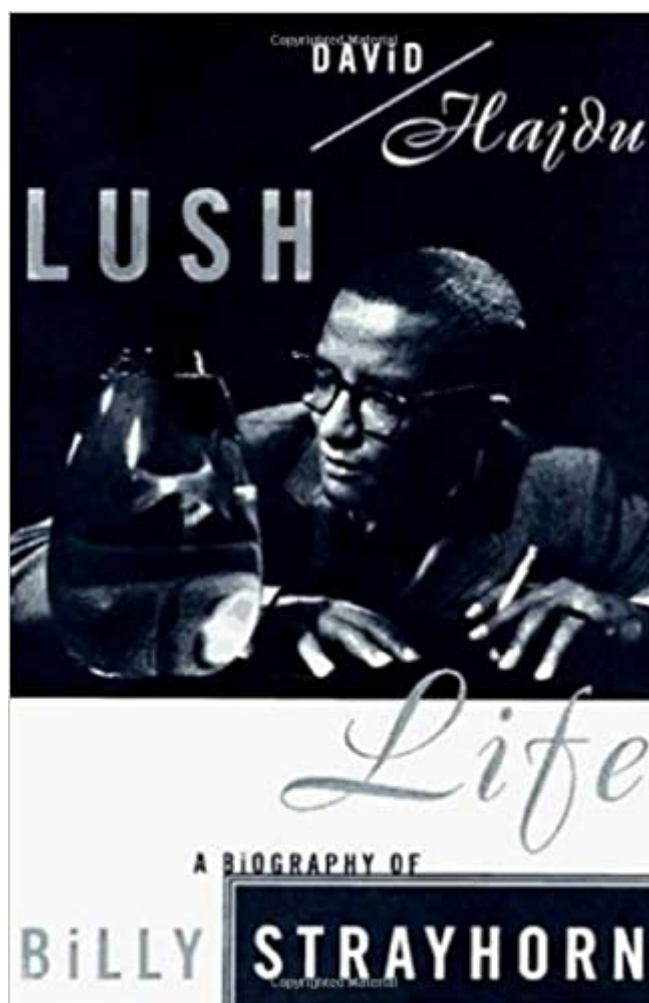


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# Lush Life: A Biography Of Billy Strayhorn



## Synopsis

Billy Strayhorn (1915-1967) was one of the most accomplished composers in American music, the creator of such standards as "Take the 'A' Train", yet all his life he was overshadowed by his friend and collaborator, Duke Ellington. Through scrutiny of Strayhorn's private papers and more than five hundred interviews, Hajdu revives Strayhorn as one of the most complex and tragic figures in jazz history.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The myth has always been that Billy Strayhorn and Duke Ellington shared an identical approach to music. In *Lush Life: A Biography of Billy Strayhorn*, David Hajdu dismisses that notion from the very beginning. Schooled in Debussy and Ravel, Strayhorn brought a sensitivity and complexity that was missing in the Ellington oeuvre. Although he had talent enough for a career without Ellington, Strayhorn lacked the confidence. Being both black and gay forced him to take a back seat to his partner's celebrity. Denied greater public recognition, he sought solace in a "lush life" of his own, smoking and drinking himself to an early death in 1967.

Hajdu, taking his title from one of Strayhorn's youthful works, deftly chronicles the life of the gifted composer, arranger and pianist about whom little has been known until now. Strayhorn (1915-1967), often called Duke Ellington's alter ego, collaborated with the legendary bandleader for more than 25 years, yet remained in his shadow; few outside the music world realized he composed and wrote

the lyrics for "Take the 'A' Train" and many other pieces often attributed to Ellington. Drawing on interviews with Strayhorn's friends, family and fellow musicians, Hajdu, an editor at Entertainment Weekly, brings his subject out of obscurity, showing him to be a complex, shy, charming genius whose extraordinary talents were recognized mainly by other musicians and members of an elite circle of black performers, artists and writers who adored him. The extent to which Ellington deliberately kept him in the background is unclear, but Strayhorn seems to have preferred this arrangement; without the need to pursue a career on his own, he could be open about his homosexuality at a time when most gay men kept their sexual orientation secret. He died tragically of cancer of the esophagus at 52. Photos not seen by PW. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Lush Life is the award-winning watershed biography of the life of Billy Strayhorn (1915-1967). In 2011, the book was selected by New York Times Magazine as one of the top 100 non-fiction titles of all time. Billy Strayhorn's story is compelling, especially in this day and age. He is best known as the collaborator with the great Duke Ellington. His best-known works are "Take The 'A' Train" (the Ellington theme song) and "Lush Life". Hajdu's biography tells of his life from the perspective of those who knew him. Hajdu did more than 400 interviews of people including musicians, friends, family, noted celebrities and other entertainment professionals who had personal knowledge of Strayhorn's life and career. A black, gay musician in the 1940's Strayhorn chose to live his life openly. There was a price to pay. Many forces sprang into play that caused his legacy to be nearly invisible. One factor involved the complicated relationship with Ellington who was not only his collaborator but also had the total power of publishing his works. There were many works for which Strayhorn was not credited and/or where Ellington's name was added. In addition, Ellington's publicist, known to be homophobic, instituted practices that served to keep Strayhorn's genius out of the spotlight. Some involved removing his name from playbills/program notes, etc. Billy Strayhorn died prematurely on May 31, 1967 from cancer at the age of 51. Strayhorn, whose catalog consists of a magnitude of titles, is best known as the most unfamous significant musician of the 20th century. Recent research, including Hajdu's LUSH LIFE, has served to remove the historical cloud and to reveal a life story so rich, so sad, so tragic, and so amazing--a "page turner" that brings the magnificent fruit of a hard life to full view. It is not necessary to know anything about music or to be a jazz buff to be inspired by this book. A. Alyce Claerbaut

Billy Strayhorn is a genius and this book does him justice. A well-researched, well-written book, the

author of Lush Life does not make the mistake of including too many boring, mundane details as some biographers do, apparently to indicate how much research they've done. However, Hajdu's thorough research shines through in the tiny details that color the descriptions of Strayhorn's family life as well as the New York scene. Hajdu takes an unflinching look at how Strayhorn's decision to be an openly gay man in a world and a time that was unaccepting, and how that decision affected his career. Strayhorn might not have written any less, but perhaps would have played more and would have been known in his own right if he had decided to hide his lifestyle. This is a touching, informative portrait of a musical genius whose star will one day achieve its properly high place in the firmament of jazz. Musicians of his time always knew his accomplishments. Certainly Hajdu's book will help the public to appreciate Strayhorn. I can't wait for the movie.

A nicely written biography. I learned things about Strayhorn that I didn't know before. Made me want to know him personally.

This is the definitive Billy Strayhorn biography and it is truly excellent. It is a fascinating book about a fascinating person and one of the best books I have ever read about a major figure in music. Billy Strayhorn was complex and brilliant and this book offers the best view ever inside the life and times of a tremendously talented person.

It is a thorough biography of Billy Strayhorn whose genius was hidden behind Duke Ellington. Billy Strayhorn wrote Take the A Train, Lush Life, Something to Live For, Chelsea Bridge and hundreds of other songs. Billy was a friend of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and encouraged & accompanied Lena Horne to go south to participate in the Civil Rights demonstrations.

Inside look at the life of a sophisticated genius. Great read

This is a dry academic paper, more concerned about demonstrating to other academics that proper research protocol was followed than about shedding insight into the structure of the music. Instead of enhancing the experience of listening to this wonderful music, it sucked all the joy out of it.

Superbly written biography of a very interesting person.

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