

3 Washington's Duke Ellington

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Once upon a time a very pretty lady and a very handsome gentleman met, fell in love and got married, and God blessed them with this wonderful baby boy. They held him in the palm of their hand and they nurtured him until he was eight years old and then they put his feet on the ground. He ran out of the front door, out across the street and somebody said, "Hey, Edward, up this way." The boy was me, incidentally. He got to the next corner and somebody says, "Hey, Edward, up there and turn left, you can't miss it." And it's been going on ever since.¹

That's how Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington once described his start in life in his native city of Washington, DC. Both fanciful and characteristically oblique, his description also reveals his family pride and penchant for florid language, speaks to his sponge-like gift to absorb musical and life lessons from others, and suggests his self-confidence, sense of accomplishment, and exceptionalism. Many of these qualities result from his upbringing in a loving, close-knit family, his exposure to teachers who instilled racial pride, his learning from musicians who guided him, and his suffusion in the remarkable culture of black Washington.

Ellington became a jazz composer, orchestrator, bandleader, and pianist who led one of the greatest jazz bands, wrote more than 1,500 compositions, and became one of the twentieth century's greatest musicians. He used the term "beyond category" as the highest possible praise for others, and the phrase richly applies to Ellington, for he led one of the most singular musical careers in American history and left a brilliant legacy likely to endure for the ages.

Edward Ellington was born into one of the most difficult periods African Americans have experienced. Indeed, historians Rayford W. Logan and Constance Green have described the period from 1897 to 1901 as an extremely low point in the history of black Americans.² African Americans faced two basic facts of life during Ellington's boyhood: socially and politically, things were getting worse—most of all in the South but also in the North, and increasing numbers of them would make the fateful decision to leave the South and move north.



Photo 3.1 Duke Ellington

Duke Ellington, at age 26, already displays his characteristic elegance and self-assurance. Raised in a warm and supportive family in the first decades of the twentieth century, Ellington credited the good fortune of finding mentors who were role models and helped him develop musically. He also drew enduring life lessons from his experiences in Washington's schools, theaters, dance halls, pool parlors, cafes, and clubs.

The downward spiral of justice and opportunity for African Americans that gripped the nation also affected Ellington's hometown. In Washington, equal treatment under the law had largely disappeared by the time of his birth. Control of many institutions lay in the hands of whites. Residential segregation increased during Ellington's first twenty years. In 1913 President Woodrow Wilson segregated the civil service throughout the nation, which hit especially hard in Washington, the nation's capital. Many African Americans lost their jobs; others were moved to dead-end, out-of-sight positions; and with photographs now required with applications, black people knew they would not be hired. In 1913, Booker T. Washington, the foremost African American leader of the day, wrote, "I have recently spent several days in Washington, and I have never seen the colored people so discouraged and bitter as they were at that time."³

And yet, when compared with rural and urban locales in the Deep South, Washington was a better place for black people. They avoided the sharecropping system, the Ku Klux Klan, and the worst of southern racial violence. In 1900 Washington had the largest black population of any American city, with 31 percent of the population African American. Racial segregation forced blacks to live separately from whites, as they did in most other places in the rural and urban South. But with a strong middle class, Washington's African American community developed viable businesses, respected churches, active social organizations, and even an opera company.⁴ The community's "main street" was U Street,