

Famous LGBT African-Americans



Billy Strayhorn

Today, historians and scholars agree that Billy Strayhorn remains one of the most under-recognized American composers in history. Born in 1915, Strayhorn chose to live openly as a gay black man. It was perhaps this decision—and his lifelong devotion to Ellington—which contributed to his near anonymity as a major American composer. Ironically, Strayhorn is the composer of many of the world's most defining and recognizable jazz standards. While Ellington is arguably the most influential and celebrated jazz composer of the 20th century, Strayhorn is only now receiving recognition.

Strayhorn was openly gay during a highly homophobic era. He was active in civil rights before it became a popular cause. Yet, as courageous as he could be, Strayhorn found it a challenge to receive a fair share of the unique musical achievements and the considerable profits he helped to generate. On the surface, their partnership seemed perfect. Ellington's ebullient charm led him instinctively to the spotlight, while writers speculated that Strayhorn shied from a more public role, both to maintain his privacy and to avoid being persecuted for his homosexuality. Recent scholarship, however, challenges this assumption, asserting that Strayhorn lived an openly gay life and deeply enjoyed concert performances.