

Edward Kennedy ("Duke") Ellington was born on the 29th April 1899 in Washington DC, and is famous as a composer, bandleader, and pianist who was recognized in his lifetime as one of the greatest jazz composers and performers. Nicknamed "Duke" by a boyhood friend who admired his regal air, the name stuck and became indelibly associated with the finest creations in big band and vocal jazz. A genius for instrumental combinations, improvisation, and jazz arranging brought the world the unique "Ellington" sound that found consummate expression in works like "Mood Indigo," "Sophisticated Lady," and the symphonic suites *Black, Brown, and Beige* (which he subtitled "a Tone Parallel to the History of the Negro in America") and *Harlem* ("a Tone Parallel to Harlem").

Beginning keyboard studies at the age of seven, Ellington's earliest influences were the ragtime pianists. He taught himself harmony at the piano and at 17, made his professional debut. Encouraged by Fats Waller, he moved to New York in 1923 and, during the formative Cotton Club years, experimented with and developed the style that would quickly bring him worldwide success and recognition. Ellington would be among the first to focus on musical form and composition in jazz using ternary forms and "call-and-response" techniques in works like *Concerto for Cootie* (known in its familiar vocal version as *Do Nothin' till You Hear from Me*) and *Cotton Tail* and classic symphonic devices in his orchestral suites. In this respect, he would influence the likes of Monk, Mingus, and Evans. Duke brought jazz into concert halls and religious services. His style of music had a basis of swing, the blues, many forms of jazz and jungle music.

Among Ellington's many honours and awards were honorary doctorates from Howard and Yale Universities, membership in the American Institute of Arts and Letters, election as the first jazz musician member of the Royal Music Academy in Stockholm, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom

Duke was from a middle class family, with his dad working as a butler Duke was set very high standards of dress and speech. Music was one of the genteel accomplishments, so Duke was sent to take piano lessons from the aptly named Mrs Clinkscale. Duke showed no promise and soon gave up. From the age of 12 Duke began sneaking into burlesque theatres and poolrooms. It was in these places that Duke first heard Ragtime, the music that was the rage of the time. Duke was captivated by this new sound. He began picking up tips on how to play and write Jazz music from local ragt imer Doc Perry. In a short time Duke became quite good at the piano. Being able to play made him the focus of attention among his contemporaries and particularly among Young women. This encouraged him a great deal and at 15 he composed his first piece of jazz called 'soda fountain rag'. Duke organised a ten piece band and in the 1930's and 40's they performed in nightclubs, on the radio and on foreign tours. The band was hard working and they lived in a coach.

Music was not Dukes only talent, he was good at painting and drawing especially ornate lettering. At 17 Duke was running two businesses, one in signwriting the other in music. When he was offered to play piano for a dance he'd ask if they could give him the poster drawing job and when he was asked to draw a poster he'd ask if there was anyone playing for the dance. At 19 Duke married Edna Thompson. One year later their son Mercer was born. The marriage did not last, some people say it is because of Dukes early success and his demanding lifestyle. Later in life Duke married another woman.

As well as his famous music career Duke starred in some films and theatrical musicals with a high jazz content like 'Anatomy of a murder' and 'Paris blues'. Midway through his life of fame he wrote an autobiography called 'music is my mistress'. Duke wrote the music to musical comedies 'Beggars opera' and 'Pousse cafe'. One of Dukes most important concerts was at Carnegie hall.

Dukes success was probably due to the facts he was a perfectionist and he brought jazz into the white community. He is now regarded as the most important writer in jazz.

