



---

## Duke Ellington's *It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)*

Kimberly Hannon Teal is an Assistant Professor of Musicology at the University of Arkansas. Her research addresses contemporary jazz, and she is interested in how live performance contexts contribute to musical experiences and meaning. Her publications can be found in *American Music* and *Jazz Perspectives*. She holds a Ph.D. from the Eastman School of Music, where she also served as the Director of Graduate Advising and Services and taught courses in music history.

by Kim Teal  
University of Arkansas

[Introduction](#)

[The Structure of It Don't Mean a Thing](#)

[Swing](#)

[The Ellington/Mills Partnership](#)

[Arrangements of It Don't Mean a Thing](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[Bibliography/Further Reading](#)

[Select Discography](#)

© 2017 A-R Editions, Inc.

This article is for authorized use only. Unauthorized copying or posting is an infringement of copyright. If you have questions about using this article, please contact us: <http://www.armusicanthology.com/anthology/Contact.aspx>

---

# Duke Ellington's *It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)*

Kim Teal

University of Arkansas

## Introduction

Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington’s *It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)*, composed in 1931 and first recorded and published in 1932, heralded the coming of the swing era. While it was not the first song to use the word “swing” in the title, it predated the word’s common use to describe the musical genre on the verge of dominating American popular music from the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s.<sup>1</sup> The song quickly became a hit, its self-referential lyrics explaining its musical style, and Ellington continued to rearrange, perform, and record the tune throughout his long career. Today, Ellington is often celebrated as one of the greatest American composers and an important artist, but in the early 1930s, he worked in the more commercial world of popular entertainment. This song offers a glimpse of the industry in which Ellington worked, the very different relationship between score and performance that characterizes jazz as opposed to Western art music, and some musical traits common to African American popular styles of the twentieth century.

## The Structure of *It Don’t Mean a Thing*

The score reproduced here exemplifies the most lucrative popular music commodity of the early twentieth century: sheet music from Tin Pan Alley (the nickname of American popular music publishing based in New York City). This arrangement of [It Don’t Mean a Thing](#) reflects several traits typical of Tin Pan Alley popular songs. While the Duke Ellington Orchestra did not perform this work as notated here, the piano-vocal arrangement made for sheet music sales allowed the song to be brought home by consumers at a time when pianos were still a common form of home musical entertainment (though they were in the process of being replaced by phonographs and radios). The form of this piece is standard for popular songs of its era: an instrumental introduction is followed by a 16-measure verse, rarely performed, and a 32-measure chorus containing the well-known tune. The chorus begins with the pick-up to m. 27, and it is the only portion of the printed song regularly heard in jazz performances, including those by Ellington and his band. The chorus, which can be repeated and improvised on to develop a longer performance of the song, demonstrates the most common popular song form of the mid-twentieth century: a 32-measure statement divided into four even 8-measure phrases in an AABA pattern. The B section, often called the bridge, begins in m. 43, and it provides contrast in the melodic, harmonic, and lyrical content between statements of the catchy A theme.

---

<sup>1</sup> Will Friedwald, “Sing a Song of Ellington; or, The Accidental Songwriter,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Duke Ellington* edited by Edward Green (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 233-34.

---

## Swing

The text of the bridge explains the title of the piece, letting listeners know that “swing” could encompass the two contrasting styles of popular jazz at the time, the so-called “sweet” and “hot” music that occupied opposite ends of a spectrum ranging from refined, fixed arrangement to blues-based improvisation. As the lyrics declare, the key to swing was rhythm, an appropriate focal point for a musical genre that largely served dancers, supporting the steps of popular crazes like the Lindy Hop or Jitterbug. While a specific, consistent definition of the word swing is not easy to pin down, jazz musicians have been using it since at least the 1920s to describe performances that achieve a satisfying rhythmic feel, often through variations in rhythm not reflected in musical notation. In particular, swing generally signifies the division of the basic pulse in 4/4 time into unequal eighth notes, wherein the first is longer than the second. In *It Don't Mean a Thing*, Ellington also highlights two other important rhythmic techniques common to a number of African American popular musics, syncopation and polyrhythm, which help propel the work's swing feel. Syncopation highlights the key word “swing” in m. 29, landing the first gesture of the melody on the second half of beat four rather than squarely on a downbeat. Polyrhythm appears two measures later, as the grouping of the melody into units of three (alternating eighth notes and quarter notes) contrasts with the basic duple units maintained in the bassline (steady quarter notes).

In addition to the African-American-influenced rhythmic characteristics of “It Don't Mean a Thing,” the song utilizes pitch, formal, and lyrical content drawn from black vernacular musical styles. The melody includes “blue notes,” exemplified by the D-flat in m. 29, the lowered fifth scale degree within its G minor context. The division of the A-section phrases into four-measure units in a call-and-response pattern is another nod to African American musical traditions, in this case a technique drawn from work songs. The “doo wahs” in the text refer to scat singing, or vocal improvisation using nonsense syllables, a style popularized by African American jazz trumpeter and singer Louis Armstrong, and they also mimic the distinctive use of plunger mutes by brass players in Ellington's band.

## The Ellington/Mills Partnership

The attribution of the tune's lyrics to Irving Mills reveals another aspect of African American music making in the mid-twentieth century. Given the legal segregation of the “Jim Crow” era and widespread racism at the time, African American artists faced enormous challenges building successful careers in the music industry. To help himself and his orchestra connect to more professional opportunities than those accessible to people of his race, Ellington worked with Mills, a Jewish American publisher, manager, and record producer who played an important role in marketing Ellington and his band to a wider audience. According to historian Harvey Cohen,

Despite the many positive attributes of the Ellington/Mills partnership, one major negative aspect existed, though Ellington never expressed dissatisfaction about it in public.... According to most sources, Mills took unwarranted writing credit for Ellington compositions.... When a tune showed commercial promise, Mills provided a lead sheet

---

of the melody to one of the stable of lyric writers under contract to Mills Music. Sometimes he gave the lyricist credit, but often he claimed it for himself.<sup>2</sup>

Though Mills played an essential role in getting Ellington's music into the marketplace and collected royalties from the sale of "It Don't Mean a Thing," it is unlikely that he in fact penned the lyrics, which may instead have been written by Ellington himself in this case.<sup>3</sup> The title was drawn from what Ellington called the credo of a former trumpet player from his band, "Bubber" Miley, and the melody of the tune seems tailor made to fit that pre-existing motto.<sup>4</sup>

## Arrangements of *It Don't Mean a Thing*

Arrangements of this song performed by the Duke Ellington Orchestra show through their rich harmonies and intricate countermelodies more of Ellington the artist composer rather than Ellington the popular songwriter. Ellington often rearranged popular works for different performance contexts or personnel, and variations in arrangements of "It Don't Mean a Thing" show the flexibility typical of jazz performance practice and its reliance on a variety of types of improvisation, from minor shifts in the performance of notated rhythms to on-the-spot composition of new melodies. The recording that generated the song's initial popularity was made in 1932, the same year the sheet music was published. It features vocalist Ivie Anderson along with a full "big band" (trumpets, trombones, woodwinds, and a rhythm section of piano, bass, and drums). Like most versions of the tune, it includes only the chorus, not the written verse. The arrangement opens with a brief scat introduction and also features improvised instrumental solos by trombonist Joe "Tricky Sam" Nanton, who paraphrases the chorus melody in an improvisatory fashion, hinting at the written tune without replicating it, and by saxophonist Johnny Hodges, who more freely creates a new improvised melody. Anderson sings the chorus in a more syncopated fashion than the notation indicates, and the call and response material in the A phrases are divided between her and the band—she sings the call, the first four measures, and then the brass section responds to her with the instrumental version of "doo wah" created through the use of plunger mutes. Another significant recording, made decades later in 1957, features Ella Fitzgerald as vocalist. Fitzgerald sings the chorus twice at the opening of the arrangement, the first time with the written text and pitches (though, as Anderson did, she improvised additional syncopation that fits with the tune's swing style). In her repetition of the chorus, Fitzgerald sings the written lyrics, including the "doo wahs," but improvises a new melody with pitches and rhythms fully distinct from the notated version. Both of these recordings represent valid interpretations of the song, but neither reproduces what is written in the published sheet music.

## Conclusion

The musical language of "It Don't Mean a Thing" and its presentation in sheet music form reflect the context in which Ellington and other African American musicians worked during the twentieth century. Ellington and his orchestra created music that functioned on multiple

---

<sup>2</sup> Harvey Cohen, *Duke Ellington's America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 143.

<sup>3</sup> Friedwald, "Sing a Song of Ellington," 234.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Kennedy Ellington, *Music is My Mistress* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1973), 106.

---

levels, both in the fast-changing world of popular song with which the simple sheet music was associated and the burgeoning world of jazz as art music in which the band's recordings of more intricate arrangements have now found a lasting place. Today, Ellington's works are performed more frequently than those of any other jazz composer.

## **Bibliography/Further Reading**

Cohen, Harvey G. *Duke Ellington's America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.  
<http://www.worldcat.org/title/duke-ellingtons-america/oclc/699687359>

Ellington, Edward Kennedy. *Music Is My Mistress*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1973.  
<http://www.worldcat.org/title/duke-ellington-music-is-my-mistress/oclc/952077872>

Green, Edward, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Duke Ellington*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.  
<http://www.worldcat.org/title/cambridge-companion-to-duke-ellington/oclc/908083724>

Hasse, John Edward. *Beyond Category: The Life and Genius of Duke Ellington*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993.  
<http://www.worldcat.org/title/beyond-category-the-life-and-genius-of-duke-ellington/oclc/970640726>

Tucker, Mark, ed. *The Duke Ellington Reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.  
<http://www.worldcat.org/title/duke-ellington-reader/oclc/493905688>

## Select Discography

Anderson, Ivie with Duke Ellington and his Famous Orchestra. *It Don't Mean a Thing*. Recorded 1932. ASV Living Era 5420, compact disc, 2002.

<http://www.worldcat.org/title/it-dont-mean-a-thing/oclc/51678448>

Fitzgerald, Ella and Duke Ellington. *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Duke Ellington Songbook*.

Recorded 1957. Essential Jazz Classics 55426, compact disc, 2009.

<http://www.worldcat.org/title/ella-fitzgerald-sings-the-duke-ellington-songbook/oclc/697795616>