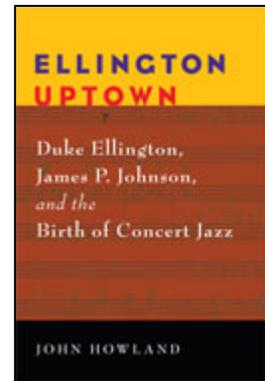


Q&A with John Howland, author of *Ellington Uptown*

Ellington Uptown: Duke Ellington, James P. Johnson, and the Birth of Concert Jazz by John Howland explores a little-discussed yet truly hybrid American musical tradition lost between the canons of authentic jazz and classical music.



Through a close examination of the music of Duke Ellington and James P. Johnson, *Ellington Uptown* uncovers compositions that have usually fallen in the cracks between concert music, jazz, and popular music. It also places the concert works of these two iconic figures in context through an investigation both of related compositions by black and white peers and of symphonic jazz—style arrangements from a diverse number of early sound films, Broadway musicals, Harlem nightclub floor shows, and select interwar radio programs.

John Howland is Assistant Professor of Music at Rutgers University and the cofounder and current editor-in-chief of the journal *Jazz Perspectives*.

University of Michigan Press: What is your book about?

John Howland: *Ellington Uptown* examines various efforts to turn black jazz and popular music into a new type of popular concert music in the late 1920s up to the early 1950s. Across the 1920s, such trends were often called “symphonic jazz,” a term that applied both to concert-style extended compositions but also a more elaborate type of popular song arranging in certain dance bands. While there were many different musicians, black and white, who were pursuing these sort of activities in this period, I focus centrally on a close-knit circle of Harlem-based musicians from 1910 through the 1940s. This group included an older generation of black musicians who initially broke New York entertainment’s racial barriers in the dance band business and on Broadway in the first two decades of the century. The middle generation of Harlem musicians included the composer and pianist James P. Johnson, who is famous for being the father of the virtuosic Harlem stride piano tradition (a key cornerstone of early jazz piano), and for his seminal role in bringing all-black productions back to Broadway in the 1920s. Johnson notably

wrote the famous “Charleston,” which introduced the dance that defined the so-called Jazz Age of the 1920s. The younger generation included such celebrated jazz musicians and composers as Duke Ellington and Fats Waller, both of whom idolized Johnson. The subsequent concert jazz ambitions of Johnson and Ellington were in many ways an outgrowth of the musical activities and cultural aspirations of the older generation in the 1910s. Ellington’s concert jazz compositions—from the 1932 *Creole Rhapsody*, to the key concert works of his 1940s Carnegie Hall concert series, to his rich 1951 *Harlem Suite*—represent the apex of this circle’s interests in creating concert music from the authentic jazz tradition. Johnson’s lesser-known concert works more directly represent the older generation’s interest in using black musical theater and its arranging traditions as the most direct bridge to translating Harlem popular music into concert music. My book thus explores how Ellington, Johnson, and their circle sought some degree of racial uplift and high-culture legitimization through their concert works. These compositions were meant to be heard as “serious” music rather than sophisticated popular entertainment, although these works were intended to be read as “serious *American* music” (where “American music” is defined as African American jazz and popular music) rather than works which were direct extensions of the European classical tradition.

UMP: What was the inspiration for writing it?

JH: Early in the Ellington centennial year, 1999, I had just reached the point where I need to decide on a dissertation topic for my musicology Ph.D. at Stanford University. The department also needed someone to teach an undergraduate jazz history course, and they suggested that I develop a new class. What I suggested was a course on Ellington. Thanks to the support of a friend who runs the Summer Jazz Workshop, this led to the fantastic opportunity of working with the conductor Maurice Peress and the big band leader and drummer Louis Bellson, both of whom knew Ellington, to reconstruct and perform Ellington’s 1943 landmark concert work, *Black, Brown and Beige*, with Bellson’s big band and the singer Joe Williams. Just a couple years prior to this, the Smithsonian Institution had opened its incredible Duke Ellington archives, which contain nearly the full manuscript score and original orchestral parts for this work. In preparing for both this concert and my Ellington class, the Smithsonian also provided me with photocopies of a number of other early Ellington extended compositions. As I began to study these scores, I

recognized some very rich connections between Ellington's compositional thinking in these early extended works and the designs of a variety of other 1920s and 1930s symphonic jazz-related concert works, particularly those from the Paul Whiteman circle. I also began to notice important connections to production number arranging traditions on Broadway and in Hollywood films. Areas of my subsequent dissertation, and in turn the more detailed Harlem entertainment focus of this book, grew from these initial observations and inspirations.

UMP: What is symphonic jazz and why is it important in the history of American musical culture?

JH: The greatest legacy of this idiom lies in a certain luxury pop aesthetic that still appears today in various guises. In its roots in the interwar years, this luxe pop, big-band-plus-strings idiom came to characterize a quintessential American entertainment sound that initially extended from dance bands, to interwar radio orchestras, to jazzy Broadway and Hollywood musicals of the Depression era. In many ways, this music was glorified, or luxury-style, pop in which standard song forms were turned into elaborate, lengthy production numbers through glamorous, sophisticated arrangements that juxtaposed sensual, lowdown jazz-style elements with lush, luxuriant strings and occasional classical-style effects. The concert compositions of this trend functioned in a similar manner, the most famous being George Gershwin's 1924 *Rhapsody in Blue*, which was commissioned and premiered by the dance band leader Paul Whiteman. Following the touchstone aesthetics of Whiteman's early 1920s symphonic jazz, American popular music has continued to glorify itself with visual and instrumental references to the classical tradition, and with particular fondness for the symbolism of merging street savvy popular music performers with tuxedo-clad string sections. After WWII, this long history of "glorified pop" efforts initially range from Hollywood "crime jazz" underscoring of the 1940s and 1950s, to the jazz-soloist-with-strings vogue of the 1950s, to 1950s mood music and exotica lounge music, to the now venerated orchestral jazz-pop of the "Great American Songbook" tradition. Non-jazz postwar popular music that carried on this tradition include areas of Motown's output, Brill Building adult pop, and the so-called teenage symphonies produced by Phil Spector, 1970s soul, disco, and Blaxploitation film scores, 1960s and 1970s orchestral-pop film soundtracks (like the Bond scores or Mancini's music to *Breakfast at Tiffany's*), various

heavy-metal-meets-symphony events, and even recent hip hop adoptions of live string sections (especially by Kanye West and Jay-Z), among other trends. These “glorified pop” manifestations are most certainly part of the legacy of the cultural ideas and musical trends that produced 1920s symphonic jazz and Ellington and Johnson’s hybrid concert works. That said, many of the aforementioned post-1960 orchestral pop efforts operate far outside the middle-culture and racial-uptift concerns that shaped these mid-century notions of concert jazz.

UMP: With so many big names, why has the musical genre become such a footnote, as you put it in the book?

JH: The footnote status of “symphonic jazz” as a music genre has to do with both the popular circulation of music genre titles and canon formation issues in popular music and jazz—in other words, the critical decisions of what music is valued beyond its time and what music is ultimately seen as dated or too commercial. “Symphonic jazz” was a loosely used term in the 1920s that was applied to a number of influential big dance bands that followed Paul Whiteman’s lead in favoring both elaborate music arrangements and an expanded ensemble model that merged a jazz-derived big band with a string section. The height of this trend ran roughly 1922 to 1929, and this sort of hybrid ensemble was quickly adopted by Broadway pit orchestras and in the nascent media of radio, though neither orchestral tradition carried the symphonic jazz moniker for very long. After Gershwin’s 1924 *Rhapsody in Blue*, this term was also widely used to describe attempts to elevate jazz and jazzy popular music into a foundation for concert works. Across the 1920s though, all of these music activities—which were largely promoted by white musicians—were also routinely just called “jazz,” and Whiteman, Gershwin, and other dance band leaders in this vein were thus widely identified as the top jazz artists of the day. Beginning around 1930 though, a number of critics—mostly white critics—began to take great offense to the suggestion that the Whiteman-Gershwin circle’s music had any relation to real, authentic jazz, which they identified as being black jazz and music guided by black musical aesthetics, black swing, and improvisation. Whiteman—due to both his music and his unfortunate last name—became the primary target in this new critical project to recognize the undeniable art and musical sophistication of black jazz, and Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong were in turn held up as the new pillars of the authentic jazz tradition. That said,

despite the damnation of Whiteman and 1920s symphonic jazz in certain influential critical circles, Whiteman remained a top commercial draw in popular music up to the 1940s, and he was a well-respected bandleader among white and black musicians well into this later era, particularly because he had long promoted the idea that jazz was artful and that this music was worthy of being presented in a concert hall, whether through concert compositions or big band swing arrangements with improvised solos. Ellington noted Whiteman's importance in this respect on numerous occasions and he was also a notably benefactor of a number of concert composition commissions from Whiteman. As the modern jazz canon took shape in criticism of the 1930s to 1950s though, Whiteman continued to be positioned as a troubling figure outside true jazz. That said, the stylistic legacy of Whiteman's 1920s orchestra saturated the airwaves in radio and came to define jazzy Hollywood and Broadway musicals, as well as the *Rhapsody-in-Blue*-style soundtracks of nearly every Hollywood film depiction of New York up to the early 1950s. Moreover, though the term "symphonic jazz" had long since been left behind, it was this same big-band-plus-strings sound that emerged in the 1950s as the sound of traditional pop, what we now call the "Great American Songbook," in the albums of artists like Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald. Indeed, Sinatra's 1950s Capitol orchestra including a number of ex-Whiteman musicians! Also, Whiteman's model for taking jazz to the concert hall via concert-style compositions continued to be quite important as pre-bebop authentic jazz sought to redefine itself as an art form rather than just commercial dance music. There are a wide range of jazz big bands—white and black—that presented Whiteman-style concerts at classical venues such as Carnegie Hall across the 1930s through 1950s, and most of these events featured at least one extended concert jazz composition. However, this music was now seen as concert jazz not something as antiquated as 1920s symphonic jazz. Ellington's extended composition efforts, and especially his 1940s annual Carnegie Hall concerts, were a huge influence in this area.

UMP: *What did Duke Ellington contribute to the genre? How did he change symphonic jazz?*

JH: In many of Ellington's extended compositions of the 1930s and early 1940s, you can see him working around a certain formal model that came out of Whiteman-style concert jazz, and which focused on how to dress up various popular song arranging traditions in a manner that outwardly resembled classical concert compositions. In nearly every case though, Ellington

transcends this model and greatly stamps these efforts with original thought and ingenuity. As Ellington moved away from this symphonic jazz formal model both in and beyond his 1943 *Black, Brown and Beige*, his concert works focused more exclusively on extensions of compositional and arranging practices from the big band jazz tradition that Ellington's orchestra embodied. These elements include a primacy of the blues idiom and African American musical aesthetics (slurs, blue notes, melismas, call-and-response patterns, riff-based textures, swing, etc.), and greater elements of improvisation. Also, as first seen in the 1943 *Black, Brown and Beige*, Ellington's postwar concert works begin to routinely reference a wealth of pre-jazz, African American musical traditions that form the bedrock of both Ellington's own musical language and American popular music in general. This deep well of African American musical inspiration included ragtime, nineteenth-century brass band music, southern dance tunes, gospel and spiritual traditions, and rural and urban blues. This latter history-oriented ideal is purely Ellingtonian and it forms a great inspiration for many later jazz composers, from Charles Mingus to Wynton Marsalis.

UMP: *What do you hope people take away upon reading your book?*

JH: I think the heart of the book—and the key take-away point that I hope the book carries—is that popular music can be artful, if not art, and that American popular music traditions are regularly in dialogue with a whole range of cultural issues that extend well beyond a given popular music genre, or even a specific generation or era. Musicians regularly live and listen well beyond the pigeonholed boundaries of their musical careers and their outward identities of race and class. A recognition of the complexity of cultural threads that inform such creative activities, especially in popular culture, can only enrich our appreciation of these creative acts and our understandings of the artists themselves.