

EARL HINES Plays Duke Ellington, Vol. 2

New World Records 80532

The recordings on *Earl Hines Plays Duke Ellington*, Volume 2 come from a series of four LPs that Earl Hines recorded for the Master Jazz label in four separate sessions between 1971 and 1975. *Earl Hines Plays Duke Ellington*, Volume 2 and its companion double CD album entitled *Earl Hines Plays Duke Ellington* (New World 80361-2) contain all of the Hines performances of Ellington tunes included in the four original Master Jazz LPs.

It is unusual for one pianist to devote so much time and attention to the work of one composer, even though the pianist is one of the finest jazz performers on his instrument and the composer is without question the finest composer of jazz music that we have ever had.

In the world and time of LPs, when most of the extant solo piano solo jazz albums were recorded, there was remarkably little attention paid to the work of Ellington by solo jazz pianists. I know of only four pianists beyond Hines who recorded one full LP album devoted to Ellington's music—Thelonious Monk, McCoy Tyner, Oscar Peterson, and Johnny Guarnieri. Interestingly, none of these players was a contemporary of Ellington, nor would any of them be considered in Hines's class as a jazz solo piano player.

Even more interesting is the fact that Ellington himself never recorded a complete solo LP of his own music, and not more than four or five of his solo performances are available on either LP or CD. In a way, turning the point around, if there was to be a jazz pianist who would and could devote four solo LPs to the music of Duke Ellington, when even Ellington himself chose not to do it, whom could it have been but Earl Hines?

And so we have *Earl Hines Plays Duke Ellington* Volumes 1 and 2.

Ellington's music is not particularly accessible to solo pianists—even to Earl Hines. There are four reasons for this.

First is the fact that Ellington wrote primarily for his orchestra. As many have pointed out, his orchestra was his instrument. And many of the Ellington orchestral pieces are—extant piano scores to the contrary—simply not easily adaptable to solo piano playing. They somehow just do not sound quite right when played solo on the piano. Their essential character is lost, even though the crucial notes are all there and all played. This does not mean, however, that the Ellington orchestral pieces cannot, on occasion, yield fascinating performances from the solo playing of a really superior jazz pianist. Take "Solitude" or "Caravan" in this set, or "Black and Tan Fantasy" and "The Creole Love Call" from Volume 1. But such performances require extra effort and very special inspiration if the pianist is to overcome the intractable orchestral quality of the music itself.

Secondly, many of the Ellington tunes were originally created with a specific soloist from the Ellington orchestra in mind and the characteristics of that soloist cannot easily be translated into solo piano music. As we worked with Hines in the recording studio that produced the third Master Jazz LP, for example, Hines toyed with the piano score of "Boy Meets Horn," originally created by Ellington for

the cornetist Rex Stewart. Finally, exasperated, Hines said, "Oh, I just can't get all of Rex's tricks out of this piano."

Third, Ellington wrote with a certain harmonic complexity that makes it difficult to work through one of his unfamiliar pieces very easily, and even more difficult to use it as a vehicle for improvisation. "There's too many changes in that piece to figure out what to do with it," Earl would say, and on we would go to the next.

Finally, when Ellington wrote a particular piece explicitly for the piano, it was a personal statement for Ellington in his mode as pianist. Other pianists sense this personal quality immediately and tend to shy away, almost as if in respect for Ellington's privacy. Looking, for example, at the score for "Dancers in Love," Hines said "That's a pretty thing, but that belongs to Duke. I used to write things like that for myself and I played them, but no one else would, and it's the same for Duke and his pieces."

So for all these reasons, Ellington's music is performed less by solo pianists than one would expect, given both Ellington's status as a jazz composer and the fact that there are more than 1,200 published Ellington compositions in existence. One must conclude that when a pianist undertakes to record a significant number of Ellington pieces, let alone more than thirty, as in the New World *Earl Hines Plays Duke Ellington* releases, the pianist must know what he is about and have the courage of his convictions, besides.

Maybe we should simply leave it that Earl Hines recorded all these Ellington tunes for the same reason that some men undertake to climb Mount Everest—simply because it is there. But as the recording sessions proceeded, there seemed to be much pride and satisfaction involved for Hines, too. And there was also gaiety and hilarity for Hines among the challenges of Ellington and the hard work of recording his music solo.

As the sessions unfolded, Hines was continually commenting on his interactions with the Ellington material and the reactions that it evoked in him. For example, as he worked over "In a Mellotone," noodling out what he would do with it once the recording began, he stopped all at once, looked up and said, "That chord's not right—I changed it, I had to work out that key change—See here (pointing at the "In a Mellotone" music), it says put a little boogie into this right here—I like that, that old Duke, he never misses a trick."

On and on, bubbling, rejecting one piece, conquering another, worrying over "Black and Tan Fantasy": "This Miley, who was he, that old-time plunger trumpet player? Sure, that's who he was. See here (pointing at the score), that's what it means, that's what it is, it's the wa-wa-wa-wa thing he used to do—can't do that on a piano, have to try something else. And over here (still with "Black and Tan Fantasy") that's Duke's blues, I'll play a couple of choruses of MY blues, that's how we'll handle that. You ready in there? Let's try one with this and see what happens."

Watching Hines work his way through the Ellington pieces, one realized that there was a lot more to his playing than simply sitting down and playing through the score, taking the notes as they come, easily and effortlessly "playing" the music. Rather, Hines was "playing" Ellington in another sense, as if in an athletic or intellectual contest. There was an active interaction between Hines the pianist and Ellington the composer. Sometimes when Hines prevailed over the music, there was a quiet sense of

victory in the studio. And, when, for one reason or another, Hines was daunted by the music, there was a subtle sense of small defeat, as if a point had been lost after a long and determined volley.

A good deal of this sense of contest—Hines the player versus Ellington the composer—sprang from the fact that so much of the Ellington music that we placed before him was unfamiliar to Hines. Even if he had heard a particular tune before, often he had never performed it, and its detailed harmonic structure was elusively new to him. Part of it, too, was that Hines never played any tune straight, that is, exactly as written, at least after he got past the first chorus.

Hines had to make what he played his own—exciting and unexpected—and this, of course, is why he was the superlative jazz artist that he was—every tune a challenge and every time he performed it became another unique expression of the Hines genius. And, one felt, as this process unfolded, rarely had the Hines talent been challenged so completely as by the music of Duke Ellington.

It is a truism that in music performance generally—classical, jazz, popular, whatever—that what one hears is both what the composer has written down and the interaction of that music and the performer who interprets the composer's work. For jazz, with its tradition of improvisation, the musician has considerably more interpretive range than, for example, in classical music. At its best, a jazz performance melds the work of the composer and the art of the interpreter into something totally unique. The work of the composer is not sacrificed in this process. Rather, if the performer is really an outstanding jazz player the work is embellished and extended and the merit of the performance lies in the quality of that embellishment and extension.

In *Earl Hines Plays Duke Ellington* we have a marvelous example of this process—a kind of master-class demonstration of the essence of jazz music. Earl Hines did indeed play Duke Ellington, both for his own immediate satisfaction and for our continued pleasure and delight.

—Bill Weilbacher, *President, Master Jazz Recordings, June 14, 1997*

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 GRD 633.

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

Earl Hines Plays Duke Ellington. New World 80361-2.

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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Producer: Bill Weilbacher

In a Mellotone, *Solitude*, *It Don't Mean a Thing, I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart*, and *In a Sentimental Mood* were recorded November 27, 1972. *Satin Doll* was recorded December 10, 1971.

Engineer: Roger Rhodes

Recording supervision: Stanley Dance

Don't You Know I Care, *I'm Just a Lucky So and So*, *Prelude to a Kiss*, and *All Too Soon* were recorded March 18, 1974.

Supervising engineer: Roger Rhodes

Recording engineer: Jim Crotty

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EARL HINES PLAYS DUKE ELLINGTON, VOLUME 2 80532-2

1 In a Mellotone (E. K. Ellington, Milton Gabler) (publ. by EMI Robbins Catalog Inc.) 7:28

- 2 Solitude (E. K. Ellington, Edgar DeLange, Irving Mills) (publ. by EMI Mills Music Inc., Scarsdale Music Corp., & Duke Ellington Music) 8:10
- 3 It Don't Mean a Thing (E. K. Ellington, Irving Mills) (publ. by EMI Mills Music Inc. & Duke Ellington Music) 4:20
- 4 I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart (E. K. Ellington, Irving Mills, Henry Nemo, John Redmond) (publ. by EMI Mills Music Inc. & Famous Music Corp.) 6:45
- 5 Satin Doll (E. K. Ellington, Johnny Mercer, Billy Strayhorn) (publ. by Warner Brothers, Tempo Music Inc., & Famous Music Corp.) 4:50
- 6 In a Sentimental Mood (E. K. Ellington) (publ. by Famous Music Corp.) 6:58
- 7 Don't You Know I Care (E. K. Ellington, Mack David) (publ. by Polygram International & Paramount Music Corp.) 6:55
- 8 I'm Just a Lucky So and So (E. K. Ellington, Mack David) (publ. by Polygram International & Paramount Music Corp.) 6:31
- 9 Prelude to a Kiss (E. K. Ellington, Irving Gordon, Irving Mills) (publ. by EMI Mills & Famous Music Corp.) 6:24
- 10 All Too Soon (E. K. Ellington, Carl Sigman) (publ. by EMI Robbins Catalog Inc.) 9:00

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