

ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



DUKE

[This is the fifth article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

Edward Kennedy Ellington was born on April 29, 1899 to James Edward Ellington and Daisy Kennedy Ellington, who were both pianists. Daisy played parlor songs while James preferred the opera.

Early on, Daisy surrounded her son with dignified friends to reinforce his manners and teach him to live elegantly. It's told that Ellington's childhood friends noticed that his casual, offhand manner, his easy grace, and his dapper dress gave him the bearing of a young nobleman, and began calling him "Duke."

His first job was selling peanuts at Washington Senators baseball games. In the summer of 1914, working as a soda jerk, he wrote his first composition, "Soda Fountain Rag". Ellington created the song by ear because he had not yet learned to read and write music. "I would play the song as a one-step, two-step, waltz, tango, and fox trot," Ellington recalled. "Listeners never knew it was the same piece."

He worked as a freelance sign-painter from 1917, and began assembling groups to play for dances. When a customer would ask him to make a sign for a dance or party, he would ask them if they had musical entertainment; if not, Ellington would ask if he could play for them.

His first play date as a group, "The Duke's Serenaders," made a profit. He took home 75 cents! As he progressed, Ellington played in DC and in Virginia for private society balls and embassy parties.

At 19, Ellington married his high school sweetheart, Edna. Shortly after their marriage she gave birth to Mercer, their only son, who eventually took full control of the band after Duke's death.

In 1923, Ellington moved to Harlem, where new dance crazes like the Charleston emerged. Soon, he was booked into the Hollywood Club with a four-year engagement, giving him a solid artistic base. He was known to play the bugle at the end of each performance.

Duke's band grew to a ten-piece organization and developed its own sound by displaying the non-traditional expression of Ellington's arrangements, the street rhythms of Harlem, and the exotic-sounding trombone growls and wah-wahs, high-squealing trumpets, and sultry saxophone blues licks of the band members. Bubber Miley, with his

“growl trumpet,” helped change the "sweet" dance band sound of the group to one that was hotter. A lot hotter.

Uniquely, Ellington led the orchestra by conducting from the keyboard using piano cues and visual gestures; he seldom used a baton. Ellington was not a strict disciplinarian. He maintained control of his orchestra with a crafty combination of charm, humor, flattery, and psychology,



Ellington produced huge hits during the 1930s, including "Mood Indigo", "It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing", "Sophisticated Lady", "Solitude", "In a Sentimental Mood", "Caravan", "I Let a Song Go Out of My Heart," and "Take the "A" Train" (which topped the charts in 1941). When Swing bands like Goodman's and Dorsey's became popular, Ellington resisted, saying "jazz is music; swing is business." As a consequence, his popularity waned.

But Ellington's appearance at the *Newport Jazz Festival* on July 7, 1956 gave him his shot at redemption and brought him brand new fans. The featured song was the seldom-heard "Diminuendo and Crescendo in Blue," two tunes that had been in the band's book since 1937. Ellington led the band through the two pieces, separated by tenor saxophonist Paul Gonsalves' 28-chorus marathon solo, which whipped the crowd into a frenzy. The concert made international headlines, led to a *Time* magazine cover story (very rare for a jazz musician) and resulted in an album that would become the best-selling long-playing recording of Ellington's career ("Ellington at Newport," Columbia CK 40587). But the reader would find, upon research, that this historic concert was almost lost to posterity, due to several recording microphone misplacements.

Ellington and Billy Strayhorn, his co-arranger began to work on music for movies, contributing scores for *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959) and *Paris Blues* (1961). Ellington was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1965, but was turned down. His reaction at age 67: "Fate is being kind to me. Fate doesn't want me to be famous too young." Ellington did receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Nixon in 1969.

Ellington died in 1974, a month after his 75th birthday. His last words were, "Music is how I live, why I live and how I will be remembered." Ironically, 25 years later, the annual Pulitzer Prize for music – for which he was recommended, but denied him, back in 1965 – was awarded to him posthumously. In 2009, the United States Mint launched a new coin featuring Ellington on the "tails" side of the District of Columbia quarter.

He is one of only five jazz musicians to appear on the cover of *Time* (the others were Louis Armstrong, Thelonious Monk, Wynton Marsalis, and Dave Brubeck). Numerous musicians honored Ellington in their music: Dave Brubeck with "The Duke" (1954), Miles Davis' "He Loved Him Madly" (1974), Judy Collins' "Song for Duke" (1975) and Stevie Wonder's "Sir Duke" in 1976, Could any finer accolade be received from one's peers?

Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as "Just Me 2", a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at www.JustMeLiveMusic.com. See them on Facebook at www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic