

Duke Ellington

- The single most creative and prolific composer and arranger in jazz history
- Wrote more than 2,000 compositions, as well as many arrangements and re-arrangements for them
- Began composing before 1920, continued until his death in 1974
- Ellington's big band was the most stable and longest-lived group in jazz history
- Some musicians remained 20-30 years in a stretch; only Ellington's death ended the band's run

*Important

His musicians had strong, unique styles of their own; together they made an all-star unit. Many of their improvisations were so good that they became permanent parts of the band's pieces, as though composed. Ellington knew their musical personalities so well, he wrote his music specifically for them.

Personalities of Ellington:

A) Pianist

- 1) Like Basie's influence by James P. Johnson, Ellington began as a stride-player
- 2) Soon develops his own percussive, swinging-style, with unusual harmonies and voicings
- 3) Musicians liked his accompaniments because of their spare and complementary comping-style. His timing and taste were near perfect.

B) Composer

- 1) Many compositions became popular songs when lyrics were added (i.e. "Solitude", "Mood Indigo" and "Don't Get Around Much Anymore")
- 2) One group of compositions is grouped in three-minute instrumentals – this was the length of a standard side of a 78-rpm record. Many of these painted musical portraits of famous personalities (i.e. Willie "The Lion" Smith – "Portrait of a Lion"; comedian Bert Williams – "Portrait of B. Williams")
- 3) Also wrote a variety of longer pieces. He is widely acclaimed for having taken jazz into the format of "extended works" (i.e. "Creole Rhapsody", "Diminuendo in Blue")

Maybe his most respected long work, "Lack, Brown & Beige", is a 50-minute tone parallel to the history of the American Negro.

Some of his longest works were film scores. A favorite of critics and musicians is his music for "Anatomy of a Murder"; Otto Preminger movie starring Jimmy Stewart.

C) Arranging Style

- 1) His greatest skill – he capitalized on the uniquely personal sounds of individual

players

2) Ellington wrote parts suited to the particular sound and capabilities of each player in the band (Johnny Hodges, Cootie Williams, Rex Stewart)

i.e. He distributed the different parts of the chord to particular players in the band based on their individual talents, not necessarily what the music would normally dictate to them. Trumpets with mutes would be mixed with those with no mutes to create color. This way, only Ellington's band really sounded authentic playing Ellington's music.

3) Voicing across the sections – Ellington would routinely write sections that would pit one section of the band against another (i.e. “Mood Indigo” – trumpet and clarinet; “Concerto for Cootie – Bass and trumpet)

4) Wordless vocal technique or instrumentalized voice (“Creole Love” & “Transbluency”)

5) Created growl style – Tricky “Sam: Nantan, Bubba Miley, Cootie Williams – “East St. Louis Toodleloo”

- Individual Musician's Contributions:

Clarinet

Barney Bigard (1906 – 81) and his successor Jimmy Hamilton

Bigard – New Orleans style to Ellington's sophisticated New York style (“Harlem Airshaft”)

Hamilton (1943 – 1968)

“Transbluency” – wordless vocal style

Trumpeters

Bubba Miley & Cootie Williams (“Concerto for Cootie”)

Growl style and plunger techniques

“Cottontail”

“East St. Louis Toodleloo”

“Creole Love Call”

Williams became Ellington's main trumpet artist – 1929-40, 1962-74

“Echoes of Harlem”

“In a Mello Tone”

“Harlem Airshaft”

Clark Terry (1951-59) – “Intimacy at the Blues”

Unique – one of the musicians that bridged the swing and be-bop eras

One of the first to popularize the flugelhorn

Saxophone

Johnny Hodges

Melodic – full, rich sound

Nearly every album features Hodges (“Prelude to a Kiss”)

Had a way of gliding from note to note smoothly – technique is called portamento

(like trombone slide) or smearing effect
Master of inflections of pitch and his syncopations were especially well-timed
Sidney Bechet was a big influence – displayed flashy double-time figures like
Bechet (“Blue Horizon” & “Prelude”) in “I Got it Bad”
May be the most influential alto player from the swing era
Aside from Hodges, Benny Carter was the most widely respected jazz alto
Alto comparison of Carter & Hodges:

Carter	Hodges
Full-bodied sounds	Placement was far less obvious than
Different rhythmic styles	Carter, floated around the beat
Even 18 th notes	Original way of striking accents

Both swing easily
“Mello-Tone” compared to Can’t Believe You’re in Love with me”

Tenors

Paul Gonsalves (1920-74)
Ben Webster (1909-73)
Influenced by C. Hawkins, Hodges
1940-43, 1948-49
Webster improvised so effectively in this period, many quotes in solos by later
Musicians
Webster – model for playing ballads – unique sound
Besides L. Young & C. Hawkins, Webster was the most influential tenor of the
swing era
Gonsalves – soloist 50’s & 70’s; known for softness of tone
Originator of jazz tenor styles and choice of notes – no one had such a command
as Gonsalves

Trombone

Joe “Tricky Sam” Nanton
Master of the growl-style
“Harlem Airshaft”

Lawrence Brown
“Golden Cress”, “Blue Cellaphone”, “Transbluency in Blue”, composed a theme

Drummers

Sonny Greer (1919-51)
L. Bellson (early 50’s)
S. Woodyard (1955-66)
Rufus Jones (1968-73)

Primarily timekeepers

Bass

Jimmy Blanton

Clearly executed, melodic solos demonstrated that, in the hands of a virtuoso, the string bass could contribute more than a timekeeping role; also that of a soloist as in:

“Harlem Airshaft”

“Cottontail”

“Pitter Patter”

Ellington spotlighted Blanton in solo roles and arranged parts for Blanton’s bass so they were like a horn

“Jack the Bear”

“Concerto for Cootie”

“Harlem Airshaft”

Voicing pizzicato bass with horns became a common feature with band with Thad Jones

Diversity of Ellington’s Music

- 1) Emphasis on colors of music (like colors that a symphony orchestra could make) yet retaining swing
- 2) Many romantic ballads
 - “Prelude to a Kiss”
 - “Sophisticated Lady”
 - “I’ve Got it Bad”
 - (“Passion Flower” & “Chelsea Bridge”, Strayhorn)
- 3) Created many extended works – some with much less improvisation
 - “Black, Brown & Beige”
 - “Diminuendo & Crescendo in Blue”
- 4) A book of solo pieces (Concerto) was aimed at featuring his sideman “Concerto for Cootie” Cootie Williams
- 5) A book of sacred music using choirs, new vocal soloists, organ and dancers. It inspired writing for different moods, such as prayer. It also inspired extensive lyrics (i.e. Duke Ellington’s Concert of Sacred Music & Second Sacred Concert)
- 6) A book of many swinging instrumentals with jazz solos and catchy ensemble themes; i.e. “Cottontail”, “Mainstem” (Blanton/Webster Band)
- 7) Also composed over 2000 compositions including several operas, a couple of ballets and 10 musical shows

Creative energy for over four decades

Summary:

- 1) Ellington is among the most significant of all figures in jazz
- 2) As a pianist, in the beginning, he was influenced by James P. Johnson, but he also devised his own original style, which was the pace and mood for his pieces and ornamented the solos of his musicians
- 3) Outstanding band leader, maintaining a large ensemble for 54 years

- 4) Composed more than 2000 compositions, frequently in collaboration with his musicians
- 5) A few pieces became popular songs – “Satin Doll”, “Mood Indigo”, “I’m Beginning to See the Light”
- 6) Extended works which extended the brief time limit of many compositions (“Black, Brown & Beige”, “Diminuendo in Blue”)
- 7) As an arranger:
 - a) Used a number of themes within a single piece
 - b) Voicing across sections
 - c) Used wordless vocals
 - d) Wrote pieces for each individual member
 - e) Mixed improvised pieces with pre-existing written parts
- 8) In 1939-41, he and Jimmy Blanton revolutionized the bassist’s role by playing melodic lines by himself and with horns in the band.
- 9) Most famous saxophonists were Johnny Hodges and Ben Webster
- 10) Featured brass players with the grow-style (Cootie Williams)
- 11) In the 1950’s, two of the biggest soloists were Paul Gonsalves and Clark Terry

Similarities:

- 1) Evolved from Swing period and dance music
- 2) Both pianists were influenced by stride – James Johnson, Willie “The Lion” Smith and Fats Waller, in particular
- 3) Both were highly improvisatory and had many great soloists
- 4) Both has a premier jazz tenor soloist that put both bands on the map (Ben Webster & Lester Young)
- 5) Both were outstanding bandleaders and many musicians wanted to play with these organizations
- 6) Each band produced many jazz stars in the business