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THE MAGAZINE OF AFRO-AMERICAN CULTURE

American Visions

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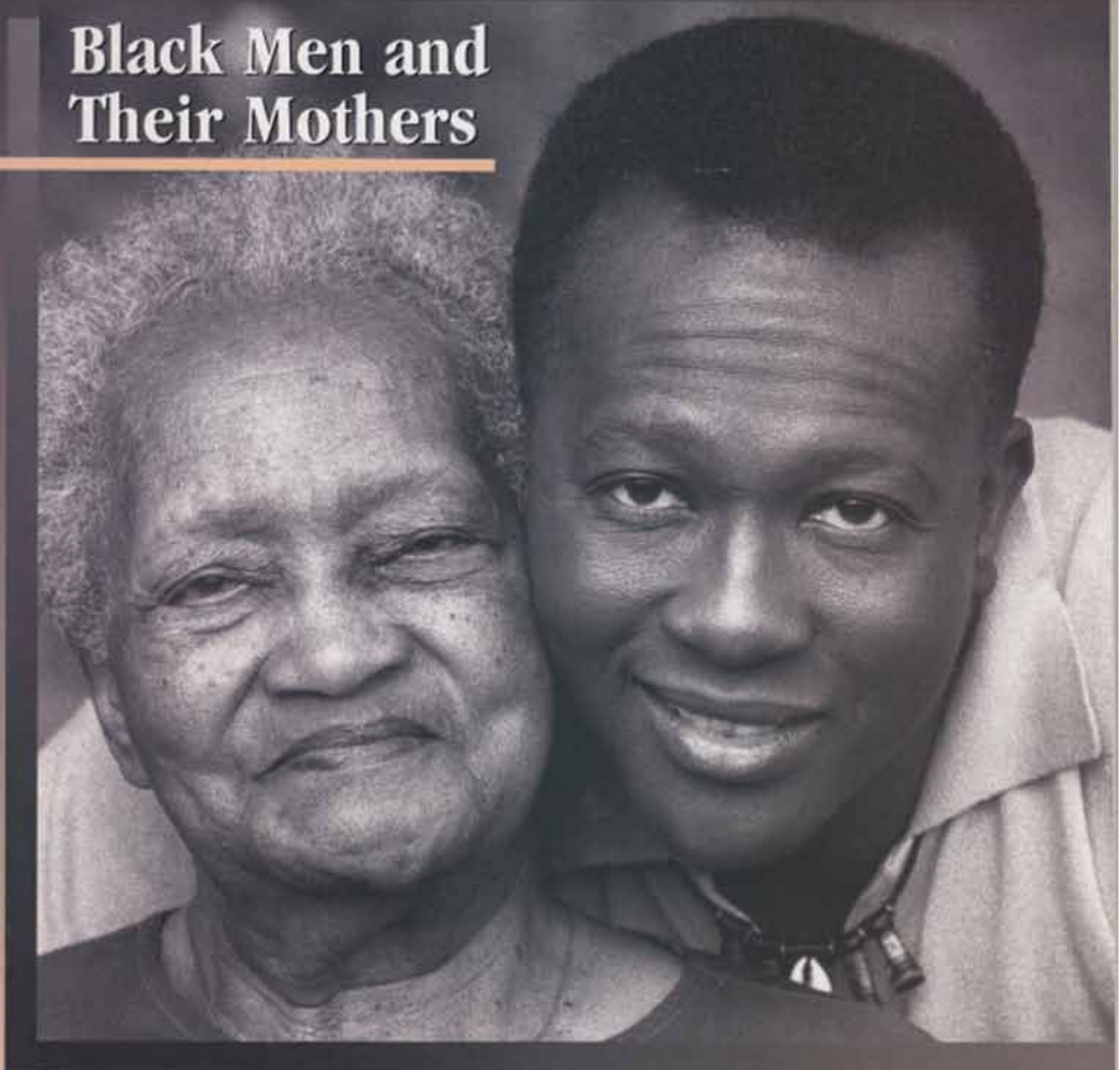

Photo by Adger W. Cowans

TO LOVE HIM MADLY

by Sharon Fitzgerald

So many of us who never met him somehow became the heirs of Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington. How enchanting and romantic we felt while dancing to a mellow rendering of "Satin Doll." We grasped that a moment of melancholy could be eclipsed by one of consolation when the first notes of "Sophisticated Lady" or "Mood Indigo" floated into a jazz set.

His compositions, his leadership, and his life set modern standards, yet the word "standard" befits neither the music nor the maestro. For Ellington—who wore his genius with the same ease as his tuxedos—created music that was at once complex and unforgettable. He was a showman who mesmerized music's purists with his expertise. He was a leader who collaborated with such giants as Billy Strayhorn and inspired generations of newcomers, all the while achieving a singular greatness.

April 29, 1999, marks the 100th anniversary of Ellington's birth in Washington, D.C. Certainly he has given us scores of reasons to celebrate. We asked a few people who knew and loved him to share their reminiscences about the musician, the work, the man.

The Duke Ellington Orchestra during an appearance with Maurice Chevalier at the Fulton Street Theatre in New York City, 1930.

Photos (2) Courtesy Duke Ellington Collection, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

Courtesy Frank Driggs Collection

Members of the Duke Ellington Orchestra performing in Paris, 1950.

"His touch, his sound … . My list doesn't stop on Ellington."

Tommy Flanagan, pianist

"I loved his music since I was a child, but I didn't recognize how great a pianist he was until much later on, since I usually just saw him standing in front of the band, conducting. And then one morning at the Apollo Theatre, I was there for the first show, the curtains opened, and it was only Duke, Lawrence Brown and Harry Carney—three people on the stage, and he was supposed to have a 15- or 18-piece band. He sat there and played so much piano that I didn't miss the orchestra at all. He was wonderful, and I knew then what a pianist he was.

"Even if you did play the piano, there is a lot you wouldn't know, because he played things that nobody else played or could play the way he played them. He just had that uniqueness.

"His touch, his sound, and certainly his compositional skills: He was a very rhythmic, a very dynamic player. He just had it all, as a pianist, a composer, a session director. A great orchestrator. He excelled at all of it. My list doesn't stop on Ellington.

"I met him when I was working with Ella Fitzgerald. Jimmy Jones had written an arrangement of 'Something to Live For' that I played for her with Duke's band. It was a great feeling, but I didn't get out of that band what he got out of them.

"He could put you on a lot. I remember once he put me on something terrible in Las Vegas. They were having a battle of the bands, Duke and Woody Herman. He was introducing people [in the audience] and guys in the band were hollering out names.

"Somebody, I think Paul Gonsalves, hollered my name out to him, and he said, 'Ah, yes, Tommy Flanagan. My piano teacher always told me to be careful playing in the presence of Tommy Flanagan.' I thought, My goodness, it was so much flattery. One of the things I remember about him was how he liked going overboard with introductions."

"He was like a big bonbon … : warm, sweet, a gentleman."

Geoffrey Holder, actor, choreographer, dancer

"My wife, Carmen [deLavallade], was the leading dancer in the Lester Horton Company, and Lester Horton put her together with Ellington. She was a child then, about 15, and she continued with Duke when I came. She did 'A Drum Is a Woman' with him, which told the history of jazz through a drum.

"So I knew Duke through that, and I remember that one day he called me to do 'Praise God and Dance' at St. John the Divine—to choreograph it. I got some dancers and watched the orchestra rehearsal.

"I am one who improvises. When I danced, I improvised. I knew what I wanted to wear—I wore a little brief costume with a red toga over it—and I had a whole group of dancers follow me up the aisle. It was wonderful using the body as an instrument, as another musical instrument.

"His sacred music was a wonderful contribution, because no one had done it. You had a gospel show or nothing. But he took it and created his own music and brought jazz into the churches.

"Duke Ellington was very much an impressionist. Like Debussy. His melodies take you somewhere; how he changes is very impressionistic.

"And not only that, there was the beat. Forget the beat. The East Indians have beats. The Africans have beats. The Spanish have beats. You can put anything against the beat; you can work against the beats.

"But his melodies—'Prelude to a Kiss,' 'Sophisticated Lady'—he goes into all of those purple tones, all of those notes in between notes, all of those purple notes inside there. Those were odd for the music of its time. He took you somewhere else. He really was an impressionist, like Poulenc and Debussy and that crowd.

"The most moving thing that I have ever heard was at the funeral of Duke. There we were at St. John the Divine with all the jazz royalty—Count Basie, everybody—in the church.

"Duke's casket was laden with roses, totally covered, like a nest of roses. The sermon went on and on and on. Then Ella Fitzgerald sang 'In My Solitude.' We couldn't see her from where we were sitting, so here was this intimate, private voice of Ella Fitzgerald, singing to her friend Duke, as though no one else was in the church.

"'In my solitude, you haunt me,' she sang quietly. No big orchestra; it was just a piano and Ella. And then a gust of wind, a draft, passed through, and the roses began to move, just began to move in the draft, in the wind. Shivers went down my spine. I don't know if anybody else saw it, but there was not a dry eye in the place. Just to hear the voice of Ella Fitzgerald in that enormous church, the roses beginning to move in the draft: crying time, crying time.

"He was like a big bonbon, a big piece of strawberry candy: warm, sweet, a gentleman. That's how I saw him, personally."

"There are people who create an aura wherever they are. Ellington was one of those."

Joe Williams, vocalist

"I remember being in the White House with him on his 70th birthday, and at the time the president was Richard Nixon. When Duke was introduced by the president, he walked up on the stage, took Nixon in his arms, kissed him four times on his cheeks and whispered in his ear.

"Now those of us who knew Ellington very, very well collapsed because Nixon turned puce. We collapsed because we knew what Ellington had whispered to him. He would take you in his arms, kiss you four times on the cheek and say, 'That's one for each cheek, baby.' He was unbelievable.

"This is the Ellington that I guess a lot of people didn't know. He was a joy to me from the first time I heard him. I was a little boy, and my mother used to put on the band on the radio from New York City, from the Cotton Club. When the band finished their theme, she would kiss me, turn off the radio, and I would go to sleep. So I've been with him a long time.

"I used to arrange my classes so that I could get home in time to hear a program they had in Chicago called 'Red Hot and Low Down.' I arranged to have early morning classes so that I could be home by 3 o'clock, in time to hear that. The program's theme was Ellington's 'East St. Louis Toodle-oo.' Later on, they changed the theme to 'Sepia Panorama.' Then they changed it again, to 'Take the "A" Train.' But I used to come home early from high school so that I could hear Duke Ellington on the radio.

"In person, in the theater, it was unbelievable, a perfect production. He said to me once, 'We try to present our artists with dignity.' You're talking about the '40s, long before 'I'm black and I'm proud.'

"This was a man who met kings and queens and the people on the street as well. When he checked into a big hotel or someplace like that, it was nothing to see him coming through the kitchen, speaking to everybody. But there was madness in his method as well, you see, because then you could call downstairs and get everything you wanted.

"One of the questions he was asked when he was celebrating his 70th birthday was, 'What is your favorite image of yourself?' He answered: 'My favorite image of myself? Ah, yes, I remember now: to wake up in the morning with room service knocking on my door.'

"He lifted the spirits of everyone around him. It was like a friend of mine, a piano player and arranger named Jimmy Jones, once said: 'Edward was in orbit before people knew there was an orbit.'

"Performing with him was an experience always. Now, that's another thing. I still don't feel as though I've ever really done justice to the music of Ellington. It's so expressive, and the harmonies are so intricate and different from anything else, and so it had to be different from anything else. I've never been able to transport myself entirely into that—to my satisfaction, that is.

"You don't hear an awful lot of it, because musicians don't want to tackle it. I mean, that is a cosmic truth. Some do. Wonderful people do. Thad Jones. Wynton Marsalis. They do a great job, I think—better than anybody, in playing that music. It thrills me to hear them do it.

"The only difference is this. The musicians that Duke Ellington had, say, from the '20s, the '30s and '40s, and even the '50s, they made distinctive sounds. You could hear a noise from a horn and you knew who the player was.

"Once in the '60s or '70s, George Duvivier and I were walking aboard a ship and discussing the Ellington music and what have you. He said, 'The music is still there, the notes are there, but the voices are gone.'

Courtesy Duke Ellington Collection, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

Duke Ellington and President Richard Nixon at the White House, 1969.

"The distinctive sound that a voice makes, like Otto Hardwicke or Johnny Hodges, Barney Bigard, Harry Carney, Cootie Williams, Rex Stewart, Lawrence Brown, Juan Tizol, Ray Nance—you knew those voices when you heard them. And, of course, we knew that distinctive sound of his on the piano.

"It is very difficult to separate the spiritual thing that happens when you immerse yourself in something like the music of Duke Ellington. It's very difficult to take it and separate it, because it is all one spiritual experience, really.

"He was constantly evolving. It was that kind of experience with him, which is why there was a piano beside the bed—because something would come to him at any time that he wanted to write down and wanted to remember.

"When he started writing his sacred music, particularly, he said, 'I'm just a messenger boy for God.' He was a genius—a gifted genius. He could show the relationship between our diversity.

"There are people who create an aura wherever they are. Ellington was one of those. Of royalty. You don't find a lot of that anymore, I don't think. That charm and grace. That was him: charm and grace and elegance."

Courtesy Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

Ellington and band members in Chicago, 1932.

"He played his band like we play our instruments."

Clark Terry, trumpet player, bandleader

"I usually refer to my stint with the Ellington band as the period during which I attended the University of Ellingtonia. It was pretty much like that, because when you're studying, wherever you are studying, you are preparing yourself for betterment—to get along with the world, in the world, and in your profession.

"When you were around him, you were mastering your craft, whether you were aware of it or not—if you were conscientious, I mean, if you were tuned into him, because he was always a source of fantastic things. All you had to do was zero in on him. Later, when things would come up, and you wanted to know, What shall I do? you'd have stored things like a computer.

"For instance, on the bandstand, after becoming a bandleader, after I left Duke's band, I would try to figure out what to do—how to do this and when to do that. And I'd just think, I wonder what Maestro would have done. How would he have dealt with these men?

"You learn how to deal psychologically with the people with whom you surround yourself. You learn how to establish a rapport from the bandstand to the audience; you know how to individually associate with everybody.

"He had a way of making every female person that he ever met feel good about herself. He would always go up to her and say: 'Oh, hello. Whose pretty little girl are you?' Something of that sort.

"Even older women would melt when he'd say, 'Gosh, you're prettier today than you were the last time I saw you.' And if one of them paid him a compliment, he'd reply, 'Oh you're just seeing me in the reflection of your halo!'

"He was a masterful person as far as psychology was concerned. One of the incidents that I like to refer to was when I left Basie's band to join Duke's band. I was in Chicago, at the Capitol Lounge. We were there with Bud De Franco, Gus Johnson on drums and Jimmy Lewis on bass.

"Duke very rarely came around himself. He would send his representatives around. There was a spot about to be opened in the trumpet section in his band, so he sent Joe Morgan, his publicity man, around to talk to me.

"Joe always wore a little felt hat, like the one Nat 'King' Cole wore all of the time. I was crazy about that hat, but they were very difficult to find. And so Joe Morgan came over and said, 'You know, we'd like to have you aboard, and if you'd consider it, I might just part with this hat.'

"I almost said, 'Yeah, yeah,' but I said, 'Well, I'll wait awhile.' So Duke sent Evie [Ellis]. He sent John Sulley, who was a road manager of a sort for him. He sent all sorts of people around to talk to me.

"Finally, one day he calls me and he says: 'Well, I think that we should come to terms, don't you think? We'd like to have you over here.'

"I said, 'Well, I'd really like to become a member of the band, Maestro.'

"He said: 'The only problem, and the big problem, is that you are with my buddy's band, and it's not the proper protocol for one to lift a key player from his buddy's ensemble. We'll have to figure out some strategy.'

"I said, 'What do you have in mind?'

Photo by Morgan and Marvin Smith/Courtesy Schomburg Center

Duke Ellington with vocalists Ivie Anderson (left) and Ella Fitzgerald at the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem, 1937.

"He said, 'I'd like to come to your hotel to talk to you.'

"I said, 'OK.'

"Well, we were in the room talking, and we discussed everything—the finances and the conditions, et cetera, and he mentions the protocol thing, and I asked him what strategy he had in mind.

"He says: 'Well, why don't you just happen to get sick and decide to take a leave of absence from the band, and since St. Louis is your hometown, it would be nice if you went home to rest. We'll be coming through there in about three months, and maybe by then your illness will have worn off and your chops will be in good enough shape to want to try them a little more.'

"It sounded very inviting, but what really put the icing on it was that he said, 'In the meantime, I'll put you on salary.' That did it. So I put my notice in with Basie.

"Just before I put my notice in, Basie had given me a $15-a-week raise. So I was making $140 a week, and that was pretty good bread in those days. Duke had offered me a bit over $200, so that's why I couldn't turn that down, you know?

"I learned so many things from Ellington: ways and means of establishing rapport on the bandstand, which I mentioned before, the psychology of handling so many different kinds of attitudes (we call them 'egotudes').

"Like it was always said about Ellington's band and Ellington: He played his band like we play our instruments. When he surrounded himself with the people he surrounded himself with, he knew exactly what he expected from them. You might sit there for a year before he realized how he was going to use your voice in his music.

"It was just amazing that he and Billy Strayhorn could do this. Everybody who was there was there for a purpose. The purpose may have been something the person wasn't even aware of himself. A newcomer might wonder, 'Why am I here?' But Duke had a plan."

"That piano, boy, was part of his weapon."

Albert Murray, essayist, novelist, cultural critic

"I met Duke back in 1947, backstage at one of his performances at Carnegie Hall, but I had been onto the music since 1927, because we listened to it on the radio back when they were broadcasting from the Cotton Club. There used to be a late-night, coast-to-coast hookup that would start in New York and then go to Chicago and then out to California.

"We memorized all the stuff we heard on the radio and on records. They used to make copies of arrangements for the high-school band when many of the songs were new. I grew up with that. I remember the songs and pieces that came out when I was in college and who was playing. Guys would get together at various places and listen to the broadcasts. We would stand outside of a store somewhere, listening to "Mood Indigo." I remember

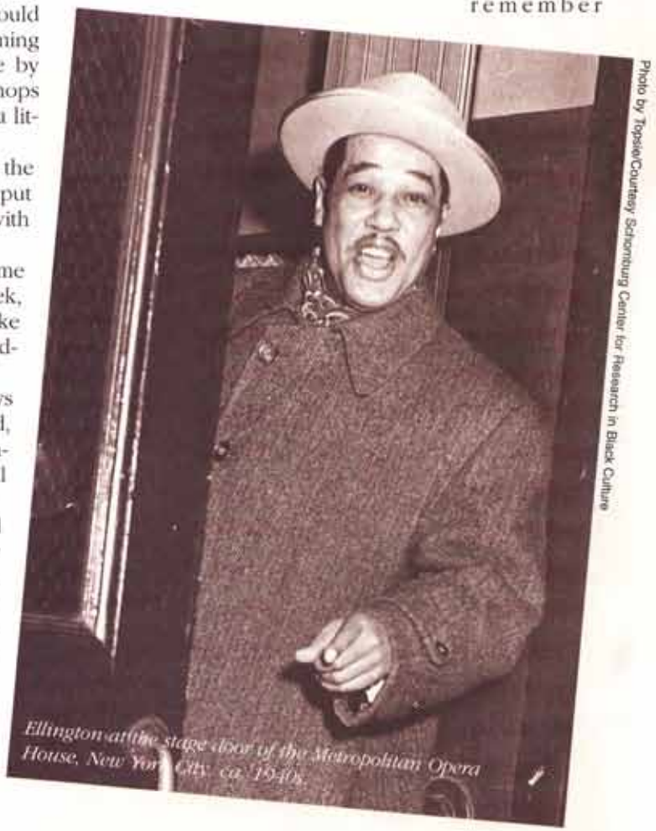

Photo by Topsie/Courtesy Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

Ellington at the stage door of the Metropolitan Opera House, New York City, ca. 1940s.

when "Rockin' in Rhythm" was new and we used it as the theme song of the spring prom.

"Ellington's music is a part of me. My literary sensibility is imbued with it. One of the highest trophies of my life is that we became friends and that he followed my writing and wanted to talk to me about things.

"Duke kept everything in his head. He knew where you were, all those sorts of things. In 1970, when I was a professor of literature at Colgate, he wanted to talk with me about *Music Is My Mistress*. He called early in the morning—before he was going to bed—and said: 'That schedule you have up there: You're free Thursday night and your next course is not until Tuesday. What do you say that I set up a flight out here? I'm in Hollywood. Ella and I are at the Coconut Grove in the Ambassador Hotel. You could leave Syracuse on Thursday night, and you won't be due back there until Tuesday afternoon.'

"So he set up the flight and I went out. We talked about the book stuff, and he took me out to dinner. He was a gourmet. He liked and he knew food, so he sent out to Perrino's for a big tray of seafood, and we ate backstage, where Ella had her dressing room and he had his. All the movie stars were coming by to see them: James Stewart and his wife, all kinds of Hollywood types. But on those nights, they were just fans.

"He was the most generous and pleasant person that you could ever wish to know. The smiles and all: He was like that. I went to many, many rehearsals over a 20-year period, and he always tried not to let anything bother him. He'd try to handle problems. The relaxed tone of voice you can hear on some of his rehearsal recordings was pretty much the way he was.

"When the band was in a studio making a record, he'd play a little bit, and then, as he headed up to the control room, he'd say, 'Well, I have to go now and exert my executive rights. Supervise.' After that, he'd return to the band and say, 'Let's try it this way,' and he'd play those guys into the mood. That piano, boy, was part of his weapon. The band played like him. They played like he wanted them to play. He was sending signals over the piano at all times.

"He's like a working man. He's like a man with a ditch and a shovel. Count Basie said he picked that up when he was almost in his apprentice stage, out in Kansas City. When the Ellington band would come to town, they would go and stand and watch them. Duke would set the stuff up on the piano, then get up and start marching around in front of the band—pulling this guy, inspiring that guy, hollering at this guy—then he'd go back to the piano and show them how it's supposed to sound. They played like him. With their own individuality, recognizable worldwide. But he was the master.

"Everybody's personality was kept intact. It became an Ellington dimension even as it became individual. He saw things in them that they didn't see in themselves because he saw them in a context they didn't see themselves in. He created the context and they just enjoyed being in it."

An early, autographed, Ellington "pub shot."

"His mother told him when he was a kid, 'You're blessed. . . .' And he believed it."

Michael James, nephew, son of Ellington's sister, Ruth

"Duke was a great man and a great musician. That's rare. We have had several who were great musicians, but were flawed men in many ways. But to quote Hemingway on Tolstoy: 'The Count was good wherever you put him. On the battlefield. In the bedroom. At his desk.'

"My uncle had that kind of quality. Whatever he did, he did well. He and Ivie Anderson would play poker, and he used to clean up the band. He started that at the Cotton Club: gambling, cleaning out all of the waiters and busboys. He was a good pool player. I think that when he and Sonny Greer first went to New York, they survived, scuffling, by playing pool. Duke was one of those guys who was just good at everything, and that gave him that other dimension that men and women loved and admired.

"Jo Jones, the great drummer with Count Basie, was once talking about Duke, and he said: 'Mr. Ellington has a big family out here. I'm not just talking about his blood relatives. He takes care of a lot of people.' The musicians knew that if you were in trouble with your rent or something, you could always go to Duke. The word was that Duke never turns anybody down. Guys who played with the Count could go to Duke before they could go to Basie.

"That was just part of this thing: He believed that he was blessed. His mother told him when he was a kid: 'You're blessed. You don't have anything to worry about.' And he believed it.

"Back in the fall of 1959 (I was about 16), he went on a trip to Europe for three months, and he took me out of school to go with him because he thought it would be a good experience. He was up in first class, sitting at the captain's table with rich people, society matrons and celebrities who continued asking him if he would play something before they left the ship.

"Duke didn't have the whole band on the ship, because some of the guys had decided to fly over, but on the last night, he gathered the seven guys who were with him, and they played for the captain and the people: an impromptu jam performance. But being a true democrat, once Duke had done that, he had to go to all of the classes. He went to play for the cabin class, then for the tourist class, and he wound up in the crew's quarters, playing for the crew. That's how he was about never leaving anybody out. He used to say, 'I never put anybody in a secondary position.'

"There were two major tragedies in his life; the other things he could handle. The first big blow for him was when his mother died. The second, in 1959, was when they sold the black cemetery in Washington, D.C., where his parents were buried. Everybody who had relatives in that cemetery had to dig them up and relocate them elsewhere. Knowing how Duke was and how he idolized his mother, this was a trauma for him. On that trip back from Europe, he knew that he was returning to face this situation. He left a note under my door one night asking me to meet him.

"So I went down to his cabin. It was a strange thing, but he always talked to you as if you were grown, even when you were a kid. He never talked down to you. He said, 'This is the second-biggest drag in my whole life.' I guess he assumed that I understood that his mother's dying was the first-biggest. I did understand on an intuitive level, but you don't know how to answer then, so you just sit there.

Photo by Harrington Studio, New York/Photos (2) courtesy Schomburg Center

The Maestro alone with his muse.

"Then he said: 'I'm living an enchanted life. This is something that only happens in storybooks and dreams. This is not supposed to happen, and I'm living it. But the situation now is a blow.'

"Duke was always able to circumvent. When he went down South in the '30s, Irving Mills, his manager, sent him down with three Pullman cars so he didn't deal with racism. Duke believed that was all a blessing.

"And that would be one of the key things about him. Most people who get famous or successful or prominent or rich, or whatever it is, tend to get a little carried away and lose their balance. They get dizzy up at those heights. But what Duke let me know when he said, 'I'm living an enchanted life,' is that he understood that it didn't have to be like that. He was aware of it all the way—of his good fortune."

JUMPING FOR JOY

"This is a celebration and a tribute," says writer Albert Murray, describing the yearlong lineup of Ellington concerts, lectures, films, discussions and educational programs being sponsored by Jazz at Lincoln Center (J@LC) in New York City. Led by J@LC's artistic director, trumpet player Wynton Marsalis, the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra (LCJO) will perform Ellington compositions at venues around the country through mid-May and will conduct an international tour this summer. A smaller band—featuring members of the LCJO—will keep the Maestro's fire burning during the fall of 1999 with a national concert tour.

The Smithsonian Institution's Jazz Masterworks Orchestra (SJMO) is devoting its entire 1999 season to the works of Ellington. In addition to its first world tour, "Duke Ellington at the Cotton Club," which is slated for Europe and Canada, SJMO will perform "Duke Ellington: A Centennial Tribute" at venues across the United States.

For more details on J@LC's events, visit their World Wide Web site at www.jazzatlincolncenter.org, or call the J@LC Hotline at (212) 875-5299. Information on the Smithsonian Institution's events and exhibits mounted by its archive center's Duke Ellington Collection can be obtained from the National Museum of American History World Wide Web site at www.si.edu/nmh.

Following is a list of Ellington-inspired events scheduled during the upcoming months.

UNITED STATES

Alaska

April 3: "Duke Ellington: A Centennial Tribute," SJMO. Alaska Center for the Performing Arts, Anchorage. (907) 272-1471.

April 4: "Duke Ellington: A Centennial Tribute," SJMO. Hering Auditorium, Fairbanks. (907) 474-8081.

Illinois

April 9: "Duke Ellington: A Centennial Tribute," SJMO. Sangamon Auditorium, Springfield. (217) 786-6150.

April 10: "Duke Ellington: A Centennial Tribute," SJMO. Millikin Civic Center, Decatur. (217) 424-6318.

April 11: "Duke Ellington: A Centennial Tribute," SJMO. College of DuPage, Chicago. (630) 942-4000.

April 16: "America in Rhythm and Tune," LCJO. Orchestra Hall, Chicago Symphony Orchestra & Ravinia Festival, Chicago. (847) 266-5018.

Indiana

April 17: "Duke Ellington: A Centennial Tribute," SJMO. Madame Walker Theatre