

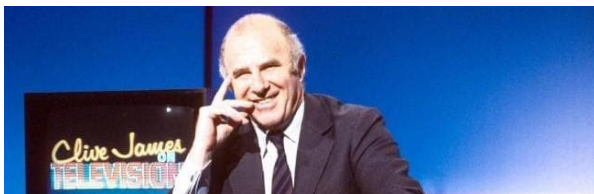
DUKE ELLINGTON

by Clive James*

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Edward Kennedy 'Duke' Ellington was born in Washington, DC, in 1899. His musical training was a compound of piano lessons and an early exposure to the heady cocktail of church music and burlesque theatre. His career as an orchestral leader began when he organized small bands for parties. His first



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professional band, the Washingtonians, had only half a dozen players when it reached New York in 1923. At the Cotton Club in Harlem, the size of his band increased to ten players or more, on its way to the later standard aggregate of sixteen —the full Ellington orchestra (usually billed as the Famous Orchestra) was usually no bigger than that. But it could create its own world, and the truest statement ever made about Ellington's supremacy was that his orchestra was his instrument.



Duke Ellington's first Cotton Club band, 1927, L-R, Ellington, Joe Nanton, Sonny Greer, Bubber Miley, Harry Carney, Rudy Jackson, Fred Guy, Nelson Kincad, Ellsworth Reynolds...

There was not only an Ellington era, there were Ellington eras, of which perhaps the most fruitful was the period of the 1940-1941 band, when every sideman was a star. After making initial contact through his Newport Jazz Festival LP of 1956, my own appreciation of Ellington started with the recorded works of that pre-war (pre-war for America) flowering in the early 1940s, and in the following set of notes I try to reflect how, when I later ranged backwards and forwards in his work, I started always from that sure base.

Beginners now, I think, would do best to start there too, so as to be never in doubt that they are dealing with a genius. When he died, he took with him a secret that no other modern composer, whether in jazz or in more formal music, has ever quite recaptured — the secret of combining other people's individual creativity into a larger vision. The best comparison, perhaps, is with Diaghilev. A prophet honoured in his own country —partly because of Richard Nixon, who invited him to the White House and played the piano beside him — Ellington died in 1974.



Ellington's saxophone section in 1940, during the fruitful period of the 1940-1941 band. L-R, Barney Bigard, Johnny Hodges, Otto Hardwick, Ben Webster, Harry Carney... PHOTO FROM "DUKE ELLINGTON AT FARGO, 1940 LIVE" ALBUM

Jitterbugs are always above you.
DUKE ELLINGTON,
quoted in *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya*,
edited by Nat Hentoff and Nat Shapiro

Ellington loved the dancers, and he was appalled by the very thought that jazz might 'develop' to the point where they could no longer dance to it. When he said 'jitterbugs are always above you' he wasn't really complaining. They might have kept him awake, but he wanted them to be there. He was recalling the sights and sounds of New York life that he got into *Harlem Airshaft*, one of his three-minute symphonies from the early 1940s.

If he had put the sounds in literally, one of his most richly textured numbers would have been just a piece of literal-minded programme music like Strauss's *Sinfonia Domestica*. But Ellington put them in creatively, as a concrete transference from his power of noticing to his power of imagining. Ellington was always a noticer, and in the early 1940s he had already noticed what was happening to the artform that he had helped to invent. He put his doubts and fears into a single funny line. *It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing*. Characteristically he set the line to music, and it swung superbly. But under the exultation there is foreboding. Ellington could see the writing on the wall, in musical notation. His seemingly flippant remark goes to

the heart of a long crisis in the arts in the twentieth century, and whether or not the crisis was a birth pang is still in dispute.

For Ellington it was a death knell. The art-form he had done so much to enrich depended, in his view, on its entertainment value. But for the next generation of musicians the artform depended on sounding like art, with entertainment a secondary consideration at best, and at worst a cowardly concession to be avoided. In a few short years, the most talented of the new jazz musicians succeeded in proving that they were deadly serious. Where there had been ease and joy, now there was difficulty and desperation.

Scholars of jazz who take a developmental view would like to call the hiatus a transition, but the word the bebop literati used at the time was all too accurate: it was a revolution. The *ancien regime* was kept as a foundation only in the sense that it was pounded into the earth. Thousands of paired examples could be adduced to make the difference audible. A simple case is the contrast between Ben Webster and John Coltrane in their respective heydays.

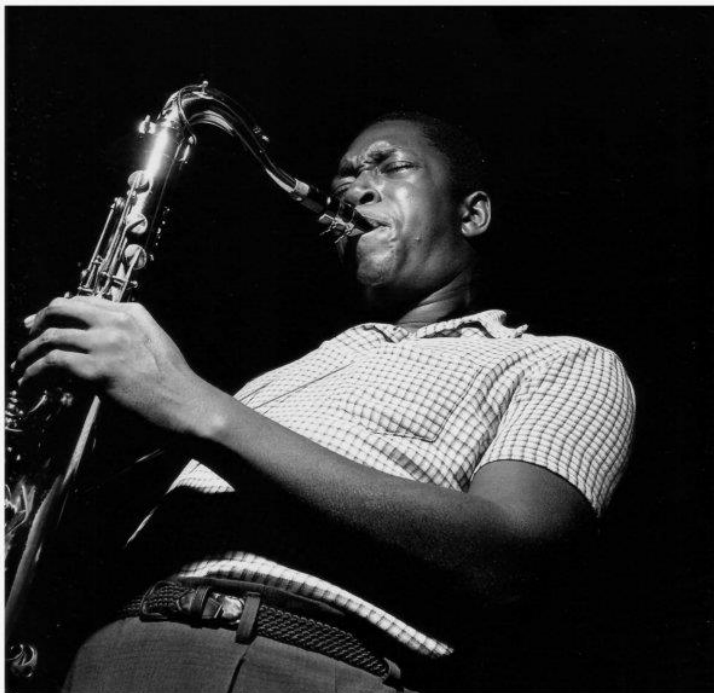


Ben Webster: he played short solos on some of the three-minute-miracle records made by the 1940-1941 band... PHOTO CREDIT HERMAN LEONARD

As a sideman for Ellington, Webster played short solos on some of the three-minute-miracle records made by the 1940-1941 band. It was the most star-studded yet best-

integrated ensemble Ellington had in his whole career. Every soloist was encouraged to give it everything he had in a brief space, with no room for cliché or even repetition: riffs were discouraged in favour of a legato flow which, though improvised at the time, could have been written down afterwards and shown not a single stutter. Musicians of the calibre of Johnny Hodges, Cootie Williams and Rex Stewart customarily packed more into their allotted few seconds than they later deployed in a whole evening when they were leading their own orchestras. But nobody packed more in than Webster. When I first heard him in action with Ellington I thought he left even Coleman Hawkins sounding tentative. Webster's solo on *Cottontail* was my favourite. After a few hearings I could hum and grunt every note of it, and 55 years later that line of notes is still in my brain like the sonic equivalent of a neon sign on a nightclub with a long name, and I can even remember the exact texture of his tone, substantial and burred like Sean Connery snoring. The name Ben Webster got into my head beside the other Webster, the one who was much possessed by death. Ben Webster, I thought, was much possessed by Melody's incestuous love affair with her brother Rhythm. As an adjective, 'Websterian' took on a new, modern meaning, with modernism taken in the sense of the age of drama happening again, in a new form and in our time, but with all the primordial vitality of the poetic emerging from the savage.

From Ben Webster's recorded works of that period, and especially when he was with Ellington, there was not a bar that I could forget. To remember it was effortless. To be remembered was what it demanded. As Lester Young was for Count Basie, Ben Webster was for Ellington: the sideman in whose tone the orchestra's entire texture was concentrated and projected. Now put *Cottontail* aside, take a couple of decades to regain your breath, and listen to John Coltrane subjecting some helpless standard to ritual murder.



Coltrane: listen to him subjecting some helpless standard to ritual murder... PHOTO COURTESY THE MUSIC TRUST

I won't waste time trying to be funny about John Coltrane, because Philip Larkin has already done it, lavishing all his comic invention on the task of conveying his authentic rage. (For those who have never read Larkin's *All What Jazz*, incidentally, the references to Coltrane are the ideal way in to the burning centre of Larkin's critical vision.) There is nothing to be gained by trying to evoke the full, face-freezing, gut-churning hideosity of all the things Coltrane does that Webster doesn't. But there might be some value in pointing out what Coltrane doesn't do that Webster does.



Phillip Larkin: he conveyed his authentic rage at Coltrane in his book "All What Jazz" ... PHOTO CREDIT JANE BROWN

Coltrane's instrument is likewise a tenor sax, but there the resemblance ends. In fact it is only recognizable as a tenor because it can't be a bass or a soprano: it has a tenor's range, but nothing of the voice that Hawkins discovered for it and Webster focused and deepened. There is not a phrase that asks to be remembered except as a lesion to the inner ear, and the only purpose of the repetitions is to prove that what might have been charitably dismissed as an accident was actually meant. Shapelessness and incoherence are treated as ideals. Above all, and beyond all, there is no end to it. There is no reason except imminent death for the cacophonous parade to stop, a fact which steadily confirms the listener's impression that there was no reason for it to start. In other words, there is no real momentum, only velocity. The impressiveness of the feat depends entirely on the air it conveys that the perpetrator has devoted his life to making this discovery: supreme mastery of technique has led him to this charmless demonstration of what he can do that nobody else can. The likelihood that nobody else would want to is not considered. It wouldn't have been true, either: nothing is more quickly copied than virtuosity, and Coltrane had a hundred clones. They didn't swing either.



Coltrane's tenor has nothing of the voice that Hawkins (above left) discovered for it and Webster (above right) focused and deepened... PHOTO CREDIT JAN PERSSON

Here made manifest is the difference between the authoritarian and the authoritative. Coltrane made listening compulsory, and you had to judge him serious because he was nothing else. Webster made listening irresistible. But such enchantment was bound to be suspect for a new generation that was determined not to be patronized. The alleged progression from mainstream to modern jazz, with bebop as the intermediary, had a political component as well an aesthetic one, and it was the political component that made it impossible to argue against at the time, and makes it difficult even now.

The aesthetic component was standard for all the arts in the twentieth century: one after another they tried to move beyond mere enjoyment as a criterion, a move which put a premium on technique, turned technique into subject matter, and eventually made professional expertise a requirement not just for participation but even for appreciation. (In architecture, the turning point came with Le Corbusier: laymen who questioned his plans for rebuilding Paris by destroying it were told by other architects that they were incompetent to assess his genius.)

The political component, however, was unique to jazz. It had to do with black dignity, a cause well worth making sacrifices for. Unfortunately the joy of the music was one of the sacrifices. Dignity saw enjoyment as its enemy. Swing was the essence of the enjoyment. In the late thirties the word 'swing' was appropriated to a category of big band jazz, which later became the music of the American war effort, and thus went on to conquer the world: in Japan, the first bobbysoxers appeared so soon after the

surrender that they might as well have been dropped from the B-29s. But swing had always been a staple component of jazz in any category, because jazz began as dance music, and without a detectable beat the dancers would have been stymied. It need hardly be added that without a detectable beat there can be no variations on it: for syncopation to exist, there must first be a regular pulse. No matter how complex, subtle and allusive it became, jazz had always contained that energizing simplicity. Unfortunately bebop had the technical means to eliminate it. The highly sophisticated instrumentalists of the rhythm section were encouraged to display their melodic invention: in the hurtling fast numbers, Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie played showers of notes that deliberately suffocated any rhythmic pulse, while the rhythm instruments that might have contained the cascades within a palpable tempo were instead intent on claiming equal status by implying the beat instead of stating it. All the implications rarely added up to the explicit.



In the hurtling fast numbers, Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie (above) played showers of notes that deliberately suffocated any rhythmic pulse... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

The word 'departure' was often heard in approval: everyone in the band departed as far as possible from a predictable measure. (In classic jazz, there had never been anything metronomic about the predictable — syncopation took care of that — but the compulsive innovators thought the essential expendable, as a brain grown too self-conscious might become bored with the regularity of its own heartbeat.) The result of the abandonment of a basic linear propulsion was a breakneck impetus with no real excitement. Only in the slow numbers could the listener tell if the

instrumentalists were in command of anything except their technique. The upbeat stuff was a business simultaneously frantic and arid, a desert preening itself as a sandstorm; so it was no wonder that Ellington, a cool customer full of the authentic juice, thought it a fraud. Listening in much later from a long way across the Pacific, I was very glad to agree with him.

I found bebop a fascinating area when I began to explore it, but I was always worried by how seldom I felt compelled to tap my foot. I loved the Thelonious Monk slow numbers and even some of the fast ones, but it was partly because they swung. (In his last phase, which I saw something of, Monk was so stoned that he would occasionally grab for a chord and miss the piano altogether, but in better times his left hand rocked along no matter how oblique his right hand got in its dialogue with the infinite.)



Thelonious Monk: in his last phase... Monk was so stoned that he would occasionally grab for a chord and miss the piano altogether... PHOTO COURTESY GEERT KEULEER

The bop that didn't swing drove jazz towards the unflowering graveyard where pretension gets the blessing of academic approbation. It was a destination towards which the exhausted higher arts had spent a hundred years looking for refuge, but what was disconcerting was the way the popular arts headed for the same terminus almost as soon as they were invented. Even without the politically inspired character

of bop — let's play something they can't steal — jazz would probably have taken the same course as the movie musical, in which a magically equipped performer like Gene Kelly sadly proved that if he were left to himself he would ditch the self-contained show numbers and turn the whole movie into a bad ballet. The fatal urge to be taken seriously would still have been there even if the musicians had all been white. But the best of them were black, and status was a matter of life and death.

Not even Ellington was immune to its lure. He was a superior being, but it took the Europeans to treat him like one. In Europe he sat down with royalty, as if his nickname were a real title. In America no president before Nixon ever invited him to the White House.



In Europe Ellington sat down with royalty, as if his nickname were a real title. Above he meets Queen Elizabeth in 1958. In America no president before Nixon (below) ever invited him to the White House...



In America he had to keep his orchestra on the road, and some of the roads led near enough to the South for Jim Crow to be waiting. Ellington did his best to stay out of all that, but it remained disgracefully true that there was plenty of humiliation available even in the North. It had to be faced: the tour was the key to his economics. He met the payroll as a bandleader, not as a composer. It was understandable that composition should become, in his own mind, his ticket to immortality. As a lover of his creative life I tried hard to agree, but on the evidence of my ears I found the large-scale works smaller in every way than the three-minute miracles. For one thing, the large-scale works didn't swing, except in selected passages that seemed to have been thrown in as sops to impatient dancers who shouldn't really have been in the hall. The set-piece suite of his last years on the world tour, the Sacred Music Concert, was the etiolated culmination of his adventures in large-scale composition —the end point of a long development in an art-form for which his own best work had proved that 'development' was an inappropriate word.

I attended the Sacred Music Concert in Great St Mary's at Cambridge while I was an undergraduate. It was a privilege to see the grand old man still in command of his destiny and his charm, but there was too much sacred and not enough music. When the sidemen rose for their solos, showers of notes were no substitute for the carved phrases of their forgotten ancestors. Ellington must have known it: he was conducting a tour of his own tomb. Later on, outside in King's Parade, I saw him ease himself into the limo with his old-time baritone saxophonist Harry Carney, sole survivor from the days of glory, the only Ellingtonian sideman who was ever allowed to ride in the car with the chief, instead of in the bus with everyone else.



Old-time baritone saxophonist Harry Carney, sole survivor from the days of glory, the only Ellingtonian sideman who was ever allowed to ride in the car with the chief... PHOTO COURTESY THE BIG BAND YEARS

From the limo before it pulled away, Ellington smiled and twiddled his fingers at the fans, the bags under his eyes like sets of matched luggage. (I got a wink from him, which I filed away among my best memories.) He had seen mobs in his time who would have wanted his blood if he had shown his face, but there was no wariness in his glance. There was not much energy either. I guessed that it was goodbye, and indeed Ellington retired not long afterwards; but the sad truth was that the creative spirit I had so admired was long gone. It had already started to go at the time when I first heard his music on record, in the late 50s.

At the 1956 Newport Jazz Festival, the Ellington band's long disquisition on the theme of *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue*, with its marathon tenor solo from Paul Gonsalves, had made world headlines on the music pages. A rejuvenation for Ellington's career, the performance was transferred to a long-playing record — it was pretty well the first time that the LP had been exploited to show what a jazz band could do in a space longer than three minutes — and in Sydney we played *Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue* over and over, making learned comments. Scholars among us knew which Joe Jones it was, plain Jo Jones or Philly Joe Jones, who was slapping the edge of the stage to flog Gonsalves onward for yet another chorus. The debating points were made in mid-dance: nobody listening was stationary, even if he was sitting down. The whole number swung so hard that you had to hit something: sometimes it was your neighbour.



Ellington eggs on tenor saxophonist Paul Gonsalves: “Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue”, with its marathon tenor solo from Gonsalves, was rejuvenation for Ellington's career...

Driven by that sweet stampede of rhythm to a belated acquaintance with what Ellington had done before, I realized only in retrospect that the rot had already set in. The possibility of more room for the band to breathe was tempting him away from the delicious intricacies he had been forced into when time was tight. Though the large-scale suites from the past all turned up on vinyl along with their more recent companions — *Such Sweet Thunder* began its life that way — it was all too evident that three minutes on shellac had been his ideal form from the start: he was a sonneteer, not an epic poet. The standard was set in the Cotton Club days, when cars still had running boards. As the LP Ellington anthologies came out, I built up a library that went all the way back to his recorded beginnings. Bar by bar I drank in the wa-wa sonorities of Bubber Miley and Tricky Sam Nanton, for both of whom the effect would have been dissipated if they had gone on longer than a chorus or two.



Bubber Miley (above) and Tricky Sam Nanton (below, pictured with Harry Carney, centre, and trumpeter Wallace Jones on the right)...



As Ellington's various ensembles succeeded each other, with the personnel always changing but a few always seeming to come back at the right moment, the soloists provided one of the connecting threads. There was a particularly tremendous Ellington band in the mid-30s, with Rex Stewart playing open horn to complement Cootie Williams and his sour manipulation of the plunger mute: two different kinds of shining trumpet, one a golden bell, the other a wail in the night. The way those two voices would call to each other was quintessential Ellington, for whom the sounds of the city — *Harlem Airshaft*, *Take the A Train* — were a collective inspiration for a melodic urban speech that no poet could ever match, not even Hart Crane in *The Bridge*, or Galway Kinnell in his wonderful mini-epic *The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World*.



Ellington's brass section in 1940, with trumpeter Rex Stewart on the far left. Sonny Greer is on drums and others to the right are Ray Nance, Wallace Jones, Tricky Sam Nanton, Juan Tizol & Lawrence Brown ... PHOTO FROM "DUKE ELLINGTON AT FARGO, 1940 LIVE" ALBUM

But Ellington's toughest connecting thread was the compactness of the head arrangements: as precise as if it had been scored yet as loose and easy as a jam session, the section work never even riffed without varying and developing the figure. The word 'development' fitted for once, and in the only way it should: to mean a deepening, an enrichment. Those inspired soloists, each of them a composer in himself, built the transparent bridges between the dense passages of ensemble voicing, and always with an unfaltering, rhythm-driven melodic surge even when the

pace was slow. When he was holding down a chair for Ellington, the most lingering alto sax solo from Johnny Hodges was never boring for a moment. Anyone who thought that Hodges's honey sweet tone could never be boring anyway was at liberty to find out otherwise by listening to the space he gave himself on recordings of the orchestra he made the capital mistake of trying to lead under his own name.



Johnny Hodges: when he was holding down a chair for Ellington, the most lingering alto sax solo from him was never boring for a moment... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ FROM NEW ORLEANS TO NEW AGE JAZZ

Ellington gave his superbly self-trained horses enough time — just enough time and no more — to perform every trick they knew, but they had to do it inside the corral. The result would have sounded like confinement if the rhythmic pulse, the swing, had not made it sound like freedom. As Nabokov said of Pushkin's tetrametric stanza, it was an acoustical paradise. The 1940-1941 band was Ellington's apotheosis, and as a consequence contained the materials of its own destruction, because all those star soloists wanted bands of their own. Hodges wasn't the only one who found out how hard it was to be the man in charge, and ever and anon the chastened escapees would make their way back to Ellington, but never again were enough of them available at once to recapitulate the hallucinating complexity of those beautiful recordings.

I memorized every bar of every track, and without trying. Vintage Ellington was a language: many-voiced, a conversation in itself, but a language none the less, or rather all the more. The most wonderful thing about the Ellington language was that it could be listened to only in the way it was created, through love. Scholarship and

biography, too often twinned in this regard, are always trying to break up Ellington's language by analysing it to pieces. In his later years, Ellington became more and more the subject of learned enquiry, and on the whole it did him little good. (He had long before tried to warn the world against too much analysis: 'That kind of talk stinks up the place.') Once it was established that Billy Strayhorn's contribution as an arranger had been underestimated, it was soon discovered that Ellington's contribution had been overestimated.



Ellington with Billy Strayhorn: once it was established that Strayhorn's contribution as an arranger had been underestimated, it was soon discovered that Ellington's contribution had been overestimated... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

Out on the road, Ellington had freed himself from the dominance of any single woman by sleeping with them two at a time. Now they were old and ready to talk. Thus we heard of the barbarism behind his suave façade. It could now be deduced that, as a cynical stroke of self-exculpation, male chauvinism had expressed itself as sentimentality: *Mood Indigo* was a midnight flit by Don Giovanni. But scholarship and biography could never add enough irrelevant nuance to dilute the truth, which was that the great man had no flaws within himself which he could not transmute into a living song.

The flaw that he could not control was in the country he lived in. Even he, a man born to rule, had to fight for prestige, the only armour against perpetual insult. He did it by expanding the lateral scope of his inventiveness beyond its natural compass, in the effort to become yet another American composer, like Aaron Copland, Samuel Barber or Charles Ives. He felt that as a necessity, but the necessity was merely political. Acting from an inner necessity, he was already the American composer,



Ellington, pictured here with singer Ivie Anderson in 1942: Acting from an inner necessity, he was already the American composer, having taken jazz to the point where no further satisfactions could be added in order to make it different... PHOTO FROM "DUKE ELLINGTON AT FARGO, 1940 LIVE" ALBUM

having taken jazz to the point where no further satisfactions could be added in order to make it different. They could only be subtracted. The new boys had to go somewhere. Ellington was too generous not to realize that one of the reasons they went there was because of him, so he was careful never to criticize them too hard. He made a joke of it: *it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing*. But the joke was true, and by extension it is true for all the arts.
