

REVIEW

MASTERPIECE | 'IT DON'T MEAN A THING (IF IT AIN'T GOT THAT SWING)' (1932), BY DUKE ELLINGTON

A Track That Danced Into Music History

By JOHN EDWARD HASSE

NINETY YEARS AGO THIS MONTH, Duke Ellington and his jazz orchestra made one of their most emblematic and memorable recordings, "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)." The title became a catchphrase. Three years later, the word "swing" seemed to be on everyone's lips as the swing era launched and jazz became the most popular dance music in America.

When Ellington composed "It Don't Mean a Thing" in the summer of 1931, he had already achieved international fame as leader of the world's most illustrious jazz band. With his tight and polished group of about a dozen performers, he'd finished a three-year stint at Harlem's famed Cotton Club and had begun the almost incessant touring that would continue for the rest of his life.

Like his contemporaries Benny Goodman and Count Basie, Ellington was a gifted instrumentalist and leader. But he stood out as the originator of most music played by his orchestra. Earlier in his career, "Black and Tan Fantasy," "The Mooche" and "Mood Indigo" had cemented his reputation as an innovative composer who wrote for the specific talents of his band members.

And now came the unforgettable "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)," which Ellington composed between sets at Chicago's Lincoln Tavern roadhouse. For the title, he revised a favorite saying of his

former star trumpeter, Bubber Miley, "If it ain't got that swing, it ain't worth playin'." The succinct, Black-vernacular lyrics were probably written by Ellington, too. But they were claimed by publisher Irving Mills, who was well known as a credit-grabber. The authorship may never be proved.

The recording is a showcase for call-and-response patterns, "talking" brass, and several soloists. It marks the recording debut of singer Ivie Anderson, who demonstrates her considerable skills. She would become the most versatile of Ellington's singers.

The 1932 performance begins slightly mysteriously, in a minor key, at a brisk, danceable tempo of 212 beats per minute. After eight bars of Anderson scating, the ingenious Joe "Tricky Sam" Nanton paraphrases the melody on his tightly muted trombone. Anderson then sings the lyrics, underscored by Harry Carney's decorative baritone sax, as the brass section answers with eight "do-wahs." Next up: the lyrical, sliding solo of celebrated saxophonist Johnny Hodges, who would evolve into Ellington's finest player. In the fourth chorus, Anderson scats and returns to the last line of the lyrics, while the brass answer with 20 "do-wahs," fading out under a surprising chime effect.

In his memoirs, trumpeter Buck Clavton recalls encountering Elling-



ton band members excitedly listening to this recording on a jukebox. "The restaurant was swinging like crazy. So much rhythm I've never heard, as guys were beating on tables, instrument cases or anything else that they could beat on with knives, forks, rolled-up newspapers or anything else they could find to make rhythm. It was absolutely crazy."

To keep his repertoire fresh, Ellington periodically gave his band new arrangements of older tunes. He followed suit with "It Don't Mean a Thing." A short film from 1943 presents a very different performance of the song. The lyrics, sung by trumpeter-violinist Ray Nance and trumpeter Taft Jordan, change "if it ain't

got that swing" to "if you ain't got that swing." The truly remarkable aspect of this version is Nanton's improvised trombone solo. He mastered the art of vocalizing his instrument to create human-like "wah-wahs" and innovated a way to make his trombone say "yah-yah."

"It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)" became a declaration, as Ellington wrote in his autobiography, "famous as the expression of a sentiment which prevailed among jazz musicians at that time." It also became an anthem of the swing era alongside "One O'Clock Jump" and "Sing, Sing, Sing." What separated swing from jazz that preceded it? Most of all, its rhythm.

Fundamentally, to swing means to play with the feeling of forward thrust, the propulsive rhythmic quality heard in much African-rooted music. Swing, Ellington told an interviewer in 1939, "is that part of rhythm that causes a bouncing, buoyant, terpsichorean urge."

With over 1,000 recordings—by artists ranging from Thelonious

The song became one of the most memorable recordings by Duke Ellington and his orchestra.

Monk, Stan Getz and Ella Fitzgerald to the Kronos Quartet, Luciano Pavarotti and go-go pioneer Chuck Brown—"It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)" is one of

many Ellington hits that became jazz standards. What makes this particular song so brilliant and popular? Novelty and artistry in the call-and-response "do-wahs"; swinging rhythms; a contagious upbeat spirit; easy-to-remember lyrics; and a catchy, vernacular title all work together. Its melody, with many repeating notes and short melodic leaps, makes it easy to recognize and hum. Plus it's a toe-tapper and delightfully danceable. Ellington's bread and butter was playing for dances, and also stage shows. It's a mark of his genius that despite such utilitarian functions, he created magnificent and long-lasting art.

Mr. Hasse is curator emeritus of American music at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. His books include "Beyond Category: The Life and Genius of Duke Ellington" (Da Capo) and "Discover Jazz" (Pearson).