

Duke Ellington's Jump for Joy: A Bibliographic Essay

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Introduction

On July 10, 1941 the musical revue *Jump for Joy* opened at the posh Mayan Theater in downtown Los Angeles. Like typical entertainment revues of the day, the show offered a variety of dance, song, comedic, and dramatic performances. This revue however was unique in more ways than one; in ways that would provoke consternation as well as kudos leading Ellington scholars such as Gary Giddens to describe it as a “benchmark in American theater” (Lawrence 2003:305). First, much of the music for the production had been composed by America’s foremost composer, Duke Ellington, and what’s more, the pit band was none other than Ellington’s own orchestra. Although far from the first to feature an all-black cast, *Jump for Joy* was one of the first high-profile theatrical productions to openly discard the dominant African-American stereotypes which prevailed in popular entertainment at the time. Not only did *Jump for Joy* dispense with these stereotypes, it openly commented on them and unabashedly celebrated African-American culture. As Duke’s son and *Jump for Joy* co-composer Mercer Ellington put it in his memoir *Duke Ellington in Person: An Intimate Memoir*, *Jump for Joy* was explicitly conceived as a statement that “the black man would no longer stay passive” and accept a social status that was “less than human” (Ellington 1978:182).

The show ran for less than three months, closing on September 27, 1941 after just 101 performances, but its significance as a social statement, a groundbreaking theatrical production, and as a statement of Ellington’s artistry, conscience, and future direction was inestimable. Although generally not regarded as one of Ellington’s major works, *Jump for Joy* nonetheless was the direct antecedent in both spirit and technique, to his *Black, Brown, and Beige* – widely considered to be among his most important.

In the following pages, I will examine some sources of information which may be of value to future scholars interested in further exploring this production.

Theatrical Sources

There seems to be but a single published work with a more than a passing mention of *Jump for Joy*, and it is a work from the field of theater arts; this is John Franceschina's excellent book *Duke Ellington's Music for the Theatre* published in 2001. Franceschina, a professor of theater arts at Pennsylvania State University, devotes the entire second chapter of his book ("The Sun-Tanned Revue-sical,") to *Jump for Joy*.¹ His work is very well-researched and presented in crisp and thoughtful prose. Franceschina traces the origin of the Los Angeles production back to the late 1930s when Ellington was collaborating with Langston Hughes on a work, *Negro Revue*, to be performed at the American Negro Exhibition in Chicago in 1940.² Franceschina also includes the most complete description to be found of *Jump for Joy*'s cast and content, as well as insight into the creative process, and musical analysis. It's an ambitious chapter but more complete and in-depth than any writing I have found on the subject. Researchers interested in *Jump for Joy* would find a wealth of information here.

Biographical Works

Perhaps more has been written about the life of Duke Ellington than any other American musician before or since. Not surprisingly then, the bulk of information to be had with regard to *Jump for Joy* is found in biographical accounts of Ellington's life and work. Most biographers would seem to agree that this was a very important period in Ellington's career artistically and commercially. It was a time when Ellington and his

orchestra had clearly matured to the point where many began to recognize them as far more than just “one more hot swing band” (Collier 1974:211). There are a number of excellent Ellington biographies and several of these discuss *Jump for Joy* in varying amounts of detail.

Although James Lincoln Collier’s biography, simply titled *Duke Ellington*, does not really deal much with the production itself, Collier does a fine job of describing the historical-commercial setting from which *Jump for Joy* emerged. He explains that at the beginning of the 1940s there was considerable upheaval in the music industry. Among other developments, the performance-rights organization ASCAP, was embroiled in a dispute with radio broadcasters which led to the broadcasters’ banning of ASCAP compositions from the airwaves. For Ellington, this meant that his band could no longer perform works of other composers on the radio (at this time most radio broadcasts were live). Many compositions in Ellington’s book, although arranged by Ellington and/or Billy Strayhorn, had in fact been composed by others. As a result, the ASCAP-radio dispute scuttled a major revenue source for the band and forced Ellington and Strayhorn to create an entirely new book of compositions – a formidable undertaking. Ellington’s new-found fascination with the theater becomes much more understandable when its financial necessity is considered. This situation is also explored in the Ellington essays compiled in *Duke Ellington: His Life and Music*.

Beyond Category: The Life and Genius of Duke Ellington, the biography by author John Edward Hasse includes a not-insignificant amount of information on *Jump for Joy* including the revelation that as far back as 1933 *Fortune* magazine had hinted that Ellington was already at work on a “negro” musical (Hasse 1995:246). Interestingly, the

Hasse book also reiterates the (perhaps inaccurate) tale that the idea for *Jump for Joy* was hatched at a jam session at writer Sid Kuller's house (Hasse 1995:246). That such jam sessions were taking place at Kuller's residence is probable, but Collier attributes the initial idea for *Jump for Joy* to Kuller and some of his lefty Hollywood associates, an account put forth in Ellington's autobiography as well (Collier 1987:211). Still the Hasse book is delightful reading: erudite, witty, and well-researched.

For insight into the role of various Hollywood personalities in the creation of *Jump for Joy*, A.H. Lawrence's *Duke Ellington and His World* is an excellent source. Lawrence recounts some fascinating stories not found elsewhere such as the presence at some of the rehearsals of a 26-year-old Orson Welles. Welles's commanding persona and creative powers apparently had a major impact on the cast and production (Lawrence 2003:304). I find some of Lawrence's assertions questionable, however. For example, Lawrence partly attributes the commercial failure of *Jump for Joy* to the recording ban which kept major artists such as Ellington and the cast of *Jump for Joy* out of the studios for nearly two years. This analysis seems implausible though as the recording ban did not begin until 1942, well after *Jump for Joy* had closed.

The most personal and penetrating accounts of the aesthetic impetus for, and meaning of *Jump for Joy* are to be found in Mercer Ellington's portrait of his father, *Duke Ellington in Person: An Intimate Memoir*, and the Duke's own autobiography, *Music is My Mistress*. Mercer recounts his father's motivation in writing *Jump for Joy* as "absolutely and definitely an indictment of the South" (Ellington and Dance 1978:182). "The South" here is taken to mean not just a geographical region of the United States, but the plantation mentality wherever it may be found. The younger Ellington explains that

Jump for Joy was his father's opportunity to "have his say about racial discrimination" – a central theme of Duke's 1943 masterpiece, *Black, Brown, and Beige* (Ellington and Dance 1978:94).

In *Music is My Mistress*, the maestro himself discusses *Jump for Joy* and its players, especially the remarkable young bassist Jimmy Blanton. Blanton's tragic death from tuberculosis shortly after *Jump for Joy* closed was clearly a great loss for Ellington. Ellington definitively identifies *Jump for Joy* as a crucial step in the evolution of his artistic path to race-consciousness. Specifically he speaks of a "feeling of responsibility that *Jump for Joy* had aroused" in him, a feeling that would lead directly to his composition of *Black, Brown, and Beige* for a performance at Carnegie Hall just two years later (Ellington 1976:180). Also of particular value to researchers, *Music is My Mistress* contains a photo-reproduction of all three pages of *Jump for Joy*'s opening night program.

Sound Recordings

It is, I think, one of the great misfortunes in the aural record of American history that an original cast recording of *Jump for Joy* was never cut. The most likely explanation for this non-event was simply the show's lack of financial success. Although it enjoyed three months of enthusiastic audiences, the explicit civil rights tone of the production no doubt prevented its capturing the imaginations (and dollars) of a wider audience. It was as Franceschina noted, "too far ahead of its time" (Franceschina 2001:37). As a result, the production company lacked sufficient funding to organize and engage a studio recording of the original cast. During the period of 1940-1942, however, Ellington and his band made a number of record dates at a Hollywood studio. Some of the sides from 1941

include material from the show, although in some cases lacking the original cast vocalists. For example, “Rocks in My Bed” which had been sung by Joe Turner in the show is sung on the recording by Ivie Anderson.

These recordings, along with others from the same period and employing the same band, were compiled by RCA’s Bluebird label into an essential three-CD set titled *The Blanton-Webster Band*. This collection, with extensive liner notes by Mark Tucker, is an indispensable addition to the collection of any listener interested in Ellington’s music, not just those curious about *Jump for Joy*. The Blanton-Webster incarnation of Ellington’s band – so-called because of the presence of two of Ellington’s most talented sidemen, bassist Blanton and tenor saxophonist Ben Webster – is considered by many critics, historians, and aficionados to be one of Ellington’s greatest. The sound quality of the recordings is what one would expect for the period, but the performances are truly remarkable. Ellington’s band plays with breathtaking verve and authority. The ensemble work is *nonpareil* and the band is blessed with tremendous solo talent in every section. Tucker’s liner notes are well researched and full of detail, but I find his critique superfluous and somewhat inconsistent. There is also a British release on the Naxos label entitled *Duke Ellington: Jump For Joy (1941-1942) (Duke Ellington, Vol. 8)* comprised entirely of sides contained in the Bluebird release, but including only the sessions from 1941 and 1942.

Geographical-Historical Context

One unique aspect of this story is the fact that *Jump for Joy* was a Los Angeles production. Although the producers hoped to take it on to Broadway, it never made it out of LA except much later when two brief revivals were attempted in Miami (1959) and

Chicago (1991) (Hasse 1995:336). Researchers interested in the geographical and historical context from which the show and much of its audience emerged would do well to check out *Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles* a product of the Oral History Project at the University of California, Los Angeles. Pre-war Los Angeles was not just home to Hollywood and its attendant retinue of celebrities, moguls and hangers-on, it also was a city with a tight-knit and economically diverse African-American community and a thriving jazz scene. Although the book refers only to *Jump for Joy* in passing, it is a wonderful tool for setting the general tone of early 1940s Los Angeles.

Social Criticism

The role of *Jump for Joy* in the expanding black consciousness movement in American music and theater has been addressed in several works. These include Graham Lock's *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton* and Mark Tucker's article "The Genesis of 'Black, Brown and Beige.'" Lock specifically develops the theme that *Jump for Joy* was an explicit statement of social justice that "pulled no punches":

What *Jump for Joy* made particularly clear was the contempt that blacks felt for various white representations of blackness, not least the figure of Uncle Tom and the notion that blacks belonged – and were happy – in the South (Lock 1999:95).

It is not surprising then that the revue included a scene depicting Uncle Tom on his deathbed as Hollywood and Broadway producers inject him with adrenaline (Lawrence 2003:305). This scene, like several others, had to be cut after threats were received from the local KKK. Lock further observes that the piece "I've Got a Passport from Georgia"³ had to be removed for the same reason (Lock 1999:96).

Turner's piece, printed in the *Black Music Research Journal*, is primarily concerned with the subsequent Ellington work, *Black, Brown, and Beige*, but makes frequent mention of *Jump for Joy* as fomenting Ellington's social awareness as expressed in *Black, Brown, and Beige*. Turner refers to *Jump for Joy* as "the socially conscious and race-proud musical" which help lay the groundwork for *Black, Brown, and Beige* (Turner 1993:68).

Challenge and Conclusion

That *Jump for Joy* was an important milestone in Duke Ellington's career and artistic evolution is clear. The available recordings from the period in question (June-September 1940) attest to the fact that his powers as composer, arranger, and bandleader were fully mature and that the band was in top form. Unquestionably, the musical aspect of *Jump for Joy*, with few exceptions, must have been formidable. The sources named above make it quite clear however that *Jump for Joy* was a commercial failure and at best received mixed reviews in the mainstream press (Franceschina 2001:34). Yet in my mind the overarching question which remains unanswered is whether the show was in fact an artistic triumph. This is a very difficult question to answer for a number of reasons.

The first impediment to answering this question has to do with the fact that the show never achieved a state of equilibrium. The form of the show was in constant flux. No less than 15 writers were involved, the majority of whom met after every performance to discuss modifications. Material was continuously added and deleted, the show's structure reworked. Most of what is known unequivocally about the content of the show is derived from the opening night program reproduced in Ellington's autobiography. But this is merely a snapshot of the production's initial form. The first challenge for scholars

then is to attempt an accurate reconstruction of the composition of the revue in its later (and presumably better) incarnations.

The second difficulty then, in attempting to survey the artistic success of *Jump for Joy*, is even more difficult. In order to make an aesthetic evaluation of the show, it is not enough to amass the material and to review it in one's mind. It really must be given life. That is to say a modern reading of the show would need to be organized and executed. Only in this way can one get a sense whether the show flows logically and continues to have impact – in other words, if it is possessed of the timeless quality which characterizes the best of Ellington's work. It is only at that point that the efficacy and wisdom of mounting a modern revival could be considered. The task is then left to a collaborative effort of scholars and theatrical professionals to continue the research into this cultural landmark and to ultimately determine its modern relevance, or if it should remain merely a footnote to Ellington's long and illustrious career.

¹ The title of Franceschina's chapter is taken from the revue's subtitle.

² This production never materialized (Franceschina 2001:30).

³ Not composed by Ellington (Franceschina 2001:33).

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