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HIS DUKEDOM IS JAZZ

Ellington Is Royal Where It Reigns

by Ben Wigder

Duke Ellington brought his orchestra to Masonic Temple Saturday night to show Detroit a sample of the jazz music that has won him the acclaim of such great names in the music world as Leopold Stokowski and Percy Grainger.

The plaudits which have been heaped on Ellington's head since his music moved from the Harlem hot spots into the rarified atmosphere of Carnegie Hall perhaps reached their apex in the dignified comment of a noted English music critic who said:

"Ellington stands alone in jazz as the one artist who has something to say that is not only personal but universal, not only down-to-earth but also indicative of a fine and dignified musical mind."

Ellington is a big, friendly fellow who prefers to call his own work "Negro music, inspired by my men and my race." He likes to talk seriously about his work, claiming that the character of the music he writes is suited to the individual personalities of the members of his orchestra.

His First Composition

The "Duke" was born Edward Kennedy Ellington 48 years ago in Washington, D.C., the son of Negro parents one generation away from the cotton fields. His father was a blueprint tracer for the Navy Department. Ellington acquired the nickname "Duke" in high school because of his immaculate dress.

He was given piano lessons at the age of seven but his first real love was for drawing. He received an art scholarship but passed it up for a job as a soda jerk in a fountain-bar-and-poolroom spot called The Poodle Dog. And in that spot Ellington fell in love with the piano.

When the piano player lost his job for paying more attention to The Poodle Dog's whisky supply than to the key-board, Ellington got the job. He began to play what he saw and felt. And out of what he saw and felt he contrived the first of his compositions, "Soda Fountain Rag."

He learned to read music, took lessons in harmony. Soon he and four other musicians banded together for dances and special jobs. And in 1923 Ellington took his little band, "The Washingtonians," to New York and Harlem. The night they arrived they had enough change left to buy one hot dog sandwich, which they shared.

The Latest Triumph

Ellington's record from that date reads like an irresistible march of triumph. The Kentucky Club in 1923 the Cotton Club in 1927, "Mood Indigo," "Creole Love Song," "Solitude," which won the \$2,500 ASCAP Prize, Carnegie Hall. His latest and greatest triumph was the commission to write the music for "Beggars Holiday," a modern version of John Gay's "Beggars Opera," which opens on Broadway soon.

Ellington's son, Mercer, also is a composer of music but the "Duke" does not attempt to influence him any more than he attempts to force his music on the uninitiated. He will not compromise by playing the banal to get himself an audience.

The dignity, intelligence, the solid and genuine emotion that are in the man are in his music. To change his music he would have to change himself.

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