

Duke Ellington

Adapted from *America's Story* by the
Library of Congress
By Kira Freed

Duke Ellington (1899–1974) was one of the founding fathers of jazz music. When he was just seven years old, Duke began playing the piano. By the age of 15, he was already **composing** his own songs. During his long life of creating music, Duke composed close to 2,000 pieces of music. His most famous songs include “Don’t Get Around Much Anymore,” “Mood Indigo,” and “In a Sentimental Mood.”



Duke Ellington has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

It's a Fact

Duke Ellington took piano lessons as a child, but he was more interested in baseball. He returned to music as a teenager because he was trying to be “cool” and impress a girl. By the age of 20, Duke was well on his way to a musical career.

Early Years

Duke Ellington, born Edward Kennedy Ellington, grew up in Washington D.C., and loved music from an early age. When he was four years old, he listened to his mother play a song on the piano. As he listened, young Duke cried to himself, saying, “It was so pretty. So pretty.” Three years later, Duke began to play the piano himself. He seemed to know he had a bright future ahead of him. He once told a next-door neighbor, “One of these days I’m going to be famous.”

When he was 15, Duke was working at a **soda fountain**. It was there that he wrote his first song, “Soda Fountain Rag.” By the time he was in his late teens, Duke was making enough money from his job to help his parents move into a larger house. It was around this time that Duke started playing the piano for money. One of Duke’s first paid **gigs** was a party where he played so long that his hand bled. He earned 75 cents for the whole thing. “It was the most money I had ever seen,” he said. “I rushed all the way home to my mother with it. But I could not touch a piano key for weeks.”



Duke Ellington was a master of the piano. A piano has 52 white keys and 36 black keys.

Duke grew up and studied music during what is called the ragtime era. Ragtime was a type of popular American music with off-beat dance rhythms. By the time Ellington was twenty, he and his friends had formed a band. From 1923 to 1927, they lived in New York City and made about 60 recordings.

It wasn’t until December 4, 1927 that the Ellington Orchestra finally got its big break, playing at the Cotton Club in New York City’s Harlem neighborhood. It was the beginning of many years of playing at the Cotton Club. Because The Ellington Orchestra often **broadcast** live on radio from the Cotton Club, their special style of jazz became familiar to people across the country.

Duke’s Band

Duke Ellington thought about music all the time and wrote new songs night and day. Duke was known for being a pianist and composer, however, some say that his real instrument was his band and the gifted musicians with whom

he worked. His drummer, Sonny Greer, played with the band from the beginning. Juan Tizol played the trombone and added a little flavor from his Puerto Rican upbringing. Another trombonist, Lawrence Brown, joined the band in 1932 and stayed for the next 19 years. Ray Nance played both the violin and trumpet. Mary Lou Williams, one of the great women of jazz, **arranged** music for Ellington.

For fifty years, Duke Ellington and the Duke Ellington Orchestra traveled the country and the world playing concerts. The band often performed two shows a day and sometimes even added in a recording session. Ellington's music was familiar to people in both the United States and **abroad**. As far as Duke was concerned, no place was considered too small or too grand for him to play.

Did You Know?

A duke is nobleman of high rank in certain countries. Duke Ellington got his nickname from a childhood friend who admired him and thought he acted in a **dignified** manner.

Duke received many awards during his lifetime and many others after his death. These included the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award (1966) and the Presidential Medal of Freedom (1969). When he passed away in 1974, soon after his 75th birthday, gifted jazz singer Ella Fitzgerald mourned his death: "It's a very sad day. A genius has passed." After Ellington's death, his son, Mercer, led the Duke's orchestra until 1996.

Glossary

Abroad (<i>adv.</i>):	in one or more foreign countries.
Arranged (<i>v.</i>):	adapted pieces of music for instruments and voices or a style not intended by the composer.
Broadcast (<i>v.</i>):	to transmit by radio or television.
Composing (<i>v.</i>):	writing musical pieces.
Dignified (<i>adj.</i>):	worthy of respect or honor.
Gigs (<i>n.</i>):	live musical performances.
Soda fountain (<i>n.</i>):	a counter or shop where ice cream, sodas, and sundaes are made and served.

Additional Sources:

Public Broadcasting Service (PBS): Jazz, A Film by Ken Burns; The Official Site of Jazz Legend Duke Ellington; Wikipedia