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# *Me and Old Duke*

ALBERT MURRAY

**B**ACK IN 1927, when I was eleven years old and in the fifth grade at Mobile County Training School on the outskirts of Mobile, Alabama, some twenty-plus years before Kenneth Burke’s notion of art as basic equipment for living became a fundamental element in my concept of the pragmatic function of aesthetic statement, I was already trying to project myself as the storybook heroic me that I wanted to be by doing a syncopated sporty limp-walk to the patent leather avenue beat of Duke Ellington’s then very current “Birmingham Breakdown.”

There were also highly stylized facial expressions, gestures, postures, and other choreographic movements that went with “Mood Indigo,” “Black and Tan Fantasy,” and “Creole Love Call,” all of which were also elements in the texture of the troposphere of that part of my preteen childhood. But “Birmingham Breakdown” (along with old Jelly Roll Morton’s “Kansas City Stomp” and Fletcher Henderson’s “Stampede”) functioned as my personal soundtrack some years before Vitaphone movies came into being.

In junior high school there was Ellington’s recording of “Diga Diga Doo,” a novelty vocal that some of my classmates and I sometimes used as a cute little takeoff jive ditty on Talladega College, which, along with Morehouse College in Atlanta and Fisk University in Nashville, was a choice liberal arts college, scholarship grants to which we as honor students were already competing with each other for upon graduation. The Ellington swagger perennial from that period was “Rockin’ in Rhythm.”

Along with the advanced courses and grade point average competition of senior high school, plus all of the ritual challenges of full-fledged adolescence, which, by the way, included cosmopolitan standards of sartorial elegance set by the latest fashions in *Esquire*, a new men’s magazine, came “It Don’t Mean a Thing if It Ain’t Got That Swing,” “Sophisticated Lady,” “Solitude,” and “Delta Serenade.” Although “Stormy Weather,” “Cocktails for Two,” and “(Everybody’s) Truckin’” were not Ellington compositions, it was Ellington’s arrangements and

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recordings that established them as radio hits and stash-swagger-fare for hip cats.

When "Caravan" came out I was in college, and that was also the year that T. E. Lawrence (of Arabia) published *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, which eventually led me to Charles Doughty's *Travels in Arabia Deserta* and to Sir Richard Burton's *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to El-Madinah & Meccah*. The dance step that used to go with "Caravan" and other ballroom exotica was the camel walk, which for a while was right out there with "Truckin'" and was no less intricate than the Suzy Q. Then came "I Let a Song Go out of My Heart" with an instrumental version that was no less popular than the lyric.

I was also in college when "Echoes of Harlem" came out, and along with "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue" it was to come to represent an aesthetic statement that was more in line with my evolving sensibility and artistic aspiration than anything I had come across in *The New Negro*, Alain Locke's anthology of the so-called Harlem Renaissance.

The world I graduated into from college in 1939 was that of Count Basie's "Doggin' Around" and "Blue and Sentimental." But in 1940 came Ellington's "Cotton Tail," a musical stylization of the elegantly nimble rabbit in the briarpatch, which for me was to become the musical equivalent of a representative literary anecdote. *For example, the blues as such may be approached as the ever nimble rabbit copes with the jam-session-like challenges of the briarpatch.* Hence the name Scooter for the protagonist of *Train Whistle Guitar*, *The Spyglass Tree*, *The Seven League Boots*, and the book now in progress.

When I came to New York the first time, "Echoes of Harlem," "Uptown Downbeat," "I'm Slappin' Seventh Avenue with the Sole of My Shoe," "Harlem Airshaft," and the then new "Take the A Train" had as much to do with my preconceptions and anticipations of the idiomatic texture of life in uptown Manhattan as Hollywood movies and the WPA guidebook had to do with my expectations of the great metropolis as a whole.

It was on my second visit to New York that I picked up on "Mainstem," Ellington's tone parallel to Broadway, which did for midtown Manhattan what "Harlem Airshaft" had done

and still does for the special ambience of New York City above 110th Street. And as "Sepia Panorama" does for the brownskin area of every large city in the United States that I have ever visited. After all, as the old barbershop saying goes, "Nobody ever knew more about what to do with all that old chitlin circuit stuff than old Duke."

When, as a young college teacher attending graduate school at NYU, I finally met Ellington and began going to his rehearsals and recording sessions, I felt, and still feel, that what I was doing was as relevant to my career as a writer as meeting Ernest Hemingway, Thomas Mann, James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, André Malraux, William Faulkner, and W. H. Auden would have been. Incidentally, it was from Mann's application of devices of German music to prose fiction that led me to explore the existential implications of the blues and also to try to make literary applications of the devices of jazz orchestration.

In time, my personal contact with Ellington became such that he sponsored a party that his sister Ruth gave at 333 Riverside Drive at 106th Street (now renamed Duke Ellington Boulevard) when my second book, *South to a Very Old Place*, was published. And his blurb on the jacket of *Train Whistle Guitar*, my first novel, is not only the most flattering I've ever received but is also the one most often quoted in profiles and platform introductions.

But even before that, there was the fall term that I spent at Colgate University as O'Connor Professor of Literature, which was in itself an unforgettable high point in my early literary career. What made it an all but incredible time for me, however, were two other surprises. Even as I was still finding my way around the campus, the *New Yorker* magazine published a long and enthusiastic review by Robert Coles of my first book, *The Omni-Americans*. And shortly thereafter Duke Ellington himself, en route to Los Angeles where he and Ella Fitzgerald were booked into the Coconut Grove, called and said, "Hey, Albert [pronounced French style], since you have no classes between late Thursday afternoon and early next Tuesday afternoon, why not let me have our office set up a weekend round-trip flight out to L.A. I'd like to talk to you about this book that Stanley Dance and I are trying to put together."

On the flight to California, the big thrill for me was not that

I was on my way to Hollywood. As an Air Force Captain assigned to duty at Long Beach Municipal Airport from 1958 to 1961, I had not only become used to driving from my residence in Compton into downtown Los Angeles and out to Hollywood to attend art exhibitions, musical entertainment and sports events as often as several times a week, I had also become a regular backstage visitor during concerts, club dates and dances every time the Ellington Band came to town. So I had also begun to go to rehearsals and recording sessions including those that produced the Ellington-Strayhorn version of *The Nutcracker Suite*.

No, the big thrill for me as I boarded the flight to Los Angeles Airport was the fact that my invitation was a follow up on a very flattering compliment that Duke had paid me two years earlier. On October 20, 1968, he had played one of his sacred concerts at Metropolitan AME church on 135th Street off Lenox Avenue, only three blocks from my apartment in Harlem. When I arrived early enough to go "backstage" to the pastor's office and study, which Duke was using as his dressing room, he introduced me to Ralph Bunche, the great United Nations diplomat. Bunche was scheduled to present Duke with a commemorative Duke Ellington postage stamp being issued by Togoland. When Duke called me over to meet Bunche, Duke told him that I was a new writer whose magazine articles were well worth checking out. "He's gone, man," he said as he turned to start dressing to go on stage, "he's already way out there."

As Bunche and I shook hands, he said "Duke's recommendation is certification enough for me." He told me about how when he, who was not a musician, was coming of age, Duke Ellington became one of his most influential role models, a development that pleased his father very much because his father thought that Ellington's cosmopolitan deportment was entirely consistent with the universality of his music.

Nor was that all. There was also the all too recent fact that when Duke's sister Ruth called from the office with specific information about transportation and lodging, she said that he had seen the very enthusiastic review of *The Omni-Americans* in *Newsweek*, which also included a snapshot of me sitting

beside Duke at the Newport Jazz Festival of 1961. Duke had said “It’s because of cats like that I’m going to have to amount to something one of these days.” I would have been just thrilled en route to meet him at a roadhouse anywhere on the chitlin’ circuit.