

"In Search Of The Melody": New Duke, Duke Ellington, A Brian Q. Torff Interview Part I

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(Image Credit: New Duke)

Today's Edition of Sunday Brunch kicks off the **first part of a four part interview** with professional Jazz Bassist, Professor of Music and Jazz at Fairfield University (<http://www.fairfield.edu/>), author of the book "In Love With Voices: A Jazz Memoir," (http://www.amazon.com/dp/1440112851/?tag=mh0b-20&hvadid=3486991554&hvqmt=p&hvbmmt=bp&hvdev=c&ref=pd_sl_8jsiejtexo_p) creator of such albums as "Life In East Bumblepuck" (<http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/briantorff>) and "Workin' On A Baseline," (<http://www.amazon.com/Workin-Bassline-Brian-Torff-Thunderstick/dp/B0009J1EPW>) and longtime ambassador of Jazz, Brian Torff (<http://www.briantorff.com/>). Mr. Torff met with TGNR's Paul K. DiCostanzo to discuss as Director, his ongoing musical ensemble, "New Duke." (<http://www.newdukemusic.com/bio/>) A project that is bringing the work of Duke Ellington to the 21st century, and doing so by using Ellington's championed approach of constant experimentation with compositions of his music. Mr. Torff will discuss the legend Duke Ellington himself, as well as the soul of Jazz in the 21st century. New Duke will be performing at Fairfield Theatre Stage One, in Fairfield, CT on 12/3/2015 (<http://fairfieldtheatre.org/shows/new-duke>). New Duke will also be playing the Yale University Ellington Series, at Sprague Hall in New Haven CT on 12/4/2015 (<http://music-tickets.yale.edu/single/eventDetail.aspx?p=14441>).

By Paul K. DiCostanzo (<mailto:pdicostanzo@tgnreview.com>) Managing Editor



Brian Q. Torff, professional bassist. (Image Credit: New Duke)

TGNR: I am here with Brian Torff, Professor of Music and Jazz at Fairfield University, and longtime jazz musician, and we're discussing his project "New Duke," and the monumental figure in jazz, Duke Ellington. Thank you for being here, and thank you for meeting me, Brian.

Brian Torff: My pleasure.

TGNR: Now when you go into the figure Duke Ellington, there are any number of ways you can go. First I want to ask, why now?

BT: In 2011 at Fairfield University my colleague Dr. Laura Nash got a grant from the National Endowment of the Humanities. That was to put on a two-week workshop on the life of Duke Ellington, for teachers who qualify for this, K-12. So we got all kinds of teachers involved. English, math, science, music, and they came to Fairfield University. We lectured, gave talks and tours on the life of Ellington; because there are so many facets of Ellington's life as you know, that it can apply to a lot of different disciplines. And I said, well we've got to have some music, but you can't duplicate Duke Ellington. Its just one of those things you just can't do.

So I said, why don't we do this: let's put a band together, a smaller group, most of them core faculty at Fairfield, and let's do Ellington's music, but in a new way. Because its exactly what Ellington would be doing if he was still alive. He didn't have one arrangement of "Take The A-Train," *he had seven*. Y'know what I mean? He was constantly changing up things. She liked the idea, and I put the band together, and I love to compose, and arrange music. So it was a joy for me, and they're great players, and it was a good experience. That was level one of this.

Then some time passed and we did it again in 2014, I was starting at that point to write and going back to my original roots that I grew up with in Chicago of Blues and Rock. I basically grew up on three main elements: The Beatles, James Brown, and Blood Sweat And Tears.

TGNR: That's a heck of a combination.

BT: Those were my influences, and so I thought I don't understand why in Jazz, which I love and have been playing for over 40 years, why we must have this kind of elitist attitude that basically says, "If you grew up on that music, that's fine, but leave it alone. Leave it in the past." Y'know, so I thought, *I don't want to leave it in the past, I want to draw on what I grew up with*. So I then started to change the arrangements for New Duke to instead of just doing updated Ellington, to now do mashups-Ellington. So therefore, I would take a Ellington piece like "Rock Skippin at the Blue Note" but I would put "I Feel Free" by Cream in front of it and "Happy" by Pharrell Williams (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pharrell_Williams) at the end of it.

Now this is sacrilege for many people in Jazz. For me, its absolutely natural from what I grew up with. I grew up with a fusion, a hyphen between every style of music that you can imagine; to me, that's always the joy of music. So, 'why now?' because I am at a point in my career where I play a lot of mainstream wonderful jazz, whether it be with the [Django Reinhardt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Django_Reinhardt) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Django_Reinhardt) group, or [George Shearing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Shearing) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Shearing), or Eroll Garner, [Mary-Lou Williams](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Lou_Williams) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Lou_Williams), and I'm proud of all of it. But its time for me to put a stamp on a different direction that is not only mine... but a holistic idea about what I think Jazz is, which is an umbrella term. It's something that brings in Rock and Hip-Hop, and Funk, and all these kind of things.

When we do a concert on the basis of updated Ellington-mashups, with new music that I write, which very much comes out of that for a lack of a better term, "Jazz-Rock" fushion-ish period of the late 60's, early 70's. But it is a new lyrical context. In other words, it's not a tribute band, it's not nostalgia. It's writing about lyric content of whats going on today, but using that as a form.

"Playing Duke's Music is for a Jazz player an historical homage one must pay." – John Fumasoli of *New Duke & The Jones Factor*

TGNR: Let's venture from the present to the past, because the approach you're describing evokes a very specific time in history, specifically Prohibition. When Prohibition was passed, the Speakeasy was born and Jazz was its kissing cousin. The approach you're describing is how Jazz went from a novelty to an art form, and Ellington had everything to do with that. If you could channel him personally, what do you think his marching orders to you would be now?

BT: Be yourself. Be authentic. That's what Duke represented. He embraced all kinds of music from around the world, but in his band he was very insistent on doing original arrangements. Even when he did someone else's material, *he never bought a stock arrangement in his life*. It was always coming from his band, or Billy Straborn (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billy_Strayhorn), or somebody's camp, and I think he would basically say, "go forward, and do the music you believe in that way you feel it." That's all we can do.

TGNR: Duke Ellington was such an interesting figure, especially in his time. When Edward Kennedy Ellington was born into a middle-class African-American family in Washington D.C., his mother in particular took a unique approach to him in that time, which was to say, "you're special." I believe it was a combination of his father and some close friends that turned his name from Edward to Duke. He built himself an empire, an incredible legacy out of nothing. What about this man's life in particular: his incredible charisma, amazing determination, somebody who in every way embodied the American dream, what in particular do you personally want the Millennial generation to take from his life, and how he chose to live?

BT: There is so much there, that's a wonderful question Paul. I think there is so much to learn from Ellington's life – as there is from any great artist, whether it's Picasso... whoever it happens to be. But I think the main thing is that when I teach Duke Ellington, and I have to admit I learned a lot more about Duke Ellington as teacher than I did a young musician because I knew his work, I knew his compositions, but I didn't know very much about the man. So my learning about Duke Ellington came later on.

There's a wonderful moment, in a movie called, "On The Road With Duke Ellington." (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akFR0RHpzNU>) It basically just follows him from getting an honorary doctorate at Yale to traipsing around the country. And there is a marvelous scene in it where the concert's over with, there's just stage lights on, the stage hands are just carrying down everything, and Ellington is sitting there at the piano, and he's playing and working on his next composition. And they can hardly tear him away from the piano. He then is shown getting on the bus to get to the next engagement. Later on he says, "You

basically live in search of the melody." I thought, *that's it!* That is it! You live in search of the melody! You never stop searching for it. So where Ellington could be resting on his laurels, traipsing around as a star, he's sitting at the piano working. I find that so inspiring. I try to live by that ideal.

TG NR: There was a very interesting story about Duke Ellington, from when he had only recently come to Manhattan, and he was with a "Cutting Contest" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDib9hmvrQ>) pianist, one that took a shine to him. They both would take a lot of Taxi rides getting to and fro around the city, and one time they were riding through Central Park, and Ellington asked his companion for advice about what to do because he wasn't satisfied with what he already accomplished. He had done a fair amount at that point, ending up a member of a notable band, and even landed a spot at a popular club in Times Square. This fellow said that he thought he should go to a conservatory to hone his sound, but Duke didn't feel he had time for it. To which his mentor basically said: *think of the logical option, dismiss it, and do it your own way.* How does that apply to Brian Torff, the man sitting before me today?

BT: I believe it was Will Marion Cook (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Will_Marion_Cook_House) who said that. I am basically trying to do something that doesn't fit. I am putting together a horn band, that has really been out of vogue for a really long time, and put it in a contemporary context, using arrangements that are very much hand-crafted, they're not of the present era – we're not making it like we're making a pop record. These are real musicians, playing real instruments, interacting. That went out of style a long time ago. So what I am basically doing is saying I realize this is probably not a tactful commercial venture, but I've never had one. I've never been involved in that. So my feeling is that it's honest, and it's me, and it's truthful, and I will see it through to wherever it can lead me. But it's not contrived. Its not looking at what Miley says, or what the latest Hip-Hop feud is about, that's another world. I get my inspiration from Ellington, Dylan, people I feel have substance to their work, because even though I will never be as famous as any of those people, I would rather be known as someone who had a body of work with a certain amount of integrity and honesty.

TGNR: Ellington has nearly 1,000 compositions/pieces credited to him in his career. You could quite literally have a set list where you never use the same music twice. As the director, why do you choose the pieces you choose?

BT: That's a great question. I am looking to do a number of things, and it depends on our audience too because they all differ. For example, when we do a concert like one we have coming up next week, it's called *Music For Youth*. It's for music students playing in the area, and what we will do at that concert is we will play some of the updated arrangements of Duke Ellington, explain why Ellington's important, connect him to other forms of music and make a connection to forms of music like Rock and Roll, and Hip Hip. Then we'll do some mash-ups, where we will show that Ellington's music is not an old history lesson and dust it off. It applies to other things that you hear today. Then we will say, now we will do some original music and we'll take this further in our own way. So that's how we choose set lists.

Who's our audience? What are we trying to accomplish? If you are dealing with someone who is high-school age, they don't know that much about Duke Ellington. They don't even know that much about music of the 60's and 70's. We say, let's play some music you may have heard before. Maybe you've heard some Stevie Wonder, let's play some of that, let's see if it can be part of a larger thing. So that's what we're really trying to do. We're trying to communicate and bring the audience into what we're doing. It's not standing apart in an elitist sort of way and saying, "well, this is it, and if you're hip enough and you dig it, great. If you don't, that's okay too."

TGNR: You're abolishing the country club mentality.

BT: Absolutely! Absolutely. Unfortunately, and it's interesting you use that term, modern jazz became almost as elitist as the very thing it disdained. It disdained the country club, it disdained racism, all this kind of stuff. It, for the most part, was African-Americans and Jews playing this style music, yet then became the hipper-than-thou art form. It still created great music, but at a certain severing of that connection between the audience, dance floor and what they were doing. I didn't grow up with that. I grew up with music that was wonderful, and highly complex, but accessible. So I think I am still trying to bridge those gaps.

[Click here to proceed reading part two of TGNR's four-part interview with Brian Torff. \(http://tgnreview.com/2015/11/30/in-search-of-the-melody-a-brian-q-torff-interview-part-ii/#more-3328\)](http://tgnreview.com/2015/11/30/in-search-of-the-melody-a-brian-q-torff-interview-part-ii/#more-3328), as we delve further into New Duke, Duke Ellington, and the soul of Jazz in the 21st century...



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