Duke Ellington was born Edward Kennedy Ellington in Washington, D.C. on April 29, 1899. His father, James Ellington, made blueprints for the United States Navy. James and his mother Daisy were both pianists.

At the age of seven Duke's parents enrolled him in piano lessons. His parents encouraged Duke to practice every day, even though Duke would have preferred to play baseball. Daisy also encouraged Duke to have good manners and elegance. A friend nicknamed him "Duke" because his elegant manner and dapper dress gave him the character of a young aristocrat.

In the summer of 1914, Duke wrote his first composition, *Soda Fountain Rag*, while working as a soda jerk. *Soda Fountain Rag* was written by ear, however, as Duke had not yet learned to read and write music.

Duke's high school music teacher gave him lessons in harmony. With additional tutoring from pianist and band leader Oliver "Doc" Perry, Duke learned to read and write music, develop a professional style, and improve his technique.

Jazz musicians were in demand in New York, and by 1923 Ellington had moved there and formed his own band, which he named, *The Washingtonians*. Musicians and critics were noticing that Ellington's music was special, and four years later Ellington was offered an engagement at Harlem's hottest jazz spot - The Cotton Club.

In 1943, Carnegie Hall hosted a concert series with the Duke Ellington and his big band, which had since become named, *The Duke Ellington Orchestra*. The concerts featured some of Ellington's extended compositions which were sometimes 45 minutes long. His compositions were so beautifully written that many people believed the orchestra was his instrument.

In 1969, President Nixon threw Duke Ellington a party at The White House to celebrate his 70th birthday. To honor his lifetime of achievement Nixon gave him the *Presidential Medal of Freedom*.

Duke Ellington died on May 24, 1974, having established himself as one of the greatest jazz artists and composers of all-time. He is best remembered for his *Take the A Train* and *It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)*.