

## **Duke Ellington (1899-1974)**

Duke Ellington, was a pianist, bandleader and composer. He was brought up with the intention of becoming an artist and began the piano at the age of 7. His early influences include Ragtime (piano music having a two-four rhythm base and a syncopated melody line) and Dixieland music (strong two beat rhythm and collective improvisations). He was brought up in a middle class family and so would have first class gigs. Unlike many other musicians of his time, he was famous for his compositions/ arrangements, rather than performance and improvisation skills. His first professional debut was at the age of 17. Ellington started composing during the early 1920s, making his first recording in 1923, the year he moved from Washington to New York, however, this trip ended up a financial crisis.

Ellington's music can not be placed into an era, as it uses so many existent and original styles putting him into his own category. He used many styles and produced music for nightclubs, churches and film scores. He also scored big band swing music using a typical Dixieland music bass part, and popular songs, developing them into his own style, avoiding cliché.

During the mid 1920s, he wrote “hot” jazz music at a time when music was usually written simply, in a rudimentary fashion for the dance orchestra. The “hot” style showed that Ellington wasn’t afraid to try something different from most other people and be unique. Forming hot five and seven groups. An example of this type of music is, “Straight No Chaser”.

Throughout the 1930s and 40s Big band swing music was the most popular style, however, it suffered from cliché, which many jazz musicians wanted to pull away from. This was the time when the formation of Bebop occurred. Bebop music is more of a listening than dancing style of music.

Cool jazz emerged in the early 50s at a time when rock and roll became the more popular type of music. This meant, however, that jazz musicians had the freedom to extend their musical ideas.

Duke Ellington is able to be distinguished from other big band composers due to his tendency to write music to compliment the actual player rather than the instrument, this was known as the “Ellington effect”.

During New York’s financial crisis, (1927-19310 Jungle music, was developed. This can be described as show type music for the racist white Americans at that time. e.g., “the mooche”. The characteristics of this type of music are: growling of instruments (especially trumpets and reeds), use of extreme pitches, and different sections of the music differing because of modulation between major and minor key unlike earlier styles (head, solos, head, solos). He performed quite a lot to the audience at the “Cotton club”. The performances would

include dancing and mimicking of tribal African stereotypes. Duke Ellington was aware these stereotypes weren't true but these were times of despair. It is apparent, that Ellington wasn't pleased with Black American history, and he wrote music to express his feelings, such as, "Black, brown n beige suite".