

Grade 6 Informational

Musical Royalty: The Duke and Jazz

All That Jazz

Jazz is an American style of music. It is a mix of many types of music. It is made up of ragtime, the blues, and classical music. African American musicians and singers started this style of music. Jazz musicians do not always play music as it is written, and they often make up what they play as they go along. The written notes are just a starting point. Jazz does not sound soft, and it is not easy on the ears. It is a loud and adventurous type of music. It is always changing.

Edward Kennedy Ellington was an important jazz musician. He wrote and played jazz music. He was also a bandleader. Some people even think of him as a musical genius. His special style of jazz is called the “Ellington sound.”

The Beginning

Ellington was born on April 29, 1899, in Washington, D.C. Ellington began taking piano lessons when he was seven years old. He soon lost interest and stopped practicing the piano. He became interested in drawing and painting. He went to a special high school where he could study art.

Inspired by ragtime performers, Ellington’s interest in the piano returned when he was a teenager. When he was seventeen, he started playing the piano professionally. He performed for groups of people. He was a confident and very talented young man. Noting his dapper dress that gave him the appearance of a young nobleman, some of Ellington’s friends nicknamed him, Duke. He was soon known as Duke Ellington.

Cotton Club Years

In 1923 Ellington moved to New York City. He hoped to find work as a musician. He played with a band called The Washingtonians. The Washingtonians played at many New York nightclubs. In 1927 The Washingtonians were hired as the house band at the Cotton Club. The Cotton Club was a famous nightclub in Harlem. Live radio shows from the Cotton Club made Ellington famous.

Ellington had a chance to write songs when he was at the Cotton Club. He wrote songs in many styles. Ellington made songs for many record companies. “East St. Louis Toodle-Oo” was his first hit song.

Ellington also experimented with musical sounds. He made instruments produce new sounds. Ellington liked “trumpet screams.” He also made the saxophone “growl” and “wah-

wah.” He would use these interesting sounds in his songs. Ellington made music that people had never heard before.

Ellington liked to have the audience take part in his shows. He was one of the first jazz musicians to use call-and-response. He would call out to the audience during a song. The audience would then respond, or call back. Call-and-response was a key part of some of Ellington’s songs.

Ellington left the Cotton Club in 1931. At this time he was one of the best-known African American musicians.

Ellington’s style of music was different from other types of music. He changed the length, feel, and sound of music. Musicians used to record only short songs. Ellington recorded much longer songs.

Sharing His Sound

After leaving the Cotton Club, Ellington went on tour. He and his band traveled throughout the United States and Europe. They played shows in many different cities. Ellington would sometimes return to the Cotton Club for special shows.

Ellington was a popular musician for many years. He wrote and played music into the 1970s. His career as a famous musician lasted more than fifty years.

To stay popular, Ellington changed the sound of his music many times. His songs were always new and interesting. His 1971 album *The Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* shows how creative he was.

An Honored Musician

Ellington was given many awards over the years. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1965. Howard and Yale Universities also gave him honorary degrees. He was the first jazz musician to become a member of the Royal Music Academy in Stockholm, Sweden. Ellington also was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. These awards show just how important Ellington was to the world of music.

A great honor for Ellington was having a school named for him. The Duke Ellington School for the Arts is in his hometown of Washington, D.C. Ellington always studied and practiced music. This makes a school named in his memory very special. The school teaches students who want to make a living as musicians and artists.

In 1974 Ellington passed away. He left many great memories. He also left many great songs. He had a long, brilliant career. Ellington was musical royalty. The nickname Duke surely fit him well.

Grade 6 Narrative

Working Together

My sister Lindsey and I grew up to the sound of shuffling steps, swirling colors, and our dad's deep baritone voice calling out the next square dance move. Twice a month—sometimes as often as twice a week—we packed up the truck with our sound system, music CDs, and a huge garment bag filled with brightly patterned western shirts for Dad and me and matching dresses for Mom and Lindsey.

Mom will tell you that Lindsey and I were square dancing before we could walk. As proof, she opens the photo album to a picture of six-month-old Lindsey in a baby carrier strapped to Dad's chest. Mom and Dad are caught mid-step: eyes shining with laughter, a blur of colors surrounding them. Baby Lindsey, in a red dress just like Mom's, flashes a drooling smile. I came along two years later and joined the rest of the family. In addition to the many square dance outfits in my closet, I've heard Dad's calls so many times I could sing them in my sleep. In other words, square dancing is part of my life.

We moved to a larger town a few years ago. Mom and Dad quickly found a group of people who enjoyed square dancing, so our family traditions have continued. The trouble is, I'm involved in quite a few activities now that I am in middle school, so I do not have a lot of extra time to participate in square dancing.

For physical-education class, we're having a school-wide Fitness Fair. Mr. Rodriguez assigned students to work together on this project. We must come up with an idea that promotes "health and well-being." Mr. Rodriguez told the class to brainstorm ideas. Lee and I are working together, so we spent those last ten minutes of class considering options, but we were unable to make a decision. As students were funneling out the classroom door, an idea entered my mind. I shouted so I could be heard above the commotion in the hallway, "Lee, can you meet me at the community center tonight at 6:30?"

Lee heard me and considered the invitation for a short period of time, then he responded, "Sure, I'll see you there."

When Lee arrived at the community center, I explained that my dad was teaching a beginner's square dancing class tonight. Hesitant new dancers asked if they were in the correct place. Experienced dancers greeted the newcomers warmly and assured them they would have a good time. Lee looked skeptical. The music amplified, and toes started tapping.

"Dancing is fantastic exercise," I said. "It helps keep your body healthy and it's fun. Maybe we could integrate dancing into our 'health and well-being' project."

"Hmmm," said Lee. He was studying the dancers as they moved around the floor.

I could sense that Lee was hesitant about making a decision, but Lindsey came by and assigned both of us to a group and a dance partner. I thought Lee might have a better understanding of square dancing once he had the opportunity to learn a few basic square dance steps—Allemande Left, Do-Si-Do, and Grand Right and Left. It was reassuring to see Lee grinning when we finally left the dance floor.

“I have an idea,” he said before he slipped out the door. “Meet me in the art room after school tomorrow.”

The next afternoon, I found Lee sitting at a table, surrounded by colorful paintings of happy, active square dancers. “Did you make these?” I asked. “When? How?”

Lee dipped his brush into a container of paint. “I thought maybe I could use my artistic abilities to help promote our project. I could paint posters portraying people square dancing. The posters would advertise the healthy benefits of square dancing.”

“I think your idea is great!” I said. “Let’s also try to create an activity in which people could participate to gain an understanding of the enjoyment of square dancing.”

After pondering for a few minutes, Lee and I decided we would inquire whether my parents would be willing to demonstrate a few basic square dance steps at the school-wide Fitness Fair. My parents were thrilled about being asked to teach people the basics, and they readily agreed to help.

Confidently, we went to tell Mr. Rodriguez our idea for the Fitness Fair.