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Creative Resilience & Aging: Duke Ellington's Artistry in his Final Decades

Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington (1899-1974) had an unparalleled 50-year career as a pianist, composer/arranger, and bandleader. After several potentially career-ending setbacks, he reinvigorated his artistic and commercial success in his mid-50s, and the last two decades of his life were among his most creative. This presentation will use audio and video clips to illustrate Duke’s career biography, and will consider the implications of generalizable points about creative resiliency and aging for our clinical work with older adults.

Over his 50-year career, Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington (1899-1974) remained a true ‘triple threat’: an underrated yet brilliant pianist; a composer/arranger of a large body of works remarkable for their diversity, influence, and uniquely personal language and vision; and a peerless bandleader.

Yet by his mid-50s, after several setbacks, Duke was becoming ignored by both jazz fans and the general public. Rather than retire and live off his royalties, he managed to reinvigorate his artistic and commercial success, achieving new career highs in live concerts, studio recordings, and collaborations with other musicians both within and outside of his usual musical circle. His work from 1956-1967 was among the strongest of his career, and he continued to produce inspiring compositions and performances up until his death.

How did Duke face potential stagnation in mid- to later-life, and continue to find – indeed, to *make* – meaning in his final years? These questions are crucial to our work with older patients facing mental illnesses, physical challenges, and a variety of developmental tasks both pleasant and stressful. This presentation will begin with an overview of Duke’s professional and personal life, illustrated with audio and video clips. It will then consider the psychological, social, and other factors contributing to Duke’s continued creativity in the context of aging, while not turning a blind eye to those aspects that were not ideally adaptive. Attendees at this session will achieve a deeper understanding of Duke’s life and work, equipping them to more fully explore Duke’s recorded legacy (itself a lifelong task!) and to consider the implications of generalizable points about creative resiliency and aging for our clinical work with older adults. The presentation aspires to be, in the words that Duke himself considered the highest form of praise, “beyond category.”