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Duke didn't obey the rules of harmony?

Yes.

He did things the way he wanted to and he broke rules and it still sounded good.

Yes.

Help our audience understand that Duke did things his own way.

Duke never studied formally. The rules of harmony and music, I mean, so he devised his own system and this evolved through years of experience. He came, came to certain conclusions and that's what he used. Whereas in the traditional study of harmony you have certain rules; you use a dominant 7th chord, there's, when you resolve it, the 7th of chord must come down the third measure go up. Duke didn't pay any attention to this rule. He had his own...

If you would use a piece of music that he had composed, would it look like something different than other people would do? The notes weren't where you expect to find them?

Would it look like...?

Sheet music – would it look different because the notes were in different places than you'd expect?

Well, the notation for the sounds of the, would be in the same places on the staff, but he used symbols like many people do today with, for the chords. He wouldn't even, probably wouldn't write the whole chord out the way he did. One voiced, but he would have G 7th, and G 9th, and flat 7th, flat 5th whatever he wanted, he'd indicate it with the symbols. But this is not, he wouldn't, different from other people's writing. But the sounds of it when he came...

Tell us about that sound. Hear any record of Duke Ellington and you know right away.

Duke said, he didn't, Duke believed in the color of chords. Different things. He studied art at one time. That probably came into play when he, Duke evolved his devices, harmonic system. And, certain chords, he liked cacophony. He liked there to be clash in the harmonic intervals, certainly. And then, of course, that's an old standard rule in the, even in the traditional harmony to create, before the resolution, you must have dissonance. You know, dissonance which resolves into consonance. Well, Duke did that, but his dissonances were farther, much further out and when they resolved, they would be resolving into dissonance, from traditional sounds really.

That sounded right.

You get used to, you get used to hearing it and, and listening to it and playing it. You don't know exactly at first, I know sometimes I used to copy some of his scores for him and I'd say, "Oh, Duke, you made a mistake. You, you have this C sharp lying up against a C. Are you..." And he'd look at me and say, "Copy it like it is, would you?" "Copy it like." See. So I'd say, "Okay." Like you're going to be sorry but you get in the studio and you hear it and how he looked, my eyes would stretch. And all he would say was, "Aargh." You know. But he knew, and, I noticed that, also, he never liked, he didn't like to do the same thing twice the same way. You know. He would change it the next day. I mean, so, there was little difference because I really picked up on what his system was. I would, the basic underlying principle was, do it different.

That worked for him.

Yeah. It worked for him and he had, he had control of it. And it, have a through the years in listening to Duke's music, 'cause he was, I don't know how many albums and how many contrasts in music he had done before I ever got with him which was in 1960. But, in listening to some of his past and up to the time that I was working with him, I could see a difference in the, his approaches and the results of his writing. And I came from, I think, with his own band, he's experimenting. And he would pass out music and we'd play it and he didn't like it. He'd say, "Pass that back in." The next day, he'd have it adjusted the way he wanted, and then pass it back out. And we'd play it, get back. So, he was his own teacher and student. He learned through the audience; he learned by doing it. John Dewey said oh I don't know, you learned to do by doing.

Seems like he composed wherever he was – on the road, he was always having musical ideas that he would write down.

That's true, he never, he never stopped. Whenever he had, had an idea, he wanted to put it down right away so he wouldn't forget it. And

somebody told me that they were on the, this was before I was in the band, Johnny Hodges told me he was on the train. And in those days, they used to travel by coach and they'd rent sleepers because, especially when they're down south, they weren't allowed to go in the hotels. So and they'd sleep on the train, get out and go to work and then come back. But anyhow, while they were going from one town to the other, he had this idea and he asked Johnny, "Have we got any munch whip?" Music paper. And Johnny said, "No." He'd say, so he just took his cuff and wrote something on it so he wouldn't forget it, I guess. When he got to the town he transferred it. But he, he always wanted to put it down. And then even...

He also wanted to hear it played right away.

After he'd, he'd take it, he wanted to hear it. When he finished it, he wanted to hear it because I, well, a prime example of that was once we played, he wrote the, "Suite Thursday," he calls it. It was commissioned by the Monterey Jazz Festival people, they were. And we were in Boston and he and Billy Strayhorn used to compose together. But Strayhorn was over in Europe and he was sending in music to be in, Duke was writing his, and they'd put it together, you know and so he had this copyist, Tom Whaley, who used to copy for him for years. He'd copy his scores. And when he finished it, Duke wanted to hear it. So we're playing a concert, I mean, wasn't really a concert. We were performing at the Bradford Hotel in Boston. And he wanted to hear it, so he passed it out to have us play it on the show.

And you hadn't ever played it.

And it was a catastrophe. We chugged through it. And we got down to a certain spot and Duke just still smiling and he said, "Take it at letter D," you know and we'd go down again with it. And we got through it, the people clapped and Duke took the mike and said, "You've just witnessed a very first performance." A suite where he was commissioned to do by the Monterey jazz festival! But he wanted to hear it right away. And there were mistakes made in the copying and things that had to be adjusted later. But he wanted to hear it so badly 'cause he had us play it on the show there. So, that's why it was not so good.

Music was so important to him. His whole life was music.

Yes. It's true. Well nothing mattered to him but music and, you know his famous, "A Drum is a Woman." And his, that's what he means by that, the musician should treat his instrument and his music like he does a woman. And caress her and be with her. But, to Duke, he never, he never lived an ordinary life of a person even, he's married, he was only married once and he never divorced his wife and he never married again. And that was Mercer's mother and she lived in, I think, in Boston mostly, for years, her later years. But he never went home. And he had different lady acquaintances that he liked to be with. And he'd be with them on the road, but he never did the traditional home life. Music was all there was to him.

He said, "Music is my mistress," his book, and he means it. He's, very true, music was his mistress and that's all he cared about.

He was always thinking about music.

He was always thinking about it. I mean sometimes, we'd be playing a thing and dance on the show. And I'm standing, playing the bass. And I hear this different sound coming from the piano that wasn't the way we'd been playing it before. And Duke's experimenting and trying to do it another way. So that's how you, in his band you had to always keep your ears, basically had to always keep his ears cocked, 'cause you never know what he's going to do. And he never, he never seemed satisfied. When you, when you asked him what his favorite composition was that he'd written, he's always say, "The next one" was his favorite.

By the time he had written it down, he had already figured it out. He had this musical dialogue with himself, going on in his head all the time.

Yes. I asked him, used to ask him where he got his inspiration for all his ideas and music. And he told me, he says, "From people. I just observe people. And I write about people and their experiences are what I think they are. What they go through." And that's where he got his ideas. And he did carry them around in his head like the story goes, and Mozart, too. The same way. He carried melodies and things around in his head. And then, when he went to write it, they'd say, "Oh, you're writing it too fast." He'd say, "No, I've been writing it for weeks in my head." And he'd just, when he put it down. And Duke was the same way. And a lot of times, as we said, I told you before. He, if he thought he was going to forget it, he wanted to put it down right away. Just a memo on it so when he got ready to write it, he had that.

All the sounds of life you never listen too, you're in this moment trying to have quiet. Duke and the way he managed the band, to get the people to do what he wanted. He was a disciplinarian. Duke said, "I want everybody in the palm of my hand." The iron fist in the velvet glove.

Yes. He did. But he was very clever with it. It wasn't noticeable by the people that he was managing. He did manage, he wasn't the disciplinarian in the sense of the people, "Do this. Do that, and you come to my party; you will have a good time." He wasn't like that. He did, he's very shrewd psychologist and he could read a person. You'd be around him for a while and he'd know exactly where you are. Where you're coming from, what you like, what you didn't like. And on the instrument, he knew what you could do best and where you sounded best. I mean, he wrote for you. That's why he put you right there. Threw you right in the briar patch for your best performance. And he was clever, he could do that. And I never yet knew him to fire a man, but he, he had a way of letting you do it by yourself.

He never fired anybody.

I never knew him to fire a person. But in the way that he handled it, they would leave on their own after a certain length of time. I won't call names, but I knew one trumpet player who came to me and said, came to me and wanted to know, "What does Duke think about me? I don't understand him." I said, "Don't worry, he'll let you know." You'll come to a conclusion as to what he thinks about you. And then, so, he'd say, "I'm leaving," I'd say, "Oh. Well then," I said, "Did you tell Duke?" And he said, "Yes, and he didn't say, 'Don't go,' so I guess he didn't mind me leaving you."

Some people stayed with the band years and years. You didn't.

Well, in those days, Johnny Hodges, Harry Carney, they were both fifty-year men in that band. And a funny story, John Hannah told me he was never hired. He said Duke met him on Broadway, they were playing at the Club Alabama, somewhere. And he asked him, he says, "Why don't you come around and sit in with us, tonight, hm?" So he did. And then he was there the next night. And Duke never said, "I like your work. You're hired." But he was there for fifty years or longer than that. And Harry Carney, I think, and he never left that band. Johnny did leave for a short while and formed his own group.

Why did they stay so long?

Well, it, what it was is, is any, every musician loved playing Duke's music. And then, it wasn't boring because such a variety in it. And so many different things he did. And he did this in times when it wasn't, it wasn't too popular to be playing, concertizing music in "jazz." He didn't like that term either, jazz. But he would change tempos. People would be dancing and then he'd add this little interlude. Change of tempo and everything. Go out of tempo. Rubata and then back into jazz. Well, that was not considered dance music, and a lot of people, the musicians who asked to play with him, has to sit there and go monotonously on the same rhythm all the time throughout the tune. So with Duke, you didn't have to do that. That would be one thing, I think, I know, I, I loved that part of his music. And night after night, you can get very bored playing the same thing. It's not as bad as playing a Broadway show where every night at 8:30 you're hitting B flat and tomorrow night you're going to be hitting that same B flat at the same time. It's not quite that bad with, in a jazz band. But the monotony is not there; routine is not there with Duke, so much. And you never, Duke, Duke would be getting ready to do a concert, we'd have the program and we'd go out and he'd leave it. Altogether, we'd do something else because his antenna would pick up the audience's vibes. And he seemed to know that this tune would work and this one wouldn't. And call a different tune.

Great showman.

He was, he was beautiful. He could, he had, well he was a great talker and speaker, he had great command of vocabulary, vocabulary command and knew when to use just say the right thing. 'Cause when I said he was a great psychologist and in different audiences. He could get the feel of the audience. He would know exactly what to say that would please them. And he was a handsome man. He dressed well, could talk well and very talented. And had a beautiful smile when he wanted to use it. And this charmed the audience. He knew how to do it. We love you madly. That got to them and he never like, he introduced him to a lady friend and he'd say, "Oh, hello, my dear. Are you as beautiful in the daytime as you are this evening?" and things like that. And the woman would just melt. He's a very charming man. He knew how to do it. And it didn't, didn't seem phony when he was doing it. He was so natural with it.

Hard to get an interview with Duke where he would reveal himself. That he was guarded. He was kind of reserved. Did you ever get to really know Duke Ellington?

I don't think, I don't think I really got to know him but I, more than most people, I was quite aware that I didn't know him. The only person I think he really was straight at, with, and talked, told his true feelings to, that I know, would be his sister, Ruth Ellington. She knew everything about him. Edward. She knew all about Edward. And he was open with her but I think interviews and public people, he, he would, he was tongue in cheek most of the time. Very seldom he was right on, would tell you exactly what he was thinking and what his feelings, what his head is.

Why?

Well, I don't know. One thing, I don't think Duke was too anxious for anybody to, to peep his whole chord when he came to his music, what he was writing and the way he wrote it. I don't think he was too anxious, he never wrote a book on it, his system. And the only people who ever, well a lot of people imitate him. But when they write, they have to, they take it off one of his records. And they put it down the way, it's a transcription. But when they go to write, when they go to write on their own, they make an arrangement and sound like Duke. It doesn't sound like Duke. They can't do it.

What would he say when he had people in the band who don't behave?

Oh, yeah. People would sometimes approach Duke and question him about the habits of some of these men in the band. And he would avoid answering them directly, but he would just say, "I don't care if they're good little boys or bad little boys as long as they play the music." And that is his answer to certain individuals getting busted for drugs and certain things. He says, "As long as they play the music," that's all he cared about. It's true.

He had a reason for not being a disciplinarian. What was he after, why didn't he come down hard on the guys?

I think Duke, he was disciplinarian in his own way. But not in the way that most people are. Like sometimes we would open a show and there'd be nobody on the stand except Duke and the bass, the drum and maybe a couple of horns. And then later, the other members would arrive. They'd stroll on, John Handers would always be the last one on. And The Duke never would say anything. He never gave them a hard time for being late or anything. And I think the reason was, he didn't want to disturb a person. He wouldn't, when the music was played, he wanted to be, he wanted you to be very relaxed in yourself. And he knew if he upgraded anyone for being late, this would not happen. And he wanted the music to be that way. So he, he never said anything to it, to, to a person about being late or anything. He liked, he used to turn to me and say, "I don't know why they all find me to join." And I turn around and say, "You find them." He likes characters. And he didn't like anyone who was normal and fitted into the usual mold of, of a saxophone player. He liked different people and he liked you to act different and he wanted you to play different. Because many times in the rehearsals, he'd come over, he'd walk over to one of the horn players and say, "Characterize it, put a little bit, would you? Characterize it." And then that's where he's saying, "Don't stick to the music so closely." He wanted you to be yourself. And I think that was why the saying, he carried that throughout in his disciplinarian method of not upgrading anyone for being late or being, he didn't want to disturb you.

Mozart. Duke had this music in his head.

Yes. I think this is quite true that Duke was a person, I asked him once, "Where'd you get your ideas from?" He said, "From people. Observing people." And he had these ideas in his head all the time. He walked around women. When he got ready to write a composition, and he put it down, he had been carrying it around in his head for weeks and that same thing like they say Mozart was the same way. He could write so fast, they say, but he'd say, "Oh, no. I, I was composing it for quite a while. I just put it down, now." And Duke was the same way. And Duke also had, had a way of I asked him, "Your inspiration." And he said, "Yes, it comes from people. Observing people and watching people." That he had also a way of changing. If he got an idea and he knew that it was one that he had used before and he went to orchestrate it and put it down, he'd make sure he didn't do it the same way he'd done it the last time. He was not, he did not want to get into a rut. And to find modus operandi for some people but for him it would be a rut. He didn't like it.

When he got sick and when he passed away...

Duke didn't see anybody. I couldn't go see him when he was sick. And, people who were much closer to him than I, weren't allowed in. I called, and they'd say, "Who it is? Who is it?" and I'd tell them, Aaron Bell, the bass player. And, and, "Well, Duke can't see anybody now." Duke was not,

I mean, when he was sick and during his last days, he didn't take too much company. He didn't receive any visitors except, I think, maybe, his sister, Ruth, of course, would be there. And I know Stanley Dance, I called and I couldn't get in to see him. And Stanley Dance who wrote for him called and he couldn't get in to see him but he did get on the phone to him. And Stanley said, he said, "Who is this?" and Duke said, "I used to be Duke Ellington." You know, he was, I guess he felt he was not Duke Ellington anymore. He didn't have the power but Duke was a very religious man, too. A lot of people didn't know. And I'm sure he had his, he was at peace with himself when he, during his last days. But he was vain. Duke was vain. He didn't want anybody to see him in that condition. I understand he had gone down to eighty, ninety pounds, something like that.

How did you feel when you heard that he was gone?

How did I feel? Oh. I felt, I felt a great loss.

His loss.

Oh. When Duke when he passed away, I felt a great loss and I felt the world had lost a great person. The world should have known it was a great loss. Some people did, some didn't. But, I think, more and more now it's being, begin to be realized what a great man Duke was. But I felt a great loss and I remember that earlier, in earlier days when I was in the band, my father had died and Duke had got up from the piano and I rejoined the band and come over and put his arms around my shoulder and consoled me by saying, "You'll always have a father as long as I'm alive." And then, now he was gone, so you know, I, I felt the loss very strongly.

Strayhorn and Ellington and how they worked together...

Well, they, the way they felt about each other is obvious. They both had a great respect for each other and they had an affinity going on that enabled them to write, co-compose on the same composition and it would be, you never noticed the change of different, where one was writing and the other took up. And one left off. But also, I noticed, I think when Strayhorn came in the band, I forget what year it was. Strayhorn had studied music in school, formally, I think. Duke picked up on a lot of things from him. And then Strayhorn, on the other hand, picked up a lot from Duke who was, had his own thing going. And I think he learned a lot from him. And so, I think is a gradual change in, if you want to say, in Duke's compositional style after Strayhorn came into the band. But they wrote together and sometimes they wouldn't have to be in the same city. They could be working on the same composition in, in and Billy would be in Europe and Duke was over here and they'd talk on the phone and they'd send each other transcripts and what they'd done. And, and it would end up that they would, they were in the same, their vibes were working right together, across the water that Strayhorn would be in the same vein as Duke, taking the same direction in a composition.

Music is a way to communicate without words.

Yes. It, it is amazing and I think it's our little vindication in music. Initially there was a similar situation. I'm not aware, there may have been one, but I'm not aware of two composers who felt so much alike that they could write a composition where you couldn't tell where one had finished and one took up.

Black people but also...

Yes, Duke wrote, he got a lot of his inspiration from black people, being a black man himself and that's, he wrote about the history of black people. He wrote about the experiences up and down, just like Langston Hughes, a great poet, he wrote about black people. But I think both, both of the works of these two great men, it, it's universal because I think, I think Duke's music proves that people are all one. The same experiences and the same ups and downs and emotional impact of different things, I mean, the black people's life, all people have those same things happen to them. And, and so, it, Duke was proving in those writing a lot of his inspiration was from, was from black people, he was writing universally in his music. His religious music was, his religious music is really just music and was taking from his inspiration from, of love of God. And I know when I asked him about it, he says, "Now I can say openly what I've always said privately on my knees at home." In his religious music. So I, his music has a universal feel that they say somewhere in the world, every second of the day, there's an Ellington composition being played. Somewhere through Musack or somewhere. There's always, concerts and some, there's, twenty-four hours a day. So that proves that his music is universal. It's everywhere, you know.

The End