PROLOGUE

"I WANT TO TELL AMERICA"

HE WAS THE most chronic of procrastinators, a man who never did today what he could put off until next month, or next year. He left letters unanswered, contracts unsigned, watches unworn, and longtime companions unwed, and the only thing harder than getting him out of bed in the afternoon was getting him to finish writing a new piece of music in time for the premiere. "I don't need time," he liked to say. "What I need is a deadline!" Nothing but an immovable deadline could spur Duke Ellington to decisive action, though once he set to work in earnest, it was with a speed and self-assurance that amazed all who beheld it. At the end of his life, he left behind some seventeen hundred–odd compositions, a number that is hard to square with the memories of his collaborators, who rarely failed at one time or another to be frustrated by his dilatory ways. That was fine with him. He knew what he needed in order to create, and as far as he was concerned, nothing and no one else mattered. "As long as something is unfinished," he told Louis Armstrong, "there's always that little feeling of insecurity. And a feeling of insecurity is absolutely necessary unless you're so rich that it doesn't matter." Few of his pronouncements can be taken at face value—he was never in the habit of telling anyone, even those who supposed themselves to be his friends, what he really thought—but this one has the

ring of truth. "He wants life and music to be in a state of becoming," said the trumpeter Clark Terry, one of the many stars of the band that Ellington led from 1924 until his death a half century later. "He doesn't even like to write definitive endings to a piece."

Whether it was true or merely one of his rationalizations for doing whatever he wanted to do whenever he wanted to do it, Ellington lived by those words. Time and again he found himself bumping up against deadlines because of his reluctance to finish what he had started. More often than not his talent got him out of the holes he dug for himself, and when it didn't, he counted on his charm to see him through. "Duke drew people to him like flies to sugar," said Sonny Greer, one of his oldest friends and his drummer for three decades. He was well aware of how charismatic he was, and used his powers without scruple whenever he thought it necessary. Once in a while, though, he cut it too close for comfort, and in the frantic days and nights leading up to his Carnegie Hall debut on January 23, 1943, some of his colleagues began to wonder whether Harlem's Aristocrat of Jazz (as his publicists dubbed him) had finally outsmarted himself.

As early as 1930 Ellington was telling reporters of his plans to compose a piece of program music about the black experience. "My *African Suite*," he called it. "It will be in five parts, starting in Africa and ending with the history of the American Negro." Sometimes he described it as a multimovement instrumental work, sometimes as an opera, but either way he made it sound as if the ink were wet on the page, and his serpentine way with words never failed to hypnotize even the most suspicious of interviewers into assuming that the curtain was about to go up. In 1933 Hannen Swaffer, an English columnist, published an interview in which Ellington spoke of the unwritten work so evocatively that you could all but hear it playing in the background:

> *I am expressing in sound the old days in the jungle, the cruel journey across the sea and the despair of the landing, and then the days of slavery. I trace the growth of a new spiritual quality and then the days in Harlem and the cities of the [United] States. Then I try to go forward a thousand years. I seek to express the future when, emancipated and transformed, the Negro takes his place, a free being, among the peoples of the world.*

Swaffer was no friend of jazz, or of blacks—he had once compared Louis Armstrong to a gorilla—but he bought Ellington's story hook, line, and

sinker. "All this was said with a quietness of dignity," he assured his readers. "I heard, almost, a whisper of prophecy."

Many more journalists would prove as willing to take Ellington at his oft-repeated word. That same year *Fortune* told its readers that he was writing "a suite in five parts . . . With this suite in his repertoire, Ellington may some day make his Carnegie Hall debut." In 1938 *Down Beat* reported that he had finished work on a full-length opera about "the history of the American Negro." The truth was less impressive. Not only had he written none of his *African Suite,* but he completed only three extended works of any kind prior to 1943, and the longest of them, *Reminiscing in Tempo,* ran for just twelve minutes, the length of the first movement of a symphony. Constant Lambert, the most perceptive of all the classically trained music critics to write about Ellington in the thirties, praised him as "the first jazz composer of distinction" and compared him to Ravel and Stravinsky, but he also acknowledged that Ellington was a "petit maître" whose best works were "written in what may be called ten-inch record form . . . Into this three and a half minutes he compresses the utmost, but beyond its limits he is inclined to fumble." Even if his *African Suite* was anything more than a fantasy, how could a petit-maître manage to pull such a work out of his hat? Instead he kept on carving one three-and-a-half-minute cameo after another, and the only sign that he wanted to do something grander was his insistence on telling credulous reporters that he had either done so or was about to.

That was Ellington's way. He talked not to explain himself but to conceal himself. Even Ruth, his adoring younger sister, said that he "definitely wasn't direct. He wasn't direct with anybody about anything." Yet he talked so fluently and impressively that nearly everyone believed him, save for those who had reason to know better. In one of his most frequently cited verbal arabesques, he claimed that "Harlem Air-Shaft," which he recorded in 1940, was a musical depiction of the sounds of black apartment life: "You hear fights, you smell dinner, you hear people making love. You hear intimate gossip floating down. You hear the radio. An air shaft is one great big loudspeaker." It's a splendidly quotable tale, so much so that one hates to point out that the composition now known as "Harlem Air-Shaft" started life as "Once Over Lightly," a title that has nothing to do with life in a Harlem apartment house. Ellington talked with similarly seductive fluency when luring women into bed, drawing on an endless supply of the come-on lines that a friend of his dubbed "crotch warmers," most of which appear on paper to be eye-rollingly florid ("I knew you were here because the whole studio was

suddenly aglow with a turquoise radiance") but which carried the force of iron conviction when spoken in his fine-grained bass-baritone voice.

Ellington kept on talking about his soon-to-be-completed tone poem–opera–symphony–suite for as long as he could get away with it. Then, in December of 1942, he stopped talking and started writing, announcing that the centerpiece of his Carnegie Hall program would be the premiere of what he now called *Black, Brown and Beige: A Tone Parallel to the History of the American Negro.* The concert, which took place six weeks later, was a celebration of his twentieth anniversary as a bandleader, and there were those, Ellington among them, who thought it far past time for him to appear at the best-known concert hall in America. Benny Goodman, after all, had played Carnegie Hall in 1938, and though three of Ellington's top sidemen, Harry Carney, Johnny Hodges, and Cootie Williams, were featured at that concert, the humiliating fact was that the King of Swing had beaten Harlem's Aristocrat of Jazz to the punch. Ellington, who was invited to sit in on piano with his own men and Goodman's rhythm section, declined with thanks but came to the concert. "He was furious," said a friend who saw him there. "He was just livid."

The event brought Goodman reams of free publicity, not to mention vast amounts of highbrow réclame, a commodity that Ellington coveted fiercely. Irving Mills, the manager who was chiefly responsible for making him a celebrity, had gone to enormous trouble to promote him not merely as the leader of a black dance band but as a musical giant. The publicity manuals that Mills Artists Inc. sent out to the managers of the theaters and ballrooms that booked Duke Ellington and His Famous Orchestra explained that he was no ordinary jazzman:

> *Sell Ellington as a great artist, a musical genius whose unique style and individual theories of harmony have created a new music. . . . Ellington's genius as a composer, arranger and musician has won him the respect and admiration of such authorities as Percy Grainger, head of the department of music at the New York University; Basil Cameron, conductor of the Seattle Symphony Orchestra; Leopold Stokowski, famed conductor of the celebrated Philadelphia Orchestra; Paul Whiteman, whose name is synonymous with jazz, and many others.*

It was bold talk for a publicist, and it had the advantage of being true. No matter what Constant Lambert may have thought, Ellington was not the first jazz composer of distinction, but he was the first to write music that used the

still-new medium of the big band with the same coloristic imagination brought by classical composers to their symphonic works. "You know, Stan Kenton can stand in front of a thousand fiddles and a thousand brass and make a dramatic gesture and every studio arranger can nod his head and say, 'Oh, yes, that's done like this,'" said André Previn, one of his best-informed admirers. "But Duke merely lifts his finger, three horns make a sound, and I don't know what it is!" Nor were his innovations limited to the field of timbre. What set him apart was not his virtuoso command of instrumental timbre, but *how* he used it. Mere arrangers took pop songs and dressed them up in new colors and harmonies, but Ellington, though he recorded his share of catchy hits, was better known for the works in which he used the language of jazz to say things that it had never said before. Previn compared him to Stravinsky and Prokofiev, Percy Grainger to Bach and Delius, Ralph Ellison to Ernest Hemingway. Within the tight confines of a single 78 side, he spun "tone parallels" (a phrase that he coined) to every imaginable human emotion. He and the nine hundred musicians who passed through his band sang of joy and loneliness, passion and despair, faith and hope. His compositions included musical portraits of pretty women, tap-dancing comedians, express trains, Shakespearean characters, and the unsung heroes of his long-despised race, and he made it sound as if writing them were simple: "I just watch people and observe life, and then I write about them."

It stood to reason that he should play Carnegie Hall, but Ellington claimed that Irving Mills had passed up an opportunity to book the band there in 1937, believing that the appearance wouldn't bring in enough revenue to justify its expense. It had rankled ever since that Mills let such an opportunity to sell him as a great artist slip through his fingers. While the band had since given full-evening concerts at UCLA, the City College of New York, and Colgate University, all were too far off the beaten path of publicity to attract the attention of the press. The time had come to even the score, and William Morris Jr., Ellington's new manager, meant to do the job right. "I want you to write a long work," he told his client, "and let's do it in Carnegie Hall."

The program that Ellington drew up opened with a new version of "Black and Tan Fantasy," the 1927 composition in which he blended together the growling gutbucket trumpet of Bubber Miley, a Victorian religious ballad, and the funeral march from Chopin's B-Flat Minor Piano Sonata, an exotic-sounding brew that put him on the map of early jazz. But most of the other numbers were written in or after 1940, the year in which the Ellington band

reached the height of its collective creativity. "Ko-Ko," "Cotton Tail," "Jack the Bear," "A Portrait of Bert Williams": These were some of the now-classic pieces that he presented at Carnegie Hall, together with a half dozen others written by Mercer Ellington, his son, and Billy Strayhorn, a young composer-lyricist who joined the Ellington organization in 1939 and soon became his closest musical collaborator. The only tunes not by Ellington, Strayhorn, or Mercer were "The Star-Spangled Banner" and "Rose of the Rio Grande," a specialty number long identified with the trombonist Lawrence Brown, one of Ellington's most admired soloists. The band's other stars all took turns in the spotlight as well, with the creamy-sounding alto-saxophone playing of Johnny Hodges making an especially fetching impression in Strayhorn's "Day Dream." Still, there was no question about who was standing at center stage. Everyone knew that it was Duke Ellington's night to shine, and he knew it, too. Yet he had put off writing what was to be his crowning achievement until the last possible minute. He started work on *Black, Brown and Beige* in mid-December, and he was applying finishing touches to the forty-five-minute score on the day of the premiere.

Ellington began writing *Black, Brown and Beige* backstage at the State Theater in Hartford, Connecticut, where the band was sharing a bill with Frank Sinatra. Next came a string of dates in Connecticut, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Canada, and upstate New York, with Ellington working on the score along the way. The band returned to Harlem on January 15, then started to go over the still-incomplete piece at Manhattan's Nola Rehearsal Studio, then as now a popular midtown rehearsal space for jazz musicians. Howard Taubman, the music editor of *The New York Times* and a longtime fan, looked in on Ellington that week:

> *On the day of my visit to his apartment in Harlem he was still asleep at 1 P.M. He had worked all the previous night, knocking off at 9 A.M. Since the band had had a night off, Duke had spent it writing music for the Carnegie Hall concert. The piano was still in the corridor where it had been pushed so as not to disturb members of his family. Sheets of freshly written music were on the piano, under the telephone, in the living room. As we chatted, members of Ellington's band drifted in, and from the kitchen they could be heard humming parts of the new score and arguing over how to do it.*

On January 22, the night before the concert, the band gave a preview performance of the complete program at a high school in Rye, a suburb

north of the city. Ellington's friend Edmund Anderson, who had come to the dress rehearsal the previous day, saw Johnny Hodges running through "Come Sunday," his solo spot in *Black, Brown and Beige,* "practically before the ink on the music sheets was dry." While Anderson was thrilled by what he heard, others were doubtful. According to Barry Ulanov, Ellington's first biographer, the consensus was that the new piece was "choppy" and hard to follow, perhaps in part because Ellington, who had yet to finish the score, was forced to rehearse it "piecemeal, section by section, sometimes in sequence, more often out of it." Only Don Redman, the composer-arranger who had been Ellington's opposite number in Fletcher Henderson's band of the twenties, begged to differ. "You're so wrong," he told the doubters. But Ellington himself was unhappy enough with "Beige," the last movement, to make a cut after the preview, dropping a win-the-war lyric ("We're black, brown and beige / But we're red, white and blue") that was to have been sung at Carnegie Hall.

The three thousand ticketholders who packed the sold-out hall the next night applauded as Ellington was presented with a plaque citing his "twenty years of laudable contribution to music." It bore thirty-two engraved signatures, including those of Stokowski, Marian Anderson, Count Basie, Cab Calloway, Aaron Copland, Benny Goodman, Earl Hines, Jerome Kern, Fritz Reiner, Paul Robeson, Artie Shaw, Max Steiner, Lawrence Tibbett, Kurt Weill, and Paul Whiteman, a veritable who's who of American music in 1943. The audience responded no less enthusiastically to *Black, Brown and Beige*, clapping after every solo. But a recording of the concert reveals Ellington to have been audibly nervous, introducing the piece without his customary sangfroid. Small wonder: He had never in his life attempted anything as challenging as *Black, Brown and Beige*, and he had not given himself enough time for second thoughts, much less a second draft.

Despite the haste in which it was written, the score was littered with his fingerprints. *Black, Brown and Beige* was a compendium of Ellington's musical language at its most advanced—now suavely lyrical, now earthily plainspoken, on occasion as dissonant as anything by Schoenberg or Bartók—as well as the embodiment of his feelings about what it meant to be black. At every stage in his career, he had written pieces illustrative of his belief that the black experience was a fit subject for a serious composer. Their titles chart the course of his racial pride: "Black Beauty," "Creole Rhapsody," "Echoes of the Jungle," "Harlem Speaks," "Sepia Panorama." In 1939 he told the readers of *Down Beat,* "Our aim has always been the development of an authentic Negro music . . . Our music is always intended to be definitely and purely

racial." He felt the same way in 1943. "The Negro is not merely a singing and dancing wizard but a loyal American in spite of his social position," he said to Howard Taubman. "I want to tell America how the Negro feels about it."

What he had to say was more specific than was immediately evident to the audience, for he had chosen not to publish the scenario, much of it written in verse, on which *Black, Brown and Beige* was based. In it he declared his theme to be the untold story of a suffering people: "Buried in the dark, uneasy conscience of Man / Lies the bright and glorious Truth / About your heritage." At the end he made an even more suggestive proclamation about the nature of his own art:

And so, your song has stirred the souls
Of men in strange and distant places
The picture drawn by many hands
For many eyes of many races.
But did it ever speak to them
Of what you really are?

In Carnegie Hall he opted instead for mellifluous generalities, preferring to let the music speak for itself. It did so compellingly, if at times haltingly. *Black, Brown and Beige* was a patchwork, a not-quite-unified composition in which stretches of sustained musical argument were linked by transitional passages that sounded as though they'd been lifted from the score of a Broadway musical. It was clear that the last movement had been written too hurriedly, for its sections barely hung together. (One of them was a 1942 composition by Strayhorn called "Symphonette-Rhythmique" that Ellington renamed "Sugar Hill Penthouse" and shoehorned into the middle of "Beige" without bothering to give credit to his silent partner, a fact that did not become known until six decades later.) Yet *Black, Brown and Beige* was still an astonishing advance on the dance-oriented music of the other big bands of the Swing Era, so much so that Ellington's own musicians found it hard to grasp. To take it in at a single hearing, much less to render fair judgment on what its composer had tried to do, was impossible, but every critic in town did his best, with results that ranged from reasonably perceptive to impenetrably dense.

The most favorable notice appeared in *Time,* which described *Black, Brown and Beige* as "one of the longest (45 minutes) and most ambitious pieces of tone painting ever attempted in jazz. Flavored with everything from Stravinskian dissonance to three-four time, it often seemed too ambitious.

But there were stages of the emulsion that might appeal to any musician." *The New York Times* praised the band but was evasive about the piece: "It had many exciting passages, but it was in the shorter works like 'Rockin' in Rhythm' and the familiar 'Mood Indigo' that the leader seemed most completely himself." The other reviews, written by critics who normally covered classical music rather than jazz—the newspapers of New York had yet to start hiring jazz critics in 1943—were rougher. "It hardly ever succeeds . . . because such a form of composition is entirely out of Ellington's ken," Douglas Watt wrote in the *Daily News.* "There is almost no continuity to the piece, filled with false climaxes." Robert Bagar, who covered the concert for the *World-Telegram*, said that *Black, Brown and Beige* was not "an in toto symphonic creation" but "a series of brief, air-tight compositions, all prettily tied together by modulatory bridges . . . Mr. Ellington can make some two dozen brief, air-tight compositions out of *Black, Brown and Beige.* He should." Henry Simon of *PM* criticized "Black" along similar lines, saying that it "all but falls apart into so many separate pieces," though he admitted to being impressed with "Brown" and felt that the work as a whole "showed . . . how well and how far Mr. Ellington has emancipated himself from the straightjacket [*sic*] of jazz formulas."

Paul Bowles's review in the *New York Herald Tribune* was unsparing, and his attack stung all the more because he was, unlike his colleagues, a classical composer of note:

> *It was formless and meaningless. In spite of Mr. Ellington's ideological comments before each "movement," nothing emerged but a gaudy potpourri of tutti dance passages and solo virtuoso work. (The dance parts used some pretty corny riffs, too.) There were countless unprovoked modulations, a passage in 5/4, paraphrases on well-known tunes that were as trite as the tunes themselves, and recurrent climaxes that impeded the piece's progress.*

Most of the jazz press put a happier face on the occasion. "Duke Kills Carnegie Cats! 'Tone Parallel,' Famed Soloists Slick, Click; Carnegie Kicked," read the *Variety*-style headline over *Metronome*'s story about the concert, which was accompanied by a testy editorial called "Reactionary Reviewers" that dismissed the classical critics as "condescending" and "stupid." Mike Levin of *Down Beat* struck a similar note in his review, but the headline hinted at his own reservations: "Duke Fuses Classical and Jazz! Stuff Is There . . . Needing Development to Attain New Art Form." And there were plenty of

dissenters, the most prominent of whom was John Hammond, a record producer–critic and a well-known skeptic when it came to the music of Duke Ellington, with whom he had had a public falling-out four years earlier. Now Hammond wrote a piece called "Is the Duke Deserting Jazz?" in which he claimed that Ellington had "alienated a good part of his dancing public . . . by becoming more complex he has robbed jazz of most of its basic virtues and lost contact with his audience." He had said much the same thing about *Reminiscing in Tempo,* claiming in addition that Ellington's biggest work prior to *Black, Brown and Beige* was "formless and shallow."

Ellington's public reaction to the reviews was unforthcoming: "Well, I guess they didn't dig it." Three decades later he described the Carnegie Hall concert as an "overwhelming success" in *Music Is My Mistress,* the autobiography in which he and Stanley Dance, his amanuensis, recounted his life and triumphs in language so circumlocutory that even his admirers found it hard to swallow. But at the time he had been worried about the likely response to *Black, Brown and Beige,* confessing his qualms to Helen Oakley in a preview of the concert that ran in *Down Beat.* He told her that he would have preferred to debut the work in Europe, believing as he did that European jazz fans were more receptive to "what [he was] attempting to do," adding that it would be "a great disappointment to him and, he considers, a deterrent to the ambition of all progressing American composers" if "a sincere interest and an intellectual discernment are not notably factors of the New York audience reaction."

To have unbent so far as to say such things to a journalist—even one who, like Oakley, was a friend—was both uncharacteristic of Ellington and indicative of his anxieties. Still more revealing was what happened next. The band repeated the Carnegie Hall program five days later at Boston's Symphony Hall, and again the following month in Cleveland. The latter performance was the last time that Ellington played *Black, Brown and Beige* in its entirety. In 1945 he recorded eighteen minutes of excerpts for Victor, and until his death he performed snippets from the complete work, even recording a revised version of "Black" for Columbia in 1958. But never again did he permit the critics to hear his magnum opus from beginning to end. Too proud to expose himself a second time to their wrath, he preferred to leave it on the shelf.

If *Black, Brown and Beige* mattered so much to Ellington, then why did he wait so long to start writing it? Because he had always worked that way, and always would. At times his disregard of the clock crossed the line into

irresponsibility, as Norman Granz learned in 1957 when he recorded an album that teamed the composer and his band with Ella Fitzgerald. Ellington had agreed to write new arrangements of his best-remembered tunes, but he strolled into the studio all but empty-handed, forcing Granz to cobble together an album out of existing charts that were altered on the spot to accommodate Fitzgerald's vocals:

> *We planned far in advance, but in the end Duke failed to do a single arrangement. Ella had to use the band's regular arrangements. She'd do a vocal where an instrumental chorus would normally go. . . . Duke would ask Ella what key she was in and he would have to transpose and there would be a lot of furious writing to change the key. Then Ella would try and fit in and the band would get swept along by its own memories of just how it ought to play . . . Really, at one point she became so nervous, almost hysterical, that she began to cry. Duke went over to her and said, "Now, baby," in his most gentle tones. "Don't worry, it'll all turn out fine."*

While *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Duke Ellington Song Book* was an extreme case, it was far from atypical. Ellington composed as he lived, on the road and on the fly. He wrote his pieces in hotel rooms, Pullman cars, and chartered buses, then rehearsed them in the recording studio the next afternoon or on the bandstand the same night. He had little choice but to do so, for he was a professional wanderer who traveled directly from gig to gig, returning to his New York apartment, he said, only to pick up his mail. It would no more have occurred to him to take time off to polish a composition than to go on a monthlong vacation. Even if he had wanted to take a sabbatical to work on *Black, Brown and Beige,* the band's touring schedule would have precluded it.

"I work and I write. And that's it," Ellington said. "My reward is hearing what I've done, and unlike most composers, I can hear it immediately. That's why I keep these expensive gentlemen with me." But maintaining a touring orchestra was for him not a luxury but a necessity. The band was his musical laboratory, the great good place where he experimented with new ideas, and he was incapable of functioning as a composer without its constant presence. A largely self-taught musician, he had never acquired the conservatory-bred facility that would have allowed him to write out a piece in his studio, bring it to rehearsal, and have his sidemen read it down note for note. He was himself a poor sight reader, as were some of his best-known soloists. "You couldn't

give him a piano part and say, 'Play this piano part,' " recalled Juan Tizol, his valve trombonist. "He was not that type of player. He couldn't play it." Throughout his career he relied on staff copyists (of whom Tizol was the first) who could decode his quirky musical shorthand, transforming it into playable instrumental parts that were then performed by the "expensive gentlemen" for whom they had been handcrafted, a motley gaggle of ever-feuding troublemakers whose antics he viewed with wry resignation and a touch of pride: "There's no attitude, no discipline, nothing. . . . Outrageous things happen, and then they come back and blow their ass off, play like angels, and I forget about it." Even the music on their stands bore the nicknames by which they were known (Cootie, Rab, Tricky) rather than the names of the instruments that they played.

What Ellington sought and got from his "accumulation of personalities" was a loose, festive ensemble sound far removed from the clean precision of Benny Goodman's band. He had no interest in the smoothly blended playing that leaders like Goodman, Jimmie Lunceford, and Artie Shaw demanded from their groups. He preferred to hire musicians with homemade techniques that were different to the point of apparent incompatibility, then juxtapose their idiosyncratic sounds as a pointillist painter might place dots of red and green side by side on his canvas, finding inspiration in their technical limitations ("With a musician who plays the full compass of his instrument as fast or as slow as possible, there seems, paradoxically, less opportunity to create"). That is why his charts never sound quite right when performed by other groups, however accomplished the individual players may be. It is also why a keen-eared virtuoso like Jack Teagarden, the greatest jazz trombonist of his generation, found it impossible to enjoy the Ellington band. "I never did like anything Ellington ever did," he said. "He never had a band all in tune, always had a bad tone quality and bad blend." What Teagarden meant, whether he knew it or not, was that the band had an *unconventional* tone quality, one that had little in common with received ideas about how a big band ought to sound. Asked why he hired Al Hibbler when he already had a singer on the payroll, Ellington replied, "My ear makes my decision." To him, no other ear mattered.

Billy Strayhorn, who saw Ellington's working methods up close and understood them best, gave them a name in a 1952 article about his mentor: "Ellington plays the piano, but his real instrument is the band. Each member of his band is to him a distinctive tone color and set of emotions, which he mixes with others equally distinctive to produce a third thing, which I call the Ellington Effect." Sometimes he worked "on" his players as a choreogra-

pher makes a ballet "on" his dancers, passing out or dictating scraps of music, then shaping and reshaping them on the spot into a piece that would later be reduced to written form. Even a work that had already been notated was subject in the heat of the moment to total transformation motivated solely by the whim of the composer. The goal, he explained, was "to mold the music around the man," and the men around whom his music was so tightly molded rarely sounded more themselves than when they were playing it.

The cornetist Rex Stewart, who spent eleven years with Ellington, never forgot the experience of seeing the Ellington Effect in full flower at a rehearsal in the forties:

> *I recall one occasion when he'd jotted some notes for the saxophones (Toby [Otto] Hardwick, Harry Carney, Ben Webster, and Barney Bigard) and each was given a part, but there was nothing for Johnny Hodges. Duke had the saxes run the sequence down twice, while Johnny sat nonchalantly smoking. Then, Duke called to Hodges, "Hey, Rabbit, give me a long slow glissando against that progression. Yeah! That's it!" Next he said to Cootie Williams, "Hey, Coots, you come in on the second bar, in a subtle manner growling softly like a hungry little lion cub that wants his dinner but can't find his mother. Try that, okay?" Following that, he'd say, "Deacon," (how Lawrence Brown hated that nickname) "you are cast in the role of the sun beating down on the scene. What kind of a sound do you feel that could be? You don't know? Well, try a high B-flat in a felt hat, play it legato and sustain it for eight bars. Come on, let's all hit this together," and that's the way things went—sometimes.*

Not only was Ellington inspired by the sounds and styles of his musicians, but he plucked bits and pieces from their solos and wove them into his compositions. Some of his most popular songs were spun out of melodic fragments that he gleaned from his close listening on the bandstand each night. "He could hear a guy play something and take a pencil and scribble a little thing," the pianist Jimmy Rowles said. "The next night there would be an arrangement of that thing the guy played. And nobody knew where it came from." This symbiotic relationship was important to Ellington's success as a popular songwriter, since his prodigal gifts did not include the lucrative ability to casually toss off easily hummable tunes. He had to work at it, and sometimes he needed a little help. "More than once," Rex Stewart recalled, "a lick which started out as a rhythmic background for a solo or a response to another lick eventually became a hit record, once Duke's fertile imagination took over and

provided the proper framework." He took it for granted that such joint creations were his sole property, but if payment was unavoidable, he tried when possible to dole out modest flat fees rather than share with his musicians the publishing rights to (and royalties from) the pieces that he based on their "licks." It was as much a matter of vanity as money, for Ellington preferred for the public to think that he did it all by himself. "It wasn't *our* thing any longer," Hardwick said when he returned to the band in 1932 after a four-year absence. "It had become Ellington's alone. . . . Ten years ago it was '*We* do it this way,' and '*We* wrote that.' Now the we was *royal*."

Could he have composed in a more traditional manner? Undoubtedly, if he'd applied himself to learning how to do so—and *Black, Brown and Beige* might well have been architecturally stronger had he tried. But Ellington knew little of the symphonic literature when he wrote *Black, Brown and Beige*, nor was he inclined to press his talent into other men's molds, instructive though the experience might have been. He insisted that *Black, Brown and Beige* was not an attempt to write a "jazz symphony": "To attempt to elevate the status of the jazz musician by forcing the level of his best work into comparisons with classical music is to deny him his rightful share of originality. . . . Ninety-nine per cent of the jazz people aren't interested in symphony techniques at all." In his case this was almost certainly true, though it fails to explain why he felt the need to write a forty-five-minute piece and perform it in Carnegie Hall, or to devote much of the second half of his career to composing a long series of jazz suites and other extended works, some scored for symphony orchestra (albeit by other hands). Most of the critics found them pretentious, but Ellington continued to turn out suites on a near-annual basis, and his unshakable devotion to the form caused some cynics to wonder whether he was trying to impress the classical musicians whose techniques he disdained.

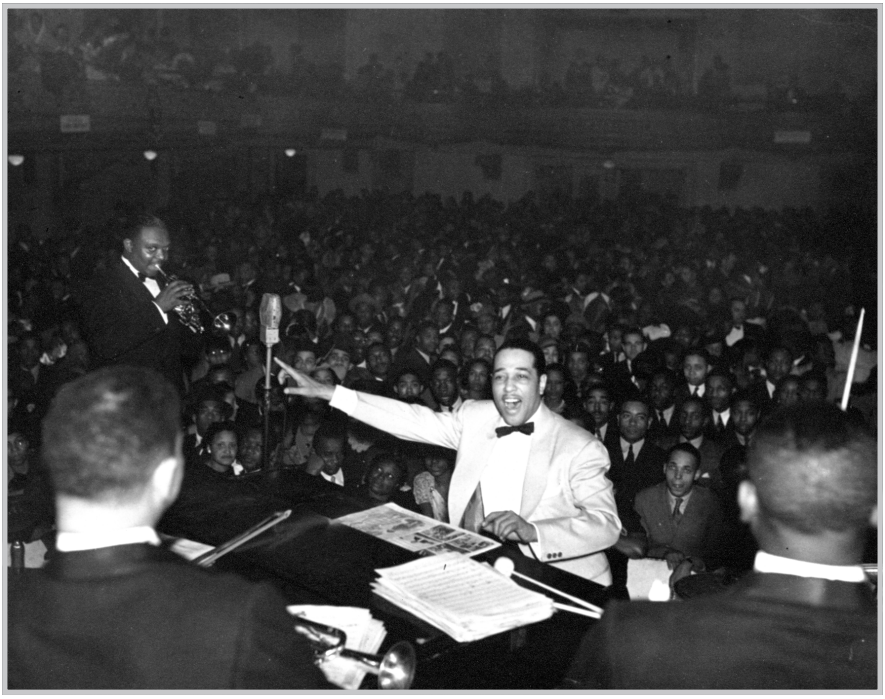
If that was what he hoped to do, then he had little choice but to do it his way. Ellington's unorthodox methods evolved bit by bit and year by year, and by the time that he discovered their limitations, he had traveled too far down his own road to change course without a struggle. It was well within his power to familiarize himself with the structural techniques of the great classical composers, to learn how to write for string sections instead of hiring orchestrators, even to figure out how to write songs that drove the plot of a musical comedy rather than sounding as though they'd been written without prior knowledge of the script. (It was one of his biggest disappointments that he never succeeded in bringing a hit show to Broadway.) But accomplishing any of these goals would have taken more time than he cared to spare, and to do so he would have had to dismantle, either temporarily or permanently, the

jury-rigged system that allowed him to keep his handpicked band on the road all the year round, playing his music as soon as he wrote it and pleasing paying audiences throughout the world.

So he chose to keep on being Duke Ellington, racing from town to town and sleeping with woman after woman, shoveling his songwriting royalties into the till in order to pay his expensive gentlemen salaries big enough to keep them riding on the band bus, cranking out shapeless suites whose inspiration varied widely, even randomly, from movement to movement, and passing the work of others off as his own. And—always—being a genius, a titan of modern music who to the end of his life could conjure high art out of thin air.

Though he carried himself like a prince of the realm, he was the son of a butler and the grandson of a slave. Washington, where Edward Kennedy Ellington was born in 1899, was one of America's most segregated cities, but it also had a black middle class that was proud and self-aware. Ellington's parents belonged to it, and their only son, a high school dropout whose regal demeanor belied his poor grades and seeming lack of interest in music, went out of his way to acquire its manners. For all his polish, it was his artistry, not his personality, that was the source of his enduring appeal. But it was the personality that made white people who might not otherwise have done so give him a second glance, and in time it opened doors of opportunity through which few other blacks had been allowed to pass.

Ellington's surface qualities were exploited to the hilt by Irving Mills. "We wanted Duke to be recognized as someone more important," Mills told an interviewer in 1984. By this he meant that the best way to position his client in a market full of talented black bandleaders was to present him to the world as a different kind of black man, fine-spoken and expensively tailored, a fellow whom broad-minded white folks could imagine introducing to their friends, even if they might not care to bring him home to meet their wives. Accordingly, Mills's advertising manual stressed Ellington's presentability as much as his talent: "He is as genial as he is intelligent, always creates a good impression upon newspaper people with whom he comes in contact and invariably supplies them with good copy for their stories." Ellington himself was happy to play the game, for he saw his public image as a contribution to the welfare of his people. "Every time you walk out [on] the street and you're exposed to a white citizen, you know," he said, "you're acting in behalf of the race." That was why he never let his guard down: He knew that there would always be somebody looking.



A different kind of black man: With Cootie Williams and the band, Philadelphia, 1939. Ellington's immaculately polished onstage appearance was one of countless manifestations of his lifelong resolve to "act in behalf of the race"

Over time Mills's strategy paid off beyond either man's wildest dreams. Long before Ellington died in 1974, he had become, after Louis Armstrong, jazz's biggest celebrity, as well as the first jazz musician to be widely hailed as an artist of consequence—and not just by his fellow jazzmen, but also by such distinguished classical musicians as Constant Lambert, Aaron Copland, and Percy Grainger. Their praise gave his work a cultural legitimacy at which no posterity-conscious black artist would have been inclined to turn up his nose. Yet he was, like Armstrong, a popular entertainer whose music was meant to please a mass audience. Long before the Swing Era, his band was seen in films and heard on network radio, and long after most of the other bandleaders who followed him into the limelight faded into obscurity, Ellington continued to perform on network TV and girdle the globe, playing "Sophisticated Lady," "Mood Indigo," "Solitude," "I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart," and the other hits that had made him famous (if never rich). Twelve thousand people came to his funeral at the Cathedral Church of St.

John the Divine in New York City, his adopted hometown and the place that he loved best. By then his baggy eyes and sardonic flattery were almost as familiar to the mourners as his music.

Underneath his soigné exterior, Ellington was a self-centered hedonist who lived a nomadic existence in which everything was subordinated to his art—and, insofar as possible, his pleasure. John Houseman, who worked with him on *Beggar's Holiday,* his first Broadway show, was fascinated by his way of life, though he mistook it for passivity:

> *At the time I worked with him the Duke had abandoned all attempts to organize his own life. Between late-night engagements with his band, concerts, recordings, interviews, composing and other activities he had turned over the scheduling of his days and nights to his wife, his manager and other associates. They woke him up when it was time, fed him, laid out the right clothes for him, transported and delivered him on time for whatever engagement he was committed to, picked him up, changed his clothes, delivered him once more, fed him again and finally put him to bed. In this way, he explained, by ceasing to concern himself with time and space, he was able to preserve his energy and his sanity.*

What Houseman did not see was that Ellington sought to exert the maximum possible amount of control over everyone in his life—by stealth. "What you need to do is wake up after two o'clock, make phone calls, but don't move an inch," he told Mercer Ellington. "Just lie flat on your back and phone, and tell everybody everything that has to be done, and lay all your plans without going out anywhere. . . . When you come downstairs you'll have prepared your day, and you'll be The Greatest!" After he died, Mercer found a handwritten note among his father's papers in which Ellington summed himself up in three lapidary sentences: "No problem. I'm easy to please. I just want to have everybody in the palm of my hand."

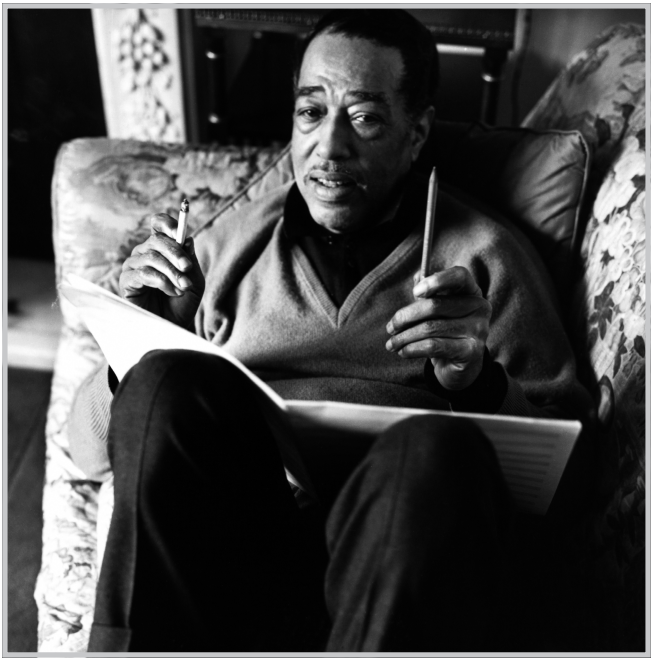
His selfishness was unswerving, though it did not exclude benevolence, if only on his own terms. "Ellington is the most complex and paradoxical individual that I've ever known . . . a combination of Sir Galahad, Scrooge, Don Quixote, and God knows what other saints and sinners that were apt to pop out of his ever-changing personality," said Rex Stewart. He was at once deeply (if superstitiously) religious and a tireless philanderer who, in the words of an admiring friend, had the sexual appetite of "a romping, stomping alley cat." He pretended to be a devoted family man for the benefit of he ever-vigilant press, he deserted Edna, his first and only wife, later

settling into a long-term relationship with a Cotton Club showgirl whom he chose not to marry (he never divorced Edna) and on whom he cheated as often as he liked.

He was careful to keep his love life out of the papers, just as he tried never to show his vulnerability to anyone who might take advantage of it—but vulnerable he was, and would always be. While he believed that his music was (to use the phrase with which he described his favorite artists) "beyond category," he was painfully conscious of the racial slights that beset him throughout his life, even after he became a star. He was enraged when he learned that he had been passed over for a Pulitzer Prize in 1965. "That night I saw him, he was furious, he was so angry," Nat Hentoff recalled. "He said, 'That's another example of what it's like to be black. They think European music, classical music is the only criterion for art.' " It says much about Ellington that though he knew better than to take to heart the opinion of a board of musically uninformed newspapermen, he still longed for a Pulitzer, the ultimate token of establishment approval, and was devastated when he failed to get it.

None of it showed. The rage, the humiliation, the unbridled sensuality: All were kept far from prying eyes. His fans saw only what he wished them to see, and nothing more. So did his colleagues. "I think all the musicians should get together one certain day and get down on their knees and thank Duke," said Miles Davis. Yet to Ellington's own musicians, he was a riddle without an answer, an unknowable man who hid behind a high wall of ornate utterances and flowery compliments that grew higher as he grew older. And while most of his sidemen admired his artistry without reservation, many of them also believed him to be unscrupulous and manipulative. On occasion one of them would chafe at his high-handedness and give notice. Even Johnny Hodges and Billy Strayhorn, the band's two seemingly indispensable members, lost patience with him in the fifties and chose to wander for a time in the wilderness. But the wanderers (Hodges and Strayhorn included) usually returned to the fold sooner or later, knowing that the preternaturally sensitive settings that he created for his players made them sound better than they could ever have dreamed of sounding on their own. They were stuck with him and he with them, no matter how badly they behaved—and a few of them behaved badly enough to land in jail.

Yet Ellington almost never fired anyone, having discovered the secret of making unwanted players depart of their own accord before he was forced to cut them loose. A rare exception was the bassist Charles Mingus, who claimed to have goaded Juan Tizol into pulling a knife and chasing him off the bandstand, thus triggering his own dismissal. Mingus set down Ellington's



Behind closed doors: Composing at the Dorchester, his favorite London hotel, in 1963. Unposed offstage photos of Ellington are comparatively rare. He went out of his way to shape his public image to his liking—and to keep his private life out of the papers

farewell speech in his autobiography, and even if he embroidered it, as he surely did, you can hear the voice of the master in every petit-point sentence:

> *"Now, Charles," he says, looking amused, putting Cartier links into the cuffs of his beautiful handmade shirt, "you could have forewarned me—you left me out of the act entirely! At least you could have let me cue in a few chords as you ran through that Nijinsky routine. . . . When you exited after that I thought, 'That man's really afraid of Juan's knife and at the speed he's going he's probably home in bed by now.' But no, back you came through the same door with your bass still intact. For a moment I was hopeful you'd decided to sit down and play but instead you slashed Juan's chair in two with a fire axe! Really, Charles, that's destructive. Everybody knows Juan has a knife but nobody ever took it seriously—he likes to pull it out and show it to people, you understand. So I'm afraid, Charles—I've never fired anybody—you'll have to quit*

my band. I don't need any new problems. Juan's an old problem, I can cope with that, but you seem to have a whole bag of new tricks. I must ask you to be kind enough to give me your notice, Mingus."

The charming way he says it, it's like he's paying you a compliment. Feeling honored, you shake hands and resign.

If it wasn't true, it should have been. With Ellington, though, the truth was usually more than good enough, and the fact that so little of it can be found in *Music Is My Mistress* is frustrating. He of all people should have left behind a frank memoir, one in which he told the story of how a somewhat better-than-average stride pianist largely devoid of formal musical training managed to turn himself into a great composer—for that is what he was, and why he matters to us today.

In 1944 a journalist dubbed Ellington "the hot Bach," a comparison that is likely to have vexed him. A decade earlier he had claimed that "you can't stay in the European conservatory and play the negro music." He insisted that his own achievement was unique unto itself, so much so that he refused to call his music jazz. "I don't write jazz," he said. "I write Negro folk music." He was wrong: His music is one of the cornerstones of jazz. But he was right about the singularity of his music, just as he himself was as singular as a human being can be, an improbably gaudy bird of paradise who spoke at least one undeniable truth in the self-interview that ends his autobiography:

Q. Can you keep from writing music? Do you write in spite of yourself?

A. I don't know how strong the chains, cells, and bars are. I've never tried to escape.