

Grade 8 Informational

American Ambassador of Music: Duke Ellington

Edward Kennedy Ellington, age fifteen, rushed home to his mother with seventy-five cents that he earned after he played piano at a party. He had played for such a long time that his fingers had become very sore, and he could not touch a piano for weeks. Such was the humble beginning of the career of the outstanding African American musician, performer, and composer who would become known to the world as Duke Ellington.

Ellington was born in Washington, D.C., on April 29, 1899. He was surrounded by a supportive family. One day when he was only four years old, he heard his mother play piano. He loved hearing her play. Three years later, he began to play piano himself. Even at such a young age, his self-confidence was obvious when he told a neighbor that he was sure that one day he would become famous.

As a teenager, Ellington became serious about his music. While working at a drugstore soda fountain, he composed his first song, "Soda Fountain Rag." However, his musical skill did not match his goal. He was dropped from two large musical groups because he did not read music very well. Learning more about reading music would come later. However, he did play well enough to make it with smaller groups. By his late teen years, Ellington had earned enough money playing music to help his parents move into a better house. In 1918 he married Edna Thompson. They became parents of a son, Mercer, in 1919. Besides playing music, Ellington earned extra money as a sign painter.

Ellington and his band, the Washingtonians, got a big break in 1923 when they performed in New York. At first his band sounded much like most of the other New York dance bands, but that soon changed. In 1926 and 1927, the band recorded some of his original jazz compositions. These recordings featured new sounds and styles, setting the Washingtonians apart from other bands in the city. Ellington was finally developing his own style and finding his place in the world of music.

Another big break came for Ellington in 1927 when the band landed a job at one of New York's most famous entertainment spots. Here New York's top African American musicians performed their own works as well as music written by other talented composers. Evening performances were broadcast on the radio, spreading Ellington's name and sound across the nation. Ellington began to thrive in this environment, composing more and more tunes for his band. Soon talented musicians clamored to join his group.

Ellington respected his band members and studied their strengths and weaknesses. He wrote compositions for specific instruments. By doing this, he promoted the talents and emphasized the strong points of various members of the band. He wrote miniature concertos, allowing a single band member to play three-minute solos backed up by the rest of the band.

In 1933, Ellington and his band were invited to Britain to perform for nearly six weeks.

Large audiences came to hear the concerts. From Britain the band traveled to Holland and France.

Ellington got the nickname “Duke” because of his love of fancy clothes and his fondness for elegance. He kept his preference for a sophisticated lifestyle throughout his life, but he was never snobbish toward anyone. Although he appreciated sophistication and elegance, his day-to-day lifestyle was not so glamorous. His band toured for most of the year. He composed music constantly, jotting down notes as he rode in a car or seated at his portable piano in a hotel room in the wee hours of the morning.

For a long time, Ellington talked of writing music about the lives of blacks in America. In 1943, he completed an opera that premiered at Carnegie Hall in New York City. Proceeds from the performance of “Black, Brown, and Beige” were donated to a special charity organization. Ellington’s performance marked the first time a prominent black composer presented an entire evening of original music in what was considered the most famous concert hall in the nation. He began a series of performances at Carnegie Hall that spanned the next five years. Duke Ellington's works resulted in his being thought of as a “serious” musician who composed jazz instead of as a jazz musician who composed serious music. In 1944, a critic in New York called Ellington “The Hot Bach.”

By the 1950s, the era of the big bands was ending. Young peoples’ preference for rhythm and blues or rock ’n’ roll caused big bands to break up. A few lead players in Ellington’s band left to start their own small ensembles. New band members joined the group. This gave a new sound to the band and called for a new style to Duke’s composing. With new music and a fresh sound, the band staged a triumphant appearance at the 1956 Newport Jazz Festival. Ellington and his band began traveling again, as they had in previous years, crossing North America and making trips to Europe.

When Ellington entered his sixties, he continued composing, performing, and traveling. Many people still think of Duke Ellington primarily as a jazz musician. He was that and so much more. A prolific creator, he composed over fifteen hundred works, including jazz compositions, scores for musicals and movies, and even music for ballet. His career as a bandleader lasted more than fifty years.

In 1993, the Smithsonian Institute’s Museum of American History in Washington, D.C., opened an exhibit honoring the genius of Duke Ellington. The young boy who earned seventy-five cents playing piano at age fifteen displayed boundless energy throughout his entire life. He chronicled the memories of his exciting life in a book published in 1973. Edward Kennedy Ellington, better known as “Duke,” died on May 24, 1974.

Grade 8 Narrative

Oh, Canada

The border to Canada was not a formidable opponent when we started to trek north for our annual fishing trip. This would be the last year to enter this beautiful country without presenting a passport to the border guards under the red and white maple leaf flag. Our old, Caribbean-sea blue Suburban pulled through the passage lanes, we answered the woman behind the smoky glass that we were indeed the children of the driver and entering the country of our own accord, and we settled in for the rest of the journey. The beauty of this country's rocky countryside was an interesting contrast to the flat plains of our home in middle Nebraska.

My brothers and I gauged the amount of time it would take to reach Thunder Bay, Ontario, reminding each other of the mile-per-hour timing versus the kilometer-per-mile timing. We knew we were approaching this small city on the shores of Northern Lake Superior when we caught a whiff of the paper plant at the southern edge of the city limits. The putrid smell of wet wood being processed to paper was much worse than I remembered it to be; the results of this process permeated our car, the air, and my nose for several kilometers; we breathed a sigh of true relief when the air cleared enough for us to breathe deeply again. We paused for a supper break and a view of Kakabeka Falls. Legend has it that if you listened carefully, you could hear the cry of the Ojibwa maiden as she cries for her lost love. The falls thundered in our ears as we crossed the man-made bridge to the other side, and for brief moments along the way I found myself feeling the thrill of momentary fear as my overactive mind took me over the bridge railing into the roaring waters in an imaginary fall.

We pulled ourselves away from the beauty of the falls and the bay and continued north. Thunder Bay held our interest for a bit more as this last highway of northern civilization led us past the Terry Fox monument marking his run across the country to raise awareness and funds for cancer research. We stopped at the lookout and gazed out at the huge pile of rock in the middle of the bay known as Sleeping Giant. The enormity of this rock brought to mind the idea of an iceberg, knowing that what we were seeing was only a small portion of the formation. We gathered ourselves and boarded the bright blue beast bearing our fishing and camping gear. Heading further north we took a winding highway around Lake Nipigon and through many small towns. The drive was long, but aside from the logging trucks that rumbled our ride, it was picture postcard beautiful. We watched for streams of water that flowed out of rocks upon the face of the high cliffs, and we tried to spot loons diving for their meals out on the lake. After what seemed to me to be a day's long travel, we passed through the last small town before reaching our camp. Where we were headed was only marked on local maps; the bound atlas that brought us this far now showed nothing but a road to nowhere. Goodbye television, telephone, and video games!

Finally, the destination I'd been waiting for! We unloaded the fishing poles, life jackets, waterproof bags, food, and tackle; then we headed to the owner's office to purchase our five-day permit. By now the sun was setting on the horizon and the cry of loons told me it would soon be too dark to catch anything but black fly and mosquito bites. I took one last look at the

lake and mentally challenged the elements to defy the master angler abilities I had acquired in my seventeen years. Walleye and northern pike beware! I climbed the wooden-plank stairs to the cabin, shook the sand off of my shoes, and declined the offer to sit up and talk for the next several hours. I wanted to get to bed and get to tomorrow. In the morning I would head out to a hidden lake found only by driving for an hour and a half on a logging road and begin my reason for enduring the long drive from Nebraska: fishing in the cold, clear waters of Canada.