



## Strayhorn, William Thomas (1915-1967)

by Teresa Theophano

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Despite his indisputable musical genius, prolific composer, arranger, and performing musician Billy Strayhorn spent much of his life in near-anonymity. Best known for his collaborations with Duke Ellington over a span of nearly thirty years, Strayhorn was the writer and arranger behind the famous Ellington Orchestra theme "Take the A Train," as well as the creator of such classics as "Lush Life," "Satin Doll," and "Johnny Come Lately."

Yet the small, bespectacled, openly gay Strayhorn--by all accounts a quiet and extraordinarily refined man--lived behind the scenes of jazz glory for most of his life. Only one solo album of his own was released during his lifetime, and until the mid-1990s, not a single biography had been written about him.

The first of five surviving children born to a soft-spoken, ladylike mother and a brutish father in Dayton, Ohio, Strayhorn was raised in the Homewood area of Pittsburgh. The town never much suited Billy, a classical music enthusiast whose sophistication from an early age far exceeded that of his surroundings.

Because Strayhorn's family did not have sufficient money to buy Billy a piano, he worked and saved up during high school to buy himself one.

Although his grandmother, who played the piano for the choir of her church, encouraged his musical interests, Strayhorn never received much formal musical instruction. Racism was certainly a factor contributing to Strayhorn's lack of musical training: he was discouraged from applying to colleges because he was black--and black concert pianists were practically nonexistent at the time.

When Strayhorn heard a jazz record for the first time, his musical focus began to shift. While his work would always have classical influences, he had discovered a world of innovative musicians who were serious, successful--and black.

He began to compose in the jazz idiom, including an early composition that would be his signature song, "Lush Life." In 1937 Strayhorn formed his first jazz group, eventually called The Mad Hatters. Although they achieved moderate local success, Strayhorn continued to earn most of his money working at a drugstore.

All of that changed when, in 1938, Strayhorn was introduced to Duke Ellington, already a successful orchestra leader. Ellington, instantly and thoroughly impressed with Strayhorn's obvious talent, quickly took him on as a protégé, even moving Strayhorn into his Harlem home in 1939 to live with other members of the Ellington family.

By the end of his first year in New York, however, Strayhorn had arranged a new living situation: he moved in with a musician named Aaron Bridgers. Strayhorn and Bridgers were anything but secretive about their relationship, and Strayhorn's homosexuality became well known in the black musical community.

As an out gay black man in the first half of the twentieth century, Strayhorn was unusual indeed--especially



Billy Strayhorn in 1958.  
Photograph by Carl van Vechten, August 14, 1958.  
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Division.

considering that no other jazzmen were openly gay. But unconcerned about appearances, Strayhorn refused to don a façade of heterosexuality.

Most of his time was spent out of the spotlight, so his sexuality simply was not an issue in his career or in his relationship with Ellington. It may, however, explain why he seemed to avoid the spotlight and let Ellington receive credit for their collaborative work.

In 1942, Strayhorn began an intimate friendship with singer Lena Horne, who memorably described him in her 1965 autobiography as her "alter ego": "A pixie, brown color, horn-rimmed glasses, beautifully cut suit, beautifully modulated speaking voice, appeared as if by magic and said 'I'm Billy Strayhorn--Swee Pea.' We looked at each other, clasped hands . . . and I loved him."

During her career, Horne recorded many of his compositions, including "Maybe," "Something to Live For," "A Flower Is a Lovesome Thing," and "Love Like This Can't Last."

Although Strayhorn did a great deal of the composing for Ellington's bands, he was credited infrequently, and remained fairly invisible to the public.

Upon learning that the collaborators' published works were all copyrighted by Ellington, who received the royalties, Strayhorn became understandably dismayed--though it was really the lack of independence in his own career, rather than the money, that bothered him.

It was not until mid-1957, when an effort entitled "Drum Is a Woman" was broadcast for the first time, that Ellington and Strayhorn were credited equally.

While Strayhorn refused to pity himself or complain to friends and family, it was clear that he was often unhappy with his failure to receive credit for work that had helped make Ellington rich and famous.

His drinking, friends noticed, escalated considerably as the years passed. Consequently his health began to deteriorate, which affected his work and activities. Although Strayhorn, a civil rights advocate, attended the 1963 March on Washington with Martin Luther King, Jr., an acquaintance of his, he did not feel well enough actually to march.

The reason for his physical decline soon became clear. In early 1964, he was diagnosed with esophageal cancer--a type of cancer usually stemming from use of alcohol and tobacco, both of which Strayhorn indulged in heavily.

The following year, Strayhorn played the only concert showcasing him without Ellington's presence, name, or influence. The concert at the New School in New York City completely sold out. It was, alas, one of Strayhorn's final accomplishments.

After a tracheostomy and the subsequent removal of his esophagus, Strayhorn finally succumbed to the disease. He died prematurely on May 31, 1967, at the age of 53, leaving behind a legacy deserving of far more recognition than it garnered for decades to come.

Happily, he is now recognized as a major figure in American music, one who immensely enriched jazz music by investing it with complexly orchestrated form.

## **Bibliography**

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## **About the Author**

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