

GREAT JAZZ LEGENDS



BILLIE HOLIDAY

by Paul Brett

Many people herald Billie Holiday as the greatest female Jazz singer of all time. As with all such claims, it is always down to personal taste an opinion. It can certainly be proven that she had a very difficult childhood and upbringing, which had a profound effect on her life in later years. Having an unsettled family life led to her being evicted from the family home in Baltimore at the vulnerable age of thirteen, because she had fallen pregnant. Prior to that, she had been raped by a family friend at the age of ten. Billie's mother, Sadie Fagan, caught her neighbour in the act. He received just three months jail time.

Billie's life went slowly downhill when she hooked up with a brothel and was paid for acts of prostitution which resulted in her being imprisoned for soliciting. Who actually knows how she started singing or why, but start she did around the clubs in Harlem. After working these clubs for a while, she was discovered by talent scout John Hammond, who got her into a recording studio where she was fortunate enough to make her debut with the great Benny Goodman, with whom she recorded two songs. Later, she met pianist Teddy Wilson, and their first collaboration included the songs "What a little Moonlight can do" and "Miss Brown to you"

established Billie as a major vocalist. From there it was all positive. A year later she recorded under her own name producing a series of extraordinary performances with groups comprising some of 'swings' greatest musicians. She also began writing her own songs including "Billie's Blues" and "Long Gone Blues"

Billie also took a great risk in performing and recording one of the most controversial songs of the era. "Strange Fruit". It was penned by a Jewish schoolteacher named Abel Meeropol. It was about a black man left hanging from a tree, supposedly by white supremacists. It's lyrics illustrated what was going on in some parts of America at the time and even Meeropol used the pseudonym, "Lewis Allan", for his work. Billie, somewhat reluctantly, and fearing possible retaliation, sang it for the first time at Greenwich Village's Cafe Society venue in 1939. In a later interview she commented that "the imagery in "Strange Fruit" reminded her of her father's death," which was why she was initially reluctant to sing it. It was also true to say that for the vast majority of listeners, they did not grasp the meaning of the lyrics and others chose to ignore them. Funnily enough, I first heard this song in the mid - 1960's performed by the Mark Leehman Five, an excellent five piece group fronted by vocalist Mark Leehman who was tragically killed in a road accident before realising his, and the bands full potential. Josh White also recorded a great version of this song. It is a haunting piece of imagery that stays with you, once heard.

Holiday went on to have a string of hits and her star shone even brighter during the 1940's. Her final recordings in the 50's were "God Bless this Child" and "This is heaven for me". She appeared in the film "New Orleans" in 1947 with the legendary trumpet player and vocalist, Louis Armstrong. She was not best pleased however with her role as a "Maid" and wrote later in her autobiography "Lady Sings the Blues".

"I thought I was going to play myself in it. I thought I was going to be Billie Holiday doing a couple of songs in a nightclub setting and that would be that. I should have known better. When I saw the script, I did. You just tell one Negro girl who's made movies who didn't play a





Louis Armstrong with Billie Holiday in 1946

maid or a whore. I don't know any. I found out I was going to do a little singing, but I was still playing the part of a maid."

Like so many jazz artistes of the time and beyond, she fell victim to drug addiction and was arrested for possession and served time in Alderson Federal Prison Camp. Her addiction was to stay with her for the rest of her life until on May 31, 1959, she was admitted to the Metropolitan Hospital in New York in a very bad state of health. Whilst there, she was arrested for drug possession as she lay dying and even her hospital room was raided by the Police, who stationed officers outside her room, where she remained under police guard until she died on July 17, 1959. It is reported that in the final years of her life, she was swindled out of her earnings, and she died with seventy cents in the bank and \$750 on her person.

Gilbert Millstein of the New York Times wrote: *"Billie Holiday died in the Metropolitan Hospital, New York, on Friday, July 17, 1959, in the bed in which she had been arrested for illegal possession of narcotics a little more than a month before, as she lay mortally ill; in the room from which a police guard had been removed - by court order - only a few hours before her death, which, like her life, was disorderly and pitiful. She had been strikingly beautiful, but she was wasted physically to a small, grotesque caricature of herself. The worms of every kind of excess - drugs were only one - had eaten her. The likelihood exists that among the last thoughts of this cynical, sentimental, profane,*

generous and greatly talented woman of 44 was the belief that she was to be arraigned the following morning. She would have been, eventually, although possibly not that quickly. In any case, she removed herself finally from the jurisdiction of any court here below."

There is no doubt that Ms. Billie Holiday was indeed a superstar of her generation who set

trends with her unique vocal style and discovered new ways of manipulating phrasing and tempo. She had a deep understanding of tragedy and the effect it had on people, including herself and applied this understanding to expressing, in an intimate way, such emotions to the listening audience. Critic John Bush wrote that she **"changed the art of American pop vocals forever."**



Billie in hospital shortly before her death in 1959