcement in February.

The performance by Bellson and the Duke University Jazz Ensemble in Washington was to be the premiere in the mid-Atlantic area of these two extended works composed by him.

The Committee at Duke is optimistic about a concert in 2008: "While we are disappointed . . . our excitement and commitment remain and we have taken the next steps we feel will continue to move the project forward." The hiring of a production coordinator is the planned next step for concerts at Duke University and in Washington, DC during the spring of next year.

Although the event will have to be re-scheduled, the Washington area Planning Group, which involves members of our Society, will continue to function as it looks toward 2008.

Ed. Note: One need not wait until next year to hear Bellson's cited compositions. One of his CDs is The Sacred Music of Louie Bellson and The Jazz Ballet that may be ordered by phone at 10800-645-6673 and online at <http://cdbaby.com/cd/louiebellson>.

April Program: Duke's 'Bones

by Mac Grimmer and Peter MacHare, Program Coordinators

Peter MacHare will present a program highlighting the role of the trombone in Ellington's orchestra at our meeting on Saturday, 7 April. This program is based on the recently revised book *Duke's 'Bones: Ellington's Great Trombonists* by Kurt R. Dietrich.

We will explore the music of the men (and woman) who played the trombone with Duke. This should be an informative meeting since Peter will use the book and musical examples together.

The meeting will be at **Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church at 16th and Varnum Streets, NW, Washington, DC on Saturday, 7 April at 8:00 pm.** As usual, guests are welcome.

Ellington Alumni Receive "Living Jazz Legends" Awards

Louie Bellson and Clark Terry, who were stellar members of the Ellington orchestra, were honored, among other luminaries, as "Living Jazz Legends" at a black-tie ceremony and concert at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC in March.

The note in the Playbill about Terry states that "In addition to being a virtuoso trumpeter, unique vocalist and consummate entertainer, he pioneered the use of the flugelhorn in jazz." Bellson is described in the Playbill as "A teenage prodigy of the Big Band Era [who] drummed for Benny Goodman, Count Basie, and Duke Ellington. Nothing like his double bass drum attack had ever been heard before, but once heard, it could never be forgotten."

The event opened a "Jazz in Our Time" series during the month that will include performances by Marian McPartland, Ahmad Jamal, Hank Jones, some free programs on the Center's Millennium Stage focusing on different musical periods of jazz, and a showing of *A Great Day in Harlem* documentary and a discussion of it led by Jean Bach, its director.

**Duke Ellington: The Complete 1936-1940
Variety, Vocalion and Okeh Small Group Sessions**

Mosaic Records Limited Edition (MD7-235)

Reviewed by Theodore R. Hudson

In the era of the sessions in this collection, recordings by Duke Ellington and his orchestra were sold under the Brunswick label for an image-protecting and enhancing price of 75 cents (and later under Columbia for 50 cents), while those by leaders of lesser prestige sold for 35 cents on labels such as Vocalion. Thus, for the less expensive records, except for a few for which Ellington was the listed leader, Ellington sidemen were the nominative if not actual leaders, with various appendages—Cootie Williams and His Rug Cutters, Rex Stewart and his 52nd Street Stompers, Johnny Hodges and His Orchestra, Barney Bigard and His Jazzopators. Generally, the groups consisted almost wholly of Ellington's musicians, a noteworthy exception being The Gotham Stompers, who were from both his and Chick Webb's bands (with Webb on drums).

The music these still upcoming artists played at these sessions is priceless, and not solely because of historical significance. (And thanks to Steven Lasker's sound engineering, the sound quality is superb.) Rex Stewart is his imaginative, authoritative, and versatile self, whether on open horn (cornet, remember), up in the stratosphere, half-valving, whatever. Barney Bigard's clarinet is characteristically liquid and woody-toned, and he provides counterpoint and trademark filigree. His gently bouncing "Barney Goin' Easy" with its lower register artistry would, with lyrics and a slightly more spritely tempo, become "I'm Checkin' Out, Goom-bye." On "Beautiful Romaine," Cootie Williams's growl is gentle, somewhat legato. "Black Butterfly," here arranged by Billy Strayhorn and destined to be a lilting melody for alto saxophone, is, surprise, a showcase for his trumpet. And, surprise again, on "Ain't the Gravy Good" Cootie is the vocalist, a vocalist very remindful of Fats Waller.

As to Johnny Hodges, he is heard more as a "hot" than "sweet" player. He rarely played soprano sax after this era, but as he plays it, for example, on "Tough Truckin'," he sounds more plaintive than languid. Sonny Greer, in the day when drums did not record well, nevertheless can be appreciatively heard swinging on a very up-tempo "Tiger Rag," which begins with Duke striding mightily. Another piece, "Downtown Uproar" is interesting for several reasons, among them a brashly braying rather than yah-yah trombone by Tricky Sam Nanton and background shouts of encouragement by Duke's early years good buddy Jerry Rhea.

Many of the tunes were or on their way to becoming standards; some would evolve into something else as the years went by. On the aforementioned "Barney Goin' Easy" Cootie plays some notes that seem to have been reincarnated later as the melodic line for "My Honey's Lovin' Arms." "Caravan" is less percussive than in later years, and without a full band's backing the uniqueness and purity of Tizol's tone is more noticeable. And, as has often been said in other instances, there are little things that developed into major composed works. Rex contends, for instance, that "I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart" is informed by a Hodges lick in "Once in a While."

How was the music and how were the musicians prepared for these sessions? It depends upon who is doing the recalling. Cootie reportedly said that tunes were rehearsed before the musicians went into the studio. Helen Oakley Dance, probably the best known of the producers of Ellington small group sessions, is quoted as saying that there was no planning as such and that typically Duke sat at the piano and he and the musicians of worked things out cooperatively. Indeed, one session in this collection reveals Duke rehearsing "Echoes of Harlem." At one point one of the musicians impatiently prompts, "Well, come on, Duke, I want to try this." Another asks, "What about the brass part?" to which Duke replies, "I don't need no brass part." Then, too, received history credits Billy Strayhorn for many of the small group arrangements once he was on board.

The accompanying booklet by Steven Lasker of more than 20 oversized pages of thoroughly researched, well documented, and clearly written text is, as far as we know, an unparalleled learned exposition on the subject. The discographical data will warm the heart of the most meticulous discographer—dates, time of day, venues, alternate takes, personnel, instrumentation, it's all there. Engaging photographs are a lagniappe.

Producers Scott Wenzell and Steven Lasker and all others concerned deserve all sorts of accolades for a *superb* love gift to Ellington and Strayhorn devotees and to those yet to come.



From Mosaic Records: *All recordings are available through Mosaic Records, 35 Melrose Place, Stamford, CT 06902; 203-327-7111. Please check their website at www.mosaicrecords.com for more information.*

About the Strayhorn Documentary

For publication in *Ellingtonia*, we invited members and other readers for whom we have e-mail addresses for their reactions to the recently telecast documentary *Billy Strayhorn: Lush Life* in PBS' Independent Lens series. Following are responses, for which we thank the contributors:

I liked the Strayhorn video. It was a wonderful appreciation of Strayhorn's ability and frailties. But I have a couple of caveats.

Somewhere in the program, it should have been made clear that Ellington wrote, arranged and performed great music before and after Strayhorn was part of the band. Also, it should have been made clear that during Strays' tenure, Duke wrote, arranged and performed the great bulk of the music. Billy was an integral part of the band, but Duke was always the sparkplug.

Near the end of the program, Duke is shown playing "Lotus Blossom." However, I don't think it mentioned that after Billy's death, Duke always played his solo version as a closing theme. Finally, mention should have been made of the album And His Mother Called Him Bill. The last two items showed Duke's love and appreciation of Billy.

– **Morris Hodara**, New York City

MY REACTION(S)

1st: Intense anger and overwhelming anguish at witnessing Strayhorn footage entrusted to my guardianship, subsequently stolen from my home, incorporated into Levi's film.

2nd: Outrage that deliberate falsehoods and manipulated half-truths were presented as facts.

3rd: The conviction that celebrating the gentle genius of my friend Billy Strayhorn does not require the trashing of Duke Ellington.

– **Patricia Willard**, Washington, DC

First, I have to admit that I was not around the band very much during the later years, so I am not privy to the truth of the situation between Billy and Duke.

During the years I knew Billy well, he never said a word that would indicate any unhappiness with the relationship, or his money. I do know Duke was devastated when Billy died, and I don't believe it was because he had lost the music writer, but because he lost the person he loved.

Also, Duke went on to write a whole lot of music after Billy died, just as he had before Billy was a part of the organization.

– **Claire Gordon**, Arroyo Grande, California

I found the Strayhorn documentary to be a balanced and moving assessment of his life and work. My only quibble was that I wanted the interviewees to be identified more frequently.

– **Reuben Jackson**, Washington, DC

I thoroughly enjoyed the program. As a documentary, I thought it was well constructed and flowed very well. I hope it helps spread the name and fame of both Duke and Billy. I thought the complex, multi-dimensional relationship Duke and Billy shared was handled with dignity and restraint, and I both learned from and enjoyed the presentation.

We should all rejoice in the musical joy Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn, individually and together, have brought and continue to bring to us.

– **Ben Pubols**, Portland, Oregon

The Independent Lens presentation of Billy Strayhorn: Lush Life did the jazz-loving public a real service in its revealing and sympathetic portrait of the complex, talented, yet tragic and tormented genius who for so long lived in the shadow of Duke Ellington. This fan of the Duke and his music did not realize the tremendous debt Ellington owed to Billy Strayhorn and the extent to which he controlled Strayhorn's life.

The program was enhanced by the music of many instrumentalists and vocalists. Among the performers, Diane Reeves was a real standout. An impressive group of family members, critics and historians, too numerous to name, contributed valuable commentary and insights.

– **Elinor F. Eugene**, Washington, DC

I was very moved by black and white images of Billy Strayhorn walking down the wet tarmac of a French airport, alone. Was he wallowing in the life he dreamed of as a teenager? Or was Strayhorn composing his next tune, as suggested by those arpeggios? The music swells, and I was hooked by the rare pleasure of seeing and hearing my favorite music on broadcast television.

While many have pointed out that the narration and point of view contained exaggerations and inaccuracies, I felt they were far outweighed by the many musicians and other commentators.

A couple of favorites were Chico Hamilton (who was subbing for Sonny Greer at the Casa Manana when the new band's new theme was introduced), "We didn't know Swee'Pea wrote 'A-Train.' We thought that was Duke," and Duke himself, tearfully recalling his best friend. The image that endures is Strayhorn himself at the piano, and the brilliance of his music.

– **Ken Steiner**, Seattle, Washington

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

Sjef Hoefsmit, Ken Steiner

Among those listed for "Special Thanks" by the producers of the monumental *Duke Ellington: The Complete 1936-1940 Variety, Vocalion and Okeh Small Group Sessions* 7-CD set are Ken Steiner and Sjef Hoefsmit.

Marion Shell

A lay reader there, Marion Shell was the Lector for the Sunday morning worship at which Louie Bellson performed on March 4 at Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Washington.

Ronnie Wells

Esther Williams, Davey Yarborough

The Washington Area Music Association recently announced winners of its 21st Annual Wammies Awards.

Ronnie Wells, founder and president of the Fish Middleton Scholarship Fund and promoter of the East Coast Jazz Festival, was been chosen as Best Jazz Female Vocalist. Esther Williams, vocalist, and Davey Yarborough, saxophonist, were among the nominees for awards.

Storyville Produces 8-CD Collection

Storyville Records has announced the February release of *The Duke Box*, an 8-CD set that "includes more than eight hours of music from what many consider the greatest decade (1940s) of the greatest orchestra in the history of jazz." An accompanying booklet by Dan Morgenstern includes photographs by Herman Leonard and William Gottlieb.

For more information or to order the set, e-mail Storyville at info@storyvillerecords or go online to www.storyvillerecords.com.

Ed. Note: We plan to have a review of this release in an upcoming issue.

Although . . .

The Annual East Coast Jazz Festival was postponed for reasons beyond the control of sponsor The Fish Middleton Scholarship Fund. Nevertheless, it, in partnership with the Strathmore performance center in Bethesda, MD, invited everyone there for a "Free and Open to the Public Salute to 'Jazz and Big Band'" day on the Presidents' Birthday holiday, 19 February.

One of the many attractions was the Duke Ellington School of the Arts' New Washingtonians, directed by faculty member Davey Yarborough, in an all-Ellington program.

Bellson Performs at Sunday Morning Church Service

Regular worshipers at the Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Washington, DC were treated to a rare performance by Louie Bellson, who played drums as the choir and audience heartily sang "When the Saints Go Marching In" on Sunday, 4 March. The night before, Bellson received a "Living Jazz Legend" award at Washington's Kennedy Center.

A fellowship reception in the church's lounge followed the service, at which Bellson chatted with worshipers and graciously responded to requests for autographs and posed with individuals and groups for photographs.

As part of the reception program, the Rev. Clinton Kersey, the pastor, and Bellson engaged in an informative and entertaining conversation on a variety of topics about the honored guest. Asked about the reasons for undertaking the writing of sacred music, Bellson gave credit to Duke Ellington for suggesting that he do so and for encouraging him. Pastor Kersey introduced Bellson's wife, Francine, a Washington native and the daughter of Willie Wright, who attended the worship service. When asked how they met, Bellson disclosed that Francine had been introduced to him by trombonist Buster Cooper, another Ellington alumnus.

Among Society members who had a group picture taken with Louie Bellson are Clinton Kersey, Ted Shell, Marion Shell, Alan Schneidmill, Peter MacHare, and Ted Hudson.

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