



GenEc DVD Review

Sunday, September 4, 2011

"Duke Ellington: Reminiscing In Tempo"/"Count Basie: Then As Now, Count's The King"/"Dizzy Gillespie In Redondo" (all MVD)

The common factor here is that all three films are the work of filmmaker Gary Keys, whose work is currently undergoing a revival of interest and exposure thanks to the folks at MVD. These are but three of several Keys films recently brought to DVD by MVD.

The Ellington film combines elements of the concert-film genre with documentary. A group of Ellington's friends, associates, and fans were gathered together for a memorial birthday party by Duke's sister, Ruth Ellington Boatright. They share reminiscences of Ellington the man, the composer, the pianist, the collaborator. Some, such as Bobby Short, Al Hibbler (who alas was WAY past his prime), Billy Taylor, Brooks Kerr, Hiromi, and Adam Makowicz, offer musical tributes as well.

Keys intersperses this with footage of a 1968 concert done in Mexico by Ellington and his band. Though the concert is from late in Duke's career, the music is still solid, the re-considered arrangements fresh, and the soloists (who include such Ellington stalwarts as Lawrence Brown, Harry Carney, Johnny Hodges, and Cootie Williams, among others) still distinctive.

The highlight of the concert is the rarely-performed "Mexican Suite", which was never commercially recorded. (It was later expanded into the "Latin-American Suite", which WAS recorded). The presence of this suite would alone justify purchase of this DVD by the Ellington faithful. While I personally would have preferred that the suite be presented straight, without the travelog photography Keys mixes in, the visuals are fascinating in their own right.

I should mention that a discussion of race relations in America includes a few graphic images which many may find disturbing. Otherwise, this is a very agreeable release, although I wouldn't recommend it as someone's first intro to Duke Ellington.

Gary Keys' Count Basie film is similar in that it juxtaposes footage, recordings, and photos of the band with spoken reminiscences by people who knew Basie well. But whereas the Ellington footage came from a single concert, the Basie film incorporates film and television footage from the 1950's and later. The Ellington reminiscences came from interviews of a grouping of sophisticates who were all too aware of the camera but the roundtable

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