

Daybreak Express

His magnificent recording celebrated travelling by speeding locomotive



Ever since he was a boy, Duke Ellington loved train travel. It excited him, fed his creativity, and gave him space to compose. It led him to write one of his most iconic pieces, a tour-de-force from 1933, “Daybreak Express.” This singular work not only tells of singing rails and wailing whistles, but also suggests the romance of highballing expresses, villages whizzing by in the dark, and blues echoing in the night.

For African Americans, trains long carried rich symbolism: the figurative Underground Railroad and Gospel Train, and beginning in WWI, the Great Migration of southern blacks to Chicago and other northern cities. During the first half of the 20th century—when Ellington grew to manhood and launched his career as preeminent composer-bandleader—passenger rail service represented the ultimate way to get from city to city.

Journalist Richard Boyer, who traveled with Ellington, wrote in 1944, “Duke likes trains because, as he says, ‘Folks can’t rush you until you get off.’ He likes them, too, because dining-car waiters know about his love for food and he is apt to get very special attention.” If he had travelled by car or bus, in many areas of the country he would have encountered demeaning difficulties in finding places to eat or sleep.

During his tours, Ellington relished the symphony of sounds of steam-engine trains. “Duke would lie there resting,” his clarinetist Barney Bigard said, “and listening to the trains. Those southern engineers could pull a whistle like nobody’s business.”

In the autumn of 1933, Ellington and his orchestra were on an upswing. They had returned from their maiden tour of Europe—a triumph. And their first circuit of the deep South, spanning eight weeks, generated acclaim among audiences black and white. And yet, for musicians of color, the South meant tension. “Man, we were happy to get back up North,” said percussionist Sonny Greer. “I’d never been South before. When we got off the train in Chicago I wanted to kneel down and kiss the ground.”

During that southern tour, probably on a train, Ellington composed “[Daybreak Express](#),” celebrating the newest and swiftest mode of ground travel. The band recorded it in Chicago, between midnight at 4 am on December 5. That was the day that the 21st

Amendment to the US Constitution revoked Prohibition, greatly boosting the live music business. It's likely that the band members knew of the impending repeal and were in especially good, um, spirits.

"Daybreak Express" ranks as one of the most awesome performances in the Ellington oeuvre, and arguably the greatest train-inspired piece in Western music. At the beginning of the piece, the train is at rest, then it gradually accelerates—with a series of ascending four-note motifs—as it picks up steam and barrels through the countryside at a blistering 295 beats per minute. Then it slows down, pulls into a station, and stops with a dissonant wheeze.

Ellington reached outside his band, turning to the Chicago arranger and saxophonist Jimmy Hilliard, to help orchestrate the second half (beginning at 1:42), with its compelling call-and-response. The writers borrowed the harmonies of the old "Tiger Rag" from New Orleans. In more than a dozen compositions, Ellington camouflaged the chords of that venerable tune with new melodies and rhythms, each time turning something familiar into something fresh. Here, the four-saxophone chorus dazzles with its precision; the entire performance was the envy of other bands.

"Daybreak Express" is not a dance number, and has no words. It's instrumental program music, meant for listening, telling the story of a hurtling train ride. Ellington's band created diverse imitative sounds—train onomatopoeia—with a mere 14 musicians: the clickety-clack of the tracks, the chug of the pistons, the echo of the whistle across the miles, the warning bell, the creak of the brakes. Magnificent as both performance and composition, "Daybreak Express," as musical polymath Gunther Schuller observed, proved that jazz could match or surpass "anything that was being done in classical program music."

Another Ellington train inspiration takes a much more leisurely tempo: "[Happy-Go-Lucky Local](#)," co-written with Billy Strayhorn, from "The Deep South Suite" of 1946.

History has blessed us with a brief shot of Ellington and his band rehearsing "Daybreak Express" in a five-minute film from 1937, "[Record Making with Duke Ellington](#)." Documentary filmmaker D.A. Pennebaker was so enamored of Ellington's recording that he used it thirty years later as the soundtrack for his first film, "[Daybreak Express](#)," about Manhattan's soon-to-be-demolished Third Avenue elevated train line.

By the time Ellington died in 1975, the golden age of passenger trains was long over in the U.S. But his "Daybreak Express" lives on, affirming the romance and rhythm of riding on the rails and implying the sense of possibility that movement symbolizes in America. And it stands as a luminous example of a composer's innovative imagination and a band's jaw-dropping virtuosity.