

Duke Ellington - A Brief Appreciation

Ellington was among the most influential musicians in jazz and in American music in general. The composer of about 2000 pieces and an arranger (orchestrator) second to none, he was self-taught, except for piano lessons in childhood from his one teacher, Marietta Clinkscales. Growing up in Washington, Ellington also showed a great talent for drawing and design and was accepted on scholarship to the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn. He chose to remain in Washington to lead a band of teenagers called the Washingtonians. Ellington took pride in the fact that he was self-taught and often said his lack of formal training contributed to the originality of his arranging and composing.

The originality of Ellington's sound also derived from the fact that he wrote instrumental parts specifically for the individual sounds his players achieved on their instruments. He could hear each musician's instrument as if it were his speaking voice, and it imbued his orchestral pieces with a very personal and expressive sound. Many musicians, e.g., Johnny Hodges (alto sax) and Harry Carney (baritone sax), remained with his band for several decades, even though they were well-known soloists who could have led their own groups. Ellington had a uniquely percussive and dissonant piano style that influenced many others (e.g., Thelonious Monk), but it was famously said that his instrument was his orchestra. His compositions have become jazz classics and more than a few, after acquiring lyrics, became standards in the American songbook. On the next page is a partial list of my personal favorites.

Ellington worked closely with his band members on ideas for tunes, and many pieces attributed to him are actually based on suggestions from band members. Some "Ellington classics" were composed entirely by his prolific collaborator, Billy Strayhorn: for example, "Take the A-Train" and "Satin Doll." Ellington never tried to falsely take credit, but his style of arranging ("realizing") the piece of music was so distinctive that his fans think of them as written by Ellington even when they were not. Duke was not a political activist, but he was devoted to, as he once put it, writing "the soundtrack of a people." When asked what inspired him, he replied: "My men and my race are the inspiration of my work. I try to catch the character and mood and feeling of my people".

Some of my favorite Compositions as played by the Duke Ellington Orchestra. (Nearly all of these have been recorded by dozens of jazz and “pop” musicians.

Don't Get Around Much Anymore (<i>orig. title: Never No Lament</i>)	I Let A Song Go Out of My Heart
Do Nothing Til You Hear From Me (<i>orig. title: Concerto for Cootie</i>)	Satin Doll (<i>comp. Billy Strayhorn</i>)
In A Sentimental Mood	Black and Tan Fantasy
Mood Indigo	Rockin' in Rhythm
I'm beginning to See the Light	Come Sunday
Sophisticated Lady	Cotton Tail
Caravan (<i>comp. Juan Tizol / Ellington</i>)	In A Harlem Airshaft
I've Got It Bad and That Ain't Good	Perdido (<i>comp. w/ Juan Tizol</i>)
It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing	Black Beauty
In My Solitude	Swampy River
Things Ain't What They Used to Be	Jack the Bear
In A Mello Tone	Willie the Lion
Congo Brava (<i>comp. Juan Tizol / Ellington</i>)	Take the A Train (<i>comp. Billy Strayhorn</i>)
Koko	Creole Rhapsody
Black, Brown, and Beige	The Mooche