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Press Release

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IMMEDIATE

MTA Music Under New York Celebrates Centennial of Billy Strayhorn in Collaboration with Jazz at Lincoln Center, New York Transit Museum

Performers from MTA MUSIC, Jazz at Lincoln Center Pay Homage to 'Take the A Train' Composer

On the centennial of Billy Strayhorn's birth, MTA Music Under New York (MTA MUSIC) collaborated on a day of musical performances to celebrate the jazz composer's legacy with the help of Jazz at Lincoln Center and the New York Transit Museum.


The homage to Strayhorn on Sunday, November 29, was planned as a surprise to holiday customers, with special performances by the Donald Malloy Quartet from the MTA MUSIC roster and the Evan Sherman Entourage at the invitation of Jazz at Lincoln Center. It kicked off at the 145 St station, where musicians played a medley of Strayhorn compositions, then followed his directions: "You must get on the A train!" and stepped aboard a special  train with seven cars from the era when Strayhorn composed "Take the A Train."


Strayhorn, whose nickname was Sweet Pea, was born on Nov. 29, 1915, in Dayton, Ohio, and lived in Pittsburgh before he moved to New York City in 1939 to take a job with Duke Ellington. The special event with the MTA is among celebrations worldwide to celebrate the man who created the Duke Ellington Orchestra's signature tune. The song, written in 1939, was inspired by Ellington's directions for Strayhorn on how to get to his new job in the Sugar Hill section of Harlem in northern Manhattan.




"If you are familiar with the jazz standard 'Take the A Train', then you know something about not only Duke Ellington, but also about Billy 'Sweet Pea' Strayhorn," said Wynton Marsalis, Managing and Artistic Director of Jazz at Lincoln Center. "Strayhorn became essential to the Duke Ellington Band; arranging, composing, and playing the piano. Strayhorn was a genius. In 1999, we played 'Take The A Train' on the train with musicians from MTA's Music Under New York program. It's time to swing the A train once again with the MTA. We celebrate the centennial of Mr. Strayhorn by saluting one of the most meaningful compositions in the jazz canon, as we also salute our public transit system."

Customers who boarded the train were treated to performances by the two bands, which alighted at 59 St-Columbus Circle and together performed on that station's mezzanine level. The bands continued the performance as they headed up to Dizzy's Club Coca Cola at Jazz at Lincoln Center, where planned one-night-only celebrations featuring MTA MUSIC performers Sunnyside Social Club and Underground Horns, and the Evan Sherman Entourage were scheduled for 7:30 p.m. and 9:30 p.m. A free livestream of the Dizzy's shows is available at jazz.org/live.

"We are absolutely thrilled to celebrate Billy Strayhorn's music in the subway since his composition, 'Take the A train,' serves as a soundtrack of sorts for millions of strap hangers and Strayhorn's soulful jazz is rooted in the New York experience," said Sandra Bloodworth, Director of MTA Arts & Design. "What better way to celebrate his centennial than by playing and enjoying his music at the source of his inspiration. We owe many thanks to local artist and jazz fan Cliff Robinson for initiating this celebration, our friends at Jazz at Lincoln Center for making this event possible and our partners at the New York Transit Museum."

The New York Transit Museum provided the nostalgia  train comprising seven R1/9 cars that are stored on the platform level at the downtown Brooklyn museum. The cars were first used on the city-owned Independent Subway System (IND), which began service in 1932. IND cars measured 60 feet in length and 10 feet wide, and had rattan seats, paddle ceiling fans, incandescent light bulbs and roll signs.

Included in this special nostalgia train was the R100, also known as the City Car, which was the first one constructed for the IND in 1930 and is the ancestor of the modern  train car. The R1/9 cars were retired from passenger service in 1977. Additional information on the cars is available in the fact sheet for the New York Transit Museum that is included in this packet.

The nostalgia train began its journey at 145 St on the Eighth Avenue Line, which was the first portion of the IND to open for service on Sept. 10, 1932. The station also opened for service on that day in 1932, and the Eighth Avenue Line had been in service for just seven years at the time Ellington directed Strayhorn to take the  to Sugar Hill. In 1932, the  train ran express from 207 St to what is now the World Trade Center station, while the AA train ran local between 168 St and Chambers St. That route was later renamed the K, then became the  train in 1988. By 1939, the Eighth Avenue Line had been extended south and into Brooklyn.

"Take the A Train" became the signature tune of Ellington's band and a major hit. Strayhorn's other well-known compositions include "Chelsea Bridge," "Something to Live For," and "Lush Life," as well as the 12-movement work "Such Sweet Thunder" that he co-wrote with Ellington. They worked together until the 1950s. Strayhorn died of cancer in 1967.