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## Wildness and Order Duke Ellington's “Happy Go Lucky Local”

This article (with musical links) looks at one of the important compositions of Duke Ellington from the mid-1940s through the perspective of Aesthetic Realism, the philosophy founded by the American critic and poet Eli Siegel. The basis of this approach is that when a work of art in any field is good or beautiful, the reason is that it puts opposites together, opposites that are in the structure of reality as a whole and that every person is hoping to make sense of. This is true of Ellington's “Happy Go Lucky Local”: it is wild and organized, repetitive and surprising, cacophonous and orderly. It is musical evidence that difficult, even unbearable things can be seen with form, seen beautifully.

### Keywords:

Jazz, Duke Ellington, Aesthetic Realism, Eli Siegel, “Happy Go Lucky Local.”

## Хаос и порядок в композиции Дюка Эллингтона «Happy Go Lucky Local»

В статье, включающей музыкальные ссылки, рассматривается одно из центральных сочинений Дюка Эллингтона середины 1940-х годов с точки зрения эстетического реализма, — философии, основанной американским критиком и поэтом Эли Сигелем. Суть данного подхода состоит в том, что если произведение искусства является привлекательным и красивым, причина этого состоит в объединении противоположностей — противоречий, свойственных реальности в целом, которые стремится понять каждый человек. Это верно и по отношению к композиции «Happy Go Lucky Local» Эллингтона: она несообразная и организованная, предсказуемая и спонтанная, какофоническая и упорядоченная. Это музыкальное свидетельство того, что сложные, даже взаимоисключающие вещи могут сложиться в гармоничную форму, смотреться красиво.

### Ключевые слова:

джаз, Дюк Эллингтон, эстетический реализм, Эли Сигел, «Happy Go Lucky Local».

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As a musician who has played jazz for over 35 years, I'm very grateful for what I have learned about the meaning, value and beauty of jazz from Aesthetic Realism, the philosophy founded by the American critic, poet and educator Eli Siegel. I learned that when a jazz composition is good, it's for the same reason a classical concerto is: it puts reality's opposites together, and this is what we want to do in our lives. "All beauty," Eli Siegel explained, "is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves."<sup>1</sup>

One of the finest big band compositions of the mid-1940s is Duke Ellington's "Happy Go Lucky Local"; it's both wild and organized. As the piece begins,<sup>2</sup> we hear shrieks, moans, growls, squeaks, rumblings, dissonance — and more! Yet through it all, there is that steady beat; amid chaos, *form* is here. In a groundbreaking paper on Duke Ellington, first given in 1991 as a Keynote Address to the annual convention of the International Association of Jazz Educators, Edward Green, editor of *the Cambridge Companion to Duke Ellington*, said: "Ellington's desire to see order in a disorderly world, without making less of the surprise and rough quality of things, is in many of his compositions, including the wonderful "train" pieces — *Daybreak Express* and *Happy Go Lucky Local*."<sup>3</sup>

"Happy Go Lucky Local" does honor the noise and disorder of the world. There is no clearly identifiable theme until 3½ minutes

have gone by. Yet, from the very beginning, we hear one repeated pattern after another. Early, Ellington on piano and Oscar Pettiford on bass play a short ostinato (see Example 1)<sup>4</sup>, and we hear the train starting to move. It's rough, dissonant, and also regular, orderly.

"Jazz," Mr. Siegel wrote, "is a new junction of the...permanent and the unexpected, the continuous and the surprising."<sup>5</sup> We hear this as open trumpets play three staccato quarter-notes, answered by trumpets with plunger mutes playing three low legato half-notes, half as fast: "wa-wa-wa." They also put together independence and need. They're so different, yet depend on each other.

Listen, for instance, to measures 7–10.<sup>6</sup> The open trumpets alone could sound on-top, mocking; the muted trumpets alone could sound weary, complaining, bored. But together — they enliven each other! And underneath, the piano and bass continue their loping beat.

In his autobiography, Ellington said that "Happy Go Lucky Local": "...told the story of a train in the South, not one of those luxurious, streamlined trains that take tourists to Miami, but a little train with an upright engine that was never fast, never on schedule, and never made stops at any place you ever heard about. After grunting, groaning, and jerking, it finally settled down to a steady medium tempo."<sup>7</sup>

We hear that train beginning its journey in measures 28–64. First, the ensemble plays, while Ray Nance comments on solo trum-

Example 1  
Duke Ellington. "Happy Go Lucky Local,"  
measures 7–8



pet. Then we hear, in turn, Harry Carney on baritone sax, Al Sears on tenor and Russell Procope on alto, and long, screaming notes by Cat Anderson on plunger muted trumpet, sounding like the whistle of a passing train, all accompanied by the trombones, sounding like the grunting of the train's engine.<sup>8</sup>

I was thrilled in a poetry class taught by the Aesthetic Realism Chairman of Education, Ellen Reiss, as she discussed a poem by Eli Siegel, titled "Noise Is of All, the World,"<sup>9</sup> which I think is beautiful. I feel what she said is needed by all musicians: "Increasingly, music has included things that people have seen as uncludable. What does that say about the world? If, increasingly, composers are showing that [noise] can be form, is that a sign that the world itself can be form? Is it a sign that things in this world that seem unbearable can be part of beauty? What has happened to sound — there is nothing more hopeful!"<sup>10</sup>

I do think "Happy Go Lucky Local" shows that we can look at the rough things, the difficult and even unbearable things in the world and in ourselves with form, with style. This is such a useful criticism of the tendency I had to be smooth, act cool — and think I was being charming. This attitude badly affected how I used to play jazz piano — it was insincerely smooth. And in my life, when something difficult demanded my attention, I would immediately feel exhausted and hopeless. I had the conceited notion that the world should keep its demands to a tolerable level.

In an Aesthetic Realism consultation,<sup>11</sup> when I spoke tragically about a situation that puzzled me, I was asked, "If there's a difficult situation,... does it *have* to be attended by suffering?" I answered, "I think my picture of happiness is one without obstruction." My consultants said: "Right. You feel, gee, I wish everything was just going my way and everything was nice. But that is really against art." And they read this from *Self and World* by Eli Siegel: "One cannot think of a world made up of smooth roads, strewn with roses and bordered by exceedingly ac-

cessible marshmallows. The world, like the human body, is a compound of resistance and ease, obstruction and going forward, obstacle and companion."<sup>12</sup>

My consultants asked me: "Do you think in meeting honestly an obstruction — a difficult situation — that it gives you the chance to have a good opinion of yourself?" It definitely does!

And I think it's great that Aesthetic Realism enables us to see, through the opposites in a musical composition, how we want to be. Here in Ellington's music, with all the roughness and obstruction — the screeches and howls, the dissonance and thickness — there is a good tempo, and an *honest* smoothness. The music is persistent, but not plodding; insistent but not hurried.

Almost at the exact center of the piece,<sup>13</sup> Ellington does this surprising thing: twice we hear five long, harsh, dissonant chords on the trumpets and reeds. They sound like the train horn coming through the night. And in between these two sets of cacophonous chords is their exact opposite: complete silence.

It is then, when the full band returns, that we finally get to a theme, a clear, orderly melody — one that was to become very popular as the song "Night Train."<sup>14</sup> First the saxes have it, with the brass answering staccato. Next, while the sax section plays high, shrieking chords, Cat Anderson plays the melody and answers himself with a very high rip, like the call of the train's conductor saying "All aboard!" This music is so different from how I was — it's that very *obstruction* that makes for the Happy-Go-Lucky feeling!

In measures 115 through 188 and again in measures 125 and 126, all the brass five trumpets and three trombones play a riff in unison. It's the loudest part of the whole piece; it's very chromatic and dissonant with the underlying chord; it could be terrifying — yet what is more agreeable and pleasing than *unison*? It's the opposites sheer!

While this piece doesn't have the greatness of such Ellington masterpieces as "The Mooche" or "Concerto for Cootie," there are

effects in “Happy Go Lucky Local” that have the ever-so-particular, unmistakable Ellington sound, the quality Eli Siegel describes in this phrase from his poem “Hymn to Jazz and the Like”: “moan with grandeur and come out right.”<sup>15</sup> In the coda to “Happy Go Lucky Local,”<sup>16</sup> there are amazing super high screeches from Cat Anderson’s trumpet, answered by a deep, rough, sustained note in the trombones. Then, the train fades into the

distance and, with two sharp notes on the bass, is gone.

Eli Siegel begins “Hymn to Jazz and the Like”<sup>17</sup> with the line: “What is sound, as standing for the world and the mind of man at any time, and in any situation?” I love him for asking that, and for enabling us, through the opposites, to see how sound itself — and very much the sounds of jazz — stand for the world and for our deepest hopes.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See [7, p. 13].
- <sup>2</sup> Measures 1–18. See [1, ex. 1].
- <sup>3</sup> See [4].
- <sup>4</sup> See [2].
- <sup>5</sup> See [5, p. 147].
- <sup>6</sup> Measures 7–10. See [1, ex. 2].
- <sup>7</sup> See [3, p. 184].
- <sup>8</sup> Measures 28–64. See [1, ex. 3].
- <sup>9</sup> See [5, p. 22].
- <sup>10</sup> The “Aesthetic Realism Explanation of Poetry” class is taught by Ellen Reiss, Chairman of Education. (link: <<https://aestheticrealism.org/ways-you-can-study/classes/the-aesthetic-realism-explanation-of-poetry-taught-by-ellen-reiss/>>) From the

author’s notes.

<sup>11</sup> A consultation is a 50-minute discussion with three Consultants on the faculty of the Aesthetic Realism Foundation, NYC (link: <<https://aestheticrealism.org/ways-you-can-study/understanding-yourself-aesthetic-realism-consultations/>>)

<sup>12</sup> See [6, p. 275].

<sup>13</sup> Measures 67–84. See [1, ex. 4].

Note: mm 75–78 of the of the published score are repeated in the recording.

<sup>14</sup> Measures 82–127. See [1, ex. 5].

<sup>15</sup> See [5, p. 63].

<sup>16</sup> Measure 124 to the end. See [1, ex. 6].

<sup>17</sup> See [5, p. 62].

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