

Billy Strayhorn: A Short, Gay and Lush Life of Beauty

by Con Chapman

In December of 1938 a short, bespectacled young man of twenty-three persuaded a friend of a friend to arrange for him to meet Duke Ellington, the jazz pianist and composer whose orchestra was in Pittsburgh for a performance. After hearing the young man—Billy Strayhorn—play a few songs on the piano, Ellington offered him an undefined job on indefinite terms. “I don’t have any position for you,” Ellington said. “You’ll do whatever you feel like doing.”

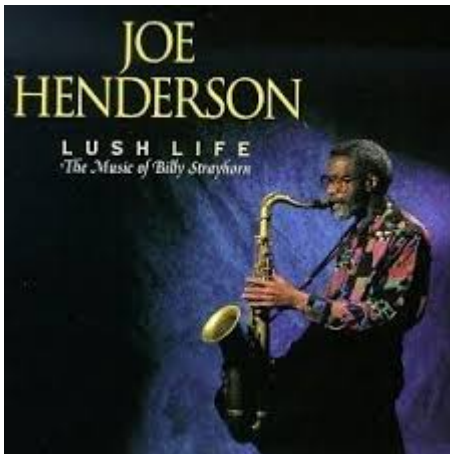


Billy Strayhorn and Duke Ellington

With no more assurance than that—no written contract or verbal agreement as to pay—Strayhorn moved to New York and joined Ellington as arranger, composer, sometimes pinch-hit pianist and songwriting partner. Their relationship would continue for nearly three decades, an extended improvisation much like those they collaborated on.



Strayhorn was a prodigy who worked odd jobs while still in grade school to buy a used upright piano. His first love was classical music, but a combination of circumstances—there were few obvious ports of entry to European art music for a young black man in the thirties—and exposure to jazz pianists such as Teddy Wilson and Art Tatum persuaded him to put his skills to work in that vernacular idiom.



Joe Henderson: Lush Life, the Music of Billy Strayhorn

As far as I can tell, there are no memorials to Strayhorn in Pittsburgh, where he grew up, or in Dayton, Ohio, where he was born, but the case can be made that he is in a class of his own

among American composers; his work is classical, and yet people listen to it with enjoyment, not to be improved, instructed or edified as is so often the case with modern classical music. You may know that Strayhorn wrote Ellington's theme song—*Take the A Train*—but you have probably heard other songs, such as *A Flower is a Lovesome Thing, After All* and *Lotus Blossom*—without knowing they were his.

At his first meeting with Ellington Strayhorn probably played a tune that he then called “Life is Lonely,” but which we now know as “Lush Life.” The song has been interpreted by hundreds of jazz singers (and butchered by more than a few), and it provides some perspective on the man whose characteristic mode was the lament; sad, poignant melodies over rich chord changes interpreted best by those masters of blue moods, Johnny Hodges on alto and Ben Webster on tenor. Strayhorn began composing Lush Life when he was eighteen and finished it when he was twenty-one, and yet it tells a fatalistic, bitter tale of alcohol and fading youth that would seem more appropriate coming from a man four decades older.

Strayhorn was gay, and perhaps he saw that aspect of his being closing off many doors to him, just as his skin color effectively barred him from prizes and fellowships that might have fallen his way if he'd been a white classical composer. Throughout his life he drank too much for his own good, and he may have already realized

at a relatively young age that alcohol would be a satisfying but embittering companion as he grew older. He describes the life of a lush with music that is also lush, in the other sense of the word; rich. What he may have seen as he looked ahead was a life that was limited by his race, sexual preference and the bottle, but full of possibilities nonetheless. As Dorothy Parker put it with resignation, you might as well live.



Strayhorn's lifelong smoking and drinking may have contributed to the esophageal cancer from which he died on May 31, 1967, in the company of his partner, Bill Grove. As he lay dying in the hospital he submitted his final composition—*Blood Count*—to Ellington, which can be found on Ellington's memorial album for Strayhorn *...And His Mother Called Him Bill*. The song is, like Strayhorn's life, a brief thing that reaches its own melancholy resolution, but leaves you wanting more.

