Jazz at Lincoln Center Library

Things Ain't What or They Used to Be

COMPOSED BY MERCER ELLINGTON

ARRANGED BY DUKE ELLINGTON

TRANSCRIBED BY DAVID BERGER FOR JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER

FULL SCORE

This transcription was made especially for *Essentially Ellington* 2002: the Seventh Annual Jazz at Lincoln Center High School Jazz Band Competition & Festival.

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NOTES ON PLAYING ELLINGTON

At least 95% of modern-day large ensemble jazz playing comes out of three traditions: Count Basie's band, Duke Ellington's band, and the orchestrations of small groups. Those young players interested in jazz will be drawn to small groups for the opportunity to improvise and for practical reasons (it is much easier to organize four or five people than it is 15). Schools have taken over the task (formerly performed by dance bands) of training musicians to be ensemble players. Due to the Basie Band's popularity and its simplicity of style and emphasis on blues and swing, the better educators have almost exclusively adopted this tradition for teaching jazz ensemble playing. As wonderful as Count Basie's style is, it doesn't address many of the important styles developed under the great musical umbrella we call jazz. Duke Ellington's comprehensive and eclectic approach to music offers an alternative.

The stylistic richness of Ellington's music presents a great challenge to educators and performers alike. In Basie's music, the conventions are very nearly consistent. In Ellington's, there are many more exceptions to the rules. This calls for greater knowledge of the language of jazz. Clark Terry, who left Count Basie's band to join Duke Ellington, said, "Count Basie was college, but Duke Ellington was graduate school." Knowledge of Ellington's music prepares you to play any big band music.

The following is a list of performance conventions for the great majority of Ellington's music. Any deviations or additions will be spelled out in the individual performance notes that follow.

- 1. Listen carefully many times to the Ellington recording of these pieces. There are many subtleties that will elude even the most sophisticated listener at first. Although it was never Ellington's wish to have his recordings imitated, knowledge of these definitive versions will lead musicians to make more educated choices when creating new performances. Ellington's music, though written for specific individuals, is designed to inspire all musicians to express themselves. In addition, you will hear slight note differences in the recording and the transcriptions. This is intentional because there are mistakes and alterations from the original intent of the music in the recording. You should have your players play what's in the score.
- 2. General use of swing phrasing: The triplet feel prevails except for ballads or where notations such as even eighths or Latin appear. In these cases, eighth notes are given equal value.
- 3. There is a chain of command in ensemble playing. The lead players in each section determine the phrasing and volume for their own section, and their section-mates must conform to the lead. When the saxes and/or trombones play with the trumpets, the lead trumpet is the boss. The lead alto and trombone must listen to the first trumpet and follow her. In turn, the other saxes and trombones must follow their lead players. When the clarinet leads the brass section, the brass should not overblow him. That means that the first trumpet is actually playing "second." If this is done effectively, there will be very little balancing work left for the conductor.
- 4. In Ellington's music, each player should express the individuality of his own line. He must find a musical balance of supporting and following the section leader and bringing out the character of the underpart. Each player should be encouraged to express his or her personality through the music. In this music, the underparts are played at the same volume and with the same conviction as the lead.
- 5. Blues inflection should permeate all parts at all times, not just when these opportunities occur in the lead.
- 6. Vibrato is used quite a bit to warm up the sound. Saxes (who most frequently represent the sensual side of things) usually employ a heavy vibrato on harmonized passages and a slight vibrato on unisons. Trumpets (who very often are used for heat and power) use a little vibrato on harmonized passages and no vibrato on unisons. Trombones (who are usually noble) do not use slide vibrato. A little lip vibrato is good at times. Try to match the speed of vibrato. Unisons are played with no vibrato.

- 7. Crescendo as you ascend and diminuendo as you descend. The upper notes of phrases receive a natural accent, and the lower notes are ghosted. Alto and tenor saxophones need to use subtone in the lower part of their range in order to blend properly with the rest of the section. This music was originally written with no dynamics. It pretty much follows the natural tendencies of the instruments; play loudly in the loud part of the instrument and softly in the soft part of the instrument. For instance, a high C for a trumpet will be loud, and a low C will be soft.
- 8. Quarter notes are generally played short unless otherwise notated. Long marks above or below a pitch indicate full value: not just long, but full value. Eighth notes are played full value except when followed by a rest or otherwise notated. All notes longer than a quarter note are played full value, which means if it is followed by a rest, release the note where the rest appears. For example, a half note occurring on beat 1 of a measure would be released on beat 3.
- 9. Unless they are part of a legato background figure, long notes should be played somewhat fp, accent and then diminish the volume. This is important so that the moving parts can be heard over the sustained notes. Don't just hold out the long notes, but give them life and personality, that is, vibrato, inflection, crescendo, or diminuendo. There is a great deal of inflection in this music, and much of this is highly interpretive. Straight or curved lines imply non-pitched glisses, and wavy lines mean scalar (chromatic or diatonic) glisses. In general, all rhythmic figures need to be accented. Accents give the music life and swing. This is very important.
- 10. Ellington's music is about individuality: one person per part—do not double up because you have extra players or need more strength. More than one on a part makes it sound more like a concert band and less like a jazz band.
- 11. This is accustic music. Keep amplification to an absolute minimum; in the best halls, almost no amplification should be necessary. Everyone needs to develop a big sound. It is the conductor's job to balance the band. When a guitar is used, it should be a hollow-body, unamplified rhythm guitar. Simple three-note voicings should be used throughout. An acoustic string bass is a must. In mediocre or poorly designed halls, the bass and piano may need a bit of a boost. I recommend miking them and putting them through the house sound system. This should provide a much better tone than an amplifier. Keep in mind that the rhythm section's primary function is to accompany. The bass should not be as loud as a trumpet. That is unnatural and leads to overamplification, bad tone, and limited dynamics. Stay away from monitors. They provide a false sense of balance.
- 12. Solos and rhythm section parts without chord changes should be played as is or with a little embellishment. Solos and rhythm section parts with chord changes should be improvised. However, written passages should be learned because they are an important part of our jazz heritage and help the player understand the function of his particular solo or accompaniment. Soloists should learn the chord changes. Solos should not be approached as opportunities to show off technique, range, or volume, but should be looked at as a great opportunity to further develop the interesting thematic material that Ellington has provided.
- 13. The notation of plungers for the brass means a rubber toilet plunger bought in a hardware store. Kirkhill is a very good brand (especially if you can find one of their old rubber ones, like the one I loaned Wynton and he lost). Trumpets use 5" diameter and trombones use 6" diameter. Where Plunger/Mute is notated, insert a pixie mute in the bell and use the plunger over the mute. Pixies are available from Humes & Berg in Chicago. Tricky Sam Nanton and his successors in the Ellington plunger trombone chair did not use pixies. Rather, each of them employed a Nonpareil (that's the brand name) trumpet straight mute. Nonpareil has gone out of business, but the Tom Crown Nonpareil trumpet straight mute is very close to the same thing. These mutes create a wonderful sound (very close tothe human voice), but they also create some intonation problems that must be corrected by the lip only. It would be easier to move the tuning slide, but part of the sound is in the struggle to correct the pitch. If this proves too much, stick with the pixie—it's pretty close.

- 14. The drummer is the de facto leader of the band. He establishes the beat and controls the volume of the ensemble. For big band playing, the drummer needs to use a larger bass drum than he would for small group drumming. A 22" is preferred. The bass drum is played softly (nearly inaudible) on each beat. This is called feathering the bass drum. It provides a very important bottom to the band. The bass drum sound is not a boom and not a thud—it's in between. The larger size drum is necessary for the kicks; a smaller drum just won't be heard. The key to this style is just to keep time. A rim knock on two and four (chopping wood) is used to lock in the swing. When it comes to playing fills, the fewer, the better.
- 15. The horn players should stand for their solos and solis. Brass players should come down front for moderate to long solos, surrounding rests permitting. The same applies to the pep section (two trumpets and one trombone in plunger/mutes).
- 16. Horns should pay close attention to attacks and releases. Everyone should hit together and end together.
- 17. Brass must be very precise when playing short notes. Notes must be stopped with the tongue, à la Louis Armstrong!
- 18. Above all, everyone's focus should remain at all times on the swing. As the great bassist Chuck Israels says, "The three most important things in jazz are rhythm, rhythm, and rhythm, in that order." Or as Bubber Miley (Ellington's first star trumpeter) said, "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing."

GLOSSARY

The following are terms that describe conventions of jazz performance, from traditional New Orleans to the present avant garde.

Break — within the context of an ongoing time feel, the rhythm section stops for one, two, or four bars. Very often a soloist will improvise during a break.

Call-and-response — repetitive pattern of contrasting exchanges (derived from the church procedure of the minister making a statement and the congregation answering with "amen"). Call-and-response patterns usually pit one group of instruments against another. Sometimes we call this "trading fours," "trading twos," etc., especially when it involves improvisation. The numbers denote the amount of measures each soloist or group plays. Another term frequently used is "swapping fours."

Comp — improvise accompaniment (for piano or quitar).

Groove — the composite rhythm. This generally refers to the combined repetitive rhythmic patterns of the drums, bass, piano, and guitar but may also include repetitive patterns in the horns. Some grooves are standard (i.e., swing, bossa nova, samba) while others are manufactured (original combinations of rhythms).

Head — melody chorus.

Interlude — a different form (of relatively short length) sandwiched between two chorus forms. Interludes that set up a key change are simply called modulations.

Intro — short for introduction.

Ride pattern — the most common repetitive figure played by the drummer's right hand on the ride cymbal or hi-hat.



Riff — a repeated melodic figure. Very often, riffs repeat verbatim or with slight alterations while the harmonies change underneath them.

Shout chorus — also known as the "out chorus," the "sock chorus," or sometimes shortened to just "the shout." It is the final ensemble passage of most big band charts and where the climax most often happens.

Soli — a harmonized passage for two or more instruments playing the same rhythm. It is customary for horn players to stand up or even move in front of the band when playing these passages. This is done so that the audience can hear them better and to provide the audience with some visual interest. A soli sound particular to Ellington's music combines two trumpets and a trombone in plungers/mutes in triadic harmony. This is called the pep section.

Stop time — a regular pattern of short breaks (usually filled in by a soloist).

Swing — the perfect confluence of rhythmic tension and relaxation in music creating a feeling of euphoria and characterized by accented weak beats (a democratization of the beat) and eighth notes that are played as the first and third eighth notes of an eighth-note triplet. Duke Ellington's definition of swing: when the music feels like it is getting faster, but it isn't.

Vamp — a repeated two- or four-bar chord progression. Very often, there may be a riff or riffs played on the vamp.

Voicing — the specific spacing, inversion, and choice of notes that make up a chord. For instance, two voicings for G7 could be



Note that the first voicing includes a 9th and the second voicing includes a 9 and a 13. The addition of 9ths, 11ths, 13ths, and alterations are up to the discretion of the pianist and soloist.

THE FOUR ELEMENTS OF MUSIC

The following are placed in their order of importance in jazz. We should never lose perspective on this order of priority.

RHYTHM — meter, tempo, groove, and form, including both melodic rhythm and harmonic rhythm (the speed and regularity of the chord changes).

MELODY — what players play: a tune or series of notes.

HARMONY — chords and voicings.

ORCHESTRATION — instrumentation and tone colors.

David Berger

Special thanks to Andrew Homzy for editing.

THINGS AIN'T WHAT THEY USED TO BE

INSTRUMENTATION:

Reed 1 Alto Sax Trumpet 4
Reed 2 Alto Sax Trombone 1
Reed 3 Tenor Sax Trombone 2
Reed 4 Tenor Sax Trombone 3 (valve)
Reed 5 Baritone Sax Piano

Trumpet 1 Bass
Trumpet 2 Drums

Trumpet 3

ORIGINAL RECORDING INFORMATION:

Things Ain't What They Used to Be by Mercer Ellington (2:56) Arranged by Duke Ellington Recorded 9/8/59, New York City Festival Session (Columbia COL 468202 2)

Johnny Hodges, Russell Procope, Jimmy Hamilton, Paul Gonsalves, Harry Carney, reeds; Cat Anderson, Willie Cook, Clark Terry, Shorty Baker, Fats Ford, trumpets; Ray Nance, cornet; Britt Woodman, Quentin Jackson, trombones; John Sanders, valve trombone; Duke Ellington, piano; Jimmy Woode, bass; Sam Woodyard, drums.

REHEARSAL NOTES:

- Things Ain't What They Used to Be is one of the best-known blues tunes in jazz. Many years ago Sonny Greer told me that although Duke's son, Mercer, is credited as the composer, it was actually written by Ellington's star alto saxophonist, Johnny Hodges, and that Hodges lost it to Mercer in a card game. This seemed to be common knowledge in the Ellington band and explains its appearance on a Hodges small group record of 1941 (the time he composed it) and its continued use as a feature for Hodges for the rest of his life.
- Aside from this particular arrangement, there is the original Hodges small group recording with Ellington and a 1943 recording of a full band arrangement.
- The form is a four-bar piano intro (call-and-response with the drums), one 12-bar blues melody chorus, a four-bar send-off with four more measures (an eight-bar blues chorus), and concludes with five 12-bar blues choruses (the last of which has a five-bar tag).
- The piano introduction is one of the greatest intros in all jazz. It should be played forcefully with a great feeling of swing and joy. It should tell us that something truly exuberant is about to follow. The rhythm of this piece is a shuffle, which means that every eighth note is swung (triplet feeling). The piano and drums set this up in the first four beats: there is no time to warm up and find the groove—they must come in swinging.

- The sax/trombone melody needs to be played boldly, but not all that loudly, so that a good unison blend can be achieved. When the trumpets enter in the eighth bar, they should hold their plungers still halfway over their bells. This is not a wan-wah effect but merely a mute coloring indicated on the parts as no inflections.
- The soloist and rhythm section players must learn the transcribed parts before venturing into their own interpretations.
- Johnny Hodges was the undisputed greatest alto player in jazz from 1930 until Charlie Parker came on the national scene in the mid-'40s. Nicknamed "Rabbit" (and sometimes "Jeep" or "Squatty Roo"), he was the master balladeer and blues player. His trademarks were his luscious sound and his subtle way of bending the pitch to create drama. Although copying his style could at best result in imitation. I suggest trying to incorporate some of his approach within a blues context and not try to play bebop licks. Incidentally, Hodges performed this piece every night for nearly 30 years with Duke. His solos tended to use much of the same material but arranged in a different order.
- Note: Letter **B** is only eight measures in length. This is a bit unusual, and rhythm sections mistakenly think that they are playing a 12-bar blues chorus. We call it the curse of **Things Ain't What They Used to Be**.
- If you want to open up the chart for extra solo choruses, letter **D** is the place. This is not necessary (the chart works perfectly well with no repeats), but it is an option.
- Letter **E** is a great example of the skronch. Bars 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10 all have an accent on the fourth beat in the trombones and drums. In fact, the drummer doesn't play the downbeat in the following bar in order to give more emphasis to the skronch. Notice that the soloist, piano, and bass ignore this pattern and continue the swing.
- Letter **F** is a soft shout chorus, which is repeated, loudly, at **G** with the saxophones adding their Kansas City blues theme. The trumpets waving their hat mutes is not only a great aural effect but also a wonderful visual effect. Notice that the bones use plungers for these choruses. Trombones with plungers blend pretty well with the trumpet hats. Special consideration should be made to coordinate all the opens and closes so that everyone is moving at the same time and rate. This will not only sound better, but it will also look better to the audience.
- The first trumpet shakes at **G** are optional.
- Although there are a few little touches of harmonic, melodic, rhythmic, and orchestrational nuance, 98% of this piece is shuffle and blues. No one should ever lose sight of that. The soloist and the rhythm section must be swinging from beginning to end.
- About the title: Hodges' subtitle was "...And They Never Was."

COMMENTS FROM WYNTON MARSALIS:

A quintessential shuffle, this familiar groove is hard for students to play because they are instinctively drawn to early rock 'n' roll's back-beat shuffle. It's important for our students to listen to a lot of different shuffles to get an understanding of the subtleties and nuances of this type of piece. We have to do a lot of work with our drummer and bassist to make sure the shuffle is maintained correctly. It's also important for the bassist to be very solid and downbeat-oriented so that the shuffle can bounce off of a steady foundation. Note that the horn players must be in sync with the drummer, shuffling the eighth notes in the exact same time feel.

As always, beware of dragging, especially during ensemble sections, such as the passage from four before **B** to **B**3. In addition, our soloists must learn some blues vocabulary. I suggest that students check out blues players like Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, and Robert Johnson.

Finally, the hat and plunger work at the end of this arrangement can be tricky. Our brass players must position themselves so that mikes pick up the sound even when the mutes are closed.















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ESSENTIALLY ELLINGTON

The Jazz at Lincoln Center *Essentially Ellington* High School Jazz Band Competition & Festival is one of the most prestigious and unique educational programs available for high school jazz bands in North America. Its goals are to disseminate Duke Ellington compositions to high school jazz bands, encourage the study and performance of Ellington's music, and foster mentoring relationships between students and professional musicians. *Essentially Ellington* was introduced in 1996, has expanded every year, and is now open to every high school jazz band in the United States and Canada. Each year, Jazz at Lincoln Center produces original-arrangement scores of several Ellington works, which are sent along with other educational materials to all eligible bands expressing interest in the program. Bands can submit audition tapes of their performance of these works either for competition or "for comments only." Each band that submits a tape receives numerical and written feedback. From the competing bands, 15 bands are selected as finalists and receive free in-school workshops with J@LC musicians. *Essentially Ellington* culminates in New York City with a multiday festival comprised of master classes, a combo showcase, live competition, and a concert at Avery Fisher Hall featuring the top-placing bands, Artistic Director Wynton Marsalis, and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra.

For more information about *Essentially Ellington*, please contact Jazz at Lincoln Center Education Department, 33 W. 60th Street, New York, NY 10023, (212) 258-9800 (phone), (212) 258-9900 (fax), or ee@jazzatlincolncenter.org (e-mail).

JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER

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