



DUKE ELLINGTON *Vol.5* “Braggin’ In Brass” Original Recordings 1938

Duke Ellington accomplished so much during his 75 years that it is impossible to accurately measure his innovations. As a pianist, he developed a very likable stride style in the 1920s based on James P. Johnson and Willie “the Lion” Smith, evolving through the years to sound quite modern even as late as the 1960s. As a songwriter and composer, Ellington wrote thousands of pieces, scores of which became standards. His inventive arrangements overlooked the conventional rules to carve out a path of his own, somehow blending together a group of very individual musicians into a recognizable and unified ensemble. And as a bandleader, he led an orchestra during 1926-74 that in any of those years ranked with the top five in jazz.

Born 29 April 1899 in Washington D.C., Edward Kennedy Ellington was nicknamed Duke early on due to his charm and classy nature. Although he had originally thought of becoming an artist, after hearing his hometown’s local ragtime and stride pianists, Ellington changed his mind. He started playing in public in 1917, wrote his first songs (starting with “Soda Fountain Rag”) and led bands in Washington D.C. In 1922 he went to New York with some of his musical friends to play with clarinetist Wilbur Sweatman’s group but, after that engagement ended, he soon returned home. The following year he had better luck during his second visit to New York, becoming a member of a band led by banjoist Elmer Snowden, the Washingtonians. After a money dispute resulted in Snowden’s ouster, Duke became the leader. Ellington’s

Washingtonians were based at the Kentucky Club during 1924-27 and during that time the band developed its “jungle sound,” emphasizing tonal distortions via cornetist Bubber Miley and trombonist Tricky Sam Nanton’s mastery with mutes. In December 1927 Ellington received the biggest break of his career when his orchestra was hired as the house band at the Cotton Club. The regular radio broadcasts made his group so well known that they were soon accurately known as “Duke Ellington’s Famous Orchestra”. Years before the swing era began, Ellington was widely recognized as a genius whose big band sounded unlike anyone else’s.

Historians often rank certain Ellington bands as his best, particularly the ones from 1927-29 and 1940-42. *Braggin’ In Brass* focuses on his relatively underrated orchestra of 1938. The 1940 big band is generally given the edge due to the additions of tenor-saxophonist Ben Webster, bassist Jimmy Blanton and arranger-composer Billy Strayhorn, but by 1938, Ellington’s orchestra was certainly in its own category. Most big bands of the period featured four horn soloists, typically one trumpeter, a trombonist, a clarinetist and a tenor-saxophonist. Ellington, who was always attracted to unique voices and loved the challenge of arranging for each of his musician’s strengths, in 1938 had seven key horn soloists. While trumpeter Cootie Williams assumed the former role of Bubber Miley, contributing his own variety of distorted wa-wa sounds (plus open solos influenced by Louis

Armstrong), cornetist Rex Stewart’s half-valve effects also made him distinctive. Trombonist Tricky Sam Nanton’s unique solos contrasted with the more straightforward and technically skilled swing statements from Lawrence Brown. Barney Bigard kept the legacy of New Orleans clarinet alive in Ellington’s band while altoist Johnny Hodges and baritonist Harry Carney were considered the very best on their instruments. In addition, Wallace Jones proved to be a fine lead trumpeter, Juan Tizol’s fluent valve trombone playing made him an expert utility player and altoist Otto Hardwick’s creamy alto sound pointed back towards Ellington’s beginnings. Duke was a fine if underrated pianist, Sonny Greer as much a percussionist as a drummer and Fred Guy offered nearly inaudible rhythm guitar that helped hold the rhythm section together. During this era, while Billy Taylor was Ellington’s regular bassist, Duke sometimes experimented with the use of a second bass played by Hayes Alvis. In addition, during the first half of 1938, Harold “Shorty” Baker (an important lyrical voice in Ellington’s bands of 1942-62) was in the trumpet section.

In 1938, the year that Ellington turned 39, his orchestra recorded 37 selections. Twenty of the very best are on this release. The polite yet swinging *Stepping Into Swing Society* opens up the set, preceding the lightly swinging *The Gal From Joe’s*, which has a fine solo from Hodges. *I Let A Song Go Out Of My Heart* was a big seller for Benny Goodman and singer Martha Tilton in 1938 but the initial version (one of seventeen songs composed or co-written by Ellington on this set) was recorded a month earlier without a vocal. Throughout the 1920s and ‘30s Duke often utilized

the chord changes of “Tiger Rag” in his uptempo originals. *Braggin’ In Brass* shows off both Ellington’s ingenuity in reworking older ideas in a new format and the brilliance of his brass section (check out the very tricky ensemble chorus) including exciting solos from Stewart, Brown and Williams. *Dinah’s In A Jam* also explores an older standard, “Dinah,” but without stating the theme and instead adding plenty of heated riffs; Stewart, Brown and Bigard star.

Ivie Anderson, Ellington’s vocalist during 1932-42 (and always considered his finest singer) makes the first of three appearances on *You Gave Me The Gate*, assisted by Williams. Juan Tizol contributed several exotic Mid-Eastern flavoured pieces to Ellington’s repertoire in the 1930s, most notably “Caravan.” *Pyramid*, which has Tizol playing the eerie theme, is particularly haunting. *When My Sugar Walks Down The Street* is by contrast a joyful rendition of the standard featuring Anderson, Hodges, Williams, Carney and Brown. Tizol’s lesser-known but worthy *A Gypsy Without A Song* is quite atmospheric while *Watermelon Man* (no relation to the later Herbie Hancock hit) is a happy tune despite having lyrics that make little sense! *Please Forgive Me* is an example of the Ellington Orchestra playing a danceable ballad (with Lawrence Brown emulating Tommy Dorsey a little) as is the remake of *Prelude To A Kiss*, sandwiching the spirited *Lambeth Walk*. *Buffet Flat* is one of Carney’s finest showcases of the era, showing why he was the premiere baritonist before the bebop era. Hodges, Williams, Brown, Carney and Bigard all have their spots on the complex but melodic *T.T. On Toast* which was not released for the first time until 1947.

Blue Light, a dreamy blues with Bigard, Brown and Duke as key voices, would be revived a decade later as "Transbluency," a wordless vehicle for singer Kay Davis. **Old King Doji** is a song also well worth bringing back; this version has plenty of enthusiastic ensembles. Rex Stewart's most famous feature, **Boy Meets Horn**, is full of his wit and his unique half-valve technique, becoming a minor hit and his permanent trademark song. One of jazz critic Leonard Feather's best songs, **Mighty Like The Blues**, received its definitive

Personnel

13 January 1938: Wallace Jones, Cootie Williams, Harold 'Shorty' Baker, trumpets; Rex Stewart, cornet; Joe Nanton, Lawrence Brown, trombones; Barney Bigard, clarinet; Johnny Hodges, clarinet, soprano & alto sax; Harry Carney, clarinet, alto & baritone sax; Otto Hardwick, alto & bass sax; Duke Ellington, piano; Fred Guy, guitar; Billy Taylor, Hayes Alvis, bass; Sonny Greer, drums

2 February 1938: Wallace Jones, Cootie Williams, Harold 'Shorty' Baker, trumpets; Rex Stewart, cornet; Joe Nanton, Lawrence Brown, trombones; Juan Tizol, valve trombone; Barney Bigard, clarinet; Johnny Hodges, clarinet, soprano & alto sax; Harry Carney, clarinet, alto & baritone sax; Otto Hardwick, alto & bass sax; Duke Ellington, piano; Billy Taylor, Hayes Alvis, bass; Sonny Greer, drums

3 March 1938: Wallace Jones, Cootie Williams, Harold 'Shorty' Baker, trumpets; Rex Stewart, cornet; Joe Nanton, Lawrence Brown, trombones; Juan Tizol, valve trombone; Barney Bigard, clarinet; Johnny Hodges, clarinet, soprano & alto sax; Harry Carney, clarinet, alto & baritone sax;

recording by Ellington in 1938. **Slap Happy**, which has solos from Carney and Nanton, ends this swinging set.

As 1938 came to a close, Duke Ellington still had 35 more years of accomplishments ahead of him. But even if he had chosen to retire at that moment, his work in 1938 alone would have made him immortal.

Scott Yanow — author of eight jazz books including *Jazz On Record 1917-76*, *Bebop*, *Swing* and *Trumpet Kings*

Otto Hardwick, alto & bass sax; Duke Ellington, piano; Fred Guy, guitar; Hayes Alvis, Billy Taylor, bass; Sonny Greer, drums

11 April 1938: Wallace Jones, Cootie Williams, Harold 'Shorty' Baker, trumpets; Rex Stewart, cornet; Joe Nanton, Lawrence Brown, trombones; Juan Tizol, valve trombone; Barney Bigard, clarinet; Johnny Hodges, clarinet, soprano & alto sax; Harry Carney, clarinet, alto & baritone sax; Otto Hardwick, alto & bass sax; Duke Ellington, piano; Fred Guy, guitar; Billy Taylor, bass; Sonny Greer, drums

7 June to 22 December 1938: Wallace Jones, Cootie Williams, trumpets; Rex Stewart, cornet; Joe Nanton, Lawrence Brown, trombones; Juan Tizol, valve trombone; Barney Bigard, clarinet; Johnny Hodges, clarinet, soprano & alto sax; Harry Carney, clarinet, alto & baritone sax; Otto Hardwick, alto & bass sax; Duke Ellington, piano; Fred Guy, guitar; Billy Taylor, bass; Sonny Greer, drums

- 1. Stepping Into Swing Society** 3:07
(Duke Ellington-Henry Nemo-Irving Mills)
Brunswick m8063, mx M 713-1
Recorded 13 January 1938
- 2. The Gal From Joe's** 2:59
(Duke Ellington-Irving Mills)
Brunswick m8108; mx M 753-1
Recorded 2 February 1938
- 3. I Let A Song Go Out Of My Heart** 3:09
(Duke Ellington-Henry Nemo-Irving Mills)
Parlophone R 3151, mx M 772-1
Recorded 3 March 1938
- 4. Braggin' In Brass** 2:46
(Henry Nemo-Irving Mills-Duke Ellington)
Brunswick m8099, mx M 773-1
Recorded 3 March 1938
- 5. Dinah's In A Jam** 2:52
(Duke Ellington-Irving Mills)
Brunswick m8169, mx M 811-1
Recorded 11 April 1938
- 6. You Gave Me The Gate (And I'm Swingin')** 2:22
(Irving Gordon-J.B. McNeely-Jimmy Farmer-Duke Ellington)
Ivie Anderson, vocal
Brunswick m8169, mx M 832-1
Recorded 7 June 1938
- 7. Pyramid** 2:56
(Juan Tizol-Duke Ellington-Irving Mills)
Brunswick m8168, mx M 834-1
Recorded 7 June 1938
- 8. When My Sugar Walks Down The Street** 2:39
(Gene Austin-Jimmy McHugh-Irving Mills)
Ivie Anderson, vocal
Brunswick m8168, mx M 835-1
Recorded 7 June 1938
- 9. A Gypsy Without A Song** 2:58
(Duke Ellington-Juan Tizol-Irving Gordon-Lou Singer)
Brunswick m8186, mx M 845-1
Recorded 20 June 1938
- 10. Watermelon Man** 2:36
(Duke Ellington)
Ivie Anderson, vocal
Brunswick m8200, mx M 844-1
Recorded 20 June 1938
- 11. Please Forgive Me** 3:01
(Irving Gordon-Duke Ellington-Irving Mills)
Brunswick m8256, mx M 882-2
Recorded 4 August 1938
- 12. Lambeth Walk** 2:28
(Douglas Furber-Noel Gay)
Brunswick m8204, mx M 883-1
Recorded 9 August 1938
- 13. Prelude To A Kiss** 3:00
(Irving Gordon-Duke Ellington-Irving Mills)
Brunswick m8204, mx M 884-1
Recorded 9 August 1938
- 14. Buffet Flat** 2:27
(Duke Ellington)
Brunswick m8231, mx M 886-1
Recorded 9 August 1938

15. **T. T. On Toast** 2:49
(Duke Ellington-Irving Mills)
Columbia 37296, mx M 948-2
Recorded 19 December 1938
16. **Blue Light (Transblucency)** 2:44
(Duke Ellington)
Brunswick m8297, mx M 958-2
Recorded 22 December 1938
17. **Old King Dooji** 2:34
(Duke Ellington)
Brunswick m8306, mx M 959-1
Recorded 22 December 1938
18. **Boy Meets Horn** 3:02
(Duke Ellington-Rex Stewart)
Brunswick m8306, mx M 960-1
Recorded 22 December 1938

19. **Mighty Like The Blues** 2:39
(Leonard Feather)
Brunswick m8231, mx M 899-2
Recorded 2 September 1938
20. **Slap Happy** 2:49
(Duke Ellington)
Brunswick m8297, mx M 961-1
Recorded 22 December 1938

All selections recorded in New York by
Duke Ellington and His Famous Orchestra

Transfers & production: David Lennick
Digital Noise Reduction: Graham Newton
Original 78s from the collections of David Lennick
& Gene Miller

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