

Honoring the master of Jazz

By Courtney McSwain



The George Watts Hill Alumni Center and James Ketch recently celebrated the 100th birthday of jazz legend Edward Kennedy Ellington, otherwise known as the “Duke.” As director of jazz studies in the UNC music department, Mr. Ketch dedicated one hour to commemorating Duke Ellington’s memory by lecturing on the unique style of the composer both in manner and in music.

Edward Kennedy Ellington, who was born on April 29, 1899 in Washington D.C. and maintained an extraordinary career as a band leader, composer, pianist, and musical genius. The man who is now commonly referred to as “Duke” obtained his name when he was young as a result of his courtly manner passed onto him by his father. Acting as maestro of the Ellington Orchestra throughout his entire career, the “Duke” was in the business of making new musical sounds for almost fifty-six years. Though Ellington is considered to be a jazz legend, according to Ketch, he avoided using the word jazz as he did not categorize his music. Jazz itself has been described as American music with African roots. However, Ketch contends that Ellington often created his own form of “jungle sound” by “pairing instruments from different sec-

tional families together.” Billy Strayhorn, Ellington’s friend and long time partner describes this as the “Ellington effect; combining two or three sounds to create something.”

While succeeding in being a creative genius, Duke Ellington was also technically sound. Proving to be ahead of his time, Ketch describes Ellington as a “master of the recording studio. Before the advancements that were made in the art of recording, Ellington was able to produce sounds that were far superior to his contemporaries.” Reaching beyond the studio, the jazz legend continuously performed music for the people of Harlem in the Cotton Club where the Ellington Orchestra was a regular band for nearly ten years. The band also toured beyond the borders of the United States appearing in 20,000 performances and bringing jazz to the attention of music listeners all over the world. Adding to Ellington’s list of credits are his 2,000 copyrighted songs, fifteen honorary doctorate degrees, and an Oscar nomination for his filmscore of “Paris Blues.” During the lecture, Ketch played several of Ellington’s compositions in hopes of sparking an appreciation for the music and message that Ellington tried to convey.

Ketch’s discussion also brought attention to the current cele-

bration of Ellington’s 100th birthday, taking place in North Carolina and throughout the country. UNC students, faculty, and staff can get involved in honoring Ellington’s memory by participating in several activities happening on campus and in the surrounding area. Starting things off will be a Holiday Jazz Concert on Friday, December 11 in Hill Hall Auditorium. The concert will also act as a CD release party for the North Carolina Jazz Reporatory Orchestra’s latest collection of Ellington’s compositions, which is directed by James Ketch. In April, the Duke Ellington Sacred Concert will take place at Duke Chapel, featuring several choirs, dancers and bands. Some of these will include The Carolina Choir, the North Carolina Central University Touring Choir, and Ketch hopes to sign the Black Student Movement Opeyo! dancers on board. Other events will be happening throughout the coming months. Jazz aficionados, students, and persons interested more about learning more about Duke Ellington can contact James Ketch at the Department of Music located in Hill Hall for more information on how to help celebrate the 100th birthday of Duke Ellington. ☀