

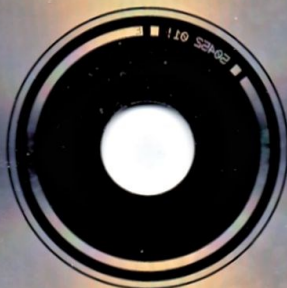
MusicMasters

**SIR ROLAND HANNA
DUKE ELLINGTON PIANO SOLOS**

5045-2-C

COMPACT
disc
DIGITAL AUDIO

PRODUCED BY
JOHN SNYDER



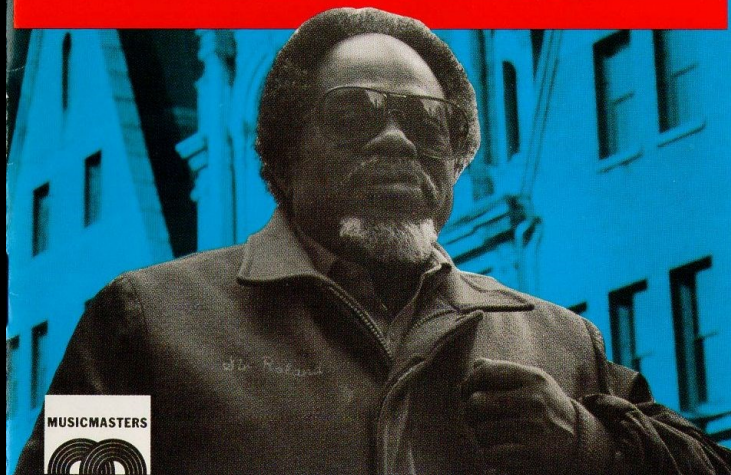
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- 1 In My Solitude; 2 Something to Live For; 3 In a Sentimental Mood;
4 Portrait of Bert Williams; 5 Warm Valley; 6 Isfahan;
7 Single Petal of a Rose; 8 I Got It Bad and That Ain't Good;
9 Reflections in D; 10 Come Sunday; 11 Caravan

TT=46:31

SIR ROLAND HANNA

DUKE ELLINGTON PIANO SOLOS



SIR ROLAND HANNA
DUKE ELLINGTON PIANO SOLOS

- 1 **In My Solitude**
(Duke Ellington)
Mills Music Inc./Scarsdale Music Corp. (ASCAP)
- 2 **Something to Live For**
(Duke Ellington/Billy Strayhorn)
Mills Music Inc. (ASCAP)
- 3 **In a Sentimental Mood**
(Duke Ellington)
Mills Music, Inc. (ASCAP)
- 4 **Portrait of Bert Williams**
(Duke Ellington)
EMI/Robbins Music Publishing (ASCAP)
- 5 **Warm Valley**
(Duke Ellington)
EMI/Robbins Music Publishing (ASCAP)
- 6 **Isfahan**
(Billy Strayhorn)
Tempo Music Inc. (ASCAP)
- 7 **Single Petal of a Rose**
(Duke Ellington)
Tempo Music Inc. (ASCAP)

8 **I Got It Bad and
That Ain't Good**

(Duke Ellington and others)
EMI/Robbins Music Publishing/Webster Music Inc.
(ASCAP)

9 **Reflections in D**

(Duke Ellington)
Duke Ellington Music (ASCAP)

10 **Come Sunday**

(Duke Ellington)
G. Schirmer Music Inc. (ASCAP)

11 **Caravan**

(Duke Ellington/Irving Mills/Juan Tizol)
Mills Music Inc. (ASCAP)

This record came about as a result of a performance by Sir Roland Hanna in Carnegie Recital Hall during a JVC Jazz Festival in New York.

There are some of Ellington's most popular numbers here, like *Solitude*, *In a Sentimental Mood*, and *I Got It Bad*, but also others that are not so well known, except among musicians. Significantly, ten out of 11 were composed by pianists—Duke Ellington himself and his close associate, Billy Strayhorn. There's more motion in a

piano player's melody," Hanna insisted. "Trombone players like Juan Tizol are used to holding notes, and that shows in *Caravan*. I sometimes cite Rachmaninov as an example of what I'm talking about, because in his piano works everything is moving. And when I write melodies, the longest note will usually be a quarter note."

His stress on melodic content is very relevant, because he invests it with emotion and rich color in this set. His improvisations rarely forsake the melodic character of the different compositions, whose harmonic foundations, in other words, do not serve as mere trampolines for flights of virtuosity. He has a wonderful gift for visualizing the imagery in Ellington's music within apposite imagery of his own.

What is immediately evident is the fact that Hanna is technically one of the most gifted pianists in jazz, although he leaves vainglorious displays of technique to others. He laughed when asked about the size of his hands. "Bigger than I am," he answered. "They're not long, but they're wide. With my thumb and little finger, I can make an eleventh, from C to F. And the Baldwin people really care. There's a lot of satisfaction in a piano like on this record, because it gave back what I put into it."

The opener, *Solitude*, was written by Duke Ellington in 1934 and given its title by his friend from Washington, the trumpet player Artie Whetsol. It has a hymnlike quality and Hanna gets the most out of it with rich tones and harmonies, his sombre basses and pealing treble sometimes suggesting church bells. Indeed, it sounds almost as though he were discovering it for the first time, so fresh and unhackneyed is his approach. Ellington liked to tell the story of how it came to be written, of how he arrived at a Chicago recording studio with only three numbers out of four prepared and ready. As it happened, the studio's occupants went into overtime, and while he waited he wrote *Solitude* in twenty minutes, "leaning against the studio's glass enclosure."

Something to Live For, one of the earliest collaborations between Ellington and Strayhorn, was first recorded in 1939. Like Hanna, Strayhorn had had considerable formal training and was well versed in the Three B's—Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. His bittersweet melody was originally sung effectively by Jean Eldridge, but here the pianist illustrates the composition's full potential with his active left hand and velvety sound. The dramatic introduction has a threatening element, but the mood changes to one of hope, and then to radiant optimism, as the pianist swings out joyously. However,

the opening motif and its gloom are reprised. Life isn't forever!

In a Sentimental Mood was written in 1935 in circumstances Ellington loved to recall. At an after-dance party in North Carolina, he encountered two girls he had known previously, and found they had fallen out with one another over a mutual boyfriend. So he "played piano as a sort of peacemaker," with one on either side of him, and dedicated a new song to them. "They loved it, hummed it together, and for a moment everything was all right." When it was later entitled *In a Sentimental Mood*, Ellington recorded it as a piano solo and always gave it brief attention in the nightly medley, but in later years it became a vehicle for tenor saxophonist Paul Gonsalves' surpassing ballad artistry. Hanna restores it to the keyboard and brings out all the composition's inherent beauty with a grace that is never overly sentimental.

Portrait of Bert Williams, written in 1940, was one in a continuing series of great black artists whose memories Ellington wished to perpetuate. Williams, a singer and comedian, was part of a vaudeville act, Williams and Walker, which early on won renown for its cakewalking! His humor was much appreciated by jazz musicians of his generation, and it was reflected, for example, in several vocals by Fletcher Henderson's outstanding trombonist, Jimmy Harrison. Ellington's composition has a period flavor that catches at both the humor and the relaxed, sauntering stage presence. Hanna's slow, gentle beat and expressive phrasing illustrate its spirit admirably and reveal aspects of the composition even more accessible to the piano than to the horns of the original soloists, Barney Bigard, Rex Stewart and Tricky Sam Nanton.

Warm Valley, another masterpiece from 1940, was the precursor of a long line of somewhat exotic showcases written, mostly by Billy Strayhorn, for Johnny Hodges. It is well to remember that Ellington set the pattern with this number, whose title, in one of his typical picture stories, had to do with the "voluptuous contours" of mountains in Oregon, which looked to him like reclining women! Hanna was also familiar with the musicians' legend about its theme deriving from phrases Hodges used to play when warming up in a record studio or before a concert. However that may be, it is a fine melody that deserved fine lyrics, and it is one the piano displays with a magic of its own while surveying the voluptuous harmonic contours. The treatment contrasts rhapsodically with Johnny Hodges' more sensuous conception.

Isfahan was last but one of the great showcases Strayhorn wrote for Hodges, this one with some assistance from Ellington. It had to do with the poetic character of the Iranian city of Isfahan, which they visited during their tour of the Middle East in 1963 (before the rise of Khomeini and his followers). Hanna first heard it when a friend in Sweden played the Ellington recording. Remarking how beautiful it was, he arranged for a copy to be sent as a form of sympathy to his dying friend, Pepper Adams. His own lilting version is the shortest performance on this disc. "You cannot improve on something like that," he said, "so it is better not to risk screwing it up by getting adventurous."

A *Single Petal of a Rose*, according to Duke Ellington, "represented wonder." It was the sixth movement in *The Queen's Suite*, which was written after his presentation to Queen Elizabeth II at Leeds in 1958. He was genuinely impressed by Her Majesty, and this is one of his most sensitive piano pieces. It benefits enormously from Hanna's velvety touch again, and from his predilection for the bass clef. His left hand, in fact, adds an orchestral depth to his arrangements very much as Harry Carney's baritone sax did to Ellington's.

I Got It Bad was written in 1941 for *Jump for Joy*, a show designed to attack racial discrimination and "to take Uncle Tom out of the theater." Ellington's son Mercer cites it as an example of how fast his father could write "for a purpose," because it was one of three songs he wrote the night before he arrived in Los Angeles, where the show was premiered. The success of *I Got It Bad* was certainly due in part to Paul Webster's excellent lyrics, but as the extended treatment shows here, it was a song with abundant possibilities. Beginning—as so often—with a pretty, intriguing introduction, Hanna plays with tenderness and delicacy of touch before building dramatically, in keeping with the sentiment of the lyrics, to a satisfying conclusion. His musicality, lyricism, richness of sound, and balance of patterns are especially striking in this performance, which has the vitality of inspired improvisation.

Reflections in D was first heard in Ellington's 1953 recording with bassist Wendell Marshall. Its melancholy, requiem-like quality is indicative of personal sorrows the composer seldom revealed. Hanna gives it grandeur, too, but the dying fall of his ending reasserts its essential sadness.

Come Sunday is the spiritual theme of *Black, Brown and Beige*, which provoked much controversy when it was premiered at Carnegie Hall in 1943. This lovely hymn was an expression of Ellington's long-held religious belief and a harbinger of his sacred concerts in 1965, 1968 and 1973. Like *Isfahan*, it was a feature for Johnny Hodges' peerless alto sax, and it is given a similarly short performance. Hanna presents a "lily" unpainted, which is not to say without emotion or color, for it is endowed generously with both.

Caravan undoubtedly owes its main theme to valve trombonist Juan Tizol, but the final structuring that made it a worldwide hit was Ellington's. First recorded by a small unit from his band in 1936, it became a big success at the downtown Cotton Club in 1937. Thirty-four years later, he was surprised to find it still a great favorite in Russia during his tour of that country. Its exotic, "desert" atmosphere is splendidly maintained in Hanna's imaginative interpretation. His strong basses are again noteworthy, for they provide both color and rhythmic impetus to an exciting musical journey.

As this recorded recital demonstrates, Sir Roland Hanna has become a worthy successor to the great jazz ambassadors of yesterday, such as Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Earl Hines, Ella Fitzgerald and Erroll Garner, and his Liberian knighthood testifies to this. As this was written, he had taken temporary leave of *Black and Blue* on Broadway to tour Japan before playing an engagement in Mexico City. His modesty and humor are charming traits in one so talented. "Some day," he said, "I'll record *Moon Mist*, but I'm not quite up to that level. In fact, even now I think I'm too young for Duke's music."

Stanley Dance
author of *The World of Duke Ellington* (Da Capo Press)

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DDD

SIR ROLAND HANNA DUKE ELLINGTON PIANO SOLOS

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|---|---|----|---|
| 1 | In My Solitude (5:07)
(Duke Ellington) | 7 | Single Petal of a Rose (4:37)
(Duke Ellington) |
| 2 | Something to Live For (4:45)
(Duke Ellington/Billy Strayhorn) | 8 | I Got It Bad and
That Ain't Good (7:00)
(Duke Ellington and others) |
| 3 | In a Sentimental Mood (3:38)
(Duke Ellington) | 9 | Reflections in D (4:03)
(Duke Ellington) |
| 4 | Portrait of Bert Williams (2:44)
(Duke Ellington) | 10 | Come Sunday (2:25)
(Duke Ellington) |
| 5 | Warm Valley (5:14)
(Duke Ellington) | 11 | Caravan (4:10)
(Duke Ellington/Irving Mills/Juan Tizol) |
| 6 | Isfahan (1:57)
(Billy Strayhorn) | | |

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