from Floyd, Samuel A., ed.
Black Music in the Harlem Renaissance
Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 1990.

CHAPTER 7

The Renaissance Education of Duke Ellington

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Harlem was home to Duke Ellington for many years. He arrived there unknown in 1923, a ragtime pianist and aspiring songwriter seeking his way in a world both faster and more competitive than the one he had known growing up in the District of Columbia. Yet like the heroes of the Horatio Alger stories he had admired as a child, Ellington slowly scaled the ladder of success. His ascent took him from the basement obscurity of the Hollywood Cafe to the elevated grandeur of Harlem's Cotton Club, where he began leading a ten-piece orchestra late in 1927. By the early thirties he was famous as the composer of "Mood Indigo" and "Sophisticated Lady" and was living high on Sugar Hill, Harlem's most prestigious neighborhood. Even when touring took him away from home—which, from the mid-thirties on, was often—Ellington continued to celebrate Harlem in music. His compositions described its echoes and air shafts, boys and blue belles. His songs advised people to drop off there and to slap their soles on Seventh Avenue. His signature piece even told them which train to take. And he paid tribute to his adopted community in "Beige," from the extended work *Black, Brown, and Beige* (1943), and in *A Tone Parallel to Harlem* (1950), a joyous evocation of Harlem's sounds, street-life, and citizens.

Ellington's initial rise to fame in New York during the 1920s coincided with the flowering of black creative expression that has come to be called the Harlem Renaissance. While Ellington honed his skills as a bandleader, Alain Locke was proclaiming the arrival of the New Negro, Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes were publishing their first volumes of poetry, Jessie Fauset and Charles S. Johnson were energetically editing *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*, and Aaron Douglas was placing his drawings in magazines like *Harlem* and *Fire!!* It is tempting, in retrospect, to view Ellington's arrival as part of that cultural explosion and to see his career as fulfilling the dreams of Renaissance theoreticians. For after the 1920s Ellington came to embody the ideals of the New Negro artist in his dignified manner and cultivated persona, his social consciousness, his use of vernacular sources as the basis for original compositions, and his deep pride in the Afro-American heritage. More than a glamorous show-business celebrity like Cab Calloway or a popular dance-band leader like Jimmie Lunceford or Count Basie, Ellington became a crusader who took on what Nathan Huggins has described as the New Negro's mission: "to discover and define his culture and his contribution to what had been thought a white civilization" (Huggins 1971, 59).

Harlem may have strengthened Ellington's resolve to carry out this mission. In the mid-twenties it was rich in black talent and ripe with possibilities for the many young writers, painters, and musicians who made their pilgrimage to this Negro mecca. But like most of the major Renaissance figures, Ellington came to Harlem after being trained for his mission elsewhere. Long before he had glimpsed the Tree of Hope or set foot on Seventh Avenue, Ellington had received the basic framework of a Renaissance education in a place over two hundred miles to the south: the black community of Washington, D.C. It was there that he spent his early years, gained experience as a pianist and bandleader, and met musicians who guided and inspired him. And it was there that he first formed ideas about who he was, what he might achieve, and how he could succeed as a black composer in a profession and a society dominated by whites.

The city into which Edward Kennedy Ellington was born in 1899 had the nation's largest urban black population; at the turn of the century it was, according to Constance Green, Washington's chief historian, the "undisputed center of American Negro civilization" (Green 1963, viii). Support for such a claim rested on the educational and economic opportunities available to Washington's black residents; on the high number of black professionals, especially teachers, doctors, and lawyers; on institutions such as Howard University, the M Street High School (later Dunbar High), the Howard Theater, and the Washington Conservatory; and on the social cultivation and intellectual distinction of the black upper class. This was the city that produced writer Jean Toomer, poet Sterling Brown, scientist Charles H. Drew, scholar and diplomat Mercer Cook, physician and teacher W. Montague Cobb, and lawyer Charles Hamilton Houston. It boasted strong civic organizations and independent churches. It was a place that fired black ambition, fostered black pride, and honored black achievement.

Although his family did not belong to the top stratum of black Washington society, Ellington grew up in a secure, middle-class home and was exposed early to people who were successful. His maternal grandfather, James William Kennedy, was one of the city's few black police officers.[1] His father, James Edward Ellington, earned enough as a butler and part-time caterer to buy a house in 1920 at 1212 T Street NW, a good neighborhood near fashionable LeDroit Park. Both parents taught their two children to aim high in their goals, assuring them they could "do anything anyone else can do" (Boatwright 1983). They encouraged Edward when he showed talent in drawing and continued their support when his attention turned to music.

The Ellington family's high expectations seem to have been common among Washington's middle- and upper-class blacks. Pianist and educator Billy Taylor (b. 1921), a Dunbar High alumnus, has described the advantages of a Washington upbringing:

> I had much reinforcement in terms of who I was, what I was about, and the tremendous contributions that black people have made to science, music, art, government. Black accomplishment was very visible in Washington, what with the judges, lawyers, and other over-achievers. . . . I was led to believe that any field that I wanted to go into, I had the possibility of success (Clarke 1982, 182).

A. Barry Rand, another Washington native, and in 1987 one of the top black executives in America (corporate vice president at Xerox), has echoed Taylor's words:

> I have always wanted to show that blacks can perform as well as or better than their white counterparts. . . . If you're raised in an environment where you have developed a lot of confidence in yourself, you view the racism you encounter as their problem and not your own (Hicks 1987, 4).

Like Taylor and Rand, Ellington inherited a drive to excel and a resilient optimism from Washington's black community. Wherever he was—in nightclubs or recording studios, on the road or behind a deadline—he somehow always managed to turn difficult circumstances to his advantage. His philosophy held that "every problem is an opportunity" and "gray skies are just clouds passing over" (Ellington 1973, 468). He never lost his Washingtonian worldview; late in life it was there when he recalled his initial motivation as a composer: "The driving power was a matter of wanting to be—and to be heard—at the same level as the best" (Ellington 1973, 457).

Together with ambition and optimism, another trait Ellington exhibited throughout his long public career was self-confidence—the solid core of belief in one's ability and potential that makes possible the highest aspirations. Ellington traced the origins of this attitude to Washington. He felt provided for by a father who "raised his family as though he were a millionaire" (Ellington 1973, 10), whose speech was elegant and manners impeccable. He experienced "a wonderful feeling of security" from attending church, and from hearing his mother Daisy Kennedy Ellington tell him, "Edward, you are blessed. You don't have anything to worry about" (Ellington 1973, 15). And he credited Miss R. A. Boston, his eighth-grade English teacher (also the principal of Garrison Junior High School), with promoting proper speech and deportment, as well as pride in self:

> I think she spent as much time in preaching race pride as she did in teaching English, which, ironically and very strangely, improved your English—she would explain that everywhere you go, if you were sitting in a theater next to a white lady . . . or you were on a stage . . . your responsibility is to command respect for the race (West 1969, 10).

Although Ellington grew up in a community that encouraged, even pressured, its residents to succeed, as a young man he did not seem destined to become one of black Washington's "over-achievers." He showed more interest in playing the piano and frequenting Frank Holliday's pool room next to the Howard Theater than in his studies. He attended not Dunbar High but the Armstrong Manual Training School, where he took courses in freehand and mechanical drawing (perhaps anticipating a career in commercial art) and which he left in the winter of 1917, several months before graduating.[2] During this time, and after, he does not appear to have been involved with any of the black community's numerous civic, fraternal, religious, or literary organizations. Instead he found work as a soda jerk, messenger boy, sign-painter, and dance-band musician.

Nevertheless, Washington exposed Ellington to various influences that would shape the course of his extraordinary musical career. Three of these came from professional black musicians he encountered there; from the community's emphasis on black history; and from the example of others raised in Washington who went on to compose, lead orchestras, and champion the cause of black music.

WASHINGTON'S BLACK PROFESSIONAL MUSICIANS

The community that produced Duke Ellington was distinguished by the quality and diversity of its professional musical life. In his memoirs Ellington dwells primarily on one facet of the scene: the popular music played by pianists and small instrumental ensembles. But black Washington also spawned choral societies and glee clubs, military bands, a symphony orchestra, chamber music groups, and one of the nation's earliest black opera companies, the Original Colored America Opera

Troupe. Young black musicians could receive instruction at the Washington Conservatory founded by Harriet Marshall Gibbs (see McGinty 1979), at Wellington Adams's Columbia Conservatory, and from many private instructors, among them Marietta (Mrs. Harvey) Clinkscales, Ellington's first piano teacher. Recitals, concerts, and other musical events were regularly reviewed in the *Bee,* the city's main black newspaper.[3] Several periodicals—*The Negro Journal of Music* (which in 1903 became the official organ of the Washington Conservatory), Wellington Adams's *The Music Master,* and *The Negro Musician*—covered local as well as national activity in black music.

Ellington seems to have kept a distance from the formal world of black music in Washington. His piano lessons with Mrs. Clinkscales did not last long or mean much; later he said they "all slipped away from me" (Ulanov [1946] 1975, 6) and "had nothing to do with the thing that followed when I became fourteen" ("CBC Interview" 1965). His experiences as a fledgling ragtime pianist took him to informal "hops" and teen dances, then, as leader of a small group, the Duke's Serenaders, to embassy receptions and Virginia hunt balls. But Ellington did meet up with musicians who combined formal training with an interest in popular music—Ellington called them the "conservatory boys," as opposed to the self-taught "ear cats" (Ellington 1973, 26).

One of these was Oliver "Doc" Perry (1885?–1961), a pianist who may have had conservatory training and who was a popular black bandleader in Washington during the 1910s and early 1920s.[4] Perry's musical versatility and personal refinement put him in demand at fancy functions. Ellington began visiting Perry at his home on U Street, occasionally filling in for the older man at dances when Perry had to play downtown at the Ebbitt House (Ellington 1973, 33). From his "piano parent," as he called Perry, Ellington developed elementary reading skills and a professional attitude toward performing. Perry later claimed that he "trained Duke for public work" (Perry 1983). And when Ellington depicted Perry in *Music Is My Mistress* as a man who spoke "with a sort of semi-continental finesse," who was "extremely gifted, dignified, clean, neat," and who was "respected by musicians, show people, and the laymen as well" (Ellington 1973, 26), he hinted at traits the piano parent may have passed on to his young protégé.

In Louis N. Brown (ca. 1889–1974), another schooled pianist, Ellington met a musician active in many different sectors of the black community. Brown played ragtime and popular piano for dances, dance classes, and parties, also organ at the Lincoln Theater on U Street. He directed church choirs and appeared as piano soloist on concert programs (Tucker 1986, 94–95). Besides admiring Brown's technical facility and engaging personality, Ellington may have perceived how Brown moved fluidly from one performing situation to the next, as did other black professional musicians in Washington.[5] Even after he had become a seasoned concert-hall artist, Ellington kept an open mind about where and what he played, and resisted drawing lines between high and low, art and entertainment. His orchestra might turn up Friday in a concert hall, Saturday in a high school gym. As he told Stanley Dance, "I like going from one extreme to another. Sometimes we play for the Elks club and it's *Melancholy Baby* all night, but I love it" (Dance [1970] 1981, 11).

A third professional black musician who influenced young Ellington was Henry Lee Grant. Son of the singer Henry Fleet Grant, he was educated at Livingston College and New York University and received an Artist's Diploma in piano from the Washington Conservatory in 1910. Grant was a major figure in Washington's black musical life. Like Louis Brown, he was a many-sided musician: composer, conductor, director of choirs and glee clubs, concert pianist, and teacher at Dunbar High. He assisted Will Marion Cook in leading the Afro-American Folk-Song Singers, played in a trio with violinist Felix Weir and cellist Leonard Jeter, and in 1919 helped found the National Association of Negro Musicians.

When Ellington was about seventeen, Grant apparently invited the young piano "plunker" to become his pupil (Ellington 1973, 28). No written record survives of what Ellington later called his "hidden course in harmony that lighted the direction to more highly developed composition." But this colorful description may disguise the fact that Grant's student simply needed some basic instruction. Ellington implies as much when he writes of his lessons, "We moved along very quickly, until I was learning the difference between G-flat and F-sharp" (Ellington 1973, 33). Grant, too, seems to have realized that, despite a certain experimental bent, "Duke was anxious to learn the fundamentals" (Ulanov [1946] 1975, 9).

In addition to teaching theory, Grant represented musical ideals different from those Ellington would have encountered in the workaday world of society gigs, dances, and "hops." Grant not only proselytized for the cause of Negro music, but believed that popular music could show seriousness of purpose and meet standards of excellence. In 1921, while serving as editor of *The Negro Musician*, he announced his intention to interview "successful Negro composers, organizers, leaders, and performers" in the popular music field, listing the names of Ford Dabney, John Turner Layton, Jr., and Will Vodery (Grant 1921a, 9). That same year he enthusiastically reviewed Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake's *Shuffle Along* and revealed that Blake was one of his ex-pupils (Grant 1921b, 13). Grant's broad musical background, his solid musicianship, his belief in the "genuine art possibilities" of popular music, and his active work on behalf of black music and musicians may have impressed a young bandleader. Grant offered Ellington not just keys to commercial success—"I had to study music seriously to protect [my reputation]" (Ellington 1973, 33)—but values he would later embrace, and embody, as a black artist.[6]

A PEOPLE PROUD OF THEIR PAST

In his 1944 *New Yorker* profile of Ellington, "The Hot Bach," Richard O. Boyer wrote that the bandleader thought it "good business to conceal his interest in American Negro history," since Duke doubted it would help "his popularity in Arkansas, say, to have it known that in books he has read about Negro slave revolts he has heavily underlined paragraphs about the exploits of Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey" (Gammond [1958] 1977, 49). But if Ellington kept his reading habits private, his music made public a passion for black history. The year before, in 1943, he had premiered at Carnegie Hall his massive "tone parallel to the history of the American Negro," *Black, Brown, and Beige.* Earlier he had celebrated the emancipation of black entertainers from racial stereotypes in *Jump for Joy* (1941), and explored the Afro-American heritage in *Symphony in Black* (1934) and *Creole Rhapsody* (1931).

Stimulating awareness of the Negro's past was a goal pursued by various Harlem Renaissance figures in the 1920s, among them Countee Cullen, Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson, Aaron Douglas, Richmond Barthé, and Marcus Garvey. Yet Ellington's hometown was filled with people equally dedicated to preserving and promoting black culture. In 1915 Howard University professor Carter Woodson founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, which soon began publishing the *Journal of Negro History.* The Bethel Literary and Historical Association and the Mus-So-Lit Club provided forums for discussing black politics, social issues, and literature. And in the schools, Ellington recalled, "Negro history was crammed into the curriculum, so that we would know our people all the way back" (Ellington 1973, 17).

Another source that focused attention on black history was the pageants put on by church, school, and civic groups. The most extravagant one during Ellington's youth was "The Star of Ethiopia," presented in October 1915 at the American League Ball Park. In 1913 it had been produced in New York for the National Emancipation Exposition by W.E.B. Du Bois ("The Star of Ethiopia" 1913; Du Bois 1915; "Review of 'The Star'" 1915). The program for the Washington production gave the following description:

> The Story of the Pageant covers 10,000 years of the history of the Negro race and its work and suffering and triumphs in the world. The Pageant

> combines historic accuracy and symbolic truth. All the costumes of the thousand actors, the temples, the weapons, etc., have been copied from accurate models ("Program of 'The Star of Ethiopia'" 1915).

The historic drama had five scenes: "Gift of Iron," "Dream of Egypt," "Glory of Ethiopia," "Valley of Humiliation," and "Vision Everlasting." In addition to acting, "music by colored composers, lights and symbolic dancing accompany the story and emphasize and explain it." Elzie Hoffman's band took part, as did a thousand actors and a chorus of two hundred ("The Horizon Guild Pageant" 1915, [5]). The music director was J. Rosamond Johnson. A spectator would have heard his brother James Weldon Johnson's song *Walk Together, Children* and Verdi's *Celeste Aida*. We don't know if the sixteen-year-old Ellington attended. (He did work at the ball park as a youngster, and some rehearsals for the pageant were held at his high school.) But surely he heard about it; the pageant seems to have been a major community event, and nearly seventy years later, Dr. W. Montague Cobb spoke of it as "very impressive" (Cobb 1984).

Other musical-dramatic treatments of black history themes were produced in Washington. In 1921 horn player and bandleader Russell Wooding—one of Ellington's first employers—put on his opera "Halcyon Days in Dixie," an "attempt at music drama based on themes of Negro life and music" ("Review of 'Halcyon Days in Dixie'" 1921, 18). The work featured Wooding's Jubilee Quintet and violinist Joseph Douglass (grandson of Frederick Douglass). An earlier production was "The Evolution of the Negro in Picture, Song, and Story," put on at the Howard Theater in 1911; Henry Grant directed the L'Allegro Glee Club accompanied by Mary Europe (sister of James Reese Europe, later a colleague of Grant at Dunbar High). The program drew upon American texts (William Dean Howells and Paul Laurence Dunbar) and European music (von Suppé, Chaminade, and Brahms). But perhaps most intriguing was the structure of the presentation:

> Overture
> Night of Slavery—Sorrow Songs
> Dawn of Freedom
> Day of Opportunity ("Program of 'The Evolution'" 1911).

Like "The Star of Ethiopia," this event brought together music and stories to dramatize the history of black Americans. Such endeavors could strengthen the pride of Washington's black community and may have left their mark on Ellington. In time he would compose works that treated similar themes using similar forms. His *Symphony in Black*, written for a Paramount music short, has an overture, a section titled "The Laborers," and a "Hymn of Sorrow." *Black, Brown, and Beige* moves from past to present and again features work songs and a hymn, *Come Sunday.*

WASHINGTON'S BLACK COMPOSER-BANDLEADERS

In describing qualities that made Ellington and some of his associates different from other musicians, Barry Ulanov has identified a "Washington pattern" that

> involved a certain bearing, a respect for education, for the broad principles of the art of music; a desire for order, for design in their professional lives. . . . [It gave them], from the very beginning, a line of development, a sense of growth toward a larger and more meaningful expression (Ulanov [1946] 1975, 13).

Ellington himself alludes to the "pattern" in describing Doc Perry, Louis Brown, Henry Grant, and two of his Washington-reared band members, trumpeters Arthur Whetsol and Rex Stewart:

> A great organization man, [Whetsol] would speak up in a minute on the subject of propriety, clean appearance, and reliability. If and when any member of our band made an error in grammar, he was quick to correct him. He was aware of all the Negro individuals who were contributing to the cause by *commanding respect.* He knew about all the Negro colleges, and he also knew all the principal scholastic and athletic leaders personally (Ellington 1973, 54).
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> . . . . .
>
> [Stewart] came out of the same Washington school system that I did, and his intellectual ambitions were typical of the Washingtonian of that time, when people believed that if you were going to be something, you ought to learn something and know something. . . . [He] had been taught the responsibility of commanding respect for his race and to this end he maintained . . . a dignified, decent-sort-of-chap image, and he never strayed from it (Ellington 1973, 124–25).

The "Washington pattern," however, produced not just a different breed of "jazzmen," as Ulanov notes, but three Afro-American musicians whose careers, in some respects, may have served as models for Ellington's: Will Marion Cook (1869–1944), James Reese Europe (1881–1919), and Ford Dabney (1883–1958). All three combined roles that Ellington himself later assumed: composer, songwriter, successful bandleader, and performer who earned the respect of both black and white audiences. Like Ellington, they were champions of black musical traditions—syncopated jazz, ragtime, show tunes, Negro folk songs, arrangements of spirituals—and drew upon black vernacular idioms for their original compositions.[7]

Did Ellington encounter these men, or hear their orchestras, before heading to Harlem? Europe, Cook, and Dabney brought their large instrumental ensembles to Washington in the period 1917–1922, when Ellington was actively pursuing his musical career. Ellington lists Dabney and Europe as two of the "great talents" in New York he had "heard of" while in Washington (Ellington 1973, 36). But he may have actually seen Europe at the Howard Theater in 1913—Ellington later claimed that as a boy he went there "almost every day to hear the good music" (Ellington 1973, 104). And Ford Dabney's local appearances between 1920 and 1922 were well publicized, especially an October 1921 concert in Convention Hall (where Ellington heard James P. Johnson that same year).

Ellington's connections with Will Marion Cook were closer. He may have seen Cook's Southern Syncopated Orchestra, featuring Sidney Bechet, as early as 1919 (Cook 1983). His main contact with the older man, however, came a few years later in New York. There he would follow "Dad" Cook as he made the rounds of music publishers around Times Square, then take a cab with him back to Harlem. In this taxi classroom, Cook gave advice to the young Washingtonian. He suggested that Ellington pursue formal training at a conservatory, to which Ellington answered, "Dad, I don't want to go to the conservatory because they're not teaching what I want to learn" (West 1969, 9). Cook also may have passed along some general points of compositional method, or perhaps some ideas for a programmatic work; in 1944 Ellington said that "some of the things he used to tell me I never got a chance to use until . . . I wrote the tone poem *Black, Brown and Beige*" (Gammond [1958] 1977, 54).

Beyond any direct contact Ellington may have had with Cook, Europe, and Dabney, however, he shared with them, as a mature musician, several traits that bore the outlines of a common "Washington pattern." One was a public persona that commanded respect by its inherent dignity and decorum. Cultivating these qualities was essential for blacks working in popular music who wanted to be taken seriously—not only by whites, but by those blacks who considered popular songs and dance music lower artistic forms. Lawrence Gushee has described the dilemma faced by the Afro-American who "considered himself (and *was*) a civilized musician," but who "almost necessarily survived by working in show or dance music as leader, arranger, or musical director, often with a seriousness or dignity that seems out of place" (Gushee 1978, [2]). Ellington seems to have reconciled his image as an artist and function as an entertainer more gracefully than his predecessors.[8] Even so, his polished manner and aristocratic bearing were characteristic of Cook, Europe, and other black professional musicians who belonged to New York's Clef and Tempo Clubs. Noble Sissle recognized these qualities when he called James Reese Europe "the Duke Ellington of his time" (Anderson 1982, 76).

A second trait linking Ellington to Cook and Europe was a distaste for labels that might limit the scope of his achievements in the public eye. Ellington's lifelong battle to do away with categories is well known. His objections to the term "jazz" mirror Europe's to "ragtime"; perhaps this attitude reflected their origins in "a section of the black middle class that strove to gain the highest standing for black cultural endeavors" (Anderson 1982, 78). Will Marion Cook could even show resentment at being labeled as an Afro-American musician. In a well-known anecdote, Cook responded to a critic who called him "the world's greatest Negro violinist" by smashing his violin and crying out, "I am not the greatest Negro violinist. . . . I am the greatest violinist in the world!" (Ellington 1973, 97). When Ellington relates this story, he seems to identify and sympathize with Cook's indignation.

Yet while demanding to be judged by artistic—not racial—criteria, Ellington and his Washington forerunners still dedicated themselves to expressing in music the feelings, aspirations, and ideals of black Americans. In pursuit of this goal, these musicians discarded the conventions of minstrelsy and vaudeville and refused to emulate white performers. Cook, according to James Weldon Johnson,

> believed that the Negro in music and on the stage ought to be a Negro, a genuine Negro; he declared that the Negro should eschew "white" patterns, and not employ his efforts in doing what "the white artist could always do as well, generally better" (Anderson 1982, 34).

Europe agreed. In 1912, after his orchestra's first concert at Carnegie Hall, he took credit for developing "a kind of symphony music that . . . is different and distinctive, and that lends itself to the playing of the peculiar compositions of our race" (Southern 1983, 288). When he returned from abroad in 1919 with his 369th Infantry ("Hellfighters") Band, he proclaimed:

> I have come back from France more firmly convinced than ever that negroes should write negro music. We have our own racial feeling and if we try to copy whites we will make bad copies. . . . Will Marion Cook, William Tires [Tyers], even Harry Burleigh and Coleridge-Taylor are [only] truly themselves in the music which expresses their race (Southern 1983, 289).

Ellington endorsed these black nationalist aims in word and deed. Later he would characterize himself not as an entertainer working in a commercial field, but as a composer for his people: "I don't write jazz, I write Negro folk music" (Gammond [1958] 1977, 26). In 1937 he called for the founding of a "Conservatory of Negro Music which would teach principally the melodies and harmonies and teachings of our ancestors" (Ellington 1937). Steeped in the black consciousness of Washington, D.C., he composed works that celebrated Afro-American culture and its outstanding contributors, from Florence Mills to Martin Luther King. He sought to educate audiences in works like *Black, Brown, and Beige* and *My People* (1963), rouse them with social commentary in *Jump for Joy,* and instill hope for the Negro's future in *New World A-Coming* (1943).

Ellington's crusade for the cause of Afro-American music rested on a conviction that it deserved a place of importance next to the greatest products of the European musical tradition. This belief was manifest in the programs offered by Europe and his Clef Club orchestra at Carnegie Hall in 1912–1913 and in concerts featuring Cook and his Afro-American Folk Song Singers, in which Negro spirituals, folk songs, and Cook's original compositions might appear side by side with European classics ("In Retrospect" 1978; "Afro-American Folk Song Singers" 1913).[9] When Ellington took his orchestra into Carnegie Hall in the 1940s, he presented his own extended compositions, together with original dance pieces, concertos, songs, and blues—all derived from the rich loam of Afro-American traditions. But he rejected the view of those who claimed he had been influenced by Europeans. In his most forceful statement on the subject, written in 1944 for the classical-record magazine *Listen,* he attempted to set the critics straight:

> Jazz, swing, jive, and every other musical phenomenon of American musical life are as much an art medium as are the most profound works of the famous classical composers. . . . [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. . . . Music, like any other art form, reflects the mood, temperament, and environment of its creators (Ellington 1944, 6).

Such words would have made Henry Grant and Will Marion Cook beam with pride. They show a man sure of himself, true to his traditions, and proud of his place in history. And they reveal a composer stamped with the imprint of the "Washington pattern"—someone with "a respect for education, for the broad principles of the art of music," who was moving, ever moving, "toward a larger and more meaningful expression."

Mercer Ellington has claimed, with some justification, that his father's "early training in Washington had really been slight and rudimentary" (Ellington and Dance [1978] 1979, 19). It was in New York that Ellington stepped up his ability to read music, learned to write it down, advanced his pianistic skills through listening to Harlem stride pianists, developed an orchestra with a distinctive style and sound, and emerged as a major composer. The performers he worked with at Barron's, the Kentucky Club, and especially the Cotton Club, were probably of a higher caliber than those he had encountered in Washington. And New York—especially Harlem—stimulated Ellington to accomplish some of his best work.

At the same time, Ellington admitted that Washington "was a very good climate for me to come up in, musically" (West 1969, 1). There he found a supportive network of pianists and an environment in which "[e]verybody seemed to get something out of the other's playing" (Ellington 1973, 26). He developed aural skills that he would rely on throughout his career. He got his start in the band business. He gained performing experience in cabarets and theaters, in fancy ballrooms and funky dance-halls.

But Washington's most important gift to Ellington may have been a set of attitudes and beliefs that allowed him to realize his artistic ambitions in a way that no other Afro-American composer had been able to do. Growing up black in Washington trained Ellington to overcome the destructive effects of racism with patience, an iron will, and the sure conviction that any goal was within his grasp. It made him aware of the rich traditions of Afro-Americans, respectful of their past, and confident of their future. Perhaps most significant for a black composer seeking his vocation in the field of popular music, it gave him a sense of being part of a historical procession. By 1931, when he wrote in the British periodical *Rhythm*, that sense had been sharpened by Harlem's Black Renaissance:

> I am proud of that part my race is playing in the artistic life of the world. Paul Robeson, Roland Hayes, your own Coleridge-Taylor, are names already high in the lists of serious music; that from the welter of negro dance musicians now before the public will come something lasting and noble I am convinced (Ellington 1931, 22).

In the same article, Ellington voiced his concern that "what is being done by Countee Cullen and others in literature is overdue in our music." The thirty-one-year-old bandleader vowed to take up the cause himself by writing a rhapsody that will

> portray the experience of the coloured races in America in the syncopated idiom. . . . I am putting all I have learned into it in the hope that I shall have achieved something really worth while in the literature of music, and that an authentic record of my race *written by a member of it* shall be placed on record (Ellington 1931, 22).

The "rhapsody," of course, appeared twelve years later as the "tone parallel" *Black, Brown, and Beige.* But the desire to leave "an authentic record of my race" became, in a way, Ellington's life's work. Few American musicians have brought to their work such fervor, determination, and uncompromisingly high standards. Few were as well qualified to succeed as this resident of Harlem, who received his early education in the proud, privileged black community of Washington, D.C.

NOTES

1. In 1910, when there were nearly 95,000 blacks in Washington, only forty were policemen (Henri 1975, 167).

2. His Armstrong transcript, available from the District of Columbia Public Schools, shows grades that were good to excellent in drawing, average in English, history, and math, and poor in the sciences. The only grade for a music course on his transcript, which he received in his first year at the school (1913–1914), is a "D" (i.e., deficient).

3. During the period 1914–1917, the *Bee* reports several recitals and programs of Mrs. Clinkscales's students. This was after Ellington's study with the teacher, however.

4. Many advertisements for Perry's band appear between 1917 and 1922 in the *Bee* and the Chicago *Defender* (in J. Le C. Chestnut's column, "Under the Capitol Dome"). No recordings by Perry—or by any other Washington pianist mentioned by Ellington in *Music Is My Mistress*—are known to exist.

5. This versatility was partly a by-product of discrimination. Since formally trained black musicians could be faced with severely limited job opportunities, they may have undertaken work in theaters, public schools, cabarets, and restaurants as a matter of economic survival. The presence of someone like Henry Grant on the Dunbar High faculty attests to the plight of the black concert musician who could not sustain a career outside the black community. The problem was not unique to musicians; before she began her work as literary editor for *The Crisis,* Jessie Fauset (B.A. Cornell, M.A. University of Pennsylvania) taught at M Street/Dunbar High from 1906 to 1919. As Billy Taylor has said about Dunbar, "There were five teachers [there] with doctorates; they were in high schools simply because there was no room for them at colleges" (Clarke 1982, 181).

6. Grant's respect for popular music was tempered by a belief that its "potential for art possibilities" was limited by its "restricted form and transitory appeal." Next to his glowing review of *Shuffle Along,* he offered a warning about ragtime: "Therefore, embrace, study, improve and utilize its values. Teach its source, history and influence, but point to its limitations and instruct of its harm as a lone medium of expres-

sion" (Grant 1921b, 13). Despite the cautionary tone, such a statement coming from a black classical music advocate could seem enlightened next to the view of a critic like Wellington Adams, who, in reviewing a Clef Club orchestra concert a few years before, had asserted that "there is as great a difference between the music of the 'jazz' and the art of Beethoven as there is between the sounds by which lower animals express their feelings and the language of Goethe" (Adams 1919, [6]).

7. Cook's works include the musicals *Clorindy; Or, the Origin of the Cakewalk* (1898), *In Dahomey* (1903), *Bandana Land* (1908), and *Darkeydom* (1915), and the songs "Darktown Is Out Tonight," "Swing Along," "Exhortation," and "Rain Song." He led and toured abroad with the Southern Syncopated Orchestra for several years, beginning in 1918 (Carter 1988; Riis 1981).

Among James Reese Europe's instrumental pieces are "Castlehouse Rag," "Castle Walk," and "Too Much Mustard." After moving from Washington to New York ca. 1905, Europe worked in musical theater, conducted orchestras, and founded the Clef Club, a protective association for professional black musicians. Around 1914 he left the Clef Club and organized the Tempo Club with Ford Dabney. His society orchestra was associated with Vernon and Irene Castle from 1914 to 1917. During World War I his 369th Infantry Band gained fame abroad (Charters and Kunstadt [1962] 1981; "James Reese Europe" 1955).

Ford Dabney was court pianist to the president of Haiti from 1904 to 1907. In New York his orchestra played for Ziegfeld's Midnight Frolic Show at the New Amsterdam Theater from 1913 to 1921. His works include the musicals *The King's Quest* (1909) and *Rang Tang* (1927), the instrumental piece *The Pensacola Mootch* (1910), and the song "That's Why They Call Me Shine" (1910) (Southern 1982; "Ford Dabney" 1955). More is known about Europe and Cook than about Dabney; accordingly, my discussion focuses more on the former two figures.

8. This may have been a matter of temperament, not just the different conditions under which Ellington worked, or the later time. Also, manager Irving Mills's successful efforts to present Ellington as an artist and composer helped pave the way for his public acceptance under these terms.

9. This concert, given November 21, 1913, at the Metropolitan A.M.E. Church, featured songs by Cook, a choral piece by Coleridge-Taylor, folk-song arrangements by Tchaikovsky and Dvorák, and Mendelssohn's *Rondo Capriccioso*, performed by Henry Grant.

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