

# Ellingtonia

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Theodore R. Hudson, Editor

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## Community Day and Gala Concert Mark Rebirth of Howard Theatre

On a balmy Monday, 9 April, Community Day began celebrations of the opening of the renovated Howard Theatre. A temporary outdoor stage was filled with dignitaries, program participants, and officials of hosts Howard Theatre, Inc. and Ellis Development.

A huge crowd cheered knowingly when Vincent Gray, Washington's mayor, declared, "It won't be the Howard Theatre of the jazz days, it won't be the Howard Theatre of the rhythm-and-blues days, it's going to be the Howard Theatre of the 21st century."

Community Day celebrated as well those who patronized the Howard "back in the day" when they saw Ella, Count, Red Foxx, Billie, James Brown, Mills Brothers, Supremes, and others there. Buses brought a number of the audience from community and senior centers.

Scores waited patiently to see the resplendent new interior. Huge murals of iconic entertainers adorn the walls. In place of rows of seats there are tables and chairs set up in supper club style. For a theatre type concert, a panel down front can be opened so that tables and their chairs can be stored and rows of chairs can be put in their space. The balcony now has banquettes.

On Thursday of the same week a black-tie, purple-carpet 101st Anniversary Opening Gala and Benefit Concert took place. Entertainers there included Smokey Robinson, Savion, Jimmy Heath, Diane Reeves, and Bill Cosby, who served as a surprise part-time MC.

Proceeds from this lavish affair will support construction of a Howard Theatre Culture and Education Center adjacent to the existing building. As planned, it will house a museum, classrooms, listening library, recording studio, donor lounge, and conference rooms.

A 20-foot tall sculpture of Duke has been installed at Ellington Plaza, situated at the front of the complex. It depicts him seated on a G-clef at a piano whose keys morph (modulate?) into notes that form an arc as they ascend around and above him. The stainless steel work was created by Zachary Oxman, winner of a design

## May Program: "Exploring Ellington"

by Peter MacHare, Program Coordinator

We have a sizeable influx of new members of late who have told us that they are just beginning their exploration of the vast world of Duke Ellington. Our May program will be the first in a series of programs geared toward these new members. In May, we will view some of Ellington's famous films from the first half of his long career. While doing so, we will introduce you to the players and some of the key concepts related to Ellington's music. I have no doubt our long-time members will enjoy viewing these classics and sharing their knowledge of Ellington. Many old films look out-of-date or corny when you see them now; this is almost never true of Ellington's films. They are hip, modern, and tasteful—just like the Duke.

Our program will be on **Saturday, 5 May, 7:00 pm**, at **Grace Lutheran Church, 16th and Varnum Sts, NW**, in Duke's hometown, beautiful **Washington, DC**. We look forward to seeing you all there!

competition. On the restored original 1910 classic facade of the theatre itself is a "Jazz Man" sculpture by Brower Hatcher.

Among those booked for performances in the next few weeks at the theatre are Wanda Sykes, Chaka Khan, Chuck Berry, and Esperanza Spalding. Regular Sunday gospel, all-you-can-eat Southern brunches are planned.

The Howard, called "the largest colored theatre in the world," opened in 1910 as a venue for plays, lectures, pageants, concerts, and community events; closed during the Depression (during which for a while it was used as a church); re-opened in 1931 with Ellington leading the bill; closed after the disturbances that followed the 1958 death of Martin L. King; and was used only sporadically until closed again in 1980.

Congratulations and kudos are in order for Howard Theatre Restoration, Inc., a nonprofit entity, and for the implementing Ellis Development Group and its CEO Chip Ellis for making it all happen!

## The Ellington Century by David Schiff

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012)

Reviewed by Theodore (Ted) Hudson

*The Ellington Century.* What an engaging title! In his “Overture,” or introduction, author David Schiff claims: “No single oeuvre spans the dual cross-categorical range of mid-twentieth-century music better than the vast repertoire of the Duke Ellington Orchestra, most of it composed by Ellington and Strayhorn.”

In developing this thesis, he discusses at some depth a broad range of composers, particularly those of the 20th century, who in some way seem to have eschewed or experimented with received theories of composition, for instance Bartok, Debussy, Gershwin, Mahler, Schoenberg, Stravinsky – and, yes, the likes of Thelonious Monk and Mary Lou Williams.

Prof. Schiff concentrates on the *how* of Ellington’s music, beginning with chapters on Color, Rhythm, Melody, and Harmony as components of his music. In each of the chapters on these four his analyses of Ellington’s compositions are supported and augmented by way of differences and commonalities, parallels and tangents, and precedents and their adaptations in the works of other composers. In the second section of the book he uses Love, History, and God as illustrative rubrics, showing how form and substance both inform Ellington’s compositions.

For each of the components, he uses an object composition. For Color it is “Blue Light.” At the onset, he claims that each chorus of this composition presents a different kind of blue and then proceeds to show *how*, technically, each is realized. “Cotton Tail” is the major example for the chapter “Rhythm,” for to Schiff it is “a groundbreaking rhythmic achievement.” According to Schiff rhythm is more than just “*swung*” eighths, syncopation, or other stylistics; “swing is an ethical ideal, a temporal image of liberation.” After providing examples of different rhythms, he cites “Tiger Rag” and “Carolina Shout” as models or predecessors for Ellington.

There is much to consider in the chapter on “Melody” and its object piece, “Prelude to a Kiss.” Noting how a singer may “own” a melody because of his/her vocal stylistics, Schiff declares that at some point, theory and training have to be put aside in favor of on-the-job experience. He also provides a partial list of some Ellington compositions in the American Song Book, from “All Too Soon” to “Sophisticated Lady.” The reader will likely want to add more.

In his treatment of Harmony, the author refers to Tatum, Luckeyeth Roberts, “The Lion,” et al as prominently as he does to classicists. He does point out, though, that modal jazz can be heard in Debussy and Shostakovich (and in Strayhorn’s “Celsea Bridge,” Ravel). He claims that most composers “work in the harmonic dark” nowadays. He says that Ellington and Strayhorn’s “Satin Doll” “can serve as a jazz harmony paradigm,” and that Ellington’s “The Clothed Woman” in 1947 was “the most outside piano solo he or anyone else had imagined up to that time.”

In “Love” the author gives extensive analysis of Ellington’s *Such Sweet Thunder*. For other examples of music of love, there are Ellington’s “Black Beauty,” “Portrait of Florence Mills,” the movie *Black and Tan*, and “Reminiscing in Tempo,” expressive of his love of his mother.

The author contends that in a time when Gershwin, Grofé, Schoenberg, and Copland were considered exemplars of history-themed music, Ellington was, too. His interest in the subject had begun early. As a young boy, given his family’s ethos, he likely saw in 1911 *The Evolution of the Negro in Picture, Song and Story* and in 1913 *The Star of Ethiopia*, both of these historical pageants at the Howard Theatre. His later *My People*, our author contends, may be thought of as a revisiting of such pageants. Though he never completed his opera, *Boola*, a history of the a Negro “everyman,” in 1943 Ellington premiered *Black Brown and Beige*. It is this work that Schiff gives a thorough expository analysis.

It is believed that Ellington considered his Sacred music as his most significant. Religious works by other composers—Mary Lou Williams’ *Mass for Peace*, Messiaen’s *Et Exspecto Resurrectionem Mortuorum*, Britten’s *War Requiem*, Stravinsky’s *Requiem Canticles*, and Bernstein’s *Mass*, etc.—are quite different from Ellington’s, Schiff says, though he feels that Bach’s and Ellington’s sacred music both have remarkable intensity.

This is not a page-turner book. Indeed, the reader would be well advised to take a break now and then to better assimilate, consider, re-consider, and let things “seep in.” Schiff can turn a phrase, though, for example, in his assessment of *Such Sweet Thunder* he writes: “It’s a well-wrought urn—with an attitude,” a lagniappe for Keats fans. And he has a subtle and unexpected sense of humor, for instance, before beginning a sub-section on Harmony titled “Satin Doll” or Jazz Piano 101” he advises: “[Parental warning: from here on things get a little technical.]”

This book may be read on different levels. All things considered, those conversant with contemporary music and composers and theories and musicology in general will gain more than, say, Ellington enthusiasts with primary to moderate knowledge of these things. A great value is that it tells not just what, but *how*.

The Notes are copious, a treasure trove for researchers and others who find delight in them. A full and pinpointing Index is always welcome, and this book has a great one. And, of course, with the in-text allusions and direct references and notes, a bibliography is obligatory, and here it is generous.

*The Ellington Century* by David Schiff is an important milestone in Ellington scholarship, a one-of-a-kind substantive, in-depth study that opens possibilities for better understanding and appreciation of Duke Ellington *the composer*.



## Ellington: French Touch by the Laurent Mignard Duke Orchestra

( Columbia / Sony / Juste une Trace )  
Reviewed by Theodore (Ted) Hudson

*Ellington: The French Touch* gives us Ellington and Strayhorn compositions that in some way have a French inspiration or connection.

It opens with “The Good Life” (“La Belle Vie”), a tune heard in other Ellington contexts. The tune gives some sidemen a chance to shine, in this instance on baritone saxophone, alto saxophone, and trombone. Three pieces, none of which is highly orchestrated, are from Ellington’s *Goutelas Suite*: “Goof,” “Gogo,” and “Gigi.” The first is a riff-like tune with piano in the foreground and a sudden end, while the second, with clarinets and flute, segues into the third. This one is a bit more melodic than the preceding two. It begins with piano, followed by trumpet and tenor over a chanting ensemble before an alto saxophone takes it out. Organically “Gogo” and “Gigi” make a sort of mini-suite within a suite.

Selections from the film *Paris Blues* are more familiar. The title tune introduces the film’s thematic melody with an exceptionally good alto saxophone solo that a trombone remarks on up later. It may be the most successful piece on the CD in terms of solo and ensemble execution. Basic-associated “Battle Royal” is a real flag waver, to use a term from the big band era. It opens with an excited trumpet followed by vigorous tenor saxophone solos, and ends with a high note specialist way up there, the whole tune pushed by an propulsive beat that ends with Woodyard-ish hand drumming. “Paris Blues Alternate,” the thematic melody at a slower pace, showcases a tenor saxophone and clarinet. “Autumnal Suite” is another re-working of the melody, this time by clarinet, then tenor, then trombone over a tenor filigree.

Of the several individual compositions on the CD, “No Regrets” is a trombone tribute nod to Lawrence Brown, “Comme Ci Comme Ça,” a rather pedestrian piano piece, and “A Midnight in Paris,” a short work for piano by Paris lover Billy Strayhorn. The inclusion of “The Old Circus Train,” its shuffle beat and alto saxophone groove close to the original, is due to Duke’s having played it at Côte d’Azur.

The last group is comprised of bits of music for a 1961 resurrection of the satiric play *Turcaret*, written by Alain René Lesage in c.1708. The producer wanted music for the revived drama and asked Duke to compose it. The longest runs two minutes and thirty seconds, and there are four bits that last fewer than thirty seconds each. They apparently were intended to match the characters’ personalities or shifts in dramatic mood. The last of the ten excerpts, “Turcaret Final,” is a reprise of some of the play’s strains and themes.

Ellington never commercially recorded *Turcaret*. And the producer did not use live music; instead, he had a French group make a rehearsal-recording to be played during performances. The only recording we know of *Turcaret* music prior to this CD is from that rehearsal-recording session, played later on an ORTF radio broadcast.

*Ellington: French Touch* is assuredly well worth having. The Laurent Mignard Duke Orchestra is among, or is, the best orchestras devoted to Ellington and Strayhorn music, and its musicians have great “chops,” individually and as an ensemble. To the Laurent Mignard Duke Orchestra we exclaim, *Remerciements! Merci!*

### Jack Dennis Memorial Service

Everything about the Memorial Service for John (Jack) Dennis on 11 March seemed appropriate for him. There were poetry readings, Duke Ellington music, a tribute from Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, and remembrances and tributes from family members and friends—all in quiet good taste. The venue, Waverly Gallery in Bethesda, MD is a gem of a studio and gallery, which, incidentally, has among its exhibits a work by Jack’s son-in-law, John Jayson Sonnier..

One of the most delightful presentations was a flawless recitation by Jack’s seven-year-old granddaughter, Gisele, of Sterling Brown’s “After Winter,” a long poem for such a little girl. The person spoken about in the poem could well have been a very young Sterling or for that matter Jack, for which the narrator points out there will be “fo’ de little feller Runnin’ space” [sic]. Other family members who spoke were daughters Laura and Jackie, who read from Kahlil Gibran; Elizabeth, who presented the Daughter’s Tribute; and son-in-law, Sonnier, who gave the Prayer of Comfort. A family

friend, Earl Shamwell, read the Obituary.

Two of our members took part in the service. Geneva Hudson, a deacon at Peoples Congregational Church of the United Church of Christ denomination, provided the Invocation and pronounced the Benediction, and Ted Hudson delivered the Eulogy.

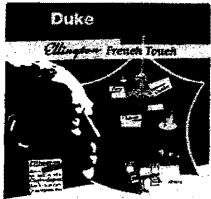
Lori Williams sang several Ellington tunes in a touchingly unembellished manner that Jack would have appreciated, “Lost in Meditation,” “Gypsy Without a Song,” and as a prelude, “Come Sunday.” She was accompanied by keyboardist William Knowles, who also provided gentle background music for the event.

A reception followed the program.

Jack’s obituary mentions that “He was a proud member of the Duke Ellington Society” and that he “was a gentle, kind, quiet and thoughtful man. The best of brother, father, and husband. ¶ Jack was the epitome of the Family Man.”

A reception followed the program.

*Ed. Note: An announcement of Jack’s 16 February 2012 death appeared in our March issue.*



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

John Edwin Mason recently traveled to Cape Town, South Africa to speak at the South African Association for Jazz Education conference at the University of Cape Town's College of Music. While there, he attended the Cape Town International Jazz Festival.

Prof. Mason's *One Love, Ghoema Beat: Inside the Cape Town Carnival* is available in paperback from the University of Virginia Press. For more about his academic, photographic, and other activities, go to: <http://johnedwinmason.typepad.com/>

**Powhatan "Brad" Bradbie**

Brad Bradbie has just released *Now and Then*, a CD of jazz, blues, and ballads performed by a quintet. All the music and lyrics were composed by him. Also, the CD introduces pianist-vocalist Janelle Gill. Notes for the CD were written by our member Rusty Hassan. (We plan more about this album later.)

**Benefit Concert for Clark Terry Planned**

Over thirty musicians will perform in a fundraiser at St. Peter's Church in New York City on 23 April to help Clark Terry meet medical expenses. He will appear via Skype.

As reported in our February issue, he underwent a leg amputation in early December. Gwen Terry, his wife, states that although he has Medicare and supplemental insurance, his overall medical expenses—including 24-hour care, therapy, medications and supplies, and co-pays—exceed their income.

Suggested at-the-door donation is \$25. Donations in the form of checks to the Jazz Foundation of American with "Clark Terry Account" in the memo line can be sent to the foundation at 322 W. 48<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY 10036. The phone number there is 212-245-3999.

**Conference Update**

‡ David Schiff, author of the new book *Duke Ellington's Century*, will take part in the events.

‡ There will be a special performance of *A Drum Is a Woman* by the Guildhall Jazz Band and Choir on Thursday, 25 May

**ELLINGTON 2012****23-27 May 2012 - Woking, England****Four Full Days and an Introductory Get-Together**

For Full Conference Details Go To

**[www.Ellington2012.org](http://www.Ellington2012.org)**

Other Contact Information:

Postal address: Ellington 2012, 2 Julian Close,  
Woking, GU21 3HED, United KingdomE-mail address: [E12@Ellington2012.org](mailto:E12@Ellington2012.org)**Rex Stewart, the King**

by Bro. Juniper

Art Luby presented Ellington cornetist Rex Stewart at our April meeting. He joined the Ellington Orchestra in 1934 and stayed for 11 years. Rex contributed many outstanding and adventurous solos and also composed several numbers such as "Boy Meets Horn" and "Morning Glory."

He was born in Philadelphia in 1907. Before joining Ellington, he played in such bands as those of Elmer Snowden, Fletcher Henderson (where he replaced Louis Armstrong), Horace Henderson, McKinney's Cotton Pickers, and Luis Russell. He had two main influences, Louis Armstrong on the hot side and Bix Biederbecke on the cool side. There are several recordings of him playing Bix note for note.

We heard selections from his time with Ellington, both the full orchestra and the small group settings, and some of his solo recordings as well. Art played "Boy Meets Horn" in several different tempos, a slow tempo from the 1943 Carnegie Hall concert being particularly good. Among Rex's solo recordings was "Jug Blues," a recording for Mercury from February 1946, in which he both sang and played the blues.

Art also reported that some of the music we heard was downloaded from the internet, so don't think that only "music for the kids" is available for download. In this regard, we wish to thank Art's daughter Meredith for providing technical support for the program.

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