

**DUKE ELLINGTON  
BILLY STRAYHORN**

*piano duets*

with **JOE SHULMAN** bass

TONK  
JOHNNY COME LATELY

IN A BLUE SUMMER GARDEN  
GREAT TIMES



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## Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn

on two pianos, with Joe Shulman, bass

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There is no more remarkable association of talents in jazz than that existing between Duke Ellington (born 1899) and Billy Strayhorn (born 1915). The most comparable to it is that of King Oliver (born 1885) and Louis Armstrong (born 1900), when the genius of maturity and of youth were similarly allied.

Strayhorn was first introduced to Duke in December, 1938, backstage at the Stanley Theatre, Pittsburgh. He ran over a few of his songs at the piano and Duke was impressed, particularly by the lyrics. The following February, he took up Duke's invitation and went to New York, where in a very short time he was firmly installed as an important part of the Ellington *ménage*. One of his songs that appealed immediately was "Something to Live For", and soon it was recorded with vocal by Jean Eldridge and arrangement by Duke. That was just the beginning. It was as though a pact of mutual assistance had been signed. From then on Strayhorn was involved in all manner of Ellington enterprises. He did arrangements for the small bands led by such famous musicians as Johnny Hodges and Cootie Williams, and he frequently took Duke's place at the piano on their recording sessions. His composition, "Day Dream", was one of Hodges' greatest successes. Travelling and living with the band, he studied Duke's work with such intent affection that he came to write for the band more like Duke than anyone had ever managed to before. From collaboration with Duke, it was no long step to the creation of his own brilliant instrumentals like "Take the 'A' Train", "Chelsea Bridge", "Clementine", "Rainecheck", "Johnny Come Lately", "Mid-

riff" and "Esquire Swank". These were originals in the true sense of the word, but they were also full of Ellington spontaneity, character and colour, and made to measure for his band of stars.

So close grew the collaboration that it became difficult for any but the most intimate to know what was by Duke or what was by Swce' Pea, to use the nickname bestowed on Strayhorn by the band's hip Toby Hardwick. Inevitably, perhaps, Strayhorn's personality was overshadowed by that of Duke, but it remained distinct and vitally contributory. His fame spread amongst the cognoscenti. Lena Horne became his warm admirer, King Cole recorded his "Lush Life", and "great times" ensued.

One of the recreations of Duke and Strayhorn is duetting at the piano, when ideas are tossed back and forth, reshaped and developed. At such interchanges, the foundations of subsequent orchestral works may be laid, or the two pianists may merely enjoy themselves, "have themselves a ball". These recordings provide examples of such activities. There is a thoughtful exploration of "Johnny Come Lately", which the full band recorded in 1941, with brilliant Tatum-like treble runs by Strayhorn and the customary commanding bass by Duke. The other three compositions are all relatively new. "Tonk" is gay, uninhibited in a quasi-stride style. The evocative "In a Blue Summer Garden" quickly creates a mood. "Great Times" swings handsomely with Strayhorn sailing serenely over a driving figure by Duke:

Piano duets are uncommon in jazz. These piano duets, uncommon in their idens, are also unique in their *entente*.  
STANLEY DANCE.

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