

Edward Kennedy Ellington was born in Washington, D.C. on April 29, 1899. His family, while not wealthy were prosperous and secure and they encouraged his interest in the fine arts. Edward began studying piano when he was seven years old. He was also an exceptional artist. He was awarded an art scholarship to the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York but turned it down and began to play the piano professionally in 1916.

In 1923 Edward moved to New York City and began playing in Broadway nightclubs. Duke Ellington and his original 10 piece ensemble produced such early masterpieces as *East St. Louis Toodle-oo* in 1926 and *Black and Tan Fantasy* in 1927.

Duke Ellington's band included some of the great jazz musicians of all time; *Bubber Miley* and *Cootie Williams* on trumpet, *Joe Nanton* and *Lawrence Brown* on trombones, *Rex Stewart* on the cornet, *Harry Carney*, *Johnny Hodges* and *Ben Webster* on Saxophones, *Jimmy Blanton* on bass, *Sonny Greer* on drums, *Barney Bigard* on the clarinet and female vocalist *Ivy Anderson*.

Duke and his band played the *Cotton Club* from 1927 to 1932 and again in 1937 and 1938. They made hundreds of popular recordings and appeared in films and on radio. They toured Europe in 1933 and again in 1939.

Duke Ellington was a great innovator, using new harmonies to blend his musicians' individual sounds. He illuminated subtle moods by combining various instruments. His composition *Mood Indigo* illustrates this method and is a combination of a muted trumpet, an unmuted trombone and a low-register clarinet.

Duke wrote and published *Creole Rhapsody*, *Reminiscing in Tempo* and *Diminuendo in Blue/Crescendo in Blue* in 1931. Many of Duke Ellington's tunes were composed to highlight the talents of his soloists. *Concerto for Cootie* and *Echoes of Harlem* highlight the considerable talents of trumpeter *Cootie Williams*.

Duke Ellington wrote some of his best compositions during the early 1940s including *Cotton Tail*, *Ko-Ko*, *Main Stem*, and *Harlem Air Shaft*. *Billy Strayhorn* became Duke Ellington's partner in the late 1940s and was the composer of the band's theme song, *Take the 'A' Train*.

Duke and his band also produced popular songs. Some of his popular music includes *Sophisticated Lady*, *Rocks in My Bed*, *Satin Doll*, *Don't*

*Get Around Much Any More, Prelude to a Kiss, and Solitude.*

In the mid 1940s Duke Ellington began to compose Jazz songs using classical forms. He composed *Black, Brown and Beige*, a portrayal of African American history in 1943, *Liberian Suite* in 1947 and *A Drum is a Woman* in 1956. In 1960 he composed a reorchestrated version of *Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker Suite*. His *Rhapsody of Negro Life* became the basis for the film *Symphony in Black* which featured *Billie Holiday*.

Duke Ellington also wrote the scores for the movies *The Asphalt Jungle* and *Anatomy of a Murder*. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Duke composed several pieces of sacred music such as *In the Beginning God*, *Sacred Concert*, *Second Sacred Concert*, and *Third Sacred Concert*.

It should be remembered that Duke Ellington himself was a gifted pianist with a style that originated in ragtime and stride piano. Duke led his band with a regal manner and charmed his audiences with his suave humor. His career spanned over 50 years and he led his band until just shortly before his death in 1974.

Edward Kennedy "*Duke*" Ellington died in New York City on May 24, 1974. His autobiography *Music is My Mistress* was published in 1973.

**Sources:**

*Encyclopedia Britannica*

*Encyclopedia Africana*

*Atlanta Music Group (AMG)*