

Masters of Music

THE WORLD'S GREATEST COMPOSERS

The Life and Times of
Duke Ellington



by John Bankston



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Printing 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bankston, John, 1974-

The Life and Times of Duke Ellington/John Bankston.

p. cm. — (Masters of music. The world's greatest composers)

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 1-58415-248-6 (lib bdg.)

1. Ellington, Duke, 1899-1974—Juvenile literature. 2. Jazz musicians—United States—Biography—Juvenile literature. [1. Ellington, Duke, 1899-1974. 2. Musicians. 3. Composers. 4. African Americans—Biography.] I. Title. II. Masters of music. World's greatest composers.

ML3930.E44B26 2004

781.65'092—dc22

2003024123

ISBN 13: 9781584152484

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Born in Boston, Massachusetts, **John Bankston** began publishing articles in newspapers and magazines while still a teenager. Since then, he has written over two hundred articles, and contributed chapters to books such as *Crimes of Passion*, and *Death Row 2000*, which have been sold in bookstores across the world. He has written more than three dozen biographies for young adults, including *Francis Crick and James Watson: Pioneers in DNA Research*, *Robert Goddard and the Liquid Rocket Engine*, and *Alexander Fleming and the Story of Penicillin* (Mitchell Lane). He has worked in Los Angeles, California as a producer, screenwriter and actor. Currently he is in pre-production on *Dancing at the Edge*, a semi-autobiographical screenplay he hopes to film in Portland, Oregon. Last year he completed his first young adult novel, *18 to Look Younger*. He currently lives in Portland, Oregon.

PHOTO CREDITS: Cover: AP Photo; pp. 6, 10, 18, 26, 32, 34, 40, 42 Hulton/Archive by Getty Images

PUBLISHER'S NOTE: This story is based on the author's extensive research, which he believes to be accurate. Documentation of such research is contained on page 46.

The internet sites referenced herein were active as of the publication date. Due to the fleeting nature of some web sites, we cannot guarantee they will all be active when you are reading this book.

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* For Your Information

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The Piano, Man

Inside the sweltering Philadelphia club, the 15-year-old pianist held the crowd's attention. Pounding out a ragtime rhythm, he performed with the skill and poise of someone twice his age. Already in the City of Brotherly Love he'd attracted fans. They came to tap their feet, have a good time, and try to forget the labors of the day. But in the audience that summer evening in 1914, there was one young man paying particularly close attention. He was a year younger than the musician, and his life would be forever changed by the performance.

His name was Edward Ellington. He'd traveled all the way from Asbury Park, New Jersey, just to hear Harvey Brooks play. He'd learned about Brooks from a waiter he worked with and from his uncle, a successful painter named John Kennedy, who was with Edward that night at the club.

Later Edward Ellington would explain, "I cannot tell you what that music did to me. He was swinging and he had a tremendous left hand and when I got home I had a real yearning to play. I hadn't been able to get off the ground before, but after hearing him, I said to myself, 'Man you're just going to have to do it.'"¹

And do it he did. Just a short time after watching Brooks play, Edward caught the flu. Lying in bed, unable to do much of anything, he imagined playing as Brooks had. He could hear the notes and chords. Although he'd taken piano lessons years before, they hadn't made much of an impression.

Now he wanted to do more than play piano. He wanted to compose, to create lyrics and music. Once he felt better, he put together silly, jazzy numbers like "Poodle Dog Rag" and "What You Gonna Do When the Bed Breaks Down?"

It was the beginning of what would be a tremendous career, not just as a pianist but as a bandleader and a composer. Even as a youth, Edward Ellington had so much class and style he was given the nickname Duke. As an adult he'd also come to be known as "the Aristocrat of Swing," "the King of Swing," and "the King of Jazz." His elegance in early motion pictures not only earned him more fans and accolades but also altered many audiences' images of African Americans altogether.

More than any other musician in the early 20th century, Duke Ellington brought jazz into the nightclubs and later into the living rooms of America. The music he played sprang in part from the blues and gospel rhythms of plantation slaves living in the middle 19th century, infused with the sounds of ragtime from the turn of the century. Jazz has been called the first musical form created in the United States. It was a type of sharp improvisation for which band members played anything they wanted along a chosen key or set of chords, so every night the music was different. Duke led with his piano playing, but he allowed the various other members of his band to shine, too.

Embracing new technologies like radio receivers and record players, Duke Ellington was one of the first pop stars. ◆



Guglielmo Marconi

Records and Radios

Although both record players and radio receivers existed in some fashion well before Duke Ellington was born, they didn't become widely available to consumers until he was beginning his musical career.

Invented by Thomas Edison in 1877, the first "records" were tin tubes that recorded sound vibrations along a groove; when a stylus or needle was inserted into the groove and the cylinder revolved, it was possible to hear the recording. Edison's first recording was "Mary Had a Little Lamb."

Flat records would be invented 10 years later by Emile Berliner, but it wasn't until 1915 that the standard 78-rpm (revolutions per minute) phonograph album was distributed. Since the records held less than four minutes of music per side, musicians often had to shorten their works to fit. In 1948, long-playing or LP records, which ran at 33 rpm, were invented by Columbia Records.

Radio waves were first "harnessed" by Guglielmo Marconi a few years before Duke Ellington's birth. After building his first transmitter and receiver in 1895, in 1901 Marconi was able to send signals across the English Channel. Although radio became a preferred method of communicating with ships at sea, its cost made it unaffordable for most families. And besides, what would they listen to? There weren't any radio stations.

That changed in the 1920s as improved technology made radios cheaper and stations blossomed to fill the increasing demand.

The incredible growth in both record sales and radio technology happened at the beginning of Ellington's career, and he did everything he could to take advantage of it.



Millions of immigrants arrived in the United States in the late 1890s. The industrial revolution provided work in production plants across the nation. This photograph shows immigrants working in a metal shop in 1899.

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