



Duke Ellington

BIOGRAPHY

Duke Ellington is often called most important composer in Jazz. In his early life, he helped bring “big band” Jazz into the spotlight, and in his later life, he helped renew Jazz with his incredible creative energy.

Ellington was born in Washington, D.C. in 1899. At that time, Washington was one of the few places in the nation where it was possible for African Americans to have a comfortable lifestyle. His parents, James and Daisy, used that opportunity to work hard and give their son a good chance. They had him take his first piano lessons at the age of 7.

Even though he started learning the piano when he was young, Ellington took more interest in baseball and paintings. It wasn't until he heard ragtime, a uniquely black form of music, that he truly wanted to become a musician. He moved from his childhood home to New York and earned money as a sign-painter. At nights, he would play all across the city. Soon, he had an “ensemble,” or group of musicians, of his own.

Over the next 20 years, Duke improved as a composer. People all over the country started to know his name. He began to record music for the radio and go on tours. With a mixture of experimental songs and popular hits, he managed to capture public interest and push the boundaries of Jazz at the same time.

By the mid '50s, Jazz had become less popular. Ellington struggled to get record deals and his people called his style outdated. All that changed in a single night in 1956, when Ellington and his ensemble put on a legendary performance at the Newport Jazz Festival. This was a new kind of Jazz, something no one had heard before! The excitement from this performance would carry through the rest of Duke's career.

READINGS, RESOURCES, AND VIDEOS

[Duke Ellington from Biography](#)

[A Duke Named Ellington from PBS American Masters](#)

[Duke Ellington Pianist & Songwriter from Biography \(4 minutes\)](#)