

Quotes from the Duke: Reflections

by Philip Lewis

“[T]he wise players are the ones who play what they can master.”¹

This is a statement Ellington makes during an interview in the film *A Duke Named Ellington* in reference to the unique talents of each player in his orchestra. But it is also a universal proclamation of the importance of individual expression – in essence finding one’s own personal truth and having the courage to commit to it completely. To me, as a musician, it is one of the most profoundly liberating and elevating statements I’ve encountered, as if I were a direct recipient of the Duke’s benediction of my own personal journey of self-discovery.

In practical terms what Duke is telling us is that it’s not necessary to play everything – in fact it’s not even desirable. How many times have we heard players of incredible range and proficiency and been left wondering exactly what it was they were trying to communicate? Sometimes technique becomes an *impediment* to expression. (If we have every approach to choose from, how do we know which represents the truest expression?) Duke’s statement makes one realize that in many ways the luckiest players are not those with the greatest range but, on the contrary, those with the most focus, even if that focus is partly due to natural constraints.

It’s about sticking with what we do best. Kenny Werner has said that mastery is playing whatever you play, effortlessly. B.B. King comes to mind. The man says more with one note than most players say in a lifetime of blowing. It comes down to this: It is in our limitations that we find our greatest gifts. In recognizing our limitations and predilections we learn who we are. When we consciously turn that into a feature of our playing, then we begin to discover our personal truth. We all have natural gifts and

natural limitations. The journey begins for real the day we realize that the limitations *are* gifts. This is the art of jazz and of life.

By no means is this an excuse for complacency. All artists must work diligently to improve their skills – to stop building the chops is to die. Duke never stopped searching, never stopped learning. One can go only forward or backward, there is no standing still. We all have to work to shore up the gaps in our technique and our knowledge, but only in service of our personal truth. And how do we learn the shape and direction of that truth? Through self-awareness, and understanding our limitations as a way the Creator has of keeping us from wandering too far afield. Then it becomes our task to figure out what is genuinely ours, to refine it, concentrate it, and ultimately to share it.

“Any tune I write is supposed to make people move.”²

In the documentary film *A Duke Named Ellington*, trumpeter Clark Terry offers this quote from Ellington. It would seem to be saying that Duke has never forsaken the essence of jazz, but this statement also begs the question: What exactly is the ideal response to music? I believe that response begins in the body and not the mind.

Personally, I like to experience a piece of music – especially on the first hearing – by forgetting everything I know about music, and just feeling the music in my body. This is the primal, and primary, experience of music. Then with that awareness at my disposal, I may move on to a more intellectual appreciation of the work at hand.

Jazz, as an Afro-American musical form, has at its core the dynamism of dance. Clearly the history of jazz music until the 1940s is inextricably linked to the history of jazz dance. Dance and movement are central to the jazz idiom. Too often it seems the

jazz musician has only an awareness of the music in the post-WWII era, when the primary performance venue for jazz shifted from the dancehall to the concert hall or showcase club. All jazz musicians would do well to learn more about that early history. But Ellington never forgot the roots of the music and knew the key to keeping it vital was to retain that essence while imbuing the music with ever-deepening layers of meaning.

“Always I try to be original in my harmonies and rhythms. [...] Because I think the music of my race is something which is going to live, something which posterity will honor in the highest sense. [...] it is my firm belief that what is still known as ‘jazz’ is going to play a considerable part in the serious music of the future.”³

This quote is culled from an essay Duke wrote for British music magazine *Rhythm* in 1931 in which he introduces the band’s personnel and provides some insight into their manner of working. He even goes as far as including analysis of the music itself, and the roles of the various instruments.

What is utterly striking about this quote is Ellington’s amazingly prescience in declaring jazz to be a serious art form which would come to be appreciated and respected by future generations – an assessment which has of course proven entirely correct. Yet this is quite a bold statement to make in 1931. The idiom we have come to know as jazz was only a few decades old at that time, barely in its infancy, and had been preserved in recorded form for less than 15 years. Such a statement could only be characterized as prophetic. Certainly the press of the time and, needless to say, academic institutions did not share Ellington’s view. They largely believed that the true American art music would arise within the forum of the established European concert music tradition. Jazz was

considered dance music – popular music for dancing or entertainment, but certainly not to be taken seriously. To put this in perspective, imagine one of our current pop stars – Snoop Dogg, say – declaring that rap was destined to become the serious music of the future. Such a statement, one might suggest, would be met with considerable outrage among the so-called “critics.” Ellington’s declaration was no less bold.

Without disparaging contemporary popular forms (elements of which will undoubtedly find their way into the “serious” music of the future), we can glean from this statement Ellington’s keen awareness of the depth of the current into which he was tapped. As well as knowing and respecting the amount of training, preparation, and experience which was and is required in order to play the idiom effectively, Ellington intuitively knew the importance of the music we know today as jazz. This quote shows us that Duke, even at 31, was attuned to the cultural streams of history which course through this continent like tributaries emptying into the Potomac. And he had a firm sense of his role as a navigator of that great body.

“And you know you can’t just play some of this music without soul. Soul is very important. And first to play this music, you have to love music. So if you love music, then it follows you love to listen to it, which makes the ear the most essential musical instrument [...].”⁴

In this quote from an interview Ellington gave to *Jazz Journal* in December 1965 he lays out the essential prerequisites for the playing of jazz. First, that “soul” is as essential to jazz as to any other Afro-American form. Second, that listening is more important than playing.

Duke was of course making this point in the 1960s when matters of soul were very much at the forefront of Afro-American consciousness. (Rather than attempting to define “soul,” let’s just take the assumption that you either know what it means or you don’t.) Soul was, at that time, a measure of legitimacy or “street cred” as we might say today. It was also a time when jazz was struggling to find an audience. We needed Duke to remind us that James Brown did not have a monopoly on soul. James P. Johnson, Bechet, Satch, Ben Webster, Cootie, Paul Gonzalves, Jimmy Hamilton, *et al*, had plenty to spread around. Duke didn’t feel the need to adopt the trappings of the Black Power Generation as, say, Miles did. He took what was true for him, and left the rest for posterity to sort out.

Duke’s second point is especially poignant and universal, that the love of jazz is integral to the making of it. Picasso said he loved to look at pictures so much, he just had to make a gallery of them, and it is no different for musicians. The jazz musician hears a sound that is so enthralling, he/she is compelled to work his/her butt off to reproduce it. And of course in the reproduction that sound is filtered by the individual and comes out as something entirely different. But I think Duke’s point is that the underlying motivation is to be able to proffer that enthralling experience to others, and as such is a gesture of generosity, not of ego. It begins with hearing. Hearing comes first.

“People are told that they must never drink anything but a white wine with fish or a red wine with beef. The people who don’t know, who’ve never been told that, who’ve never been educated along those lines – they drink *anything*. I suspect they get as much joy out of their eating and drinking as the other people.”⁵

I love the music-food analogy – it works on so many levels. Both are colored by the unique shadings and subtleties of culture; food feeds the body, music feeds the soul; both are best enjoyed in the company of others; and on and on. With this quote Ellington takes up the analogy to argue for the emancipation of personal judgment in the aesthetic realm.

The essence of his argument is for the experience of music free from externally-imposed prejudice. Our culture is rife with would-be arbiters of taste – the media, academic institutions, family, society – all claiming authority. But in matters of taste (as in food and music) the last word is purely subjective. If one doesn't care for tilapia, that's a personal preference. It's not open to debate. Ellington's point is that one should taste tilapia first, before deciding it is not to one's liking. Why allow the opinions of so-called "experts" to decide for us?

"If it sounds right, it is right."⁶ (quoted by Kenny Burrell)

Here Ellington addresses again the importance of independence in exercising one's personal judgment, this time regarding the writing of music. As a musician, Duke was not of the academy – he learned his craft on the bandstand. He learned what worked and what didn't through trial and error, night after night, finding solutions by way of his own ingenuity rather than relying on a bunch of internalized rules. An important mentor to young Ellington was the violinist and composer Will Marion Cook who had trained at Oberlin and in Europe. Cook apparently told Duke, "First you find the logical way, and when you find it, avoid it, and let your inner self [...] guide you."

I have often wondered why the good ideas almost never come out of the academy. My conclusion is that the “rules” as taught in learning institutions serve the needs of academia, not of musicians or audiences. As our good Professor Burrell has said, “There are no rules, only history.” In order for the academy to be able to teach something measurable, the practices of the past are codified, petrified, reified. But the “rules” are not the real world. In the real world the concern is not with “correctness” but with pleasing oneself and one’s audience.

This is not to minimize the value in understanding the work of the past – in fact it’s essential. When Ellington was faced with a particular musical problem, what did he do? Undoubtedly he examined how previous composers/arrangers had addressed the same challenge. The difference is that he saw each solution as only one within the field of possibility, not as a matter of right/wrong dictated by some authority figure. This allowed him the freedom to explore ideas without being constrained by preconceived notions of “correctness.”

¹*A Duke Named Ellington*. 1988. Carter, Terry, director. Council for Positive Images, Inc.

²Ibid.

³Ellington, Duke. "The Duke Steps Out" *Rhythm*. October, 1931.

⁴Ellington, Duke. "The Most Essential Instrument," *Jazz Journal* 18/12, December 1965.

⁵Ellington, Duke and Dance, Stanley. "The Art Is In the Cooking." *Down Beat*, June 7, 1962 (I);

⁶Burrell, Kenny. "Ellingtonia." University of California, Los Angeles. Feb. 2008.