

Record Reviews

Records are reviewed by Don DeMicheal, Gilbert M. Erskine, Kenny Dorham, Barbara Gardner, Bill Mathieu, Marian McPartland, Dan Morgenstern, Bill Quinn, Harvey Pekar, William Russo, Harvey Siders, Pete Welding, John S. Wilson, and Michael Zwerin. Reviews are signed by the writers.

Ratings are: ★ ★ ★ ★ excellent, ★ ★ ★ very good, ★ ★ good, ★ fair, ★ poor.

When two catalog numbers are listed, the first is mono, and the second is stereo.

BIG BANDS

Duke Ellington

SOUL CALL—Verve V/V6-8701: *La Plus Belle Africaine*; *West Indian Pancake*; *Soul Call*; *Skin Deep*; *Jam With Sam*.

Personnel: Cat Anderson, Herbie Jones, Cootie Williams, Mercer Ellington, trumpets; Buster Cooper, Lawrence Brown, Chuck Connors, trombones; Russell Procope, Johnny Hodges, Jimmy Hamilton, Paul Gonsalves, Harry Carney, reeds; Ellington, piano; John Lamb, bass; Sam Woodyard, drums.

Rating: ★ ★ ★

The Ellington band has a predilection for giving off-handed performances at important appearances. Conversely, in some small town in the corn belt, the band is likely to pull together and wail.

These tracks are from Ellington's portion of the 1967 Antibes Festival, where one might have expected the band to be on best musical behavior. Instead, there is a general air of triteness to this album.

Along with Ellington's fey announcements ("Love you madly," etc.), there are pedestrian solos and lackadaisical ensembles. On *Indian Pancake* and *Soul Call*, Paul Gonsalves is flashy and superficial. *Jam With Sam* is the familiar round-robin of the band soloists, none saying anything of substance. Sam Woodyard's 12-minute *Skin Deep* may be a good visual attraction, but it is not a memorable piece of music.

The one saving track is *La Plus Belle Africaine*, based on a minor-key blues. There is a fine bowed solo by Lamb, and very powerful and effective ensemble passages.

I don't guarantee the accuracy of the personnel (which is not listed in the album notes), but it should be substantially correct.

—Erskine

Duke Ellington—Frank Sinatra

FRANCIS A. & EDWARD K.—Reprise FS1024: *Follow Me*; *Sunny*; *All I Need Is the Girl*; *Indian Summer*; *I Like the Sunrise*; *Yellow Days*; *Poor Butterfly*; *Come Back to Me*.

Personnel: Sinatra, vocals; Cat Anderson, Mercer Ellington, Cootie Williams, Herbie Jones, Sweets Edison, Al Porcino, trumpets; Lawrence Brown, Chuck Connors, Buster Cooper, trombones; Russell Procope, Johnny Hodges, Jimmy Hamilton, Paul Gonsalves, Harry Carney, reeds; Ellington, piano; John Lamb, bass; Sam Woodyard, drums; Billy May, arranger.

Rating: ★ ★ ★ ★

At first hearing, this much heralded summit meeting is a bit disappointing, but it grows on you—at least it did on me.

To begin with the negatives: it seems odd indeed that only one Ellington piece (*Sunrise*) was included, and perhaps even odder that the album was not arranged by Ellington himself. Let me hasten to add, however, that Billy May has done a great job. Always an Ellington admirer (older listeners may recall his many Dukish charts for Charlie Barnet in the '40s), he must have relished this assignment, and at

times (especially on *Yellow Days*) his touch is uncannily close to the master's.

Two ringers were brought in to beef up the trumpet section, currently the band's weakest link. Everybody was on best behavior, it seems—the band sounds tight and together at all times. The superb recording brings out the full flavor of the magnificent Ellington sound; the reeds, in particular, are opulent.

To put it bluntly, this would have been a great album if Sinatra had been in top voice. On a few tracks, he is; at other times, one can sense that he is holding back. But he is nothing if not an old pro, and his mastery of phrasing overcomes all potential pitfalls.

Relaxed tempi predominate to the point that the final selection, a way-up romp, comes as a positive relief. Why was it saved for that particular spot? Don't ask me.

Quite a bit of space has been granted the band and its key soloists, and the tracks are thus longer than is customary on vocal albums. Cootie Williams, Gonsalves, and Hodges are most frequently spotlighted, and make their impact felt.

Indian Summer is the album's masterpiece, and one of Sinatra's most impressive efforts in recent years. The mood is bitter-sweet, the reeds add lovely touches, Ellington makes the most of his keyboard presence, and Hodges' touching solo is a perfect extension of the mood set by the singer. This one makes the whole venture worth the effort.

Come Back, the aforementioned swinger, also finds Sinatra in peak form. Few singers could sustain such a tempo, but he never loses his firm grip on the melody and the lyric. The band shouts and romps, with brilliant work from the trumpets, a glimpse of Gonsalves, and superb Woodyard. (The drummer, consistently low-rated by critics, does a sterling job throughout.)

Sunrise, though well sung and scored, and enhanced by comments from Cootie and Gonsalves, does not measure up to the Al Hibbler original. The song's range, it appears, is more suitable for a voice deeper than Sinatra's, though it was his own choice.

Butterfly and *Girl* are set in a mold that recalls the Sinatra-Basie collaborations, and the former could have stood a few solo comments. The final chorus, however, is top-drawer singing.

The cover, featuring photographs of the two protagonists at a tender age, is a cute touch. Young Edward Kennedy already had that regal air, while young Francis Albert (with bangs) hadn't yet found his groove. But then, he seems to be about 5 or so, while Duke must have been at least 8.

—Morgenstern

Thad Jones—Mel Lewis

LIVE AT THE VILLAGE VANGUARD—Solid State SS 18016: *Little Pixie II*; *A Tale of Freedom*; *Bach's Fugue*; *Don't Get Sassy*; *Willow Tree*; *Samba Con Gatchu*.

Personnel: Jones, flugelhorn; Snooky Young, Jimmy Nottingham, Marvin Stamm, Richard Williams, Bill Berry, trumpets; Bob Brookmeyer, Garnett Brown, Tom McIntosh, Cliff Heather, trombones; Jerome Richardson, Jerry Dodgion, Joe Farrell, Eddie Daniels, Pepper Adams, reeds; Roland Hanna, piano; Sam Herman, guitar, percussion; Richard Davis, bass; Lewis, drums.

Rating: ★ ★ ★ ★

To followers of this great band, its first album, good as it was, did not quite indicate just what these guys are capable of—perhaps because it was a studio effort.

This one, recorded live at the band's stomping ground, New York's Village Vanguard, before an enthusiastic audience does give a true picture in sound of what I believe to be the finest and most important big jazz band to come along since the old giants got their thing together.

Through some miraculous alchemy, this ensemble of men who are both soloists and section players combines the best elements of freedom and discipline in an amalgam that retains the power and excitement synonymous with the big band jazz tradition but adds to it the freshness and surprise of today and now.

That is quite an accomplishment, and it has been achieved as a labor of love. Maybe that's the secret—along with, of course, extraordinary talent and perseverance, and teamwork in the truest sense.

One could write a book about this album and this band, but annotator Ed Beach has done nearly that in his excellent, detailed notes, so I'll confine myself to some of the highlights.

Pixie, composed and arranged by Thad Jones, stars the reeds. As a section, they have no peers other than their Ellington counterparts, with whom they share the ability to breathe as one. And can they get around their horns! Look out!

As soloists, they have a variety and individuality that is equally astonishing. Lead man Richardson, doubler par excellence, is spotlighted here on the soprano, of which difficult horn he is one of the prime practitioners. His choruses climax a round-robin of solos by, in order, Farrell, Dodgion, Daniels (clarinet), and Adams, all of them first-rate, and backed by a variety of rhythmic and coloristic devices.

This track is a gas—and to me, not least because it shows what can still be done after all these years with one of the most basic sets of changes in jazz.

The album's other Jones original, *Sassy*, has a fabulous reed passage led by Richardson's soprano, a great Farrell tenor solo, stunning ensemble work, fine Hanna piano, and as the filling in the pie, exuberant trumpet solos (with plunger