



Duke, Mercedes and Mercer Ellington

MERCEDES ELLINGTON

SOPHISTICATED LADY

BY JEFF CEBULSKI

At 86, Mercedes Ellington, the indomitable dancer and founder of The Duke Ellington Center for the Arts, remains as active as ever, planning and co-directing (with Tony Waag, Founding Director of the American Tap Dance Foundation) *Such Sweet Thunder*, a spectacular musical and theatrical presentation honoring her grandfather Duke Ellington, to be presented this month at Symphony Space. Mercedes will appear (but not perform) during the extravaganza. Effervescent about her commitment to Duke's legacy and the promulgation of his history, Mercedes has a rich history of her own that helps to elucidate the cultural evolution of musical and theater arts in NYC and the US.

THE NEW YORK CITY JAZZ RECORD: What originally got you into dancing?

MERCEDES ELLINGTON: My mother's mother raised me, and she had me make regular visits to the doctor because my circulation was not that great. The doctor told her to keep me moving. [Children like me] were sent to dance school. In high school I was taking classes from some well-trained neighborhood twins—they were the real deal. I got a scholarship at the Metropolitan School of Ballet, which was then connected to the Metropolitan Opera Ballet Corps. When I graduated, [my family] insisted that I go to Juilliard, where I earned a B.S. degree in dance.

After Juilliard, I auditioned for the first *West Side Story* movie, and I was kept for a long time until the very end when I was eliminated. But when they were preparing a touring company of *West Side Story* to go to Australia, they came and asked if I'd like to go. So I was four months in Melbourne and three months in Sydney. At the end, they asked me to stay on and my family thought I should [accept] because they knew that here in the States I wasn't going to get much work. But I was determined to be in Broadway shows. We had a group that went to the auditions. We were taking jazz classes, ballet classes, just to keep in shape in case anything happened. I remember an audition for Radio City Music Hall. One time they had a ballet corps as well as the Rockettes, and the Urban League sent me to audition for that corps just to test and see if they were taking any people of color. Of course, they didn't take me. It was before *Sophisticated Ladies* on Broadway and *No, No, Nanette*, and before I was chosen as a June Taylor dancer on The Jackie Gleason Show.

TNYCJR: That's the first time I ever saw you dance.

ELLINGTON: It was a long road leading to that. When I went to audition I knew my tap dancing was not as strong as required, but a friend of mine said, "I know the tap combination. Come over to my house, I'll teach you the combination and you can have a head start." I went to the audition and noticed that every time we did a combination, there would be people who were let go. At one point there were only 17 of us left, and I was

preparing to get eliminated in the next group. Then I saw [Producer] Jack Philbin and Jackie Gleason come in the room; they started to whisper with June. Then June turned to all of us and said, "Welcome. You are the new June Taylor Dancers." I was about to faint; I thought that maybe she had made a mistake. But she took me aside and said, "Now there's going to be a big hullabaloo about your being in the line, but I want you to know, if you do not get your yourself together, especially in tap, I will fire you." So immediately after every rehearsal, I would go to take a tap class. That was 1963.

When Gleason made the decision to move to Florida, we took The Great Gleason Express [train] and I was really a little bit nervous about going through the South... We made a stop somewhere for press purposes. They insisted that everybody come out to take pictures. I came out and I was wearing dark glasses, a big hat, and was lurking near the door in case anything happened, because I'm thinking, strange fruit hanging from the trees, you know? All of a sudden, somebody from the back of the crowd yells out, "What's that colored girl doing up there?" But Gleason reached out and pulled me towards him and said, "You stay right here."

After Gleason terminated his show, I returned to New York and auditioned for and got into *No, No, Nanette*. Then I found out that the Ellington band was invited to Russia. I asked Actors Equity for two-weeks' vacation and went with the band to Russia. When we landed, the people were running alongside the plane on both sides to escort us into the hangar. The tour itself was really incredible. The people knew the music because of Radio Free America.

TNYCJR: The irony is that the people in Russia got excited about your grandfather and his music and they welcomed you. But then when you came back to the States, were there still problems?

ELLINGTON: Yeah, there were still problems. I thought that maybe I could transition after *No, No, Nanette* closed. I did some concerts, some revivals at City Center. I did some of George Wein's jazz festivals as a choreographer. I had to take a state test to prove that I could teach; and then they sent me to teach at schools in Harlem. Because of my interest in Latin culture and the Palladium, I taught them mambo, cha cha, all of those things. There were gangs in those schools, and some of the teachers were in danger because they insisted on teaching stuff that the Latin students were not interested in, but I befriended them, and they would even escort me to the subway to go home so that no harm would befall me.

TNYCJR: What led to your developing The Duke Ellington Center for the Arts?

ELLINGTON: I am trying to maintain (my grandfather's) legacy to pass on his tradition, his knowledge, his energy, his body of work and his belief of [being] beyond category, of erasing all of the labels that people put on

things, to explore and try out anything, everything that comes into your head. What I wanted to do is to create a place for young adults, not because there's so many scholarships available but for the chance to create. After the Ellington High School Jazz Band competition, where do they go? How can we help them keep the musical interest up, and how we can also operate and expose the people to the vast Ellington-Strayhorn catalog?

TNYCJR: You obviously had some relationship with your grandfather. How do you feel he would want his legacy to be?

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(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

ELLINGTON: He was a rebel as far as being harnessed to one way of thinking, one way of composing. He was very aware that in the musical world you have to be knowledgeable about composition. He sent his arrangers to Juilliard. I think that his mental and physical health depended on his involvement with music. He had been ill for a long time before anybody knew, but he was still pushing to be active because he knew that as long as he was active and he could do what he loved to do, he would be okay. When I went to visit him in the hospital, I took empty sheet music to him so that he could still compose because he had a piano in his room.

TNYCJR: Let's talk about the Symphony Space presentation of *Such Sweet Thunder* in December. How did that come about?

ELLINGTON: I figured that because of my experience in the world of theater, it would be something that would employ a theater company—ballroom dancers, tap dancers, vocalists, instrumentalists, featured instrumentalists and narration, a little bit of history. What better way than to talk about history than in concert form? And it's Duke's Shakespearean suite, which has no lyrics whatsoever, scatting or obligato or whatever for the vocalists. We're going to have ballroom dancers involved in half the fun. A fine actor playing Puck will take us from one thing to another, a little bit of narration as to why we're going on that direction. And even the musicians are going to be scattered around. Everybody's going to be in different platforms around the orchestra, and they will have masks on, so that'll scare the bejesus out of the audience.

TNYCJR: Looks and sounds stimulating. Your grandfather's music was always connecting different genres or some sort of relationship between the visual and the musical.

ELLINGTON: I think maybe he was a frustrated director. He wanted to tell stories as well when the band was playing. He would address the audience: "We would like to dedicate this next tune to the most beautiful woman in the room. She's in the audience now, and we don't want to point her out because we don't want her to be embarrassed or self-conscious. But we do want her to know that we know that she knows that we know that she knows, who she is." And then they played "Satin Doll".

For more info visit decfa.org/about-mercedes. Such Sweet Thunder (directed by Mercedes Ellington) is at Symphony Space's Peter Jay Sharp Theatre Dec. 12 (presented by The Duke Ellington Center for the Arts and American Tap Association and featuring Eli Yamin and The Duke Ellington Center Big Band with guests). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Duke Ellington And His Orchestra — *A Drum Is a Woman* (Columbia, 1956)
- Duke Ellington And His Orchestra — *Such Sweet Thunder* (Columbia, 1956-57)
- Duke Ellington And His Orchestra — *The Nutcracker Suite* (Columbia, 1960)
- Duke Ellington — *My People* (Stateside-Flying Dutchman, 1963)
- Duke Ellington — *The Private Collection, Volume Five - The Suites, New York: Suite from "The River"* (Saja, 1970)
- Duke Ellington — *Third Sacred Concert: The Majesty of God* (RCA Victor, 1973)

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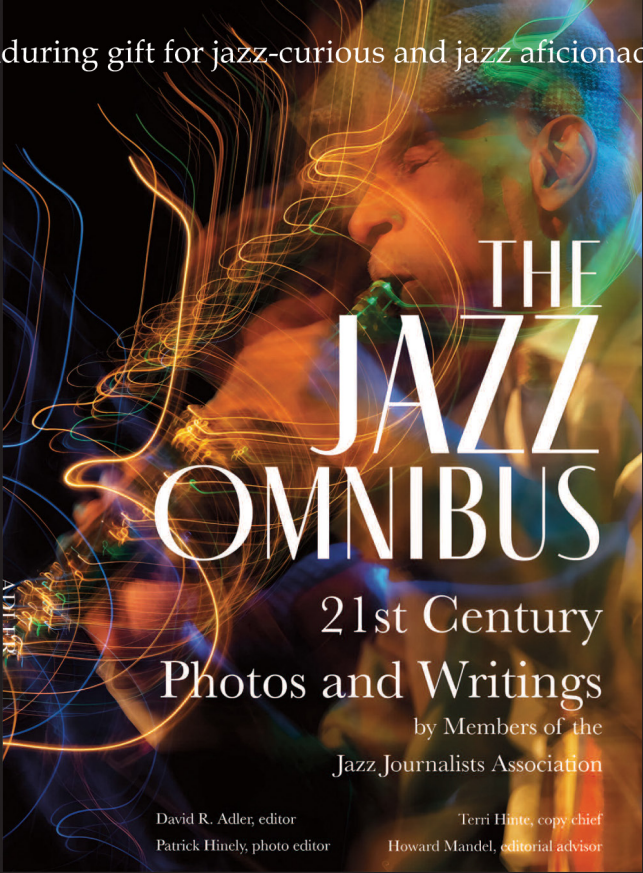
years ago this month, he was co-manager and founder of Manhattan's Jazz Cultural Theater, where he held classes and workshops. Israel-born pianist Ehud Asherie studied with Harris, then became a friend. "Barry showed our generation of musicians how to take from Bird and Monk, combine that with Chopin, and make our own thing out of it," he says. "He was the most legato piano player I ever heard. He had an incredible sound—one note and you knew it was him." Asherie recorded *Thank You, Barry Harris!* (Arbors) with trumpeter Bruce Harris (no relation) last year. Harris' legacy also continues with The Barry Harris Institute of Jazz (BHIJ), which works to preserve his compositions, teaching and legacy through ongoing workshops, including a forthcoming online digital archive collecting the recordings of Harris' classes. "In the course of teaching his methodologies, Barry also formed a community around him," says Alex Stein, BHIJ product manager. "His teachings) shows the best of what humans are capable of."

For more info visit barryharrisinstituteofjazz.org. A Barry Harris 96th Birthday tribute event is at The New School Lang Center Dec. 14 (presented by the Barry Harris Institute of Jazz). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Barry Harris — *At The Jazz Workshop* (Riverside, 1960)
- Lee Morgan — *The Sidewinder* (Blue Note, 1963)
- Charles McPherson — *McPherson's Mood* (Prestige, 1969)
- Barry Harris — *Plays Tadd Dameron* (Xanadu, 1975)
- Barry Harris — *Live at Maybeck Recital Hall, Vol. 12* (Concord, 1990)
- Barry Harris — *Live in Rennes* (Plus Loin Music, 2009)

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