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Ellington’s America

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For more than half its existence as a discrete though intensely varied musical form, jazz lacked a scholarly literature. Periodicals ruled the roost. In the USA *Metronome*, founded in 1881, and *Downbeat*, first published in 1936, dominated, reviewing records, profiling leading instrumentalists and chronicling music industry gossip. In Britain the *Melody Maker*, which first saw the light of day in 1926, provided fans with news of leading hot musicians, as well as the more popular, smoother dance genres, and raised the domestic critical bar following historic visits by Duke Ellington in 1933 and Louis Armstrong in 1934. In France during the interwar period the critical scene was dominated by Hugues Panassie’s *Le Jazz Hot.* Pannasie alienated the overwhelmingly white American critical establishment – key figures were John Hammond and Leonard Feather – by insisting that only black musicians were capable of making genuinely original contributions to the art of improvisation.

In the post-war era, bitter disputes between supporters of the old and new threatened to tear the music apart. Fans of traditional revivalist jazz, based on the classic New Orleans paradigm, denied the validity of bebop, the scarily demanding and harmonically complex music seminally associated with the monumentally talented Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. In Britain this was reflected in the rival positions of the traditional *Jazz Journal* and modernist *Jazz Monthly*. When, half a generation later, the music entered another period of revolutionary change, old battles were refought. To some, the saxophonists John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman produced anti-music. To others, their records signalled a majestic summation and creative development of all that had gone before. In his monthly column in *Jazz Journal*, Stanley Dance, a confidant of and record producer for several of Duke Ellington’s later projects, praised the virtues of a tradition-based, swinging mainstream. At *Jazz Monthly* the prescriptively Leavis-like Max Harrison made fine distinctions between the musically valid and invalid among the new experimentalists and championed Third Stream – the merging of jazz and European art music.

By the late 1960s, American jazz criticism had reached new levels of intellectual and stylistic sophistication. Leading white writers Martin Williams, Whitney Balliett and Gary Giddens, were now joined by a pioneering generation of black commentators – Leroi Jones (later Amiri Baraka), A. B.Spellman and Stanley Crouch. Baraka in particular perceived jazz as integral to and indivisible from African-American history, culture and politics and the distribution of social and cultural power and justice. The fundamental economic structures of the music, he and other radical commentators

argued, demonstrated the extent to which non-white bands and instrumentalists had from the very outset been subject to discrimination that reproduced the ethnic *apartheid* and exploitation rife throughout American pre-civil rights society.

Jazz clubs were owned by white entrepreneurs. Major black innovators were paid appallingly low wages and required to play three exhaustingly long sets a night, beginning work at nine and ending at three in the morning. Hotels, particularly in the South, closed their doors to touring black bands, who were forced to sleep on the bus or with friends they had met when they last passed through town. Since only a small minority of non-white improvising musicians possessed access to reliable financial advice, they were repeatedly cheated out of royalties.

Hardly surprisingly, life expectancy among jazz musicians – black or white – was appallingly low. Alcoholism, tuberculosis and, later, heroin addiction claimed a terrible toll. To survive you needed enormous strength, courage and luck. Some musicians kicked their habit. Others, remarkably, remained heavily dependent on one or another addictive substance for the entirety of their professional career. Great musicians like Billie Holiday, Lester Young ,Charlie Parker and the white Bill Evans – the last the subject of one of the best biographies of a jazzman ever written, particularly on the subject of the self-destructive scourge of drugs (1) – and many others died before they had enjoyed middle-age.

Edward Kennedy – Duke – Ellington, the greatest composer and certainly the most influential jazz musician in 20th-century America avoided nearly all these temptations and traps. A light-skinned, spoilt Washingtonian child, Ellington, the only son in a family dominated by daughters, aunts and a much adored mother, rapidly became precociously self-assured and vain. In time this engendered a unique and uniquely seductive stage persona – super-relaxed, witty, articulate. Many studies and biographies have presented this handsome, at times over-weight, genius as an unreadable mask (or bewildering series of interchangeable masks). Making psychological sense of Ellington the man is peripheral to the main task that Harvey G. Cohen, an American scholar who works at King's College, London, has set himself in this vast and richly documented exploration of 50 years of American improvised and popular music. However, Cohen demonstrates that the great band-leader's self-absorbed personal and deeply religious make-up, his pride, vanity and elusiveness helped him to survive for more than half a century as a major 20th-century musical figure and composer of more than 2,000 songs, suites, sound-tracks and ballet scores.

Cohen also etches in the essential elements of Ellington's mysteriously clandestine private life. Too many earlier memoirists and biographers knew the man personally and tacitly signed an oath of loyalty to the maestro and his unconventional 'extended family' of relations, intimates, business associates, physicians and publicists, the most influential of whom was the indefatigable Stanley Dance. The author has also made telling use of a treasure-trove of interviews with numerous individuals – family, friends, musicians, business associates – who worked with or knew Ellington, housed at the National Museum of American History in the Smithsonian Museum. Interpretation of this fascinating cache of evidence is combined with an encyclopaedic coverage of the American and European musical press, additional oral material, State Department files and radio and television transcriptions and interviews.

Married and separated by the time he was in his early thirties – he never divorced his wife, who he had met in high school – Ellington had a 30-year, obsessively secretive relationship with Ruth Ellis, a former dancer at the Cotton Club, sometimes erroneously known as 'Mrs Ellington'. However, both on and off the road, Ellington had innumerable brief and sometimes much longer than brief affairs. His view of the world of love and commitment consciously 'challenged traditional American middle-class values'. In 1956 he half-playfully told an anonymous interviewer that music remained his first and most important 'romance'. In more serious vein he went on to say that he associated the

conventions of a married or fully shared life as tainted with ‘possession’ and the social need to ‘demonstrate’ feeling and togetherness rather than simply to love and be loved. Formally authenticated relationships implied ‘condition’ – ‘unconditional’ remained a much favoured Ellingtonian adjective – with marriage and partnership dictating that passion and affection became routinized into a mere ‘behaviour’. This undermined the very qualities that such arrangements were designed to foster (pp. 332-3).

To this we may add that Ellington’s approximately 150,000 days and nights away from his New York apartment – in hotels, on the road or in planes and on boats – constituted the price (if it was a price) he consciously chose to pay to retain absolute personal and creative independence. Working in an industry dominated by white businessmen, hustlers and gangsters, even this well-educated, light-skinned, articulate, and astonishingly talented Washingtonian son of a butler could have tumbled off the wire. Too many others – and particularly black musicians – had suffered that fate: Ellington, the sybaritic, arch-romantic, aesthete-cum laid-back showman and ambitious workaholic, was determined to survive. He went on dramatically to transform what he preferred to call – eschewing ethnic connotations – ‘American Music’.

Records from the early 1920s with the Washingtonians reveal the young pianist-composer as a stiff-handed ‘society’ instrumentalist who nevertheless possessed the insight to understand that his skills might develop if he recruited exceptionally talented improvisers as sidemen. By the late 1920s, when the Ellington band was creating a sensation at Harlem’s elite Cotton Club, these musicians – Bubber Miley, Tricky Sam Nanton, Johnny Hodges, Harry Carney – had transformed the band into a quite different kind of unit. ‘Society’ politesse had been replaced by hot improvisations, sonorous harmonies, growling trumpets and trombones – the distinctive ‘jungle sound’ that transfixed night-clubbers and nationwide radio audiences.

How much of this was Ellington’s doing, and how much should be attributed to the leader’s creative reworking of his soloists’ composing and improvising abilities? In a superb section of his book, predominantly concerned with the conventions, illegalities and potential pitfalls of the music business in the 1920s and 1930s, and Ellington’s up-and-down relationship with his agent, Irving Mills, Cohen tackles this problem head-on (pp. 148–53). Many years later, the clarinettist Barney Bigard provided telling evidence for the prosecution. He recalled that he, Bigard, had written the ‘major portion’ of the classic *Mood Indigo*: ‘then Duke added a beginning … [Irving] Mills got hold of it and gave me twenty five dollars, and for the first twenty-eight years of the copyright, there was no Barney Bigard royalties’.(2)

Several leading members of the band – particularly the highly-paid Johnny Hodges and the irascible trombonist, Lawrence Brown – went through the same experience and never forgave Ellington for his egotism and double-dealing. Following one of his sinuously luxuriant solos, the inscrutable Hodges would turn to the audience, bow, and then, glancing at his employer, rhythmically stroke his thumb across the palm of his hand. Ellington remained smilingly impassive. Saddest of all, following the death of Billy Strayhorn, from the early 1940s onwards the maestro’s intimate friend, co-composer and arranger, the Strayhorn family had to fight tooth-and-nail to obtain an equitable royalties agreement (pp. 520–2).

Irving Mills, a canny Jewish enthusiast for black improvised music, taught Ellington everything he needed to know about a cut-throat ‘whites only’ business and how to construct a dual musical persona: a massively prolific writer of popular hits – Ellington (and even more so, Mills) detested being excluded from the limelight – and a uniquely talented composer of suites and ‘concertos’ for pedigree soloists. The leader was happy to be exploited if Mills could create a niche that differentiated his ‘instrument’ – now known as a ‘Famous Orchestra’, rather than a common or garden ‘band’ – from other competitors on the block.

Mills' marketing strategy prepared the way for public acceptance of a quite different kind of music: performances that broke the sacrosanct bounds of the three-minute 78 r.p.m, tone poems, suites and extended pieces – notably the, for Ellington, anxiety-ridden *Black, Brown and Beige* (pp. 229–36) – which reflected the vitality and tragedy of the urban African-American condition. Ellington aped the Mills method. Insouciantly allowing his agent to share writing credits and recruit second-class lyric writers to transform beautiful melodies into something akin to Tin Pan Alley dross, he failed to secure royalty agreements for members of the orchestra who had transformed the amateurish 'society' band into a unique and thrilling American institution. Even though he is probably too kind to Ellington, this section of Cohen's *magnum opus* is the best analysis we have of the ways in which the music business reflected the pressures, contradictions, compromises and injustices inseparably associated with deeply imbedded ethnic and economic inequality in interwar America (pp. 41–140).

The miracle is that so few of Elllington stalwarts moved on. Several – Cootie Williams, Bigard, Carney and Hodges – stayed for 40 years, or took intermittent four or five-year breaks before returning to the fold. For instrumentalists of this calibre in the inter-war years big band or session work was plentiful and well paid. Why did they stay? There are several reasons. Even though he operated a complex pay-scale, which sometimes caused bad feeling and rifts between his musicians, Ellington treated his virtuosi well and was always willing to talk, or get someone else to talk about a bonus if it meant retaining an instrumental voice that had become integral to his ever-evolving compositional palette.

Other than at the very end, when, with the exception of the leader, the exhausted, globe-trotting veterans looked ready and willing to drop into a collective grave, the sheer beauty and originality of the music itself and the size and variety of the Ellington repertoire proved a strong musical incentive to stay in the band. (In the 1960s critics frequently complained that the orchestra did little more than recycle predictable hits. Not so: this writer frequently went to performances which included exciting new material and long forgotten gems.) Next, in post-civil rights America, the Ellington gloss meant that band members were finally treated with the respect their collective genius deserved: they were exceptionally proud to be long-serving members of the greatest jazz orchestra in the world.

The band was also the least formally disciplined of all in the jazz world: senior members, in particular, were allowed to do pretty much as they pleased. Key soloists frequently wandered on 20 minutes after a concert had begun, and then wandered off again for a ten-minute break. Others, notably the tenor saxophonist Paul Gonsalves, dropped asleep in mid-concert. But Ellington refused to dismiss instrumentalists who were crucial to the orchestral sound that he had been developing for such a long time, however unpredictable or bizarre their behaviour. In extremis, he would hand out loans – and bribes – to the needy and discontented. Finally, there was the famous Ellingtonian charisma and cunning: he could charm birds, women and musicians out of the trees.

When in the post-Mills, post-war era Ellington became an increasingly honoured and venerable celebrity, radical African-Americans increasingly looked to him for public comment on the issue of race. As Cohen shows, throughout his career the composer remained committed to a conservative world-view that emphasized the importance of education, hard work and mastery of a skill. All this would then be rewarded, Samuel Smiles-style, by well earned upward social mobility. Only when sufficient numbers of black Americans had followed this life-route, Ellington believed, would it be possible to build a bridge-head from which to advocate – and then politically demand – full civil rights. At the same time, and as Cohen again documents, the band played numerous charity concerts for the National Association of the Advancement of Coloured People, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, the Congress of Racial Equality and the Urban League.

In 1951 Ellington became embroiled in the disastrous 'we ain't ready' episode. According to a

syndicated interview with journalist Otis N.Thompson, given while the band leader was trying on a succession of typically gorgeous suits before going on stage, Ellington stated ‘there are so many arguments against us that our efforts are futile’: only when the reform movement could ‘get together one hundred million dollars [would it be possible to] do something’. A carefully worded response claimed that the offending sentences had been taken out of context (pp. 301–7). However, thereafter, Ellington chose his words carefully and frequently resorted to the trope that everything he had to say about the race issue had been best expressed in his music, and particularly in longer compositions devoted to the black condition in a predominantly white society.

American progressives were unhappy about Ellington’s seeming preference for Republican rather than Democratic presidents. But this is a tangled tale. Like Herbert Hoover (though for different reasons), both Franklin Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy were less than enthusiastic about inviting honoured black guests to the White House: from a Democratic perspective, too many votes might be lost in the South. (And Jacqueline Kennedy almost certainly considered jazz less culturally acceptable than classical music.) Ellington offered to play for the Roosevelts in 1934 and was hurt when the offer was spurned. However, he and the orchestra put on a memorable commemorative radio concert when the President died in 1945 (p. 250).

Ellington was stricken when Kennedy was assassinated and immediately began to prepare a programme of memorial music. The idea remained still-born. In a profoundly self-revelatory comment he told the press: ‘Of course, I’d have cut out the theatrical stuff and there couldn’t have been any swinging … But it would have had a beat. Religious music, you know, does have a beat. And I’d have eliminated the glib sense of humour from my annotations’ (p. 440). It was left to a slightly bemused Richard Nixon, who could hammer out a down-home melody on the piano, but knew nothing about jazz – and even less about the maestro’s habit of kissing all and sundry on both cheeks – to present Ellington with the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1969.

There is too little space in a review even of this length fully to engage with Cohen’s penetrating account of Ellington’s whirlwind series of State Department tours in the early 1970s, when both he and the orchestra repeatedly circled and recircled the globe (pp. 537–60). Those who witnessed these concerts remember a band in virtual collapse, tired and ill-disciplined to the point of mutiny, casually wandering on and then just as suddenly vacating the stage, pulling bouquets apart and tossing individual flowers back into the audience, leaving the sick though still unflappable Ellington to see out the night with bass and drums. Suffice it to say that, together with the performances of the musically undistinguished Sacred Concerts, which finally and publicly revealed his deep religious convictions, these events – particularly the trip to Moscow – confirmed more comprehensively than ever before Ellington’s deeply conservative patriotism.

In his view, political freedom was ‘unconditional’ and had been enshrined in the words of the founding fathers and the Constitution. Black radicals should accept that the American system could in time be trusted to allow every citizen, regardless of colour, to gain full political and social rights. Nothing would be gained by listening to the siren call of collectivist, anti-capitalist promises of equality. (Ellington had been appalled by what he had seen of everyday life in the Soviet Union.) Such un-American solutions – he detested communism – would confiscate the potential for change from ordinary men and women, both black and white. To the ears of African-American progressives, all this seemed anachronistic and irrelevant: and young black activists could be forgiven for thinking that Ellington’s stage persona smacked of Uncle Tom and a by-gone, best forgotten, era. However, when he died in 1974, Ellington was mourned like the first black president: 15,000 attended the funeral.

40 years earlier, Duke Ellington stood on the balcony of an exclusive Edwardian hotel in Bournemouth, England and told the British jazz critic, Max Jones: ‘You know, I love this place. I

don’t know if you realize this, but I have the utmost difficulty staying in a hotel like this in the United States’ (p. 247). One of the many virtues of Cohen’s monumental study is that it illuminates the day-to-day existence of non-whites in the interwar America music business and confirms that even the relatively privileged and massively talented – Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Paul Robeson – had no alternative but to adapt to a life lived at least partly in the shadows.

This book too often gives its extraordinary subject the benefit of moral doubt. Nevertheless, it is a triumphantly successful piece of twentieth century history writing, as good in its way as Lewis Erenberg’s *Swinging the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (3) and Scott DeVeaux’s *The Birth of Bop: A Social and Musical History*.(4)

Notes

1. Peter Pettinger, *Bill Evans: How My Heart Sings* (New Haven, CT, 1998).Back to (1)
2. Quoted on the sleeve-notes to *Masterpieces by Ellington*. Columbia/Legacy. 512918 2. Remastered and reissued 2004.Back to (2)
3. Lewis A. Erenberg, *Swinging the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (Chicago, IL, 1998).Back to (3)
4. Scott DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bop: A Social and Musical History* (Berkeley, CA, 1997)*iatH HHist*.Back to (4)

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