

Recreating Duke Ellington: Historically Informed Performance in Jazz and Popular Music

Jimmie Blanton (1918–42), best known for his tenure in Duke Ellington’s famed jazz orchestra between 1939 and 1941, is generally seen as one of the most influential bassists in jazz history. One of the qualities he has been most praised for is his tone, in particular its volume, which has been characterised as ‘outsized’, ‘resonant’, ‘roaring’, and ‘huge’. While jazz scholar Brian Priestley (2009: 85) observed that tone is often ‘thought of as god-given’, I wanted to understand why and how Blanton’s tone was (perceived as being) different from that of his peers. I examined a number of possible impact factors, such as his performance technique and his instrument, but found that none of these differed significantly from those of his fellow-bassists. Eventually, I (partially) found the answer by recreating Blanton’s music.

In this paper, I will discuss a recording session by the Brussels Jazz Orchestra and myself on bass in which we recreated the circumstances of an Ellington performance in the 1930s and 1940s, both live and in the studio, in a historically informed way, for example by using a historically appropriate instrumentation, repertoire, location, recording set-up, and performance practice. The outcome revealed that certain changes in the orchestra’s seating plan were key to Blanton’s perceived superior tone. I will review the preparation, recording process, and results, drawing on a combination of visual analysis of historical photographs, complete participant observation, comparative auditory analysis, and formal and informal (semi-structured) interviews with a number of the participants. Overall, I will demonstrate that the concept of historically informed performance practice is a useful, yet underused research tool in the field of jazz and popular music studies.



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Matthias Heyman has recently obtained his Ph.D. with a research on Ellington bassist Jimmie Blanton at the University of Antwerp in affiliation with the Royal Conservatoire Antwerp, where he acquired his MA in Double Bass Performance. He remains active as a postdoctoral research in jazz and popular music, currently with a project on the artistic impact of jazz competitions. Additionally, Matthias teaches jazz history courses at the Jazz Studio (Antwerp) and the LUCA School of Arts (Leuven). As a bass player, he has worked with Toots Thielemans, Bert Joris, and the Brussels Jazz Orchestra, among others. His work has appeared in journals such as *Jazz Research Journal* (2015, 2017) and *Jazz Perspectives* (forthcoming), and he has presented at several international conferences, including the Duke Ellington Study Group conferences (2014–18), Rhythm Changes conferences (2014–19), and The Beatles’ White Album Symposium (2018).