

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Black Genius

Reminiscing in Tempo

Duke Ellington

By Ronald Turco, M.D.
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Edward Kennedy Ellington was born April 29, 1899 in Washington D.C. He married Edna Thompson, pregnant with his son Mercer, on July 2, 1918. Mercer was born March 11, 1919. Ellington's closest confidants in life were his mother Daisy, his physician Arthur C. Logan with whom he forged a close relationship after his mother's death in 1935, and Billy Strayhorn, Ellington's arranger, pianist and assistant.

Billy Strayhorn, "Sweet Pea" or "Strays" as he was called, was practically the opposite of Ellington in lifestyle and physical appearance. He was also homosexual. However, Ellington said that with Strays he was so close their brain waves meshed.

Ellington emulated a white culture that espoused Victorian values, an interest in the arts, a formal manner of dress, deportment and speech, and, above all, an optimism and belief in achievement. His parents lived the ideal of Victorian gentility until they died, and they raised their son accordingly.

The name he adopted, "Duke", relies on both the attribution of aristocracy and the expectation of how he was to be treated by others. He remained aristocratic in bearing and behaviors his entire life. Part of this related to being taught pride in his race and a "responsibility" to represent it well. Positive aspects of race were emphasized in his home. Ellington said that his friend Edgar McEntree nicknamed him "Duke" in response to these qualities.

Duke Ellington has been described as having charisma from childhood through the end of his life, possessing a majesty that was simultaneously unique and utilitarian. His character and his talent were said to have been one.

He was conscious of his appearance and did not like the word "Jazz" because it related to sex, at least in the early days, and was a word used by the lowly elements of society in association with orgies.

Ellington was given the sense that he was special and was actually told by his mother that he was "blessed" — this clearly meant that he was beyond the ordinary. Ellington's mother was

"blessed" — this clearly meant that he was beyond the ordinary. Ellington's mother was optimistic, creative and strong-willed. The close attachment with his mother, however likely created problems of intimacy in his heterosexual relationships as well as contributing to his sexual adventures — of which there were many.

When Ellington's mother, Daisy, was sent to Providence Hospital in Detroit in May 1835, Ellington spent the last three days of her life with his head on her pillow. She died on May 27. He was devastated; his mother had been the center of his emotional life. He had chosen to live with her for a substantial portion of his adult life and, in many respects, had replaced his father in family relationships and as head of the household. Ellington became the provider, bearer of expensive clothing, sole source of his mother's social status and center of importance. His world was built around his mother.

He never fully recovered from this loss which was reinforced by later losses, the greatest of which was Strayhorn's death. Duke Ellington grew up in the European musical tradition and likely knew very little of Black folk music. During early development he showed very little musical talent, wasn't interested in learning music and was not a good student when his mother attempted to arrange piano lessons for his at age 8 or 9. One important permanent personality characteristic of his life was his resistance to formal study.

Ellington regarded himself as having two careers: band leader and composer and he did not want them confused. Ellington once said, "I can never catch on to whatever anyone else played, so I developed my own stuff." His lack of skill forced him to invent ways to get around deficits and it fostered a creativity that might have otherwise not developed. He learned to organize his music according to his own instinct. As a result of Ellington's lack of ability to read music and his educational deficits, he "did it by ear."

It was the essence of Ellington's character to break rules. He loved the out of the ordinary — one of the hallmarks of his genius. Variety, change, shocking effect, and the lack of adherence to the formal rules became Ellington trademarks.

Ellington was able to develop lyric quality of his music and make many innovations. This is the sensuality in Ellington's music — emotion is associated (attached) with the sound. The hallmark of Ellington's genius was his ability to use harmonies and voicings that were, from a conventional perspective, not supposed to work. According to the textbooks, harmony and voicings were unorthodox and wrong.

Duke Ellington possessed a strong ability to "hear and see in his

mind combinations of sounds and colors that other simply could not." He thought of music in terms of color and associated specific tones with specific emotions and each tone had a different color. These tones would become "colors in his mind's eye" and he would work with them drawing upon his background as a painter for visual imagery in producing musical effects. And thus, he was able to tolerate enormous degrees of uncertainty, ambiguity and anxiety.

Discarding a rule was a source of inspiration which helped shape his work and the improvisation that went along with it. He played an wrote from something deep within — "soul."

Duke Ellington was well aware of Black history. He had 800 volumes of books on Black history, many of which he studied and underlined, especially the sections dealing with slave rebellions. His expression of racial concerns was subtle and creative.

Ellington was proud of his heritage and, although he initially ignored racial problems, he composed a great number of pieces celebrating Black culture and was well aware of the

unequal and denigrating status of Black Americans. Without question, Ellington enjoyed a far greater acceptance in white society than most Blacks. He eventually became a spokesman for Jazz and for his race, but not without significant criticism from political figures such as Adam Clayton Powell. On the other hand, Martin Luther King, Jr. was more understanding of Ellington's situation and appreciated his efforts.

Duke Ellington died in 1974 at the age of 75, leaving more than 3000 compositions. In 1974, leaving more than 3000 compositions. In the 1920s he led a band of individualists. During the 1930s he rose in stature as a composer concerned with harmony and form and their integration with Jazz. In the 1940s and 1950s, Ellington's musical patterns became innovative and perhaps somewhat simpler as he preserved a strong central identity.

During his fifty-year career, Ellington played at over 20,000 performances in the United States, Europe, the Middle East and Latin America and had reached tens of millions of people.



The band of the Thirties stressed individualism. Ellington believed that a strongly disciplined band would not have the freedom to create and play.

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Music
By Duke Ellington

*Music is a beautiful woman in her prime,
Music is a scrubwoman, clearing
away the dirt and grime,
Music is a girl child
Simple, sweet and beaming,
A thousand years old,
Cold as sleet, and scheming.*

*Wise and patient,
Unfathomably kind,
Music is the woman you always
wanted to find.*

*Music is a gorgeous bitch, ...
A volcano of desire
Makes your blood to boil
As you get higher and higher.*

*No matter how well you know her,
There's always more to learn;
An endless adventure, every day she's
brand-new.*

*Music is that woman, who
You'll hope will say,
"There's very few who do a new-do
like you do."*

*But, alas, you're the victim of her
coup,
'Cause she can always satisfy you.*

*Music is the
woman
You follow day
after day:
Music is the
woman
Who always
has her way.*

*The topless
chick —
You like to see
her shake it —
No matter how
hard you try,
You never
quite make it.*

*When you
don't hear her,
You desper-
ately miss her,
And when you
embrace her,
You wish you
could kiss her.*



Black and Tan Fantasy

Black and Tan Fantasy commemorated the death and love of Ellington's affair with an actress. Ellington had a basic contempt for women. His son, Mercer writes, "I would say that apart from his mother and sister, he had a basic contempt for women." He further notes, "He spent so much time celebrating and charming them, but basically hated them." His attitude towards women could be found in the song "She Always Wanted to be a Witch." *Black and Tan Fantasy* was selected by music critics and intellectuals as being the single most important piece of Jazz in 1927.

Daybreak Express

The train almost had a mythic meaning for African Americans during the 19th and 20th centuries. Ellington used the effects of the train in many of his pieces, perhaps the most famous of which is *Daybreak Express*, and Ellington classic. Ellington described the refuge the train provided with its soothing metallic rhythm conducive to writing music. This was also a refuge from the segregation in the South.

Reminiscing In Tempo

Reminiscing In Tempo was a four-part recording in which his mood alternated from the sadness of the past shared with his mother, to fond memories — clearly a

reaction to her death. It was his creative alternative to grief. This album was not well received by critics.

Sophisticated Lady

Although Ellington remained ever "loyal" to his wife, Edna, he took Mildred Dixon, a dancer, to be his partner in 1929 after his move to an apartment in the fancy Sugar Hill area of Harlem. Ellington related to Edna's depressed state of mind and consequent drinking after the marital breakup in his recording, *Sophisticated Lady*. Duke Ellington appears to have changed significant heterosexual partners approximately every ten years. He was involved in numerous affairs as well as female acquaintances.