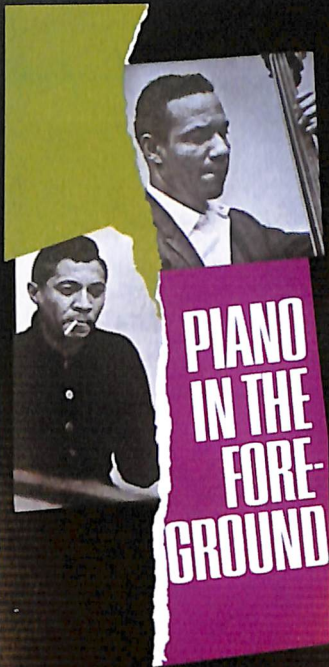


# DUKE ELLINGTON



PIANO  
IN THE  
FORE-  
GROUND

GUARANTEED  
HIGH FIDELITY

Produced by  
Irv Townsend

# DUKE ELLINGTON

## PIANO IN THE FOREGROUND



I CAN'T GET STARTED  
CONG-GO  
BODY AND SOUL  
BLUES FOR JERRY  
FONTAINEBLEAU FOREST

SUMMERTIME  
IT'S BAD TO BE FORGOTTEN  
A HUNDRED DREAMS AGO  
SO  
YEARNING FOR LOVE  
SPRINGTIME IN AFRICA

In one of the most widely quoted remarks ever made by one jazz musician about another, Billy Strayhorn said that Duke Ellington played the piano, but his real instrument was the Ellington orchestra. Strayhorn, by virtue of his unique position as Ellington's friend, arranger, co-composer and nearly inseparable collaborator, is in an excellent position to know what he is talking about, and his comment is a highly astute tribute to the special nature of one of the most prodigious talents in the history of jazz. As composer, arranger and leader capable of making his entire personnel reflect his own personality, Ellington is unapproachable.

But when Ellington speaks of himself in relation to the orchestra, he generally refers to himself as "the piano player." Some of that assessment may be mocking self-disparagement, some may be a manifestation of the elegant, sardonic facade Ellington erects between himself and the world. (I once spent an evening talking with a musician who had been a member of the Ellington band for about twenty years, and even allowing for my companion's possible self-censorship in the interests of privacy, I got the impression that he didn't know Ellington very well.) Ellington himself notwithstanding, the process of critical re-evaluation started by jazz critics in the mid-Fifties (its most significant achievement to date is probably rescuing Thelonious Monk from obscurity) has begun to establish Ellington's importance as a piano player.

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The difference between the two is perhaps best noted by the third of Balliett's astutely chosen pianist-composers, Cecil Taylor. "One is conscious or one is unconscious of everything that happens," Taylor says, "and your music reflects it. Ellington is a sophisticated man, in many ways. Monk is a different type of person." This sophistication, which a quarter of a century ago invited comparison to Ravel and Debussy, as well as dire warnings that Ellington was corrupting his music and would be washed up any day, is revealed here in the lovely, impressionistic pieces *Fontainebleau Forest* and *Springtime in Africa*. These tracks are cultural ages away from the stride style which Ellington so precisely delineates elsewhere in the album, and are small gems of the kind that only he has brought to jazz. Besides these two pieces, there are five that have

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Also, there are the standards—*Body and Soul, I Can't Get Started* and *Summertime*—to show how Ellington makes anything he touches peculiarly his own.

I feel that this album, recorded in one afternoon with Aaron Bell on bass and Sam Woodyard on drums, goes far to reveal the great jazz pianist that stands behind the great composer-arranger-bandleader, and perhaps even shows that the pianist propels all the other talents. If Ellington did nothing but play the piano this well, he would be a giant. And what Ellington said respectfully of James P. Johnson can be said as well about Ellington himself: "There never was another."

—JOE GOLDBERG

(Contributing Editor, "HiFi/Stereo Review")

Other Duke Ellington albums you will enjoy:

The Ellington Era: Volume 1...CSL 27  
Paris at Midnight...CL 1907/CS 8707\*  
First Time (with Count Basie)...CL 1715/CS 8515\*  
Piano in the Background...CL 1940/CS 8342\*

\*Stereo

THE SELECTIONS...PUBLISHED BY TEMPO MUSIC, INC. (ASCAP) EXCEPT WHERE NOTED—ARE FOLLOWED BY THEIR TIMINGS

SIDE 1	I CAN'T GET STARTED	Chappell & Co., Inc. (ASCAP)	4:19
CONG-GO			2:47
BODY AND SOUL	Harms, Inc. (ASCAP)	4:45	3:13
BLUES FOR JERRY		4:45	3:01
FONTAINEBLEAU FOREST		2:48	3:40
		21:00	19:52

Color photo: Jim Marshall/Black photos: Don Heston

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This Columbia GUARANTEED HIGH FIDELITY recording is scientifically designed to play with the highest quality of reproduction on the phonograph of your choice, new or old. If you are the owner of a new stereophonic system, this record will play with even more brilliant true-to-life fidelity. In short, you can purchase this record with no fear of its becoming obsolete in the future.

1. I Can't Get Started 4:21 I. GERSHWIN-V. DUKE
2. Cong-Go 4:14 D. ELLINGTON-A. BELL
3. Body And Soul 4:46 E. HEYMAN-J. GREEN-R. SOUR-R. EYTON
4. Blues For Jerry 4:36
5. Fontainebleau Forest 2:50
6. Summertime 3:50 G. GERSHWIN-D. HEYWARD-D. HEYWARD-I. GERSHWIN
7. It's Bad To Be Forgotten 3:19
8. A Hundred Dreams Ago 2:24
9. So 4:31
10. Searching (Pleading For Love) 1:47 D. ELLINGTON-S. ALLEN
11. Springtime In Africa 3:44 D. ELLINGTON-A. BELL

### BONUS TRACKS

12. Lotus Blossom 3:16 B. STRAYHORN
13. All The Things You Are (take 1) 3:59 O. HAMMERSTEIN II-J. KERN
14. All The Things You Are (take 2) 3:49 O. HAMMERSTEIN II-J. KERN
15. Piano Improvisation No. 2 3:23
16. Piano Improvisation No. 3 2:46
17. Piano Improvisation No. 4 1:51
18. Piano Improvisation No. 1 9:45

ALL COMPOSITIONS BY DUKE ELLINGTON UNLESS OTHERWISE INDICATED.

DUKE ELLINGTON - PIANO

AARON BELL (#1-12) OR JIMMY WOODE (#13-18) - BASS

SAM WOODYARD - DRUMS

- #1-12: RECORDED AT THE RADIO RECORDERS ANNEX, LOS ANGELES ON MARCH 1 & 2, 1961 BY ALAN EMIG  
 #13 & 14: RECORDED AT COLUMBIA 30TH STREET STUDIO, NEW YORK CITY ON OCTOBER 10, 1957 BY HAROLD CHAPMAN  
 #15-18: RECORDED AT COLUMBIA 30TH STREET STUDIO, NEW YORK CITY ON MARCH 20, 1957 BY FRED PLAUT  
 #13 & 14 ARE IN MONO. ALL OTHER SELECTIONS ARE STEREO.  
 #1-11 ORIGINALLY ISSUED AS *PIANO IN THE FOREGROUND* (COLUMBIA CS 8829).  
 #15-17 ORIGINALLY ISSUED AS "IMPROVISATION IN THREE PARTS" ON *THE WORLD OF DUKE ELLINGTON - VOLUME 3* (COLUMBIA CS 33961).  
 #13, 14 & 18 ORIGINALLY ISSUED ON *DUKE 56/62 - VOLUME 1* (FRENCH CBS 88653).  
 #12 ORIGINALLY ISSUED ON *DUKE 56/62 - VOLUME 2* (FRENCH CBS 88654).



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—Joe Goldberg

(Contributing Editor, *HiFi/Stereo Review*)

1961



## "Piano In The Foreground"

is the most relaxed album we ever made"—Aaron Bell.

### Duke Ellington

played for his public, smiling broadly, sometimes elegantly mugging a bit, interspersing the forceful chords with witty, extemporaneous as well as trademark verbal and musical comments. But when he explored the keyboard for his own pleasure, he was most often given to deep reverie and a ruminating beauty. Those were the special times that he occasionally shared with his rhythm section. On "...Foreground," the piano player proves his virtuosity, essentially playing for himself. The audience is extraordinarily privileged.

"On some of these tunes, we didn't even know we were recording," Bell disclosed, "listening appreciatively to this CD in 2003. 'There was no rehearsal, no discussion of what we were going to do. Mostly, Duke just started playing, and Sam and I came in when we felt like it. We were so loose that there must have been some editing on these tracks but it doesn't sound like it now.'"

"Before he played a note, he could sway an audience to like whatever he was going to do. I considered all that talk a sophisticated veneer. But when he played the piano, Duke Ellington was real. He never played superficially, and he was always trying to reach somewhere else...constantly searching, looking for new ways...new things to do. That's the truest side of Duke that you'll ever meet...the most sincere side—when he's actually playing the piano."

Dr. Samuel Aaron Bell, a native of Muskogee, Oklahoma, initially was drawn to Ellingtonia by the 1938 recording of "Jeep's Blues" by Johnny Hodges and His Orchestra, a seven-piece unit from the big band with Duke on piano, and by broadcasts from New York's downtown Cotton

Club. Then a teen-age musician whose mother, a church music director and singer, gave keyboard lessons to neighbor Jay McShann, Bell's interests progressed through piano, trumpet, tuba and, during his senior year in high school, to string bass.

Ellington first heard Aaron at Manhattan's Hickory House restaurant in pianist Billy Taylor's trio. On Bell's inaugural date with Duke's band in 1960 at a New England college, he found that he was the second bass violinist, sans music. His companion, Jimmy Woode, had the bass book. Amazingly, to the newcomer, the challenge worked. Weeks later, told that Woode had left, Bell flew to Las Vegas and again found himself paired with Woode for several days.

On his two years as Ellington's sole bassist, Aaron reflected, "Playing with Duke satisfied every instinct of any good musician. He allowed you the privilege of musical growth while you're making money...It wasn't the same thing all night long every night...Even when it was the same tune, it wasn't the same. We played it different ways. When I arrived in the band, we'd be playing 'Mood Indigo,' he'd go *whack...yack*, and I'd say, 'Damn, he doesn't know his own tune! What's he doing?' He was experimenting. He was trying to get if this would work, if that would work. He's feeling around in there. You had to keep your ears cocked. Don't get too set on the way you did it before. You had to stay on top of him, stay tuned to him."

Sam Woodyard (1925-1988), born in Elizabeth, New Jersey, progressed through the ensembles of Paul Gayten, Joe Holiday, Roy Eldridge and Milt Buckner, en route to Ellington in 1955. Although he arrived with an

impeccable reputation as a drummer who could swing. Woodyard consistently credited his Ellington experience as teaching him "not to play loud because it doesn't prove anything...I learned so much about not just percussion but about myself." Enormously respectful of Duke's keyboard prowess, Sam, in a combination of affection and intermittent defiance, dubbed his leader "Piano Red."

Vernon Duke and Ira Gershwin's "I Can't Get Started With You," introduced by Bob Hope in *Ziegfeld Follies Of 1936* and perennially embraced by jazz artists, was an infrequent choice of Ellington. In more than ten months in the band, Aaron had not played it. "I think he was after a special atmosphere in our playing here," Bell suggests, "in the sound of the old East Side clubs...at the Embers, when you walked in the room, you heard the piano in the foreground. That's it. The bass and drums were there but you almost didn't hear them."

"Cong-Go," Bell describes as "a figment of Duke's imagination as well as mine...I just started improvising in the studio what became the main theme, and Duke latched onto that. Yet I felt that he somehow suggested what I was playing. He asked me the name of our creation I thought it sounded African—definitely not cocktail music. I said, 'Congo.' The ultimate spelling is Duke's. He never explained it."

Ellington had what seemed an infinite lode of original music to mine, as well as a wealth of provocative resident collaborators. When the pianist elected to interpret another composer's work, he demonstrated his total admiration, as here, with Johnny Green, Edward Heyman, Robert Sour and Frank Eyton's 1930 "Body And Soul."

"Blues For Jerry," Ducal authority and confidant Brooks Kerr reports, is an homage to the composer's Washington D.C. boyhood friend, drummer, singer and early business manager Jerome Rhea. "To me, this is

Thelonious Monk-y," Bell commented. "It's not a blues but it is. It's the blues pattern that everyone listens for. If you don't listen close, you won't get that because he's throwing you off."

From Duke's many Gallic tours, "Fontainebleau Forest" is his exquisite aural painting of the lush stands of foliage surrounding Fontainebleau Palace, built for Francis I, 35 miles south of Paris. Famed mentor of musicians Nadia Boulanger taught at the conservatory at Fontainebleau.

With "Summertime," Duke delves into the other Gershwin, discovering elements of the solstice not investigated by George. Aaron and Sam build turbulence. "That's our winter version of 'Summertime,'" Bell laughed. "Near the end, Duke was like in the lower...b-flat—boom! Everywhere he'd go, I'd go find him so he got off my bass. The e-string is the lowest thing on the strings. He went down below the e so I loosened it, and he groaned, 'Aaaaauuughh!'"

"A Hundred Dreams Ago," in Aaron's opinion, is Ellington's variations on the Victor Young melody "A Hundred Years From Today" from *Lew Leslie's Blackbirds Of 1933*.

Bell characterized the meandering "So" as a musical conundrum, querying "So?" or "So what?" or "So where?" and "So, Whither Goes?" On the very end, Duke comes back to the final cadence, "So!" Musically, he went through several different conclusions and ended up where he started. Sometimes you never know what Duke had in mind."

Ellington's penchant for recycling melodic ideas and revising song titles is the historians and discographers' bane. Despite Joe Goldberg's certainty in the original notes, the 1936 tune "Yearning For Love," listed in *Musica Is My Mistress* as having lyrics by Mitchell Parish and Irving Mills, is not the same composition as "Searching

(Pleading For Love)," cited in *MIMM* simply as "Searchin'" with lyrics by the well-known author-composer-comedian Steve Allen. The one here, Bell felt, is indebted to Jesse Stone's 1942 "Idaho."

"Springtime In Africa" is a figment of both of our imaginations...indulging in our African fantasies...where we're just going and feeding off of each other. He's really having fun," Aaron explained. "I had in my mind a little flower making its way up in the springtime from underneath a big shady place like a rock. I don't know what was in Duke's mind. He asked me for the name of what we'd played, and I told him. None of this was written out...till after it was recorded. Then they wanted a lead sheet."

"Lotus Blossom," perhaps Ellington's most eloquent and introspective solo piece, often reflected his mood, almost a benediction, at the close of a recording session. Bell's arco bass accompaniment and Woodyard's near-subliminal drums are perfection. This was Billy Strayhorn's favorite Ellington composition, as played by its creator.

James Bryant Woode, also the son of a music teacher, was born in Philadelphia in 1928. Baritone horn and piano studies preceded his adoption of the bass. He was with Zoot Sims, Flip Phillips, Sarah Vaughan, Nat Pierce, Sidney Bechet and Billie Holiday before joining Ellington, January 2, 1955, exactly seven months before Woodyard.

Aaron Bell was enduring his third series of chemotherapy treatment when he agreed to listen to and reminisce about *Piano In The Foreground* and *Piano In The Background* in late May, 2003. Optimistic, witty and upbeat but physically weak and forbidden by his doctors to play his beloved bass, he insisted upon hearing every track—some more than once. At the final six improvisations, on which Jimmy Woode is the

bassist, Aaron remarked at "All The Things You Are (take 1)," "Jimmy's doing just what I thought he'd do—Thump! Hummmph!"

Suddenly, as Take Two began, Aaron leaped from his easy chair, grabbed the bass leaning against a wall, and, with an startling surge of power, announced, "Here's the way I would play this!" and accompanied Ellington, Woode and Woodyard. Beaming with fulfillment, he collapsed into the chair but not until after the final note of Track 18.

Aaron Bell succumbed to cancer July 28, 2003.

—Patricia Willard

May 2004

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Patricia Willard is a free-lance writer and former *JazzTimes* Columnist, *down beat* and *Jazz & Pop* Contributing Editor, Historical Consultant to the Duke Ellington Collection at the Smithsonian Institution, Consultant in Jazz and Popular Music at the Library of Congress, and was research, editing and West Coast Public Relations Consultant to Duke Ellington for more than 25 years. She is completing a book on that period of Ellingtonia and collaborating with Louie Bellson on his autobiography *Skin Deep*.

The author gratefully acknowledges the research assistance of Aaron and Delores Bell; Rrahime Bell; (Filmmaker) David G. Berger; Sjel Hoefsmid, Editor, *International Duke Ellington Music Society Bulletin*; Brooks Kerr; Steven Lasker; Holly Maxson; G. William Ross, Founder, *International Duke Ellington Jazz Societies*; Jack Towers—and Edward Kennedy Ellington.

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ORIGINAL RECORDING PRODUCED BY  
IRVING TOWNSEND

Reissue Produced by  
Michael Brooks and Michael Cuscuna

Remixed and Mastered using DSD technology by  
Mark Wilder at Sony Music Studios, New York

Project Director: Seth Rothstein

Legacy A&R: Steve Berkowitz

A&R Coordination: Stacey Boyle

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## DUKE ON COLUMBIA

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PIANO IN THE BACKGROUND CK 87107  
REMINISCING IN TEMPO CK 48654  
SUCH SWEET THUNDER CK 65568  
THIS IS JAZZ #7 CK 64617  
THIS IS JAZZ # 36 - PLAYS STANDARDS CK 65056  
THREE SUITES - NUTCRACKER/PEER GYNT/  
SUITE THURSDAY CK 46825

The history of jazz begins in 1917, and Columbia Records was right there at the inception. The label, which as a descendant of the Columbia Gramophone Company could already claim pioneering achievements in the development of the phonograph, the recording cylinder, the 78 rpm disc and the two-sided record, was the scene of the first studio session by the Original Dixieland Jazz band, as well as another seminal 1917 session by W.C. Handy's Orchestra of Memphis. Over the next three decades, through its own recording efforts and the purchase of such labels as Okeh, Brunswick

and Vocalion, Columbia's holdings came to include seminal music by Mamie Smith, King Oliver, Louis Armstrong's Hot Fives and Sevens, Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, Bix Beiderbecke, Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, Teddy Wilson, Billie Holiday, Mildred Bailey and Red Norvo, Count Basie, Benny Goodman, Harry James, Gene Krupa and Woody Herman. Columbia's introduction of the 33 1/3 LP in 1948 launched two decades of recordings that emphasized influential small groups led by Erroll Garner, Dave Brubeck, Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk. Larger ensembles were also documented, including the unequalled Miles Davis/Gil Evans collaborations, the combustible mid-size groups of Charles Mingus and some of the early mergers of jazz and classical music involving Gunther Schuller. Columbia's historic first live recordings at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1956 returned the Duke Ellington Orchestra to its

deserved position of jazz preeminence.

Another evolutionary step was being taken by the end of the '60s. This was fusion, the earliest stages of which can be traced through several of Miles Davis' Columbia recordings. The trumpeter's innovations inspired his sidemen to create groups of their own such as Weather Report, featuring Wayne Shorter and Josef Zawinul, Chick Corea's Return To Forever, Herbie Hancock's

### The Legacy of Columbia Jazz

McLaughlin's Mahavishnu Orchestra and the Tony Williams Lifetime, all of which made important recordings on Columbia during the '70s. At the same time, the label documented pioneers of acoustic new music with important recordings by Ornette Coleman, Charles Mingus, Bill Evans, Dexter Gordon and Woody Shaw, plus the more pop-oriented instrumentals of Bob James and Lee Ritenour.

Columbia again led the way when the jazz tradition was revisited by a generation

of young musicians in the '80s. Wynton and Branford Marsalis, Terence Blanchard and Donald Harrison, Marcus Roberts, James Carter, David Sanchez and Leon Parker are among this new wave of musicians that has sparked a new interest in jazz through their Columbia recordings. At the same time, Columbia continued to document jazz in all its varieties, from the classic sounds of Doc Cheatham to the uncategorizable creations of Henry Threadgill. Add the strong reissue activity under the Legacy imprint and Columbia continues its history as jazz's most comprehensive home base.









50997 087042-2



ORIGINAL RECORDING PRODUCED BY IRVING TOWNSEND

Whenever he introduced the members of his orchestra to audiences around the world, Duke Ellington (1899-1974) invariably and jokingly referred to himself as "the piano player." On *Piano In The Foreground*, the Maestro's singular touch and graceful solos are center stage for a program of sublime originals, one dream-like piece by longtime collaborator Billy Strayhorn, plus four of the most perdurable and pleasurable entries in the Great American Songbook. Given exemplary support on the bulk of this set by Aaron Bell and Sam Woodyard, the orchestra's bass-drums tandem at the time of the 1961 recordings herein, this newly remastered collection has been expanded to eighteen selections, with seven bonus tracks coming from two 1957 dates. As Joe Goldberg astutely pointed out in his original notes: "If Ellington did nothing but play the piano, he would be a giant."



1. I Can't Get Started 4:21
2. Cong-Go 4:14
3. Body And Soul 4:46
4. Blues For Jerry 4:36
5. Fontainebleau Forest 2:50
6. Summertime 3:50
7. It's Bad To Be Forgotten 3:19
8. A Hundred Dreams Ago 2:24
9. So 4:31
10. Searching (Pleading For Love) 1:47
11. Springtime In Africa 3:44

**BONUS TRACKS**

12. Lotus Blossom 3:16
13. All The Things You Are (take 1) 3:59
14. All The Things You Are (take 2) 3:49
15. Piano Improvisation No. 2 3:23
16. Piano Improvisation No. 3 2:46
17. Piano Improvisation No. 4 1:51
18. Piano Improvisation No. 1 9:45

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