



Duke  
Ellington

*Retrospection*  
The Piano  
Sessions



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*“I think all the musicians  
in jazz should get together  
on one certain day and get  
down on their knees to  
thank Duke”. – Miles Davis*



The mid-50s weren't a good period for sustaining a big band. The post war effects on the economy, the success of bebop and small combos in jazz and the arrival of rock & roll made it difficult to afford the upkeep of a large band, and work grew scarce. However, while many ex-big band leaders (like Louis Armstrong, Earl Hines and Count Basie) disbanded their orchestras (in some cases temporarily) in order to form smaller groups, the great Duke Ellington refused to

do so despite the circumstances. Ellington's musical soul mate Billy Strayhorn once said that although Duke played the piano, his real instrument was the orchestra, and from the 30s on he used the different instrumental combinations to bring his music to life. Ellington was mentally strong enough to keep his musicians happy and together.

No other jazz orchestra had ever attained Ellington's continuity in personnel, and figures like Johnny Hodges, Harry Carney and

Cootie Williams accompanied Duke for many decades. Ellington's band, however, was not immune to the big band crisis of the period. His long collaborators Lawrence Brown, Sonny Greer and the great Johnny Hodges left the band in 1951 to try their luck as leaders of their own small combos (Hodges would return to the band a few years later).

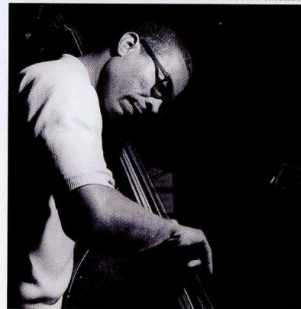
Ellington party with Billy Strayhorn



Duke made some of his very first trio recordings during this period, and it is unknown whether this was due to the crisis or to the fact that he wanted to try to explore new territory. Ellington had made some solo recordings in the mid-20s, and there were his outstanding 1940 duets with the ill-fated Jimmy Blanton, of course. He also played solo, duo and trio parts here and there during his big band performances. However, the 1953 sessions originally recorded for Capitol were the first well known sides by the "Duke Ellington Trio", showcasing him as the splendid pianist he was. Here, Duke was

backed by Wendell Marshall (cousin of Jimmy Blanton) on bass and Butch Ballard (or Dave Black) on drums. Even though the aforementioned Strayhorn quote is true, Ellington's much deserved fame as a bandleader should in no way diminish his importance as a superb pianist with an individual sound. On these sessions he reworks (and often recomposes) some of his old compositions with amazing freshness. Three tracks, "Retrospection", "Reflections in D" and "Melancholia" are in fact duets, but not in the same sense as the Ellington-Blanton duets of a decade earlier. Here the

Wendell Marshall





Duke Ellington with Sonny Greer

bass (sometimes heard only playing subtly with the bow) only backs Ellington's piano, which is the only solo instrument. While these are among the most interesting recordings he had made for a while, the fact is that he still continued to front his orchestra for the rest of his life, and that his solo, duo

and trio recordings (even if a bit more frequent than in the first three decades of his career) continued to be scarce. During the 1950s, Duke only recorded the 1953 sessions and a couple of 1957 dates which, oddly enough, weren't issued at the time they were recorded (although some were released at a later date on LP compilations that soon went out of print). Two wonderful takes of the perennial Kern song "All The Things You Are" allow us to see how Duke the pianist could handle the work of other composers. And then there are those four tunes intriguingly titled "Improvisation", which

received this title because Ellington himself never took the time to name them. In fact, these seem to be some form of contrasting pieces, on which Duke tries different styles of jazz piano, from stride to more modern approaches. After these recordings, Ellington's trio sessions continued to be



Sam Woodyard

scarce, but were usually true gems, like *Piano on the Foreground* (recorded on March 1, 1961, with Aaron Bell on bass and Sam Woodyard on drums), the unique *Money Jungle* (taped on September 17, 1962, with Charles Mingus and Max Roach) and the July 18, 1966 session with John Lamb on bass and Aaron Bell on drums issued as *The Pianist*. At the request of his audiences, he also began to perform more often in trio and solo formats during the last decade of his life, and fortunately some of those performances were recorded for posterity, such as the celebrated concert at the Whitney Museum of American Art on April 10, 1972. (A long concert similar in approach—half Ellington piano solo, half Ellington trio with Aaron Bell and Sam Woodyard—given on January 4, 1962 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York is listed on discographies as having been recorded, but has not been issued yet on any format!) In any case, Ellington "the piano player" continued to allow some space for solos and trios here and there during his big band concerts up until his final performances.

As a bonus to the sessions included here, which should be considered the seminal tracks of all trio recordings to come, we have added a long piano solo by Ellington



on his own "New World a Comin'" recorded in France in 1966 (taken from a performance on which he also played an extended medley of his all-time favourites, this time as a piano solo—not included on our CD). An extremely rare Ellington solo on "Mood Indigo" has also been added as a bonus. It was taken from a Nat King Cole radio show on which Duke made a guest appearance and played only this sole unaccompanied number.

**Liner notes by Arthur Morton**

Jimmy Woode



1. **WHO KNOWS** 2:37
2. **RETROSPECTION** 3:58
3. **B SHARP BLUES** 2:47
4. **PASSION FLOWER** 3:05
5. **DANCERS IN LOVE** 1:56
6. **REFLECTIONS IN D** 3:35
7. **MELANCHOLIA** 3:20
8. **PRELUDE TO A KISS** 3:04
9. **IN A SENTIMENTAL MOOD** 2:30
10. **THINGS AIN'T WHAT THEY USED TO BE**  
(Duke Ellington-Ted Parsons) 2:56
11. **ALL TOO SOON**  
(Duke Ellington-Carl Sigman) 3:08
12. **JANET** 2:15
13. **KINDA DUKISH** 2:32
14. **MONTEVIDEO** 2:33
15. **DECEMBER BLUE** 2:41
16. **ALL THE THINGS YOU ARE (version 1)**  
(Jerome Kern-Oscar Hammerstein II) 4:01
17. **ALL THE THINGS YOU ARE (version 2)** 3:50
18. **PIANO IMPROVISATION No.1** 9:46
19. **PIANO IMPROVISATION No.2** 3:25
20. **PIANO IMPROVISATION No.3** 2:48
21. **PIANO IMPROVISATION No.4** 1:51
22. **NEW WORLD A-COMIN'** 8:28\*
23. **VARIATIONS ON MOOD INDIGO** 2:08\*

TOTAL TIME: **79:22**

All compositions by **DUKE ELLINGTON** except otherwise indicated.

## **DUKE ELLINGTON.**

piano on all tracks, plus:

**1-12:** Wendell Marshall (b), Butch Ballard (d).  
Los Angeles, April 13 & 14, 1953.

**13-15:** Wendell Marshall (b), Dave Black (d).  
New York, December 3, 1953.

**16-17:** Jimmy Woods (b), Sam Woodyard (d).  
New York, October 17, 1957.

**18-21:** Same personnel as 16-17.  
New York, March 20, 1957.

**Note:** Tracks 2 & 6-7 are piano/bass duets.  
Ralph Collier (conga) added on 14 only.

### **\*BONUS TRACKS:**

**22:** Duke Ellington (solo piano).  
Chateau Goutelas en Forez, France, February 25, 1966.

**23:** Duke Ellington (solo piano).  
"Nat King Cole Radio Show", Cincinnati, Ohio, December 6, 1947.



**LONEHILL JAZZ**



# *Retrospection* **Duke Ellington The Piano Sessions**

The great Duke Ellington only rarely recorded in a trio format. This release compiles all of his trio recordings from 1953 to 1957 (three tunes, in fact, are piano-bass duets on which the bass only accompanies Ellington's piano). As a bonus, we have added an extended 1966 solo piano version of "New World A-Comin'" and an extremely rare solo piano version of "Mood Indigo".

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21. **PIANO IMPROVISATION No.4** 1:51
22. **NEW WORLD A-COMIN'** 8:26\*
23. **VARIATIONS ON MOOD INDIGO** 2:08\*

TOTAL TIME: 79:22

**DUKE ELLINGTON**, piano on all tracks, plus:

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Los Angeles, April 13 & 14, 1953.

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SEE **12-PAGE** BOOKLET FOR COMPLETE INFORMATION.

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