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Festival: Preparation and Aftermath

The sea tumbled the drowned man up on the sandy beach. A suspicious character emerged from the fringe of tropical undergrowth and carried the body away. He was observed through the binoculars of the Border Patrol, vigilant in their launch a convenient distance offshore. He was observed, too, by Duke Ellington across a table strewn with manuscript paper. Ellington was modifying a section of the score of a new work to be presented at the Monterey Jazz Festival. He sized up the coastal situation and from then on looked up only to follow the action when the TV characters stopped talking.

Whenever he was long enough in one hotel, a piano had been moved into his suite. At Camden, it hadn't been possible, and he had worked alone in the hotel's empty ballroom, all lights on, until dawn. Here in Boston, the piano was conveniently situated opposite the TV and near the doors of the adjoining rooms. He could step out of the shower, play a chord or a phrase, and step back in again. He could swing around during a meal, a conversation, or a TV shoot-'em-up to try out an idea as soon as it occurred to him. There were constant interruptions during the irregular hours of his working day by friends, musicians, and journalists, but in between there was intense concentration, and *Suite Thursday* had begun to take shape.

Music was handed to Tom Whaley to copy, and at night in Storyville the band would play it, unannounced to the crowd. Sometimes it sounded right to its maker, but when it didn't, it was taken back upstairs for revision.

Soon there was enough music for a regular rehearsal. At the appointed hour, the piano player and a small and somewhat dejected proportion of the band were gathered together. The punctual musicians did not feel themselves obliged to wait on latecomers, and several wandered out of the hall and disappeared. Ellington, meanwhile, worked on the score at the piano, and played over some of the music previously found satisfactory.

was on stage and Ellington was bringing it to order with piercing whistles. The sax section began to run through the first part, now known as *Misfit Blues*. Its infectious character and wonderful tempo seemed to put everyone into a good humor. Ellington was listening intently, pulling at his ear lobes.

"Did I write that?" he asked Tom Whaley, pointing to a bar on the score.

"I copy what you put down," Whaley expostulated.

"Oh, I don't know. Sometimes I wonder . . ."

One phrase particularly intrigued Johnny Hodges.

"Hey, Duke," he called, "repeat that one more time. Be-boom-de-dey. See what I mean?"

"This is my this year's stuff," Ellington answered, "that I got from your last year's stuff, that you got . . . Bones right in!"

Hodges grinned and shrugged.

The band swung into *Schwiphti* with a considerable degree of confidence, having run it through twice the previous night. Until now, who would have thought that this behatted and casually attired group of men was the finest jazz orchestra in the world? Sam Woodyard there, superb big-band drummer, his cap on back to front, was mischievously discussing the vintage years with Matthew Gee while maintaining a vigorous, driving beat. Fats Ford wore a jaunty, semi-Tyrolean hat that suited him better than the tin derby he donned each night during performances of *Rockin' in Rhythm*. Johnny Hodges, his hat pulled well down over his eyes—was he meditating on the sounds around him or the Yankees' chances in the World Series? Jimmy Hamilton, slouched beneath a floppy cap appropriate to a golf course of the '20s, was playing now the pretty clarinet part of *Zweet Zurzday*, immaculately. Even Ellington was wearing a hat, a weatherproof model with a gay band. As his barber entered the hall, he cried:

"Everything is going to be all right, fellows. Billy Black is here. Have no fear!"

"Where are you going now?" asked Lawrence Brown gravely.

There was a great sorting of music and they were just ready for *Lay-by* when a waiter brought in the leader's breakfast-lunch.

"I'm too busy. Can you eat my steak?" he shouted to the musician who had been mildly reproved the night before.

Getting a negative reply, Ellington began to eat—steak, grapefruit, and black coffee with lemon. Aaron Bell eyed the spread a little hungrily from the stand as the band ran through *Lay-by*. Ellington looked up at him and said:

"I'm playing the part mentally if not physically, you know, and it's just as strenuous."

After a last sip of coffee, he took his seat at the piano again. A slightly heated discussion was developing within the band as to how one phrase should be interpreted.

"Don't let emotion interfere with our progress," Ellington called.

Ellington was talking about the work in hand after the rehearsal.

"Yes, I've been burning the midnight oil, drinking coffee with lemon, smoking cigarettes, chewing gum, walking the floor, humming, tinkling the piano, and so forth.

"What you've heard are little phrases, some of which will be used, some of which will not, and some of which will most likely be added to. Some are short and some are long. Some have to be pruned and some have to be extended. They have to be dramatically routinized. We've been writing parts, passing them out, and trying them on the stand. If we didn't like them, we'd tear them up and rewrite them, and then pass them out and re-routine them. All I can say specifically at this point is that we expect to have a rehearsal when we get to Monterey, a final rehearsal. The thing that is about to take place is the adjustment of my perspective. The story is quite involved, you know. It's set in Monterey's Cannery Row after World War II."

Ellington picked up his notes on Steinbeck's *Sweet Thursday* and began to read, with humorous inflections and interpolations:

"After the pilchards have been caught, the canneries shut down, and the characters, judged by conventional standards, are a lot of social misfits who stay on for lack of anything else to do or any place to go. Steinbeck brings them alive and the mood evoked here is, I would say, gay and funny, sad and tragic, conveying through simple people and incidents the essence of, eh, human nobility touched with the ridiculous, which gives it reality. Yes, really.

"The main characters are Doc, a high I.Q. type from the University of Chicago, who makes a shaky living in his pad by catching and selling specimens of marine life to college and research laboratories. Then there's Susie, who is a crude, proud little girl, kind of down on her luck, who briefly inhabits the bar—the Bear Flag, I mean—and who is just a little too frank and hot-tempered to make a very successful lady of ill repute.

"Doc, of course, is beloved by all the folks of Cannery Row because of his natural and instinctive kindness, and the slight plot centers on their efforts to help him when they sense his depression is not really caused by his inability to write a research paper on the emotional manifestations of the octopi, but by the mere fact that nothing so big can be accomplished by a man so obviously in need of a woman.



Composer at work

“Doc and Susie are destined to really get together, but on Page 1 they have trouble. They are not able to get together, because both are proud and defensive, and seemingly incompatible by reason of wildly different backgrounds, mental capacities, and aspirations, if any. But they can’t stay apart either, because—well, you dig? So on Page 273 they drive off to La Jolla in Doc’s old car to catch the morning tide. Now I think that’s where we are going to begin the last part, when we swing out.

“Doc has a theory that the octopus changes color according to his mood, emotions, etc. Now I’m just pulling this out of my head, but we sort of feel the people in Cannery Row change their colors, too. You look at a man, you think he’s a bum, but it turns out he’s a real angel. Or you think he’s a horrible guy, but inside he’s—well, dress him in some clean clothes and you find he’s a real right guy, and so forth.”

Ellington laid the notes down and continued:

“It’s a very, very interesting thing to do. I don’t know that we’re going to be able to say very much about the story, because you can only parallel so much of it in music. The most we’re going to be able to say, I imagine, is that on Page 1 Doc and Susie are not going to get together. Then we turn to the other people, looking for a story, and we find these different changes of color. Finally, we jump to Page

273 when the two drive off in Doc's car, and they're swinging, man!

"The titles we have are just references. For instance, *Schwiphti*—well, there's one in every town.* *Lay-by*, you should know, is the official name for an emergency parking lot alongside the highways of England. We saw a lot of them when we were riding around over there in 1958."

A couple of days later, Ellington left for California. There was a final rehearsal, and then came the première performance at the Monterey Jazz Festival. The pattern of critical reaction was all too familiar.

Time found the work "considerably less intriguing than the titles" and spoke patronizingly of what "Ellington too often uses as a substitute for invention." when "he tries for concert length." To the reviewer in *Metronome*, it "seemed to be a hastily concocted group of independent statements without a substantial theme" and one that lacked anything more than "superficial musical content." *Down Beat's* man in Monterey got "the impression there was not the least intent to produce a work of the stature of, say, *The Liberian Suite*," and he decided that "the four sections of *Suite Thursday* are separate entities, good musically and quite interesting in many places, but bearing no discernible relationship to each other, much less to John Steinbeck's works and Monterey."

Such criticism was almost completely contradicted subsequently in enthusiastic reviews of the recorded version, a fact which suggests that though jazz critics often lead the clamor for "extended works," they are not yet equipped by experience to judge them on one hearing. What was also indicated was a misconception of the musical meaning of that word "suite."

A suite is a series of short pieces which may be of quite varied character or linked together as parts of one idea. In the days of Bach, Handel, and the Elizabethan composers, the suite frequently consisted of different dance forms. The advantage of contrasting movements was thus recognized centuries ago, but some jazz critics seem to have in mind either the kind of formal development and variation which properly belong to the sonata and symphony, or the most banal kind of program music.

Ellington's suites usually consist of contrasting movements, mostly in dance style. However, quite apart from the recurring minor sixth interval referred to in the album notes, there is here an obvious melodic relationship between *Zweet Zurzday* and *Lay-by*, a relationship entirely undisguised by the switch from beguine rhythm to four-four. The loose and often subtle connection between the music

and the Steinbeck book has been indicated earlier, but it should be noted that the suite as a whole, in keeping with a tale of "simple people," has an outward simplicity. With the exception of the fast-stepping *Schwiphti*, even the tempos are relaxed and easy. There is nothing pretentious, nothing highly colored or dramatic, and Ray Nance's fiddle is properly expressive of gaiety and happiness when they swing out to La Jolla. This, in fact, is the most consistently swinging of all Ellington's long works.

By the time the band had returned East and Johnny Hodges had rejoined, its interpretations were even more exciting than that on the record. All four movements were played, night after night, in clubs and at dances, and the entry of the saxes after the pace-setting piano in *Misfit Blues* was always an electric moment. The emphasis on the saxes throughout is worth remarking. This sax section has worked together with the same personnel longer than any other in the history of jazz. Each man in it is an individual with exceptional gifts, and together they form an incomparable team, especially since Ellington writes with so full an awareness of their every quality.

Complimented after a particularly brilliant performance, Ellington was asked how he himself felt about *Suite Thursday*.

"Well, I must admit I'm rather pleased with the way it turned out," he answered.

[1961]