

**Written Testimony of
Mercedes Ellington
To The
New York City Council Committee on Consumer Affairs
Hearing on Proposed Int. No. 1652-A
A Bill to Repeal the New York City Cabaret Law
September 14, 2017**

Good afternoon Chairman Espinal and distinguished members of the City Council Committee on Consumer Affairs.

First I'd like to thank all of you for giving me the opportunity to testify on Int. No. 1648-2017.

I would like to thank Council Member Espinal and the sponsors of this bill for taking the initiative to repeal the existing Cabaret Law thereby reuniting LIVE music with LIVE dance.

Who am I?

My name is Mercedes Ellington and on behalf of my musical Ellington family headed by my grandfather Edward Kennedy 'Duke' Ellington (who insisted the entire family and close friends call him 'Uncle Edward'), and my father, Mercer, who called him 'Pop'. My Dad picked up the baton after my grandfather's death in 1974 and most notably conducted the band-on stage- for "Sophisticated Ladies" on Broadway, and now I have picked up the baton as Founder and President of The Duke Ellington Center For the Arts- a 501C3 Educational entity.

I am a performer, choreographer/director, producer and historian (of sorts).

I was sent to kindergarten at 18 months of age and when I was 3, I made my stage debut as a snowflake in the Nutcracker Suite in a local uptown

dance recital. I majored in dance and received a BS degree from the Juilliard School of Music in 1960.

I've been dancing ever since.

The year JFK was assassinated was my first year as a June Taylor Dancer on the Jackie Gleason Show- and it caused quite a stir as you can imagine.

I currently participate in Ballroom Dance Competitions in the Rhythm Category: samba, rhumba, cha cha, paso doble and jive.

But enough about me...and my qualifications to speak on behalf of the Cabaret Law repeal, let's get to the current situation.

The freedom to be 'Beyond Category', to explore and express through music and dance is our human responsibility.

The current Cabaret Laws were designed to restrict, curtail and separate these freedoms. Moving and dancing is a natural response to the sounds we hear coming from our musicians.

Please repeal the Cabaret Law. It has no place here in the greatest city on earth.

My grandfather's orchestra was at one time the 'house band' at the original Cotton Club in Harlem. The club boasted its fare of bands of color and white only audiences. Yet the Savoy Ballroom a few blocks away packed in 5000 dancers a night in an integrated situation.

Astor Piazzola, the famous Tango composer used to frequent the Cotton Club and was said to be inspired by Ellington to break out of his traditional tango musical structure and create extended compositions. Both composers were inspired to write their music for dancers. Both composers were

highly criticized for straying from the 'normal', 'accepted' structure of their compositions.

These days, musicians seldom get opportunities to play in clubs or restaurants, and then, dancing is not allowed.

Musicians inspire dancers inspire musicians.

Please repeal the Cabaret Law. The 'Dance Police' who are able to shut down clubs when a few enthusiastic patrons get up and move to the music, can turn their attention to other really disruptive situations- and maybe they'll feel a little better if they start to swing and sway themselves!