



Alice Babs



1924 - 2014

Alice Babs in

Alice Babs left us on February 11 at the age of 90 years and after having suffered from bad health well over a year. Her personal situation and well-being over the last years has been subject of public discussions in the form of TV-presentations which have caused some commotion amongst family members on one side and friends on the other. We leave that discussion aside here.

Her career has been described and documented in almost every Swedish paper so we leave that aside as well and here we will concentrate on her Ellingtonian career.



Alice was very proud of her connection with Duke Ellington and in a TV-celebration on her 80th birthday she confirmed that she understood her cooperation with Duke as the climax of her career. She was proud of being considered an Ellingtonian. In this TV-show, which was just recently shown in Swedish TV, she explained how she very early in life became influenced by Louis Armstrong, Mills Brothers and Duke Ellington. She became the popular artist who in the early 1940's introduced "swing" to the Swedish people which was done under the influence of these giants. Still there were many cultural personalities who judged her to exercise bad influence on younger people but her popularity could not be broken.

Alice many times told her admirers that she participated in Duke's 40th birth-day celebrations which took place in Stockholm on April 29 while Duke made his extensive 1939 tour of Sweden. Duke surely had no memory of that when they met again in 1963 during Ellington's first tour of Sweden that year. On February 7, 1963, Swedish TV had arranged a broadcast from "Circus" and Alice Babs was invited to take part. Surely Alice was flattered by this invitation but we are unaware of Duke's knowledge about her capacity as a singer. There are unissued recordings from the rehearsals made in the morning and Alice sings *Take Love Easy*. Later the same day recordings were made for a TV-show to be named "Indigo" where Alice sang *Take The "A" Train*, *Take Love Easy* and *Come Sunday*. This show has been released in its entirety on the DVD

*Alice, Eric Ericson
and Duke in the
Gustav Vasa Church
1969.*



"A Duke named Ellington" (Issued by Council for Positive Images, Inc.).

Ellington was apparently impressed by Alice's performance. By the end of February 1963 his band performed on the Continent but after the last concert in Paris on February 24th the majority of the musicians were sent back to US. At this time Ellington had an agreement with Frank Sinatra and his Reprise Records to make recordings for that label with artists of his own choice. Duke called Alice and asked her to come to Paris immediately for a recording session. Alice was not in a position to go at once but on March 1st they spent a day together with the assistance of local musicians to record for an LP that was later released as "Alice Babs and Duke Ellington" (Reprise RS-5024). For unknown reasons Reprise never bothered to release this wonderful record in the US but only in Europe.

If not earlier Alice had now made a deep impression on Duke and he wanted her to become a regular member of his band but she was well aware of what touring with a band meant and therefore turned down the offer. Her private life and family meant more to her.

In 1965 Duke Ellington had performed his *First Sacred Concert* in San Francisco. By January 19, 1968, it was time for the *Second Sacred Concert* and Alice Babs was asked to participate because Duke had composed a few numbers especially for her. The concert was held at St. John The Divine in New York and Alice is featured in *Almighty God*, *Heaven*, *T.G.T.T.*, and *Praise God And Dance*. Duke had always been a bit religious and by his later years in life this religiosity became more obvious resulting in his Sacred Concerts. It is probably correct to say that Alice also had a belief in God and maybe they met here not only musically

memoriam



*Alice performing
in Gustav Vasa
Church.*

*Alice rehearsing
with Duke.*

but also in a common religious belief. The Sacred Concert was repeated next day in St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Connecticut and on January 22nd recordings were made.

In November 1969 it was time for Duke Ellington's and the orchestra's annual tour of Europe and on November 6 Ellington together with Alice Babs and The Swedish Radio Choir under the direction of Eric Ericsson performed the *Second Sacred Concert* at The Gustav Vasa Church in Stockholm.

Again on November 16th the *Second Sacred Concert* is performed in Eglise St. Sulpice in Paris, and now also together with The Swingle Singers. Finally the Concert was performed in Barcelona, Spain. This concert is recorded and one surprisingly finds how Duke calls forward Alice but decides to play another number while she politely sits down somewhat confused. Instead Duke calls

in Tony Watkins who is not at all prepared for his entrance and one notes from a camera placed behind the scene that Duke is far from pleased with the situation. The expression on his face shows that he utters some rough comments. But the concert works out well after all and Alice sings beautifully.

The next time Alice appears with the Ellington band is on July 1, 1973. The orchestra played two concerts during that year's Newport Festival which had been relocated to New York. Alice was invited to sing and surely made a good job but for once the Ellington orchestra got bad reviews. Whitney Balliett wrote: "a mishmash of bad taste, beauty and virtuosity". There exist no recordings from this concert but we have reason to believe that Alice stood for the two latter judgments, especially as New York Times wrote about "Miss Babs' lovely tone, impeccable vibrato and astonish-

ing accuracy in the upper register". Duke must have felt the same way because two days later he hired a studio for one of his private recording sessions. Four tunes arranged by Nils Lindberg and with Alice as vocalist were recorded and they were later released on the Phontastic's LP-album "Far Away Star" (Phont-50-11).

Later the same year it was time for Ellington to present his *Third Sacred Concert*, with its premier at Westminster Abbey in London. It was of course in a high degree built around Alice's capacity as a brilliant soprano singer.

Already next day the orchestra played a concert in Malmo, Sweden. Alice is in the audience and of course Duke calls her up on the stage. She sings amongst other tunes *Serenade To Sweden* and a wonderful version of *Jeep's Blues*, a number she had always been very fond of. Together with Nils Lindberg and Joe Benjamin she also presents a composition by Ellington that had never before been played publicly; *There's Something About Me*. This concert was later issued on CD by Swedish Caprice (CAP 21599). The very informative inlet has a chapter by Alice which is reprinted separately in this Bulletin.

The last time we find Alice sing with Duke Ellington is when the *Third Sacred Concert* is performed in Barcelona on November 10, 1973.

Those of our readers who use to attend the Ellington conferences held several times on various locations around the world have had the pleasure of meeting Alice under very informal and relaxed circumstances. On these occasions she has usually been the member of a panel together with other Ellingtonians talking about her experiences with Duke Ellington and his orchestra. At the two conferences in Stockholm in 1994 and 2004 she was of course a great attraction and contributed to the success of the events. Despite her long and successful career she was still very humble and always had time to talk to anybody having a question for her. Alice was of course a honorary member of DESS and the Society made contributions to an annual award in her name to a promising new Swedish talent in the field of jazz. Alice Babs will be missed by all of us. We loved her madly!

DESS

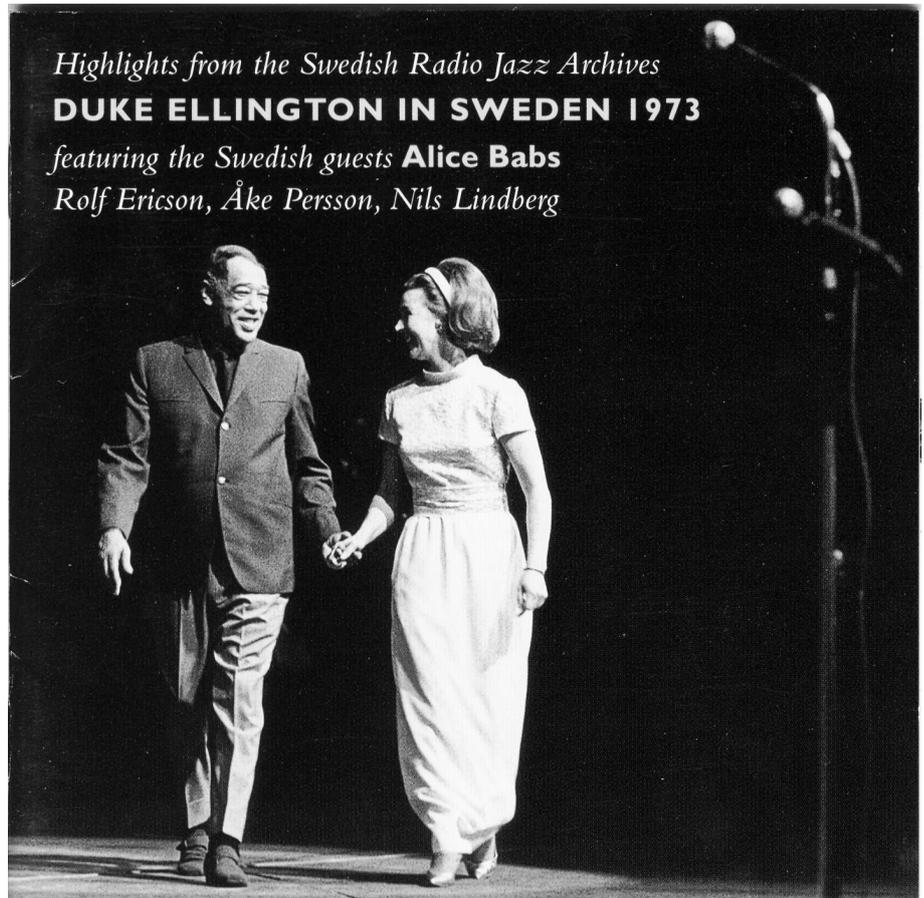
Malmö, October 25, 1973

In their series of *Highlights from the Swedish Radio Jazz Archives*, Caprice records back in 1999 re-leased the CD "Duke Ellington In Sweden 1973" featuring the Swedish guests Alice Babs, Rolf Ericson, Åke Persson, Nils Lindberg. (CAP 21599). The liner notes contain an essay by Alice Babs, which is here quoted in full:

When I hear anyone using the word "unexpected" or "surprise" I cannot avoid thinking about the Duke and those days leading up to this Malmö event. Why? Because only on the previous evening in Westminster Abbey I was fully convinced that this had been his "last night stand". Duke was very ill and even the painkiller shots applied by Mercer to his father seemed to have no effect. We had accepted an invitation to have supper with Prime Minister Edward Heath in no. 10 Downing Street immediately after the concert and so had Princess Margaret, Ruth Ellington and a few more people, but the Duke stopped by at no. 10 on his way back to the Dorchester Hotel only to make his excuses for not being able to come. Therefore, to meet D.E. just one day later in Malmö, apparently fit as a fiddle and even with the looks of that "young promising apprentice piano player" (as he announced himself at the concert), was to me the surprise of my life.

But then I have to forget the runner-up sensation of unexpectedness from only a few days earlier. I was engaged to sing "The Second Sacred Concert", which I knew by heart, when Duke phoned to ask me to come to London as soon as possible for rehearsal, because what he had in mind was an entirely new concert. To call that a surprise is an understatement.

Well, back to Malmö. To tell you the truth, I find it difficult to recall any occasion, when the Duke had displayed more of that contagious enthusiasm that had become his hallmark. Could it be the sounds of Åke Persson's trombone and Rolf Ericson's trumpet that had this invigorating effect? This was not an everyday listening pleasure for the Maestro who loved them both, and wel-



Highlights from the Swedish Radio Jazz Archives

DUKE ELLINGTON IN SWEDEN 1973

featuring the Swedish guests **Alice Babs**
Rolf Ericson, Åke Persson, Nils Lindberg

comed every opportunity to let them "sit in". I myself had a very special reason for wanting the Duke to be his normal fit self that day in Malmö. I had prepared my surprise for him by asking Nils Lindberg to fly down from Dalecarlia to accompany me on the piano for a performance of *There's something about me* without him that really is not me, a composition which the Duke had dedicated and presented to me during a luncheon four months earlier in the home of his sister Ruth in New York. He asked me to switch on my portable recorder, sat down at the piano and sang to me this entirely new composition. A week or two later I gave the recorded tape to Nils Lindberg asking him to make an arrangement for symphony orchestra for a TV programme I was contracted to make some weeks later in Stockholm. Nils was therefore prepared to help me with the big surprise that it turned out to be in Malmö. Some of my friends in the band assured me that D.E. was deeply moved during these rare moments of inactivity for him on the stage.

For my participation with Duke Ellington and his Orchestra during the Newport Jazz Festival earlier in July at the Lincoln Center in New York, Nils had made arrangements of *Checked hat* and *Far away star*, both of which came to be of the greatest interest to the Maestro. You will find the former on this CD, but

as no time was given to the orchestra for rehearsals, here is where Nils, too, gets his surprise.

I would like to comment on *Somebody cares*. I heard this song for the first time when Duke played it to me in between rehearsals for THE MAJESTY OF GOD, the *Third Sacred Concert*, in London only two days before the Malmö event. Anita Moore and Tony Watkins were present and Duke then asked them to sing it for me as he was very anxious that I should get to know it. Duke always gave his singers a lot of freedom to improvise and give their versions but Anita and Tony, he thought, were improvising the song all through, never once singing the melody straight. Therefore, considering that I still had no written music nor lyrics given to me, I was taken by surprise, when I heard Duke announce that I should sing the song together with Anita and Tony. It was just as big a surprise for me to find the song included on this CD.

In spite of everything I am very glad that these concerts in Malmö got to be documented, as they marked the end of my dream-come-true, singing with my Maestro. Apart from a Sacred Concert on November 11th, 1973, in Santa Maria del Mar in Barcelona, we never saw each other again.

Alice Babs

A composer's dream

Duke Ellington's view of Alice Babs

Alice a legend at 85.

The Ellington Conference in Oldham 1988 - Alice fronting a band lead by Bob Wilber and Bill Berry.



There was mutual admiration between Duke and Alice. These two had a personal relation that probably not existed between Duke and many of his sidemen. When in New York, Alice together with Nils-Ivar got invited to Duke's home, where they met his sister Ruth and other members of the family. When Duke wrote his *Music Is My Mistress*, he devoted a page to Alice Babs. His portrait of Alice is full of superlatives and we quote his words in their entirety:



Duke paying his respects to Alice



In 1963, I found myself in Paris with an unusual contract that gave me authority to act as A&R man for Reprise Records and record six or seven people of my choice. The first one I got was Alice Babs, for she is probably the most unique artist I know. She is coloratura soprano, an unlimited soprano. She sings opera, she sings lieder, she sings what we call jazz and blues, she sings like an instrument, she even yodels, and she can read any and all of it! No matter how hard the intervals, when you hand her the music, she sight-reads and sings it as though she had rehearsed it a month. Every word comes out perfectly enunciated, understandable and believable. Alice Babs is a composer's dream, for with her he can forget all the limitations and just write his heart out. When I persuaded her to come down from Stockholm to Paris, we made a wonderful record with her and four French horns. It never came out here, but the Swedes made sure it was issued in their country.

She is just one of the rare people, one of the rarest artists. Whenever I get an opportunity to do anything I feel is out of the ordinary, I think of her. So when I got ready to do my second sacred concert in 1968, where I had to go up over the top of the first, I sent to Sweden to bring her to New York. There were a couple of things in that concert which required real musicianship, which had to be read and executed just as they were planned, and she was the one I had complete confidence in to do that. She is a terrific musician, and when I look at the pictures of her taken in the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine - why, I think she looks like an angel! She is a beautiful person who has overcome the problem of singing as pretty as she looks. In referring to her, one never says, "There are just a few left," because she was probably the only one born.