

# Ellingtonia

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Theodore R. Hudson, Editor

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## Music and Larger Communities Mourn Death of Ronnie Wells

Popular vocalist, educator, jazz festival and scholarship founder Ronnie Wells passed away on 7 March 2007 at Holy Cross Hospital in Maryland. She was a member of our Society.

While deeply saddened, friends who knew her best and those whose lives she had touched so meaningfully found ways to celebrate her life and show their love for her. One was a jazz party in March at recently opened venue Sabang in Wheaton, Maryland, where she had appeared as an opening attraction a short time before illness precluded further public performances by her. Fittingly, proceeds from the event supported the Fish Middleton Jazz Scholarship Fund (FMJS), which she and husband Ron Elliston co-founded as a response to dwindling attention to music in area schools.

Our member Patricia Braxton, who coordinated a Ronnie Wells concert that our Society sponsored in May 2001, fondly recalls that she "performed a wonderful and memorable concert along with her husband, pianist Ron Elliston, and their quartet as a fundraiser for the our Society's student scholarship ....

"Her selection of many lesser known Ellington compositions interspersed with a few popular renditions was a delightful treat. We will miss Ronnie's presence on the jazz scene, and will always remember her vibrant talent, her love of early jazz ballads, and her dedication to young musicians." She also wrote that Ms. Wells "dedicated her energies to promoting and sustaining an interest in jazz among high school and college musicians and instructing emerging artists."

Ms. Wells believed deeply in keeping the legacy alive. Her East Coast Jazz Festival was a popular annual event that prominently featured not only established artists but also many school students and other aspiring musicians.

A Washington *Post* obituary noted that Ms. Wells had a "wispy, slightly husky voice and preferred

## May Program: Interviews with Ellingtonians

by Mac Grimmer and Peter MacHare, Program Coordinators

Our member Alan Schneidmill will present videos of interviews with six Ellingtonians at our May program. The videos are from the Hamilton College Jazz Archives. You will see interesting discussions featuring Louie Bellson, Bill Berry, Buster Cooper, John Lamb, Clark Terry, and Norris Turney.

The program will be on **Saturday, 5 May 2007 at 8 pm** at our usual meeting place, **Grace Lutheran Church, 16th and Varnum Sts, NW, Washington, DC.** Our meetings are open to the public, so do come and check us out.

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The Duke Ellington Society, Inc.

Will Celebrate

**Duke Ellington's Birthday**

**Saturday, April 28, 11:00 AM-12 Noon**

At His 1922 Residence

**2728 Sherman Avenue, NW**

**Washington, DC**

The Celebration Will Include Historical  
Informational Presentations and Musical Tributes

For Further Information, Contact

**Bill Hasson at 202-829-8246.**

Admission Is Free

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slow ballads, although she could render convincing up-tempo works as well..."

An online obituary suggested that expressions of sympathy be in the form of donations to her beloved Fish Middleton Jazz Scholarship Fund. The address is: FMJS, PO Box 1768, Silver Spring, MD 20915.

We extend to Ronnie Wells' family and other loved ones and friends our sincere sympathy.

## **Duke's 'bones: Ellington's Great Trombonists by Kurt Dietrich**

Rottenburg, Germany: Advance Music

A book review and audio presentation by Peter MacHare

[ Peter's review of this book is in conjunction with his presentation at our 7 April 2007 meeting. ]

Kurt Dietrich has given us a very fine book about the wonderful musicians who, over the years, have sat in Duke Ellington's trombone section. In addition to this review, our April program was based of Dietrich's book to give you all a chance to hear a lot of fantastic trombone alone with Dietrich's illuminating comments.

Dietrich is Professor of Music and Barbara Baldwin De Frees Chair in the Performing Arts at Ripon College in Wisconsin. Pay Prof. Dietrich a visit at [http://www.ripon.edu/academics/faculty/profiles/dietrich\\_k.html](http://www.ripon.edu/academics/faculty/profiles/dietrich_k.html).

Kurt Dietrich is also an accomplished musician. You can visit him in his capacity as jazz trombonist at <http://.studioland.com/matrix/>. So all this is to say that his opinion on matters trombone is more valuable than that of your humble reviewer. Several members and friends of The Duke Ellington Society are mentioned in the book: Patricia Willard, Jack Towers, Sjef Hoefsmit, Annie Kuebler, and Andrew Homzy.

The greatest strength of the book, of course, is telling the story of Duke's wonderful trombone section. Our readers will probably enjoy a brief summary before a brief evaluation of the strengths (many) and weaknesses (few) of the book.

Charlie Irvis, who joined the Washingtonians early in 1924, became the group's first "distinctive voice" on trombone. While most of us will recall Bubber Miley and Joe Nanton as the best representatives of the growl plunger style of playing, Ellington recalled that "Charlie Irvis was first." But there is a very good reason that Irvis is not the name that first comes to mind when discussing the growl plungers players in the Ellington band—maddeningly enough there are no surviving recordings of Irvis playing in this style. Miley and Irvis, who were boyhood friends, roamed Harlem nightspots looking to make a little extra money playing as a brass duo. The best guess seems to be that they developed their growling plunger styles together.

Joe Nanton replaced his friend Charlie Irvis in the band in the middle of 1926. Nanton and Miley worked together in further developing the growling jungle sound for which Ellington was noted. Nanton stayed with the band for two decades and, unlike Irvis, was recorded extensively. Some of Nanton's best known works with Ellington are the famous trio from the original "Mood Indigo," "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)," and the 1943 Carnegie Hall Concert. Nanton, born in 1904, suffered a stroke in 1945 and died in 1946.

Juan Tizol joined Ellington in 1929. Tizol, of course, is best known as a composer of several well known pieces such as "Caravan," "Pyramid," and "Perdido." He was also an excellent copyist and could transpose in his head so as to be able to play any part in the orchestra.

When Lawrence Brown joined in 1932, Ellington finally had a trombone section with the trio of Joe Nanton, Juan Tizol, and Lawrence Brown. The study of these three make up a good portion of the book. They were so good that they acquired the appellation "God's Trombones." Brown made his mark early in his tenure with the band with his solos in "The Sheik of Araby" and "Ducky Wucky." Brown is also credited with first playing the melody that became "Sophisticated Lady."

Alas, God was not to allow his trombones to stay in Ellington's band forever. Juan Tizol left Ellington in 1944. Joe Nanton died in 1946. Lawrence Brown left Ellington (along with Johnny Hodges and Sonny Greer) in 1951. Although Tizol and Brown would eventually return, the trombone section was in a state of flux during the late 1940s, which time saw the emergence of Tyree Glenn, one of the best musicians ever to play in Duke Ellington's orchestra. Glenn's solo on the long version of "Mood Indigo" from the Masterpieces album is one of the finest solos in all Ellingtonia.

The trombone section of the 1950s was another notable group—Britt Woodman, Quentin Jackson on plunger, and John Sanders on the valve trombone. The three men also became great friends who enjoyed playing together, making for an exceptionally cohesive section.

In the 1960s, the great events in the trombone section were the return of Lawrence Brown and the arrival of Buster Cooper and of Chuck Connors on bass trombone. Dietrich states that the addition of the bass trombone was the most significant development in the section since it became a trio in 1932. Indeed, the trombone section with Connors had a rumble and a roar of its own. Buster Cooper was a unique voice in the history of ducal trombone, being a blues specialist who did not use plunger. (Continued on page 3 under "Duke's 'bones")

## Short Sheets . . .

### Travel Nuisances

Because of inconsistent interpretation and enforcement, a current air travel guideline about what can be placed in overhead bins can be confusing to musicians. More and more they are having to check their instruments and in some cases being required to pay extra for checking certain instruments. Some musicians are taking their mouthpieces and other accessories with them and then renting instruments at their destinations.

### Say What?

In deference to its readers not fluid in Swedish, the Duke Ellington Society of Sweden is including inserts of English translations of some articles that appear in its quarterly *Bulletin*.

### Individuals, Groups, Publication, CDs Of Interest to Our Readers Nominated For Jazz Journalists Association Awards

Several of our members are nominees in various categories for the Jazz Journalists Association's 11th Annual Awards: Ronnie Wells for Jazz Events Producer of the Year; Davey Yarborough for Alto Saxophonist of the Year; and Dr. Anthony Brown for two categories, Percussionist and Drummer of the Year.

*DEMS Bulletin*, edited by Sjef Hoefsmit and available at Peter MacHare's "Ellington Panorama" web site ([www.depanorama.net/dems](http://www.depanorama.net/dems)), is among nominations for Best Periodicals Covering Jazz category.

Among other award candidates are Ellington alumnus Barrie Lee Hall, Jr., for Trumpeter of the Year; his group The Ellington Small Band for Small Ensemble of the Year; and its CD *Barrie Lee Hall, Jr.: The Duke Ellington Small Band* (M&N Records MN 0039) for Jazz Album of the Year.

Nominated for Jazz Reissue of the Year is *Duke Ellington: The Complete 1936-1940 Variety, Vocalion and Okeh Small Group Sessions* (Mosaic MD 7-235)

Winners will be announced later in the year.

## Willie Ruff Honored

A photograph of Duke Ellington by William P. Gottlieb purchased by the Katharine Ordway Fund was presented to Willie Ruff by the Yale University Library, where it will remain as part of its permanent collection. This award is fitting in that Ruff, a professor in the Yale School of Music, was founder of the Duke Ellington Fellowship at the institution, which brings jazz artists to the campus and community for workshops, lectures, and performances for both adult and youth participants and audiences.

Willie Ruff, French horn and bass player, and Dwiki Mitchell, pianist, formed the Mitchell-Ruff Duo more than 50 years ago and still perform. Billy Strayhorn wrote for them, as one of his last compositions, *Suite for the Duo*, also referred to as *Suite for Horn and Piano*. It may be heard along with other Strayhorn compositions on *Strayhorn: A Mitchell-Ruff Interpretation* (Kepler Label CD MR-2421).

*Ed. Note: We thank member Yvonne Condell for alerting us about this event and for details included in this article.*

### Fantasy Cruise Marks Ellington School of the Arts 33rd Year

The Duke Ellington School of the Arts 2007 gala, "Fantasy Cruise on the S.S. Ellington," will showcase its students in performance at the historic Warner Theatre, followed by dinner and dancing at the I.M. Pei-designed Atrium in the next door Columbia Square Building, at 7-11 pm on Thursday, May 3. The festivities are a fund raising event to support the school's dual academic and arts mission.

For more details, contact the Ellington Fund by phone at 202-333-2555 or by way of the internet at [www.ellingtonarts.org](http://www.ellingtonarts.org)

*DEMS Bulletin*, April-July 2007

Is Out

Download Your Free Copy At

< [www.depanorama.net/dems](http://www.depanorama.net/dems) >

## Duke's 'bones

(Continued from page 2)

Kurt Dietrich's descriptors of Ellington's pieces that feature trombones certainly had me listening with new ears. There are many transcriptions of trombones solos and of section playing that someone with a basic knowledge of music will appreciate. There are many fine photographs of our heroes and more than a few good stories. [Want to hear the stories? Buy the book!] I have only one criticism, and that is that the transcriptions should have been labeled with the title of the book instead of just "Example 7-1." A fine book that you will consult often if you decide to add it to your Ellington library.

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

### Georgia Brown

During March student member Georgia Brown toured with the Oakland Interfaith Youth Gospel Choir, including an appearance in Vancouver, Canada.

### Dick Spottswood

Veteran radio program host, music researcher, CD producer, and discographer Dick Spottswood contributed notes and compiled selections for *How Low Can You Go? Anthology of the String Bass, 1925-1941* (Dust to Digital). A review of the release in *DownBeat* says that "Spottswood has boxed a trove of obscure musical treasures that the average jazz fan would never come across in a lifetime of collecting." He certainly deserves the reputation of a premier (or, in the view of some, the premier) authority of what he, tongue firmly en-cheeked, calls "obsolete music."

### Anthony Brown

Dr. Anthony Brown composed the score for *After the War*, which has premiered at the San Francisco American Conservatory Theater. Incorporating jazz, contemporary, and Japanese music, the production explores the dynamics of the return following World War II of Japanese who had been interred to the Fillmore and other areas in San Francisco.

In April, he traveled to Washington, DC to lead a group of Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra (SJMO) musicians in a tribute to Art Blakey that launched the 2007 Jazz Appreciation Month (JAM). The *Washington Post's* reviewer wrote, "Needless to say, drummer Brown had his work cut out for him. Yet he always seemed more cheerful than daunted, even when the rhythms shifted from shuffle patters and Brazilian grooves to an explosive take on 'Caravan,' with its full-kit detonations and the evening's stirring send-off, [Benny] Golson's 'Blues March.'"

Before returning to the West Coast, Anthony, along with some SJMO members, conducted a clinic for music students at American University.

## LÔÖKING AHEAD

29 April, 4 pm

The Duke Ellington School of the Arts  
New Washingtonians Jazz Orchestra Presents  
***The Cotton Club Goes "Brazilian"***  
Celebrating the Duke's Birthday  
St. Paul's, Rock Creek Parish  
Rock Creek Church Rd & Webster St, NW, DC  
**Free Admission – Donations Accepted**  
Concert proceeds to benefit the ensemble's  
efforts to attend  
the Samba School in Brazil during June 2007.

## Our April Meeting

Peter MacHare's combination book review and abstract of his presentation, on page 3, is in place of a separate book review and a report of our meeting on April 7. His talk was delightfully illustrated by recordings highlighting all the major trombonists, beginning with a 1924 "Rainy Nights" with Charlie Irvis and ending with the 1971 "Afrique" featuring bass trombonist Chuck Connors.

## Small World Department

During a casual conversation with him a while back, we learned that then First Sergeant Jacque "Saxman" Johnson played tenor sax in the Army Blues band concert at Ft. Myer that was part of the first of the Annual International Duke Ellington Study Group Conferences, which our Society held in 1983.

Since his retirement from the service, Mr. Johnson has been very active as an soloist, orchestra leader, producer, teacher, and sought-after sideman. In 1987 he was instrumental in the production of the concert of Ellington sacred music at the National Cathedral in which classically trained McHenry Boatwright, Ruth Ellington Boatwright's husband, was a featured vocalist. He has taught jazz instrumental classes at Catholic University. Among his present activities is directing the Blues Alley Youth Orchestra.

## Dues?

If you haven't, join or renew right away.  
Remember, memberships are for the calendar year.  
*Mail your check payable to*  
The Duke Ellington Society, Inc. at  
PO Box 15591, Washington, DC 20003, USA  
*Our dues remain a bargain:*  
Member, \$30; Couple, \$50; Student, \$5;  
First-time-ever member, just \$20.

## THE DUKE ELLINGTON SOCIETY, INC.

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