

Ellingtonia

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Theodore R. Hudson, Editor

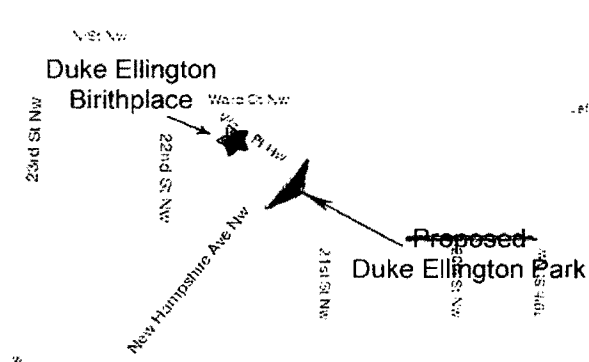
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Now It's Officially Duke Ellington Park

In our last issue we reported a movement to name the triangular park in Northwest Washington bordered by New Hampshire Avenue, 21st Street, and M Street the Duke Ellington Park. Legislation designating it as such has been passed by the City Council.

The location is fitting, for the block of Ward Place where Ellington was born ends where it meets New Hampshire Avenue, the western side of the triangle.



To celebrate this signal honor, a ceremony and a concert at the park on 29 April featured King James and the Serfs of Swing playing Ellington and Strayhorn music. Additionally, a number of fashionable restaurants, hotels, and other establishments in the area featured only Ellington music for the entertainment of their guests during the evening.

The initiative to name the park in honor of Ellington had originated with West End Friends, a neighborhood group. This organization presented the idea to the Advisory Neighborhood Commission; it promptly and unanimously approved a resolution and forwarded it to the City Council for consideration.

Now there is already talk about having a statue of Ellington placed in the gem-like park and to have an annual commemorative concert there on his birthday.

Bring a Favorite Ellington Recording

by Peter MacHare, Program Coordinator

Our last program of the season will be a member's choice—bring a favorite Ellington recording and tell us a little about it. This will be an opportunity for some of our newer members to share their interests. On a member's choice night, each person may bring a recording (CD is easiest, but we can also play from a cassette, VHS tape, or DVD). Feel free to bring two or three recordings; we may get to them if there is time.

The program will be at **7 pm on Saturday, 5 June at Grace Lutheran Church at 16th and Varnum Streets, NW, Washington, DC.**

All for the Love of Duke

Our Society could use a volunteer to coordinate snacks and refreshments for our monthly programs. This service involves arranging for someone to volunteer each month (October to June, excepting January when we have our party).

If you would like to help us out, get in touch with Peter MacHare at spmachare@yahoo.com or at 301-982-4249.

Condolences

Martha Randall Hunter died suddenly on Sunday, 18 April in Washington, DC. She and her husband, William, have been members of our Society for about two decades.

Funeral services for Mrs. Hunter were held at the Simpson-Hamline United Methodist Church in Washington on 23 April.

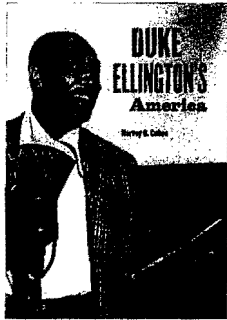
We extend to William, other members of the family, and her many other loved ones our heartfelt sympathy.

Duke Ellington's America by Harvey G. Cohen

Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010. 688 pp. \$40. ISBN-13-978-0-226-11263-3.

Reviewed by Scott W. Schwartz

Harvey Cohen's voluminous publication on America's greatest twentieth-century composer, bandleader, and music bon vivant, *Duke Ellington's America*, provides readers with a diverse contextual analysis of the individuals, organizations, and American culture that shaped Ellington's life and music throughout his professional career. Unlike several past monographs written about Duke Ellington, either couched in sentimentality, excoriation, unreliable generality, or fan-like adulation, Cohen's work is based largely on the historical documents produced by Ellington and his music organization as well as the extensive array of oral history interviews with family, friends, band members, and business associates. The final section of the book occupies 84 pages of end notes and bibliographic citations. In addition, Cohen includes thoughtful commentaries, when appropriate, from other recognized Ellington scholars to solidify crucial points, for example Walter van de Leur regarding Billy Strayhorn and Mark Tucker regarding Ellington's compositional process.



Cohen's narrative is well written and his chronological presentation of Ellington's life is a pleasant read for any individual interested in gaining a better understanding of the complex social, economic, cultural, and artistic influences that defined Duke and his music. For this reviewer Cohen's quick reference to John Philip Sousa's early twentieth-century efforts to disprove "the widely accepted premise that American musicians and composers could not be as skilled as those from Europe" was a pleasant surprise because both men led world-renowned bands, one symphonic wind ensemble and the other big band jazz, whose primary focus was the creation of quality musical entertainment. Both men wrote for and maintained large, successful ensembles throughout their professional careers, bands that were essentially the voice for their artistic expression. While we often don't associate these two great American musicians and band leaders because of the different artistic genres that they worked within, nearly everyone around the world today recognizes Ellington's and Sousa's music as world-class and distinctly American.

Cohen's chapter on Ellington's relationship with Irving Mills is particularly noteworthy because it illustrates Mill's long-term impact on some of Ellington's business practices and management decisions in his later years. In addition the chapters devoted to Ellington's and Strayhorn's thematic recordings and Ellington's difficult challenges with the IRS are also informative and shed additional light on these two arresting areas of Ellington's life. Overall the most interesting aspects of this book are the numerous examples of how Ellington adapted himself and his music to the country's constantly evolving racial complexities, but never allowed himself to be narrowly defined by race. In many respects these examples help shed further light on the unique mosaic that we've come to understand is Ellington.

Like most things in life the book is not without some minor flaws that are often inherent in such expansive biographies of complex individuals like Duke Ellington. Cohen's title, *Duke Ellington's America*, clearly reflects his desire to document American culture's impact on Ellington, but this effort occasionally created situations where large amounts of information pertaining to many different historical and cultural events are compressed into a single chapter's content, which make it difficult to understand a chapter's primary focus. This situation is most pronounced in the first chapter, "Washington/New York." For the remainder of the book this is an infrequent occurrence and when it does occur it is always related to a specific composition or event (e.g., *Black, Brown and Beige* on pp. 213-229). While the book's numerous footnotes and thoughtful narrative provide exceptionally detailed information about Ellington's life, there were situations when this reader was left hanging when additional information was not provided by Cohen (e.g., "The move to New York did not work out as well for Ellington and his wife Edna – they separated about a year afterward, and Mercer mainly lived with his grandparents" on p. 81).

Overall this is an exceptional book that makes great use of the primary source information that is preserved at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. Cohen's publication is a welcome addition to the recent scholarship on Ellington. While its imposing mass of information will not be something that one should expect to casually consume in a couple of days of leisurely reading, its content provides substantive research that is easily understood and clearly presented. If this book is not currently part of any Ellington aficionado's or scholar's reference collection, then their book collection is woefully lacking.

Duke's Spiritual Life Is Hasse's Topic for Baccalaureate Address

John E. Hasse, author of *Beyond Category* and Curator of Music at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, was selected to deliver the address at George Washington University's Interfaith Baccalaureate on 15 May as part of its Commencement Weekend. His topic was Ellington's spiritual journey, during which he also made reference to Dave Brubeck's sacred music.

The next day First Lady Michelle Obama was the commencement speaker and, along with Brubeck, was awarded an honorary doctorate. This program included a performance of Ellington's "Come Sunday" and a performance of a brief Brubeck piece.

Bay Area Society Comes to an End

We sadly report the demise of the Bay Area Duke Ellington Society. Around 1996, Claire Gordon single-handedly started the organization and held the first few meetings on the Peninsula. When two members found a venue in San Francisco, meetings were then held there and things went along fine. However, by the time Ms. Gordon moved to another part of California, for various reasons the number of members had begun to decline, but they were not replaced by new persons. She gave advice from afar and even went back a few times and spoke on a local jazz station. Unfortunately, despite subsequent efforts by another person to keep the group viable, but it did not come about.

Quotation of the Month

The autograph [music manuscript in Duke's hand] and copyright scores of *Black, Brown and Beige* reveal some fascinating information about Ellington's composing practices. For example, on the opening pages of the *Beige* autograph there are asterisks indicating six different high-pitched vertical chords-clusters (seven or eight interlocking notes) identified by the numbers 1 through 6. These clusters, led by a clarinet in its highest register, function as "hits"—short, sharp chords that punctuate the wild jungle theme being grunted out by low trombones and baritone sax. The numbers are shorthand for the clusters when next they appear, relieving Ellington from having to write out the seven or eight interlocking notes every time. On the bottom margin of the first page of the autograph, Ellington identifies the asterisks as "Piano Theme." Why are the clusters called "Piano Theme"? The first five clarinet notes at the top of the clusters spell out (in minor) a variant of the theme from "Work Song," with its characteristic falling fifth and rising third.

— Maurice Peress, *Dvořák to Duke Ellington*.

Our Youngest Ever Member Is Heading for College in the Fall

It all started during Black History Month when Erica MacHare's kindergarten teacher asked her very young pupils to name an African-American whom they admire. Having watched *Black and Tan* with her dad, Peter, Erica chose Fredi Washington because she felt sorry about her dying at the end of the movie.

And just like that, Erica became a dues paid student member of our Society and has remained so to this day.



Now it appears that our little girl is all - well, almost all - grown up. She graduates from Elizabeth Seton High School this June, where she is on the honor roll. Her special interests and hobbies include Japanese animation and creative writing. Erica is also quite an artist, excelling particularly at drawing. And let's not forget that she continues to serve as the Distribution Director for our newsletter.

Erica plans to attend either Frostburg State University or Montgomery College in the fall and major in art and design.

Congratulations, Erica MacHare! We are very proud of you, our youngest ever member.

Morris Hodara Honored

In a program on 19 May that featured commendations, testimonials, and live music, TDES [the New York-based Ellington Society] paid tribute to Morris Hodara.

An announcement of the event in its newsletter states that "For many years, Morris has done the lion's share of the work of TDES." He served as its president from 1988-1994, is currently corresponding secretary, for many years edited the newsletter, and in many other ways has been a highly valued member. The article further notes that "For many people around the world, Morris Hodara has been the face of our society."

Congratulations, Morris. We love you madly!

Studios at Ellington School Available

Newly completed sound-proof recording studios at the Ellington School of the Arts can accommodate needs of individuals, ensembles and bands. According to an item in the school's publication *Rhythms*, the facility may be used by commercial clients at "competitive rates." Also, during May, school alumni are being offered discounted rates.

For more information, contact studio director Billy Hickey at 410-299-1260 or at billyhickey@gmail.com.

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

Mark Harvey

Rev. Mark Harvey and his Aardvark Jazz Orchestra, with special guest pianist Gerri Allen, presented a "Mary Lou Williams Centennial Celebration: From Swing to Sacred Music, a Journey of Faith" on 9 May at Boston College's Robsham Theatre. Enthusiasts will remember that Mary Lou Williams, whom Duke described as "perpetually contemporary," contributed "Trumpets No End" and, reportedly, some other arrangements to that orchestra's book. While married to Ellington trumpeter Harold "Shorty" Baker, she traveled with the band at times.

John E. Mason

One Love, Ghoema Beat, an exploration in words and photographs of the annual New Year Carnival in Cape Town, by Dr. John E. Mason has already been released

Focus Is on Versatile Alice Babs at April Meeting

by Don Rouse

Our contemporary Swedish Nightingale, Alice Babs (Alice Nilsson Sjöblom) was the exclusive May meeting focus. Her life, documented in the video *Alice Babs-Swing It*, is quite exceptional.

Starting life as a member of a family in poor circumstances, she became the teen idol Babs (and made her first movie in 1940, *Swing It, Teacher*, which has remained internationally popular), navigated occupied Scandinavia to present jazz concerts even though the Nazis were doing all they could to discourage it, worked with some mighty prestigious jazz musicians (Rolf Ericson, Arne Domnerus, Svend Asmussen, Stan Hasselgard), touring the US with some of them in a jazz vocal trio. Through the years her voice captured a broad repertoire: folk music,