

Duke Ellington

1899-1974

Pianist, bandleader, composer

Duke Ellington was a distinctive and pivotal figure in the world of jazz. While many critics agree that his flair for style far exceeded his raw musical talent, few dispute the significance of his impact on the music scene in the United States and abroad. A prolific composer, Ellington created over two thousand pieces of music, including the standard songs "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)" and "Sophisticated Lady" and longer works like *Black, Brown, and Beige* and *The Liberian Suite*.

With the variously named bands he led for more than fifty years, Ellington was responsible for many innovations in the jazz field, such as the introduction of "jungle-style" musical variations and the manipulation of the human voice as an instrument—singing notes without words. During the course of his long career, Ellington was showered with many honors, including the highest civilian award granted by the United States, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, which was presented to him by President Richard M. Nixon in 1969. "No one else in the . . . history of jazz," concluded critic Alistair Cooke in a 1983 issue of *Esquire*, "created so personal an orchestral sound and so continuously expanded the jazz idiom."

Born Edward Kennedy Ellington in Washington, D.C., on April 29, 1899, "Duke" earned his nickname at an early age

to suit his aristocratic demeanor. He was brought up in a cultured, middle-class household: his father made blueprints for the U.S. Navy and served as a White House butler for extra income, and his mother, who hailed from a respected Washington family, set a dignified tone for the family to follow. "Ellington's parents lived by the ideal of Victorian gentility until they died," noted James Lincoln Collier in *Duke Ellington*, "and they raised Duke to it. . . . The view that he was special was cut into Duke's

consciousness when he was very young. . . . [He] came into his teens, then, as a protected and well-loved child, growing up in an orderly household where decorous behavior was simply part of the air he breathed; he was confident in manner and sure that he had . . . been born to high estate."

But Ellington matured at a time when attitudes and values were changing in America. The Harlem Renaissance—a period of heightened pride, interest, and activity in black arts and culture—was beginning to dawn. Rigid self-discipline was cast aside, and people began to indulge in the satisfaction of a variety of earthly desires. This newfound freedom to enjoy "good times," as Collier put it, had a profound influence on American music. The syncopated rhythms of ragtime, a wildly popular precursor of jazz that flourished in the late 1800s,

At a Glance...

Born Edward Kennedy Ellington, April 29, 1899, in Washington, DC; died of lung cancer, May 24, 1974, in New York City; son of James Edward (a butler, carpenter, and blueprint maker) and Daisy (Kennedy) Ellington; married Edna Thompson, July 2, 1918; children: Mercer. *Education:* Left high school in his senior year; later received honorary diploma.

Worked in a soda shop and as a sign painter, c. 1914-17; began playing in jazz bands, c. 1917; served as a U.S. Navy and State Department messenger during World War I; formed his first band, 1918; performed in Washington, DC and New York City during the 1920s; toured Europe in the 1930s; appeared many times at Newport Jazz Festival; concert performer and recording artist (primarily on Reprise and RCA labels) with his various bands until his death in 1974. Appeared in and/or wrote scores for films, including *Check and Double Check*, 1930, *Murder at the Vanities*, 1934, *Anatomy of a Murder*, 1959, *Paris Blues*, 1961, and *Assault on a Queen*, 1966.

Selected awards: Spingarn Medal from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1959; Academy Award nomination for the score of *Paris Blues*, 1961; Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (NARAS), 1966; Grammy Awards in several categories, including jazz composition and jazz performance—big band, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1976, and 1979; Presidential Medal of Freedom from Richard M. Nixon, 1969; inducted into NARAS Hall of Fame, 1990; elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

gave way in the early 1900s to the blues of the Mississippi Delta area. New Orleans, Louisiana is generally regarded as the hot spot in music history where ragtime, blues, and other forms coalesced, giving birth to jazz.

But, according to Collier, "it was not until 1915, when a cadre of white musicians brought it to Chicago, that [jazz] made a significant splash. The stir it created there encouraged an entrepreneur to bring . . . the Original Dixieland Jazz Band to New York, where it also made a hit. . . . [Their] records became best-sellers, and the jazz boom began." And so the 1920s came to be known as the Jazz Age. The independent-minded Ellington fell in love with the sounds of the time. "Jazz

is above all a total freedom to express oneself," he concluded, as quoted by Stanley Dance in Peter Gammond's *Duke Ellington: His Life and Music*.

A Late Bloomer

Both his father and his mother could play the piano, and Ellington was exposed to music at an early age. The Ellingtons were strongly religious and hoped that if their son learned piano he would later exchange it for the church organ, but at first he showed little interest in music. He proved to be an uncooperative student of his ironically named piano teacher—Miss Clinkscales—and managed to wrangle his way out of lessons after just a few months.

As he grew older, Ellington became interested in drawing and painting. He won a prize from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for a poster he created, and was eventually offered a scholarship to the prestigious Pratt Institute in Brooklyn to study commercial art. But a latent interest in music kept him from pursuing a career in art. According to some biographers, Ellington's motivations to make it in the music world were far from pure: he apparently felt that he could earn more money as a bandleader than as an artist, and he noticed that pretty girls tended to flock around piano players.

Ellington lacked the self-discipline to engage in the formal study of the piano. However, he did begin to take the piano more seriously as a high school student, learning harmonies from his school's music teacher, Henry Grant. But Ellington never really learned to read music, and he could never play a musical selection for piano on demand. Ellington's son, Mercer, was quoted in Collier's *Duke Ellington* as having said: "The greater part of his knowledge was self-taught, by ear, and gradually acquired." Collier suggested that Duke's pride and stubbornness were at the root of his roundabout musical education. "This was the hard way of doing it, but it was the way [he] preferred, even if it would take him more time and cost him more energy."

Despite his unorthodox training, Ellington achieved the power to leave an audience spellbound. In an essay dated September 1957 in *Duke Ellington: His Life and Music*, Hughues Panassié noted, "Duke might not be one of the most agile or brilliant technicians of the keyboard, but what a great stylist he is! . . . He [puts] so much of his own spirit into the band. . . . He is an outstanding creator who puts all that is humanly possible into the greatest of jazz orchestras."

Formed His Own Band

Around 1914, while working after school in a soda shop,

Ellington wrote his first jazz song, "Soda Fountain Rag." He later dropped out of school to pursue his musical career, playing in jazz bands by night and supplementing his income by painting signs during the day. Often he managed to persuade club owners to let him paint the signs announcing the group's engagement. Around the same time, Ellington married schoolmate Edna Thompson, who had become pregnant with their son, Mercer.

Influenced by the style of earlier jazz artist Doc Perry, Ellington continued to work on his piano playing and, after the end of World War I, formed his own band. Critics contend that it was his band, rather than his piano, that was his true instrument. He composed not so much with a particular instrument in mind, but rather thinking of the current band member who played that instrument, suiting the music to the style of the player. The turnover rate in Ellington's band was not high, but due to the band's longevity many musicians and singers played with Ellington over the years, among them: saxophonists "Toby" Otto Hardwick, Harry Carney, Johnny Hodges, and Paul Gonsalves; trumpeters Artie Whetsol, Bubber Miley, and Cootie Williams; banjo players Elmer Snowden and Sterling Conaway; drummer "Sonny" William Greer; clarinet and sax player Barney Bigard; bass player Wellman Braud; trombonist Joe Nanton; vocalist Adelaide Hall; and pianist-composer Billy Strayhorn.

Ellington and his band, then known as the Washingtonians, began playing local clubs and parties in Washington, D.C., but during the early 1920s moved to New York City, where they secured steady work at the midtown Kentucky Club and, later, a three-year engagement at the popular Cotton Club. His notable compositions during this period included "Black and Tan Fantasy" and "Love Creole," both of which became jazz standards.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Ellington branched out into writing musical revues, such as *Chocolate Kiddies*, a success in Germany; playing in Broadway musicals, such as Florenz Ziegfeld's 1929 *Show Girl*; and appearing with his band in motion pictures, including the 1930 Amos and Andy feature *Check and Double Check*. Ellington's 1931 long piece, titled *Creole Rhapsody*, offered "confirmation of [his] emergence as a major composer," according to Collier. He soon added to the band's popularity with the legendary cuts "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)" and "Sophisticated Lady."

Throughout the 1930s, Ellington also played the hot, primitive sounds of so-called "jungle music" and began experimenting with the infusion of Latin American elements into jazz. In 1939 Strayhorn joined Ellington's band, beginning a composition partnership that would last until the former's death in 1967. Strayhorn is perhaps best known for writing the band's theme, "Take the 'A' Train." The band's horizons expanded geographically in the 1930s

as well—Ellington was well received on tours throughout the United States and in Europe.

In 1943 Ellington helped set up an annual jazz concert series at New York City's Carnegie Hall that lasted until 1955. Ellington was deeply involved with it each year and used the event to premier new, longer works of jazz that he

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composed. For the first concert, he introduced *Black, Brown, and Beige*, a piece in three sections that represented symphonically the story of blacks in the United States. "Black" concerned people of color at work and at prayer, "Brown" celebrated black soldiers who fought in American wars, and "Beige" depicted the African American music of Harlem. Other Carnegie Hall debuts included *New World a-Comin'*, about a black revolution to come after the end of World War II, and *Liberian Suite*, commissioned by the government of Liberia to honor its centennial.

"Blew the Joint Away" at Newport

The band's triumph at the Newport Jazz Festival of 1956 did much to broaden Ellington's audience. That year, Ellington's band was set to close the bill on the night of July 7th. Due to delayed starting times for earlier acts, the group did not take the stage until 11:45 p.m.—just 15 minutes before the concert was scheduled to end. Some members of the audience were already starting to leave. After performing an elaborate suite and a few standard works, Ellington led the band into "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue," highlighted by the improvisations of tenor saxophonist Paul Gonsalves.

The piece brought listeners to their feet. "It was solid jazz, blazing hot," proclaimed Collier. "Four men went out and played . . . for six minutes and blew the joint away. . . . [The audience was] shaken by the music, and those who were there would never forget it. . . . Within weeks Ellington's picture was on the cover of *Time*. The record of the Newport concert sold in the hundreds of thousands and became Ellington's biggest seller."

The 1960s: Musician, Historian, Lecturer

Ellington continued to compose throughout the 1960s, writing scores for various motion pictures and gamering an

Academy Award nomination for the score of the 1961 film *Paris Blues*, which featured Paul Newman and Sidney Poitier as lovestruck musicians in Paris. Two years later, Ellington was appointed by President John F. Kennedy's Cultural Committee to represent the United States on a State Department-sponsored tour of the East, including Syria, Jordan, Afghanistan, India, Ceylon, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. Aside from performing in concert on the tour, Ellington lectured on the history of jazz, famous jazz musicians, and the state of American race relations.

During the mid-1960s Ellington and his band, ever innovative, started to perform jazz-style sacred-music concerts in large cathedrals throughout the world. The first was in San Francisco's Grace Episcopal Cathedral in 1965 and included *In the Beginning God*. Ellington featured another lineup of sacred songs at his 1968 concert in New York City's Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine and went on to perform at St. Sulpice in Paris, Santa Maria del Mar in Barcelona, and Westminster Abbey in London.

Duke Ellington was active as a performer and composer until his death from lung cancer on May 24, 1974, in New York City. His compositions such as "Mood Indigo" and "In a Sentimental Mood" remain jazz standards more than half a century after their introduction. Following Ellington's death, his son, Mercer, who had been serving as the band's business manager and trumpet player, took over its leadership. But as Phyl Garland, writing in *Ebony* magazine, put it, the elder Ellington will always be remembered for "the daring innovations that came to mark his music—the strange modulations built upon lush melodies that ramble into unexpected places; the unorthodox construction of songs. . . ; the bold use of dissonance in advance of the time."

Selected compositions

Shorter works

- "Black and Tan Fantasy," 1927.
- "Creole Love Call," 1927.
- "Hot and Bothered," 1928.
- "Mood Indigo," 1931.
- "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)," 1932.
- "Sophisticated Lady," 1933.
- "Drop Me Off at Harlem," 1933.
- "In a Sentimental Mood," 1935.
- "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue," 1937.
- "Caravan," 1937.
- "Empty Ballroom Blues," 1938.
- "Concerto for Cootie," 1939.

Other compositions include "Soda Fountain Rag," "Solitude,"

"I Got It Bad and That Ain't Good," "When a Black Man's Blue," "Rockin' in Rhythm," and "The Blues Is Waitin'."

Longer works

- Creole Rhapsody*, 1931.
- Black, Brown, and Beige*, 1943.
- New World a-Comin'*, 1945.
- The Deep South Suite*, 1946.
- The Liberian Suite*, 1947.
- The Tattooed Bride*, 1948.
- Harlem*, 1950.
- Night Creature*, 1955.
- Festival Suite*, 1956.
- My People*, 1963.
- The Far East Suite*, 1964.

Selected discography

- Afro-Bossa*, Reprise, 1963.
- Happy Reunion* (recorded 1957-1958), Sony, 1991.
- At Newport*, Columbia House Legends of Jazz Program, 1993.
- The Beginning* (recorded 1926-1928), Decca.
- The Best of Duke Ellington*, Capitol.
- (With the Boston Pops) *Duke at Tanglewood*, RCA.
- Early Ellington*, Everest Archives.
- The Ellington Era* (two volumes), Columbia.
- Fantasies*, Harmony.
- Hot in Harlem* (recorded 1928-1929), Decca.
- The Indispensable Duke Ellington*, RCA.
- In My Solitude*, Harmony.

Sources

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- Dance, Stanley, *The World of Duke Ellington*, Da Capo, 1980.
- Ellington, Duke, *Music Is My Mistress*, Doubleday, 1973.
- Ellington, Mercer, and Stanley Dance, *Duke Ellington in Person*, Houghton Mifflin, 1978.
- Frankl, Ron, *Duke Ellington*, Chelsea House, 1988.
- Gammond, Peter, editor, *Duke Ellington: His Life and Music*, Da Capo, 1977.
- Jewell, Derek, *Duke: A Portrait of Duke Ellington*, Norton, 1977.

Rattenbury, Ken, *Duke Ellington: Jazz Composer*, Yale University Press, 1991.

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Ebony, July 1969, p. 29.

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Newsweek, May 12, 1969.

New York Times Magazine, September 12, 1965, p. 64.

Progressive, August 1982.

Reader's Digest, November 1969, p. 108.

A permanent exhibit titled *Duke Ellington: American Musician* was installed at the Smithsonian's Museum of American History, Washington, DC, in the late 1980s; a larger exhibit, *Beyond Category: The Musical Genius of Duke Ellington*, was scheduled for display at the Museum of American History from April through September of 1993 before traveling throughout the United States.

—Elizabeth Wenning and Barbara Carlisle Bigelow