# 5 Edward Kennedy Ellington as a cultural icon

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At the beginning of the prologue of his autobiography, *Music Is My Mistress*, Edward Kennedy Ellington described his parents and his childhood in the following insightful and fanciful narrative:

> Once upon a time a beautiful young lady and a very handsome young man fell in love and got married. They were a wonderful, compatible couple, and God blessed their marriage with a fine baby boy (eight pounds, eight ounces). They loved their little boy very much.
> They raised him, nurtured him, coddled him, and spoiled him. They raised him in the palm of the hand and gave him everything they thought he wanted. Finally, when he was about seven or eight, they let his feet touch the ground.[1]

Ellington's pride in discussing his family, early childhood, and adolescent development reveals much about his personality and sense of privilege and destiny. He obviously perceived himself as a proud member of a family that was upwardly mobile and actively involved in the pursuit of an economically stable and socially fulfilling life, aspirations that were shared by many middle-class African Americans in Washington, D.C., during the first 20 years of the century. The famous photograph of the four-year-old Ellington – in which he stands regally, dressed in what appears to be a military uniform, with his right arm resting on a chair, and his left arm placed behind his back – reveals volumes about his early childhood as a boy of self-confidence and promise.

Much of *Music Is My Mistress* describes Ellington's idyllic childhood and gives us an insight into his complex personality. He discusses his family in the first chapter, including details of his father's entrepreneurial skills and means of making a living.

> My father had a job working as a butler for Dr. Cuthbert at 1462 on the south side of Rhode Island Avenue. I believe the house is still there. The cook and the maid were under him, and he was the fellow who made the decisions around the house. The doctor was rather prominent socially, and he probably recommended my father for social functions, because my father also belonged to what you might call a circle of caterers. When he or one of his cronies got a gig, all the others would act as waiters. They hired good cooks and gave impeccable service. They even had a page, I remember,

> because one day something happened to the page and I had to stand in for him . . .
>
> During World War I, he quit the butler job and rented a big house on K Street, in the fashionable area where all the suffragettes were. He rented out rooms, and continued as a caterer until he went to work on blueprints in the Navy yard. He kept at that till he had trouble with arthritis in his knee.
>
> J. E. always acted as though he had money, whether he had it or not. He spent and lived like a man who had money, and he raised his family as though he were a millionaire. The best had to be carefully examined to make sure it was good enough for my mother. Maybe he was richer than a millionaire? I'm not sure that he wasn't.[2]

Ellington also commented on his father's penchant for speaking effectively and effortlessly in flattering poetic terms, particularly to women.

> He was also a wonderful wit, and he knew exactly what to say to a lady – high-toned or honey-homey. I wrote a song later with a title suggested by one of those sayings he would address to a lady worth telling she was pretty. "Gee, you make that hat look pretty," he would say. He was very sensitive to beauty, and he respected it with proper gentility, never overdoing or underdoing it. He would never scratch a lady's charisma or injure her image.[3]

It is plausible that Ellington's ability as a man of verbal eloquence had its origin in his father's utterances. In support of that assertion, one need only cite Duke Ellington's convincing assessment of his father's persuasive and expressive verbal fluency:

> While my mother had graduated from high school, I don't think my father even finished eighth grade. Yet his vocabulary was what I always hoped mine would be. In fact, I have always wanted to be able to be and talk like my pappy . . . Whatever place he was in, he had appropriate lines. "The millions of beautiful snowflakes are a celebration in honor of your beauty," he declared in Canada. Complexions were compared to the soft and glorious sunsets in California. In the Midwest, he saw the Mississippi as a swift messenger rushing to the sea to announce the existence of a wave of unbelievably compelling force caused by the rebirth of Venus. In New York and on the East Coast, he spoke about "pretty being pretty, but not that pretty." Sometimes he would attempt to sing a song of praise, and then apologize for the emotion that destroyed the control of his voice.[4]

What Ellington reveals here are the sensibilities of a proud man whose values were profoundly shaped by the optimism of the emerging, urban African-American middle class of the first two decades of the twentieth century. As the eminent historian John Hope Franklin states:

> The two world wars had a profound effect on the status of Negroes in the United States and did much to mount the attack on the two worlds of race.

> The decade of World War I witnessed a very significant migration of Negroes. They went in large numbers – perhaps a half million – from the rural areas of the South to the towns and cities of the South and North. By the thousands they poured into Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Chicago. Although many were unable to secure employment, others were successful and achieved a standard of living they could not have imagined only a few years earlier. Northern communities were not altogether friendly and hospitable to the newcomers, but the opportunities for education and the enjoyment of political self-respect were greater than they had ever been for these Negroes. Many of them felt that they were entirely justified in their renewed hope that the war would bring about a complete merger of the two worlds of race.[5]

Duke Ellington was an extraordinary creative artist whose brilliant contributions to the world were rooted in his profound understanding of the broader African-American music tradition. His particular genius was the ability to create a new paradigm that celebrated and reinforced the characteristic elements of that tradition while simultaneously introducing significant innovations to it. As such, his work was shaped fundamentally by aesthetic principles and conceptual processes of music-making derived from African music and altered to conform to the realities of the African-American experience. Although he visited Africa on concert tours several times during his fabulous career, there is little evidence that he was directly influenced by specific African music. On the other hand, there is abundant empirical evidence that his musical universe was centered in the concepts that collectively comprise the African-American music tradition, and that his basic sources were African-American manifestations or transformations of modes of musical thought and practice shared with West African cultures and the African diaspora. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. states in discussing the nature of the relationship between African and African-American culture, and refuting the notion that African-American culture has nothing to do with African culture:

> Common sense, in retrospect, argues that these retained elements of culture should have survived, that their complete annihilation would have been far more remarkable than their preservation. The African, after all, was a traveler, albeit an abrupt, ironic traveler, through space and time; and like every traveler, the African “read” a new environment within a received framework of meaning and belief. The notion that the Middle passage was so traumatic that it functioned to create in the African a tabula rasa of consciousness is as odd as it is a fiction, a fiction that has served several economic orders and their attendant ideologies. The full erasure of traces of culture as splendid, as ancient, and as shared by the slave traveler as the classic cultures of traditional West Africa would have been extraordinarily difficult. Slavery in the New World, a veritable seething cauldron of

> cross-cultural contact, however, did serve to create a dynamic of exchange and revision among numerous previously isolated Black African cultures on a scale unprecedented in African history. Inadvertently, African slavery in the New World satisfied the preconditions for the emergence of a new African culture, a truly Pan-African culture fashioned as a colorful weave of linguistic, institutional, metaphysical, and formal threads. What survived this fascinating process was the most useful and the most compelling of the fragments at hand. Afro-American culture is an African culture with a difference as signified by the catalysts of English, Dutch, French, Portuguese, or Spanish languages and cultures, which informed the precise structures that each discrete New World Pan-African culture assumed.[6]

Research into the relationship between African and African-American music certainly concurs with the basic viewpoint stated above. This viewpoint is also consistent with the published work of Robert Farris Thompson, who studies the relationship between African and African-American art, and Albert Raboteau, who studies African and African-American religion. Moreover, Duke Ellington, in an interview with Carter Harman in 1964, stated unequivocally: "My strongest influences, my inspirations, were all Negro."[7]

To paraphrase a passage I wrote in 1974, the relationship between African and African-American musical traditions consists of the common sharing of a core of conceptual approaches to the process of music-making, and hence is not basically quantitative but qualitative. The particular forms of African-American music that evolved in the New World are specific manifestations of this shared conceptual framework, which reflects both the unique nature and specific contexts of the African-American experience. As such, the essence of their "Africanness" is not a static body of something that can be depleted, but rather, a shared conceptual predisposition, the manifestations of which are infinite. The common core of this shared cultural affinity consists of ways of doing something, not simply something that is done.[8]

The African influence on African-American music and, by extension, Duke Ellington, has been reflected historically in shared or similar conceptions regarding (1) the fundamental nature of the musical experience; (2) principles of musical organization – specific approaches to musical form, patterns of continuity, and syntax; and (3) performance practices – the processes involved in actively making music.

Many fundamental aspects of the musical experience are shared by African and African-American music. One of the most salient of these shared concepts is the view of music as a communal activity in which there are no detached listeners, but rather a communion of participants – a view which expects and encourages the active interaction of all participants. The notion of "inclusion" in the music-making process becomes an important dimension of performance in both African and African-American music.

Duke Ellington's extensively documented method of working with his band members is an excellent example of this practice. Ellington developed an exceptionally fruitful collaborative relationship with his band. As Gunther Schuller states:

> A unique musical partnership, truly unprecedented in the history of Western music, developed in which a major composer forged a musical style and concept which, though totally original and individual, nevertheless consistently incorporated and integrated the no less original musical ideas of his players. No such musical alchemy had ever been accomplished before, with the possible exception of Jelly Roll Morton's *Hot Peppers* recordings of 1926. Miraculously, the Ellington imagination fed on the particular skills and personalities of his players, while at the same time *their* musical growth was in turn nurtured by Ellington's maturing compositional craft and vision. This process of cross-fertilization was constant and, given the stability of personnel, self-expanding.[9]

The Ellington band was shaped by the unique artistic symbiotic relationship between Ellington and individual artists like Bubber Miley, "Tricky Sam" Nanton, Sonny Greer, Otto Hardwick, Arthur Whetsol, Lawrence Brown, Johnny Hodges, Barney Bigard, Paul Gonsalves, Cootie Williams, Ben Webster, and Clark Terry, to name a few. Each of these artists had a distinct musical personality, and Ellington created the precise musical framework to enhance and expand that personality by challenging the artist to explore new musical forms and contexts in which to achieve even greater heights of sublime artistry. In a broad sense, Ellington's approach both reinforced a traditional African/African-American ideal and created an innovative means of doing so. He was a composer because his overall conception shaped the final result, but he also worked within the received framework of communal collaboration.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote "We Wear the Mask," a poem that captured with exceptional insight an important aspect of the African-American experience:

> We wear the mask that grins and lies,
> It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, –
> This debt we pay to human guile;
> With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
> And mouth with myriad subtleties.
>
> Why should the world be over-wise,
> In counting all our tears and sighs?
> Nay, let them only see us, while
> We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!

The metaphor of the mask also invokes *minstrelsy*, the nineteenth-century entertainment tradition based on the crude caricature of African-American culture by white men in blackface – a tradition that provided ideological support for the institution of slavery. Simply put, minstrelsy was a white distortion of African-American culture for commercial gain. Minstrelsy was not only the first indigenous American popular music, but also established norms of show business practice, some of which are still part of American popular entertainment today. As an entertainer entering the field at the beginning of the 1920s, Ellington – like many before him, including composer Scott Joplin, comedian Bert Williams, and George Hicks, founder of the Georgia Minstrels, the first African-American minstrel troupe, in 1865 – all had to accommodate the expectations of this tradition. Ellington wore the mask in the 1920s as his mentor, the erudite violinist and composer Will Marion Cook, had worn it almost two decades earlier. That is, although Ellington was always regal, urbane, and sophisticated in his public appearance and demeanor – a credible exemplar of the scholar Alain Locke's "New Negro" – his work at the Cotton Club in Harlem was influenced very much by remnants of the minstrel tradition. The cover page of *Jig Walk*, one of his earliest piano compositions, written in 1925 for the musical revue *Chocolate Kiddies*, clearly displays the stereotyped images of the minstrel show.

The Cotton Club patrons were almost exclusively white and the entire theatrical ambiance was based on the image of either the "old southern plantation" or the "primitive" jungle. The titles of many of the compositions designed for the Cotton Club revues invoke the image of the African jungle (*Jungle Blues, Jungle Jamboree, Jungle Nights in Harlem*, and so on). The suave, tuxedo-clad Ellington band played beside these minstrel show-like tableaus, and here we have Ellington cast in the role of the music creator of "fantasy land" revues based on stereotypical images of "darkies" on the southern plantation or the exotic, erotic mysteries of Africa.

There is no question that the smashing success of Josephine Baker's appearance in *La Revue nègre*, which opened in Paris in October 1925 and catapulted her into instant stardom, had an influence on the subsequent New York Cotton Club revues. Major figures of European "highbrow" culture were fascinated by the *Revue nègre*. Glenn Watkins, in his astute study of the development of modernism, tells us:

> Fernand Léger, Blaise Cendrars, and Darius Milhaud all attended the opening night performance, as did Jean Cocteau, Janet Flanner, and Jacques-Émile Blanche. Colette, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Erich Maria Remarque caught later ones, and Cocteau, who totally succumbed to her charm, attended six times. Man Ray photographed her, and she posed repeatedly for Picasso, who called her the "Nefertiti of now." F. Scott Fitzgerald speaks of her in *Babylon Revisited*; Hemingway was dazzled by her and later claimed to have danced the night away with her; Alexander Calder's first wire sculpture of 1926 attempted to capture the vitality of her figure; in 1928 the Viennese architect Adolf Loos designed a house for her that seemed to conjure up the stripes of an African zebra more than the black and white marble striations of Siena's Cathedral; and in 1929 aboard the *Lutetia* on their way back from South America, the architect Le Corbusier honored her, and in the process created something of a stir, by appearing at the costume ball in blackface and with a circle of feathers around his waist.[10]

The cultural context of this adulation must be taken into consideration. The early twentieth-century emergence of "modernism" in art, music, and dance was fueled by a strong attraction to "primitive," "exotic," and presumably "pure" non-European models, and Africa – as expressed by African and African-American music, dance, and art – was central among these. The concept of absolutely pure "primitive" expression was highly attractive to many of the intellectual elite of the post-World War I "Jazz Age," who were seeking new models of human expression in the wake of what appeared to be the "end of the century decadence" of European culture.

Duke Ellington's Cotton Club revues were an American manifestation of this phenomenon, and Carl Van Vechten, George Antheil, George Gershwin, and others were interested in these developments as well. The notion of Duke Ellington as a wearer of the mask relates to the supreme irony of this extraordinarily creative man producing music that was "pseudo-African" on the surface, but in reality was the manifestation of new approaches to the creation of African-American music. The Cotton Club revues enabled Ellington to experiment with new ideas, establish a band with a distinctive style built upon the musical personalities of his specific performers, and expand his compositional skill within a tradition in which improvisation was vital. Behind the mask of an entertainer was a superb creative artist who defined much of what is best in African-American and American culture.

In a broader sense, Ellington was a pivotal agent in effecting an extraordinary (and perhaps inevitable) change in the perception of African-American music by the American public in general and the intellectual elite in particular. During the 1920s and 1930s, most popular depictions of African Americans were still dominated by minstrelsy's image of "black folk" as crude, ignorant, and childish. Ellington's music, his "suave persona," and his scintillating, disciplined, and musically superb orchestra fundamentally altered American society's impressions of African Americans. This dynamic music encompassed urban sophistication, postwar optimism, an unquenchable zest for life, and the ability to capture the essence of multifaceted human emotions suggested by such titles as *Black and Tan Fantasy*, *Mood Indigo*, *Sophisticated Lady*, *Solitude*, and *It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)*.

Ellington's music reflected a more nuanced, subtle, and complex reading of African-American culture, and, ultimately, projected a sophisticated and realistic understanding of African-American life. Duke Ellington used his music to communicate the complexity, depth, joy, and beauty of the contemporary African-American and American experience.

The European perception of people of sub-Saharan Africa and the African diaspora as inferior human beings is centuries old, and was expressed in the most direct terms even by some of America's most eminent champions of egalitarianism, democracy, and liberty. In 1785, Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* was first published in France and included the following:

> But never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never seen even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture. In music they are more generally gifted than the whites with accurate ears for tune and time, and they have been found capable of imagining a small catch [meaning a "round," usually at the interval of a unison, as in the popular "Are You Sleeping?"]. Whether they will be equal to the composition of a more extensive run of melody, or of complicated harmony, is yet to be proved.[11]

If Jefferson (1743–1826) had lived in Newport, Rhode Island, given his intellectual curiosity, he might have heard of the music written and published by the African-American former slave and singing-school master Newport Gardner (1746–1826). Eileen Southern's comprehensive study of African-American music, *The Music of Black Americans*, quotes a contemporary writer, John Ferguson, from 1830:

> Newport Gardner . . . early discovered to his owner very superior powers of mind. He taught himself to read, after receiving a few lessons on the elements of written language. He taught himself to sing, after receiving a very trivial initiation into the rudiments of music. He became so well acquainted with the science and art of music, that he composed a large number of tunes, some of which have been highly approved by musical amateurs, and was for a long time the teacher of a very numerously attended singing school in Newport.[12]

And if Jefferson, late in life, had visited Philadelphia and paid close attention to the formal band music of that time, he would have heard of Francis Johnson (1792–1844), who was described in a popular book published in 1819 as the "leader of the band at all balls, public and private."[13] Eileen Southern writes of Johnson:

> Johnson was indeed a celebrity of all times! During his short career he accumulated an amazing number of "firsts" as a black musician: first to win wide acclaim in the nation and in England; first to publish sheet music (as early as 1818); first to develop a "school" of black musicians; first to give formal band concerts; first to tour widely in the nation; and first to appear in integrated concerts with white musicians. His list of achievements also included "firsts" as an American, black or white: he was the first to take a musical ensemble abroad to perform in Europe and the first to introduce the promenade concert to the United States.[14]

Francis Johnson was followed by a long line of musically literate African-American composers who were active in the nineteenth century as concert bandleaders, dance bandleaders, and publishers of sheet music that reflected the musical taste of their time. These musicians were active in major cities such as Philadelphia, where composers Aaron J. R. Connor (d. 1850), James Hemmenway (1800–1849), and William Appo (*c.*1808–*c.*1878) were among the leading composers and bandleaders; St. Louis, where Joseph Postlewaite (1827–1889) directed at least four bands and published dances and marches that became well known; and Boston and Cleveland, where Justin Holland (1819–1887) published music that was also well known in the United States and Europe. By the end of the nineteenth century, African-American composers in the written tradition of minstrel music, such as James Bland, were internationally acclaimed, and by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, the "kings" of published classic ragtime were musical giants like Scott Joplin and Tom Turpin.

Duke Ellington's emergence as a major figure in American music occurred during his tenure at the Cotton Club, which began in 1927. In this context, Ellington catapulted his band into the first rank, as a result of the musical excellence of its members, the brilliance and imagination of his original music for revues at this venue, and the new image he and the band projected to the American public, as superb artists of the highest order. Between the time he first published a piano solo piece and the time he left the Cotton Club, Ellington had become one of the most popular and influential musicians in the country. One reason for Ellington's emergence was his major role in changing the general public's view of his music, from signifying the sensibilities of a shuffling, indolent minstrel show character to demonstrating the power of a creative artist whose ideas were compelling as music and influential as agents of social change. Ellington was a cultural icon during his lifetime, and as an icon continued to shine even more brightly long after his death.

The distortion of African-American culture associated with the nineteenth-century minstrel show enticed the audience to laugh at the antics of crude, ignorant, and inferior black people as depicted by white blackface performers with large red lips. The thousands of African-American people who fled from the stifling "neo-peasant trap" of share-cropping and other institutions of "slavery by another name" in the post-*Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) legal environment of the South were entranced by their exodus to the bustling, dynamic life of the northern cities, where at least some "people of color" appeared to be living exciting lives. The powerful, authentic music of the 1920s "Jazz Age" enticed black and white people to participate in the exuberant celebration of life that this music both reflected and demanded. This dramatic shift in the perception of African-American culture in the United States resulted from many important and diverse social, political, and economic factors, as with any such major transformation in the cultural values of any society. Nevertheless, an undeniable quantum shift of cultural values occurred in the United States in the first three decades of the twentieth century, and the fundamental nature of the American spirit was indelibly transformed by the emergence of jazz and blues as a phenomenal expression of the American experience. Edward Kennedy Ellington was a major force in making this change happen.

Duke Ellington's first original extended work, *Creole Rhapsody*, recorded in 1931, reveals his early compositional concerns. The work is over eight minutes long and required both sides of a 78 rpm disc. The title makes reference to "Creoles of color" or people of African, French, and/or Spanish descent.[15] In any case, Ellington seems to clearly connect this music to its ethnic identity. Musically, *Creole Rhapsody* represents the diversity of Ellington's musical output. The piece begins with minor-mode "exotic" jungle music, which after 16 measures moves to a brief piano cadenza, before the next contrasting section in a major mode, organized into 12-measure phrases. What becomes obvious very soon is that this piece is not intended to support dancing. The steady tempo and regularity necessary for dancing are interrupted often throughout the piece, sometimes symbolically thwarted by Ellington's piano cadenzas. The music at the end of the first part evokes the mellow calmness of Ellington's mood pieces. It becomes more obvious in the second part that Ellington is developing prior material from the piece and elaborating elements of his compositional voice. The short piano cadenzas continue to "call" or direct the music into different sections as if the piece were improvised. The soloists help define various sections of the piece by their instrumental timbre, and Ellington, like a master drummer of a traditional West African music ensemble, shapes the piece by redirecting the mood with interrupting cadenzas. This connection between timbre and form is very important in this piece and in Ellington's music generally, and *Creole Rhapsody* is an important example of his efforts to develop jazz within the tradition of African-American music.

Ellington clearly states his objectives as a composer in the important essay "The Duke Steps Out," published in 1931 in *Rhythm*, a British magazine. The trajectory of his artistic vision seems to stem from ideas and opinions expressed in this essay, which articulates his approach to composition and a musical vision rooted in originality.

> Always I try to be original in my harmonies and rhythms. I am not trying to suggest that my tunes are superior to those of other writers . . . I put my best musical thoughts forward into my tunes, and not hackneyed harmonies and rhythms, which are almost too banal to publish.[16]

While Ellington generally did not attack or belittle the work of other musicians, he was aware early in his career of the qualitative difference between his compositional goals and the general field of popular music in the early 1930s. Continuing Scott Joplin's and James Reese Europe's legacy of innovation, Ellington was more concerned with defining African-American music through his art than with being pigeonholed by commercial expectations. *Creole Rhapsody* may have been the first extended work to literally break the conventional mold of recorded African-American music by requiring both sides of a 78 rpm disc, but this composition also revealed Ellington's musical direction and concerns as stated in "The Duke Steps Out":

> But I am not content with just fox-trots. One is necessarily limited with a canvas of only thirty-two bars and with a strict tempo to keep up. I have already said that it is my firm belief that what is still known as "jazz" is going to play a considerable part in the serious music of the future. I am proud of that part my race is playing in the artistic life of the world.[17]

*Reminiscing in Tempo* (henceforth referred to as *RIT*) was Duke Ellington's first truly controversial composition. Composed after the devastating loss of his mother in 1935, *RIT* allowed Ellington to cope with this emotional nadir by placing his brooding thoughts in this composition. Reaching almost 13 minutes in length, *RIT* required four sides of two 78 rpm discs, exceeding the logistical requirements of *Creole Rhapsody*. *RIT* also broke the mold of aesthetic expectations of "jazz" music. Similar to *Creole Rhapsody*, *RIT* is not designed for dancing and is definitely meant for listening. *RIT* is not an example of Western classical art music collaborating with jazz, nor is it an example of a jazz composer collaborating with Western classical music. *Creole Rhapsody* could have been mistaken for a long jazz piece, but in writing *RIT* at 12′ 55″, Ellington was clearly expanding a genre of African-American music within its own musical syntax and forms of expression. Four years after writing "Duke Steps Out," Ellington created in *RIT* a non-foxtrot, non-32-bar, non-strict-tempo work of "serious music of the future."

Musically, *RIT* is an example of Ellington's mood/blue pieces where a melody seems to float over an ostinato accompaniment. The orchestral writing fits firmly within the aesthetics of big band arrangements, and the sections of the orchestra have their assigned roles. The rhythm section establishes the original ostinato, and then brass and wind instruments enter as soloists or as a soloing section. The opening muted trumpet solo is an alternating minor third over shifting parallel harmonies in the ostinato; in general terms, this is a blues riff without a blues progression. This melody can also be heard as a distillation of the important contribution of field hollers, cries, spirituals, blues, and gospel music to the tradition of African-American melody. Beginning *RIT* with the constructive material of a blues riff, Ellington firmly roots the work in the tradition of big band music and the African-American musical tradition. The use of instruments with fixed rhythmic elements against other instruments with changing rhythmic elements is fundamental to African-American musical expression.[18]

Development throughout the work comes from the changing combinations and timbres of the solo instruments. The music becomes most intense soon after the ninth minute of the piece, when the four-chord ostinato becomes a more complex dissonant chord against the moving woodwind countermelody and the riff melody. The organic growth of the piece is all intrinsic, similar to Ravel's *Bolero*. What are missing, to those listeners expecting a conventional jazz recording, are the harmonic and formal signposts associated with the popular music of the time. Although the length of *RIT* is in itself significant as an expansion of standard recording practices, Ellington's composition of a work outside the limitations of commercial popular music is more important. Ellington not only extended the duration of his individual works, but he also expanded the definition of African-American music.

Duke Ellington used his music to document African-American culture, and the titles of his works reveal a commitment to recording elements of African-American life. In his 1933 essay "My Hunt for Song Titles," Ellington declared, "It will not, therefore, surprise the public to know that every one of my song titles is taken from, and naturally principally from, the life of Harlem."[19] Understood, but not stated in this quote, is that Harlem was the cultural center of African-American life in the 1930s. Harlem encompassed the diversity of African-American society, as reflected in Ellington's music. The titles of his works also incorporated the African-American vernacular, including "dicty," "jive," "rent party," and other words and phrases that were common to the denizens of Harlem. Similar to the titles of bebop songs in the 1940s and hip-hop songs of the 1980s, Ellington's titles give an added stamp of cultural authenticity to his music. These titles also have a didactic quality by revealing to the general public unique elements of African-American culture. Teaching the world about African-American society was an important goal of Ellington's work; he also stated in "My Hunt for Song Titles" that "it is through the medium of my music that I want to give you a better understanding of my race."[20] And in "The Duke Steps Out" he wrote:

> I am therefore now engaged on a rhapsody unhampered by any musical form in which I intend to portray the experiences of the coloured races in America in the syncopated idiom. This composition will consist of four or five movements, and I am putting all I have learned into it in the hope that I shall have achieved something really worth while in the literature of music, and that an authentic record of my race *written by a member of it* shall be placed on record.[21]

Although the didactic intent of his artistry seemed to be missed by many critics and some of his fans, Ellington's nine-minute film *Symphony in Black* and his extended work *Black, Brown and Beige* were important ballasts to the imagery and import of the music of African-American artists. Released in 1935, *Symphony in Black: A Rhapsody of Negro Life* helped to cultivate a serious understanding of African-American music among the general public. The film presents four sections or movements, the traditional number of movements in a classical symphony, entitled "The Laborers," "A Triangle," "Hymn of Sorrow," and "Harlem Rhythm." *Symphony in Black* tells the history of African Americans through music as dictated by Ellington in "The Duke Steps Out."

The first movement is an obvious documentation of the hardships African Americans endured during slavery. Reminding his public of the legacy of slavery and the mistreatment of African Americans in the United States, Ellington opens *Symphony in Black* with an example of one of the first documented forms of African-American folk music: the work song. The second movement eventually reveals a blues performed by Billie Holiday. As one of the most important genres of the African-American musical tradition, the classic blues, as performed by Holiday in "A Triangle," also symbolically represents the great migration of African

Americans to northern urban centers. "Hymn of Sorrow" uses slow, melancholy music to support scenes of devout African Americans in church at prayer or listening to a sermon. This third movement of *Symphony in Black* pays homage to the centrality of the church in African-American culture.

The last movement, "Harlem Rhythm," ends the rhapsody with music and images associated with what could be scenes from a revue at the Cotton Club. The Ellington orchestra's tenure at the Cotton Club represented the epitome of the new artistic developments in African-American music that inspired pilgrimages to Harlem by white jazz enthusiasts living in other parts of New York City, and the film ends with music evoking these exciting advancements.

Duke Ellington did not direct the filming of *Symphony in Black*, but the images of African Americans in general, and Ellington specifically, are culturally significant for 1935. A year later, the Warner Brothers film *The Green Pastures* was released, depicting "a story of heaven and of earth as it might be imagined by a very simple, devout people," according to the trailer. Presenting a common, patronizing view of African Americans as simple folk with a confused understanding of the world and heaven, *The Green Pastures* promoted the popular stereotypes of black life in America. In stark contrast to *The Green Pastures* and similar depictions of African Americans, *Symphony in Black* begins with Duke Ellington composing a new commissioned work at a piano in his studio. After writing down his music, he then performs it. We see him thinking about his work in a reflective manner. This is an uncommon treatment for any African American on the silver screen in the 1930s. Eight years after the release of *The Jazz Singer* starring Al Jolson in blackface, Duke Ellington is represented as an authentic recorder of the history of his race in America in *Symphony in Black*.

The culmination of Ellington's musical historiography of African-American culture is the monumental composition *Black, Brown and Beige*, premiered at Carnegie Hall in 1943. The title alone reveals a desire by Ellington to write music that represents all people of African descent, regardless of their hue. *Black, Brown and Beige*, which Ellington subtitled *A Tone Parallel to the History of the Negro in America*, presents a history of African Americans, but in more detail than *Symphony in Black*. Ellington announces each of the three movements in the live Carnegie Hall recording to give a detailed description of the music. "Black" starts with a work song, similar to *Symphony in Black*'s beginning, but Ellington here also includes a spiritual section to round out the important forms of African-American music before the end of slavery. The second movement, "Brown," represents the migration of West Indians into the African-American community, emancipation, and the development of the blues in response to continued hardships. Ellington's description of the last movement, "Beige," balances a fine line between patriotism and suffering in the African-American community. The revolutionary moment in the piece, one might say, occurs in Ellington's discussion of the suffering in the last movement. Ellington proclaimed from the stage:

> The first theme of our third movement is . . . the veneer that we chip off as we get closer and find that all these people who are making all this noise and responding to the tom toms are only a few people making a living, and they're backed really by people who, many don't have enough to eat and a place to sleep, but work hard and see that their children are in school. The Negro is rich in education. And it develops until we find ourselves today, struggling for solidarity, but just as we are about to get our teeth into it, our country is at war and in trouble again, and as before, we, of course, find the black, brown, and beige right in there for the red, white, and blue.[22]

Rich in history and complicated social and political debates, Ellington's eloquent introduction to "Beige" is a soliloquy parallel to his music in general, and *Black, Brown and Beige* specifically. Ellington also makes an important connection between his orchestra and the plight of all African Americans – or, as he put it, the people backing him and his band members. In other words, the "Maestro" is telling the audience that if you support our music-making, then you need to know that we are no different than our families and loved ones who struggle and work hard to make sure that the next generation receives a good education. Or, even more poignantly, Ellington seems to be saying, "We, the Black, Brown, and Beige community, are not shiftless or lazy, but are focused on improving our future through education and hard work, while continuing to help defend America in every war, despite social and institutional barriers to our progress."

Ellington's final statement on *Black, Brown and Beige* summarizes the ideas and goals of the piece, without literally describing the musical organization of this movement, thereby enabling the musical experience of the work itself to achieve his artistic objective of expressing "an authentic record of my race *written by a member of it.*"

## Notes

1 Duke Ellington, *Music Is My Mistress* (New York: Doubleday, 1973; reprint, Da Capo Press, 1976), x.

2 Ibid., 10.

3 Ibid., 12.

4 Ibid.

5 John Hope Franklin, *Race and History: Selected Essays 1938–1988* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 144.

6 Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 4.

7 Duke Ellington interview by Carter Harman, May 30, 1964, from the Carter Harman collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

8 Olly W. Wilson, “The Significance of the Relationship Between Afro-American Music and West African Music,” *Black Perspectives in Music* 2/1 (1974): 3–22; the original passage is on page 20. See also Alan P. Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964).

9 Gunther Schuller, *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz 1930–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 48.

10 Glenn Watkins, *Pyramids at the Louvre: Music, Culture, and Collage from Stravinsky to the Postmodernists* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 135.

11 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. Frank Shuffelton (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 147.

12 Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, 3rd edn. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 69.

13 Robert Waln, *The Hermit in America on a Visit to Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: M. Thomas, 1819).

14 Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 107.

15 Two important studies of Creole identity and culture in Louisiana are Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992) and Carl A. Brasseaux, Keith P. Fontenot, and Claude F. Oubre, *Creoles of Color in the Bayou Country* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994).

16 Duke Ellington, “The Duke Steps Out,” *Rhythm*, March 1931, 20–22. Reprinted in *The Duke Ellington Reader*, ed. Mark Tucker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 46–50; the quote appears on pages 48–49.

17 Ibid., 49.

18 See Olly W. Wilson, “Black Music as an Art Form,” *Black Music Research Journal* 3/2 (1983): 1–22.

19 Duke Ellington, “My Hunt for Song Titles,” *Rhythm*, August 1933, 22–23. Reprinted in *Ellington Reader*, ed. Tucker, 88.

20 Ibid., 89.

21 *Ellington Reader*, ed. Tucker, 49–50.

22 Ellington’s stage remarks appear on the CD *The Duke Ellington Carnegie Hall Concerts: January 1943* (Prestige 2PCD-34004–2).