



## Episode 712, Story 1: Duke Ellington Plates

Tukufu: Our first story examines metal fragments which may record a pivotal moment in jazz history. 1941, Manhattan bustles, and New York City's newest subway line - the "A" train - is moving people in more ways than one. A new instrumental "*Take the 'A' Train*," rolls up the charts and will become the signature song of pianist Edward Kennedy Ellington. The song will bring financial success to a pioneering music publishing venture, owned by Duke Ellington. But was the young composer of "*Take the 'A' Train*" himself denied full credit for the hit song? More than half a century later, Garfield Gillings, of Brooklyn, New York, has made a discovery, one that may take us to the moment of creation of this celebrated piece of American music.

Garfield: I kept feeling these hard objects beneath the paper.

Tukufu: Hey, how you doing?

Gillings: Hey, how you doing? Pretty good. Come on in.

Tukufu: So what you got for me, man?

Garfield: I don't know what it is but I think it's pretty important. I think these might be plates to "*Take the 'A' Train*".

Tukufu: Are you a musician?

Garfield: No, but I'm a big duke Ellington fan.



Tukufu: Garfield tells me he knows "*Take the 'A' Train*" was Ellington's theme song, and that it was written by his long-time collaborator, Billy Strayhorn. These are cool. Where'd you get 'em?

Garfield: I actually found these in a dumpster up in Harlem.

Tukufu: What were you doing looking in a dumpster?

Garfield: Well, I'm a dumpster diver by nature.

Tukufu: How long they been with you?

Garfield: Over twenty years.

Tukufu: What question do you have for me?

Garfield: Well, I want to know what's the historical significance of these plates. Are they the originals? You know, I've had them so long I just feel like I need some closure.

Tukufu: Now, do you mind if I just sit here for a minute and, uh, check 'em out?

Garfield: No problem. No problem. Okay.

Tukufu: Thanks. Now, "*Take the 'A' Train*" is a classic jazz song. Duke Ellington is known for it. I've never seen plates like this before. They look like something you'd put on a printing press and



just pump out a lot of copies. I can see what might be ink caked into the recessed engravings. Everything is written backwards. There's nothing on here who printed it, who may have published this thing or anything like copyright. Edward Kennedy Ellington was born in Washington, DC, in 1899. His middle class family emphasized manner and dress, leading to the nickname "the Duke." Ellington embraced the new forms of jazz and blues music that were springing up across the country. At 14, he composed his first tune, a ragtime number. For the young "Duke", the sounds of Dixieland, ragtime, and big band music were all tributaries that fed an extraordinary river of creativity. He called it, simply, "American music." Listen to what Duke Ellington has to say about jazz, "it is my firm belief that what is still known as jazz is going to play a considerable part in the serious music of the future." In 1923 the young musician landed in New York at the height of the Harlem renaissance. An explosion in art, music and literature were under way. Two men were instrumental in Ellington's success. One was the music agent and publisher Irving Mills. Another was pianist and composer Billy Strayhorn, who Ellington met in 1938, and who composed "*Take the 'A' Train*" the following year. This gives us a sense of the significance of "*Take the 'A' Train*". "This compelling dance number became a big hit and Ellington adopted it as his orchestra's signature tune from 1941 until the end of his life." If these are plates from the period, they are significant. But I'm not clear why there is no copyright information on them. I'm meeting printing historian Frank Romano at the Vandeb Editions Studios in New York City.

Frank: What you have here are intaglio plates for music typesetting. And it would have taken a skilled craftsman a day or more to produce just one of these.

Tukufu: Today, music is typeset by computer. Frank says only a handful of hobbyists still engrave this way.



Frank: They actually engraved into these plates, the notes, the staffs, the type. And they had to do all of it backwards. You have here a very rare form of this craft.

Tukufu: So how would you print these? Would you just punch out a lot of copies?

Frank: No, they only made one copy. They made one perfect print.

Tukufu: Frank shows me how the plates were part one of a multi-step process.

Frank: I'd like to introduce Marjorie.

Mills: So I'm going to very lightly clean the plate with alcohol, ink the plate up with etching ink and it's ready to print. So I'm putting the plate down on the press bed, placing dampened paper over the plate and running it through the press.

Tukufu: Can we print the other pages? Frank explains how the copy produced from the plates was photographed to make a negative that was then transferred to a high speed printing press. This song is a major song. Why isn't there any copyright information on there?

Frank: Copyright notices might change; the location of the office might change. They would create small pieces of film and those small pieces of film would then be assembled. That process in the printing industry is called stripping.

Tukufu: So exactly when were these plates made?



Frank: These are plates from the Museum of Printing in North Andover, Massachusetts and they're very typical of the plates that you have and they would be dated from about 1939 to about 1944.

Tukufu: That means our plates were likely made during the war, when the dance tune was taking America by storm. In their own way, Frank explains, Garfield's zinc and lead plates dodged a bullet. Both metals were in short supply and needed for war materials.

Frank: Most of this metal would have been recycled, and so for these plates to have been preserved for this long is amazing.

Tukufu: With no copyright, I'm still in the dark about exactly who made these. I'm taking my prints to Harlem. I've been invited to ride the original A train to celebrate what would've been Duke's 110th birthday. How cool is this? Listening to "*Take the 'A' Train*" on the A train. Loren Schoenberg is the Director of the National Jazz Museum in Harlem. Let me lay this stuff out for you because I really want you to take a look at it. So is this the same music that Duke Ellington would've played from?

Loren: No, no, no. This is the music that you would use to play the piano at home or with your little local band.

Tukufu: At the time, Loren explains, publishing popular music for home use was a big business. Music distributed to Ellington's band members, would look very different.



Loren: This is a manuscript as Duke Ellington actually wrote it for his band. This is like algebra and this is like two and two equals four. Because here you have at least 5, 6, 7, 8 notes at one time.

Tukufu: So what is it that made "*Take the 'A' Train*" such a historic and major song?

Loren: A train was a new train in New York City to bring people from downtown right to the center of Harlem. When you hear that theme song, with that driving rhythm and the melody and the bup-ba-ba boop boo-boo, it's kind of exciting.

Tukufu: Loren explains how in 1941 Ellington was at a crossroad in his career. He faced stiff competition from a new sound in jazz. It was called swing.

Loren: My ex-boss Benny Goodman came in and everybody thought that he had invented that kind of music and Ellington was thought to be old hat. But then in the late 1930s and early 1940s an explosion happened. Some people came in, the saxophone player named Ben Webster, bass player named Jimmy Blanton and, the guy who wrote your tune, Mr. Billy Strayhorn of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Tukufu: Ellington had given Strayhorn directions for how to get to Harlem when he came to New York.

Loren: So he said you write some music and Strayhorn wrote it Ellington style. And that's where this baby came in.



Tukufu: In his first composition for Duke, Strayhorn had captured Ellington's style and infused it with his own genius for melody and lyricism.

Loren: I think it's fair to say that when you hear "*Take the 'A' Train*" with that melody and that driving rhythm you're also hearing the new Ellington.

Tukufu: Loren explains how "*Take the 'A' Train*" became the musical engine that powered Duke's independent publishing venture, Tempo Music Company. So this marks a real big change in how he was doing business?

Loren: Absolutely because he severed his relationship with Irving Mills. Irving Mills did well by Ellington, Ellington did well by Irving Mills, but once Ellington got to the point where he could get up on his own two feet, he didn't need this guy anymore, and Ellington started owning all his music. And having all the royalties. You know the music publishing business is exploitive. I mean anybody exploits anyone in it.

Tukufu: Loren thinks Garfield's plates could be connected to Duke's groundbreaking business plan.

Loren: I would assume that it was tempo music. But I'm really not sure.

Tukufu: One thing about these plates seems off to him.



Loren: From a musician's standpoint, it's in a different key. It's not in the key that became famous for "*Take the 'A' Train*". And for all I know this could actually be a rip off, you know, like how people sell bootleg dvds now.

Tukufu: Really?

Loren: There's something unusual about this.

Tukufu: Jazz historian Stanley Crouch has written extensively on Ellington, and has some unique skills acquired from a past life. You ever seen something like this before?

Stanley: Yeah, because I used to work in a print shop.

Tukufu: Stanley doesn't know if we have plates from Duke's Tempo Publishing Company. But he says the song illustrates the almost uncanny ability of the 23-year old Strayhorn to compose for Ellington's band.

Stanley: That's why for years people didn't even know Strayhorn had written it. They thought it was a song of Duke's.

Tukufu: Two new biographies of Strayhorn document how the composer of "*Take the 'A' Train*" did not receive full recognition in his lifetime for his contribution to Ellington's resurgent career. But Stanley says Ellington's relationship with Strayhorn reflected the challenges of running an orchestra which included some of the top musicians in the country.



Stanley: When Ellington got this hit, he just took the money and put it back in the band, right? Now people say, well he shouldn't have -- that was Billy Strayhorn's song. Now the hard - the hard fact of the matter is Duke Ellington gave him a salary which allowed him to do basically what he wanted to do. Which was write some music, right?

Tukufu: Uh-huh.

Mr. Stanley: So, none of that ever stopped.

Tukufu: Whoever created our plate, Stanley says, it documents the creation of one of the most important songs in American music. With jazz songs such as this, popular dance numbers were elevated to high musical art.

Stanley: Guys would be there with their arms around their girl and they would just be swaying back and forth listening to the band play, right? While the whole dance floor was full of these other people who were dancing. And there's nothing like it in western music that ever happened like that before.

Tukufu: I'm headed to the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution, where curator John Hasse oversees the Duke Ellington collection. Yes, I want to show you these plates.

John: Oh, my gosh. You know we have 100-thousand pages of his unpublished music, I've never seen plates like this before.



Tukufu: You ever see these words to the song before?

John: Well this is the familiar part. "You must take the A train to go to Sugar Hill Way up in Harlem."

Tukufu: Ok. John explains how Duke's publishing company helped set a precedent for African American musicians.

John: In later years everybody from Miles Davis to John Coltrane to Herbie Hancock started their own companies to control their copyrights and maximize their income.

Tukufu: How successful was tempo music?

John: Sometimes it brought in more money than the band did.

Tukufu: As Stanley Crouch had suggested tempo music, including the best seller "*Take the 'A' Train*" had helped to keep the Duke's orchestra afloat.

John: This is a statement from the end of 1944. The, income the band made that year was 404,000 dollars. They had expenses of 394,000, meaning the net profit was only 10,000 dollars for the whole band.

Tukufu: Now, did Billy Strayhorn have a partnership in the company?

John: Eventually he got a 10% share.



Tukufu: Do we have an original tempo printing plate? What John shows me next will certainly strike a chord for Garfield. This has simply been a lot of fun for me. Now, I have something special for you.

Garfield: Wow, man. These are really, beautiful. I've always had these things and never knew what they looked like on the reverse side, but these are excellent.

Tukufu: What I found out next is what turned the volume up on this investigation.

Garfield: I'm waiting, I'm waiting!

John: Now let me bring out the original published version of this and we'll do a little comparison.

Tukufu: Yes, let's see what we got.

John: This is "*Take the 'A' Train*". It looks like note for note, chord symbol for chord symbol, word for word, this is the same thing.

Tukufu: The same thing.

Mr. John: Except for this little thing right here. It says copyright 1941 by Tempo Music. This was the first successful publication of his new publishing company.



Tukufu: That's serious. So these are the original plates that were used in the printing process for "*Take the 'A' Train*".

Garfield: Wow. Wow. Wow. Wow. I'm overwhelmed.

Tukufu: So, you know, Duke Ellington was the first of his stature to set an example for musicians like John Coltrane and Miles Davis, all of them trying to do what Duke Ellington did. At many points the band cost more than it was bringing in. And in order to keep it alive and keep the band together he was able to take money from tempo music to pay for the band.

Garfield: Just to think that this history could've been lost that quickly, you know what I mean?

Tukufu: But for you and your dumpster diving...! Thanks a lot for letting me investigate your story.

Garfield: Okay, my brother. Alright. Ok, no problem.

Tukufu: A life-long smoker and drinker, on May 31, 1967, Billy Strayhorn died of esophageal cancer at the age of 51. Two years later, at a White House ceremony honoring Ellington's 70th birthday the Duke told an audience, which included President Nixon, that Billy Strayhorn had lived by four moral principles: freedom from hate, freedom from self-pity and pride, and freedom from the fear of doing something that might help someone more than it might help himself.