

Duke Ellington (1899-1974, aged 75)

Much More Than Just All That Jazz

In our monthly theme concerts of piano trio music, we present music of **significant composers** of classic American popular music such Harry Warren, Richard Rodgers, and Jimmy Van Heusen **who are largely unknown** to the general American public today. These important composers do not have name recognition as George Gershwin, Cole Porter, and Hoagy Carmichael do.

A Greatest Jazz Composer and Bandleader of His Time

Duke Ellington, unlike Warren, Rodgers, and Van Heusen, does have name recognition with the American public, but most **associate him only with jazz**: This is understandable. Ellington, an American pianist, was the **greatest jazz composer and bandleader of his time**. One of the originators of big-band jazz, Ellington led his band for more than half a century, composed thousands of scores, and created one of the most distinctive ensemble sounds in all of Western music.

By his inventive use of the orchestra (or big-band) and through his eloquence and charisma, Ellington elevated the perception of jazz to an art form on par with other traditional genres of music. Ellington's sense of musical drama enhanced his orchestras and his musicians. His blend of melodies, rhythms and subtle sonic movements gave audiences a new experience—complex yet accessible jazz that swung. He continued to play what he called “American Music” until shortly before his death in 1974.

A Prolific Composer of Classic American Popular Music

Duke Ellington's accomplishments in the jazz idiom tend to overshadow his other musical contributions. He is considered to be the most important composer in **jazz** history. **But he is much more than just all that jazz.** He is also among the top composers of classic American **popular** music (aka "standards"). From the early 1930s on, Ellington composed hundreds of great popular tunes which became part of classic American **popular** music. These tunes include:

- Sophisticated Lady (1933)
- Solitude (1934)
- Prelude To a Kiss (1938)
- I Got It Bad and That Ain't Good (1941)
- Don't Get Around Much Anymore (1942)
- Do Nothing Till You Hear From Me (1943)
- I Didn't Know About You (1944)
- It Shouldn't Happen to a Dream (1946)
- Love You Madly (1950)
- Satin Doll (1958)

Ellington's Musical Ensembles-Washington, D.C.

In high school, Ellington was engrossed in studying art and was awarded a scholarship in commercial art at the Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York. He declined it, however, and began to perform as a professional musician at age 17. Playing in a ragtime-inspired style, Ellington became a successful pianist; he moved out of his parents' home and bought his own. His pianistic influences included stride pianists James P. Johnson and Willie "The Lion" Smith.

By 1919, Ellington had formed his first musical ensemble which played throughout the D.C. area and into Virginia for private society balls and embassy parties. The band included childhood friend Otto Hardwick, who began playing the string bass,

then moved to C-melody sax and finally settled on alto saxophone; Arthur Whetsel on trumpet; Elmer Snowden on banjo; and Sonny Greer on drums. The band thrived, performing for both African American and white audiences, rare in the segregated society of the day.

With this ensemble as well as with his later, larger orchestras, Ellington, like Mozart and Haydn, conducted from the piano. Very rarely did he conduct using a baton. Ellington **always** played the keyboard parts when the Sacred Concerts were performed.

Ellington's Musical Ensembles-New York City

Ellington was persuaded to give up his successful musical career in Washington, D.C. and move to New York City in mid-1923 by his drummer Sonny Greer. It was a good move for Ellington as he and his ensembles were able to land four-year engagements in upscale night clubs where they grew a solid audience. Because they were not a touring band (with the heavy demands of touring on time and energy), they had the freedom to experiment with orchestral colors and arrangements and to develop and enrich the style and repertoire of their ensembles. These were the Roaring Twenties, and good, live music, like that played by Duke Ellington and his musicians, was in demand.

The Hollywood Club (49th and Broadway, 1923-1927)

Ellington's group was at the Hollywood Club during 1923-1927 where it came to be known as the Washingtonians. The group began as a sextet that grew into a ten-piece ensemble. Ellington's ability to arrange for larger ensembles grew commensurately. The band was actively recording during this period.

The Cotton Club (142nd St. & Lenox Ave. in Harlem, 1928-1931)

The extended residence at the Cotton Club enabled Ellington to enlarge his band to 14 musicians and to expand his compositional scope. He selected his musicians for their expressive individuality; many of these musicians were top jazz artists in their own right. They included trumpeter Cootie Williams, cornetist Rex Stewart, trombonist Lawrence Brown, baritone saxophonist Harry Carney, alto saxophonist Johnny Hodges, and clarinetist Barney Bigard. These exceptional musicians remained with Ellington throughout the 1930s. During the 1920s and 1930s, Ellington's orchestra made hundreds of recordings, appeared in films and on radio, and toured Europe in 1933 and 1939.

The expertise of this ensemble at the Cotton Club allowed Ellington to break away from the conventions of band-section scoring. Instead, he used new harmonies to blend his musicians' individual sounds and emphasized congruent sections and a supple ensemble that featured, for example, Carney's full bass-clef sound. He illuminated subtle moods with ingenious combinations of instruments; among the most famous examples is "Mood Indigo" in his 1930 setting for muted trumpet, un-muted trombone, and low-register clarinet.

(Note: The Cotton Club closed temporarily in 1936 after the race riot in Harlem the previous year. It reopened later that year at Broadway and 48th, and the Ellington orchestra was in residency at this new location in 1937–38. The Cotton Club closed permanently in 1940.)

The Post World War II Years

Musical tastes changed after World War, negatively impacting big bands, many of which were forced to disband. Also, the cost of hiring big bands had increased, so, club owners now found smaller jazz groups, such as Bebop groups, more cost-effective than big bands. For example, Count Basie was forced to disband his big band and work as an octet for a time.

Despite these major cultural and economic shifts, Ellington continued with his full orchestra. The Ellington band toured Europe often after World War II. As an example, it toured most of Western Europe between April 6 and June 30, 1950, with the orchestra playing 74 dates over 77 days. It also played in Asia (1963–64, 1970), West Africa (1966), South America (1968), and Australia (1970) and frequently toured North America.

Despite this grueling schedule, some of Ellington's musicians stayed with him for decades; Carney, for example, was a band member for 47 years. The fact that so many of the Ellington band members stayed with him for so many years despite the vagaries of the music business shows that **Duke Ellington had people skills as well as musical skills.**

Full-length Musical Forms and Classical Forms

Ellington was an acknowledged master of pop and jazz hits within the then-required three-minute limit. However, his long-term goal was to extend the jazz form beyond this limit to extended musical forms. He realized this goal in 1941 with *Jump for Joy*, a full-length musical based on themes of African American identity. He followed this with his musical suite *Black, Brown and Beige* (1943), a portrayal of African-American history. Next came: *Liberian Suite* (1947); *A Drum Is*

a Woman (1956), created for a television production; *Far East Suite* (1964); and *Togo Brava Suite* (1971).

Movie Scores, Music for Ballet and Theatre, and Sacred Music

Ellington's film work began with *Black and Tan* (1929), a 19-minute all-African American RKO short. After a two-decade hiatus, Ellington wrote motion-picture scores for *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) and *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959) and composed for the ballet and theatre—including, at the height of the American civil rights movement, the show *My People* (1964), a celebration of African American life. In his last decade he composed three pieces of sacred music: *In the Beginning God* (1965), *Second Sacred Concert* (1968), and *Third Sacred Concert* (1973).

Honors

- Ellington earned 12 Grammy awards from 1959 to 2000, nine while he was alive.
- He received the Presidential Medal of Honor personally from President Nixon in the White House in 1969. It is the highest civilian award in the U.S.
- 1973, he was awarded the Legion of Honour by France, its highest civilian honor.
- In 1999, he was posthumously awarded a special Pulitzer Prize "commemorating the centennial year of his birth, in recognition of his musical genius, which evoked aesthetically the principles of democracy through the medium of jazz and thus made an indelible contribution to art and culture."

Duke Ellington's Early Life

Born on April 29, 1899, Edward Kennedy Ellington was raised by two talented, musical parents in a middle-class neighborhood of Washington, D.C. Both his parents were pianists. At the age of seven, he began studying piano and earned the nickname "Duke" for his gentlemanly ways. Inspired by his job as a soda jerk, he wrote his first composition, "Soda Fountain Rag," at the age of 15. His mother Daisy (Kennedy) Ellington was the daughter of two former American slaves. His father James Edward Ellington made blueprints for the United States Navy.

At the age of 19, Ellington married Edna Thompson, who had been his girlfriend since high school, and soon after their marriage, she gave birth to their only child, Mercer Kennedy Ellington. Ellington was joined in New York City by his wife and son in the late twenties, but the couple soon permanently separated.

Duke Ellington's Final Days

Ellington died on May 24, 1974, a few weeks after his 75th birthday, of complications from lung cancer and pneumonia. Over 12,000 people attended his funeral at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine (in Manhattan). Ella Fitzgerald summed up the occasion: "It's a very sad day. A genius has passed."

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