

Blanton-Webster Era Recordings—Duke Ellington Orchestra (1940-1942)

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Essay by Cary O'Dell



Duke Ellington

Duke Ellington's Blanton-Webster era recordings get their name from the presence of two musicians during their 1940s recording sessions: bassist Jimmy Blanton and tenor sax player Ben Webster. While their contributions to the 66 tracks that make up these sessions should not be undervalued, these recordings also benefit greatly from the presence of other top-of-the-line players like Johnny Hodges, Cootie Williams, Rex Stewart, Ray Nance, Juan Tizol, and Barney Bigard not to mention writer/arranger Billy Strayhorn.

Together, this group of artists, in collusion with the great Duke Ellington himself, formed one of jazz's most precise and coordinated ensembles and set down on record a staggering number of songs destined to become modern-day classics--"Take the 'A' Train," "Johnny Come Lately," "Warm Valley," and "Chelsea Bridge." In retrospect, many critics and music historians now look back at this time period as not only the apex of Ellington's creativity but also the apex of all those who played with him.

Duke Ellington (1899-1974) was already on his way to becoming a legend when the Blanton-Webster sessions for RCA Victor got underway in 1940. Edward Kennedy Ellington (Duke's real name) was born in Washington, DC. And though his father was once employed as a butler (and later worked as a blueprint maker for the Navy), Ellington's family was considered quite well-to-do. He got his famous knick name, "Duke," from a childhood friend who took note of Ellington's dapper dress and regal air. Ellington began his piano studies in 1906 and by 1918 was already booking his own professional gigs.

Gaining momentum, Ellington and the musicians he gathered for his first band shuttled between Manhattan and Hollywood playing revues. He cut his first record in 1923. In 1924, he made his first album; it contained the songs "Choo Choo" and "Rainy Nights." Beginning in 1927, Ellington and his combo began a long engagement at Harlem's legendary Cotton Club nightclub. They remained there until 1932. As their fame grew, so did their reputation. By the end of the '20s and the beginning of the '30s, Ellington and his group were known as the nation's top providers of orchestral jazz. Their prestige was solidified by the success of two hit singles "Mood Indigo" and "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)." In 1933, Ellington and company made a triumphant tour of Europe.

Throughout the 1930s, the personnel of Ellington's back up band remained surprisingly consistent, unusual for music ensembles of the era (and ever since). Still, new blood was occasionally brought in and changed the group's sound and dynamic. Perhaps the person with the most impact during this era was Billy Strayhorn (1915-1967), an arranger, composer and

lyricist; he joined up with Ellington in 1940. Strayhorn wrote some of Ellington's most memorable numbers including "Take the 'A' Train" and "Chelsea Bridge." He collaborated with Ellington on the signature tunes "Day Dream" and "Something to Live For." (Strayhorn was also the composer of the immortal standard "Lush Life.") Strayhorn's great knowledge of music helped refine and evolve Ellington's sound. Strayhorn and Ellington had a deeply simpatico relationship and would work together for the next 25 years.

Of course at this time Ellington also welcomed Jimmy Blanton and Ben Webster into the fold. Jimmy Blanton (1918-1942) played the double bass and his proficiency on the instrument encouraged Ellington to make use of it. As Derek Jewell notes in his book, "Duke: A Portrait of Duke Ellington," "Blanton wanted to use the bass as an instrument for themes, improvising tunefully with finger and bow, essaying long runs, and using melodic and harmonic ideas unheard of from his cumbersome instrument until that time."

Ben Webster (1909-1973) hailed from Kansas City and played the tenor sax. He would be the band's first tenor soloist and is today considered one of the pioneers of the swing tenor style. He can be prominently heard on such Ellington cuts as "Cotton Tail" and "All Too Soon."

With his musicians in place and a new, freshly-inked contract with Victor records under his arm, in 1940, Ellington embarked on a very prolific year of playing and recording. He and his band had 10 recording sessions in that year alone: seven in Chicago, two in New York and one in Hollywood. The '40 sessions yielded such numbers as "Morning Glory," "Ko-Ko," "Jack the Bear," "Blue Goose," "Warm Valley," "So Far, So Good," "Harlem Air Shaft," "Rumpus in Richmond," "Cotton Tail," "The Sidewalks of New York," "Five O'Clock Whistle" and "Across the Track Blues."

Recorded exclusively in Hollywood, the 1941 sessions included the tracks "Take the 'A' Train," "Chocolate Shake," "I Got It Bad (And That Ain't Good)," "Clementine," "Jump for Joy," "Rock in My Bed," "Raincheck," and "Chelsea Bridge."

Then it was back to Chicago, New York and Hollywood for the 1942 recordings. They included: "Johnny Come Lately," "I Don't Mind," "Main Stem," and "Sherman Shuffle."

Though Ellington would go on to many other career milestones, including the first of his legendary Carnegie Hall concerts in 1943, and to work with an exceptional array of musicians, his Blanton-Webster period remains a highpoint among highpoints. Seldom has a unit gelled so well or played so well to each other's strengths.

In the liner notes for a 1986 packaging of the Blanton-Webster sessions, author Mark Tucker states, "The recordings Ellington produced...represent the creative peak of a developmental process that had begun over 20 years earlier. The performances by Ellington's orchestra...are authoritative."

As another author put it, "In showing to what heights a large jazz orchestra could aspire, [Ellington] achieved a reputation not likely to be duplicated or forgotten. Certainly [by the end of his career], it was clear that he had made a more extensive and more important contribution than had any other figure in the history of jazz."

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