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UK Reminiscences of the 1958 Tour

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Published below is a verbatim copy of the liner notes for the double LP “Duke Ellington in London 1958”, issued as a souvenir, 30 years on, at the Ellington ’88 Conference held in Oldham, Manchester, UK, from Thursday 26th to Monday 30th May 1988. This recording is reissued now, available for the first time on CD, for Ellington 2008. The notes are reproduced here with the kind permission of the author, Ian Celnick.

In the middle 1950’s, the young jazz enthusiast in Britain had to rely almost exclusively on records for listening. 1956 saw the end of the twenty year ban on American musicians performing before British audiences. A senior official of the musicians union in this country wrote seriously that there was no point in Art Tatum playing here when we had a lot of pianists in this country who could play just as well. Someone (Humphrey Lyttleton I think) challenged him to name them. He remained silent! Early in 1956 the Stan Kenton orchestra played the Albert Hall, and the sound of that very heavy band was lost in the famous echo. We thought that they couldn’t have picked a worse venue for a jazz concert. We were wrong! The same year they had Louis playing on a revolving stage in the Empress Hall – a dreadful barn of a place in West London better suited to the staging of prize fights and long since demolished. Lionel Hampton followed in the same unbelievably bad surroundings. The truth is that the promoters had little experience of jazz concerts. A large number of letters from irate fans sent to the Harold Davidson office appeared to have some effect. The following year the Basie band toured (twice) and played on concerts at London’s Royal Festival Hall, a far more suitable venue. But what about Duke?

It was not until the autumn of 1958 that Duke and the band started their first concert tour here for twenty five years. They opened at the Royal Festival Hall on Sunday October 5th with a “safe” programme, which seemed designed to please everybody. At that time the band’s U.S. Columbia records were being issued in Europe by Philips and were well distributed. Much of the programme content was based on these records with a heavy emphasis on featured soloists.

Several critics took the view that there was not enough opportunity to hear the band and that Duke was underestimating the audience. My own feeling at the time was that it was impossible to do everything in a concert lasting less than two hours. I would have preferred more swingers, but thought the band and soloists were superb.

All Duke’s bands were good but the 1958 aggregation was something special, even by Ducal standards. The brass had an awesome power and depth that was only hinted at on records. Ray Nance was heavily featured as soloist and was in magnificent form. His exquisite sound with its unique vibrato was a delight throughout the tour.

And the saxes..... With Johnny Hodges back after a three month absence at the start of the year, the finest and longest lived reed section in the history of jazz was once more complete. And the sound was that marvellously vibrant and human blend of five such totally individual tones.

The rhythm section provided sterling support. Jimmy Woode was the latest in a line of superb bass players that Duke had employed and in Sam Woodyard, Ellington had one of the finest of big band drummers. He used the full dynamic range of his drums from the

merest whisper of cymbal noise to explosions of great power, which made him unpopular with recording engineers as did his unconscious singing. This was just about the most unselfish drumming I had ever heard. Without showing off, Sam was always there listening, anticipating and reacting to the band and soloists, driving them to great heights. He gave the impression of putting everything into a performance. This is drumming of distinction and power.

As the tour progressed, the programme changed. They played selections from “**BLACK BROWN AND BEIGE**” at Liverpool, and elsewhere Shorty Baker played a superb “**MOOD INDIGO**” on open trumpet.

The band’s stay concluded with four concerts at Kilburn. These were reckoned to be among the best of the tour, the band being particularly “on” on these nights. The Gaumont State was a cinema, one of the largest in Europe, situated about 3 miles north of Hyde Park. There was a lot of atmosphere at those concerts and the sound was good. Duke sounded relaxed, and the band were clearly enjoying themselves.

In recent years a large number of Ellington recordings have been issued, many of which present music previously unknown to us. Collections such as the present one, which consist mainly of familiar titles, are still of considerable value because even on some of the most familiar titles, the band sound is different at each performance. Not only do solos vary but so do the sound of the sections. Any recordings which increase our understanding of this extraordinary man and his music are of inestimable value.

THE MUSIC:

TAKE THE A TRAIN: The curtains opened just after the start of this number. Ray Nance played the original trumpet solo when they recorded this in 1941. He does this now, playing better than ever. Hodges makes his own contribution in the last few bars. Duke came onstage at the end of this number and everything immediately tightened up.

RED GARTER and RED CARPET: These were part of the Toot Suite, also known as the Jazz Festival Suite and here referred to by Duke as the Ready Suite. They were recorded during the summer but it was years before those versions were issued, so this was new music to just about everybody. At the start of **RED GARTER**, the stage lights went bright red which cannot have made the parts easy to read (did this band need to read the music?) but everybody coped valiantly. On the first number Britt Woodman and Shorty Baker solo. **RED CARPET** has an excellent clarinet solo from Russell Procope followed by two fine choruses from the piano player.

MY FUNNY VALENTINE follows the Bethlehem recording of two and a half years earlier in overall structure. It is a pleasant performance with Jimmy Hamilton and Quentin Jackson playing well but the finest moments come from Ray Nance.

JUNIFLIP: One of the very few tunes that Duke wrote for Clark Terry, the band had been playing this since the start of the year. It features Terry’s warm toned, bop influenced flugelhorn.

FRUSTRATION: Duke had written this for Harry Carney as long ago as 1944 but the first commercial studio recording by the Ellington Band was not until 1956, for Bethlehem. On stage, Harry conducted himself with professional dignity. The depth of his tone was truly awe-inspiring when compared to records. Harry never really had any competition on baritone because nobody knew how he was able to get that sound.

Standing back from the microphone, he managed to fill the Gaumont with his marvellous warm and deep tone.

ON THE SUNNY SIDE OF THE STREET: Like Harry, Johnny Hodges did not need to rely much on microphones. He appeared to play with the minimum of physical effort and appeared to be totally unflappable, to such an extent that some people thought that he was uninvolved and playing automatically. I thought that this was nonsense. He glides coherently through his variations on this tune which is taken at a perfectly judged tempo. Did any saxophonist ever play with such perfect intonation as Hodges?

THINGS AIN'T WHAT THEY USED TO BE: This was what we wanted to hear! As with so many musicians of his generation, Rab could play the blues supremely well and he does this for no less than seven choruses. He builds his solo with total artistry and listen to how well he uses the pause in his playing. This has become a lost art in these days of technically brilliant musicians with nothing to say. Thirty years later, the background riffs do sound a bit familiar. At Kilburn, however, the whole thing sounded spontaneous the way good jazz should.

EL GATO: Written by Cat Anderson and premiered at the 1958 Newport Jazz Festival, this features the entire trumpet section. What a collection of individuals they were! Clark: fast and witty. Shorty: beautiful tone with little vibrato – a very underestimated musician. Ray: pure golden tone. Cat: astonishing high note facility.

NEWPORT UP: This was played at just about every concert on the tour, often being programmed to follow **THE MOOCHE**. It was the first experience that the audiences had of the brass section in full cry and the effect was electrifying as the first great blast of sound shot through the hall. Clark, Jimmy and Paul all had great facility for playing at this speed. Paul's unusual playing stance often led to him being off mike although, on these recordings, the balance is reasonable.

TENDERLY: Many people found Jimmy Hamilton's clarinet playing rather cold. True, he did not play with the warmth of Barney Bigard, but he fulfilled his role within the band extremely well. This is a charming and rather wistful set of variations on a well known song which never really gets to sound like an Ellington composition. He gets excellent backing from the other reeds who knew how to play quietly behind a soloist.

BOO-DAH: There is no piano to be heard on this. It opened the second half of the first concert and Duke came onstage as they finished the number. Written by Billy Strayhorn, it was recorded first of all for Capitol in 1953. It swings at a tempo suitable for dancing. Ray Nance and Jimmy Hamilton shine in their solo responsibilities and there is excellent work from Jimmy Woode.

BLACK AND TAN FANTASY/CREOLE LOVE CALL/THE MOOCHE: This medley opened the first concert. The stage lights went down and Ray and Quentin were out front in a spotlight. The effect was magical! The sound of clarinets playing in unison was something that Duke liked and continued to use. The clarinet duet at the start of **THE MOOCHE** is also pure Ellington. It works so well because these two players had such different approaches to the instrument and such contrasting tones. Duke was the only bandleader at that time who really knew how to use a musician's personal sound. As Duke suggests at the end of this medley, Jimmy Woode had not been on stage for **TAKE THE A TRAIN**. He does not start playing until Russell Procope's solo on **BLACK AND TAN FANTASY**.

WHAT ELSE CAN YOU DO WITH A DRUM?: Ozzie Bailey sings a number from **A DRUM IS A WOMAN**, which was disliked by some critics who made the mistake of taking the whole thing seriously. It is a pleasant light weight song and Ozzie gets excellent backing from the band.

AUTUMN LEAVES: Ozzie sings the first chorus in French and does it very well too but he is totally carved by Ray Nance whose violin playing really had to be seen to be appreciated. At one of the London concerts he managed to do the splits while playing!

SUMMERTIME: This is recommended to fans of high note trumpet playing rather than lovers of the George Gershwin song. Cat Anderson was a very versatile musician but his role on this concert tour was almost entirely confined to high note pyrotechnics. There is a mock-solemnical fanfare introduction, a section with a latin beat, and finally straight swing. Tremendous versatility and physical stamina but it would have been nice to hear Cat in one of his more subdued roles.

PASSION FLOWER: Johnny Hodges played this beautiful Billy Strayhorn tune with superb control of dynamics. A minority of fans disliked his use of glissandi and found the whole thing a bit sugary. Most people loved it.

From the medley: **CARAVAN/I GOT IT BAD.../JUST SQUEEZE ME/IT DON'T MEAN A THING.../SATIN DOLL**.

This extract gives us the opportunity to hear John Sanders' valve trombone on **CARAVAN**. Johnny Hodges plays **I GOT IT BAD...** Ray Nance sings **JUST SQUEEZE ME** and **IT DON'T MEAN A THING...** Finally **SATIN DOLL** played slower than in later years. Jimmy Woode solos.

MR GENTLE AND MR COOL was first played at Newport the previous July. This version has a longer piano introduction and is generally a more extrovert performance than issued as from the Newport Festival. It is a duet between Ray Nance on violin (digging in ferociously) and the muted trumpet of Shorty Baker. The trombones play an effective swinging background.

TAKE THE A TRAIN: Ray Nance sings with vocal interjections by the band, very much in the pattern set by the 1952 recording where Betty Roche was the vocalist. The performance then moves into ballad tempo for a very personal set of variations by Paul Gonsalves. This is a particularly fine solo from this most original of musicians. With his unique tone and harmonic conception, he creates his own personal statement from the very first bar. After one chorus, the performance moves into fast tempo and the solo becomes more predictable but it is still uniquely Paul.

JONES: At the time, Duke's finger snapping routine was a recent introduction. The E.P. version of this number had recently been issued although it is unlikely that many of the audience were familiar with it. This was the most swinging part of the programme and it is followed by an Ellington first recording! The performance of **GOD SAVE THE QUEEN** is, well, interesting.

It was nearly all over. Two more concerts at Kilburn the following day and then the band was off to Europe not to return to London until 1963. If you listen again to **JONES** with Paul and the band grooving behind Duke, you will understand why a lot of people went home happy that night thirty years ago.

Ian Celnick