

Duke Ellington's Singular Swing

BY JOHN EDWARD HASSE

Duke Ellington encompassed multitudes. He lived 75 years and directed his jazz orchestra for 50. His compositions number 1,700. More than 800 musicians recorded with him. He led his ensemble through 10,000 recordings, an estimated 20,000 performances and 10 million miles of travels across 65 countries.

But his legacy goes far beyond numbers. In American music, I argue, Ellington ranks as the greatest all-around figure: composer, arranger-orchestrator, bandleader-conductor, piano accompanist, soloist and musical thinker. He composed broadly—three-minute songs and instrumentals such as “Mood Indigo,” multi-movement suites like “Such Sweet Thunder,” scores for such motion pictures as “Anatomy of a Murder” and ballets as “The River,” and concerts of sacred music. He was a restless innovator who kept evolving, much as did Pablo Picasso, Frank Lloyd Wright and Miles Davis.

Ellington dedicated his career to commanding racial respect. Supporting social justice and civil rights, he advanced esteem for African-Americans through his elegant deportment and sophisticated music, and with such pieces as his “Black

Beauty,” “Symphony in Black” and “Black, Brown and Beige.”

Ellington was born in Washington on April 29, 1899, and in 1924 he began recording his own compositions. In the '20s, popular music primarily emphasized songs, leaving room for stars who made hits. Late in that decade, Louis Armstrong musically stamped each tune he touched as his own, putting emphasis on the solo performer. But few

members of the public could name a musician working within a band. Ellington thought up and implemented a more complex, revolutionary musical model.

Within that collective, he strove to maximize the individuality of all his players to create a daz-

zling, original idiom. Unlike other composers, he didn't write for first trumpet or second trumpet, but rather for the bandmembers playing those instruments. Like a magisterial painter, he alchemized his one-of-a-kind pigments—the signature styles of his performers—into a wondrous aggregate greater than the sum of its parts.

In 1961, Ellington said, “My biggest kick in music—playing or writing—is when I have a problem. Without a problem to solve, how much interest do you take in anything?”

He was in fact a ceaseless obstacle jumper. He spoke of his players,

Born 125 years ago, he was a generous bandleader and a jazz pioneer.



“We have deep consideration for the limitations of everyone; it's an interesting problem to handle.” Ellington solved the challenge of shortcomings by listening closely to all his musicians and then composing to highlight their strengths.

While clarinetist Benny Goodman kept his big-band players for an average of three years, Ellington managed to retain his performers for an average of 15, some for two or three times longer. He did so by writing pieces that featured individual musicians, such as trumpeter Cootie Williams in “Concerto for Cootie.” Unlike Goodman, who was wont to monopolize solo space, Ellington generously gave it away to his bandmembers, throwing the spotlight on them rather than on himself.

How did Ellington keep his music fresh? By jotting down musical notations nearly every day of his adult life, producing a stream of new

▲ Duke Ellington and his orchestra circa 1934, a decade after he made his first recordings.

pieces year after year. He left behind roughly 100,000 pages of music manuscripts, nearly all preserved at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

He maintained his orchestra for half a century to introduce and prefer his work: Each night was like a rehearsal or laboratory for the next piece he was composing. Some of his musicians were expensive, but Ellington knew that without hearing his creations nightly, his ability to compose would suffer greatly.

Across the U.S. and Europe, Ellington's 125th birthday is being celebrated throughout the year. In Washington, the John F. Kennedy Center is leading the way, offering 21 different programs. Pianist Jason Moran, the Center's artistic director

for jazz, said in an email, “Ellington's work stands as a towering tree that provides us fruit and shelter.”

Meanwhile, creating new audiences for Ellington's music has been a driving mission of Jazz at Lincoln Center, which since 1996 has run the annual Essentially Ellington High School Jazz Band Contest and distributed 300,000 Ellington music “charts” for free to 40,000 high-school bands in 57 countries, involving nearly one million students. It's an unprecedented success story.

Ellington's legacy reaches well beyond his corpus of consummate music: He became a cultural hero, inspired thousands of performers, arrangers and composers, and brought joy to millions of listeners.

In later years, Ellington used the expression “beyond category” as the highest possible praise for someone, such as Ella Fitzgerald, unique in her brilliance. Because of the unmatched sound of his orchestra, the extraordinary range of his creations and the astonishing artistic heights to which his music soared, no one deserved his accolade more than he did himself.

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