

Ellingtonia

Newsletter Of
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All-Strayhorn Concert Earns Critical Praise

By all accounts that we have read or heard, by individuals and by critics and other knowledgeable persons, the two concerts of recently discovered and seldom heard Billy Strayhorn music as performed by the Chicago Jazz Orchestra in that city in March was an all-around success.

The concerts drew large audiences, the second of which was "standing room only." In the Chicago *Tribune* Howard Reich observes that these "... listeners were among the first to savor Strayhorn's forgotten scores and to behold a music more rich in atmosphere, complex in structure and subtle in orchestra effect than even Strayhorn devotees might have expected."

To fully appreciate "the orchestral sheen and compositional finesse of Strayhorn's scores," he goes on to say, they "... must be heard in a live performance, such as this one by Jeff Lindberg's Chicago Jazz Orchestra, which revealed the minute details of Strayhorn's orchestrations, the exceptionally translucent quality of his tone colors and the ingenuity of his thematic pacing."

And, as he should, Walter van de Leur continues to get accolades for his pioneering research and analyses of Strayhorn music and for his book, *Something To Live For*. Were it not for Walter, it is likely that much of this music would not be available in performance today.

Valburn and Towers Tribute

Music lovers, especially our members and others in the New York area, are happily reminded that on 23 April, TDES will honor Jack Towers and Jerry Valburn in a special "Member's Choice" program of Ellington and Strayhorn music that they have recorded, preserved, restored, and/or produced, and ultimately made available in various ways to thankful listeners over many years.

The event takes place at 7:30 pm on 23 April at St. Peter's Church, 54th Street and Lexington Avenue, in New York City.

May Program: Treasures on Classic

by Mac Grimmer & Peter MacHare, Program Coordinators

Is it possible to fall in love with a record label? Peter MacHare will suggest that the answer is "yes" at our May Program. The French label Classics has been reissuing Great American Music for more than a decade. Classics reissues all the records of their featured artists in "chronological" order (never mind that they can't spell). Needless to say, Duke Ellington is among them, but many Ellingtonians are featured on Classics as well. In addition to playing a lot of fine music, Peter will bring a Classics discography and many Classics CDs for everyone to examine. For more information on the Classics reissues series, see Peter's article on page two.

The date is **Saturday, May 3**, at the **Grace Lutheran Church, 16th and Varnum Streets, NW at 8 pm.**

True Reformers Building To Be New Home of Famous Mural

Last month we reported that the mural of Ellington at 13th and U Streets, NW in Washington had been removed. We now learn that the rumor we included was on target. The Washington *Post* reports that the portrait will be installed on the True Reformers Hall building, the tall structure at the other end of the block, on the corner of 12th Street.

AAO Concert Coverage

Because this issue of *Ellingtonia* is scheduled to be printed (but not distributed) by the time of the Asian American Orchestra's Washington performances, led by our member Dr. Anthony Brown, our report on the events will be in the next edition.

The first concert is on Sunday evening, 13 April, at the Meyer Auditorium of the Freer Gallery, to be followed by another at noon the next day at the Smithsonian's Carmichael Auditorium in the National Museum of American History.

How's Your Collection of Early Ellington? Ellington on Classics

by Peter MacHare

In 1990, the French label Classics began reissuing Duke Ellington's 78s in chronological order. At that time, I was reasonably familiar with Ellington post-Newport, but had only a few items from Ellington's first thirty years. I jumped at the chance to develop my collection. As I bought each Classics CD as soon as it came out, I experienced a time warp of a most pleasant sort. I imagine I felt the same anticipation that many of you experienced waiting for Ellington's next 78. What on earth would he do next?

I remember the perverse delight in first hearing Louis Bacon's almost subversive vocal on "Dear Old Southland" from 1933. What rock band from the 1960s ever sounded stranger than that? "Daybreak Express," recorded the same day, was equally amazing for its evocation of a train and its sharp ensemble playing. I took delight in discovering that the Blanton-Webster era started before the exclusive contract with Victor in March of 1940 (so our Blanton-Webster Band CDs do not include all the Blanton-Webster studio material!) and that there was an earlier series of Ellington-Blanton duets in November 1939 (the famous ones took place in October 1940).

Sometimes, I even had a better time of it than those of you who collected Ellington's 78s as they came out. I didn't have to endure the union recording bans of 1942-1943 and 1948. I could even bear Johnny Hodges' departure without tears since I knew he would soon return.

I know that some of our members have collected Ellington three times: the original 78s, the reissues on LP, and now the reissues on CD. Amazing! This article, however, is primarily for our members who are now collecting early Ellington for the first time. I grew up buying albums as they came out. I didn't have much time or money to invest in collections of older material. Another reason I hesitated was that the sound quality of older recordings was hard for me to get used to. If your collection consists mainly of Ellington's albums from the second half of his career rather than collections of his old 78s, you are missing too much. Besides, there isn't that much current music worth buying anymore, so you may as well buy the old stuff now (I think that officially makes me a member of our moldy fig club).



At present Classics has released 41 Duke Ellington CDs covering 1924 through 1951. They have progressed into the early stages of the LP. Generally speaking, Classics is releasing everything that was originally released on record under Ellington's leadership. Thus they are not releasing alternate takes, music from movies, radio transcriptions, or recordings where Ellington was a sideman (like the Alberta Pryme or Florence Bristol sessions from 1924). Classics' main competition is from another French label called Masters Of Jazz. Masters Of Jazz is including alternate takes, movie soundtracks (such as Black And Tan), the miscellaneous sessions noted above, and has better liner notes. But Masters Of Jazz has released only 12 CDs covering 1924-1931 and is getting devilishly hard to find in the United States. Classics has the overwhelming advantage of having issued more music. 41 CDs worth! Moreover, Classics has generally good sound. When making compilation CDs of my favorite Ellington 78s, I compared the sound on Classics, Masters Of Jazz, and the RCA 24 CD box. More often than not, Classics had the best sound of the three.

Neatwork If You Can Get It

For many of us, alternate takes are unnecessary. Do you really want to listen to three takes of the same song one right after another when you listen to an album? Probably not. Classics does not interrupt the listening experience with alternate takes. But if you want them anyway, there is an Austrian label called Neatwork that is issuing albums that complement the French Classics series by including the alternate takes and other titles that Classics does not include. To date, Neatwork has released 9 volumes of Ellington covering 1924-1947. Specific information about what is available on the Ellington reissues on Classics Neatwork and Masters Of Jazz is available on "A Duke Ellington Panorama" <depanorama.net>. To order Classics or Neatwork (but not Masters Of Jazz) CDs, visit "Worlds Records" <worldsrecords.com>.

Ellingtonians Too

"Well," you might be thinking to yourself, "if I already have all this Duke Ellington, does Classics have anything for me?" Yes! Classics has released a wide variety of music from the 1920s to the early 1950s. The label has over 800 CDs in its catalog. All in this chronological format. [Classics, by the way, famously misspells Chronological as Chronogical on all of these CDs. All the letters didn't fit into their cover design and they didn't think anyone would notice!] They are also releasing Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, Earl Hines, and many others such as Ben Webster, Johnny Hodges, Cootie Williams, Rex Stewart, Taft Jordan, and Al Hibbler who are best known from their years with Ellington.

Sometimes you even find Ellingtonians in unexpected places on the Classics reissues. Ivory Joe Hunter, for example, hired many Ellingtonians to play on his records. Classics is also reissuing the work of Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson, who of course got his start in the Cootie Williams Orchestra (as all moldy figs will know). It is true that there is a lot of great music out there on Classics. There is only so much that we can afford to buy and bring home. Why do you think everyone plays the lottery?

Duke Ellington at the Hurricane

Reviewed by Patricia Willard

If the ultimate enjoyment of a recorded music performance is an acute sense of *being there*, *Duke Ellington And His Orchestra at the Hurricane 1943* featuring Ben Webster, Storyville Records' new CD 101 8359 offers double the pleasure. Not only has Jack Towers wrought superb, like-sitting-ringside, digital transfers; Kenneth R. Steiner's liner notes create a verbal cyclone depositing the reader into the Oz of dazzling, wartime midtown Manhattan.

Although Webster receives appropriate cover billing for his beautifully constructed and often impassioned solos and section playing, the serene, delectable contributions of Lawrence Brown, as in "It Can't Be Wrong," deserve equal attention. Betty Roche, certainly one of the all-time finest Ellington singers, is on three tracks—at her ballad best with "I Don't Want Anybody." And Johnny Hodges's delicate-to-no-holds-barred dynamics on the then current hit "Don't Get Around Much Any More" is just so beautiful that versions are included from each of the three Hurricane broadcasts represented. Ray Nance's violin is exquisite on "Moon Mist," the opening and closing theme for the "Pastel Period" Ellington dinner music program.

Among the continuing delights of this CD for avid Ellington listeners are recognizing arrangements that survived nearly intact through the decades and those that evolved with personnel and musical progressions. Except for its distinctive ending solos, "What Am I Here For?" could be from any period of Ellingtonia.

Tricky Sam Nanton, Juan Tizol, Rex Stewart, Shorty Baker, Sonny Greer, Jimmy Hamilton, Taft Jordan and "all the kids in the band," back when they almost were, are there. No wonder "Altitude" (which the almost unbearably "hep" but era-reflective announcer describes as "higher than Superman") very soon became "Main Stem." That's where this exciting young—nearly all twenty- and thirty-something—band was coming from, upstairs at 49th and Broadway.

Original source material is from the collection of Jerry Valburn so, with Towers and Steiner, three members of the DC Ellington Society were involved in this Carl Hallstrom production. Steiner's exhaustive research is impressive and includes relevant trade and newspaper commentaries of major significance as well as trivia. On the cover, a reproduction of an ad for the engagement offers dancing "to the music of Duke Ellington & His Orch. 7 P.M. to 4 A.M." and "Dinners from \$1.50." Steiner suggests Saturday midnight listening: "Mix yourself a Hurricane" (the club's 50-cent signature whiskey cocktail) "Put the CD in a boom box and place inside the console of a vintage radio. Turn the lights low and the music up." But he neglects to reveal the recipe for a Hurricane.

Corrections (A.K.A. Clinker Alert!)

In our March issue we erroneously characterized the Aardvark Jazz Orchestra as a "repertory" group. As its performances, recordings, imaginative arrangements, resourceful musicians, and breadth of artistic interests demonstrate, it is indeed a versatile orchestra that, to paraphrase our hero's famous expression, is beyond such a limiting category.

That's not all. In our last issue, we stated that Dr. Luvenia George conducted a workshop and lectured at Indiana State University. She did both, but it was at Indiana University in Bloomington, IN.

We sincerely apologize for our mistakes.

Can Anyone Give Us More Details?

Other changes in the band . . . the arrival of Tony Scott to replace Paul Gonsalves, who left to join Tommy Dorsey.

– "Bellson Quits Duke Ellington" in an otherwise unidentified news clipping, circa February 1953.

For a brief spell in September/October 1953 Paul [Gonsalves] left Duke's band and went to play for Tommy Dorsey. After two weeks he was back!

– Wendy Lawrence, "Mex' - A Tribute to Paul Gonsalves," Duke Ellington Society of Sweden *Bulletin*, Nummer 1, Mars 2003. Årg. 10.

Ellington, Woodson, and Boola

In our February issue we cited a quotation in which it was claimed that Duke wrote but did not record compositions commemorating the likes of Denmark Vesey, Crispus Attucks, Nat Turner, and Frederick Douglass. (We know that he did compose a piece about Brazzilai Lew, an obscure Revolutionary War soldier.) In a script in the Ellington Collection at the Smithsonian of his chronologically structured, unfinished opera *Boola* about a mythical hero, they are among freedom fighters invoked, including "The greatest of them all...A black woman...HARRIET TUBMAN!" Other things that inform his music and statements he made from time to time indicate his admiration for such historic figures.

Beginning in 1909, before he was well known, Carter G. Woodson taught foreign languages, English, and history in Washington's racially segregated high schools and was principal of Armstrong High School in 1918-19. Ellington attended but left Armstrong in 1917, so he was not a student during Woodson's principalship. Perhaps Woodson taught there during Ellington's years at the school, maybe not. In any event, given Ellington's exceptional knowledge of American history not generally found in textbooks nor taught in most American schools, one may speculate about whether he met or was directly or indirectly influenced by Woodson, an intellectual who was to become an iconic historian.

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

Jack Towers and Jerry Valburn

Jerry Valburn supplied the masters and Jack Towers did the remastering for the latest set of CDs in the Duke Ellington Treasury Series (D.E.T.S.), available through Storyville.

Scott Schwartz, Reuben Jackson

Scott Schwartz and his student Andrew McEvoy—a high schooler!—gave a classical guitar music performance at the Smithsonian's Carmichael Auditorium on 11 March. At the same venue on 5 April, Reuben Jackson read his own and others' classic jazz-inspired poetry on a "Rhythm and Rhyme": A Celebration of Jazz Poetry" program.

Ulysses LaPradde

Ulysses "Speedy" LaPradde is coordinating a group visit by devotees to Ellington's grave site at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx on 4 May. Speedy has organized other such visits in the past as well.

Jazz Drama by Former (Mercer) Ellington Orchestra Musician to Premiere in May

Gregory Charles Royal, a trombonist in the 1989-2000 Ellington Orchestra, has written *It's a Hardbop Life*, in which musicians (all of whom, according to advance publicity, have been in Grammy Award winning bands) will be featured actors. The play is scheduled to run 21-25 May at Howard University's Ira Aldridge Theater. Watch media for details.

Make a Weekend of It

If you go the Valburn-Towers program in New York City sponsored by TDES on 23 April (see page 1), you might consider staying over through Saturday, 26 April when that society is presenting "Mingus Salutes Duke Ellington," a concert by the Mingus Big Band of music that Charles Mingus wrote to honor Duke, as well as familiar standards such as "Mood Indigo" and "Sepia Panorama."

Preparations Proceed Apace For 2004 Conference in Sweden

Venues, preliminary day and evening schedules, number and types of speakers, and other details are being pretty well worked out for the International Ellington Conference to be hosted by the Duke Ellington Society of Sweden in Stockholm in 2004.

The Birger Jarl Hotel has been selected as Conference headquarters, and nearby Nalen music hall will be the site of principal Conference events. The tentative schedule calls for an opening Get-Together-Party on Wednesday, 12 May, three days of day presentations, a surprise concert, and a closing dinner on Saturday, 15 May.

Duke on Film

by Gina Rollins, Secretary

For our April meeting, Mac Grimmer presented a program of Duke on film, including excerpts from a big band television program produced by WGN (Chicago) in 1965. In addition to standards like "A-Train," "Cotton-tail," "Rockin' in Rhythm," and "Satin Doll," the session featured lesser-known works like "Banquet Theme," "Skillipoop," and "Prowling Cat," featuring Cat Anderson doing a squealing opening trumpet solo.

Vintage 1942 soundies included "I Got It Bad," with Ivie Anderson, some of the cast from "Jump for Joy," and Duke featured in a flashback sequence as Ivie's no-count lover, lying on a sofa smoking and drinking and generally ignoring her.

Next came the official video from Duke's 1969 White House Concert in celebration of his 70th birthday, featuring jazz and entertainment luminaries such as Billy Taylor, Earl "Fatha" Hines, Joe Williams, Milt Hinton, Dave Brubeck, and Willie "The Lion" Smith. President Nixon presented Duke with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, noting that Duke had "carried the message of freedom to all nations of the world." In a gracious acknowledgement, Duke noted the four freedoms that Billy Strayhorn lived by: freedom from hate unconditionally, freedom from self-pity, freedom from fear of doing something that would help someone more than it does myself, and freedom from pride that makes me feel that I'm better than my brother.

Mac ended the evening with two excerpts from the 1972 Timex All-Star Swing Festival. Duke and the Orchestra, introduced by a typically flamboyant Doc Severenson and all wearing royal blue, played "C-Jam Blues" and "It Don't Mean a Thing."

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