

On Ellington, Part 1

by Diggs Duke

Though his earnings were pillaged both [before](#) and [after](#) his death, Duke Ellington is consistently propagandized as either being sympathetic to the cause of the *Citizenry* or being completely apolitical. However, the slightest bit of research reveals that he was a realist with [a hefty investment in the People](#), and engaged the *Citizenry* only as it pertained to this investment. He was one of the few who saw through the rhetoric of integration, and verbalized it to be the extraction process to end all extraction processes. Every style of music that has descended from the *People* owes a great debt to Duke Ellington.

For example, although his production entitled 'My People' is [predated by many examples of rapping](#), it can be argued that [he forged the path for socially-informed 'Hip-Hop.'](#) He can also be credited, along with people like Ray Charles and Mary Lou Williams, for secularizing the *People's* Christian music. Though this secularization was labeled an abomination by religious purists, agnostics found it was a first step out of the quicksand of hypocritical religious doctrine.

Certainly, the sound of the secular religious music that emerged in the 60s is greatly indebted to Duke Ellington's conception of sound. The Impressions and Johnny Pate performed an arrangement of [Ellington's 'Satin Doll'](#) as a statement of homage on their first collaborative album, "The Never Ending Impressions." In the years to come, some of the group's most engaging productions [featured Mayfield and Pate's Ellingtonian conception of music](#). It is no coincidence that 'My People' debuted in Chicago in 1963 and that Curtis Mayfield's "[Keep On Pushing](#)" was released by The Impressions in 1964. Much of the music that Curtis Mayfield and [Johnny Pate](#) wrote after their time writing for the Impressions carried the spirit of Duke Ellington, as well.

Though Ellington's closeness to the spirit of the *People* enabled him to cultivate such divine music, it was always a source of resentment for the *Citizenry*, including all of their pets and pet organizations. There was an incident in 1951 that began a wave of public confrontation between the

NAACP, the Afro-American newspaper and Duke Ellington. On the 10th of November, members of the NAACP picketed Ellington's performance at the segregated Mosque Auditorium in Richmond, Virginia. He pulled out of the engagement, lamenting that the protests were preventing the members of his band from earning a living. Soon after, the band was scheduled to play at the segregated Municipal Auditorium in Atlanta, where a similar protest was staged.

THE AFRO-AMERICAN NEWSPAPER: ELLINGTON PLAYS AS ATLANTANS ENTER BACK DOOR – Atlanta: More than 1,000 indignant Atlantans tore up their \$2.50 tickets refusing to enter the Municipal Auditorium here Friday after rudely being informed the front door was for white only. While this number, angered over the disgusting Jim Crow arrangements, refused to enter the small back entrance, more than 4,000 crowded in to see and hear Duke Ellington, Sarah Vaughn and Nat King Cole. There were 1500 white record fans with a great big section all to themselves... Approached backstage by the Afro, Duke Ellington, a greasy stocking on his head, snapped, "I don't want to discuss it." It was the same attitude he took in Richmond during the fight over segregation at the Mosque. While patrons were forced to undergo segregation, the white members with the Ellington and Cole aggregations were allowed to perform. This was in contrast to Birmingham, where Police Commissioner Eugene Bull Conner informed the white musicians they could not play on a stage with colored musicians.

Surely, even if there is a criticism to be made about their methods, the *People* were righteous in protesting the way that the *music* was being presented to them. But, since it would be laughable for musicians to show up at the protesters' segregated workplaces with demands that they walk off the job, it seems unreasonable to expect musicians take such a stance in the middle of a tour.

DUKE ELLINGTON: All this fighting that's going on now about race is for the negro at the bottom. It isn't doing the Negro who's got something any good.

The entrepreneurial mind is one that doesn't always understand the concept of asking for permission. Ellington had invested quite a bit of sacrifice into the development and maintenance of his band. For example, their first gigs were gained via [an exploitative ad in the Washington D.C. phone book](#), but later [he would rent Pullman trains](#) to ensure that his band would not be victimized by supremacy. I suspect that these protesters were apathetic, in terms of the conditions faced by the touring musicians. I also suspect that this type of apathy, combined with a lack of entrepreneurial thinking, strengthens the recruitment and fund-raising efforts of organizations such as the NAACP or Black Lives Matter, that quantify the *People's* struggle into an ethically-gratifying activity.

With his statement about his band being blocked from their wages and his comment about the desperate nature of protest, Ellington was hinting at the *People* solving their own problem autonomously, by collectively investing in themselves, in order to collectively be of undeniable value to the world. His words are controversial because they seem to blame the *People* for their own hardship, distancing him from the ones he claims to love so much. However, the information contained within the actual words carries a message of undeniable truth – *and isn't that what we long for when we look into a lover's eyes?*

THE AFRO-AMERICAN: DUKE CALLS FIGHT FOR [CIVIL] RIGHTS SILLY – St. Louis, Mo: Declaring with pointed emphasis 'We ain't ready yet,' Duke Ellington, world famed swing orchestra leader, said in an interview here that fighting being carried on in an effort to gain integration is “a silly thing,” at the matinee performance of the Biggest Show of '51 ... According to the Duke, the fighting being carried on by some people is getting us nowhere. He could see no particular progress over the last

few years and questioned "the good it's doing us" to get one or two people in a few white schools or certain jobs. Several times during the conversation, he referred to "those people" but would call no names. He did mention the Richmond incident when the Richmond NAACP picketed the Mosque Theatre where he played to a segregated audience. Ellington maintained that there are so many arguments against us that our efforts are futile. As he prepared to return to the stage he said, "No, we ain't ready yet. Get together \$100,000,000 and then we can do something."

DUKE ELLINGTON: You own \$100,000,000, you go and demand something, you're somebody, you're somebody of substance. You don't walk in and say I represent 20,000,000 people, you say I represent \$100,000,000. It has a different image.

MERCER ELLINGTON: [They] took a statement of Ellington's out of context, from the article and says, 'Duke Says We Ain't Ready!' One reason for the statement was that we ain't ready because we didn't have the money to go to court to litigate and to keep on appealing and do what was necessary. But, [the paper] implied 'Not ready for education' and 'Not educated well enough to accept freedom' and so forth. We had a hard time going around trying to explain that and trying to straighten out the whole thing...The point was which way do you want it? Do you want to go ahead and start fighting with no money? Or do you want to get money from the sources which it is available.... His philosophy towards race was the achievement of financial support in order to go about these things legally... the answer, as is being proved, is about money, he felt the solution was economic.

THE AFRO-AMERICAN: DUKE ELLINGTON'S VIEWS ON JIM CROW SHOCK NATION – Maestro says 'We Ain't Ready Yet.' He intimates that coloured people who live in the South know the law – that calls for the practice of jim crowism – and they might as well make themselves satisfied with their lot and stay in their 'places.' Says the Duke: 'This thing about sitting anywhere they (coloured people) want is so much bunk. If you go South don't you have to sit in the rear of the streetcar?' With the NAACP his obvious target, the Duke questioned the progress that has been made in the past few years... Early in February, the Duke showed evidence that the civil rights battle was getting 'under his skin' when he was quoted in the daily press as saying: Why do they do this to me? Why only the other Sunday I gave a concert in New York that netted them (the NAACP) about \$10,000.'

It would seem that the Afro-American newspaper was working in tandem with the NAACP in order to secure donations from Ellington. This, in addition to being [constantly stalked by the government](#), had to have been a great source of stress. The Afro-American newspaper stopped their attacks on him only after years of donations to the NAACP, which I imagine is comprised of many of their supporters. Indeed, it seems as if this paper is [still using the same tactics](#) to secure funding and readership. But, it is more important to understand that this type of journalism is recycled from the *Citizen's 'journalism.'*

THE AFRO-AMERICAN: DUKE BENEFIT FOR NAACP NETTED \$1500, NOT 13,000. The record shows that Duke at times has tried to win more support from coloured people by attempting to prove he is a great race man who has contributed heavily to their cause through organizations such as the NAACP. A closer look at the record will show this to be false... A case in point is the benefit performance which Duke

staged last Jan. 20 at the Metropolitan Opera for the benefit of the NAACP... From the box-office standpoint the performance was a great success with about \$14,000 being collected from the sale of tickets, the NAACP ran up expenses of approximately \$1900... Duke's organization also came up with approximately \$7500 in ticket sales...[but] Duke's organization reported that their expenses with the promotion were approximately \$6,000 ... The net result was that when the two operations were dovetailed, the expenses shared and the profits accounted for, the NAACP 'benefited' about \$1500 from a \$14,000 promotion ... The inescapable fact in the whole thing... is that Duke, like so many great bandleaders of today is faced with economic ruin in this day of small combos, television and cocktail rooms.

The excerpt below is taken from Stuart Nicholson's "Reminiscing In Tempo," the book containing this back and forth between Ellington, The Afro-American newspaper and the NAACP.

Clearly the black press were not about to forgive easily the 'We Ain't Ready Yet' incident. The fact of the matter was that Ellington was damaged by his statement and it took some time to weather the storm. Nevertheless, despite something of a feud that developed between him and the NAACP, he continued to make contributions to the organization but thereafter was far more circumspect in his handling of racially-motivated questions from the press, his replies always graciously avoiding any contentious issues.

Eventually the differences between Ellington and the NAACP were patched up and on 11 September 1959 he was presented with the [Spingarn Medal](#) for 'the highest and noblest achievement by an American Negro during the preceding year or years.'

Ellington soon withdrew from discussing certain issues with the media. But, we can be thankful

that, every now and then, he would address the world using the word rather than the song. The following excerpt is taken from a concert program at an Ellington performance of his "Sacred Music" in 1965.

How can anyone expect to be understood unless he presents his thoughts with complete honesty? This situation is unfair because it asks too much of the world. In effect, we say, "I don't dare show you what I am because I don't trust you for a minute but please love me anyway because I so need you to. And, of course, if you don't love me anyway, you're a dirty dog, just as I suspected, so I was right in the first place." Yet, every time God's children have thrown away fear in pursuit of honesty, trying to communicate themselves, understood or not, miracles have happened.