Please note:

This reading is a primary source document intended to serve as an example of attitudes at the time. It contains racially insensitive language and viewpoints. This language does not reflect the views of this course.

The Duke Ellington Reader

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5. First Cotton Club Review (1927)

The Ellington orchestra made its Cotton Club debut on 4 December 1927, performing for a new revue with music by Jimmy McHugh and Dorothy Fields. Covering this event for *Variety*, Abel Green devoted most of his article to the dancers, singers, and stage production, mentioning the music only in passing. Such a balance suggests the way Cotton Club patrons may have responded to the evening's entertainment—at least initially, before Ellington's reputation as the house bandleader started to soar.

For a biographical note on Green, see §2.

The Cotton Club is the Club Richman of Harlem.[1] It is the foremost black and tan cafe featuring a whale of a colored revue that matches any of the preceding editions, all of which have been noteworthy for their artistry and talent.

As in the past, the undressed thing goes double. The almost Caucasian-hued high yaller gals look swell and uncork the meanest kind of cooching ever exhibited to a conglomerate mixed audience. One coocher, boyish bobbed hoyden, said to be especially imported from Chicago for her Annapolis proclivities who does the Harlem River Quiver like no self-respecting body of water.[2] The teasin'est torso tossing yet, and how!

The show otherwise is a pretentious affair for a night club, colored or ofay [i.e., white], and cleverly routined by the astute Danny Healy who rates as one of our foremost floor show entrepreneurs. Healy is now of the Ziegfeld "Follies," but his extensive Silver Slipper and other night club training evidences itself in the manner of show routining.

Jimmy McHugh is solely programmed-credited for the restricted music, but Dorothy Fields, daughter of Lew Fields, was orally introduced as the authoress of the lyrics. Miss Fields, like her brother Herb, who is now an established musical comedy book author, is turning to the stage for her creative outlet. Even in a night club revue her words to music are impressive. So much for the creative credits, although some of the costumes (by Mme. Bertha) are strikingly noteworthy for their ingenious design.

Aida Ward, who reminds of a Florence Mills in her song delivery, is a charming song saleswoman and the particular luminary of the proceedings. Miss Ward seems to be the nearest approach to the sainted blackbird-looking-

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Source: *Variety* (7 December 1927), 54, 56.

[1] The Club Richman was a swank nightspot on West 56th Street owned by entertainer and musician Harry Richman (1895–1972).

[2] Ellington's orchestra recorded *Harlem River Quiver* for Victor on 19 December 1927.

for-a-bluebird. Her own "Broken Hearted Black Bird" will become a standard for Miss Ward like other ditties did for Miss Mills.[3]

The 15 numbers take more than an hour to unloose, but it's a type of entertainment that defies lackadaiscal [*sic*] interest. It compels attention and any over-length is only the result of audience demand.

In the Berry Brothers, a pair of youngsters, who as "the Kalifornia Kids" are sub-billed as "the greatest team since Williams and Walker," more than live up to expectations, without ever having seen [Bert] Williams and [George] Walker. It's hardly possible the ancient team possessed the complete self-assurance, floor presence and showmanship of the young Berrys.

Edith Wilson and Jimmy Ferguson were liked in a comedy skit, although Miss Wilson's build does not brook abbreviated costuming and knockabout comedy. She led "Doin' the Frog" in the second stanza.[4]

Henri and La Perl are a novelty among colored performers, ballroom dancers of fetching appearance and unusual ability. Some astute showmanship could sell them to any mixed audience. Possibly a little ballyhoo on the Africastillian hoke might do the trick, as their Spanish stuff is made doubly interesting by the subconscious native syncopation.

Leonard Ruffin, standard colored stepper, is also a feature when not stage managing. Then there is Mae Alix, another Chi[cago] importation, jazzy, hot and a fool for splits.

The big attraction, of course, are the gals, 10 of 'em, the majority of whom in white company could pass for Caucasians. Possessed of the native jazz heritage, their hotsy-totsy performance if working sans wraps could never be parred by a white gal. The brownskins' shiveree is worth the $2 couvert alone.

In Duke Ellington's dance band, Harlem has reclaimed its own after Times Square accepted them for several seasons at the Club Kentucky. Ellington's jazzique is just too bad.

Harry Block with Ben Marden, et al., somewhat interested, continues in control (white management) with a colored service staff.

A trend at the club that Block should curb is the psychological reaction of the service corps to the ofay invaders who, not content to dictate to the blacks downtown, enter the very heart of the so-called Black Belt (Cotton Club is at 142nd street and Lenox avenue) and essay to do likewise. The staff seems to take the attitude that for once it can assert itself in native territory with the morale and service dubious at times. Several instances were noticeable at neighboring tables, possibly complicated through poor distribution of patrons so that one waiter was over-worked and another was churly, because of the captain's slighting him and his section of tables.

But, otherwise, for a "hot" show and something different from the general nocturnal fare, get a load of the Cotton Club.

[3] The famous black entertainer Florence Mills—who was closely associated with the 1924 song, *I'm a Little Blackbird Looking for a Bluebird*—had died on 1 November 1927.
[4] Recorded by Ellington for Vocalion on 29 December 1927.

6. R. D. Darrell: Criticism in the *Phonograph Monthly Review* (1927–1931)

R. D. Darrell was among the earliest writers to grasp the significance of Duke Ellington's music. While his 1932 essay "Black Beauty" (§12) represents his most comprehensive statement on the subject, it was preceded by a regular "Dance Records"—or simply "Dance"—column he wrote for the *Phonograph Monthly Review* between 1927 and 1931. There the shaping of Darrell's views can be traced. The column appeared in a section of the magazine called "Analytical Notes and Reviews by Our Staff Critics," and for it Darrell used the byline "Rufus." These brief notices revealed how frequently new Ellington discs reached the record-buying public and how powerfully they affected one discerning listener.

Born in Newton, Massachusetts, Robert Donaldson Darrell (1903–1988) began reviewing records while attending the New England Conservatory. Over the years he wrote on music for many publications, among them the *Music Lovers' Guide*, *Saturday Review*, and *High Fidelity*. In 1936 he compiled a pioneering discography, *The Gramophone Shop Encyclopedia of Recorded Music* (see §30).

In a 1980 letter to the scholar Ron Welburn, Darrell described his approach to reviewing popular music and dance records in the twenties: "I operated in those days (in the realms of jazz as everywhere else) almost entirely without advice, supervision, or formed intentions . . . almost exclusively in instinctive reaction to what I heard . . . I had no real jazz knowledge or background or experience when I began."[1] In light of this disclaimer, Darrell's youthful insights seem all the more remarkable.

All of the following selections are excerpts from longer columns by Darrell.

June 1927

With [Columbia] 953-D we come to another real winner, Duke Ellington and his Washington[ian]s playing the *East St. Louis Toodle*[-]O and *Hop Head;* they are a new Columbia band and they make a very creditable debut.

July 1927

Two unusually interesting records lead the Brunswick list, indeed are right in the forefront of the releases from all companies. The *Black and Tan Fantasy* (coupled with *Soliloquy* on Brunswick 3526) deserves perhaps the first prize; in it The Washingtonians combine sonority and fine tonal qualities with some amazing eccentric instrumental effects. This record differs from similar ones

Source: R. D. Darrell in the *Phonograph Monthly Review*, 1927–1931.

[1] Letter to Ronald G. Welburn, 23 June 1980, reproduced in Welburn, "American Jazz Criticism, 1914–1940" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1983), 185.