

Ellingtonia

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Prez Fest 2009 Honors Billy Strayhorn

by Bill Hasson

The Jazz Ministry at Saint Peter's Church and TDES, Inc. (the New York-based Ellington Society) presented as Prez Fest 2009, 14 and 15 March, a celebration of Billy Strayhorn featuring performances of his compositions and arrangements.

Members of the Strayhorn family in attendance were executor of his estate and nephew Dr. Gregory Morris and his wife Thelma, Billy's niece Leslie Demus, as well as his nephews Douglass and John Strayhorn.

The first day's program began with two hours of listening to well-known and rare recordings of Strayhorn. The next day David Hadju, author of *Lush Life*, gave a presentation chronicling Strayhorn's life. A Jazz Vespers made famous by this church was offered by the Junior Mance/Hide Tanmako Duo.

Jimmy Owens, MC for the evening, initiated the program with the duet pianos of Aaron Diehl and Adam Birnbaum, who played a tune called "Tonk," the name of a card game. Card playing was a popular means to pass the time while the Ellington orchestra was between engagements. It is said that Duke and Billy indulged in this pastime.

A number of pianists would perform on Strayhorn's piano, which had been given to the church and refurbished. When Billy Taylor was introduced, he reminisced over Strayhorn's request to hear a complete solo version of his, Taylor's, "In Loving Memory." Jimmy Heath's tribute to Strayhorn, "Ellington's Stray Horn," was magnificently rendered by saxophonist Ron Blake, pianist Jeb Patton, bassist David Wong, and drummer Winard Harper.

Vocalist Darius De Haas mesmerized the congregation with his interpretation of "Day Dream." Randy Weston, who had paid a tribute to Ellington on an earlier CD, played solo piano on "Star Crossed Lovers" (originally titled, "Pretty Girl") from *Such Sweet Thunder*. Gene Bertocini, guitar, and Sara Caswell, violin, contributed haunting interpretations of "Lush Life" (originally titled "Life Is Lonely") and "Isfahan" (originally titled "Elf").

A Mixed Bag of Ellington Videos

by Peter MacHare, Program Coordinator

For our May program we shall feature a mixed bag of Duke Ellington videos from many different periods in his career.

Some of the videos are classic, some obscure, but seeing Duke and all our heroes in the band is always a pleasure.

We are sure you will enjoy the evening, so why not bring a friend? Our program will be at 7 pm on **Saturday, 2 May at Grace Lutheran Church, 16th and Varnum streets, NW, Washington, DC.**

A splendid time is guaranteed for all.

TDES is to be commended for having the Ellington Legacy Band, an octet, who performed "Happy Go Lucky Local" and "A Flower Is a Lovesome Thing." The latter part of the concert included masterful solo piano by Fred Hersch on "UMMG" and "Chelsea Bridge." The Mike Hashim (alto) Duo with Ehud Asherie on piano magnificently rendered "Triple Play" and "Absinthe." The Alan Ferber Quartet offered one of Strayhorn's longtime favorites, "Chelsea Bridge," and "Drawing Room Blues," which can also be heard on Joe Henderson's *Lush Life*, a CD salute to the music of Billy Strayhorn.

The pianist Valerie Capers' Quintet featuring John Robinson, bass, Rudy Lawless, drums, Michael Morris, trumpet/fluegelhorn, and Alan Givens, sax, opened with "Blood Count" and gave a convincing display of artistry and a fresh fast-paced approach on "Johnny Come Lately." After Jimmy Owens, trumpet/fluegelhorn, and Mike Howell, guitar, closed out their contributions with "A Flower Is a Lovesome Thing" and "Drawing Room Blues," the remaining performers joined in with a jam session on "A' Train."

Again, a debt of gratitude is owed to the officers, members and staff of TDES for continuing the legacy of the true genius of Billy Strayhorn, and much success in the future is wished for Ike Strum, Director of Music for the Jazz Ministry at Saint Peter's Church. I give special thanks to Patricia Willard and Ted Hudson for their assistance in this article.

The Penguin Guide to Jazz Recordings: Ninth Edition
 by Richard Cook and Brian Morton. New York: Penguin Group, 2008.
 Reviewed by Peter MacHare

Duke Ellington and the Penguins

The Penguin Guide to Jazz first appeared in 1992. The authors, Richard Cook and Brian Morton, have consistently produced a new edition every two years. Even the death of Richard Cook after the eighth edition did not disturb this schedule. The current edition, the ninth, appeared late last year.

The heart of the *Penguin Guide* is the writing of Cook and Morton. They are both informative and entertaining and maintain their high standard throughout the 1,545 pages of reviews. The *Guide* is excellent company on a cold or rainy evening; it is difficult to put it down at bedtime. You will come across fascinating tidbits every time you pick up the book. Do you know who was first to record the Thelonious Monk composition “Round Midnight”? Our own Cootie Williams in 1944. If you are looking to round out your Ellington collection or to explore an artist and you don’t know just where to begin, there is no better source.

Aside from the excellent writing, there are two other notable features of the *Penguin Guide to Jazz*. First, it has a rating system where four stars is the highest rating, but some recordings are singled out as appropriate for a Core Collection of jazz or are the authors’ personal favorites, in which case they get a Crown in addition to the four stars. The rating system is actually useful. If, for example, you want to investigate the music of Sun Ra, the *Guide* points you to the album *Jazz in Silhouette*, which is indeed quite remarkable. The second notable feature is an extensive index. This allows you to find, for example, recordings by Clark Terry even when he is not the leader.

Using the ninth edition, a reader wishing to start an Ellington collection would be directed first to buy the albums *Never No Lament* (which covers the Blanton-Webster years), the new Storyville reissue of *The Duke at Fargo* (recorded by our own Jack Towers), *Ellington at Newport*, and *The New Orleans Suite*. If you already have the beginning of an Ellington collection, the book can suggest where to go next. You can also read sound advice on where to start your Ben Webster or Johnny Hodges collection of solo albums.

The only major shortcoming of the book is the selection of vocalists. Johnny Hartman is included, but Frank Sinatra is not. If Frank Sinatra is not included in a book that covers jazz vocalists, then there is no reason to include any vocalists at all. A minor shortcoming is that the authors drop reviews of albums that are no longer in print, but the book is massive enough anyway. If you are thinking that a massive book must cost massive dollars, rest easy. The book lists for \$35.00, but can be had at *amazon.com* for only \$23.10. A small price to help you spend your Duke Ellington quarters more wisely.

Commentary

The Echoes of Ellington Conference sponsored by the Butler School of Music and the University of Texas at Austin, 15-17 April, falls between the printing of this issue of *Ellingtonia* and its distribution. Hence, there is no coverage.

However, through the conference website we have learned that the presenters of papers are, by and large, academicians. Given the event’s venue and context, they could contribute new perspectives and approaches to the study of Ellington and Strayhorn and their art. Likely there is an incipient Hoefsmit, Massagli, van de Leur, Tucker, or Stratemann among the younger ones. An “independent scholar” on the program is Bill Saxonis, well known among the international community of respected Ellington scholars, researchers, writers, and other types of devotees.

We anticipate that the event will be enhanced by the presence of speakers John Franceschina, whose fine book *Duke Ellington’s Music for the Theatre* is a major contribution in a relatively unexamined field, and by John Howland, whose just-released book *Ellington Uptown* (which we hope to review in our next issue) explores a fresh topic—Duke, James P. Johnson, and others “and the Birth of Concert Jazz.” Finally, the production of *Queenie Pie* and a concert of Ellington music by the University of Texas Orchestra can be enlightening as well as entertaining.

Another Celebration of Billy Strayhorn

Dayton, Ohio will salute Billy Strayhorn in a week-long celebration of his life and music, 11-18 April. Though he grew up in Pittsburgh, Strayhorn was born in Dayton, that city will proudly tell you. It has already honored two other Dayton-based Ellington orchestra alumna, Mitchell “Booty” Wood and Norris Turney.

The sponsor, Cityfolk, among other attractions has planned films, talk sessions, instrumental ensembles and the Stivers School of the Arts Jazz Orchestra performances. Several radio broadcasts will focus on Strayhorn, notably the Jazz Nights show on Tuesdays over WYSO 91.3FM. The online announcement—which includes a listening guide, introductory essay by David Hadju, event line-up, and a reading guide—can be a short course on Strayhorn, especially for those not familiar with him and his art. For more information about this important happening, go online to Cityfolk’s Web site at www.cityfolk.org/celebratingstrayhorn/listen.

Short Sheets . . .

♫ Ben's 100th ♫

March 28 marked the centennial of Ben Webster's birth date.

♫ Sad News ♫

Birgit Åslund, widow of Benny Åslund, died on 7 February. A funeral was scheduled for 10 March in Järfälla. In the current issue of DEMS Bulletin, Benny's friend and successor as editor of the publication, writes that she gave him great help in his running of the Duke Ellington Music Society and "was not only a perfect cook and a lovely wife, but she was also Benny's greatest support..."

♫ UCLA Festival for Duke's 110th Birthday ♫

Among performers at an April "Festival of Music" celebrating the 110th anniversary of Ellington's birthday at the University of California, Los Angeles were Kenny Burrell, UCLA Philharmonia Orchestra, violinist Lesa Terry, vocalist Dee Dee Bridgewater, UCLA Jazz Orchestra, and special guests, among them Herb Jeffries.

Folkways Plans 110-Track Boxed Set

According to a recent media announcement, the release of *Jazz: The Smithsonian Anthology* under it's the Smithsonian's Folkways label is "impending."

As planned, the multi-CD set and accompanying book with photographs will cover the history of jazz and its place in global music.

Dennis Askey, 1910-2009

Dennis Askey, a noted collector of Duke Ellington materials and former Foreign Service Officer with the US Information Agency, died in Washington, DC on 8 March. He was a friend of music greats, including Ellington. In a Washington *Post* obituary photo, he is shown along with Duke and former Princess Suga in Tokyo in 1970.

In 2000 the Felix Grant Collection at the University of the District of Columbia acquired from Askey an audio-taped collection of 149 10-inch reels from some 570 Ellington performances, 1924-47.

Mr. Askey's comprehensive personal collection is now being offered by Brita Askey, his widow, as a whole set. The collection includes 78-rpm recordings (1924-1947), CDs, videos, custom cassettes, and a 168-page matching discography. There are also books, and Aasland, Lord, Timmer, DEMS, DESOR, etc. "associated research files."

It was Dennis Askey's wish that his collection go to an Ellington devotee rather than to a museum or other repository. For more information, seriously interested persons should contact Mrs. Askey at 560 N Street, SW, Apt. N-40I, Washington, DC 20024, USA or online at britaaskey@earthlink.net.

Smithsonian Events Observe Jazz Appreciation Month

"*Anatomy of a Murder: An Ellington Classic Reconsidered*" was the topic of a presentation by Reuben Jackson at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History on 4 April. (His writing, we thankfully say, graces our pages from time to time.)

On the same day a "Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn: Jazz Composers and Their Signature Works" exhibit opened at the same Museum. Running until 28 June, it concentrates on two "ubiquitous" pieces, "Caravan" and "Take the 'A' Train."

Favorite Late 1920s Recordings

by Ben Pubols

Recently, Martin Thach, a frequent contributor to the Duke-LYM online discussion group, queried contributors regarding their favorite Ellington recordings from the late 1920s. Each respondent was allowed to submit two titles, and 18 individuals responded. The winners were:

"Black Beauty" (piano version) - 4 times

"The Mooch" - 4 times

"Awful Sad" - 3 times

The following received two votes each: "Black Beauty" (orchestral version), "Black and Tan Fantasie," "Birmingham Breakdown," "Creole Love Call," "Saturday Night Function," "Down' The Room Room."

What would your choices have been?

Ed Note: We thank Ben Pubols for this contribution, and we thank you in advance for your response to his closing question.

JJA Awards Nominees

Among nominees in various categories for Jazz Journalists Association honors for 2008 are:

Record: *Ten* by Anthony Brown's Asian American Orchestra

Drummer: Anthony Brown

Best Periodical Covering Jazz: *IAJRC Journal*, *DEMS Bulletin*, and *Blue Light*

Best Book about Jazz: *Backstory in Blue: Ellington at Newport '56* by John Fass Morton.

Quotation of the Month

Two Things You Never Knew About Duke Ellington:

"Number one, man, he was the only person I know that sent his Christmas cards out in July. And the other thing is, You'll be talking to Duke and you'll want to say no, and he'll make you say yes. If you want to say yes, he'll make you say no."

– Chico Hamilton as quoted by Jeff Tamarkin in "Chico Hamilton," *Jazz Times*, September 2008.

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

As one of 12 artists invited under the Helsinki Cultural Exchange Program, Davey Yarborough recently spent a week in Helsinki. He visited Finnish Music Conservatory and a university, experienced the music scene there, and exchanged cultural ideas and information.

Patricia Willard

Patricia Willard has written a splendid article on Louie Bellson that appears in the current issue of *DEMS Bulletin*, available at www.depanorama.net/dems/091.

Esther Williams

Esther Williams won the Washington Area Music Association's "Wammie" in the Gospel/Inspirational category for her vocals on the 2008 CD *In the Spirit* by her and husband Davey Yarborough. A versatile vocalist, last year she won the "Wammie" in the Jazz Vocalist category.



*Celebrate
Jazz
Appreciation
Month*

Founded in 2001 by John E. Hasse, Curator of American Music at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, Jazz

Appreciation Month annually focuses on jazz as an authentic American art form. Nationally and internationally it is celebrated by performers, institutions, organizations, government entities, students, clubs, and music-loving private persons.

"Live it, learn it, love it" serves as a theme for much that is available to the general public through JAM about this American-born and now international art form.

One can go online to www.smithsonianjazz.org/jam to learn about engagingly varied events and resources widely available. For instance, one can access a map there, click on a specific locale, and learn what's going on there jazz-wise during the JAM. One can also find links there to a directory of jazz societies, a guide for school programs, FAQ, and much more.

This year's poster features Benny Goodman, whose centennial is celebrated this year. Copies of free posters for schools, libraries, radio and tv stations, clubs can be downloaded in PDF format or requested by e-mail at jazz@si.edu.

Backstory on *Backstory in Blue*

by Art Luby, Secretary

On April 4, at one of the best attended meetings of the year, the Society hosted John Fass Morton, author of *Backstory in Blue: Ellington at Newport '56*, an account of the events leading to and from the Ellington Orchestra's famous performance at the 1956 Newport Jazz Festival.

The story of the rendition that evening of "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue," and the remarkable solo by Paul Gonsalves that bridged the two movements of the piece, is well trodden ground, and Mr. Morton described his efforts to bring a new perspective to the event. This was accomplished by describing the "backstory," that is, the social and economic context in which the performance was delivered, a matter that required examination of the development of the technology of recording live performance, as well as the decline in the fortunes of big bands and the city of Newport itself in post-war America.

However, the backstory's poignant elements are provided in the account of the fates of the two protagonists to the evening's events, Paul Gonsalves and Elaine Anderson, the Fall River housewife responsible for the impromptu dance that expressed the audience's excitement at Gonsalves' historic solo. Both were troubled figures who spent the balance of their lives unmoored from their families and, in very different ways, in the shadow of Newport '56.

Mr. Morton was generous with his time and was available to anyone who wanted to discuss a recollection of the Newport performance or the members of the Ellington Orchestra who delivered it. Our meeting was, all in all, a unique and very worthwhile evening.

To Join or To Renew Membership

Mail your check payable to

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

Our dues remain a bargain:

**Member, \$30; Couple, \$50; Student, \$5;
First-time-ever member, just \$20.**

Keep in mind that memberships are for the calendar year.

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