5. Duke Ellington in Cleveland

Edward Kennedy Ellington was probably the most creative force in jazz history. For more than 40 years, he made monumental contributions as a composer, arranger, pianist and bandleader in a variety of musical forms. Christoph von Dohnányi, the world famous classical conductor and the music director of the Cleveland Orchestra, told me in 1985 that he believed Ellington was “one of the really great people in music.”

Ellington biographer John Edward Hasse said it was Clevelander Noble Sissle, the son of the pastor of Cleveland’s Cory Methodist Church, who opened the door for Ellington and other black entertainers by producing an all-black Broadway review, *Shuffle Along*, in 1921.

When Ellington, a native of Washington, D.C., went to New York, he met violinist and orchestra leader Will Marion Cook. Ellington said Cook was one of his strongest musical influences. He called him “Dad Cook” and said the Oberlin graduate gave him lectures in music. But, according to Ellington, the most important thing Cook told him was, “Don’t try to be anybody else but yourself,” advice that Ellington followed throughout his career.

Ellington had many local connections. When he was leading his band at Harlem’s Cotton Club in 1928, he hired a four-foot ten-inch left-handed trumpet player from Ohio’s Wilberforce University. Freddy Jenkins was the first of a number of Ohioans who would perform with Ellington. From 1931 until his death in 1974, Ellington made more than 40 appearances in Northeast Ohio, frequently for extended engagements.
Ellington’s opening at the Palace

After attracting wide attention for four years at the Cotton Club, making his first hit recording, “Mood Indigo,” in October of 1930, and recording the music for a movie, Check and Double Check, Ellington set out in 1931 with his orchestra on his first national tour. Beginning February 13, 1931, they played for a month in Chicago and moved on to Detroit, Omaha, Minneapolis, Des Moines, Denver, Kansas City, St. Louis, Indianapolis, Toronto, Philadelphia, Toledo, and, during the week of July 4, at the RKO Palace Theatre at East 17th and Euclid in downtown Cleveland.

Ellington and his orchestra played half-a-dozen performances a day at the 3,100-seat theatre. They played between showings of a movie called Ex-Bad Boy and newsreel film of the heavily-promoted July 3 Max Schmeling-Young Stribling boxing match, the first event at the brand new Cleveland Municipal Stadium.

In the depths of the Depression, when 100,000 Clevelanders were unemployed, tickets for the Ellington performances were 35¢ for evening performances and 25¢ for matinees.

The 1931 orchestra consisted of trumpeters Artie Whetsol, Freddie Jenkins and Cootie Williams; trombonists Joe “Sam” Nanton and Juan Tizol; saxophonists Harry Carney, Barney Bigard and Johnny Hodges; guitarist Freddie Guy; drummer Sonny Greer; and Ellington on piano.

After the Cleveland opening, a Plain Dealer reviewer wrote, “Duke Ellington Burns ‘Em Up!” Ward Marsh said Ellington’s tunes “rush at you with a kind of frenzied madness, spiced with tricky rhythms and garnished with strange, half-eerie tonal backgrounds. They ripple and swell through the house with their flashing, artful way of almost completely submerging the melody to give you effects and colors no other orchestra seems to have been able to do.”

Archie Bell, writing in the Cleveland News two days after the opening, said, “Duke Ellington and his Cotton Club Orchestra are star-lined and they bring along a remarkable newcomer, (singer) Ivie Anderson.” Bell said she “has a great individual style of shouting her songs that carries them across the footlights with the skill of a song recitalist who aims to tell a complete story and establish a distinct mood by each selection.” Bell wrote that Ellington’s new vocalist “takes her place with Ethel Waters and Adelaide Hall.”

Anderson later remembered, “When I first joined his band, I was just an ordinary singer of popular songs. Duke suggested I find a ‘character’ and maintain it.”

Reviewing the instrumentalists, Bell said trombonist Nanton “tells a tearful story in something so like a human voice that it is almost uncanny as well as amusing.” Praising the band’s playing of “Black and Tan Fantasy,” the reviewer said, “I’ll wager the guess that there’s more originality and worthy experimentation in it than in half of the ‘new music’ that is offered in a season by the Cleveland Orchestra.”

Later in the week, there were reports of “phenomenal business at the RKO Palace this week.” A July 9 story in the Cleveland News said, “The crowds not only follow this dispensation of jazz and syncopation, they demand more and more of it.” Bell said, “Duke has the best band of its kind to be heard anywhere.”

In a newspaper interview, Ellington said, “When I’m making my arrangements or composing something new, I try to think of something that will make my hearers feel like dancing. The desire to step around a little means that people are not bothered very much about the cares of the world, at least for the moment.”

Other performances in the 1930s

Seven months after that first engagement in Cleveland, Ellington returned to Chicago and made his first recording of “It Don’t Mean a Thing If It Ain’t Got That Swing.” The record, featuring singer Anderson, and solos by Nanton and Hodges, became a sensation in 1932, five years before before Benny Goodman was hailed as “The King of Swing.” In a later Cleveland interview, Ellington said his band had been exploiting for years a style characterized by “swing,” which he said was a Harlem word for rhythm.

Bolstered by his great success in 1931, Ellington returned to the Palace Theatre in Cleveland for another week beginning June 11, 1932. Trombonist Lawrence Brown and saxophonist Otto “Toby” Hardwick joined the musicians who had been in Cleveland the previous year. Ellington was playing a number of engagements around the country at theatres like the Palace. But, when he was interviewed by the Cleveland Press, Ellington said, “Every once in a while, I drop out of theatres for a week or a few weeks and play dance engagements. That wakes up the boys and they get back into form. It works like magic.”

The Ellington band returned to Cleveland two months later to play a dance engagement August 4, 1932 at the Crystal Slipper Ballroom at 9802 Euclid Avenue. The Crystal Slipper, which had opened in 1924, could accommodate 4,000 dancers. Two years after the Ellington Orchestra first played there, the name was changed to the Trianon Ballroom after a famous dance hall in Chicago.

The Ellington band made its third 1932 appearance in Northeast Ohio when it played for a December 27, 1932 dance at the Land O’Dance Ballroom in Canton. It was a new ballroom at 12th and Market and featured many national and local orchestras. The owner, W.H. Perry, charged 75¢ for admission.
Ellington made his first tour of Europe in 1933. It was followed by tours of New England and the South.

He returned to Cleveland with his orchestra for another week at the Palace Theatre beginning March 22, 1935.

When he came to Cleveland in the 1930s, Ellington and the members of his band frequently went out after their stage shows or dances to Cleveland after-hours clubs to hear local jazz. Duke first heard pianist Art Tatum at Val’s in the Alley near East 86th and Cedar. Veteran Cleveland saxophonist Willie Smith recalled that “Duke and the guys in the band came down to the SDCH&Y Club (at East 40th and Woodland) because they knew this is where all the musicians would be after 12 o’clock at night.”

The band returned to the area in May of 1935. They did a stage show at the Palace Theatre in Youngstown May 11 and a dance at Cleveland’s big Public Auditorium at East 6th and Lakeside May 15. Public Auditorium was the huge downtown hall where Republican National Conventions nominated Calvin Coolidge for president in 1924 and Alf Landon in 1936. Tickets for the Ellington dance were $1.

Just prior to his 1935 appearances in Northeast Ohio, Ellington recorded “In a Sentimental Mood.” At the time, he had two bass players in his band, Wellman Baud and Billy Taylor, the uncle of longtime Cleveland jazz promoter Art Sutton.

The Ellington band returned to the Palace Theatre for another week-long engagement beginning July 31, 1936. This was shortly after trombonist Juan Tizol composed “Caravan.”

While Ellington was in Cleveland that week, he met privately with poet and playwright Langston Hughes who had grown up in Cleveland and in 1926 had written a poem called “The Weary Blues.” The two planned to collaborate on a Broadway show, Cock O’ the World. The show never got to Broadway.

1936 was a difficult year for Ellington. He had made relatively few new records, had no real hits, and other big bands, particularly Benny Goodman’s, were exploding in popularity.

When Ellington returned to Cleveland for another one-week engagement at the Palace Theatre August 6, 1937, the band played between showings of a movie called Marry the Girl. A young comic from Mansfield was also on the bill. He later borrowed some money from the theatre manager, went to Hollywood and a year later, appeared in his first film. His name was Red Skelton.

Ellington and his orchestra returned to the Palace the week of October 7, 1938, just after playing at the Apollo Theatre in New York City. On November 25, 1938, a month after his sixth week-long run at the Palace Theatre, Ellington and the band played for a Friday night dance at the Trianon Ballroom where they had performed six years earlier when it was called the Crystal Slipper. A newspaper promotional article said, “Made popular by radio, Duke and his musicians have created a sensation in theatres and ballrooms from coast to coast, as well as in Europe. Duke and his boys have an instinctive feeling for jazz rhythms and broken tempos. They can play ‘sweet’ and discreet jazz in the manner of Paul Whiteman, then turn about and twist their music into weird and primitive strains.”

The article went on to say, “It is his artistry as a conductor and composer that accounts for the presence of so many non-dancers at his dance engagements from coast to coast. Hundreds of the most sedate people crowd the dance halls where the Ellington aggregation..."
plays for the genuine pleasure of listening."

Ellington and his orchestra did not return to Cleveland again until the summer of 1942. But in 1939 there were significant developments in the evolution of the Ellington Orchestra. When the band made its second tour of Europe, the tour that was cut short because of Adolph Hitler’s increasing military aggression. Ellington hired saxophonist Ben Webster who, like Freddy Jenkins, had attended Ohio’s Wilberforce University. Webster quit the Cab Calloway band while it was playing at the Trianon Ballroom in Cleveland to join Ellington. To replace Webster, Calloway hired Chu Berry from the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra. For two nights, Webster and Berry played side by side on the bandstand at the Trianon.

Duke also hired bassist Jimmy Blanton and pianist-arranger-composer Billy Strayhorn. Blanton would set new standards for the string bass and, like guitarist Charlie Christian, opened new ideas in jazz which would later emerge in bebop. Neither, however, lived to hear bop in full flower.

Strayhorn, who was born in Dayton and grew up in Pittsburgh, made many quiet but extremely significant contributions to the Ellington Orchestra and jazz in general. He is best known for composing the Ellington theme song “Take the ‘A’ Train” and the haunting “Lush Life.”

Kay Davis, who later sang with the band, was among many who called Strayhorn “Ellington’s musical alter ego.” She told me, “They thought alike, they composed alike, their whole approach to music was the same. In fact, it was very difficult to tell who was playing piano on some of the recordings. It could have been Billy; it could have been Duke. You couldn’t tell where one stopped and the other began.” But, Davis also said, “Billy’s playing at times was different. He was a classically-trained pianist and when he played by himself, it was different.”

The 1940s

Ellington spent most of 1941 on the West Coast. He had written a show, *Jump For Joy*, which he hoped to take to Broadway. It opened in Los Angeles July 10, 1941 and folded 11 weeks later, September 27, after only 101 performances. Ellington later said, “It was the hippest thing we ever did.” He said his show created the zoot suit phenomenon which was often credited to another bandleader, Cab Calloway.

With Strayhorn and Webster, Ellington brought his band back to Cleveland’s Palace Theatre the week of August 28, 1942. Blanton, the brilliant young bassist, was not with the orchestra and never played in Cleveland. He had died of tuberculosis at the age of 21.

While performing at the Palace, the Ellington orchestra also played on a seven-hour national radio broadcast promoting the sale of war bonds and stamps. The program, *I Pledge America*, included 21 top dance bands and was carried in Cleveland on WHK Saturday night, August 29, 1942. During the broadcast, the Ellington band played three popular songs of the day – “Tangerine,” “Who Wouldn’t Love You?” and “I Don’t Want to Walk Without You, Baby.”

During 1942, Ellington and his band traveled by train to 80 cities including Cleveland, Canton, Columbus and Cincinnati.

1942 was also the year that Jimmy Hamilton replaced Barney Bigard, singer Betty Roché joined the band, Tizol wrote “Perdido,” and Ellington composed “C Jam Blues.”

Ellington returned to Cleveland in February of 1943 for only the third and final performance of his much anticipated 48-minute tone poem “Black, Brown and Beige,” the longest piece he had ever written. More than 7,200 people attended the concert at Cleveland’s Public Auditorium February 20, 1943. The only other performances of “Black, Brown and Beige” were at New York’s Carnegie Hall a month earlier, January 23, and in Boston January 28. Many critics were not kind. Paul Bowles in the *New York Herald-Tribune* said “it was formless and meaningless.”

However, based mainly on his popular records, Ellington had become an American musical institution. In 20 years, he had made more than 700 records and sold almost 20 million copies.

During the World War II years, there were many
personnel changes in the orchestra. When Ellington played for a dance at Cleveland’s Public Auditorium November 29, 1943, one of the members of the band was Cleveland saxophonist Elbert “Skippy” Williams who had graduated from Central High School in 1930, played in Cleveland with Tadd Dameron and Freddie Webster, and toured with the Fletcher Henderson and Count Basie bands. Williams was with the Ellington orchestra from September of 1943 until May of 1944. Williams was no longer with the orchestra when it returned to the Palace Theatre in his hometown for another week, beginning November 3, 1944.

Another new member was Al Sears, whose brother led the house band at Cleveland’s Cedar Gardens nightclub. Sears took Ben Webster’s place and remained with the band until 1948. Cat Anderson also joined in 1944.

Jazz historian and musician Gunther Schuller, then playing with the Cincinnati Symphony, recalled he came to Cleveland to see and hear the Ellington Orchestra. In an article in the March 1999 edition of JazzTimes, Schuller said black musicians were not permitted to stay in downtown Cleveland white hotels and many spent the week living in the dressing rooms at the Palace Theatre. He said the management put cots and heaters in the small dressing rooms. “They put a piano in Duke’s room,” said Schuller, “and after each show each night, about 1 a.m., he would come in and start ruminating at the piano, improvising. He’d put on his stocking cap and his beautiful maroon silk robe and play (and compose) ‘til five or six in the morning. He’d stop about six and grab a few hours of sleep.”

Ellington won Esquire magazine’s Gold Awards for both arranger and for best band in 1945, ‘46 and ‘47.

During 1945, the orchestra did a series of Saturday afternoon radio broadcasts. Date With the Duke was broadcast live from various sites around the country, wherever the band was playing. On June 23, the broadcast originated from the stage of the Palace Theatre in Akron. A recording of that broadcast, saved by singer Mel Tormé, was later released on Fairmount Records under the title A Date With the Duke, Vol. 6.

The band opened with its theme song, “Take the ‘A’ Train” and followed with “Jump For Joy,” “All at Once,” “Ko-ko,” “I Should Care,” “Go Away Blues,” “Tootin’ Through the Roof,” “Every Hour on the Hour” and “I’m Beginning to See the Light.”

When the Ellington Orchestra appeared in Akron, the band members stayed at the Mathews Hotel on North Howard Street. In an era when African-Americans were not welcome in most hotels, Mathews, which had opened in the mid-1920s by George Mathews, became the black hotel in Akron and hosted such other touring jazz artists as Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Ella Fitzgerald, Lionel Hampton, Dizzy Gillespie and Cab Calloway. The hotel closed in the mid-1970s.

After singer Betty Roché left Ellington, Duke decided to hire three girl singers – Kay Davis, Joya Sherill and Marie Ellington. Marie was not related to Duke but had been married to Spergan Ellington, an Air Force pilot who was killed in the war. Davis later told me, “Marie had a terrific voice and was a beautiful woman. Duke would always say something very flattering when he brought her out.” She later married pianist and singer Nat Cole and their daughter, Natalie Cole, became a very popular singer.

Davis, who is best remembered for her haunting and beautiful wordless vocals with the Ellington Orchestra, said she joined the band through a fluke. “I had gotten my masters degree in music from Northwestern University,” she recalled, “and I was sallying forth to do my concert singing and somebody bet me that I couldn’t get with Ellington. I knew they were right, but I went down and auditioned anyway.” After she sang, she told Duke she was a concert singer and planned a recital the following Sunday. To her surprise, Ellington attended the recital and asked her, “Can you be in Baltimore next Friday?” Davis said, “I picked myself up off the floor, went home and packed my clothes. I had been such a fan of the band! I felt like I was in a dream world.”

Her first recording with Ellington was also something of a fluke. She said Duke was backstage teaching singer Al Hibbler the song “I Ain’t Got Nothin’ But the Blues.” Davis recalled, “I just sort of absent-mindedly started humming along with Al’s lyrics. The next thing I knew, Duke said, ‘Keep that in! I want that on the record!’”

Another time, at Carnegie Hall in New York, Davis remembered Ellington sat down at a little old upright piano backstage and asked Kay, “Do you remember ‘Creole Love Call’?” He had composed the song in 1927. With a laugh, she said, “I vaguely remembered something in my childhood. He played a few bars and said, ‘Okay, now you go!’ The next thing I knew, I was on the stage of Carnegie Hall, with the music on the floor, singing ‘Creole Love Call.’ That was my rehearsal.”

Strayhorn wrote some arrangements that featured
Duke Ellington in Cleveland

Davis’ singing, including the all-time Ellington classic “In My Solitude.” But most of her solos were wordless obbligatos. The classically-trained singer seldom did songs with lyrics. “Duke was right,” Davis told me years later. She admitted she was angry at the time. “I wanted to sing some songs with lyrics! But when I listen to the stuff from way back, he knew what he was doing.”

Cleveland trumpeter Francis Williams joined the Ellington Orchestra in December of 1945 and toured with the band until April of 1949. He returned briefly in 1951 to record “A Tone Parallel to Harlem” and several other numbers, and again briefly in July of 1958. Williams was the father of actor Greg Morris who later starred on TV’s Mission Impossible.

Django Reinhardt’s American debut

Ellington brought legendary French jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt to the United States for his only appearances in this country. Reinhardt’s first performance in the U.S. was in Cleveland.

It was Monday night, November 4, 1946, at the Music Hall at East 6th and St. Clair. The headline in the Plain Dealer the next morning said, “French Guitar Artist Steals Duke’s Concert.”

Ellington, who called Reinhardt “the most creative jazz musician to originate anywhere outside the United States,” invited Reinhardt to come to the U.S. for a tour. Duke paid for his trip.

It proved to be something of a culture shock. While the two world famous musicians had great respect for each other’s artistry, they had trouble understanding each other’s languages and habits.

When Django arrived, his first words, in a combination of French and English, were, “Where’s Dizzy playing tonight?” Django brought no luggage. He didn’t even bring a guitar. According to Reinhardt biographer, Charles Delaunay, Django believed American companies would compete with each other for the honor of presenting a guitar to him. He was wrong and had to buy a guitar when he got to the United States.

On the train trip from New York to Cleveland, Django shared a two-berth compartment with Ellington. The other members of the Ellington band were in a sleeping car. As they were getting ready for bed, Django was astounded to notice that many of the band members were wearing underpants with floral designs. In his limited English, he said, “You’re crazy!” When he returned to the private compartment, he was about to joke with Ellington about the floral designs when he noticed Duke’s underpants were even more gaudy than his musicians.’ Later, Reinhardt asked some French friends to buy him some flowered underwear.

In Cleveland, Django and Duke shared a suite at the Hotel Statler at East 12th and Euclid. Cleveland Press columnist Milt Widder reported that before they left for the concert, they had dinner in their suite. Django was again amazed when he noticed Ellington eating his dessert first. Widder quoted Duke saying, “I always eat my dessert first.”

John Edward Hasse, in his Ellington biography, said Duke was a hypochondriac. “He’d have four physical examinations a year, pop seven vitamins a day during the winter, and reportedly suffered a phobia of serious illnesses.” Hasse also wrote that Ellington “disliked fresh air. Upon entering a room, he would often close all the windows. He was said to also dislike the country. Grass reminded him of graves, and he refused to wear green clothes because they were the color of grass.” Among his other phobias, according to the biographer, were flying and wearing clothes with loose or missing buttons, which he thought brought bad luck.

While he was having dinner with Reinhardt in Cleveland, Ellington made a telephone call to his record producer, Albert Moss, in New York City, and listened to two of his new records. Moss asked about a hotel where they planned to stay later on the tour. The name began with the letter M, but Moss had trouble understanding the name over the phone. Ellington spelled it out for him: “M – like in ‘Mood Indigo’.”

Reinhardt had only one brief rehearsal with Ellington before the Cleveland concert. It was little more than a 20-minute warm up on the stage of the Music Hall. Duke at the piano asked Django, “What key do you want?” “Any key,” said Django. Duke tapped his foot and the two all-time jazz masters just started playing. It sounded like they had been playing together for years.

There had been very little advance publicity for the historic concert in Cleveland. There was only a small ad in the local papers that simply announced, “Elroy Willis presents Duke Ellington and his Orchestra at the Music Hall.” There was no mention in the ad that Django
Reinhardt would also appear. Ticket prices for the concert ranged from $3.60 to $1.25. Widder wrote the next day, "How the advent of Django Reinhardt escaped the local promoters is a mystery."

The Plain Dealer reported 1,800 people attended the Monday night concert. But they had to wait for the music to begin. A baggage car, carrying the Ellington Orchestra's instruments, arrived late and the concert was delayed for about 45 minutes, to about 9:15.

But Glenn Pullen, writing in The Plain Dealer, said, "The faithful followers of the popular composer-bandmaster did not seem to mind the long wait. They were offered extra compensation in the form of Django Reinhardt, the noted French guitarist."

Pullen said Django's first American performance soundly substantiated his reputation. Wrote the reviewer: "In the hands of this virtuoso, who resembles the screen's Adolph Menjou, an electric guitar acquires richer, magical qualities. His digital dexterity was remarkable, in intricate chords that were executed with such technical brilliance that the band musicians kept shouting, 'Go to it, master!'"

Reinhardt played improvisations of "Tiger Rag," "Blues in E Flat," and a tune which even Ellington admitted on stage that he was unable to identify.

The Ellington Orchestra also played without Reinhardt. The selections included a new arrangement of "Black, Brown and Beige." The Plain Dealer reviewer singled out trumpeter Taft Jordan for special praise for his solo on "Bugle Break Extended." Ellington, at the piano, played a medley of popular songs of the day, and Johnny Hodges soloed on "Magenta Haze." The Plain Dealer reviewer said Hodges "can create more mellow rhythms on an alto saxophone than all the Lombardo brothers," and was "a show-stopper."

After the Cleveland concert, Reinhardt traveled with Ellington to Chicago, St. Louis, Detroit, Kansas City, Pittsburgh, and finally New York City where they played two nights, November 23 and 24, 1946, at Carnegie Hall.

Biographer Delaunay said Django was nervous before playing at Carnegie Hall. Django said the guitar he had purchased in the United States was too heavy and didn't have the proper tone. Carnegie Hall was packed when the concert began at 8:30. Many of the people in the audience were admirers of Reinhardt and had been waiting for years to hear him in person. But, Django showed up late and did not go on stage until about 10:30.

Many had hoped to see Django performing with the Ellington Orchestra as he had in Cleveland. Instead they were disappointed when he was accompanied by only a rhythm section. Nevertheless, Django got a big ovation and took six curtain calls.

The second night at Carnegie Hall, Django was again late. Ellington even announced at one point that Django would not appear that night. But, at 11 o'clock, he walked in, played, and got thunderous applause.

Reinhardt told Ellington he had met French boxer Marcel Cerdan and they lost track of the time as they talked about France. Realizing he was late for the concert, Django said he jumped in a taxi and asked to be taken to Carnegie Hall. But the New York cab driver apparently could not understand Reinhardt's French accent and took him to the other side of the city.

Because of the incident, some historians called the tour a failure. But, it was the only time that one of the most important guitarists in jazz history came to the United States. And his first performance in the U.S. was in downtown Cleveland.

One of Duke's sophisticated ladies

Dolores Parker Morgan proudly displayed in the living room of her home in Fairlawn an etched crystal bearing the distinctive profile of her former boss, Duke Ellington. It was presented to her in 1993 when the Smithsonian Museum of American History honored the five surviving female vocalists of the Ellington Orchestra.
Duke Ellington in Cleveland

As Dolores Parker, she began singing with the Ellington Orchestra in 1947 and appeared with the band during its ninth and last full-week engagement at Cleveland’s Palace Theatre the week of February 12, 1948.

A native of Chicago, Dolores Parker had won a 1939 amateur contest at Chicago’s Regal Theatre. “I started right out of high school,” she recalled, “having worked with local bands in Chicago and should have gone on to Howard University. I was scheduled to go, but I received an offer to join Fletcher Henderson as a member of a trio called ‘The Rhythm Debs.’ Much to my mother’s disappointment, I joined Fletcher Henderson, and much to all of my friends’ shock that I would go on the road with ‘a bunch of musicians!’”

Henderson’s 1942 band was the last edition of his orchestra that, over the previous 20 years, had included such jazz giants as Louis Armstrong, Roy Eldridge, Cleveland’s Emmett Berry, Benny Carter, Coleman Hawkins and Ben Webster. Dee’s family and friends were still not impressed.

“They thought it was the road to degradation,” she said. “I would just never be the same person again. And so, to their enormous disappointment, nothing happened! It was just another job for everybody. And it was wonderful!”

With the Henderson Orchestra, Parker performed at the Akron Armory March 3, 1943, in Cleveland in November of 1943, at Cleveland’s Public Auditorium in September of 1944, and at Cleveland’s Metropolitan Theatre at East 50th and Euclid for week-long engagements in October of 1944 and January of 1945.

She left the Henderson band in 1945 when she and her husband, trumpeter Vernon Smith, joined the Earl Hines Orchestra. When they had a daughter, they decided to get off the road and move to Los Angeles.

“I was going to just sing in LA or be a housewife or something, but Vernon came home one day and said, ‘I hear that Duke Ellington is looking for a singer.’ I said, ‘Yeah. So?’ He said, ‘Why don’t you go try out?’ I said, ‘I don’t want to try out, I’m not interested.’ He said, ‘Look, you really ought not turn down an opportunity to at least audition.’

“So I did go and I auditioned, with Billy Strayhorn at the piano, singing his famous ‘Lush Life,’ which I did not know. He gave me the music and said, ‘Sing “Lush Life!”’ I said, ‘I don’t know “Lush Life!”’ He said, ‘You can read the music. Sing it!’

“And then, he had me sing it for Ellington on the phone! This is the honest-to-God truth! He said, ‘Now that you’ve sung it, I want you to sing it for Ellington on the phone. And I said, ‘What?!’

“So he got him on the phone. I sang it to Ellington and thought I did terribly because I did not know the song. Somehow, I was hired on the spot. He came back after talking with Ellington and said, ‘Well, you’re hired! How soon can you join us?’ I said to myself, ‘That’s not really what I wanted to do, but yes, I’ll go.’ And that’s the way I joined the band.”

Since that day in 1947, Dolores Parker has never sung “Lush Life” again, but she became a member of the Ellington Orchestra that, at the time, included such jazz legends as Ray Nance, Tyree Glenn, Lawrence Brown, Russell Procope, Johnny Hodges, Jimmy Hamilton, Al Sears, Harry Carney, Freddy Guy, Oscar Pettiford and Sonny Greer as well as Shelton Hamphill, Harold Baker, Wilbur Bascomb, Claude Jones, singer Al Hibbler and ClevelandFrancis Williams.

She recalled, “They were tremendous musicians who did not take themselves as individuals seriously, but they took their music very seriously and they knew they had always better be in top form or the boss would let them know about it. I mean, everything was lighthearted and fun and it looked like it was all going so smoothly and easily. But Ellington had his ear out for anybody who wasn’t up to par.”

Among Parker’s recordings with Ellington was a song called “Take Love Easy.” The 1947 record began with alto saxophonist Hodges, one of the all-time jazz masters, playing a classic singing solo. Critic Stanley Dance wrote, “The way Johnny Hodges ‘sings’ the first chorus would make it hard for any vocalist to follow, but Dolores Parker does it very well. Her diction, articulation and smooth vocal quality all recall a period when soft, seductive voices were esteemed in ladies more than the harsh, abrasive kind.”

Dolores Parker toured the country with Ellington, singing with the band at ballrooms and theatres. “We all received an itinerary sheet,” she said, “and all we wanted to know was where they were going next, what kind of date it was (dance or concert) and what we were wearing. For the girls, it had to be gowns. We all wore floor-length dresses. We never appeared in short dresses or in anything other than evening gowns!”

She sang with the Ellington band at a dance at the Akron Armory February 11, 1948 and on stage at
Cleveland’s Palace Theatre the week of February 12, 1948 when the band performed several shows a day. She remembered the routine for those motion picture theatre performances: “The basic run for a day was four shows. You would come off the stage, they would show a movie or something, and, before you knew it, somebody was yelling out, ‘Half an hour!’ We rushed back, changed clothes and started all over again.”

Kay Davis, who roomed with Dolores on the road, said, “It was arduous but wonderful. It was difficult with all the one-nighters and riding on the bus. But, when we traveled across the country (on trains), we had a sleeper. We were in the good days because later bands traveled by bus most of the time.”

Dolores Parker said she treasured the time she spent with Ellington. “I was in awe of the talent in that band and I absolutely felt very, very privileged to be there.”

The late 1940s was not the greatest period for the Ellington Orchestra. Musicians’ salaries, traveling expenses, a recording ban, and the growing popularity of popular singers were beginning to take their toll on the once-invincible big bands. Ellington, approaching the age of 50, began working on other projects including another ill-fated Broadway show and the new medium, television. Despite the problems, Dolores said he worked hard at maintaining the classic Ellington sound.

**Duke’s form of discipline**

“The public perception of Ellington,” said Dolores Parker, “was exactly what he wanted them to see and I think that his love and his desire to always present a good show was very, very important to him. He didn’t want anybody to slack off and goof up at any point or any juncture.

“He could be a perfectionist. Sometimes a musician was being replaced because of an illness or something by some new guy who would want to change some of the notes. Whoever was sitting next to him would say, ‘Don’t do it! You play it as you see it because that’s the way it is to sound.’”

Kay Davis remembered, “If somebody had a little bit too much to drink — or a *lot too much* — he had to play everything in the book. He would solo on one thing after another.”

Dolores added, “If he knew the fellas had been out a little bit too late the night before or had too much to drink, and they had a two-chorus solo, Duke would make them play three or four choruses. He would stand on the side of the stage, egging them on while they were about to die from exhaustion. He would do this and laugh about it. It was hilarious!”

One time, Ellington directed his unusual form of discipline at trombonist Sam Nanton, who had been an important part of the band for more than 20 years. Dolores said Nanton had a bottle in his jacket pocket and was sipping from it with a straw. “Ellington saw it,” laughed Davis, “and made him play many more choruses.”

After touring with Ellington, Parker made several appearances in films and toured the nation and Europe before marrying Gates Morgan, a physician who became the medical director of the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company in Akron. In 1985, she provided an endowment for the Kent State University School of Music and in 1989, was the recipient of a Kent State award for her contributions to the arts.

Unlike Ellington’s other singers, she continued performing through the 1990s and fondly recalling her years with the giant of American music. Displayed along the staircase of her attractive home in Fairlawn was a series of photographs of her with Ellington and the legendary members of his orchestra. And nearby on a table in the living room was that etched crystal, bearing the profile of her former boss, presented to her by the Smithsonian Museum of American History.

In June of 1949, Ellington received his first honorary degree. It was awarded by Ohio’s Wilberforce College. He was also made an honorary citizen of the City of Cleveland.

But he would never again appear on the stage of Cleveland’s Palace Theatre. By 1950, the Palace had all but ended its policy of presenting live entertainment. The theatre became strictly a movie house until the 1970s.

**The 1950s**

Ellington, now 50 years old, had been touring the world almost non-stop for almost 30 years. A critic for *DownBeat* magazine, Mike Levin, called the Ellington Orchestra “sloppy, disinterested, dreary and tired” and said Duke “seems tired and dejected.”

With television becoming popular, ballrooms were dropping big bands and nightclubs were having trouble attracting customers. Trying to regain his momentum, Ellington began touring with package concert shows.

The Ellington Orchestra played a concert with Nat “King” Cole and Sarah Vaughan at the Cleveland Arena, a 10,000 seat sports facility at 3717 Euclid Avenue October 16, 1951.

Built in 1937, the Arena hosted ice hockey, basketball, boxing and many other events until it was demolished in 1977. In the early 1950s, it was also the site of many musical events including disc jockey Alan Freed’s ill-fated Moondog Coronation Ball in March of 1952, just five months after Ellington played there. Freed oversold the house and there was a near riot as the rock ‘n roll concert was just beginning.

By 1952, longtime Ellington sidemen Johnny

The week of September 19, 1952, the Ellington Orchestra performed at Cleveland's Town Casino at East 107th and Euclid. During the engagement, the band recorded "Take the 'A' Train," "Ko-ko," "Mood Indigo," "VIP Boogie" and "Jam With Sam."

Ellington composed "Satin Doll" in 1953 and returned to Cleveland in October of 1954 for a Norman Grantz-promoted concert with Dave Brubeck, Gerry Mulligan and Stan Getz at the Music Hall, the 3,000-seat theatre in Cleveland's huge Public Hall building.

The band played in Toledo in January of 1956 and received a scathing review in the Toledo Blade. The reviewer wrote, "What I heard last night seemed a carnival of uncouth and ugly sound."

Hoping to revitalize his reputation, Ellington concentrated on his extended compositions and scheduled joint concerts with symphony orchestras.

The band played a concert with the Cleveland Orchestra's Pops Orchestra July 25, 1956 at Severance Hall. With Louis Lane conducting, they performed "New World A-Coming" and the three movements of Ellington's extended piece, "Night Creature" which had been commissioned by composer and conductor Don Gillis. It had been originally performed by the Symphony of the Air and later by symphony orchestras in Detroit, Buffalo, Washington and New Haven.

Playing trumpet with the Cleveland Pops was Harry Herforth who had been Billy Strayhorn's boyhood friend in Pittsburgh. After the intermission, the Ellington band played "Skin Deep" (featuring a long drum solo by Bellson), a medley of Ellington songs, "VIP Boogie" and "Jam With Sam."

A few months after saxophonist Paul Gonsalves electrified the jazz world with his 27-chorus solo on "Diminuendo in Blue" and "Crescendo in Blue" at the Newport Jazz Festival, and Ellington's picture was on the cover of Time magazine, the band returned to Cleveland to play an extended engagement at the new Cleveland Cotton Club at East 4th and Huron. An ad in the Plain Dealer all but shouted, "Now! Now! In Person! Thru Sunday! Duke Ellington and his 16-piece orchestra." The band performed there from Friday, November 23 to Sunday, December 2, 1956.

Ellington did not return to Cleveland again for almost four years. He spent much of 1958 playing at jazz festivals and again touring Europe where he was introduced to Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain. In early 1958, there was a revival of the show Jump For Joy in Miami but it closed after 20 performances. Later in 1959, Ellington wrote the score for the film Anatomy of a Murder.

The 1960s

In another package tour, the Ellington Orchestra played a joint concert with the Dave Brubeck Quartet for 2,500 people at the Cleveland Music Hall Sunday night, November 6, 1960.

Pianist Brubeck and his group opened the evening with their version of "St. Louis Blues." Plain Dealer reviewer Glenn Pullen wrote, "Some of his quartet's ultramodernized arrangements had so much razzle-dazzle that it was difficult at times to recognize the original
tunes. They took on an exhilarating freshness through the leader’s rapid-fire facile piano technique. His thickly-chorded style in a jazz suite, based on an ancient minuet, made it a spectacular original number.” The other members of the Brubeck Quartet were saxophonist Paul Desmond, drummer Joe Morello and bassist Eugene Ryan.

The reviewer said Ellington’s big band dominated the second half. He wrote, “Suave and witty, the maestro revitalized many of his own jazz classics with color-splashed grandeur.” They played “Black and Tan Fantasy” and “I Got It Bad” featuring Johnny Hodges. Other members of Duke’s band that night included Sam Woodyard, Ray Nance and Harry Carney.

There was a crisis for the Ellington Orchestra in February of 1961. Nance, Paul Gonsalves, Willie Cook and Fats Ford were arrested in Las Vegas on charges of narcotics possession. Nance, who had been convicted on drug charges in 1956, was sentenced to 60 days in jail.

Trombonist Mitchell “Booty” Wood, who was born and raised in Dayton, Ohio, joined the Ellington band in 1959. He stayed until 1960, returned briefly in 1963, and was a mainstay from 1969 to 1972.

Another Cleveland Orchestra concert

When the Ellington Orchestra played a second concert with the Cleveland Orchestra Wednesday, June 28, 1961 at Public Auditorium, it again performed “Night Creature.” The concert opened with “Asphalt Jungle Theme,” “Overture,” “Flirtbird,” “Pie Eye’s Blues” and “Suite Thursday,” which Ellington had composed the previous year for the Monterey Jazz Festival.

According to an article by Jan Mellow in the June 28, 1961 Plain Dealer, Ellington was “the personification of a night creature.” He arrived in Cleveland at 7 a.m. the day before the concert after traveling all night and checked into the Sheraton-Cleveland Hotel.

He immediately had four scoops of ice cream as a bedtime snack and slept until 4:30 p.m. For breakfast, when most people prepare for dinner, Duke ordered a sirloin steak, medium-well, two halves of grapefruit, mild cheddar cheese, tea and a baked potato. He hollowed out the potato and ate only the skin, drenched in four pats of butter.

His main concern was a scheduled 10 a.m. rehearsal with the Cleveland Orchestra, at a time when he usually was sleeping.

During the Cleveland newspaper interview, Ellington said, “I keep this big, expensive band at my fingertips so I can hear right away what I wrote. They get the money, I get the kicks.”

His kick at the time was his semi-autobiographical composition “Night Creature.” He said, “It starts with the real king of night creatures, a blind bug, coming out of his shelter. His antennae pick up the idea of morning and he hides. In the second movement, comes the imaginary monster we all fear we shall some day meet at midnight. Finally, comes the dazzling woman who really reigns over the darkest night.”

At that 1961 concert in Cleveland, Ellington’s close musical collaborator, Billy Strayhorn had a reunion with a Clevelander who had been his boyhood friend.

Billy Strayhorn’s boyhood friend

Harry Herforth of Cleveland Heights, who played trumpet with the Cleveland Orchestra and taught in Cleveland for half a century, grew up in Pittsburgh with Billy Strayhorn.

“We were in grade school together in the Homewood-Brushton area,” said Herforth. “He was in my class in 1925. He was 11 and I was 10.”

“It wasn’t until I became a trumpet student that our burning interest in music brought us together,” said Herforth. “We discovered we were simpatico.” Herforth became the boyhood best friend of Strayhorn who was born in Dayton in 1915.

Herforth remembered, “Sometimes he would come to my house. Sometimes I would go to his house. You had to go in a little alley to get to his home. We were both dirt poor. Our love of music and books brought us together.”

While his family was struggling for money in the 1920s, young Strayhorn worked at number of odd jobs to save enough to buy an old upright piano.

Herforth recalled, “When I went to his home, sometimes I would have to wait for him in the house. There was nothing in the living room except the piano. Nothing! His father, a plasterer, would come in covered with plaster dust. There was no exchange. The rest of the family were somewhere off in the distance. But, despite that environment, Billy, from the beginning, from my earliest recollection, had an elegance and a style. He was refined.”

David Hajdu, in his biography of Strayhorn, Lush Life, said Billy’s father was a bitter man who all but ignored his quiet son. But, his mother, Lillian, who had
graduated from a two-year course at Shaw University, had an ear for elegant speech, and a reputation for formality. Herforth said she apparently instilled a love of books in young Strayhorn.

"I was an avid reader and so was he," said Herforth. "He was far ahead of me. I remember he was telling me one time he had read a marvelous book by Faulkner, Sanctuary. I got Sanctuary and I couldn't make head nor tail of it."

In their early teens, Herforth and Strayhorn took long walks together in Pittsburgh’s Frick Park and talked. "Mostly about books and music," said Herforth. "I know we did not talk about girls. There was no sexual reference at all. We didn’t talk about race relationships. We just seemed to accept he was black; I was white. So what?"

Sometimes the two boys would walk to nearby clothing stores. "Billy and I both shared a love of fine clothes," said Herforth, "the clothes that we couldn’t afford. We used to go window shopping, look at high-priced, expensive shoes, expensive suits, expensive hats and, each one of us promised the other, when we got where we were going to go financially and professionally, we were going to dress well."

But, more than anything else, Strayhorn and Herforth shared an interest in music. Billy was playing the piano and Harry the trumpet. "When I needed an accompanist," recalled the Cleveland Heights resident, "Billy was there and ready and played my piano accompaniment when I played in public."

Eventually, the two boyhood friends went to high school and played in the school orchestra together. In those days, in the early 1930s, Strayhorn and Herforth were not playing jazz; they were playing classical music. When Strayhorn graduated from Westinghouse High School in 1934, he soloed with the school orchestra. The music teacher, Carl McViker, said more than 50 years later, "The orchestra may have been a group of students, but Billy Strayhorn was a professional artist."

Herforth recalled, "I was there in the orchestra when he played the Grieg “Piano Concerto.” A marvelous memory! This young, impoverished black young man, playing the Grieg “Piano Concerto” from memory in front of the whole audience. That memory still blows me away!"

Other graduates of Westinghouse High School included jazz musicians Mary Lou Williams, Erroll Garner and Ahmad Jamal.

After high school, Strayhorn was beginning to compose. Herforth remembered, "I was working and going to orchestra rehearsal on Wednesday night (in 1936). I stopped at the drug store where Billy was working. As we took a walk, he asked me, ‘What do you think about this?’ He sang the opening lines of a song he had composed called ‘Lush Life.’ I thought it was fantastic."

Herforth may have been the first person to hear the song, written by the young Strayhorn, that later became a jazz classic.

According to Herforth, Strayhorn "admitted a marvelous and undying admiration for the lyrics of Cole Porter, those super-sophisticated things. That’s where he got his model, if he needed one. But ‘Lush Life’ is as super-sophisticated as anything Porter came up with."

More than six decades later, Herforth became emotional when he heard the song his old childhood friend had written. "It brings me to the point of tears sometimes. It chokes me up that Bill could not be even more renowned, that Billy could not have lived long enough to see greater recognition come his way."

Herforth went to the New England Conservatory and...
later played trumpet with the Boston Symphony and the Cleveland Orchestra.

When Herforth went home to Pittsburgh in 1938, Strayhorn told him he had been listening to the music of Duke Ellington and shared a secret plan with his longtime friend. "He told me that Ellington was coming to Pittsburgh to play at the Stanley Theatre and he, Billy, would like to take a group of his compositions and show them to Ellington. I remember saying, 'Do it! Do it!' I'm sure he would have done it without my encouraging, but that is what got Ellington and Strayhorn together."

A man Strayhorn had met at the drug store where he worked arranged for the young piano player to meet Ellington who immediately asked him to play. Strayhorn began playing "Sophisticated Lady" and said, "Mr. Ellington, this is the way you played this number in the show. Now, this is the way I would play it."

Three months later, Ellington made his first recording of a Strayhorn song. Within a year Ellington recorded a series of Strayhorn tunes, including one he adopted as his new theme song, "Take the A Train," which also became a jazz classic.

Strayhorn was soon an indispensable part of the Duke Ellington American jazz saga and a legend among musicians.

When the Ellington Orchestra came to Cleveland in June of 1961 to play the joint concert with the Cleveland Orchestra, Herforth was playing trumpet with the symphony orchestra.

"We had a joyful hug and a glad reunion," remembered Herforth. I asked him if he could come out to the house for dinner and he said, 'yes.' "I drove downtown later in the afternoon, picked him up, and brought him out to our house on Berkshire Road in Cleveland Heights. We had dinner, this elegant young man, elegant in every aspect, speech and dress, demeanor. I'm sure he charmed my whole family because my children, even as adults, remembered Billy."

Looking back on that family dinner with Strayhorn in Cleveland Heights, Herforth said Strayhorn, who died seven years later, should have been much more appreciated by the general public. Herforth, an outstanding classical trumpeter and a teacher for more than 50 years, remembered his long friendship with jazz giant Billy Strayhorn as a highlight of his long and colorful career. Herforth said, "Anyone who did not know Strayhorn would be envious of anyone who did."

Ellington at Musicarnival

The tent theatre on Warrensville Center Road

In 1962, the Ellington Orchestra played the first of six annual concerts at Musicarnival, a 1,500-seat tent theatre on the grounds of the Thistledown race track on Warrensville Center Road. The Musicarnival had opened in 1954 mainly to present summer musicals and remained in operation until 1975. The July 22, 1962 Ellington performance featured the return of trumpeter Cootie Williams.

There was another Musicarnival concert the following year, Sunday afternoon, July 14, 1963, shortly after Ellington's tours of Europe, the Middle East and the Near East. The Ellington "Jazz Matinee" was followed that night by a performance in the tent of Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.

Ellington at Karamu House

After that concert at Musicarnival, Ellington and his orchestra stayed over in Cleveland for an unusual performance the following day, July 15, 1963. Cleveland's Channel 5, WEWS-TV, was producing a series of television programs featuring some of the top popular and jazz artists of the period. For one program, the station lined up trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and a group of local jazz musicians including pianist Bill Gidney, singer Dinah Washington, and Duke Ellington and his orchestra. The television station tape recorded the program in various segments on the stage of Karamu House at East 89th and Quincy Avenue.

Opened in 1915 as a neighborhood settlement house, Karamu, over the years, had developed a series of arts programs including nationally recognized dramatic presentations. Langston Hughes had been one of the first teachers at Karamu and many of his plays had debuted there.

The music director at Channel 5 at the time was Joe Howard, the pianist who had become a favorite in
Cleveland by playing almost everywhere – from saloons to Severance Hall. Howard was to play a medley of Ellington songs in a piano duet with Duke. Howard later recalled, “They had two Steinway nine-foot grands on stage, no audience, and we were to play just a medley of a bunch of his compositions.”

Gillespie and his group recorded the first portion of the videotaped television program. Fearing that the director might insist on a number of re-takes, Dizzy made it clear he wanted to play his part only once. He told the director, “I always do it right the first time.” The television director complied with Gillespie’s request and got his camera shots right the first time.

Then, it was time for Ellington to take the stage and videotape with Howard. “When it came time to record,” said Howard, “I had not met Ellington nor had I spoken with him. So I had no idea what we were going to do.”

Howard remembered the entire production was pretty informal. Members of the Ellington band were wandering in and out of the Karamu theatre and nobody, including Ellington, seemed overly concerned about how the show would go.

With absolutely no rehearsal and no planning beyond Ellington’s instruction to “just start and play,” the pianist, who had graduated from Cleveland’s John Adams High School and Western Reserve University and was making his living playing on Dorothy Fuldheim’s One O’Clock Club television program, found himself playing twin pianos with perhaps the most important figure in 20th century music.

“Occasionally,” remembered Howard, “the band would come in on some of the numbers. On ‘Squeeze Me,’ the band all of a sudden came in.” The band members probably saw a subtle signal from Ellington. “We did ‘A-Train’ and ‘C-Jam Blues,’ with the band,” said Howard. “It was just marvelous how the whole thing worked out.”

The members of the Ellington Orchestra at the time included Cat Anderson, Cootie Williams, Lawrence Brown, Johnny Hodges, Paul Gonsalves, Harry Carney, Jimmy Hamilton and Sam Woodyard.

While playing with Ellington and his orchestra, Howard recognized a familiar face on the band stand. “Playing bass on his band was Ernie Shepard who was from Cleveland.” Howard said, “I used Shep a lot before he joined Ellington. And we used to do the morning Paige Palmer Show (on WEWS-TV). He and I used to play exercise music for her. And he worked with me at a couple of the clubs. It was nice to see him.” Shepard was with the Ellington Orchestra from 1962 to 1964.

The videotaped television program was broadcast on Channel 5 sometime later. Howard, after leaving Channel 5, got his masters degree from Kent State University in 1967 and became a professor of music at Cuyahoga Community College in 1969. For almost three decades, he taught music and jazz and told his students about Duke Ellington, the man he had performed with that day in 1963.

“I think he had a great band and he was a fine piano player,” said the music academician, “but I think his greatest contribution was (composing) the American song. He wrote some gorgeous things!”

But, 35 years later, Howard did not have a recording, videotape, or even a photograph of his twin-piano performance in Cleveland with Ellington.

A month after that videotaping at Karamu House, Ellington and his band returned to Cleveland for another concert at the Musicamival (August 14, 1963).

Also in 1963 in New York City, Ellington demonstrated his famous charm on a woman from Cleveland. When her husband demanded that they stay to meet Duke, she wanted to leave, but when they finally met Ellington, he said, “It’s lovely to meet you. Let me show you something beautiful.” He took her by the hand, led her to his dressing room, and pointed to a mirror. Jon Hendricks, who told the story, said, “It was magic. She suddenly became beautiful.”

**Problems at the Golden Key Club**

Late in 1963, Ellington and his orchestra were booked into the Golden Key Club at 641 Euclid Avenue. An ad in the December 15, 1963 Plain Dealer said, “Ellington opening Tuesday, December 17, for a limited engagement.”

Another ad four days later said, “Regular show 11 p.m. to 2 a.m. Open Christmas Eve.”
Then, on January 3, 1963, there was an ad announcing, “Held over, continuous dancing Friday and Saturday beginning at 9:30 and regular show Sunday night 11 p.m. to 2 a.m.”

But, the following week, Winsor French’s column in the Cleveland Press reported, “The Duke Ellington-Golden Key honeymoon came to an abrupt and not entirely amicable ending over money matters. There simply was not enough trade to crack the nut. According to rumors,” said French, “the Duke’s fee was $6,000 a week and to meet it, you have to sell a considerable amount of steak, potatoes and whiskey.”

There were more performances at Musicarnival May 30 and August 14 of 1964 and March 27 and July 18 of 1965. The Ellington band also played for a private party at the Statler Hilton Hotel at East 12th and Euclid March 27, 1965.

**The death of Billy Strayhorn**

Six weeks after the orchestra played at the Cleveland Music Hall April 15, 1967, Ellington’s close friend and collaborator Billy Strayhorn died of cancer. Dolores Parker Morgan recalled, “Billy’s death was a blow to Duke.”

The funeral service for Strayhorn was conducted by Rev. John Gensel, the pastor to New York’s jazz community, who had earlier lived and preached for eight years in Mansfield, Ohio.

Rev. Gensel said it was the first jazz memorial service he held in the sanctuary of St. Peter’s Church in New York City. He remembered, “Ray Nance and Billy Taylor played a slow version of ‘Take the ‘A’ Train.’ That was really something else! And Randy Weston played ‘Blues for Strayhorn,’ a piece he had written some five years before.”

Rev. Gensel remembered, “Duke Ellington was there and Benny Goodman and Lena Horne. Just about everybody was there because Billy Strayhorn was such an incredible person. I don’t know anyone who wrote more beautiful, sensitive songs and compositions than he.”

There was obviously a special relationship between the jazz pastor and Strayhorn. Rev. Gensel said, “Billy left his personal piano to our church to use in our jazz vesper services. He said, ‘I want to leave it to you because I know that when the musicians play this piano, it will mean a great deal to them.’ And when I tell a musician who doesn’t happen to know that piano was Billy Strayhorn’s private piano, boy, they are just transfixed!”

In honor of the former Ohioan, Ellington in 1968 composed “The Shepherd Who Watches Over the Night Flock.” It featured a trumpet solo by Cootie Williams.

Two months after Strayhorn’s death, the Ellington Orchestra came back to Cleveland to play a free concert July 18, 1967 at Woodland Hills Park, Cleveland’s largest outdoor recreation center, at East 116th and Kinsman. The name of the park was changed in 1980 to Luke Easter Park in honor of a former Cleveland Indians player who was murdered.


The band returned to play at the summer festival at Woodland Hills Park July 14, 1968.

Following a South American tour, Ellington and his band returned to the Music Hall for a concert Wednesday night, October 2, 1968. About 1,900 fans had to wait when the band was again late. But, the Plain Dealer’s Glenn Pullen wrote the concert “clearly proved that he is still the royal duke of inspired jazz music.”

The review in the October 3, 1968 Plain Dealer said the 68-year-old Ellington was wearing a bright green jacket (he must have reconsidered his earlier dislike for green) and tan slacks and looked incredibly youthful for a man celebrating his 50th anniversary as a jazz artist. Soloists included Hodges, Brown and Gonsalves. Opening the concert were Cleveland combos led by Johnny Boston and Joe DeJarnett.

In April of 1969, Ellington was honored on his 70th birthday by President Richard Nixon at the White House in Washington.
Seven months later, Ellington was again touring Europe. During the grueling tour, he hired native Cleveland trumpeter Benny Bailey, who was living in Europe, to play with his band for a week.

The 1970s

Lloyd “Tiny” Grimes, who had won national fame with the Art Tatum Trio and later spent a great deal of time playing in Cleveland, performed with the Ellington Orchestra during a CBS television broadcast February 22, 1970 in New York. It was the only time Grimes played with Ellington.

Duke and his orchestra played twice in the Cleveland area in 1972 – for a private party in the Grand Ballroom of the Sheraton-Cleveland Hotel on Public Square September 28 and at a benefit for Glen Oak School in the Mardi Gras Room of the La Place Shopping Center at Cedar and Richmond Roads in Beachwood November 10. Ridley Watts, who organized the benefit, said years later the Ellington band was beginning to sound a little ragged.

Ellington returned May 6, 1973 for a 7 p.m. dance at the Case Western Reserve University gymnasium. Ellington’s last appearance in Northeast Ohio was July 10, 1973 at Admiral King High School in Lorain.

He was scheduled to play in Cleveland in February of 1974 but that appearance, along with many others, was canceled because of Ellington’s failing health. His last appearance on stage was in Sturgis, Michigan, March 22.

Duke Ellington died May 24, 1974 in New York City.

Three days later, Rev. John Gensel conducted the funeral service that was attended by more than ten thousand people at New York’s Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine. Joe Williams sang “Heritage” and Earl Hines played a medley of “Mood Indigo,” “Solitude,” “I Got It Bad” and “Satin Doll.” Count Basie was in the front row weeping.

After Ellington’s death, Mercer Ellington took over his father’s band and brought it back to Cleveland’s Palace Theatre August 12, 1975. It was 44 years after Duke first played in Cleveland and the 10th appearance of the Ellington Orchestra at Cleveland’s Palace Theatre. No other jazz band or group made more appearances.

Kenny Davis joins the Ellington band

It was the call he had been dreaming of for years.

Kenny Davis, who had grown up at East 79th and Melrose in Cleveland, first learned to read music at Addison Junior High School and first played with big jazz bands when he was a student at East High School, was at home when he got that call.

“The phone rang and it was Mercer Ellington calling from Pittsburgh,” said Davis. “He said, ‘I called the musicians’ union and told them I need somebody that can sight read and can solo. Okay? So meet me in Warren at the Carousel Theatre.’” Mercer said, ‘Wear black pants and a white shirt. We’ll have a tuxedo coat for you and I just want you to play one night because our trumpet player’s not here. He’s not going to make it.”

Davis asked, “Is there going to be a rehearsal?” “No rehearsal,” said Ellington. Sight read everything. Also,” added the son of the legendary Duke, “When you come in, don’t shake hands with anybody. Act like you’ve been here before. We don’t want the people to think it’s a brand new guy coming into the band.”

Davis’ parents had danced to the music of the Ellington Orchestra in Cleveland in the 1940s. Kenny had always dreamed of some day playing with the Ellington band. Even though Duke had been dead for six years and his son, Mercer, was leading the band, it was still “The Duke Ellington Orchestra.” Kenny jumped at the chance and drove to Warren with his trumpet.

After that gig, Mercer asked him if he could play with the band the next night in Lorain. After that, recalls Davis, “He said, ‘Can you go to Canton?’ And eventually he said, ‘Would you like to join the band?’ I said, ‘Sure!!’”

Davis, who had played with Navy bands after high school and returned to Cleveland to play with a number of Cleveland jazz groups, found himself playing the trumpet parts that in earlier years had been performed by such jazz legends as Bubber Miley, Cootie Williams, Rex Stewart and Clark Terry.

“Oh, man,” said Davis, “we toured for awhile. We sometimes did two gigs in one day. One day gig in New York State and another that evening in North Carolina. It was amazing, but wonderful. We played with everybody including Ella Fitzgerald.”

Unlike later editions of the Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey and Artie Shaw Orchestras, Mercer Ellington’s version of his father’s band was not a “ghost band,” simply playing the old arrangements. The band combined new music with the timeless jazz Mercer’s father had written and made famous. Kenny said he felt he was playing in The Duke Ellington Orchestra.

“I’m offended sometimes,” he said, “when I hear that term ‘ghost band’ because here it was, a dream come true, even though it was Duke Ellington’s son. We were
A handwritten Ellington score.

Notice "Cooty" in the upper left corner

playing the tunes I had grown up playing. 'Take the "A" Train,' things like that. I was playing the original manuscript. The page in front of me said 'A Train' and instead of listing first, second or third trumpet, it said 'Cootie.' It was Cootie Williams' original manuscript! Oh, man, this was amazing. I was in heaven!

Davis' featured solo with the band was Duke's composition "Warm Valley."

Davis left the band in 1981, about a year after he joined it. Most of the other band members went to New York to play in the pit orchestra for the Broadway show Sophisticated Ladies, based on the music of Duke Ellington. Ironically, Ellington's long dream of a Broadway show did not happen until after his death.

Davis returned to Cleveland and continued to be one of the city's leading jazz artists.

After Davis left the Mercer Ellington Orchestra, Duke's son brought the band back again to Cleveland's Palace Theatre August 12, 1985.

Cleveland singer Vanessa Rubin also performed with the Mercer Ellington Orchestra.

In 1986, Cleveland Congressman Louis Stokes spearheaded the drive in Congress to appropriate funds to purchase Ellington's personal archives for the Smithsonian Institution.

**World's biggest Ellington celebration**

In 1999, the 100th anniversary year of Ellington's birth, the Tri-C JazzFest at Cuyahoga Community College in Cleveland organized the biggest and most ambitious Duke Ellington celebration in the world. It was bigger than anything in Washington, where Ellington grew up, and bigger than anything in New York City, where Ellington lived most of his life. The eight-month *Everything Ellington* project included:

- Thirty-six concerts by such artists and groups as the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra led by Wynton Marsalis, Joe Williams, Louie Bellson, the World Saxophone Quartet, Clark Terry, Dianne Reeves, Jon Hendricks, James Newton, the Cleveland Orchestra, the Akron Symphony, the Cleveland Chamber Symphony, the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra and the Jazz Heritage Orchestra.
- A series of lectures by such speakers as Patricia Willard, David Hajdu, Stanley Couch and Amiri Baraka.
- More than 60 special Ellington radio programs.
- Several dance presentations.
- Three film presentations including *Anatomy of a Murder* and *Paris Blues*.
- Several workshops.
- Stage presentations of *Duet for Duke* and *Sophisticated Ladies*.

There is no question that Cleveland played a significant role in the Ellington American music saga.
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<td>Land O'Lakes Ballroom, Canton</td>
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<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>September</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Idora Park, Youngstown</td>
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<td>1934</td>
<td>Jan. 27-Feb. 2</td>
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<td>Palace Theatre, Akron</td>
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<td>June</td>
<td>15-21</td>
<td>Loews Theatre, Canton</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Triangle Park, Canton</td>
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<td>1935</td>
<td>January</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Danceland Ballroom, Cleveland</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>Stambaugh Auditorium, Youngstown</td>
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<td>22-28</td>
<td>Palace Theatre, Cleveland</td>
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<td></td>
<td>May</td>
<td>11-14</td>
<td>Palace Theatre, Youngstown</td>
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<td></td>
<td>May</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Elberta Beach, Vermillion</td>
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<td>1936</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>Trianon Ballroom, Cleveland</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>Stambaugh Auditorium, Youngstown</td>
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<td>June</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Oberlin College, Oberlin</td>
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<td></td>
<td>June</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Pier Ballroom, Geneva-on-the-Lake</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>July</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Palace Theatre, Cleveland</td>
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<td>1937</td>
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<td>6-12</td>
<td>Palace Theatre, Cleveland</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>East Market Gardens, Akron</td>
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<td>15-16</td>
<td>Idora Park, Youngstown</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>October</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Trianon Ballroom, Cleveland</td>
<td>(Ellington not with band, was at his father’s funeral)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>November</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Trianon Ballroom, Cleveland</td>
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<td>1938</td>
<td>October</td>
<td>7-12</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>25</td>
<td>Trianon Ballroom, Cleveland</td>
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<td>1939</td>
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<td>30-July 3</td>
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<td>4-6</td>
<td>Palace Theatre, Youngstown</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>Columbia Theatre, Alliance</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Public Auditorium, Cleveland</td>
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<td>June</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Palace Theatre, Canton</td>
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<td>1942</td>
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<td>6-9</td>
<td>Palace Theatre, Canton</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>August-Sept. 3</td>
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<td>Palace Theatre, Cleveland</td>
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<td>November</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Youngstown</td>
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<tr>
<td>1943</td>
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<td>(performed “Black, Brown and Beige”)</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>Robin Theatre, Warren</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Armory, Akron</td>
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<td>Fairgrounds, Akron</td>
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<td>Public Auditorium, Cleveland</td>
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<td>18-21</td>
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<td>22-24</td>
<td>Palace Theatre, Youngstown</td>
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<td>August</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>New Elms Ballroom, Youngstown</td>
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<td>September</td>
<td>8-10</td>
<td>Palace Theatre, Canton</td>
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<td>November</td>
<td>3-9</td>
<td>Palace Theatre, Cleveland</td>
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<td></td>
<td>November</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Armory, Akron</td>
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<td>1945</td>
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<td>Armory, Akron</td>
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<td>July</td>
<td>19-21</td>
<td>Palace Theatre, Youngstown</td>
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<td>22-25</td>
<td>Palace Theatre, Akron</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>21-23</td>
<td>Palace Theatre, Canton</td>
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<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>November</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Music Hall, Cleveland</td>
<td>(Django Reinhardt’s American debut)</td>
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<td>1947</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Akron</td>
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<td>1948</td>
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<td>12-18</td>
<td>Palace Theatre, Cleveland</td>
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<td>Palace Theatre, Youngstown</td>
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<td>7-9</td>
<td>Palace Theatre, Youngstown</td>
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<td>Masonic Auditorium, Cleveland</td>
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<td>Arena, Cleveland</td>
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<td>Music Hall, Cleveland</td>
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<td>November</td>
<td>23-24</td>
<td>Town Casino, Cleveland</td>
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<td>1954</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>Music Hall, Cleveland</td>
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<td>November</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Public Hall, Cleveland</td>
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<td>October</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Finney Chapel, Oberlin College</td>
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<td></td>
<td>November</td>
<td>23-24</td>
<td>Cotton Club, Cleveland</td>
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<td>1956</td>
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<td>Music Hall, Cleveland</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>Statler-Hilton Hotel, Cleveland</td>
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<td>Public Auditorium, Cleveland</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>Musicarnival, Youngstown</td>
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<td>1957</td>
<td>April</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Musicarnival, Warrensville Heights</td>
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<td>1958</td>
<td>July</td>
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<td>Musicarnival, Warrensville Heights</td>
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<td></td>
<td>July</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Karamu House, Cleveland (TV taping)</td>
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<td>Musicarnival, Warrensville Heights</td>
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<td>17-26</td>
<td>Golden Key Club, Cleveland</td>
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<td>1964</td>
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<td>Musicarnival, Warrensville Heights</td>
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<td>1965</td>
<td>March</td>
<td>27-28</td>
<td>Statler-Hilton Hotel, Cleveland</td>
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<td></td>
<td>November</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Cedar Point Ballroom, Sandusky</td>
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<td>1966</td>
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<td>Music Hall, Cleveland</td>
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<td>1967</td>
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<td>Woodland Hills Park, Cleveland</td>
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<td>July</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Cedar Point Ballroom, Sandusky</td>
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<td>1968</td>
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<td>Woodland Hills Park, Cleveland</td>
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<td>1969</td>
<td>October</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Music Hall, Cleveland</td>
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<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>September</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Shaker Heights, Cleveland</td>
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<td></td>
<td>November</td>
<td>10, 1972</td>
<td>LaPlace, Beachwood</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>May</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland</td>
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<td></td>
<td>July</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Admiral King High School, Lorain</td>
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<td>1974</td>
<td>February</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Kent State University, Kent</td>
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<td>February</td>
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<td>Cleveland Athletic Club, Cleveland</td>
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</table>

Duke Ellington died three months later, May 24, 1974

(Revised April 2012)