

IAJRC - Journal Article - *"In Duke's Head"*

By Michael P. Zirpolo



I've always enjoyed rainy summer evenings in New York City. The gigantic landmarks are partially shrouded in clouds and fog and rain. This particular night, in the late 1970s, a friend and I had decided to go and hear a trio led by the blind pianist Brooks Kerr. Kerr had received a lot of publicity after Duke Ellington's death in 1974. He had graduated from the Julliard School of Music, studied with Willie "The Lion" Smith, and had gotten to know Ellington. He had assisted the maestro in various ways, and like so many others before him, he had become unable to resist the gravitational pull of Ellington's music and personality. His entire life became a study and expression of all that was Ellington. He got to know seemingly everything about Duke, and never hesitated to expound on his favorite subject on the bandstand between numbers.

As interesting as Kerr seemed, what caught my attention was the fact that in his band were two gilt-edge Ellingtonians: the drummer Sonny Greer; and the alto saxophonist/clarinetist Russell Procope. Together, these two had witnessed the entirety of Ellington's career. Greer had been with Duke long before the formation of the Cotton Club band. He had met and began to work with Ellington in Washington, D.C. in 1920, and remained Duke's drummer until 1951. He was approximately four years older than Duke (no one ever knew Greer's age, and he guarded the secret), so in 1920 he would have been about 25. Now he was past eighty. Russell Procope, born in 1908 in New York City, had gone to school there with Benny Carter. He later worked with a succession of top-grade bands including Carter's, Fletcher Henderson's, Tiny Bradshaw's, Teddy Hill's, and most notably, with John Kirby's sextet from 1937 to 1943, when he entered military service. He joined Duke's band in 1946, and remained until Ellington's death. Now, he was about seventy.

As our taxi wended its way toward the First Avenue club, we passed near the ornate metalwork of the Queensboro or 59th Street bridge. The bridge itself was illuminated by floodlights and street lamps, but only partially visible through the falling evening mist. The club, then called Gregory's, was situated on the corner of First Avenue and East Sixty-Third Street. It seemed like most of the club occupied the sidewalk, with a sloping roof extending out from the brick façade on the First Avenue side of the building around the ninety degree bend along the Sixty-Third Street side. As we entered, we went around a corner, then back onto the sidewalk, but under a roof with windows extending all the way down. The three musicians were placed against the building's brick exterior wall facing out toward the windows. That night there were maybe fifteen or twenty people in the place, mostly casually dressed upper east siders, who seemed unaware of the fact that the two elderly men sitting before them had been witnesses to and participants in the entirety of one of the greatest musical careers in American history.

It was Greer who first caught my attention. He sat ramrod straight on his drummer's stool, high above his tiny drum set. He played with his arms almost straight down from his shoulders. He was nattily dressed, and



always had a smile on his face. As played, he spoke to each patron who entered, the length of his remarks varying from a cheerful "good evening" to me, to a full-blown conversation with someone he evidently knew.

None of this affected Russell Procope who sat serenely with his horns on their stand at the ready. Kerr was doing all the work, playing some obscure Ellington opus in stride-style piano.

We listened to two sets, which ran the gamut from "Soda Fountain Rag" to "Creole Love Call" to "Solitude" to "Come Sunday" and beyond. Then I approached Greer. Standing away from his drums, he resembled a jockey; tiny, slim, energetic. We exchanged pleasantries. I told him how I enjoyed Duke's music, and especially how I enjoyed his drumming on the many Ellington recordings I had. He caught me by surprise when he said: "Duke wanted color. That's why I had the chimes and gong and so forth. I designed that big set of equipment, and the Leedy Drum Company out in Indiana built it for me. We needed that in the theaters we played in. And, God, did we ever play the theaters. Hundreds of them. It was vaudeville. We were part of the stage show. We worked with dancers, comedians. We started in the late twenties. Back then, it was taken for granted that musicians were in show business, just like the dancers, singers, comedians. We were like a big extended family. We would work with each other, run into each other around town and on the road. Show business was not a job, it was our way of life. We were proud to be in show business. We were proud to take the stage. We worked hard to get the audiences to enjoy what we were doing. Today it's different, man. Musicians think they're not in show business. They don't care what the audience thinks, which is ridiculous. The first theater we played in was the Palace Theater here in New York. When I left Duke in 1951, we were still playing in theaters, though by then it had slowed down considerably. Television was starting to come in. Even when I didn't use all that equipment, and just played drums and cymbals, Duke still wanted color. He'd say, 'now Sonny, would you brighten it up back there a little, please?'. He felt the bass should provide the pulse, the drums the color. And, of course, they should never fight each other."



*Fredi Washington and Duke Ellington, August, 1929
Publicity still from the film "Black and Tan"*

After a few questions about the Cotton Club days, Greer lingered for a moment and mentioned a name with which I was not familiar: Fredi Washington. "She was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. She had gorgeous skin, perfect features, green eyes, and a great figure. When she smiled, that was it! She worked with us in a little movie we did called Black and Tan. She also danced in front of the band at the Cotton Club, damn near naked. She upset a lot of us because it was torture watching that woman writhe around night and night. Later, she married Lawrence Brown, from Duke's band, who was a handsome guy. When they walked down the street together, heads turned, believe me!"

I then mentioned the name Irving Mills, and Greer was off again. "Irving Mills was a very aggressive manager. He pushed us into a lot of places where black entertainment had never been presented before. He did the same with Cab Calloway. We went all over this country north, south, east and west. And it was all

segregated then. But when we broke down the wall somewhere, there was no big fanfare. We went in and did our job, then moved on."

"Irving did wrong when he put his name on so many of Duke's songs. But Duke looked at it like it was sort of a bonus that Irving was giving himself. And Duke felt he was entitled because he had made Duke a star, got his music published and so forth."

"But as much as Irving Mills pushed Duke's career, no one pushed it harder than Duke himself. Duke had to appear before the public. We worked so much it was ridiculous. Theaters, films, shows, dance dates, records I don't think any band toured more than we did. I thought I was going to die when I quit the band in 1951, I was so tired. But Duke kept on going for another twenty-three years! He just had to, that's all there was to it."

Greer returned to his drums for the next set, then returned to our table to chat a bit longer. "I think that Duke started getting disenchanted with Irving Mills in 1938, when we were at the downtown Cotton Club. We were there for three months." (This location was in midtown, on Broadway and 48th Street. It later housed the Latin Quarter, and is now gone. The original Cotton Club, where the Ellington band became famous in the late twenties, was in Harlem, on Lenox Avenue at 142nd Street.) "He began to think that Mills was not giving him the attention he deserved. This was right after Benny Goodman had played in Carnegie Hall. Duke started thinking if Benny Goodman can play in Carnegie Hall, why can't I? And Irving wasn't able to get Duke in there. Duke went to the hospital to have an operation after we left the Cotton Club. I think he brooded over this because when he came out, things were cooler between him and Irving. Also, Irving's record labels, Variety and Master, had not been successful, and we were recording on Master. Duke was not happy that our records were not getting proper distribution. After we went to Sweden the next year, it was all over between Duke and Irving Mills."



Ellington and Billy Strayhorn, 1959

"Then some good people began to join us. Billy Strayhorn, Jimmie Blanton, and Ben Webster came into the band within a short time. And we finally got back onto the Victor record label. Duke was very happy to be on the Victor label again. At that time, Victor was like the Cadillac of records. We were the only black big band on Victor. That was stipulated in Duke's contract. Other black big bands had to be issued on Bluebird, which sold for 35 cents. Victors sold for 75 cents."

I next asked Greer if he thought the 1940-42 Ellington band was the best of any time he was with Duke. "Not necessarily. In the late 1930s we had a great band. We had great music and great soloists. You'll never find anything better than 'Braggin' in Brass'. We did 'Steppin' Into Swing Society', 'A Gypsy Without a Song', 'I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart', and 'Battle of Swing'. Back then, it was a big thing for two bands to be booked at the same place, and try to play each other down. No one, and I do mean no one, ever played down the Ellington band. I don't care if they were black, white, or green, we would wash them away. Duke would toy with them, and come on with something smooth, then we would build and build. By the time we were through, there was nothing left for them to do, but pack up their

horns and go home."

"Johnny Hodges was the most popular soloist in the band. He was always just great. His sound, his swing, his ideas. He just connected with the audiences. And his consistency was unbelievable. Rex Stewart was also a very exciting musician. He played cornet, not trumpet. Rex was a giant, man, and a big influence on guys like Roy Eldridge and Dizzy Gillespie. It's too bad people have sort of forgotten about him today. Cootie Williams played trumpet like Louis Armstrong, but was great with the plunger mute. I don't think Cootie Williams ever forgave Duke for hiring Rex. I believe Cootie's jealousy of Rex is what caused him to leave the band."

"The three trombones were as different as it was possible to be: Lawrence Brown could play ballads and

swinging jazz. Juan Tizol got a sound out of his valve trombone that no one else could. Joe 'Tricky Sam' Nanton used the plunger mute to get effects that had never come out of a trombone before. Barney Bigard was unique on clarinet. We had two good basses at the same time: Hayes Alvis and Billy Taylor. Otto 'Toby' Hardwick led the saxophones, and Wallace Jones the trumpets. And of course Harry Carney was there on baritone sax. Ivie Anderson was our very popular vocalist."

"All of these people, except the two bassists, who were replaced by Jimmie Blanton, were still a part of Duke's 1940 band. Cootie left at the end of 1940, and was replaced by Ray Nance, who not only played good trumpet, but played good violin and danced too. We never had a tenor soloist before Ben Webster, and he just blossomed with Duke. Let's just say a great band got greater when those guys arrived."

"I think Billy Strayhorn was the biggest single factor in making the band greater. He took a big load off Duke by helping with the arranging. Duke had more time to work on things after Billy arrived. And Billy's writing was terrific, right from the start. He impressed Duke because he had had schooling, and Duke didn't. Duke hated schooling where he was concerned. He learned by doing and was constantly experimenting. But in others, he admired it. He sent his son Mercer to Julliard to learn about music. Mercer learned all the rules there, then his father taught him how to break them.

But Billy knew what to do with what he had learned in school. He knew just how to fit his writing to the band. Duke placed a lot of confidence in Billy's ability almost immediately. And Billy's big chance came when that ASCAP-BMI dispute stopped Duke's music from being broadcast on radio. Duke was an ASCAP member, Billy wasn't. So Duke told Billy to start writing originals for the band, which he did. Many great things came out of that first batch of Strayhorn compositions, including 'Take the A Train'."

"I guess my favorite time with Duke's band was when we were in Hollywood in 1941. We went out there to play at the Casa Mañana, did some one-nighters up the west coast, and some in the south, then went back to Hollywood for the show 'Jump for Joy'. It ran for ten weeks. Once again, Duke was way ahead of his time with this kind of satire. In 1941, most white people did not see the humor in 'Uncle Tom's Cabin is a Drive-In Now'."

"After the war started, we worked harder than ever. In addition to the constant touring, we did the movie 'Cabin in the Sky' at MGM with an all black cast including Ethel Waters and Lena Horne. Lena was another great beauty who was just starting to make a name for herself then. She loved Billy Strayhorn, but that could never go anywhere because he was a homosexual."

"Duke finally made it to Carnegie Hall in 1943. He had written 'Black, Brown, and Beige' for the occasion. It was an extended work that ran over 45 minutes. We returned to Carnegie Hall about once a year until 1948. I think we did six or seven Carnegie Hall concerts in the forties."

"Duke was also involved in quite a few things without the band in the late '40s. He and Billy Strayhorn wrote the music for the Broadway musical, 'Beggar's Holiday'. Duke had a radio show called 'Dial the Duke'. He went to England in 1948, I believe, with Ray Nance and Kay Davis, who was then the female vocalist with the band."

"While Duke was gone, which was for a couple of months, I worked with a small group led by Johnny Hodges here in New York. Billy Strayhorn wrote the arrangements and played piano. That little band swung and the people who heard it liked it. We liked it too because it was so different from what we were doing with Duke. That was the seed for what eventually took Johnny Hodges, Lawrence Brown, and me out of Duke's band in 1951."

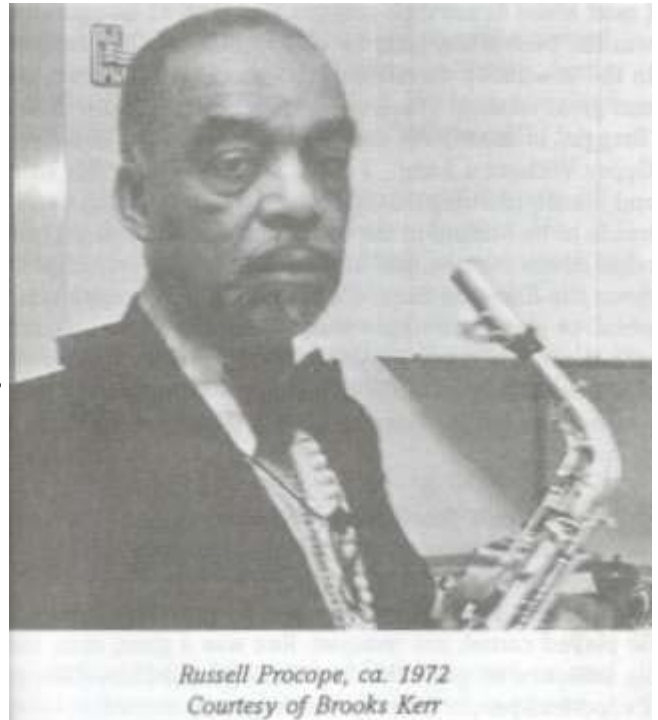
"About the last interesting thing I did with Duke was our extended tour of Europe in the spring of 1950. We played something like 75 concerts in 76 days. I couldn't handle it any more, so we brought along a relief drummer by the name of Butch Ballard. When we got back, we were all completely exhausted, but there were more one-nighters and theaters to play. Right after we premiered Duke's extended pieces, 'Harlem' and the 'Controversial Suite' at the Metropolitan Opera House here in New York, Johnny, Lawrence, and I quit. We

probably would have died of exhaustion if we hadn't.

As Greer returned to the bandstand for an abbreviated last set, I realized I would have to return the next night to talk with Russell Procope. After the last note sounded, Kerr was quickly assisted into a taxi by a bartender. Greer and Procope followed him out of the door, and vanished into the night.

The next day was sunny, hot, and humid. By the time we got to the club that evening, it was still steamy. The coziness of the club the night before had turned into closeness. Nevertheless, the trio performed in much the same manner as on the previous night, though I recognized some different tunes.

After the first set, Russell Procope left the bandstand and went out to the sidewalk for a breath of air. I joined him. To break the ice, I told him how much I liked the sound of his clarinet. I mentioned the recording of '4:40 Blues' that had been made during Ellington's seventieth birthday celebration in England. He didn't recall it. "The blues is the blues. Just name a key." I quickly sensed that Procope was not the extrovert Greer was.



I then asked Procope about the circumstances surrounding his joining the Ellington orchestra. "Duke started trying me out in the fall of 1945, right after I got out of the service. Toby Hardwick would not show up from time to time. For me, it was like being a baseball player getting a tryout with the Yankees. In my eyes, Duke Ellington was the very top of the world of music. I felt that way then, and still feel that way. But, I didn't get hired right away. In April of 1946, I finally got the call. I was told to meet the band on its way from Washington, D.C. to Springfield, Massachusetts. Hardwick had walked off the stage at the Howard Theater in Washington. Nobody knew if he was coming back. He never did."

"My job was to play first alto. Duke had a good clarinet soloist in Jimmy Hamilton, and of course a great alto soloist in Johnny Hodges. But gradually, Duke started giving me solos on clarinet because my sound on clarinet was so different from Jimmy's. And my whole approach to the clarinet was different from his. He was a great technician who had a sound almost like a symphony man. My playing was more gutbucket. I never did play many alto solos because Johnny took care of that, and when he wasn't there for a while, there was Willie Smith and Hilton Jefferson, both of whom were excellent soloists."

"The first crisis in the band after I joined was when Joseph Nanton died in his bed in San Francisco. We were on tour in California when it happened. It was very disturbing, like losing a brother. To work with a man every day, and to see him playing on the bandstand one night, then for him to be dead the next, well it was a shock."

"Shortly after that, we made a movie of Duke's 'Perfume Suite' with some puppets. It seems strange now, but at the time, I thought the movie it was really a short subject was pretty good."

"Throughout the rest of the '40s, we did mostly one-nighters, with some theaters too. The theaters were for a week at a time usually, though I remember working for a month at a time at the Paramount Theater here once or twice. We played Carnegie Hall three times in the '40s after I joined the band, and made another movie short called 'Symphony in Swing'."

"My first big European tour with Duke came in 1950, when we went there for over two months. This was the

first of many tours that took me all over the world with him."

"After Johnny Hodges, Lawrence Brown, and Sonny Greer left, Duke had to scramble to get replacements. Eventually Juan Tizol came back on trombone, and Willie Smith on alto, and Louis Bellson on drums. By that time, we had Clark Terry, Cat Anderson, Ray Nance, and Willie Cook on trumpets, and Paul Gonsalves on tenor. The band was crackling but business was going down."

"We got involved in some of those package tours about then. I think we did a couple for Norman Granz, who was responsible for Johnny Hodges leaving Duke's band. Duke held a grudge over that for many years, and finally he and Norman Granz had a blowup in the 1960s.

"Probably the low point was when we played out in Flushing behind ice skaters. Duke had to lay off some of our guys and hire musicians out of local 802. And there were strings and a harp. It was pretty bad."

"Things got better after we played at the jazz festival in Newport, Rhode Island in 1956. Somehow, parts of that concert were recorded by Columbia. We were not recording for Columbia, or anyone at that time, but eventually part of our concert there came out on Columbia records. Then Duke got his picture on the cover of Time magazine, and good things started to happen again. He was on the Edward R. Murrow TV show, which also was a big deal. In short, Duke started to get a lot of attention again, so the band got busier, and we made more money. Johnny Hodges also came back, and I can't tell you what a joy it was to hear him again. But, after he came back, he would do strange little things on the bandstand, like pretend to count money when Duke was playing a tune Johnny thought he had written, but Duke ended up the composer of it. He was putting Duke on, and I think Duke enjoyed it because he loved to put people on."

"We did 'A Drum Is A Woman' on network TV, and that was very unusual for a black band then. We also did about two months in Europe at that time. After that, the overseas tours started to run together because there were so many of them. We edged out of show business a little, and into politics a little. Duke wasn't too happy about it because he wasn't a politician. But he figured that it gave us good visibility, so when we would get back to the old grind of one-nighters, we could get even more money. He was right about that, but he did get caught up in the political games just the same. When he didn't get the Pulitzer Prize, he was upset and hurt. All of us in the band knew that Duke Ellington the musician didn't need the Pulitzer Prize. Everybody in the music business knew that he didn't need the Pulitzer Prize. But Duke Ellington, the human being, needed the Pulitzer Prize. And he was hurt when he didn't get it."

"Still, Duke made the most of all that. He had more diplomatic skills than most of the diplomats we worked with on those State Department tours. We often succeeded in projecting a good image in spite of some of those people. But if were handled badly, Duke would get revenge by putting these people on. They took everything he said at face value so it was pretty easy. We all used to laugh about it."

Procope looked through the windows of the club and Greer began gesturing him to come in. He excused himself with the promise he'd finish the conversation after the next set.

When he and I resumed our places out on the sidewalk, I asked him about the film, 'Anatomy of a Murder'. "Yes, I remember doing the sound track for that. I enjoyed the experience because that was the first time I did what so-called studio musicians did. But that little taste was enough to tell me I would not have enjoyed doing that sort of thing day to day."



*Brooks Kerr, piano; Russell Procope, reeds;
Sonny Greer, drums, ca. 1972
Photo courtesy of Brooks Kerr*

"Even though we were very busy in the later '60s, we could see that Duke was slowing down, especially after Billy Strayhorn passed. Billy had done a lot of writing for us, and many times, his work would go uncredited. When he was gone, Duke tried to do his work and Billy's. That was too much even for Duke Ellington. Then, when we lost Johnny, we all realized that it would only be a short time until there wouldn't be an Ellington band anymore."

"But we underestimated Duke. He had the strongest willpower of any human being I have ever known. He just kept going until he went to the hospital for the last time. We were in England and Scotland at the end of 1973. He would go backstage during our concerts and rest. He was sick, sicker than we realized. Then, at the same time, Duke's doctor, Arthur Logan, died. I think Duke was closer to Arthur Logan than to just about anyone else on earth. Arthur's death broke Duke's spirit."

"We came back here and played some one-nighters, then went into the Rainbow Grill over the holidays. While we were there, Duke went to the hospital to have some tests done. It was clear that he was sick, but nobody told us what his illness was. After the Rainbow Grill, we went back out on the road again. As incredible as it now seems, Duke came back on the road with us. He collapsed at a concert in Washington, D.C., but kept on. Finally, after he insisted on playing two concerts in one day in Michigan, he could no longer go on. That was in March, 1974."

"I enjoyed every day I was a member of the Ellington band, even though it was grueling trying to keep up with Duke. But I knew I was a part of something that was very special, something that would never die. But the biggest joy I had, and I think the other musicians had too, was the music. Duke constantly surprised me. Musically, I could never predict what was going on in Duke's head."