

Suite for the Duo – Billy Strayhorn

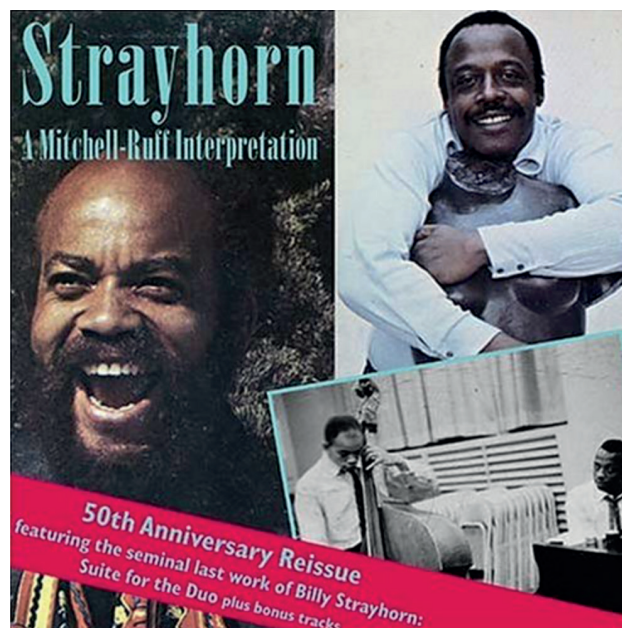
Richard Steggall looks at the re-emergence of a work that is deserving to be in every horn player's repertoire

The horn player **Willie Ruff** (b.1931) may not be a household name in the UK but I would urge anyone to explore his back catalogue of albums. He played double bass, as well as French horn, in Lionel Hampton's band along with the pianist **Dwike Mitchell** before they left in 1955 to strike out together as the Mitchell-Ruff Duo.

Duke Ellington had recommended the duo for a residency at the Hickory House jazz club in New York. One night in 1967 he brought his chief collaborator and arranger Billy Strayhorn (the composer of tunes such as "Take the 'A' Train" and "Lush Life") to the club. Strayhorn, who had previously employed Ruff as a member of his Riverside Drive Five group in 1965, made further visits to hear the duo before inviting Ruff to his apartment to try out a piece he was writing for them.

Willie Ruff's excellent memoir *A Call to Assembly: The Autobiography of a Musical Storyteller* tells of developing the work with Strayhorn, with Ellington at the other end of a phone line.

"Strayhorn poured a generous slug of wine into my glass and signaled me to wash away the lamb chop and take up the horn. Performing an unfinished work long-distance for Duke El-



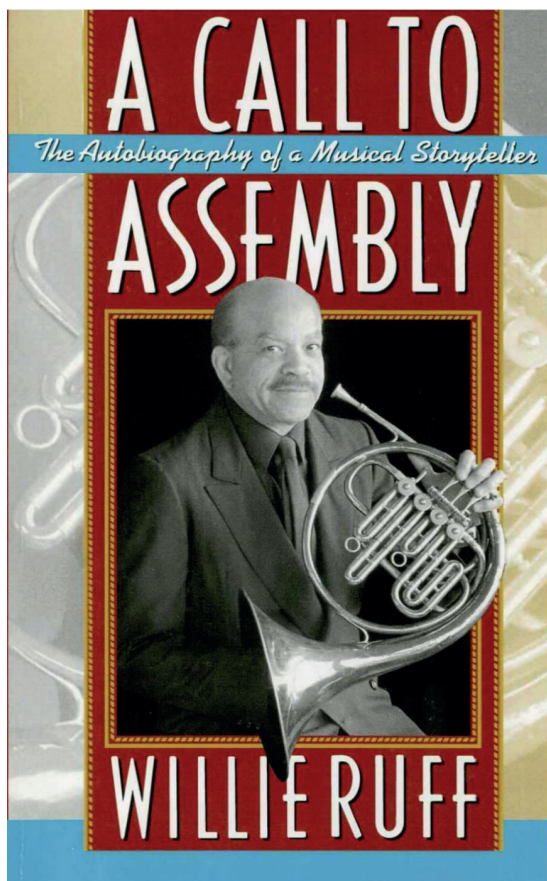
lington with the grease of a lamb chop still on my embouchure made my blood rush. But I did as I was told.

"I shudder to think how much that phone call cost the Ellington-Strayhorn duo. But that's the way we did it for the rest of the week, my horn and I at Strayhorn's, playing for Ellington somewhere out on the distant prairie. Days later, when he had the suite set down in its final manuscript form, Strayhorn said, 'Now I want to hear it with a real pianist. Call Mitchell!'"

The suite turned out to be Strayhorn's last work. He was suffering from oesophageal cancer and died a few months later. At Duke Ellington's request, Mitchell and Ruff performed the *Suite for the Duo* at Strayhorn's memorial concert at Lincoln Center. It was recorded a year later and finally released in 1971 on the album *Strayhorn: A Mitchell-Ruff Interpretation*.

I first came across this album a couple of years ago and was immediately struck by the wonderful range of tone colours that Ruff creates on the horn. The suite is a superb piece and I remember being disappointed that the sheet music was not available. Towards the end of 2020, I replied to a Twitter post by **John Edwin Mason** (a source of much knowledge – horn and otherwise – for many Twitterers) and asked if he knew why the piece wasn't published. He let me know that **Katy Ambrose**, Assistant Professor of Horn at the University of Virginia, was on the case. I'll let Katy continue the story:

"I learned about the piece in 2003 and have been trying to find it in earnest since last Spring. The original manuscript is in the Library of Congress and only available in-person in their reading room. I had thought it a lost cause for many years until I heard of a transcription that was being passed around by jazz scholars. This turned out to be Walter van de Leur's adaptation. Since the adaptation was done for scholarship and not an official publication from the Strayhorn Foundation, it was not clear whether it was legal to perform from this copy. At the suggestion of my friend and colleague John Edwin Mason, I organized a viral social media campaign to contact the Strayhorn Foundation. John had tweeted to the foundation and learned they



had considered publishing the *Suite for the Duo* in the past, but the publisher did not believe there to be an ample market of purchasers. I went to Facebook on 4th January, 2021, to solicit appeals from horn players to send to the Strayhorn Foundation. The response was overwhelming and within 24 hours the Foundation requested that we stop writing, and the piece was made available for purchase and performance on 7th January, 2021. The power of social media is remarkable!”

So thanks to Katy, I, along with many others, eagerly purchased and downloaded a copy. Initial excitement was tinged with a little confusion as the printed music didn't seem to match the version on the album in quite a few respects. “Part 1”, for example, is a tone higher than the recorded version and “Part 3” sails around top, top D sharps and Es, which is an octave higher than the recording. There are differences in the piano part, and free blues improvisation sections in “Part 2” for both the piano and horn, making any performance tricky for many players.

The problem is that most of us were looking at it with “classically trained” eyes. In lieu of a printed copy, the only version that we knew was the Mitchell-Ruff recording. This must have gone through many developments from the sheet music that the composer left with the duo – remember that Ruff tells us that the manuscript was completed before Dwiki Mitchell ever saw, and developed, the piano part.

On 4th February, I received an email from **A. Alyce Claerbaut**, President of Billy Strayhorn Songs, Inc., confirming my suspicions:

“Greetings Musician Friends... The score that you received was based on the original manuscripts by Billy Strayhorn. However, many of you became familiar with the piece based on the only recording by Dwiki Mitchell and Willie Ruff. The Mitchell/Ruff recording was an ‘interpretation’ of the work by Mitchell/Ruff rather than a literal reading (very common in jazz). Several of you asked about the source used by researcher Walter van de Leur to develop the score. Yes, it was totally based on original manuscripts in the hand of Billy Strayhorn.

“The Mitchell/Ruff was a standard-setting interpretation of the work. For this reason, Billy Strayhorn Songs, Inc. is developing a transcription of the recording which we will distribute on the Hal Leonard website for those who are interested in furthering the Mitchell/Ruff version of this work.

“The work of transcribing is currently in progress. We will let you know when the piece becomes available on the Hal Leonard website.

“Again, we thank you for your interest in the legacy of Billy Strayhorn.”

So, that was that. Now just to wait and look forward to seeing the transcription.

Happy that I'd finished my article, I sent it to our trusty sub-editor **Paul Cott**, who then dropped the bombshell that he played through the piece about 15 years ago, with Richard Bissill on the piano. The sheet music that he used was the Walter van de Leur version which was in fact published by Billy Strayhorn Songs, Inc. in 2005, so at some point it must have stopped being available. He then told me that Strayhorn actually called the piece *The*

North by Southwest Suite.

Time for more research, so I downloaded **Walter van de Leur's** book ***Something to Live For: The Music of Billy Strayhorn***. Not only did I find Strayhorn's title but also those of the three movements: “Up There”, “Boo Loose” and “Pavane Bleu No. 2”. The second movement, “Boo Loose” was actually written and recorded as “Pretty Little One” in 1963 by Duke Ellington's Jazz Violins. There is much information about the suite which is of both theoretical and practical interest.

I do find the recorded title – *Suite for the Duo* – problematic. Even Willie Ruff, in his autobiography, calls the piece *Suite for Horn and Piano*. Maybe it was a decision by a record company executive to emphasise the fact that Strayhorn wrote it for and developed it with Mitchell and Ruff.

From a performance point of view, the phrase “North by Southwest” could be crucial to understanding the work. Strayhorn would have known this was one of his final works and, in the words of Ruff, it “thunders with highly autobiographical overtones; the moods of a vibrant musical career, shutting down”. As an openly gay, black man living in Ellington's shadow, the daily prejudices he faced left him with something of a sense of emptiness. Ruff observed, “He looked back at his own life and he couldn't find himself”. Maybe “North by Southwest” is a place that doesn't exist, or is imaginary? Made of two definite directions but can't be found? I'm sure these are questions that the performer should ponder, and without the true title, those possibilities are somewhat lost.

For now, we are close to success in getting an authorised transcription of *Suite for the Duo*, but is there anyone out there brave enough to just use Strayhorn's manuscript and create their own “interpretation”? And with the Mitchell-Ruff influences stripped back, should it be called *The North by Southwest Suite* once again? **RS**

