

Duke Ellington Keeps on Bettering His Music

By Leonard Feather Los Angeles Times

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**Jazzing
It Up**

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BEFORE leaving recently for the Far East, Duke Ellington stopped off at the RCA studios in Hollywood to record an album.

A session with the Duke has none of the clock-watching rigidity that enshrouds too many recording dates. The blue cloud that settles over an Ellington studio is less mist than mystique. Always gathered in the control room is a nucleus of the loyal Ellington camp-followers: A businessman friend who becomes his unpaid social secretary every time the band hits town; an ex-sideman or two; an assortment of glamorous ladies awaiting that magniloquent moment of ducal flattery ("I knew you were here, because the whole studio was suddenly aglow with a turquoise radiance"); an agent, an ex-agent now turned old friend; even an ex-recording executive from a rival company. Nobody once exposed to the aura of Ellingtonia ever accepts total removal from the man or his entourage.

This project was a familiar one: a package of new versions of songs that have made Ellington a permanent guest in the global household.

"It isn't easy to do these things," said Ellington. "If one wants to attract people who heard the tunes years ago, one must retain the original flavor so they'll think they are listening to the same arrangement; yet we must add new dimensions, broader voicings.

"Other people's versions aren't what bother me. The opposition I contend with on these songs is not from Count Basie or Woody Herman: It's from Ellington."

THEN, head sunk in arms, Ellington concentrated deeply as "Mood Indigo" came out of the stereo playback speakers, its textures richer and deeper than ever.

"I don't know what's the matter with the piano player today," he said as the take ended. "The damn piano player doesn't seem to know what's happening.

On the next take the "piano player" (Ellington, of course) found still another new set of cloudy harmonic variations. Satisfied at last, Ellington said, "thank you, gentlemen." The session complete, he chatted about his re-

cent trip to Dakar, Senegal, where he represented the United States in the World Festival of Negro Arts.

"It was a magnificent experience. Dinner with President and Mrs. Senghor. Senegal Africans demonstrating exotic instruments. Poets and painters and folklorists from South Africa and the Caribbean. We played six shows in five days: two at a theater, two in a big sport stadium, and two at the U.S. Embassy, where we had the pleasure of a reunion with Mr. and Mrs. Mercer Cook."

The world, which began to shrink for Ellington a few years ago when will power overcame fear and ended his 20-year boycott of flying, seemed smaller than ever during the Dakar festivities. One reason was that Mercer Cook is the son of the late Will Marion Cook, the distinguished American Negro composer, and is himself a composer of substantial talent, a professor of romance languages, and today, at 63, the U.S. ambassador to Senegal. A fellow-Washingtonian and childhood friend, Ellington named his only son for Mercer Cook. The trip brought a reunion, too, for Mercer Ellington, who today works as trumpeter and manager for his father's band.

"Sam Woodyard, our drummer, was a big hit," said Ellington Jr. "He's spent a lot of time studying African rhythms, so the natives got a big kick out of hearing their own licks come back home."

DRIFTING from yesterday in Africa and today in Hollywood, the conversation

soon concerned itself with the few hours that remained before departure to Japan on a flight early the next morning. "Right now I have to run over and catch a preview of the picture," said the senior Ellington, who had had perhaps three hours sleep a night during the preceding week, and who before that had been the unbelieving recipient of 67th birthday greetings. The picture about to be screened was "Assault on a Queen," for which Frank Sinatra had commissioned Ellington to write the background score.

Leaving the studio, I recalled a high point of the date. It was an up-tempo original, a new, rocking blues by Duke. He conducted it now by lifting arms high and swooping down, now by dancing in an odd, youthful zig-zag of steps, now by snapping his fingers, his face rejuvenated by a broad, contented smile. The musicians, sensitized through the dec-

ades to every nuance of face and fingers and feet, received the radar message and transmitted the blues as an ageless Ellingtonian ritual of joy.

Twentieth century music has wrought few miracles and produced few geniuses. In Edward Kennedy Ellington we are fortunate to have one

of each. Sayonara, young man; and please don't leave us Ellington regulars alone too long.

ALBUM OF the Week: Joe Zawinul — "Money in the Pocket" (Atlantic 3004.) Cannonball Adderley's Viennese pianist in a well-planned small-combo program of his own.