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study guide

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the play

Duke Ellington's Sophisticated Ladies is a musical revue set during America's Big Band Era (1920-1945). Every song tells a story, and together they paint a colorful picture of Duke Ellington's life and career as a musician, composer and band leader. Act I highlights the Duke's early days on tour, while Act II offers a glimpse into his private life and his often troubled relationships with women.



Duke Ellington's Sophisticated Ladies

Now Playing at the Lincoln Theatre

April 9 – May 30, 2010

Concept by Donald McKayle

Based on the music of Duke Ellington

Musical and dance arrangements by Lloyd Mayers

Vocal arrangements by Malcolm Dodds and Lloyd Mayers

Original music direction by Mercer Ellington

Directed by Charles Randolph-Wright

Choreographed by Maurice Hines

meet the "Duke"



"His music sounds like America."

— Wynton Marsalis

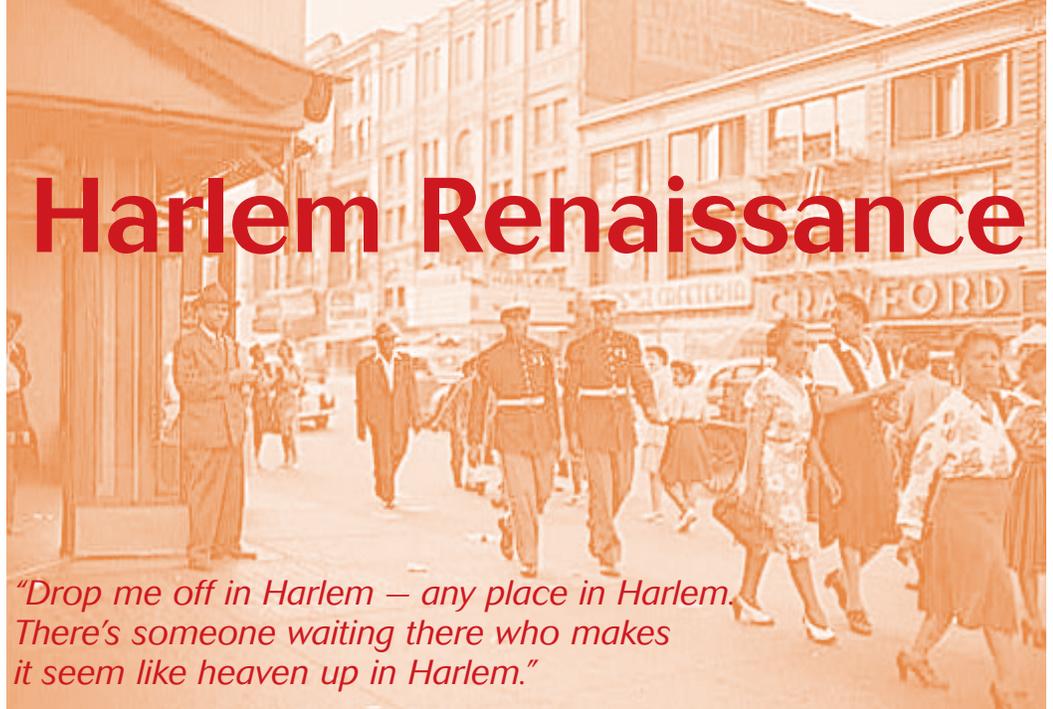
Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington was born in Washington, D.C. on April 29, 1899. He began playing the piano at age 7, and by 15, he was composing music. A job at a soda fountain inspired him to write his first song, "Soda Fountain Rag."

When he was 20, Ellington formed his first jazz band. After several years of playing gigs along D.C.'s U Street, he moved the band to New York City. Before long, the Duke Ellington Orchestra had become a fixture at Harlem's Cotton Club. Their music was played on radio stations nationwide, and they toured both the U.S. and Europe.

Ellington himself wrote more than 1,000 songs and greatly contributed to the popularity of jazz and swing music. He also composed for Broadway shows, musical revues, operas, ballets, movies and more.

Duke Ellington died on May 24, 1974 in New York City. That same year, the Duke Ellington School of the Arts opened in Washington, D.C.

Harlem Renaissance



"Drop me off in Harlem – any place in Harlem. There's someone waiting there who makes it seem like heaven up in Harlem."

From the mid-1920s until the early 1930s, the African-American community in Harlem enjoyed a surging period of cultural, creative and artistic growth. Spurred by an emerging African-American middle class and the freedom after slavery, the Harlem Renaissance began as a literary movement. Authors such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston expressed the spirit of African-Americans and shed light on the black experience.

Soon, the Renaissance spread to the visual and performing arts, including music. Many black writers and artists gained acceptance within the larger community. Although the Harlem Renaissance ended around the time of the Great Depression, its impact on the African American voice is still felt today. ●

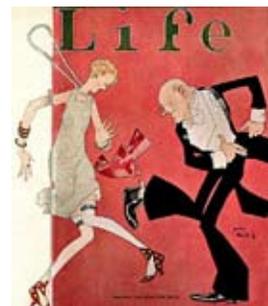


Activity! Familiarize yourself with a poem by Langston Hughes. Practice reading it with feeling. Perform it in front of your classmates.

Cotton Club

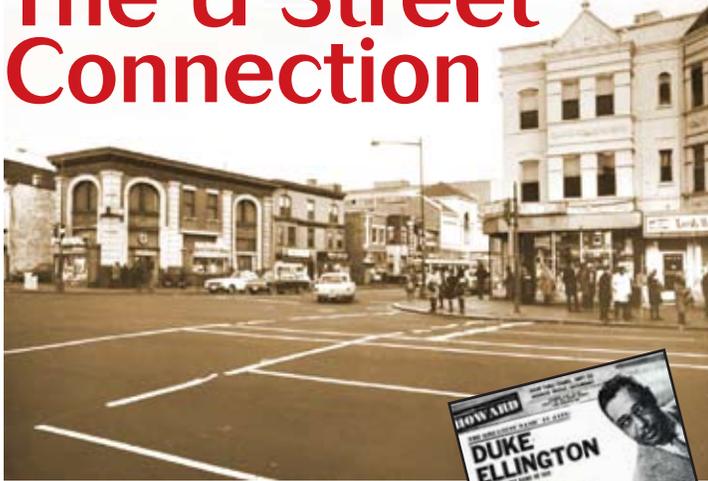
"Hit me with a hot note and watch me bounce."

Ellington and his band got their big break at the Cotton Club, a popular Harlem nightclub. Its shows featured jazz bands, singers and dancers, and the liquor flowed freely there even when it was illegal. Although its performers were mostly African Americans, the club did not allow blacks in the audience. Rather, the Cotton Club catered to New York's white elite. After much urging from Ellington, the club did eventually loosen its whites-only policy, but it never became fully integrated.



The Duke Ellington Orchestra was a staple at the club. From 1927 to 1931, it reigned supreme as the house band. Shortly after Duke's arrival, the CBS radio network started broadcasting the shows. Many famous musicians came to play. By the time it closed its doors in 1940, the Cotton Club had launched countless musical careers. ●

The U Street Connection



Duke Ellington got his start playing in the clubs and dancehalls of D.C.'s U Street, also called "Black Broadway." He came back regularly to perform even after his move to New York City. Other jazz entertainers, including Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Miles Davis and Shirley Horn, made regular visits to U Street, which includes the historic Lincoln Theatre, where you will watch *Sophisticated Ladies*! This area, located right down the road from Howard University, was the nation's largest urban African-American community until 1920 when Harlem surpassed it. ●

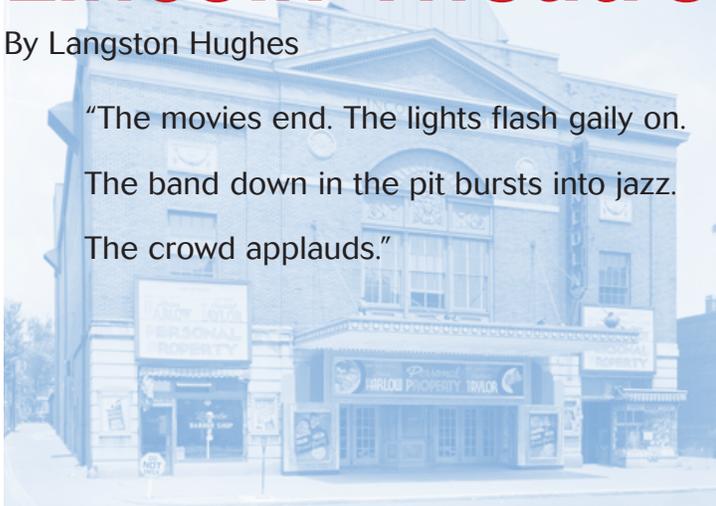


a! **Activity!** Research a famous jazz singer or musician with ties to D.C. Find a recording of this artist. Share your findings with the class.

Lincoln Theatre

By Langston Hughes

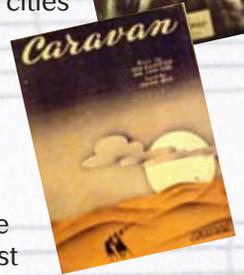
"The movies end. The lights flash gaily on.
The band down in the pit bursts into jazz.
The crowd applauds."



Jazz Music

*"Makes no difference if it's sweet or hot.
Just give that rhythm ev'rything you've got!"*

Jazz music was born in the clubs of New Orleans, Louisiana, in the early part of the 20th century. Its sound drew inspiration from African-American spirituals, blues and ragtime. It quickly spread to northern cities where its toe-tapping rhythms and intricate instrumental arrangements appealed to audiences both black and white.



Instrumental solos and improvisation are trademarks of jazz. Musicians take turns playing the melody while the rest of the ensemble backs them up.

Out of jazz came swing, a type of jazz featuring upbeat rhythms and danceable tempos. Swing music and dancing were very popular in the 1930s. Against the backdrop of the Great Depression, music provided a welcome escape. It played over the radio and in countless clubs. Many of the era's biggest radio hits came from Duke Ellington. You'll encounter several of them in *Sophisticated Ladies*, including "In a Sentimental Mood" and "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)." ●

a! **Activity!** Listen to a piece of jazz music. What instruments can you recognize? What mood does the piece evoke?

Musical Revue

*"I let a song go out of my heart —
It was the sweetest melody."*

Duke Ellington's *Sophisticated Ladies* is a type of theater called a musical revue. A musical revue comprises a series of songs and dances. Although generally lacking a plot, a revue may focus on a particular theme, historical period, or style of music. How are the songs of *Sophisticated Ladies* connected? ●

Dancing Brothers



The star and choreographer of *Sophisticated Ladies*, Maurice Hines, began his career tap dancing with his brother, the late Gregory Hines. The pair was a Broadway and national sensation, touring the country and appearing on *The Tonight Show* 35 times.

In October 2009, Arena Stage held open auditions and master classes in Washington, D.C. for *Sophisticated Ladies*. There, Hines discovered another, new pair of tap dancing brothers, John (age 17) and Leo (age 14) Manzanari. Both brothers – students at The Field School – were cast in the show.

Hines said, "I see a great deal of myself and my brother in them when they dance. They are just fabulous." ●



Activity! See video of both pairs of brothers dancing at www.arenastage.org. What similarities do you notice?



Additional Resources

Books/Plays

Daily Life in the United States, 1920-1940: How Americans Lived Through the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression by David E. Kyvig

Duke Ellington and His World: A Biography by A.H. Lawrence

The Harlem Reader: A Celebration of New York's Most Famous Neighborhood, from the Renaissance Years to the 21st Century by Herb Boyd

Understanding Jazz: Ways to Listen by Tom Piazza

On the Web

Jazz: A Film by Ken Burns: <http://www.pbs.org/jazz/index.htm>

PBS Kids: Jazz Greats: <http://www.pbs.org/jazz/index.htm>

On DVD

Duke Ellington: Live in '58, 2007

Jazz: A Film by Ken Burns, PBS DVD, 2000

In D.C.

Take a self-guided, walking tour of the Greater U Street Heritage Trail. Find information at www.culturaltourismdc.org.

Sub/Text

For links and research related to Arena Stage productions compiled by Arena Stage **dramaturgs**, please visit *Sub/Text: Your Virtual Dramaturg* at www.arenastage.org/season/09-10/subtext.

dramaturg – a theater specialist who does research for productions and represents the intentions of the playwright

Helpful Hints for Theater Audiences

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

Arrive at least 30 minutes early.

Visit the restroom before the show starts.

Before the show begins, turn off your cell phone, watch alarms, pagers, and other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, shut it off immediately.

Save food and drinks for the lobby. There is no eating or drinking inside the theater.

Walk to and from your seat - no running in the theater!

Do not talk, whisper, sing, or hum.

Do not use cell phones for calls, text messages, pictures or games.

Keep your feet on the floor, not on the seat in front of you.

Avoid getting up during a show because it distracts your neighbors and the performers. If you must leave, wait for a scene change, then exit quietly and quickly.

Performers appreciate enthusiastic applause rather than whistling or shouting.

Cameras and videotape are prohibited because they are distracting to the performers.

Enjoy the show!



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Visit www.arenastage.org for more information on Arena Stage productions and educational opportunities.