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THE MUSIC OF BILLY STRAYHORN
JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER RADIO
SEASON 18
EPISODE 44; AIRDATE 07/28/11

1) Music: Take the A Train

2) VOX: INT HAJDU

I still remember playing albums that I thought of as Duke Ellington albums, meaning the music of Duke Ellington, I still remember listening to tracks and hearing some songs that would jump There was something different about them and //looking at the credits and // they would say Billy Strayhorn and I would say oh yeah that sounds like that other thing. And sometimes they would say Duke Ellington, but they would sound like that other guy. So I was drawn to the music, and also the mystery-and the relationship between these two names and the music.

3) PIERCE:

THEY WERE A STUDY IN CONTRAST: ELLINGTON – CHARMING, DEBONAIR -THE “LADIES’ MAN” -- ‘LOVE YOU MADLY.’ HE THRIVED IN THE SPOTLIGHT.

BILLY STRAYHORN - SHORT OF STATURE AND OPENLY GAY IN THE 1940S. POSSESSED OF WHAT A COLLEAGUE CALLED “GENTLE, PLEASING , INTELLIGENCE”. STRAYHORN PREFERRED LIFE BEHIND THE CURTAIN.

DUKE’S FRIEND LUTHER HENDERSON TOLD STRAYHORN’S BIOGRAPHER DAVID HAJDU “THE MISCONCEPTION WAS THAT EILLINGTON PUT STRAYHORN THERE BECAUSE BILLY KNEW WHAT DUKE WOULD DO. THE TRUTH WAS THE OPPOSITE -- ELLINGTON PUT

BILLY THERE TO DO WHAT HE WANTED, BECAUSE DUKE KNEW THAT WHATEVER BILLY DID WOULD BE GREAT.”

GREAT SOUNDS AND THE STORY BEHIND THAT MAN BEHIND THE CURTAIN -- BILLY STRAYHORN.

FROM THE ROSE THEATER IN THE HOUSE OF SWING, IT'S JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER. I'M WENDELL PIERCE.

3) Music: Just a Sittin' and a Rockin' (Piano Passion)

4) PIERCE:

HE WAS BORN IN 1915 -- SO SMALL, THEY WERE UNSURE IF HE WOULD SURVIVE. AT FIRST, THEY JUST CALLED HIM “BABY BOY STRAYHORN”. FROM AN EARLY AGE, WILLIAM THOMAS STRAYHORN KNEW HE WANTED TO PLAY THE PIANO. BUT WITH FIVE OTHER CHILDREN, AN ALCOHOLIC FATHER AND STRUGGLING MOTHER, IT WOULD TAKE MORE THAN JUST DESIRE.

IN THE STREETS OF PITTSBURGH, HE SOLD NEWSPAPERS AND THEN WORKED AT A PHARMACY. HE WAS SINGLED OUT AND TUTORED BY HIS MATERNAL GRANDMOTHER WHO MADE SURE HE GOT A PIANO.

4) PIERCE: (continues)

AT WESTINGHOUSE HIGH SCHOOL, HE STUDIED MUSIC WITH THE INSPIRING CARL MCVICKERS. IN THE 1930'S, RIGHT OUT OF SCHOOL, STRAYHORN WAS LEADING HIS OWN BANDS --HE EVEN PUT ON A REVIEW CALLED “FANTASTIC RHYTHM” THAT WOULD TAKE ON A LIFE OF ITS OWN. BUT THE YOUNG MAN SEEMED TO BE SEARCHING FOR SOMETHING MORE. SOMETHING TO LIVE FOR.

7) MUSIC: SOMETHING TO LIVE FOR (5:35)

8) PIERCE:

“SOMETHING TO LIVE FOR” – WRITTEN IN 1939 BY A 24 YEAR OLD BILLY STRAYHORN, AND SUNG WITH THE JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER ORCHESTRA HERE BY JOSE JAMES.

JAMES GREW UP IN MINNEAPOLIS, AND LIKE STRAYHORN, HE ALSO FELT THE HEAT FROM THE BIG CITY CALLING HIM.

5) VOX INT Jose James

I think I can relate to Strayhorn you grow up and you want to go to LA and you want to go to New York you want to go to the coast you want to see some sites, you know you want to be a part of it. // You feel you contain some immensity within yourself and you want to see the reflection of that.

6) PIERCE:

IN DECEMBER 1938, STRAYHORN WOULD GET HIS CHANCE FOR SOMETHING MORE. GEORGE GREENLEE, A FRIEND OF AN ACQUAINTANCE OF STRAYHORN'S AND FROM A PROMINENT BLACK FAMILY IN PITTSBURGH, SET UP A DATE FOR STRAYHORN TO MEET DUKE ELLINGTON.

6) PIERCE (continues)

BACKSTAGE, AT THE STANLEY THEATER, STRAYHORN SAT DOWN AT THE PIANO, AND SAID “MR. ELLINGTON THIS IS THE WAY YOU PLAYED THIS NUMBER IN THE SHOW... NOW, THIS IS THE WAY I WOULD PLAY IT.”

AND THEIR COLLABORATION BEGAN -- AS EASY AS THAT.

ELLINGTON INVITED STRAYHORN TO NEW YORK CITY. DUKE WASN'T SURE WHAT TO DO WITH HIM (SINCE THE BAND ALREADY HAD A PIANIST). BUT, HE WAS SURE OF STRAYHORN'S IMMENSE ABILITY. SO WHILE DUKE AND THE ORCHESTRA WERE ON THE ROAD, STRAYHORN CAMPED OUT AT THE ELLINGTON HOUSEHOLD COMPOSING, ARRANGING AND DOING WHATEVER DUKE NEEDED.

IN 1941, A STRIKE BY THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF COMPOSERS, AUTHORS AND PUBLISHERS (KNOWN AS ASCAP) PARALYZED THE ELLINGTON BAND. THEY COULDN'T PLAY ANY SONGS UNDER DUKE'S NAME.

STRAYHORN AND DUKE'S SON MERCER, (MEMBERS OF THE NEW AND COMPETING SONGWRITERS ORGANIZATION, B M I) WERE ENLISTED TO WRITE A NEW SONGBOOK. FROM THAT SONGBOOK, COMES THIS ENDURING RUMINATION -- "A FLOWER IS A LOVESOME THING"

10) MUSIC: A Flower is a Lovesome Thing 3:29

11) PIERCE:

"A FLOWER IS A LOVESOME THING' – WORDS AND MUSIC BY BILLY STRAYHORN WITH THE VOCAL BY JOSE JAMES.

THE 1940S WAS A PERIOD OF COPIOUS COLLABORATION FOR STRAYHORN AND ELLINGTON. THEY WROTE FOR THE ORCHESTRA, TOOK ON MUSICALS, BROADWAY SHOWS AND EVEN MUSIC FOR THE ARMED FORCES DURING WORLD WAR II.

11) PIERCE: (continues)

SOMETIMES, ELLINGTON WOULD START A PIECE, STRAYHORN WOULD PICK IT UP WHEN DUKE WAS EXHAUSTED AND THEN ELLINGTON WOULD CONTINUE WRITING THE PIECE IN THE MORNING. THEIR COLLABORATION WAS THAT SEAMLESS, BUT IT WAS ELLINGTON'S NAME THAT USUALLY DREW THE PRAISE.

SO BUSY AND PROLIFIC WAS THE DUO THAT MANY OF STRAYHORN'S OWN COMPOSITIONS WERE NEVER RECORDED IN STUDIO.

AMONG THEM, “FLAME INDIGO” FROM THE BROADWAY MUSICAL “JUMP FOR JOY” AND A TUNE THAT BEGAN LIFE WITH THE TITLE OF “LANA TURNER,” BUT IS KNOWN NOW AS “CHARPOY.”

13) MUSIC: Charpoy 3:24 ‘

14) MUSIC: 46Flame Indigo 4:28

15) PIERCE:

WYNTON MARSALIS ON THE TRUMPET ON BILLY STRAYHORN'S “CHARPOY” PRECEDED BY “FLAME INDIGO.”

THE FINANCIAL BACKING THAT DUKE ELLINGTON PROVIDED STRAYHORN GAVE HIM A GREAT DEAL OF FREEDOM -- CREATIVELY *AND* SOCIALLY.

IN PITTSBURGH, STRAYHORN HAD NEVER FOUND THE LOVE HE WROTE ABOUT. BUT, WHILE LIVING IN THE ELLINGTON HOUSEHOLD, MERCER ELLINGTON INTRODUCED STRAYHORN TO THE PIANIST AARON BRIDGERS.

15) PIERCE: (continues)

THEY BEGAN A RELATIONSHIP AND QUICKLY MOVED IN TOGETHER, LIVING OPENLY, WHICH WAS A RARE FOR A GAY COUPLE IN THAT TIME; THEY HAPPILY ENTERTAINED FRIENDS AND MUSICIANS IN THEIR SMALL APARTMENT.

IN 1947, BRIDGERS, A PROFESSIONAL MUSICIAN HIMSELF, TOOK A POST A IN PARIS AND MOVED THERE TO PURSUE HIS OWN DREAM. STRAYHORN WOULD REMAIN STATESIDE WHERE THIS UNRECORDED SONG (FROM AN UNFINISHED MUSICAL) CAPTURED HIS FRUSTRATION

-- "LOVE HAS PASSED ME BY AGAIN."

16) MUSIC: Love Has Passed Me By Again (4:49)

17) PIERCE:

"LOVE HAS PASSED ME BY AGAIN" – WYNTON MARSALIS ON TRUMPET WITH THE JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER ORCHESTRA.

DON'T LET LOVE OR GREAT MUSIC PASS YOU BY -- BRING HOME THE SWING FROM OUR RADIO ARCHIVE AND ON OUR JAZZSTORIES PODCASTS – FIND THEM ALL AT J A L C DOT ORG (SLASH) JAZZCAST.

17A) VOX: DAVID HAJDU INT

it's not so easy. One thing, why leave? When you're living well. You're being encouraged, nurtured, supported by a great composer.

And Ellington lured him back very deftly and with the proposition that they would begin working in a different way.

17B) PIERCE:

IN ANY RELATIONSHIP, LOVE DON'T COME EASY – COMING UP, ELLINGTON AND STRAYHORN PLAY A GAME OF GIVE AND TAKE.

18) MUSIC: Chelsea Bridge (from Piano Passion)

MIDBREAK:

19) PIERCE:

JUST AFTER HE LEFT HIGH SCHOOL, BILLY STRAYHORN COMPOSED A SONG WELL BEYOND HIS YEARS. HE WAS JUST NINETEEN AND LIVING IN PITTSBURGH, BUT HE COULD ENVISION AN EXTROADINARY LIFE OF SUCCESS AND LOVE.

LESS THAN A DECADE LATER, HE WOULD LIVE IN THE SPLENDID WORLD OF DUKE ELLINGTON AND BE WRITING FOR THE ELLINGTON

BAND. BUT, THIS SONG WAS NEVER PLAYED BY THE ELLINGTON ORCHESTRA -- STRAYHORN CALLED IT HIS 'PRIVATE LITTLE PROJECT.'

BUT HE WOULD PLAY IT AT PRIVATE PARTIES -- AND IT WOULD GO ON TO BECOME A JAZZ STANDARD SUNG BY JOHNNY HARTMAN, NAT KING COLE AND SO MANY OTHERS. THIS IS "LUSH LIFE."

20) music: lush life 7:04 '49

21) PIERCE:

BILLY STRAYHORN'S LUSH LIFE. JOSE JAMES ON VOCALS, DAN NIMMER AT THE KEYBOARD, CARLOS HENRIQUEZ ON BASS AND ALI JACKSON PLAYING THE DRUMS.

STRAYHORN'S LIFE WITH DUKE WAS A PARADOX -- HE SACRIFICED RECOGNITION, AND THE PUBLIC RECOGNITION OF HIS OWN NAME TO BE ABLE TO LIVE AND CREATE FREELY.

HE WAS WRITING FOR THE ELLINGTON ORCHESTRA -- ONE OF THE MOST VISIBLE BANDS ON THE PLANET, BUT HIS NAME WAS VIRTUALLY UNHEARD. AFTER SOME FIFTEEN YEARS STRAYHORN BEGAN TO HAVE MISGIVINGS ABOUT THEIR ARRANGEMENT.

21) VOX: David Hajdu

it's not so easy. One thing, why leave? When you're living well. You're being encouraged, nurtured, supported by a great composer. //to compose music to be played //by a great orchestra. And encouraged to be yourself as an artist.

21a) PIERCE:

DAVID HAJDU IS THE AUTHOR OF THE BILLY STRAYHORN BIOGRAPHY TITLED LUSH LIFE.

21b) VOX: David Hajdu

One aspect of Ellington's genius is that he empowered his musicians and encouraged his musicians to write not just in service to his own vision, but in service to their individual visions. to serve a larger whole that you can think of as Ellingtonia.

22) PIERCE

STRAYHORN NEVER FORMALLY LEFT ELLINGTON, BUT HE DID SET OUT TO DISCOVER HIS OWN MUSICAL INTEREST.

HE BECAME AN HONARY AND INTEGRAL MEMBER OF THE DANCE TROUPE CALLED THE COPASETICS. HE RECORDED WITH ELLINGTON SIDEMAN LIKE JOHNNY HODGES AND COOTIE WILLIAMS. HE WAS AN ARDENT CIVIL RIGHTS ADVOCATE, A COMMITTED FRIEND OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

AND A FRIEND AS WELL TO DR. ARTHUR LOGAN AND HIS WIFE MARIAN – A WELL-OFF COUPLE DEVOTED TO THE ARTS. LOGAN WAS DUKES' (AND STRAYHORN'S) PERSONAL PHYSICIAN, AND FOUNDER OF THE UPPER MANHATTAN MEDICAL GROUP TO WHOM STRAYHORN DEDICATED THIS COMPOSITION "U .M. M. G".

23) MUSIC: U.M.M.G. 5:59 '56

24) PIERCE:

U.M.M.G – WRITTEN BY BILLY STRAYHORN IN 1956. FOUR YEARS PASSED WITHOUT STRAYHORN CONTRIBUTING A SINGLE PIECE OF MUSIC TO THE ELLINGTON ORCHESTRA. THE AUDIENCE MAY NOT OF NOTICED, BUT DUKE CERTAINLY FELT IT.

25) VOX; DAVID HAJDU,

Ellington started to miss him And Ellington lured him back very deftly and with the proposition that they would begin working in a different way. It was very, very significant. He lured Strayhorn back by saying we are going to share more credit. I'd like to use more of your concepts and more of your ideas.

The irony is this elevated the stature of Ellington at the expense of Strayhorn. Ellington on the cover of Time Magazine...and Strayhorn is missing again. So that period was really the beginning of the end for Strayhorn psychologically.

26) PIERCE:

AFTER THE ELLINGTON ORCHESTRA'S REVITALIZING APPEARANCE AT THE 1956 NEWPORT JAZZ FESTIVAL, ELLINGTON AND STRAYHORN BEGAN TAKING ON LARGER SCALE PROJECTS -- A DRUM IS A WOMAN, SUCH SWEET THUNDER AND THE NUTCRACKER SUITE.

AND ON THEM, HE SHARED EQUAL CREDIT WITH DUKE BUT THE PRESS DID NOT BILL IT THAT WAY. STRAYHORN SEEMED DESTINED FOR PUBLIC OBSCURITY.

ALTHOUGH HE WAS DISENCHANTED, STRAYHORN CONTINUED TO WORK WITH ELLINGTON ON PROJECTS INCLUDING THE SCORE FOR THE FILM "ANATOMY OF A MURDER"

FROM THE 1959 MOVIE, THIS IS 'POLLY'S THEME' .

27) MUSIC: ANATOMY OF A MURDER

28) PIERCE:

"POLLY'S THEME" FROM ANATOMY OF A MURDER.

IN 1964, BILLY STRAYHORN WAS DIAGNOSED WITH ESOPHAGEAL CANCER. HE STILL COMPOSED THROUGHTOUT HIS ILLNESS, BUT HE DIED IN 1967. CONTRARY TO THE RUMOR, IT WAS NOT IN THE ARMS OF HIS GREAT ADMIRER LENA HORNE, BUT AT A HOSPITAL IN THE COMPANY OF HIS PARTNER BILL GROVES.

WITH STRAYHORN'S DEATH, ELLINGTON LOST PART OF HIMSELF -- THE MAN HE DESCRIBED AS "MY RIGHT ARM, MY LEFT ARM, ALL THE

EYES IN THE BACK OF MY HEAD, MY BRAINWAVES IN HIS HEAD, AND HIS IN MINE.”

DUKE’S DEEPEST RESPONSE, OF COURSE, WAS MUSICAL AND IN 1967 HE RECORDED A TRIBUTE ALBUM TITLED “HIS MOTHER CALLED HIM BILL.”

INCLUDED ON THAT ALBUM IS A SOLO PIANO REVERIE THAT ELLINGTON PLAYED WHILE THE BAND WAS PACKING UP IN THE STUDIO - - ANOTHER STRAYHORN TUNE THAT WOULD BECOME A SIGNATURE FOR DUKE. THIS IS LOTUS BLOSSOM.

29) MUSIC: LOTUS BLOSSOM (TRY TO EXTEND MUSIC BY TIGHTENING)

“LOTUS BLOSSOM” – JOE TEMPERLY ON BARITONE SAX AND DAN NIMMER ON THE PIANO.

30) VOX: JOSE JAMES INT

@1:17:35 There’s some kind of simplicity that’s almost like a childlike in Strayhorn’s stuff //but it opens you up to a lot of deeper emotions. Like // looking at something very simple and unlocking the mysteries. In this case it’s a flower, // which is a thing of beauty, but it’s not a lasting thing of beauty.

I think that is the key to understanding Strayhorn’s expression -- that here’s these moments, here’s these... Here’s our lives which are these things of beauty, but they don’t last, so you have to enjoy that and it’s a tragedy, but it’s also something to be celebrated.

31) PIERCE:

AND WE DO CELEBRATE BILLY STRAYHORN, IN ALL OF HIS REMARKABLE MUSIC,

“TAKE THE A TRAIN” – VOCALIST JOSE JAMES AND THE JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER ORCHESTRA HONORING THE MUSIC AND LEGACY OF THE GREAT BILLY STRAYHORN – ON THE STAGE OF FREDERICK P. ROSE HALL.

33A) MUSIC: pull music under credits

33B) PIERCE: (continued)

JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER RADIO IS PRODUCED AT MURRAY STREET. THIS PROGRAM WAS WRITTEN BY ALEXA LIM, WHO PRODUCES THE PROGRAM WITH DAVID GOREN AND STEPHEN RATHE. SPECIAL THANKS TO DAVID HAJDU AUTHOR OF 'LUSH LIFE" THE BIOGRAPHY OF THE REMARKABLE BILLY STRAYHORN.

33B) PIERCE: (continued)

THE RECORDINGS WERE MIXED AT XM PRODUCTIONS BY ROB MACOMBER. ADDITIONAL RECORDING AT WWNO BY JENNIE LAWSON.

YOU CAN HEAR THIS SHOW OR ANY PROGRAM IN OUR ARCHIVES AT JALC (DOT) ORG SLASH JAZZ CAST.

AND WHILE YOU' RE THERE CHECK OUT OUR JAZZSTORIES PODCASTS –TO HEAR MUSICIANS, INCLUDING OUR SINGER JOSE JAMES, TELL THE STORIES OF JAZZ IN THEIR OWN WORDS.

THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER IS ADRIAN ELLIS. CAT HENRY SUPERVISES OUR RECORDINGS AND BROADCASTS. OUR ARTISTIC DIRECTOR IS WYNTON MARSALIS.

I' M WENDELL PIERCE. JOIN US AGAIN NEXT WEEK FOR JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER.