



Backstory in Blue: Ellington at Newport '56

John Fass Morton

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It may be that the song most baby boomers identify from July 1956 is a simple twelve-bar blues, hyped on national television by a twenty-one-year-old Elvis Presley and his handlers. But it is a very different song, with its elongated fourteen-bar choruses of rhythm and dissonance, played on the night of July 7, 1956, by a fifty-seven-year-old Duke Ellington and his big band that got everybody on their feet and moving as one. More than fifty years later, "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue," recorded at the 1956 Newport Jazz Festival, still makes a profound statement about postwar America - how we got there and where it all went. "Backstory in Blue" is a behind-the-scenes look at this epic moment in American cultural history. It is the story of who and what made Ellington's composition so compelling and how one piece of music reflected the feelings and shaped the sensibilities of the postwar generation. As John Fass Morton explains, it was music expressed as much by those who performed offstage as by those who performed on. Written from the point of view of the audience, this unique account draws on interviews with fans and music professionals of all kinds who were there and whose lives were touched, and in some cases changed, by the experience. Included are profiles of George Avakian, who recorded and produced Ellington at Newport 1956; Paul Gonsalves, the tenor sax player responsible for the legendary twenty-seven choruses that enabled the rebirth of Ellington's career; and the "Bedford Blonde," Elaine Anderson, whose dance ignited both the band and the crowd. Duke Ellington once remarked, "I was born at Newport." Here we learn that Newport was much more than the turning point for Ellington's career. It was the tipping point for a generation and a musical genre.

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