FANTASY 5999

DUKE ELLINGTON–THE PIANIST

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Fantasy
STEREO
SACEM
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33 tours
FACE 1
THE PIANIST
DUKE ELLINGTON
1. DON JUAN - 2'33
2. SLOW BLUES - 3'58
3. LOOKING GLASS - 2'54
4. THE SHEPHERD - Take 2 - 5'48
5. THE SHEPHERD - Take 3 - 6'32
(all selections composed by Duke Ellington)
Distribution Musidisc-Europe


Fantasy
STEREO
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FACE 2
THE PIANIST
DUKE ELLINGTON
1. TAP DANCER'S BLUES - 2'50
2. SAM WOODYARD'S BLUES - 6'35
3. DUCK AMOK - 3'40
4. NEVER STOP REMEMBERING BILL - 4'25
5. FAT MESS - 2'58
(All selections composed by Duke Ellington)
Distribution Musidisc-Europe

DUKE ELLINGTON—THE PIANIST

Side 1:

1. Don Juan (2:33)
2. Slow Blues (3:58)
3. Looking Glass (2:54)
4. The Shepherd/Take 1 (5:48)
5. The Shepherd/Take 2 (6:32)

Side 2:

1. Tap Dancer's Blues (2:50)
2. Sam Woodyard's Blues (6:35)
3. Duck Amok (3:40)
4. Never Stop Remembering Bill (4:25)
5. Fat Mess (2:58)

All selections composed by Duke Ellington (Tempo Music—ASCAP).

DUKE ELLINGTON—piano

on first seven selections:

John Lamb—bass
Sam Woodyard—drums
(Recorded in New York City; July 18, 1966)

on last three selections:

Victor Gaskin—bass
Paul Kondziela—bass (except on "Fat Mess")
Rufus Jones—drums
(Recorded in Las Vegas, Nevada; January 7, 1970)

Remixed by Skip Shimmin and Orrin Keepnews at Fantasy Studios, Berkeley, Ca.; June 1974.

Art direction—Tony Lane
Cover photos—Baron Wolman
Design—Phil Carroll

When Duke Ellington came onstage to open the show at a nightclub, he would walk out just as the band was finishing the theme, "Take the 'A' Train," welcome the audience, thank them, tell them the boys in the band all loved them madly, and then say, "And now we'd like you to meet the pianist."

Duke loved the effect he would get occasionally from some member of the audience uneducated in Ellingtonia. As Duke finished saying "...meet the pianist" he would put out his arm toward the piano, turn his hand palm up and look expectantly toward the empty piano bench. For a split second he was the master of illusion. There was more than one nightclub patron over the years who saw a pianist on that bench when Duke made that gesture.

Then, of course, as the appreciative applause arose, Duke would smile his elegant smile and stride over to the piano. It always amazed me how quickly he could move when he wanted to. He could sure move faster than I could.

Once across the stage and on the bench, Duke would stretch out his arms again to remove any tension from a tight sleeve, sometimes touch his hands together and look down at the keys. Then he would play.

Make no mistake about it: in addition to all the other things Duke Ellington was, and was superbly, he was also one hell of a piano player. Anytime.

Duke dominated the keyboard. He played all of it, sometimes his long arms extending from the bottom of the bass to the top of the treble. He not only had the scope to play the entire instrument, but he understood, as very few pianists understand, the use of the pedals for special effects. Duke was a master at this.

He played the piano in a constantly shifting way. I don't mean he had different styles. He did

not. He had his own, personal, unique style, and what is even more important, he had a personal sound on the piano. Let Duke strike a chord or a note and you knew it was Duke and no one else.

But what I mean is that sometimes he played the piano as if he were playing an orchestra or as if the sounds he made were parts of an orchestral sound. And sometimes he played it like a rent party blues-man at nine in the morning after a long night. And sometimes he played it like a lover with his guitar serenading under a lady's window. And sometimes he played it like a man possessed, as if there would not be time even to get out all he wanted.

Duke came up on piano in a tough school. When he was first in New York the city was full of hard-playing keyboard men and they played against each other—like Minnesota Fats and Willie Hoppe. Competition was not only the spice of life, it was the act of survival in a sense, as the musical underground grapevine established a pianist's reputation by the contests at Mexico's or other late-hour clubs, and that reputation was what got the jobs.

Throughout his long career after his orchestra became established, and after Duke himself became established as a composer, his gifts as a pianist were generally treated casually when they were not ignored. To a degree Duke's other talents obscured his piano playing and his role as pianist in the orchestra was not obvious at all much of the time.

However, there was a clue for all who wanted to see it. The Ellington orchestra in stage shows and in nightclubs always began to play before the Maestro appeared. Duke would enter from the dressing room and walk up to the stand as the band was playing. You could always tell the moment he came into sight. The musicians sounded differently instantly. It was like a change in the electric current. And the moment he sat at the piano and struck the first note, the whole thing tightened up into a cohesive unit.

Then, throughout the performance, Duke would subtly feed chords, drop in rhythmic figures, add a special sound to underline the soloists or the the ensemble passages, and literally drive the band.

He rarely recorded as a soloist but when he did he showed that he could extend to an entire number the brilliance he exhibited in the short solos he took in the orchestra's arrangements.

Ellington's roots as a pianist went back to the era of ragtime and stride piano, to a time when both hands and all ten fingers were needed because the pianist played alone, hour after hour, without the aid of other instruments. And thus he had to supply it all—melody, harmony, and rhythm—himself. Duke did not, as some of the modern jazz pianists did, play the piano like a horn. He could play hornlike figures and he did, but Duke heard the instrument on a larger scale than that, and thus made it sound larger.

No one in my memory has ever had the ability to make the piano growl and rumble the way Duke could, with those low clusters of notes and that heavy rhythm. He could stomp, in the old-fashioned sense, and he could rock like the all-time swinging pianist. And, of course, he could be melodic and rhapsodic, sometimes playing melodic lines that truly seemed to sing almost as if they had words.

Many times Duke worked out ideas for compositions at the piano after the concert when the stage and the hall were empty. Many times he sat at the piano during intermissions in clubs, if the circumstances were right, and worked on some idea, letting the audience assume he was aimlessly doodling. But that was pure deception. Duke Ellington did nothing aimlessly. Ever.

The most amazing thing about his piano playing, to me at any rate, was the way in which he could switch moods. At one number he would be the suave, international boulevardier, and in the next tune he would be as down-home funky as the raunchiest back-room, after-hours piano player. He could become positively earthy in an instant.

Sam Woodyard, who played with the Ellington band on and off for a decade, used to call Duke "Piano Red." That was a tribute to his basic funkiness because Duke Ellington's drummers, who had to work with him night after night knitting together the rhythmic basis for the band, really knew as no one else could know, just how good he was.

—Ralph J. Gleason

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