

The mistake of the fashionable jazz aesthetes has been to take jazz out of the simple sidewalk and Dancehall milieu where it belongs and pretend that it is a complex civilized art. In its own surroundings, jazz need make no apologies. It is the most vital folk music of our time; it is distinctly and indigenously American, and it speaks a new, infectious dialect that is fresher than anything of the sort Europe has involved in centuries. It is, I think, something of a pity that, in a watered down commercial form, jazz has virtually drowned out every other form of American popular music. The flood of musical bilge that emanates from Hollywood and the commercial dance band business has practically swamped the creation of more lighthearted and elegant types of entertainment music. Curiously enough, The mass produced commercialized product is also attending to swamp what is left of real improvised jazz. It is already obvious that the fresh, ingenious type of jazz the Negro of New Orleans and Chicago played a generation ago is unlikely ever to be heard again except in phonograph records. Thus, The original spring of jazz has run dry - and for very logical reasons. The musical dialect of jazz, like verbal dialects, owes its development to its remoteness from standardized education. One of its most important ingredients has been the rather colorful awkwardness - the lack of technical polish- with which it is played. And that awkwardness, when genuine, is the fruit of ignorance.

Jazz appeared in the first place because the poor southern Negro couldn't get a regular musical education, and decided to make his own homemade kind of music without it. His ingenuity has proved him to be one of the world's most gifted instinctive musicians. But as his life improves, and was it his facilities for musical education, he is bound to be attracted by the bigger scope and intricacy of civilized concert music. Give him the chance to study, in the Negro will soon turn from boogie-woogie to Beethoven.

Duke replies

Most of all, I was struck by Mr. sergeants concluding statement, that given the chance to study, The Negro will soon turn from boogie-woogie to Beethoven. Maybe so, but what a shame! There is so much that is good in a musical expression in the popular field.

Nights at the Cotton Club

From Music is My Mistress (1973)

As a result of The Cotton Club's radio wire we were heard nationally and internationally.

The Cotton Club was a classy spot. Impeccable behavior was demanded in the room while the show was on. If someone was talking loud while Leitha Hill, for example, was singing, the waiter would come and touch him on the shoulder. If that didn't do it, the captain would come over and admonish him politely. Then the headwaiter would remind him that he had been cautioned. After that, if the loud talker still continued, somebody would come and throw him out.

The performers were paid high salaries, and the prices for the customers were high too. They had about twelve dancing girls and eight show girls, and they were all beautiful chicks. They used to dress so well! On Sunday nights, when celebrities filled the joint, they would rush out of the dressing room after the show in all their finery.

They were absolutely beautiful chicks, but the whole scene seems to have disappeared.

Sometimes I wonder what my music would sound like today had I not been exposed to the sounds and overall climate created by all the wonderful and very sensitive and soulful people who were the singers, dancers, musicians, and actors in Harlem when I first came there.

During the Prohibition period, you could always buy good whiskey from somebody in the Cotton Club. They used to have what they called Chicken Cock. It was in a bottle in a can, and the can was sealed. It cost something like ten to fourteen dollars a pint. That was when I used to drink whiskey as though it were water. It seemed so weak to me after the twenty-one-year-old corn we had been accustomed to drinking down in Virginia. That was strong enough to move a train, but I paid no attention to this New York liquor. I just drank it, never got drunk, and nothing ever happened.

The episodes of the gangster era were never a healthy subject for discussion. People would ask me if I knew so-and-so. "Hell, no," I'd answer. "I don't know him." The homicide squad would send for me every few weeks to go down. "Hey, Duke, you didn't know so-and-so, did you?" they would ask. "No," I'd say. But I knew all of them, because a lot of them used to hang out in the Kentucky Club, and by the time I got to the Cotton Club, things were really happening!

## **Race**

July 1936. Downbeat magazine

A black genius in a white man's world

[Editors note: May it be to the white man's eternal credit that a black man's a genius is so universally recognized and claimed in a white man's world. The colorline that his built so many racial barriers in the social world and other lines of endeavor have not corralled nor subdued the Duke's great talent although it, of course, has influenced him. The following remarks are an honest attempt to get THE MAN on paper. The sketch is the result of an interview from midnight to sun up, and search for the tangible in a brilliant talent. The key to understanding and appreciating fully his unusual compositions and his brilliant scoring is to UNDERSTAND THE MAN. Because of the short acquaintance in the limited time to probe is genius necessarily this must be a Portrait in miniature]

The Duke is a Negro!

He is a black man fully conscious of the extraordinary talents of his race AND PROUD BECAUSE HE IS. BLCK MAN.

He thinks and acts Negroid Ways. He is not a black edition of a white man and he is not trying to imitate a white man as is the case with many Negroes who prostitute their own fine talents trying to copy or emulate those of the white.

His inspiration comes from within. He and his music is written in what he calls the Negro idiom. Every race has its own characteristic feelings and ways of expressing them. For instance, the colored man makes love, dresses with different ideas, sings, and pouts etc. quite differently than his white brother.

All these the Duke has grown up with and has been a part of, and his genius is the first to translate in music all the rich color and personality of the American

Negro. Their feelings are of a racial minority, their hopes and ideals, their tremendous vitality and good humor, their possibilities and their limitations. Remember then that when a colored man is full of jive, he isn't always that way because he wants to be, but because when he is sincere he usually isn't taken seriously. Remember when he is sad that he still isn't completely free. Remember that he lives in a world that has boundary lines that he cannot cross. That when he gets out of line he may be trampled by the cool feet of race hatred. Yes, there are many overtones in Negro music.

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Black, Brown, and Beige: One Piece of Duke Ellington's Musical and Social Legacy

Written by Garth Alper:

Ellington's interest in transforming racial attitudes developed early in his life. He remembered his eighth-grade principal telling him and his classmates, "When we went out into the world, we would have the grave responsibility of being practically always on stage, for every time people saw a Negro they would go into a reappraisal of the race."

With his high profile performing career, and the creation and performance at Carnegie Hall of Black, Brown, and Beige, this figurative stage became a literal one.

Sonny Greer, the drummer on the Carnegie Hall recording of Black, Brown, and Beige, stated, "All through the years, Duke has been deeply concerned about his race and its problems. The feelings of the Negro, as interpreted by him, are there in the music. But the man never makes it a great point of his interest; he's too subtle for that. He just composes works like Black, Brown, and Beige, . . . leaving it to the people to find and interpret his thoughts for themselves."

Greer was partially correct. Ellington was a master of subtlety and tact. In the many articles he wrote, and countless interviews he gave, Ellington never explicitly described or complained about the ugly conditions under which the group operated. When he chose to speak about his feelings on racial matters, he selected his words carefully. But what seems to be missing in Greer's statement is the recognition of the effectiveness with which Ellington used language to express himself on issues of race.

From the time he gained fame in the 1920s, to the Carnegie Hall concert, overly candid speech on matters of race likely would have caused serious repercussions for Ellington and his career.

But he also knew that the stature he held as a celebrity gave him some opportunities to speak out on social issues. He used this capital judiciously and effectively. For example, in a 1930 interview, Ellington said: "I am just getting a chance to work out some of my own ideas of Negro music. I stick to that. We as a race have a good deal to pay our way with in a white world." And in 1931, he stated: "The music of my race is something more than the "American idiom." It is the result of our transplantation to American soil, and was our reaction in the plantation days to the tyranny we endured. What we could not say openly we expressed in music, and what we know as "jazz" is something more than just dance music."

By 1941, Ellington's language had seemingly become more potent. In part of a speech given to an African American church, and later published in the

California Eagle,

Ellington stated: "I contend that the Negro is the creative voice of America, is creative America, and it was a happy day in America when the first unhappy slave was landed on its shores. There, in our tortured induction into this "land of liberty," we built its most graceful civilization. Its wealth, its flowering fields and handsome homes; its pretty traditions; its guarded leisure and its music, were all **our** creations.

We stirred in our shackles and our unrest awakened Justice in the hearts of a courageous few, and we recreated in America the desire for true democracy, freedom

for all, the brotherhood of man, principles on which the country had been founded.

We were freed and as before, we fought America's wars, provided her labor, gave her music, kept alive her flickering conscience, prodded her on toward the yet

unachieved goal, democracy—until we became more than a part of America! **We**—this kicking, yelling, touchy, sensitive, scrupulously-demanding minority—are the

personification of the ideal begun by the Pilgrims almost 350 years ago.

This excerpt, like *Black, Brown, and Beige*, uses potent imagery and historical facts in its call for recognition of African American achievement. Yet, Ellington's skillful use of musical composition, and the written and spoken word was just part of a wider approach he used to transform American society. In addition to these skills, he employed a carefully constructed public persona, and developed tactics to neutralize prejudice against the word "jazz." The performance of *Black, Brown, and Beige* at Carnegie Hall was tied to all of these strategies. As to the persona, Ellington spent considerable energy trying to strike a balance between promoting his popular music and projecting an image as a serious composer. Advertisements for concerts showed him wearing tuxedos and holding a baton, images borrowed from the prototypical classical conductor. The promotional campaign for the Carnegie Hall concert built upon this image-making.

1945

An interview with Duke Ellington

"There are those who seek in Mr. Ellington's music a growing affinity between jazz and serious music actually be on the stick the style and distinction of his work is based on and derived from the jazz idiom only, and employs an instrumental technique utterly different from that of symphonic music."

The Duke listened to the quotation with a smile.

" I guess serious is a confusing word,"he said. "We take our American music seriously. If serious means European music, I'm not interested in that. Some people mix up the words serious and classical. They are a lot different. Classical music is supposed to be 200 years old. There is no such thing as modern classical music. There is great serious music. That is all.

"Critics are a funny bunch of people. They use words to their own advantage. They live in one world and we live in another. We do not understand what they are talking about. I don't think the public does either. All music critics think jazz musicians are trying to get into the Symphonic field. 99% of the jazz people aren't interested in symphony techniques at all.

"Jazz is like the automobile and airplane. It is modern and it is American. I don't like the word jazz but it is the one that is usually used. Jazz is freedom. Jazz is the freedom to play anything, whether it has been done before or not. It gives you freedom. I remember in the old days when I was struggling to write something entirely new. I would try something that hadn't been done before. I felt like an intruder in the new land. No - more like an illiterate.

"I'm not the offspring of a conservatory. I have a voided music schools and conservatories. I didn't want to be influenced away from what I felt inside. Back in 1915, 1920 when I was getting started in Washington, there were two schools of jazz. There were the disciplined jazz musicians who played exactly what was written. They had all the good work. I got kicked out of a couple of those bands.

"Then there was another group of musicians that didn't know music. Some of them could only play in one key. But they played precious things. I was in between. My greatest influence came from the ragtime piano players. I was trying to play ragtime. That's what I was trying to do, but it came out a little different.

"I wouldn't have been a good musician if I'd gone to a conservatory and studied in the usual way. I haven't the discipline.

In that case, we said, why had he recently established three scholarships for graduates of New York high schools at the Juilliard School of Music?

"Things are different now," he said. "A musician coming along today has a lot to learn. Even if he has loads of natural ability, he has to develop great skill to be eligible for a good job. If he goes about it the way I did, it will take him much too long. Juilliard is a fine school. The people there are aware of American music. They won't hold anyone back. I developed the helter-skelter way. I don't think everyone should be allowed to do that. Most people learn faster and more at school.

"We've tried to absorb the styles of all the individuals in the band," the Duke went on. I don't write for anyone else but the band. When I'm writing a trumpet part, for instance, I don't write within the radius of the horn but for the man behind the horn.

"Our music grew out of the personalities in the band. We see an old man walking along the street we play a song that goes with that man.

"Playing is demonstration," said the Duke. "But writing is the real thing. Writing is a matter of adjusting yourself, settling down to do it. You have to have a contented feeling. You get your mindset on writing, then you do it. There is no formula for it. I go for long stretches without writing. I'm a great procrastinator. I have great ideas, but nothing ever happens. Then I get an idea or I promise to do a piece and I do it. I tried to write fast. Usually I work walking up and down, humming to myself and drinking Coca-Cola.

"I don't believe in working at the piano. A piano is more or less of a hindrance in composing. It limits you to watch your fingers fall on. Unless you're an awfully good pianist, your suggestion is stunted. You're too apt to follow familiar harmony. I can imagine a lot of sounds I wouldn't play offhand on the piano.

Negro life, rhythm and melodies have been an important source of his music, the Duke says but he prefers to think of it as American music.

"20 years ago when jazz was finding an audience, it may have had more of a Negro character," he said. The Negro element is still important. But jazz has become a part of America. There aren't as many white musicians playing it as Negro. Charlie Barnett does so well on my stuff it sometimes scares me. We

are all working along more or less the same lines. We learn from each other. Jazz is *American* now. And *American* is a big word.

Duke Ellington interview with Stanley Dance

The Art is in the Cooking (1962)

No let's consider your imaginary customer goes into a restaurant. He looks at the menu and find the dishes classified under such headings as fish, fowl, and meat. That's a convenience for him. Right? He orders steak, but after a few minutes, here comes the waiter with a plate of fish. When he complains, The chef - and the chef is the important cat! - comes out of the kitchen with a big carving knife in his hand. The chef tells him to eat, because it's good food, because if he were starving he wouldn't care if it were fish or steak.

If a man has some very hungry ears for what he considers jazz, or for a pleasant noise that makes him feel he wants to swing (and we have there possibly a reasonable definition of jazz), then almost anything would suffice. At least, if he were starving he would tolerate it for one take. But if he were not starving, And if he were now like a gourmet in a gourmet restaurant, and he ordered fish, and they brought him fish, and the minute he tasted it he said, "No this is not cooked by Pierre! Who is the chef today? This is not the way I like it. I like it the way Pierre cooks it. What then?

You could divide up the meat section of that menu under beef, lamb, pork and so on - under hot and cold or according to the way they were cooked- grilled, roasted, baked, broiled etc.- maybe that's a service to the customer, but to multiply divisions that way in music, in my opinion, merely multiplies confusion. Fish fowl and meat may provide us with a parallel, but never forget that *the art is in the cooking*. And what is convenient for the listener, or the critic, is not necessarily helpful to the musician.

I'm sure critics have their purpose, and they're supposed to do what they do, but sometimes they get a little carried away with what they think someone *should* have done, rather than concerning themselves with what