



Today, Duke Ellington is considered by many to be one of America's greatest jazz songwriters of all time, writing over 1000 compositions throughout his fifty year career. But did you know that when he was a child, this jazz great almost gave up playing music altogether?

Tired of practicing classical music every day, the young Duke Ellington quit his piano lessons to play outside with his friends when he was seven years old. In fact, Duke didn't take up the piano again until he reached his teens. Why did Duke Ellington start playing piano again in high school? The answer is pretty simple: to get a date. Teen Duke found out that the girls at his school loved a boy that could play a mean piano. True to his royal nickname, the "Duke" showed up to every music gig dressed like royalty, flashing a big smile to each lady in the audience.

As a teenager, by day, Duke Ellington earned money as a dishwasher and a few other odd jobs, and by night he formed small jazz ensembles to play high school dances and dance halls. Soon after, the Duke decided to follow his dream of a musical career by moving to New York with some of his closest musician friends. At first, Duke Ellington and his group of friends found only limited success. The dance craze at this time, just after World War 1, was the **Charleston** and there was a lot of competition for jazz audiences in New York. After a while though, Duke's group worked up a reputation and landed a permanent gig in the late 1920s with the hottest club in Harlem, New York called **The Cotton Club**. It was there the Duke became famous.

The 'golden' age for Duke Ellington and his jazz orchestra was from 1932-1942 when he hosted a weekly radio broadcast and white clientele were pouring in to see him nightly. This set the stage for him to become a worldwide celebrity and he enjoyed many years playing and touring the world.

Just about every year in the height of his career, Duke Ellington and his Orchestra produced major jazz hits which included *Mood Indigo*, *It Don't Mean a Thing (if it ain't got swing)*, *Sophisticated lady*, *Solitude*, *In a Sentimental Mood* and *Caravan*.

Today, Duke Ellington is remembered with many awards and memorials signifying his contributions to American music. He has a star on the Hollywood walk Of Fame and was one of only five jazz musicians to have ever been featured on the cover of **Time Magazine**. In 1976, pop music great Stevie Wonder wrote a song called *Sir Duke* as a tribute to Ellington. In 2009, Duke Ellington became the first African-American to be featured on a US coin. From his early performances at high school to his Carnegie Hall successes, everyone loved his royal highness, Duke Ellington!

FAST FACTS

NAME: Edward Kennedy Ellington
BORN: April 29, 1899 - Washington D.C., USA
DIED: May 24, 1974
STYLE: Big band, jazz, swing
INSTRUMENTS: Piano, Bandleader

IMPORTANT WORKS

It Don't Mean a Thing, Sophisticated Lady, Mood Indigo, Satin Doll

FUN FACTS

Duke Ellington stopped using his full name, Edward Kennedy Ellington, when a buddy in grade school decided that a royal name better fitted Duke's aristocratic attitude. True to his reputation, the Duke dressed to impress, always wearing the trendiest fashions and trying his best to woo his adoring female fans.