



"The wise musicians are those who play what they can master." —DUKE ELLINGTON



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Duke Ellington (seated) with members of his orchestra.

Duke Ellington

WHO: Pianist, composer, and jazz and big band leader.

WHAT: One of the world's greatest composers and musicians.

WHEN: Edward Kennedy Ellington was born on April 29, 1899, and had a 50-year career spanning over 20,000 performances around the world. He died on May 24, 1974.

WHERE: He was raised in Washington, D.C., but came to national prominence in New York City when his band played at the Cotton Club and their music was broadcast on the club's famous radio show.

THE STORY: Ellington's band became the most sought-after band in the United States, and even throughout the world, with his famous songs, "Rockin' in Rhythm," "Satin Doll," "New Orleans," "Take the 'A' Train," "Happy-Go-Lucky Local," and "Crescendo in Blue," some of the biggest hits of his day. It is estimated that his orchestra recorded around two thousand compositions.

Young Edward began to play piano at seven, but preferred baseball to music. He later attended Armstrong Manual Training School to study commercial art and even got a scholarship to the Pratt Institute of Fine Art, but he turned it down.

Ellington got the nickname "Duke" from a friend who thought that his elegant manners, style and clothes made him seem "royal."

Duke began to listen to ragtime pianists in Washington and, during the summers, in Philadelphia or Atlantic City, where he and his mother vacationed. While vacationing in Asbury Park, NJ, Duke heard of a hot pianist named Harvey Brooks. At the end of his vacation, Duke sought Harvey out in Philadelphia where Harvey

showed Duke some tricks and shortcuts. Duke later recounted: "When I got home, I had a real yearning to play. I hadn't been able to get off the ground before, but after hearing him I said to myself, 'Man you're going to have to do it.'" Thus, the music career of Duke Ellington was born.

In late 1917, Duke formed the Serenaders, moved out on his own, and played around the D.C. area. By 1923, he was in New York and started reaching mass audiences. He began recording and performing in New York's famous night spots, most notably the Cotton Club. Radio was just beginning to spread to homes across the U.S., and Duke's live "From the Cotton Club" broadcast put him on the national map. His jazz orchestra brought sophistication to big band jazz that took it beyond its previous boundaries. He collaborated with many of the great musicians of his time, none more notable than pianist, composer and arranger Billy Strayhorn, who wrote or co-wrote hits like "Take the 'A' Train" and "Satin Doll." Together, they composed and arranged jazz that matched classical music for complexity, subtlety and grandeur. Many consider him to be the most important composer and bandleader in American musical (let alone jazz) history.

Of his many classic albums and compositions, *Ellington at Newport* (1956) may be the clearest example of his band's incredible depth and skill.

Duke Ellington and his band went on to play everywhere from New York to New Delhi, Chicago to Cairo, and Los Angeles to London. They entertained everyone from Queen Elizabeth II to President Nixon. Before passing away in 1974, Duke Ellington wrote and recorded hundreds of musical compositions, all of which will continue to have a lasting effect upon people worldwide. ¶