

SEVEN

Exploring the World of Duke Ellington



Born in 1899, one year after George Gershwin and one year before Aaron Copland, Duke Ellington is among the most important composers in American history. He possessed extraordinary energy and productivity, writing more than one thousand songs and instrumental works, many of which have become jazz standards, and leading one of the most legendary and enduring big bands of the century. He disliked the term *jazz*, thinking that it suggested too narrow a range of music. With characteristic wit, he said, “We don’t use the word *jazz*. As a matter of fact, we haven’t used it since 1943. Everything is so highly personalized that you just can’t find a category big enough, and jazz certainly isn’t big enough a category to combine so many wonderful people in it. Everybody’s got his own individual style. Like the Diz has got his ‘ding,’ and Hawk’s got his ‘hing,’ and Bird had his ‘bing,’ and Rabbit has his ‘ring.’”¹

Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington (1899–1974) was the son of James Ellington, a butler who sometimes worked in the White House, and Daisy Ellington, a doting mother who instilled strong religious values and self-confidence in her son. Ellington commented, “Do I believe that I am blessed? Of course I do! In the first place, my mother told me so, many, many times.”² Ellington grew up in a refined and cultivated household within the growing African-American middle class. Duke’s younger sister, Ruth, described the unusually close family ties: “Everybody in the family loved everybody else so intensely, and everybody in the family expected everybody else to be perfect. We were always taught that we were the best, and so we couldn’t be anything else but the best.”³ Duke

The Ellington Oral History Project

At the gala occasion of the founding of the Duke Ellington Fellowship program at Yale University (7 October 1972), Duke Ellington agreed to be interviewed for the Oral History American Music project upon completion of his autobiography. Unfortunately, he died before this was possible. Nevertheless, an oral history project on Ellington was initiated by OHAM shortly after his death in 1974. It eventually grew to ninety-two interviews with musicians, family members, record producers, jazz critics, cultural historians, and others in the music business. Even John Joyce, Ellington's undertaker, was interviewed. A subseries included those who knew Ellington's close collaborator, Billy Strayhorn (for the entire list of Duke Ellington Project interviews, see the OHAM website: www.yale.edu/oham/). It is interesting to note that several individuals drew parallels between Duke Ellington and Charles Ives: both were complex and private, paradoxical, and innovative; and both are seminal figures in the development of American music.

earned his nickname early on because of his stylish dress and polished manners—qualities he would be known for throughout the rest of his life. He lived up to his noble title with legendary charm, sophistication, and dignity.

Ellington grew up during a time when Washington, D.C., was filled with dance halls and ragtime music. As a youth, he picked up keyboard techniques in the local pool hall from Washington rag pianists and heard Eubie Blake and Harlem stride pianist James P. Johnson perform. He painstakingly memorized Johnson's "Carolina Shout" by slowing down a player piano roll and watching the keys move. Ellington started his musical studies with piano lessons from a teacher appropriately named Mrs. Clinkscales. He described his early musical life:

Oh, I began to get interested when I first went to high school at about fourteen. Before that I had piano lessons like all kids do, and I learned enough to play one half of the piano at the church recital. The teacher, Mrs. Clinkscales, played the upper half of the piano. She took the major responsibility, naturally. I sort of learned to play piano, and composing—as you might call it, after a fashion, if this is composing—all came at one time.

When I was a kid I became interested in jazz and ragtime, and I tried to get a lot of people to teach me what they were doing around Washington, but I never could learn anything anybody taught me. So, I was sick and had to stay in the house a couple of weeks, and I finally came up with the "Soda Fountain Rag."

Well, probably the most outstanding incident in my musical career was the beginning of it as a paying proposition when I charged a lady seventy-

five cents to work from 8:00 until 1:00. The woman was desperate for a piano player, and I was the only thing left in town, so she had to take me. I played the worst piano in the world with no rhythm section. I only knew about three or four numbers, and I kept changing the tempos—played them slow and fast, medium tempo. And then she paid the seventy-five cents, and I ran home like a thief. I ran home so happy and woke up everybody in the house to tell them about it. A lot of things sprang from that. I became the school pianist. I played for all the school dances and a lot of things locally.

I was supposed to have been a painter. That was my first recognized talent. I've seen some of my things I did years ago. They are pretty good. You know, I won a scholarship in fine art to the Pratt Institute, but by the time I was ready to take advantage of it, I was already too much involved in music.

When my repertoire got up to about four or five numbers, I was working in the number five band in Washington with all the society work, and I got very smart one day. You know, the guy would send me on a job and say, "Well, collect \$100 and bring me \$90." And I get the \$10. I said, "Well, this is a pretty good business. I think I'll go into it." They had their ads in the telephone book, so I decided to put my ad in the telephone book. My ad was as big as anybody else's, so I began to get work, and I was sending out bands too. I was a pretty good businessman then, seventeen, eighteen years old.

It got around that I was playing the piano, and when you play the piano you get exposed to the ladies. You become aware of them, and they become aware of you. A lot of people think I got bags under my eyes writing music late at night, but it's not true. No, actually what the bags under the eyes are, that's an accumulation of virtues [laughter].⁴

Ellington developed a successful career as a pianist and bandleader in Washington. In 1918 he married Edna Thompson, and in 1919 their son Mercer was born. The musical scene in Washington was thriving, but when Ellington was given the opportunity to work in New York City, he jumped at the chance. In 1923 he went there with drummer Sonny Greer and saxophonist Otto Hardwick. These were the first of numerous musicians who enjoyed unusually long musical associations with Duke Ellington. By the fall of 1923 they joined banjo player Elmer Snowden and trumpeter Arthur Whetsol, called themselves The Washingtonians, and began a four-year engagement at the Hollywood Club. After a fire, the venue was renamed Club Kentucky (usually referred to as the Kentucky Club). It was here that Ellington first met Irving Mills, a controversial figure who was to manage Ellington's business affairs and bring him national prominence.

Irving Mills was a shrewd and aggressive businessman who had his own publishing firm, Mills Music. From 1926 until 1939 he played a crucial yet problematic role as Ellington's manager. During this period, there was a strong division between white and African-American musical acts. Mills, who was white, provided recording and performance opportunities that would otherwise have been unavail-

able to Ellington. He also published Ellington's music, and he has been criticized for taking unearned credit and royalties for Ellington's work. Mercer Ellington commented, "It was the practice of publishers in those days to take credit. If they were somewhere, as Duke Ellington said, and you wanted to get somewhere, you had to make a deal with somebody to get your first tunes out. Today it hasn't changed too much."⁵

By 1927 Ellington had begun to record on the Brunswick, Vocalion, Columbia, and Victor labels, and he had written some of his early classic pieces such as "East St. Louis Toodle-O," "Creole Love Call," and "Black and Tan Fantasy." Then came one of the most significant opportunities of his career: an engagement at the Cotton Club. This was the top spot in Harlem, noted for its lavish interior and high-class (exclusively white) customers. Ellington described the lucky break that helped land the job:

They were having auditions for a band to go into the Cotton Club. About five or six bands or so auditioned. I think the audition was set for noon. When we got there about two o'clock, everybody else had auditioned and gone home. We went on with our audition, and when we got through the man said, "You're hired." I later discovered that the man who said that was the big boss, and he wasn't there when the other guys were there. He only heard us! Some of the fellows around there didn't have very high hopes for us staying there. The waiters were giving odds on us getting thrown out after three or four days, and we stayed there five years.⁶

Ellington's stint at the Cotton Club was during the period known as the Harlem Renaissance, when African-American literature, poetry, fine art, drama, and music flourished. Harlem was the cultural capital of black America, and some adventurous white people, including George Gershwin and Aaron Copland, went there to sample the exotic artistic offerings. The Cotton Club presented elaborate revues with chorus girls, dance numbers, comedians, and singers, all accompanied by Ellington's band. These diverse demands challenged the musicians and expanded their artistic palette. Ellington pointed out another element of the band's success: "Radio was first catching on, and we were broadcasting almost every night across the country. At the same time all the other big bands in the world were imitating Paul Whiteman and playing big grandiose fanfares and that sort of thing. And we had a very plaintive style. As a matter of fact, we were contrasted by all these other people imitating Whiteman."⁷

During his Cotton Club period, Ellington performed a number of original tunes in "jungle style," including "East St. Louis Toodle-O," "Jungle Nights in Harlem," "Echoes of the Jungle," and "The Mooche." Jungle style employed such pseudo-African effects as pounding tom-toms, unusual harmonies and scales, and plunger-muted growling brass lines.⁸ Ruth Ellington recalled, "I remember that I

turned on the radio and this music came, and the announcer said, 'jungle music,' and my shock: Edward was playing jungle music?! Why would Edward be playing jungle music? I've often thought about that—what a funny thing that was."⁹ The Harlem Renaissance writer Langston Hughes described the period as a time when the Negro was in vogue. Always a supreme entertainer, Ellington gave his white audiences what they wanted, including jungle music. He was an outstanding musician, so he did it well.

Ellington had remarkable skill at selecting musicians for his band and getting the most out of them. His band was made up of brilliant, individualistic, and sometimes eccentric voices. He wrote for these specific musicians and featured their unique qualities. For example, the trumpeter Arthur Whetsol had a sweet and elegant tone, while his colleague and 1923 successor Bubber Miley performed with raunchy growls and plunger technique. Miley's presence started to define a new Ellington sound, hotter and dirtier, and his growling trumpet was used in pieces such as "East St. Louis Toodle-O," which he co-wrote. Over the years, the Duke Ellington Orchestra featured such legendary and outstanding musicians as Johnny Hodges, Ben Webster, Jimmy Blanton, and Cootie Williams. Ellington explained, "We write to the individual, provide him with a fitting ornamentation, and he has complete freedom. If you know the man behind the instrument plus the instrument or that which comes out as a result of the two—then, of course, that has a specific musical image. Actually, it's like tailoring a suit."¹⁰ The Duke Ellington Orchestra was remarkably stable, and individuals often stayed on for decades. This was probably due not only to the regular salary that Ellington provided but also to his charismatic leadership, loyalty, and respect for each musician's particular artistic qualities.

Ellington was known to encourage each performer's musical contribution; his compositional process relied upon close interaction with the band. The historian and jazz critic Nat Hentoff described Ellington's working methods: "He would bring out some of the manuscript paper, and if somebody didn't like the way his part was, he would say so. And sometimes a whole section would get together and try to overrule him, saying, 'This will sound much better if you let us do this.' And he would listen because he didn't have that kind of megalomaniac pride of composition. He learned by listening. He didn't always accept the suggestions, but he put a whole lot of them in."¹¹ Some people hold the opinion that in this interactive approach to composition, Ellington exploited his band members, while others feel that he simply encouraged their creative freedom.

During the Cotton Club period, Ellington's band established a distinctive sound, and Ellington's compositions were increasingly innovative. "Creole Love Call" included a musical gesture new to jazz: a wordless vocalise sung with raspy tone by Adelaide Hall. "East St. Louis Toodle-O" was a programmatic song depicting the shuffle of a tired man's broken walk. The piece is highly original in its har-

“Duke was always putting the men in the forefront . . .”

Duke picked up on my style, which I didn’t even recognize. He would teach me a song, and he would imitate me to show me what I was doing. He also told me, “See every live performance you can wherever anyone is performing. From all of them you will be aware of what you’re doing. Just be conscious of everything: how they walk out on the stage, how they bow, all the different things.” And I did. I really focused on it, and that was a great education for me. But I never would have thought about that if he hadn’t said that to me. He helped me find my style. But I didn’t realize that was what was happening. It just sort of fell into place.

Everybody had a chance to solo numerous times, because that’s the way he’d write. He wrote for everybody. The majority of the men with Duke’s band were soloists. They were all stars in their own right, and he gave them the opportunity. Unlike, for instance, when I was with the Benny Goodman band—he didn’t want anyone to star. It was such a contrast I couldn’t believe it. Duke was always putting the men in the forefront. There was great respect for Duke. There was no question that he was the leader and he was the boss and they didn’t want to upset him. He was in command.

—Joya Sherrill

from OHAM interview with Valerie Archer,
29 November 1979, Great Neck, New York

mony, orchestration, and timbres: it featured plunger mute technique in the brasses as well as the growling trumpet of Bubber Miley, accompanied by a bottom-heavy scoring of three saxes in close harmony with the tuba doubling one of the lines an octave lower. The popular “Mood Indigo” of 1930 was scored for a trio of muted trumpet on melody, muted trombone in the middle, and clarinet on the bottom. Not only did this create a totally new sonority, but it utilized new technology: Ellington instructed the trio to stand close to the microphone to achieve a perfect blend, and he recalled that this was “the first tune I wrote specially for microphone transmission.”¹² In addition to its unique tone color, the song’s winding chromatic harmony and quiet rhapsodic style defined a distinctive Ellington sound.

The Depression brought extreme hardships and limited opportunities to many musicians, but Ellington’s band continued to make records and to perform and broadcast steadily from the Cotton Club. In 1929 Ellington’s career expanded to include Hollywood, with his first motion picture, a short film called *Black and Tan*. The next year the orchestra performed in its first feature-length movie, *Check and Double Check*. Ellington and his band appeared in several more Hollywood

"They didn't mention my name . . ."

I just write the melody, and Duke write the arrangement so I give him credit. Like, for instance, "Caravan," written by Duke Ellington and Juan Tizol. I used to get mad when on television I hear all the time, "Now, ladies and gentlemen, we will play 'Caravan' by Duke Ellington," and they didn't mention my name. Still they're doing it. He had nothing to do with "Perdido," "Lost in Meditation" and "Gypsy Without a Song," "Conga Brava," a million songs that I did. They are my tunes, and I put it that he made the arrangement so he could get a little cash through the ASCAP. Well, God bless him because he's dead now, but he took credit for everything I did.

—Juan Tizol

from OHAM interview with Brad Dechter,
30 July 1980, Los Angeles

movies, including *Symphony in Black* of 1934, in which they performed with a little-known singer named Billie Holiday.

The Duke Ellington Orchestra made its first tour abroad in 1933, with enormously successful performances in England and Paris. Ellington was thrilled by the enthusiasm and knowledge of European audiences and moved by their conception of him as a serious artist. Not only did the band perform on concert stages rather than in clubs, but elaborate program booklets accompanied the shows. Ellington also had the opportunity to meet some of the British royal family; on one occasion, the prince of Wales even sat in on the drums! The tour had a positive impact on Ellington, both commercially and artistically.

As the Depression began to abate in the middle of the thirties, musical tastes changed. People had more money to spend and were likely to go to nightclubs rather than to stay home and listen to the radio for entertainment. Swing was all the rage, and big bands led by such white bandleaders as Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, and Jimmy Dorsey were at the height of their popularity. This trend was an obstacle to Ellington's career. A key element of swing is rhythmic drive, and Ellington's band was criticized for not swinging. Its drummer, Sonny Greer, was more inclined toward elaborate and artistic drumming, and Ellington's compositions themselves tended to be more complex and innovative than the standard swing tunes. Ellington—who had written "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got that Swing)" years before the rise of swing—said: "My definition of swing is that part of music that causes a bouncing buoyant terpsichorean urge. It makes you want to dance and bounce about. Of course, that isn't what's accepted today as swing. Swing today is a com-

“He was the consummate everything in jazz . . .”

My parents and all of their classical music friends in the New York Philharmonic, particularly the ones who were German—they were all down on jazz. I don’t know whether it was because Hitler had put jazz down and declared it as “degenerate music” or whether they just innately couldn’t understand jazz; I don’t know. My mother used to berate me when I listened to Louis Armstrong sing. She didn’t mind his trumpet playing so much, but he sang with this gravelly, growly voice. She said, “*Das ist doch gar kein Singen*. That’s no singing. How can you listen to that?” Well, I just kept on listening and in my own little teenage mind, thought “Wait a minute. I don’t believe what any of these people are telling me. This is great music—particularly Ellington.” Ellington was for me and still is *the* greatest jazz composer—in the full sense of the word *composer*, not just in the improvising performer sense in which many other fine musicians are also composers, instantaneous composers. Ellington was everything. He was an improviser; he was a composer; he wrote extended works; he was a great pianist; he was a remarkable bandleader; in short, he was the consummate everything in jazz. Some of the sounds that Ellington created in his career as early as the late twenties and early thirties are sounds which had never been heard before on the face of the earth—had never been created before by anybody: not Ravel, not Debussy, not Schoenberg, not Stravinsky, not anybody. He was a totally unique and new world of sound, rhythm, and even harmony.

—Gunther Schuller

from OHAM interview with Ev Grimes,
18 July 1992, Lenox, Massachusetts

mercial label on a music itself. But we always thought that swing was an emotional element. We’ve always accepted it as that. It is something that you feel when the music is played. When your pulse and my pulse are together, we’re swinging. That’s total agreement, you know.”¹³

During one of the band’s many national tours, Ellington met a young man who was to have an enormous impact on his compositional life for years to come. The slim, shy, and bespectacled Billy Strayhorn may have seemed an unlikely partner for the handsome, charismatic Ellington, but they worked so closely together and their creative output was so intimately connected that Strayhorn is often described as Ellington’s alter ego. From 1939 until Strayhorn’s death in 1967, the two worked together with a remarkable and legendary compatibility. Numerous individuals cited occasions when the two would work independently only to find that both

ended on the same key or produced almost identical musical material. Luther Henderson, arranger, orchestrator of Ellington's *Beggar's Holiday*, and friend of Strayhorn, recounted one such tale:

They literally could think together. I mean, Ellington would start something, and he would give it to Strayhorn and see if he could finish it. Strayhorn really did a great deal of the exposition in *Beggar's Holiday*, but all the tunes were written by Ellington. I remember one night that something came up in the show, and they decided they needed a ballet. Duke was out in the country someplace. Strayhorn got on the phone with Ellington, and they must have talked and hummed for an hour or more. And Strays: "All right, okay, oh great." And got himself a little beer and some coffee and wrote it that night. It was about a five-minute ballet, but he did it over the phone.¹⁴

Ellington described their first meeting:

Somebody brought him to the theater we were playing in Pittsburgh and said, "This young man has got a lot of talent and I think you should hear him." And he sat down and played some of his music and the lyrics. And he had such perfect wedding of words and music. And I said, "Gee, I'm going to bring you to New York and let you write lyrics for me." So finally, he came to New York, and when he came, I was just about to leave for Scandinavia. That was 1939, and I left him at my house with my son and my sister. While I was gone for six weeks, they were there going through my scores. He had wonderful musical training, schooling, but he had never written for a band. And he got these ideas and started playing with them. One day we had a small band date, six pieces, eight, or something, and I got stuck for a number. I said, "Write this. Do something." He did it, and everybody's eye's popped when they heard what he played because it was wonderful—the first thing. Then of course, in 1940 came the renaissance of vocal background orchestration when he did "Flamingo." And of course it's been flowering ever since.¹⁵

In addition to "Flamingo," Strayhorn wrote such memorable songs as "Lush Life," "Chelsea Bridge," "Lotus Blossom," and "Take the A Train," which became the band's theme song.

Soon after Strayhorn started to work with Ellington, two other legendary musicians joined the band: bassist Jimmy Blanton and tenor saxophonist Ben Webster. The young and brilliant Blanton revolutionized jazz bass playing, and Ellington responded by writing pieces which featured him, such as "Jack the Bear," and to record an extraordinary album of duets. Ben Webster's unique and compelling sound and terrific rhythmic drive distinguished him as an important solo voice. He joined a saxophone section that already included the expressive and soulful Johnny Hodges, and he was featured in "Cotton Tail" and "Conga Brava." Many consider the band of the early forties to be the finest that Ellington ever led. At this point

“That’s not for me . . .”

Uncle Bill was low key. I mean, he was never a braggadocious person. He was very humble, quiet, and gentle. I knew that if he were aggressive or if he had wanted more from his career that it could have been so. In fact, I can remember when André Previn, who is a preeminent jazz musician, when he was really making his play to get into the national limelight. And I said, “Uncle, you’re every bit as competent as André Previn. There’s no reason why, using some of the contacts you have, that you couldn’t be equally—” And he looked at me and he said, “Yeah, I think so. But that’s not for me. What’s it going to get me? Oh yes, a lot of fame, a lot of publicity,” he says, “a lot of ulcers. All that money that you end up making, then you end up paying it either to the doctor or you give it to a shrink trying to get your head back together because you’re trying to keep up with too many things. No, I’m really happy with the kinds of things I’m doing. And I’d rather be behind the scenes where I can be creative. I can work at my own pace. I’m not dangling at the end of somebody else’s string.” He was happy in what he was doing, and he just didn’t need all the money and all the limelight.

Ellington and Strayhorn were creative artists, and I don’t think they did much about the business side. I think Uncle Bill gave Ellington a whole new dimension, a new flair. And it really added something to all this music, and I think that’s what he recognized. And I think that’s what he exploited. I don’t mean exploited in the negative sense. But that’s what happened.

—Gregory Morris, Billy Strayhorn’s nephew
from OHAM interview with Harriet Milnes,
23 August 1984, Pittsburgh

Ellington furthered his career by changing management, parting from Irving Mills and joining the William Morris Agency. He signed a five-year contract with RCA Victor in 1939.

In 1941 Ellington wrote a musical, *Jump for Joy*. The show, sometimes called a civil rights musical, gave Ellington the opportunity to express his views on race relations. Although Ellington generally avoided controversy, the show included some biting criticism of racism. Moreover, it portrayed the all-African-American cast in a positive, strong, and nonstereotypical way. The show, which included the popular “I Got It Bad (and That Ain’t Good),” was widely praised, but it closed in Los Angeles after an eleven-week run and never made it to Broadway.

One of the most momentous occasions in Ellington’s extraordinary career came in 1943, when the band performed in Carnegie Hall. Although they had played on European concert stages, in America the band was more often seen in

“Simpatico . . .”

They had a marvelous relationship, where Edward could be in California and Strays could be in Paris, and Edward would call him up and tell him he had an idea for a certain number. Strays would write his part in Paris, and Edward would write his part in California. And when they got the two parts together, they had started or ended on the same key or the same note, or they could dovetail the two together and make one piece without having discussed it with one another. They were that simpatico. Extraordinary relationship.

—Marian Logan
from OHAM interview with Sonia Rosario,
27 February 1978, New York City

nightclubs, cabarets, dance halls, and stage shows. Similarly, Carnegie Hall rarely featured jazz groups, with the notable exception of Benny Goodman in 1938. An African-American jazz group on stage at Carnegie Hall was dramatic, and Ellington used the occasion to premiere a striking piece, *Black, Brown, and Beige*. Subtitled *A Tone Parallel to the History of the American Negro*, this work also addressed racial issues, but its greatest notoriety came from its length: a little more than three quar-

“ . . . it was impossible to tell where Duke stopped and where Billy started . . .”

Billy was the one that took care of rehearsals. Duke was there, but Billy would do the arranging on a lot of things and he would direct the guys. Not only that, at a recording session it was impossible to tell where Duke stopped and where Billy started, because Duke would be conducting and Billy would be playing the piano. It would happen at concerts too. He would be conducting, and then there was a spot that he wanted to go to the piano, and Duke would pick up the next note and sit down and finish what he was doing without missing a beat. When you'd listen to a record, Billy would be playing in Duke's style, but he was able to do this so well.

—Joya Sherrill
from OHAM interview with Valerie Archer,
29 November 1979, Great Neck, New York

“He did not make himself easy to know . . .”

Billy was a marvelous person. He was very astute, very sharp. Much sharper than he would let on because his image was like his nickname, Sweetpea. But he knew what was going on, and he was utterly devoted to Duke. I did not get the sense that he felt diminished by being Duke’s alter ego. I think that was really the role he wanted, and he was delighted he could do it, and he really was indispensable to Duke. Billy was a homosexual at a time when the closets were still largely closed. Although jazz was supposed to have been a field in which individuality had a fair amount of free exercise, nonetheless, Billy was not all that eager to have it known. Part of his retiring nature was, I think, because he was in the closet. He did not make himself easy to know.

—Nat Hentoff

from presentation to Duke Ellington Seminar, Yale University,
28 February 1978

ters of an hour. The length of most popular songs then was three minutes, dictated by the limits of a ten-inch 78 rpm record. Ellington had earlier experimented with longer durations and forms with songs such as “Reminiscing in Tempo” of 1935 and his “Creole Rhapsody” of 1931, but *Black, Brown, and Beige* sparked a particularly lively debate. Many critics questioned whether Ellington was capable of writing a good large-scale piece or whether such forms were appropriate for jazz. In *Jazz* magazine, John Hammond asked the tendentious question, “Is the Duke Deserting Jazz?”¹⁶ Others wondered whether jazz itself belonged in Carnegie Hall, described by Jake Trussell Jr. as “the sacrosanct, hypocritical hideout of everything and everybody that hates jazz music.”¹⁷ Nevertheless, the Duke Ellington Orchestra would go on to perform six more concerts at Carnegie Hall.

After the heady times of the early forties, Ellington’s fortune began to shift. The band experienced numerous personnel changes, including the departures of Cootie Williams (for Benny Goodman’s band), Barney Bigard, Ivie Anderson, Ben Webster, Rex Stewart, Juan Tizol, and Otto Hardwick, and the deaths of Jimmy Blanton and Tricky Sam Nanton. Some of these musicians, like Hardwick and Nanton, had been working with Ellington for decades; others, like Blanton and Webster, had redefined the band’s sound with their brilliant and individual voices. By the late forties, the band had lost its widespread popularity. The rise of bebop made Ellington seem old-fashioned, and pop singers like Frank Sinatra attracted much larger audiences. By the early fifties, very few big bands survived. People moved from the city to the suburbs and watched television, the latest novelty, rather than listen to

“You work with what you’ve got . . .”

I wanted to tell you about an incident with Duke, just to give you another idea of the kind of guy he was. We were traveling, and I was doing more strenuous dancing than I had ever done before. I went out on the stage, and I found that although it was hardwood, the old floor had deteriorated, and it was almost like corrugated wood. I used to do a series of slides in which I’d kick up one leg and would slide along with one foot attached to the floor. It felt like it was going to tear my upper thighs apart. We used to look at those performances religiously, and I was really hurt because of it. I had experienced this the first show, and I came backstage and I was beating the walls with my fists. And Ellington saw it.

So Duke: “Hi, babe. What’s the matter? What happened to you?” I said, “God, that stage out there. It’s tearin’ my thighs apart.” He could see I wasn’t needing surgery or anything. It wasn’t that severe, but I was just unhappy about it. So he says, “Hey, c’mere.” He took me to the other side of the stage where the piano was that he had performed on and he showed me his hands en route. His hands looked worse than a bass player’s: calluses, cuts, cracks, and so forth. He said, “You know, I’m the star of this show, and this is what I have to work with.” I looked at the piano. It was a mess. The black keys were ripped off by the dozens. The white keys, through use of fingers rubbing along it, get a sort of rounded shape and the very edge is razor sharp. That’s what had been cutting up his fingers. This guy is the feature attraction of the whole show, and that’s what he had to contend with. This was the way that he taught you things. The moral of this story being: you don’t question what you have to work with in show business. You work with what you’ve got. I never complained anymore.

—Alfredo Gustar
from OHAM interview with Harriett Milnes,
19 February 1983, New York City

the radio or go out to hear live performances. In 1951 the band suffered another crushing blow, the departure of Johnny Hodges, Sonny Greer, and Lawrence Brown, who left to form their own band. Hodges’s sensuous and expressive saxophone had long been a featured attraction of Ellington’s band, and Greer had worked with Ellington since their youthful days in Washington, D.C.

Despite these adversities, Ellington, with characteristic optimism and dedication, continued with his band. He hired new players, such as trumpeter Clark Terry and saxophonist Paul Gonsalves. However, the former glory days of performances in major urban venues and European tours were replaced by low-paying one-night stands and even a six-week stint accompanying ice-skaters in Flushing, New York.

One lucky night on tour in 1956 Ellington's shifting fortunes turned around yet again. The band performed brilliantly at the Newport Jazz Festival, and their set culminated in a spontaneous twenty-seven-chorus solo by Paul Gonsalves on "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue." The record producer George Avakian described the occasion:

The performance was just unbelievable. The band was in terrific shape that night. Gonsalves was just fantastic. There was a good-looking blonde girl in a tight black dress who started dancing in the crowd, and it got everybody steamed up, including the band interchanging with her. You know, the guys, when Paul was blowing, clapping hands behind him and shouting. The excitement was quite tremendous. The recording was just a super smash. It was the best-selling Ellington record of all time, and remains so, and it was a real turnaround in Duke's career. Duke himself appreciated it enormously because he was one who always understood the problem of retaining musical integrity and goals, but at the same time having to reach people in order to meet the payroll. Duke said, "Well, I've gotta do it no matter what, because without the band, I can't be me, and I can't work."¹⁸

After the comeback in Newport, Ellington and his band enjoyed renewed opportunities. *Time* magazine featured Ellington on the cover, and Columbia Records offered the band a contract and recorded numerous albums, including "A Drum Is a Woman," a satirical history of jazz. Ellington and Strayhorn also wrote a number of extended works, including *Such Sweet Thunder* (also known as *The Shakespearean Suite*), the *Nutcracker Suite* (based on Tchaikovsky), *Peer Gynt Suite* (based on Grieg), and *The Far East Suite*. Ellington created music for a number of film scores including *Anatomy of a Murder* and *Paris Blues*, and he wrote incidental music for the Ontario Shakespeare Company in Stratford. Ellington collaborated with such well-known and diverse artists as Ella Fitzgerald, Rosemary Clooney, Coleman Hawkins, John Coltrane, and Frank Sinatra. He joined two major figures in the jazz world, Charles Mingus and Max Roach, to create the *Money Jungle* record of 1962. The following year he wrote *My People*, a large-scale work celebrating various distinguished African-American leaders. The piece was presented in Chicago as part of a celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. It included "King Fit the Battle of Alabam'," a piece dedicated to Martin Luther King Jr., who attended a rehearsal and greeted Ellington warmly. Despite the fact that *My People* and previous works like *Jump for Joy*, *New World a-Comin'*, *Deep South Suite*, and *Harlem* addressed racial issues, Ellington was sometimes criticized for not speaking out more vehemently and directly about civil rights.

Prestigious honors and awards came to Ellington in increasing numbers. He received honorary degrees from such institutions as Yale, Brown, Howard, and Washington Universities and the Berklee College of Music. President Nixon presented him the Presidential Medal of Honor at a gala White House celebration of Duke's

“ . . . my people . . . ”

The music of my people is what? Let's see, my people? Now, which of my people? I'm in several groups. I'm in the group of the piano players. I'm in the group of the listeners. I'm in the groups of the people who have a general appreciation of music. I'm in the group of those who aspire to be dilettantes. I'm in the group of those who attempt to produce something for the plateau. I'm in the group of what? Oh yes, those who appreciate Beaujolais. The music of the people—the people, that's a better word. *The* people, rather than *my* people. Because *the* people are *my* people. The music: you go further and further back in the music that I have become a part of. It's strongly American Negro.

—Duke Ellington

seventieth birthday in 1969. Haile Selassie, ruler of Ethiopia, paid tribute to him with the Emperor's Star, and France's president Georges Pompidou named him to the Legion of Honor. Even snubs, like the decision of the Pulitzer Prize Committee in 1965 not to present him with a special award in composition, did not seem to upset him. With his usual calm graciousness, the sixty-six-year-old Ellington's sardonic reply was, "Fate is being kind to me. Fate doesn't want me to be famous too young."¹⁹

Near the end of his life, Duke Ellington wrote three large-scale religious works, the Sacred Concerts of 1965, 1968, and 1973. Ellington's religious convictions had been strong since his youth. He commented on the startling idea of putting jazz into a religious setting:

They said they would like for me to do a sacred concert up at the Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. Of course, this knocked me completely out. I said: "Wait a minute. I'll have to think about this," because this is quite a thing. I'm going to go up in this beautiful cathedral and make my kind of noise? This has to be right—because when you play or say something in a church, you can't be acting. You've got to mean what you say because you never know what's going to fall on you if you don't. You have to mean what you say. If you don't, you've got no business in there.²⁰

The First Sacred Concert was created largely from preexisting material, including the haunting tune "Come Sunday," originally written for *Black, Brown, and Beige*. It was premiered at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, and included the band, chorus, solo singers, and a tap dancer. The Second Sacred Concert, which premiered at New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine, consisted of entirely new

“He was like Bach . . .”

The contemporary composer as misunderstood, ignored, unappreciated, alienated, I find an absolutely pathological model. I decided early on in my life that a composer like Duke Ellington was a far more important model to me. Ellington particularly influenced me because he was a person who wrote for his audience. He wanted to be popular. He wanted to write hits. He worked constantly. He was like Bach. There was just this endless flow. He never stopped. He was married to his work and married to the players in his band. He created one of the great bodies of art in this century.

—John Adams
from OHAM interview with Perlis,
3 May 1997, New York City

material, including Ellington’s original lyrics. It was very well received and was widely performed for many denominations throughout the world. The Third Sacred Concert was premiered at Westminster Abbey in London.

In the last year of his life, Ellington completed his autobiography, *Music Is My Mistress*. This book, full of colorful and positive reflections, has been criticized for its inaccuracies. Ellington, always polite and nonconfrontational, must have recognized the overly optimistic nature of the book. He said to his son Mercer and coauthor Stanley Dance, “We’ve written the Good Book . . . and now we’ll write the Bad Book!”²¹ Even after the publication of his memoirs, Ellington remained enigmatic. Musician Willie Ruff described him as “a master of illusion. . . . Never heard anybody get a straight answer out of him.”²² Ruth Ellington commented, “Many people thought he was an enigma, and I’ve often described him as having veils behind veils behind veils behind veils behind veils. I think that he developed that kind of facade because he was so hypersensitive that he knew that he was vulnerable to injury, and therefore he did not expose large areas of himself. He just opened up small little facets here and there, and he was always extremely aware of what was going on about him. He could look at people and see straight through them.”²³

Duke Ellington has been described as unique, original, elusive, refined, hard-working, and restlessly productive. His obituary in the *New York Times* referred to him as “America’s most important composer.”²⁴ The pianist Randy Weston called him “a prophet, one of the great leaders in music. There’ll never be anybody who’s ever accomplished what he accomplished, before or after. With his elegance and his quick wit and his manners and his charm and his fantastic personality, there’ll never

“ . . . like reading James Joyce . . . ”

Music Is My Mistress—that’s the book that really says everything, but you have to look at it like reading James Joyce; you need to know the humor and the wit and all the subtle nuances. Knowing his intuitive sensing of things, I think he sensed that he might have been at the end, and I think that he looked at the book as thanking a lot of people, not really a biography as such. This was giving credit to those who contributed. That’s the basic spirit that the book was written in. He does comment on a lot of things in there, but it’ll take fifty years before the scholars and the general world will get enough knowledge of him to be able to read that book and see all the irony in there. He says some very potent things, if you know how to read it. His sarcasm: he had a way of seeming to be building someone up and actually putting them down. The musicians that live with him, they read it and understand it. I talked with several of them and we laughed over certain passages, the type of thing that would be very difficult for the average person to understand. I try to tell them he told everything—you just didn’t read it right. It’s all right there.

—Michael James, Ellington’s nephew
from OHAM interview with Harriett Milnes,
22 January 1983, New York City

be another Ellington.”²⁵ Pianist Billy Taylor described the worldwide embrace of Ellington’s music, calling it a “monumental achievement.” He added:

His melodies were interesting and the harmonies always went to some unexpected place. I asked him, “Duke, how is it that your harmonies are so logical and they seem to flow naturally into unexpected places? How did you ever get started in that direction?” And he said, “Well, when I found out C-sharp wasn’t D-flat.” It was very profound. And then, hand in hand with that, was the way in which he presented his music. He was serious about his music, even something that was obviously a lot of fun—I mean, the band is having a good time, Sonny Greer is playing on everything in sight—but they were serious about it. That made a marked impression on me because I could see that there were two approaches to fun. Some guys were comic in the show business sense. Fats Waller would do all these outrageous things when he was playing the piano. Louis Armstrong would do his show biz kind of routine with the handkerchief and everything. And yet Ellington was just as effective and communicated just as much with a certain kind of elegance. It was all through his music.²⁶