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Paris Blues:
Ellington, Armstrong, and
Saying It with Music

WWith overlapping careers that dominated jazz throughout its most turbulent years, Duke Ellington (1899–1974) and Louis Armstrong (1901–1971) had surprisingly little interaction. They spent the most time together when they stayed in the same hotel in Paris during the shooting of the film *Paris Blues* (released in 1961) and then a few months later when they followed up on conversations begun in Paris and recorded together back home. Specifically, Armstrong and Ellington worked together in Paris during the last weeks of 1960 and the first week of 1961.¹ Their recording session took place at the RCA studios in New York on April 3 and 4, 1961.²

The Dignity of the Trickster

The Great Summit, the title of the Armstrong/Ellington recording session in its most recent reissue, solved the problem of bringing together two performers with well-established musical traditions of their own by first placing Ellington in the pianist's chair in Armstrong's sextet. Producer Bob Thiele then saw to it that the band recorded nothing but Ellington's compositions. The band belonged to Louis, but the music was Duke's. According to those who were present, the musicians were both tired at the time of the recording session, and not surprisingly, the music is a bit ragged in places. There are also moments of the brilliance that one would expect when the two men do what they do best. Ellington creates new versions of his compositions for a sextet that also included Barney Bigard, the clarinetist and saxophonist who had been a key member of the Ellington orchestra from 1928 un-

til 1942. Ellington's piano work with Armstrong's group is consistently dependable and at times even surprising as he finds new ways of working through his old material. At one point he even seems to be alluding to the style of Thelonious Monk.

Armstrong is also himself at *The Great Summit*, deploying his usual exuberance as a singer and a trumpeter as he struts through the Ellington canon. As always, Armstrong is a quick study, in full control even when he is playing tunes for the first time. Anyone who knows the lyrics to Ellington's songs, however, can hear Armstrong making significant departures from what was originally written. On "I'm Beginning to See the Light," for example, the original lyrics read, "But now that your lips are burning mine, I'm beginning to see the light." Armstrong, however, sings, "Now that your chops are burnin' mine." Later, instead of ending a phrase with the complete lyric—"I'm beginning to see the light"—Armstrong suggests a broader range of meaning by abbreviating the phrase and inflecting it as: "I'm beGINnin'!"

In short, Ellington plays the dignified leader and Armstrong plays the trickster. Armstrong's tricksterisms were an essential part of his performance persona. On one level, Armstrong's grinning, mugging, and exaggerated body language made him a much more congenial presence, especially to racist audiences who might otherwise have found so confident a performer to be disturbing, to say the least. When Armstrong put his trumpet to his lips, however, he was all business. The servile gestures disappeared as he held his trumpet erect and flaunted his virtuosity, power, and imagination. Even in one of his earliest appearances on film, *A Rhapsody in Black and Blue* (1932), a nine-minute short subject in which he is costumed as a grotesque caricature of an African native, he is not always a comic figure. And at those moments in the film when he seems most eager to please with his vocal performances, his mugging is sufficiently exaggerated to suggest an ulterior motive. Lester Bowie has suggested that Armstrong is essentially "slipping a little poison into the coffee" of those who think they are watching a harmless darkie. (The crucial scenes from *A Rhapsody in Black and Blue* as well as Bowie's commentary appear in *Satchmo* (1988), a video documentary directed by Kendrick Simmons and Gary Giddins.) Throughout his career in films, Armstrong continued to subvert received notions of African American identity, signifying on the camera while creating a style of trumpet performance that was virile, erotic, dramatic, and playful. No other black entertainer of Armstrong's generation—with the possible exception of Ellington—brought so much intensity and charisma to his performances. But because Armstrong did not change his masculine presentation after the 1920s, many of his gestures became obsolete and lost their revolutionary edge. For many black and white Americans in the 1950s and 1960s, he was an embarrassment. In the early days of the twenty-first century, when Armstrong is regularly cast as a heroized figure in the increasingly heroicizing narrative of jazz history, we should remember that he was regularly asked to play the buffoon when he appeared on films and television.

Paris Blues would have been a remarkable film simply for the participation of Ellington and Armstrong. The film is all the more remarkable for providing Armstrong with a rare opportunity to display some dignity. The film effectively begins

when Wild Man Moore (Armstrong) arrives in Paris, and it ends when he departs. Cheering throngs of musicians serenade him as he arrives at the train station. When a small band performs for him (they play a composition written specifically for the film by Ellington and Billy Strayhorn), Moore/Armstrong extends his trumpet out of the window of the train and magniloquently inserts his own phrases into the music. Moments later the film's protagonist, Ram Bowen (Paul Newman), walks onto the train and is greeted warmly by Moore. Although they joke amiably ("This town agrees with you. What is it? The chicks or the wine?" "Oh, it's both, man."), Moore is in no way the obsequious dark companion of the white hero. In fact, Bowen has come to see Moore to ask for his help. As an aspiring composer of "serious" music, Bowen hopes to gain an audience with René Bernard (played in the film by André Luguet), a grand old man of classical music in Paris. With Bernard's help, Bowen seeks to have his own music played in a concert setting. So great is the reputation of Wild Man Moore that he has the power to intercede with Bernard on behalf of a young acolyte. The jazz trumpeter's special relationship with a character based on Nadia Boulanger, the great teacher of aspiring composers, may reflect Armstrong's interactions during his European travels in the 1930s and afterward, when he regularly mixed with the conservatory-trained musicians who recognized his special talents as a musician. At least in *Paris Blues*, these interactions bear fruit. Before the film is over, Moore has arranged a meeting between Bernard and Bowen.

Ellington never appears in *Paris Blues*, but his music is everywhere. We hear Ram Bowen's band playing complete versions of "Mood Indigo" and Billy Strayhorn's "Take the A Train." When Bowen plays a recording of his own music, it is a composition by Ellington and Billy Strayhorn. And numerous scenes are backed up by gorgeous performances of an expanded Ellington orchestra playing Ellington and Strayhorn's music. The two composers, however, use their music to engage in a dialogue with the film at a few crucial moments. At one point, Ellington may even be engaging in a dialogue with Strayhorn. In *Paris Blues*, Ellington actually plays the trickster. At least in this film, Armstrong and Ellington have traded places.

The Studio Changes Its Mind

Although he worked in films as early as 1929, during his fifty years as a composer Duke Ellington wrote soundtracks for only four feature-length films. Of the four, Ellington had the most control over the score for *Paris Blues*. Working also with Strayhorn, Ellington wrote his first soundtrack for Otto Preminger's *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959). Ordinarily, a film composer is handed an edited copy of a film and then given approximately six weeks to write and record a synchronized soundtrack.³ Preminger, however, persuaded Ellington and Strayhorn to spend time in Ishpeming, Michigan, while the film was being shot.⁴ He also convinced the two to write a great deal of music even though they could not have known exactly how it would be used. Some of this music appeared on the soundtrack album for the film and has also been widely praised. For the actual film of *Anatomy of a Murder*, how-

ever, Ellington and Strayhorn's music was given to music editor Richard Carruth, who used only a small portion of what was written.⁴ There is no music at all in the film's long courtroom scenes. When the music is actually heard on the soundtrack, it occasionally sounds extraneous, and in some cases, even inappropriate.

Shortly after *Anatomy of a Murder* was released, Ellington admitted that he was less than satisfied with his work as a composer for films. He is quoted in an article in the *American Weekly Entertainment Guide*: "Music in pictures should say something without being obviously music, you know, and this was all new to me. I'll try another one and then I'll show them" (*DEDBD*, p. 407). Ellington has accurately characterized the theory and practice of film music. As Claudia Gorbman has suggested, a Hollywood film's extradiegetic score is almost always "invisible and 'inaudible,'" and the musical sounds are supposed to be "just there, oozing from the images we see."⁵

For *Paris Blues*, Ellington and Strayhorn used what they learned from *Anatomy of a Murder*, showing real competence with the conventions of scoring for classical Hollywood. They would never again have such an opportunity. In Ellington's scores for two subsequent films, *Assault on a Queen* (1966) and *A Change of Mind* (1969), the music was as extensively edited as it was for *Anatomy of a Murder*. Only Ellington and not his band were contracted for *Assault*, and although Ellington revived several of his classic compositions for *A Change of Mind*, the film features only fragments of extradiegetic music, much of it obscured by dialogue. But, for *Paris Blues*, producer Sam Shaw gave Ellington and Strayhorn the same stature ordinarily granted to established film composers. What one hears on the screen is exactly what the two intended.

Billy Strayhorn played a central role in composing the music for *Paris Blues* from the outset. *Paris Blues* was an ideal project for Strayhorn, an openly gay composer and pianist who worked consistently in the shadow of Ellington. From 1939 until his death in 1967, Strayhorn had a hand in the majority of Ellington's most important works. As his biographer David Hajdu has observed, Strayhorn was a major figure among expatriate American jazz musicians in Paris and regularly traveled to Paris, where he spent time with pianist Aaron Bridgers, who had been his lover in the 1940s.⁶ Bridgers moved to Paris in 1948 and eventually became the house pianist at the Mars Club, a tiny Paris cabaret where on any given night "the clientele was nearly half gay."⁷ Bridgers actually appears in *Paris Blues* as the pianist in Ram Bowen's band, although Ellington and Strayhorn are the only pianists heard on the soundtrack. The presence of Bridgers as well as the gay couples who appear in the opening scene of *Paris Blues* suggest that the club in the film may have been at least in part inspired by the Mars Club.

Other aspects of *Paris Blues* must have appealed to Strayhorn, at least at first. The film's attempt to place jazz within an art discourse was probably as important to Strayhorn as it was to Ellington. Strayhorn worked closely with classical musicians in Paris, and one of the few LPs released under his own name, *The Peaceful Side*, was recorded in Paris with a string quartet. His solo compositions were always much closer to the classical mainstream than were Ellington's; Strayhorn's "Suite for the Duo," recorded for the Mainstream label by the Mitchell/Ruff Duo in 1969,

is an excellent example of his ability to fuse jazz with more European forms. Some of the early work on the music for *Paris Blues* was in fact directed by Strayhorn, who arrived in Paris a month before Ellington. A close inspection of the scores for *Paris Blues*, most of them in the Smithsonian Institution, reveals that a large portion of the music is in Strayhorn's hand.

Most of what Ellington and Strayhorn wrote and recorded during the *early* stages of their work on *Paris Blues* was for the actors who play musicians on camera. Paul Newman and Sidney Poitier, who plays the tenor saxophonist in Ram Bowen's band, convincingly mime playing their instruments because they could practice with recordings supplied to them before rehearsals began in Paris. This music was probably recorded in Hollywood during the summer of 1960 and in Paris later that year. In May 1961, when all filming had been completed and Ellington had resumed touring with his band, Ellington and Strayhorn received an edited copy of the film and quickly wrote the score for *Paris Blues*. A few days later they took an expanded version of the Ellington orchestra into the Reeves Sound Studios in New York and recorded about thirty minutes of extradiegetic music.

Paris Blues was based on a novel written in 1957 by Harold Flender.⁸ The main character in the novel is an African American tenor saxophonist named Eddie Jones who plays regularly in a Paris nightclub. Entertaining no desire to be anything other than a working musician, he plays mostly Dixieland and traditional jazz. He meets and gradually falls in love with a black American schoolteacher, Connie, who is vacationing in Paris. Even though Eddie has been living happily in Paris for several years and appreciates its tolerance for blacks, at the end of the novel he decides to return to the States and marry Connie. The novel also introduces the trumpet player Wild Man Moore, who is clearly modeled after Louis Armstrong, long before he was cast in the film. While in Paris, Moore offers Eddie a job that he first refuses, but after Eddie decides to follow Connie he knows that he can work with the Wild Man when he returns. The film takes almost all of this directly from the novel.

The film of *Paris Blues* retains the black saxophonist Eddie, but it greatly expands the novel's character Benny, a Jewish pianist in his fifties who is a member of Eddie's band. In the novel, when Connie arrives in Paris with a large group of tourists, she rooms with Lillian, a middle-aged, white, unmarried schoolteacher. When Lillian insists on accompanying Connie to hear Eddie perform at his club, Benny does Eddie a favor by latching on to Lillian so that Eddie can devote all of his attention to Connie. A little drunk and filled with the desire to *épater la bourgeoisie*, Benny shows the wilder side of Paris to Lillian. He even takes her to an all-night nudist swimming club where she is titillated almost as much as she is offended. Although Benny later says that he regrets his crude treatment of Lillian and wants to apologize, nothing comes of the relationship. Lillian goes back to the States alone.

Benny, the minor character in the novel, becomes Ram Bowen the handsome young (Jewish?) trombonist played by Paul Newman, and Lillian the old maid schoolteacher becomes Lillian the beautiful young divorcée played by Joanne Woodward. Eddie Jones the handsome young black saxophone player and Connie

the beautiful young schoolteacher make the transition from the novel relatively unscathed—in the film they are played by Sidney Poitier (as Eddie Cook) and Diahann Carroll. The adaptation of the novel by Lulla Adler and the screenplay by Jack Sher, Irene Kamp, and Walter Bernstein also include the significant addition of Ram Bowen's desire to become a "serious" composer. Although he has enlisted Eddie as his arranger, it is also clear that Ram Bowen is the leader of the group and much more an "artist" than Eddie.

Ellington probably did not know about these aspects of the script when he signed on to do the music. He had been told that the film would dramatically depart from the novel by romantically pairing Paul Newman with Diahann Carroll and Sidney Poitier with Joanne Woodward. The vestiges of this romance are still present in an early scene when Ram is much more interested in Connie than in Lillian. Even earlier, during the opening credits, the film seems to be preparing audiences for interracial romance by repeatedly showing nontraditional couples in the Paris nightclub where Ram Bowen's band performs. We see people of all ages and ethnicities, including male and female homosexuals, interracial couples, and a young man with a much older woman. Intentionally or not, this multiply integrated scene was also an idealized reflection of the milieu inhabited by Billy Strayhorn. As the progress of the film's script should make clear, however, the Hollywood of 1961 was not prepared to accept so much tolerance for nontraditional romantic pairings.⁹ In a scene that takes place about twenty minutes into the film, the camera again pans the faces in the club, but there are absolutely no interracial or same-sex couples. There are not even any older people. This sequence was shot after the decision had been made to dispense with the interracial love affairs.¹⁰

Ellington agreed to cancel a number of appearances and fly to Paris to do the film's music largely because he was attracted to a story about romance between the races. Sam Shaw said, "Duke thought that was an important statement to make at that time. He liked the idea of expressing racial equality in romantic terms. That's the way he thought himself."¹¹ For similar reasons he later agreed to write music for *A Change of Mind*, a film about a black man who has the brain of a white person inserted into his skull. Ellington was upset when the executives at United Artists lost their nerve and color coded the couples in *Paris Blues* according to more conventional standards.¹² Billy Strayhorn may have been disappointed for similar reasons, including the transformation of the nightclub from a tolerant, heterogeneous space into a club with more conventional clientele.

Is Jazz Art?

I also suspect that Ellington and Strayhorn were upset by the film's suggestions that jazz lacks the "seriousness" of classical music. The final print of *Paris Blues* preserves the opening credits sequence with its daring mix of couples, but in the larger context of the film's conservatism the club in this early scene might just as well represent a degraded milieu that the trombonist hero hopes to escape by becoming a serious composer. The dedication of Ram Bowen (Rimbaud? Ram [a trom]Bone?) to art—and Eddie Cook's lack of interest in "serious" music—is established in the

first scene after the credits. As the owner, Marie Séoul (Barbara Laage), descends into her cabaret after an early morning trip to the market, Ram is playing a melodic phrase that will later be established as the “Paris Blues” theme. With Eddie, Ram has been working all night on his composition. Asserting that the melody is too heavy, Eddie says that he will score it for an oboe. Ram protests what he considers a criticism of his music and insists that Eddie tell him whether or not he really likes the composition. Eddie seems more interested in calling it a night. In an intriguing reference to this exchange, Ellington and Strayhorn (probably Strayhorn alone) score the “Paris Blues” theme for an oboe when it appears later in the film.

This first stretch of background music, including the oboe solo, is not heard until thirty minutes into the film. Lasting approximately six minutes, the music quickly reveals how thoroughly Ellington and Strayhorn had learned the craft of composing for films after their mixed success with *Anatomy of a Murder*. Like all background music from classical Hollywood, the softly soothing version of the “Paris Blues” theme creates an appropriate mood, even before the audience knows exactly what to feel. As Kathryn Kalinak has observed, film composers have always struggled to find the right moment to introduce a segment of extradiegetic music.¹³ Often a composer will “sneak” the music in softly where the audience is unlikely to notice its appearance. This is exactly what Ellington and Strayhorn accomplish with the early stirrings of romance between Ram Bowen and Lillian. The same music continues as the camera picks up the romance between Eddie Cook and Connie and climaxes when we see Lillian the next morning in Ram’s apartment wearing his dressing gown. Each of the transitions between the two sets of couples is clearly marked in the music. Ellington and Strayhorn have even written somewhat “funkier” music for the black couple. When the camera first moves to Poitier and Carroll after the two couples have separated, Ray Nance can be heard making the kind of vernacular, growling sounds on his trumpet that were originally associated with Ellington’s “jungle music” in the 1920s.

Documents in the Smithsonian show that Ellington and Strayhorn knew exactly where each moment of their music would fit in the final film. There are several pages from the shooting script that are carefully marked with timings suggesting that someone (the handwriting is not Ellington’s or Strayhorn’s) had stopwatched parts of the film so that the music could be precisely correlated with the action. At one point in the script, when Connie is telling Ram about her affection for Eddie, Ellington has written next to her line, “Pretty,” a concise description of what happens in the extradiegetic score during her speech.

The choice of an oboe for the “Paris Blues” theme is significant in a score so closely tailored to the dialogue and action.¹⁴ Ellington and Strayhorn had not used an oboe since 1946 when they wrote the score for *Beggar’s Holiday*, a musical adaptation of John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera*. The show opened in New York at the Broadway Theater on December 26, 1946, to mixed reviews and closed after fourteen weeks and 108 performances.¹⁵ (Walter van de Leur has pointed out that the section of the score for oboe, strings, French horn, and harp is entirely in Strayhorn’s hand.)¹⁶ The connection between a line of dialogue about an oboe and the presence of the instrument in the extradiegetic version of the same music suggests

that Ellington and Strayhorn were blurring the distinction between the diegetic and extradiegetic scores. In the script, Ram Bowen is writing a composition called “Paris Blues” that he wants to see performed as a concert piece. When the film is approximately half over, Bowen puts on a record of his “Paris Blues.” He is in his apartment with Lillian, who has asked to hear something that he has written. The audience then hears the same theme by Ellington and Strayhorn that has been extradiegetically featured throughout the film. (The actual music we hear on Ram’s record was written and recorded *after* the scenes with Newman and Woodward had been shot and edited.)

On the one hand, the matching of diegetic and extradiegetic music is completely consistent with classical Hollywood practice: it is common in the many biographies about composers, and movies often introduce a theme diegetically before it becomes a part of the extradiegetic score. In *Casablanca*, for example, Max Steiner repeatedly used phrases from “As Time Goes By,” but only after the song had been sung on camera by Dooley Wilson. On the other hand, Ellington and Strayhorn could be using an oboe to wink at those in the audience who recall that Eddie Cook, the black musician, had suggested an oboe as a way of correcting the heaviness of a theme that a white musician had played on his trombone.

According to *Paris Blues*’s producer Sam Shaw, director Martin Ritt made few demands on Ellington, but he specifically requested that Ram Bowen’s trombone have a smooth sound with a strong vibrato in the tradition of Tommy Dorsey.¹⁷ Shaw did not speculate on why Ritt made this stipulation except to say that Ritt liked this kind of sound. Perhaps Ritt was not familiar with the work of Lawrence Brown or did not know that Brown had rejoined the Ellington orchestra during the summer of 1960. (Brown had earlier been with Ellington between 1932 and 1951.) Although Brown played an American trombone with a wide bore, he could surely have produced the mellow, singing sound we associate with a trombonist such as Dorsey, who played on a French trombone with a more narrow bore. Perhaps Ritt was aware of the striking difference between the role of the trombone in jazz as opposed to the more classical sound associated with the instrument outside of jazz and essentially brought back into jazz by Tommy Dorsey. Ellington’s growling, talking trombonists, such as Charlie Irvis, Joe “Tricky Sam” Nanton, and Booty Wood, had their roots in the vaudeville traditions of early jazz when the trombone was a novelty instrument. Farting, belching, and braying, the trombone was often the clown of the instrument family. In the first jazz recordings of 1917 by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, trombonist Eddie Edwards provides many of the appropriate sounds for tunes such as “Livery Stable Blues” and “Barnyard Blues.” A man like Dorsey was able to restore a certain stateliness to the sound of the instrument, even though one could argue that Lawrence Brown and numerous other African American musicians had already brought a great deal of artistry to the instrument from within a jazz context.

Ritt’s preference for the “white” Dorsey sound may be another example of the color anxiety that drove the filmmakers to back away from interracial romance as *Paris Blues* took shape. It may also have reflected the needs of a script in which Ram Bowen hopes to transcend jazz and write classical music. Tommy Dorsey

might have seemed a more likely candidate for advanced study in harmony and counterpoint than would, say, Tricky Sam Nanton. At any rate, the white trombonist Murray McEachern was brought in early to play the first solos that Paul Newman mimes. (To further complicate Ritt's distinction between white and black trombonists, McEachern would later become a regular member of the Ellington orchestra.) McEachern's trombone can later be heard at a key moment in the film's final background music. Trombonist Billy Byers, who is also white, dubbed in solos during location shooting in Paris while he was working as the film's "musical adviser" (*DEDBD*, p. 433). Since the film insists on the strict separation of jazz and classical music, and since this division is embodied in the character of Ram Bowen, Ellington and Strayhorn may have found a place where they could have their say. Since both composers would have rejected the kinds of distinctions between jazz and classical music that are central to the ideology of *Paris Blues*, they may have adopted the introduction of an oboe into their score because it is recommended by a musician who has no pretensions about art.¹⁸ They accepted a musical choice spoken on screen in a spirit of creative pragmatism by a character played by Sidney Poitier, even though the choice was effectively made by the screenwriters.

The film's attitude toward jazz and art is articulated explicitly and with great authority by René Bernard when Bowen is finally ushered into his quarters toward the end of the film. Although Bernard says that he has long admired Bowen's work as a jazz trombonist, he is only guarded in his praise of the written score that Wild Man Moore delivered to him. When he characterizes it as a "jazz piece of a certain charm and [pause] melody" he sounds uncomfortable. Pushed by Bowen to declare whether or not his work is any good, Bernard tells him that there is a great deal of difference between what a jazz musician can write and "an important piece of serious music." He urges the young trombonist to devote a few years to developing his craft in Paris, studying "composition, harmony, theory, counterpoint." The scene ends with Bernard giving Bowen some small encouragement that he might someday become "a serious composer" instead of a "lightweight," Bowen's self-description after he hears Bernard's faint praise for his jazz tunes.

In *Paris Blues*, jazz cannot be an art form even if it has been written by Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn. Many in the classical music community of Paris in 1961 would probably have agreed with Bernard—jazz can be charming and melodic but not truly serious.¹⁹ If we are to accept the film's message, then Ellington and Strayhorn simply have a "gift for melody." In *Paris Blues*, that melody is the one the audience has been hearing all along, the "Paris Blues" theme, both diegetically from Ram Bowen and extradiegetically on the soundtrack.

Thoroughly discouraged by his conversation with René Bernard, Bowen arrives at Lillian's hotel to tell her he is prepared to return with her to the United States immediately. In the States he will simply play his horn and abandon his dream of becoming a great composer. Eddie independently arrives at the decision that he too will return and join Connie a few weeks after she leaves Paris. Later, at a party with his musician friends, Ram tells Eddie what Bernard has said about his music. In a moment that is, at least for the purposes of this essay, charged with significance, Ram brushes aside Eddie's attempts to question Bernard's authority. The

logical argument that the old Frenchman has used an inappropriate aesthetic to judge jazz in general and Ram's "Paris Blues" in particular is raised only to be rejected. With a noticeable lack of conviction, Eddie says, "He's longhair, and he doesn't always know what he's talking about." Ram replies definitively, "He knows," and the film's debate on cultural aesthetics comes to an end.

On the one hand, the chickens have come home to roost for the view that Ellington belongs within the European musical tradition where some critics—beginning in the 1930s with R. D. Darrell and Constant Lambert—have sought to place him.²⁰ As Scott DeVeaux has written, the particular art discourse for jazz that emerged in the 1950s could only succeed if jazz was ultimately regarded as "an immature and imperfectly realized junior partner to European music."²¹ A more Afrocentric view of jazz, such as Amiri Baraka would forcefully present two years later in his *Blues People*, was not yet widely available.²² At least it did not seem to be known to the writers of *Paris Blues*. On the other hand, Ellington never saw himself as part of the European tradition and even ridiculed those who claimed that he was.²³ Nevertheless, almost the entire Ellington discography stands as a refutation of René Bernard's argument that a "jazz piece" cannot be "an important piece of serious music."

In the final scene of *Paris Blues*, Lillian is waiting for Ram at the train station along with Eddie and Connie. When Ram arrives shortly before the train is due to depart, Lillian can tell from his face that he has decided not to leave with her. Directly behind them, workmen are papering over the poster that depicts the laughing face of Wild Man Moore. As alto saxophonist Johnny Hodges and the Ellington orchestra play the "Paris Blues" theme behind his words, Ram explains that he has decided to follow the advice of Bernard and remain in Paris to study: "Lillian, I got to follow through with the music. I got to find out how far I can go. And I guess that means alone." After an emotional farewell speech, Lillian rushes to her train. The solo statement of the theme is now taken over by the trombone of Murray McEachern, whose sound has been associated throughout with the character of Ram Bowen. The music swells as Eddie bids farewell to both Lillian and Connie. Then a new theme emerges, one that recalls Ellington's many train songs, including "Lightnin'" (1932), "Daybreak Express" (1933), and "Happy-Go-Lucky Local" (1946). Unlike the more lyrical, almost mournful "Paris Blues" melody, the new theme is fast, dissonant, and dominated by percussion. While "Paris Blues" is primarily the work of Strayhorn, the new train theme is almost surely the work of Ellington. The "Paris Blues" theme is not entirely erased by the train tune, however. McEachern's trombone can still be heard playing fragments of "Paris Blues" on top of the now dominant train theme. This juxtaposition continues for about sixty seconds as the train departs and Eddie and Ram leave the station. In the film's final shot, the poster with Wild Man's face has been almost entirely papered over with a new billboard.

I would suggest a number of interpretations for this final scene in *Paris Blues*. First, the closing music can be imagined as emanating from the screen, "oozing from the images we see"²⁴ as an expression of the conflicting emotions of the characters. The "Paris Blues" theme might represent the feelings that the lovers have

for each other, while the train theme looks toward the future and the need for the characters to get on with their lives. This final music could also be what Ram Bowen will write once he has transcended the pain of his experiences with Lillian and completed his study of “composition, harmony, theory, counterpoint” as recommended by René Bernard. This interpretation combines a rationalist belief in conservatory training with the romantic myth of suffering as the key to artistic creation. Bowen will, according to this reading, write music that will cover over the “charming” but “lightweight” jazz exemplified by Wild Man Moore/Louis Armstrong, whose image is erased as Bowen sets off to become a “serious” artist. Appropriately, the new billboard that is covering over the face of Armstrong is an advertisement for the *Librarie Larousse*, the leading French publisher of canonical literature at that time. The jazz of Ram Bowen and Wild Man Moore, the film tells us, will be replaced by something more established and more literate once Bowen emerges as a serious composer.

I strongly suspect, however, that Ellington wrote the music that ends *Paris Blues* as an answer to the statements of René Bernard. Remember that Bernard had said he liked the melody of “Paris Blues” but little else. So Ellington gives us Strayhorn’s melody in all its glory as played by the trombonist, but he audaciously covers it over with another entire piece. The pretensions of the white musician who wants to rise above jazz is overwhelmed with rousing African American rhythms and harmonies. This is the composer’s response to the demand that the trombone sound be color coded as white. It is also a response to the film’s squeamishness about mixing black and white as well as jazz and classical.

But the music is also a key to understanding the dynamics of the long collaboration between Ellington and Strayhorn. At the finale of *Paris Blues*, the lovely Parisian music of Strayhorn—at its most ravishing thanks to the alto saxophone of that single greatest interpreter of Strayhorn’s music, Johnny Hodges—is overpowered by the Ellington Express. In scrupulously chronicling the evolving relationship between Ellington and Strayhorn, Hajdu has found strains of ambivalence even where there was a great deal of love and respect. Although he is circumspect about the issue throughout his biography, Hajdu implies that Strayhorn willingly gave up his identity as a composer and musician to protect his privacy as a gay man. He would never have been able to lead the uncloseted life he embraced had he become “Billy Strayhorn and his Orchestra.” He knew and accepted the price for ensuring his privacy, but Strayhorn often resented the extent to which Ellington took credit for his work. The opening credits for *Paris Blues*, for example, simply read “Music by Duke Ellington.” Conversely, Ellington must have felt vulnerable by relying on Strayhorn to provide beautiful compositions and arrangements that had become essential to the success of the Ellington orchestra. In Paris, where Strayhorn was right at home but Ellington was a stranger, Ellington was even more dependent on Strayhorn, who often disappeared for days at a time to enjoy himself with friends.²⁵ At least on an unconscious level, Ellington may have used the last moments of *Paris Blues* to establish a degree of independence from Strayhorn by drowning out his composing partner’s music with his own. Of course, Ellington would become extraordinarily prolific and creative after Strayhorn’s death in 1967,

but when he was writing music for *Paris Blues*, in 1961, Ellington had no way of knowing what his music would be without the contributions of Strayhorn.

It must be remembered, however, that the final musical moments in *Paris Blues* were entirely conceived and executed as part of a film score. None of the Ellington orchestra's subsequent recordings of material from the film includes the juxtaposition of the trombone solo and the train theme. The music is unique to the film. Regardless of the degree to which Ellington and Strayhorn worked together or at cross-purposes in *Paris Blues*, they managed to express themselves politely but sharply. By pulling out all the stops at the end of *Paris Blues*, the composers surely made the filmmakers happy at the same time that they subtly destroyed the film's dichotomies of jazz and art.

The "stylistic excess" of the Ellington/Strayhorn composition that ends *Paris Blues* can be understood in terms of an argument that Caryl Flinn makes in her discussion of music in film noir and melodrama: "Stylistic excesses and unconventional formal practices have often been identified as the purported means by which cinematic content (e.g., story lines) can be politicized and rendered subversive."²⁶ Accordingly, the critique of *Paris Blues* that I hear in the film's final music depends on the excesses of a music that completely overwhelms every other aspect of the film, including the "Paris Blues" theme itself.

When *Paris Blues* was released in November 1961, the critics were mostly dismissive. John Tynan wrote in *Down Beat*, for example, that it was "dramatic nonsense."²⁷ As has always been the case with the film scores credited to Ellington, critics have chosen to write only about the music for *Paris Blues* as separate from the film. Through this one film score, however, the real achievement of Ellington and Strayhorn can only be appreciated within the film's specific context.

Ellington was capable of sending out ambiguous messages, inviting the hip members of his audience to decode in ways unavailable to the rest. I would argue that his achievement in *Paris Blues* was foreshadowed by the effect he created with "Goin' Up," the composition he wrote specifically for *Cabin in the Sky*.²⁸ The film was released in 1943, just after the great Carnegie Hall concert where Ellington compellingly combined the sacred and the vernacular in *Black Brown and Beige*. Like *Green Pastures* before it, however, *Cabin in the Sky* was built on the old idea that African Americans must choose between the church and the dance hall. Ellington surely knew what he was doing when he wrote "Goin' Up" for *Cabin in the Sky*. Although the tune is played in a dance hall, it features a preacherly trombone solo by Lawrence Brown. The congregation of dancers even engages in some churchly call and response with the trombonist. The music undermines the film's naive dichotomies by joyously fusing the sacred with the profane. One could cite numerous if less flamboyant examples of Ellington's irony and his subtle habit of "signifying" on those who would hold him to standards other than his own. His droll deflections of extravagant praise for his composing skills are a typical example. Ellington's conventionalized assurance to his audiences that he and "all the kids in the band love you madly" is also typical as is the ironic "finger-snapping, earlobe-tilting bit" with which he often closed his concerts in his last decades.²⁹

Louis Armstrong also signified on audiences, filmmakers, and the classical

repertoire. Like Ellington, he was able to send out a variety of messages, some of them more easily decoded by certain groups than by others. In almost all his film appearances, the trickster Armstrong presents the face of the seemingly obsequious jester at one moment and the heroic sound of the trumpet king at the next. In *Paris Blues*, however, Armstrong speaks as the peer of classical musicians despite the fact that his music is subsequently denigrated; he is denied the opportunity to play the trickster. Ellington, by contrast, was not to be denied. It is Ellington who becomes the trickster, signifying on filmmakers who lost their nerve when faced with the controversy of interracial romance and then forswore the claim that jazz is art. *Paris Blues* tells us that there is a difference between the jazz musician and the serious artist. Both Armstrong and Ellington, however, spent their long careers revealing the absurdity of that distinction.

NOTES

I am extremely grateful for the contributions that Robert O'Meally, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Brent Edwards, David Hajdu, Stanley Crouch, Tom Harris, Mark Tucker, Steven B. Elworth, Lewis Porter, Bob Mirandon, and Dan Morgenstern have made to this essay, which revises and expands material in the Ellington and Armstrong chapters of my book, *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago, 1996). I also thank the members of the Jazz Study Group at Columbia University for many hours of inspirational conversation about jazz and American culture.

1. For the details of the Ellington/Armstrong collaboration in *Paris Blues*, see Klaus Stratemann, *Duke Ellington Day by Day and Film by Film* (Copenhagen, 1992), pp. 429–36 (hereafter abbreviated *DEDBD*).
2. Originally issued on LP, the music from the session has been reissued on two compact discs with additional material on Roulette Jazz 7243 5 24546. The CD set includes an essay by Dan Morgenstern that touches on the few occasions when Armstrong and Ellington had less productive interactions.
3. For the classical film score, see Irving Bazelon, *Knowing the Score: Notes on Film Music* (New York, 1975); Roy Prendergast, *Film Music: A Neglected Art* (New York, 1977); Hanns Eisler and Theodor Adorno (uncredited), *Composing for the Films* (New York, 1947). The practice of film music is theorized most completely in Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington, 1987).
4. Otto Preminger, *Preminger: An Autobiography* (Garden City, N.Y., 1977), p. 156.
5. Walter van de Leur, who has exhaustively catalogued the three boxes of music now in the Smithsonian Institution that Ellington and Strayhorn composed for *Anatomy of a Murder*, says that only shards of the music were used in the final print of the film (personal communication, June 8, 1994).
6. Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, pp. 73, 75.
7. David Hajdu, *Lush Life: A Biography of Billy Strayhorn* (New York, 1996).
8. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
9. Harold Flender, *Paris Blues* (New York, 1957).
10. Not until 1968 did Sidney Poitier become the first major black star in a Hollywood film to be romantically linked with a white person in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. For a discussion of the racial dynamic of Poitier's career, see Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (New

York, 1993), pp. 284–94. For the treatment of homosexuals in Hollywood film, see Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York, 1987), which includes as an appendix a “necrology” cataloging the numerous films in which gay characters die on screen.

11. Sam Shaw, personal communication, August 17, 1994.
12. Shaw quoted in Hajdu, *Lush Life*, p. 207.
13. Mercer Ellington, with Stanley Dance, *Duke Ellington in Person: An Intimate Memoir* (Boston, 1978), p. 183.
14. In *Settling the Score*, Kalinak quotes a contemporary of Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Herbert Stothart: “If an audience is conscious of music where it should be conscious only of drama, then the musician has gone wrong” (99).
15. The oboe solo in the score for *Paris Blues* is played by Harry Smiles, one of nine musicians added to the Ellington orchestra for a recording session held in New York on May 1, 1961 (*DEDBD*, p. 434).
16. John Edward Hasse, *Beyond Category: The Life and Genius of Duke Ellington* (New York, 1993), p. 293.
17. Walter van de Leur, personal communication, June 8, 1994.
18. Sam Shaw, personal communication, August 17, 1994.
19. Ellington himself frequently rejected the term *jazz*, largely because it limited his options as a composer. See his many statements on the subject in Mark Tucker, ed., *The Duke Ellington Reader* (New York, 1993), pp. 324–26, 332–38, 364 ff.
20. When George Gershwin met Maurice Ravel in 1928 and asked if he could study with him, Ravel refused, adding, “You might lose your *melodic* spontaneity and write bad Ravel” (Victor I. Seroff, *Maurice Ravel* [New York: 1953], p. 248, emphasis added). Nevertheless, Ravel shared an enthusiasm for jazz with composers such as Milhaud and Stravinsky, just as Ansermet had expressed delight at a performance of Sidney Bechet as early as 1919. Members of the conservatory, however, such as the fictional René Bernard, were more likely to police the confines of what is and is not “serious art.”
21. Tucker, *The Duke Ellington Reader*, pp. 33–40, 57–65, 110–11.
22. Scott DeVaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography,” *Black American Literature Forum* 25 (Fall 1991): 547.
23. Amiri Baraka (as LeRoi Jones), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York, 1963). I name Baraka’s book because it was widely read by white intellectuals in the 1960s. Needless to say, a variety of writers, most notably Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison, made eloquent pleas for understanding jazz outside of a Eurocentric aesthetic many years before Baraka’s book appeared.
24. When he was asked in 1935 about Constant Lambert’s lavish praise for his music, including the claim that he was in the same league as Ravel and Stravinsky, Ellington responded, “Is that so? Say, that fellow Lambert is quite a writer, isn’t he?” When he was praised for the “texture” of his records, Ellington told of transposing a piece to a different key so that it would sound better when recorded by “a goofy mike” with a “loose plunger.” After the interviewer read a phrase that compared Ellington’s music to “the opalescent subtleties of Debussy,” he responded, “Opalescent subtleties. Don’t those London fellows push a mean pen?” See Tucker, *The Duke Ellington Reader*, p. 113.
25. Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, p. 75.
26. Hajdu, *Lush Life*, p. 210.
27. Caryl Flinn, *Strains of Utopia: Gender, Nostalgia, and Hollywood Film Music* (Princeton, 1992), p. 116.

28. Tynan, "Paris Blues," *Down Beat*, November 23, 1961, p. 16.
29. Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins*, pp. 177–84.
30. A good example of this routine has been preserved on a CD of a November 26, 1969 concert in Manchester, England, on Sequel Jazz NED183. Ellington was by no means the only jazz artist to engage in some version of signifying. Jed Rasula has written: "Because Ellington was perceived as debonair, his (much noted) strategies of verbal evasion were regarded as displays of inscrutable charm, where corresponding strategies on the part of other musicians tended to be seen as dissimulation, insolence, capriciousness, or a simple inability to speak standard English (or, as in the case of Lester Young, symptomatic of some alleged mental fatigue). It would be more accurate to see Ellington as the norm rather than the exception here, practicing a strategically contrapuntal speech intended to glance off and otherwise evade the dominant code" (Rasula, "The Media of Memory: The Seductive Menace of Records in Jazz History," in Krin Gabbard, ed., *Jazz Among the Discourses* [Durham, N.C., 1995], p. 155).

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Gabbard, Krin. 2004. "Paris Blues: Ellington, Armstrong, and Saying it with Music." *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*. Edited by Robert G. O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, & Farah Jasmine Griffin. New York: Columbia University Press. 297-311.

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