

# BILLY STRAYHORN

b. November 29, 1915

d. May 31, 1967

## COMPOSER

**Although relatively unknown during his career, his complex arrangements and classical elements have inspired generations of jazz musicians.**

*“If you want something hard enough, it just gets done.”*

Billy Strayhorn was a celebrated composer and arranger. Best known for his collaborations with bandleader Duke Ellington, Strayhorn had an important influence on the American jazz movement.

The youngest of five children, Strayhorn spent his early years in Hillsborough, North Carolina. His grandmother, who was active in her church choir, encouraged Strayhorn’s musical interests. In 1924, his mother moved the family to Pittsburgh. At the Pittsburgh Musical Institute, he took piano lessons and studied classical music. Strayhorn’s musical focus shifted when he was introduced to jazz, a genre dominated by innovative and successful black musicians.

In 1937, he began to compose in the jazz style and formed his first jazz group. The following year, he was introduced to Duke Ellington, who took him on as a protégé. Strayhorn worked with Ellington for the next 25 years as a composer, arranger and pianist. He composed the band’s best-known theme song, “Take the A Train.” Although Strayhorn and Ellington collaborated on numerous pieces, Strayhorn remained fairly anonymous and was rarely credited or compensated for his work.

In 1946, he received the Esquire Award for Outstanding Arranger. Ellington and Strayhorn were equally credited on “Drum is a Woman” (1957). In 1965, Strayhorn played his only solo concert to a sold-out theater at the New School in New York City. Some of his best-known compositions are “Chelsea Bridge,” “Day Dream,” “Johnny Come Lately,” “Clementine” and the Ellington Band’s “Lotus Blossom.”

Strayhorn was openly gay. There is speculation that his sexual orientation motivated his decision to avoid the spotlight. He was actively involved in the African-American civil rights movement. For the musical revue “My People” he arranged “King Fought the Battle of ‘Bam,”” dedicated to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

At 53, Strayhorn died from cancer. Although relatively unknown during his career, his complex arrangements and classical elements have inspired generations of jazz musicians.



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