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## Duke Ellington: Reminiscing In Tempo

[MVD Entertainment Group](#) // Unrated // March 22, 2011

**List Price: \$14.95 [Buy now and save at [Amazon](#)]**

Review by [Jason Bailey](#) | posted June 27, 2011 | [E-mail the Author](#) | [Start a Discussion](#)

### THE MOVIE:

You know what *Duke Ellington: Reminiscing in Tempo* could use? A good editor. This free-form documentary portrait is basically two different films fighting for screen time: one good, a compilation of performance clips and home movies from Ellington's 1968 tour of Mexico, and one bad, a recent gathering of friends, family, and admirers in celebration of the late jazzman's birthday. The first film is fascinating, handsome, and enjoyable; the second amounts to a home movie, with both the production value and outside interest that such a phrase brings to mind.

To his credit, director Gary Keys does not construct *Reminiscing in Tempo* as a straight-up biographical film; it is more impressionistic, flitting from one theme to the next (religion, civil rights, musicianship, image). The group of fans and collaborators, assembled by Ellington's sister Ruth Ellington Boatwright, share stories and memories; some of the subjects are insightful, while others are dull or obvious, speaking in platitudes. There's no selectivity--everything makes it in.

Many of those at his party are musicians, so they take the opportunity to perform his songs, with varying degrees of success. What is irritating about these sequences is that Keys often cuts away from his priceless archival footage of Ellington at work in order to show us someone else doing that song. You keep wanting Keys to just let the clips play--why would anyone thing we'd rather watch an admirer play one of Duke's songs, if it means cutting away from the man himself?

Early on, the performance clips are agonizingly short. However, after the first 20 or so minutes (which are an utter chore to get through) the clips become much more prominent, and the film markedly improves. It becomes something of a memoir/travelogue of the Ellington Orchestra's '68 Mexico trip, constructed primarily around an extended performance of the rare "Mexican Suite." It is a wonderful piece, and Keys is wise enough to let it play all the way through--though he does interject quick bits of narration, some helpful, some not so much (we probably don't need the 1968 history lesson, complete with MLK, RFK, and Carlos and Smith's Black Power salute). Some later performances (such as his iconic "Take the A Train") run more or less intact, but the film keeps getting in its own way, with a long, poorly recorded and decidedly mediocre modern performance of "Come Sunday" towards the end, and a final clip of a wonderful, talked-up rendition "Satin Doll" that is jarringly intercut with wrap-up interview snippets.

### THE DVD :

#### Video:

The full-frame image mixes the archival footage from 1968 (presumably shot on 16mm film) with the new material, shot on video in 2006 but looking much older. The new footage is blocky, hazy, and frequently ugly--and that's the better A-camera. The B-camera looks even worse, with top-of-frame color shifts that are reminiscent of VHS. The old clips are noticeably better, though they are plagued with some pretty severe crushing and occasional dirt and scratches.



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**Audio:**

We get a pretty clear idea of what we're in for, audio-wise, from the first moments of the film, with an opening voice-over/interview with director Keys that sounds like it was recorded in a bathroom on an iPhone. The quality of the interview audio varies wildly--some was clearly recorded with a lavalier microphone, but others use the built-in condenser microphone, and those are often indecipherable. Loud room tone muddles up the interviews with Ellington's sister (she sounds like an old Victrola recording); singer/pianist Bobby Short tells a story about the Ellington memorial (on mic) and later shows photos from the unveiling (off mic), and the two are intermingled without prejudice. Most confusing is Keys's decision not to re-record his own audio--if anyone would be up for it, you'd think it would be the director. At any rate, the track is a nightmare, requiring the viewer to constantly crank up the bad interviews and knock the volume down when music or competent audio appears. Camera and microphone handling noise during the birthday performances are frequent and distracting as well.

But in contrast to the thick, nasty surface noise of those scenes, the archival audio is actually quite good--the sound of the orchestra is full and robust, and the LFE channel handles the nimble bass line of the "Mexican Suite" quite nicely. There you have it--just one more reason to have stuck with the old stuff.

The track is billed as Dolby Digital 5.1, but there is no separation to speak of.

**Extras:**

None.

**FINAL THOUGHTS:**

Fans of Duke Ellington (and of classic jazz, period) will want to see *Reminiscing in Tempo* for the archival performances, which are not to be missed. But the decidedly poor quality of the new footage--from both a technical and narrative standpoint--puts a drag on the entire enterprise; if Keys would've stuck to the vintage stuff, he'd have really had something here.

*Jason lives with his wife Rebekah and their two cats in New York and is pursuing an MA in Cultural Reporting and Criticism at NYU. He blogs at [Fourth Row Center](#) and is yet another critic with a [Twitter feed](#). He also blogs for [Flavorwire](#).*

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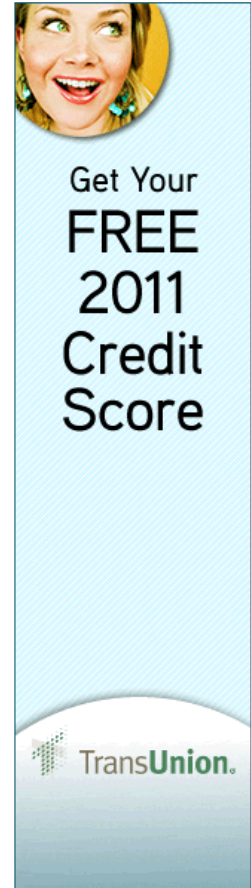
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