

Billie holiday

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Billie Holiday Jazz singer Billie Holiday (1915-1959), nicknamed “Lady Day” was a prominent and influential voice in popular music from the 1930s to the 1950s. She is remembered for her unique method of phrasing and soulful manipulation of songs along with the personal and sometimes risqué nature of the lyrics. The tempo of her performances resulted from her interpretation of the rhythm of the music, a style that influenced the future of stage performance as well as the genre of jazz. Holiday became well known worldwide for the style and was respected for her intensely personal approach to her singing. Holiday grew up hard, lived fast and died young but will forever be an important fixture in the history of American music. Much of Holiday’s early life is largely unknown. The available information paints a bleak picture, however. The father left the family when Holiday was very young. He thought she was born illegitimately and would not claim her as his own, until she became famous. When her mother moved to New York, Holiday was left with relatives who treated her poorly, forcing her to drop out of school to work. At age 13 she moved to New York and as a teenager was arrested for prostitution. Following that episode she began a legitimate career singing in Brooklyn nightclubs. While working in a Harlem club in 1933, Holiday was discovered by a talent scout who introduced her to the famous musician and bandleader Benny Goodman. She recorded some songs with Goodman, a wise career move which made her a wanted commodity of the nicer New York clubs. (“Billie,” 2012) By the late 1930s, Holiday was debuting original songs at upscale venues such as the Cafe Society nightclub. She co-wrote God Bless the Child which became a nationwide hit selling more than million copies. Holiday followed that success with Strange

Fruit. “ Holiday’s ‘ Strange Fruit’ changed the politics of American popular culture, despite the fact that many radio stations refused to play this song. While Billie was not the first woman to sing the song on stage, she is the most famous one to do so. Holiday described this song as her personal protest against racism.” (Dawson, 2012). Many of Holiday’s songs described her stormy relationships. My Man and T’ain’t Nobody’s Business if I Do are two of the more famous selections that spoke of the abusive and destructive relationships she endured. (Doyle, 2011). Holiday became one of the first black persons to sing with a white orchestra in 1937 when she fronted Count Basie’s band. The next year she sang with the Artie Shaw orchestra and continued breaking the color barrier by performing in interracial clubs throughout New York City. She was rapidly becoming popular with the politically liberal intellectuals but while Holiday’s career was soaring to great heights, her personal life was in a rapid descent. By the early part of the 1940’s she was taking hard drugs and in 1947 was imprisoned on drug charges following a widely publicized court trial. She became involved in a series of abusive relationships which led to her alcohol dependency. Her health declined as did her considerable earnings along with her distinctive voice which became raspy due to age and neglect. “ Although she continued to sing and record, and to tour frequently until the mid-1950s, it was no longer with her former spirit and skill.” (“ Billie,” 2012) Holiday is generally regarded as the most important female singer the history of jazz music, an opinion validated by her influence on the singers that followed her. Outside the realm of music, Holiday helped black feminists form a unique perception of their role in society instead of allowing the culture defining it for them. For

women of all races during Holiday's time and beyond, her outspokenness addressed an inner desire of theirs to be considered as equal to men. She was, possibly unwittingly, an inspiration for the feminist movement in the years following her passing. " Her songs expressed female self-possession and assertiveness, particularly in the realm of sexuality." (Doyle, 2011). Holiday is often grouped with singing legends Aretha Franklin, Judy Garland and Joni Mitchell as being among the most influential female talents of the 20th Century. According to music critic John Bush, Holiday " changed the art of American pop vocals forever." (Doyle, 2011). Holiday often expressed herself through love songs. Her untrained voice was compensated by her natural " ear for music." Holiday's performance was in the form of a jazz soloist, not simply an accompanying singer; a distinctive quality that characterized her as the complete musician. Her soulful voice easily made the transition to lighter musical numbers while still carrying a troubled poignancy, an attribute that attracted all audiences. Holiday claimed to have modeled her singing style from Bessie Smith though, unlike Smith, Holiday she didn't sing the blues very often and did not possess a powerful, booming voice. (" Billie," 2012) Though Holiday didn't sing what is traditionally understood as blues music, interwoven in her lyrics were implied allusions to subjugation and feminist effort. " Rejecting the cruel political opinions of discrimination, which labeled artists like her ' fallen women,' (Holiday) embraced sexual freedom" (Dawson, 2012). Frank Sinatra said Holiday was " unquestionably the most important influence on American popular singing in the last 20 years." (Considine, 1994). In 1957 music critic Dan Morgenstern wrote, " Some say that what Billie does now is no longer singing; whatever it

is, it sure as hell communicates” (Considine, 1994). Holiday never possessed the rich singing voice of Lena Horne or Sarah Vaughan or the specialized technique of Mildred Bailey or Ella Fitzgerald. In spite of her natural singing limitations, Holiday’s effects on listeners was like no other. More than 50 years after her death, people are still touched on an emotionally level by her emphasis on the underlying feelings of the songs. Holiday’s was a musician, her voice was her instrument. Her art form personified a significant attitude regarding racial and societal relations during a period in American history when these changes appeared very far off. References “ Billie Holiday.”

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