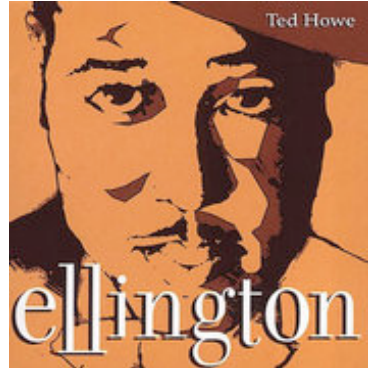


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BY KEN DRYDEN

Ted Howe is a veteran jazz musician who seems to be treading on dangerous ground by tackling a Duke Ellington songbook, not exactly an original idea. The pianist was originally hired to choreograph his long-running Ellington program for a ballet performance by the Ruth Mitchell Dance Theatre in Atlanta.

In the process of recording the music for the show's producer, he realized that he had a viable CD in the making. Howe chose ten pieces from Ellington's vast repertoire, but the pianist came up with some imaginative approaches, mixing various styles into each track.

Accompanied by two talented musicians, bassist Neal Starkey and drummer Jerry Fields, he dreams up a wild Latin chart for an extended workout of "Caravan" that showcases Fields to good effect. His playful side comes across in the whimsical take of "Sophisticated Lady." His perky interpretation of "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)" utilizes his effective stride piano chops. His introduction to "Take the 'A' Train" suggests a locomotive getting underway, before venturing into more familiar bop variations of this famous theme song.

It is refreshing to discover musicians the caliber of Ted Howe and his trio, who can find new ground to explore within well-known compositions by a jazz legend.