

Late Jimmy Blanton Bassdom's Greatest

By Dave Koonce

FOR YEARS bass men contented themselves with lightly plucking tonics and fifths—a job surmounted in boredom only by that of the drawbridge watchman. Then, during the closing months of the last decade, came the sensational young bassist from the Midwest, Jimmy Blanton.

Jimmy worked with The Duke for nearly three years, until the early spring of 1942, when he contracted a respiratory disease. This ailment brought his tragic death the following July 30. Although his stay in the limelight was short, his influence on modern bass playing will be felt for years to come.

The Duke recognized the youngster's talent, and immediately began featuring him quite often. Blanton had complete command of his instrument and consequently never was hampered by lack of technique. Playing with Sonny Greer's extremely light, scarcely felt bass drum, Jimmy's big, full bass tone cut through like a knife. And so the string bass in the dance orchestra came out of relative obscurity. It suddenly became, as Glenn Miller once termed it, the "backbone" of the band.

Swing fans began *hearing* the bass and taking notice. This made playing the instrument in tune more necessary than ever before; no more when-in-doubt-play-soft complexes.

Jimmy inspired ambitious young bass men from coast to coast with his lifting beat. An example of this tremendously powerful beat may be heard on *Jumpin' Punkins* (Victor 27356). He played loud, but even so his tone was unequalled. Musicians marveled at his speedy presentation and his ability to hit every note "on the head." Older members of the Ellington crew, always on the alert for even the most minor defects in musicianship, were quick to notice that the young bassist never played too far on top of the beat, like many top-rated bass men, nor did he play with an over-anxious beat. His style was wonderfully relaxed, which is the paramount requisite for a steady, driving beat.

Blanton was one of the first rhythm men to realize the difference between the chopped beat and the flowing beat, and he played accordingly. He had a style that made one beat seem to run into the next one. The space between 1-2-3-4 would be filled with a sustained tone, with the following beat fully accented. This left the effect of a rolling or flowing beat. Most good bassists strive constantly for that effect today.

Improvisation being the watchword of Duke's music, Jimmy soon found himself featured in many solo spots. Victor and Columbia released several piano-bass duets, with Duke Ellington at the keyboard and Jimmy Blanton on bass. The best of the group was *Blues and Plucked Again* on Columbia 35322.



Jimmy Blanton's sensitive face and fingers are reflected in the photo above, taken in his Ellington days. Below, Dave Koonce writes about Jimmy.

On the latter side, the incredible young bassist exhibited his skill at playing fast passages. Every note was played with perfect intonation, and every tone was as clear as the proverbial bell. Victor soon released a similar duet that featured two choruses of bowed bass on *Sophisticated Lady*. Here Jimmy played many double-stops, and though his tone was not deserving of the best raves, he showed surprising adeptness with the bow. At that time, Slam's bow work had not become as well-known as it is today, but Stan Kenton cut *Concerto For Doghouse* for Decca featuring Howard Rumsey's weird bowed bass, and Milton Hinton picked up the bow and turned out a simple little thing called *Ebony Silhouette* for Cab Calloway on Okeh.

Many hold that the best solo bass ever recorded was Blanton's on *Jack The Bear* (Victor 26536). On this side, which was coupled with *Morning Glory*, Jimmy played many wide intervals, sometimes averaging six strokes a second.

The youngster was the first bass man to stray away from the basic one-three-five chords, to begin experimenting with flatted ninths, flatted fifths and thirteenths. And he knew where to use them. Regardless of how modern his playing was, it was always *pretty*—that's the best description for it. With the setting of such a style as the criterion of good bass playing, bass men soon found that much more was expected of them. They began studying and, consequently, producing.

From this new school of bass playing, inspired by Jimmy Blanton, came Oscar Pettiford, Trigger Alpert, Chubby Jackson, and many others not as well-known. Blanton certainly must have given arrangers new ideas on writing for the cumbersome and difficult instrument, for since his death arrangers have begun to see the advantages in writing more harmonically important bass parts—parts that are often doubled by baritone or trombone.

It is tragic that at the height of his career, when his influence was strongest, that the amazing but ever-moderate young man died.

Most of his best discs are now hard-to-get prizes, but it is hoped that The Duke's records which featured Jimmy's best playing such as *Bojangles*, *Conga Brava*, *Concerto For Cootie*, *Ruincheck* and others mentioned above, in addition to "C" *Blues*, *Squatty Roo* and *Going Out The Back Way* with Johnny Hodges' or Barney Bigard's Ellington units will be re-issued.

Bass men can thank him for what he has done to bring out the importance of the string bass. But for Jimmy Blanton, the bass still would be considered the least important of the rhythm instruments; now it is indispensable as a rhythm instrument and almost equally important harmonically to modern arrangements.

In spite of the surge of popularity offered the present-day sensationalists on the instrument, Jimmy Blanton will not be forgotten—he was *building* something that is still being built.