

ellington 101

a beginner's guide





Vital Statistics

- One of the greatest composers of the 20th century
- Composed nearly 2,000 works, including three-minute instrumental pieces, popular songs, large-scale suites, sacred music, film scores, and a nearly finished opera
- Developed an extraordinary group of musicians, many of whom stayed with him for over 50 years
- Played more than 20,000 performances over the course of his career
- Influenced generations of pianists with his distinctive style and beautiful sound
- Embraced the range of American music like no one else
- Extended the scope and sound of jazz
- Spread the language of jazz around the world

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Table of Contents

A Brief Biography of Duke Ellington	4
Meet the Ellingtonians	9
Additional Resources	15

Duke's artistic development and sustained achievement were among the most spectacular in the history of music. His was a distinctly democratic vision of music in which musicians developed their unique styles by selflessly contributing to the whole band's sound . . . Few other artists of the last 100 years have been more successful at capturing humanity's triumphs and tribulations in their work than this composer, bandleader, and pianist. He codified the sound of America in the 20th century.

Wynton Marsalis
Artistic Director, Jazz at Lincoln Center



Ellington, 1934

I wrote “Black and Tan Fantasy” in a taxi coming down through Central Park on my way to a recording studio. I wrote “Mood Indigo” in 15 minutes. I wrote “Solitude” in 20 minutes in Chicago, standing up against a glass enclosure, waiting for another band to finish recording. But when I wrote “Sophisticated Lady” it took me 30 days, because I couldn’t decide which way I wanted to go in the 17th bar.

Duke Ellington

Duke Ellington

A Brief Biography

Duke Ellington was born in Washington, D.C. on April 29, 1899. His parents both played piano and they encouraged their son to study music at a very early age. Duke sought mentorship both in and out of the family. He studied with local pianists Oliver “Doc” Perry and Louis Brown and listened to piano rolls by the great stride pianists James P. Johnson and Luckey Roberts. By age 24, Ellington was among the most successful dance bandleaders in Washington. Already, the regal nickname he’d earned in high school seemed prescient.

In 1923, Duke moved to New York, where he joined the cultural revolution known as the Harlem Renaissance. He immersed himself in the musical life of the city, playing and studying alongside many of his heroes, including pianists Johnson and Willie “The Lion” Smith, and composer Will Marion Cook. It was Cook who advised young Ellington, “First ... find the logical way, and when you find it, avoid it and let your inner self break through and guide you. Don’t try to be anybody else but yourself.” It was a lesson Duke would carry throughout his career.

That year, Duke and his group, The Washingtonians, found steady work at the Kentucky Club near Times Square. Though he was just beginning his career as a composer, his five-piece band quickly earned attention for its fresh and unusual sound, highlighted by the startling growls of trumpeter Bubber Miley. Their growing reputation eventually earned the band a job at Harlem’s prestigious Cotton Club, where they would stay from 1927 to 1931. Now a large 10- to 12-piece orchestra, the band (which included longtime members Barney Bigard, Johnny Hodges, Sonny Greer, Cootie



The Duke Cotton Club Orchestra, 1931



Duke at the London Palladium

Williams, and Miley) offered Ellington the opportunity to experiment with his writing and perfect the “jungle sound” for which he’d become famous. Writer Ralph Ellison, then a high school student, recalled the Cotton Club days, “It was as though Ellington had taken the traditional instruments of Negro American music and modified them, extended their range and enriched their tonal possibilities . . . It was not until the discovery of Ellington that we had any hint that jazz possessed possibilities of a range of expressiveness comparable to that of classical European music.”

By 1930, the orchestra had recorded nearly 200 compositions, including the best-selling Ellington/Bigard classic, “Mood Indigo.” Among his earliest hits, “Mood Indigo” offered listeners a glimpse into Ellington’s unorthodox musical world. Though wedded to the blues and jazz traditions, Ellington was not afraid to turn the music on its head. At times, his unusual orchestral combinations baffled even his own band members. His haunting blend of trumpet, trombone, and clarinet on “Mood Indigo” (with the low-pitched trombone playing the highest part and the high-pitched clarinet playing the bottom part) offers just one example of the group’s inimitable sound, later coined the “Ellington Effect.”

Ellington was just beginning to hit his stride. In 1931, the band embarked on an extensive national and



m, 1933



Ellington, 1961

international tour that, in a sense, would continue for the next four decades. At times, it was not unusual for the group to perform as many as 300 concerts a year. Despite the exhaustive nature of his schedule, Ellington’s cosmopolitan elegance and integrity never wavered. Whether in small town or sprawling metropolis, the band’s visits were considered sacred events. Ellison recalls, “Then Ellington and his great orchestra came to town—came with their uniforms, their sophistication, their skills; their golden horns, their flights of controlled and disciplined fantasy; came with their art, their special sound; came with Ivie Anderson and Ethel Waters singing and dazzling the eye with their high-brown beauty and with the richness and

bright feminine flair of their costumes and promising manners. They were news from the great wide world, an example and a goal . . .”

My band is my instrument even more than the piano...I’m something like a farmer. He plants his seed and I plant mine. He has to wait until spring to see his come up, but I can see mine right after I plant it. That night. I don’t have to wait. That’s the payoff for me . . .

Duke Ellington

The band, a musical laboratory of sorts, continued to expand in size, offering its leader ever-varied tone colors with which to experiment. “The music,” he said, “must be molded to the men,” and as a

result, the band's handpicked personnel had an immeasurable impact on the group sound. Two of the most notable additions were bassist Jimmy Blanton and tenor saxophonist Ben Webster, whose combined mastery left a lasting impression on Ellington. Even more profound was the impact of the young Billy Strayhorn, who in 1939 became the band's assistant pianist and arranger. Strayhorn composed or assisted with over 200 compositions in the orchestra's repertoire, including their theme song, "Take the 'A' Train" (1941). For Ellington, Strayhorn was "my right arm, my left arm, all the eyes in the back of my head; my brainwaves are in his head, and his in mine."

Armed with a growing arsenal of sounds and textures, Ellington began to broaden the scope of his work, experimenting with extended song forms, unconventional harmonies, and orchestrations. Already a master of the then-standard three-minute song form [exemplified by such classics as "Cottontail" (1940) and "Harlem Airshaft" (1940)],

Ellington is a perfect example of a twentieth century master of music. No question about it. When you talk about Bach, Beethoven, and Stravinsky, Duke is right up there . . . He produced something so valid and so American.

Louis Bellson, drummer

Ellington embarked on more expansive pieces, including *Such Sweet Thunder* (1957) and *The Nutcracker Suite* (1960), that stretched the boundaries

of his genre. The music, as Duke liked to say, was "beyond category."

Simply put, Ellington embraced the scope of American music like no one else. He synthesized ragtime, the minstrel song, Tin Pan Alley, the blues, and American appropriations of the European music tradition, creating a consistent and recognizable style. While technically complex, his music had a directness, simplicity of expression, and intent largely missing from twentieth century art music.

His understanding of and appreciation for the blues resulted in new conceptions of blues form, harmony, and melody. He was also the master of the romantic ballad, writing evocative (though not saccharine) pieces that featured the distinctive sound and phrasing of his great soloists.

Ellington's appreciation for the diversity of American life and music contributed to an incredibly varied repertoire. He wrote for the ballroom, comedy stage, nightclub, movie house, theater, concert hall, and cathedral. Anticipating the current popularity of "world music," he incorporated themes and motifs inspired by his tours abroad into such evocative pieces as "The Far East Suite" (1964) and "Afro-Eurasian Eclipse" (1971). His adventurous spirit also extended to the piano. Always willing to embrace innovations in jazz, Ellington periodically left the bandstand to showcase his instrumental prowess. He performed and recorded in various small group settings with "modernists" Max Roach, Charles Mingus (Money Jungle), and John Coltrane (Duke Ellington & John Coltrane).

Ellington performed regularly until the spring of 1974 when he was overcome by lung cancer. In addition to a vast musical output, he left a distinctive personal account of his life and work in his autobiography *Music is My Mistress*, published in 1973.



Ellington's music was a model of modern democracy, celebrating the freedom of personal expression in the service of a group sound. He wanted his musicians to "sound like themselves," but to "make him sound good as well!" Writer Albert Murray explains, "at its best, an Ellington performance sounds as if it knows the truth about all the other music in the world and is looking for something better. Not even the Constitution represents a more intrinsically American statement and achievement than that."

Meet the Band

The Ellingtonians

Billy Strayhorn once said, “Ellington plays the piano, but his real instrument is his band. Each member of his band is to him a distinctive tonal color and set of emotions . . .” Over a career that spanned fifty years, Ellington had the opportunity to work with hundreds of musicians. Following are brief descriptions of just a few—some of the most distinctive “sound identities” to play in the Duke Ellington Orchestra.

Barney Bigard (1906-80) clarinet: A distinctive and technically adept clarinetist, Bigard was best known for his sweeping runs and glissandos. He traveled with Ellington for 15 years (1927-42) and co-wrote “Mood Indigo” and “Saturday Night Function.”

Jimmy Blanton (1918-42) double bass: Considered by many to be the first great modern bassist, Blanton developed an approach that was markedly different from the New Orleans

style that predominated early jazz.

Jimmy Blanton revolutionized bass playing and it has not been the same since. No one had played from the same perspective before. He played melodies that belonged to the bass and always had a foundation quality.

His huge, warm sound, buoyant beat, and harmonic sophistication set a new

Duke Ellington

standard for the

instrument. Blanton’s improvisations on “Ko-Ko,” “Jack the Bear,” and “Concerto for Cootie” represent some of the first real bass solos in jazz.

Lawrence Brown (1907-88) trombone: A gifted and versatile trombonist, Brown’s distinctive style made him a strong soloist and an even stronger section leader. An orchestra member from 1932 to 1951, and later from 1960 to 1970,



Brown's profound understanding of Ellington's musical sensibility made him a lasting asset to the band.

Harry Carney (1910-74) baritone sax: Carney was one of the first and most influential practitioners of this often-difficult instrument. His warm, robust tone anchored the reed section and added a distinctive note to the Ellington sound. He was also one of the first musicians to make serious and effective use of the circular breathing technique, which enabled him to play for great lengths of time without pausing to breathe. Carney performed with the Ellington Orchestra for a remarkable 46 years (1927-74).

Paul Gonsalves (1920-74) tenor sax: Gonsalves gained immediate acclaim at the 1956 Newport Jazz Festival where he played an extraordinary 27-chorus solo on Ellington's "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue." The show-stopping performance brought the orchestra back to prominence after several years of diminished popularity. Equally adept on ballads and up-tempo features, Gonsalves toured with the band from 1950 to 1974.

Sonny Greer (1895-1982) drums: Greer met Ellington in Washington in 1919 and joined the Washingtonians soon after. From the start, he surrounded himself with an arsenal of percussion instruments, including gongs and chimes. His unique set contributed to the distinctive colors and



The Orchestra in Los Angeles, 1934

textures of Ellington's "jungle" sound and created a stunning visual effect as well. Greer performed with the orchestra for more than 25 years (1923-51).

Jimmy Hamilton (1917-94) clarinet, tenor sax: Hamilton's technical approach to the clarinet was markedly different from the earthy New Orleans style of his predecessor Barney Bigard. He used very little vibrato (an undulating of pitch) and his solos were tightly constructed and highly logical. Hamilton performed with the Ellington band for 25 years (1943-68) and was often featured as a soloist.

Johnny Hodges (1907-70) alto sax: One of the most beautiful and lyrical saxophonists in the history of jazz, Hodges' unmatched nuance and command of his instrument raised the bar for generations of musicians. His indifferent demeanor notwithstanding, Hodges played ballads and blues with equal mastery and sensitivity.

Johnny Hodges has complete independence of expression. He says what he wants to say on the horn, and this is it. He says it in his language, which is specific, and you could say that his is pure artistry.

"Things Ain't What They Used to Be," "Come Sunday," and "Passion Flower," are among his signature tunes. Hodges played with the orchestra from 1928 to

Duke Ellington

1951 and again from 1955 to 1970.



Left to Right: Johnny Hodges, Ellington, and Jimmy Hamilton

Bubber Miley (1903-32) trumpet: A member of Ellington's band from 1923 to 1929, Miley was the undisputed master of the plunger mute growl that characterized Ellington's early "jungle" sound. In fact, Ellington credits Miley for changing the Washingtonians' musical sound from sweet to hot. He co-wrote "East St. Louis Toodle-oo" (the band's first theme song) and "Black and Tan Fantasy."

Ray Nance (1913-76) trumpet, violin, vocals, dance: Nance was a multi-faceted entertainer and Ellington took advantage of all of his talents for more than 20 years (1940-63). Most noted for his trumpet solo on the original version of "Take the 'A' Train," his violin also added color to the suite "Black, Brown, and Beige."

Joe "Tricky Sam" Nanton (1904-46) trombone: Along with trumpeter Bubber Miley, Nanton was a major force behind Ellington's early "jungle" sound. His "talking" style of play is featured on the classic early recording of "Black and Tan Fantasy." Nanton performed with Ellington for the better part of his professional career (1926-46).

Russell Procope (1908-81) clarinet, alto sax: Though he rarely performed as a soloist, Procope's strong section playing and beautiful tone made him a fixture in the orchestra from 1946 to 1974.

Rex Stewart (1907-67) trumpet, cornet: An orchestra member from 1934 to 1945, Stewart was famous for his “talking” style and half-valve effects. He was also a composer of note, co-writing both “Boy Meets Horn” and “Morning Glory.” A talented writer, he penned *Jazz Masters of the Thirties* and the highly entertaining autobiography *Boy Meets Horn*.

Billy Strayhorn (1915-67) pianist, composer, arranger: An extraordinarily gifted musician, Strayhorn was Ellington’s closest musical collaborator for over 30 years. In fact, the two men were so attuned to each other’s musical sensibility that it is often difficult to discern the extent of Strayhorn’s contributions to the orchestra. His most famous compositions include “Take the ‘A’ Train,” “Chelsea Bridge,” and “Lush Life” and he co-wrote “Such Sweet Thunder,” “A Drum is a Woman,” and the “Far East Suite.” Strayhorn was Ellington’s alter ego from 1939 until his death in 1967.

Juan Tizol (1900-84) valve trombone: Though Tizol was rarely featured as a soloist, his unique tone on the valve trombone added an important element to the Ellington sound. As a composer, Tizol brought a distinctly Latin feel to such classic pieces as “Caravan,” “Perdido,” and “Pyramid.” Tizol played with Ellington on and off throughout his long musical career: 1929 to 1944, 1951 to 1953, and 1960 to 1961.



Left to Right: Rex Stewart, Cootie Williams, Arthur Whetsol, circa 1937

Ben Webster (1909-73) tenor sax: Webster, like Coleman Hawkins and Lester Young, was a leading tenor saxophonist of the Swing Era. His huge, bold tone could drive up-tempo numbers, while his warm, breathy sound could wrap a ballad in unmatched tenderness. The featured soloist on “Cottontail” and “All Too Soon,” he is documented on one of Ellington’s strongest recordings, *The Blanton-Webster Years: 1940-42*.

Cootie Williams (1910-85) trumpet: Williams was a powerful and versatile soloist who mastered and extended the plunger mute techniques developed by Bubber Miley. Equally skilled with or without a mute, Ellington included Williams’ solo voice on hundreds of compositions, including “Echoes of Harlem” and his signature piece, “Concerto for Cootie.” Williams performed with the orchestra from 1929 to 1940 and from 1962 to 1974.

Sam Woodyard (1925-1988) drums: Powerful but never overbearing, Woodyard fully understood Ellington’s musical aesthetic. The driving force behind Paul Gonsalves’ celebrated solo on “Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue” at Newport, Woodyard’s rhythmic energy was central to the resurgence of the Ellington Orchestra in the mid-1950s. He played with the orchestra from 1955 to 1966.



Ellington with Sonny Greer, circa 1934

Additional Resources

Recordings (in chronological order)

There are literally hundreds of Ellington recordings available today. Some fans prefer his earlier works, while others enjoy his later recordings from the 1950s and '60s. Following is a chronological listing of some of his finest works.

The Best of Early Ellington, Decca GRD-660, 1926.

The Okeh Collection, Columbia C2K-46177, 1927.

Reminiscing in Tempo, Columbia 48654, 1935.

Never No Lament: The Blanton-Webster Band,
1939-42, Bluebird 82876508572.

Duke Ellington Carnegie Hall Concerts, Prestige 34004-2, 1943.

Duke Ellington: The Complete Mid-Forties Recordings,
1944-46, Bluebird 09026 63394-2.

Duke Ellington Carnegie Hall Concerts, Prestige 24075-2, 1947.

Ellington Uptown, Columbia 87066. 1951.

Ellington at Newport 1956 (complete), Columbia 64932.

Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Duke Ellington Songbook,
Verve 314559248-2, 1957.

Black, Brown, & Beige, Columbia 65566, 1958.

Anatomy of a Murder, Columbia 65569, 1959.

The Ellington Suites, Pablo OJCCD-446-2, 1959.

Money Jungle, Blue Note CDP 7 46398, 1962.

Duke Ellington & John Coltrane, Impulse! 166, 1962.

The Great Paris Concert, Atlantic 304, 1963.

Far East Suite (remaster), Bluebird 55614-2, 1966.

Duke Ellington Second Sacred Concert, Prestige 24045-2, 1968

Three Suites, Columbia 46825, 1969.

New Orleans Suite, Atlantic 1580-2, 1970.

Books

Music is My Mistress by Duke Ellington
(New York: DaCapo Press, 1976).

The World of Duke Ellington by Stanley Dance
(New York: DaCapo Press, 2001).

*Ellingtonia: The Recorded Music of Duke Ellington and His
Sidemen* compiled by W.E. Timner
(Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 1996).

The Duke Ellington Reader by Mark Tucker

(New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Ellington: The Early Years by Mark Tucker

(Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

Duke Ellington by Barry Ulanov (New York: DaCapo Press, 1995).

Children's Books

Duke Ellington: Bandleader and Composer by Ron Frankl

(Langhorne: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987).

Duke Ellington: The Piano Prince and His Orchestra

by Andrea Davis Pickney and Brian Pickney

(New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 1998).

Duke Ellington: A Life in Music by Eve Stwertka

(New York: Franklin Watts, 1994).

Videos

Anatomy of a Murder (1959) Columbia/Tristar, 2000.

Duke Ellington, Good Years of Jazz (1962) VAI, 1993.

Duke Ellington in Europe (1963-64) Vidjazz, 1998.

Duke Ellington: Live at the Tivoli Gardens (1971)

Image Entertainment, 2003.

Duke Ellington: Memories of Duke (1968)

Music Video Dist., 2002.

Ken Burns Jazz. Florentine Films, 2000.

On the Road with Duke Ellington (1967)

A & E Home Video, 2002.

Paris Blues (1961) MGM/UA, 1993.

Internet

Billy Strayhorn Songs, Inc.

www.billystrayhorn.com

This organization was established in 1997 to bring recognition to the life and music of Billy Strayhorn.

Duke Ellington Centennial Celebration

www.dellington.org

A celebration of the 1999 Ellington Centennial organized by the National Museum of American History, MENC, and the Kennedy Center's Artsedge.

Duke Ellington's Washington

www.pbs.org/ellingtonsdc/

An online companion to the PBS documentary, the site explores life and music in turn-of-the-century Washington, DC

Smithsonian Jazz: Duke Ellington

www.smithsonianjazz.org

Take an interactive tour or download helpful lesson plans on this dynamic site.

Additional Resources

The Duke Ellington Society

P.O. Box 15591

Washington, DC

20003-0787

The International Duke Ellington Music Society

Voort 18b

Meerle, Belgium

Telephone: 32-3-315-75-83

DEMS is an international organization devoted to studying the recordings of Duke Ellington.

Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra

Smithsonian Institution

NMAH 4100, MRC 616

P.O. Box 37012

Washington, DC 20560

Tel: (202) 633-3606

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