

“Strange Fruit”—Billie Holiday (1939)

Added to the National Registry: 2002

Essay by Cary O’Dell



Billie Holiday



Original label



Abel Meeropol

Considering the vivid images and sustained metaphor of the song “Strange Fruit,” it shouldn’t be surprising that it began as a poem. It was written by Abel Meeropol (1903-1986), a teacher, poet and songwriter, who published under the name Lewis Allan. Along with “Strange Fruit,” Meeropol/Allen would also compose the hits “The House I Live In” for Frank Sinatra and “Apples, Peaches and Cherries” for Peggy Lee.

But the lighter fare of these other songs do not remotely hint at the brutal power of “Strange Fruit,” a tale of a lynching told via the rich description of a lifeless body hanging from a flowering tree:

*Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees*

*Pastoral scene of the gallant South
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolia, sweet and fresh
And the sudden smell of burning flesh!*

*Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.*

Though the short song/poem is told as a metaphor, there is little left opaque in its lines (i.e. “Black body swinging in the Southern breeze”; “The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth”). Meeropol’s language throughout is uniformly simple and straight-forward. His rhyme scheme (A-A, B-B) is also sharp and brutally to the point. The author also shows a preference for strong, loaded words like “rot” and “suck.” And though he sometimes reaches for more gentle, even quaint, images (“Southern breeze”; “Scent of magnolia”), he immediately undermines them with his next lines and the hard, ugly truth of this grisly murder. The vivid contrast between the two—the romantically genteel vs. gore-ish real details--only adds to the work’s overall impact.

Singer Billie Holiday (nee Elenora Fagan; a.k.a. Lady Day) (1915-1959) is today (as during her lifetime) recognized as one of the First Ladies of the Blues. Born illegitimately in Philadelphia, Holiday had little interaction with her often traveling mother and even less with her absentee

father. After eventually being dispatched to Baltimore, the little girl was raised primarily by her aunt, Martha Miller.

As could be heard in her voice years later, Holiday's youth was a hard scrapple one—she was arrested for truancy at age nine and sent to reform school not long after. At age 15, Holiday's mother reentered the picture and moved her and her daughter to Harlem. There, Billie's mother worked as a prostitute in a brothel. Rumors have long circulated that Holiday, too, turned to prostitution at this time.

When she was a little older, Holiday began to support herself as a dancer in New York speakeasies. When dancers weren't needed, she auditioned as a singer. Long enamored of blues and jazz artists, and perhaps possessing a natural gift (her father was a musician by trade), Holiday learned a lot from listening and singing along to records by Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong. She made her "professional" singing debut at Pod's and Jerry's on West 133rd Street accompanied by pianist Dick Wilson. That first night, the duo made over \$100 in tips.

Around this time, she also adopted her stage name. "Billie" she borrowed from silent film actress Billie Dove; "Holiday" came from musician Clarence Holiday. (Clarence Holiday, it has also been rumored, may actually have been Billie Holiday's real father.)

Though the newly-christened Billie Holiday continued to perform at Pod's and Jerry's, she also began to branch out to other clubs. By the 1930s, jazz, with its mix of blues and ragtime, was all the rage in Harlem and New York. Holiday found a wide and willing audience wherever she performed. One night, at Monette's, a club on 132nd, she was heard by music producer and promoter John Hammond. Hammond, in turn, introduced her to clarinetist and "King of Swing" Benny Goodman. Together, they arranged for Holiday to cut her first record. On November 27, 1933, joined by a nine-piece band in the studio, Holiday recorded "Your Mother's Son-in-Law."

Despite the lackluster success of her first pressing, Holiday continued to excel on the club circuit. In 1935, she played the legendary Apollo. She also toured with some of the biggest bands of the day, including those of Count Basie and Artie Shaw. And she often returned to the recording studio, cutting sides for the Brunswick label including "What a Little Moonlight Can Do" and "Miss Brown to You."

Still, regardless of this success, Holiday faced some difficult times. Not everyone immediately cottoned to the emotional, heavy-with-feeling delivery of Lady Day and she sometimes found herself fired from clubs after just one night. She faced further challenges due to the racism of the era. Often she performed to segregated audiences or to audiences where only whites were admitted. This was especially true in the American south.

In December 1938, back home in New York, Holiday booked an extended series of performances (nine months worth of them) at a new and fully integrated club just opened by Barney Josephson, Café Society.

It was in late 1938 or early 1939, that teacher/poet Lewis Allan brought "Strange Fruit" to Billie Holiday. Though it would go on to become her most renowned song, at first, Holiday was reluctant to sing or record it. With its tale of lynching, it was largely out of character with most of the songs Holiday had performed up to the time. She said, "I was scared people would hate it. The first time I sang it I thought it was a mistake."

Despite Holiday's early reservations, she soon made it a staple of her evening concerts, closing her show with it often and usually to complete, awed silence by the crowd and even the nightclub's dazzled staff. On April 20, 1939, at age 23, Holiday took the "inflammatory" song into the recording studio and laid out the track for the Commodore label. Upon its release, a few

weeks later, “Strange Fruit” became the best selling record of Holiday’s career; it reached number 16 on the charts.

As both a song and a message, the single “Strange Fruit,” when conveyed by Billie Holiday’s dramatic, precise, and world-weary delivery, struck a major chord with audiences, both black and white. For many listeners, it either hit close to home or was disturbingly autobiographical. So-called “protest songs” were nothing new, but to have the story of a brutal lynching laid out so blatantly, yet so poetically, at this time in US history was unusual indeed. “Strange Fruit’s” subject matter was certainly a far cry from other songs that made the hit parade that year: Cole Porter’s “Well, Did You Evah,” “Two Sleepy People,” and Glenn Miller’s bouncy “In the Mood.”

The single “Strange Fruit” made Billie Holiday a star. Though she would never again record such an overtly political song, she continued to perform and record. Holiday had hits with “God Bless the Child,” “Lover Man,” “Lady in Satin,” “Gloomy Sunday,” and “Easy Living.” Her musical output remained impressive despite the personal demons that often undermined her life and work. Throughout her adult life she battled addiction to narcotics including heroin. The long gloves she often favored wearing on stage were supposedly there to hide her track marks. Holiday also had poor choice in men. During her life she had two legal husbands and one common-law one. Often the men she got involved with beat her, a result of the poor self-image she had fostered on her in childhood.

Holiday died when she was only 44 years old, of cirrhosis of the liver, on July 17, 1959. In the years since her passing, her music has lost none of its popularity or its potency. A new generation was introduced to her legacy via the 1972 motion picture “Lady Sings the Blues,” a bio pic starring Diana Ross as Holiday.

Though a few others have gone on to record the song “Strange Fruit,” including Ross, Nina Simone, Tori Amos, Lou Rawls and Jeff Buckley, nothing quite compares to Billie Holiday’s original. And the song and its message is still often evoked. As we have sadly learned in recent years, race-related killings and lynch-like murders are not yet a thing of the past. And the lyrics of “Strange Fruit” still describe them, as eloquently and as powerfully as ever.

Cary O’Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books “June Cleaver Was a Feminist!” (2014) and “Women Pioneers in Television” (1997). He also served as assistant editor of “The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2009) and “The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2010).