PBS - JAZZ A Film By Ken Burns: Selected Artist Biography - Duke Ellington

Duke Ellington

Courtesy of Jazz at Lincoln Center

(1899-1974) Composer, bandleader, pianist



Image courtesy of Frank Driggs Collection

Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington was the most prolific composer of the twentieth century in terms of both number of compositions and variety of forms. His development was one of the most spectacular in the history of music, underscored by more than fifty years of sustained achievement as an artist and an entertainer. He is considered by many to be America's greatest composer, bandleader, and recording artist.

The extent of Ellington's innovations helped to redefine the various forms in which he worked. He synthesized many of the elements of American music — the minstrel song, ragtime, Tin Pan Alley tunes, the blues, and American appropriations of the European music tradition — into a consistent style with which, though technically complex, has a directness and a simplicity of expression largely absent from the purported art music of the twentieth century. Ellington's first great achievements came in the three-minute song form, and he later wrote music for all kinds of settings: the ballroom, the comedy stage, the nightclub, the movie house, the theater, the concert hall, and the cathedral. His blues writing resulted in new conceptions of form, harmony, and melody, and he became the master of the romantic ballad and created numerous works that featured the great soloists in his jazz orchestra.

The NPR 100: "Mood Indigo"
Lou Santacroce tells the story behind this Ellington tune, a selection from National Public Radio's list of the 100 most important American musical works of the 20th Century.
(Courtesy NPRJazz.org)


Image courtesy of Frank Driggs Collection

This elegant representative of American culture was born in Washington, DC, on April 29, 1899. Ellington studied piano from age seven and was influenced by stride piano masters such as James P. Johnson, Willie "the Lion" Smith, and Fats Waller. By 1923, he had moved to New York City and had his own band, the Washingtonians. He later formed the Duke Ellington Orchestra, which by 1930 had grown to include 12 musicians and achieved national prominence through radio broadcasts, recordings, and film appearances.

It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)
Recorded February 2, 1932
(Courtesy Columbia/Legacy)

Monsignor John Sanders, musician
Reflections on Duke Ellington
(Audio Excerpt from JAZZ A Film by Ken Burns)

By the early 1940s, Ellington experimented with extended composition and his orchestra toured the US and Europe extensively. In 1943, Ellington inaugurated a series of annual concerts at Carnegie Hall with the premiere of *Black, Brown, and Beige*. He continued to expand the scope of his compositions and activities as a bandleader throughout his life. His foreign tours became increasingly frequent and successful; his travel experiences served as the inspiration for his many works about people, places and trains. He wrote nearly two thousand compositions before his death in 1974.



NPR's Jazz Profiles: Duke Ellington, part 1
Host Nancy Wilson presents a general introduction to the career and music of the Duke in this first of a five-part Ellington profile.
(Courtesy NPRJazz.org)



NPR's Jazz Profiles: Duke Ellington, part 2
In this second part of our Ellington profile, host Nancy Wilson discusses how the Duke reconciled his popularity with the country's racial climate prior to civil rights.
(Courtesy NPRJazz.org)



NPR's Jazz Profiles: Duke Ellington, part 3
Host Nancy Wilson describes Ellington skills as a bandleader in this third of our five-part profile of the Duke.
(Courtesy NPRJazz.org)



NPR's Jazz Profiles: Duke Ellington, part 4
Host Nancy Wilson introduces a few of the key players in the Duke Ellington orchestra, including Johnny Hodges, Cootie Williams, Harry Carney, and Clark Terry.
(Courtesy NPRJazz.org)



NPR's Jazz Profiles: Duke Ellington, part 5
In the final part of the NPR Jazz profile of the Duke, host Nancy Wilson features a roundup of the Duke Ellington songbook, including tracks like *Don't Get Around Much Anymore* and *Satin Doll*.
(Courtesy NPRJazz.org)

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