

Take The "A" Train

"Take The A Train" was written in 1939 by Billy Strayhorn for the Duke Ellington Band. His lyrics were replaced by those of Joya Sherrill. The choral arrangement was written by Kirby Shaw.

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Lyrics

Over the years the lyrics have contained many variations, as is not unusual for songs of this era. Those below are representative only, and may not be the original Sherrill lyrics:

You must take the A Train
To go to Sugar Hill way up in Harlem
If you miss the A Train
You'll find you've missed the quickest way to Harlem
Hurry, get on, now, it's coming
Listen to those rails a-thrumming (All Aboard!)
Get on the A Train
Soon you will be on Sugar Hill in Harlem

I. Take The A Train^{1,2,3}

"**Take the 'A' Train**" is a jazz standard by Billy Strayhorn that was the signature tune of the Duke Ellington orchestra. The title refers to the "A" subway service that runs through New York City, going at that time from eastern Brooklyn up into Harlem and northern Manhattan, using the express tracks in Manhattan.

"**Take the 'A' Train**" was composed in 1939, after Ellington offered Strayhorn a job in his organization and gave him money to travel from Pittsburgh to New York.

Strayhorn had inquired of Duke what was the best way to get to Harlem when he got back to New York. He was told "Take the A train," a route of the recently opened Eighth Avenue subway line. This inspired him to use this line as the title of his composition. Strayhorn had also written a set of lyrics that were (wisely) omitted from this recording. Strayhorn was a great fan of Fletcher Henderson's arrangements. "One day, I was thinking about his style, the way he wrote for trumpets, trombones and saxophones, and I thought I would try something like that," Strayhorn recalled in Stanley Dance's *The World Of Duke Ellington*.

"The reason we gave it that title," Strayhorn explained, "was because they were building the Sixth Avenue subway at that time, and they added new trains, including the "D" Train, which came up to Harlem, to 145th Street, and then turned off and went to the Bronx, but the "A" Train kept straight on up to the 200-and-something Street. People got confused. They'd take the "D" Train, and it would go to Harlem and 145th Street, but the next stop would be in the Bronx. So I said I was writing directions – Take the "A" Train to Sugar Hill." While it conjures the sounds and noises of a modern New York subway express train dashing through the tunnels, changing tracks with shrieking brakes, and vanishing in the underground darkness, "Take the A Train" is not so much about a subway ride as about *movement*.

One of the bizarre music industry interruptions that became quite common in the 1940's began in December of 1940. Radio stations refused to play ASCAP songs because of a hike in per-play prices. Broadcast Music Inc. was formed by the radio stations to compete with ASCAP. Ellington's entire "book" was ASCAP, so in order to be heard on radio, he needed to write a whole new "book".

Strayhorn and Mercer Ellington were asked to accomplish this task quickly. With a bottle of blackberry wine between them, and a couple of cartons of cigarettes, they began writing furiously. Mercer wrote "Jumpin' Pumpkins", and Billy wrote "After All", "Clementine", "Chelsea Bridge", "Johnny Come Lately", "Rain Check", "A Flower is a Lovesome Thing", and "Passion Flower". During this writing marathon, Mercer noticed a crumpled manuscript in the garbage can. It was Billy's arrangement of "**Take The 'A' Train**". He had thrown it away thinking it sounded too much like Fletcher Henderson's formula. Mercer rescued it, and it was recorded in February of 1941 in Hollywood. It stayed on the charts for 7 weeks during that summer.

Although Strayhorn said he wrote lyrics for it, the recorded first lyrics were composed by or for the Delta Rhythm Boys. The lyrics used by the Ellington band were added by Joya Sherrill, who was 17 at the time (1944). She made up the words at her home in Detroit, while the song played on the radio. Her father, a noted Detroit Black Activist, set up a meeting with Ellington. Due to Joya's remarkable poise and singing ability and her unique take on the song, Ellington hired her as a vocalist and adopted her lyrics. The vocalist who most often performed the song with the Ellington band was trumpeter Ray Nance, who enhanced the lyrics with numerous choruses of scat singing. Nance is also responsible for the trumpet solo on the first recording, which was so well suited for the song that it has often been duplicated note for note by others.

"**Take the A Train**" was the first credited, full-fledged Strayhorn composition for the big band that was neither arranged by Ellington (unlike the earlier "Something to Live For" and "Your

Love Has Faded”), nor co-composed to a certain extent (as “Grievin’ or I’m Checking Out, Goom-Bye” had been). The song reportedly was composed late in 1938 or early in 1939, shortly after Strayhorn had first met his future employer, but the famous *arrangement* of “**Take the A Train**” must have been the most performed work by the Ellington orchestra. After Ellington adopted it in the fall of 1941 as the band’s signature theme (replacing “Sepia Panorama,” which was partly by Strayhorn). “**A Train**” opened and closed virtually every concert. The record also became one of Ellington’s biggest commercial successes, “a leitmotif of the swing era.”

With his “**A Train**,” Strayhorn contributed his share to the tradition of descriptive train pieces in American music. Based on the chordal structure of “Exactly Like You”, the song combines the propulsive swing of the 1940s-era Ellington band with the confident sophistication of Ellington and the black elite who inhabited Sugar Hill in Harlem. The tune is in AABA form, in the key of C, with each section being a lyric couplet.

According to Quincy Jones, “**Take The ‘A’ Train**” was the Holy Grail. It identifies a population. It identifies a lifestyle because it’s the Harlem Renaissance. It’s unbelievable. It covers everything – ant it says it all in 32 bars.” In 1999, National Public Radio included this song in the “NPR 100,” in which NPR’s music editors sought to compile the one hundred most important American musical works of the 20th century.

I. Billy Strayhorn^{4,5}

William Thomas "Billy" Strayhorn (November 29, 1915 – May 31, 1967) was an American composer, pianist and arranger, best known for his successful collaboration with bandleader and composer Duke Ellington lasting close to three decades. His compositions include "Chelsea Bridge", "Take the "A" Train" and "Lush Life".

Strayhorn was born in Dayton, Ohio. His family soon moved to the Homewood section of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. However, his mother's family was from Hillsborough, North Carolina, and she sent him there to protect him from his father's drunken sprees. Strayhorn spent many months of his childhood at his grandparents' house in Hillsborough. In an interview, Strayhorn said that his grandmother was his primary influence during the first ten years of his life, and where he first became interested in music, playing hymns on her piano and playing records on her Victrola record player.

Billy returned to Pittsburgh, and attended Westinghouse High School, later attended by Erroll Garner and Ahmad Jamal. In Pittsburgh, he began his musical career, studying classical music for a time at the Pittsburgh Music Institute, writing a high school musical, forming a musical trio that played daily on a local radio station, and, while still in his teens, composing (with lyrics) the songs "Life Is Lonely" (later renamed "Lush Life"), "My Little Brown Book", and "Something to Live For". While still in grade school, he worked odd jobs to earn enough money to buy his first piano. While in high school, he played in the school band, and studied under the same teacher who had earlier instructed jazz pianists Erroll Garner and Mary Lou Williams. By age 19 he was writing for a professional musical, *Fantastic Rhythm*.

Though classical music was Strayhorn's first love, his ambition to become a classical composer was shot down by the harsh reality of a black man trying to make it in the then-completely white classical world. Strayhorn was then introduced to the music of pianists like Art Tatum and Teddy Wilson at age 19. These musicians guided him into the realm of jazz where he remained for the rest of his life. His first jazz exposure was in a combo called the Mad Hatters who played around Pittsburgh.

Meeting With Duke Ellington

His reputation as a great arranger had spread among the musicians of Pittsburgh, and he was writing more scores for a variety of Swing bands. He worked at a drug store, and was often asked to play piano at the delivery destinations for an extra tip.

David Pearlman, a young pharmacy student who met Billy at the Pennfield Drug store, was aware of Billy's extraordinary talent. Pearlman was studying at the University of Pittsburgh's College of Pharmacy. In class, Pearlman sat next to George Greenlee, who was the Pharmacy school's first black student.

Greenlee's uncle, a wealthy man, who it was said had made his fortune hijacking beer trucks and running numbers rackets, owned Pittsburgh's Negro League baseball team, "The Crawfords". He also owned the ballpark, Greenlee Field, as well as two of Pittsburgh's best and busiest nightclubs, the Crawford Grill One and Crawford Grill Two.

Pearlman asked Greenlee if he would ask his uncle to introduce Billy to some big name musicians. Greenlee remembers "...I had never met this fellow Billy or heard him play. So I said, 'David, are you sure this guy is that good?' He said, 'Believe me'...it turned out that my uncle was having a big party that night for the band that was opening in town the following evening. I could set everything up at the party for this guy to meet the incoming bandleader, Duke Ellington. Otherwise, I'd have to wait a week and introduce him to the next bandleader, Basie." As soon as George Greenlee was introduced to Ellington, he alluded to Strayhorn; "Duke, a good friend of mine has written some songs, and we would like for you to hear them..." Duke told him to come backstage with his friend after the first show the following day.

George and Billy met at the theater the next day and went up to Ellington's large dressing room, which included a piano. Duke was reclining in a chair, while someone styled his hair. As the pair approached and introduced themselves, Duke never opened his eyes. He asked Billy to sit down at the piano and play.

Strayhorn sat down and announced in a calm voice that he would play a piece that Ellington had just performed in the show. He duped it perfectly, note for note. When he finished, he said just as calmly, "Now this is how I would play it." When he was finished, Ellington was standing behind him staring over his shoulder at the keyboard. Ellington asked his valet to go get Harry Carney, Johnny Hodges and Ivie Anderson. As the trio of Ellington veterans stood behind Billy at the keyboard, Duke asked him questions about his education and background.

Not quite sure what to do with him, Ellington "...had an idea for a lyric. He said: You go home and write a lyric for this,' and I did." According to van de Leur in his book "Something to Live For, The Music of Billy Strayhorn", "The lyric he referred to may be the one Strayhorn set to an earlier instrumental work credited to Ellington, *T.T. on Toast*, ... recorded by the orchestra December 19, 1938, twelve days after the two composers first met."

In his own account of the day, Leonard Feather reported that Strayhorn "ran over a few original tunes at the piano [at his first meeting with Ellington]. He couldn't leave them with Duke as they had never been written down. Duke was sufficiently impressed to invite Strayhorn to arrange one of them for the band."

Billy returned the following night with the completed work. He then penned arrangements of "Lonely Again" and later, wrote arrangements for his own tunes, "Lush Life" and "Something to Live For". His writing style is noticeably different from Ellington's, but he wrote with the personalities of the band in mind, writing the names of the band's soloists on the manuscripts. His Pittsburgh writing for such local bands as the "Moonlight Harbor Band" and Rex Edward's Orchestra had provided him with enough knowledge to seamlessly infuse his ideas into Ellington Orchestra arrangements. He wrote with the familiar Ellington concepts in mind, yet the music was his: unique, distinct, and appearing 'out of the blue' to the seasoned Ellington band.

Billy also penned an arrangement of the standard "Two Sleepy People", for which he was given twenty dollars. When he later brought it to the theatre, Ellington looked it over and then walked it right out on to the stage where it was performed. The enthusiastic response from the audience was another step in convincing Duke that he should hire Strayhorn.

Duke wrote down his address in New York City and gave it to Billy. Then the Ellington band left on a road tour. Billy went back to Pittsburgh, and the drug store counter. A month passed. Billy wrote Duke but received no reply.

Bill Esch had to make a trip to New York, and suggested Billy come along with him. Before leaving Pittsburgh, Billy looked at Duke's directions to his home in Harlem, and composed the song "**Take the "A" Train**" based on Duke's written instructions. He intended the song to be a greeting gift for Duke.

As they were preparing to leave for New York, Billy received a note from one of Duke's staff. He told Billy to meet up with the band in Philadelphia. He missed the band there, but caught up with it on its next stop in Newark, N.J. Billy went in through the stage door. He was taken to Duke, who was about to walk on stage for the next show. Ellington was standing in the wings.

"...He had about five or seven minutes before he went on, so we talked. Actually, he didn't say too much, and I didn't say too much. We were just kind of looking at each other. I was scared to death, and he wasn't, of course... Finally he said, "Well, it's really something that you arrived at this moment. Yes, because I just sent Jack Boyd (his manager) upstairs to look for your address and send for you."

"You don't have to, here I am." Strayhorn replied.

"I don't have any position for you", said Ellington, "You'll do whatever you feel like doing."

Ellington called on his son Mercer to arrange for Billy to stay at the local YMCA. Duke would pay his \$5.00 a day tab.

Billy went back to Pittsburgh to say goodbye to his friends and family, telling them about his new employer. He told his friend Ralph Koger that he was going to work for Duke, "I played that tune **"A' Train"** for him, and he liked it."

"Take the 'A' Train" was almost relegated to the wastebasket. In Stuart Nicholson's *Reminiscing in Tempo-A Portrait of Duke Ellington*, Mercer Ellington describes how he retrieved **"Take the 'A' Train"** from the garbage. Strayhorn had thrown it there claiming it was an old thing and too much like Fletcher Henderson.

In *The World of Duke Ellington* by Stanley Dance, Strayhorn claims the title is about choosing the 'A' train over the 'D' train. He said he kept hearing about Harlem bound housewives who took the 'D' train and ended up in the Bronx, as it only went as far as 145th Street before turning off. If you want to go to Sugar Hill, you need to take the 'A' train! Another account has the title "Take the 'A' Train" evolving out of directions Ellington gave Strayhorn on how to get to Ellington's Harlem apartment by subway.

Soon he was back in New York, but after only one night at the YMCA, Billy called Mercer and asked if he could come over to the seven-room Ellington apartment about a half mile away to learn more about Duke. Duke was out on tour at the time.

Ellington lived at 409 Edgecomb Ave. in the Sugar Hill district of Harlem. The building was atop a seven-story bluff overlooking the rest of the neighborhood and the Harlem River below. Duke lived with his sister Ruth, a biology student at Columbia, his lover Mildred Dixon, and son Mercer. Billy left the "Y" and walked over to the Ellington's.

After dinner they sat around comfortably talking and playing records. When it was time to go to sleep, everyone went to their rooms except Billy, who said he would just sleep on the couch. After that, Billy went back to the YMCA only to change clothes, and he finally just moved into Duke's apartment.

Years With Ellington

Strayhorn worked for Ellington for the next quarter century as an arranger, composer, occasional pianist and collaborator until his early death from cancer. As Ellington described him, "my right arm, my left arm, all the eyes in the back of my head, my brain waves in his head, and his in mine".

Strayhorn's relationship with Ellington was always difficult to pin down: Strayhorn was a gifted composer and arranger who seemed to flourish in Duke's shadow. Ellington was somewhat of a father figure and the band, by and large, was affectionately protective of the diminutive, mild-

mannered, unselfish Strayhorn, nicknamed by the band "Strays", "Weely", and "Swee' Pea". Ellington may have taken advantage of him, but not in the mercenary way that others had taken advantage of Ellington; instead, he used Strayhorn to complete his thoughts, while giving Strayhorn the freedom to write on his own and enjoy at least some of the credit he deserved. Though Duke Ellington took credit for much of Strayhorn's work, he did not maliciously drown out his partner. Ellington would make jokes onstage like, "Strayhorn does a lot of the work but I get to take the bows!"

Strayhorn composed the band's best known theme, "**Take the 'A' Train**", and a number of other pieces that became part of the band's repertoire. In some cases Strayhorn received attribution for his work such as, "Lotus Blossom", "Chelsea Bridge", and "Rain Check", while other such as "Day Dream" and "Something to Live For", were listed as collaborations with Ellington or in the case of "Satin Doll" and "Sugar Hill Penthouse" were credited to Ellington alone. Strayhorn also arranged many of Ellington's band-within-band recordings and provided harmonic clarity, taste, and polish to Duke's compositions. On the other hand, Ellington gave Strayhorn full credit as his collaborator on later, larger works such as "Such Sweet Thunder", "A Drum Is a Woman", "The Perfume Suite" and "The Far East Suite", where Strayhorn and Ellington worked closely together.

Detroit Free Press music critic Mark Stryker concludes that the work of Strayhorn and Ellington in *Anatomy of a Murder* is "indispensable, [although] . . . too sketchy to rank in the top echelon among Ellington-Strayhorn masterpiece suites like *Such Sweet Thunder* and *The Far East Suite*, but its most inspired moments are their equal." Film historians have recognized the soundtrack "as a landmark -- the first significant Hollywood film music by African Americans comprising non-diegetic music, that is, music whose source is not visible or implied by action in the film, like an on-screen band." The score avoided the cultural stereotypes which previously characterized jazz scores and rejected a strict adherence to visuals in ways that presaged the New Wave cinema of the '60s."

Shortly before Ellington went on his second European tour with his orchestra, from March to May 1939, Ellington announced to his sister Ruth and son Mercer, that Strayhorn "is staying with us". Through Mercer, Strayhorn met his first partner, African-American musician Aaron Bridgers, with whom Strayhorn lived until Bridgers moved to Paris in 1947.

Gay Activism and Legacy

Strayhorn was openly gay during an extremely homophobic era, Strayhorn participated in many civil rights causes, trying to correct this societal flaw before the movement gained momentum. As a committed friend to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., he arranged and conducted "King Fought the Battle of 'Bam'" for the Ellington Orchestra in 1963 for the historical revue *My People*, dedicated to Dr. King. Critics agree that his dedication to the gay movement was a contributing factor to him being so overlooked as an important musician. More attention was given to the fact that he was gay and black than to his genius as a pianist, composer, and arranger. For this reason, he long hid behind Ellington, letting the Duke take credit for much of his work.

Billy Strayhorn had a reputation for having an impact on many people he met because he had such a strong character. He had a major influence on the career of Lena Horne, who wanted to marry Strayhorn and considers him to have been the love of her life. He was well versed in classical music, and used his knowledge to improve her technique as a singer. They eventually recorded songs together. In the 1950s, Strayhorn left his musical partner Duke Ellington for a few years to pursue a solo career of his own. He came out with a few solo albums, revues for the Copasetics (a New York show-business society) and took on theater productions with his friend Luther Henderson. Strayhorn's compositions are known for the bittersweet sentiment, and classically infused designs that set him apart from Ellington.

Strayhorn was diagnosed with esophageal cancer in 1964, which eventually caused his death in 1967. Strayhorn finally succumbed in the early morning on May 31, 1967, in the company of his partner, Bill Grove. (It has often been falsely reported that Strayhorn died in Lena Horne's arms. By her own accounts, Horne was touring in Europe when she received the news of Strayhorn's death). His ashes were scattered in the Hudson River by a gathering of his closest friends. While in hospital, he had submitted his final composition to Ellington. "Blood Count" (originally "Blue Cloud") which was used as the first track to Ellington's memorial album for Strayhorn, *...And His Mother Called Him Bill*, recorded several months after Strayhorn's death. The last track of the album is a spontaneous solo version of "Lotus Blossom" performed by Ellington, who just sat at the piano and played for his friend while the band packed up after the formal end of the recording session (they can be heard in the background).

Strayhorn's arrangements had a tremendous impact on the Ellington band. Ellington always wrote for the personnel he had at the time, showcasing both the personalities and sound of soloists such as Johnny Hodges, Harry Carney, Ben Webster, Lawrence Brown and Jimmy Blanton, and drawing on the contrasts between players or sections to create a new sound for his band. Strayhorn brought a more linear, classically schooled ear to Ellington's works, setting down in permanent form the sound and structures that Ellington sought.

Strayhorn's own work, particularly his pieces written for Johnny Hodges on alto saxophone, often had a bittersweet, languorous flavor. Although Billy Strayhorn's distinguished songs, arrangements and virtuosity at the piano gave him status among musicians, few others realized what he had achieved for Ellington as his tireless co-writer and arranger. Fewer still appreciated that this generous, deferential man had created some of the most important and enduring American music of the 20th century.

III. Joya Sherrill⁶

Joya Sherrill worked with Duke Ellington for a short spell in 1942 and, after writing the lyrics to *Take the "A" Train*, joined his band in 1944. She married Richard Guilmenot in 1946. After four years with Ellington she became a solo singer but returned to the band to perform in the television program *A Drum is a Woman* (1956). Sherrill toured the USA in 1959, appearing in nightclubs and at army bases, then took an acting role in a Broadway play. She went to the USSR with Benny Goodman (1962), performed and recorded with Ellington in Chicago (1963), and

also recorded two albums as a leader (1960, 1965). Ellington had a high regard for Sherrill, whose diction and articulation he considered excellent.

IV. Kirby Shaw⁷

Kirby Shaw has made a major impact in choral music education and has shared his musical expertise in 45 states, Canada, Australia, the Bahamas, Sweden, the Netherlands, Italy and South Africa.

He has degrees in Music Education and Choral Composition from San Jose State University and a DMA degree in Choral Conducting from the University of Washington. Dr. Shaw's teaching is infused with a sense of humor and breadth of knowledge that is transmitted in an exciting and highly contagious manner.

Kirby taught in the Mt. Shasta public schools before joining the faculty at College of the Siskiyous in California where he founded and directed the innovative and highly acclaimed COS Vocal Jazz Ensemble. He also directed similar groups at Colorado State University and The University of Missouri—Kansas City and is now directing the Jefferson State Choral Coalition at Southern Oregon University.

Kirby has scatted one-on-one with such notables as Bobby McFerrin, Al Jarreau, Chris Calloway, Jon Hendricks (who once told Kirby... 'Man, you don't make mistakes!'), Mark Murphy, legendary guitar player Joe Beck and alto saxophonist Brandon Fields. He has overseen the creation of hundreds of educational recordings, 5 college-university albums and 2 solo albums.

Kirby is a member of Just 4 Kicks, a four man *a cappella* ensemble specializing in Jazz. A composer/arranger with over 2,500 choral arrangements/compositions in print, Kirby's music is sung around the world and has sold nearly 20 million copies. His most recent commission is for The Mormon Tabernacle Choir. This creative and prolific output has resulted in numerous ASCAP awards.

Kirby and his wife, Markita have written an original musical based on Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* entitled "SCROOGICAL," soon to be presented at a quality theater near you! Kirby, his wife, Markita and their lick-your-face-off pound puppy, Solomon, live in a forest high above Southern Oregon's Rogue Valley.

Audio Links and Discography

Select YouTubes

Duke Ellington Band

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nrisYOEpADY&feature=related>

Billy Strayhorn with Duke Ellington Band

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tjc7mu9leYw>

Delta Rhythm Boys

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KG9htI6yzSs>

Ella Fitzgerald (Scat Version)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhK-zYfFsIY&NR=1>

Gay Men's Chorus of Los Angeles

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pa26IsZJV7E>

Arhus Girl's Choir (In Danish!)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3sjLGOT5-Ug>

Bacon Academy Jazz Choir

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8vngesfhTg>

Short Bio of Billy Strayhorn

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPBeTUw5c4>

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If you subscribe to iTunes, BuyMusic, Rhapsody or a similar service, keyword in "Take the 'A' Train" where you can listen to a sample from each artist, and then purchase/download the song for 99 cents. Or, you can listen to a sample from *Select MP3 Downloads* below, which are cuts from CD Albums - then purchase/download the song for 99 cents.

Duke Ellington Band

<http://www.amazon.com/Take-Train-1999-Remastered/dp/B00137TXPC/>

Billy Strayhorn

<http://www.amazon.com/Take-The-A-Train/dp/B0017E6N7C/>

Betty Roche with Duke Ellington Band

<http://www.amazon.com/Take-The-A-Train/dp/B0013CZXNS/>

Ella Fitzgerald

<http://www.amazon.com/Take-The-A-Train/dp/B000WQZU0M/>

References:

The above article about the song “Take The ‘A’ Train” was extracted from these websites. Additional references are also given. For more information, please read the articles:

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- ¹ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Take_the “A”_Train](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Take_the_“A”_Train)
 - ² <http://www.jazzsight.com/jazzsightprofiles.html>
 - ³ <http://tinyurl.com/dlqbel>
 - ⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billy_Strayhorn
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