

HIGHLIGHTS
OF
THE
GREAT
1940-1941
BAND



Duke Ellington
AND HIS FAMOUS ORCHESTRA



"HIS MASTER'S VOICE"

LONG PLAY $33\frac{1}{3}$ R.P.M. RECORD



D L P
1034

“ELLINGTON HIGHLIGHTS 1940”
DUKE ELLINGTON AND HIS FAMOUS ORCHESTRA

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SIDE 1

- Band 1 — *Ko-Ko* — (Ellington)
- Band 2 — *Concerto for Cootie* — (Ellington)
- Band 3 — *Conga Brava* — (Ellington — Tizol)
- Band 4 — *Cotton Tail* — (Ellington)
- Band 5 — *Bojangles* — (Ellington)

SIDE 2

- Band 1 — *Portrait of Bert Williams* — (Ellington)
- Band 2 — *Blue Goose* — (Ellington)
- Band 3 — *Harlem Air-Shaft* — (Ellington)
- Band 4 — *Sepia Panorama* — (Ellington)
- Band 5 — *Take the A Train* — (Strayhorn)

No one has combined jazz composition, orchestra, and performance with more telling effect than Duke Ellington. His single awareness of this ideal has done more than anything to bring jazz recognition as a unique and vital contribution to music.

Commencing in his teens as a rent-py pianist around Washington, D.C., he more than earned the 'title' bestowed on him because of his natty attire and lofty ambitions. For his genius ranged far beyond the confines of the keyboard to encompass the entire jazz orchestra and completely revolutionize its form and content.

Remarkable enough that a man with no conservatory training should have managed this, even more so that he developed as a personal and complex a style as any in contemporary music. But Ellington is a remarkable person, possessing a vivid instinct for his art. He has never been afraid to break with tradition, and his experiments of yesterday have become a standard part of hand-styles today.

Ellington admirers will welcome this set, embracing under one cover ten of his most original and varied works from a period representing a peak in his highly-productive career. Not only was his hand crammed with the greatest galaxy of talent that it ever contained, it was also the point when his creative powers were stretched to the utmost logical limits of the 'three-minute' musical form.

Always of inestimable value to Ellington has been the respect and understanding of his musicians, each supreme in his own field, with the further attribute of being able perfectly to interpret and even extend upon the leader's ideas.

Concerto for Cootie is a perfect example of a soloist's elaboration on an Ellington theme. Better known as *Do nothing till you hear from me*, it is here made a vehicle for 'Cootie' Williams, who cries, growls, sings, and shouts through the whole range of his trumpet.

Except for the last, all the selections are Ellington compositions recorded between the spring and summer of 1940. Furthermore, the tracks have been specially arranged in chronological sequence.

Right from the bold opening bars of *Ko-Ko* the scene is set for some of Ellington's most imaginative work, heard in the striking modulations, instrumental timbres, and poly-tonal qualities so exclusively his own. In the first piece his robust, chordal piano-style swings the whole orchestra.

A Latin-American motif pervades *Conga Brava*, both in the introductory theme and in the solo-style of the trumpet, and shows the collaboration of Ellington with his Puerto Rican trombonist, Juan Tizol. Piano carries the rhythm with trombone stating the wistful melody before the band breaks into normal tempo with Ben Webster's immaculate tenor featured.

Cotton Tail, an amazing tour de force for the full orchestra, highlights Webster at his fiercest and most exuberant. The rhythm section, headed by Sonny Greer's drumming, lends tremendous lift, until, amidst dissonant chords hurled together in searing shafts of sound, the entire ensemble is stomping out a dual-rhythmic pattern.

As a young man, Ellington took up painting, so it is not surprising that much of his music consists of impressionistic sketches

inspired by the lives of his people or some particular personality.

Bojangles and *Portrait of Bert Williams* are really no more than caricatures of these two famous entertainers, the former suggesting through piano, bass, and orchestra, the great tap-dancer, Bill Robinson, bouncing on-stage and nimbly slipping into his paces. The latter is a delightfully whimsical picture of the beloved old vaudevillian, his stuttering patter satirically mimicked by muted trumpet and trombone, with light runs from Barney Bigard's clarinet adding the final touches.

The dreamy *Blue Goose* is mainly a show-piece for the saxes, particularly Johnny Hodges' lyrical soprano, though Lawrence Brown's suave trombone-style is included for good measure.

Another descriptive piece follows in the tumultuously gay *Harlem Air-Shaft*, based on a blues riff, from which emerges an impression of the fetid flue backing the tall city tenements, into which on a hot summer's night pianolas, gramophones, and radios all empty their din.

Sepia Panorama, one further tone sketch of Harlem life, is notable for the rhythmic drive and rich tonal beauty of Jimmy Blanton's bass. Rounding off the set is the original version of *Take the A Train*, a well-established favourite by Ellington's arranger, Billy Strayhorn, featuring for the first time the trumpet-playing of Ray Nance.

This is not only a set of ten Ellington masterpieces, it also goes a long way towards unfolding the unique process by which his orchestra has undoubtedly become the most creative unit jazz has ever known.

Note by HECTOR STEWART

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