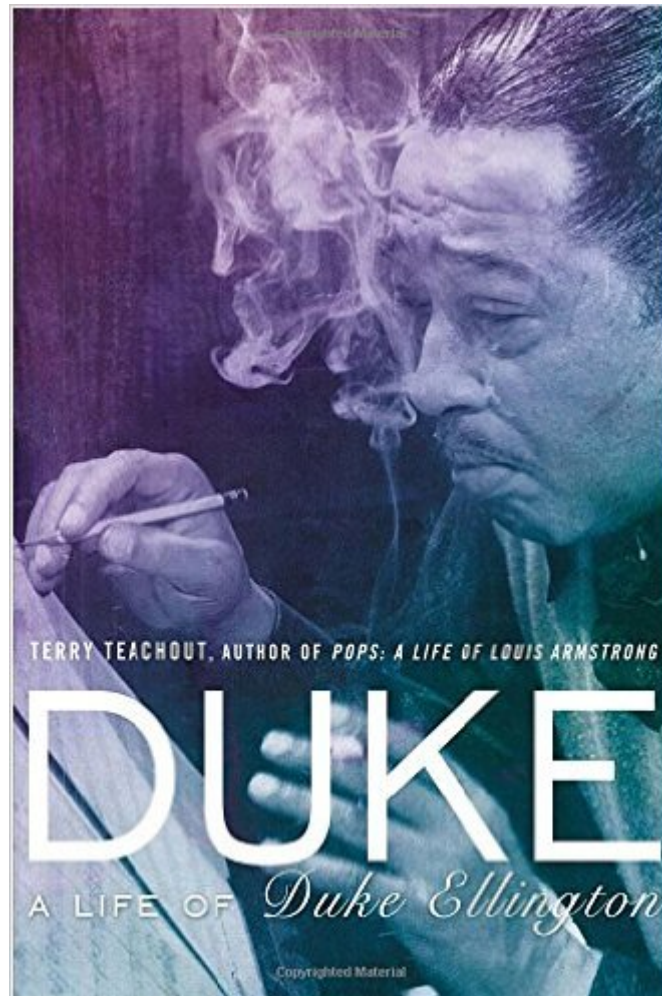


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Duke: A Life Of Duke Ellington



Synopsis

A major new biography of Duke Ellington from the acclaimed author of *Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong*—Edward Kennedy —“Duke” Ellington was the greatest jazz composer of the twentieth century—and an impenetrably enigmatic personality whom no one, not even his closest friends, claimed to understand. The grandson of a slave, he dropped out of high school to become one of the world’s most famous musicians, a showman of incomparable suavity who was as comfortable in Carnegie Hall as in the nightclubs where he honed his style. He wrote some fifteen hundred compositions, many of which, like “Mood Indigo” and “Sophisticated Lady,” remain beloved standards, and he sought inspiration in an endless string of transient lovers, concealing his inner self behind a smiling mask of flowery language and ironic charm. As the biographer of Louis Armstrong, Terry Teachout is uniquely qualified to tell the story of the public and private lives of Duke Ellington. Duke peels away countless layers of Ellington’s evasion and public deception to tell the unvarnished truth about the creative genius who inspired Miles Davis to say, “All the musicians should get together one certain day and get down on their knees and thank Duke.”

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Customer Reviews

I was going to write an in-depth review but why? If you’re familiar with Teachout’s great book on Louis Armstrong, this is very much in that mold. Plus, when I looked closely at the cover photograph, I noticed that it was Ellington’s left side—with the long scar from a razor cut inflicted by his wife in 1929—something he attempted to hide. So I was intrigued and fairly sure that this was no

glossy, shallow (there's 81 pages of Source Notes!) look at Ellington. While Teachout never really is able (through the circumstance of Ellington not being able to speak for himself) to delve into the nitty-gritty of who and what Ellington really was (he never talked much about himself), his penchant for detail gives the reader a long inside look at Ellington himself. Some details about the man's lifestyle (his self-centeredness for one, taking credit for compositions not entirely his own is another), and his views on life and people (he was a lifelong procrastinator and treated people--especially women--poorly) might surprise you. His life, both in music (most of the book) and out, the music itself (Teachout feels that Ellington may have tried to go further musically than he was able), and the people (Billy Strayhorn and their relationship is a good example) are looked at in depth. Plus, the many musicians/people he crossed paths with (including the 900 musicians who passed through his bands) throughout his life are open to Teachout's research and help immensely in giving a new, valuable, and interesting look at Ellington--even though his friends and band mates struggled to understand the "real" Ellington. Through years-long, diligent, in-depth research and the (relatively few) photographs from various periods in Duke's life we come away with even more respect, closeness, and awe for Ellington's many accomplishments. If you're a jazz fan, or a fan of good music in general, or want to learn more about one of the Twentieth Century's true geniuses, then you should read this tome on Ellington. As I said, Teachout goes the route of including much detail about his subject, and for some that may be a bit of a challenge if you're wanting a broad, general overview of Ellington. If so, Teachout lists a number of biographies on Ellington for reference. Also included is a list of some of the main musical pieces Ellington was known for. But Ellington was responsible for so many great compositions and so much actual music it's hard (if not impossible) to list every great thing he's recorded. But in the end those details are what gives the book (and Ellington) a foundation and adds more information about Duke (a nickname possibly given to him by childhood friends "...partly because of his princely manner...and partly because his mother dressed him so stylishly."). And those details--some of them seemingly inconsequential--are the mark of an author who takes his subject seriously, and it shows all through this book. And fans are ultimately all the better for those details. To paraphrase Miles Davis--"All musicians should get on their knees and thank Ellington." This book balances Ellington's life and viewpoints with his music-making (areas which are oftentimes at odds with his public perception), and gives the reader a look into a man with flaws much like all of us. Ellington did so much for jazz and music in general. So it's about time that someone, who is qualified to write a book with so much detail about a giant of music, has finally done so. And jazz/music lovers are the better for it. With its embossed jacket title of "DUKE", and end papers filled with color reproductions of record labels, this is a well put together

book. This book can sit next to Teachout's Armstrong book (and other good biographies) in your library. One of the better books of its kind this year. Also, if you're looking for a good overview of Ellington's music from the 1920's into the 1970's, look for a book (pub. 1993 by Oxford, edited by Mark Tucker) titled "The Duke Ellington Reader". Included in it's 500 pages (not including two indexes) are reviews, critiques, essays, and interviews (Ellington and various band members) that cuts across several decades, and from many sources that really have the flavor of those particular times. This is a book that Ellington fans should have in their library--and it's still available from several sellers on , or check your neighborhood used book dealer. It's a valuable look through time at Duke's music. AND SPEAKING OF GREAT BIOGRAPHIES ON DESERVING JAZZ MUSICIANS, check out "WAIL The Life of Bud Powell" (pub. 2012), by Peter Pullman. If Armstrong and Ellington are important to you, and you're a jazz fan--you need Pullman's book. His research on Powell is every bit the equal (and may be better) than Teachout's look at Armstrong and/or Ellington. Its available as a Kindle edition on , but I prefer a paper book that I can hold in my hands--to each his own--so I e-mailed Pullman (Google his name and book title) and purchased a "hard" trade size, soft cover copy, and received it in short order. A very fine piece of research and writing. This is (and will continue to be) the best book on Powell and his music. Miss this at your own loss.

I am not an Ellington scholar, by any stretch of the imagination. But I have read quite a bit about him and have played and studied 100 or more of his 3 1/2 minute chestnuts. That said, I can say without reservation that this is the best single piece of Ellington scholarship I've read to date. There are opinions galore, of course, but most appear to be based on fairly solid research. (The bibliography and footnotes section at the end of the book are as extensive as I've ever seen in a biography.) I'd certainly recommend you read Terry's book before you read Duke's autobiography, which, to me, was largely a waste of time. As in most things personal to Ellington, the concept of telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth appear to have been largely alien to him.

Terry Teachout's new bio of Ellington is briskly and engagingly written, and very informative. He has mined about as much personal information on Ellington as we are likely to get. There's no heavy musical analysis but lots of information about the music. He keeps the story clipping along and provides plenty of interesting anecdotes and social history of the period. I would highly recommend it for established fans, who will get a clearer understanding of Ellington as a person, as well as for the lay person, who will get a broad overview of Ellington's work and a nice glimpse of jazz culture.

The intent of this book is clear from the first page: to knock a revered jazz legend off his pedestal and drag him through as much mud as possible. Only the author can explain his motivation. Was it simply to generate controversy and publicity? Here are Mr. Ellington's chief offenses, as laid out in the Prologue: 1.) he was a terrible procrastinator, always frantically working at the last minute to complete charts for new compositions--this has been well known for quite some time; 2.) he was a sex-crazed serial adulterer--he abandoned his wife, Edna, but refused to grant her a divorce while shacking up with numerous other women; 3.) he stole musical ideas from others and claimed them as his own creations; 4.) his whole life was a facade, with the real man always hidden from the public's view; 5.) he only produced a very few worthwhile, true extended works, many being shapeless suites; 6.) he was somewhat better than average stride pianist [to be fair, the author credits him later in the book with some brilliant solo performances]; 7.) he employed a relentless public relations apparatus to hype his accomplishments and only present to the world the face he wanted perceived--so shouldn't he be credited with being a celebrity ahead of his time?

Chapter 1: The author attempts to put the black community of dawn-of-20th-Century Washington, DC on a psychoanalyst's couch. He appears obsessed with a battle for status within this community based on skin tone; this will be a recurring theme throughout the book. Teachout says Duke benefited from his relatively light coloration (coffee with cream)--as if he had a choice of how much melanin his skin contained! Page 31: Instead of worrying about getting lynched, Duke played with his friends, read Sherlock Holmes and Horatio Alger, sang hymns in church... Light-skinned black folk (my terminology; the author declines to use African-American at all) didn't get lynched, Mr. Teachout? And I guess you've never seen the footage of mass KKK marches through the streets of the nation's capital in early 20th Century? Duke even gets slammed for saying only nice things about his parents, and admitting that they spoiled him.

Chapter 5: On page 101 Teachout says Ellington emasculated his own father by supplanting him as the family's chief breadwinner. He...forced [son Mercer] to wear his hair in girlish braids for much of his childhood to keep [him] dependent.

From the same page: All he wanted, in other words, was to have everybody in the palm of his hand, and at the age of thirty-one, he got it.

On page 112 we're told that Duke was severely challenged in writing memorable, tuneful melodies. At that point, a question sprang instantly into my head: so, I suppose Sophisticated Lady is lame? Right on cue, Teachout has a reply: that song was purloined from themes developed by Otto Toby Hardwick and Lawrence Brown. This follows exposition on how tunes were frequently worked out

collaboratively in rehearsals, at least in the early years. Hardwick and Brown were paid for their contributions and thereafter only Ellington got official credit for composition. But Teachout has earlier explained that this was Duke's system, so to accept the honor of being in the band was to accept this situation. Also acknowledged was the fact that Duke kept his musicians securely employed for years (some stayed for decades, of course), including through the Great Depression. And let the world note that in his own book, *MUSIC IS MY MISTRESS* (not a proper autobiography but more a collection of reminiscences about phases of his career and the people he knew and worked with), Ellington states clearly that from the day he started collaboration with Billy Strayhorn (1938) until the latter's death (1967), all works presented by the band were to be considered just as much Billy's as his own, regardless of whose name appeared as composer. Granted, these words were penned after Strayhorn's death, but I feel they demonstrate tremendous respect and affection for his collaborator. Oh, how foolish of me! Teachout says we basically shouldn't believe anything in that book. From page 116: "...those who have spent time around geniuses know that some of them cannot bear to be thought less than perfect. Later on he will attempt to say this piece is clearly the work of Ellington alone, that one of Strayhorn alone. This one is in Duke's handwriting alone, etc. He doesn't accept Duke's recounting of how, when the two composers were in different cities, they would discuss arrangements over the phone, even playing musical ideas back and forth to one another via piano over the phone line. (Again, to be very fair: Teachout says later that this actually happened some of the time.)

Chapter 7: On pages 159-160 Mr. Teachout takes music critic, later talent scout and record producer, John Hammond to task for writing in *Down Beat* "[H]e [Duke] has purposely kept himself from any contact with the troubles of his people...he shuts his eyes to the abuses being heaped upon his race and his original class..." (Quoting Teachout himself now:) "To criticize Ellington for remaining aloof from the troubles of his people was, of course, ridiculous. It appears, at this point, that the author has forgotten that back in Chapter 1 he wrote that Duke took advantage of his relatively light skin tone to advance his own status in the white-dominated society. Oops. In addition to being simple-minded, Hammond's review was an unforgivably personal assault..."

Interesting, since up to this point, for every compliment given Ellington's accomplishments Teachout has given us three or four bits of "dirt" about how shabbily the book's subject treated other people.

Chapter 9: The following statement appears on page 192. "...Strayhorn, UNLIKE ELLINGTON, was blessed with the gift of tunefulness..." (reviewer's emphasis added). Again, on page 193, the accusation of theft: "By

withholding credit for his work, Ellington struck at Strayhorn's as-yet-unformed sense of identity--and kept on doing so for years to come. Really? The chap who wrote *Lush Life* while a mere teenager? Who arrived on Duke's doorstep precocious and talented enough to be put right to work doing charts for the band? This is part of Mr. Teachout's argument that Ellington was a manipulator of people, and clearly implies a cruel streak (he *struck at*). On pages 193-194 the author dismisses Duke's claim that he and *Swee Pea* collaborated on everything as a charade with which the younger man went along. Again, Duke the liar. He cites a scholar's finding that *only 52* manuscripts can be found that are in both men's handwriting. But this does not for a moment disprove that other compositions were, in fact, discussed between the two when they were geographically separated. A rather bizarre claim is made on page 195: Strayhorn quoted Ravel's *Valses nobles et sentimentales* in the opening bars of *Chelsea Bridge*...before he'd ever heard the work! I guess Mr. Teachout believes in *universal consciousness*.

Chapter 11: The author relishes the failure of *Jump For Joy* to be financially sustainable and to make it to Broadway. (It ran for 101 performances in Los Angeles in 1941.) He complains that the show's anti-racist message is heavy-handed. Page 232: *It would not be the last time that Daisy Ellington's pampered son ran afoul of the gods of the copybook headings.* Concerning a proposed collaboration with Orson Welles that never bore fruit, Teachout declares both men were *spoiled children*.

Chapter 13: Teachout continues to relish failures of Duke's efforts in the realm of musical theater. On page 265 he quotes approvingly from a critical article in *Saturday Review* by composer Alec Wilder. But included is this Wilder observation: *...the man [Ellington] has the knack, as always, for creating lovely melodic lines...* I guess Teachout would claim that must be Strayhorn's work, stolen by Duke.

Chapter 14: More beating of the drum on theme of failures of the extended works Ellington moved more toward as the years went by, apparently quoting every negative contemporary review the author could dredge up. On page 298, on subject of *Such Sweet Thunder*, he complains that previously composed works, e.g. *The Star-Crossed Lovers*, were incorporated into this Shakespearean-themed suite. Elsewhere he has complained that thematic titles were appended to works previously composed in other contexts, or with no particular programmatic context, especially *In A Harlem Air-Shaft*. Mr. Teachout, I believe this is known as artistic license and a composer's prerogative. Critics long complained that in *Ein Heldenleben*, Richard Strauss

recycled bits and pieces of his best-known earlier works. Be that as it may, this listener has always thrilled to the "hero's theme" in that opus. To be fair yet again, I note that after this griping the author deigns to allow that "For all its limitations, 'Such Sweet Thunder'...is a satisfying piece..." High praise indeed!

Chapter 16: On page 339 Mr. Teachout objects that a very enthusiastic review of Gunther Schuller's "EARLY JAZZ: ITS ROOTS AND MUSICAL DEVELOPMENT", which featured a 40-page chapter on Duke full of high praise, "...was written not by a musicologist but by Frank Conroy, a novelist and part-time jazz pianist." Turning to the dust jacket blurbs of Teachout's own book, what do we learn of HIS credentials? "Terry Teachout is the drama critic for The Wall Street Journal. He blogs about the arts...He has also written two plays...[He] played jazz bass professionally before becoming a full-time writer." Interesting, yes? If we should discount Mr. Conroy's opinions based on his background, aren't we entitled to do the same in Mr. Teachout's case?

I will make two final points. Mr. Teachout offers the hypothesis that "Black, Brown and Beige" (the thematic, extended work debuted at Carnegie Hall in 1943) is mostly about internal strife within the black community--the "caste system" or hierarchy determined by skin tone--rather than the consequences of having dark skin in a racist society. (For the last time, to show my fairness: the author does acknowledge the burden of racism on black folk in America.) Divisions of this nature are acknowledged within the African-American community, but I find the author's obsession with this phenomenon unproductive. Perhaps Mr. Teachout isn't familiar with Big Bill Broonzy's song "Black, Brown and White," which lays things out clearly with these lyrics: "If you're white, you alright; If you're brown, stick around. But as you is black, whoa brother, Get back, get back, get back!" Finally, I point out that on several occasions Mr. Teachout credits a detractor of Duke's character as quoting an "unnamed source" for some juicy gossip. In this reviewer's opinion, this is unsound journalism. I am reminded of an old joke that the author is probably old enough to be familiar with. A man is on trial for physically abusing his wife. On the witness stand, he denies laying a hand on his spouse. So the Prosecutor asks: "Well then, can you tell us exactly when you STOPPED beating your wife?" So, Mr. Teachout, when did YOU stop beating YOUR wife? No one is without sin, and a balanced view of a figure like Duke Ellington is desirable, but I find the glee with which this book besmirches his reputation quite unpalatable. ###

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