

**Billy Strayhorn's *Four Freedoms***  
**(From Duke Ellington's "Eulogy for Swee' Pea")**

- He demanded freedom of expression and lived in what we consider the most important and moral of freedoms: *freedom from hate*, unconditionally.
  
- *Freedom from self-pity* (even throughout all the pain and bad news).
  
- *Freedom from fear* of possibly doing something that might help another more than it might help himself.
  
- *Freedom from the kind of pride* that would make a man feel he was better than his brother or neighbor.

## 101. Ellington: "Eulogy for Swee' Pea" (1967)

**B**illy Strayhorn's death on 31 May 1967 affected Ellington profoundly. Soon after receiving the news he wrote a brief tribute to his friend and alter-ego; it was later included with other reflections on Strayhorn in *Music Is My Mistress*.<sup>1</sup>

A musical response followed in the form of *And His Mother Called Him Bill*,<sup>2</sup> an all-Strayhorn album by the Ellington orchestra recorded in August and September of 1967. At the end of the last recording session Ellington played Strayhorn's *Lotus Blossom* unaccompanied at the piano, in a gesture at once elegiac and affirming.

Poor little Swee' Pea, Billy Strayhorn, William Thomas Strayhorn, the biggest human being who ever lived, a man with the greatest courage, the most majestic artistic stature, a highly skilled musician whose impeccable taste commanded the respect of all musicians and the admiration of all listeners.

His audiences at home and abroad marveled at the grandeur of his talent and the mantle of tonal supremacy that he wore only with grace. He was a beautiful human being, adored by a wide range of friends, rich, poor, famous, and unknown. Great artists pay homage to Billy Strayhorn's God-given ability and mastery of his craft.

Because he had a rare sensitivity and applied himself to his gifts, Billy Strayhorn successfully married melody, words, and harmony, equating the fitting with happiness. His greatest virtue, I think, was his honesty, not only to others but to himself. His listening-hearing self was totally intolerant of his writing-playing self when or if any compromise was expected, or considered expedient.

He spoke English perfectly and French very well, but condescension did not enter into his mind. He demanded freedom of expression and lived in what we consider the most important and moral of freedoms: freedom from hate, unconditionally; freedom from self-pity (even throughout all the pain and bad news); freedom from fear of possibly doing something that might help another more than it might help himself; and freedom from the kind of pride that could make a man feel he was better than his brother or neighbor.

His patience was incomparable and unlimited. He had no aspirations to enter into any kind of competition, yet the legacy he leaves, his *oeuvre*, will never be less than the ultimate on the highest plateau of culture (whether by comparison or not).

God bless Billy Strayhorn.

Source: Duke Ellington, "Eulogy for Swee' Pea," written 31 May or 1 June 1967, published in *Down Beat* (13 July 1967), 11. Reprinted in *MM*, 159-60.

<sup>1</sup> *MM*, 156-62.

<sup>2</sup> RCA LSP-3906, reissued on the Bluebird CD 6287-2-RB13.

*From the Duke Ellington Reader*