

Ellington Anecdotes

1. Ellington is a calm man of forty-five who laughs easily and hates to hurry. His movements are so deliberate that his steps are usually dogged by his road manager, Jack Boyd, a hard, brisk, red-faced little white man from Texas, whose right index finger was shortened by a planing machine twenty years ago. Boyd, who has been an Ellington employee for some years, yaps and yips at his heels in an effort, for example, to hurry him to a train which in fifteen minutes is leaving a station five miles away. Boyd also lives in fear that Ellington may fall asleep at the wrong time, and since it usually takes an hour of the most ingenious torture to put the slumbering band leader on his feet, the manager's apprehension is not unreasonable. In general, Boyd's life is not a happy one. It is his job to herd about the country a score of highly spirited, highly individual artists, whose colors range from light beige to a deep, blue black, whose tastes range from quiet study to explosive conviviality, and whose one common denominator is a complete disregard of train schedules. Often Duke finishes his breakfast in a taxi. Frequently, driven from the table in his hotel room by the jittery, hen-like cluckings of Boyd, he wraps a half-finished chop in a florid handkerchief and tucks it in the pocket of his jacket, from which it protrudes, its nattiness not at all impaired by the fact that it conceals a greasy piece of meat. Not long ago this habit astonished an Icelandic music student who happened to be on a train that Duke had barely caught. The Icelander, after asking for Ellington's autograph, had said, "Mr. Ellington, aren't there marked similarities between you and Bach?" Duke moved his right hand to the handkerchief frothing out of his jacket. "Well, Bach and myself," he said, unwrapping the handkerchief and revealing the chop, "Bach and myself both" — he took a bite from the chop — "write with individual performers in mind."

2. Ellington has, like most entertainers, a stage self and a real self. On the stage, at least when he supplies the "flesh" — the trade term for personal appearances in movie houses — he presents himself as a smiling, carefree African, tingling to his finger tips with a gay, syncopated throb that he can scarcely control. As the spotlight picks him out of the gloom, the audience sees a wide, irrepressible grin, but when the light moves away, Ellington's face instantly sags into immobility. He has given a lot of thought to achieving serenity and equipoise in a life that gives him neither repose nor privacy. He craves peace. He will not argue with anyone in his band, and his road manager, on whom most of the burdens fall, repeatedly sums up his problem in the phrase "Trouble with this band is it has no boss." The arguments which Duke refuses to have, and which, to Boyd's acute distress, he concedes beforehand, usually involve overtime pay or a request for an advance on next week's salary. When Boyd tries to persuade Duke to take a militant attitude, Ellington usually says, in a tone of wheezy complaint, "I won't let these goddam musicians upset me! Why should I knock myself out in an argument about fifteen dollars when in the same time I can probably write a fifteen hundred dollar song?"

3. He has a passion for color and clothes. He has forty-five suits and more than a thousand ties, the latter collected in forty-seven states of the Union and seven European countries, and his shoes, hats, shirts, and even his toilet water are all custom-made. His usual manner is one of ambassadorial urbanity, but it is occasionally punctuated by deep despair. In explaining his moods, he says, "A Negro can be too low to speak one minute and laughing fit to kill the next, and mean both." Few people know that he is a student of Negro history. He is a member of one of the first families of Virginia, for his ancestors arrived at Jamestown in 1619, a year before the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock. He has written music commemorating Negro heroes such as Crispus Attucks, the first American killed in the American Revolution; Barzillai Lew, one of the men depicted in the painting called "The Spirit of '76;" and Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Frederick Douglass, and other Negro fighters for freedom. He has also written an unproduced opera, "Boola," which tells the story of the American Negro, and a long

symphonic work entitled "Black, Brown, and Beige," which he says is "a tone parallel to the history of the Negro." His concern for his race is not entirely impersonal, since he and his band are constantly faced, even in the North, by the institution of Jim Crow. "You have to try not to think about it," Duke says, "or you'll knock yourself out."

4. Some time later Boyd hustled through the coach, shouting to the band that the train would be in New York in half an hour. He was brought to a halt by the sight of Ellington's sleeping form. He began to shake Duke. "Damn if I don't let him stay here!" Boyd said to Duke's friend after a moment. "Damn if I don't do what I did in Tacoma! Let him stay there that time until the train was switched to a siding five miles away. He had to walk back. Damn if you wouldn't think that'd cure him!" He loosened his clutch on Duke's collar and the big man sagged forward. Boyd glared at him. "Once in San Francisco," he said, "Ellington slept that way and when he got off the train he was so sleepy he got in a line of men that were being herded into a van. They were prisoners for San Quentin. When Ellington tried to get out, the guard wouldn't let him. Damn if I should of rescued him! Should of let him go to prison. It would of taught him."

5. There are times when Duke Ellington exudes such calm contentment that a colleague, under the influence of benign radiation, once murmured drowsily, "Duke make me sleepy, like rain on the roof." His nerves and laughter are so loose and easy that members of his jazz band believe that they got that way because of his physical makeup rather than because of the quality of his spirit. "His pulse is so low he can't get excited," they explain. "His heart beat slower than an ordinary man's." Only something in the flow of blood, they are sure, could explain a calm that has survived 23 years in the band business - years in which Duke and his 17 piece band have again and again clattered on tour from one end of the country to the other.

6. Duke likes trains because, as he says, "Folks can't rush you until you get off." He likes them too, because dining car waiters know about his love for food and he is apt to get very good attention.

7. 1944: Duke has made nearly a million dollars in the last 20 years, but he has spent it as he made it. He has received about a half million in royalties from phonographic records; almost 20 million of his records have been sold. He has received a quarter of a million in sheet-music royalties. For one night stands - dances and concerts - which have taken up most of the band's time in recent years, Duke collects between \$1250 and \$2,000, depending on the attendance. He may gross as much as \$10,000 a week from one nighters, but the band's payroll and expenses are so heavy that he is fortunate if he breaks even on the road. Duke's men receive between \$125 and \$185 a week. (Note: The band members were among the highest paid in the business.)

8. Ellington lives in a large, air apartment at 935 St. Nicholas Avenue. The furnishing, which include gold and blue rugs from Sweden, are modern. He was married in 1918 but for the past 15 years he has been separated from his wife. They have one son, Mercer, also a composer and now a sergeant in the Army. Occasionally, around 4 or 5 in the morning, when the band is in New York, the men go up to Duke's apartment and talk and drink and eat. 'Do you remember whey...' and the stories they introduce may concern anything for the time that Tricky Sam, after a good of schnapps in Copenhagen, joined a confusing Danish folk dance, to the time Harold Baker blasted out a trumpet solo to quell a riot on a boat on the Mississippi.

My band is my instrument even more than the piano...I'm something like a farmer. He plants his seed and I plant mine. He has to wait until spring to see his come up, but I can see mine right after I plant it. That night. I don't have to wait. That's the payoff for me..."

From the Funky Genius of Duke Ellington, Mar 20, 2016)

Nelson Algren once observed that "if society denies someone their reality, then they'll structure their own reality." That is precisely what Duke Ellington did. He knew what league he was really competing in ("Bach and myself both write with the individual performer in mind"), even when the critics and the impresarios and the managers denied it. After his first Carnegie Hall concert in the early Forties, one manager dismissed his extended compositions as valueless (as did some critics) and is supposed to have told him to get back to "nigger music." He even had to fight at first to get his membership in ASCAP, the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers.

So Duke early on reached a decision. Let the symphonies and philharmonic orchestras be supported by civic organizations and foundations. He had to have his music played and since he wrote for a special group of virtuoso players he would pay for his own orchestra by writing pop songs and playing in nightclubs. He did it for decades. His musicians received the most expensive payroll in the popular music or symphonic fields. He wrote its songs that earned him a guaranteed six-figure income for years, and he toured night after night. His was the only band that always worked 52 weeks a year and never disbanded.

He became so successful as a nightclub performer, as a songwriter, as a personality, that his serious musical efforts never got the attention they deserved. He mesmerized everybody with his elegance, his charm, and his melodies, and then went ahead and wrote important music behind that screen.

10. Thus it was that about a quarter-century ago (1965) the board charged with such matters rejected the recommendations of the jury reporting to it and refused to award Ellington a Pulitzer Prize in music. Never mind that Ellington had long since dwarfed the cumulative, not to mention individual, accomplishments of the succession of minor composers (including all those above-mentioned) to whom the prize had before and has since been given; Ellington played jazz, and jazz -- even in the 1960s! -- was not respectable, and thus he could have no prize. The decision of course said far more about the personages who then occupied the Pulitzer board than it said about Ellington himself; it was a confession, however unwitting, of the cultural establishment's hostility to the new and the different and the unsanctioned. It was a narrow-minded judgment by a narrow-minded group of men and should have been recognized as such, but it hurt Ellington deeply. He put on a brave front, but he more than anyone else knew the true value of his music and he badly, if not desperately, wanted it accepted for what it was: the great American music, the true voice of his country, a total body of work that was neither jazz nor classical but something that drew strength from both and emerged, triumphantly, *sui generis*. It is a pity that Ellington allowed the Pulitzer decision to weigh upon him, but it is understandable. Quite apart from matters of personal and artistic pride -- Ellington was amply endowed with both -- there was the deeper and more troubling question of race, of the ambiguous position Ellington occupied in a racial culture that was, and is, itself endlessly ambiguous. He was a proud black man long before that was acceptable to the larger society, and nothing informs his music more profoundly than his racial identity and heritage, yet he also moved with ease and confidence among whites, and he clearly both sought and expected approval by the white elite. He didn't get it, at least not as he wanted it. He was praised as a genius of jazz, but only as that; jazz was black music, and jazz musicians were to be kept in their place. It was all well and good for Ellington to compose and perform such "numbers" as "Mood Indigo" and "Sophisticated Lady" and "Ring Dem Bells" and "The Mooche"; these were jazz pieces, short enough to fit on one side of a 78 rpm record, wonderful for dancing and even for listening, but mere "entertainment." If, however, Ellington chose to write at length -- suites and tone poems such as "Black, Brown and Beige," "A Tone Parallel to Harlem," "Such Sweet Thunder" -- that was mere pretentiousness; that -- yes, we do have a word for it -- was uppity. Thus was Ellington treated during his lifetime; thus he is treated now. DE was awarded the Pulitzer posthumously in 1999.

