

## ★ COUNT BASIE

Born August 21, 1904, in Red Bank, NJ | Died April 26, 1984, in Hollywood, FL

“I’ve always played happy music,” William “Count” Basie once said. “That’s what I intend to keep on playing.” He kept that pledge for nearly 50 years. There were two great Basie bands. The first was loose, loping, and suffused with a buoyant optimism. “There is nothing like the pure swing this outfit has,” said Benny Goodman. The new band that emerged in the 1950s was tight and brassy and built around arrangements that highlighted the great dynamic range of Basie’s musicians. But both bands were rooted in the blues, and in the unmistakable piano style of their leader. A native of Red Bank, New Jersey, Basie found his musical home in Kansas City, Missouri, where, he remembered, “you could hear the blues from every window.” Never playing five notes when one would do, his playing embodied the jazz definition of “less is more.” “The band,” a Basie sideman once explained, “doesn’t feel as good until he’s up there.”

 NEA Jazz Master

## ★ DUKE ELLINGTON

Born April 29, 1899, in Washington, D.C. | Died May 24, 1974, in New York City

“If jazz means anything,” Edward Kennedy Ellington once said, “it is freedom of expression.” No one in the history of jazz expressed himself more freely—or with more variety or swing or sophistication. Ellington was a masterful pianist, but his real instrument was the orchestra he led for half a century. More consistently than anyone else in jazz history, Ellington showed how great music could simultaneously be shaped by the composer and created on the spot by the players. Each of his almost 2,000 compositions—from dance tunes to orchestral suites—was crafted to bring out the best in the extraordinary individuals who traveled the road with him. Ellington hated what he called “categories,” and he managed to encompass in his music not only what he once called “Negro feeling put to rhythm and tune” but also the rhythm and feeling of his whole country and much of the wider world, as well.

## ★ ELLA FITZGERALD

Born April 25, 1917, in Newport News, VA | Died June 15, 1996, in Beverly Hills, CA

“If the musicians like what I do,” Ella Fitzgerald said, “then I feel I’m really singing.” She was really singing all her life. Discovered at 16 after winning an amateur night contest at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, she first won fame in the late 1930s, performing novelty tunes and romantic ballads with the hard-swinging Chick Webb Orchestra. During the 1940s, she established herself as a

master of scat singing, incorporating the fresh harmonies and rhythms of bebop into astonishing wordless acrobatic performances. Then, in the 1950s, she recorded definitive versions of standards by America’s greatest songwriters, from Cole Porter to Duke Ellington. Through it all, she never lost the girlish joy evident on her earliest records, never seemed to sing out of tune, and never failed to swing. Fellow musicians were awed. For her, “music is everything,” her sometime accompanist Jimmy Rowles said. “When she walks down the street, she trails notes.”

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## ★ BENNY GOODMAN

Born May 30, 1909, in Chicago, IL | Died June 13, 1986, in New York City

“Nothing less than perfection would do,” Benny Goodman said of his long band-leading career. His exacting standards paid off. A virtuoso on the clarinet and a taskmaster on the bandstand, he was also a student of music who never let a day go by without practicing. “I’ve always wanted to know what made music,” he said. “How you do it and why it sounds good.” In 1934, Goodman established an orchestra that introduced big band jazz to the larger American public, helped to usher in the Swing Era, and succeeded in establishing jazz in America’s concert halls. “Benny built himself a band playing musician’s music,” explained his drummer, Gene Krupa. And at a time when even the stage was racially segregated, his ongoing desire to perfect that music led him to bring to it great African-American musicians. “If a guy’s got it, let him give it,” Goodman said. “I’m selling music, not prejudice.”

## ★ BILLIE HOLIDAY

Born April 7, 1915, in Philadelphia, PA | Died July 17, 1959, in New York City

“Me and my old voice,” Billie Holiday once told an accompanist, “[i]t just goes up a little and comes down a little. It’s not legit. ...” It may not have been legit, but it was unforgettable and helped make her the most influential female singer in jazz history. Her friend and frequent collaborator Lester Young gave her the nickname “Lady Day,” and she shared with him a great jazz instrumentalist’s ability to shift the rhythm, alter the melody, and uncover new meanings in any song she chose to perform. The personal turmoil that shortened her life has sometimes been allowed to obscure the power of her singing. Her greatness lies not in the pain she endured but in her ability to transcend her suffering and transform it into art. “It’s not nice to think that each time she goes into the lights she’s crying her heart out,” the singer Bobby Short said after her death. “It’s nice to remember that she had a good time when she was singing.”