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Essay: Take the A Train – Billy Strayhorn

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The song "Take the A Train" was written by a man named Billy Strayhorn. Strayhorn played piano and wrote arrangements for Duke Ellington's band. The song eventually became a signature opening piece for Duke Ellington and his Orchestra. After a show in Pittsburgh in 1938, Strayhorn played a piece for Ellington. He copied the orchestra's performance of "Sophisticated Lady," and then proceeded to play his own version. Ellington eventually invited Strayhorn to his home in the wealthy Sugar Hill neighborhood of Harlem. After using the subway directions that Ellington gave him, Strayhorn wrote, "Take the A Train." He composed it in his head at a party, and then put it all on paper when he was done. When Strayhorn played the song for Ellington after a show in Newark, the two began a partnership that would last the rest of their lives. The two versions of this song I will be comparing is Duke Ellington and his Orchestra, and Ella Fitzgerald.

The signature tune of the Duke Ellington Orchestra was recorded in 1941. The song marked the beginning of a decades-long partnership between Ellington and a shy young songwriter named Billy Strayhorn. The song

begins with a pianist introduction. This particular recording was of Ellington and his orchestra. Being that Ellington is performing with a big band the instrumentation needs to blend together perfectly. For example, the trumpet cannot overpower the saxophone and vice versa. In this recording, the saxophone section is given the melody, while the brass section has the harmony. In the first solo, the trumpeter uses a mute to change the sound of the instrument. This gives the trumpet a unique and creative sound. The drummer keeps a steady tempo, using quarter notes for the high hats.

Ella Fitzgerald is one of the most famous female jazz singer in the United States. She gained great success in the 1950s and '60s, even earning the title of "First Lady of Song". Fitzgerald used her talents and recognition to record the most famous version of "Take the A Train" in 1957. In Ella Fitzgerald's "She performed the song numerous times during her long association with Ellington and it also appears on her 1957 album Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Duke Ellington Songbook.

Similar to Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald begins the song with the same piano melody. She then transitions into her famous "scat" style singing. In this recording, rather than having a particular instrument play the melody, Ella sings it. The song has an uplifting and joyful tempo, with the high hats are played with half notes, and the saxophone is the accompaniment to Ella Fitzgerald who sings the melody. The upbeat tempo is pushed by the bassline who plays quarter notes. Fitzgerald finally tops the song off by adding her signature scat sound. It makes the music authentic and differentiates it from other versions.

Both recordings begin with the same introduction, played using pianos. In Ella Fitzgerald's recording, she is playing with a big band however the big band is accompanying her singing. In Duke Ellington's recording, the melody is played by the saxophone section rather than having vocals. I prefer Ellington's version because I enjoyed the way the different sections blended together. Both songs were bright and cheerful, however, I enjoyed how in Ellington's version the use of instrumentation was strong

The second song I decided to compare was One O'clock jump which was composed by Count Basie in 1937. Basie collaborated with saxophonist Buster Smith and arranger Eddie Durham. "One O'Clock Jump" is a composition based on a 12-bar blues progression. The original 1937 recording of the song featured musicians such as saxophonists Evans and Lester Young, trumpeter Buck Clayton, bassist Walter Page, and Basie himself on piano. The original title of the song was "Blue Balls", which was seen as inappropriate for radio. Count Basie allegedly looked at the clock and responded with "One O'Clock Jump." The two versions of "One O'Clock Jump" I will be comparing is Basie and his band, as well as Benny Goodman and his band.

One O'Clock Jump was played by the Count Basie orchestra with One O'Clock Jump being their theme song. In Basie's version, he begins with a fast-paced piano introduction It then transitions to a slower paced rhythm with the saxophone section playing the melody. The drummer keeps the tempo by playing half note rimshots on the snare. In this recording Basie uses One O'Clock Jump to end a show. The song has high intensity with the instruments playing in fortissimo. After Basie's rap up the performance, the orchestra repeats the ongoing melody. Eventually, the melody shift and the songs end with a saxophonist playing three low notes into the entire orchestra playing a chord.

The Count Basie Orchestra became one of the most popular bands of the swing era, with Basie becoming known as the "Jump King of Swing." In fact, Basie's popularity was such that it rivaled that of bandleader and clarinetist Benny Goodman. The Benny Goodman Orchestra responded by recording their own version of the song in 1938, which became a hit for them and that group's first million-selling record.

Benny Goodman's recording begins with a loud introduction with trumpets blaring. It soon then transitions to a soothing piano solo, with the bass on the downbeat. The pianist plays a complicated part up until it switches to a saxophone solo. In the middle of the song the bass crescendos, and later decrescendos into another saxophone solo. Toward the end of the song the music repeats and has a gradual crescendo where it ends with a drum break.

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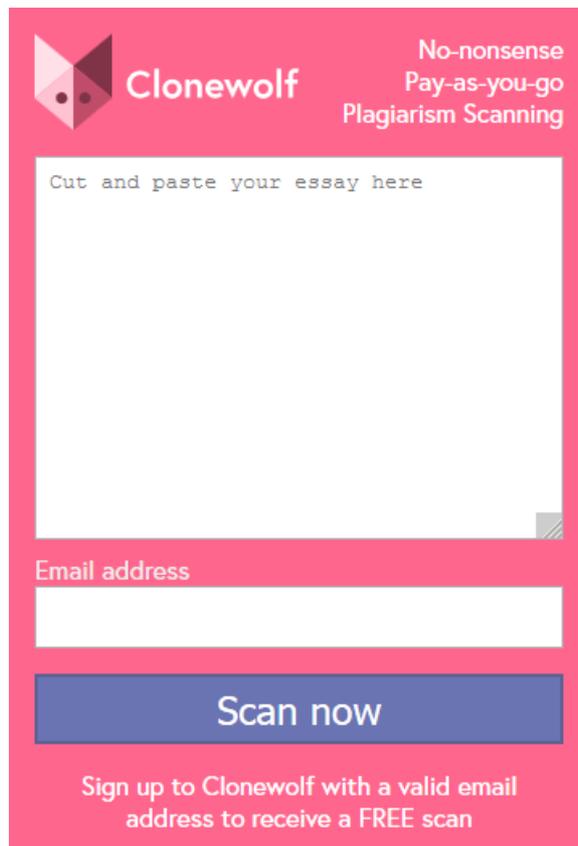
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