

Jazz Backstory Podcast

Episode #25 — The Band Leaders — Ellington

[Audio Introduction]

Perhaps you have been to a jazz gig where the band plays a set and the leader then says, “We’re going to take a short break, we’ll be right back.” (fade in “Jazz Class”). Short and right back are purposely nebulous terms. The time-honored gig format of 40 on 20 off is not written in stone although it’s probably suggested in the Musicians Union handbook. Our Jazz Backstory podcast break between Season 3 and 4 was longer than intended. Be that as it may, welcome back. I appreciate you tuning in for more jazz tales, spoken by the musicians themselves. For first time listeners, my name is Monk Rowe and I am the Joe Williams Director of the Fillius Jazz Archive at Hamilton College. Since 1995 we have been conducting videotaped interviews with jazz artists from across the country. Our Jazz Backstory podcast is based on audio excerpts from these interviews, organized into themes and topics that have included tales of childhood inspiration, life on the road, the art of improvisation and racial relations in jazz. Before we launch into Season 4, episode 25, I’m going to take a short break, Don’t go anywhere, I’ll be right back.

[audio interlude]

Back in eleven seconds, which is by the way the same amount of time it took John Coltrane to play the melody to “Mr. PC” on his iconic “Giant Steps” LP. That’s some deep jazz trivia and if you ever want to disengage with someone at a boring cocktail party conversation, just bring that up.

The term “sidemen” was used throughout our previous first three seasons, meaning the musicians who sat in the brass, saxophone or rhythm sections in a big band. Our first three episodes in Season 4 focus on the leaders who directed these sidemen to one extent or another. This episode starts at the top of the leader board. Name this tune (vocalize Sir Duke) Those of you from a certain generation recognize this as the ear worm from Stevie Wonder’s “Sir Duke.” And those of us from an earlier generation know it was dedicated to Edward Ellington, better known as Duke Ellington. The stats on Duke Ellington include leading a big band for five decades, composing over 1000 songs, earning 14 Grammys and ultimately becoming one of America’s most significant artistic individuals. With his sidemen, Ellington inspired a sense of awe, admiration, bewilderment and occasional frustration. Trumpeter Bill Berry and trombonist

Buster Cooper played in the Ellington band during the 1960s and shared their impressions of Duke during this September 1995 interview:

BB: Buster can tell you this, corroborate it or anybody else, everybody from Count Basie on down said, you know, I mean there was no question, Duke was it. He was the champ. And it was not a question of rivalry or anything like that, because Ellington had everything covered hands down. There wasn't even any competition. It was every musician's—

BC: Dream.

BB: Favorite.

BC: Exactly.

BB: Also, Duke Ellington was the — I don't know how do you say this — he was the smartest, brightest person I've ever met. Period.

BC: Exactly. I used to sit and watch him man and I'd try and figure him out, you know. And I used to sit up on the bandstand and I'd just watch him you know. And I finally came to the conclusion one night. I said Duke Ellington knows who Duke is. Period. Believe me.

BB: He's the only one that knew.

BC: Believe me. He knew what Duke was all about. Fantastic man. I've just seen people come into a room you know, after Duke would walk into this room right now, and it would be something like a halo right around him.

BB: Yeah. The room lights up.

BC: Really. It does.

BB: There's very few people like that. He was one of them.

BC: He'd walk in this room and — boom — the whole room would go up.

BB: Yes. I was at the White House for his seventieth birthday. And there were like not only a bunch of great, world famous jazz musicians, but there was the President, the Vice President, the Cabinet, the Supreme Court and heaven knows who else. And the spotlight was on Ellington at all times. I mean you'd have sworn there was somebody following him around with a light, and there wasn't. You know I mean this is in very fast company. You know the most powerful people in the country, in the world.

BC: But he stood out.

BB: But he was the one, like who's that with Ellington? — oh, the President.

Apparently a “Duke” outranked a president at social events. This excerpt reminded me that Hamilton College, which houses the Fillius Jazz Archive, has a motto: “Know Thyself.” According to Buster Cooper, Duke knew himself very well, but no one else did.

Phoebe Jacobs worked as a publicist for a number of iconic jazz figures including Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington. She spoke about Ellington's multiple personas and his relationship with his sidemen:

PJ: He was the essence of refinement whether he had his dinner or he would talk to a waiter or a busboy, whatever it was he did he did it like an elegant gentleman. He had exquisite vocabulary, expressed himself divinely and nobody really knew Duke Ellington because there were about ten Duke Ellingtons. I never knew which one he was going to bring into work.

MR: Well name a few of the Duke Ellingtons.

PJ: Well let's say Duke Ellington was very complex in the sense that he could adjust himself to whatever situation he was in. I did a party for Arthur Rice's mother, who is going to be 80 years old, I worked at the Rainbow Room and Duke Ellington was the artist that was performing with his orchestra. And I said to Mercer, who was part of his band and was very involved in his father's career, that was Duke's only son, "Merce, I've got a lady that's having a birthday party, 80 years, when the band breaks does their break let them all come for champagne and cake, it would make her very happy. She'll be very excited." And I invited everybody and they all came. And suddenly, who do I see come walking down the steps but Duke Ellington. And I said, "Edward, what are you doing here?" He says, "Well you invited everybody but me." I said, "Well I didn't think you'd have any interest in this girl, she's going to be 80 years old." He loved women but not 80 years old. He sat and talked to Mrs. Rice for an hour for his entire break. And then for years afterwards she was sending him mass cards, and he would send her flowers. That was one Ellington that amazed me. By the same token you could go into a restaurant with Duke and he had a French poodle that Joe Glaser gave him and he loved Davy and he'd have permission to go into the Hickory House with Davy and Davy would sit right next to Edward on the side of his seat and never move. He got into a conversation with the bus boy 'cause the bus boy's father raised poodles. And for the rest of the night he didn't talk to me. Then another time he said to me, "Don't go home now, wait around I'll take you for breakfast." Okay, that was exciting, to go to breakfast with Duke. And he used to love to go to a restaurant called Reuben's on 58th Street and Fifth Avenue. He had a charge account there. We come down stairs at Rockefeller Center, it's two o'clock in the morning, and we get a cab. We go from 51st Street over to 58th Street, pull up in front of the restaurant and Duke says, "Pay him." I paid the cab. We get into the restaurant I said to him, "Edward, why do you have pockets?" He said, "I like to keep my hands in 'em."

He never walked around with money. He didn't like to handle money it's very dirty. He was absolutely off the wall but delightful.

MR: Why were his sidemen so mostly loyal to him?

PJ: Because he was loyal to them. What orchestra do you know in the entire world, what orchestra leader could have his orchestra working 350 days of the year and charter a train for his orchestra because he doesn't want them to be embarrassed by being ostracized because of their color and not be able to stay at a hotel or not able to go to a restaurant. So he rents two luxurious trains and he's got his own chef and his own kitchen and everyplace they pull in, they go to a city, they stop there, they dis — whatever they call it — unlatch the train, the cars, and stop at the railroad yard and that's where the guys stayed. And they just I mean let's face it — and also Ellington used to write pieces for them. I mean if he wrote a thing that required a lot of wonderful trumpet parts it was just for Cootie Williams. If he did something for saxophone he'd write just for Johnny Hodges or Harry Carney. I mean he wrote for the guys that played with his band because he knew what they could do. They inspired him. And I guess they just loved it.

An oft used phrase has emerged about the Duke, that he played the piano, but his real instrument was his orchestra. In his 1970 biography, he stated: The writing and playing of music is a matter of intent. You can't just throw a paintbrush against the wall and call whatever happens art. My music fits the tonal personality of the player. I think too strongly in terms of altering my music to fit the performer to be impressed by accidental music. You can't take doodling seriously.

[audio interlude]

Duke Ellington hired a number of sidemen who eventually became leaders of their own bands, including drummer Louie Bellson. Our loyal Jazz Backstory listeners may recall episode #21, "The Color of Jazz," where Mr. Bellson, as the only white member of the Ellington orchestra, agreed to masquerade as a Haitian to avoid racial confrontations during a 1951 tour of southern states. In this excerpt from that same 1996 interview, Louie describes the near mystical relationship between Duke and co-arranger Billy Strayhorn and mentions a few superstitions he learned to deal with.

LB: So Duke gave Strayhorn an assignment for lyrics, and he said, "I'll check you out when I get back, we've got to go to Europe." So when they came back from Europe, Billy said, "I write arrangements also." So Duke said "Really?" He said, "Do you have one?" He

said, “Yeah.” And that was “Take the A Train.” And I think Strayhorn told me that Duke put his arm around Strayhorn and said, “You’re with me forever.” But you know that was a perfect match. Because nobody in that band, even the guys that had been there for years like Harry Carney, they couldn’t tell the difference, whether Strayhorn wrote the composition or whether Duke did it. That’s how close it was.

MR: Amazing.

LB: They were an exceptional twosome. I would say they were both geniuses, really. Very superstitious. Don’t ever whistle in the dressing room; Duke and Strayhorn never put a button, a fine on an arrangement. They got down to letter S and then just let it fizzle out, then they worked it out at the rehearsal, but never really put like boom, the finale there.

MR: They didn’t write it you mean?

LB: They didn’t write it. They worked it out at rehearsal, see? And never wore a shirt with buttons all the way down, there was only maybe three buttons this way and then the slipover, and no color yellow, but blue was the favorite color. And I made the mistake once of giving him a gift for his birthday, a pair of bedroom shoes, he says “no, no, no, no, no, don’t do that, don’t do that. That means you’re going to be walking out of my life.” I said “oh really?” And so I exchanged those for a blue sweater. But they both had that great originality that you look for, that you strive for, and it came natural for them. You know Ellington never really went to school to learn how to write music. And Strayhorn may have had a little bit, but they had that God-given talent to be able to sit down and write music but it was strictly their style. They weren’t getting it from somebody else. It was, there it was. In the voicing in the reed section, the voicings in the brass section, being able to supply the band, the soloists. He knew every soloist, what their range was, so when he wrote something for you, it was perfect, just like you getting a brand new set of clothes and they fit perfect.

[Background: “Jazz Class”] It always struck me as ironic that the Ellington orchestra’s most recognized number, “Take the A Train”, was not written by Duke Ellington, but by Billy Strayhorn. Similar to Dave Brubeck’s iconic “Take Five,” mostly composed by his saxophonist, Paul Desmond. Louie Bellson mentioned a couple of inside musical terms that reminds me to segue into our jazz vocabulary spot. Now this was a new for me, a “button.” Louie mentioned the maximum of three buttons on a Ellington’s shirts and also a “button,” a fine, commonly known as an ending. Ellington and Strayhorn avoided writing the ending, the fine, the button, until the band was actually in the recording studio. Go figure. He also spoke glowingly of Ellington’s “voicing” for the reeds and brass. Voicing is a vital part of arranging, knowing where on the staff to place the pitches for particular instruments and what combinations will create a signature

sound. Ellington employed the three traditional New Orleans front line instruments — clarinet, trumpet, and trombone — for his “Mood Indigo” theme, but flipped the traditional voicings from bottom to top, achieving a distinct sound that caught the attention of the best arrangers of the day. Noted conductor and pianist Andre Previn remarked, "Stan Kenton stands before a hundred reeds and brass, makes a dramatic gesture, and every studio arranger knows just how it's done. Duke Ellington lifts his little finger, three horns make a sound — and nobody knows what it is."

Trombonist Grover Mitchell was an Ellington sideman and future band leader. He experienced the Duke’s particular approach to discipline during his tenure with the band.

GM: Look, let me tell you. I was in that band one time and just to give you I guess we’ll call it an anecdote. The first night, I lived in the San Francisco area. We had left the Monterey Jazz Festival. The Monterey Jazz Festival, this was the second year, 1960 I guess it was. And we got to San Francisco and there was a club that we played in that was owned by the DuPonts called The Nevey. And the first night was just absolutely gorgeous. The band just roared. This was my first night with these people, see? And the second night, it seemed like everybody was late. There was a nucleus in this band that was always on time. And so some of the guys were out milling around in the audience and I mean here I am in what was my hometown then, trying to make this big impression and you know I was really embarrassed you know what I mean? So I told him I says, “Wow, I says, “Duke, man this is terrible, this is embarrassing, all of my friends are here.” And he says, “Look, I don’t worry about these people. Number one, these people are not going to drive me crazy. He says, I live for the night that this band is great. Tonight means nothing to me.” I said, “Oh, how can you say that?” Because here are these guys milling around, and Jimmy Hamilton was sitting there, he was playing and I’m all upset, and I said, “Jimmy, look at all these people walking around out here, and we should be up on the bandstand playing” you know and he looks at me like I’m crazy and the waiter comes up to the bandstand and says, “Mr. Hamilton, your steak is ready.” And right in the middle of the tune he steps over the rail and starts cutting on a steak. And so about a week later we were playing at an Air Force base outside of Sacramento called Mather Air Force Base. Now there’s no place to go. So here’s the band, and they’ve got to play. There’s no place for these guys to fool around and you know, this whole military atmosphere, and so the band is just roaring, beautiful. And so I hear the piano player, Duke, saying dink-dink-dink-dink; dink-dink-dink-dink. And so I looked around, and he over there and he says, [whispers] “see what I mean?”

This laissez-fair approach to discipline apparently had it's limits. Bassist John Lamb spoke about his experience as an Ellington sideman.

MR: What kind of salary did he offer you?

JL: Well my being naïve about salaries, anything was better than what I was getting, \$48 a week, and so they decided to start me off with scale. They had to pay me the scale. It was about \$60 or something a night I guess.

MR: I'm sorry, \$60 a night?

JL: Yeah probably \$60 a job or something like that. And the stars were getting all the money. And my being, not knowing anything about charges and all that, and prices, I was just happy to get a gig. I had been making \$48 a week at Acme Markets. So \$60 a night was great, huh? And compared to \$50 a week at that other place years ago. And so I worked my way up. Gradually it began to increase.

MR: And you were responsible for your own, putting yourself up?

JL: Yeah.

MR: The whole thing.

JL: Yeah, I was responsible for that. But I began to pull my way up a little bit gradually financially. And my wife, being the type of person that she is, utilized the monies in a very positive way. When I went overseas — as a matter of fact I didn't like the band at all. I didn't like the way they did their business. Everything seemed so unorganized.

MR: I had heard something about that.

JL: Yeah.

MR: That getting everybody on the stand sometimes was just a chore.

JL: That's right.

MR: And I mean not everybody had the same attitude you did about professionalism.

JL: Well I had been in the military. I was taught to be on time. Everybody else came in little by little. It didn't matter. They'd done it 40 or 50 years. They had the gig anyway. But Duke would come up and begin to play the piano, his call [scats]. He'd do that for about ten minutes or so, and then one other guy would come in, and then another one would come in, and so on. But I was always there. Because you know, I'm the bottom of the pole. The baby, so to speak. And they had very, very strong personalities those people. I had to sort of like draw from my military experience in order to survive there, my confidence level. Otherwise confidence could have been crushed. You had to be very sure of yourself in the band like that. Everybody was so individualized.

MR: I see. It's amazing that he could hold it together.

JL: Well he would listen and he would put all of this together in composition. He'd listen. Anybody said something, he'd just let it go you know. But there are times he would get the band together and he'd give them a piece of his mind. And everybody was — he'd say some things I'd never heard anybody else say. And he'd walk around and he'd tell each person, this is the way it is. Then he'd go back to his regular self.

MR: What kind of things would he say?

JL: Well I can't mention that on camera, you don't say that kind of stuff. But he would use some words that were not too pleasant.

MR: So every once in a while he had to kind of —

JL: Yeah, he had to straighten everybody out. But most of the time he was just easy going. If he found somebody not pulling their end of the bargain he would feature them a lot. Like Paul used to go to sleep on the stand a lot. He'd always pull Paul out and feature him two or three times in a row.

MR: That's one way to keep them awake.

JL: Right.

Some of Ellington's band members stayed with him for multiple decades while others played musical chairs moving from one band to another for artistic or monetary reasons. As a kid, I eagerly read the personnel listings on the back of my big band LPs and took note of the prized sideman who seemingly played with every significant band leader. There was an unwritten protocol when switching loyalties. We'll wrap up this episode with a story from trumpeter Clark Terry who provides a bridge from Ellington to Count Basie.

CT: I don't know if everybody knows about this, but when I was with the Basie band, and when I left the Basie band to join Duke, you know I left, well we had kicked it around a little bit and he had sent his scouts around,

JW: Joe Morgan. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

CT: He said "You want to join the band?" And I used to like his little hat that he used to wear. And he said, "I'll get you a hat like this if you'll join." So finally we talked about it long enough and I finally decided well I think I'd like to join Duke's band. And this is when, at this time, Basie was down to a quintet. So we were working in Chicago —

JW: At the Brass Rail.

CT: At the Brass Rail, right, yeah. So Duke finally he comes around and I says "Yeah, I'd like to discuss things with you." So he says, "Okay." He says, "But we can't do it out in public, so later on I'll have to come to your hotel." So I says, "Okay, I'm at the South Way." He says, "All right, I'll come by and I'll call you when I get in the lobby and I'll

hurriedly get out of the lobby and meet you in your room.” So Duke gets off the elevator about the same time I come out my door. And just as I walk out of my door and Duke steps off the elevator, and next door to me is Freddie Green. Freddie Green opens his door and steps out. He says, “Whoa,” and went back and slammed the door. So of course Duke and I went on with our business. But that night on the gig, Freddie, I walked in and you know, Pep would look at you like this, he didn’t even say hello. “If you don’t you’re a fool.” So the funny thing is, the conversation with me and Duke, he says, “Well now we’ve agreed on the bread and everything,” and for me it was big bread in those days. ‘Cause I was making with Basie \$125 a week, and the last part of my stint with the Basie band I got a raise, \$15 raise, so I’m making \$140 a week. And Duke says, Duke would give me \$225 a week.

JW: All right.

CT: Oh, man, that was great big bread for me, you know, ‘cause there was cats in there making three and four and five, but I didn’t know it. But to me, that was big bread. So that day he says to me, he says, “Well you know, it’s just not proper protocol for a person to snatch somebody out of his buddy’s band. So we’ll have to strategically work this out.” I said, “Okay, what do you suggest?” He said, “Well I’ll tell you what I think. I think you should maybe just get sick and tell Bill that you’re going to go home and recuperate and while you’re home recuperating I’ll put you on salary.” Yeah? Wow man. Ain’t no better deal than that. So I went back and told Bas’ —

[fade in “Things Ain’t What They Used to Be” featuring Bill Watrous] Whoa, it seems we have faded out mid- story. Maybe that’s why my producer was frantically waving and pointing to her watch You’ll just need to tune into Episode 26, one week from today, when we focus the spotlight on Count Basie. I promise we’ll begin with the conclusion of Clark Terry’s switching bands anecdote.

You can check out the full video sessions with the musicians you heard today and approximately 480 more on the Fillius Jazz YouTube channel. That is “Fillius” — got a piece of paper? F-I-L-L-I-U-S.

See you on the flip side.