

Duke Ellington

Ellington was among the most influential musicians in jazz and in the history of American music. The composer of about 1000 pieces, he was self-taught, except for piano lessons from his only teacher, Marietta Clinkscapes. Growing up in Washington, Ellington showed a great talent for drawing and design and was accepted to the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn on a scholarship. However, he remained in Washington where he learned to play piano well enough to form a band, the Washingtonians. Ellington took pride in the fact that he was self-taught in arranging and composition and he often said his lack of formal training contributed to the originality of his sound.

Ellington's originality also derived from the fact that he wrote instrumental parts with the sound of his players in mind. It gave his orchestra a very personal and expressive sound. Some of musicians, like Johnny Hodges (alto sax) and Harry Carney (baritone sax) remained with him for more than 40 years. Although Ellington has a uniquely percussive and dissonant piano style, it was often said that his real instrument was his orchestra. His compositions have become classics of jazz and more than a few, once they acquired lyrics, became standards in the American songbook. Here is a partial list of my personal favorites.

Ellington was the composer of more than 2,000 songs and many extended works, most famously "Black, Brown, and Beige" (1943). Ellington worked closely with his band members on ideas for tunes, and many pieces attributed to him are actually based on suggestions by long-time members of his band. A few were composed entirely by his most prolific collaborator, Billy Strayhorn: for example, "Take the A-Train" and "Satin Doll." Ellington never tried to falsely take credit and the copyrights are correctly attributed. But his style of arranging and realizing a piece of music was so distinctive that the public considered them written by Ellington even when they were not. He 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 Essential Compositions played by the Duke Ellington Orchestra.

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
	<i>Consult your Listener's Guide handout for recommendations of specific recordings.</i>