

BILLY STRAYHORN

Gay African American Composer, Arranger and Pianist
(1915-1967)



Billy Strayhorn studied music at the Pittsburgh Music Institute. While still a teenager he wrote both the music and the poignant lyrics for his classic “Lush-Life,” one of the most musically sophisticated Jazz standards ever recorded. Strayhorn, a gifted arranger, composer and pianist met Duke Ellington in December 1938 and served as his collaborator for the next twenty-eight years. Strayhorn’s arrangements had a tremendous impact on the Ellington band, bringing a linear, classically schooled sound to Ellington’s works. Though Duke Ellington received credit for much of Strayhorn’s work – understandable given his established fame and skill – it was Strayhorn who composed the band’s best known theme, “Take the ‘A’ Train”, as well as a number of other pieces including “Lotus Blossom”, “Chelsea Bridge”, “Rain Check”, “Day Dream” and “Something to Live For.” Collectively, Strayhorn’s work is among the most renowned and distinctive of the 1940s and 50s Big Band Era. He participated in the Civil Rights Movement and was a confidant of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Strayhorn was openly gay during an extremely homophobic time. Contemporary critics agree that his unapologetic openness about being gay contributed to him being perhaps purposefully overlooked as an important musician in his own right for so many years. He succumbed to esophageal cancer on May 31, 1967, with his partner, Bill Grove, at his side. He remained in Ellington’s shadow until his acclaimed biography, *Lush Life: A Biography of Billy Strayhorn*, was published in 1996, followed by the award-winning documentary it inspired – “Billy Strayhorn: Lush Life” (2007). His legacy lives on through new generations of aspiring musicians who discover that his genius has only deepened with the passage of time.



Lesson Plan

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate prior experience: What do you think Strayhorn meant in this phrase, “If you want something hard enough, it just gets done”?
2. Read the biographical information at <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/person/billy-strayhorn>
3. Group Discussion: How did Strayhorn’s early teenage experience show his potential as a gifted arranger and composer?
4. Extend knowledge: How did Strayhorn’s experience with the Duke Ellington band show his experience in the creation of the hits for which he did not receive any credit?

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. What are some of the major takeaways of Strayhorn’s early life and training in Pittsburgh, working with Ellington, and his personal life? Use this link at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billy_Strayhorn
2. How did Strayhorn influence other musicians (ex: Duke Ellington, Lena Horne)?
3. In what ways did Strayhorn advocate for civil rights as a friend of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.?
4. Website investigation: Search “Music” contributions at <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/explore/advanced>. Describe any common elements that other LGBTQ music professionals in history share with Strayhorn.

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. In what way did Strayhorn: Lush Life tell the story of this pioneering composer, arranger and pianist? View the <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/billystrayhorn/film.html>
2. Strayhorn was not only a pioneer in his musical talent but also he chose to live openly as a gay man during a time when this was not popular. How did Strayhorn have the courage to follow this path?
3. What do you think that Ginell means that being “gay probably added more stress to his life”? View this link at <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/billy-strayhorn-mn0000359199/biography>
4. From what you have learned about Strayhorn’s life, how did he maintain his belief in building his musical expertise and being true to what he valued in life?

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. In what ways should we advocate for jazz musicians, like Strayhorn, who have made an impact in many areas of our history? View link at <https://www.last.fm/music/Billy+Strayhorn/+wiki>
2. Strayhorn has left his mark in many ways. He was a musical icon, an African American and a gay man. How can we further support other LGBTQ individuals who have these talents in our education system?