

# Ellingtonia

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Theodore R. Hudson, Editor

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## Patricia Willard Speaks on Ellington's Involvement with Dance

Contributed by Rusty Hassan

"Dance: The Unsung Element of Ellingtonia" was the topic of Patricia Willard's lecture in the Jazz Forum Series at the University of the District of Columbia on November 17. She pointed out that Duke Ellington was renowned for his writing, piano playing, arrangements, and collaborations but little notice was given for his intense involvement with dance. The talk was based on an article she wrote for the *Antioch Review* in 1999.

Patricia's lecture was informal with numerous video clips that demonstrated that Duke not only performed music for dancing, he incorporated choreographed dance as an art form in his performances from his early years until the very end of his long career. Among the visual highlights were "Snakehips" Tucker dancing with Bessie Dudley in *Symphony in Black*, ballerina Janet Collins romantically entangled with Talley Beatty in the soundie of Herb Jeffries singing "Flamingo," and Carmen de Lavallade performing as Madame Zazie in *A Drum Is a Woman*.

Her commentaries on the clips were especially fascinating when she spoke of events in which she participated. For example, she connected Duke with choreographer Lester Horton, whose troupe performed *Liberian Suite*. He died in 1953 of a heart attack at age 47. A very young Alvin Ailey was introduced to Duke Ellington by Patricia Willard. Ellingtonia would be integral to the repertoire of the Alvin Ailey Dancers.

The visual finale of the program was Bunny Briggs tap dancing in San Francisco's Grace Cathedral in the First Concert of Sacred Music.

*(Continued on page 3 under "Duke and Dance")*



## It's Party Time!

by Peter MacHare, Program Coordinator

Our annual New Year's party will be on **Saturday, 8 January 2011 at 7 pm** in our usual meeting room at **Grace Lutheran Church, 4300 16th Street, NW**, at the corner of 16th and Varnum Streets, Washington, DC.

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

Members may bring guests.

## Thinking About Jazz Program Focuses on Duke Ellington

Contributed by Patricia Braxton

A presentation by pianist Vince Evans on "The Legacy of Duke Ellington's Life and Music," at Washington's Westminster Presbyterian Church on 11 December, was a really informative and fun program.

Evans, a pianist, composer and arranger from the Washington area, provided a teaching lesson on Ellington's music. He interspersed his own solo performances with both video and audio clips to highlight the voicings that Ellington used for the orchestra or to show some of the comping piano style that Ellington had picked up from Art Tatum, Willie "The Lion" Smith, or even Monk.

The event was part of a bi-monthly Thinking About Jazz series by the Southwest Renaissance Development Corporation of Washington, DC.

*Washington's U Street: A Biography*, by Blair A. Ruble

Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010.

Reviewed by Theodore (Ted) Hudson

This is a wonderful book. It belongs right there on the shelf beside Constance McLaughlin Green's monumental 1967 *The Secret City* and the 1983 *The WPA Guide to Washington, D.C.* by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the District of Columbia. Just think, this new book's range is from the Civil War to today's still evolving Shaw, or "New You," to use the author's term. Indeed, its all-encompassing scope was a challenge that the author met admirably.

Clearly, Mr. Ruble is a skilled aggregator and synthesizer of material from written sources, so the generous "Notes" section that follows the body of the book is most welcome. [Ellington experts may recall the use of the word "aggregator" elsewhere, but not in the complimentary sense that we use it here.] Accordingly, in view of the wealth of in-text and notes citations of written sources, one might wish for a selected bibliography. As to tone and form, this work is more a scholarly, academic, topical chronology than an evolutionary, narrative *biography*. In other words, what we have here is an outstanding reference work, worthy of historians' praise.



The book is enhanced by maps, photographs, helpful index, and mini-profiles of several of the area's historically significant citizens—among them Civil War-era Major General Oliver Otis Howard, to 19th century public figure Alexander "Boss" Shepherd, to today's Adrian Fenty.

Omissions and misstatements are almost inevitable in ground-breaking, comprehensive studies of this sort, and there are a few here. For example, in a listing of area theaters, the Booker T, Raphael, Gem, Mid-City, and Broadway are not included. And popular music devotees may look in vain for the likes of historically significant figures such as Elmer Snowden, Jelly Roll Morton, Claude Hopkins, and even Bill Baldwin, who led the Lincoln Colonnade's "house band."

But for every minor omission or factual "clinker" there are intelligent discussions of major historical periods, personages, and events; lesser known but vital facts; and scores and scores of historical gems. Among the latter, for instance, we learn that today's Ben's Chili Bowl structure was at one time the, by later standards, tiny Minnehaha movie theater; that Carter G. Woodson, who would become the "Father of Negro History," was first a teacher and, although alumnus Duke Ellington had gone by then, later the principal of Armstrong High School. And we are glad that the invented history that contends that the Lincoln Theatre was a venue for shows featuring big bands is not perpetuated. Rather, the book correctly points out that the Lincoln Colonnade, physically under the theater, was such a venue.

Our readers are likely to be most interested in the chapter entitled "Black Broadway," for it was during this time and for a while thereafter that the U Street area was at its peak insofar as popular entertainment was concerned. There are those among our readers who remember it as a time when black restaurants, drug stores, flower shops, record stores, financial services, theaters, educational institutions, and other amenities and services in a vibrant neighborhood flourished; as a time when music entertainers played the Howard Theatre, dance halls, arenas, and other places. Week after week there would be Pops, Count, Pearl Baily, Barnet, Lunceford, Cab, Fats, Moms, Mills Brothers, Hamp, Godfather of Soul, Duke, et al in town. It was a time when one could see Sportin' Daniels strut his stuff along a busy street, catch the Homestead Grays baseball team at Griffith Stadium, take in a poetry reading by Langston Hughes, see a drama by the Howard Players, be inspired by a sermon by the Rev. Walter H. Brooks at the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church, and "Read all about it!" in the *Afro-American* newspaper.

Much of this milieu was to phase out, however. Desegregation/integration as public policy; domestic disturbances following the assassination of Dr. King; construction of the underground Metro, especially as it affected black businesses along U Street; and other factors contributed to the demise of the social, cultural, recreational, and commercial activities and institutions that had contributed to there being a "Black Broadway."

In his discussion of "The New You," the author asks, "[I]s U Street still a place where people come and go as they make the world richer and purer by adding more beauty to it? There is, indeed, no higher mission for an urban community to fulfill. Throughout its history until this very day, U Street has been one of the very few urban communities that rightfully can claim to have done so. The value of its future incarnations will be found in whether or not the people who make U Street 'new' will continue to add beauty to the world."

All told, *Washington's U Street: A Biography* is a meritorious study of a subject of considerable historical importance. Thank you, Mr. Ruble.

## Short Sheets . . .

### ♪ Not a Word -- Tsk! Tsk! ♪

On 14 November, "Travel," a regular Sunday supplement to the *Washington Post*, ran a feature article on Fargo, ND and another on Kansas City, MO. The author of the latter mentions having "spotted" the American Jazz Museum at 12th and Vine. But the Fargo article never even mentions what we all *know* is that town's greatest event in its cultural history.

### ♪ Bellson Artist Store ♪

Did you know that one may buy Louie Bellson drum cookies and embroidery as well as more expected items such as CDs, books, and T-shirts. For details, go to [www.louiebellson.com](http://www.louiebellson.com).

### ♪ Kelly-Strayhorn Theater ♪

From media releases, we learn that pittsburgh's Kelly-Strayhorn Theater "has increased [its] activity by 10%" and is launching new programs, artSEEDS for young audiences and FAMILYTime to engage families in arts activities. As you may already know, the theater is named in honor of Pittsburghers Gene Kelly and Billy Strayhorn. The web address is: [kelly-strayhorn.org](http://kelly-strayhorn.org)

### ♪ CT Autobiography in the Works ♪

Clark Terry's autobiography, as told to his wife Gwen, is planned for publication by the University of California Press next spring. On December 14, he became a nonagenarian and when asked what he wanted for his birthday, he reportedly said, "More birthdays."

## Did Duke Ellington Make the Cotton Club Famous or Was It the Other Way Around?

This is the opening sentence of Storyville's announcement of its recently released 2-CD *Duke Ellington at the Cotton Club*. We hope to have a review of it shortly.

## Duke and Dance (Continued from page 1)

The really special aspect of her presentation was Patricia stepping out of the role of Ellington scholar to tell stories about her personal involvement with Duke, Billy Strayhorn, and individual members of the band. The impact this had on the audience was clearly indicated after the discussion when Greg Osby came up to her and asked about his hero Johnny Hodges. We DC Ellingtonians have been blessed to hear a number of these stories at Society functions.

Special thanks go to Judy Kory and Michael Fitzgerald of the Felix Grant Jazz Archive for providing to a different audience the forum for Patricia to demonstrate the important connections that Duke Ellington had. Now all Patricia Willard needs is the wherewithal to get a book published and take the story to an even larger audience on a book signing tour.

## 2010 "Bests"

In *DownBeat's* "Best CDs of 2001" annual review of masterpieces, among the winners in the "historical" category is *Tenor Sax Legend: Live and Intimate* about Ben Webster.

In the *Washington Post's* 12 December *Book World*, its book critic Jonathan Yardley named *Duke Ellington's America* as one of the year's six best books about "notable lives," crediting author Harvey Cohen with having "unearthed a staggering amount of material . . ."

## Quotations of the Month

Usually we present a quotation each month for your consideration. We hope that they are both informative and interesting. We also hope that they are evocative, even provocative. In any event, we enthusiastically encourage you to send us your reactions and comments. We would also appreciate your contributing some. Following are several for your consideration this month.



Duke Ellington stands alone as the foremost American genius who remained loyal to the improvisational, tonal, and rhythmic endowments of African American music. His universe was an orchestra of brilliant jazz artists, one he never found wanting. With a light but firm tether, he drew and followed them along a trail of discovery, leaving glorious artifacts in his path

– Maurice Peress, *ending of Dvořák* to Duke Ellington



DE: Well, tell me what do you think if Rock and Roll?

BS: What I think of Rock and Roll? Well...

DE: Yes, that is a very good answer. Tell me, what do you think of jazz?

BS: What's that?

DE: Do you have a definition of jazz?

BS: Nothing that I could put my finger on.

DE: Yes. Do you contend the [sic] jazz like Don Shirley. That jazz is only a verb.

BS: Jazz is only a potpourri of vowels and consonants.

DE: Oh, I see. Well, thank you very much Mr. Strayhorn for allowing me the privilege of this interview...

– Unattributed "Duke Ellington Interviewing Billy Strayhorn," *Duke Ellington Society of Sweden Bulletin Nummer 4, November, 2010, Arg. 18.*



Show business motivation underlies Ellington's construction of numbers for the special solo talents of, say, Cootie Williams, Johnny Hodges, and Ben Webster, no more and no less than it underlies Shakespeare's compositions of soliloquies for the actor Burbage.

– Albert Murray, *The Hero and the Blues, 1973*

**"Dramatis Felidae"** (To Use Our Man's Term from *MMMM*)**About Our Members****Hugh (Rusty) Hassan**

As part of its Strathmore Education series, the Strathmore cultural center in North Bethesda, MD has scheduled Rusty Hassan for a program on "The Golden Era of Jazz in DC," at 11 am-12:30 pm on Monday, 17 January. The presentation promises "an insider's look at the Howard Theatre, Bohemian Caverns and One Step Down while listening to the music of Duke Ellington, Shirley Horn and Buck Hill . . ." Tuition is \$15, "Stars Price" \$13.50.

**Jehangir B. Dalal**

At the reception and concert in late October that launched the Ertegin Jazz Series at the Turkish Embassy Residence, Jehangir Dalal presented Ambassador Namik Han with a copy of a late 1940s issue of the *Record Changer*, in which there is an article by Nesuhi Ertegin on Benny Carter. A pleased Ambassador Tam graciously accepted this rare collector's item. At one time this Ertegin brother served as editor of that publication.

*Ed. Note: See our December issue for an account of this event that took place in late October at the official Residence.*

**Carol Mumin**

In a discussion of drama productions at the Lincoln Theatre, in his new book *Washington's U Street: A Biography* author Blair A. Ruble writes of Carol Mumin's play *Where Eagles Fly*, "the story of an elderly woman who fought to preserve the Shaw neighborhood and promote its history."

**Anthony Brown**

As a response to increasing violence in the Oakland and Bay Area community, through auspices of its Fifth Stream Music project, leader Anthony Brown and his Asian American Orchestra have been conducting a series of residences in public schools in the San Francisco area in an effort to use "the power of music to transform lives and celebrate American cultural diversity through the art form of jazz."

**Election Results**

As the outcome of the election at our regular meeting on 4 December, our officers remain in place for another term. Two members of our Board, Joseph and Olivia Macmillan, decided not to continue, and their places will be taken by Thomas E. Henderson and William McFadden.

We sincerely thank the McMillans for years of valuable service and congratulate and welcome our two new Board members.

**Billy Strayhorn Potluck**

by Art Luby, Secretary

The December meeting of our Society was an informal potluck affair, the potluck referring to a request that the members bring samples of Billy Strayhorn compositions or arrangements. The reason for the theme was, of course, that the December meeting came on the heels of the 95th anniversary of Billy Strayhorn's birth on November 29, 1915.

As it happened, obvious choices like "Lush Life" and the standard versions of "Take the 'A' Train" were passed over in favor of lesser known, but wonderful material such as "Transblucency" and selections from the *Afro Bossa Suite*. An updated version of "Take the 'A' Train" by Jonathan Gross and "Mack" Jay Jordan was played, and the Laurent Mignard Orchestra recording provided a lovely rendition of "Isfahan" from the *Far East Suite*. Strayhorn's understanding of the capabilities of the orchestra and its soloists rivaled Ellington's and, as was shown in a 1950s recording of "Autumn Leaves," his arrangements were at once sensual and reflective.

It would take many nights of listening to get a sense of the enormity of Strayhorn's contributions to the Ellington legacy, but his creative power is obvious from a potluck night of selections.

**Attention Members**

Please check your membership expiration date on the upper right of your address label. Remember, our membership is by the calendar year. Thank you.

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