

Ellingtonia

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The New Year Brings to Mind . . .

This issue begins the 16th volume of *Ellingtonia*. Yep, 16th.

Known Society publications date back to lively letters by then President Terrell Allen in which he described (touted, really) upcoming meetings and other matters of interest to members, the last being his "Hail and farewell, O beloved Ellingtonians" one in May 1992, so full of wit, warmth, and reminiscent history. These letters are now considered collectors' items. Beginning in November 1992, then Acting and later President Theodore Shell continued them until April 1993, using "Newsletter" at the top of each. (In the March 1993 issue, he included an obituary by Patricia Willard of Allen, who died on March 17, that had appeared in the *Washington Post*, and a tribute by Ted Shell that he had read at the funeral, ending in "Terrell, all the boys and girls of the Duke Ellington Society and all of your friends loved you madly, and will miss you, miss you madly." An unforgettable era had ended.)

Our first newsletter by Ted Hudson was a generic, untitled 4-pager for May-June 1993. The next issue carried the simple title *Newsletter*. In March 1994 the first serial notation, III:3, appeared. Then, in response to an appeal for title suggestions, Harold Gray, our most senior member, thought of *Ellingtoniana*, then followed another's suggestion to drop the last syllable/beat, and we had *Ellingtonia* beginning in October 1994.

All these publications are primary sources of history. Now if we could get them indexed!

Ed. Note: We don't know exactly when Terrell Allen began his letters, nor what printed communications there were before or early in his presidency. The first letter by him in our collection is dated August 1986, but we believe that there were earlier ones.

Happy New Year !

by Mac Grimmer and Peter MacHare, Program Coordinators

Our annual New Year's party will be **Saturday, 5 January at 8 pm** in our usual meeting room at **Grace Lutheran Church, 16th and Varnum Streets, NW, Washington, DC.**

The Society will provide liquid refreshment, ice, plates, and cups. We ask our members to bring a pot-luck dish for the table. If you forget to prepare a dish, please come anyway.

Officers, Board Members Re-Elected

At our December meeting, members unanimously voted for our present slate of officers and directors to continue in office. In each issue of our newsletter, *Ellingtonia*, there is a list of the wonderful people who volunteer their services all for the love of Duke. If you have any general comments or suggestions for future programs, send an e-mail to Peter MacHare at peter@depanorama.net or drop a line to our post office box.

— Peter MacHare

Revue about Strayhorn Planned

A special event of the Conference on Black Music Research, Feb. 14-17, 2008 at the Palmer House Hilton, Chicago, will be a single performance Saturday, Feb. 16 at 7:30 pm of *Sweet Thunder: The Billy Strayhorn Story*, billed as "a musical revue, held in the historic Empire Room, based on the play by Ben Tyler, directed by Paul Carter Harrison, and featuring vocalists Bobbi Wilsyn, Maggie Brown, Andrew Schultz and Martez Rucker and members of the New Black Music Repertory Ensemble." Tickets are \$30. It is not clear if the show is accessible to persons not registered for the conference.

— Patricia Willard

Willis Conover: Broadcasting Jazz to the World
by Terence M. Ripmaster

New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2007. 218 pp. \$18.95

Reviewed by Ben Pubols

There are many non-musicians well known for their roles in promoting jazz, individuals such as George Avakian, Norman Granz and George Wein. There is another such promoter, equally as important but less well known in the Western hemisphere, and that man is Willis Conover, who was the Voice of America's "Voice of Jazz" for 40 years, from his first broadcast in January 1955 until shortly before his death in 1996. His program, *Music USA*, was beamed to as many as 80 foreign countries, but, by Congressional decree was not available to listeners in the United States. Conover traveled extensively, including many trips to Iron Curtain countries, where he was often hailed by his admirers as a saint. He spoke in a slow, deliberate, deep baritone voice. He had a particularly strong impact on listeners behind the Iron Curtain. As one commentator put it, "If I had to list the five people most responsible for the dismantling of the Soviet Union, Willis Conover would be at the top of the list."

His programs consisted primarily of playing jazz recordings, from the infancy of jazz through the swing era and into the "modern" period. His theme song was Duke's classic recording of *Take The A Train*. The programs included many interviews, with jazz musicians (e.g., ten with Louis Armstrong, fifteen with Duke Ellington) and others (e.g., several U.S. presidents, Martin Luther King Jr., Jackie Robinson and Leopold Stokowski).

The author of this biography, Terry Ripmaster, a retired professor of history, takes detailed advantage of the vast amount of primary material on Willis Conover. His principal sources are VOA tapes of Conover's *Music USA* programs and interviews, many now at the National Archives, and Conover's personal papers, including extensive notes for an autobiography, now in the North Texas University library. Extensive use is also made of correspondence and interviews. Among the latter are interviews with our own Jack Towers and with the author of this review, Ben Pubols. (Disclosure: I was friends with Willis while I was in high school in the late 1940s, during Conover's pre-VOA, radio station WWDC days).

The book itself is arranged topically rather than chronologically. After a brief introduction on Willis's personal life, including his time as a student at Western High School (now the Duke Ellington School of the Arts) and his stint as an announcer at station WWDC, there are chapters on the formation and history of the Voice of America and Willis's activities there. A lengthy chapter deals with his influence on many listeners from abroad, including details of his trips behind the Iron Curtain and the many fans he met there. Also included is a chapter on his non-VOA activities and excerpts from many of his interviews. But the most exciting chapter is the one entitled "Conover Under Fire: Black Nationalism and Jazz." "Black Nationalism" is perhaps too strong a term in this context, as the chapter deals primarily with the Black Power movement of the 1960s, not the earlier Marcus Garvey Black Nationalism movement. In particular, Willis encountered many problems as a white man promoting what began as black man's music. But, as Ripmaster states, "He had a deep appreciation of what can be called the black roots of jazz. He devoted his life to understanding, playing, and promoting jazz."

As is well known, Conover was instrumental in organizing the 1969 75th birthday tribute to Duke Ellington at the White House. Ripmaster quotes H. R. Haldeman to the effect that "When President Nixon heard about the plans for this tribute to Duke, he told us to invite all the jazz greats, like Guy Lombardo."

The book is not without its shortcomings. For example, dates are not given for the many interviews and letters cited. At one point Conover is quoted as saying that he was making "between twenty and thirty thousand dollars a year" (when was this?), while elsewhere it is stated that, by the 1990s he was making close to \$100,000 a year. And the book could have profited by another round of proof-reading. There are many instances where a source is quoted, but there are no close quotes (including a "quote" from this reviewer). Also, "he" is often mentioned without a clear referent.

In the opening chapter, Willis is quoted as stating that during his childhood he was enamored of the *Wizard of Oz* books. In the final chapter, James Lester, writing in 1999, states that ". . . it is hard not to think of Conover as the Wizard of Oz, a gentle, reticent sort of person hidden behind a curtain, projecting through the turning of dials and pushing of levers, a powerful image, rather different from himself, that ends up changing lives. He seems to have been the perfect person for the job." A fitting and insightful statement.

There remains a vast amount of material on the mysterious, majestic Mr. Conover, waiting to be tapped by the next author. Meanwhile, Mr. Ripmaster provides an overdue, pioneering book on this individual who did so much to promote and spread American jazz throughout the world.

Now Available Online: Complete *DEMS* Bulletins

A complete set of *DEMS* Bulletins is now available online at Peter MacHare's "A Duke Ellington Panorama" web site, *depanorama.net*. The *Bulletins* from 1979-2000 are in PDF files courtesy of Bjørn F. Andresen, while those from 2001 to the present are in HTML format.

The *Bulletins* contain a wealth of information, mostly about Ellington's recordings, but also contain articles about all aspects of Ellingtonia. Since being uploaded to the internet, *DEMS* Bulletin has been visited more than 112,000 times.

We are deeply grateful to Sjef Hoefsmit for his dedicated, meticulous editing of the publication, having assumed the responsibility following the 2002 death of his dear friend Benny Aasland [Åslund], who founded *DEMS* Bulletin some 29 years ago. In the current issue Sjef writes, "I am convinced that Benny Aasland would be delighted to know that his work is now saved in a way which enables many young *DEMS* readers to follow the history of Ellingtonian research which he started so brilliantly 29 years ago."

The latest *DEMS* Bulletin 0713 (Dec. 2007-Jan. 2008) is available free at depanorama.net/dems/073a.htm.

Herb Pomeroy Passes

Herb Pomeroy, internationally renowned educator, bandleader, composer, and some time trumpeter with the Duke Ellington Orchestra, passed away at the age of 77 this past August 11th in his hometown of Gloucester, Massachusetts.

Herb substituted for Cootie Williams on occasion when the Ellington band came to New England, and he taught a celebrated course on Ducal writing techniques at the Berklee College of Music. The Maestro himself called one day to say something to the effect of "Herb, maybe I should come up there and find out what it is I've been doing all these years." Many years later, Duke called Herb "one of America's jazz treasures."

The Rev. Mark Harvey officiated at a private burial and a public memorial service in Boston's Emmanuel Church that featured reminiscences and musical offerings by dozens of colleagues and former students from across the country and the world.

Ed. Note: We thank our member Mark Harvey for providing information about Pomeroy, his death, and his relationship with Duke.

Reunion Jazz Orchestra Presents Duke and Billy's *Nutcracker Suite*

by Don Rouse

Several performances of Ellington's *Nutcracker Suite* were scheduled around town this holiday season. I refer, of course, to the arrangement of Tchaikovsky's work by Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn. It's really more than arrangement; it's actually new composition that refers throughout to elements of the original work.

On November 30 the Reunion Jazz Orchestra, Christopher Johnston conducting, presented it as part of "An Evening with The Duke" at the Northern Virginia Community College in Annandale, VA. Ellington Society members Geneva and Ted Hudson and Sandi and Don Rouse joined the appreciative audience.

The program included the full arrangement of the *Nutcracker* together with "Take the A Train," "Satin Doll," and "C-Jam Blues." Johnston took over the piano role. Michael Thomas provided strong trumpet solos throughout the evening, as did Herb Smith on alto and clarinet, and Vaughn Ambrose on tenor and clary. Tenor honors were also shared by Michael Horton. Trombonist John Jensen soloed strongly.

Bassist Wes Biles was featured to good effect. In informal discussion after the concert, he revealed that the charts for the suite are complex, and pose a real challenge (which the band met admirably). The last movement of the suite provided the extra-added feature of interpretative dance by Toy Falcone and Douglas Yeuell. I regret I did not get the name of the trombonist who gave a perfect reincarnation of "Tricky Sam" mute work in one of the movements.

With five reeds, three trombones, four trumpets and three rhythm the band provided a full complement to do Duke justice. The *Nutcracker Suite* arrangement reveals just how well Ellington and Strayhorn integrated solos into the overall ensemble, with the solos rising out of the ensemble; elsewhere the ensemble lines supported the soloist. A tricky clarinet duet sequence must have been a bear to execute. I wonder if Jimmy Hamilton may not have had a hand in putting it together?

The orchestra is supported by the Reunion Music Society, which also sponsors the NCCC-Annandale Symphony. One of the coordinators of the Reunion Jazz Society performances is Dr. Claiborne T. Richardson, whom some of our readers may recall meeting at Ellington Society functions.

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

John O. Coleman

Identified in the announcement for the event as "a lifelong music lover and music historian," John Coleman lectured on "Women in the Blues" at Riderwood in Beltsville, MD in November. Last year he spoke on "The Blues from Cottonfield to the Jazz Festivals" at the same venue.

Theodore A. Shell

Ted Shell is up and about following his surgery. He showed up at our December meeting in good spirits and looking fit. Shortly he will present a Paul Gonsalves program that he had to postpone because of the operation.

Belated Condolences

We extend sincere sympathy to the family of former member Rodney Corry, who died in October. Members will remember that for a time he, an affable young man, saws to it that Helen Frazier, now deceased, was able to attend our meetings. At our December meeting his father, David Corry, was presented posthumous citations of appreciation to Rodney for his valuable contributions to *Ellingtonia* over several years.

Origin of Ellington Conferences

For an account by one of the Study Group founders of the evolution of the International Duke Ellington Conferences, go online to <http://jazzchicago.org/educates/journal/articles/Ellington-study-group> and read "An Ellington Study Group."

More on Ellington 2008

The latest information release states that Ellington alumni Art Baron, Buster Cooper, and John Lamb will be "in conversation and performing" at Ellington 2008 in London, 22-26 May 2008. Among scholars already listed to make presentations at this 20th of the Ellington International Conferences are Bjarne Busk, Steven Lasker, Earl Okin, and two of our members, Harvey Cohen and Ken Steiner. Bands include British groups Guildhall Jazz Band and Echoes of Ellington Orchestra.

For updates and information about venues, schedule, accommodations, registration, and online links, contact the sponsors by postal mail: **Ellington 2008, 38 Thurlstone Avenue, London N12 0LP, United Kingdom**; by e-mail: contact@Ellington2008.org; and online at web site: www.Ellington2008.org.

The Lion Roars and The Shell Returns

by Peter MacHare

Our December program on Willie "The Lion" Smith turned festive as soon as Ted Shell arrived. Ted was attending his first meeting of the season since he had surgery in October. He looked very well and was actually surprised that his arrival produced an ovation from the membership. (Ted, you must know by now that we love you madly.)

The first half of our program featured an artist that greatly influenced Duke Ellington. We watched a documentary titled *Willie the Lion*, directed by Marc Fields and originally shown on NJN Public Television. It was released on DVD in 2004 on Shanachie, catalog number 6317. It is a program rich in music and stories about our music heroes such as Will "The Lion" Smith, James P. Johnson, Fats Waller, Jelly Roll Morton, Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk, and many others.

In order to have more time to celebrate Ted Shell's return, the membership voted to extend our intermission/refreshment time and postpone the documentary about Sidney Bechet until some time next year. Instead, we enjoyed an abbreviated second half featuring short videos by Duke Ellington from the 1930s and 1940s, including some delights as "Hot Chocolate," "Bli-Blip," and "Jam Session."

It's Already 2008.

Have You Taken Care of Your Dues?

Keep in mind that memberships are for the calendar year.

Mail your check payable to

The Duke Ellington Society, Inc. at
PO Box 15591, Washington, DC 20003.

Our dues remain a bargain:

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