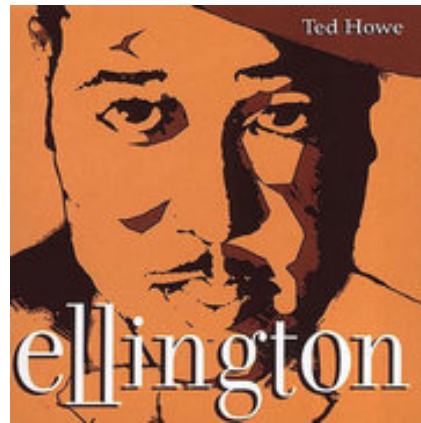


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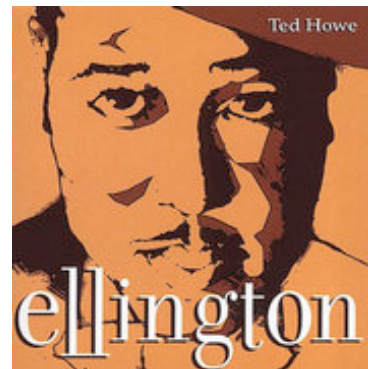


BY HARVEY SIDERS

This CD—one master paying tribute to another—was almost called Accidental Ellington. It began as a guide to familiarize choreographers for the Ruth Mitchell Dance Theatre, in Atlanta, with Howe's well-known paean to the Duke. After a few first takes, Howe had an epiphany: "I realized we were also making a 'record.'" Duh! When you got it, share it.

I wonder how the dancers' body language has influenced Howe's arrangements of "Caravan" and "Sophisticated Lady." They reveal Howe at his most musically mischievous, toying with tempos and extending parts of the tunes but never losing their clever reharmonizations. "Things Ain't What They Used to Be" and "Take the 'A' Train" show off Howe's tightly knit trio with bassist Neal Starkey and drummer Jerry Fields. "In a Sentimental Mood" has a noir, modal feel to it that Fields expands on with the cajon drum.

Starkey's highlight comes on his lead playing in "Mood Indigo." Howe's high points never end; fluidity like his is rare. "Prelude to a Kiss" is pure reverence, and his solo stride track, "It Don't Mean a Thing," is pure joy.



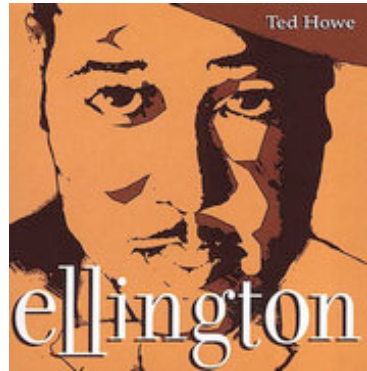
BY DAN McCLENAGHAN

Pianist Ted Howe missed the centennial of Duke Ellington's birth by six years with this release. In late '98 and '99 there were more tributes to the Duke spinning around out there than you could count. I don't recall anybody honoring Ellington via the piano trio route, though, and Duke himself rarely recorded in the format—Money Jungle (Blue Note, 1962), with bassist Charles Mingus and drummer Max Roach, stands out as an exception.

On Ellington, the pianist and his trio give ten of Duke's most beloved compositions the piano trio treatment, delving deep into the Ellington songbook with an informed gusto. Their respect for the music is obvious, with Howe and Company employing an array of styles from deep blues to sensual Latin and a gorgeously, dreamily classical take on "A Sentimental Mood." "In My Solitude" has a gentle, lilting Brazilian feeling, featuring drummer Jerry Fields on cajon, and "Mood Indigo" features bassist Neal Starkey taking the lead on melody.

Howe began this recording as a set for use by the Ruth Mitchell Dance Theatre, as music for the purpose of choreographing his "Ellington Show." Then this CD happened along the way. Sometimes when an artist isn't sitting down with the expressed desire to create timeless art, timeless art happens anyway. It did here, in an extraordinarily fine tribute that gets to the core truths of the songs while giving those truths new perspectives—Ellington done with a deft mix of reverence and innovation.

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BY KEN DRYDEN

Ted Howe is a veteran jazz musician who seems to be treading on dangerous ground by tackling a Duke Ellington songbook, not exactly an original idea. The pianist was originally hired to choreograph his long-running Ellington program for a ballet performance by the Ruth Mitchell Dance Theatre in Atlanta.

In the process of recording the music for the show's producer, he realized that he had a viable CD in the making. Howe chose ten pieces from Ellington's vast repertoire, but the pianist came up with some imaginative approaches, mixing various styles into each track.

Accompanied by two talented musicians, bassist Neal Starkey and drummer Jerry Fields, he dreams up a wild Latin chart for an extended workout of "Caravan" that showcases Fields to good effect. His playful side comes across in the whimsical take of "Sophisticated Lady." His perky interpretation of "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)" utilizes his effective stride piano chops. His introduction to "Take the 'A' Train" suggests a locomotive getting underway, before venturing into more familiar bop variations of this famous theme song.

It is refreshing to discover musicians the caliber of Ted Howe and his trio, who can find new ground to explore within well-known compositions by a jazz legend.