

PROLOGUE

ONE NIGHT IN 1967, my musical partner, Dwiki Mitchell, and I were in New York, playing at a jazz emporium called the Hickory House, when Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn came in together. John Popkin, the proprietor, loved feeding stars, and Ellington, a friend of Popkin's who was devoted to the Hickory House menu, was never allowed to pay for a meal there. To return the kindness, Duke advised Popkin on jazz groups he felt would be good for business. In fact, he had suggested the Mitchell-Ruff Duo, Mitchell's piano and my French horn and bass, for the job we were playing that night.

I knew Ellington was then between tours. I also knew he was there that night on a diplomatic mission: he'd called me very early one morning a few days earlier from somewhere on the road. He did all his social calling (often to the consternation of his friends) after a night's work, generally in the predawn hours. When the sound of the hotel phone jolted me out of a deep sleep, Ellington began cooing into my ear the sugary platitudes he loved using when jiving his friends.

"One hopes not to disturb the sweet repose of the Muses' favorite French horn and bass man at this uncivilized hour," he began in his characteristic fashion. "And please believe that this humble working

slob prays forgiveness. But ahh me, how one envies the exalted who've already achieved beyond measure, and whose riches and fame afford, such luxurious leisure as yours. [Pause for breath.] "We want you to know that when *we* grow up, *we* want to be exactly like *you*."

Then I knew why Duke was calling. Two nights earlier, Popkin and I had had a noisy spat when I told him the duo was ready for a rest and would be leaving in two weeks. He went through the roof—but hard. Business was good, and he'd hoped we would stay right through the summer. And there he stood in front of a packed house of diners, his face gone purple, shaking his raised fists and screaming at me:

"Whaddya mean, Ruff, giving notice, for Chrissakes? You can't do this to me. Don't we treat you good? Duke Ellington said you were good people. He likes you fellows. He went to the trouble to recommend you, didn't he? I'm going to call Duke tonight and tell him what you're doing to me!" So here was Ambassador Ellington on the phone, sweet-talking me in the line of duty.

I said, "OK, Maestro, when did Popkin call, and just what did he say?"

Switching gears out of the jive mode, Duke said, "Aw, come on, where's your charity, Willie? John Popkin's just a little guy running a good place to eat steaks and good Chinese food. How is it going to hurt you and Mitchell to stick with him awhile longer? If business is as good as he says it is, ask him for a raise. Haven't you learned how to handle white folk yet?" I said that we needed a rest, not a raise; to which he remarked—back in the jive mode—"You're tired? You need a rest? Ohhh, poor lamb . . . poor baby . . . Hold the phone while I borrow Ray Nance's violin and improvise an appropriately sad and pitying air for the working class."

I tried not to laugh too long and went on to explain that after my recent divorce, I was moving to Los Angeles and had promised to spend some undivided time during the summer with my ten-year-old daughter, Michele. At that, Ellington stopped kidding around.

"Go back to sleep," he said. "I'll fall by to see you kitties in a couple of days. Sweet dreams."

Over the years, I had come to enjoy a congenial friendship with Ellington. I was always welcome backstage whenever I turned up in

cities around the world where Duke and his musicians were working. I loved to listen to the band and visit with my idols, Harry Carney, Johnny Hodges, Ray Nance, Lawrence Brown, Cootie Williams, and others among his distinguished sidemen. Put simply, Dwiki Mitchell and I worshiped Ellington, both the legend and the man.

So here were Duke and Strayhorn at Popkin's joint inviting Mitchell and me to sit with them and share the Chinese meal. The talk predictably turned to our "problem" with the boss. Ellington was expansive, felt good, and was visibly making the most of his role of peacemaker.

He had good news. He'd already talked to Popkin, told him of my promise to my daughter, soothed him, and found him a replacement for the Mitchell-Ruff Duo, an English piano trio. There was, however, one minor hitch: the Englishmen were in London, still on another job.

"Would you gents consider staying on an extra week or so, until the Brits arrive?" Mitchell said he'd enjoy helping me entertain Michele in New York that extra week, and Popkin was satisfied. Duke, leveling his most self-satisfied smirk at us, tossed off this improvisation on one of his favorite biblical pronouncements:

"You see, baby," he said as he took up a Hickory House napkin and flicked a grain of shrimp fried rice from his mustache, "bread cast upon the water comes back buttered on *both* sides."

A few nights later, when the Ellington orchestra had taken off on a string of cross-country one-nighters, Strayhorn was back at the Hickory House, alone. We knew he'd had surgery weeks before he came in with Duke, but was on the mend. He ate dinner while we played. I noticed him writing something on paper as I played the horn. He stayed on late into the night. The next night, he was back again, and over a drink during intermission he put a few technical questions to me about the French horn's range, its loudness, bent notes, and the use of the mute. A couple of nights later he showed up once more, this time with a message:

"Willie," Billy Strayhorn said, "can you come over to my apartment sometime soon and play something I've written for you and the French horn?"

I was startled. Strayhorn had written something for me? "Is this afternoon soon enough?" I asked.

That afternoon, horn in hand, I called on the master composer, songwriter, and arranger. Strayhorn was seated at the Steinway. He still looked slightly frail from his operation, but he went right to work accompanying me as I played a passage of his new composition. It was a heavy work of dark sonorities, laden with surprising melodic turns that seemed to leap through daring rhythmic configurations into totally unexplored crevasses of the diatonic scale. No light musical entertainment, this, and like his thoughtful "Lush Life," the composition was extremely hard to play but overwhelmingly rewarding and masterful.

He led me through the first movement of what he intended as a suite, taking it section by section until he was sure of what was needed. Then he used his eraser, tore away pages, resketched, and played through the new materials with me until he was nearly satisfied. I was in heaven. How did I get lucky enough to attract the notice of the composer of "Take the A Train" and "Passion Flower"? Nobody this important had ever written an original work for me or the duo before.

Then more work with the manuscript, and we took a break for the dinner working on the stove; Strayhorn cooked as imaginatively as he wrote music. During the main course of lamb chops, fried corn, new peas, and yams, the phone rang. Ellington was calling from Omaha.

"Listen, Edward," his arranger said, "you called at a good time. I want you to hear something new. Gotta minute?" Strayhorn poured a generous slug of wine into my glass and signaled me to wash away the lamb chop and take up the horn. Performing an unfinished work long-distance for Duke Ellington with the grease of a lamb chop still on my embouchure made my blood rush. But I did as I was told.

When we had played all he'd written, Billy took up the phone and accepted Ellington's compliments graciously. More talk followed. Words like "transition," "modulation," "bridge," "coda," and "diminuendo" flew back and forth to Omaha. More scribbling. Then came the signal to rinse again, and Strayhorn sat down to repeat with me the middle section. After we'd played a few bars of it through twice, there was further talk on the phone, and out came the eraser. Strayhorn expanded parts and added dynamics, while the receiver rested on the

Steinway. There was no apparent rush and scurry. We played the new and very much improved version again and again. By then it was time for me to rush out to the Hickory House. I shudder to think how much that phone call cost the Ellington-Strayhorn duo. But that's the way we did it for the rest of the week, my horn and I at Strayhorn's, playing for Ellington somewhere out on the distant prairie.

Days later, when he had the suite set down in its final manuscript form, Strayhorn said, "Now I want to hear it with a *real* pianist. Call Mitchell!"

For the next several days, Mitchell and I came together to Strayhorn's apartment and worked at learning the suite. On the first day, Strayhorn sat beside Mitchell on the piano bench, propped the new manuscript on the music rack of his Steinway and turned to sections he wanted to discuss. With his elegant finger, he pointed to places in the score.

"What I've written here," he said to Mitchell, "is quite complete in the compositional sense. But I want this first meeting to feel to you like a fitting, as in 'fit' a custom-made suit. The compositional elements should fit *your* hands, which are so much larger and more powerful than mine. . . . You know how to make sections like these on this page as big and as rich in sonority as you can. But here in this interlude, let the horn ring through. . . . Let Willie's sound kind of hover over it all, right there. And pause here, but only slightly. . . . Over in this middle part, your line and the horn line are of equal importance. Balance is the key word; but that's the kind of thing you two do naturally anyway. I have left you space and, at the same time, given indications of essential details. . . ."

By now Mitchell was alive with excitement. His large fingers trembled as he carefully shaped them to fit the powerful, two-fisted chords Stray had written to underscore the horn theme. And *wham!* Stray was up off the piano bench at the huge sound Mitchell made. He stomped the floor and beamed at Mitchell. "Hell yes!" he hollered. "That's what I had in mind; I just don't have the hands and strength to make it sound *that way*."

Mitchell's reaction to the compliment was almost sheepish. "Ohhh, I see more clearly now what Ruff has been trying to describe these past two weeks. It's a very beautiful and powerful piece, Billy."

When Ellington called later that afternoon, Strayhorn put the receiver close to the piano strings.

"Now, Edward, you'll hear the final setting, with Dwiki Mitchell at the Steinway." And at last Billy Strayhorn's Suite for Horn and Piano took its place in our permanent repertoire.

Several months later, while I was living in Los Angeles and teaching at UCLA, my phone rang and Ellington's voice surprised me; it was afternoon, the wrong time for him to call. But Strayhorn had died a few weeks before, and Ellington's life and most of his old habits had changed. Nobody among his friends could have guessed how much the loss of Strayhorn, his greatest artistic ally, would cost him. Still, his voice that day sounded the same as ever, only better, more enthusiastic than I'd heard him in a long time.

"Strayhorn had such an extraordinary musical life in New York," Ellington began; he was in no mood for small talk. "He should have a fitting memorial here. He was a New York composer; I mean, what other New Yorker wrote 'Take the A Train' and 'Upper Manhattan Medical Group'? I'm establishing a Billy Strayhorn Memorial Scholarship at the Juilliard School, and we're going to kick it off with a gala: the *dream* concert, man.

"Imagine a program with Stray's friends: Lena Horne, Tony Bennett, Willie 'The Lion' Smith, Joe Williams, Clarke Terry, Lou Rawls, Carmen DeLavallade, Geoffrey Holder, and of course all his many friends in my band—"

I interrupted, "That sounds like a concert I don't want to miss. Count me in for a ticket."

"Oh, no," said Ellington, "that's not what we had in mind. I want you and your partner on the stage to play that fabulous suite Strayhorn wrote for you two. I still hear that music coming from Stray's apartment on the phone.

"The concert will be at Lincoln Center on Sunday, October 6. I'll get back to you later about a rehearsal time."

On the day of the performance, at Philharmonic Hall, Ellington's rehearsal plans were still sketchy; there was only enough time for the

singers and dancers to do a quick run-through with the orchestra. Mitchell and I made ourselves comfortable backstage, cooled our heels and “visited” with the stars. Carmen DeLavallade and Miss Horne charmed us all with their beauty, and Geoffrey Holder, with his deep voice and towering frame, gave us individual lessons in the side-to-side neck-stretching head dance of Thai dancers.

Ellington, rehearsing the band onstage, led Tony Bennett through his set, called Lena for a run-through, and Joe Williams sang “Come Sunday.” Willie “The Lion” Smith, the old piano patriarch, just directed traffic and told us all how much the “kid” (Ellington), along with Fats Waller, had learned from him since he, Smith, had become Duke’s adviser in Harlem in the 1920s, how he had taught him the ropes—on and off the keyboard—and watched him grow into his artistic maturity. It was clear, too, that Ellington valued the Lion’s presence. They acted like father and son.

By showtime, everything was in readiness, and the program began with Duke and the orchestra onstage. The artists waiting backstage could hear that the band sounded great. Lena Horne said, “Listen to them! They’re playing their hearts out for Strayhorn.”

But none of us knew beforehand when Duke wanted the next act onstage, or who it would be. We all just had to wait and wonder when Ellington would call on us.

During an extended trombone solo by Lawrence Brown, or a Jimmy Hamilton clarinet solo, Duke would sidle to the wings to chat with Lena Horne, laugh with the Lion, Tony Bennett, Lou Rawls, and jive around with Joe Williams and me. He was comfortable now, in his element, working his magic. But we, his anxious pool of performers, waiting to be told when we would go on, were pacing nervously. He gazed casually into our expectant faces like a seasoned gourmet considering a dream menu.

Smiling at Miss Horne, he said, “I think your public is properly primed and ready for you now, darling. Ready?” Then he suddenly scooted back to the front of the orchestra, cut off their large resonant chord, and went to the microphone. When he announced Lena Horne, the audience roared. Willie the Lion snatched off his derby hat, slapped his thigh, and exploded out of his chair.

"You can't beat him! That guy just can't be beat. I don't care *how* you cut it. My Gawd! You see what he just did? He's got a dozen world-class artists, a *million dollars'* worth a talent waiting right here in this wing, and he hasn't said a word to anybody about the order of this program. Only *he* knows who's on next; he's making it up as he goes along, I tell ya. You can't beat experience, man. You know what I call him? 'The Master of Situations!'"

For more than two and a half hours we all watched as Ellington mastered the situation: playing out his dream concert, dishing up his musical feast with the flair of the consummate host-presenter. One surprising delicacy after another showed his practiced attention to texture, color, and, above all, timing. The dancing was tastefully placed and balanced, and there was proportion to the singing and the instrumental performances.

Then Ellington pointed at Mitchell and me in the wings at the side of the stage and went to the microphone to share with his audience just how it was that he'd been the first person to hear Strayhorn's new suite, long-distance. Willie the Lion eased up to my ear and whispered:

"Now go out there and kill 'em for Strayhorn."

The suite we were about to play was written during Strayhorn's short but stunningly introspective final creative outburst. Another of his most serious compositions, "Blood Count," was also a product of that period, and like "Blood Count," the suite thunders with highly autobiographical overtones; the moods of a vibrant musical career, shutting down.

As Mitchell and I began to play, I was oblivious to our Lincoln Center surroundings. I was hearing Strayhorn in his apartment, leading us through the music; talking us through the transitions; showing me when to bring out a counterline, when to make my horn's voice match Mitchell's heavy piano sonorities. Strayhorn's powerful presence was there on the stage with us, giving directions and sounding his music through us and making us play better than we knew we could. The spell was broken for me only as the last note lingered and died and Joe Williams and Tony Bennett led the applause there among the performers in the wings.

As soon as we left the stage, Dizzy Gillespie, who had been down in the audience, burst through the dressing room door. "Mitchell and

Ruff! Man! I didn't even know Stray had written that music for you guys. What a compliment to you. He sure as hell *wrote* it, didn't he? And you two played it so fabulously. The three of us have to make a record together some time soon, you hear?"

Ellington ended the concert with a sensational string of selections by the orchestra. Then all the artists assembled to link hands in a long line across the stage and bow long and low with Ellington.

Afterward, in a moment of quiet, Duke gave a wise wink to us all. "Strayhorn," he said, "smiled tonight."

I write this years later, remembering it as if I had just stepped out of Strayhorn's apartment or slipped into the wings at Lincoln Center, with Ellington's voice shivering me in the heart. It was indeed a landmark, a transition for a still young artist who had come from what seemed like nowhere, had arrived somewhere, and was going he knew not where.

The one thing I do know about that magical evening—about the totality of that experience with those creators and ambassadors of the music that was born and bred nowhere else but in America—is that it seemed to represent to me a calling: "a call to assembly" was the phrase they used when I was a young army private. I knew I was on notice, and I had to heed the call.

So my life in music did become what one of my mentors, an old army musician, once hung on me as I was learning to play the horn. "Junior," he said, "always remember that music don't mean a thing unless it tells a story. You've got a story to tell, and don't you ever let nothing or nobody make you ashamed to tell it in music."

I hope you will hear the music behind the words, the good "remembers" of one American musician.