

America is rediscovering one of its musical giants.

"There is something in the air about Billy Strayhorn, something that says it is his time," said David N. Baker as he led the Smithsonian Jazz Orchestra in a series of concerts celebrating Strayhorn's music.

The flurry of activity is tied to *Lush Life: A Biography of Billy Strayhorn* by David Hadju, which has garnered rave reviews, and to several

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new recordings of Strayhorn's jazz and pop masterpieces.

Strayhorn was born in 1915: poor, black, gay and with monumental musical talent, all of which seemed apparent virtually from the start. At age 11 he decided he needed a piano in order to learn how to play. He earned the money for it by selling newspapers and running deliveries for a neighborhood drugstore in Pittsburgh.

During the depths of the Depression he attended what now would be called a magnet high school where he learned French, became an accomplished classical pianist, and wrote and had produced his first musical review. He became an immaculate dresser, a dedicated sophisticate, and an inveterate reader of the *New Yorker*. He also penned the melancholy "Lush Life," later a hit for many artists, most recently Linda Ronstadt. It begins:

I used to visit all the very gay places,
Those come what may places
Where one relaxes on the axis
Of the wheel of life
To get the feel of life
From jazz and cocktails.

At 23, he introduced himself to the already immortal Duke Ellington whose big band was playing a gig in Pittsburgh.

"Mr. Ellington, this is the way you played this number in the show," he said sitting down at the piano, perfectly imitating the master's version of "Sophisticated Lady." "Now this is the way I would play it."

Ellington was enthralled by what he heard and gave the kid an assignment, then another. By the end of the week when the band packed up, Strayhorn had been offered a job, but with no clear duties and no fixed starting date.

Weeks of anxious waiting ensued. Then Ellington sent word to meet him in New York. Duke had scribbled directions to his Harlem residence on a piece of paper. Strayhorn turned them into a song, "Take the A Train." Those opening chords are among the most recognizable ever written, and would become the band's signature tune. Soon the crew had dubbed him "Swee' Pea,"

REDISCOVERING "SWEET" PEA

After too long in Duke Ellington's shadow, Billy Strayhorn and his music are coming into the light

by Bob Roehr



Billy Strayhorn

after the impish baby in the "Popeye" comic strip and because of his diminutive size.

The songs and arrangements seemed to flow

effortlessly from Strayhorn's pen: "Chelsea Bridge," "Rain Check," "Passion Flower." He and Ellington meshed effortlessly as collabora-

LISTENING TO STRAYHORN

• *Lush Life: The Billy Strayhorn Songbook* (Verve 314 529 908-2) is a set of 15 classic cuts, vocal and instrumental, from the likes of Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Dizzy Gillespie and Oscar Peterson. It has the strengths and weaknesses of a compilation where styles and approaches vary.

• *Portrait of a Silk Thread* (Koko 1310) offers "newly discovered works" recorded by The Dutch Jazz Orchestra. Their beauty and power takes your breath away. Still, as a group dedicated to preserving various forms of jazz, the orchestra mimics the styles of others and hasn't developed its own. Its sound, while technically impressive, seems a bit academic—a tad lacking in heart or soul when compared to bands with their own signature sound.

• *Duke Ellington...And his mother called him Bill* (RCA/Bluebird 6287-2-RB) was recorded in 1967 a few months after Strayhorn's death as a tribute to the man. It epitomizes big band swing in all its power, performed by perhaps the greatest collection of jazz soloists ever assembled into a single band. Strayhorn wrote and arranged these songs for these men for nearly 30 years. It is tight, sweet and played from the heart.

• *Passion Flower* by Fred Hersch (None-such 79395-2) offers a more contemporary feel and personal interpretive approach to Strayhorn's songs. Hersch's liquid solo piano is sometimes backed by a trio and at times by string arrangements. Hersch is also gay, draws strongly from jazz and classical music traditions, and is a long-term survivor of HIV.

Bob Roehr

tors. Strayhorn brought sophisticated knowledge of classical music and the coloring of Debussy to Ellington's strength in the blues. The senior partner often contributed little to songs which bore his name as co-author or even sole author.

In fact, Strayhorn lived almost completely in Ellington's shadow. Part of it was a public relations machine which focused on Duke as the front man for the band and its touring, which was their source of income. Ellington was 16 years Strayhorn's senior when they met. He already had the suave persona and established reputation of a star; he was the known quantity. Strayhorn seldom played with the band or accompanied it on the road.

Strayhorn showed occasional flashes of resentment over the arrangement, but it generally seemed to fit his temperament. It spared him the rough demands of being on the road and the discipline of performing. It allowed him the freedom to write and arrange music as well as indulge in the night life of New York's cafe society.

Strayhorn lived a matter-of-fact, openly gay life in a day when few people dared to do so. Soon after moving to New York he set up housekeeping with another pianist, Aaron Bridgers. They moved in both gay and straight circles and assumed they would be treated like a couple wherever they went.

"I'm not going to change for anybody, and if they don't like it, that's their problem," Strayhorn once told a friend.

He met Martin Luther King Jr. and in the early 1960s became active in planning and performing at big-dollar fund raisers. In 1963 he accompanied his longtime close friend Lena Horne to an NAACP rally in Jackson, Miss. Their host, Medgar Evers, apologized for not putting them up, but his home had recently been fire bombed. Less than a week after their visit Evers was shot to death.

Strayhorn's pleasures of the flesh—excessive drinking and smoking—caught up with him soon thereafter. He spent the last years of his life fighting esophageal cancer. And like gay men who would fight AIDS decades later, he reflected that struggle in his art. He wrote "Upper Manhattan Medical Group (U.M.M.G.)" and his final song, "Blood Count." His life was cut short in 1967 at the age of 51.

"His greatest virtue, I think, was his honesty—not only to others but to himself," said Duke Ellington in his eulogy. "He demanded freedom of expression and lived in what we consider the most important of moral freedoms: freedom from hate, unconditionally; freedom from self-pity (even through all the pain and bad news); freedom from fear of possibly doing something that might help another more than it might help himself; and freedom from the kind of pride that could make a man feel he was better than his brother or neighbor."

And he left a legacy of brilliant, sophisticated music that delights those who come to know it.

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