

Hiding in Plain Sight on the Internet

A Free Concert by Duke Ellington And his Orchestra from November 1963



The specter of the city of Baghdad in turmoil has figured large in the events of the past eight years. Fans of Duke Ellington and his orchestra might be surprised to know that the band's one visit to the city, forty-eight years ago, also took place during a tumultuous time. That visit *may or may not* be documented in a 76-minute video recording of the Ellington Orchestra which has surfaced in the last two years and which is now available free for viewing on the Internet. You'll find the link near the end of this article on the next page.

The recording was purportedly made during the telecast of the concert given by Ellington in Baghdad on November 12, 1963. But whether the video recording stems from that concert is

open to question. Although the recording is documented in the *DEMS bulletin* 10/1 (April-June 2010), it was not previously known to me until several months ago when I stumbled across it, hiding in plain sight on the Internet. It is in the *DEMS bulletin* that the recording is ascribed to the Baghdad venue. The Baghdad telecast is referred to, but not documented in detail, in Klaus Strateman's *Duke Ellington Day by Day and Film by Film* (page 476). He cites the telecast's date as November 14, but the date was in fact two days earlier, based on a report of Duke's activities during his Iraq visit in *Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Penny M. Von Eschen, Harvard University Press, 2004, page 132). There is no mention of a surviving audio or video recording of the concert in either of the two standard Ellington discographies: *The New Desor* and the fourth edition of *Timmer*.

The occasion of the concert was Ellington's two-and-a-half month tour of the Near and Middle East, sponsored by the United States State Department, which had begun on September 6. Before arriving in Baghdad, the orchestra had visited Syria, Jordan, Afghanistan, India (three and a half weeks), Sri-Lanka (then called Ceylon), Pakistan, and Iran. After spending five days in Iraq, Ellington, his orchestra, and entourage visited Lebanon and Turkey, where the tour was abruptly cancelled on November 22 because of President John Kennedy's assassination.

Because trumpeter Ray Nance does not appear in the video – He returned to the United States when the band was in Jordan – and trumpeter Herbie Jones does – he apparently joined the band in Sri Lanka--the video can be dated as coming from the last few weeks of the tour.

Ellington's concert in Baghdad on November 12 was held in Khuld Hall near the presidential palace and telecast in its entirety (Von Eschen, p. 132). A State Department dispatch quoted by Von Eschen refers to "thousands [who] sat around television sets in open-air cafes and restaurants or in the comfort of their own homes and enjoyed the artistry of one of the great contemporary figures in American Music." During the night after the concert, Ellington relates in his autobiography, *Music is My Mistress*, "...we hear a couple of planes flying around.... We learn that they sent rockets or bombs into the front and back of some government official's house. He was lucky not to be there at the time" (*Music is My Mistress*, p. 327). In fact Iraqi jets had strafed the presidential palace in an apparent attempt at a *coup d'etat*. Ellington performed in an additional successful concert and left Iraq for Lebanon with his orchestra on November 15. A second coup attempt – this time successful – occurred three days later.

The telecast of the 12 November Baghdad concert was, according to Von Eschen, made by Iraq's one television station. Yet the credits for the surviving video recording as seen on its opening screen suggest a different origin. The opening credits are in French – see the illustration above – and proclaim that the broadcast is "the King of American Jazz – Duke Ellington and His Orchestra." Also on the opening screen is a stylized "11" in an oval. This symbol is the mark for what was then a Lebanese television station, *Télé-Orient*, channel 11, which broadcast in both Lebanese-Arabic and French.

The suggestion that the video recording may have a Lebanese origin is furthered by the credits at the end of the program, as seen in the screen-shot to the right. The credits are written this time in Lebanese-Arabic and say that the broadcast is over channel 11, The Television Company of Lebanon and the Near East.

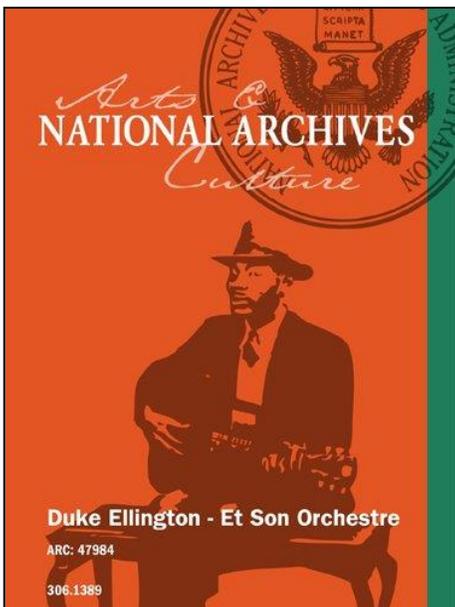


There are, then, several possible explanations for the origin of the video program: either that it was broadcast from Baghdad on November 12, but by a Lebanese channel rather than an Iraqi one; or that a kinescope of the Iraqi concert was subsequently presented on Lebanese television; or that the video recording was actually made in Lebanon at the Théâtre du Liban during Ellington's engagement there from November 17 through November 20, 1963.

Regardless of the origin and exact date of the video recording, it gives us a chance to see and hear the 1963 version of the Ellington orchestra perform, among others, such numbers as *Afro Bossa*, *Stomping at the Savoy*, *Paris Blues Cha Cha Cha*, *Perdido* (with Rolf Ericson soloing), *Rockin' in Rhythm*, *I Got It Bad*, *Things Ain't*, *The Eighth Veil*, *Diminuendo in Blue* and *The Wailing Interval*, and *Lush Life* (with the song's composer Billy Strayhorn at the piano.)

The quality of the recording depends on the standards one measures it by. By contemporary standards, it is not good. The picture is fuzzier and the sound more distorted than we are used to. By the standards of the time, neither the picture nor the sound is that bad. This recording was made before videotape was in wide use and likely results from the older practice of placing a film camera in front of a television monitor to make a kinescope of the live broadcast. The program is, naturally, in black and white. Its production values are not sophisticated. The first couple of minutes of the program are especially rough, but both sound and picture improve when *Afro Bossa* starts.

There are two sources for the video recording, one free and one not. If you want to watch and/or download the entire 76 minute video on your computer, tablet, or smart-phone at no cost, you can go to this URL at the Internet Archives: <http://www.archive.org/details/gov.archives.arc.47984> There are instructions on the page for watching or downloading the program. Clicking on the screen shot in the middle of the page starts the recording. Click on the screen symbol in the lower right-hand side of the picture and it expands to full-screen size, though with notable loss of detail. The Internet Archive is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, just like the Duke Ellington Society. It has received the recording from US Information Agency files at the National Archive.



The second way to see the program is on DVD. It can only be ordered through Amazon.com, where it is made to order on a DVD-R disc, apparently through an arrangement between Amazon and the National Archives and Records Administration. The price is \$18.95. Here is the URL:

http://www.amazon.com/Duke-Ellington-Et-Son-Orchestre/dp/B001FB4Z54/ref=sr_1_2?s=movies-tv&ie=UTF8&qid=1320532256&sr=1-2

I have the disc and while the picture is not notably better than the free version on the Internet, it does give one the freedom to play the recording at full screen size through a television set.

Thanks to Imad Bayoun at the University of California, Riverside, for translating the Lebanese-Arabic credits page.

--Lee Farley