

The box set *Duke Ellington: The Blanton-Webster Years* [RCA] documents the strength of Blanton's contribution to the Ellington band. The composition "Jack the Bear" is the best-known Blanton feature in this set, but there are several other Ellington compositions from this period that spotlight him, including "Sepia Panorama," "Ko-Ko," and "Bojangles." On these tunes Jimmy turned the jazz world around by playing music on the bass that no one thought was possible.

One of the most important Ellington recordings with Blanton was a series of piano/bass duets; they are available on a CD called *Duke Ellington: Solos, Duets, and Trios* [RCA]. These recordings, made in October 1940, were the first to seriously showcase the bass as a solo instrument in jazz. Milt Hinton had stepped in front of Cab Calloway's band with his feature "Ebony Silhouette," Bob Haggart had made his mark earlier with "Big Noise from Winnetka," and Slam Stewart had entertained with "Flat Foot Floogie." But the Ellington-Blanton duets presented the bass on a higher artistic level. "Pitter Panther Patter," the disc's first duet, features intricate conversations between the piano and bass. "Body and Soul" and "Sophisticated Lady" are showcase ballads for Blanton; he plays complicated melodies and rhythms using the bow as well as his fingers. "Mr. J.B. Blues" has several different sections and features Jimmy's arco blues choruses.

Unfortunately, Blanton spent only two years with the Ellington band; he died of tuberculosis on July 30, 1942, at age 23. His impact became evident soon after his death, and such outstanding bassists as Oscar Pettiford, Charles Mingus, and Paul Chambers were the immediate heirs to the Blanton legacy. The best-known follower of the Jimmy Blanton school is probably Ray Brown, who has said that he used to take his bass home from school and practice with the duet records every day. In 1973, Ray and Duke Ellington recorded a series of duets entitled *This One's for Blanton* [Pablo]; in the liner notes, Brown wrote, "The two reasons I began to play the bass were Duke Ellington and Jimmy Blanton."

In 1988 I had the opportunity to record several of the Blanton features with the American Jazz Orchestra on a CD entitled *Ellington Masterpieces* [East West/Atlantic]. Blanton's bass lines were transcribed from the original recordings, and my job was to interpret his parts—a challenging, humbling, and exciting project! From playing these lines I learned that Blanton had a creative genius not evident in many other bassists. He was an innovator whose playing forever changed the sound of jazz. **Examples 1 through 4** show a few of my favorite Blanton licks.

Ex. 1

Ab7

Ex. 2

♩ = 144 G7 D7

Arco V □ V □ V □ V □ V □ V □ V □ V □