

Name: _____ Class: _____

Duke Ellington

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Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington (1899-1974) was an African American composer, pianist, and leader of a jazz orchestra. Ellington is an important figure in the Harlem Renaissance, an African American cultural, social, and artistic movement that took place in Harlem, New York during the 1920s. This informational text explores Ellington's life and career. As you read, take notes on what Duke Ellington did to advance his career.

- [1] Duke Ellington is one of the most famous American musicians in history. As a musician and an orchestra conductor, he brought the new style of jazz to an international audience.

Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington was born to African American parents in Washington, D.C. in 1899. His father worked for the U.S. Navy, and both of his parents were talented pianists. The Ellington family was very proud of their heritage, and they lived in an African American community that worked to protect their children from discriminatory Jim Crow laws.¹ Ellington's casual manner, easy-going nature, and well-dressed appearance earned him the nickname "Duke" amongst his childhood friends.



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Early Interest in Music

Ellington started taking piano lessons at age seven. He did not take the lessons very seriously or practice well for the first few years. He often skipped his lessons in favor of playing baseball because he did not think he was a good pianist. But by the time he was fourteen, he started sneaking into music clubs and listening to the professional pianists there. He developed a new passion for music. Soon he wrote his first song, "Soda Fountain Rag," inspired by his experiences working at a soda shop.

During high school, Ellington continued to take music lessons, and he imitated his favorite ragtime² pianists. Whenever he traveled with his family, he sought out local famous musicians to get advice for his own music. After he graduated he took a job as a sign-painter, which he also used to build his music career; anytime someone requested a sign for a party, he also asked them if they needed a musician for entertainment. He became quite successful playing for both black and white audiences, which was a unique accomplishment at the time.

1. laws that enforced racial segregation in the Southern United States
2. a style of early jazz music, characterized by its lively rhythms and playful mood

Music Career

- [5] Ellington decided to move to New York City in the early 1920s. He became an important figure in the Harlem Renaissance, an artistic and cultural transformation that was taking place in Harlem, a neighborhood that was mostly filled with African Americans. He organized a band called the Washingtonians, and Ellington produced eight records with them in 1924. They played in Broadway nightclubs for several years.

In 1927, after continuing to rise to fame, Ellington and his band started playing in the Cotton Club, Harlem's most famous nightclub. The club hosted an all-white audience, and weekly Cotton Club radio broadcasts gave Ellington national attention. He played for all the musical and entertainment acts. He continued to gain popularity and began to appear in TV shows and films, and he and his orchestra kept putting out new records.

International Stardom

The Ellington orchestra stopped playing the Cotton Club in the early 1930s and started touring across the country. Their following was mainly African American, but they also had a big fan base overseas; they went on two European tours in 1933 and 1934. Ellington's popularity continued to surge³ for many years. In the 1940s he began writing jazz pieces designed to tell the story of African Americans in the U.S. He got to premiere one of them, called "Black, Brown, and Beige," at the prestigious⁴ Carnegie Hall, where he was invited to return for several years.

The start of World War II made it harder to make a living as a musician because many people did not have enough money to spend on records and performances. Ellington's career slumped during and after the war, although he continued to produce music and play some concerts. Some of his fans worried his music had become too outdated. However, in 1956, his band performed at a Jazz Festival, which exposed him to a completely new generation of jazz fans and reignited his popularity.

For the rest of his life, Ellington and the band enjoyed continual success. They toured all over the United States and the world. He kept recording music and touring almost right up until he passed away in 1974.

Legacy

- [10] Ellington received 12 Grammy Awards, nine during his lifetime and three after he died. He has been credited with being the main musician to elevate jazz to a popular music genre. He also popularized "big band" music through his orchestra. His innovations⁵ in jazz and the different styles he employed are considered to be very influential to musicians over the years and even up until today. He is one of the most well-respected African American celebrities in the 20th century, and is also remembered for his graceful and engaging personality. His popularity continued to grow after his death, and people still buy his records and albums today.

3. **Surge** (*verb*): increase suddenly and powerfully, typically during an otherwise stable or quiet period

4. **Prestigious** (*adjective*): inspiring respect and admiration

5. **Innovation** (*noun*): the introduction of something new; a new method, idea, product etc.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best expresses the central idea in the article?
 - A. Ellington changed music forever, as he was one of the few successful African American artists of his time.
 - B. The new style of jazz that Ellington introduced in his music impressed audiences across the world, even impacting fellow musicians.
 - C. While Ellington was popular during the Harlem Renaissance, he did not use his music to explore the experiences of African Americans, as many artists did.
 - D. Without the musical success and contributions of Ellington, it is likely that many music clubs would have remained segregated.

2. PART B: Which TWO details from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "For years he did not take the practice very seriously; he often skipped his lessons in favor of playing baseball, and he did not think he was a good pianist." (Paragraph 3)
 - B. "Whenever he traveled with his family, he sought out local famous musicians to get advice for his own music." (Paragraph 4)
 - C. "The club hosted an all-white audience, and weekly Cotton Club radio broadcasts gave Ellington national attention. He played for all the musical and entertainment acts." (Paragraph 6)
 - D. "Their following was mainly African American, but they also had a big fan base overseas; they went on two European tours in 1933 and 1934." (Paragraph 7)
 - E. "Some of his fans worried his music had become too outdated to keep him in the music business." (Paragraph 8)
 - F. "His innovations in jazz and the different styles he employed are considered to be a huge influence to musicians over the years and even up until today." (Paragraph 10)

3. How does Paragraph 10 contribute to the development of ideas in the article?
 - A. It helps bring attention to all the obstacles that Ellington faced in life.
 - B. It supports the idea that his parents were right to give him piano lessons.
 - C. It emphasizes the lasting impact that Ellington had on jazz music.
 - D. It demonstrates how record sales often increase after the songwriter has died.

4. How does the author primarily structure the text?
 - A. The text details Ellington's actions as a musician, and then talks about how his childhood influenced his decisions.
 - B. The text focuses on Ellington's childhood first, in order to highlight how Jim Crow laws were an obstacle to his success.
 - C. The text is structured thematically, and details Ellington's life before and after the war.
 - D. The text is structured chronologically, starting with his childhood and the different actions he took in order to be successful.

5. How did the actions Ellington took early in his life impact his future success?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In the context of the text, why do you think Ellington's music is still popular today? Who are the musicians, artists, or performers that you think will still be listened to or celebrated after they have died? What things do you think they will be remembered for? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
2. Duke Ellington was successful as a result of his efforts, but there were other factors that also shaped his career. What kind of factors beyond our control can affect our success? What kind of things can we do to ensure success? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.