

BLUENOTE

JAMES NEWTON

The African Flower



- 1 Black And Tan Fantasy
- 2 Virgin Jungle
- 3 Strange Feeling
- 4 Fleurette Africaine (The African Flower)
- 5 Cottontail
- 6 Sophisticated Lady
- 7 Passion Flower



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Produced by Mike Berniker

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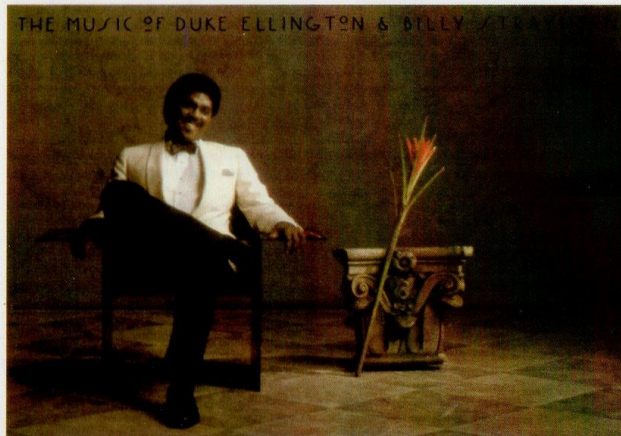
NOTE



JAMES NEWTON — THE — AFRICAN FLOWER



AA



JOHN BLAKE • ARTHUR BLYTHE • ANTHONY BROWN • OLU DARA • MILT GRAYSON
SIR ROLAND HANNA • BILLY HART • JAY HOGGARD • PHEEROAN AK LAFF • RICK ROZIE

One of the fascinating things about this recording is that flutist and leader James Newton plays an instrument that had a very small part in the sound of the Ellington Orchestra, and then only in the last years of its leader's life. But there is always room in jazz for fresh directions and James Newton is a man who has made his way by looking for the unique, pushing his instrument and his skills for the purposes of individual expression and development. All artists must do this in some way because the fact that one has never been here before is itself a mandate for the creation of artistry shaped by a personal direction. Ellington himself said it this way, "I like a man who is a number one himself, not a number two somebody else." James Newton fits that description and this recording, for all its luminous understanding of tradition, has the sound of the leader as much as it does the sensibility of that giant from Washington who organized and led the most imposing and idiomatic American orchestra in the nation's history.

Newton is a musician who developed during the 1970s, when jazz got less attention than the commercial concessions to fusion and when much of the experimental music associated with jazz lacked the substance of serious study. But Newton's seriousness pushed him to become a virtuoso and the scope of his curiosity resulted in his learning the internal elements of more than a few schools of European and non-European music. He studied music in which there is only simple melody, no harmony, and complex rhythm as well as music in which melody, harmony, and rhythm were equally intricate. But as he developed the figure of Duke Ellington meant more and more to him. Ellington's restlessness and will to fresh victories were important as his ability to bring together musicians not far removed from folk roots and musicians who were extremely sophisticated. "When

you think about Ellington," Newton says, "you have to deal with a musician whose approach was so wide that he could put musicians of different levels in his orchestra and get all of them to give their most, add something that no one else could add, and complement each other. This has never happened, to my knowledge, in European music. To have Cootie Williams and Paul Gonsalves in the same band, just as two examples, was incredible. If he wanted hard-core, down home stuff, he could point at Cootie, if he wanted high level harmonic sophistication, he could point at Paul. Then you have to mention the value of Billy Strayhorn, whose chromatic harmony influenced musicians in generations as different as mine and Wayne Shorter's. But all of this is because Ellington's concept and his understanding were so broad that he could pull all of those things together. There has never been anyone in music quite like him and his achievement is absolutely unique."

The emotion, technique, and sense of color heard on this recording wouldn't be possible had Newton not brought off some broad achievements of his own. He has given well-received solo flute recitals, has performed in the better avant garde jazz bands, has met the challenges of traditional jazz harmony and phrasing, and has composed for ensembles working either in the jazz or European concert tradition. As an instrumentalist and a composer, James Newton is at ease in a variety of disciplines, and his best work leaves no doubt that he, unlike too many of his contemporaries, is no jack of all trades and a master of none.

In order to give the recording the range of sound that it has, Newton has put together a program of Ellington pieces that cross the 1920s, the 1930s, the 1940s, and the 1960s. They include the central elements of jazz—the blues, the ballad, swing in four/four time, and the Afro-Hispanic or "Latin" pulse. What Newton brings to those

moods and rhythms demands an imaginative handling of his instrumentation, something quite obvious in the way the violin and the saxophone are used behind the flute on "Passion Flower" or the texture between flute and cornet on "Black and Tan Fantasy," or the shifting timbres on "Strange Feeling." And since the essence of one aspect of jazz technique is transferring the African approach to the "talking drum" to Western instruments, it is interesting to hear the Negro inflection as distinctly on the flute as on the cornet or the violin or the alto saxophone. Newton's singing through his instrument with a four octave range, Olu Dara's phrases scooped thick and sticky from the Mississippi gutbucket, John Blake's melancholy sound that somehow includes an arco twang, and the wide growl and shout of Arthur Blythe are as emphatically vocal as Milt Grayson's broad and wonderful baritone. The result is a recording that personalizes the Ellington tradition of instrumental singers in an environment rich with harmony, percussive pulsations, and startling timbres provided by Roland Hanna, Billy Hart, Jay Hoggard, Rick Rozie, Pheeroan Ak Laff, and Anthony Brown.

Duke Ellington was a man who looked back as much as he looked into the present. He was an artist who said, "Remembrance of things past is important for jazz musician." Newton also knows the importance of looking back, which is why "Black and Tan Fantasy" is such a wonderful exhibition of jazz color. Under the line of muted cornet and flute, he achieves harmony and chords of timbre in the voicing of the piano and the bass in combination with the tom-toms and sock cymbal. As Billy Hart plays the drum part and embellishes upon it, he achieves what I call *timbral harmony*—the use of simultaneously stoned colors for effects roughly parallel to harmony but devoid of pitch. The inventive arranging for cornet, alto saxophone, and violin provides further fresh-

ness. Dara's cornet feature offers the substance of the bitersweet sensibility that drives jazz; Hanna's unaccompanied section is exquisite on every level, and the leader's improvisation shows that he was influenced by plunger technique. "That style has so many nuances from opening and closing the plunger in different degrees. I apply that to the flute by varying the differences in volume between what I'm playing and what I'm singing. Also, I sometimes work in two or three octave distances between the sung note and the played note."

"Virgin Jungle" is a throbbing paradise of percussion in which the interplay between the notes on the melody instruments and the phrases of the drummers are often equally informed by dance rhythms. It is also another study in timbre, with the vibraphone replacing the piano. "I was amazed of how much I learned about Mingus when I arranged this piece and some others," says Newton. "Mingus's last great work, 'Cumbia and Jazz Fusion,' is closely related to 'Virgin Jungle.'" The ensemble improvisation between the opening melody statements show how musicians sensitive to motifs can avoid formless nonsense. The featured improvisers are Hoggard, Blake, Newton, Blythe, and Dara [notice how the horn accompaniment to the cornet brings a forboding sorrow to the song that poignantly contrasts the joy of the drum rhythms].

As Newton is quick to point out, "Strange Feeling" presaged Mingus works like "Weird Nightmare," "Eclipse," and even "Half-Mast Inhibition." It is a decidedly dissonant work with a mood like that of "Gloomy Sunday." Newton reveals just that much more brilliance by using the growling trumpet during the introduction to provide a precedent for the color of Milt Grayson's classic baritone. The variety of ensemble textures comes from not only insightful voicings but from setting most of the notes above the range of the baritone, allowing the

voice all the necessary room for expression in an environment of shifting colors.

According to Ellington, "La Fleurette Africaine" was written to depict a little flower growing prettier and prettier each day in a part of the rain forest where human beings never tread. The use of flute and violin for a sound both airy and grainy is yet another example of the album's lovely colors. The feeling of a lush and exotic world undulating before the listener is flawlessly maintained by a rhythm section that dissolves the distance between the featured musician and the background, opting for a sound as organically intertwined as an African percussion ensemble or a string quartet. All of the improvisations are brief but complete and Newton is particularly lyrical, enunciating each note in the structural design with a passion equal to the intelligence.

"Cotton Tail" avoids the theme-solos-theme approach by having the piano and vibes trade phrases after the alto feature, then play together. The two voices over bass and drums supply the kind of contrast that the unaccompanied piano section did on "Black and Tan." "Sophisticated Lady" is a solo flute rendition in which Newton stays fairly close to the line, bursting away now and then, almost as though playing obligatos to his own reading of the melody. Newton's writing on "Passion Flower" would probably have intrigued Ellington because the small number of pieces are used for such effective densities. The technique of work gives the instruments mobile parts that move from the background to the foreground, that fill out chords, that deliver melodic counterpoint. Roland Hanna again shows how great a player he is in every way. "Roland was the statesman of the session," Newton says, "and his harmonic knowledge, his spirit, and his ability to relax everybody gave so much to what I was trying to do. I have always loved what Sir Roland and Frank Wess have created with The

New York Jazz Quartet. Their work has had a lasting influence on me."

As a whole, this is probably James Newton's best effort so far. He has met the challenge of bringing an individual body of ideas to some powerful material that was often reworked over the years by Ellington and Strayhorn. That Newton's arrangements grasp the substance of a select bit of Ellingtonia while making their own turns, shows that his talent is perhaps even richer than his notable career has indicated. I'm sure that the skills he brings to this recording will continue to deepen and broaden. As James Newton grows, in some ways that may prove lasting, so will his art form.

STANLEY CROUCH

BLACK AND TAN FANTASY—5:43
(Ellington/Miley) (Belwin-Mills Publishing Corp.—ASCAP)

VIRGIN JUNGLE—11:10
(Ellington/Strayhorn) (Tempo Music Inc.—ASCAP)

STRANGE FEELING—4:53
(Strayhorn) (Tempo Music Inc.—ASCAP)

FLEURETTE AFRICAINE
(THE AFRICAN FLOWER)—4:12
(Ellington) (Tempo Music Inc.—ASCAP)

COTONTAIL—6:55
(Ellington) (Belwin-Mills Publishing Corp.—ASCAP)

SOPHISTICATED LADY—4:05
(Ellington) (Belwin-Mills Publishing Corp.—ASCAP)

PASSION FLOWER—5:49
(Strayhorn) (Tempo Music Inc.—ASCAP)

James Newton plays Muramatsu Flutes exclusively.

Arthur Blythe—Courtesy of Columbia Records.

John Blake—Courtesy of Gramavision Records.

Design: Paula Scher/Koppel & Scher

Photography: Greg Hesler

1. JOHN BLAKE—Violin.
2. ARTHUR BLYTHE—Alto saxophone
3. ANTHONY BROWN—Maracas and finger cymbals
4. OLU DARA—Cornet
5. MILT GRAYSON—Vocal on "STRANGE FEELING"
6. SIR ROLAND HANNA—Piano
7. BILLY HART—Drums on "BLACK AND TAN FANTASY," "VIRGIN JUNGLE," "FLEURETTE AFRICAINE" and "PASSION FLOWER"
8. JAY HOGGARD—Vibraphone
9. PHEEROAN AKLAFF—Drums on "STRANGE FEELING" and "COTONTAIL"; Tavil and talking drum on "VIRGIN JUNGLE"
10. RICK ROZIE—Bass
11. JAMES NEWTON—Flute and arrangements

Produced by MIKE BERNIKER
Arranged and conceptualized by JAMES NEWTON
Recording Engineer: MIKE MORAN
Recorded at RCA Studio B,
June 24 and 25, 1985

THESE CODES IDENTIFY THE RECORDING TECHNOLOGY UTILIZED ON THE ORIGINAL MASTERS

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- digital tape recorder used during session recording, mixing and/or editing, and mastering (transcription)
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AAD

- analog tape recorder used during session recording and subsequent mixing and/or editing, digital tape recorder used during mastering (transcription)
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J A M E S / N E W T O N

THE AFRICAN FLOWER

A very special thanks to the artists on this record who came together and celebrated the spirit of Edward Kennedy Ellington and William Strayhorn. Also thanks to these people whose help

was invaluable: Bob Cummins, Mike Berniker, Bruce Lundvall, Mike Moran, Anthony Brown, Mr. Osamu Muramatsu, Mr. Sakabe, Ruth Ellington, Eckhart Rahn and the deep love and support of the Newton and Alex families.



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THE AFRICAN FLOWER

THE MUSIC OF DUKE ELLINGTON & BILLY STRAYHORN

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