Henderson, (James) Fletcher


Like Duke Ellington, he was untypical of his black contemporaries in being conventionally educated, having majored in chemistry and mathematics at Atlanta University, Ga. On arrival in New York City in 1920 for graduate work, he drifted into professional music and became a bandleader in 1923, continuing intermittently until two years before his death. For much of that period a place in his band was an accolade for black musicians, from Louis Armstrong and Coleman Hawkins to Roy Eldridge and Leon (Chu) Berry.

Henderson is important as the first orchestrator to use written arrangements without puncturing the spirit of improvisation. By using sections of the orchestra contrapuntally and as an amplified backdrop to the soloist, he paved the way for the regimented jazz and dance orchestras of the 1930s. He played an important part in the success of one of the most famous of them, the Benny Goodman orchestra, by becoming Goodman's staff orchestrator.