



Smithsonian
National Museum of American History
Kenneth E. Behring Center

Guide to the Jazz Oral History
Collection about Duke Ellington

NMAH.AC.0431

Wendy Shay

2011

Archives Center, National Museum of American History
P.O. Box 37012
Suite 1100, MRC 601
Washington, D.C. 20013-7012
archivescenter@si.edu
<http://americanhistory.si.edu/archives>

Table of Contents

Collection Overview	1
Administrative Information	1
Arrangement.....	2
Scope and Contents.....	2
Biographical / Historical.....	2
Names and Subjects	3
Container Listing	4
Series 1: Interviews, 1988 - 1990.....	4

Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Title:	Jazz Oral History Collection about Duke Ellington
Identifier:	NMAH.AC.0431
Date:	1988-1990
Extent:	0.4 Cubic feet (2 boxes)
Creator:	Hasse, John Edward, 1948- Willard, Patricia
Language:	English .
Summary:	Collection consists of original cassettes, open-reel master, and reference cassette audiotapes of two oral history interviews about the life and career of Duke Ellington. Leonard Feather's oral history interview has a transcript. In separate interviews jazz critic Leonard Feather and Sam Woodyard discuss their relationships with and knowledge of Ellington and his music.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Made for the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

Provenance

Transferred from Division of Music History (now Division of Cultural and Community Life), National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution on January 3, 1992.

Available Formats

The Archives Center created 1/4 inch open-reel preservation master audiotapes and audio cassette reference copies.

Processing Information

Processed by Wendy Shay, archivist, September, 2011.

Preferred Citation

Jazz Oral History Collection about Duke Ellington, 1988-1990, Archives Center, National Museum of American History

Restrictions

The collection is open for research.

Conditions Governing Use

No release forms exist. Collection items are available for reproduction, but the Archives Center makes no guarantees concerning intellectual property rights. Archives Center cost-recovery and use fees may apply.

Biographical / Historical

The Jazz Oral History Collection comprises two oral history interviews about Duke Ellington and his Orchestra.

One interview is with Leonard Feather (1914-1994), noted jazz critic, record producer, and composer. Born in England, Feather became an ardent fan of jazz by listening to recordings. The first time he saw Ellington perform live was in 1933 at the Palladium in London. Feather made his first trip to the United States in 1935 and through music critic and record producer John Hammond he met many of the leading musicians, producers, and concert promoters active in the American jazz scene. Feather was hired by Ellington in 1942 to do publicity and became part of what Feather referred to as "the Ellington family." Feather worked with Mercer Ellington as well and throughout the years he maintained an active involvement and friendship with Ellington.

A shorter interview with drummer Sam Woodyard (1925-1988) is poorly recorded and consequently it is difficult to hear and understand Woodyard's responses to the questions. Sam Woodyard was a drummer with the Ellington Orchestra from 1955 through 1966.

Scope and Contents

Audiotape interviews with jazz critic Leonard Feather and drummer Sam Woodyard about their relationships with Duke Ellington and the Ellington Orchestra. John Hasse interviewed Leonard Feather on June 10, 1990. Patricia Willard interviewed Sam Woodyard on May 30, 1998 and May 31, 1988. The interviews were recorded on audio cassette.

Arrangement

Collection organized into one series.

Series 1, Jazz Oral History Collection, 1988-1990

Subseries 1.1: Leonard Feather

Subseries 1.2: Sam Woodyard

Physical Characteristics and Technical Requirements

Researchers must use audio cassette reference copies.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

Jazz -- 20th century -- United States
Jazz musicians -- United States
Music -- 20th century -- United States

Types of Materials:

Audiotapes

Names:

Ellington, Duke, 1899-1974
Ellington, Mercer Kennedy, 1919-1996 (musician)
Feather, Leonard, 1914-1994
Strayhorn, Billy (William Thomas), 1915-1967
Woodyard, Sam, 1925-1988

Container Listing

Series 1: Interviews, 1988 - 1990

English.

Subseries 1.1: Leonard Feather Interview, 6 October 1990

Box 1

English.

Box 1

Tape 1: Leonard Feather Interview, 6 October 1990

Leonard Feather Interview, 6 October 1990

RTC 1: Side A Running Time: 30:00

- Discusses first visits in New York. • Born and raised in London; became jazz fan by listening to records. • Met Ellington in Chicago for the first time through Irving Mills' cousin; summer of 1936 Ellington was playing there and Feather went back stage and meant him Ellington's reputation in England when Feather was still living in England --more so than in the United States; more jazz publications in the early 1930s in Europe than in United States.
- Feels that Ellington did not gain the same level of acceptance as a great artist in United States because of race. Same issues didn't apply in UK. • First Ellington records- Black and Tan, The Mooch, Creole Love Call • *Check and Double Check* film Ellington demeaned by being secondary to white Amos and Andy, but at least Ellington got to perform music on screen. • First saw Ellington at Palladium in 1933 in London with Ivie Anderson, Snake Hips Tucker --was in awe of the music. • Why did Feather come to the US in 1935? Came on a visit largely because of the music; had met John Hammond; took the ship the Normandy; met many people through John Hammond. • Went on road with Louis Armstrong and experienced Jim Crow America hired by Ellington in 1942 to do publicity and promotion; became part of the Ellington family. • *Black, Brown, and Beige* • Ellington and Strayhorn work habits. • Morale problems in Ellington Orchestra circa 1943.

RTC 1: Side B (Note: recording starts at 2:00 minute) Running Time: 28:00

- Morale issues (continued) • Discipline problems. • Ellington put up with problems because he knew what he wanted musically. • Orchestra musicianship and discipline began to fall apart by the end of Ellington's life, particularly after Strayhorn died. • Johnny Hodges unhappiness with the band.
- Irving Mills --thoughts and memories by Leonard Feather. • Feather never went to Cotton Club because blacks weren't allowed in the audience. • Many New York jazz clubs were whites only until the early 1940s. • Ellington the pragmatist. • Meeting Helen Oakley (Dance)- produced Ellington small group sessions for Irving Mills and Ellington. • Ellington income sources during -- records provided the smaller amount because of poor jazz record sales; composing income subsidized the band. • Strayhorn --met him as part of the

Ellington "family"; worked with Strayhorn on a blues piano book for Robbins Music; Strayhorn was a delight and a total genius.

Box 1

Tape 2: Leonard Feather Interview, 6 October 1990
English.

Leonard Feather Interview, 6 October 1990

RTC 2: Side A Running Time: 30:00

- Strayhorn (continued) • Esquire Stars recording (?) • Ellington and Strayhorn working relationship; why Strayhorn didn't perform as pianist for the orchestra more. • Ellington/Strayhorn - question about composing credits. • Second stint in 1950 --about 1952 with Ellington at Tempo Music and then a small record company with Mercer called Mercer Records; became a friend of Mercer's. • Ellington/Mercer relationship. • Tempo Music Company.

RTC 2: Side B (starts 2:00 minutes in) Running Time: 28:00

- Mercer Records • Irving Townsend/Ellington relationship beginning in 1956. • Feather pieces that ended up in the Ellington Orchestra repertoire. • John Hammond/Ellington relationship. • Ellington as a man of contradictions. • Feather's move to Los Angeles and effect on relationship with Ellington. • Memories of Johnny Hodges leaving the Ellington Orchestra. • Integrating the Ellington Orchestra --1951 Louis Bellson joins. • Norman Granz/Ellington relationship. • Joe Glaser booked Ellington, but an Armstrong man first and forever. • Race as it shaped Ellington's career and music. • Ellington as a significant 20th century musical figure.

Box 1

Tape 3: Leonard Feather Interview, 6 October 1990
English.

Leonard Feather Interview, 6 October 1990

RTC 3: Side A Running Time: 20:00

- Feather's opinion of Ellington's portrayal in books, documentaries, and historical record. • Memories of band rehearsals. • Jimmy Hamilton compositions for the band. • Joe Morgan and Ellington. • Ellington and religion --Feather's observations. • Did Ellington open up to anyone? A couple of times let façade down with Feather; probably with Ruth as well, maybe Strayhorn. • Ellington's drinking, heavy during his twenties, much less so as he aged; didn't drink much when Feather knew him. • Did Feather's experience having grown up Jewish influence his attitude toward race? • Making a living as a jazz critic in the late 1930s --not possible, Feather did many other jazz-related jobs like writing music, producing records, publicity, etc. • People influenced by Ellington --just about every major composer to come along since Ellington's heyday.

Tape 3: Side B, Blank

Box 2, Folder 1

Transcript

114 pages. Interview conducted by John Hasse, curator, National Museum of American History.

Subseries 1.2: Sam Woodyard Interview, 30 May 1988-31 May 1988

Box 1

English.

Interviewed by Patricia Willard, Sam Woodyard discusses his life and his time in the Ellington Orchestra. Poor sound quality makes it impossible to hear Mr. Woodyard's answers and comments throughout most of the interview.

[Return to Table of Contents](#)