

Jumpin' Punkins
By Mercer Ellington
Arranged by Duke Ellington

Unit 1: Composer

Mercer Ellington was born in Washington D.C., on March 11, 1919. He was the son of world famous composer, pianist, and bandleader, Duke Ellington. He tried for his entire life to escape from under the shadow of his famous father. A talented trumpet player, Mercer studied music with his father and wrote his first composition, "Pigeons and Peppers", at the age of eighteen. Mercer, a classically trained musician, studied music in New York at Columbia University and the Institute of Musical Arts at Juilliard. He had several professions in life including salesman, disk jockey, record company executive, trumpet player, and aide to his father.

Mercer performed in Sy Oliver's Band after WWII, led his own band for a number of years, and then served as music director for Della Reese in 1960. He took over as leader of the Ellington Orchestra after his father's death in 1974. He even won a Grammy with the Ellington Orchestra in 1988 for "Digital Duke." This recording actually pulled together many of the former greats of the Ellington Orchestra including Clark Terry, Norris Turney and special guest artists including Branford Marsalis and Sir Roland Hanna.

Mercer also wrote a biography of his father entitled "Duke Ellington in Person," offering a personal account of Duke Ellington from a son's perspective.

Unit 2: Composition

Mercer wrote *Jumpin' Punkins* (1941) after being asked by his father, Duke, to join the band as a writer. It is believed that even though Mercer composed several compositions during this two-year period, Duke actually arranged this chart for the Ellington Orchestra himself. This accounts for the near perfect adherence to many stylistic concepts of harmony and voicing used by Duke during this period. This composition also contains the swing feel and style of many other Ellington Orchestra recordings of this time. The parallel voicing of the chromatic clarinet and baritone sax melodies are very reminiscent of many Duke Ellington compositions. The 32 bar form with a 20 bar interlude has blues and dance feel as its major focus. Still, the main emphasis of this composition is to showcase the greatness of the individual performers in the Ellington Orchestra including Duke Ellington on piano, Harry Carney on baritone sax, Jimmy Blanton on bass, Barney Bigard on clarinet, and Sonny Greer on drums. It seems obvious that this composition was specifically written for the dance era because of the traditional dance swing rhythms employed throughout, yet it is also a great vehicle for soloists.

Unit 3: Historical Perspective

During the early 1940's, there was an ASCAP strike that affected all music, especially big bands and their popularity. This occurred because the broadcast industry (radio) refused to program any music written by ASCAP composers, which included Duke Ellington. This led to bands' inability to generate dance hits through radio, which led to a decline in touring performances. Duke asked his oldest son, Mercer, to join the orchestra as a songwriter to get songs published through a new performance rights organization established by the broadcast industry, BMI. During 1940 and 1941 Mercer wrote his best compositions including, "*Things Ain't What they Used To Be*" (reported to have been won in a card game from Johnny Hodges), "*John Handy's Wife*," "*Blue Serge*," "*Moon Mist*," and of course, "*Jumpin' Punkins*."

The early 1940's saw two of the greatest soloists in the music business join the Ellington orchestra, bassist Jimmy Blanton and tenor saxophonist Ben Webster, joining forces with the great Johnny Hodges on alto saxophone. The level of compositions for the Orchestra

heightened tremendously because of the great talent available to perform the music. This was also when Billy Strayhorn, a former member of the Mercer Ellington Band, joined the Duke Ellington Orchestra. “*Jumpin’ Punks*” was written specifically to showcase this great talent as well as provide material for arguably the greatest of the Duke Ellington Orchestras and for one of the greatest recordings in the history of the Duke Ellington Orchestra, “The Blanton-Webster Band.”

Unit 4: Technical Considerations

This chart is rated Grade 3 - 4 and the recommended tempo is quarter note = 120-137 (playing time = 3:41). This tempo works well as a dance, jump tempo. The chart works well for intermediate to advanced jazz bands because of the extended range of the lead trombone, which is common in Ellington arrangements.

The lead trumpet range extends to concert A in the third octave, and the lead trombone range goes to concert B-flat in the third octave.

This composition employs a very sing-able saxophone section introduction that recapitulates in the eight bar ending section. The brief but effective ostinato bass line, as performed masterfully by bassist Jimmy Blanton, is very important in setting up the driving dance feel for the composition. The piano solo at section **A** should be played as written because it introduces the melody and because of the interaction with the open fifth bass line that drives the swing feel forward. The repetitive stylistic swing rhythms through out the piece add a cohesive feel and dance intention. The composition is playable by saxophonists of any age. The instrumentation calls for clarinet double in the tenor saxophone and no doubles in the brass section. There is the usual six brass instrumentation, which is common for big bands during this era.

There are very predictable key centers in this composition with complex, “Duke-type” passing chords throughout the piece. The solo sections have predictable changes with written solos that should be learned first. Chord changes are included to allow students to create an original solo in the style of the referenced recording; but complete study of the transcribed solos from the original Ellington recording is suggested. The use of chromatic progressions throughout the composition adds variety, excitement, and interest to this well crafted, exciting piece of dance music.

The bass line and piano parts are fully voiced and written out for less experienced jazz bands but have chord symbols to allow for the creativity of more advanced players. However, the guitar part does not have any written parts, just chord symbols. Be sure to imitate the guitar comping on all four beats as done on the recording because it emphasizes rhythm and employs the third to seventh chord-tone resolutions in the voicings.

Unit 5: Stylistic Considerations

This danceable, swing-style composition exemplifies the hard-driving Ellington Orchestra style of the Blanton-Webster years. The articulations are reminiscent of the Basie and Louis Armstrong styles popularized in the 1940s. “*Jumpin’ Punks*” is a composition that swings at a broad range of tempos and should be taken slower until younger bands understand the style of articulations and phrasing.

This selection would also be an ideal feature for clarinet and baritone saxophone. (The original recording featured Barney Bigard on clarinet and Harry Carney on baritone sax.) There are many examples of swing rhythms throughout this composition that should be isolated to teach swing feel and syncopation. “*Jumpin’ Punks*” also provides many examples of the importance of repetition that can be used to teach style and interpretation in jazz. Because the chart doesn’t demand an abundance of technique, it lends itself to teaching blues inflections and many other very important jazz concepts needed to perform more complex literature. The dynamics and balance between the clarinet as lead, and the saxophone and brass sections is

very important. It is also important for each player to listen to the whole ensemble in order to hear the orchestrated harmonies.

Unit 6: Musical Elements

MELODY:

The simple but strong melody should be learned vocally, without notation, using call and response with the entire ensemble while listening to the original recording. The sequence and repetition of melodic ideas are unifying forces throughout the composition. The key centers are well defined with logical progressions. The unifying melodic rhythm is also typical for this era and specifically blues oriented with swing-style syncopations. The melody is used throughout the composition as different colors in orchestration are introduced. The piano sets the melody and mood for the entire composition.

Make sure when singing the melody that all attacks, releases, and specifically, the blues inflections are incorporated. This attention to detail will make the performance concepts much easier.

HARMONY:

The melody and chord progressions are very blues oriented emphasizing the I and the IV chords on the **A** section with tritone progressions added as movement starting in concert C. Mercer Ellington uses a tritone bridge with the B7 chord to add contrast and a great deal of movement and excitement to the composition. He also uses chromaticism in the harmonic progressions through the use of tritone substitutions.

Chromatic dominant chord movement on the **C** section to D minor (ii chord) in the full ensemble scoring also adds harmonic excitement to the stop time drum breaks. It is evident that Duke was either a great teacher of his son or that Duke actually arranged the Mercer compositions for the Ellington Orchestra.

RHYTHM:

The swing, jump dance feel requires that the entire band feel all four beats in each measure as well as the triplet pulse within each beat. It may be necessary to encourage everyone to listen for the feel of the quarter note pulse set by the bass and bass drum while feeling the triplet subdivision (*doo-od-la*). Make sure the band starts at a moderate to slow tempo. There are concepts presented in earlier chapters that address teaching rhythmic feel in the large jazz ensemble. Make sure the entire band feels the third triplet of the beat as they attack or sing the downbeat. In other words, rather than feeling 1-2-3-4, try *ah~1-ah~2-ah~3-ah~4*.

Singing stylistic and rhythmic articulations is very important in any swing composition. Have students sing rhythmic examples from the composition daily.

Unit 7: Form and Structure

The basic form of the composition is **AABA** (32 Bar) with a twenty bar (8+8+4) **C** interlude section, and a six bar intro and outro.

<u>SECTION</u>	<u>MEASURE</u>	<u>EVENT AND SCORING</u>
Intro (1):	1-6	The tempo is quarter note = 137 (learn at a much slower tempo until the swing and style are established); alternating saxophone section melody with clarinet lead and baritone sax in octaves, bass included, and drum fills (exaggerate swing feel and phrase direction through use of appropriate dynamics); all ending notes are accented with short articulations. Listen to the use of the obvious blues

inflections. The clarinetist must really spend a great deal of time listening to the recording because of the lead responsibilities for the entire ensemble. Listening to learn is very important for the entire ensemble; imitate to emulate.

- A** 7-14 Piano introduces the main theme for the composition while the guitar (ala Freddie Green), bass (ala Jimmy Blanton), and drums (ala Sonny Greer using brushes) maintain the rhythmic feel and forward drive. Everyone should sing and learn the melody stylistically as it is introduced by Duke Ellington on the recording. This melody will be the basis for the cohesion of the composition. Bassists should practice the parallel moving bass-line just as played by Jimmy Blanton because it is a driving force in the rhythm section.
- B** 15-22 The hard driving, jump feel has to be maintained in the rhythm section as the piano maintains the melodic theme (continue to feel the triplet pulse as well as the four beat jump dance feel). The clarinet solo should be rooted in the blues.
- C** 23-30 This section is the bridge of the tune with the piano leading the melody, accompanied by a two-measure riff with the alto lead repeated throughout the saxophone section. This section changes key center to a B7 progression (tritone). Make sure all lines are vocally oriented and articulated in the same manner. Add dynamic contours throughout the phrasing with everyone following the piano and lead alto, listening to the entire section; exaggerated swing phrasing is required, tongued short and accented (*dot-doo-dot-dot*); sing all phrases along with the original recording to agree on style and articulations.
- D** 31-38 The piano maintains the melody on the return to the **A** section of the **AABA** form. The saxophones, with clarinet lead, answer the piano in a very traditional bluesy tone as it relates to the history and development of the jazz language. Listen to the clarinet for the lead voice, maintain balance, and keep the blues and swing as the main focus. Saxophones need a big swinging sound at measures 37-38, with the clarinet as lead.
- E/F/G** 39-62 Baritone saxophone solos (with changes on the **AABA** form) with the trombone section playing backgrounds. Trombones need to sing through all rhythms with everyone singing the lead trombone line along with the original

recording to agree on style of phrasing and articulations (short exaggerated notes). All ending notes are characteristically short and accented. Measures 55-62, the **B**, or bridge section, employs a very rhythmic comping figure in the trombones that must be accented and precise. The trumpet section joins the backgrounds as the solo form returns to the **A** section of the form.

- H** 63-70 The baritone saxophone solo continues as the melody returns in the **A** section of the form with the brass section and clarinet lead. The clarinet should work on listening to the original recording in order to lead the ensemble. Trumpets and trombones have to listen to their balance with the clarinet lead in this section. Dynamics throughout the section are very important. The baritone saxophone solo as played by the great Harry Carney is very important since it was written specifically for him. Learn the original recorded and transcribed solo, then work to create your own in a similar style (spend time at the piano studying the progressions).
- I/J/K** 71-90 This is a **C** section that uses full ensemble scoring and chromatic writing to create a stop time environment for the great Sonny Greer on drums. Make sure all articulations are consistent and the clarinet is heard because it has the lead for the entire ensemble. The baritone saxophone and double bass have to be very confident on downbeats. The rhythms are very traditional and predictable but should adhere to the Louis Armstrong and Cootie Williams models of articulation. Singing the rhythms and individual parts would be very valuable at this section for style and balance. Use very obvious dynamic contours to build to the drum breaks. In measures 87-90, the composition sets up the return to the original form and the saxophone section.
- L** 91-98 This section is a saxophone soli that is not technically challenging but stylistically very important to the composition. Pickups to this section must be very aggressive and confident. The intent to swing has to be very obvious. Listen and sing along with the original recording while feeling the triplet pulse and the four beat dance feel. Follow all dynamic contours. Rhythm section has to play a *subito piano* at the beginning of section **L**.
- M** 99-106 A repeat of the **A** section of the form with the entire ensemble listening and responding to each other melodically and rhythmically. Trombones have the melody while the bass begins to prepare for the next section to follow. Trumpets should remember that cup mutes are used to create a sense of urgency in the composition.

- N** 107-114 This is the return to the **B** section, or bridge, where the composer uses the entire ensemble to create the excitement of a train sound as many other Ellington compositions do as well. The melody is in the piano, but the repetition and exaggeration of the rhythm is very important. Everyone must feel the anticipation of the triplet pulse so that the forward motion is maintained. The cross rhythms between the brass section and the rest of the ensemble should be very obvious.
- O** 115-122 Here is the final **A** section of the composition that uses the sax section with a clarinet lead to introduce the last version of the melody with the piano answering.
- P** 123-128 Finally we have the recapitulation of the introduction with the saxophone section and the clarinet playing the lead. The drum fills have to be in the exact jump, swing style that is present in the entire composition. Dance on the drums!

Unit 8: Suggested Listening

Count Basie Orchestra, *The Complete Atomic Basie* (Blue Note Records)

Count Basie Orchestra, *April in Paris* (Polygram Records)

Duke Ellington Orchestra, *The Blanton-Webster Band (RCA, 1940-42/1987)*

Duke Ellington, *The Great London Concerts* (Music Masters Jazz)

Unit 9: Additional References and Resources

Dunscomb, Richard, and Hill, Willie L., Jr. *Jazz Pedagogy: The Jazz Educator's Handbook and Resource Guide*. Miami, FL: Warner Brothers, 2004.

Thigpen, Ed. *Rhythm Brought to Life: A Rhythmic Primer*. Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Publishing Company, 2000.

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