



**THE  
ELLINGTON  
ERA**

**1927-1940**

**Duke Ellington & His Famous Orchestra  
Volume One**



**Part Three**

# THE ELLINGTON ERA 1927-1940

Volume 1

Foreword by Irving Mills

It is difficult to know where to start in a tribute to the genius of Duke Ellington. So much has been said before, by me and by countless others, that there is little to add except one general observation: the more time goes by, the more my original faith in him is justified.

From the time I first met him, in 1926, until our relationship ended in 1930, I was as close to Duke as anyone living, outside of his own family. I saw him rise from a position of obscurity to one of world-wide recognition, and I didn't see this from the sidelines as a spectator; as Duke's personal manager I was proud and happy to be an integral part of the developments, and to watch his mounting success with a great sense of personal satisfaction.

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In those days it was necessary for a bandleader to play for shows and for dancers. Duke functioned efficiently in these capacities, of course, but it soon became clear that helping to organize his career was a big-scale operation. It involved a great deal more than getting dance dates or nightclub bookings for him, or selling his compositions. It was necessary to show the public a broader image of the man as a figure of real stature on the American musical scene.

Within a few years after the inauguration of this policy, Duke was able to claim a list of accomplishments that no other jazz orchestra at that time had ever experienced. The band had been featured in a Hollywood motion picture. Duke had several songs that had become international hits, and as early as 1933, aboard the *Olympic*, we arrived in England—Duke, the band, Irie Anderson and myself—where we were greeted by Jack Hylton, the British bandleader and impresario who had helped to arrange our first overseas tour.

There is no need for me to review here the events that followed during the remaining years of our direct association. They are all admirably represented in this album, the first truly comprehensive panorama on records of a major segment of Ellington's career. The music speaks for itself, and it speaks eloquently as a reminder of the unique achievements of this man during the days when jazz was still in a formative stage and had to face a great deal of opposition on every level.

Despite all the difficulties, Duke remained loyal to his beliefs. His philosophy, a rare one in the musical world of those days, was that of a resolute, dedicated artist. Moreover, as I told the late Charles Emge for a *Down Beat* interview back in 1952, 'I never tried to persuade Duke to sacrifice his integrity as Duke Ellington, the musician, for the sake of trying to find a short cut to commercial success. There might be something for today's personal managers, booking agents and press agents to think about. Too many of them think solely in terms of developing and exploiting musicians as commercial attractions.'

I think the performances on these sides will bear out the belief I held then and hold now, that the finest and most lasting music of our time has been made by the men who have been unwilling to compromise. This attitude, and the talent that came with it, have made Duke Ellington the most durable figure in the history of American jazz; a music he played a great part in helping to build.

## The Ellington Mystique, by Leonard Feather

On the evening of April 29, 1963, a very active telephone line connected Beverly Hills, California, with New York City.

At the California end, where an amplifier was attached to the telephone so that the message would be audible to all the faithful, were Patricia Willard, an Ellington fan and

employee; Rex Stewart, an Ellington alumnus, and many past and present members of the Duke Ellington Jazz Society. As Rex blew out the candles on the cake, friends across the continent sent greetings.

At the other end of the line, almost crushed by cake-carrying mobs backstage at the Apollo Theatre, was Harry Carney, then in his thirty-seventh year as an Ellingtonian, and Edward Kennedy Ellington, composer, arranger, bandleader and pianist, celebrating his sixty-fourth birthday.

The events of that evening were remarkable in that they symbolized the perennial mystique that surrounds the Ellington orchestra and its iconic leader. No Masonic ritualism can surpass the intensity and dedication of the Ellington Jazz Society, whose members once held simultaneous birthday parties at 24 cities in 15 countries. The Society, founded in 1958 by Bill Ross, an Ellington enthusiast and discologist from Montreal, had been in existence effectively long before that, in the sense that Ellington students consider themselves a special breed, beyond the normal boundaries of jazz enthusiasm, tied together by the unique thread of the Ellington band that has run through a major segment of their lives.

In this sense, many of us, even those who differ strongly in other areas of opinion, have been bound by this thread for two, three and, in some cases, even four decades.

Ellington's music transcends the most violent disputes among musicologists, providing a bond for such disparate as Milton Berle, Percy Faith, Arthur Fiedler, Benny Goodman, Morton Gould, Woody Herman, Lena Horne, Gordon Jenkins, Andre Kostelanetz, Peggy Lee, Guy Lombardo, Cole Porter, Pee Wee Russell, Deems Taylor and Lawrence Welk. These names were not picked at random; they were among the dozens who, in 1952, on the occasion of the silver anniversary of Ellington's Cotton Club opening, paid tribute to Duke in *Down Beat* and named their five favourite Ellington records. It is highly improbable that any other musical figure, in or out of jazz, could induce such an eclectic assemblage even to name five of his or her records.

Ellington's music does more than cut across party lines; it induces an unparalleled kind of fierce, jealous loyalty. If you dare to say, in the presence of Joe Morgen (the New York press agent who once arranged a White House interview between Ellington and President Truman) that Count Basie's latest album is better than Duke's, you will be subjected to a harangue so withering that you will hasten to assure him you were only kidding (as you undoubtedly were). And if you happen to be a member of the Ellington band who at one point decided to quit, there is absolutely no assurance, no matter how final your terms of departure, that you have quit forever. Among the moths that have been attracted back to the flame in the past couple of years are no fewer than nine former members who rejoined, briefly or permanently, after absences ranging from a few weeks to 22 years: trumpeters Cootie Williams, Cat Anderson, Ray Nance, Willie Cook; trombonists Lawrence Brown, Quentin Jackson; saxophonists Johnny Hodges and Paul Gonsalves, and Sam Woodyard, the drummer.

Ellington's place in American musical history was underestimated for many years before it was fully misunderstood. A factor that has tended to confuse the public (and to some degree the historians) is that Ellington, as he himself pointed out long ago, functions on two main bases, as a bandleader and as a composer. Sometimes I compose for the band, sometimes I compose for other organizations, sometimes I compose in a vacuum,' he told Barry Ulanov. Ellington has led the misconceptions by appearing on television shows and at jazz festivals as the performer of a medley of his 'hits'. The fact is that the most vital of his works in the main are neither the simple melodies that take on lyrics and earn wide popularity (*Solitude*, *Mood Indigo*), nor the themes he has written for nightclub, Broadway and movie scores (*I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart*, 'I'm Gonna Go Fishin''), but the strictly orchestral pieces, in which his flair for the creation of interesting melodic lines is inextricably entwined with his skill in devising them, in devising sectional and ensemble passages of an extraordinarily personal nature, and in presenting the results through the medium of what has always been called his favourite instrument: the Ellington orchestra.

Duke's accomplishments, in other words, are best evaluated not in relationship to his successes alone. Tin Pan Alley, by entirely in terms of his achievements within the framework of jazz. As a songwriter he is a master, but Gershwin and Kern and Rodgers can be considered masters on the same plateau. As a composer-arranger-bandleader, in the irremovable-hyphen sense, he is unique.

There has been no continuous line of development in Ellington as a tunesmith, for in this miniaturist art the plain diatonic approach of a *Solitude*, vintage 1934, is as satisfying and fulfils its purpose as adequately as any hit he may write today; but as a weaver of orchestral textures he has been changing, developing and expanding since the beginning. It is his continuous evolution on this level that makes the present album



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THE ELLINGTON ERA: VOLUME I

Part III

DUKE ELLINGTON and His Famous Orchestra

SIDE 1



33

BPG 62180

(CL 2048)

BIEM/NCB

1. Lawrence

Wright

2, 5, 7, 8.

Mills Music

3, 6, J. H.

Laffeur

4. United

Artists

BPG 62180 1L

RECORDING FIRST  
PUBLISHED 1961

1. I LET A SONG GO OUT OF MY HEART (J. Redmond/H. Nemo/  
I. Mills/D. Ellington) 2. RIDIN' ON A BLUENOTE (I. Mills/  
D. Ellington) 3. BOY MEETS HORN (I. Mills/D. Ellington/  
R. Stewart) 4. SLAP HAPPY (D. Ellington) 5. THE GAL  
FROM JOE'S (D. Ellington) 6. PRELUDE TO A KISS  
(I. Gordon/I. Mills/D. Ellington) 7. DIMINUENDO  
IN BLUE (D. Ellington) 8. CRESCENDO  
IN BLUE (D. Ellington)

MADE IN ENGLAND

THE ELLINGTON ERA: VOLUME I

Part III

DUKE ELLINGTON and His Famous Orchestra

SIDE 2



33

BPG 62180

(CL 2048)

BIEM/NCB

1. United Artists

2, 3, 6. Mills

Music

4, 7. Lawrence

Wright

5, 8. Robbins

Music

BPG 62180 2L

RECORDING FIRST  
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1. JAZZ POTPOURRI (D. Ellington) 2. SUBTLE LAMENT (D. Ellington)  
3. PORTRAIT OF THE LION (D. Ellington) 4. SOPHISTICATED  
LADY (M. Parish/I. Mills/D. Ellington) 5. GRIEVIN'  
(D. Strayhorn/D. Ellington) 6. BATTLE OF SWING  
(D. Ellington) 7. STORMY WEATHER (I. Koehler/  
H. Arlen) vocal: Ivie Anderson 8. THE SERGEANT  
WAS SHY (D. Ellington)

MADE IN ENGLAND



VOLUME 1  
PART 3

# THE ELLINGTON ERA 1927-1940

## Duke Ellington and his Famous Orchestra

### SIDE 1

1. LET A SONG GO OUT OF MY HEART, Brunswick 8108 (mx M 753-A), 2/2/38. Personnel as track 2.
2. RIDIN' ON A BLUENOTE, Brunswick 8083 (mx M 751-A), 2/2/38. Personnel as track 1, but Guy absent.
3. BOY MEETS HORN, Brunswick 8306 (mx M 960-1), 22/12/38. Personnel as track 2, but Baker and Alvis absent; Guy returns to the band.
4. SLAP HAPPY, Brunswick 8207 (mx M 961-1), 22/12/38. Personnel as track 3.

### Notes by STANLEY DANCE

Jazz is so accustomed to fiery talents which burn brilliantly, and burn out too soon, that a career of steady growth like Duke Ellington's is altogether exceptional. Most jazz musicians express—and continue to express—their impact upon the musical imagination of the times during which they reach a kind of maturity. Duke's imagination, to the contrary, seems to be constantly nourished by both past and present experience. Thus, the most consistently progressive musician jazz has ever known is, paradoxically, one of its greatest conservatives. He adds the new and promising, but at the same time he cherishes the old and proven. This partly accounts for the richness of his music, for he builds into the future on the best of the past. Though he has long had the unanimous admiration of his profession, Duke's example is a lesson few have learned, or have apparently attempted to learn. The contrasting material, the careful attention to dynamics and muted nuance, the unusual instrumental groupings and the resultant variety of orchestral colour, are all reflections of the Ellington genius, but the emulation they have inspired has, for the most part, been surprisingly brief. When Harry Carney was asked which band represented the biggest challenge during the period covered by this set, he thought a moment before answering: "Jimmie Lunceford's." A relatively broad acquaintance, a good understanding and use of the jazz heritage, and a stable personnel for some years were, of course, characteristics of the Lunceford band, too. The present selection of recordings illustrates the development and scope of Ellington's music from 1927 through the following decade, though the emphasis is deliberately on those orchestral pieces which Leonard Feather has justly described as the "most vital of his works." There is, however, such a wealth of material available from these years that a forthcoming second set is necessary to do it complete justice and to dispel the ignorance that still exists about the band's pre-1940 activities. If the '30s are regarded as the period when the foundations were laid, the '30s were a decade of extensive and imaginative building and one in which the supremacy of the Ellington band was firmly established.

LET A SONG GO OUT OF MY HEART was written for the 1938 Cotton Club show. "It was taken out," Duke remembers, "and replaced by a Hawaiian number." A perfect melody for Johnny Hodges, who is the first soloist, it was soon a big hit. Carney, Brown and Bigard also solo, and Duke's piano punctuations add much to the ensemble.

RIDIN' ON A BLUENOTE, written in a Loew's theatre dressing room, is primarily a showcase for Cootie Williams. Like the preceding performance, it derives from a period when Duke

5. THE GAL FROM JOE'S, Brunswick 8108 (mx M 753-A), 2/2/38. Personnel as track 2.
6. PRELUDE TO A KISS, Brunswick 8204, (mx M 984-1), 4/8/38. Personnel as track 2.
7. DIMINUENDO IN BLUE, Brunswick 8004 (mx M 648-A), 20/3/37. Personnel as track 3.
8. CRESCENDO IN BLUE, Brunswick 8004 (mx M 648-A), 20/3/37. Personnel as track 3.

### SIDE 2

1. JAZZ POTPOURRI, Brunswick 8203 (mx M 947-1), 19/12/38. Personnel as side 1, track 3.
2. SUBTLE LAMENT, Brunswick 8344 (mx MW 998-1), 20/3/39. Personnel as side 1, track 3.
3. PORTRAIT OF THE LION, Brunswick 8305 (mx M 1006-1), 21/3/39. Personnel as side 1, track 3.

was experimenting with two bassists. Both Hayes Alvis and Billy Taylor are heard.

BOY MEETS HORN was Rex Stewart's concerto and greatest success. "It was a matter," Duke says, "of employing effectively the limited range of Rex's cocked-vocal tones." Limitation seems to have provoked rather than handicapped the concert player's artist in this case.

SLAP HAPPY gives the biggest solo role to Harry Carney, though Cootie Williams and "Tricky Sam" are also heard from individually. Sections and soloists lose in an arrangement of smooth continuity.

THE GAL FROM JOE'S is one of the best vehicles for the soloist, also of Johnny Hodges. "We still have to play it," Duke confesses, "those of us who remember it, although you might say it's always totally unprepared nowadays." Hodges scars above the chanting muted brass and then the ensemble takes over for a logical climax and fade.

PRELUDE TO A KISS is a beautiful ballad whose lyrics, by Irving Gordon, Duke is always quick to commend. This set and ingeniously scored instrumental version features Hodges (soprano), Lawrence Brown, Duke, and on lead trumpet, Wallace Jones.

DIMINUENDO AND CRESCENDO IN BLUE, a two-part composition that was to achieve immortality at Newport in 1956 (with a long, linking tenor solo by Paul Gonsavers), is presented here in its original form. There are no solos of the usual kind, merely brief embellishments by Bigard, Brown and Williams, and a short piano passage by the leader. The conception and arranging technique are advanced as compared with what is found on earlier recordings in this set, and the orchestra plays with additional authority. Yet Duke knows how exciting whaling clarinets can be, feeds fashion, and still uses them, creatively and effectively.

JAZZ POTPOURRI had all the right, bright ingredients for the heyday of the swing craze. Williams, Bigard and Nanton are the soloists, and Sonny Greer is heard to good advantage.

SUBTLE LAMENT is a slow twelve-bar blues on which the trombones are skillfully used for melancholy colour. The poignancy of the trumpet solo is a reminder that there were several sides to Rex Stewart's musical personality. Duke's piano commentary retains harmonic freshness, while Bigard's eight bars are replete with his customary artistic polish.

PORTRAIT OF THE LION, an appropriate sixteen-bar theme, was written for pianist Willie "The Lion" Smith. "One of the greatest people in the whole music scene as I remember it,"

4. SOPHISTICATED LADY, Columbia 35556 (mx WM 1136-1), 14/2/40. Personnel as side 1, track 3, but Jimmy Blanton, bass, replaces Taylor, and Ben Webster, tenor sax, added.
5. GRIEVIN', Columbia 35310 (mx WM 1003-1), 14/10/39. Personnel as side 2, track 4, but Webster absent.
6. BATTLE OF SWING, Brunswick 8293 (mx M 946-1), 19/12/38. Personnel as side 1, track 3.
7. STORMY WEATHER, Columbia 35556 (mx WM 1136-1), 14/2/40. Personnel as side 2, track 4. Vocal by Ivie Anderson.
8. THE SERGEANT WAS SHY, Columbia 35214 (mx WM 1003-1), 28/3/39. Personnel as side 1, track 3.

All recordings made in New York City.  
Produced by FRANK DRIGGS.  
Technical Supervision: Mike Figlio.  
Original recordings loaned by Jeff Atterton, Stanley Dance, Harry N. Fein, Sidney Mills, Don Molinelli, and Jacob S. Schneider.

Duke says, "He even influenced Art Tatum." Duke's piano playing in the second chorus reflects his admiration compellingly, and Rex Stewart and Johnny Hodges are hardly less complimentary in the third and fifth respectively.

SOPHISTICATED LADY was intended to be, Duke says, "a composite picture of the lady schoolteachers of Washington, who travelled and learned and spent holidays in Europe. The lyrics that were added were wonderful, but not entirely fitted to my original conception." The soloists in this 1940 version are Carney, Hodges, Duke and Brown.

GRIEVIN' introduces a portentous new name as part-composer with Duke—Billy Strayhorn. The number is typically Ellington in character and Johnny Hodges displays its quality before a rich background in the first chorus. Cootie Williams has sixteen impassioned growls and Lawrence Brown appears briefly before the brass wave goodbye to their derbies.

BATTLE OF SWING, Duke says, "was my first attempt at the concerto grosso. If you can call it that with so small a band!" One may regret that it was recorded before stereo, but the music that emerges is extremely exciting nonetheless. A quartet composed of Stewart, Tatum, Bigard and Hardwicke, playing in harmony, opposes or punctuates the unusual role of the rest of the reeds and brass. Despite an unanticipated key change in the seventh chorus, the performance has remarkable unity and it swings throughout. The soloists are Bigard, Stewart and Tatum.

STORMY WEATHER, from the Cotton Club Parade of 1933, was one of Harold Arlen's hits that Duke and Ivie Anderson helped to fame. Duke never forgets the occasion when Ivie began to sing it started to cry, and couldn't finish. Six years later, the emotional control under control, she sings it with the controllable dramatic feeling of her command. Cootie Williams is heard before her chorus, Ben Webster behind it. Recorded the same day (in 1940) as Sophisticated Lady, this performance is played by an orchestra which includes five saxes—and bassist Jimmy Blanton.

THE SERGEANT WAS SHY illustrates Duke's conception of "the tough fighting man" who is "real shy in private life." The orchestration is full of felicities, notably a muted trumpet solo. Away from the martial sound of the parade-ground, several sides to Rex Stewart's musical personality are heard, and on an extremely early side, Sonny Greer, normally so musically retiring, steps into the foreground for a few bars.

Further notes, by Irving Mills and Leonard Feather, will be found inside this sleeve.

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