

Notes on “This One’s For Blanton”

The liberating of an instrument from its own structural limitations is one of the most profound feats any musician can perform. Obviously it requires artistic courage, to attempt something never done before, also a brilliant technique, to attempt it with. But above all else it requires imagination, to perceive that the act of liberation is practicable at all, and the history of music shows two ways in which the imagination is often stimulated. In the formal world the pattern is usually that of a questing instrumentalist or instrument-maker who presents a technical *fait accompli* to the composer, as with Mozart, who took one look at an improved model of a woodwind instrument dreamed up by a friend, and promptly composed the celebrated Clarinet Concerto. Or Debussy, who was so taken with the implications of a new chromatic harp introduced at the turn of the century, that his “*Danses Sacrée et Profane*” was the outcome.

In jazz the process is different, as usual, the key man being the virtuoso instrumentalist who can see for his instrument a role different in kind from the one it has been allotted. Coleman Hawkins, for instance, delivered the saxophone once and for all from its early vaudeville slap-tongue roots; Lionel Hampton established forever the principle that the vibraphone is something more than a mere novelty instrument; and Charlie Christian, although not quite the first electric guitarist, was the first electric guitarist to perceive that the accident of amplification had overnight raised the instrument to the status of a full blooded front line horn.

But there can be no question that the most spectacular rescue-act in the entire history of jazz was the one performed just over thirty years ago by a teen-aged musician called Jimmy Blanton, who, before he died in the summer of 1942, had altered the status of the double bass beyond retraction. In theory Blanton's idea was so simple as to be almost laughable; he had the idea that the string bass ought to play solos. But simple as the idea sounded in theory, in practice it meant literally a revolution in thinking and playing. It meant, in fact, creating a whole new language in a historical context wherein the instrument's tonality and keyboard structure, plus the decidedly limited technical command of almost all its practitioners, made the idea sound hopelessly quixotic.

In less than two years with Duke Ellington's band, Blanton triumphed as casually as a man shelling peas, and the very fact that today everything he did in the way of bass solos is taken for granted by player and listener alike, is proof of the completeness of his success, for it is only those revolutions which never succeed, never become the new status quo, that are remembered. In some of the most remarkable re-

cordings ever made, "Jack the Bear," in which Blanton astonishingly conducts a duet with the whole of the rest of the Ellington band, in “Concerto for Cootie”, where he plays the double role of soloist and rhythmic spine, above all in “Pitter Panther Patter” and “J.B. Blues”, where he and Duke dispense with everyone else and indulge in some of the most uncanny mental telepathy on record, Blanton showed that until his arrival nobody had actually played the string bass before at all. By the time he retired to California to fade away of tuberculosis at the shockingly premature age of 21, Blanton had truly made himself immortal.

Later in the decade another bassist, hardly older than Blanton developed the process still further, by recording with Dizzy Gillespie pieces like “One Bass Hit” and “Two Bass Hit”, performances which may be said to have completed the revolution which Blanton never lived to carry through. The second bassist, Ray Brown, went on to establish himself as the most outstanding instrumentalist of his kind, and there is something beautifully apt in the wheel coming full circle for Duke Ellington, who having first presented the totally unknown Blanton to the world, now finds himself in the identical musical situation with Blanton's true heir. At which point it becomes necessary to say a few words about the piano player. (There is no need at all to say anything about the bassist, whose brilliance is, as always, self-evident).

Duke Ellington, for fifty years now the most underrated piano virtuoso in jazz, is also the supreme master of providing cushions for other soloists. On this album one example is the second chorus of “Things Ain't What They Used to Be” while the opening of “Do Nothing Till You Hear From Me” (perhaps there is a moral obligation to call it by its earlier name of “Concerto for Cootie”, since it was under that description that Blanton recorded one of his great exhibitions) is an example of a different kind, where Duke appears to be the soloist, but in fact is merely stating the bare bones of the melody while the bass skips and gambols in a way that would have delighted Jimmy Blanton's soul. As for those interludes where Ellington the soloist appears, for instance the starkly romantic entry, unheralded and totally unexpected, in “Sophisticated Lady”, they are more than enough to send the mind wandering on an extraneous issue like how a down home concept like stride piano can be led over the years into the sumptuous baroque paths where, it appears, Ellington alone is able to stroll without getting himself hopelessly lost. To think of such things in the middle of a track like “Sophisticated Lady” would be unfortunate, because it would detract from the fine precision with which Ray Brown embellishes the famous descending seventh chords in the melody, the perfect curve of

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his glissando, an octave down, in the fourth and fifth bars of the song. However, thanks to the thoughtfulness of Thomas Edison, distractions are unimportant. This is one album to be played over and over again, for a different reason each time.

—Benny Green

It is not often that I get a chance to express my thoughts or feelings about a record I’ve played on. However, after thirty years of recording, this is the first time that I absolutely insisted that I have my say. This is not a review of the contents, but what I feel you should know regarding the hows and whys from my standpoint. First and foremost, the two reasons I began to play the bass were Duke Ellington and Jimmy Blanton. (One is on this record and the other is the one to whom it is dedicated.) I can remember clearly as a young boy, standing outside a neighbourhood bar, listening to “Things Ain’t What They Used to Be” and always waiting to the end to hear the last two bass notes. I was playing piano at the time, but I was continually fascinated by the bass. It seemed to be the heartbeat of the Orchestra; especially on Duke Ellington records. I was lucky not only to be in a neighbourhood where they played Ellington’s records on the jukebox, but lucky that my folks bought the same records. When I began playing bass and started practising with the records, I found myself continually playing “Duke’s” records because you could hear the bass clearly. This brings up two salient points: (1) that Ellington knew how to record the bass, (2) that Blanton could play it like no one had before.

It is so funny that nowadays if you read a review of a performance or a recording and the bass plays fast and high or plays some good solos, he will get special merit, but if he just lays down some good time, with a good sound and good intonation, he may not even be mentioned. You know, when they want to see if someone is dead, they listen for the pulse (heartbeat). Maybe that’s what a lot of people think happened to some music.

Ellington and Blanton were only together for a short time, but the things they did as a duo, or the Hodges Big Eight, or the whole Ellington Orchestra, were my total inspirational beginning. After Blanton’s untimely death and in the years following, I had a fierce desire to play all of those same things with that Band. However, after meeting up with Dizzy Gillespie and Bird, Bud and Max and then Oscar Peterson and staying with him fifteen fantastic years, my desire faded and I went on to other things. In the fall of 1972, Norman Granz called me and said, I want you to go to

Las Vegas in a couple of weeks and do a duo album with Duke of all the things Blanton and Duke did together. First I panicked and then the desire began to return. It had been over thirty-five years since I stood outside those bars listening to that sound.

Duke Ellington is gone now, and though he left many things for a lot of people, I received a little more. In fact, much, much more.

—Ray Brown

Producer’s Note:

Years ago when I was very young and just beginning my love affair with jazz, I used to hang out with Nat Cole and Lee Young, Lester’s drummer-brother. From time to time we had an addition to our small group of hanger-outers, Jimmy Blanton.

At that time Duke’s Band was performing in Los Angeles in that fantastic, ahead-of-its-time musical, *Jump for Joy*, and I used to see a great deal of Jimmy in those days. Then he became ill and suddenly it was too late and it was over with.

Years later, I literally drafted Ray Brown, who was an innocent backstage bystander at one of the JATP Carnegie get-togethers, into playing bass when my regular that night didn’t show; it was the beginning of an enduring, meaningful relationship. For years thereafter I tried to convince Duke to team with Ray and do the famous Blanton duets but the logistics, or perhaps the vibes, as they say now, were never right.

Finally, I managed towards the end of 1972 when Duke was in Vegas to do this session with Ray and all of us, at the conclusion of the date, were proud of it.

I think, too, that Blanton would have liked it as well.

—Norman Granz