Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington was one of the 20th century’s most important American figures. His influential career spanned five decades and was comprised of world tours, an inexhaustible songbook, film scores, as well as written essays and poetry. Due to his inventive use of the orchestra, and his refined public manner and extraordinary charisma, he is generally considered to have elevated the perception of jazz to an artistic level on par with that of classical music.

Ellington grew up in Washington, DC, the son of two piano players. At an early age, he not only exhibited musical talent, but the casual, easy grace, he soon came to be known for. His dapper dress gave him the bearing of a young nobleman and he was soon nicknamed, appropriately, “Duke.”

Starting out as a commercial sign painter, Ellington soon established himself among his peers in the burgeoning jazz scene. His compositions, arrangements and orchestrations heralded in the swing era. He was only one of four jazz musicians to ever grace the cover of “Time Magazine,” and he was posthumously awarded a Pulitzer Prize and his visage appeared on a United States Postal stamp.

By the time of the Blanton-Webster recordings for RCA Viktor, Duke had been honing his craft for over 20 years. By 1920, he was already earning $10,000 a year as a band leader. In 1923, Ellington made his first recording, on a cylinder, a stride piano piece entitled “Jig Walk.” By 1926 he was recording regularly with his band.

During the 1930s, Ellington and his bands had many hits: “Mood Indigo” (1930), “It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)” (1932), “Sophisticated Lady” (1933), “Solitude” (1934), and “In a Sentimental Mood” (1935). Throughout this period, Ellington and his band performed all around the world.
By 1940, jazz had smoothed out its rough edges and metamorphosed into swing, which provided the soundtrack for the World War II generation. Leaders of swing included Louis Armstrong, Fletcher Henderson, Benny Goodman, Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey, Glenn Miller, Count Basie, Artie Shaw and Woody Herman, et al. And Duke Ellington. According to Ellington, “Jazz is music, swing is business.” It’s in this light and spirit that Ellington and his then current band headed into the studio in 1940.

Many consider the Blanton-Webster sessions to be the apex of Ellington’s oeuvre. At the time of these recordings his relationship with Billy Strayhorn, as co-composer and co-arranger, was in full force. Duke’s son, Mercer, also came on board as composer of such tunes as “The Girl in My Dreams Tries to Look Like You,” “Jumpin’ Punkins,” “John Hardy's Wife,” and others. The sessions were recorded in New York, Chicago, and Hollywood over a two-year period, while the band was on tour.

The band is so named because of the presence of bassist Jimmy Blanton and tenor saxophonist Ben Webster, who had recently joined the Ellington band. For the first session, March 6, 1940, the band recorded five songs, two of which became instant classics—“Ko-Ko” and “Jack, The Bear,” a showcase for bassist Blanton. “Ko-Ko” features Cootie Williams using a mute on the trumpet to replicate the sound of a human voice, a favored affect employed in Ellington’s bands over the years.

This was followed, on March 15, a session which produced “Concerto for Cootie,” another classic. And, on May 4, Ellington recorded “Cottontail” featuring tenor saxophonist Ben Webster, a rearrangement of George Gershwin’s “I’ve Got Rhythm.”

The band consisted of Wallace Jones and Cootie Williams on trumpet; Rex Stewart on cornet; Joe Nanton, Lawrence Brown and Juan Tizol on trombone; Barney Bigard on clarinet and tenor saxophone; Johnny Hodges on alto saxophone, soprano sax and clarinet; Otto Hardwick on alto saxophone; Ben Webster on tenor saxophone; Harry Carney on alto saxophone, baritone saxophone and clarinet; Chauncey Haughton on clarinet and tenor sax; Fred Guy on guitar; Jimmie Blanton on bass; Sonny Greer on drums, with Strayhorn and Duke sharing the piano duties. Vocals were alternately provided by Ivie Anderson and Herb Jeffries. Mid-sessions trumpeter Cootie Williams left to join Benny Goodman’s band. Ellington replaced him with Ray Nance, who played trumpet, violin and sang. Sadly, Blanton had to leave the band after 44 recordings due to tuberculosis, and died soon after at the age of 23. He was replaced by Alvin “Junior” Raglin.

These recordings were constricted by the technical requirements of the 78 rpm (revolutions per minute) LP (long playing) recording; a 12-inch vinyl record which could only extend to a little over three minutes per side.

Between 1940 and 1942, the band recorded 66 songs, including the definitive version of “Take the A Train,” which was a huge hit and became the band’s theme song. Other hits included “Never No Lament (Don't Get Around Much Anymore),” “Sophisticated Lady,” “I Got It Bad (and That Ain’t Good)” and “The ‘C’ Jam Blues.” Ever prescient, Ellington’s recording of his composition “Cottontail” anticipated Charlie Parker-style, Bebop. In 1942, Ellington won the
“Downbeat” magazine “Swing Poll.”

Always the restless creative spirit, following the Blanton-Webster sessions, Ellington’s interests expanded beyond the three-minute commercial record. His compositions took on a longer form more akin to classical music than jazz. The first of such works was “Jump for Joy;” a musical based on themes of African-American identity, performed at the Mayan Theater in Los Angeles, which ran for 122 performances. This was followed by “Black, Brown and Beige” that told the story of African-Americans, slavery, and the church, which debuted at Carnegie Hall in 1943. He also appeared in several films and composed film scores, notably for “Anatomy of a Murder,” which won the 1959 Grammy for Best Sound Track Album.

“It is becoming increasingly difficult to decide where jazz starts or where it stops, where Tin Pan Alley begins and jazz ends, or even where the borderline lies between classical music and jazz. I feel there is no boundary line.”--Duke Ellington

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.