

ALICE BABS interviewed by ED BRIDGES

Ed Bridges, New York, has many times visited Sweden during the Jazz & Blues Festival in Stockholm. Ed Bridges has been a journalist/columnist in Boston in press/radio and TV.

He wrote about music and politics. He got to know Duke Ellington privately in 1946 and as a friend he used to travel with the orchestra in the bus during tours. He was a personal good friend with many in the orchestra. Ed is also a close friend of Ivan Sundberg, Stockholm, the record distributor, who made it possible for Ed to meet and interview Alice Babs. Ivan has now permitted DESS to publish the interview.

“DUKE FOREVER”

Place: Restaurant Hasselbacken, Stockholm, Sweden

Date: July 7, 1993

EB: Hi, I am Ed Bridges, and I am sitting here with the lady, I have been waiting years and years to meet, Alice Babs. You have for long been one of my favourite singers. You didn't know that?

AB: No, I didn't know that, I'm pleased to hear you say that.

EB: Well, the first time I saw you were when you were singing with the Duke Ellington Orchestra in New York. The next time was at his funeral at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and I never got a chance to say hello to you, so I'm very glad to say hello to you now.

AB: Yes, it is many years ago now.

EB: Since hearing about you and studying your career here in Stockholm, I found that when you were a child, you were a singer, but you were also considered a sinner.

AB: Oh, yes I was a schoolgirl, singing in places where I was not permitted to enter actually, because I was a schoolgirl. But, of course, I sang jazz and American songs and that was very bad, you know.

EB: You also told me a very funny story about your headmaster of the school, who knew that you were singing but he was also in your fan club.

AB: Yes, he was, I was singing musicals at school and I helped along with concerts that we gave. He really belonged to my fan club, when I began to sing with a famous jazz orchestra in a restaurant in Stockholm. He said: "I know about it", but he placed his hand before his face: "I know nothing at all" he said, "The only thing you have to do is to call your self something else than Alice Nilsson. You have to find another name". That is how the name "Babs" came up.

EB: As I recall you were 14 or 15?

AB: Yes, I was actually 14, but that was more private, but I was 15 when I started my career.

EB: The other night I had the privilege to listen to a song called "My little Radiola".

AB: Oh, that must have been recorded already in 1939 or 1940.

EB: Yes, but were you singing with the bands even then?

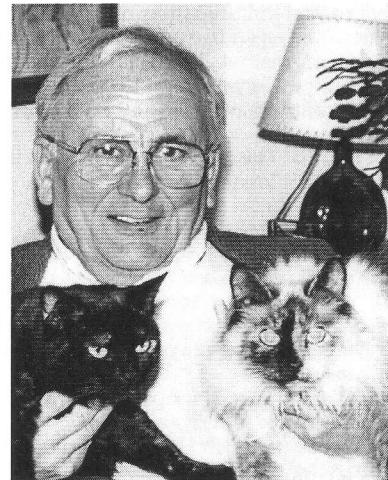
AB: Yes, in Stockholm. I sang with all the good jazz musicians, really the old-timers, people don't know their names today, but I met them, I knew them, I was very pleased to sing with those musicians.

EB: Someone told me to ask you if you were once chosen as a swimmer in the Olympics for Sweden?

AB: No, not as a swimmer, but as a diver. You jump from high points and you do a lot of rolling in the air. I don't remember all the names today. I trained for a year and a half. I went to a swimming pool in Stockholm and trained. Then my father said "You have to chose now either you will be a singer or go on swimming or diving".

EB: Well, you were at one time chosen to go to the Olympics but you didn't go - or there were no Olympics?

AB: No, I was chosen among a group of young people they thought could be very good at diving. They found me in an open-air pool where I went in the summer diving. I had seen Margie Gestry, I even remember her name, and she came to Sweden. She was an Olympic winner for U.S. I was very impressed, so I wanted to do the same as she did. I was very gymnastic, but I had no training, so I did it in the way I thought was correct, and they could see that I was talented for it. I was brought into a group of young



Ed Bridges and his cats.
Photographer: Ivan Sundberg, Sweden.

people. It was a pity that I couldn't continue with it, but it was all this chlorine in the water and I couldn't take that and at the same time keep my voice in shape.

EB: Is it also true that you are an experienced glider-pilot?

AB: Yes, I was not so experienced, but I was one of the first ladies or girls, who tried it. I have been up alone in the air, sitting in that very difficult construction, I could only glide 8 meters. People who are flying, they understand what I am talking about. It is like a stone in the air - terrible - I would never do it again.

EB: When was the last time?

AB: Oh, I did it in late 40's or early 50's with a double commando, and if we were up then together I could glide 40 meters, that is quite a difference.

EB: I have also seen a copy of your biography where I can't understand everything because it is in Swedish, but I have seen the pictures of you driving trotting horses?

AB: Oh, yes, I liked that. I have only tried it once and I enjoyed it tremendously.

EB: Did you go on a race?

AB: Yes, it was a race among famous people. It was incredible that they allowed us to do that, because we had only one day of training. The next day we had the race but they hadn't told us how to use the reins. You had to sit on them, they didn't tell me, so the reins flew away and bothered the other horses and my horse too - a friend saved me from a catastrophe.

EB: Is it anything you haven't told me you have done, which I haven't covered, except from singing?

AB: Well, I have been driving the car myself during the wartime, we didn't have any petrol, and so we had coal instead. Every 70 kilometers we had to put a whole sack of coal into the car like an oven, and then you drove another 70 kilometers. Oh, you should have seen my face; I looked like I had gone through a chimney.

EB: How did you spend the 2nd world war years 1941 to 1945, were you singing?

AB: Oh, yes, I was singing for the people in the army in Sweden, because they had it tough, drilling and watching and preparing for a possible war. The soldiers had to be entertained, and already as a young girl I was out in the archipelago singing for them. I was touring, I made movies and I sang American songs. I sang in Denmark in 1941, the Germans were there, they hardly let me in, because I was singing American songs. I was forbidden to go to Norway, because the Nazis had an even harder control of Norway than of Denmark.

EB: What was the first American song you ever remember singing?

AB: That was "Sweet Sue", but my father wrote Swedish lyrics to it, and I was only 12 years old when I sang it. The second song was "Diga Diga Doo". I had heard a Duke Ellington recording and I imitated the growl effects, which Duke had on that recording.

EB: At an age of 12, was it the first time you heard Duke?

AB: Yes

EB: Did you know he had written it when you sang it?

AB: No, he hadn't composed it, but he made a recording of it.

EB: That's right. When was the first time you ever heard his name? How old were you and where were you?

AB: I was 12, because I had a friend and she was four years older. She had recordings of Louis Armstrong, Mills Brothers and El-

lington, so I imitated them all. I started to sing with the instruments. I enjoyed it tremendously. My father was a musician and my mother was a singer. I had the talent, I could hear very well and I was a very good listener very early in my life.

EB: You must have been only 3-4 years old when you started singing?

AB: Yes, and I also accompanied myself on the piano.

EB: Without lessons?

AB: Yes, by ear.

EB: You still play the piano?

AB: Yes, I still play it by ear.

EB: You haven't taken any lessons on the piano?

AB: Yes, I did take some lessons, but I broke my arm, so I cannot get it in the right position. I didn't want to concentrate on being a piano player, so I concentrated on my singing instead.

EB: Let's leave the Maestro out for a moment. Did you ever sing with any other American bands?

AB: Yes, I sang with Louis Armstrong, when he came to Sweden, I sang with Don Redman in the Concert Hall and with Chubby Jackson.

EB: Chubby Jackson, the bass player?

AB: Yes, he had a bebop band, and that was very interesting. Of course with Louis Armstrong I sang with my favourites like Jack Teagarden. I also rehearsed with Earl "Fatha" Hines.

EB: Did you smoke cigars too?

AB: No, and I never saw him doing it. Cozy Cole was another of my favourites, because he had done recordings with Cab Calloway, which I have in my record collection. And of course Barney Bigard, Velma Middleton and Arvell Shaw were with him. Velma was very sweet to me and so was Louis.

EB: When you were singing with Louis, how old were you?

AB: I was 26 years old, when that happened.

EB: Oh, then you were an old woman, and the Radiola song was long gone.

AB: Yes, and I had already three children.

EB: You mentioned your daughter Titti, you recorded an album with her?

AB: Oh yes I did, I recorded with all my children, but Titti is the one, who has continued singing. She is a very good singer, she sings my Ellington ballads now. I have given her some of my music, so she can continue doing that.

EB: I told a lady that I have all the Alice music and she asked, "Have you heard her singing Bach and Mozart?" And I said, "No", I didn't realize that.

AB: Well, and also Negro Spirituals, romances, Grieg, Sibelius, Swedish composers, folksongs and Elizabethan love songs. I don't want to have closed doors. The music has no borders.

EB: Let us talk about, except for your husband and for me, my father, the greatest man you have ever met, lets talk about Duke. When did you first meet him and where did that happen? Tell me how you got to sing for Duke, and how you first got to meet him, and how you were introduced to him. How did that come about?

AB: Well, I sang for him when he became 40 years old, in 1939 in the Concert Hall in Stockholm. I shouldn't have been there, but my father couldn't go so his friends had to bring me instead.

EB: How did you wind up singing for Duke on that occasion, how old where you then?

AB: I was 15 and Duke made a fantastic impression on me with the orchestra and Ivie Anderson, whom I admired very much. I had already heard them on recordings, and to see them was something extraordinary for me.

There was also the man, who took part in the arrangement for the concert with Duke Ellington that day and he knew I was a singer, he was already backing me up with the jazz orchestra in the restaurant I told you about. He said: "Now you have to come up on the stage, I have a few girls, we want you to sing with Duke Ellington". That's how I met Duke. So you know I was in heaven, and I also met Ivie Anderson and the boys in the band. It was fantastic.

EB: What was the first thing Duke ever said to you? Was he as charming and as complimentary in the 40's as he became later?

AB: This was 1939 and of course he thanked all the girls. I was a tiny little girl and of course he was polite, but it was not until 1963 that he really flattered me by letting me sing with his orchestra on a TV-program here in Sweden.

EB: I have seen that program, and how did it come about that you sang? Did he call you?

AB: No, he didn't, but the producer went over to New York to discuss the program. He said that Stockholm wanted a Swedish

singer in the program and he had a tape with him. Duke heard me on a recording "Alice in Wonderband" and he said, "I want that girl".

EB: Did he remember you from 1939?

AB: Yes, he said he did, but I think he flattered me. He might have, and since then my face has always been smiling as Ivie's and Duke's. That touched me so much that they were happy on the stage and I have always been that way myself.

EB: Duke knows lots of women, but you were a woman for whom he had a tremendous respect and he spoke always with reverence about you. How did you establish that great relation with him, when there were so many other people that he didn't take any notice of musically or that he took no interest in whatsoever?

AB: I think it was because we improvised a lot between the rehearsals. It has to do with the first program we did, Duke and I, and that I didn't have any fear whatsoever. I just started to improvise and he played it and enjoyed it. One month later he phoned me from Paris and said "Can you come down to me and sing with me, I want to make an album with you". One month after the TV-program in 1963 we did the album.

EB: That was the album in which he played the piano with musicians from other organisations and Duke was the only one from his orchestra.

AB: Yes, but also Billy Strayhorn was playing the piano. Both of them were making arrangements for me. Billy had engaged four French horn players and he told them to do the growl effects, it was such a joy.

EB: So in that Alice album Billy Strayhorn actually plays piano in some parts instead of Duke?

AB: Yes, and also Alice Babs.

EB: You played the piano too?

AB: Yes, he placed me in a chair, and he said, "Now you play this song", which I had played for him. I didn't have any fear, you know. I just played. I just wanted to give some examples of what I could do.

EB: Which number on the album did you play that came out under his name?

AB: It is "Strange Visitor", that's my composition, which is already released with two orchestras in Europe. It is a world music company, which has the right for it. Duke enjoyed and liked that song so much that he said, "Now you sit down and play it yourself". But they forgot to write my name on the album where I was playing the piano myself. Both Billy and Duke tried to play "Strange Visitor", but they said they couldn't get the song in the same way as when I sang and played the song myself. I said, "I'm not a piano player". Duke said, "I don't care, it sounds good."

EB: What is your favourite composition?

AB: Well, our signature was "Serenade To Sweden", and I must say I favour that very much. It has always been in my heart and Duke always played it, before we started. I remember when he wanted me to make my entry onto the stage at Lincoln Centre in New York. Duke said, "I start playing it and you start singing outside the stage". I started to sing the song outside the stage and I walked in with a microphone and continued singing it, so we also had an idea of how I should appear on the stage.

EB: Of all the numbers, there are some of Billy Strayhorn's numbers you have done that I just love. Billy and Duke were much alike, but I must say that Billy's numbers were really among the most favourite that I have ever heard the Ellington band record and you sang many of the Strayhorn numbers. Which of those did you like best?

AB: Oh, there is "A Flower Is a Lovesome Thing", I adore that song, but there are so many others, "Lush Life", but I never sang that song and there are so beautiful versions and Duke played many of Billy's songs after Billy died. He sat there remembering, you know, just playing.

EB: Actually, he made an album called "and His Mother Called Him Bill" and played all the Strayhorn numbers.

AB: Yes, he adored Billy, so did all of us. He was very humble, and Duke dedicated the 2nd Sacred concert to Billy Strayhorn.

EB: Yes, he did. You recorded an album with him in Paris called "Serenade To Sweden". Did you ever sing anywhere in U.S. with Duke other than Lincoln Centre or Sacred Concerts? Did you make any other concert appearances?

AB: No, besides some concerts at some towns outside New York during that period, but I sang and I made jazz concerts with him in Copenhagen and Sweden.

EB: No, I mean in the States. You never did for example a dance date with them?

AB: I did one after the Newport Jazz Festival concert. Then I was

invited with him to the Roseland, and there were Count Basie, Woody Herman and Duke. He invited me to sing with him.

EB: You know I was there that night, and I don't remember you singing with him.

AB: It was a wonderful evening and wonderful arrangements. I didn't stay all night, that's for sure. I am not a night owl.

EB: Maybe you did, because parts of the time Duke was playing, I was in the dressing room downstairs with Sonny Greer quite a while, he was there that night

AB: Yes, he was and I met him.

EB: Did you meet those guys who played with Duke before you ever knew Duke, like Sonny Greer or some of the old-timers? .

AB: No, I always saw them together with Duke.

EB: Ah, you have done Mozart and Bach and children songs and everything else plus "my Radiola". What would you say is the most musically significant experience?

AB: Duke is over everything.

EB: I didn't want to say it, unless you didn't say it.

AB: No, it's coming out of my heart, because he had all the elements of everything there is in music in himself. He was so far ahead of everybody else. If you want you can spot Ravel, Stravinsky and they all listened to Duke. You can spot Poulenc and so many others and they all admired Duke. He of course listened to everything in the music business, because he didn't have any closed doors.

EB: Duke always said about critics " ignore them if you like it, if you like it it's good".

AB: (laughs)

EB: I remember him saying that, it's what your tastes aspire to.

AB: I have heard him being a little bit mad at people only talking about him as a jazz composer because to him it was music. He has done an opera, ballets and music for movies and everything he did was perfect.

EB: What do you think of the movie " Anatomy of a Murder"?

AB: I think it is a great movie. I think the music is fantastic. It's so different from what you normally hear when it comes to music.

EB: Don't you think they could have called him Duke instead of Pie-eye, the piano player, in the movie? Do you remember that?

AB: No, I have forgotten that, we have to go through the movie again, Nils-Ivar and I.

EB: He was listed in the credits, as being a performer, but they didn't call him Duke. Well, did you make movies? .

AB: Yes, I made 20 movies, I started when I was 16 years old and I was working in the film business until 1956 or 1957.

EB: I know I'm going to show my ignorance now, but you must understand that Americans don't know what goes on in the rest of the world, they don't even know what's going on in Canada. Did you play dramatic parts?

AB: Yes, I did. I did one movie where I didn't sing much, but in the movie Jussi Björling sang a song.

EB: Really

AB: Yes, he took part in that movie, and the movie was shown in Russia. They liked the movie, because it was a sweet little story about a poor girl and a movie star, a singer. She left her business to live with her husband in a moderate life.

EB: At Duke's funeral, your voice was heard, but it was a recording. It was not your own live voice. They did ask you to sing at the funeral?

AB: Yes, his sister Ruth said that Duke wanted me to sing "Heaven" and "Almighty God" and "God Has Those Angels". I told them that I will come over for the funeral, but will not be able to sing. I will be too touched to sing. I was so sad, I still am, but in a way among all the friends of Duke Ellington he is still alive. Duke Ellington is forever.

EB: That's right, I agree with you. That is a great slogan. There were many performers, who sang that day, Joe Williams and Ella Fitzgerald, but the Ellington people didn't, they just sat there.

AB: No, they couldn't, they didn't want too.

EB: So we heard instead excerpts from Sacred Concerts played on recordings at the Cathedral of St John the Divine.

AB: Yes, when I heard Johnny Hodges and his voice, his alto, it's like a woman's voice, I was so touched. When I heard my own voice I started to cry and shiver, I was in such a shock.

EB: George Wein came to Stockholm a few years ago, I have known him all my life since I became an adult, but we never really talked in depth, and I told him "George, did you ever listen to recordings from the past festivals in the old days", and he said no, he couldn't, because it's like old friends, it just reminds him of the people, who had passed away.

AB: I'm the opposite, I listen a lot and they are still with me, it's good that you have the recordings. I have so many good friends,

like Red Mitchell for example, he lived in Sweden for many years and he adored Duke's music. He had done many recordings, where he played Duke's music and I loved to listen to that, because I'm singing and it's the right mood, the Ellington mood.

EB: Do you ever sit down to listen to him for hours on end? I'm asking, because I do, and I wonder if anybody else does?

AB: I do, I am a nut, when it comes to Ellington. I can sit for hours, that's true and Johnny Hodges, I have a lot of recordings, I have big reels where Johnny specially is playing with "Wild Bill" Davis for example and small groups. I like those small groups that Duke also worked with.

EB: It's obvious that you have a great deal of affection for Johnny and I wonder how you got him to open up to you? You know how quiet he was, seldom smiled.

AB: Yes, but I was accepted. The one who told me that was Harry Carney. When we made our first program 1963 I had put together a few of the soloists that I had heard on recordings and I sat sang with the recordings. Then Johnny opened one eye! Harry told me later "Now you are accepted, that's the sign". To sing with Johnny, to have him at your side, he played for me and I sang for him, which was wonderful.

EB: Of all the people, who ever played in the Ellington band, I felt Harry Carney was about the nicest guy. I found myself closer to him, than anybody else. When Duke was riding in Harry's car, when they were playing in my part of the country, Harry would say, "Eddy, you have to come along with us, because you know the way". He knew the way as well as I did, but Harry was such a gentle man and that's two words, not gentleman in one word.

AB: Yes, I had the pleasure of being in the seat driving up to New Canaan with Harry and Duke and my husband and we stopped at a very small café. We had bread and a cup of coffee and chatted and then continued driving. Oh, that was wonderful and Harry was really a sweet man. I miss him so.

EB: I suppose you have a collection of Christmas Cards, we all treasure those cards from Duke.

AB: We do, I have some of them too.

EB: Has anyone approached you about one more time do an album just about Duke?

AB: Oh, yes I have standing offers to do that. It might be, with artists you never know, perhaps the time comes when I want to do it. Just now I don't feel like it.

EB: Since Duke died how many times have you been to the States?

AB: Oh, I have been there many times, because we have a son living in Canada. We often go to America. I also have two grandchildren studying at universities.

EB: Have you been to New York?

AB: Yes, because I take part in those Ellington Conferences. This year we are going to the Conference.

EB: Have you ever visited Duke's grave?

AB: I was there that same day of the funeral, because I went there with the family.

EB: The reason why I am asking is that it's easy for me to visit there, being only a few hours from my home. I pass there on my way to New York and it is always someone there.

AB: I understand it must be, but to me Duke is almost like Jesus said, he is not in the grave, he is somewhere else, his soul is around you, he is here with us now.

EB: Do you think he is enjoying this conversation?

AB: (laughing), I think he is, I am not sure, because he was so much brighter than I am in expressing my feelings about music. He was fantastic.

EB: Do you think Duke would pick up the check? (laughing)

AB: No, I don't think so, he would pick up the kicks, and the others get the money.

EB: That's what he said. That's why I suspect he didn't die as a rich man. There have been two film documentaries in recent years in the States and in both of them you are featured as an integral part of his life.

AB: Well, he was the greatest.

EB: He was, I think we can conclude this conversation with me saying, "As from one Duke nut to another" Alice Babs, thank you very much.

AB: Thank you, all for the love of Duke.

ED: That's it!

Note: DESS met Ed in July at Skeppsholmen and he saw our Ellington-pin from Toronto. Can anyone send him a pin?