“Ellington at Newport”--Duke Ellington (1956)

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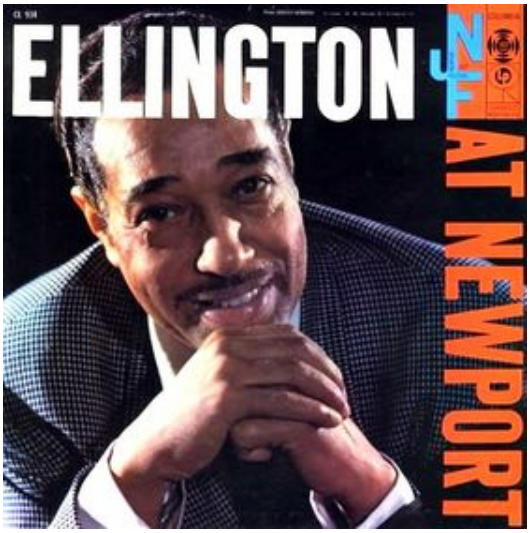

Album cover

Few people change the world, even fewer for the better, Duke Ellington is one of them. But it was not a simple task and by the mid-1950s, times got difficult for The Duke Ellington Orchestra. WWII decimated the supply of men and musicians for big bands and, along with it, destroyed the demand. Few big bands survived the culling and the few that did faced difficult and largely unprofitable days ahead. Duke was no exception. He kept his band afloat by using his own revenue streams from his music licensing income to cover the salaries of his musicians. But it was getting more discouraging by the year; the band was relegated to playing ice skating rinks for kids that didn’t care and for cash that didn’t cover expenses. The Chicago Blue Note pay rate hadn’t inched up even a penny since 1931. However, the trajectory for Duke and his band forever changed due to a single performance on the night of July 7th, 1956.

Duke Ellington was born Edward Kennedy Ellington on the 29th of April, 1899 in Washington, DC. Many African Americans at the time moved north to DC to lessen the burden of Jim Crow laws on their children, and Duke’s mother, the daughter of a slave, was no different. Both of Duke’s parents played piano and he began piano lessons at age seven. Unlike most other boys his age, he always dressed dapper, which is why he was labeled “Duke” among his boyhood friends. Early on in his career, Duke turned down a scholarship at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, NY, choosing instead to remain in DC and promote concerts and parties. Eventually, he was summoned to NYC by the Wilber Sweatman Orchestra and then headlined at the famous Cotton Club in Harlem. During this time, Duke was composing soon to be Americana classics, like “Diminuendo in Blue,” “Mood Indigo” and “Black and Tan Fantasy.” These great American songbook tracks were composed during his extremely productive late 1920s/early ‘30s years. They all became staples played throughout his exhaustive touring schedules.

This famous 1956 performance at Newport, Rhode Island, was marked by an emerging transitional period in jazz. Along with the standard classic artists performing such as Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, Art Tatum, and Sarah Vaughn, there was a famous musician also attempting a comeback on the support stage named Miles Davis. Just a couple years later, the Newport Jazz Festival would be taken over by the young, the hip and the cool with Miles Davis, Chuck Berry, Thelonious Monk and Dave Brubeck headlining. Times were changing and big band music was considered old and unhip. Few would expect Duke Ellington to manage a career turnaround during these times. But his status as a legend still got his band on the stage of the most coveted annual music festival in jazz: the Newport Jazz Festival led by famous jazz promoter Georg Wein. Over 15,000 tickets were sold and the town of Newport was inundated with all strata of society. People were arrested for drug possession and rumor has it that one woman gave birth in a porta-potty. But it was also attended by some of the wealthiest families of Rhode Island who sat up front in box seats behind the photographers.

Duke took the gig so that Columbia Records, his new record label by 1956, could record with its long-playing new technology. This innovation allowed Columbia to record the lengthy live performance and successfully promoted it. Unfortunately, the audio recording contained no stereo engineer. The album is oddly an amalgam of two entities present that day, both recording in mono: pan your audio to the left and you'll hear Voice of America radio recording, pan right and you'll hear the Columbia Records recording, pan center and you get a faux stereo of the two synced recordings.

Duke was nervous. Pictures taken of Duke before the performance show him visually stressed and he confided in George Avakian, famous jazz producer, that he "was still worried about the performance" and Duke was right to be worried; Avakian later described the rehearsal as a "disaster." Part of Duke's tension was due to his belief that Georg Wein would anticipate the shortfalls and would cut him off early or put him on as background exit music.

Before the performance began, in an effort to combat this pre-show trepidation, Duke gave the band a pep talk, relaying the importance of the show to their careers--the desire to maintain their relevance, and to produce a well recorded live album for their new contract with Columbia Records. But the speech fell largely on deaf ears--Clark Terry (trumpet), Jimmy Hamilton (clarinet), Ray Nance (trumpet) and Jimmy Woode (bass) missed the beginning of the show (Clark Terry vaguely recalls "partying" with Ray Nance and missing the start of the performance). Although no-show musicians were not new, Duke was unsettled. His star, Paul Gonsalves (saxophone), who played for Count Basie and Dizzie Gillespie prior to joining up with Duke, was drunk. Duke knew the potential minefield that lay ahead and had already assured the band that the performance could be re-recorded. Duke even tagged certain players as "insurance" to cover for the failures of others. At first, things went as poorly as expected with

a below par performance. The band was largely angry at those that didn't show and those that were drunk. They took a break, sobered up and collected the missing musicians.

Once back, they opened with Billy Strayhorn's "Take the A Train" (an old tune even then) and Duke then performed "Festival Junction," a piece he composed especially for this performance. It was largely a bore requiring Duke to invite applause from the crowd but the polite compliance faded quickly. However, something changed and the momentum picked up, the show had just the right setup to make it a match ready to be struck. For starters, George Wein had placed the photographers between the upfront box seats and the stage. This was not common at the time and created a visual space between the audience and the show; this may have contributed to the sense of dancefloor space inviting them to come closer to the stage.

What happened next, however, changed the lives of the The Duke Ellington Orchestra and the 7,000+ attendees forever. After a few more dull tracks, the crowd exploded in pandemonium when the band transitioned to "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue." Prodigal saxophonist Paul Gonsalves played a 10-minute solo that had whipped the crowd up into what Avakian described as a "magnificent frenzy" causing the audience to rush "crazily at the bandstand." A woman--always referred to as the "anonymous woman" but who was actually Ms. Elaine Anderson, a wealthy amateur dancer sitting up front in the box seats[1]--stood up and began provocatively dancing to the chant of Jo Jones (Count Basie's drummer) egging her on with his newspaper, slapping the stage in rhythm. When the crowd saw Ms. Anderson, they all rose up and began dancing in the aisles. George Wein was afraid a stampede was inevitable and wanted Duke to pull the plug on the performance. The crowd swelled and began encroaching on the photographer box, pushing chairs aside, and pressing forward towards the stage. The cry and excitement of the crowd can be heard in this legendary recording and a track was devoted to it on the record. It is titled "Riot Prevention" which is approximately one minute of the crowd booing and chanting at the prospect of Duke being pulled from the stage for security purposes. However, Duke was seasoned and knew how to handle a crowd; he also knew that if he stopped playing, it could trigger a response with unintended consequences, so he played on, albeit a slower tune to calm the crowd.

This historic response to what many considered a band on their way out of the limelight reignited a career for Duke and all his musicians. Further it was sustained by the recorded release about four months later which remained on the charts into July of 1957. The recording went on to be Duke's biggest seller of all time and it wonderfully captures this moment in all its glory from just five microphones scattered on stage (and two hanging from the makeshift ceiling).

Upon hindsight, the technical aspects of the performance were disappointing. Nat Hentoff, famous jazz critic, criticized the recording stating that it simply "...doesn't…hold up." However, what was being critiqued as a comeback for Duke, was more so a throwback for the pre-war small jumping blues clubs of yore. That swing bluesy feel is what got the people out of their seats and why Henthoff had missed the larger picture by dissecting the technical recording. Fortunately, pre-war rhythm and blues Americana ruled that evening and it catapulted Duke's

[1] Mortified by her public display, her husband left the performance early insistent she leave with him. It marked the end of her marriage. Elaine coincidentally went on to strike up a relationship with Duke himself and Quincy Jones while living in Los Angeles.

old rule of jazz back into stardom--a foreshadowing of danceable music to come, as evidenced by the very new pop star at the time--Elvis Presely. In later interviews, when Duke was asked his age by reporters, he would reply with, "I was born in 1956 at the Newport Festival."

Duke Ellington was also an incredibly giving person and loyal to those that supported him. His composer Billy Strayhorn was gay and despite the presumption that this would threaten Duke's masculine machismo identity, Duke was instead devoted to him and devastated when Strayhorn passed away of esophageal cancer in May 1967. Paul Gonsalves died a mere 10 days before Duke passed away, but Duke died without knowing; no one had the heart to tell him.

Duke was a musical genius, caring, supportive, loyal, and a devoted friend. He put his own money on the line for his musicians when times were difficult (despite knowing full well what the consequences entailed). He loved them like siblings and defended those he thought were unfairly treated without care for his ego, or reputation. Duke was rewarded with a long life, a Grammy, a Pulitzer Prize Citation, a US Postal stamp, numerous honorary degrees and lifetime achievement awards. He passed away in New York at the age of 75 on the 24th of May 1974, from lung cancer. Over 12,000 attended his funeral. This album and performance, "Ellington at Newport," revived Duke and allowed his altruism, philanthropy. and cadre of musicians to continue with unrelenting passion and positivity.

Evan Nass is an attorney and the managing partner at Nass Roper & Levin, PC in New York City. He is a drummer and jazz history writer. He has worked in the music industry both in the recording and record label ends of the spectrum. Over the years, he had the pleasure of being able to work for musicians such as Joe Satriani, Steve Vai and Keith Richards.

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