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Taking Subway Directions, Literally, From a Song of the City

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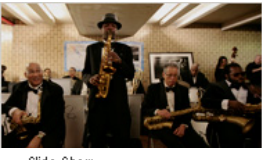
James Estrin/The New York Times

In honor of the 110th anniversary of Duke Ellington's birth, the orchestra that bears his name, directed by his grandson, played "Take the A Train" on Wednesday. [More Photos >](#)

By JAMES BARRON
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"Somebody said they want us to do 'A Train' again," Paul Mercer Ellington, the musical director of the [Duke Ellington Orchestra](#), reported just before 11 a.m. on Wednesday.

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[Taking the A Train](#)

And why not? A full 27 minutes had passed since the orchestra's last performance of his grandfather's signature song, a song some Ellington fans cannot hear too often. Wednesday was, after all, the 110th anniversary of Duke Ellington's birth, and the orchestra was ready to celebrate.

But A. C. Lichtenstein, the orchestra's manager, blinked. "Can we do it without a piano?" he asked Mr. Ellington.

For once, they had to. They were standing on the platform of the 125th Street subway station at St. Nicholas Avenue in Harlem, about to board an A train — and perform — as the train sped toward the other end of the line, in Queens, picking up regular passengers along the way. There was no way to take a piano along, though they had used a Steinway grand earlier, up on the concourse.

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An 'A Train' Serenade



In honor of the 110th anniversary of Duke Ellington's birth, two bands performed Mr. Ellington's signature song while riding on the subway line he helped make famous. Two excerpts from the underground concert are below.

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The Duke Ellington Orchestra



The Alex Lodico Ensemble

fare booths. "It's very festive, but weird," he said.

Other passengers looked puzzled as they stepped into the vintage cars and sat on seats that felt as if they had springs in them. Some looked even more puzzled as they realized that there was live music on board: The Ellington band was near the front, and the Alex Lodico Ensemble was near the back. It performs with the Music Under New York program run by [New York City Transit](#), but usually on subway platforms, not in the trains themselves.

The two bands began the trip after a morning performance at the 125th Street station, where there were also hard-to-hear speeches commemorating Ellington's birthday. Among those in the crowd were Ellington's granddaughter Mercedes; Joel Iskowitz, the artist who designed the 2009 District of Columbia quarter, which has a portrait of Ellington on the back; and Maxine Gordon, the widow of the legendary tenor saxophonist [Dexter Gordon](#). Mr. Gordon's father was Dr. Frank Gordon, Duke Ellington's physician in Los Angeles.

The train that pulled into the station after the speeches consisted of subway cars that had gone into service on the A line between 1932 and 1948. The scene had the look of a come-as-you-are party. There were public relations people in T-shirts promoting the Bahamas, which had paid for the bands and the train as part of a tourism campaign. There were JetBlue flight attendants handing out fliers advertising low fares to the Bahamas. And there were jazz fans like Jeff Bauer in his [Thelonious Monk](#) T-shirt — "I didn't have a Duke Ellington T-shirt," he explained.

Mercedes Ellington got off the train after two stops. The Ellington Orchestra had packed up in time to get off at the Nostrand Avenue stop in Brooklyn. (The Lodico band stayed on to Howard Beach, and made the trip back to 125th Street.)

Mr. Lichtenstein said the lack of a piano had not been a problem because the old cars were so noisy.

"You wouldn't have heard the piano if we had one," he said.

So much for the opening bars of a song that began with Ellington's scribbled-out directions to his apartment, given to a young composer and arranger named Billy Strayhorn. "I turned them into something," Strayhorn said later, and he and Ellington began a collaboration that lasted until Strayhorn died in 1967.

This time, the A train was not just any A train, but one made up of cars about as old as the song, which was written in 1939 but not performed until a couple of years later.

"I've never seen a train like this," said Luis Acevedo, a passenger who boarded at 42nd Street and marveled at the ceiling fans that were whirling overhead.

His friend Glen Martinez had watched the military-green train pull into the station and figured that it was for collecting trash from the platforms or revenue from the



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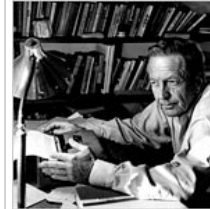


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