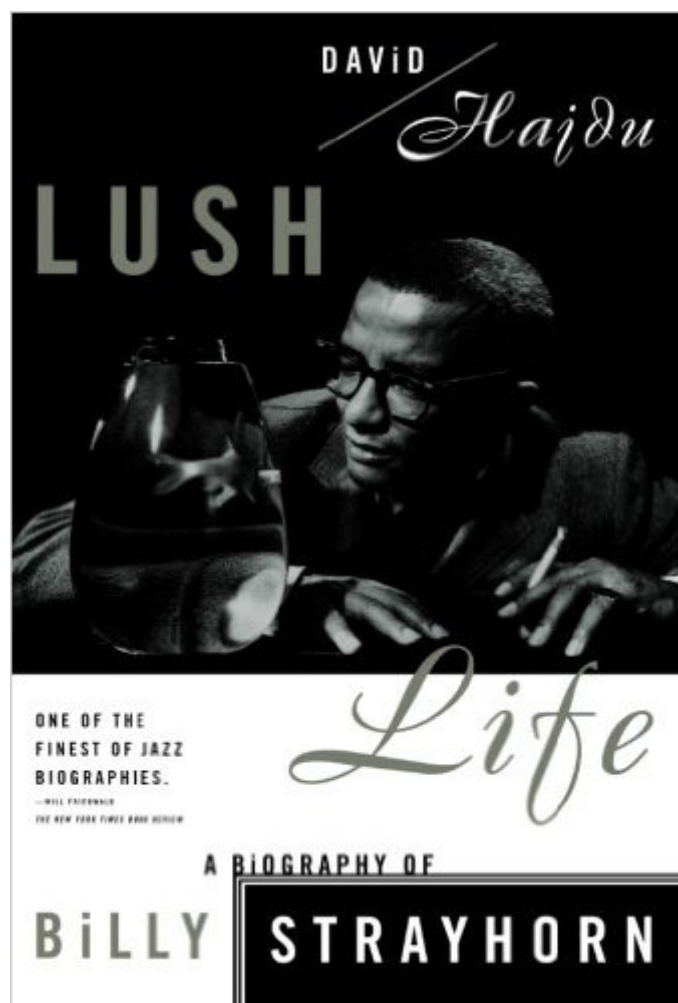


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Lush Life: A Biography Of Billy Strayhorn



Synopsis

A finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award Billy Strayhorn (1915-67) was one of the greatest composers in the history of American music, the creator of a body of work that includes such standards as "Take the 'A' Train." Yet all his life Strayhorn was overshadowed by his friend and collaborator Duke Ellington, with whom he worked for three decades as the Ellington Orchestra's ace songwriter and arranger. A "definitive" corrective (USA Today) to decades of patchwork scholarship and journalism about this giant of jazz, David Hajdu's *Lush Life* is a vibrant and absorbing account of the "lush life" that Strayhorn and other jazz musicians led in Harlem and Paris. While composing some of the most gorgeous American music of the twentieth century, Strayhorn labored under a complex agreement whereby Ellington took the bows for his work. Until his life was tragically cut short by cancer and alcohol abuse, the small, shy composer carried himself with singular style and grace as one of the few jazzmen to be openly homosexual. *Lush Life* has sparked an enthusiastic revival of interest in Strayhorn's work and is already acknowledged as a jazz classic.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Billy Strayhorn's contribution to the work of Duke Ellington is immeasurable--at last he is given his full due in David Hajdu's perceptive and insightful portrait of this largely unsung genius of 20th century music. Hajdu's sensitive biography, derived from countless interviews with friends, family and fellow musicians, reveals Strayhorn as a complex, creative individual who preferred to stay discreetly in Ellington's shadow throughout much of his life. It also provides a telling portrait of a man who lived his life as a gay African-American musician completely out in the open during a time

in this country when it was both difficult and dangerous to do so. Hajdu has given us telling portraits as well of many of Strayhorn's contemporaries such as Lena Horne, Ella Fitzgerald, Johnny Hodges, Ray Nance and the Duke himself who loved "Swea-Pea" (Strayhorn's nickname) as a part of himself. Not only a portrait of a creative, intellectual genius, "Lush Life" also gives us an insightful look into the world of jazz and African-american popular music that grew out of an age of racism and discrimination. The concluding chapters that chronicle Strayhorn's involvement in the civil rights movement of the early '60's and his friendships with Martin Luther King and Medgar Evers and his own battle with the throat cancer that cut his life short (at age fifty-one) are especially powerful. Throughout the book, Hajdu provides lively anecdotal writing while remaining a respectful journalist and chronicler of his subject. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in jazz history, popular culture, or purely for a portrait of an understated genius.

This was an excellent read and it was great to see that somebody finally came out with a biography on Billy Strayhorn. So why the 3 star rating? Well, the author actually attempts to overemphasize Strayhorn's importance to the Ellington band (hard as that is to do). The author unfortunately tries to paint a picture of Ellington as somebody that didn't appreciate Strayhorn's talent and put his name on Strayhorn's songs and basically didn't do much at all after the arrival of Strayhorn. This, of course, is a complete crock. Ellington wrote the vast majority of his most well known songs before Strayhorn even came into the picture ("Mood Indigo", "Sophisticated Lady", "It Don't Mean A Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing", "Rockin' In Rhythm", "In A Sentimental Mood", and "Solitude" just to name a few). Are we really supposed to believe that all of a sudden Strayhorn comes and Ellington's compositional skills go down the drain and he relies on Strayhorn for everything thereafter? That's a little too much (actually way too much) to believe. Also, if Strayhorn was truly all the brains behind the post-1940 Ellington band, then how come Ellington was still writing great works after Strayhorn's death (New Orleans Suite anyone?)? It just doesn't add up. Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn were one of the greatest song writing teams of all time. Both were equally important players to the other's success after they joined together and each made his significant contributions. The author is probably a big Strayhorn fan and to make up for the lack of recognition that Strayhorn has received the author actually does a disservice to Strayhorn by overstating his importance to the Ellington band. Strayhorn accomplished so much it's just not necessary to do so. That being said, the book is still a great source for learning about the life of Billy Strayhorn and who he was and it's great that somebody finally wrote a book on his life.

This book has a lot going for it. Do you like music, swing and jazz? Do you like interesting people? Did you live through the 30's, 40's and 50's? Do you enjoy reading about that era? Do you enjoy reading a well written biography? If the answer to any of these is yes, you'll like this book, if the answer is yes to several of these questions then you'll LOVE this book. David Hajdu has done an exemplary job of documenting the life of Billy Strayhorn. I really felt like I knew the man after reading this. He has done his research and he also writes with a very smooth style that keeps you interested. I love music and I've read bios of Miles Davis, Dave Brubeck, BB King, Chuck Berry, Led Zeppelin, Allman Bros. on and on. This is one of the best if not the best music bio I've read.

Hajdu really does a nice job of summarizing the life of a songwriter. He keeps his story moving with pacing, characters, travel, and yes, even drama! Racial prejudice, sexual prejudice, loneliness and alcoholism did nothing to stop this little man from Pittsburgh who knew he was destined to a "lush life" and wrote about it in his fantasies, such as the title song begun at age 19 in Pittsburgh. He grew up poor, effeminate, and misunderstood; but he loved the theater, and he knew where he belonged. Off to New York where his awesome talent so impressed Duke Ellington that he was immediately hired into the organization, where he would thrive and struggle and live and write for the rest of his life. He died of cancer, after penning and arranging much of Ellington's later work. The book tells his story with panache that would make him proud!

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