

ROY ELDRIDGE

The Nifty Cat

New World Records 80349

When Roy Eldridge moved into Jimmy Ryan's in New York in 1969, it was a shock to many of his fans to find the feisty little trumpeter playing in a Dixieland club. At that time he was without question one of the three most important trumpet players in the history of jazz--a succession that started with Louis Armstrong in the 1920s, moved to Eldridge in the '30s, and was followed by Dizzy Gillespie in the '40s.

Eldridge was constantly referred to as "a bridge" between Armstrong and Gillespie. But he brushed such ideas aside.

"I was never trying to be a bridge between Louis Armstrong and something," he said. "I was just trying to outplay everybody--and to outplay them my way."

Eldridge had always played with state-of-the-art jazz musicians--and done it his way. He was swinging long before swing became fashionable in the mid-'30s. Later, when the white swing bands became dominant, he was so discouraged that he retired briefly to study radio engineering and electronics, but he soon returned as a star with Gene Krupa's band and with Artie Shaw. In the '50s, he toured with Norman Granz's star-studded Jazz at the Philharmonic troupes.

But never in his career had he played Dixieland.

"I'm basically not a Dixielander," Eldridge admitted when people questioned his move to Ryan's.

"But I'm adaptable. I've played bar mitzvahs, society dates, Viennese waltzes, tangos. At Ryan's, there are basic tunes they recognize--'South Rampart Street Parade,' 'Muskrat Ramble,' 'Jazz Me Blues,' things like that. You learn these and you play them."

He adjusted so well to the Ryan's repertoire--seasoned with some of his own specialties--that he stayed there for eleven years, until a heart attack in the fall of 1980 forced him to stop blowing his horn at the age of sixty-nine. One of the benefits he gained from the gig at Ryan's was the opportunity to make this record, his first in ten years.

One night Stanley Dance, the jazz writer, brought William Weilbacher of Master Jazz Recordings to Ryan's to hear Eldridge. Three years earlier Weilbacher, a successful advertising executive, had started moonlighting as a record producer to get out records by swing-era stars whom he admired but who were then being neglected by the major record labels. He started with Jimmy Rushing and Earl Hines and went on to Johnny Hodges, Booty Wood, Don Byas, Julian Dash, Jay McShann, Claude Hopkins, and Sir Charles Thompson. After Weilbacher heard Eldridge at Ryan's, he asked him to make this album.

"The last time I was in a studio before that was in 1960," said Eldridge. "That time, I blew the whole thing on bossa nova. They told me they wanted to do this new thing that was a combination of something old and something new. So I did an album combining something old of Duke Ellington with some new things."

"This time," he went on, "I chose the musicians and played things I wrote myself."

The musicians he chose were old friends in whom he had confidence.

A key man was Budd Johnson, playing tenor and soprano saxophones. Johnson was also an arranger who had been the straw boss in Earl Hines's band for eight years in the '30s and early '40s and later wrote arrangements for all five of the big bands that made the move from swing to bebop in the '40s--those of Hines, Boyd Raeburn, Woody Herman, Billy Eckstine, and Dizzy Gillespie.

Benny Morton, the trombonist, had played with Fletcher Henderson, Don Redman, and Count Basie. The pianist, Nat Pierce, had been a band leader in New England before he joined Woody Herman and established himself as a pianist capable of substituting for the very personal styles of Claude Thornhill and Count Basie. Tommy Bryant was the bass-playing brother of the pianist Ray Bryant, and Oliver Jackson, the stylish Detroit drummer, had played with Yusef Lateef and Earl Hines and later joined Budd Johnson in forming the JPJ Quartet.

Weillbacher remembered the mood of the session.

"Roy was carefree, even gay, working out his own melodic lines and riffs," he said. "No one knew any of the songs except Roy before the date began, and each one was worked out in the studio, around the piano."

The result is a set to tunes that reflect the musical image of the enthusiastically energetic trumpeter whose short stature and bristling attack led to his identification as "Little Jazz" and "The Nifty Cat".

"Jolly Hollis," named for Eldridge's home town of recent years--Hollis, Queens--is a laid-back, lazily swinging piece. "Cotton" has Roy going slowly misterioso on muted trumpet. The group get swinging and riffing on "5400 North" and settles into a blues groove on "Wineola," on which Roy shows his sense of involvement as a singer. "Ball of Fire" is a product of Eldridge's work as star singer and trumpet player with Gene Krupa's orchestra from 1941 to 1943.

"The Nifty Cat," the keystone of the session, has a brisk, crisp attitude that is characteristic of Eldridge--a brilliant and original musician, a key link in passing the torch from Armstrong to Gillespie, and a dazzling performer on his own terms.

—John Wilson

John S. Wilson covers jazz for the New York Times and Video Review. He conducts a weekly jazz radio program, John Wilson's Classic Jazz, produced at WQXR in New York, as well as a weekly radio program for the Voice of America, Jazz Today.

Roy Eldridge is a nifty cat. We didn't know this when we first thought about asking Roy if he would like to record for Master Jazz. And it wasn't apparent from our first conversations with him at his gig at Jimmy Ryan's, either. We found him there, bubbling around the bandstand in a rather nearsighted way, introducing the songs and the players, singing occasionally, playing mostly unmuted in middle register, always with taste and imagination and intensity, often with dramatic virtuosity, ending each set with the sly announcement that it was "Pepsi-Cola time."

Roy was always available between sets. He is, like many jazz players, known to more people than he will ever know. And he is known to them in a particularly intimate way that he can sense but not experience. The jazz player creates, when he is good at his job, an emotional response in his listener that is quite different from the emotion that goes into his playing. The jazz player's emotions may be intense and fiery, all right, but there is great discipline and control within the intensity and fire, and genuine artistic integrity. The jazz listener's emotional response comes when he permits the player's artistry to take hold of him--the listener provides an inner discipline to the player's discipline, the inert emotional material for the player to mold, to make whole and unique. The player is barely aware of this even as the listener can never forget it.

Because Eldridge has been one of our very best jazz players for more than forty years, he has left behind lots of residual emotional transformations. And because Eldridge is an amiable and outgoing man, he made himself accessible to these memories between sets whenever he played. And so he was repeatedly asked to validate these past experiences by answering questions like "How many times have you played 'I Can't Get Started?'" or "Who was that trombonist you worked with on the Jazz at the Philharmonic tour in Denver in 1953?" The variations are endless. It is up to an Eldridge to respond to these memories of others, created by himself, that are almost entirely irrelevant to him either personally or artistically.

For these and a host of other reasons, our Roy Eldridges develop a certain world-weariness. They have seen it all, have heard it all, and know it all, and what they really want to do is continue creating on the basis of their own talent, hoping that the irrelevancies of others will diminish or disappear.

When an independent jazz-label producer approached Roy Eldridge in 1970 with a simple proposition to come make a record, do your thing, choose your own sidemen, your own tunes, you call the shots, there was no reason on earth for him to believe that this could be on the level. It must be some part of the irrelevancy, a gimmick or a con or something that in the end will mean nothing to him.

It took five meetings and heaven knows how many phone calls before he decided that he could believe us. In the process, we became the world's leading authority, save the musicians themselves, on the second set at Ryan's with which our arrival always seemed to coincide. Roy finally decided we were for real.

And what a time Roy had in the studio! It was his time, his date, his own, and he, exultant, beamed from start to finish. He taught us all what a nifty cat he is.

—Bill Weilbacher

- 1- Jolly Hollis (9:38)
- 2- Cotton (4:57)
- 3- 5400 North (6:03)
- 4- Ball of Fire (4:00)
- 5- Wineola (7:50)
- 6- The Nifty Cat (6:53)

Roy Eldridge, trumpet (vocal on WINEOLA);
Budd Johnson, tenor and soprano saxophones;
Benny Morton, trombone; Nat Pierce, piano;
Tommy Bryant, bass; Oliver Jackson, drums.

All songs by Roy Eldridge, published by Goldcast Music Publishers, Inc., except BALL OF FIRE, by Roy Eldridge and Gene Krupa, published by Variety Music Co.

The recording was previously available as
Master Jazz MJR 8110

Producer: Bill Weilbacher
Recording engineer: Roger Rhodes
Recorded November 24, 1970, in New York City
Prepared for reissue by Arthur Moorhead
Compact Disc mastering: Robert C. Ludwig, Masterdisk
Front cover photograph: William P. Gottlieb
Cover design: Bob Defrin

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