

THE DUKE ELLINGTON SOCIETY, CHAPTER 90

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N E W S L E T T E R

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Mercer Ellington, "A Fine Musician"

Contributed by Ted Shell

We, the lovers of Duke Ellington, certainly mourn the loss of his only son, Mercer, who died at the age of 76 on February 8, 1996 in Copenhagen. For many years, he made his home in Denmark. In the later years of Duke's life, Mercer was his father's band manager and played in the trumpet section.

After having studied in New York City at Columbia, Institute for the Arts, and Julliard, Mercer led his own band for a few years and made several successful recordings. During his career he was a salesman, disc jockey, and record company executive. With the assistance of Stanley Dance, he authored a biography of his father, *Duke Ellington in Person*.

Mercer composed quite a few numbers that became standards in the Ellington Orchestra repertoire, among them "John Hardy's Wife," "Jumpin' Punks," "Blue Serge," and "Things Ain't What They Used to Be"

After Duke's death, he assumed leadership of the orchestra and achieved moderate success. He was musical director and conductor for the popular *Sophisticated Ladies*, a revue of his father's music. His band's *Digital Duke* CD won a Grammy in 1988. The band made several other well received recordings, but without the Duke, it stood little chance of the great successes achieved by the Duke. Much of its waning popularity resulted from Mercer's ceasing to play the old arrangements and the band's not achieving the Ellington sound.

He is survived by his wife, Lena, daughters Mercedes and Gaye, and sons Edward and Paul.

Mercer was not much involved with the Duke Ellington Society. He will be remembered, however, as a fine musician and one who valiantly attempted to maintain his father's traditions.

Members' Choice Program

On Ray Nance Scheduled for March

by Mac Grimmer, Program Coordinator

On **March 2**, our monthly meeting at the Grace Lutheran Church will be "Ray Nance Night," a members' choice evening. Members are requested to bring one or two of their favorite Ray Nance recordings—either on CD or tape—to play for the edification and pleasure of the other members of the Society.

Ray was one of the most overworked and, we believe, underappreciated members of the band during his long tenure, and richly deserves a night of his own. A mainstay and unique voice in the trumpet section, he was the whole string section, an inimitable vocalist, an occasional dancer, and a talented humorist.

Bring an extra selection or two, in case we have duplicate choices, and the downbeat will be at **8:00 pm**, a half hour earlier than our previous starting time. We may need an extra half hour so we can fit in the many Ray Nances.

Remember, that's at **Grace Lutheran Church, 4300 16th St, NW, 8:00 pm sharp, Saturday, March 2.**

**Ellington Memorial Dedication
Planned for June**

In an item in its newsletter, TDES reports that Bobby Short has announced that the future site for the Duke Ellington Memorial, at 110th Street and 5th Avenue in New York City, has been formally renamed Duke Ellington Circle. It is hoped that President Clinton will dedicate the memorial next June.

Short is president of the sponsoring Duke Ellington Memorial Fund. Contributions for ongoing maintenance of the memorial may be sent to the Fund at 444 57th St, NYC 10022.

The Soul of Ben Webster. Verve double CD 314 527 465-2

Reviewed by Mac Grimmer

Is there anything left to say after all the superlatives have already been used for Ben Webster records? Yes, because here is another that belongs at the top, one that attains that level not only due to exceptional musical achievement, but also because of other Ellington connections.

This is another of Verve's reissue series of "3 Lps on 2 Cds," the connecting link being Ben, but otherwise with three different all-star line-ups. The first LP, *The Soul of Ben Webster* (also the title of the CD set), was the one with Harold Ashby, Duke's last tenor discovery, who idolized Webster and considers him his role model. Ben lets Ashby solo first on the five numbers they both play on, including "Ash," a tune that Webster named for his protege, but on "Chelsea Bridge" he keeps it all to himself and comes up with another stunning treatment of one of his signature tunes. Also present are Art Farmer and Jimmy Jones, the third piano player in the Ellington band.

Sweets Edison is the other horn player in the second group, along with a Norman Granz rhythm section, including Oscar Peterson. Sweets, as is everybody else on this double CD, is at peak form. His extended solo on "Blues for Bill Basie" is a quintessential example of his "peek-a-boo" trumpet style. Oscar is Oscar, playing as only Oscar can—listen to him on "Blues for Piney Brown."

The third LP was Johnny Hodges' *Blues A-Plenty*, with pyrotechnics added by Roy Eldridge and an Ellingtonian rhythm section of Sam Woodyard, Jimmy Woode, and Billy Strayhorn, whose gem-like introductions and interjections make this CD a must for Strayhorn fans. There are a couple of alternate takes that are not on the LP, including bits of Norman Granz' conversation directing the proceedings—at the end is a take of "Don't Take Your Love From Me" that breaks down after Strays' teasing, over-the-top introduction. Granz says, "Billy, I'm going to put that out as a single, just the intro!"

Duke Ellington: Black, Brown and Beige. Louie Bellson and His All-Star Orchestra.

Maurice Peress, Conductor. Music Masters 01612-65096-2 465-2

Reviewed by Lee Puricelli and Eva-Marie Nye

It's about time.

For too long the entirety of Duke Ellington's masterpiece *Black, Brown and Beige* [BBB] has been neglected. *Duke Ellington: Black, Brown and Beige* (1994) rights that wrong with a rhythm-driven performance of Ellington's masterpiece.

Ellington composed *BBB*, a nearly 45-minute musical portrait of African-American history, for his 1943 Carnegie Hall debut. All academic arguments about the validity of tone poems aside, *BBB* is a work of stunning musical quality. The piece contains some of Ellington's finest moments, particularly the movement *Black*, "The Blues" from *Brown*, and the theme "Sugar Hill Penthouse" from *Beige*.

Unfortunately, the cold reception from critics spurred Ellington to trim the piece and never perform the original score again. Some of Ellington's edits, most of *Beige*, for example, excised weak points. However, his neglect of parts of *Black* was unfortunate. Stung by critics, Ellington abandoned longer works.

In this return to the original score, Maurice Peress wields the baton but Louie Bellson drives the band with his powerful straight-down-the-middle drumming and superb musical taste.

This outing of *BBB* swings solidly with Bellson's overt rhythmic changes setting the mood. However, while the All-Star Orchestra is accurate and precise, the band sounds stiff and unemotional sometimes. But, with Bellson at the drums, the piece generally flows nicely and has a number of special moments, namely, Clark Terry's playing of the "Come Sunday" theme. Rather than copying Johnny Hodges' brilliant alto solo, Terry lends the piece a more somber, spiritual air on flugelhorn. Also, due in large part to the rhythmic center of Bellson's drumming, the disjointed musical themes of *Beige* connect. And, it is a treat to hear Joe Williams sing "The Blues."

Maurice Peress' well written and informative liner notes include interesting excerpts from Ellington's libretto *Black, Brown and Beige* which follows the life of a mythical character named Boola over 300 years.

Bellson's musical talents go beyond drumming, as evidenced in his composition *Ellington-Strayhorn Suite*, which concludes the CD. It is full of poignant twists and turns that go deeper than his rousing swingers "Hawk Talks" and "Skin Deep," which begin the CD.

Let's hope this is not the last we hear of *BBB* or of Louie Bellson's wonderful talents.

(Duke's 1943 performance of *BBB* released on CD from Prestige is essential Ellington. Although the sound quality is not superb, the band plays with astonishing depth and emotion. Truly, a desert island disc, especially *Black!*)

Quotation of the Month

... and this was Ben

*Who cursed, who juiced, who tangled anywhere
With anyone, one of those double-hearted men
Who do not trust the beauty they can make,
And sometimes rip the canvas, for the gesture's
sake.*

--from "Ben Webster" by Peter McSloy in his book of poetry *For Jazz*, with linoleumcuts of musicians by Nina Mera.

(The collection is distributed by Larry's Books & Autographs, PO Box 1018, Lafayette, CA 94549. Incidentally, Larry sells autographed photographs and books, including some autographed by Ellingtonians.)

Sheet Music of Ellington Tunes

Information supplied by Peter MacHare

Piano, vocal, and guitar arrangements of 35 Ellington tunes may be found in *Duke Ellington: American Composer*, published in 1995 by Hal Leonard Corporation, 7777 W. Bluemound Rd, P.O. Box 13819, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53213. The price is \$14.95. Included are lesser known tunes such as "Tooth and Claw," "Wanna Be Bad," and "I've Got Me" as well as standards such as "Prelude to a Kiss," "Sophisticated Lady," and "East St. Louis Toodle-oo."

Ed. note: When you see him, ask Peter to tell you how he came upon this book.

Duke Ellington's Black, Brown and Beige

Special Issue of *Black Music Research Journal* 13:2 (Fall 1993), edited by Mark Tucker
Reviewed by Theodore R. Hudson

This volume succeeds admirably, to use a passage from Mark Tucker's introduction, "to open a series of windows on *Black, Brown and Beige* [BBB] through which a new image of richness and complexity might come into view." There is much to praise in this collection: a characteristically scholarly and readable essay "The Genesis of *Black, Brown and Beige* by Tucker; an informative "BBB in Duke Ellington's Repertoire, 1943-1973" by Andrew Homzy; an analysis of "The Role of Trombones in BBB" by Kurt Dietrich; an enlightening "BBB and the Critics" by Scott DeVeaux that looks at received assumptions in the context of fresh scholarship and thinking; an autobiographical "My Life with BBB" by Maurice Peress; and an exhaustive "Chronology of Ellington's Recordings and Performances of BBB, 1943-1973" by Sjef Hoefsmit, one of only several persons worldwide with this type of expertise.

Unfortunately, the parts of this publication, superb as they are, are greater than its sum, for there is a puzzling sin of omission. In discourse on the substance, the "what," of Ellington's art, his knowledge of American history in which people of color are central needs to be kept in mind. For BBB, he was specific about what informed the work: it is a "tone parallel to the history of the Negro in America." While his assertion suggests an ethnically discreet "parallel," this history is sweepingly inclusive, integral to the course of Western, and corollarily, world history. There are relevant passages and statements in this publication, but no essay or developed thesis that focuses on BBB as artistic rendering of this history. This troubling oversight aside, the collection is a valuable contribution to authoritative discourse on Ellingtonia. (Copies of this BMR Journal issue may be available from the Center for Black Music Research, Columbia College, 600 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL 60605.)

San Francisco Chapter in the Works

Through the initiative of Claire Gordon, a San Francisco area Ellington Society chapter will likely be formed. An organizing meeting was scheduled for early February.

Claire, you will recall, edited the Rex Stewart autobiography. Last spring she and husband were guests at the home of Ted and Marion Shell when Sjef and Milia Hoefsmit were being hosted by our Chapter.

We send congratulations and best wishes to Claire and others for a successful chapter.

For Their Reading Pleasure

According to Francine and Louie Bellson, the books they "enjoyed reading in '95" are: *The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours* by Marian Wright Edelman, *Let's Get to Know Each Other: What White Christians Should Know about Black Christians* by Tony Evans, *Having Our Say* by Sarah and Elizabeth Delany, and *Time with God: The New Testament for Busy People*.

DESUK Newsletter Adds Title *Blue Light*

The Duke Ellington Society, United Kingdom (DESUK) has a revised name for its publication, *Blue Light* as a subtitle with *Newsletter*, a compromise instead of a completely new title.

"Dramatis Felidae"

(To Use Our Man's Term in *MIMM*)

Sjef Hoefsmit sends from Belgium "warmest regards to our mutual friends in Washington" and hopes that we "all have survived the terrible winter rather well." ♪ ♪ ♪ A Delta Queen Steamboat Co. brochure states that John Hasse is the director of their "Music of the River Vacation" series, which offers opportunity to experience rich musical heritage in ports of call. ♪ ♪ ♪ Among DESUK's new members listed in its current newsletter are Chapter 90 members Ted Hudson, Walter van de Leur, and Ulysses LaPradde. ♪ ♪ ♪ Alex Rado's "Cat Anderson-The Music and the Man" appears in the same issue. Also, he is scheduled to take part in DESUK's next national meeting, at Ronnie Scott's Club in London. ♪ ♪ ♪ His stint at the Smithsonian completed, Anthony Brown has gone back to California. Keep in touch, Anthony. ♪ ♪ ♪ Walter van de Leur and Ilona, with their two girls, Floor and Heleena, are in the area for a short stay while he does research at the Smithsonian. ♪ ♪ ♪ Scott Schwartz, on guitar, and his wife, Sarah, on piano, will perform Vivaldi's *Concerto in D* and medieval music at the Smithsonian on Wednesday, February 21, at 9:30 am.

Get Well Wishes

Benny Åsland, we learn from Gören Wallén in Stockholm, has recently been in the hospital. At the time we received word of his illness, Mrs. Åsland believed that Benny would be home soon. (His incapacitation has delayed publication of the *DEMS Bulletin*.)

We extend to our friend Benny our heartiest wishes for a speedy recovery.

Chapter Chairpersons/Coordinators

In our Chapter we have members whose acceptance of certain responsibilities is vital to our success. Here are some of our key persons:

Amenities	Helen Frazier
"Ellington '99" (Pro Tem)	Ben Pubols & Bob Reny
Membership	Angela & Mac Grimmer
Nominating	Jack Dennis, Bill Flemmons, & another/others t.b.a.
Program	Mac Grimmer

These "first chair" leaders will welcome your suggestions and active involvement.

Weather Conspiracy Fails to Stop Ellingtonians

by Angela Grimmer, Secretary

For the second consecutive month, the weather conspired against the Ellington Society in the form of ice and snow, but nevertheless the February meeting went on as usual, at the home of our president, Ted Shell. We were treated to Ted and Marion's always welcome hospitality as well as to choice video selections, including a showing of the PBS "American Masters" program on Ellington.

The LYM = Love You Madly On the Internet

Contributed by Peter MacHare

If you have access to e-mail on the Internet, you can join and participate in an Ellington discussion group called Duke-LYM. To join the group, send the message "subscribe duke-lym" to "majordomo@concordia.ca" (nothing in the subject field). In a moment, you will receive a reply which contains all the information you'll need about the list, including how to find out who else is subscribed and their e-mail addresses.

Calendar

Saturday, March 2 - Monthly Meeting:

Members' Choice: "Ray Nance Night"

Saturday, April 6 - Monthly Meeting and

Reception: Smithsonian

Saturday, May 4 - Monthly Meeting: Ben and

Lillian Pubols' Home

TBA

★ Jack Towers Program

★ Annual Duke Ellington Youth Festival

★ Dedication of Duke Ellington Memorial,
Duke Ellington Circle, NYC

June 19-23

"Ellington '96," Park Plaza Hotel, Toronto

Sponsor: Toronto Chapter, DES

Condolences to Ezrin Loved Ones

Sydney Ezrin, a founding member of the Toronto chapter of the Duke Ellington Society, died in December. Sadly, his widow, Diana, succumbed in January, after a fall. Some of our Chapter members knew Syd, who attended a number of the annual International Ellington Study Group conferences.