

America's Great Jazz Arrangers

American composers, ranging from Aaron Copland to John Cage to John Philip Sousa, have created pivotal musical works that shaped music as we know it and are performed extensively around the world to this day. Of all the musical styles created in America, it is impossible to deny the importance of jazz. Although the world is completely familiar with names like Miles Davis, what many people don't realize is that many of the charts that they play are not arranged by them. Although jazz is an art form that tends to applaud the spontaneous musical genius of great improvisers, it may be interesting to consider the people behind the scenes whose ability to arrange music for different groups have helped develop jazz music into what it is today.

1939

TAKE THE 'A' TRAIN

Composed & arranged by Billy Strayhorn

1959

PORGY AND BESS

George Gershwin compositions, arranged by Gil Evans for Miles Davis

1966

ABC BLUES

Written by Bob Brookmeyer for the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra

1984

LIVE AT SWEET BASIL

Live album by Gil Evans with his Monday Night Orchestra

1993

MILES & QUINCY LIVE AT MONTREUX

Gil Evans arrangements played by Miles Davis, conducted by Quincy Jones

1957

BIRTH OF THE COOL

Compilation of works from several artists, including Miles Davis and Gil Evans

1959

KIND OF BLUE

Composed by Miles Davis and Bill Evans

1968

BASIE - STRAIGHT AHEAD

Composed & arranged by Sammy Nestico

1985

WE ARE THE WORLD

Written by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie, produced by Quincy Jones

Gil Evans (1912-1988)

- Worked as chief arranger for the Claude Thornhill jazz orchestra, alongside jazz greats such as Gerry Mulligan and Bob Brookmeyer
- Thornhill's band was known for their distinct sound, between using techniques such as underblowing/non-vibrato and use of the French horn and tuba
- Arranged and directed many albums with Miles Davis, including "Birth of the Cool" and "Miles Davis - Porgy and Bess"
- Miles began to see infinitely more fame and Gil seemed to be content playing weekly slots on Monday nights at Sweet Basil, a jazz club in New York
- In an email chain that I had with trombonist Tom "Bones" Malone, who spent ten years performing with the Gil Evans Orchestra, he said:
"Gil & I always hung out during the break at Sweet Basil. Out the back door by the garbage bin. He was not a guy who put himself up above you. We just hung out like two dudes trying to figure out the universe." (Malone, personal communication, April 29, 2020)

Billy Strayhorn (1915-1967)

- Composed Duke Ellington's signature tune, "Take the 'A' Train"
- At performances, Ellington would tell the crowd, "Strayhorn does a lot of the work but I get to take the bows!" (Hadju)
- Strayhorn revealed "a deepening well of unease about his lack of public recognition as Ellington's prominence grew" (Hadju)
- Despite not becoming famous, Strayhorn's works have been immortalized as some of the most iconic American songs of all time.

Sammy Nestico (1924-present)

- Arranged for the Count Basie Orchestra and U.S. Air Force "Airmen of Note"
- He often voices the lead trumpet trombone in octaves for a powerful punch, and in the sax soli about halfway through the chart, he uses tight 4-part voicings with octaves on the top and bottom to give a strong melodic feeling, almost as though it were a right hand of a piano playing a solo with blocked chords (Nestico).
- Though his charts are not outwardly experimental, Nestico's writing is a great example of the style of big band writing that has defined the modern big band sound.

Bob Brookmeyer (1929-2011)

- Composed "ABC Blues" for the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra
- Pushed jazz arranging techniques to new levels by combining influences from classical compositional techniques
- In "ABC Blues," Brookmeyer used the method of 12-tone, as created by classical composer Arnold Schoenberg, to create a sense of musical ambiguity (Rivello)
- Quotes major musical influences ranging from Gil Evans to Igor Stravinsky (Rivello)

Quincy Jones (1933-present)

- World-renowned arranger, director, and record producer
- After being commercially unsuccessful with a band, Jones stated:
"I discovered that there was music, and there was the music business. If I were to survive, I would have to learn the difference between the two" (Gleason)
- Went on to produce records for major names, including Michael Jackson
- Was the driving force behind "We Are the World", which brought together essentially every big-name American pop artist of the time.
- In 1991, he convinced Miles Davis to revisit and perform his works that he made with the then-deceased arranger Gil Evans, featuring the Gil Evans Orchestra - the same as from his Monday night gigs at Sweet Basil.
- These charts were transcribed by Jones, as most of Gil's music was lost over time
- Davis passed away three weeks after the album was recorded and before it was released in 1993, not living to see it win him his seventh Grammy Award (Ruhlmann).

Hadju, David. Lush Life: a Biography of Billy Strayhorn, 2001.
Nestico, Sammy. "Basie - Straight Ahead" (Count Basie & His Orchestra) (Score)
Rivello, David. Bob Brookmeyer in Conversation with Dave Rivello. ArtistShare, 2019.
Gleason, Ralph J. (2016). Conversations in Jazz: The Ralph J. Gleason Interviews. Yale University Press. pp. 20– ISBN 978-0-300-21452-9.
Ruhlmann, William. "Miles Davis: Biography & History." AllMusic. www.allmusic.com/artist/miles-davis-mn000423829/biography.