

## **Duke Ellington big draw in Twin Cities**

Someone once said, presumably half in earnest and half in jest, that American contributions to world culture could be reduced to three things: Abraham Lincoln, baseball and jazz.

Say what you will about the first two, it's a lot harder to take third and last one off the list. Jazz has been blessed with innumerable muses, but few if any can match the influence, genius, output and flair of Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington, the incomparable pianist, bandleader and composer.

Ellington, whose seemingly endless touring schedule was the stuff of legend, made at least nine visits to this stretch of Central Illinois (though there were likely others as well).

One of Ellington's earliest visits—if not the earliest—occurred on Sept. 4, 1931, when his orchestra performed at Mackinaw Dells, a gone-but-not-forgotten resort along the Mackinaw River near Congerville.

Ellington was back less than three years later, Aug. 10, 1934, this time appearing at Shalain Park (now known as G.J. Mecherle Memorial State Farm Park) on the southern end of Bloomington.

The park's lovely dance pavilion, which sat on the edge of a small spring-fed lake, was lost in a mysterious fire two years before Ellington's appearance. That meant that the band played on an outdoor stage with the dance platform spread out before them. Talk about "Rockin' in Rhythm" in corn country! Tickets were \$1 plus tax, though you could catch the whole thing from the east side of the lake for just 40 cents.

In the event of rain the performance was to be moved to the city's old Coliseum, which was located about where U.S. Cellular Coliseum stands today. There was threatening weather that night but it didn't rain, so it's likely the outdoor show went on. Interestingly, fellow Cotton Club great Cab Callaway and his orchestra appeared at Shalain Park later that same month.

According to Dean Litt, who operated the Coliseum as a roller rink and ballroom for a few years in the 1930s, Ellington and Callaway also performed at his venue. At that time, African Americans were not welcomed at downtown Bloomington hotels or restaurants, so Litt served homemade ham sandwiches to Ellington and his bandmates.

On May 15, 1953, Ellington and his 15-piece band were at Illinois State Normal University for a dance at McCormick Gymnasium. Included on stage were Ellington regulars trombonist Juan Tizol and baritone saxophonist Harry Carney. By this time the band traveled by luxury liner bus, making it unnecessary to stay overnight in segregated communities.

Ellington was back in the Twin Cities one year later, May 17, 1954, this time performing at the Scottish Rite Temple (now the Bloomington Center for Performing Arts) for the State Farm Employees Activities association.

The playlist that night was heavy with Ellingtonia—"Mood Indigo" and "Satin Doll," for instance—though there were a number of surprises, such as "Happy Go Lucky Loco" and "Jam with Sam." Those onstage included longtime Ellington collaborators William "Cat" Anderson on trumpet, Paul Gonsalves on saxophone and Jimmy Hamilton on clarinet.

By this time young listeners were turning away from jazz, especially the big band sound, and instead falling hard for something called rock & roll. Even so, Ellington would enjoy a return to national prominence with his band's show-stopping version of "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue" at the 1956 Newport Jazz Festival.

Although the local audience wasn't whipped into a near-frenzy as the crowd would be two years later at Newport, the State Farm employees were a surprisingly boisterous lot. At one point the 55-year-old Ellington stepped offstage and repeated several times, "What a wonderful crowd!"

Ellington made no less than three appearances in The Pantagraph readership area in 1957: June 11 at the Pontiac Country Club; Sept. 2 at the LeRoy Fall Festival; and Nov. 15, once more at ISNU's McCormick Gymnasium.

Fifteen years later, Sept. 18, 1972, Ellington was back at Bloomington's Scottish Rite Temple for what was likely his swan song to the area. Introducing Ellington at this concert was Bloomington native Edward Tick, part-owner of longtime local recycler Morris Tick Co. who had served as The Duke's tour manager during a recent swing through Asia.

The 73-year-old Ellington came out in an "impeccable midnight blue suit," with his straightened hair nearly shoulder-length. Mixed in with the "greatest hits" were more recent and ambitious compositions, such as "Toga Brava Suite" and "La Plus Belle Africaine."

"The Duke was on his feet nearly as much as he was at the piano," observed Pantagraph reporter Dave McClelland. "He would softshoe through some numbers, his arms in perpetual motion. He directed the band with his head, his shoulders, his elbows, and at times even his eyebrows."

At one point during the concert McClelland, who was backstage, overheard a lighting director order more blue light on Ellington. "He's got all the blue we have," came the reply.

After the show McClelland visited the dressing room and chatted with Ellington, now clad in nothing but boxer shorts and socks. "We're on the go 52 weeks a year with no holidays," he said. "You never catch up. You never get to where you want to be."

Ellington, who learned that spring that he was suffering from lung cancer, succumbed to pneumonia on May 24, 1974.

Twenty-one years before his death, at the conclusion of the May 15, 1953 show at ISNU, Ellington and his magnificent arranger Billy Strayhorn remained on stage in eerily silent McCormick Gym. With the two of them sitting at the piano they worked at reviving the piece “Is it a Sin?” from the 1920s. “The Duke hummed, Strayhorn corded and the night watchman looked disgusted,” noted Pantagraph reporter Helen Rorabach, observing the impromptu session from afar.

Two months later Capital Records released a 45 record with “Bunny Hop Mambo” on the “A side” and “Is it a Sin? (My Loving You)” on the “B.”

The two musicians, one of the greatest artistic pairings of the 20th century, American or otherwise, called it a night at 1:30 a.m., finally prodded by their driver who was leaning on the tour bus horn.

With due respect to the weary night watchman, in 185-plus years of McLean County history, one would be hard pressed to come up with a more beautiful, more touching and more sublime scene than that of Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn revising an old tune past midnight in an empty McCormick Gym.