

Editor's introduction: Ellington and Aesthetic Realism

EDWARD GREEN

I am among a large and ever-increasing number of people who see Duke Ellington as America's greatest composer. I also think a good case can be made that, all in all, Ellington, who lived from 1899 to 1974, was the most influential composer of the twentieth century – for jazz, with its various stylistic offspring, has had more impact worldwide than any other form of modern music. And Ellington is acknowledged almost universally as the greatest of all jazz composers.¹

Jazz is a word inseparable from Ellington; a word he lovingly embraced, but far more frequently disavowed, sometimes fiercely. He wanted his music seen in a wider and more inclusive light, and felt that the term, used casually, would interfere with people listening deeply and truly to what he had to say. Jazz composer, African-American composer, big band composer: these descriptions all highlight important aspects of his musical career. But if we stop there, and don't go deeper, we will miss the fullness of who Ellington was, and the largest meaning his work can have for us.

I learned from *Aesthetic Realism*, the philosophy founded in the early 1940s by the great American poet and scholar Eli Siegel: art shows reality as it truly is – the oneness of opposites.² The greater the work of art, the more that is so. The size of a musical artist is in proportion to how much of the world is present in his or her work: the depth of the world; its variety; its width; its integrity over time. It is the world we are meeting when sounds come our way, and we are looking for sounds that will tell us the truth about that world.

It is in this fundamental principle of *Aesthetic Realism*: “The world, art, and self explain each other: each is the aesthetic oneness of opposites.”³ Through this magnificent idea – which has widely affected scholars and critics these past decades, though far too often without acknowledgement – one can see the true relation of art and life.⁴ I have found it invaluable in my study of Duke Ellington. It is the key to appreciating the greatness of his music, and the meaning of music, as such.

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Ellington and the opposites

In Ellington's masterpieces – compositions such as *The Mooche*, *Harlem Air Shaft*, *East St. Louis Toodle-O*, *Jack the Bear* and *Concerto for Cootie* – we meet vibrant energy and deep thoughtfulness, passion, and control. Again and again, his music swings with intensity, yet also with natural ease. Just think, for example, of *Cotton Tail*. Opposites are convincingly, beautifully together – joined in a way we hope they can be in our own lives.

There are, in Ellington's finest works, a true composition of roughness and velvet smoothness; a sense of the orderliness of the world and its confusion. Sounds are heavy, yet also winsome in their lightness. Sounds are wide, but also edgy; painfully thrusting, yet also lovely, suffusing, tender. There is surprise after sonic surprise; at the same time, there is the *beat* and an unshakable continuity of musical design. We hear poise, elegance, sophistication; we are also in the presence of a sincere, "primitive" wildness that comes straight from the gut.

It is honest, stirring music. Duke Ellington, by putting opposites together, gives us the opportunity to have emotions about the world and the human self that are grand and logical and beautiful. I love him for it.

Earlier jazz literature has given illustrations of the presence of opposites in Ellington, though without seeing the large philosophic significance of that fact. Consider, for example, these words by the British critic Vic Bellerby, taken from Peter Gammond's classic 1958 anthology of essays, *Duke Ellington: His Life and Music*. Bellerby describes how we can hear in *Black and Tan Fantasy*, a masterpiece of the 1920s:

[a] unification of elements, apparently so diverse. The creamy alto of Otto Hardwick and Ellington's dreamy blues piano have little in common with the opening hymn-like chant and the desperate protests of the brass men; but the whole is so fused together that it would be impossible to add or subtract one single note.⁵

When Bellerby says this music is both "desperate" and "dreamy," yet these elements are "fused together," he is pointing to the opposites in Ellington's art. And we can see also in his words evidence for the Aesthetic Realism idea that art has within it the answers to the problems we face in life. How, for example, can we have integrity, even as we experience emotions that are so contradictory – pleasure and pain, anger and love? How can our "protests" and our sense of the world as deserving "hymn-like" praise go together? But that, as we can see through Bellerby's description, is *exactly* what Ellington and his musicians do!

And doing it, they have achieved something big, aesthetically and ethically.

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Like of the world

True art satisfies a great need. Eli Siegel was the philosopher who explained that everyone's deepest desire is to like the world on an honest basis. In art, the conflicts we find in ourselves and in the world are resolved. We go deeper into the truth of things; we see the inseparability of opposites; we experience beauty.

Ellington's suavity, his sensuality, his poignant lyricism, his sophistication, his sly and often politically subversive humor, his advocacy of the grandeur, scope and dignity of "Negro" life, even his inspired roughness (a.k.a. his "jungle style") – all of these are put forward as central to his musical personality. They are all there; importantly so. Yet the most pervasive thing in Ellington, in my opinion, and the thing which ultimately matters most, is *joy*.

This joy is philosophic; it is present when the thing we yearn most to see, we *do* see: the profound friendship that is possible between ourselves and the outside world. It is the joy told of, in his own way, by the great English Romantic William Wordsworth in the "Prospectus" to his poem *The Recluse*:

... my voice proclaims
 How exquisitely the individual Mind
 (And the progressive powers perhaps no less
 Of the whole species) to the external World
 Is fitted: – and how exquisitely, too –
 ...
 The external World is fitted to the Mind ...

This joy is not limited to bright, happy things; it takes them in but goes further. It has more courage. A true artist – and Ellington was that – proceeds, even in the midst of heartbreak, on the belief that the world will provide the material needed to express oneself sincerely and beautifully. Art is always the victorious discovery of the fittingness Wordsworth proclaimed.

The Mooche

As an example of the power of art to find something joyous in uncomfortable territory – the kind of territory most frequently used by people to hate the world – we can look at the opening measures of what, I believe, is the greatest music from Ellington's early years: *The Mooche*. It is a work filled with sounds that are strange, painful, snarling, disorderly – yet what is its upshot? A thrilling affirmation of life.

Ellington composed *The Mooche* in conjunction with his lead trumpeter, Bubber Miley. The very first sonority we meet, in the famed recording of

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October 1, 1928, is harsh and unsettling. That ghostly trio of clarinets in C minor, hovering high above, sinuous and eerie, is a sound at once remote and impinging. There is terror in the vast and empty space separating the clarinets from the weighted tread of the bass four octaves below. All this we hear immediately; and the sense of the world as dissonant and painful is insisted on further when Miley joins in with brassy snarls on *muted* trumpet, adding to the feeling of suppression and struggle.

There is likewise unease in the harmony. In the center of the opening eight-bar phrase, the clarinets, after slithering down chromatically, suddenly pause. They rest on a double whole note for measures 3 and 4, and on another for measures 5 and 6. These held tones are very stable rhythmically. But is stability the message of the harmony? Hardly! We feel disruption, eeriness, a sense of standing on quicksand – and why? Because the piece begins explicitly in C minor, and the first double whole note finds the clarinets resting on a B9 chord, far away from that key. The next double whole note comes on an even more tonally distant sonority: a whole-tone sonority, which, in 1928, would be guaranteed to give a “lost-at-sea” effect.

Just seconds into the composition, our sense of key and of the stability of the tonal universe has been shattered. We have been wrenched off center. But then what happens? Ellington returns us, so gracefully, directly back to C minor, and the lead clarinet settles in measure 7 on the most harmonically solid possible note (the tonic, over an equally firm tonic harmony). We hear the astonishing boldness of the not-yet 30-year-old artist. He is asserting a world at once off-kilter and balanced, a world of confusion and clarity. And he is showing the *coherence* of that world: a world at once wrong and ever-so-right.⁶

Why does this matter? The biggest fight in everyone, I learned from Aesthetic Realism, concerns the question: How much can the world honestly be liked? Does the world, including the world of other people, deserve my contempt or my respect? At any one moment (though we are not ordinarily conscious of it) we are choosing one attitude or the other. Either we are impelled to make less of the meaning of people and things, thinking that by contrast we rise in our self-esteem; or, we base our like of ourselves on our power to be fair to the world not ourselves. The mistake, I learned, made by people throughout history is to try to build a personality for oneself through private victories of contempt. One form this took in me as a young man was not wanting to get too stirred up by things. I was uncomfortable having feeling I couldn't control. That was certainly the case in situations which were in emotional territory like that of *The Mooche*. When things were difficult, and demanded deeper emotional involvement from me, I kept my distance.

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At the time I thought this was smart; I hadn't the slightest idea how anti-art my attitude was. In fact, as was then fashionable among conservatory students, I was a devotee of the abstractionist view of music, and associated success in art with cool and impressive technical mastery.

Some years later, in classes I attended taught by Eli Siegel, I began to learn how much this "cool" way of mind held me back, both in music and in life. With much kindness, he asked me in a 1977 class discussion: "Do you think at times the desire to let go, to be as intense as one can be, is sensible?" And he continued: "You like to see yourself as the master of any situation. But is it wise in any way to have a feeling tell you what to do? What do you think inspiration is: the sudden command of a feeling, or letting the feeling tell you what to do?"

These questions were great, and affected me very much. I began to ask whether I was – despite my love for music – harboring attitudes within me that hurt my art. I told Eli Siegel how important I felt these questions were for my life, and how new. He then continued, bringing the discussion even more directly to music: "In 1810, Beethoven had sounds working in him, and he felt they were telling him what to do, and that the first thing was to get them down. Was that sensible?" Yes, I said, it certainly was. "All sincerity," Mr. Siegel then explained, "is yielding to the meaning of something outside oneself. Now, there are some people who feel strength is in *not* having too big a feeling; and if they do have it, to hide it. But when we do that, we become like the weaker moments of any artist – contrived. When we really feel something, reality tells us what to do. In the field of music, if you are really fortunate, the notes will tell you what to do."

That is what, to my ear, happens in *The Mooche*. In this truly inspired work, early in the "Cotton Club" period, Ellington, Miley, and the band as a whole are finding beauty amid the roughness and irregularity of things. They are finding order within disorder; sweetness within what seems, at first, merely harsh and unsettling. They are saying: "You don't have to turn away from the world and have contempt for it in order to take care of yourself. You can be completely honest about the most painful and terrible things, not water them down a bit, and yet have a sense of beauty – a feeling of being alive in a world that honestly can be liked."

Ellington's love for the concrete, visual world

Ellington, who grew up in Washington, D.C., studied the visual arts in high school and was talented enough to earn a full scholarship to

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New York's Pratt Institute. As it turned out, he didn't go to Pratt; he made his career in music. But the feeling he had for the beauty and power of the visual world – the world of actual people, objects, and events – never left him. And he wanted his music to convey it.

On jazz terms, he was aiming after what Berlioz, Liszt, Strauss, and Rimsky-Korsakov likewise aimed for. Bach, too, with his *Capriccio on the Departure of His Beloved Brother*. Or, closer to home, Gershwin with his *An American in Paris*. Ellington preferred the term “tone parallel,” which he coined, to the European concept of the tone poem, but the idea in essence was the same: to create compositions which hold together well on strictly structural terms, yet express what the world is like, in terms of a specific story or picture.

For a good deal of the twentieth century, especially in academic circles, a cool, structuralist philosophy of music prevailed. The idea that music was impelled by deep, large, and passionate feeling about the world and people was largely put aside. One could read journal article after journal article brimming with technical talk, and find an emotional desert.

Ellington's view was very different. He wanted his music to be in touch with life always; to deal with and express his feeling about the concrete world. “In my writing,” he told Richard O. Boyer in a 1944 interview for *The New Yorker*, “there's always a mental picture. That's the way I was raised up in music. In the old days, when a guy made a lick, he'd say what it reminded him of. He'd make the lick and say, ‘It sounds like my old man falling downstairs’ or ‘It sounds like a crazy guy doing this or that.’ I remember ole Bubber Miley taking a lick and saying, ‘That reminds me of Miss Jones singin’ in church.’”⁷ And as Boyer reports it, Ellington then repeated nearly word for word what he said earlier: “That's the way I was raised up in music. I always have a mental picture.” He wanted there to be no doubt where his aesthetic sympathies lay.

Among the compositions which illustrate this point is his *Harlem Air Shaft* of 1940. It is an amazing picture in sound of the sheer diversity of life found in a Harlem apartment building. But what is most noteworthy is not the cataloguing of the diversity of upper Manhattan life; it is how Duke Ellington “composed” it, bringing unity to that diversity through musically coherent form. That, I think, is what this piece is all about, and why it matters. It is his way of saying joyously, through the language of music: “World – bring on your diversity, your disorder. Bring on the way things get tangled up, and ugly with each other. We'll find order there; we'll find the unity; we'll find beauty!”

In the Boyer interview Ellington tells us, “You get the full essence of Harlem in an air shaft.” The piece, he says, included musical images of barking dogs, an aerial falling down and breaking a window, “intimate

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gossip,” and energetic jitterbuggers dancing away – “always over you, never below you.” There are fights and lovemaking, someone cooking a great meal, and someone else, he noted, “doing a sad job” with a turkey. And, he said, “you can smell coffee.”⁸

How colorful this description is! Some of it, admittedly, may be exaggerated for the purpose of entertaining an interviewer. And Boyer himself clearly wanted to write an engaging piece. He gave it a striking title: “The Hot Bach.” But as I showed in a 2011 article for the *Journal of Jazz Studies*, what Ellington says is in the music, pretty much *is* there.⁹ Ellington was proud of his ability to get the tangible world into his compositions, and was right to be. It was a sign of his imaginative love for reality.¹⁰

Ellington scholarship, past and present

The Gammond collection of 1958, which includes the Vic Bellerby essay I cited earlier, has a historic place in Ellington scholarship. It was the first multi-author, full-length study of the composer. I am grateful for it; and in various ways, as I set this book in motion, I had it as my model. I wanted the authors to have diverse backgrounds. There are noted jazz musicians; professional critics; and musicologists, both academic and non-academic, including several not from the U.S. – which is fitting, since Ellington is an international figure. There is also a member of his immediate family: a nephew, Stephen James, who was in a position to see Ellington interact with his band in ways never before reported. I want also to take this opportunity to thank my associate editor, Evan Spring, whose keen eye for factual accuracy, and love for and knowledge of Ellington’s music, helped the book take form. I am hardly the only contributor to this volume who benefited from his careful observations.

Returning to the Gammond anthology, one of its most important essays is by Burnett James. Titled “Ellington’s Place as a Composer,” it asks where Ellington stands in relation to certain enduring artistic principles – principles not limited to jazz. Above all, James is dealing with the opposites of logic and emotion: of the need for music to have impersonal structural integrity, and also heartfelt personal feeling:

What matters in the present context is that Duke Ellington has achieved to an increasing extent throughout his career as a composer the first requirement of all creative artists – that is, the proper solution to the equation between form and content, between feeling and expression. All his best compositions are remarkable for a quite unusual felicity in finding the exact form and texture necessary to bring the inner emotion to life. He habitually surpasses not only other jazz composers but many straight

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composers also in the ability to prevent form in music from becoming mere formalism. His music grows out of an internal compulsion that is not dependent on and tied rigidly to a pre-conceived method or formula. Melody, harmony, rhythmic emphasis, and orchestral texture are all of a piece, and a unified part of the creative process.¹¹

Notice the use by James of the phrase “all his best compositions.” Some fans of Ellington try to show their enthusiasm through blanket approbation. But this is not fair, and not accurate. Ellington toured constantly, performing on the average well over a hundred concerts or nightclub appearances a year, let alone dozens of dances and recording sessions. He had to snatch off-moments on a bus, or on a train at 2 a.m., to write his music. He had to oversee a myriad of complex business details, often on a daily basis. Perhaps no other composer ever worked under such physically demanding circumstances. Let us also remember that this was Ellington’s schedule, year-in, year-out, for roughly a half-century. Under these conditions, naturally some of his work falls short of the very highest standards. The extraordinary thing, given that exhausting schedule, is just how often superb music did emerge!

Ellington and rhythm

Rhythm is a key reason why Ellington’s best music is exactly that – *superb!* I think he knew it early on. His career-long focus on rhythm is clear enough from the title to one of his most famous songs: “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing).” It is a focus he shared with nearly all of the world’s great musicians. The legendary nineteenth-century conductor and pianist Hans von Bülow, for example, famously said: “In the beginning was Rhythm.” Charming words, and, in my opinion, a very respectful gloss on the Bible.

Why does rhythm deserve such intense praise? Because, as Eli Siegel explained in an essay titled “Conflict as Possibility,” through rhythm we can see the world as making sense.¹² In a true rhythm, we feel conflict *as conflict*, yet simultaneously as *resolution*.

In Duke Ellington’s powerful (and powerfully subtle) rhythms, contradictory qualities are set against each other: slowness and speed, acceleration and drag, jumpiness and glide. We hear momentum and sudden pause; the stop and go of things. We hear sustained sounds, and sounds that embody the fleetingness of things. We hear weighty, accented sounds, and sounds with enchanting lightness. The pace goes on in an unbroken manner, yet there are shocks that take us completely by surprise. There is the groove, whose steady repetitions give us confidence, and there are

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Example 0.1. Core thematic motif of Duke Ellington's *Concerto for Cootie*. Publishing rights administered by EMI Robbins Catalog Inc. (ASCAP) and Sony ATV Harmony (ASCAP).



sounds which seem to come straight out of left field – sounds that remain eternally unexpected no matter how often we've heard the music.

An Ellingtonian rhythm can seem perfectly straightforward, yet complexity will nestle within, just waiting for us to notice it. Let me now give a technical example, which I find thrilling. It comes from my favorite work by Ellington, *Concerto for Cootie*, recorded in 1940, about four months before *Harlem Air Shaft*.

The example will be a single musical phrase: the famous seven-bar phrase that begins the trumpet's melody. Incidentally, hardly anyone else in jazz ever used seven-bar phrases, let alone so gracefully.

It is well established that the core idea in this phrase, heard in measures 1 and 2, was a "warm-up" lick invented by Cootie Williams himself. Throughout his career, Ellington, with his keen ears, was quick to recognize the potential for compositional development in ideas percolating among the musicians in his band. Sometimes he gave formal credit to the band member who originated it; sometimes (not so honorably) he did not.¹³ At other times he would pay a player for the right to work creatively with his material. That was the case with this lick by Cootie (Example 0.1).

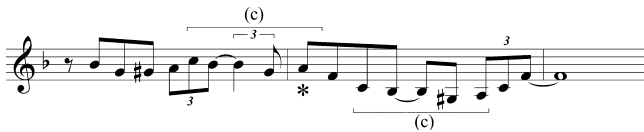
It is a pattern of eight notes which divides naturally into groupings of seven and one. In measure 1, there are seven relatively swift notes that gently swing at a moderate pace. In measure 2, by contrast, there is a single sustained note. What did Ellington hear in this musical design that so intrigued and inspired him? The world as contradiction. Manyess, then unity; motion, then rest. But together we have one beautifully coherent musical phrase.

At first glance the phrase seems fairly simple, but there is a good deal of complexity just beneath the surface. We hear the complexity when we remember that rhythm cannot be isolated from melody; they interpenetrate in our experience of music. As we pay attention to this melody, the rhythm takes on new dimensions of liveliness.

Let's see how. The first four pitches in this eight-note pattern are B \flat , G, G \sharp , A. Then a C. Then – and this is the point to concentrate on – the final three pitches (marked "b" in Example 0.1) cover exactly the same ground as the opening four (marked "a"). As with the "a" notes, the "b" notes start with B \flat and end with A, but with a signal difference: the G \sharp is now absent. As a result, there is a subtle "rush" as we push towards the final note in the phrase.

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Example 0.2. *Concerto for Cootie*, opening trumpet melody, measures 5–7. Publishing rights administered by EMI Robbins Catalog Inc. (ASCAP) and Sony ATV Harmony (ASCAP).



Remarkably – and this is the art of it – this compact, three-note version of the basic melodic idea (traveling from B \flat to A) is designed so that we experience it not only as an acceleration, but simultaneously as a “stretching out.” How does he do this? By making both halves of the phrase end on an A, but the second A is now a whole note, eight times longer than the first A.

So far I have only talked about two measures of music; still five to go! And at first, Ellington’s plan for developing that lick seems almost childishly simple. Measures 3 and 4 are in essence a repetition of what we’ve just heard. Measure 5 makes us feel that yet another simple repetition will be in store. But no – in this third presentation, when the final note arrives, it is not a sustained whole note as before, but passes by as quickly as the seven notes preceding it.

Technically, this short A – marked with an asterisk in Example 0.2 – is an *elision*. It is, at once, the conclusion of one melodic unit and the beginning of another. It is also the last note of one 7+1 rhythmic pattern and the initial note of another.

One further point to notice: this final group of 7+1 has a very different melodic contour than the earlier groups. They travel modestly, in tight circles: C as the highest note, G the lowest. Their compass is limited. By contrast, this fourth and last group swoops boldly down and up, spanning more than a full octave: from high A down to a low G \sharp . Yet what do we find right in its midst? C, B \flat , G \sharp , A: the same notes in the same order (marked “c”) we heard back in measures 1, 3 and 5, only now an octave lower and shifted just a bit in rhythmic placement.¹⁴ It is wonderful, musically and ethically wonderful. Difference, this music tells us, is likewise sameness!

In February, 1925, soon after Eli Siegel won the prestigious poetry prize of *The Nation* magazine, the 22-year-old author was quoted in the *Baltimore Sun* on the subject of jazz, showing a respect for it *as art* without parallel for that time. He spoke of its “metaphysical ecstasy.”¹⁵ And in a column for the *Baltimore American* two months later, he continued to affirm the philosophic depth of jazz, pointing in particular to its rhythms, and its important, new, and thrilling junction of the subtle and the elemental.

When rhythm is great, I learned from him, it meets our primal need to see the world as both coherent and surprising. “As you hear sound you