

Duke Ellington: The Top 25 icons in Jazz history

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Duke Ellington: The Top 20 icons in Jazz history

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"It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing."

Considered one of the greatest jazz composers of all time, Duke Ellington had an enormous impact on the popular music of the late 20th century. Among his more than two thousand songs are such hits as "In A Sentimental Mood," "Sophisticated Lady," "I Got It Bad And That Ain't Good," and "I'm Beginning To See The Light." For almost fifty years he toured the world as a band leader and piano player. Today his recordings remain

among the most popular jazz of the big-band era.

Early Career

Born in Washington D.C. in 1899, Edward Kennedy Ellington, better known as "Duke," began playing piano as a child. His mother, who also played the piano, oversaw his education, and by the time he was seventeen he began playing professionally. Making his name as a piano player in Washington, Ellington started to compose his own music.

In 1923 he moved to New York, and the following year formed his own band, the Washingtonians. By 1927, Ellington's band had found a small base of fans and secured an engagement at Harlem's famous Cotton Club. This proved to be a major turning point in Ellington's career, providing him with access to larger audiences through radio and recordings.

Duke's Band

In 1931 Ellington left the Cotton Club and began a series of extended tours that would continue for the rest of his life. For Ellington, the big band was not simply made up of five reeds, four trumpets, three trombones, drums, a bass, and a piano; it was made up of individuals. Where other composers had concerned themselves with creating a sound that unified the many instruments into one voice, Ellington believed in letting the dissonant voices of each musician play against each other.

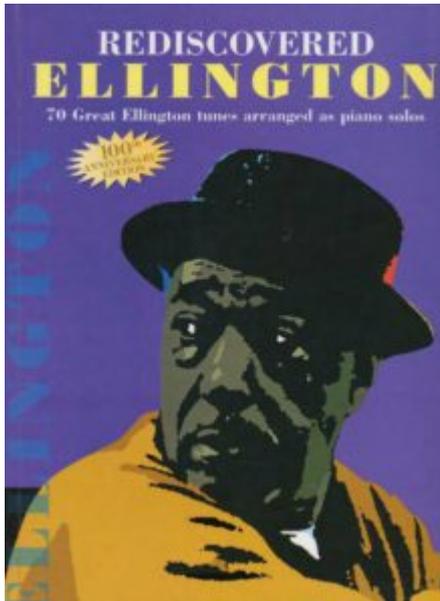
He wrote music that capitalized on the particular style and skills of his soloists. For this and many other reasons, his soloists often stayed with him for extended periods. Among the best members of his band were Jimmy Blanton, Johnny Hodges, Cootie Williams, and Harry Carney (who was in the band for nearly every one of its forty-seven years).

Working with Billy Strayhorn

In 1939, Billy Strayhorn joined the band as an arranger, composer, and sometimes pianist. The two worked well together, continuing in the tradition that Ellington had built. Strayhorn's contribution to Ellington's achievements at the time were significant, and even some of their most popular tunes (such as "Take The A Train") were written by Strayhorn.

Though not as well known as much of Ellington's other work, pieces such as "Jack the Bear," "Ko-ko," and "Cotton Tail" (done between 1939 and 1942), had a profound influence on much of the jazz composition and performance that followed. Though Ellington continued to compose and perform regularly throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the public demand for big-band music had faded. It was not until 1956, with a triumphant performance at the Newport Jazz Festival, that Ellington re-emerged as an important voice in contemporary music.

For most of his time as a composer and bandleader, Ellington underplayed his role as a pianist. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s he began performing with a number of the other great musicians and composers of the time, making albums that included DUKE ELLINGTON AND JOHN COLTRANE (1962), MONEY JUNGLE (1962, with Max Roach and Charles Mingus), and DUKE ELLINGTON MEETS COLEMAN HAWKINS.



Among the younger generations, Ellington was both a symbol of the traditional modes of jazz music and the finest example of how to transcend those modes. The beauty and energy of earlier pieces such as “Mood Indigo” remained alive in even the final years of his life. In May of 1974, Ellington died of lung cancer in New York City.

In his more than fifty years as a professional musician, Ellington had been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, awarded a doctor of music degree from Yale University, given the Medal of Freedom, and, most importantly, built the foundations from which much of the best American music consequently grew.

Duke Ellington – [Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue](#)

It'd be impossible to overlook the importance of big bands in the development of jazz, and of musicians like [Benny Goodman](#), [Tommy Dorsey](#), Fletcher Henderson and [Count Basie](#) in launching the swing era of the 30s and 40s. But the band that continued unbroken, unscathed, and continually inventive during those decades, and which most successfully survived the end of the big band era, was [Duke Ellington's](#).

He wrote intricate parts for particular soloists in his band, but occasionally he just allowed them to let rip – and that’s what happened at the 1956 [Newport Jazz Festival](#) when tenor saxophonist Paul Gonsalves came to the mic and launched into 27 of the most exciting choruses ever recorded – leaving the audience baying for more, standing on their chairs and cheering!

Ellington At Newport 1956 Often regarded as the best performance of his career, in 1956, Duke Ellington and his band recorded their historic concert at the Newport Jazz Festival, revitalizing Ellington’s waning career. Jazz promoter George Wein describes the 1956 concert as “the greatest performance of Ellington’s career...

It stood for everything that jazz had been and could be.” Ellington had lately been connecting the songs “Diminuendo in Blue” and “Crescendo in Blue” in a medley via a tenor solo from saxophonist Paul Gonsalves. At Newport, Gonsalves summoned a 27-chorus workout so inspired and transcendent that the audience was practically rioting by the time he had finished. Orchestra and audience both remained at a fever pitch for the rest of the show (vividly captured on the live album Ellington at Newport).

Duke Ellington Interview: [What is “American Music?”](#)

In 1963, [Duke Ellington](#) gave an interview on Swedish Television remarking that in the hundred years since the Emancipation Proclamation the demands for equality were growing stronger. At the time, President Kennedy had promised

to introduce a Civil Rights bill in Congress, and Ellington was about to go on an official State Department tour representing American culture in the middle east and India.

African Americans, he noted, fought in all American wars, contributed tremendously to culture, and most pertinently, created the quintessential “American” music: jazz. “That is the music that is recognized as the American music, which of course is mostly negro.”

Ellington toured for the State Department on cultural diplomatic missions more than any other musician at the time, and would later visit the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Latin America, East Africa, and Southeast Asia. Officials at the State Department described him as “without fail gracious, articulate, charming, and absolutely winning.”

This clip is from [The Jazz Ambassadors](#). Discover how the Cold War and Civil Rights movement collided when America asked Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman to travel as cultural ambassadors and combat racially-charged Soviet propaganda through their music.

[Download the best Jazz sheet music and transcriptions from our Sheet Music Library \(PDF\).](#)

Duke Ellington: [the best of](#)

Tracklist:

[00:00](#) □ Duke Ellington – Take the A Train (1941) (Billy Strayhorn, Jody Sherrill) [02:50](#) □ Duke Ellington – In a Sentimental Mood (1935) (Duke Ellington) [06:05](#) □ Duke Ellington – Diga Diga Doo (1928) (Dorothy Fields, Jimmy McHugh) [08:55](#) □ Duke Ellington – It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing) (1932) (Duke Ellington, Irving Mills)

[12:02](#) □ Duke Ellington – Mood Indigo (1931) (Duke Ellington, Barney Bigard, Irving Mills) [14:56](#) □ Duke Ellington – Black and Tan Fantasy (1928) (Duke Ellington, Bubber Miley) [18:17](#) □ Duke Ellington – Prelude To a Kiss (1938) (Duke Ellington, Irving Gordon) [21:11](#) □ Duke Ellington – Creole Love Call (1928) (Duke Ellington)

[25:17](#) □ Duke Ellington – East St. Louis Toodle-0o (1927) (Duke Ellington, Bubber Miley) [28:18](#) □ Duke Ellington – Creole Rhapsody Parts 1 & 2 (1931) (Duke Ellington) [34:33](#) □ Duke Ellington – Limehouse Blues (1931) (Douglas Furber, Philip Braham) [37:40](#) □ Duke Ellington – Sophisticated Lady (1933) (Duke Ellington, Irving Mills)

[40:51](#) □ Duke Ellington – Rose Room (In Sunny Roseland) (1932) (Art Hickman, Harry Williams) [43:49](#) □ Duke Ellington – Stormy Weather (1933) (Harold Arlen, Ted Koehler) [46:48](#) □ Duke Ellington – Caravan (1937) (Juan Tizol) [49:24](#) □ Duke Ellington – I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart (1938) (Duke Ellington, Irving Mills, Henry Nemo, John Redmond)

[52:25](#) □ Duke Ellington – Ko Ko (1940) (Duke Ellington) [55:05](#) □ Duke Ellington – Perdido (1943) (Juan Tizol) [58:13](#) □ Duke Ellington – Don't Get Around Much Anymore (1943) (Duke Ellington, Bob Russell) [01:01:27](#) □ Duke Ellington – I'm Beginning To See the Light (1945) (Duke Ellington, Don George, Johnny Hodges, Harry James) [01:04:39](#) □ Duke Ellington – Satin Doll (1953) (Duke Ellington, Billy Strayhorn, Johnny Mercer)