

‘Serenade To Sweden’ marks, together with the telecast ‘Indigo’, the start of the cooperation between Duke Ellington and Alice Babs.

The recording took place in Paris at the end of February and beginning of March 1963.

For some reason, the record was only issued in Europe and not until 1966. Now 40 years later, a CD with the same content as the LP has been issued on the Real Gone Music label.

The thought to make a record with Babs apparently entered Ellington’s mind during the rehearsals and recordings of the Indigo telecast. “Duke said to me that he very much would like to make a record with me ... but I never thought it would happen,” Babs said.

But she was wrong. Ellington had booked a week at the end of his European tour in 1963 to make recordings for Reprise Records – launched by Frank Sinatra (together with among others Dean Martin) in 1960 – and Babs was apparently one of the artists he wanted to record.

But as was often the case with Ellington, everything happened at the last minute and there seems to have been too little planning ahead for the recording week.

The South African singer Sathima ”Bea” Benjamin has told how she managed to get in contact with Ellington back-stage after his concert in Zurich and persuade him to come and listen to her at the club where she played with Dollar Brand.

Apparently, Ellington liked what he heard and he arranged for Benjamin and Brand to be in Paris the week thereafter to record with him.

Something similar happened to Alice Babs. On Sunday evening February 22, she got a call from Ellington. “I like you to be in Paris tomorrow for a recording. This was too short a notice for me so we agreed on three days later.”

It must have been the same way for the other artists that Ellington recorded during the week – Svend Asmussen, Stéphane Grappelli and Bud Powell.

In any case, Babs flew to Paris three days later together with her daughter Titti and her close friend Ragnvi Gylder. They checked in at their hotel and then Alice went to Ellington’s hotel where he, Billy Strayhorn and a piano were waiting for her for a first rehearsal.

Alice told: ‘He had only written harmonies on which I was supposed to improvise. There was no melody so I had to find it out myself. When Duke pointed upwards, I was supposed to sing in the high register and when he pointed downwards then I should sing in the low register.’

According to discographies, the recordings for “Serenade To Sweden” took place on February 28 and March 1.

However, Ragnvi Gylder says that they were in the studio at Avenue Hoche three nights in a row. Alice Babs gave the same information to the Ellington specialist and editor for the DEMS Bulletin, Sjef Hoefsmit, in 2000 (DEMS Bulletin 2000:4).

Gylder says that the first night was very much about talking, improvising and feeling their way. When the session ended at midnight, three takes had been approved.

She also remembers that only a few people were in the small studio on the first night. Ellington arrived dressed in an elegant white coat with blue lining, sat down in the control room and invited Titti Sjöblom and her to join him. Then the session started.

Two nights later, 69 takes of 16 different melodies had been recorded. In addition to the ones on the record, also "Things Aint What They Used To Be" was taped but strangely enough it caused Babs problems and one never got a real good take.

As the words got around about the recording, more and more people came to the studio and in the end, there was no space in the studio for all of them.

It was a fantastic experience for Alice to work with Ellington in this way, says Gylder, and to get his total confidence. "But my strongest impression was to see Ellington moved and happy when he heard Alice sings his music. He took Titti's and my hands and said to us and to everybody else in the studio: "This voice embodies all the warmth, joy of life, rhythm and tragedy that is the innermost secret of jazz".