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## Album Review: Duke Ellington — Rare Live Recordings 1952-53



If your tastes include the work of [Duke Ellington](#) – one of the most important composers and bandleaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – then you might want to check this one out. While Ellington’s catalog is staggeringly extensive, almost all of it is worthwhile. In fact, when *The MusicHound Guide to Jazz* attempts to list an Ellington title in its “what to avoid” section of his entry, they’re forced to dig deep and mention a Christmas album that was recorded eighteen years after his death! He was that good.

His 1950s work found him still working with big bands at a time when most others approaching his league had to scale their lineups down.

While this period in Ellington’s studio career is well documented – a dozen albums under his name were released in 1952-53 – airchecks and radio broadcasts were common, and not as well documented. So from the San Francisco Traditional Jazz Federation’s collection of recordings known as the Ackerman Tapes comes this new three-CD set of four performances from 1952-53. Broadcaster **Ken Ackerman** compiled these recordings in the 1950s and following decade, and (as the fairly extensive liner notes explain) the tapes were forgotten about until 2006, at which time salvaging began.

There’s some tape damage, but these are generally very listenable recordings. The first disc includes a couple of tracks recorded at New York City’s Metropolitan Opera House, plus seven cuts of indeterminate origin (almost certainly the same show, but not 100% nailed down as such). But these latter performances are not only in excellent recorded shape, but they’re thrilling to hear. Often, as each soloist takes his turn, Ellington himself identifies them by name. **Quentin Jackson**’s trombone solo on “Jam With Sam” is filled with astounding vocalese.

Ellington is in fine form throughout, connecting with the live concert audience. But what's most fascinating about this nearly four hours of music is that there's nearly no song duplication. Ellington's band had such an extensive repertoire that they could do completely different sets each night. Some of the material here hadn't been released officially in any form at the time of these shows: Ellington even introduces "Blues at Sundown" as a preview of his upcoming Columbia release. **Louie Bellson's** thunderous drum workout on his "Skin Deep" is thrilling in its intensity; the crowd responds enthusiastically, and Ellington calls him out no less than five times at the piece's end. The New York concert ends with a medley of hits, crowd-pleasers all.

A few vocal tracks are among these four performances, featuring **Betty Roche**, **Ray Nance**, or **Jimmy Grissom**. The remainder are big-band arrangements of varying ambition. But what makes *Rare Live Recordings 1952-53* so extra special is this quote, summed up on the back of the set's package: "In all, of the 45 tracks, 20 are previously unreleased, 15 have appeared on vinyl, while the other 10 have been on various CDs now generally unavailable." Presented here in as close to as is possible their original performance contexts, nearly four dozen live recordings of big band Duke Ellington make this a must-have for any serious fan of Ellington, and – thanks to its astoundingly cheap retail price (under \$20), well worth considering for the casual listener as well.

Tags: [duke ellington](#)

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