

# Ellingtonia

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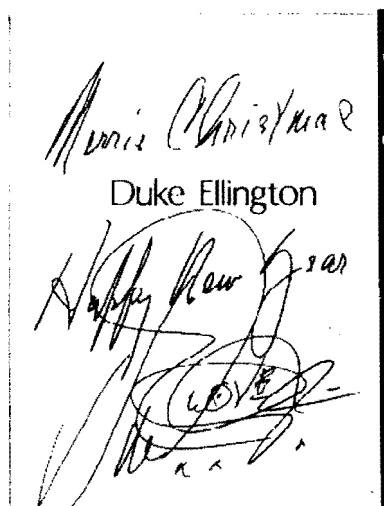
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Theodore R. Hudson, Editor

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The inside of this undated card has printed lyrics from "Something About Believing" from his Sacred Concerts.

Courtesy Duke Ellington Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

## Duke Ellington and The Great American Song!

by Peter MacHare, Program Coordinator

For our December program, John Gray and Peter MacHare will present some of Duke Ellington's contributions to the Great American Songbook. After our November program featuring Billy Strayhorn's compositions, it seemed natural to feature Duke the very next month. What could be more enjoyable than hearing great vocalists singing great songs!

Come one, come all to **Grace Lutheran Church at 16th and Varnum Streets, NW in Washington, DC on Saturday, 5 December at 7 pm.**

## Ellington Orchestra Concert at Strathmore a Delight

The Duke Ellington Orchestra under the direction of Barrie Lee Hall, Jr., opened swinging that wonderful ensemble passage in the middle of the later, extended version of "Perdido" at its concert sponsored by the Baltimore Symphony at the Music Center of the Strathmore cultural and arts complex in North Bethesda, MD on 5 November.

While Hall was the only one who had actually performed with the orchestra led by Duke himself, this aggregation of talented musicians admirably achieved the "Ellington effect." The soloists "played themselves" with imagination, verve, and enthusiasm, and the section and ensemble work was superb.

The program consisted of richly varied Ellington and Strayhorn creations. Of course, the offerings included pieces that Duke included in his canonical medleys. After all, what would be an Ellington concert be without "The Mooch," this one with Mark Gross, clarinet, and Hall, muted trumpet, distinguishing themselves; a "Sophisticated Lady" spotlighting Robert Landham on baritone sax; "Satin Doll," with lovely piano and bass by Lafayette Harris and Hassan Ash-Shakur respectively; and "Things Ain't What They Used to Be" with Hall and altoist Charlie Young telling them what it had been *and still is* all about.

Though this is in a sense a repertory band, it is not a slavish one. They captured much of the spirit of "Jubilee Stamp," a joyous treat from "back in the day" (c.1928) that proved to be a wonderful opportunity for a string of the artists to get in their licks. "Cotton Club Stomp," another swinger that stuck close to the original, evoked a swirling period floor show. Later works, from perhaps what could be called Duke's middle period, included "Oclupaca," and "3-Cent Stomp." Extended works were represented by tango-flavored "Dance #3" from *The Liberian Suite* with Hall playing the opening trumpet passage and trumpeter Kevin Bryan ascending to way up there at its end, and by buoyant "Anitra's Dance" from *The Peer Gynt Suite* with punchy and deftly executed section passages work.

*Continued on page 3 under "Ellington Concert"*

## **Being Prez: The Life and Music of Lester Young, by Dave Gelly**

Oxford University Press, 2007. 171 pages. Illustrated. \$23.95.

Reviewed by Ben Pubols

“But you take a person like me. I stay by myself, so how do you know anything about me?” This quote from Lester Young appears at the beginning of this excellent biography. The British musician, musicologist and author Dave Gelly, learned a lot about Prez in researching this highly readable book. And there is an Ellington connection that I will get to below.

The book essentially follows a chronological order, covering many well-known aspects of Prez’s life and career, his indebtedness to Frankie Trumbauer, his difficulties as a member of the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra, his great times with the Count Basie Orchestra, his musical partnership with Billie Holiday, his horrible experience in the United States Army during World War II, his appearance in the delightful short movie *Jammin’ the Blues*, and his JATP tours. Not so well known were his early membership in the King Oliver aggregation, or his later-day 1956 appearances in Washington, D.C. with the Bill Potts Trio (now available on CD).

But there is much else regarding Prez the person, such as his introversion and his unique vocabulary, including introduction of the terms “bread” and “cool” as we now use them, and his use of the phrase “I feel a draft.” Prez insisted on knowing the lyrics of the ballads he played (“Then you can go for yourself and know what you’re doing.”). Also of interest were his verbal exchanges with friend Herschel Evans (Evans: “Why don’t you buy an alto, man? You only got an alto tone.” Young, tapping his forehead: “There’s things goin’ on up here, man. Some of you guys are all belly.”). In contrast to many jazz musicians, he disdained musicians who tried to emulate his sound and style, referring to them as copycats. In response to being told that such and such “sounds just like you,” he replied, “Then who am I?”

Finally, the Ellington connection. Prez and Ben Webster were both born 100 years ago this year. In 1929, when Prez was playing in his father’s touring band, at the time headquartered in Albuquerque, NM, Ben Webster was learning to read music and taking tenor sax lessons from Prez’s father, Billy. During a swimming outing Prez was struggling against the currents of the Rio Grande river and Ben pulled him to safety.

Without Ben Webster there would have been a Lester Young but no Prez!

## **Duke Ellington: His Life in Jazz with 21 Activities, by Stephanie Stein Crease**

Chicago Review Press, January 2009. For Kids Series-Ages 9 & up. 148 pp. \$16.95.

Reviewed by Luvenia A. George

“The story of jazz is a long list of great names, rather like those lists of kings and queens and presidents in history books. Divided up by instruments instead of countries, you can easily trace how the crown was passed down . . .” (from: “Jazz for Young People” by Duke Ellington). Stephanie Stein Crease has written an excellent book about Duke Ellington for young people, placing him so solidly within the socio-cultural context of his time that the man and his music come to vivid life with every turn of the page. By the time they reach the end of the book, the readers will have encountered many of the “long list of great names” that make up the history of jazz and learn of their influences on both Ellington and American music.

Stein Crease cites Scott Joplin and ragtime, W.C. Handy and the blues, composer and conductor Will Marion Cook’s advice to young Duke to “don’t try to be anybody else but yourself,” band leader Fletcher Henderson, composer/pianist James P. Johnson, and others are usually not mentioned in books for children and youth when the story of jazz is told. Above all, the men for whom Ellington composed, his band members, are acknowledged as the artists and inspirations that they were. Drummers Sonny Greer, Louis Bellson, Sam Woodyard; trumpeters Bubber Miley, Cootie Williams, Cat Anderson; saxophonists Harry Carney, Johnny Hodges, Ben Webster, Paul Gonsalves . . . I’ve got to stop—but it’s a wonderful assignment to give a class: list the names of the players on the recordings listened to in class and find out something about them .

The 21 activities that accompany the text are excellent: they challenge students to dance the Lindy Hop, with instructions and suggested recordings listed. This is a perfect activity, since jazz was written to be danced to. The kids can also do their own dances to jazz—the beat is still there! Other activities include making costumes for a floor show, with the Cotton Club shows in mind; creating original posters; writing liner notes to CD’s, and (here’s a good one) making corn bread for a rent party!

This book is well written by an author who knows her subject well. It’s a real “page turner” that not only young people will enjoy, but adults will find equally entertaining. Like jazz itself, it bridges the gap between Generation X and the elders—an “equal opportunity” joy to read.

## Short Sheets . . .

### ♪ Orchestra to Japan ♪

Following several engagements in the United States, the Duke Ellington Orchestra is scheduled to travel to Japan to perform at the Cotton Club in Tokyo, 18-24 November.

### ♪ No. Say It Ain't So! ♪

In an e-mail Reuben Jackson, so uniquely savvy about things Ellington at the Archives Center and so helpful to researchers using the resources there, informs that he is leaving at the end of the year. He is taking advantage of an "early retirement" program at the Smithsonian.

## What's in a Name?

In our November issue, we included an item from Ben Pubols about a character in a television drama who is given the name Quentin Jackson, so named because his father had been an Ellington fan.

Well, Ben tops himself this time with characters in a 1987 *Murder She Wrote* television production: Louis Metcalf, Fred Jenkins, Dr. Cliff Strayhorn, Capt. Whetsel, Otto Hardwick, Leon Bigard, Carney, Blanton, Mr. Miley, Mrs. Metcalf, Kay Davis, Mrs. Miley, and Sonny Greer.

## Ellington Concert (Continued from page 1)

Strayhorn was well represented by an engagingly interpreted "Lush Life" by tenor saxophonist Bobby LaVelle, and "Take the 'A' Train" provided Hall and trumpeter James Zollar a setting to exchange spirited pleasantries.

To the listeners' (and the band's) delight, masterful bassist Ash-Shakur had fun with "Jack the Bear," and it seemed as though practically everyone in the whole orchestra "got some" either down front or with his section on "Jam with Sam."

For many, the definitive high point of the whole evening occurred when a seemingly palpable stillness fell over the audience as a trio of Hall, Landham, and trombonist Dion Tucker eased into the *mysterioso* of "Mood Indigo." Pure magic!

The evening ended as if had begun, swinging. The encore was "Cotton Tail" at flag-waver tempo, with two bunnies (that's what leader Hall called them) Lavelle and Shelley Paul chasing each other on tenors. And that reed section passage was something to hear!

*Personnel: leader: Barrie Lee Hall, Jr.; trumpets: Kevin Bryant, Chris Albert, James Zollar, Ravi Best; trombones: Stafford Hunter, Dion Tucker, Jack Jeffers; tenor saxophones: Robert LaVelle, Shelly Paul; alto saxophones: Charlie Young, Mark Gross; baritone saxophone: Robert Landham; bass: Hassan Ash-Shakur; drums: Marty Morell; piano: Lafayette Harris*

## Catherine McPhail Passes

Catherine Gant McPhail, widow of Ellington vocalist Jimmy McPhail and a member of our Society, died on 6 November in Atlanta, GA while visiting her daughter Sharon, who had just won an award as teacher-of-the-year there.

Funeral services for Mrs. McPhail were held in her native Washington, DC on 16 November.

In addition through her husband's professional ties to Ellington, she had personal ties to the Ellington family. Her parents were classmates of Duke and Edna Thompson, whom he married. Edna and Mrs. McPhail's mother remained dear friends throughout their lives, and Jimmy sang at Mrs. Ellington's funeral. And while Duke's grandchildren Gaye and Eddie were attending college in Washington, for them the McPhails' home was a welcoming place where they could stop by to relax off campus (and enjoy Catherine's cooking).

Mrs. McPhail was an uncommonly gracious and loving person who will be deeply missed. We extend our sincere sympathy to her children Sharon McPhail Brake and James E. McPhail, other relatives, and many friends.

## New Washingtonians Alumnus Wins Prestigious Monk Competition

Ben Williams, a graduate of the Duke Ellington School of the Arts, earned first place in this year's Thelonius Monk Institute of Jazz Competition. He will receive a \$20,000 scholarship from the Monk Institute and a contract with Concord Records. The competition focuses on a different instrument each year, and this year it was for Williams' instrument, the string bass.

While a student at the Ellington School in 2002, Williams was the recipient of one of our Society's Student Fund Awards. After graduation, he went on to earn a degree from Michigan State University and is now a student at Julliard.

For the performance competition among 15 semi-finalists on 10 October at the Smithsonian Institution, Williams played "Caravan," accompanied by vocalist Dee Dee Bridgewater, pianist Geoff Keezer, and drummer Carl Allen.

Established stars who performed at the Monk Institute awards ceremony, held at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC on 11 October, included Dianne Reeves, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Jimmy Heath, Ron Carter, Nicholas Payton, Joe Lovano, Terence Blanchard, and Bobby McFerrin. According to the *Washington Post*, "But no one got a bigger hand than Ben Williams, the new hometown hero."

**"Dramatis Felidae"** (To Use Our Man's Term from *M/M/M*)**About Our Members****Anthony Brown**

Dr. Anthony Brown and his Asian American Orchestra performed his "India & Africa: A Birthday Tribute to John Coltrane" for a special celebration of Coltrane's birthday at Yoshi's in San Francisco in September. According to a media release, Brown "has consistently maintained that Coltrane's music globally inspired other musicians to *explore* music, particularly from a spiritual center."

In October he was in Baltimore as a panelist for a program sponsored by the Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation and several days later gave a public talk at the University of Maryland, College Park, on "Translating History into Music: Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the Japanese Internment Camps." He also visited classrooms, and otherwise participated in a series of events sponsored by the Japanese Program of the School of Languages, Literature, and Culture, the Asian American Studies Program, and the Center for East Asian Studies.

**Maude Harrison-Hudson**

We heartily welcome our very first "brand new" member for 2010, the Rev. Maude Harrison-Hudson.

**Luvenia George**

Dr. Luvenia George is assisting in the preparation of curriculum materials for school principals for the Smithsonian's next Jazz Appreciation Month, April 2010.

**Lois Moody**

Lois Moody writes from Ottawa that "our Impressions in Jazz Orchestra presented another fine tribute to Ellington with an early September program marking key periods in the orchestra's development. Thoroughly enjoyed it."

**Ken Steiner, Sjef Hoefsmit, Morris Hodara, and Peter MacHare**

A number of entries from fresh research by Ken Steiner are in the "latest up-date" of *Duke Ellington Directory/Itinerary*, dated 15 August 2009, compiled by Klaus Götting. Sjef Hoefsmit's *DEMS Bulletin* 1979/1-2009/2 is listed as a major source of data.

In the "Acknowledgments" of her book, *Duke Ellington: His Life in Jazz*, Stephanie Stein Crease gives "special thanks" to Morris Hodara.

At the beginning of *Duke Ellington: A Survey of His Music*, Hans-Joachim Schmidt prominently thanks Peter MacHare for being "a guide from the very beginning" and Sjef Hoefsmit for "always able and willing to answer my questions." A copy of the survey can be obtained via <http://themenschmidt.de/duke>

**November Is for Billy**

by Art Luby, Secretary

For any devotee of jazz in general and the Ellington legacy in particular, there are few better ways of spending an evening than reviewing the music of Billy Strayhorn. This unique and immensely significant body of work was the subject of November's meeting, which is, of course, the month of Billy's birth in 1915. The general rule was to feature recordings in which Strayhorn actually played his own music, almost always working with Ellington sidemen or singers.

Accordingly, members brought wonderful recordings of Billy's playing, including one with Joya Sherrill on "A Flower Is a Lovesome Thing," another with the highly underrated Ozzie Bailey on "I Want Something to Live For." and a recording of Carmen McCrae covering the same number with Billy's assistance to great effect. Ben Webster, the original soloist on "Chelsea Bridge," was also heard teamed up with Billy late in both of their lives generating a longer and warmer version of that great classic.

Several exceptions were made to the above operating rule. Gregory Hines and Phylis Hyman's Broadway version of "Take the A Train" was presented, as was the immortal Coltrane/Hartman recording of "Lush Life." One of the final recordings of the program was Johnny Hodges' poignant rendition of "Blood Count," a performance included as part of *And His Mother Called Him Bill*, one of the finest albums ever produced by a jazz orchestra.

Any one present couldn't help but leave with a greater appreciation not only of Strayhorn's music, but also his subtle, powerful piano style.

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Keep in mind that memberships are for the calendar year.

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