



## DVD: Duke Ellington In Hollywood (Swing Era)

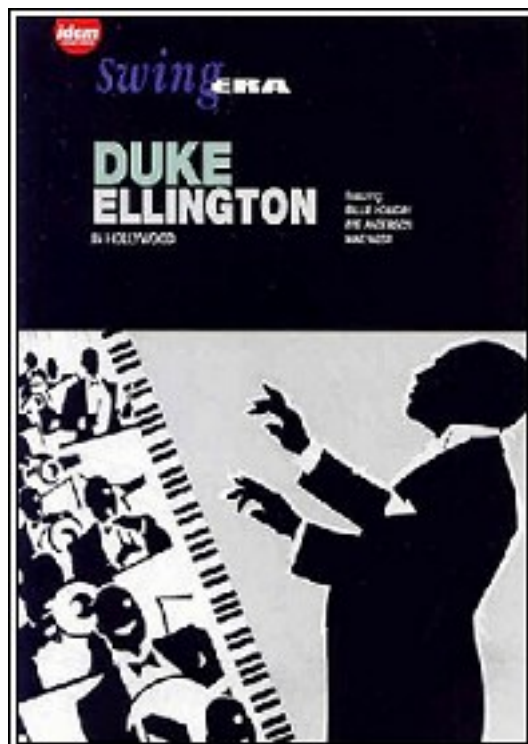
Idem Home Video (Running time 60:03)

Reviewed by [DJ Johnson](#)



[Back to REVIEWS](#)

[Back to FEATURES](#)



Duke Ellington In Hollywood is a wonderfully entertaining and nostalgic collection of scenes from Ellington's movie appearances, loaded with equal parts stellar playing and amusingly bad acting from just about all concerned. Beginning with The Duke's first film appearance, 1929's *Black and Tan*,

Ellington's acting limitations are masked by the louder bad acting of others, like the over-the-top performance from dancer Fredi Washington, whose death scene just dragged on and on. But that's okay, because it gave Duke and the boys a chance to set up by her bedside (no, really!) and play the title dirge.

The best clips are those that dispense with plot, for the most part, and simply show the band in performance, and there are several of those. There are also a few extremely pleasant surprises, the best of which is *Record Making with Duke Ellington*, a short film showing the process of -- you guessed it -- making a record, from rehearsing the band to recording (in the days when sound

was passed to a lacquer disc through a stylus) to the chemical treatments at the factory and on through several more phases, eventually ending with a lump of warm plastic in a record press. The Duke seems to have been filmed candidly working with his band, and by this point you'll know the difference, having seen him "act."

I can't resist mentioning one more segment, one that I love so much I keep popping the DVD in just to watch it when I have some spare time. *Symphony In Black: A Rhapsody of Negro Life* is a wordless short that begins outside Duke's office door. A hand pushes a note through the mail slot and we're shown the contents, basically a "your show is almost here, I hope your new piece is ready to perform" thing. The rest of the short consists of Duke at the piano, writing a modular piece. He stops to write on sheet music, then begins playing, and he fantasizes about how it will go in concert. We see the concert from a prime balcony seat, popping back into Duke's office when he needs to figure out how the next part should begin. The storyline of the musical piece also comes to life on the screen, a tale of infidelity and sadness, with Billie Holiday as the woman scorned. This is definitely the best little film in the collection.

Will you care about the plots or the acting? Gosh, I hope not, because if you do you'll be missing the point, which is that in every sequence here there's some damned good footage of Duke, and some of the great jazz musicians who passed through the ranks of his bands, performing for real before the cameras in the pre-overdub years. For fans of The Duke, this will be a very happy discovery.

© 2005 - DJ Johnson