



Mercedes Ellington

Location: The Apollo Theater

Date: N/A

I'm trying to get to know Duke Ellington

If I told you who Duke Ellington was, I don't know, I think Duke Ellington was different things to different people. He kept re-inventing himself. He was the kind of a person, he wasn't like a grandfather type of person, as a matter of fact he never asked or never would wish any of us to call him grandfather. We always had to call him Uncle Edward, I mean, that was everybody. It didn't matter how you were related to him. And my father, just to be annoying used to call him Pops, you know. Because he knew that that would, you know, really get his attention. And sometimes not a very good way but he was a very private person; he was a person who didn't necessarily show his true feelings towards people he was talking to. There was, I guess, a bit of the etiquette that he was brought up with in Washington DC which was a very strict one for people of color. You were kind of guarded in what you let other people know you were feeling. And I think this is, this is something that people of color everywhere were aware of in their dealings and social dealings with outsiders or with people other than family and even with family members, my grandfather, we rarely saw each other. We, he, they came into town, I don't know, maybe twice, three times a year and those would be very special times. And everyone was very happy and they'd keep, the occasions of our meetings were always like Christmas, you know, although it was not Christmas.

Shorter things. How did he get his nickname?

I'm told that it was a nickname from child, that that his nickname was gotten from childhood. His friends used to see him and he would choose his style of dressing not like anyone else. I think it was an attempt to be an individual. Like I said, he was, was reinventing, or inventing himself and his persona

that he wanted to present was of this ilk. So rather than be like the other people, he would dress, maybe he had an image of movies, I don't know where he got this idea, but he dressed very well all the time. He didn't, I don't think he knew what jeans were, you know, or chinos or any kind of relaxed clothing. He was always dressed in silks and cashmeres and even when he had no, not a lot of money. I think, and so people said, "You look like a duke. You look very aristocratic." He was always described as being aristocratic and Duke was the name. . .

What was the world that he came out of?

Well, you know,

When he grew up

Washington, DC, basically is, really is a southern town. I mean, you have to understand, I guess, for me its very difficult to understand. I was born and raised in New York and so, but to me, I, when I go to Washington now, I have to remember that this is a very southern town and all the niceties and the manners, you know, you were very polite, you were brought up in a way that was very, well restricted in certain areas and certainly in the way that there was a certain amount of segregation and then within your own group you were allowed certain areas and you were restricted in certain areas which I think went on to make him so much against being categorized, I think that contributed a great deal to his breakout, you know, in later years.

Tell me about his relationship with his mother

I think there were maybe two people that Duke Ellington valued above all others. And in reality I believe that one of them was his mother and the other one was Billy Strayhorn.

Tell me about his mother

Now, his mother whom he valued greatly, highly, I I think she established his entire relationship with women and he valued women. He valued his sister, thereafter, all of the women in the family, women he loved, women he worked with, they were, all of the relationships were fashioned after the relationship that he had with his mother. His mother gave him everything, piano lessons, painting lessons and read to him from the Bible, took him to church, you know. All of these things she provided and she instilled in him the thought that he could do anything he wanted to do. That he could establish, he could establish himself, he could attain anything. That he was a

genius, that he was, he was the bomb. You know, he was it. So I think he, he latched on to that because in a world, and he's surrounded by what he was, there were, were not so many things that were conducive to attaining, I don't know if he had any, he had heroes, he had role models in other musicians. But like I said, he began from the very beginning from some part within him to invent him, his own self unlike anybody else.

Why doesn't he like to ruffle feathers? Everything on the exterior is sort of smooth and hard to know;

Hm. Well, it might have seemed like that. I mean it seemed, he himself was a very unruffled type of person but that didn't mean that there was chaos around him. As a matter of fact, I think he contributed a great deal because of his reticence to get involved in the everyday pins and needles working of how things get done that he was able to keep this cool. To maintain this. He had other people scrambling around to do those ordinary things. You know, he kept himself aloof. He kept himself totally dedicated to the music. That's the way he expressed himself the best. He knew that. He was a great performer. He was a great actor. He was a good, he was a good writer too.

Yet he created some of the most emotional and some of the most American music we have

Yeah, he was a, like I said, above all things not wanting to have any name tags. And he made that in his music, he wanted to be known as an American composer. That, to him, was the best thing that he could do, that could be said about him. How he came up with the sound and the combinations of chords that people to this day still think they're mistaken and they're too close together or whatever. However, you know, it's like the painters, how did certain painters come up with the Goya, the long faces. It's how he perceived the music, the sound, and what kind of a twist was his own individual, it's unfathomable for somebody else and I'm not that musically analytical that I think that I could put my eye on it.

What must it have been like to be his son?

I think my father must have had the most frustrating time keeping up with my grandfather. I think that my father in the very beginning really started out to think that he could have his own life. And very early on I think he really knew that that was a totally frustrating desire of his that would, he would begin, he had many false starts. He had a band and then he had a career as a disk jockey for a while. He had all these beginnings but always there was the big hand of Duke Ellington that came and grabbed him and took him out of whatever he was doing.

Wouldn't let him call him father?

Well, no. And that was the reason of that because they had a big argument about my father, my father had turned prematurely gray and then white. And my grandfather, of course, had dyed his hair and all slicked back, you know, and was just perfectly coifed at all times. My father couldn't care less. You know, my father said, "Ah, you know." Wouldn't dye his hair and this led to a great big gap between the two of them because, because my father had this white hair and he was playing in the band, my grandfather would introduce every member of the orchestra except my father. He didn't want anyone to know that he was old enough to have a man who had white hair as a son.

Was he afraid of age?

That was another category.

My questions not in it.

The age was another category and so that was, like its another limitation. It was another label. So age, nationality, race, types of music, anything that had a label, he did not want to have anything to do with. Whenever he could, wanted, he well, if he would sort of compliment someone, the best thing he could say about them was that they were beyond category. Categories to him were something to be ignored, completely ignored. So he didn't want anything to do with color, you know. That was nothing he dealt with.

Notion of how he wanted to avoid problems all the time.

My grandfather wanted to avoid problems, he wanted to avoid any ruffle in his aura. Anything that would take him away or distract him from the music. That was the constant in his life, every day, it was the music. Even in the hospital when he was dying. There was a piano there. He was composing, he composed every day. It didn't matter where or when, it if he had music paper or didn't, he would write on napkins, shirt sleeves, menus, he would compose snatches. Smithsonian is still trying to put all this stuff together.

What is driving this man?

The struggle that was driving, that was within him was driving him to become somebody. To become, you have to remember heres a man whose father was a butler in the White House and hes seen all of these other things happening around him, of people who were making it in different aspects and who were doing things that he was attracted to. And then this tremendous talent that he had within him to make these sounds. I have difficulty understanding it, I have difficulty understanding Mozart. I have, I don't know where, its got to be this gift and an immediacy to the nature of who you are.

You know, its a big truth there, a big honesty. So that you come immediately to who you are and you come immediately to where you want to go.

But he stayed on the road for more than 50 years. What was it about being on the road?

That was work. Being on the road was the key to work. He had to work. He told me, I remember once, that was one of the big arguments we always had. I was working in Australia for six months doing a "West Side Story" and I was asked to stay on to do the next production after that and I was homesick, I mean, Australia, where we were was the furthest away from New York that you could possibly get. So I came back home and I made the mistake of telling him this story and he was so furious he hit the ceiling. He told me, he said, "Look, if you're going to be in this business, you have to take it seriously. Home is where the work is. Thats where you go." He wanted me to go to Europe. He want, he didn't want me to stay here. He said the only place, if you really want to be a dancer and if you want to be something and make it, because it wasn't enough for him to think that I would be satisfied in the chorus. If I was going to be a dancer, I'd have to be somebody like Freddie Washington or Josephine Baker and those people made it. They, they went to Washington, to Europe. Thats the only place that they could have made. Europe was the only place that was accepting people of color.

So what was it about the road for him?

No, he could not not work. He needed the orchestra; he needed to hear the sound. Because the piano was not his instrument, the orchestra was his instrument. Thats why after performances he would record immediately. He would get the bands, and having, and working all that time, working so many months a year, kept the band honed to a fine tune that they were really, its like, you know, you can practice the piano eight hours a day, but when can you practice the orchestra? You have to do that in performance and so that was, that was his practicing.

How did he treat the members of the orchestra?

Each, each member of the orchestra was a different man to him. He treated each one differently. He treated them according to their talent, according to their input, according to their personality. And it was amazing how he was kind of a magnet straight to the core of their being because he knew their weaknesses, musically, and he knew their strengths. He knew, he involved himself in their situation as far as their families because he always was ready to help people out financially. But he treated them, you know, I mean, they were together, they were like children, they were like his children, almost.

Billy Strayhorn

Billy Strayhorn. I remember him by a smell. He would always chew these violet scented Sen Sen I think it was called. So I remember Billy as violets. And I remember his voice. And I remember that he was one of the few people that I could almost communicate with eye to eye because of his height, you know we were. . .

What was his relationship with your grandfather?

It was very private. I think the two of them, only the two of them, I think that only the two of them knew what their relationship was like. People now are trying to interpret it. I don't think they can. I don't really think honestly can, because up to the point of meeting Billy Strayhorn I think that my grandfather was a very lonely person. On the musical level. There was no one he could communicate to on that level. And if you can imagine, what if Mozart had somebody like that? It was, it would be such an opening. It would be such a joy to be able to not necessarily say something but just write a note and have somebody else write a note and you write a note and then its all the same thing, you know, its like communicating with just feelings, with just music, with just music. They communicated through music.

Did they love each other?

I think they did. I think they had to. They had to for because if you look at the product you must know that they loved each other. They had to work under many different circumstances probably, many stressful circumstances but basically, I think, the joy of them finding each other was the core of their mutual creativity. They brought out the best in each other. They had many things.

What did Duke Ellington give us Americans? The world?

He gave us food for thought. He gave us, I believe a way, another way to speak. Another way to communicate. He was always criticized because he never became a part of any particular political group or movement. But he would always say that he said whatever he had to say through the music. All you had to do was listen. And I think that he made us listen. I certainly find out now, more, I learn more about him when I work and I choreograph to the music and I listen I find out more about him than I ever knew before.

At the heart of this story of American jazz in which Duke Ellington of course is the center, there is the question of race. What is Duke Ellington saying about that in his music or in his life?

I think he, I think that Duke Ellington through his music is saying that people of color are worthy, are a proud people. "My people." That was the name he gave one of his compositions. He realized and recognized the struggle that had good, that we'd all gone through. He recognized it, he, the struggle that he himself, that his family had gone through. That the history of Black people in America where we all came from. Where we all go to. I think he had vision as to, at one point, all of those lines, all of those categories being erased. And all that would be left would be the music.

What is the legacy of his music, for America?

The legacy of the music is that it permeates life. That this is what life is about. Its not really the feeling of the day to day things and the transactions that you, but the aura, that the thing that carries you about seven inches off of the ground is, are the notes, is the melody.

He was such a pampered kid. His parents were grooming him to be somebody.

I think my grandfather must have exhibited some abnormal quality from the very beginning to his mother and his father and I think his mother was really listening and she recognized that there was something different about him. And she was going to give him every opportunity to use this difference and to take advantage of it. To, she felt he was a pioneer, he, she felt that he was going to be a pioneer, that he was going to break down barriers and she wanted to prepare him, so she gave him everything that she could, or she armed him with everything that she could.

And he returned the devotion to her

Very greatly. I think, I know that his long term relationship for instance with Irving Mills was completely destroyed because Irving Mills did not follow his instructions as far as the type of casket for his mother and bought a cheaper casket. And that did it. I mean, that, there were problems before they had discussed and always patched up things, but the one thing that he would not tolerate was any aspersions cast or anyone dissing his mother, you know. I mean, or any female, actually, in the family.

Whats the first thing that comes to mind when you think about your grandfather?

When I think about my grandfather, I think about him smiling and about his voice. He had a very, I think his voice would be in the, in the category of a James Earl Jones, or a Jeffrey Holder. It was a very distinctive voice and I know that he loved to tell stories and I loved to listen to him talk, especially

when he was talking on stage because he would charm anybody. It doesn't have to male, female, whatever, children, grownups. People he would talk to. He just had a way of charming people and you just found yourself smiling when you were around him.

What was his voice like? Did he take you up into his lap?

Well, he was in back of his, in back of his eyes he was kind of looking at you and saying, "Hm." You know, that kind of a, judging, but a kindly person, he was kind of testing, I always felt that he was kind of a devils advocate with me. Especially when he found out that I was interested in being in the business. When he found out that I wanted to be a dancer, it was a kind of test of the wills. Had I been, maybe, if I had wanted to be a school teacher or something else, you know, I think it would have been, our relationship would have been different. But, being that we had a lot of things in common, I felt he was very close to the dance. I was completely taken over by the dance world and in the way that he was completely taken over by music. So, I think he saw this in me and although he may not have known that much about the dance world itself, I just felt there was a tremendous joy every time I came to see him. I if I went to see him at the Apollo or if I went to see him, there were people around that I liked, there was something about this atmosphere that made it very comfortable for me. Made it, I was around people like me, you know, as opposed to my school friends.

Sense of who he was, physically, what he looked like, how he dressed.

He was, he gave an appearance of a tall person to me. I don't know if he was six foot, but I think he looked six foot to me. He was dressed always very impeccably, I feel. I remember shininess, I remember silk. I remember cashmere. Cashmere, he loved cashmere because whether it was summer or winter, air-conditioning or cool weather, it would keep him at a temperature of comfort.

He was cool.

He was cool.

Did he have a life outside of music?

I don't think so. I don't think that he had a life outside of music. I think he had a private life with his mistress, Evie. And I think he had a life with other women and I think that that was very private to him. I think it was also very complicated. For instance at the, at the hospital there were, I know one of my great aunts jobs in her lifetime always was to keep all of these ladies separate so that they never met each other and so that there would never be

a disturbance in the aura, but it happened at the hospital. It, they did come together, but everyone was so concerned at that point about my grandfather, knowing that the end was coming that didn't result in too much of a fracas but I think that side of my grandfather was a, another separate entity other than the music. Of course after performances when we'd gather to eat or we'd go, he loved to eat, he loved food, he loved ice cream, he loved steak. He loved things to discuss, he loved discussions with people. Harry Carney was his driver, for instance, when they were going from one date to another and they had to go by car, he would ask Harry to drive him because he trusted Harry's driving and he was very confident, and he liked talking to Harry and but I think that, you know, private life, or regular life for him was rare. There were rare times.

Why were the band members so loyal to him?

It was, the band members acted as if Duke Ellington had cast a spell on him, on them, on all of them, each one of them. I sometimes wonder if they could have had their own career. Some of them did go and for a while, Johnny Hodges and people like that, they had their own small bands, but they always came back. They always, they seem, there was nothing like being with Duke Ellington. Duke Ellington was someone, it was almost like an institution. That they were proud to be connected with. You get the feeling that musicians when they are in an orchestra, are, they need a strong leader. And my grandfather was a very strong leader. He knew them intimately. That also was something that kept them. He cared enough to know each of them. He cared enough to include them. They actually contributed to the compositions. They knew that. They knew that they were necessary to the sound. That they were a part of the Duke Ellington sound.

Tell me about the end. He got sick.

Towards the end of his life when he realized that something was seriously wrong, he started to get into the more spiritual level musically because that was the way he expressed himself and so came the sacred concerts and all the other liturgical music and that was his driving force. That was what he rode on until the end.

Where were you when you heard that he had died?

When I heard that Duke Ellington died, I was on an airplane. I knew that he was sick. I was going to California to visit some friends. And I'd gone to visit him before I left and we had a great talk. I brought him some pencils and paper so that he could write and I wasn't allowed to touch him because his resistance was down so badly from all the treatments that he was undergoing. But I sat across the room and we talked and I found it strange because he chose the subject of women to talk to me about. And his heydays

of dating and I was very surprised, I said, "This is my grandfather talking to me about this stuff," you know. "What am I supposed to do, am I supposed to be embarrassed?" I just, I said, "No. Just listen." 'Cause this is a man, you know, whos talking. And when I left, I said, "Now, I want you out of this hospital when I come back. I'm coming back soon, you get better." And I don't think I was aware even of how serious this was. At least I'd hoped, some type of remission. I knew that he could fix it, somehow. And I was coming back from California because my mother had had an aneurysm and on the plane I read over someones shoulder that Duke Ellington had died. And this was a double-whammy for me. I mean, it wasn't, it was bad enough that my mother was in jeopardy. Her life was in jeopardy. This is your mother. And now, heres a man that I asked him to get out of the hospital, but not in this way.

When Billy Strayhorn died, what did the Duke feel?

I think he went into a depression. I think Duke went into a depression when Billy Strayhorn died. Billy Strayhorn was ill for a while before and so there was a chance for my grandfather to prepare himself for might be the worst. And surely he must have known the conditions were not that hopeful. But the difference between someone being ill and then someone not being there at all is just too much to take, the loss is too much to take. And even while Billy was sick, he was still communicative, he was still, my grandfather was still able to call him up, ask him questions, or to talk to him. But the voice was no longer there.

Did he complain when he got sick?

Its a funny thing, when my grandfather was really getting ill, I think I realized something was really wrong on the last dates that he did because he worked up to the very end, practically. The book came out, Music is my Mistress and I bought a couple of copies and I went to see him at the Rockefeller Center and I brought a book with me and I remember my father not wanting me to take up too much....

My grandfather never complained, that was part of that upbringing, that you never show your true feelings. So if you were ill, if you were in pain. It was impolite. I'm sure in at, when doors were closed behind the dressing room, in his own private place there were complaints, there was truth about what was really going on but none of us ever saw that. My father, I think was the only one who really saw that. And so when I went to visit him when he was playing at Rockefeller Center, I bought a copy of his book and I wanted him to autograph it. And I visited, through the whole visit I had the book and I was so excited and talking to him and everything and I'd forgotten about the book. And on, at the very end, when we were all downstairs and he was ready to get into the car, I said, "Oh, my book. Can you please sign it for

me?" And my father wanted to whisk me away and said, "Oh, no, no. Don't bother him now. Hes tired. Hes getting ready to go home." And my grandfather said, "No. I want to do it now." And he insisted. And I think there was something in that insistence that spoke to there may not be another time.

What was his relationship to Irving Mills?

My grandfathers career was spun off by Irving Mills. Irving Mills probably was the first one who took a chance. And started to create this image of Duke Ellington, who this man was and who he eventually became and so involved was Irving Mills in my grandfathers life touring, both in America and in Europe that he became an integral part, he knew the ins and outs of my grandfather, the family, everything. He was, he was listed as being a writer on some of the credits of, of course he wasn't but I think this was my grandfathers way of including some of the royalties to pay him back some of the personal loans that they may have made, you know, he may have made.

So, Irving Mills, what kind of relationship between the two men?

I don't know what the relationship was between Irving Mills and my grandfather. It was a business relationship, but it also verged on the personal relationship because I think my grandfather had Irving Mills take care of a lot of personal things for him. I think he provided moneys or the dispersion of different moneys to different people in the family or different people who needed money or whatever. And of course, his own personal needs if you had, wanted to get an advance, and constantly wanting to be in the recording studio, was a great, great, I `m sure a great draw on finances. So, that was the cause, I think, that they had, they had a lot of ups and downs in their relationship. But the real biggy the out, the last one was the straw, was the incident about his mother and the coffin.

Talk to me about his relationships with women. Theres sort of a popular notion that hes a womanizer, but its more complicated than that.

I think in todays terms we, we tend to be very harsh with the terminology of womanizer. In my own witnessing of some of this womanizing, I toured with the band to Russia and it was in 1971 when there were very strict laws. You couldn't wear a crucifix into Russia, you couldn't bring any religious tracts, you couldn't, no Star of David, nothing that resembled any type of religion. There were strict rules about fraternizing and with, for the band members and especially for my grandfather, and it didn't matter. At the airport, when the plane landed, at the hotel, at the concert hall, backstage, the women just gathered. They were there. They made themselves available. They were calling on the telephone. People came to the rooms, try as they may, there was no, no way. And when you see that, I can't imagine how it is because

he, heres a band and I think this is with all people who travel a lot. You're deprived of a home, the comforts, the satisfaction of a home and, you know, nice home cooked meals and things like that, of a nest. And so, your nest has to be wherever you are and I think women were a very big part of his nest and his comfort zone of when he was not on stage. Of course he was in his element when he was on stage and very, very at home and comfortable, but I think that when his rest time came, for food, for pleasure, for happiness, for conversation, women, you know, just brought out the best in him.

How should we remember Duke Ellington?

I think that everyone can remember Duke Ellington's legacy as something that was almost like another language that he created. He created a language out of thin air, out of the music, out of sounds, of things other than words. It was an all-encompassing and, and it was also something that didn't have any category. It was something you just couldn't quite put your finger on it. It just kind of escaped you just when you thought you had something figured out. It just turned out to be the other way. So its like, never be quite so sure that you think you've figured something out because it can always go another way. Which is what happens if you write, if you write, journalists and, and musicians. So its a, I think that the legacy that he left had to do with a way of living, a way of enjoying life. A way of enjoying work. I mean work was not work. He never never called it work. Its, its something that you go to do your thing.

And he was writing up to the end, in the hospital.

To the very end. To the end. To the end, I remember in the hospital the papers that were strewn around the place even on the backs of cards, the sympathy cards, or get well cards that people would send, letters that people would write. We had all put all the cards up on the walls and the walls were all decorated with cards and messages that people would send and every once in a while you'd see that there were a few notes that he had, something was conveniently where he was at the time he would just write a couple of phrases. I wonder about what was inside of his head. Complete orchestrations were inside of his head.

I love this idea that you said that the touring orchestra was his instrument.

When you have a head the way a composer, it must be a phenomenal thing. Like I said before with, with a Mozart, with a Beethoven, with Duke Ellington to hear those sounds so clearly all the time, you know how you feel when you wake up sometimes and you hear a tune, you know, but its not necessarily something that you wrote, its something that you've heard. But what must that be, I can't imagine what that must be like to hear and then

write it down. Just completely, and not miss a beat. Just have it down and have it sound exactly the way you thought it was going to sound.

So clean and so smooth.

Very clean, very smooth, very much in keeping with his master plan.

Is there one tune that is the epitome of Ellington?

One tune, if there was one tune, it would be "Sophisticated Lady," the harmonies in that tune, the closeness of the chords, the subject matter. The charm, the title all are conducive and descriptive of what he was about.

The End