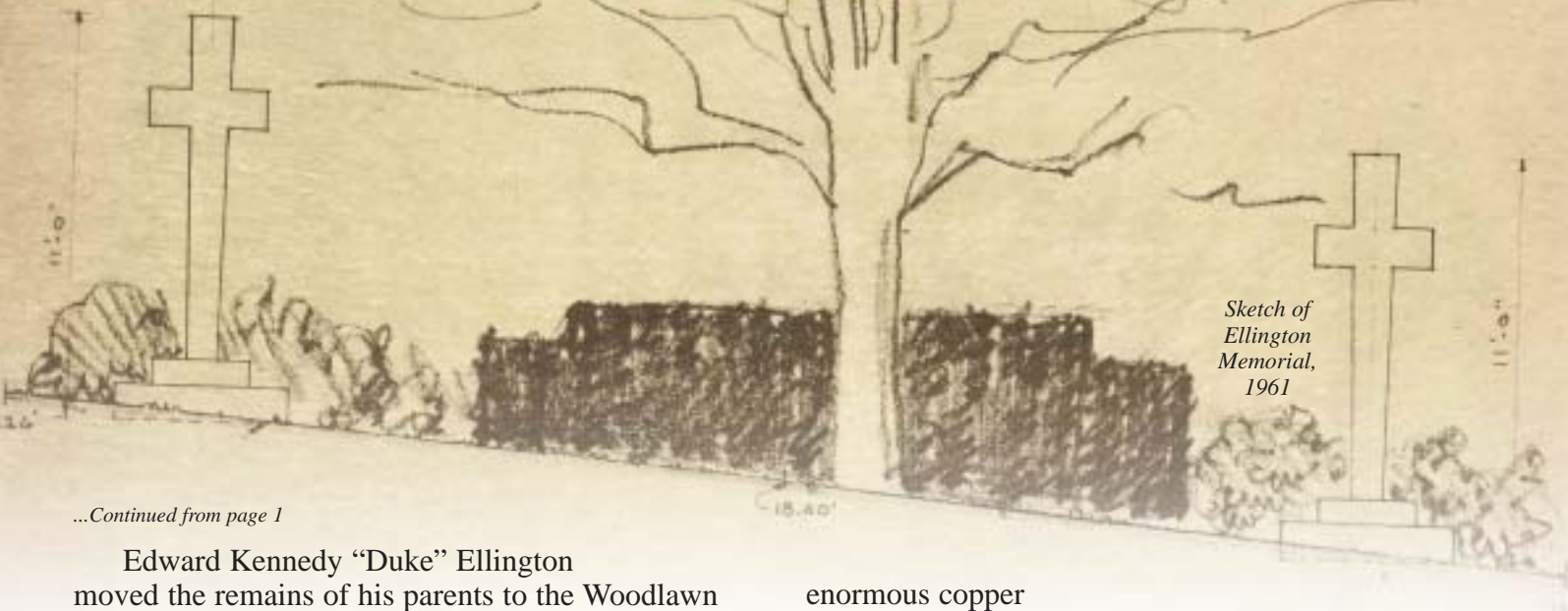


AS CLOSE TO DUKE AS POSSIBLE



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Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington moved the remains of his parents to the Woodlawn Cemetery in 1959. From the time of the Harlem Renaissance, many members of the African American community have selected Woodlawn as their place to spend eternity. W.C. Handy, Madame C.J. Walker, Countee Cullen, Bert Williams and Florence Mills are among the notables at rest in the south side of the cemetery.

Ellington selected a prominent location, in the center of the cemetery. The lot was designed to accommodate several generations with the silver linden tree as a centerpiece. Graves sites were sketched out like a seating chart for an orchestra; six in the front, eight in the back, flanked by two eleven-foot crosses for balance. “The Lord is My Shepherd” is carved into the center of the crosses and at the base is etched, “Ellington”.

After Ellington purchased the lot, this section of the cemetery became the place to be. For forty-five years, “As close to Duke as possible” was the request uttered by many potential lot owners. Duke’s trumpet player, Charles “Cootie” Williams, is buried nearby in a grave marked by a trumpet sounding up to heaven. Just a few feet away from Williams is Sam Lewis, composer of “Dinah” and “Sittin’ On Top of the World.” Around the corner in the Yew plot, saxophone player Coleman Hawkins rests on a hill. Not far from there, in the Zinnia plot, is William “Sonny” Greer, Duke’s innovative percussionist.

Gradually, lots near Ellington filled, and it was a coincidence that enabled the family of Miles Davis to choose a neighboring lot. Miles rests beneath an

enormous copper beech tree in a gray sarcophagus fronted by a highly polished ten-foot black granite slab inscribed, “Sir Miles Davis 1926 - 1991.” Under the name there are a few bars of music, notes from Davis’ 1954 composition, “Solar.” On the side of the tablet is a trumpet pointing down, in the way Miles played the instrument.

In 2000, a small lot near Ellington was selected for the acclaimed tap dancer Harold Nicholas. As one of the world famous Nicholas Brothers, the dancer performed with Ellington in the early days of the Cotton Club. With his brother Fayard, he went on to be a star of stage and screen.

Before his death in September of 2002, Lionel Hampton’s representative contacted the cemetery to purchase a lot “as close to Duke as possible,” but there was no available space in the area. Hampton, known as “The King of the Vibes,” blazed trails with Ellington in the early years of the jazz era, so the cemetery struggled to fulfill his request. After reviewing all the lots in the area, cemetery staff was able to “buy back” an empty lot from a family. Lionel Hampton is now at rest near his friend and within walking distance of Milt Jackson, the vibraphonist from the Modern Jazz Quartet.

Now that the Hillcrest section of the cemetery is open, there is space available across from the Ellington lot. Although the great composer and orchestra leader has been gone for almost thirty years, The Woodlawn Cemetery anticipates there will still be requests to be “as close to Duke as possible.”