



**LIKE A FATHER** to his band rather than an employer, Duke talks of his band as an American band, rather than Negro. "It is an American band," he says, "because it is democratic." It is an axiom in the Ellington office that he never fires a man; a man usually fires himself. Of the five with whom he began 26 years ago, three still work for him, the fourth is Duke and the fifth is dead.



**NO BATON** is used by Duke. He gets as good results with his expressive hands. His band is a medium for putting over many of his compositions. Cootie Williams is a graduate of Ellington's band. Duke wrote *Concerto for Cootie* when he left.

## ELLINGTON WRITES OF RACE

**A**MERICA'S Negro problem is seen in terms of music by Duke Ellington. He will pound a dissonant chord on the piano and say: "That's the Negro's life. Hear that chord. That's us. Dissonance is our way of life in America. We are something apart, yet an integral part."

In his monumental work, *Black, Brown and Beige*, Duke told that story. In his book, *Duke Ellington*, Barry Ulanov has told that story. For in the success story that is Duke Ellington's, he and his band have by no means escaped the clutch of racial prejudice.

Duke's father became a Navy blue-printer after some years as a butler. Hunger was never a problem until Duke became a band leader and took his first outfit to New York.

First he had ambitions to be a commercial artist and even won an NAACP poster contest. His early lessons in piano at 5 were a bore and he quit until he was 15. Then he got inspiration at a rent party where he heard the important James P. Johnson's *Carolina Shout*, and tackled music seriously.

In a couple of years he was organizing his own band. In 1918, at the age of 19, he was earning \$10,000 a year and owned his own home in Washington. Here he went to New York with his Washingtonians and ran into bad luck. "We didn't starve," recalls Duke, "but at times it seemed like it. There were days when one Texas weiner, split six ways, was plenty of meat for the Washingtonians." Fortune and entertainer Ada "Bricktop" Smith smiled on them soon and she got them their first big engagement at Barron's one of the brightest spots in Harlem.

Before long Ellington had worked his way downtown to the Hollywood and Kentucky Clubs. Their greatest triumph followed in 1927, with five solid years at the Cotton Club on 143rd and Lenox Avenue in Harlem.

But with the passing years they learned more about New



**THREE LOVELY SINGERS** round out the Duke Ellington organization. Joya Sherrill (left) is a good jazz singer with lots of personality and a pert figure. She has been with the band longest. Kay Davis (center) holds a master of arts degree from Northwestern and is a trained lyric soprano. Marie Ellington (no relative of the Duke's) is attractive and sophisticated.

## PROBLEM IN VIVID MUSIC

York than its geography. At the Cotton Club, in the center of Harlem, there was a rigid color line. A prominent Negro entertainer could get a back seat in the cafe but the average colored citizen was welcomed with a stay-out sign in Harlem's No. 1 night spot.

How Ellington's band felt about it is told by Ulanov in his book: "Ofay is the colored man's word for white; it is Pig Latin for foe. The use of this word is of deadly significance; it indicates just how strongly the Negro feels about his white brother, whose own feelings and actions have been so far from fraternal toward the darker-hued fellow. The Ellington musicians had every reason to hate white people, coming as they did from Washington, as restrictive a city along color lines as any in the Deep South. The Ellington musicians had, nevertheless, only a fatalistic acceptance of race differences.

"To them when they arrived in New York it was simply a matter of slight readjustment, of an easier life but one still organized along racial lines, with their own ghetto, a gay ghetto, but a district apart, with more mixing permitted downtown, but watch your place, black man, in restaurants and night clubs and theatres, and woe unto you if you entered the wrong one where the 14th and 15th amendments to the Constitution were unheard of and colored people 'simply did not belong.' In any one of a dozen ways you could be embarrassed, shocked, humiliated. New York was like that. But the Washingtonians didn't hate; they were fatalistic, sad when they thought about it, more often blank to skin pigments, lost in the wider range of musical colors."

Duke's attitude on Jim Crow is: "You have to try not to think about it or you'll knock yourself out."

But whether he thinks about it or not, his music has crossed the color line and joins with the Negro's fight everywhere for full equality.



**'COKE' AND LYRICS** of a new song occupy Kay Davis and Duke. After she sang a Negro spiritual when President Roosevelt died, listeners wrote to find out if Marian Anderson was singing with Duke. She got more to do after that.