

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Mercedes Ellington

PERSON

Ellington, Mercedes

Alternative Names: Mercedes Ellington;

Life Dates: February 9, 1939-

Place of Birth: New York, New York, USA

Residence: New York, NY

Work: NY

Occupations: Dancer; Choreographer

Biographical Note

Dancer and choreographer Mercedes Ellington was born on February 9, 1939 in New York City to Ruth Silas Batts and trumpet player and conductor Mercer Ellington, son of renowned composer and bandleader Duke Ellington. Ellington was raised by her maternal grandparents Louise Petgrave Silas and Alfred Silas, who enrolled her in dance and ballet classes at an early age. Ellington received a scholarship to attend The

Metropolitan Opera School of Ballet, but decided to enroll at The Julliard School at her father's insistence. She graduated with her B.A. degree in classical and modern dance in 1960.

Ellington's first professional role was in a production of *West Side Story* in Australia. She also appeared in productions of *On the Town* and *Pal Joey* at the New York City Center. In 1963, Ellington became the first African American member of the June Taylor Dancers, the featured performers on *The Jackie Gleason Show*. She danced with the June Taylor Dancers for seven years, until she moved on to perform in Broadway shows like *No, No Nannette*, *The Night That Made America Famous*, *The Grand Tour*, and *Happy New Year*. In 1981, Ellington starred in *Sophisticated Ladies* alongside her father, who conducted the Duke Ellington Orchestra. In 1983, she co-founded *BalleTap*, later named *DancEllington*, with Maurice Hines. Ellington produced award-winning choreography in musicals such as *Blues in the Night*, *Juba*, *Satchmo* and *Tuxedo Junction*. The organization dissolved in 1992, and Ellington went on to direct the *Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS Tribute to the Spirit of Harlem* in 2001. In 2004, Ellington founded *Duke Ellington Center for the Arts*, a non-profit organization dedicated to scholarship, education, and performance connected to the legacy of Duke Ellington.

Ellington's choreography and commitment to her grandfather's legacy earned her numerous honors and awards, including the Actor's Equity Association's Paul Robeson Award and the FloBert Lifetime Achievement Award. She also served as a judge for the *Capezio Dance Awards*, and as a member of the *Screen Actors' Guild* and the *American Tap Dance Foundation*. In addition, Ellington served on the local and national boards of the *American Federation of Television and Radio Artists*. In 2016, she also co-authored a book entitled *Duke Ellington: An American Composer and Icon* with Stephen Brower.

Mercedes Ellington was interviewed by The History Makers on August 12, 2016.

Related Entries

The Juilliard School [STUDENTOF]

[from ? to ?]

St. Walburga's Academy [STUDENTOF]

[from ? to ?]

Our Lady of Lourdes School [STUDENTOF]

[from ? to ?]

'West Side Story' [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from ? to ?]

Cast

'On The Town' [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from ? to ?]

Cast

'Pal Joey' [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from ? to ?]

Cast

The Jackie Gleason Show [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from 1963 to 1969]

Dancer

'No No Nanette' [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from 1971 to 1973]

Cast

'Sophisticated Ladies' [EMPLOYEEOF]

[from 1981 to ?]

Cast

DancEllington [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1982 to 1993]

Founder

BalleTap USA [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1984 to ?]

Founder

'Blues in the Night' [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1984 to ?]

Choreographer

'Juba' [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1985 to ?]

Choreographer

'Tuxedo Junction' [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1990 to ?]

Choreographer

American Federation of Television and Radio Artists
[MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Member

Actors Fund of America [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Member

American Tap Dance Foundation [MEMBEROF]
[from ? to ?]

Board

Duke Ellington Center for the Arts [MEMBEROF]
[from 2004 to ?]

Founder

