

# “Strange Fruit”—Billie Holiday (1939)

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Essay by Julia Blackburn (guest post)\*



*Billie Holiday*

*Southern trees bear a strange fruit,  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,  
Black bodies 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 magnolias sweet and fresh,  
Then 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 the tree to drop,  
Here is a strange and bitter crop.*

Billie Holiday’s dignified and heart-breaking rendition of “Strange Fruit,” released on the Commodore label in 1939, was, according to the music critic Leonard Feather, “the first significant protest in words and music, the first unmuted cry against racism”; while Ahmet Ertegun called it, “a declaration of war...the beginning of the Civil Rights movement.”

William Dufty, was the ghost writer who conjured up his own version of Billie’s life in “Lady Sings the Blues,” a book which she said she never got round to reading, although she quickly came to realise how much it had damaged her reputation and even her chances of surviving as a singer. When drawing up the contract, Dufty had agreed with the publisher that narcotics would be “the gimmick” that would sell the book and he did everything he could to give prominence to Billie’s naivety and drug addiction. Nevertheless, he saw her as a friend and understood how brave she was to go on singing a song which led to her being “harassed and kicked around for years by the authorities. One of the reasons was that...’Strange Fruit’ made her well-known and politically controversial.”

Billie was always very aware of the political dimension of “Strange Fruit”; she even had a clause put into some of her contracts, allowing her to sing it in those clubs where they would have preferred her to stick to simply happy or unhappy love songs. It was probably the main reason for her being denied a Cabaret Card, which meant she was banned from singing in

clubs in New York City for the rest of her short and tragic life and she had no doubt it was why she was hounded so fiercely by the Federal Bureau of Narcotics and the FBI. She said it was no coincidence that she was ordered not to sing it at the Earle Theatre in Philadelphia and the very next day was arrested on charges that eventually led to her imprisonment.

The song “Strange Fruit” had its beginnings sometime in the early 1930s when a young and liberal-minded schoolteacher called Abel Meeropol (he later changed his name to Lewis Allan) saw a photograph of a lynching. “It was a shocking photo and it haunted me for days. As a result I wrote ‘Strange Fruit’ as a poem. I set it to music and my wife, Anne, sang it around at small gatherings.” The photograph he is referring to might have been the one taken in Omaha Nebraska in 1919: three dead black men hang mute and eloquent from the branches of a tree, surrounded by a terrifying crowd of eager-faced white men and women and there is even a young child present.

Lynching was at its most virulent between 1900 and 1920. Thousands would turn up for a well-publicized spectacle and Baptist and Methodist ministers often worked hand in hand with the Ku Klux Klan by delivering sermons that incited racial hatred and violence. In spite of all the talk about defending the honour of white women from black rapists, the most frequent trigger for a lynching was any signs of what was known as “uppitiness”: a black man seeking employment “above his station,” evidence of material success, or a soldier returning home with a medal for valour. Things had eased a bit by the 1930s, and cases of public lynching had almost entirely ceased by 1940, but as one cynical commentator pointed out, “public opinion is beginning to turn away from this sort of mob activity...but the work of the mob goes on ...countless [black men] are lynched yearly,... their disappearance shrouded in mystery for they are dispatched quietly and without general knowledge.”

Billie Holiday was introduced to the song that would become such a crucial part of her life in April 1939. She was working at a New York nightclub called Café Society where black and white audiences could mix freely together. Barney Josephson, the club’s owner, invited Meeropol to come and present Billie with the song, to see if she would like to sing it. Billie listened as Meeropol played the tune on a piano. She read the text and asked what “pastoral” meant and he explained it was a romantic and gentle image of the countryside where shepherds and shepherdesses tended their flocks, but here it was meant ironically. The “gallant South” was self-explanatory and there were no more questions.

When Billie sang “Strange Fruit” on that same day, Meeropol said, “her styling fulfilled the bitterness and the shocking quality I hoped the song would have.” After that, she sang it every night and the intensity of her performance had an immediate resonance with Café Society audiences, and people started to come just to hear it. She wanted to record it and although her Columbia label did not dare to take it on, they gave her permission to record it on the Commodore label, with “Fine and Mellow” on the other side. The record quickly rose to number sixteen in the charts and eventually sold more than a million copies.

In the same year that the record was released, copies were sent to all the members of the US Senate as a form of protest against lynching. The Civil Rights campaigner, Walter White, wrote to Billie to congratulate her and there was talk of her being awarded the Spingarn medal, given annually to a black person of special achievement.

Whenever you see her singing “Strange Fruit” on film or in a photograph, you see the deep introspection in her expression; it is as if she watching something terrible unfolding slowly before her eyes, something which she is helpless to stop. You also see her bravery and her defiance. In that way, it is interesting to learn she not only sang “Strange Fruit” for an

audience, she also sang it to give herself courage if she was feeling particularly vulnerable. According to her pianist, Mal Waldron, “if things were not going right she would sing that tune.”

When the celebrated photographer Robin Carson was trying to make a portrait of Billie in 1946, she remained tense and self-conscious until she was asked to sing “Strange Fruit” *a capella* and as soon as she had launched into a contemplation of those southern trees and the fruit they bore, she was utterly absorbed in the poem and its meaning. Her face took on a passionate and haunted expression, and the resulting photographs became the most iconic images of her entire career.

*Julia Blackburn FRSL was born in London in 1948. She is the author of two novels and ten works of non-fiction. Of her biography of Billie Holiday, “With Billie,” published in the US and the UK in 2005, Toni Morrison wrote: “Nowhere else is the context of [Billie’s] life and work so vividly captured.”*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.