

THE GREAT ELLINGTON UNITS  
JOHNNY HODGES/  
REX STEWART/BARNEY BIGARD

ND86751



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# THE GREAT ELLINGTON UNITS



REX  
STEWART

BARNEY  
BIGARD

JOHNNY  
HODGES



### JOHNNY HODGES:

- 1 DAY DREAM**—Strayhorn - Ellington  
SBK Robbins Catalog Inc., (ASCAP) (2:59)
- 2 GOOD QUEEN BESS**—Johnny Hodges  
Mills Music Inc., (ASCAP) (3:03)
- 3 THAT'S THE BLUES, OLD MAN**—Johnny Hodges  
Mills Music Inc., (ASCAP) (2:58)
- 4 JUNIOR HOP**—Duke Ellington  
SBK Robbins Catalog Inc., (ASCAP) (3:09)

### REX STEWART:

- 5 WITHOUT A SONG**—Rose - Eliscu - Youmans  
SBK Miller Catalog, (ASCAP) (2:48)
- 6 MY SUNDAY GAL**—Duke Ellington  
SBK Robbins Catalog Inc., (ASCAP) (3:12)
- 7 MOBILE BAY**—Stewart - Ellington  
SBK Robbins Catalog Inc., (ASCAP) (3:08)
- 8 LINGER AWHILE**—Owens - Rose  
SBK Feist Catalog, (ASCAP) (3:30)

### BARNEY BIGARD:

- 9 CHARLIE THE CHULO**—Duke Ellington  
SBK Robbins Catalog Inc., (ASCAP) (3:02)
- 10 LAMENT FOR JAVANETTE**—Duke Ellington  
SBK Robbins Catalog Inc., (ASCAP) (2:51)
- 11 A LULL AT DAWN**—Barney Bigard  
Mills Music Inc., (ASCAP) (3:29)
- 12 READY EDDY**—Barney Bigard  
Mills Music Inc., (ASCAP) (3:13)

### REX STEWART:

- 13 SOME SATURDAY**—Rex Stewart  
SBK Robbins Catalog Inc., (ASCAP) (3:00)
- 14 SUBTLE SLOUGH**—Duke Ellington  
SBK Robbins Catalog Inc., (ASCAP) (3:18)
- 15 MENELIK (THE LION OF JUDAH)**—Rex Stewart  
Tempo Music, (ASCAP) (3:19)
- 16 POOR BUBBER**—Rex Stewart  
SBK Robbins Catalog Inc., (ASCAP) (3:20)

### JOHNNY HODGES:

- 17 SQUATY ROO**—Johnny Hodges  
Mills Music Inc., (ASCAP) (2:26)
- 18 PASSION FLOWER**—Billy Strayhorn  
Tempo Music, (ASCAP) (3:10)
- 19 THINGS AIN'T WHAT THEY USED TO BE**—Mercer Ellington  
Tempo Music, (ASCAP) (3:41)
- 20 GOING OUT THE BACK WAY**—Johnny Hodges  
Mills Music Inc., (ASCAP) (2:44)

### BARNEY BIGARD:

- 21 BROWN SUEDE**—Mercer Ellington  
Tempo Music, (ASCAP) (3:05)
- 22 "C" BLUES**—Duke Ellington  
SBK Robbins Catalog Inc., (ASCAP) (2:51)

Reissue produced by Orrin Keepnews  
Executive Producer: Steve Backer

DISCOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

JOHNNY HODGES and Orchestra: COOTIE WILLIAMS, trumpet; LAWRENCE BROWN, trombone; HODGES, alto sax (soprano sax on *That's the Blues, Old Man*); HARRY CARNEY, baritone sax; DUKE ELLINGTON, piano; JIMMY BLANTON, bass; SONNY GREER, drums. Recorded November 2, 1940, in RCA Studio "A," Chicago.

DAY DREAM (master number BS-053603-1/first issued on Bluebird 11021)

GOOD QUEEN BESS (mtx. no. BS-053604-2/Bb 11117)

THAT'S THE BLUES, OLD MAN (mtx. no. BS-053605-1/Bb 11117)

JUNIOR HOP (mtx. no. BS-053606-2/Bb 11021)

REX STEWART and Orchestra: STEWART, cornet; BROWN, trombone; BEN WEBSTER, tenor sax; CARNEY, baritone sax (also alto sax on *My Sunday Gal*); same piano, bass, and drums (except: pianist on *Linger Awhile* is probably BILLY STRAYHORN). Same recording date and studio as above.

WITHOUT A SONG (mtx. no. BS-053607-1/Bb 10946)

MY SUNDAY GAL (mtx. no. BS-053608-1/Bb 10946)

MOBILE BAY (mtx. no. BS-053609-1/Bb 11057)

LINGER AWHILE (mtx. no. BS-053610-2/Bb 11057)

BARNEY BIGARD and Orchestra: RAY NANCE, trumpet; JUAN TIZOL, trombone; BIGARD, clarinet; BEN WEBSTER, tenor sax; same piano, bass, and drums. November 11, 1940; same studio as above.

CHARLIE THE CHULO (mtx. no. BS-053621-1/Bb 10981)

LAMENT FOR JAVANETTE (mtx. no. BS-053622-1/Bb 11098)

A LULL AT DAWN (mtx. no. BS-053623-1/Bb 10981)

READY EDDY (mtx. no. BS-053624-1/Bb 11098)

REX STEWART and Orchestra: same as previous Stewart session. Recorded July 3, 1941, in RCA Hollywood Studio.

SOME SATURDAY (mtx. no. PBS-061342-1/Bb 11258)

SUBTLE SLOUGH (mtx. no. PBS-061343-1/Bb 11258)

MENELIK (THE LION OF JUDAH) (mtx. no. PBS-061344-1/Label "X" LP 3001)

POOR BUBBER (mtx. no. 061345-1/Label "X" LP 3001)

JOHNNY HODGES and Orchestra: RAY NANCE, trumpet; others same as previous Hodges session (Hodges plays alto sax only). Same recording date and studio as just above.

SQUATY ROO (mtx. no. PBS-061346-1/Bb 11447)

PASSION FLOWER (mtx. no. PBS-061347-1/Bb 30-1817)

THINGS AIN'T WHAT THEY USED TO BE (mtx. no. PBS-061348-1/Bb 11447)

GOING OUT THE BACK WAY (mtx. no. PBS-061349-1/Bb 30-1817)

BARNEY BIGARD and Orchestra: HARRY CARNEY, baritone sax; BILLY STRAYHORN, piano; replacing WEBSTER, ELLINGTON. Others same as previous Bigard session. September 29, 1941; same studio as just above.

BROWN SUEDE (mtx. no. PBS-061688-1/Bb 11581)

"C" BLUES (mtx. no. PBS-061690-1/Bb 11581)

The story of these "Ellington Units" actually begins some years before the first of the sessions reissued here. In 1936, I was working for Irving Mills, Duke's legendary early manager. Mills, always keenly aware of the importance of records to the careers of his artists, decided in that year to enter the record field with two labels of his own, one at the regular price and one much lower. I was put in charge of the latter and given considerable freedom to record small jazz groups.

The Duke Ellington orchestra, as Mills' major attraction, appeared on his "Master" label, but the Cab Calloway and Mills Blue Rhythm bands were switched from Brunswick and Columbia respectively to "Variety," on which I was able to record musicians I liked, such as Frank Newton, Pete Brown, Ed Hall, Billy Kyle, Sandy Williams and even Chick Webb. My first order of business, however, was to get Irving and Duke to agree to my plan to use small units of the latter's great sidemen. This did not prove difficult. Irving was an energetic and imaginative entrepreneur, and there was never a time in Ellington's long and unparalleled career when he failed to take advantage of opportunities to widen his horizons. Since I had promoted the Benny Goodman Trio with some success, he saw merit in new ways of presenting men in his band who were always a source of inspiration. He accordingly took the first step by recording a septet under Barney Bigard's nominal leadership and an octet under Rex Stewart's while in Hollywood during December, 1936.

It was when Duke returned to New York early in 1937 for an engagement at the Cotton Club that there was a chance to begin harvesting the riches I foresaw. At first I didn't have things all my own way. My main objectives were Johnny Hodges, Cootie Williams and Tricky

Sam Nanton. But Ellington, ever the wily campaigner with an eye to the future, had other ideas. The Bigard and Stewart records were to have priority, and it was some months before I was able to record Hodges and Williams at the head of "their" groups. The first Hodges session was not too successful anyway, because Mills insisted on adding a singer whose efforts had the reverse of the desired effect. Luckily for me, the first hits on the Mills labels were both instrumentals—*Caravan* and a Raymond Scott novelty entitled *Twilight in Turkey*. Within a year, too, we had another big hit on all the Harlem jukeboxes—Johnny Hodges' *Jeep's Blues*. As the Swing Era moved into top gear, record sales generally picked up, those of the Ellington units grew, many recordings of enduring value were made and a kind of tradition was established.

By 1940, when the first of the sessions in this collection was recorded, a number of changes had occurred. Ellington was no longer associated with Irving Mills, and Mills had sold his labels to CBS. Duke (now with the William Morris Agency) was once more recording for Victor with the full band, while the small units were to be on the subsidiary Bluebird label. There would be only three such groups—Hodges, Stewart, and Bigard—because Cootie Williams left during this period to join Benny Goodman. The stamp of Ellington's musical personality was on all these units, but each nevertheless had a character of its own. Although now in an unofficial capacity, I attended most of these sessions—and was even supposed to be fined if I were late. By this time, too, Duke had an able aide-de-camp in Billy Strayhorn, who was responsible for some of the sketches and for occasional keyboard duties when the maestro wanted to listen from the control booth.

The Johnny Hodges group maintained the high standards it had set before, the presence of Jimmy Blanton on bass being a decided plus. Here is the very first performance of *Things Ain't What They Used to Be*, a blues written by Mercer Ellington that rapidly became a jazz standard and a favorite at jam sessions. It is taken at a slower and more insinuating tempo than that adopted by the full band in later years. Note how capably Ray Nance steps into Cootie Williams's shoes on this and the other 1941 selections: *Squaty Roo*, *Going Out the Back Way* and *Passion Flower*. The last-named and *Day Dream* are fine examples of Billy Strayhorn's skill in writing lyrical mood pieces for Hodges in the vein Ellington had originally mined in *Warm Valley*. "You're supposed to close your eyes and dream a while," Hodges advised listeners to this kind of number.

Although he never made much display of it, except in his music, Johnny's was really a "sunny" temperament. He was a kind of innocent youth with enough of the grown-up in him to think that he should disguise some aspects of it. Further, what some took to be his taciturnity was in reality shyness. He was adept at cooking up comparatively simple compositions with a nursery-rhyme character that were easy to swing and always immeasurably enhanced by his "singability" and peerless tone. *Squaty Roo* (one of his several nicknames), *Going Out the Back Way* and *Good Queen Bess* are examples of this. The last, named for his mother, has a recognizable relationship with the then-popular *Christopher Columbus*. Best of all, the 1940 *That's the Blues Old Man* is the kind of performance I always strove for at Variety, and I believe that for Duke, too, this symbolized the essence. Of additional significance is that Johnny plays soprano

saxophone here—for the last time on record. Also, with this number and *Junior Hop*, Cootie Williams said farewell to Ellington for over twenty years.

Rex Stewart's sessions feature some of the best work of his entire career and they are further strengthened by the giant talent of another relative newcomer to the band, Ben Webster. Although I esteemed him highly at the time, I failed to appreciate what a great asset to this group Ben was. I have no doubt that Strayhorn is at the piano on *Linger Awhile* and think it is probably he on *My Sunday Gal*, a number on which there is a rare opportunity to hear Harry Carney playing alto saxophone, for eight bars. Two of the most successful and moving performances are *Poor Bubber* and *Mobile Bay*, with Rex saluting, respectively, his illustrious predecessors with Ellington, Bubber Miley and Cootie Williams. An enormously likable aspect of Rex's work was the way he enjoyed expressing himself "vocally" on his horn, as on *Mobile Bay*, and to humorous effect as in the lionlike roarings on *Menelik*. Ellington loved the expression of personalities and opened gates for his men to do so. This accounts, curiously enough, for the Fletcher Henderson flavor in *Linger Awhile*. Rex also remembered *Without a Song* from the time he and the Henderson band were briefly in the Broadway show "Great Day;" *Subtle Slough* also began life in a musical, "Jump for Joy," where it served as background music for a team of comic dancers. (Later it acquired lyrics and—retitled *Just Squeeze Me*—became a fine vehicle for Ray Nance's singing, but from a jazz viewpoint, this performance was never excelled.)

The Barney Bigard sessions derive a distinctive character not only from

his unique qualities as a clarinetist, but also for the somewhat exotic flavor provided by Juan Tizol's valve trombone. The first two numbers show once again Duke's remarkable gift for supplying ideal settings for his soloists. The up-tempo *Charlie the Chulo* displays Bigard's facility superbly, while the pretty *A Lull at Dawn* is a perfect vehicle for the clarinetist's excellent legato style and beautiful tone. Duke saw the opportunity for some understated pianistic embroidery here, but the simplicity of the whole is typical of his working methods. The title of Bigard's own creation, *Ready Eddy*, was probably intended as a playful compliment to his boss, who sometimes found amusement in announcing himself as "Little Eddy." In their interplay on this, Duke certainly shows he was ready and willing. *Lament for Javanette*, on which Bigard and Strayhorn collaborated, suggests exotic orientalia. Tizol's trombone is most appropriate here, but Ben Webster reasserts the values of the West in his chorus.

For the last Bigard session, Strayhorn took over at the piano and Harry Carney replaced Webster. Perhaps because Duke was unavailable, it was the least successful, but the two most rewarding performances were *Brown Suede* and "*C*" *Blues*. The former, a soberly sophisticated mood piece by Mercer Ellington, is notable for the voicing of the four horns, Strayhorn's piano fills, and Bigard's confident embellishments. Ellington's "*C*" *Blues* brings this collection to a suitably swinging conclusion. With slight modification it was to become "*C*" *Jam Blues*, another jam session favorite. This version features brilliant solos by Bigard, Carney, and in two appearances (first muted, then open), Nance. Blanton's exhilarating bass is heard to advantage, but this, alas, was his last session. (Suffering from tuberculosis, he left the band very shortly thereafter, and died in July 1942.) And, unfortunately, it also marked the end of recording on any regular basis by small Ellington units.

—Helen Oakley Dance

[Most recently the author of "Stormy Monday" (Louisiana State University Press), Helen Oakley Dance has had a long and distinguished career as a jazz writer and publicist. As these notes make clear, her career has included a close association with the world of Ellingtonia.]

Two notes from the producer:

(1) The expanded—although not unlimited—capacity of a compact disc makes it possible to assemble here virtually all the 1940-41 Ellington small-band material. (Since not *quite* everything could be included, the decision was to omit two selections generally recognized as the lesser items on the second Barney Bigard date: *June* and *Noir Bleu*.) In order to emphasize that all these sessions were, above all, part of the main body of Duke's work, the material is presented exactly in sequence as recorded, rather than being divided in the customary way, according to leaders. On both occasions, the Johnny Hodges and Rex Stewart sessions directly followed each other: on the same day, in the same studio, and with quite similar personnel.

(2) The results of Sonic Solution's remarkable "NoNOISE" process are certainly remarkable—particularly to those of us who are familiar with the chewed-up and click-filled sound of previous reissues. But even this magical system is subject to some realities; in a few instances (an example here is "*C*" *Blues*) the source material has deteriorated so badly that we must accept some imperfections in order to have the original music at all.

—Orrin Keepnews

## THE GREAT ELLINGTON UNITS

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**JOHNNY HODGES** AND **ORCHESTRA: COOTIE WILLIAMS** (#1-4) OR **RAY NANCE**

(#17-20). **TRUMPET: LAWRENCE BROWN**, **TROMBONE: HODGES**, **SOPRANO AND ALTO SAXES:**

**HARRY CARNEY**, **BARITONE SAX: DUKE ELLINGTON**, **PIANO: JIMMY BLANTON**, **BASS:**

**SONNY GREER**, **DRUMS.**

**REX STEWART** AND **ORCHESTRA: STEWART**, **CORNET: BROWN**, **TROMBONE: BEN**

**WEBSTER**, **TENOR SAX: CARNEY**, **BARITONE SAX (ALTO SAX ON #6): ELLINGTON**, **PIANO:**

**BLANTON**, **BASS: GREER**, **DRUMS.**

**BARNEY BIGARD** AND **ORCHESTRA: NANCE**, **TRUMPET: JUAN TIZOL**, **TROMBONE:**

**BIGARD**, **CLARINET: WEBSTER**, **TENOR SAX (#9-12): CARNEY**, **BARITONE SAX (#21, 22): ELLINGTON**

(#9-12) OR **BILLY STRAYHORN** (#21, 22). **PIANO: BLANTON**, **BASS: GREER**, **DRUMS.**

### JOHNNY HODGES

1 DAY DREAM

2 GOOD QUEEN BESS

3 THAT'S THE BLUES, OLD MAN

4 JUNIOR HOP

### REX STEWART

5 WITHOUT A SONG

6 MY SUNDAY GAL

7 MOBILE BAY

8 LINGER AWHILE

### BARNEY BIGARD

9 CHARLIE THE CHULO

10 LAMENT FOR JAVANETTE

11 A LULL AT DAWN

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13 SOME SATURDAY

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16 POOR BUBBER

### JOHNNY HODGES

17 SQUATY ROO

18 PASSION FLOWER

19 THINGS AIN'T WHAT THEY USED TO BE

20 GOING OUT THE BACK WAY

### BARNEY BIGARD

21 BROWN SUEDE

22 "C" BLUES

Reissue produced by

Orrin Keepnews

Executive Producer—

Steve Backer

Illustration—

Victor Stabin

Digital transfers and

audio restoration

by Ray Hall

reprocessing by

Sonic Solutions

This reissue has been prepared by transferring the best available source material to digital tape, which has then been reprocessed by Sonic Solutions, using their unique computerized NoNOISE system. NoNOISE is designed to remove virtually all imperfections and aural distractions (surface noise, pops and clicks, scratches, rumble, etc.) commonly associated with vintage material, without altering the basic recorded sound. Thereafter, only minimal re-equalization is applied; the goal has been to preserve the musical qualities and ambience of the original recordings in as clean and clear a form as possible. (NoNOISE is a trademark of Sonic Solutions.)



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THE GREAT ELLINGTON UNITS

## THE GREAT ELLINGTON UNITS

**JOHNNY HODGES** AND **ORCHESTRA**: **COOTIE WILLIAMS** (#1-4) OR **RAY NANCE**

(#17-20), TRUMPET; **LAWRENCE BROWN**, TROMBONE; **HODGES**, SOPRANO AND ALTO SAXES.

**HARRY CARNEY**, BARITONE SAX; **DUKE ELLINGTON**, PIANO; **JIMMY BLANTON**, BASS;

**SONNY GREER**, DRUMS.

**REX STEWART** AND **ORCHESTRA**: **STEWART**, CORNET; **BROWN**, TROMBONE; **BEN**

**WEBSTER**, TENOR SAX; **CARNEY**, BARITONE SAX (ALTO SAX ON #6); **ELLINGTON**, PIANO;

**BLANTON**, BASS; **GREER**, DRUMS.

**BARNEY BIGARD** AND **ORCHESTRA**: **NANCE**, TRUMPET; **JUAN TIZOL**, TROMBONE;

**BIGARD**, CLARINET; **WEBSTER**, TENOR SAX (#9-12); **CARNEY**, BARITONE SAX (#21, 22); **ELLINGTON**

(#9-12) OR **BILLY STRAYHORN** (#21, 22), PIANO; **BLANTON**, BASS; **GREER**, DRUMS.

### JOHNNY HODGES

- 1 DAY DREAM
- 2 GOOD QUEEN BESS
- 3 THAT'S THE BLUES, OLD MAN
- 4 JUNIOR HOP

### REX STEWART

- 5 WITHOUT A SONG
- 6 MY SUNDAY GAL
- 7 MOBILE BAY
- 8 LINGER AWHILE


### BARNEY BIGARD

- 9 CHARLIE THE CHULO
- 10 LAMENT FOR JAVANETTE
- 11 A LULL AT DAWN
- 12 READY EDDY

Composers:

I, Strayhorn-Ellington; 2, 3, 17 & 20 Johnny Hodges; 4, 6, 9, 10, 14 & 22 Duke Ellington; 5, Rose-Eliscu-Youmans; 7 Stewart-Ellington; 8, Owens-Rose; 11, 12 Barney Bigard; 13, 15 & 16 Rex Stewart; 18, Billy Strayhorn; 19 & 21 Mercer Ellington.

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Reissue produced by Orrin Keepnews • Executive Producer—Steve Backer • Illustration—Victor Stabin  
Digital transfers and audio restoration by Ray Hall  reprocessing by Sonic Solutions



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F: RC720

UK: QK

A D D

THE GREAT ELLINGTON UNITS

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