

PHOTOS

Jazz musician, 91, who played with Duke Ellington, now entertains residents at seniors' home

Eve Duke recorded with Ellington in 1950 under the name Yvonne Lanauze

By Rafferty Baker, [CBC News](#) Posted: Jun 07, 2016 8:26 PM PT Last Updated: Jun 07, 2016 8:26 PM PT



Eve Duke, 91, now performs for her neighbours at a seniors' care facility in South Vancouver. (Rafferty Baker/CBC)

In a Vancouver seniors' care facility, several elderly residents and staff go about their business in the main foyer area. In the corner, Eve Duke, 91, plays a couple of songs on the grand piano.

When Duke finishes a song, applause fills the room. The residents had, it turns out, been intently enjoying the tune.

More than sixty years ago, Duke was playing for a different crowd — or rather, many of them.

The musician, who was born in Washington, D.C., made a name for herself as a jazz singer and struck it big when the legendary pianist Duke Ellington recruited her for his orchestra.



Eve Duke plays a song on the piano at St. Vincent's: Langara. The facility is trying to fundraise to buy a new piano that doesn't need to be tuned as frequently. (Rafferty Baker/CBC)

'Big name in those days'

"I was in my mid 20s ... it was thrilling. I was knocked out by it," said Duke, who performed for about three years with Ellington under the name Yvonne Lanauze.

"Well, Duke Ellington, of course, was a big name in those days. He had one of the most famous orchestras," said Duke.

When asked whether the racial segregation of the time left her excluded from venues, she says, "He could go anywhere."

Duke grew up attending segregated schools and later became immersed in the civil rights movement and the March on Washington in 1963.

She now gets helped around the care facility in a wheelchair and struggles with her memory.

'My memory ... basically it sucks'



Eve Duke (second from left), under the name Yvonne Lanauze hangs out with Duke Ellington (third from left) and his group. (Family of Eve Duke)

"My memory is not very good," she said. "Basically it sucks, because I don't remember a lot of things unless I'm right there in front of it."

But when it comes to reminiscing about the old days with Ellington's group, a lot comes to the surface.

Duke's father convinced a friend who owned a club in Washington to give her a singing gig. That's where a member of Ellington's group heard her and told the band leader about her chops. Ellington checked her out at the club when he was in town and liked what he heard.

Recording with Ellington



Eve Duke performed with legendary jazz pianist Duke Ellington under the name Yvonne Lanauze in the early 1950s. (Family of Eve Duke)

Duke recorded three tracks with Ellington in 1950, including [*Mood Indigo*](#), [*Sophisticated Lady*](#), and *Love You Madly*.

She says the lifestyle of a musician touring with one of the world's top bands was exciting. The alcohol and drugs weren't as big in Ellington's group as some of the other bands of the time, according to Duke, but some of her fellow musicians would indulge.

"I'd watch the guys in the band when I was with [Ellington], and they would drink, they would bring things — They'd have a mickey in the pocket," she said. "I just wasn't turned on."

"I didn't get involved in that sort of thing, because I knew I didn't hold it very well. If I'm going to function as a singer, or a performer at any rate, I have to watch my health."

Settling in Vancouver

Eventually, life on the road began to wear on Duke. She married and had a daughter, so she decided to settle down.

Settling in Vancouver, she met CBC producer and film director [Daryl Duke](#), and remarried.

The singer played in her own trios and quartets around Vancouver for years.

A little over a year ago, Duke moved into [St. Vincent's: Langara](#) in South Vancouver. But in her mind, she never retired.



Eve Duke, 91, laughs after finishing nearly every sentence. (Rafferty Baker/CBC)

"I hate calling it that, because you think of some fogey, bogus old lady who can barely walk and looks like she'll croak in a day, and I don't feel that," she said.

"I don't work as much as I'd like to and I think it's mainly because I don't put myself out there. At this stage in your life, when you've done it for years, unless you're very highly publicized, you don't work, you know."

Music therapy

Leah Rosling, who works as a music therapist at the care facility, is dazzled by Duke and her talent.

"I love working with her. I find her — well, she's an inspiration. She's an extraordinary human being who's been — she's seen a lot of her life," said Rosling.

"She's had tremendous courage, a very intelligent woman, extraordinarily talented. I feel like it's a gift to come into contact with her and hear her play and hear her stories."



Leah Rosling is a music therapist at the care facility where Eve Duke lives in Vancouver. She's in awe of the talent and courage she sees in Duke. (Rafferty Baker/CBC)

Rosling laughs when she hears Duke refer to herself as a "second-rate pianist" (she considers herself a singer who happens to play piano).

"Her playing is like a canvas of all kinds of shimmering colours that you mightn't think to put together in certain way. But because she does it so masterfully, it's an extraordinary thing to hear," she said.

Regular performances at care facility

Rosling says the concerts in the common area are a routine thing, and they always go over well.

"She has many followers here, as far as her music goes, people who just love to hear her play," she said, adding the applause is typical.

But Duke still wants to get a group together. Rosling says some music therapy interns and staff play with her, but there aren't any residents to jam with.



Though Eve Duke is losing some memory, she plays lots of songs without sheet music and also enjoys improvising. (Rafferty Baker/CBC)

"That would be her dream ... she'd like a drummer and she'd like a bass player," said Rosling.

And while Duke does seem to yearn for the perfect trio, she also seems happy just taking it easy.

"I'm at the stage and age in my life where I don't really want to do that much," she said, ending the statement with the same laugh she uses to punctuate most of what she says.