

Duke Ellington (1899-1974)

Known as the first composer of Indigenous African American Folk music. While writing and performing, he is always aiming to tell a story, sharing a narrative.

He started taking piano lessons at the age of 7, at which time his mother surrounded him with dignified women to help reinforce his manners and to teach him elegance. His friends around this time noticed his noble demeanor and dapper way of dressing, and began calling him “Duke”.

Started his first band at age 18, “The Duke Serenaders”, who called themselves “Colored Syncopaters” in a local advertisement, who played for both black and white patrons.

He moved to Harlem to be a part of the Harlem Renaissance in the early 20’s, played with a large variety of groups and eventually started his own group.

1927 his group was selected to be the House Band at the illustrious Cotton Club, which included a weekly national radio broadcast. They played dance music, mixed comedy, vaudeville and burlesque, all while serving illicit alcohol. This was the key to vaulting his astronomical popularity!

“It Don’t Mean a Thing” – 1943 note the high level of “arrangement”..

<https://youtu.be/qDQpZT3GhDg>

(Top – 1:35)

During his time at the Cotton Club and through the 60’s he composed and recorded dozens of swing hits, receiving several Grammy’s for charts such as: “Black and Tan Fantasy”, “Mood Indigo”, “It Don’t Mean a Thing”, “Take the A Train”, among others.

“Take the A Train” – written and arranged by Billy Strayhorn, who Ellington had an incredibly close relationship with, and describes Billy as his doppelganger.. this recording features Joe “Tricky Sam” Nanton on trombone, using the Jungle Style “growl” technique he made famous along with trumpet player James “Bubber” Miley.

https://youtu.be/dQnNnPLC_b4

(Top to 1:45)

Notice the spectacular scatting performed by Ella Fitzgerald

“Symphony in Black”, “Creole Love Call” and “Black, Brown and Beige” are good examples of his ability to craft longer, more artistic compositions. His ability to tell a meaningful, soulful, honest story through music is both elegant and to the point. The multimovement masterpiece “Symphony in Black” won an Academy Award for Best Musical Short, and features Billy Holiday in her first cinematic role.

<https://youtu.be/QTT9Su1d-VE?t=270>

(4:35-7:15)

Ellington used the Big Band Swing sound to not only inspire people to dance in the clubs and ballrooms with catchy up-beat pop-tunes, but also entranced and transformed listeners in the concert hall with his inspiring and soulful story telling. His style of running a band was not the common “disciplinarian” approach common at the time, but led the group using charm, humor, flattery and astute psychology. To put simply, with the elegance of a duke.

Ellington also explored arranging classical pieces for jazz orchestra. He borrowed several movements from Tchaikovsky’s Nutcracker Suite and arranged them for his band, changing the titles ever so slightly for tongue and cheek reference.

Sugar Rum Cherry:

<https://youtu.be/iYORGLfeexc>

Benny Goodman (1909-1986)

Made his professional clarinetist debut at age 11, went on to perform as a soloist with a variety of Jazz and Concert Bands. At age 14 he joined the musician’s union and played alongside trumpet virtuoso Bix Beiderbecke.

Was a member of several Big Bands while growing up in Chicago and New York City, and eventually started his own Big Band at age 29, called the “Benny Goodman's Boys”, and featured jazz legend Glenn Miller. The band eventually evolved to “The Benny Goodman Orchestra”, and scored its first #1 Chart hit “Moonglow”, featuring Lionel Hampton on Vibes.

<https://youtu.be/4cq8ZGnfUN4>

(Top to 2:35)

The Benny Goodman Band was selected to be one of the feature bands on the National TV show “Let’s Dance”, tremendously improving the band’s notoriety, making them particularly popular on the West Coast. August 21, 1935, Los Angeles CA, Palomar Ballroom is credited with the “Night the Swing Era Began”. “King Porter Stomp” and “Stompin at the Savoy” were two of the arrangements Fletcher Henderson arranged they performed that night.

<https://youtu.be/5ky8IH2RVM>

(Top – 1:45)

Sing, Sing, Sing! This performance is from the 1937 Warner Brothers feature film “Hollywood Hotel”, featuring Gene Krupa on drums and Harry James on trumpet.

<https://youtu.be/GwPvLMIGWPI>

(Top-2:15)

Some of the black bands of the time, including Henderson’s own, had pioneered the swing sound. Nevertheless, with its solid professionalism, outstanding horn sections, noted sidemen, and Goodman’s

clarinet, Goodman's band was worthy of its popularity, and its brand of jazz was more forceful and authentic than what most other white bands of the period were playing.

It has been said that Goodman's stern personality was a factor in his approach to music and in the uneasy relationship he had with his band members. "Benny was a terrific leader," recalled pianist Jess Stacy, "but if I'd had any spunk I'd probably have thrown the piano at him." Singer [Helen Forrest](#) called Goodman "the rudest man I have ever met" and claimed to have left Goodman "to avoid a nervous breakdown." Goodman's steely gaze, which band members came to call "the ray," could bring the most self-assured musician into submission. He was also a relentless perfectionist who demanded the same high standards from others that he had established for himself. Although some critics identified a lack of emotion and [innovation](#) in the music, the striving for perfection in musical polish is what distinguished the band and was a major component in its success.

Count Basie (1904-1984)

William James "Count" Basie was the best student in school, though he dreamed of a traveling life, inspired by touring carnivals which came to town. He finished junior high school but spent much of his time at the Palace Theater in Red Bank, New Jersey, where doing occasional chores gained him free admission to performances. He quickly learned to improvise music appropriate to the acts and silent movies.

Early Years

Before the age of 30, Basie had played with many of the active jazz musicians living in New York, touring with a variety of big bands throughout the '20's. Basie eventually moved to Kansas City where he took over leadership of the Moten Big Band, renaming it "Count Basie and his Cherry Blossoms". It was in this band that he first worked with Freddie Green (guitar), Jo Jones (drums) and Lester Young (tenor saxophone). Eventually, he brought the group to Harlem. Count Basie's Band was a fresh big band sound for New York, contrasting the complex jazz writing of Duke Ellington and highlighting the difference in styles that had emerged between the east and west coasts. The soloists are at the foreground, with the ensemble effects and riffs playing a strictly functional backing role.

"One O'clock Jump"

<https://youtu.be/e4LEL3OREKE>

(Top – 2:15)

Hits such as "One O'Clock Jump" and "Jumpin' at the Woodside" (from 1937 and 1938, respectively) helped to gain the band, now known as the Count Basie Orchestra, national and international fame. These tunes were known as "head-arrangements"; not scored in individual parts but made up of riffs memorized by the band's members.

During the next twenty years, his music evolved. Rather than the music being built around the soloists with memorized head arrangements and riffs, the group's sound at this time became more focused on ensemble playing; closer to the traditional East Coast big band sound. This can be attributed to the increasing reliance on arrangers such as Buck Clayton, Neil Hefty, Frank Foster and Sammy Nestico, to influence the band with their music

Here is an arrangement of the 1932 Jazz Standard “April in Paris”, arranged for the Basie Band in this recording.

<https://youtu.be/dgf2CNJ6APw>

(Top-1:30)

The Count Basie Orchestra sound eventually became identifiable, that of a tight, powerful and expressive ensemble: heavier and more full bodied, contrasting with the riff-based band of the late 1930s and early 1940s. Whereas previously the emphasis had been on providing space for exemplary soloists such as [Lester Young](#) and [Buck Clayton](#), now the focus had shifted to the arrangements. This orchestral style continues as the typical sound of the band up to the present day with virtues centering on discipline, precision, and collective power. A superb precision ensemble!

“Scoot” arranged by Neil Hefty

https://youtu.be/p377kD4s_-Q

(Entirety – 2:26)

Duke Ellington’s “In a Mellow Tone”

<https://youtu.be/-0v0RJqpu0g>

(Entirety – 5:55)

Today

The basic fundamentals of Basie’s orchestra were and still are foot stomping 4/4 swing, an unparalleled use of dynamic contrasts, shouting the blues at any tempo, and just making one want to dance. The Count Basie Orchestra continues to perform and record today and was led by players who Basie selected himself. In the history of Jazz music, there is only one bandleader that has the distinction of having his orchestra still performing sold out concerts all over the world, with members personally chosen by him, for over 30 years after his passing.

“Basie Straight Ahead”

<https://youtu.be/fm8uHT-BJP4>

Stan Kenton (1911-1979)

Born in 1911, he grew up in Southern California, in the Los Angeles area, and earned the nick name “Old Man Jazz” by the other kids in his high school. At age 16 he started an 8-piece band that played at the local hamburger shop for 50 cents a night, with him playing the piano. His first arrangements were composed for this group.

1940 he formed his first full jazz orchestra, he played the role more as arranger, rather than the pianist. When composer/arranger Pete Rugolo joined the Stan Kenton Orchestra as staff arranger in late 1945 he brought with him his love of jazz, Stravinsky and Bartok. This is when the Stan Kenton orchestra first started experimenting with the "Third Stream", bringing the classical and jazz genres together into a whole new kind of sound.

From the album "Artistry in Rhythm"

"Artistry in Bolero"

<https://youtu.be/KL7Ohsk1e3M?t=45>

(0:45-1:45)

During the '50's, the band moved to more mainstream arrangements and standard instrumentation, and were heavily influenced by the arrangements of Gerry Mulligan, Bill Holman and Bill Russo, as well as the drumming of Mel Lewis. They collaborated and experimented with bringing heavy Latin music into their arrangements, culminating in the album "Cuban Fire". Orchestral writing style for the modern Big Band, this was a whole new kind of Big Band sound, a far cry from the dance-band sound of the Swing Era!

"Cuban Fire"

<https://youtu.be/RbT7lfOMnJ8>

(Top-2:15)

1960 Kenton added a new instrument, the "Mellophonium". The new instrument was used by Kenton to "bridge the gap" in range, color, and tonality between his trumpet and trombone sections. Essentially it creates a [conical](#), midrange sound that is common in a [symphonic setting](#) with a [horn \(French horn\)](#) but the bell of the instrument faces forward, for projection through the big band texture. The addition of this instrument filled the whole sound of the band out, creating a thick, lush texture, with more expressive range than the standard instrumentation of the more lean standard Big Band instrumentation.

"Maleguena" arranged by Bill Hollman

<https://youtu.be/TN9sp6ApX4o>

"Macarthur Park" arranged by Jim Webb

<https://youtu.be/MrerjuNLpmY>