

Duke
Ellington

Born: 1899
Died: 1974
Instrument: Piano; Bandleader
Style: Swing
Great Tunes: Take The 'A' Train
Mood Indigo



Edward Kennedy 'Duke' Ellington was born into a fairly well-to-do family. His father was a butler at the White House. Ellington started to learn the piano at the age of six, and learned to play ragtime and stride piano styles. By his mid teens he was playing in cafes in Washington, and at around this time he started composing.

In 1923 he moved to New York, where he and two friends formed a band called 'The Washingtonians'. In 1927 this grew into a much larger band, which developed the 'swing' style. The Duke Ellington Orchestra, as the band was now known, spent five years as resident musicians at a Harlem 'speakeasy' known as The Cotton Club. He shot to fame during this time, becoming the best known jazz composer and band leader. He made many great recordings, and also appeared in several films.

In 1933 he began touring with the band, and he continued to do this for the remaining 40 years of his career. His musical style broadened, and he composed many ambitious pieces based on Classical styles and forms. In 1938 he hired Billy Strayhorn, a composer and arranger who wrote 'Take The 'A' Train, which was to become the Duke Ellington Orchestra's signature tune.

One of the highlights of Ellington's later career was his appearance at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1956. A recording of this concert was made, and it became his biggest-selling album.

In the latter part of his life, Duke Ellington composed film music, and even church music. He is now thought of as one of America's greatest composers.



<http://duke.fuse.net/> is the website of The Duke Ellington Society. This site contains a wealth of material.