

EARL HINES PLAYS DUKE ELLINGTON

New World Records 80361

When time pulled the rug from under Earl Hines in 1983, he was still enjoying a comeback that had lasted almost twenty years. That comeback was one of the most important events in recent jazz history and the music included here was recorded when his return to action was in high gear.

In 1964, when Stanley Dance talked him into appearing for two performances at the Little Theater in New York, Hines had been in near obscurity and on the verge of retiring. Few at that point understood or valued his position in the development of jazz. Like too many others, Hines had by then begun to experience the dismay of one who had not only been of seminal significance to the language of his instrument but had also been very popular at one time. But as of that engagement in 1964, at fifty-eight, he was working again, and in circumstances that did not reduce him to “bookings with a trio into the kind of after-theater clubs that feature self-effacing music, as an unobtrusive accompaniment to the patrons' conversation,” as Martin Williams wrote of Hines's worst professional period.

That episode had been so appalling because Hines was the “seer” of modern piano-playing, in just the same way that Louis Armstrong was the seer of modern trumpet-playing: the solutions found within his approach indelibly influenced his contemporaries, in absolute terms, and the future by implication. To the orchestral style of Afro-American piano formed of ragtime, stride, and blues, Hines added a linear approach that was a counterpoint to what Armstrong was doing on his horn. Where pianists prior to his arrival had played a regular oompah figure in the left hand, sometimes slightly ornamenting it for variety, Hines chose to break out of this pattern and use the left hand for spontaneous contrapuntal figures and dramatic rhythmic punctuations much like drumbeats voiced in chords. He was also given to rhythmically unpredictable flurries in the right hand that were as much melodic variations as they were phrasing puzzles. With Armstrong, he recorded material in 1928—“Weatherbird,” “Tight Like This,” and so on—that marked the emergence of a fresh level of jazz virtuosity. To the mastery of idiomatic timbres, of percussive phrasing, and of blues feeling, Armstrong and Hines added fluidity of such dimension that the music was forever offered other aspects of expression.

But as this recorded material proves, perhaps too much has been made of Hines's playing “trumpet-style piano.” Yes, there are bold, ambitious departures from the steady tempo—stunning rhythmic snakes and melodic accomplishments—but there are also numerous instances where the capabilities of the piano and the piano alone are used for musical effects no horn player could execute. Hines treats the material as though each piece were a compressed concerto. The idea of variation itself is given a much more imaginative interpretation—*every* aspect of the music becomes a potential basis for invention. There are improvised movements where choruses undergo drastic changes of mood, color, tonality rhythm, and dynamics. This gives the improvisations an orchestral feeling of great freedom.

The deft sense of dynamics, of contrast, and of contrapuntal intrigue clearly resulted from the studies Hines undertook as a young man intent on becoming a classical pianist and conductor. The inevitable encounters with Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, and Liszt must have alerted him to the wide range of passions the piano could encompass, the effects—from delicate to booming—inherent in its very physics, and the many different ways the dialogue between the two hands could be used. Hines was able to bring that knowledge to jazz and successfully transform it with idiomatic authority. He thereby expanded the idiom and gave a classic quality to his own playing—but a classic quality that was not European in feeling or meaning.

The classic quality that Hines maintained throughout his career, and that dominates these interpretations, was a persistent exuberance, a spirit of engagement. What Armstrong had said of himself applies with equal truth to Hines, who was also there “in the service of happiness.” Hines was not incapable of meditative melancholy or the deep sorrow which some consider the epitome of seriousness, but he knew that profound joy is just as significant, and just as serious. For Hines, a pervasive feeling of zest took on form and presence through the rhythmic sensation of swing. His was largely a music of celebration and rhythmically complicated grace. It is almost as though one must listen to his work as if watching the hero of a musical render his condition through dance. There are slow, even mournful turns and expressions of longing, but they almost invariably mutate into swing. Moving deeper into the implications of the individual piece, finding lines, rhythms, and harmonies further and further removed from the initial point of reference, Hines will return to the melody as so many concert composers do, letting the listener know what it is that all these variations depart from. The relaxation with which Hines achieves all of those things is a definition of elegance, of engagement, of spirit.

Because Hines greatly respected Duke Ellington, and because his close friend and undaunted supporter Stanley Dance was impressed by the idea of this project, the work of the great composer and the imagination of the great pianist met in the arena of jazz. Though close listening will reveal the things that Hines gave to jazz piano and that affected Teddy Wilson, Nat Cole, Billy Kyle, Bud Powell, and numberless others, this is a much more inventive recital than one expects of pianists who evolved in the wake of Powell. All of Hines’s resources are brought forward and the individual pieces have an unpredictability that makes each of them some special sort of delight. There is the introduction to “Heaven” that reminds one of the harmonies of “Crepuscle with Nellie,” the opening of “C’ Jam Blues” that shows astonishing originality of rhythm, the freedom of the playing of “Black Butterfly,” the range of mood brought to “Creole Love Call,” and so on. One hears a totally unexpected sweep of left-hand inventions, reharmonizations—such as the endings of “Mood Indigo” and “I’m Beginning to See the Light”—that are shocking, and a clarity of sound and scope of attack that express a personality too distinctive to take presence through clichés. When Earl Hines made these recordings, he was the seasoned resource only a great artist can be.

—Stanley Crouch

RECORDING “HINES PLAYS ELLINGTON”

The “Hines Plays Ellington” recording project commenced in December 1971. It required four separate recording dates spread out over three and a half years, concluding, finally in April 1975. Devoting four entire LPs to one artist's solo piano interpretations of another artist's compositions was a considerable undertaking, even when the pianist was Earl Hines and the composer was Duke Ellington. I know of no other comparable recording project in the history of jazz.

The major burden of the work fell, of course, on Earl Hines. Ellington had completed his contribution over a period of almost fifty years, creating over 1,200 songs. But Hines not only had to choose material from this cornucopia, he had to play it, and play it within the idiom of his own genius. This may sound considerably easier than it turned out, in fact, to be. Although Hines already knew many of the songs that were recorded (“Sophisticated Lady,” “Mood Indigo,” “C’ Jam Blues”), many others were either totally unknown to him (“The Shepherd,” “Black Butterfly,” “Mood Indigo”) or unfamiliar (“Heaven,” “I Ain’t Got Nothin’ But the Blues”). And beyond this, over the entire work loomed the not inconsiderable shadow of the Duke himself and his preeminent position in jazz.

The project would never have gotten past the first LP had it not been for my friend and associate in Master Jazz, Stanley Dance. Stanley was, of course, friend, confidant, and advisor to both Hines and Ellington. It was Stanley's approval and support that gave Hines the intellectual and visceral assurance to go forward with the project and to complete it so brilliantly. Without Stanley, no piano player, not even Earl Hines, would have presumed to interpret in his own almost preemptive way so much of Ellington's music.

So as you enjoy these marvelous performances, think about the kind of courage it required for one master to perform the work of another, and give credit not only to Hines and Ellington, but also to Stanley Dance.

—Bill Weilbacher

Disc One

1. Love You Madly (5:16) (Ellington)
2. Sophisticated Lady (4:13) Ellington-Parrish-Mills)
3. I’m Beginning to See the Light (4:13) (Ellington-George-Hodges-James)
4. Black and Tan Fantasy (3:51) (Ellington-Miley)
5. Warm Valley (7:25) (Ellington-Russell)
6. Do Nothin’ Till You Hear from Me (3:44) (Ellington-Russell)
7. “C” Jam Blues (4:31) (Ellington)
8. Caravan (5:57) (Ellington-Mills-Tizol)
9. Everything But You (4:37) (Ellington-James-George)
10. Mood Indigo (6:58) (Ellington-Mills-Bigard)
11. Just Squeeze Me (5:09) (Ellington-Gaines)
12. Come Sunday (5:10) (Ellington)

Disc Two

1. The Creole Love Call (7:08) (Ellington)
2. I Ain't Got Nothin' But the Blues (6:36) (Ellington-George)

3. The Shepherd (10:44) (Ellington)
4. Don't Get Around Much Anymore (6:56) (Ellington-Russell)
5. Black Butterfly (10:42) (Ellington-Carruthers-Mills)
6. Take Love Easy (6:20) (Ellington-Latouche)
7. The Jeep Is Jumping (4:51) (Ellington)
8. Heaven (5:49) (Ellington)

EARL HINES, piano
Recorded 1971-1975

Publishers (all ASCAP)

Love You Madly: Duke Ellington Music

Sophisticated Lady, Black and Tan Fantasy, Caravan, Mood Indigo, The Creole Love Call, Black Butterfly, The Jeep is Jumping: Mills Music, Inc.

I'm Beginning to See the Light: Chappell and Co. Inc.

Warm Valley, Do Nothin' Till You Hear from Me, 'C' Jam Blues, Just Squeeze Me, Don't Get Around Much Anymore: SBK Robbins Catalog, Inc.

Everything But You, The Shepherd, Heaven: Tempo Music, Inc.

Come Sunday: G. Schirmer, Inc.

I Ain't Got Nothin' But the Blues: Tempo Music, Inc./Ricki Music

Take Love Easy: Chappell and Co., Inc./Fisher Music Corp.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Blues & Things. (with Jimmy Rushing). New World 80465-2.

The Chronological Earl Hines 1934-1937. Classics Records 528.

Fine and Dandy. Vogue Records 15082.

Grand Reunion: Live at the Village Vanguard. Limelight 528137.

Jimmie Noone Featuring Earl Hines. Decca CRD 633.

Earl Hines Plays Cole Porter. New World 80501-2.

Earl Hines Plays Duke Ellington, vol. II. New World 80532-2.

Live at The New School. Chiaroscuro CRD 157.

Louis Armstrong and Earl Hines. Columbia 45142.

Piano Man. Bluebird 6750.

Piano Solos: 1928-1940. Collector's Classics 11.

Solo Piano. Laserlight Records 15790.

Spontaneous Explorations. Red Baron Records 57331.

Swingin' the 20's (with Benny Carter). Contemporary Records 7561.

Tour De Force. Black Lion 760140.

Up To Date. Bluebird 6462.

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Down Beat, February 8, 1952.

"Earl Hines." *The New Yorker*, June 6, 1983.

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Morgenstern, Dan. "Today's Life With Fatha Hines." *Down Beat* June 26, 1965.

"Remembering Earl Hines." *Jazz Times*, July 1983.
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Produced by Bill Weilbacher
Engineers: Roger Rhodes and Jim Crotty
Recorded 1971-75
Prepared for reissue by Arthur Moorhead
Cover photograph: David Gahr
Cover design: Bob Defrin

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