

MASTERPIECE

A Sapphire of Tonal Brilliance

A departure from his swinging dance music, Duke Ellington's *Mood Indigo* softly conveys an intimate, ruminative and melancholy mood.

By John Edward Hasse

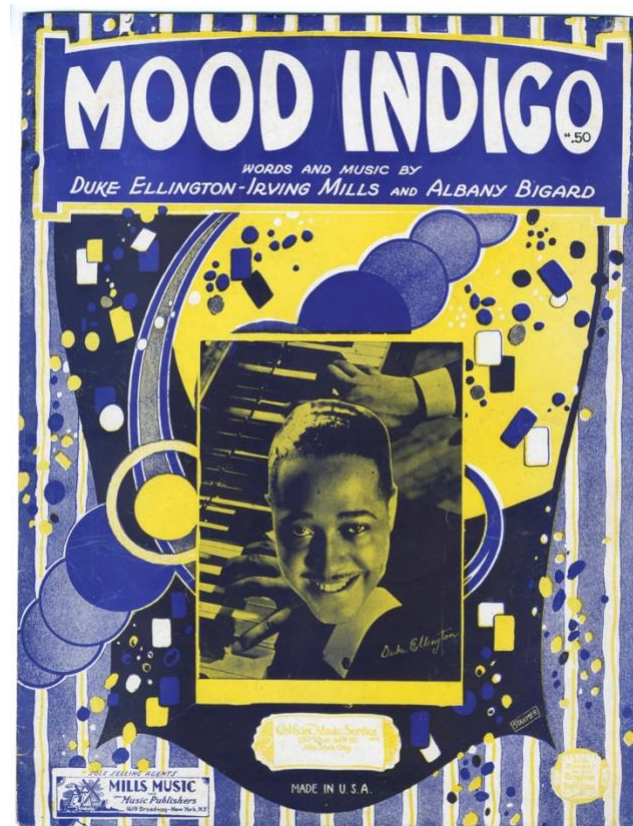
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In the fall of 1930, if you were listening to a radio broadcast from Harlem's hottest night spot, the Cotton Club, you might have heard something surprising. From just the first four notes of its opening chorale, you'd realize here is something fresh. You'd never forget its ravishing timbres, languid beat and poignant feeling. The song was Duke Ellington's resplendent *Mood Indigo*.

By then, the composer-bandleader had shaken up the music world with his jazz band, which sounded unlike any other because of its imaginative harmonies and kaleidoscopic sonorities. He didn't write for nameless trumpet, trombone or clarinet players, but for the signature sounds of his trumpeter Arthur Whetsel, his trombonist Joe "Tricky Sam" Nanton and his clarinetist Barney Bigard, mixing their colors like a master painter. Ellington didn't compose for the instrument, but for the man behind it.

Projecting urban sophistication and breaking barriers for Black musicians, Ellington had reached a new peak of popularity, thanks to the reach of radio and recordings. But one piece raised his renown to new heights—*Mood Indigo*, one of the most original and memorable musical miniatures of the 20th century. It would become his best-known composition, a career milestone, a hit, a standard, and a classic.

In late 1930, he made three recordings of the composition. The first and second, on Oct. 14 and 17, featured his band pared down to a septet. For the third, on Dec. 10, he used



his full ensemble of 12 players and added an orchestral accompaniment that showcased the diaphanous, haunting solo of trumpeter Whetsel and the gentle, flowing sound of clarinetist Bigard.

Departing from swinging dance music, *Mood Indigo* softly conveys an intimate, ruminative and melancholy mood. It launched a new avenue for Ellington: quiet pastel pieces, some, like this one, denoting his favorite hue, blue: *Azure*, *Blue Light*, and *On a Turquoise Cloud*.

Jazz band arrangements typically contrasted three families of wind instruments—the trumpet, trombone and sax sections. True to form, the maverick Ellington rejected this norm, instead combining here a single trumpet and trombone—each using a mute and avoiding vibrato—with a clarinet. He placed the trumpet in its usual register, above the other instruments, put the trombone slightly below, in its high range, unexpectedly gave the clarinet smoky low notes, and assigned the instruments unusual harmonies. “The resulting tone colors,” observed composer Gunther Schuller, “had never been heard before in all of music history.” Even experienced musicians must have wondered “What was that?”



The song’s authorship is disputed. Ellington’s star clarinetist Bigard said that he developed the second theme based on a melody written by his New Orleans teacher Lorenzo Tio Jr., and that Ellington wrote the first. (Publisher Irving Mills, a known credit grabber, listed himself as co-author, but it’s not clear if he contributed.) Neither Ellington nor Mills was scrupulous in giving credit to band members who contributed melodic ideas, and Bigard said he received only \$25 for his role. Decades later, he sued and won a share of royalties.

Despite—or perhaps because of—its singularity, *Mood Indigo* became a national hit, Ellington’s first. Not only did critics and the public embrace *Mood Indigo*—so did musicians. A quintessential standard, it ranks 16th among jazz tunes in its number of recordings: more than 1,300. By the late 1930s, the song was used as the theme of 16 different radio shows.

Mood Indigo came to be a staple of Ellington’s repertory. To keep the piece novel, he—and later composer/arranger Billy Strayhorn—would periodically fashion a new orchestration. Strayhorn’s striking 15-minute concert version for the 1950 album *Masterpieces by Ellington* even goes into waltz time. Clarinetist/saxophonist Russell Procope commented, “a new arrangement would freshen it up, like you pour water on a

flower, to keep it blooming. They'd all bloom—fresh, fresh arrangements.”

No fewer than 10 orchestrations of *Mood Indigo* lie among the roughly 100,000 pages of Ellington's unpublished music at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. One manuscript puzzled catalogers until they realized that the title “Ogidni Doom” was *Mood Indigo* playfully spelled backward.

In 1931, slangy lyrics were added, opening with:

You ain't been blue—
No, no, no—
You ain't been blue,
Till you've had that mood indigo.

Mitchell Parish, a staff lyricist for Mills, credibly claimed in a 1987 interview that he wrote the words to *Mood Indigo* but never got a byline or a royalty.

Mood Indigo also became a popular-song standard, interpreted by singers ranging from Ella Fitzgerald and Nina Simone to Dr. John and Annie Lennox. If you listen to just one vocal rendition, however, it should be Frank Sinatra's, from his landmark 1955 album *In the Wee Small Hours*. Cradled by Nelson Riddle's lush orchestra, Sinatra—a wizard with words—vivifies the lyrics and summons the song's 3 a.m. loneliness as only he could. But because of the unique sonorities that Ellington's band conjured in performance, the piece will always belong to the maestro. Its mark on music having lasted for 90 years, who's to deny that the matchless *Mood Indigo* just might prove indelible?

—Mr. Hasse is curator emeritus of American music at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. His books include “*Beyond Category: The Life and Genius of Duke Ellington*” (Da Capo) and “*Discover Jazz*” (Pearson).