

PLAY GUIDE

HIGHMARK PRESENTS
WORLD PREMIERE

BILLY STRAYHORN: SOMETHING TO LIVE FOR

HIGHMARK



MUSIC AND LYRICS BY
BILLY STRAYHORN

BOOK BY
ROB ZELLERS
w/ KENT GASH

MUSICAL DIRECTION BY
MATTHEW WHITAKER

CHOREOGRAPHY BY
DELL HOWLETT

DIRECTED BY
KENT GASH

PITTSBURGH
PUBLIC
THEATER

For more information about this production,
including cast photos & bios visit:
<https://bit.ly/STRAYHORN>

For more info about PPT, including Racial Justice
Commitments & Land Acknowledgement visit:
https://ppt.org/ppt_home/about

EXPOSITION



This production is a biographical musical about Pittsburgh born jazz legend, Billy Strayhorn, telling the story of his professional relationships, with greats such as Duke Ellington, Lena Horne, and Billie Holiday, as well as his life as an out, gay man in a time period where that was incredibly uncommon, due to the risk of violence and discrimination. The story follows Billy Strayhorn's life, starting with his time in high school in Pittsburgh, through his collaboration with Duke Ellington throughout his life, his relationship with Aaron Bridgers, the way he chafed at and pushed against the discrimination he faced as a gay black man, his alcohol use, and eventual untimely death in 1967 due to esophageal cancer.

CULTURAL CONTEXT



During the life of Billy Strayhorn, the Civil Rights Movement left an imprint on every aspect of society, including Billy's realm of music. Billy Strayhorn's journey unfolded against the backdrop of this personally relevant historical period, marked by landmark events that reshaped the course of humanity, such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, and the Selma to Montgomery marches. While Strayhorn was crafting melodies and harmonies, activists were taking a stand, demanding an end to racial segregation and discrimination. The interplay between Strayhorn's artistic contributions and the historical milestones of movements - such as The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 - is a testament to the profound interconnectedness of culture and sociopolitical transformation, forever linking the cadence of his melodies to the rhythm of social progress.

THE BILLY & DUKE DYNAMIC



HISTORY

- Duke Ellington's collaboration with Billy Strayhorn was a significant and influential partnership in the world of jazz music. Billy Strayhorn, a young and talented composer, was a talented composer, joined Duke Ellington's band in 1939 when he was just 23 years old and captured Duke Ellington's attention with his remarkable musical sensibility. Duke, recognizing Billy's innate genius, not only welcomed him as a creative collaborator but also extended a warm hand of friendship. This connection went beyond the professional realm, embodying mutual respect and shared artistic vision. Their collaboration lasted for over two decades until Strayhorn's untimely death in 1967.

KEY ASPECTS

- **Collaborative Composition:** Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn worked closely together in composing many of Ellington's most famous and enduring compositions. Strayhorn co-wrote and arranged many of Ellington's classics, including "Take the 'A' Train," "Lush Life," "Chelsea Bridge," and "Satin Doll."
- **Musical Arrangements:** Strayhorn was responsible for creating some of the most memorable and innovative arrangements in the Ellington repertoire. His unique harmonic and melodic ideas added depth and sophistication to Ellington's music.
- **Mutual Respect:** Ellington and Strayhorn had a deep mutual respect for each other's talents. Ellington recognized Strayhorn's immense contribution to the band and often referred to him as his "alter ego." Strayhorn, on the other hand, greatly admired Ellington's abilities as a bandleader and performer. Their partnership flourished artistically, as Billy's imaginative compositions seamlessly intertwined with Duke's distinctive style. The result was a harmonious blend of innovation and tradition. Billy's creative nuances enriched Duke's orchestra, while Duke provided a platform for Billy's unique voice.
- **Discreet Relationship:** Beyond the realm of music, their relationship navigated the complex terrain of racial prejudice and societal barriers, underscoring the depth of their connection. Their professional collaboration extended into a close personal friendship, but they kept their relationship discreet, partially due to societal attitudes and norms regarding homosexuality during their era. Billy Strayhorn was openly gay, while Duke Ellington was heterosexual, and they had to navigate these complexities.
- **Strayhorn's Impact:** Billy Strayhorn's influence on the Duke Ellington Orchestra was profound. His compositions and arrangements helped define the Ellington sound, making it more diverse and innovative. Strayhorn's contributions ensured that Ellington's music remained fresh and relevant throughout the years.
- **Legacy:** After Strayhorn's death in 1967, Duke Ellington continued to perform and record Strayhorn's compositions as a tribute to his friend and collaborator. Strayhorn's work remains an integral part of the Duke Ellington Orchestra's legacy, and his compositions are still celebrated in the jazz world. Duke stepped forward as a custodian of Strayhorn's legacy. He commemorated Billy's memory through heartfelt performances and a steadfast commitment to keeping his music alive. This gesture became a testament to their enduring friendship and creative partnership. By ensuring that Billy's compositions remained vibrant and celebrated, Duke immortalized their connection, solidifying their status as jazz greats. Though in this regard, Strayhorn didn't get his dues in the history books, while Ellington remained the front man.

Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn's partnership was one of the most fruitful and enduring collaborations in the history of jazz music. Their work together contributed significantly to the development of jazz as an art form, and their compositions continue to be cherished by jazz enthusiasts and musicians alike.



ART AS ACTIVISM

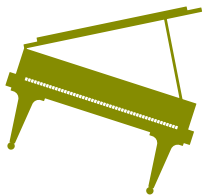


Billy Strayhorn believed strongly in living authentically, despite the discrimination that both black people and homosexual people experienced during the years that he was alive. Billy however, was undeterred and used his fame as a platform to amplify the messages of civil rights organizations and leaders.

- **NAACP** - Duke Ellington was host and master of ceremonies at the thirtieth anniversary part for the New York City chapter of the NAACP (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), and Billy Strayhorn played in the band. The performance was nationally broadcast on CBS radio. Billy became a literal poster child for the NAACP, appearing in campaign photos urging folks to register to join.
- **MLK** – There were many fundraisers that were planned to help finance Martin Luther King Jr.'s work during the civil rights movement, and Billy Strayhorn played piano tributes after he spoke sermons, while donations for the movement were accepted. Later in his life, he and Dr. King became closer, and Billy helped to plan these fundraising events himself, eventually including Lena Horne in a massive event in Jackson, with more than 2,500 people packed into the party. Additionally, While Dr. King and other activists were put in jail for their efforts advocating for civil rights, Billy Strayhorn and many other artists gathered for an "Afternoon of Jazz" to perform in front of a crowd, raising over \$15,000 to donate to the activists' bail funds.
- **Duke's Medal:** Duke Ellington won a Presidential Medal of Freedom and cited during his acceptance speech four freedoms that Billy Strayhorn lived by:
 1. Freedom from hate, unconditionally;
 2. Freedom from self-pity;
 3. Freedom from fear of possibly doing something that may help someone else more than it would him;
 4. Freedom from the kind of pride that could make a man feel that he is better than his brother



MUSICAL HIGHLIGHTS



- While Billy Strayhorn attended Westinghouse High School, he began composing "**LUSH LIFE**" at just sixteen years old, finishing it in 1936 which went on to eventually be performed by musical powerhouses like Nat King Cole, John Coltrane, and more recently, Lady Gaga.
- "**SOMETHING TO LIVE FOR**" written in 1937, was one of the final compositions Billy wrote while living in Pittsburgh, with the lyrics somberly hinting at his longing for romantic love since homosexuality was completely taboo in the 1930s.
- "**TAKE THE 'A' TRAIN**" — Duke Ellington rescued this composition after Billy had reportedly thrown it away in 1938. Despite overwhelming evidence that Billy actually wrote the original tune, it is still technically attributed to Duke. Regardless who wrote it originally, this swinging composition was one of the duo's most commercial successes, and was eventually adopted by Duke Ellington's band as their signature theme.
- "**SUCH SWEET THUNDER**" – Billy and Duke worked together to compose a full 12 part-suite based on the works of William Shakespeare. Written in just three weeks, the duo studied Shakespeare's cannon, and eventually named the album after one of Hippolyta's lines in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* - "I never heard / So musical a discord, such sweet thunder."
- "**BLOOD COUNT**" – originally titled "Blue Cloud," when Billy was hospitalized for esophageal cancer, he continued to develop the song and gave the piece a new name. This was the last song that Billy Strayhorn ever composed.





- **AARON BRIDGERS**, an American jazz pianist, like many other American jazz musicians, found his way to the vibrant jazz scene in Paris during the 1930s. Paris was a hub for jazz during this time and many American musicians, including Billy Strayhorn, spent time there. The time that both Bridgers and Strayhorn spent in Paris had a profound impact on their musical development, especially since the Paris jazz scene was diverse and experimental, exposing musicians to different styles and ideas. Aaron and Billy shared their love for music and supported each other's careers. Their partnership was an enduring and important part of Strayhorn's life until his passing in 1967.



- **LENA HORNE** was an American singer, actress, and civil rights activist. She is best known for her remarkable career in entertainment, particularly as a pioneering African American performer who broke down racial barriers in the entertainment industry. Lena began her career as a dancer at the Cotton Club in Harlem in the 1930s. She quickly gained recognition for her talent and beauty. In the 1940s, Horne signed a contract with MGM, becoming one of the first African American actresses to sign a major studio contract. However, she was often relegated to roles that could be cut from films shown in the segregated South, and she refused to play demeaning stereotypical roles. Lena Horne and Billy Strayhorn collaborated on several musical projects during their careers. One of their most famous collaborations was the song "Lush Life," which was composed by Strayhorn. Horne recorded a memorable version of this song in 1963, showcasing her vocal prowess and Strayhorn's intricate composition; the song has since become a jazz standard. Beyond their professional collaboration, Lena and Billy shared a close friendship. Strayhorn was openly gay, and Horne was known for her advocacy for civil rights and her support of LGBTQ rights. Their friendship was based on mutual respect and shared experiences as marginalized individuals in the entertainment industry.



- **BILLIE HOLIDAY**, often referred to as "Lady Day," was one of the most iconic and influential jazz and blues vocalists of the 20th century. Her unique and emotionally charged vocal style, along with her ability to convey deep emotions through her singing, made her a legend in the world of music. Some of her most famous recordings include "Strange Fruit," "God Bless the Child," and "Summertime." Billie Holiday's career was marked by both her musical achievements and her personal struggles, and she remains a symbol of the jazz era's enduring impact. Billy Strayhorn and Billie Holiday had a professional and artistic relationship marked by collaboration and mutual admiration for each other's talents. Their work together, particularly on songs like "Lush Life," showcases the synergy between Strayhorn's composition and Holiday's interpretive abilities, leaving a lasting legacy in the world of jazz music.



- **MERCER ELLINGTON**, the son of the legendary jazz bandleader and composer Duke Ellington, played a significant role in continuing and preserving his father's musical legacy. Both Mercer Ellington and Billy Strayhorn were members of the Duke Ellington Orchestra, during which they collaborated on various musical projects. Mercer played the trumpet and occasionally took on leadership roles in the band, especially after his father's passing in 1974. They both helped maintain the orchestra's high musical standards. Mercer and Billy became key figures in the Duke Ellington Orchestra, and their combined efforts helped ensure the orchestra's continued success and prominence in the world of jazz music. Their contributions to the orchestra's repertoire and their dedication to preserving Duke Ellington's musical legacy were significant aspects of their friendship.

OPEN STAGE: Resource Guide



This musical brings to life the remarkable true story of one of the greatest composers of all time. Through his collaborations with notable artists - such as Lena Horne and Billie Holiday, at the dawn of the Civil Rights movement - and sustaining one of the greatest jazz orchestras of all time, Billy Strayhorn transcended barriers and brought a unique fusion of jazz and classical music to the world.

BRAINSTORM



With the above in mind, talk about a time you collaborated with someone else. What sparked it? What were some things you shared in common? What were the differences?

List any jazz artists you can think of - what image comes to mind for each one? Any instruments or signature style associated with them? Get together with a group and share!

*PA Core Standard: CC.1.4.8.H
National Core Arts Standards: TH:Re9.1.8*

DISCUSSION POINTS



- What is the most striking thing to you about Billy Strayhorn? Explain Why.
- Which one of Strayhorn's songs and/or collaborations most interests you? How come?
- If you were famous, would you use your platform to uplift messages seeking change in society? If so, what messages? If not, Why?
- Take five minutes and create your own Jazz persona: what's your instrument? Most famous song title? What is the story it tells?

*PA Core Standard: CC.1.2.11-12.G
National Core Arts Standards: TH:Re8.1.8*

THEMES IN THE PLAY



- Mentorship and collaboration-
- Racism and homophobia
- Alcoholism and trauma
- Triumph and genius
- Identity and pride in an unjust society
- Appearance vs. Reality
- Love, romantic and platonic
- Past, present, and future

Critical Thinking: Choose a theme listed above and use examples of how it applies in the play. Give an example of how one of these themes connects to your own life.

*PA Core Standard: CC.1.3.11-12.A
National Core Arts Standards: TH:Re8.1.8*

MAKING SENSE OF THE WORLD IN *BILLY STRAYHORN: STLF*



SIGHT

- piano keys
- microphone and recording equipment
- suitcases and train tickets



SOUND

- round of applause
- record scratch
- orchestra
- ringing in ears



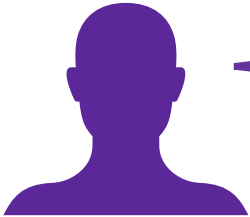
TASTE/SMELL

- restaurant and bar atmosphere
- hotel breakfast
- fresh breeze through trees



TOUCH

- lapels on a jacket
- hair pins
- the rim of eye glasses on face
- lips on the edge of a cup



Awaken your senses! The lists above contain examples of what characters in the play might see, hear, taste, and feel. Add more as you watch the show. **Choose at least one from any column to consider further: try to imagine it, look up an image, find a recipe, add a song to your playlist, invest in the action of it, and get inspired!**

PA Core Standard: CC.1.4.8-12.M
National Core Arts Standards: TH:Re7.1.HSI

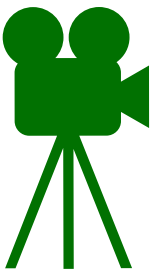
ON SET & BEHIND THE SCENES



Click [here](#) to read a quick interview with Broadway's Darius de Haas, starring as Billy Porter himself!



Below is a snapshot of PPT's incredible crew mounting the backdrop of the set.



SUPPLEMENTAL VIEWING:

- A [trailer](#) of PPT's production of *STLF*
- [Ever Up and Onward: A Tribute to Billy Strayhorn](#)
- [22-year-old pianist leads musical direction for Billy Strayhorn: *STLF*](#)
- [Matthew Whitaker: About Tomorrow](#)



DID YOU KNOW?

- Darius de Haas, the actor portraying Billy Strayhorn, also starred in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*.
- The piano suspended in the middle of the set is real and displayed specifically so you can see the chords inside.
- The movement and choreography in the show is a meditation on the evolution of jazz.

What is at least **ONE** new thing you learned from this play?
What impacted you the most from this show?
What is **ONE** question you have for anyone on the *BILLY STRAYHORN: STLF* creative team?

PA Core Standard: CC.1.3.11-12.C
National Core Arts Standards: TH:Re7.1.HSI

OPEN STAGE MATINEES ARE SUPPORTED BY:

