

The Good News Review

"The Refuge From All The Other News"

**"In Search Of The Melody": A
Brian Q. Torff Interview Part II**

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Duke Ellington. (Image Credit: WikiCommons)

Today TGNR presents *the second part of our four-part interview with Jazz bassist, Professor of Music and Jazz at Fairfield University, and ambassador of Jazz Brian Q. Torff* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brian_Torff). Mr. Torff is the Director of the ensemble "New Duke (<http://www.newdukemusic.com/>)," a collection of dedicated musicians that are bringing the work of Duke Ellington to the 21st century, using Ellington's method of creating new-sound with revolutionary experimentation of his countless compositions. New Duke is performing at Fairfield Theatre Stage One, in Fairfield, CT on 12/3/2015 (<http://fairfieldtheatre.org/shows/new-duke>), as well as Yale Universities Ellington Series, at Sprague Hall in New Haven, CT, on 12/4/2015 (<http://music-tickets.yale.edu/single/eventDetail.aspx?p=14441>).

In part two, Mr. Torff discusses what Ellington's legacy means for the nation today, the subtlety of Ellington's work, his leadership by example, how it all ties into Jazz in the 21st century, and bringing the art form to a new generation.

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

TGNR: The Good News Review is inherently apolitical, but when you look at who Duke Ellington was and what he means, he is truly a shining figure in terms of what it means to be an American. How do you believe Ellington's legacy can inform the racial discourse of the nation today?

Brian Q. Torff: Ellington was never elitest. One of my favorite quotes of his was- a reporter asked him, "Duke, do you do the music of your people?" To which he said, "*All people are my people.*" What Duke truly realized was that he was an American, and that while his race was important, he was part of a bigger picture.

Duke showed that one can always demonstrate a demeanor of respect and integrity, and he had an enigmatic aloofness that went with that. I think that when you look back then – once again- looking back at a body of work, and being impressed and inspired by it. As opposed to saying 'well, this is problematic.' Ellington is not problematic. *He is strictly inspiring.* I think that every work is brilliant. He was always in search of the melody, and always put in the sweat ahead of everything else.

TGNR: Ellington was quoted as saying, "You have to find a way of saying something without saying it." Based on your scholarly work and study of the man, how do you feel Ellington accomplished that particular ethos?

BT: Well Ellington didn't lecture people, he didn't proselytize. He's actually a man of relatively few words, and when said they were very discretely put. Sometimes a little too much. So, I think what Ellington did was lead by example.

TGNR: The only kind of leadership...

BT: Yes, he basically wrote "Black, Brown, and Beige." He didn't have to say, 'ah look, this is what this means!' He didn't really have to do that any more than a song-writer like Bob Dylan has to give a discourse on what Masters of War (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masters_of_War) means. When you do that, you ruin it. You ruin it. Ellington says, 'its on the wall, you figure it out.'

TGNR: Historians are often fond of saying, 'nothing in history is inevitable.' With that in mind, how do you interpret the events of the 1917-1920 period? As a historian of Jazz, how do you see Jazz evolving from a novelty to an art form at that time, in your mind? How would you explain that history? How it made that transition, and why it could at that time? Putting aside the broad strokes of the opportunity through birth of the Speakeasy, and accompanying hot music with enjoying an illicit pastime.

BT: It was the liberal educating of America. It was an America at that time that was extremely naive. Then suddenly there was a black migration. Entering places like Chicago and New York, and they bring this music with them. What that music did was not solve our racial problems, but it introduced us to each other. By introducing us to each other, without placing a moral lesson there, it put us on the road to becoming a better version of ourselves in a democracy. Of course, as you know, we're still trying to work through that now. But it got us started, it got us onto the turnpike, and got us going.

TGNR: Say Duke Ellington had been born in 2007, and did so under similar / parallel circumstances within a modern context. Would he have succeeded? If so, how would it have looked? How would he have done it? Given that he was known for his ingenuity, making opportunities, a singular charisma, and being such a hard worker.

BT: The game has completely changed now, Paul. So, its a great question, but a very hard one. He would have had a very different life, and very different career since what was in place then is no longer in place. It's completely changed.

TGNR: Could you elaborate?

BT: Back in those days you performed live all the time. You played for dancing, you played for popular music. You're lucky if you're recorded. If you got on the radio, and if you had an original sound, you maybe had a career that would start to open up. So the opportunities were very much live music oriented. We still have live music today, but it has changed. So we produce music in a totally different way now. Not everybody, but most people do. The game has changed to the point where, yes- there is still music with integrity, but its harder and harder to shine through.

Though remember Ellington was a good businessman. He probably would have been a hip-hop producer, a mogul. With his kind of talent today, he would not have said, 'let's put a big-band together.' He wouldn't have done that. He would have found another way, using the materials of the day to get through.

TGNR: But he would have still found a way?

BT: I think someone who is that talented, whether its him or Stevie Wonder, or whoever it happens to be, is going to take what they have, and they're going to mine it. They're going to dig. The tools just change. Though the process of creation is really kind of the same.

TGNR: Say Duke Ellington was sitting at the table with us now. He is in his prime, though also knowing of all the events in the world since his passing. Really the ultimate hypothetical question here: If you could ask Duke Ellington one question as Brian Torff the Jazz musician, the Professor, the historian. *What one question would you ask him, right now?*

BT: That's tough... I don't think I would ask him a question. The reason I wouldn't ask him a question is because I think his life and his work speak for itself. It is so vivid that I couldn't think of a question I would ask that wouldn't sound stupid, because I think its all there.

I wouldn't say, 'Hey Duke! How'd you work those saxophones in there?' I just don't think I would. I think what's important is that the life example is so vivid, so clear, that I would just want to shake his hand! I don't think I would really need to do more than that. Anymore than you go up to a writer that you admire and say, 'Y'know, Hemingway... how come you...' Right?

TGNR: I totally understand.

TGNR: Where do you think Jazz is going?

BT: I think there is a bigger question, I never know where anything is going. I think, 'where's our culture going?'

TGNR: I understand prophecy is one of life's less fruitful endeavors, but in this case I defer to your expertise. By all means...

BT: I think there will always be a wellspring of creative artists doing interesting material. I think that we're in some kind of a vortex in the industry. Structures have collapsed, but that doesn't have much to do with the music. The music will continue. It will continue to grow, take on different influences, and it will still be meaningful throughout the world. It won't have the kind of numbers that pop-music does, even Rock music doesn't have the numbers that pop-music does, and that's O.K.

I don't see myself as a preservationist, because I don't think something that's great needs to be preserved. It just needs to be carried on with honesty and hard work.

TGNR: As both a musician and teacher, a very interesting combination of things, you get to relay a lifetime of unique experiences to people who are young, and don't have that many experiences themselves. In your career, and to your students, once they have handed in their final at the end of the semester, and go on to the next thing, what's the message you want them to take from your time with them?

BT: When the course is over, I still want them to go on and live a full life. That no matter what it is they end up doing, they still incorporate the arts into it for themselves, and for their children. The arts are there as a metaphor for their own lives, and you can give them that. Give them the spark that will eventually make them pick up this book, or go to this concert, buy this recording, so they can take that and pass it on to their children.

If they do that, I have succeeded. I won't bat 1.000, it won't work that way. I feel that giving them the gift that we're studying whatever it happens to be, Ellington for example, his life is a metaphor for what you can do. A metaphor for what is inside

you. Are you going to be Duke Ellington? No. You're going to be you. But maybe this can guide you towards whatever realization that may be. You try.

Join TGNR later this week for part three of our interview with Brian Q. Torff!

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