

Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington (1899 - 1974)

Jazz has been called the first truly American music, and Duke Ellington reigns as the foremost composer in the history of jazz. Even this praise doesn't do him justice, though, for he spent his long career in music wearing many hats: composer, pianist, conductor, band leader, and world statesman.

He was born just before the turn of the century in Washington, D.C. He always spoke fondly of his childhood, and carried through life many of the lessons he learned from his family. His father was sometimes a butler for the White House and sometimes a blueprint maker for the U. S. Navy. From him young Edward learned the importance of good speech and manners as well as a great sense of humor. His mother probably had even a greater influence on him. From her he inherited unshakable self-confidence and a deep religious faith that he kept his whole life.

Ellington was steered into music indirectly through baseball. His mother saw him hit by a baseball bat in front of their home and immediately decided that he should take piano lessons. He still occasionally skipped sessions with his teacher Mrs. Clinkscales (he swore that this was her name!), but he quickly came to love music.

On a family vacation in Atlantic City he heard a famous ragtime pianist, and from then on he listened to local musicians whenever he could. By his teens, he was playing at dances and parties. At one private party he had to play for four solid hours without stopping. His hands actually bled, but he made more money than he had ever seen before: seventy-five cents!

Duke (who got his nickname from a childhood friend and wore it most of his life) was quite a painter in school. He was offered a scholarship to the Pratt Institute but didn't accept it. Instead he kept playing piano and writing music, and by 1922 he was in New York thanks to offers from musicians there who had heard him play. From that point on, Ellington's schooling came from the music around him, and he never tired of listening to the great performers of the day. Soon Duke was leading a band of his own, and he continued to do so for the next fifty years!

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Duke Ellington Band was highly respected by jazz fans in America and abroad. Still, this was not an easy time to be a black musician. Jazz was just starting to get a wider acceptance, but the big money and fame went to the

white bands like that of Paul Whiteman who was famous for his premiere of Gershwin's *Rhapsody In Blue*.

Though Whiteman was dubbed “King of Jazz,” when he wanted to get a real jazz sound, he sent his orchestrator, the famous composer Grofé, to spend hours listening to Duke's band. Still, Ellington's hard work and talent started to pay off. The band took over as the headliner and “house band” at Harlem's Cotton Club, and before long they were regularly broadcasting a radio show from the club.

Duke was always writing new music for his musicians, and the innovations he brought to jazz influenced virtually every jazz writer and player from then until today. Even though America was slow to view this music as *art* and not just *entertainment*, the rest of the world had started to take note. When Igor Stravinsky, the famous French/Russian composer, visited America, his hosts asked what he wanted to do. He immediately replied that he wanted to see Duke Ellington at the Cotton Club. The hosts, classical musicians, had never heard of him.

Ellington was always able to keep many of the best musicians of the day in his bands because he treated them with respect and paid them well. Even though the band ran into racial prejudice on their tours, Duke tried to insulate them from the problems. When they toured the South in the '30s, many hotels would have refused to let them stay, so they traveled by train in two large pullman cars with a 70-foot luggage car complete with all of the luxuries of home. In each town they parked in the station and lived in the cars... “just like the President,” Duke liked to say. When the band was having rough times, as they did in the early 1950s, Ellington would pay his musicians out of his pocket rather than break up the band. Some weeks this cost him thousands of dollars, but it was why great players stayed with him, many of them for as long as 20, 30, and even 40 years!

Duke Ellington's amazing career saw him travel over a million miles playing his special brand of music for people in every corner of the globe. During that time he wrote over a thousand works including 21 suites, 3 Broadway shows, 3 movie scores, a ballet, and 3 large sacred concerts. He never retired, but kept on playing and composing until the end, always drawing energy from the musicians around him.

It is impossible for us to predict what people in the future will remember of music in the 20th century, but as long as recordings exist, Duke Ellington's music will continue to delight and inspire listeners of all ages.

