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(Duet: Joe Henderson/Gregory Hutchinson)
- 8 **Drawing Room Blues** 7:33
(Trio: Joe Henderson/Stephen Scott/Christian McBride)
- 9 **U.M.M.G. (Upper Manhattan Medical Group)** 5:00
(Quintet: Joe Henderson/Wynton Marsalis/Stephen Scott/
Christian McBride/Gregory Hutchinson)
- 10 **Lush Life** 4:57
(Solo: Joe Henderson)

Produced by Richard Seidel and Don Sickler

Joe Henderson
tenor saxophone

Wynton Marsalis
trumpet

Stephen Scott
piano

Christian McBride
bass

Gregory Hutchinson
drums

All compositions by
Billy Strayhorn
except Isfahan,
by Duke Ellington
and Billy Strayhorn
Music Transcriptions:
Don Sickler
Arrangements of 1,6,8
by Don Sickler
All compositions:
Tempo Music Inc./ASCAP
Wynton Marsalis appears
courtesy of
Columbia Records.

Though nothing in an art as delicately based on improvisation and collective chemistry as jazz can be expected to automatically go from the initial idea to the superb artifact, this is one of those occasions when it all worked out perhaps better than anyone expected. Where everyone assumed bringing Joe Henderson together with Wynton Marsalis, Stephen Scott, Christian McBride and Greg Hutchinson would result in a very fine recording, it is doubtful that anyone thought that what is perhaps a masterpiece would be the result of stirring these souls together in a repertoire of Billy Strayhorn compositions. Here we find Joe Henderson at a point of extraordinary expressive clarity, sparked by -- and inspiring! -- young men who have either been at the front of the game for a number of years now or who have come to represent by their very youth the vitality that the music now exhibits through the work of its fresh faces. One can hear the undeniable command of sound from one player to the next, can notice how each performance sits right down in the rhythm and becomes progressively radiant with swing or song or both, and as telling as anything else is the overall feeling that this set of pieces contains essential aspects of the splendor of the art at its finest.

For nearly thirty years, Henderson has possessed his own sound and has developed his own angles on swing, melody, timbre and harmony, while constantly expanding his own skill at playing in uncommon meters and rhythms. In his playing you hear an imposing variety of harmonic, rhythmic and melodic choices; you also hear his personal appropriation of the technical victories for his instrument achieved by men such as Sonny Stitt, Stan Getz, Sonny Rollins, Warne Marsh, Paul Gonsalves, Johnny Griffin and John Coltrane. His, then, is a style

informed by enormous sophistication, not limited by insufficient study or dependence on eccentric clichés brought into action for the purpose of masking the lack of detailed authority. In this tenor playing there's a relaxation in face of options that stretch from Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young and Charlie Parker to all of the substantial innovations since. So the music of Joe Henderson contains all of the components that make jazz so unique and so influential woven together with the sort of feeling, imagination, soul and technical authority that do the art proud.

Given Henderson's intriguing and sublimely rounded virtuosity, the idea of an album devoted to the music of Billy Strayhorn was an exceptional one. Though most commonly famous for his work with Duke Ellington over nearly a thirty year stretch from 1939 to his death in 1967, Strayhorn has taken on an identity of his own as a composer with the passage of years, primarily because so many musicians working in so many different contexts have been attracted to his work. Strayhorn's compositions are as demanding as they are lyrical and they have offered various musicians opportunities to move through a singular but far from alienated universe of skill and feeling. It doesn't matter whether the given piece is a ballad or a blues, sensually insinuates its way into the listener's ear or stands up joyously dancing to beat the band, each helps provide an overall sound on this recording that is consistently expressive of a particularly gifted composer's sensibility.

"This is the first time I've ever done a record date of just one person's music," says Henderson. "I haven't even done that with my own music. But Strayhorn has just got such a wealth of music out there that you can make a good album by just focusing on what he had to say with that golden pen of his. I mean this man was somebody you couldn't take for

granted. This was a man who came to the table fully prepared. He always provided a beautiful set of chord changes put together in a way that gives the improviser wonderful things to roam around in. So just having the opportunity to work with this man's music was a pleasure in itself.

"Another thing that makes me happy about this recording is the way things are varied from track to track. The variety of the compositions is approached in a variety of situations - solos, duos, trios, quartets and five pieces. So in this situation, my work becomes the unifying factor. That means that there are only two things that are consistent in this session - my sound and Billy Strayhorn's. Nothing else can be taken for granted. You might get a tune approached by any of the the possible combinations you can get from five musicians. And by the end of the record, it's just me and *Lush Life*, which, by the way, if things were mapped out and put in their proper perspective, would have to be in the circle of whatever you wanted to bring out here as the most beautiful tune ever written. Now there might be some tunes that I missed that might qualify for the prize more than *Lush Life*, but there is no way possible that it wouldn't make it to the finals."

Henderson was also very insightful about the meaning of having so many younger players who have not been duped into missing the weights of an aesthetic that one has to keep lifting if being in good artistic shape is the goal.

"You see, in the old days, it seemed that every year some youngster would come to New York and terrorize the scene. Everything would be going along just fine and then this young demon would turn up with something everybody had to sit down and pay attention to. But, for a while that wasn't happening. Something had disappeared from the

music. It started about twenty years ago. You not only had gotten to the point where all of those beautiful songs had x's drawn through them, but then you had this other kind of stuff that really didn't challenge a serious musician, and which I had no interest in whatsoever. So I just went right along with what I had spent all those years learning how to do. There was a dry spell of about ten years. Around 1980, things started changing for the better, but nobody knew if that was going to keep happening. As it turns out, it wasn't a mirage. Now I look around and there are all of these young musicians coming up who have their heads on right and are focused on a zone that will benefit themselves as musicians and will benefit the listener who is out there seeking some quality."

So we have a program of timeless American music performed by one of the greatest tenor players in the history of the instrument, aided and abetted by musicians who have in common vast talent and the experience of being ushered into the aesthetic by masters. Henderson's position in music is clear from no more than his classic melody statement of *Blood Count* or the improvisation on *Drawing Room Blues* or the swing of *Johnny Come Lately* or the sustained invention of *Rain Check*. Few are in his class and he shares with the young musicians assembled here a career that began with masters. Marsalis was brought out here by Art Blakey; Scott and Hutchinson worked with Betty Carter, who is one of the music's finest talent scouts and encouragers; and McBride has been embraced by Freddie Hubbard and many others since he arrived in New York. Together, these musicians provide us with the sort of timeless vitality we always seek when we go out looking or listening for art. The levels of lyricism, of blues, of swing, of rhythmic fluidity and surprise define this as a signal achievement.

"You can do anything if you have musicians who have done enough homework, which all of these musicians definitely have in common," says Henderson. "Wynton Marsalis, for instance, has come into his own and those who went to sleep a few years back when they thought he was getting praise out of proportion to his capabilities will wake up and find out they had better rearrange their definitions. This young man was definitely in great form on this date. Listen to him on *Johnny Come Lately*. When you hear that, there is no question about what's going on with him. The way Wynton and I were phrasing and blending on the lines reminded me of the way Kenny Dorham and I used to get inside some music to the point that there was one sound, not two different sounds. There's the way we play together on *A Flower Is A Lovesome Thing*. Now that's the way I always want a ballad to sound on a recording of mine. We get the feeling in the melody and there's a very unusual continuity in our improvisation. For those who think Wynton's already made too much noise, they had better get ready for this next stage because he's done what he needs to do to live up to whatever you want to say about him in a positive direction."

Henderson is no less taken by the rest of the band -- pianist Stephen Scott, bassist Christian McBride and drummer Greg Hutchinson. "What I like about each one of them is that I could play with them in any formation and it would come off. I could play with one of them or two of them or three of them or all of them with Wynton and something musical was within the city limits. Nobody ended up somewhere without a map and no awareness of the language. It's just a wonderful thing to hear these young guys play right now! Stephen Scott is definitely going to be somebody it will be well worth your while to pay attention to because he's got something strong at this very moment

and isn't afraid to study. I knew that when I made his record date, *Something To Consider*. Chris McBride is probably the strongest and best prepared young bass player I have heard since the young Paul Chambers joined Miles Davis. He comes ready and he's not even twenty. He's playing in tune all through every piece, he knows his chords, he has imagination and he doesn't stop swinging. He's got the instrument under control from any way you come at it, plucking or bowing. Greg is another one. Listen to him on the duet on *Take The "A" Train*. There's a perfect example of what's going on now and what Billy Strayhorn is about. Here is a tune that nobody who plays jazz doesn't know and hasn't played who knows how many times. So here we have two musicians thirty years apart in age and we have this piece of music in common. Strayhorn gets rid of the generation gap immediately. In fact, there is none. And the tune is so strong that if you respect it and respect your own individuality, nothing goes wrong. I don't want to sound egotistical, but I have to say that I'm very proud of this recording and that I feel much better about the future of jazz when I hear young musicians like these playing this well and taking the art this seriously." Joe Henderson is right to feel so good about this date, for it is one of the best we have heard for a long time and might be one of not only a grand moment for Joe Henderson and his fellow players, it is a grand moment in the story of an art prevailing through adversity in the way any art must -- by hard work, courage and faith in the revelations of the human soul.

STANLEY CROUCH



Notes On The Compositions

1

ISFAHAN: Written for Johnny Hodges, this piece was inspired by the beauty of this Persian city and was written by Strayhorn after his return from the Duke Ellington band's tour of Iran in 1963. Also known as Elf. The original studio recording was not made until December 20, 1966 for RCA Victor as part of Ellington's "Far East Suite."

2

JOHNNY COME LATELY: Also known as Stomp; the first recording in Chicago on June 26, 1942, featured the trombones of Tricky Sam Nanton and Lawrence Brown.

3

BLOOD COUNT: One of Strayhorn's last compositions. He completed the version used for a Carnegie Hall

appearance by Duke Ellington on March 26, 1967 from his hospital bed and had the score sent down to the rehearsal. This version was subsequently released on Pablo Records and was the first recording made of the title by Duke. Also a feature for Johnny Hodges.

4

RAIN CHECK: Written in Los Angeles on a rainy day, it was recorded in Hollywood on December 2, 1941 and featured Juan Tizol, Ben Webster and the composer himself on piano.

5

LOTUS BLOSSOM: Duke has said that this was the piece that Billy most enjoyed listening to him play. Its first performance was by Duke's trio on January 4, 1962 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Its original recording was for RCA Victor on August 30, 1967 as a piano solo by Duke and during the same sessions on September 1, 1967, as a duet of Duke and baritone saxophonist Harry Carney.

6

A FLOWER IS A LOVESOME THING: The first recording of this rare piece by Strayhorn was on a Johnny Hodges small band recording for Sunrize Records in 1949.

7

TAKE THE "A" TRAIN: The most famous of all of Strayhorn's compositions. The first commercial recording was done for RCA Victor on February 14, 1941. The Victor recording has remained the most popular in large part because of the trumpet solos by Rex Stewart and Ray Nance, which are still being copied by trumpet players today. Strayhorn patterned his writing for this composition on the style of Fletcher Henderson, whom he greatly admired.

8

DRAWING ROOM BLUES: Created by Duke and Billy during an intermission at RCA Victor's "Esquire Jazz Album" session on January 10, 1949. Duke and Billy were killing time with some ad libbing which so excited the musicians present, that it was decided to record them. Strayhorn sat at the piano and played twelve bars, then slid away as Duke edged in at the keyboard and took over for twelve bars. They alternated in this manner for five choruses.

9

UPPER MANHATTAN MEDICAL GROUP: Originally recorded by the Duke Ellington Orchestra to feature trumpeter Willie Cook in February of 1956. This composition is dedicated to Duke's doctor and longtime friend, Dr. Arthur Logan.

10

LUSH LIFE: Ironically it is only just recently that we have been able to hear the version of *Lush Life* which Duke's band used in the late 40's. The orchestration, featuring a vocal by Day Davis, has recently been issued on compact disc from Duke's November 13, 1948 Carnegie Hall concert. This was one of the first pieces Strayhorn played for Duke at their initial December 1938 meeting in Pittsburgh. Of all the compositions Strayhorn played for Duke at that meeting, *Lush Life* was not Duke's favorite for he was most impressed with *Something To Live For*. It took Nat Cole and Pete Rugolo to establish this great Strayhorn composition as a pop standard when they recorded it for Capitol Records on March 29, 1949. Since then, of course, it has been recorded many times, most notably by John Coltrane in 1958, and again by Coltrane with Johnny Hartman in 1963. Strayhorn recorded the piece himself for United Artists in an album entitled "The Peaceful Side." There also exists among collectors a version from Basin Street East featuring the composer singing and playing his own composition. Strayhorn has said that *Lush Life* never had a title when it was written and that he happened to call it *Lush Life* because that was the line that everybody remembered.

DEAN PRATT

Digitally recorded, mixed and mastered by Rudy Van Gelder
Recorded September 3,6,8, 1991 at Van Gelder Studios, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.
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Production Assistant: Camille Tominaro

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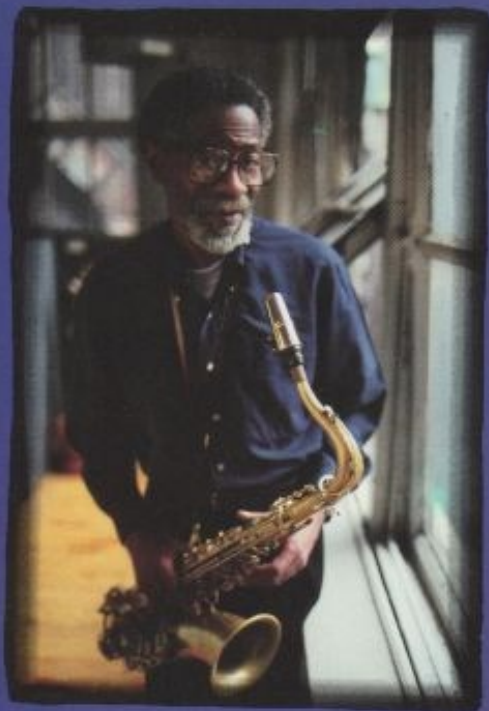
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JOE HENDERSON LUSH LIFE

The Music of Billy Strayhorn



Produced by Richard Seidel and Don Sickler

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