

Ellingtonia



Newsletter of the Washington, D.C.

Duke Ellington Society

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Theodore R. Hudson, Editor

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Jazz World Mourns Loss Of Beloved Father John Gensel

The Reverend John Gensel, 80, died in a Pennsylvania nursing facility on February 6, having become ill in December. The flood of tributes in the media testified to his esteem among the countless persons, especially in the jazz world, whom he served as pastor, mentor, and friend.

His attention to the spiritual and other needs of so-called "night people" was legendary. So effective was he that the Lutheran church designated him Pastor to the Jazz Community in New York City. In this capacity, in addition to conducting Sunday jazz vespers at St. Peter's Lutheran Church, Father Gensel, as he was popularly known, baptized, married, counseled, comforted his "parishioners." He officiated or participated in funeral and memorial services for notables such as Miles Davis, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, Billy Strayhorn, and Duke Ellington.

He is quoted as having said, "I think jazz is probably the best music for worship because it speaks to the existential situation of a human being. It is the personal expression of the person playing it."

At our regular meeting on February 7, the day after his death, Patricia Willard conducted a brief, moving commemoration of Father Gensel. Describing him as "a very sweet person," she recalled his sincere concerns about people, his availability at all times, his compassion and empathy, and that while he went to clubs because he enjoyed the music, his main purpose was to be there for those whom he could serve. Patricia then read a passage about Father Gensel from Duke's *Music Is My Mistress*. To climax the memorial interlude, she had arranged to have played Duke's "The Shepherd Who Watches Over the Night Flock." (For the text read by Patricia and for tributes by our members John Hasse, Morris Hodara, and Sjef Hoefsmit, see page 2.)

Member's Choice for March Meeting: Piano Night

by Mac Grimmer, Program Coordinator

It's time for our annual choice program for our March 7 meeting. The piano is a particularly appropriate instrument for the Ellington Society to focus on, with two certified geniuses to choose from, Duke and Billy.

And to expand the arena just a little, any piano rendition of Ellingtonia is acceptable, whether by one of the two principals, quasi-Ellingtonians like Jimmy Jones and Brooks Kerr, or any other pianist, past or present, completely outside the Ellington galaxy. All that we ask is that the piece be an Ellington or Strayhorn composition. No shortage of possibilities!

Bring a couple of selections and be ready for a grand night of piano music. The time is **8:00 pm, Saturday, March 7**, in our regular meeting hall in the **Grace Lutheran Church, 16th & Varnum Sts, NW**. Don't miss piano night!

Unkown Side of Strayhorn Is Topic For Walter van de Leur at TDES

Speaking on the topic "Billy Strayhorn: The Unknown Side" at the January TDES meeting, musicologist Walter van de Leur told, among other things, of how he became involved in researching Billy Strayhorn's music, some clues to identifying the music, and some of the previously "unknown" music he has uncovered and caused to be recorded.

One of the European members of our Society, Walter made several appearances while in this country: the IAJE convention in connection with Strayhorn Editions, for which he is Music Editor; the Smithsonian for further research; special guest at an AVC affair; and the TDES presentation.

Tributes to Father Gensel

Sjef Hoefsmit:

This is a very sad message. Not only for the Duke Ellington community but for the whole Jazz world. Father Gensel, "The Shepherd," died this morning (6 February).

I had the great honor to know him. He was one of the few people I have ever met who was made of pure gold.

Duke Ellington in Music Is My Mistress:

... I met Pastor John Gensel, whose Lutheran church my sister, Ruth regularly attends. I went to his church and found that music was not confined there to the more or less solemn kind usually heard in churches. Pastor Gensel had recitals and music that were, I sensed, much more appropriate to the jazz musicians with whom he was involved. This led to the observation I made in connection with the first sacred concert: that every man worships in his own language. And I *know* that there is no language God does not understand.

In addition to this, Pastor Gensel often went without, denying the needs of his own family, and even using money earned by his beautiful wife as a schoolteacher, in order to pay the rent, or doctor's bills, or to buy food for some of the less fortunate night people. That is why we saluted him with a tonal portrait as "The Shepherd Who Watches Over the Night Flock." His is pure humanism and the type of unselfishness that mark a man as a true representative of God.

Morris Hodara:

Although it was expected, Pastor John Gensel's death came as a great shock.

I have known John for more than 30 years both personally and through his participation in the Duke Ellington Society. John was a founding member of TDES. He met with a small group of Ellington devotees in 1959 to form the New York Chapter of the then Duke Ellington Society. John invited TDES to meet at Saint Peter's Church about 17 years ago when the Church was rebuilt at its present site. We have met there ever since. Several years ago he also invited me, as the president of TDES, to present three concerts a year devoted to the Music of Duke Ellington at Saint Peter's.

He regularly attended our meetings and participated fully. he married us, attended to us and buried us. We will miss him.

Our love to his lovely wife, Audrey, and his wonderful family.

John Edward Hasse:

I, too, will miss Pastor John Gensel. What a rare and remarkable person he was. An advocate for, supporter of, and, really, kind of an angel sent from heaven...to look out for the music we call jazz.

He was always supportive, too, of our efforts at the Smithsonian Institution to preserve the music of Ellington and others. He and Audrey came down to the opening, in April 1993, here in Washington of our traveling exhibition "Beyond Category: The Musical Genius of Duke Ellington," and there were multiple opportunities to see him in New York. The last time I saw him was in February 1996, at the memorial service for Mercer Ellington. He and I each presented a eulogy for Mercer. John was very eloquent...and also was pointed, admonishing the remaining members of the Ellington family to quit bickering and pull together. John stood for, among many other wonderful values, reconciliation.

May God grant him eternal peace and wonderful music with those he loved so much. What sessions he can attend! (Will John mount a concert of Ellington's Sacred Music, reuniting himself with the maestro, Cootie, Johnny, and the others?)

And may God grant us that John's many good works will live on and on and on.

Ellington '98

16th Annual International
Duke Ellington Conference
May 6-10, Chicago

For details, contact:
Ellington '98

6935 South Crandon Avenue, Suite 2D
Chicago, IL 60649
Phone: 773-288-DUKE; Fax: 773-643-4829

Special Airfares for Conference

United Airlines is offering 5%-15% discounts to Ellington '98. Call their Meeting Plus Reservation Center at 1-800-521-4041 and refer to Code 518YX, or go through your own travel agency. These rates also apply to United Express and Shuttle by United. (For more conference details, see the announcement-registration form inserted in this issue.)

Short Sheets

Duke Ellington is in the first group to be inducted into the American Classic Music Hall of Fame in May. ● ● ● For a biography, Terry Ripmaster, president of the New Jersey Jazz Society, is seeking persons who knew or have information about Willis Conover. Terry is at 125 Deer Park Rd, Hackensack, NJ 07849; his phone is 908-813-2468. ● ● ● The Fifth Annual Duke Ellington Salute in Baltimore on April 24 will feature the 21-piece band of Whit Williams and others in an evening concert. Sponsored by R&R Associates, the day-long salute will have a free student workshop during the day, where youngsters will learn not only how to play their instruments better but also learn about jazz pioneers and institutions of higher education where they can fur- their music studies. Last year 93 music and lay students participated. For further information, con- tact Ricardo Robinson, R & R Associates, at 703 Beaverbrook Road, Ste. 102, Baltimore, MD 21212; phone: 410-532-7871; fax: 410-523-4156. ● ● ● The late Klaus Stratemann, so well known as an Ellintonia scholar, was also a dentist by profession and a drummer. His band has scheduled a memorial concert for him in February. ● ● ● Music from *Cabin in the Sky* is being issued on a CD as a movie soundtrack. ● ● ● *Reported by Peter MacHare*: Rykodisc will release the soundtrack to *Paris Blues* on February 24. ● ● ● *Reported by Jack Dennis*: Eight hundred guests attended Tiffany and Company's Winter Table Setting Show in January, an evening dedicated to the Duke Ellington Memorial Fund founded by Bobby Short, whose group played. The Ellington family was represented by Mercedes Ellington and Ruth Ellington Boatwright. The *New York Times* carried a half page of photos of some of the guests, among them Mica and Ahmet Ertegun, Geoffrey Holder and wife Carmen De Lavaladde, Peter Duchin, and former Mayor and Mrs. Dinkins.

Hudson Speaks, van de Leur a Guest At AVC Program in January

At the American Veterans Committee luncheon in Washington last month, Ted Hudson was the featured speaker. He punctuated his lecture on "Duke Ellington Plays Ellington and Tchaikovsky" with sound bites. Walter van de Leur, in town for research at the Smithsonian, was a special guest and contributed during the question-answer period. Geneva Hudson, at the request of the Committee, introduced her husband.

"Utter Lack of Pretense"

In the Folger Shakespeare Library brochure announcing a January 27 evening featuring poets Reuben Jackson and Al Young, Joseph Brodsky is quoted re his selection of Reuben's book, *Fingering the Keys*, for the 1992 Columbia Book Award. He praises Reuben's poems "for their restraint" and "their utter absence of pretense or the use of pedal." The part about lack of pretense, particularly, could be said about Reuben the person. For his presentation, Reuben read mainly his recent poems, but did include one on Johnny Hodges. His "For Duke Ellington" was published in *Seeing Jazz: Artists and Writers*, the printed complement for the Smithsonian's exhibit of the same name.



DUKE ELLINGTON

who will vie with more than 50 radio, stage and screen stars at the Bert Hall Rhythm Club ball Thursday night, February 26, at the Renaissance Ballroom, New York.

Ed. note: We thank Mac Grimmer, who discovered this drawing and text in a 1935 Washington Bee newspaper, for sharing them with us.

"Dramatis Felidae"

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

About Our Members

David Fleming's cleverly designed seasonal greetings card includes the advice "Nil Significat Si Non Pulsatur." ♪ ♪ Joseph "Tex" Gathings is a prominent subject-commentator-historian in the recently telecast documentary "Swing, Bop & Hand Dance." Early in his career, Tex, as program director for WOOK-TV, produced the popular "Teenarama Dance Party," the first of its kind in segregated Washington. In its depiction and discussion of Lindy-Hop descended dances, the film mentions other area tv programs "The Milt Grant Show" and Buddy Deane's in Baltimore and dance venues such as Turner's Arena. ♪ ♪ As of December, Lois Moody was getting ready for an extended trip on a freighter! ♪ ♪ Did you know that Aledra Allen was the founder of the International Monetary Fund Staff Jazz Society? The activity-oriented group's latest initiative is an impressive newsletter, *In the Mood*, for which Patricia Braxton will write a regular column, "Pat's Corner." ♪ ♪ Harold Gray, too, is a columnist. His "Washington Watch" appears quarterly in *Federation Jazz*, the American Federation of Jazz Societies' publication. ♪ ♪ Luvenia George has been invited to deliver the [prestigious!] Annual Paul Phillips Cooke Lecture this spring.

Mercer Ellington Remains at Arlington

Contributed by Jack Dennis

In September, Mercer Ellington's cremated remains were interred at Arlington National Cemetery, following a ceremony attended by his widow, Lene; son Paul; daughter Mercedes, and several others. Mercedes and Paul spoke about their father's life. Thanks to Phoebe Jacobs, friend of the family, Father Gensel and our roving New York reporter, Ulysses LaPradde, for information for this report.

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Conferences Revisited

by Angela Grimmer, Secretary

Jack Towers presented a fascinating program of sound highlights from the International Ellington Conferences at our February meeting. It was a rewarding experience for all, for many of us a first hearing, and others a chance to refresh their memories of these events. Fortunately, all the conferences were recorded, the earlier ones by Jack himself. Sound bites of some of the programs were included, as well as some of the music. Beginning with the first conference, here in 1983, the program included:

Washington, DC, 1983: Joe Igo finds Jerry Valburn's lost camera, returns it to him on the podium. Patricia Willard discusses her research on *Jump for Joy*, which Duke called his "social consciousness musical". Brooks Kerr and George Duvivier's piano-bass duet at our fraternity house meeting place **Oldham, England, 1985:** Jimmy Hamilton with Bob Wilbur's band. Alice Babs sings "Happy Birthday" to Jimmy Hamilton **Oldham, England, 1988:** Bob Wilbur's band plays "Le Sucre Velour". Herb Jeffries, master of ceremonies of the (recreated) Cotton Club. "East St. Louis Toddle-Oo," Bob Wilbur's band. Andrew Homzy leads the Bob Wilbur band, "Idiom '59" **Washington, DC, 1989:** John Hasse introduces Martin Williams, who discusses plans for a Smithsonian record set, *Duke Ellington: 70 Masterpieces 1926-1968* (never issued). Patricia Willard introduces an excerpt from an interview of Billy Strayhorn by Willis Conover; they listen to the band play "Three Cent Stomp". Mark Tucker plays a piano rendition of "Black Beauty". Doug Richards' band ("Rockin' in Rhythm," "Braggin' in Brass"), with Jimmy Hamilton ("The Mooche"), and Herb Jeffries ("Flamingo," joined by Terrell Allen, our Ellington Society president, and Ann Legister, conference chairperson) **Ottawa, Canada, 1990:** Charles Ellison plays a trumpet solo on "Isfahan" **Copenhagen, Denmark, 1992:** Alex Rado discussion "Ellingtonians in Paris" **New York City, 1993:** Kenny Burrell introduces his lecture on "Teaching Ellington" **Stockholm, Sweden, 1994:** Joya Sherrill, interviewed by Patricia Willard, tells how she met Duke as a teenager and later joined the band **Leeds, England, 1997:** The Echoes of Ellington Band plays "Chelsea Bridge"

At the intermission, Patricia Willard gave a tribute to Bill Ross, who founded the Ellington Society in Lost Angeles exactly 40 years ago, and then she read Duke's *MIMM* tribute to Pastor John Gensel, who died recently. Jack played the appropriate music, "The Shepherd," the version with Cootie Williams.