

The success of his first Carnegie Hall concert in 1943 had an important effect on Duke Ellington's writing as well as his work schedule. Widely accepted as a serious and major artist in Europe, this concert created the same stature for him in his own United States. No longer would he be considered just a big band leader and a writer of popular songs. Americans began to listen and appreciate his serious writing; his "mini-concertos" that were vehicles for the featured sideman; and those unusual harmonic structures in the bands' arrangements. His itinerary also changed, with more and more concert bookings into major halls and colleges and universities.

In 1946, Duke was approached by the executives of the Musicraft company. Musicraft, a successful independent, had begun as a small, esoteric record company in the 1930's. By 1946, the company had an impressive array of artists under contract in both the jazz and classical fields. Ellington was looking for a record company that would give him and his music the kind of attention that was needed. Musicraft filled this void, and the fifteen titles recorded between October 23rd and December 11th would be Duke's only recorded output until the summer of 1947. It is interesting to note that out of the total recordings made, there would be only two pop tunes. The balance are all important sides reflecting the serious writing efforts of both Duke and Billy Strayhorn.

Diminuendo in Blue, introduced in 1938 as a two-part recording along with *Crescendo in Blue*, was to be the first item chosen to record on October 23, 1946. No one around today can recall why Duke only recorded the first part of this work. It is very similar in structure to the original, with a good balance and sound. *Magenta Haze*, introduced in 1945, was a "mini-concerto" for the talents of alto saxman Johnny Hodges, and apparently an item that the band never got around to recording before. Johnny's work

leads off the next session, which took place two days after the annual Carnegie Hall concert on November 23rd. *Sultry Sunset* is a very melodic piece of Ellingtonia, and Hodges makes it shine. *Happy-Go-Lucky Local* is a section from Duke's extended work, *Deep South Suite*. Duke loved trains, and wrote a piece in the thirties called *Daybreak Express*. This one depicts a train moving along in the south. In 1943, Duke commissioned Mary Lou Williams to arrange Irving Berlin's *Blue Skies*. By 1946, it became a vehicle to showcase the trumpet section and was called *Trumpet No End*. In sequence we hear Taft Jordan, Harold "Shorty" Baker, Ray Nance, Francis "Cootie" Williams, and William "Cat" Anderson in this performance.

The next recording session introduces *The Beautiful Indians*. Part 1, *Hiawatha*, features the trumpet work of Taft Jordan, and Al Sears' tenor sax. Part 2, *Minnehaha*, offers a beautiful wordless vocal with the soprano voice of Kay Davis against a rich musical background. *Flippant Flumy* is a clarinet piece for Jimmy Hamilton, and a Strayhorn contribution, while *Golden Feather* (a salute to critic and writer Leonard Feather) is a vehicle for Harry Carey's magnificent baritone sax. The session of December 11th was devoted to two serious extended works. The first, *Overture to a Jam Session*, is a Strayhorn composition depicting his concept of a full band, rather than a small group, involved in a jam session of sorts. The first part gives us the rich clarinet of Jimmy Hamilton and the bass of Oscar Pettiford playing over a warm ensemble. Part 2 is a major feature for the excellent violin work of Ray Nance, along with more Pettiford and tasteful trumpeting by Harold Baker. *Jam-a-Ditty (Concerto for Four Jazz Horns)* is a section of Ellington's work known as *The Tonal Group*. The other two sections, *Fugue-a-Ditty* and *Rhapsóditti*, were never commercially recorded, but were recorded on radio transcription and also featured in concert performances. Four jazz horns are

featured on this chamber-like music performance which opens with Duke's piano followed by Taft Jordan's lead trumpet. The other horns heard here are those of Lawrence Brown, Harry Carey, and Jimmy Hamilton. On the final session two "pop" numbers were recorded. The first, *Tulip or Turnip*, is a humorous novelty item with vocalizing by Ray Nance. The other (also an Ellington-Don George collaboration), *It Shouldn't Happen to a Dream*, offers the baritone voice of Al Hibbler along with Johnny Hodges' alto. Johnny, incidentally, recorded this later on, instrumentally.

It should be pointed out that this is rich, vintage Ellington recorded during a period when some of his best musicians were in the band. There are two special votes of appreciation here. The first goes to the record producer, Albert Marx. Albert was a young and well-respected A & R man for Musicraft at the time these records were made. He wisely gave Duke full freedom in the studio and handled his control room chores admirably. The second salute goes to Jack Towers, a dedicated person, who has beautifully remastered the originals. They have never sounded better, and the rich, full sound you hear on this record is reminiscent of high-fidelity recordings made fifteen years later.

—Jerry Valbum

Recorded at WOR Studio No. 3,
WOR Longacre Theatre, New York, N.Y.
Tracks 2, 7 were recorded October 23, 1946
Tracks 3, 10, 13 were recorded November 25, 1946
Tracks 4, 6, 8, 9 were recorded December 5, 1946
Tracks 1, 12 were recorded December 11, 1946
Tracks 5, 11 were recorded December 18, 1946
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Musicraft

REMASTERED HISTORIC RECORDING

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