VCFA TALK ON ELLINGTON COMPOSITION TECHNIQUES FEB.2017 A.JAFFE

1.) **Clarinet Lament** [1936] (New Orleans references)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FS92-mCewJ4 (3:14)

Compositional Techniques:

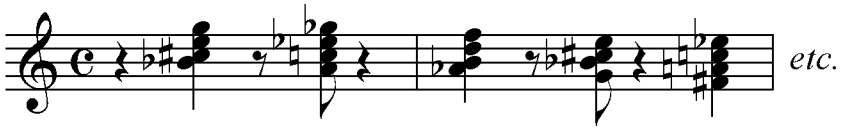
- ABC 'dialectical' Sonata/Allegro type of form; where C = elements of A + B combined;
- Diminution (the way in which the "Basin St. Blues" chord progression is presented in shorter rhythmic values each time it appears); play chord progression
- Quoting with a purpose (aka 'signifying' – see also Henry Louis Gates)

2.) **Lightnin'** [1932] ('Chorus' form); reliance on distinctively individual voices (like "Tricky Sam" Nanton on trombone) – importance of the compositional uses of such voices who were acquired by Duke by accretion were an important element of his 'sonic signature' – the opposite of classical music where sonic conformity in sound is more the rule in choosing players for ensembles. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XlcWbmQYmA (3:07)

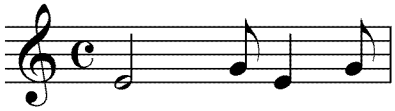
Techniques: It's all about the minor third (see also discussion of "Tone Parallel to Harlem")

- **Motivic Development** (in this case the minor 3rd; both harmonically and melodically pervasive)

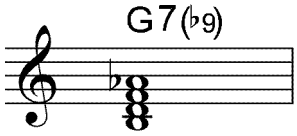
  The descending diminished 7ths in the Brass in the Intro:



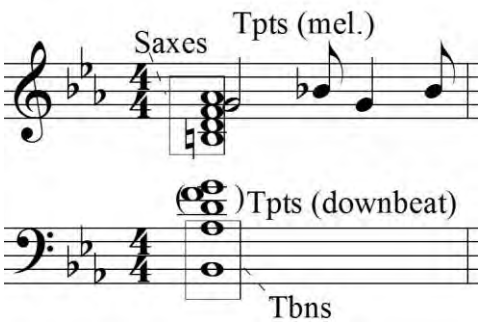
  The ascending minor third motif of the theme:



  The extended ("*b9*") background harmony in the Saxophones, reiterating the diminished 7th chord from the introduction:



- Harmonic AND melodic implications of the motif
- Early use of the octatonic scale (implied at the modulation -- @ 2:29):

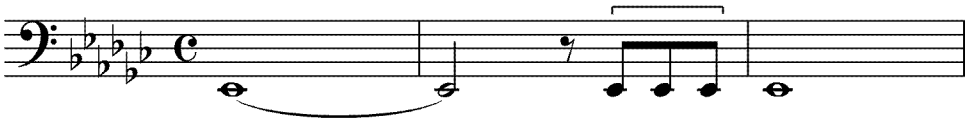


- Delay of resolution to the tonic chord until ms. 31 of 32 bar form (prefigures Monk, "Ask Me Now", among others, but decades earlier).

3.) **KoKo** [1940];
A tour de force of motivic development, in this case rhythmic; speculated to be related to Beethoven's 5th (Rattenbury, p. 108). If Ellington was indeed channeling Beethoven it would not have been a first in terms of 'classical' appropriation/signification ("Black and Tan Fantasy [1929] was based on Chopin's "Funeral March" of course). This site explores the use of Beethoven's Fifth (the iconic rhythmic motif equaled "V" for Victory in Morse code, and was used by the BBC to symbolize freedom in its WWII broadcasts to occupied Europe, where Duke had been in 1939): http://holocaustmusic.ort.org/resistance-and-exile/french-resistance/beethovens-5th-symphony/Churchill;).

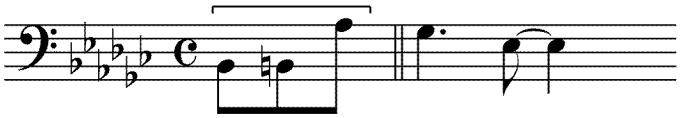
Examples of reiteration of the motif. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FA0yIiTVu1Q 2:48

Harry Carney's Baritone line in the intro of Ellington's "*Koko*":

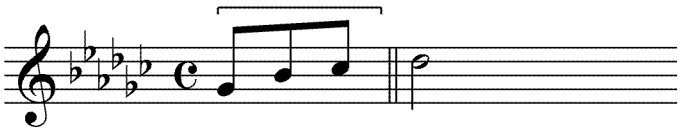


As shown in the above example, the opening rhythmic motif of Ellington's 1940 masterpiece consists of three simple eighth notes which is reiterated throughout the piece.

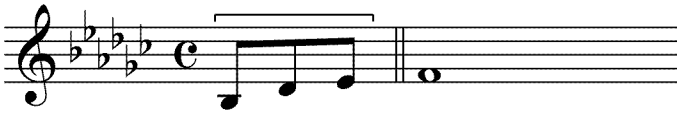
The motif in the Valve Trombone Solo in Chorus #1:



The motif in Chorus #4, in the saxophones, behind the piano solo (played outside its harmonic context of Eb minor, this sounds like a quote of "*When the Saints Go Marchin' In*" in the relative major):



The motif in the Trumpets in Chorus #5 (the pickup note changes from chord to chord, but the motivic identity is retained):



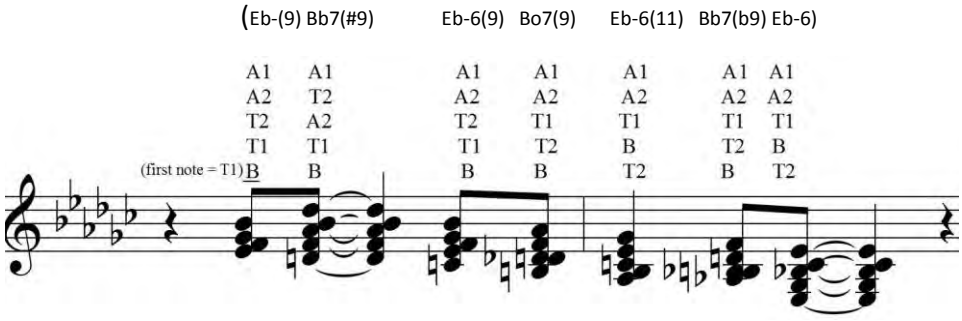
Interestingly, each of these iterations targets a different note in the harmony. The Baritone targets the *tonic* (in the introduction), The Valve Trombone the *third* (first

full chorus), the Saxophone background to the piano solo the *seventh*, and the trumpets the *ninth*.

Techniques

- **Voice-crossing** in main theme (usually in close position voicings; but also could be between adjacent open voicings; as for example in the ensemble statement of the main theme of "Morning Mood" from the "Peer Gynt Suite" (@ 3:10) -- score attached at end of article):

Ko-Ko opening theme statement saxophone soli:



Also of note:

- Ben Webster saxophone part in ms. 9-10 of the theme (featuring a concert Bb against a B7 chord, which works melodically in the blues-based context);
- polytonal whole tone scale runs in the piano solo (@ 1:09), featuring an E whole tone scale against the predominant Eb minor harmony;
- the final modal minor 11th chord in 'stacked thirds' (anticipating, for example, "So What" from nearly two decades later);
- and the fact that all of these formidable 'devices' (to use Ellington's word) are couched in the comfortably accessible minor blues form.

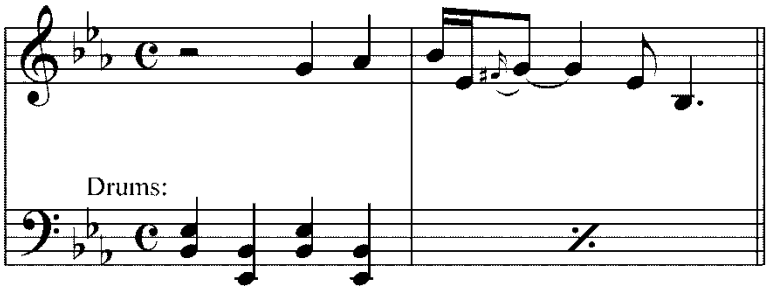
4.) **Black** (from "Black Brown and Beige") [1943]; motivic but also adds elements of 'text painting' (based on narrative poem written by Ellington; as such prefigures Coltrane's "Psalm" from "A Love Supreme" by decades); and recycles prior DE material (opening scene of "Symphony In Black" entitled "The Laborers": (see Peress article)

Techniques: DE's opening comments lay out his formal approach ("…necessitates developing the two [Work Song and Church Themes] and showing their close relationship…" :55 of "Black" from 1943 Carnegie Hall Concert):

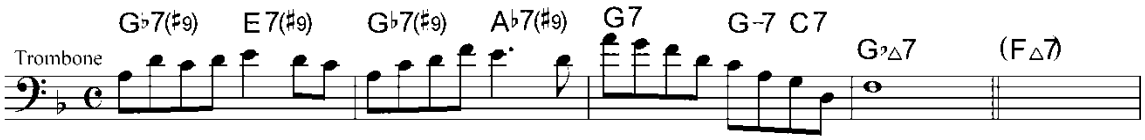
- Motivic deconstruction and recombination
- A + B → C (examples)

Ellington, as he so frequently did, was appropriating his *own* ideas to an extent in "*Black, Brown and Beige*". For many years he had been discussing the notion of creating an extended work depicting the

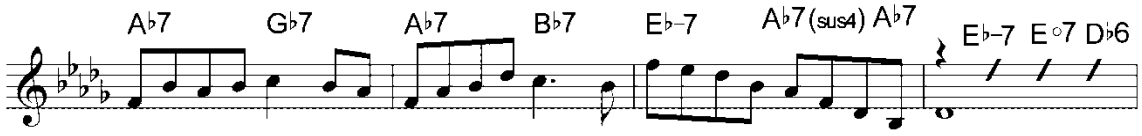
history of African Americans[1]. In fact, in 1935, his dramatic film short, "*Symphony in Black*", employed some of the same musical and programmatic content which would later resurface in "*Black, Brown and Beige*" in 1943. The most famous example involves a scene entitled "*The Laborers*", from the first movement of "Symphony in Black"* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTT9Su1d-VE , (NOTE: This is BEFORE "SCORING TO PICTURE") – note use of Timpani
depicting slaves hauling sacks up a flight of stairs in rhythmic unison to the musical accompaniment that would later become the famous "*Work Song*" in *"Black Brown and Beige*" (from 1:00 to about 2:06 – note the deliberate juxtaposition between Ellington's sophisticated 'concert' music and attire and the picture he's portraying *in* the music). Of further note is the spot @ 4:15 (the beginning of "The Blues") where one can see the aforementioned Bigard playing with Juan Tizol seated behind him and to the right. In any event, Ellington clearly had a picture in his mind's eye, and recycled this basic them at the beginning of "Black" (from the Ellington manuscript score at the Smithsonian; @ 1:05 of "Black"):
Opening:



Black's other main theme, so-called 'church them', aka "*Come Sunday"*
appears @ 10:10 -- from p. 15 of Ellington manuscript score, played by Tizol in what appear to be tritone substitutions for the standard chords for the tune which undergird Hodges' subsequent statement of the theme @ 12:48:
TIZOL:



HODGES:

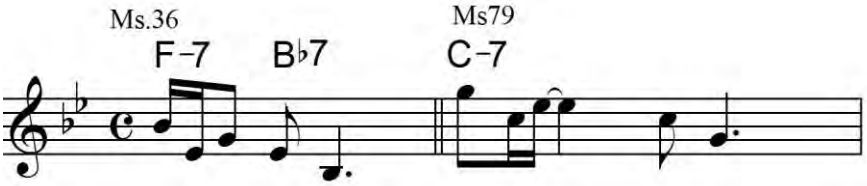


The presentation, development, and intertwining of these contrasting themes is not only programmatically meaningful, it also gives form to the entire movement.
After presenting the themes separately, Ellington gradually combines, reharmonizes, reorchestrates and interweaves them throughout the course of the development section. Indeed, Ellington wished, as he made clear in his introductory remarks at Carnegie Hall in January of 1943, to show the connection between the *Sacred* (as epitomized by the "*Come Sunday*") and the

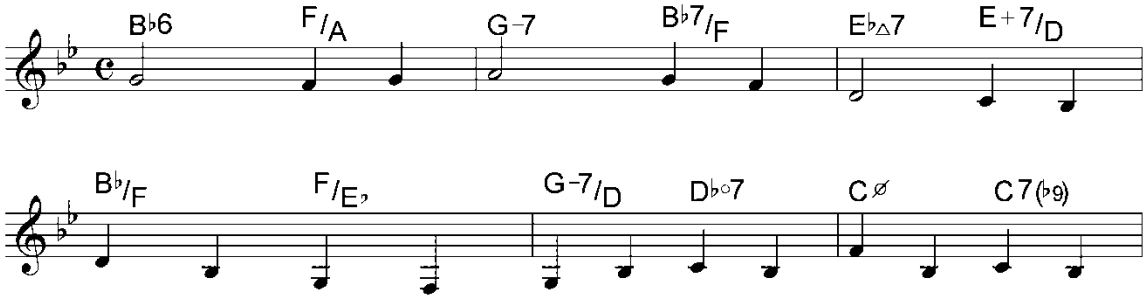
[1] Hasse, John. *Beyond Category: The Life and Genius of Duke Ellington*. Simon and Shuster, New York, 1993, p. 260

Secular (the Work theme) in African American life*, "to show their close relationship…"*[2], as noted above.
Here are but a few examples of the process by which Ellington achieves variety in presenting, developing and in interweaving these themes *(due to discrepancies between the manuscript score from the Ellington archives at the Smithsonian and the recorded performances, measure numbers are assigned only for the first examples).*

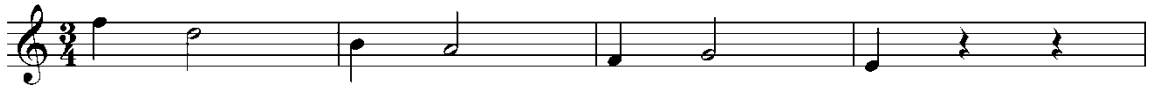
- Harmonizations of the "*Work Song*" theme (found on p. 2-5 of Ellington manuscript score); these can be heard at 2:10 and 3:35, although there are almost as many harmonizations as there are thematic statements:



Variation of the "*Come Sunday*" theme (Ellington manuscript, @ 18:43):

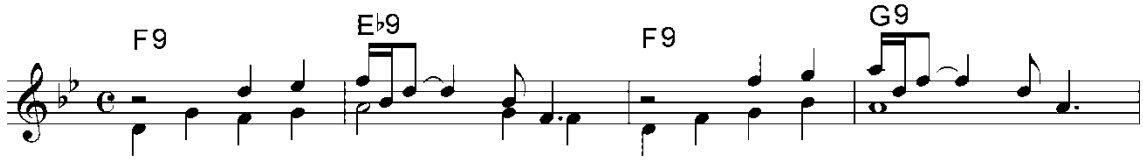


Following the completion of the thematic statement shown above, Ellington interpolates four bars of ¾ that serve as a *metric cadence*. The melodic material here could be thought of as being related to the consequent part of *either* theme, or as a *synthesis* of the two (19:02):



The piece then returns to a medium up tempo 4/4 and immediately combines the two melodies over the chord changes of "*Come Sunday*", creating a dramatic and inevitable point of arrival that bears out the musical realization of Ellington's introductory comments. Though the melody and harmony of "*Come Sunday*" are both included here, the elements of the "*Work Song*" that are used are not just its theme, but also its basic *tempo*.

Combination of the two themes in the recapitulation of "*Black*" (@19:33): [Go through about 19:46]



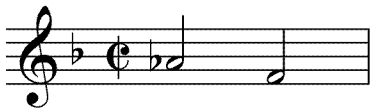
[2] Ellington's opening remarks at January, 1943 premiere (1943 Carnegie Hall Concerts)

Further study of the piece will reveal more of this structure to the student. (Note: this can be done equally effectively by careful listening, since Ellington's development of motivic material is almost always audible). It is well worth listening to "*Black*" with a copy of the formal synopsis of the movement found Wolfram Knauer's article "*Simulated Improvisation in Black Brown and Beige*" in hand – see Bibliography).
Finally, it should be not be forgotten that *Black Brown and Beige* is deliberately *programmatic* in content as well, not just in the general sense of telling the story in music of the history of African-Americans, but specifically in relation to a poem of the same title authored by Ellington, whose text is depicted in the music. Those who have criticized the piece as being structurally weak (both in 1943 and subsequently) did not have access to the poem (see Maurice Peress' article "*My Life with Black Brown and Beige*", bibliography). Notwithstanding this fact, however, as is clearly evidenced in the examples cited above, Ellington's introductory remarks provide ample guidance to anyone attempting to follow the form of the piece *aurally*…

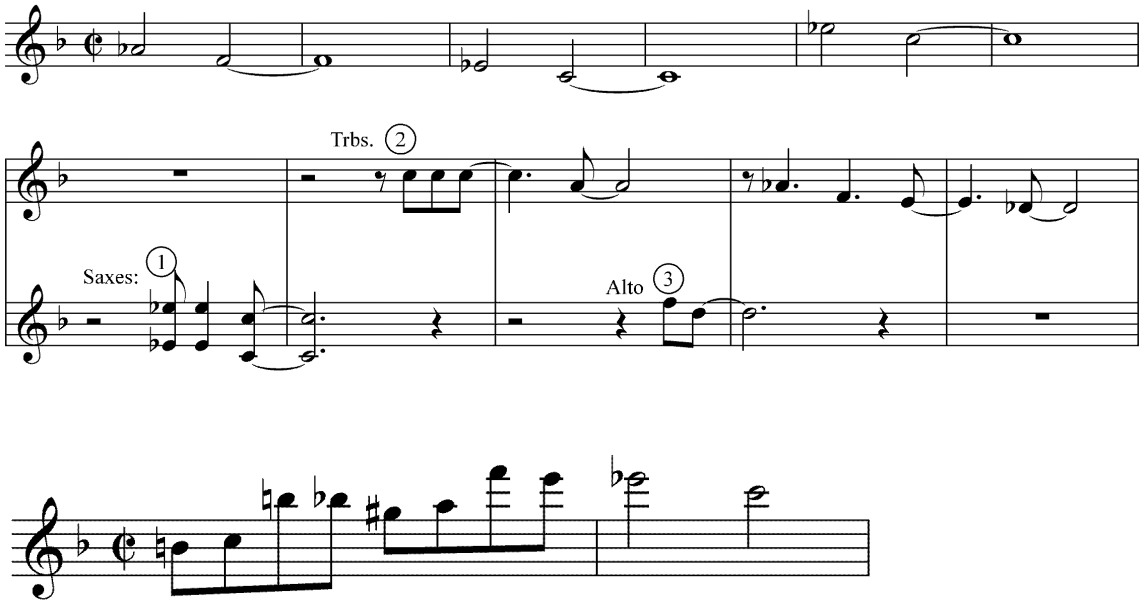
5.) **Tone Parallel to Harlem** [1951]; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yTqU4Sme2XM

- Tour de force of motivic development; completely through-composed based on eponymous opening 'leifmotif' (as 'spoken' by Ray Nance); again, the minor third pervades not just melodic material but also the harmony. Note Timpani and lack of "improvisation"
- In "*A Tone Parallel to Harlem*" (occasionally entitled more formally the "*Harlem Suite*"), Ellington masterfully and economically develops the entire piece from the opening "*motto theme*" of a minor third, "*spoken*" at its outset by trumpeter Ray Nance employing the characteristic vocalese of the muted horn. (Though this sound may have been popularized by King Oliver, Bubber Miley, "*Tricky*" Sam Nanton, and others with whom Ellington was familiar early on in his career, he had long since embraced it as one of his own signature compositional devices). The piece also works as a sonic landscape of its subject, portraying in music the scenes of everyday life in Harlem by means of varying the initial leitmotif. As such it might also be referred to as a *programmatic* or even an *impressionistic* piece. Whatever term is used, there is no doubt that Ellington, as he often stated, frequently composed with a particular visual scene inspiring his work. Examples of the use of the minor third interval:

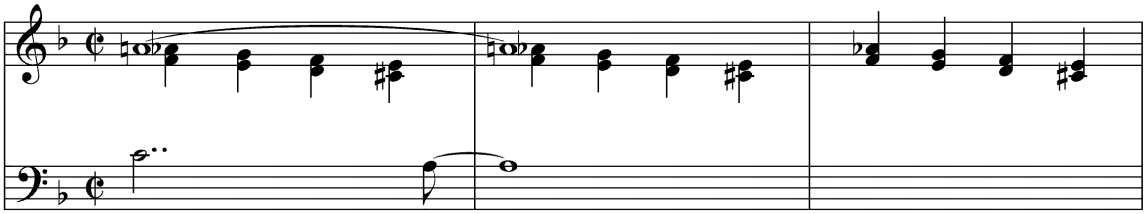
The opening eponymous minor third Leitmotif: (play from beginning to about 2:25)



Throughout the piece, we are constantly confronted with various manifestations of this opening "*blue*" interval, in every conceivable possible transformation and embellishment (these arbitrarily chosen examples are but a few of many such related thematic statements).

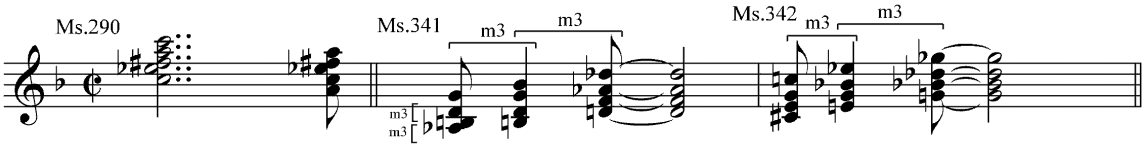


Play from about 7:40 to 9:45: The “Church theme” evoking N.O. 3-part counterpoint



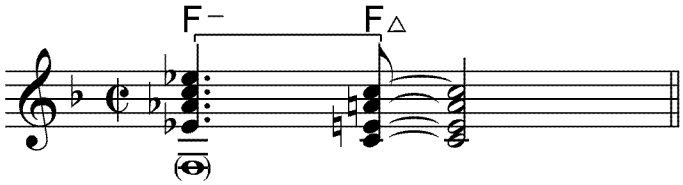
Even the *harmony* is impacted by the minor third interval.

Play @ 12:34 through 12:48

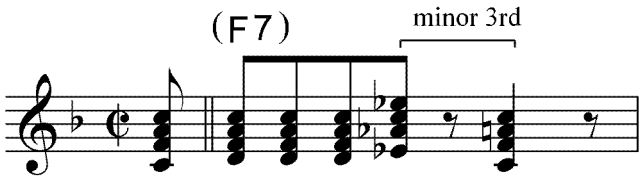


Note also the ability of the minor third to fit and/or reconcile both major and minor tonality, an important property of the Blues generally as noted earlier. In “*Harlem*” this results in the same theme working in both major and minor tonality.

Ms. 33 showing juxtaposition of major and minor harmony in thematic presentation:

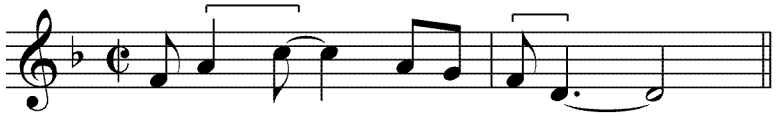


Theme used in a major Blues context:

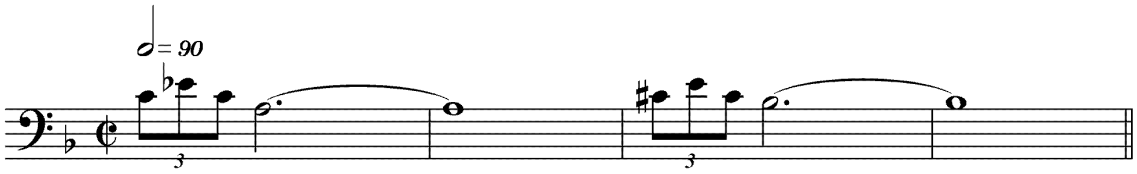


Further variety is achieved through the presentation of the theme in various rhythmic contexts.

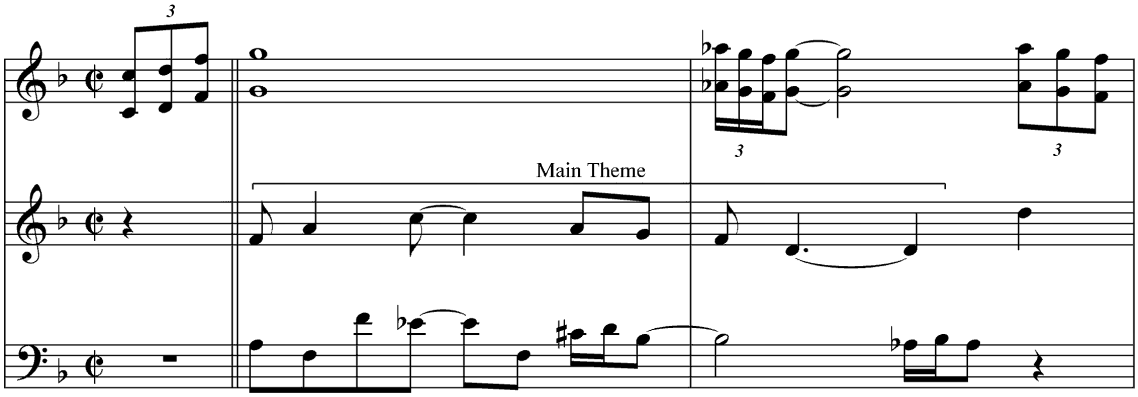
The theme as a "*Ballad*" (in the "*Church Theme"*). Note that this is really just an embellished version of the main leitmotif, which appears in the second two notes in inversion, and in its original form in the last two:



The theme in an up tempo context (saxophones):



Ellington's development of the slow incarnation of the theme occurs via the device of composed New Orleans style counterpoint, building to the dramatic final statement of the theme.



A formal description of the musical events in Harlem follows:

Form Analysis of "Harlem" (timings based on 1952 "*Seattle Concert*"):

PART 1: INTRODUCTION of Main Theme (start time is 1:07)
(Stays primarily in Key of F)

EVENT(S):	Measure Number	Timing*
Introduction (quarter = 84): Mostly Rubato	Ms. 1-10	1:07
Slightly Faster theme statement. Call and Response between Saxes and Brass.	Ms. 11-18	1:47

Trumpet Solo w/Brass, Drums	Ms. 19-23	2:08
Clarinet Theme Presentation	Ms. 24-42	2:28
Call and Response Theme Statement (quarter = 80) led by Trumpet	Ms. 42-47	3:23
Rubato Saxophone Soli (Clarinet Lead)	Ms. 48-50	3:40
Contrapuntal Transition	Ms. 51-62	3:46
medium tempo Osinato and theme in Baritone	Ms. 63-75	4:19
Ritard and reiteration of Theme (Slow/Concerted)	Ms. 76-85	4:44
Composed Tenor Solo w/Backgrounds	Ms. 86-97	5:07

PART II: IN TEMPO
(includes discrete Blues Choruses and first key changes)

The Theme presented as a Rhumba in minor Blues form	Ms. 98-125	5:52
The Theme presented as a Swing Blues	Ms. 126-137	6:25
The Theme presented as a Rhumba	Ms. 138-147	6:41
Ensemble Unison Figure (Break)	Ms. 148, 149	6:52
The Theme presented in Swing in Trombone accompanied by Sax Backgrounds derived from it	Ms. 150-161	6:55
theme presented in Ensemble "Call and Response"/ "Shout" format	Ms. 162-173	7:10
Theme presented as a truncated Minor Blues	Ms. 174-184	7:25
Modulation and Accelerando	Ms. 184-185	7:34
Ensemble "Shout" continues in G (still maintaining Blues-based phrase structure)	Ms. 186-199	7:38
Antiphonal Saxophone and Reeds/Brass Call and Response "Shout" continues, in Ab	Ms. 200-209	7:50
Further Accelerando	Ms. 210-11	7:59-8:00
Ensemble Unison based on Embellished version of the Theme	Ms. 212-219	8:01
Ritard and Key change (Back to Primary Key of F)	Ms. 220-229	8:05
Call and Response Fanfare leads to SLOW tempo	Ms. 230-235	8:13

PART III
(Church Theme and Recapitulation)

Unaccompanied composed Clarinet Solo	236-239	8:29
Bass/Clarinet duet, gradual contrapuntal thickening of texture	240-253	8:40
Motto theme in Plunger Muted Trombones	254-257	9:39
Contrapuntal Crescendo and Cutoff	255-261	9:42
Reestablishment of Slow Tempo by slow saxophone Ostinato	262-265	9:58
Antiphonal Presentation of Slow Theme, gradually building, in composed "New Orleans Counterpoint"	266-289	10:13
SHOUT statement of Main theme in Brass in A-	290-295	11:41
Fermata and Contrapuntal transition	296,297	12:02
Uptempo Saxophone Statement of Main Theme		

(Ends in F Major)	298-307	12:11
Brass Choir Statement of the Main Theme (F -)	308-315	12:41
Solo Trumpet Theme Statement Solo/Counterpoint (C -) over ostinato	316-323	13:08
Contrapuntal Transition, and Accelerando	324-327	13:33
Crescendo featuring sectional counterpoint	328-342	13:47
Composed Drum Solo (Sets up final Tempo)	343,344	14:23
Concerted Ensemble Statement of Main Theme (F -)	345-351	14:24
Drum Roll/Fermata	352	14:40
Antiphonal 3-part Full Ensemble Tutti (piece ends in Ab)	353-362	

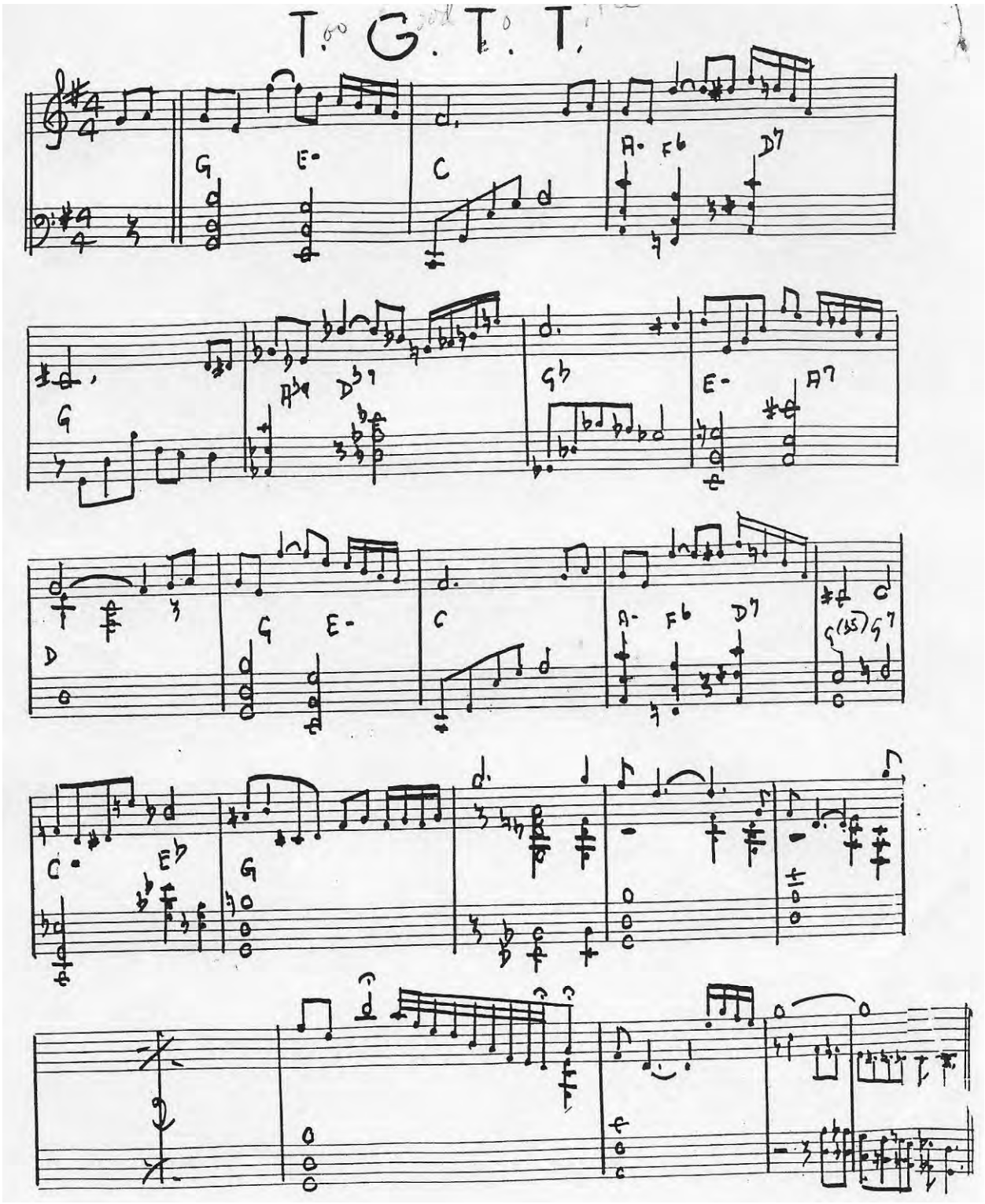
6.) **TGTT** [1968]; from "The Second Sacred Concert"; featuring Alice Babbs
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ThVjVO3YBdU 2:28

Techniques:

- Individuality of voice;
- Wordless vocals (a 'bookend' to DE's career with for example "Creole Love Call");
- Symbolism (the use of the b5 to represent the 'Supreme Being' – i.e. flipping the script on "Diabolus in Musica" and Guido d'Arezzo's prohibition and celebrating the Blue note as beboppers so often did)
- 'flipping the script' ('aka signifying' or implicit commentary in choice of musical material – see also "Apes and Peacocks" from "The Queen's Suite" – where DE's title refers to the Bible story of the Queen of Sheba bringing great riches to King Solomon. "The Queen's Suite" was in fact Duke's present for Queen Elizabeth, and he produced only one copy of it, which was given to her, with orders that the record would not be released publicly until after his death. This piece is also a good example of Ellington's "exotic" style of writing, eschewing swing rhythm in favor of more Afro-centric percussion.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f9RzmjAh4Ko [1959]

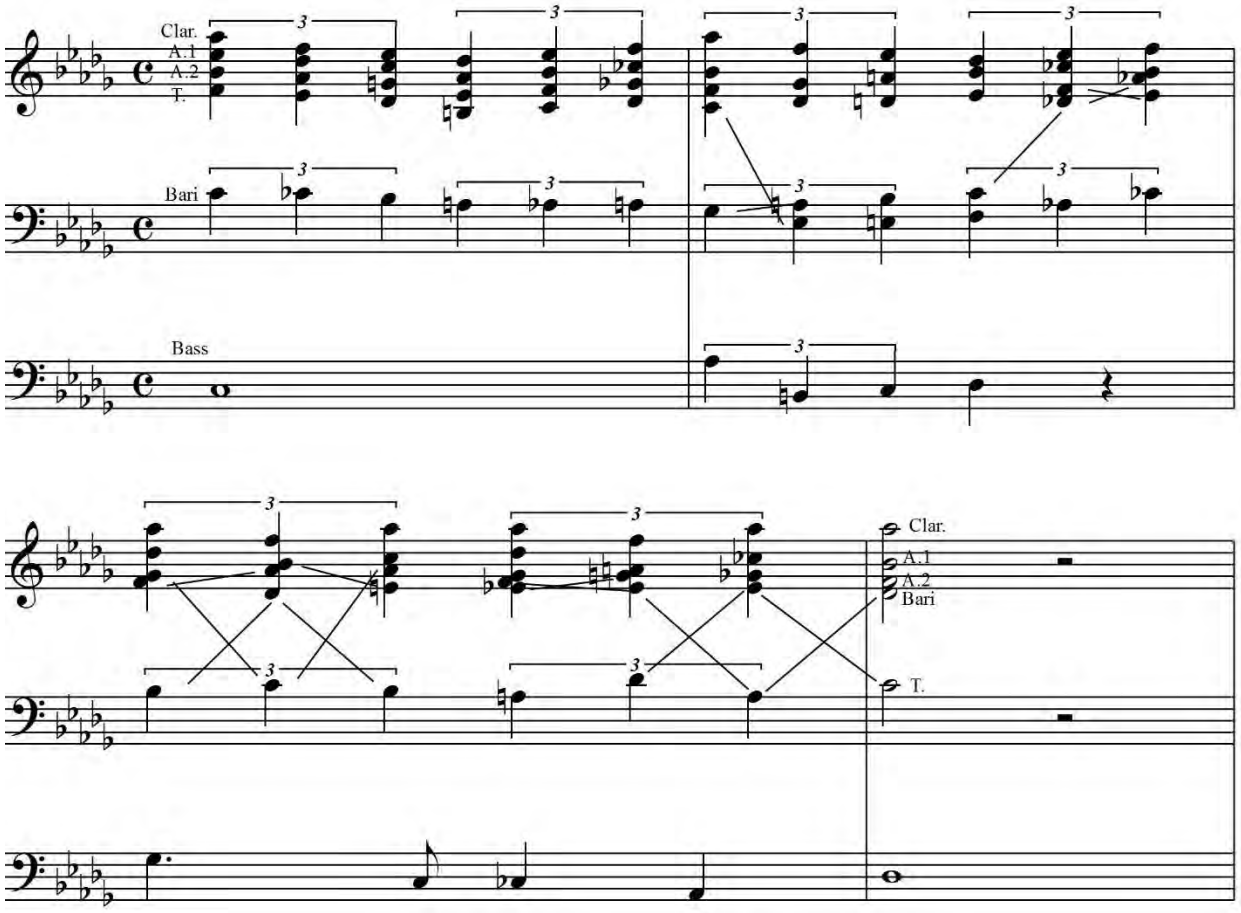
Ellington's handwritten score for "TGTT" follows:

"...means Too Good To Title, because it violates conformity in the same way, we like to think, that Jesus Christ did."
(Stanley Dance. The World Of Duke Ellington. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 260.



Last chord not shown: but it is significant (even if 'improvised'): Db triad over G

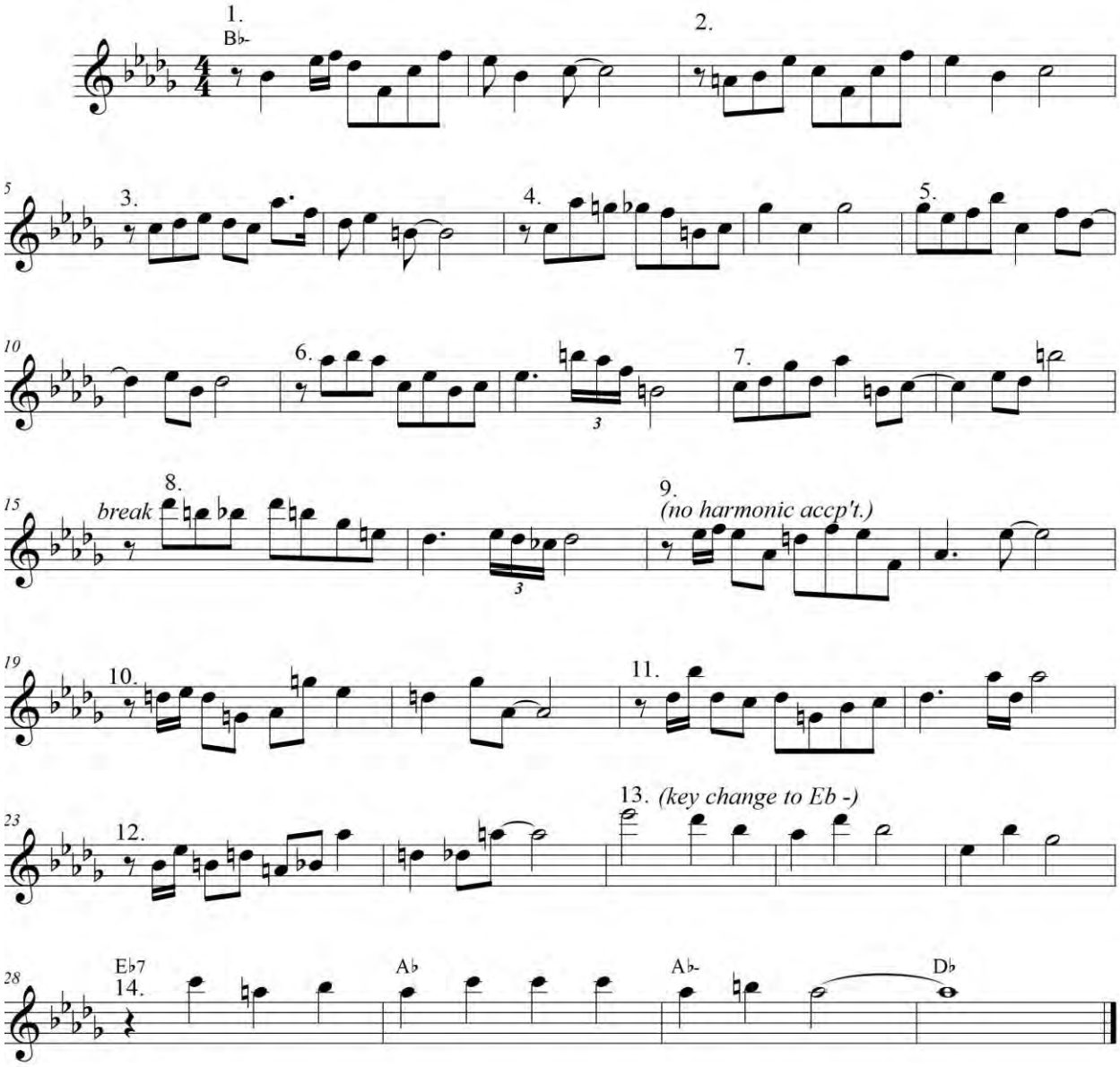
- “Morning Mood” soli showing open voicing voice-crossing technique cited in discussion of “Ko-ko” (in concert pitch): [1960]



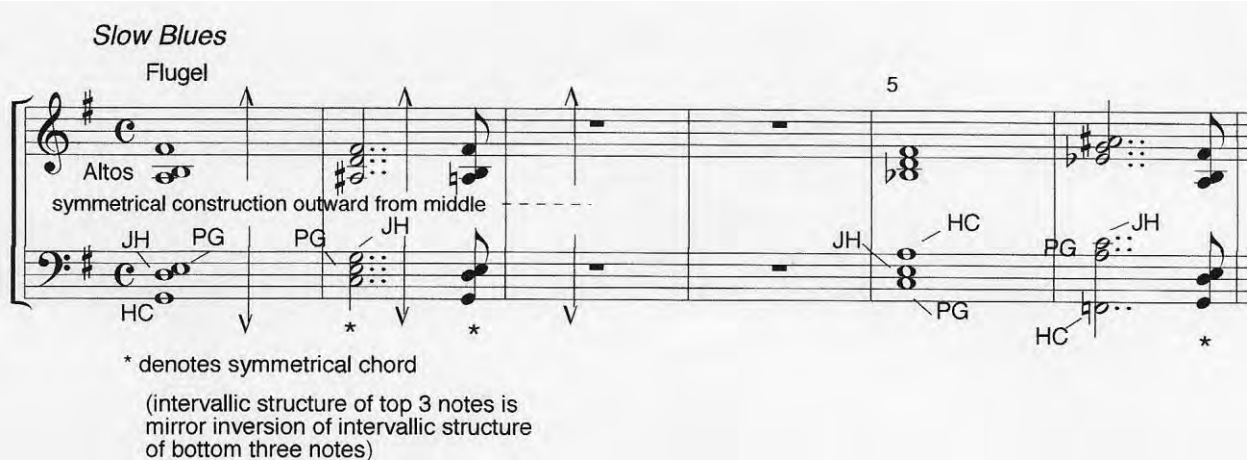
7.) Other compositions with unique and situational formal gestures:
- “Mirror Writing” from “Blues in Orbit” [1959 -- see below]
- The Sonnets from “Such Sweet Thunder” [1957]
  (see transcription which follows of the 14 ten-note phrases from “Sonnet for Caesar”),

Sonnet for Caesar — Ellington

Dirge



Mirror Writing (as in Strayhorn's "Blues in Orbit" – see also Domek article)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rMg1IZ4ij1M



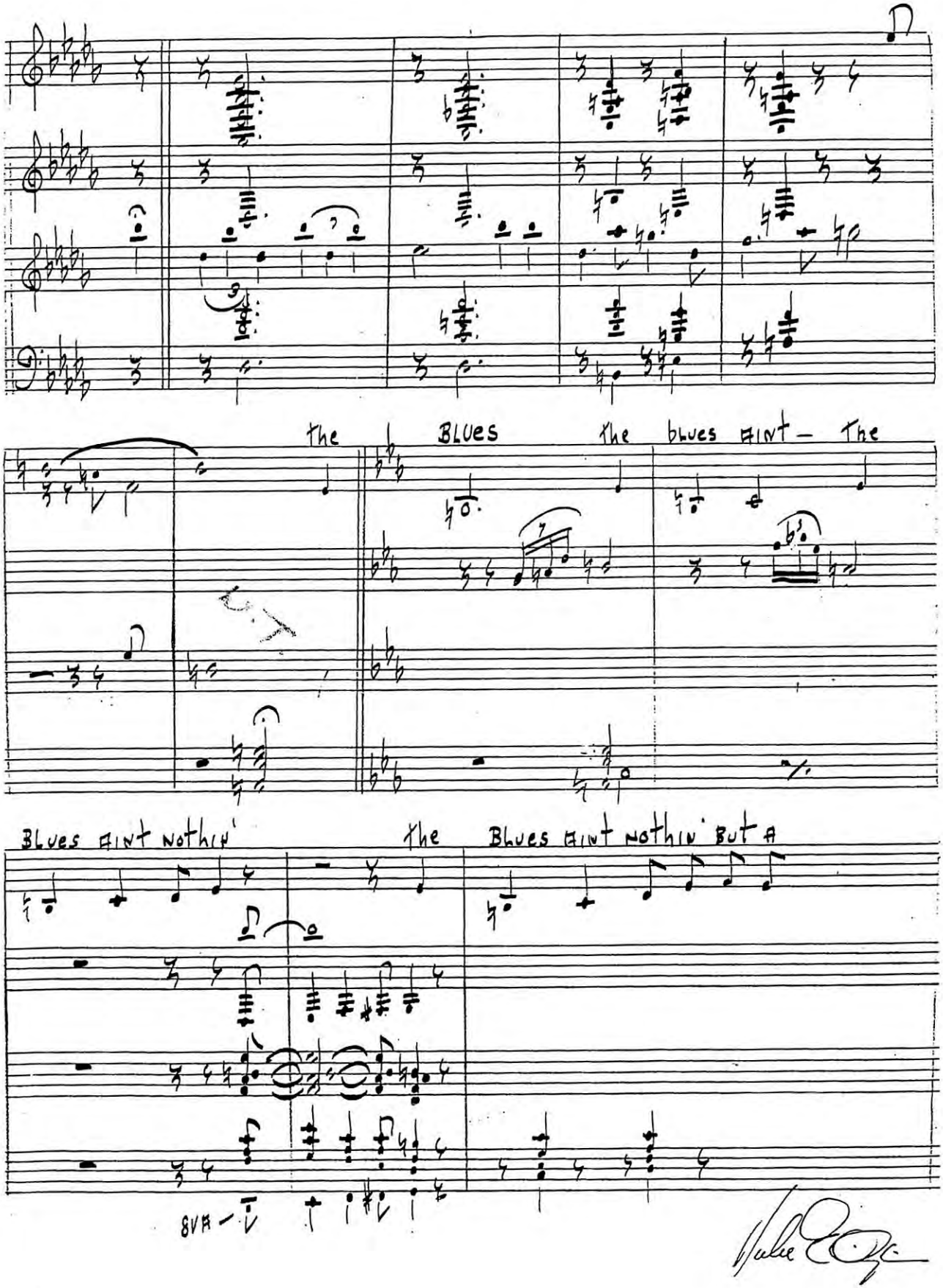
- Palindromic Form ("The Blues"). Note the way the opening lyrics build up to gradually arrive at the opening melodic statement and are 'deconstructed' in reverse to conclude:

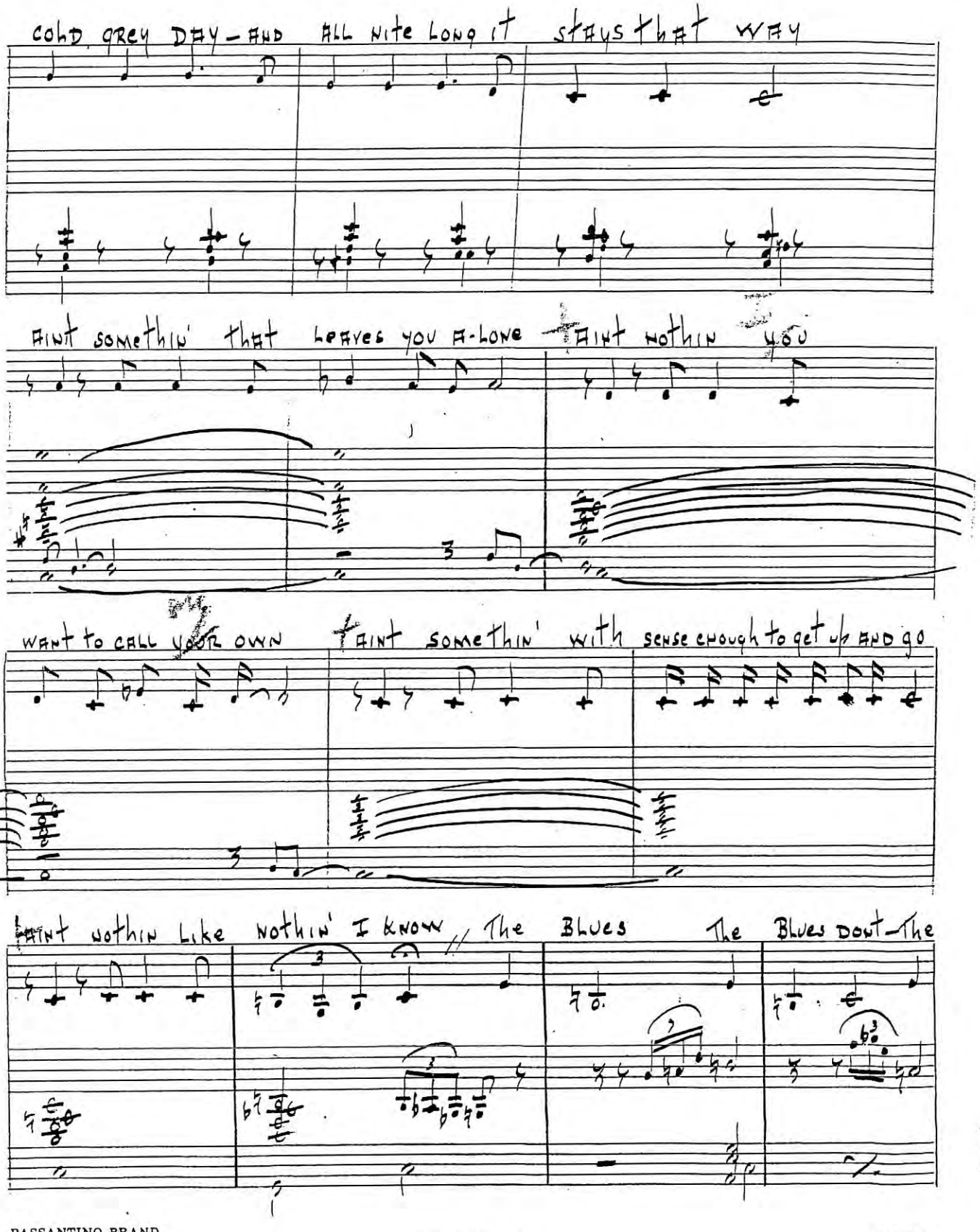
(Note: Starts @ 6:11 of "Brown" from the 1943 Carnegie Hall Concert and continues through about 11:26) play through 8:25 to show that the tenor solo is basically composed….then skip to 9:22 for the band soli: a 12-bar form but is it a Blues? "Sweet" (Trombones' 'call') vs. the "Hot" (#9 'answer'); make note of:

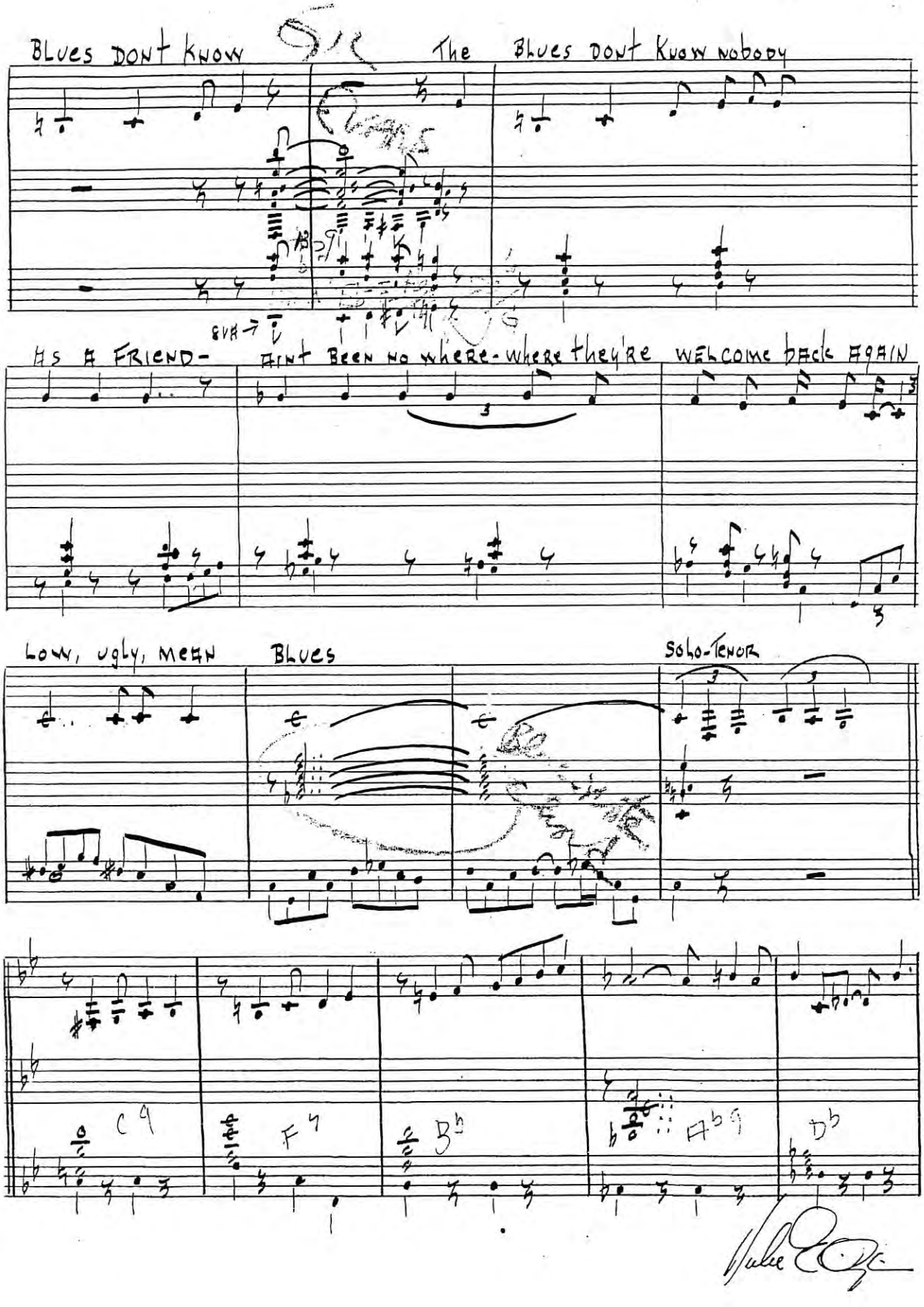
- DE's personalized score format and
- the reharmonization under the vocals after the band 'soli'.

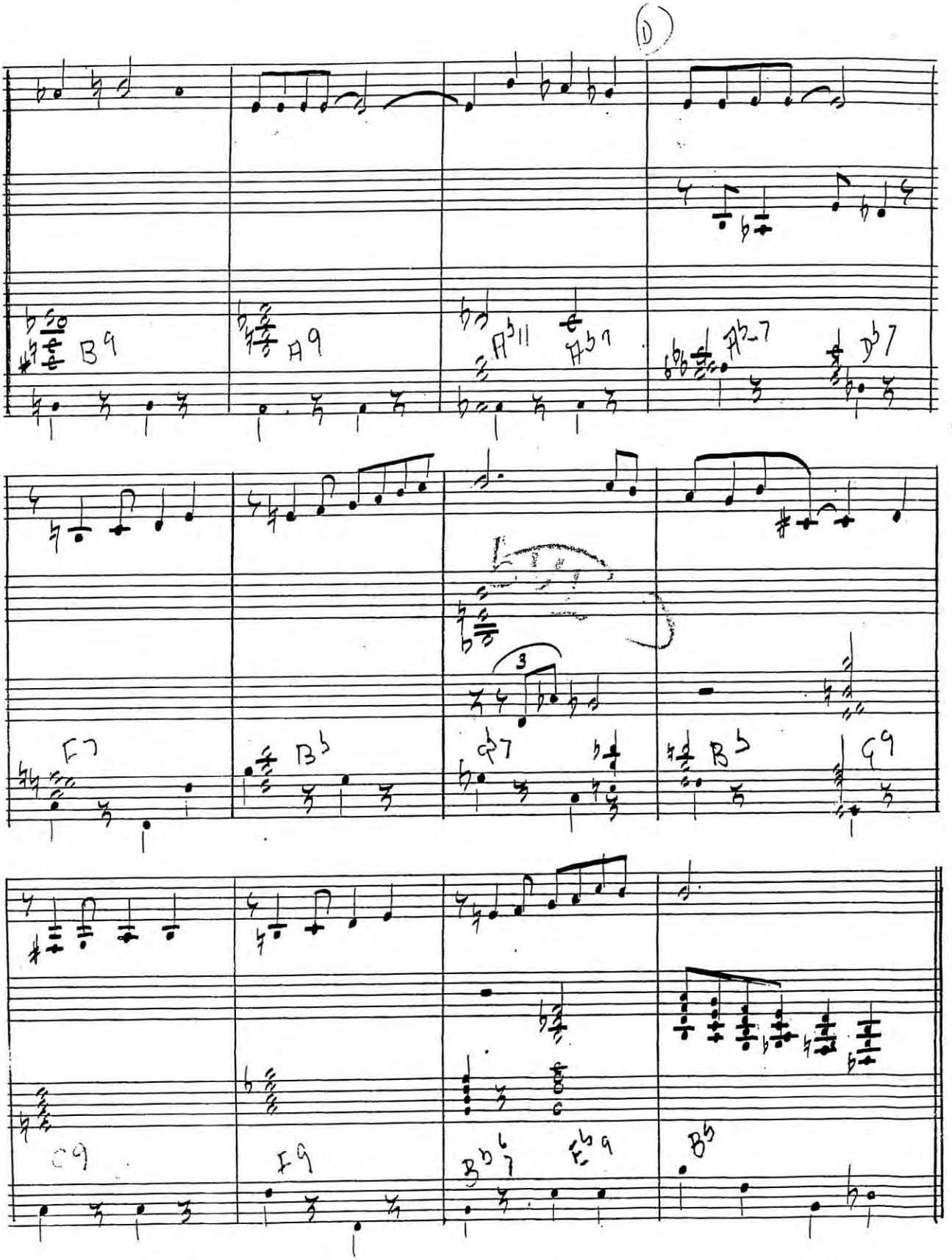
The Blues Theme

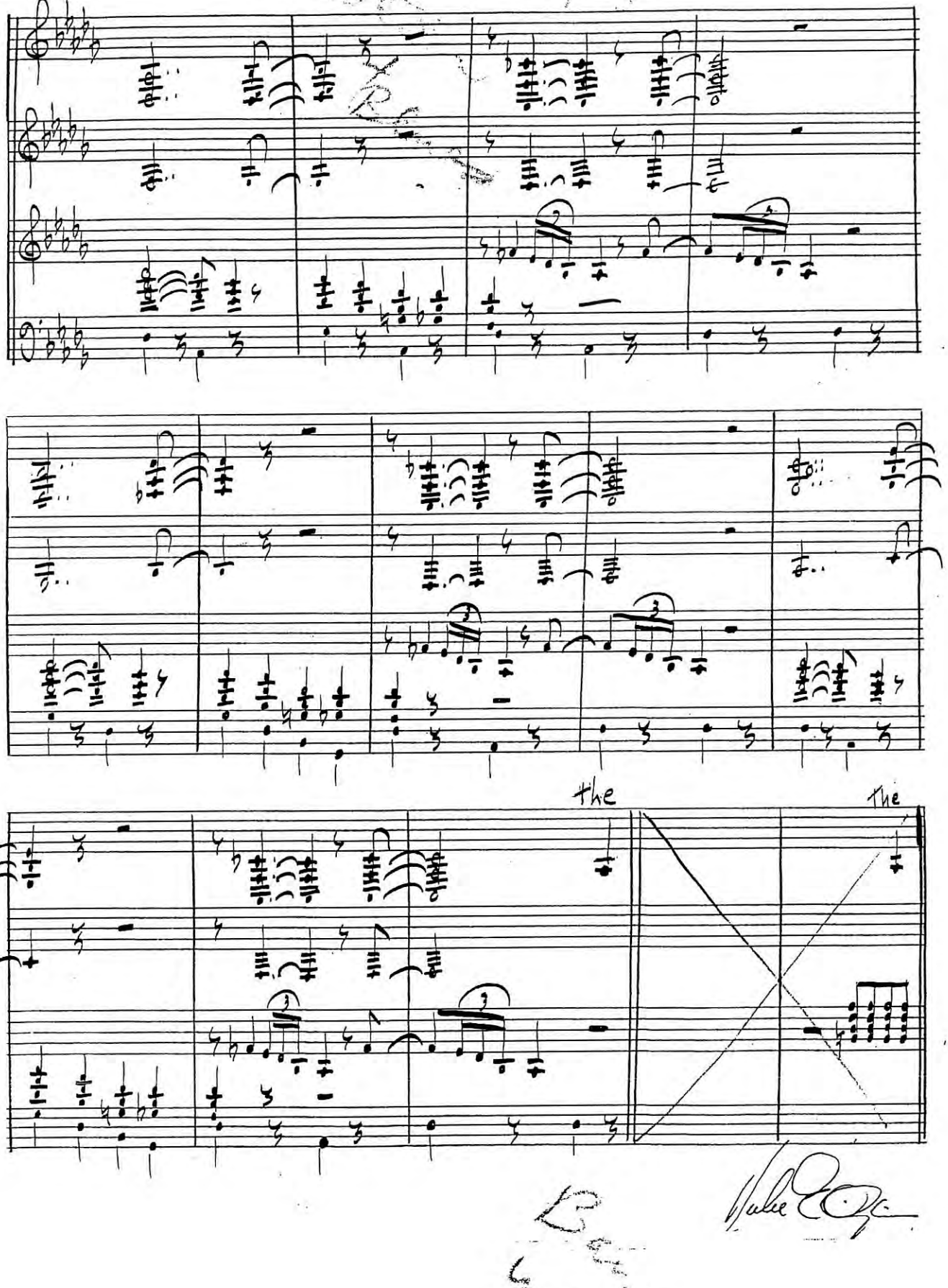
Blues 3




COLD GREY DAY - AND ALL NITE LONG IT STAYS THAT WAY
AIN'T SOMETHIN' THAT LEAVES YOU A-LONE AIN'T NOTHIN YOU
WANT TO CALL YOUR OWN AIN'T SOMETHIN' WITH SENSE ENOUGH TO GET UP AND GO
AIN'T NOTHIN LIKE NOTHIN' I KNOW // The BLUES The BLUES DON'T - The


BLUES DONT KNOW
The BLUES DONT KNOW NOBODY
8VA
HS A FRIEND-
AINT BEEN NO WHERE-WHERE THEY'RE WELCOME BACK AGAIN
LOW, UGLY, MEAN BLUES
SOLO-TENOR
C9
F7
B♭
A♭9
D♭


D
B9
A9
A11
A7
A-7
D7
F7
B♭
C7
B♭
G9
C9
F9
B♭7
E♭9
B♭
3


the
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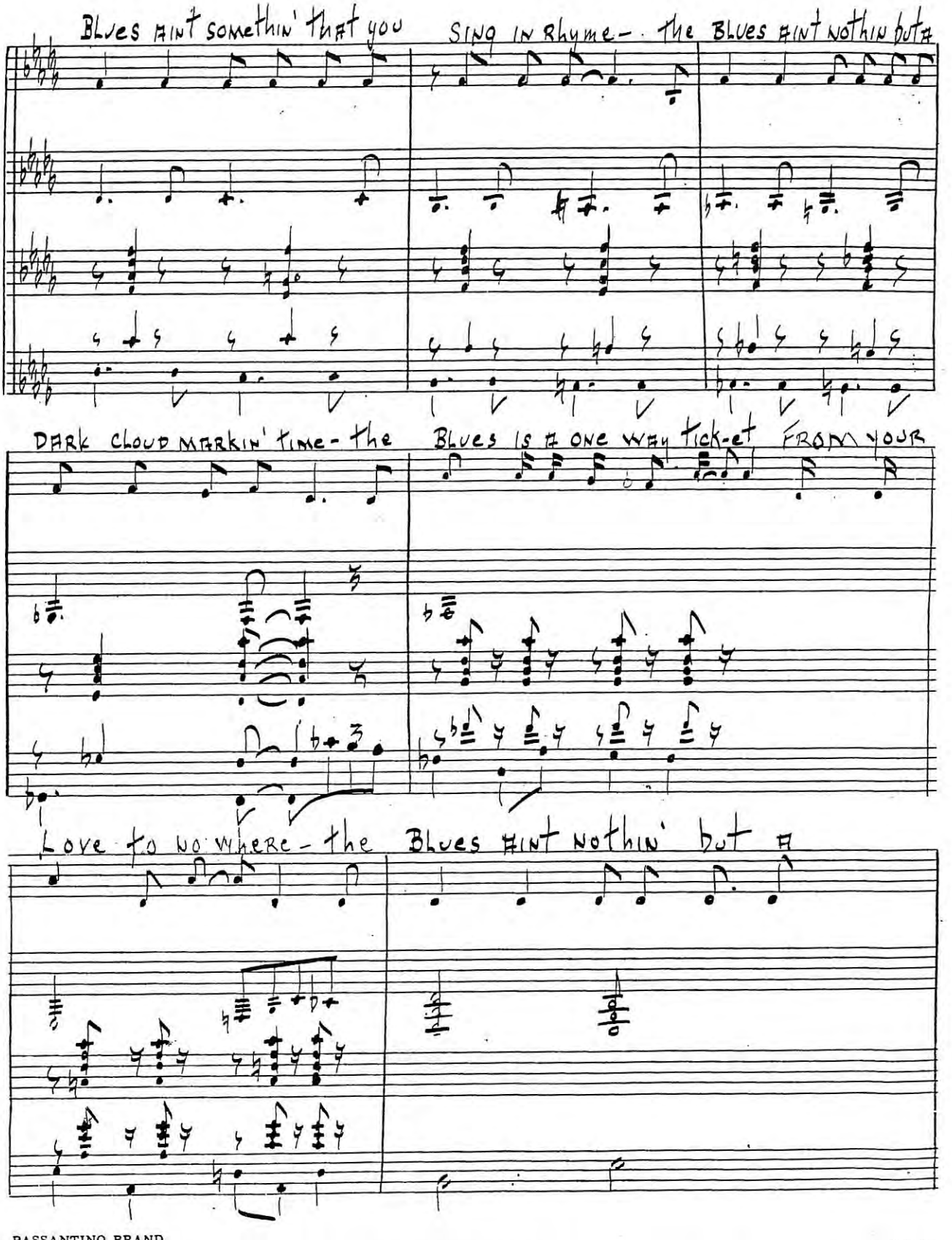

Blues ain't somethin' that you sing in rhyme - the Blues ain't nothin but a
dark cloud markin' time - the Blues is a one way ticket from your
love to no where - the Blues ain't nothin' but a

All Rubato

black crepe veil-read-y to wear

Sighin' CRY-IN'

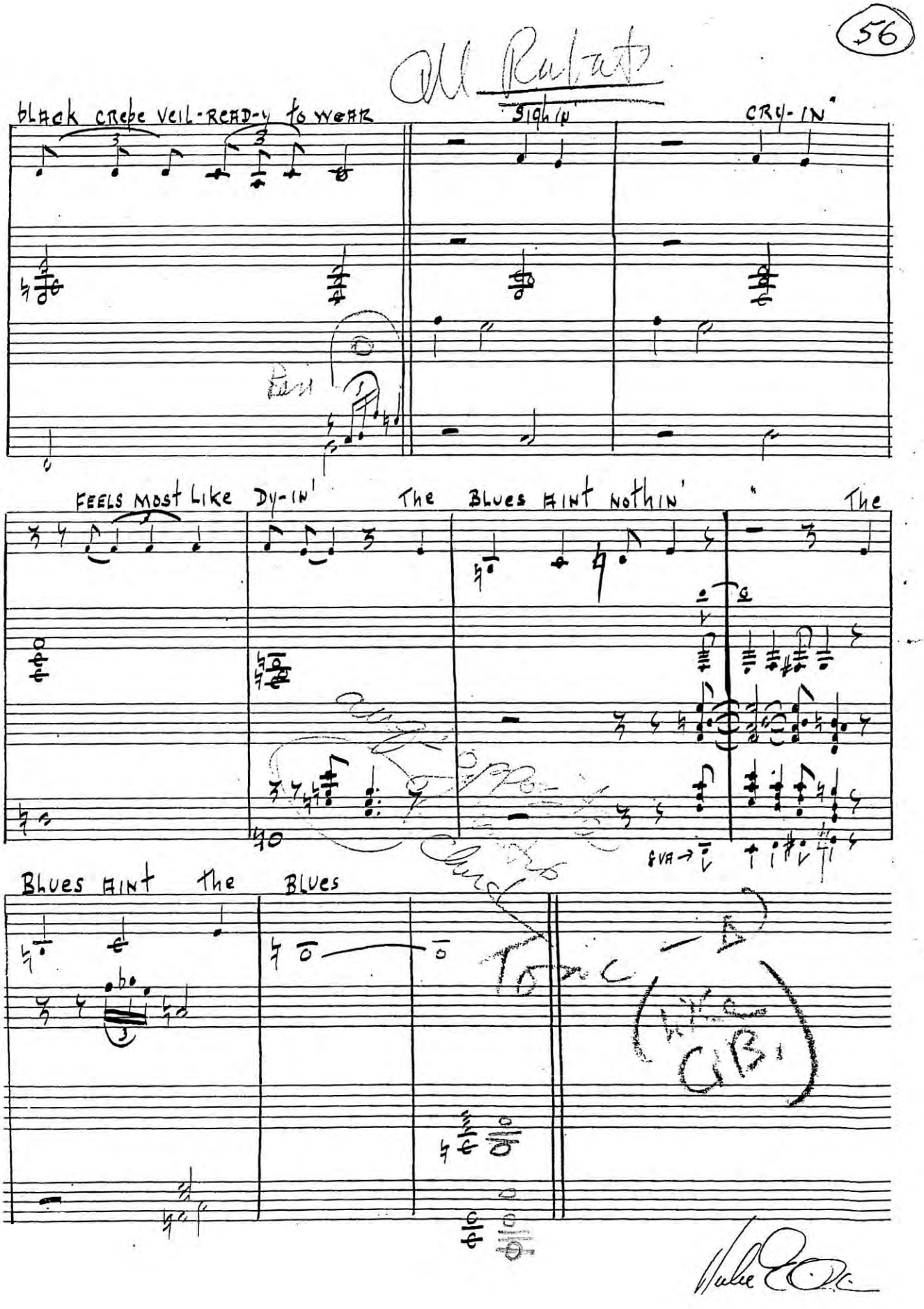
FEELS most Like Dy-IN' The Blues AINT nothin' The

8VA →

Blues AINT the Blues

Tonic — A

(like GB)



Sources:

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Domek, Richard. *"Compositional Characteristics of Later Duke Ellington Works*". IAJE Research Papers, 2001, pp. 120-131.

Ellington, Duke. Introductory Remarks from *"Black Brown and Beige: The Duke Ellington Carnegie Hall Concerts, January 1943."* Prestige CD (also embedded youtube link)

Ellington, Duke. *"Symphony in Black" (originally Paramount), in "Duke Ellington and His Orchestra: Classics, 1929-1952"*, Amvest Video, 1935 (see also embedded youtube link)

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Tucker, Mark, Ed. *The Duke Ellington Reader*. Oxford University Press. 1993.

Tucker, Mark. *"The Genesis of Black, Brown and Beige"*. Black Music Research Journal 13, No. 2, pp. 67-86. 1993.

van de Leur, Walter. *Something to Live For: The Music of Billy Strayhorn*. Oxford University Press, 2002. Especially useful: Appendix D.

The Duke Ellington Centennial Edition: The Complete RCA Victor Recordings (1927-1973) (*Ko-Ko; T.G.T.T.*; Seattle Concert version of *Tone Parallel to Harlem*)

The Carnegie Hall Concerts 1943 (Prestige) (*Black Brown and Beige*)

Such Sweet Thunder 1957 (Columbia) (*Too Good to Title*)

Blues in Orbit 1960 (Columbia) (*Blues in Orbit*)

The Queen's Suite 1959 (Original Jazz Classics) (*Sonnet for Caesar*)

The Complete 1932-1940 Brunswick/ Columbia Masters Ellington and His Famous Orchestra (Mosaic) (*Lightnin'*)

Ellington Uptown 1951 (Columbia) (Studio version of *Tone Parallel to Harlem*)

Peer Gynt Suites Nos. 1 & 2 1960 (Columbia) (*Morning Mood*)

Smithsonian Collection Scores for "A Tone Parallel to Harlem"; "T.G.T.T."; and "Black Brown and Beige (including "The Blues")"

Kingbrand (David Berger) Scores for "Ko-Ko"; "Lightnin'"; and "Morning Mood"

Author's transcriptions of "Sonnet For Caesar"

Richard Domek's transcription of "Blues in Orbit"

All transcriptions and scores, regardless of source, checked for accuracy by the author.

Resources:

http://www.ejazzlines.com/big-band-arrangements/jazz-at-lincoln-center/

David Berger Website: www.SuchSweetThunderMusic.com

Finding aid to the huge Duke Ellington Collection at The Smithsonian Institution:

http://amhistory.si.edu/archives/d5301.htm

Ruth Ellington Collection:

http://sova.si.edu/details/NMAH.AC.0415

More than a dozen other Ellington collections can be found through this page:

http://americanhistory.si.edu/archives/collections