

Eddie Durham

Narrator: Composer, arranger, trombonist, pioneer of the electric guitar, architect of big band swing, Eddie Durham was one of the most influential and important players in the world of jazz music.

N: A Texan, Durham brought a unique sound and style to his work, one that had an enormous impact in the jazz world and beyond.

Vince Giordano: He had sort of a flavor to his jazz arrangement that I think the fellows in New York did not have.

Loren Schoenberg: And like Texas, you know it's this huge place, in a sense the music represented that and Eddie was the ultimate exponent of that in the compositional sense.

Dan Morgenstern: Aside from being a fine trombonist and a brilliant arranger, he's also one of the ancestors of the electric guitar.

DM: Playing amplified before electric, acoustically amplified and then being really the very first jazz player to record on an electric guitar and it is very influential.

LS: And Eddie Durham is definitely one of the most individualistic, unique human beings I ever met.

LS: When they handed out brains he was in a different line than most people.

N: Although the exact year is unknown, Eddie Durham was born in the dawn of the twentieth century in San Marcos, Texas.

N: Eddie's father, a fiddler, encouraged his children to learn instruments, and young Eddie took to the trombone and the banjo.

N: Still a child when his older brother Joe formed the Durham Brothers Orchestra, Eddie began his professional career playing local dances and celebrations.

N: He soon got a job playing with a traveling theater group called Doug Morgan's Dramatic Show.

N: This was followed by a stint with Oklahoma's 101 Ranch Show, a traveling Wild West circus.

N: The 101 Ranch Show featured horses, buffalo, and longhorn cattle, wagons and stage coaches with hundreds of performers.

N: Eddie was part of a fifteen piece African-American band, as well as a nine piece minstrel show.

DM: Eddie worked with the traveling circus with the Wild West show.

DM: That's where he first began to actually arrange.

DM: There was one band that had a lot of horns in it and he started writing stuff for trombones, which is wonderful.

DM: This is stuff that was happening in an everyday basis and people like Eddie, this genius, to work with what was there and that's what he did.

N: After hours, white musicians would often join Durham and other black musicians, and Eddie would create arrangements for them to try.

N: Traveling with the 101 Ranch Show took the musician across the country to Chicago, where he heard the jazz legend Louis Armstrong was playing.

N: Although he didn't have enough money to pay admission, he recalls standing on a box outside of the club window, transfixed by the jazz music that was pouring out.

(Music playing)

N: Durham began playing with a number of western territory bands, African-American jazz bands that traveled throughout the mid and southwest.

DM: Touring bands all over the place, every band tried to have something of its own you know, they wanted to have something special and usually there was maybe one or two guys in the band that would be the sparkplugs and Eddie was one of those.

(Music playing)

N: Durham was that sparkplug briefly for many territory bands including Gene Coy's Black Aces, Chauncey Don's Rinky Dinks, George E. Lee, T. Holder, Jesse Stone, and Andy Kirk's Clouds of Joy.

N: It was in 1928, however, when he joined the band that would showcase his skills and catapult him into the center of the burgeoning jazz scene.

DM: But then there was the Blue Devils and the Blue Devils have become sort of symbolic of that whole western, mid-western swing tradition.

DM: Count Basie was in that band, the wonderful trumpeter and singer Hot Lips Page, who was very friendly with Eddie.

N: When Walter Page's Blue Devils went to Kansas City, they encountered Benny Moten's band.

DM: Benny Moten had things sewed up in Kansas City and the Blue Devils went on for quite awhile after Moten kind of raided them and that's how he got Eddie and a little later on he got Hot Lips Page, of course he got, eventually he got Walter Page.

LS: Benny Moten had the money to hire away one by one all the musicians from Walter Page's Blue Devils, and they began to create this hybrid in the Benny Moten band of the best of the Blue Devils and the best of Benny Moten.

N: Eddie Durham's arrangements became an important part of Benny Moten's sound.

DM: Well, that's where we first really get to hear what Eddie could do and he really changes the band.

DM: Before Eddie comes in, it's a good band but it's, compared to what happens once Eddie takes over, it's kind of primitive.

LS: When he joined the band in 1929, you can hear a very clear progression of increasing sophistication of orchestration, the base lines, the base notes, a broader compositional way of thinking about music, it's just really, really fascinating.

(Music playing)

N: Eddie first recorded with Benny Moten in 1929.

N: With his arrangements and with his increasing focus on playing an amplified guitar, during the next three years he helped create a unique style of jazz music.

DM: Moten bought them because he had this Victor contract and would get to follow the band, you know they would record quite frequently and would get to follow the development and we can see how Eddie Durham's influence and young Count Basie because they would ride together and Basie wasn't anybody who had training as an arranger either but he had the gift, he had that instinct.

DM: So they started doing things together and you can see how that develops and then after awhile you come to that marvelous 1932 session that includes Moten's swing, which is sort of the, might call it a theme song of what really becomes 1930s big band music.

N: In December of 1932, Benny Moten recorded what would become some of the most groundbreaking and influential records in the early development of jazz music.

DM: And you get a whole new feeling of rhythm there, you get that really the beginning of four-four flat foot swing that swings like nothing else, I mean those records they swing, even today you can listen to them and marvel at the rhythmic impact of that music and Eddie Durham has a lot to do with that happening.

VG: And you take the arrangements that he did in 1932, those last Moten recording arrangements, they're like a decade ahead of their time, I mean they're just totally amazing.

VG: I listen to them and I said, "Where did this arranger and man come from?" I mean it was like they took a time machine and went a decade up there and listened to the later bands and then came back.

N: The session in Camden, New Jersey included a song written and arranged by Eddie Durham and Count Basie called "Moten Swing," which many agree heralds the coming swing era.

(Music playing)

VG: And the other remarkable thing about that session is that if you check the discographies that's one take on everything.

VG: They were allocated one take, no second take, not third take, and each one of them is genius.

(Music playing)

N: Durham left the Benny Moten Band shortly before the band leader died in 1935, heading to New York where his skills as an arranger were in demand.

N: He worked briefly with such notable acts as Cab Calloway and Willie Bryant, bringing his unique talent and style to a new arena.

DM: Eddie brings some of that, brings some of that western thing, which later became identified with Kansas City becomes the name for that, refer to it as Kansas City, but that is something that Eddie brought which hadn't been there before.

LS: And then he becomes a major arranger for the Jimmy Lunceford Orchestra 1935, 1936, 1937, and all of the sudden there's almost like an exponential growth in his compositional output because the Jimmy Lunceford band was like an orchestra.

LS: Five brass and four reeds and a very strict band leader who's also very cheap and didn't want to pay the arrangers much.

LS: Horrible the way Jimmy Lunceford took advantage of those arrangers, but gave them a great opportunity.

DM: The Jimmy Lunceford Band is neglected today, it is not as well known as it should be.

DM: It is one of the primary bands of the swing era, musically and commercially.

DM: It was a very successful band, working constantly.

DM: The guys are complaining that the only time they got off was for Christmas, between Christmas and New Years they might have a few days off, but they were constantly working.

DM: It was known as the Harlem Express.

DM: It was a great show band as well as a musically fascinating band.

LS: What you see in the Lunceford short where they're doing that thing where they all stand up, that was undoubtedly choreographed by Eddie Durham because that's all his trademarked stuff.

LS: He had all kinds of rules with the trombone with the slide that he used to do.

N: It was with the Lunceford Band that Eddie Durham made musical history.

N: On three songs, Durham played an electrically amplified guitar.

N: These were the first recordings to utilize this groundbreaking innovation.

(Music playing)

LS: Obviously Lunceford gave him a lot of leeway.

LS: In those days bands got famous by formulas, in other words you would make all these records and you would eventually have a hit and once you hit then the band, like Glen Miller would be a great example for the most part, they wanted to replicate that sound.

LS: Lunceford had a sound that Cy Oliver had created, but Eddie's sound was broader and more experimental, and somehow it managed to coexist with the commercial framework of the band and Eddie's more imaginative stuff.

N: When Count Basie, who had begun to lead his own band, offered him more than double what Lunceford was paying, Eddie agreed to join his old band mate for a year.

LS: He goes back to the Basie band for a one year contract because the Basie Band has come to New York, they don't have a lot of great arrangements and they don't have a lot of organization, Basie's not that kind of band leader.

LS: So, him and Eddie had had a very close association in the Benny Moten Band and they reunited in 1937.

LS: He stayed with the band for one year, from the summer of '37 to the summer of '38, and that's where all these classic things were written, "Jumpy at the Woodside" and all those famous sides, and it's really Eddie doing for the Basie Band what he had really done for the Benny Moten Band before.

N: Durham's time with Basie yielded some of the most classic and revered recordings of the big band era, including "Swinging the Blues," "Jumping at the Woodside," and "Topsy."

N: And Eddie's revolutionary guitar work soon began to influence others.

(Music playing)

N: Charlie Christian is one of those influenced by Durham's innovations.

N: While playing a month-long residency in Oklahoma with Count Basie, the young guitarist sought him out to ask him how he made his guitar sound like a saxophone.

N: Durham agreed to show the young Texan some techniques, and with their guitars, they met several times over the next few weeks in a local pool hall.

N: Christian went on to revolutionize the use of electric guitar in jazz music with the Benny Goodman Band.

N: Eddie Durham, although he would downplay his role, certainly had some influence.

N: Eddie Durham seemed poised to become a star in his own right, never more so than in 1938.

DM: Now Eddie's breakthrough in jazz terms is when he does have a session that is terrifically important, which was made for Commodore which was an independent jazz label, the first one, the first jazz label ever.

DM: This was a small group from the Basie Band with Buck Clayton and Lester Young playing tenor and clarinet, and he was a beautiful clarinet player, gorgeous clarinet player, Eddie who was the leader really and the arranger on his electric guitar, Walter Page on bass, and Joe Jones on drums, no piano, Freddie Green of rhythm guitar, unamplified.

DM: And they made a series of records that came out under the name of The Kansas City Six.

DM: That is the breakthrough for the electric guitar in jazz because it's before Charlie Christian, doesn't have as much impact yet but it has considerable effect and it establishes that instrument which is really a different instrument from acoustic guitar.

DM: It's a different sound and it's a different, more of a single note concept and it's something new.

(Music playing)

N: After leaving Count Basie in 1938, Eddie played sessions with Teddy Wilson and with Billie Holiday.

N: He was one of the most sought-after arrangers in jazz music.

LS: One thing that Eddie became famous for with Glen Miller and Artie Shaw, after he left the Basie Band, was he was kind of like an idea guy, so Artie wanted somebody to come in and spruce up the band, give them some ideas, same thing with Jan Savitt's band, and Eddie would come in and like magically see what you had and, you know, make lemonade out of lemons or something like that.

LS: A lot of things that the Glenn Miller Band does, when you see them in some of those films with the derbies and the hats, that's all Eddie Durham's stuff when you look at it, knowing him he taught them what to do.

LS: He was an idea man.

(Music playing)

N: Durham had a major part in arranging one of the most famous and popular of the big band swing hits, Glenn Miller's "In the Mood."

N: He also wrote a song destined to become an American jazz and R&B standard.

(Music playing)

N: "I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire" has been recorded by dozens of artists and was a top ten hit for the Ink Spots.

(Music playing)

N: During World War II, Eddie Durham took over leadership of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm and later went on to form his own female ensemble, Eddie Durham's All Girl Orchestra.

(Music playing)

N: Eddie Durham continued to make music for the rest of his life as a freelance arranger, composer, and side man.

N: His talent, kindness, and influence continues to touch generation after generation.

LS: There will never be another Eddie Durham and I'm just one, I guess, of so many people who are blessed to have him in their lives, and I'll always be, to my last day, espousing Eddie Durhamisms.

LS: He was a great guy, what a wonderful man, what a wonderful spirit he had.

VG: And I wanted to capture that excitement and that vitality and that sort of boiling water effect that I feel in my time and that's why this band exists.

(Music playing)