

## **Review intended for opening remarks for a CMS Webinar on Friday, May 8, 2015.....**

Duke Ellington was not the most dexterous pianist, but his inherent musicality makes him one of the most fascinating. In terms of musical rather than digital virtuosity, he is unexcelled. For many of his listeners, Ellington's pianism has long been overshadowed by his greatness as a composer and bandleader, but Ellington has always been recognized by his fellow musicians as one of the best jazz pianists.

In a special edition of *Down Beat* (dated April 25, 1974), which was issued on the occasion of Ellington's 75th birthday, the Canadian arranger, composer and bandleader Gil Evans had the following to say about Ellington the piano player:

"You're part of my musical life. You're part of everybody's musical life. You have to be. Many of us take you for granted ... like the air we breathe... you are the original man ... the original composer for America ... the main composer ... *one of the all-time great piano players ... a sensational jazz piano player (...)*" (p. 16).

In the same issue, Ellington scholar Brooks Kerr examines Ellington's piano style as follows:

"I admire your skill as a pianist, which so many people seem to overlook. No one else can coax quite the sounds you get from your instrument. Your touch is so rich ... the way you strike any chord. Art Tatum once said, "Duke knows all the chords," and I can hear what he meant. I think you have the largest, most colorful, harmonic palette of any pianist living. "The Lion observed once, if Edward had concentrated totally on the piano, he would have become a pianistic phenomenon." (p. 18).

Pianist Randy Weston is brief and to the point:

"Ellington is the master. Though I listened to Duke's orchestra from the beginning, I didn't hear his piano much until later years. Like Monk, he was always creating new, wonderful sounds from the piano. His introductions, the things he could do in four to eight bars to bring in the band, were incredible." (*Down Beat*, October 1998, p. 23).

Pianist Matthew Shipp is particularly impressed by Ellington's playing on the famous 1962 Money Jungle session with Mingus and Roach:

"There's a very dark grittiness and beauty to the harmonic language that Duke employs that's a full flowering of a piano language. There's something so integral about the space-time that he generates ... Every little architectural detail is carved to the Nth degree. It's one of the greatest examples of piano playing I've ever heard." (*Down Beat*, June 2013, p. 37).

Fortunately, Dr. Matt Cooper has dwelled at greater length on the peculiarities of Ellington's pianistic artistry in his important book 'Duke Ellington as Pianist. A study of Styles'. The book is not only of great importance because it puts Ellington's piano in the foreground, but also because the author substantiates his arguments with vast knowledge of the subject-matter and copious piano transcriptions. But, most significantly, this book is a must-read because it is the *first book ever* on Duke Ellington the pianist. And it has been written with so much authority and expert knowledge that it will remain the undisputed reference-guide on Ellington the pianist for many years to come.