



Duke Ellington
(April 29, 1899 – May 24, 1974)

The Duke, was a title Duke Ellington never tried to shed, nor wanted to. If his accomplishments were a criminal record, with over a thousand compositions, they would have locked him up and threw away the key.

There was no doubt Duke was a leader. Leading his band through his long career until his death. Duke brought to my attention of the big band sound of Jazz. Even though he preferred not to call it Jazz, just American Music. He showed how important it was to read music and even better, how important it was to compose your own.



Richard M. Nixon presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Duke Ellington, 04/24/1969

Edward, (Yes his original name was Edward) stayed true to his course and like I've said, played to whatever crowds that would listen. Of course it had that swing and boy did people swing to it.

Ellington made eight records in 1924, receiving composing credit on three including *Choo Choo*.^[19] In 1925, Ellington contributed four songs to *Chocolate Kiddies* starring Lottie Gee and [Adelaide Hall](#),^[20] an all-African-American revue which introduced European audiences to African-American styles and performers. "Duke Ellington and his Kentucky Club Orchestra" grew to a ten-piece organization; they developed their own sound by displaying the non-traditional

expression of Ellington's arrangements, the street rhythms of Harlem, and the exotic-sounding trombone growls and wah-wahs, high-squealing trumpets, and sultry saxophone blues licks of the band members. For a short time soprano saxophonist [Sidney Bechet](#) played with the group, imparting his propulsive swing and superior musicianship to the young band members. In 1927, [King Oliver](#) turned down a regular booking for his group

as the house band at Harlem's [Cotton Club](#); the offer passed to Ellington. With a weekly radio broadcast, famous white clientele poured in nightly to see them. In October 1927, Ellington and his Orchestra recorded several compositions with [Adelaide Hall](#). One track in particular, [Creole Love Call](#) became a worldwide sensation and gave both Ellington and Hall their first hit record.^[21]

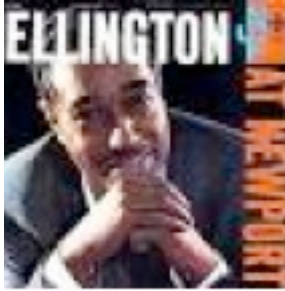
Ellington was joined in New York City by his wife, Edna Thompson, and son Mercer in the late twenties, but the couple soon permanently separated.^[22] According to her obituary in [Jet](#) magazine, she was "[h]omesick for Washington" and returned (she died in 1967).

Although trumpeter [Bubber Miley](#) was a member of the orchestra for only a short period, he had a major influence on Ellington's sound.^[24] An early exponent of growl trumpet, his style changed the "sweet" dance band sound of the group to one that was hotter, which contemporaries termed "jungle" style. He also composed most of "Black and Tan Fantasy" and "[Creole Love Call](#)". An alcoholic, Miley had to leave the band before they gained wider fame. He died in 1932 at the age of 29. He was an important influence on [Cootie Williams](#), who replaced him.

In 1927, Ellington made a career-advancing agreement with agent-publisher [Irving Mills](#), giving Mills a 45% interest in Ellington's future.^[25] Mills had an eye for new talent and early on published compositions by [Hoagy Carmichael](#), [Dorothy Fields](#), and [Harold Arlen](#). During the 1930s, Ellington's popularity continued to increase – largely as a result of the promotional skills of Mills – who got more than his fair share of co-composer credits. From the beginning of their relationship, Mills arranged recording sessions on nearly every label including Brunswick, Victor, Columbia, Okeh, Perfect, Pathe, the ARC/Plaza group of labels (Cameo, Romeo, Lincoln, Oriole, Domino, Jewel, Banner), Hit of the Week, and Columbia's cheaper labels (Harmony, Diva, Velvet Tone, Clarion) labels which gave Ellington popular recognition, as well giving Ellington's fans the opportunity of hearing multiple versions of the same song. Ellington ended his association with Mills in 1937, although he continued to record under Mills' banner through to 1940.



At the Cotton Club, Ellington's group performed all the music for the revues, which mixed comedy, dance numbers, vaudeville, burlesque, music, and illegal alcohol. The musical numbers were composed by [Jimmy McHugh](#) and the lyrics by [Dorothy Fields](#) (later [Harold Arlen](#) and [Ted Koehler](#)), with some Ellington originals mixed in. Weekly radio broadcasts from the club gave Ellington national exposure. In 1929, Ellington appeared in his first movie, a nineteen-minute all-African-American RKO short, [Black and Tan](#), in which he played the hero "Duke". In the same year, the Cotton Club Orchestra appeared on stage for several months in [Florenz Ziegfeld's](#) *Show Girl*, along with vaudeville stars [Jimmy Durante](#), [Eddie Foy, Jr.](#), [Al Jolson](#), [Ruby Keeler](#), and with



Ellington at Newport 1956

music and lyrics by [George Gershwin](#) and [Gus Kahn](#). That feverish period also included numerous recordings, under the pseudonyms "Whoopie Makers", "The Jungle Band", "Harlem Footwarmers", and the "Ten Black Berries". In 1930, Ellington and his Orchestra connected with a whole different audience in a concert with [Maurice Chevalier](#) and they also performed at the [Roseland Ballroom](#), "America's foremost ballroom". Noted composer [Percy Grainger](#) was also an early admirer and supporter. He wrote "The three greatest composers who ever lived are [Bach](#), [Delius](#) and Duke Ellington. Unfortunately Bach is dead, Delius is very ill but we are happy to have with us today The Duke".^[26]

In 1929, when Ellington conducted the orchestra for *Show Girl*, he met [Will Vodery](#), Ziegfeld's musical supervisor. In his 1946 biography, *Duke Ellington*, [Barry Ulanov](#) wrote:

From Vodery, as he (Ellington) says himself, he drew his [chromatic](#) convictions, his uses of the tones ordinarily extraneous to the [diatonic scale](#), with the consequent alteration of the harmonic character of his music, its broadening, The deepening of his resources. It has become customary to ascribe the classical influences upon Duke – [Delius](#), [Debussy](#) and [Ravel](#) – to direct contact with their music. Actually his serious appreciation of those and other modern composers, came after his meeting with Vodery.

Ellington was nominated for a [Pulitzer Prize](#) in 1965, but was turned down. His reaction at 67 years old: "Fate is being kind to me. Fate doesn't want me to be famous too young In September of the same year, the first of his [Sacred Concerts](#) was given its premiere. It was an attempt to fuse Christian liturgy with jazz, and even though it received mixed reviews, Ellington was proud of the composition and performed it dozens of times. This concert was followed by two others of the same type in 1968 and 1973, known as the Second and Third Sacred Concerts. This caused controversy in what was already a tumultuous time in the United States. Many saw the Sacred Music suites as an attempt to reinforce commercial support for organized religion, though Ellington simply said it was "the most important thing I've done".^[44] The [Steinway](#) piano upon which the Sacred Concerts were composed is part of the collection of the [Smithsonian's National Museum of American History](#). Like [Haydn](#) and [Mozart](#), Ellington conducted his orchestra from the piano – he always played the keyboard parts when the Sacred Concerts were performed.^[45]



Portrait of Duke Ellington at the
Paramount Theater, New York City
1946

Ellington was awarded the [Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award](#) in 1966. He was later awarded several other prizes, the [Presidential Medal of Freedom](#) in 1969, an Honorary

PhD from the [Berklee College of Music](#) in 1971, and the [Legion of Honor](#) by France in 1973, the highest civilian honors in each country.

His son, [Mercer Ellington](#) kept his big band alive after his death. When Mercer died, Paul Ellington kept the Duke Ellington Orchestra going. It plays in concert halls around the world to this day. But as Phyl Garland of Ebony magazine writes, the elder Ellington will always be remembered for "the daring innovations that came to mark his music—the strange modulations (changing from one key to another) built upon lush melodies that ramble into unexpected places, the unorthodox (untraditional) construction of songs...."

Today, Mercedes Ellington, Duke Ellington's granddaughter, keeps her grandfather's legacy alive as President of the Duke Ellington Center for the Arts.^[52] Ellington's eldest grandson Edward Kennedy Ellington II also is a musician and maintains a small salaried band known as the Duke Ellington Legacy, which frequently comprises the core of the big band operated by The Duke Ellington Center for the Arts.



CENTRAL PRESS / GETTY IMAGES
American big band leader and legendary jazz composer Duke Ellington on arrival at Heathrow Airport, London, on Nov. 26, 1969

Ellington's work has come to be recognized as a cornerstone of American culture and heritage. He is widely regarded as the most important composer in jazz; he was also a galvanizing band leader who inspired many of his musicians to produce their best work, while himself being a significant exponent of jazz piano. His talent as a pianist, however, is overlooked by many due to his unmatched

composing and arranging abilities. His works have been revisited by artists and musicians around the world both as a source of inspiration and a bedrock of their own performing careers. Ellington's compositions are now the staple of the repertoire of music conservatories, and even high-school band programs that have embraced his music continue to give it life and voice. I remember my father telling me one time, "You never miss what you never had." So when special people like The Duke leaves us, if anything it shows in the music after their departure. It seems it was no different from the Ellington Band in LA when they [failed to swing](#). So I guess If there is a band in heaven, Duke Ellington's leadership, skills and talents is composing and conducting it.

Bill Sommerville