

Duke Ellington

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Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington (April 29, 1899–May 24, 1974) was a composer, pianist, and big-band leader who figures prominently in the history of jazz. Ellington’s music extended into various other genres, including blues, gospel, film scores, popular, and classical. His career spanned more than 50 years and included leading his orchestra, composing an inexhaustible songbook, scoring for movies, and completing world tours. He also recorded for many American record companies and appeared in several films. Through his inventive use of the orchestra, or big band, and thanks to his eloquence and extraordinary charisma, he is generally considered to have altered the perception of jazz significantly, elevating the genre to an art form on par with other, traditional music genres. His reputation continued to grow after his death, and in 1999 the Pulitzer Prize Board bestowed on him a special posthumous honor.

Ellington termed his music “American music” rather than “jazz,” and liked to describe people who impressed him as “beyond category,” including many members of his orchestra. While some of these jazz musicians are considered among the best in their own right, it was Ellington who melded them into one of the best-known orchestral units in the history of jazz. He often tailored his compositions specifically to the style and skills of these talented individuals—such as “Jeep’s Blues” for Johnny Hodges; “Concerto for Cootie” for Cootie Williams, which later became “Do Nothing Till You Hear from Me,” with Bob Russell’s lyrics; and “The Mooche” for Tricky Sam Nanton and Bubber Miley. He also recorded songs written by bandsmen such as Juan Tizol, whose “Caravan” and “Perdido” brought the “Spanish tinge” to big-band jazz.

A number of members of the orchestra remained with Ellington for several decades. After 1941, he frequently collaborated with composer-arranger-pianist Billy Strayhorn, whom he dubbed his “writing and arranging companion.”

Ellington led his band from 1923 until his death in 1974. His son, Mercer Ellington, who had already been handling all of the administrative aspects of his father’s business for several decades, led the band until his own death in 1996, at which point, the original band dissolved. However, under the guidance of pianist and composer Paul Ellington, Mercer’s youngest son and the executor of the Duke Ellington estate, The Duke Ellington Orchestra still continues to perform today.

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