

## Research Note

# Lady Day: A Major American Musician and Recording Artist of the Twentieth Century

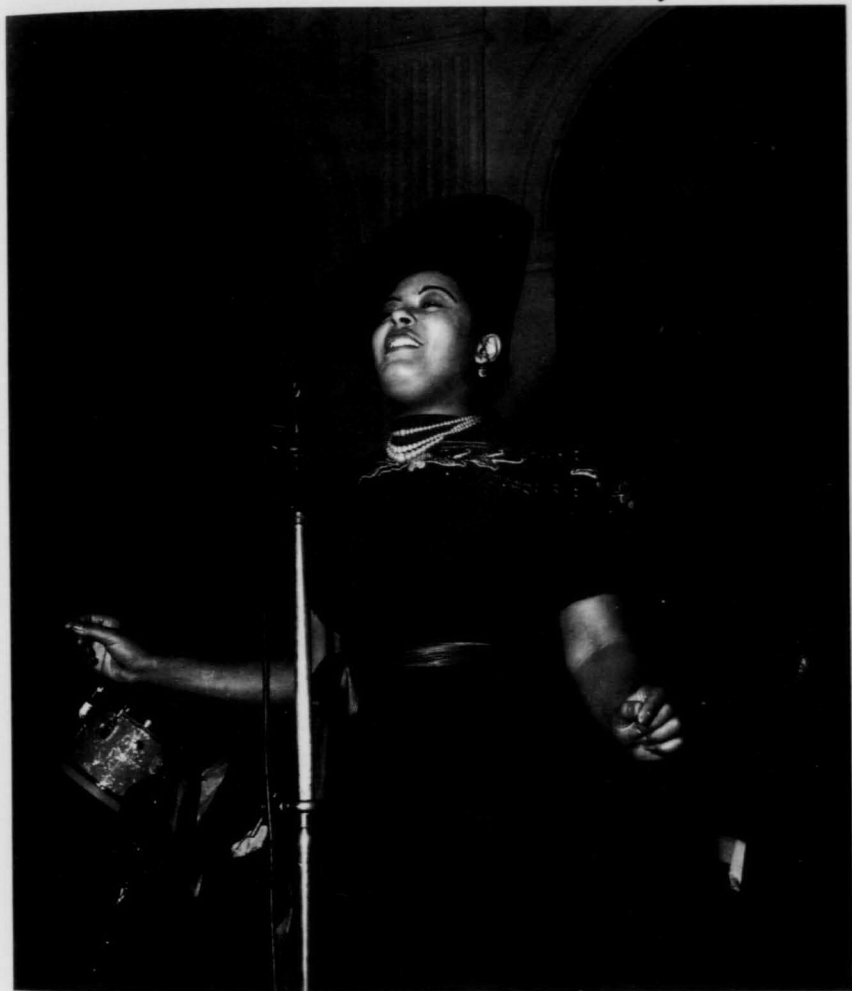
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Billie Holiday, also professionally known as *Lady Day*, was born on 7 April 1915 in the Philadelphia General Hospital. At that time, the Hospital, originally part of the Almshouse, built in 1731-1732, was located at 34th and Pine Streets. Billie's maternal and paternal family were Baltimoreans. After Billie's mother, Sara Harris, left Philadelphia with her infant daughter, she returned to Baltimore, where Billie grew up in a rich musical environment and, at an early age, began singing for night-world audiences.

In the 1910s and 1920s Baltimore, home of renowned drummer and bandleader Chick Webb and pianist and Broadway composer Eubie Blake, was known for its musical atmosphere. Music rang out from churches and church-sponsored events such as Saturday or Sunday afternoon picnics from various bands or groups that played for public dances at Mary's Casino. Baltimore featured tent shows, carnivals, and Friday night parades to the train station or down to the boat docks. Musicians from Philadelphia and Washington DC often made it a priority to join or sit in with Baltimore musicians, performing at small clubs, theaters, or in good-time-house parties. While Billie and her mother moved to New York City during her later adolescence, Billie's Baltimore musical background was the foundation that facilitated her entrance into the skilled artistic, New York environment of her father. Banjoist, guitarist, and singer Clarence Holiday was a member of the Fletcher Henderson band for about five years, 1928-1933.

Before Billie Holiday was twenty-five years old, her vocal art, heard on stage or on recordings, extended the blues tradition, charted a course for modern jazz singing, and influenced instrumental jazz and American popular music. Prior to jazz ensemble recordings with Billie as lead vocalist, jazz artists were only envisioned to be instrumentalists. She raised the vocal expressiveness of classic female blues artists, already renowned for their expressive depth, to a highly instrumental level and fused blues and jazz in American popular songs, forever changing the course of this art form.

Courtesy of Don Peterson



*Billie Holiday at the Park Lane Hotel, New York, February 24, 1939. Photo by Charles Peterson.*

Billie Holiday became recognized internationally as a leading recording artist. She and Edith Piaf, vocally, are the world leaders with the highest quantity of recorded songs. Billie was among American musicians who led in the Diaspora of Jazz. Most of the jazz ensemble recordings with her as lead vocalist were issued in Europe as well as in America. The British were the first to read about Billie. John Hammond, jazz enthusiast and promoter, wrote about her jazz ingenuity in the English music magazine, *Melody Maker* (1933).

The reviewers of *Melody Maker* wanted information on American jazz artists, especially African Americans. English critical and public acclaim for American jazz was growing in the early 1930s. The Great Depression and radio competition more adversely affected American recording companies than their British counterparts. The Depression ended the American boom sales for blues recordings at the same time that jazz was becoming internationally popular. Today, the "Billie Holiday Circle" — Lady Day's British fan club — is still active, publishing its own newsletter four or five times each year.

Billie Holiday was eighteen years old in 1933 when she made her very first recording for Columbia Records. This recording session, prior to the Theodore "Teddy" Wilson directorship of jazz ensembles, was set up under Benny Goodman's first American recording contract. "Riffin' The Scotch," one of the two songs recorded at that time, placed in the top ten, according to a contemporary compilation of Pop charts. The success of both recorded songs guaranteed Goodman a continuing American recording contract. "Riffin' The Scotch" is historically listed as the fourth Goodman recording hit. In 1935, Hammond, who states that Billie was the best jazz singer ever, persuaded pianist Teddy Wilson to hire her as lead vocalist for small ensemble recordings of Tin Pan Alley songs, along with professional sideman of the highest caliber. New York's Tin Pan Alley and Brill Building were the American popular music (commercial) headquarters for many decades.

Teddy and Billie were the first African Americans to have personal contracts specifically for recording American popular songs. Billie, who procured her legal agreement a year later than Teddy, made the first discs under her own name for Vocalion in 1936 — "Did I Remember" and "No Regrets."

Before Billie Holiday, African American singers learned popular songs by listening to piano rolls, discs, and other singers. A few exceptions like Ethel Waters, star of Broadway theater and film who recorded for the Black Swan Record label and Ivie Anderson, soloist with Duke Ellington's band, may have had access to sheet music of specific popular songs through their recording directors, theater, film producers, or band leaders. Billie learned her songs from the score.

Several Tin Pan Alley and Broadway show tunes were popularized by the Wilson-Holiday Orchestra and Billie Holiday and Her Orchestra's ensemble recordings. Billie transmuted some of these songs into classic jazz repertoire. The artistic impact of these two bands on American jazz and its spread in England is inestimable.

Like all jazz masters and artists during her lifetime, Billie served out her jazz apprenticeship in "The Jazzman's True Academy" — jam sessions. After Billie began singing in Harlem back rooms and after-hours night-clubs, before being hired as lead vocalist for jazz ensemble recordings, she was accompanied by her father to daily jam sessions of the Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, and Fess Williams bands. To survive in the competitively performing environment of jams sessions, musicians had to learn traditional African American musical practices, such as blues, tunes, shouts, riff originals, dance rhythms, rags, and Euro-American orchestral or standard popular music. Jam sessions served as the African American scene of musical transformation and innovation.

Jazz artists like Billie Holiday became masters in assimilating traditional music concepts and Euro-American musical elements. Compartmentalization of musical activities was an early practice of African captives and their American descendants. Their segregated community gave room for African Americans to generate music without relegating the past (African) to oblivion, while incorporating their present (Euro-American) musical experiences without conflict. On the one hand, in their closed community, African captives and their descendants sang African songs, performed traditional African dances, and held religious rites and musical celebrations in their African traditions. On the other hand, they learned Euro-American songs, religious and secular, that they heard around them, and they participated in musical celebrations of European settlers.

Neither the African Diaspora, slave trade, nor atrocities inflicted on African captives in America were able to destroy the syncretic relationship between music and African divinities or their gods' representatives. This interrelationship deeply affected the music-making of their descendants in the United States. African Americans preserved a tradition of the close association between God and music, and struggled to regain through music a human identity that was obscured by the captivity of their ancestors. In making music, African Americans integrated Euro-American musical elements with their own vernacular, characteristic activities (drama), compatible concepts of motion, and the embellishments of their forebears. African Americans' creative ability to integrate compartmentalized forms into an indistinguishable whole was the seed for change, and its flowering in more sophisticated forms of jazz, blues, and American popular songs produced an artistic medium that became a global phenomenon.

Billie Holiday was motivated by both her female blues predecessors, who transformed traditional African musical concepts, and by instrumental

jazz. On the one hand, she emulated the speech-song expressiveness, clear diction, blues tonality, and bending of tones (tonal variation) of classic female blues artists. On the other hand, she emulated jazz artists' improvisational dialogues, their superimposing jazz time over absolute or linear time (pulse flexibility), and their instrumental approach — brass and woodwind — to melodic phrasing, tone coloring, and dynamics. She was encouraged by the music skills of her father and her performing mentors. One of them, pianist Bobby Henderson, was an exceptional musical improviser. Billie's jazz credentials became indisputable during her partnership with him. She was also a fan of clarinetist and bandleader Benny Goodman and was known often to "sit in" on his band rehearsals. She and saxophonist Lester Young, whom she called "the President," shared a mutual admiration for each other's melodic expressivity. Lester often made it a priority to help Lady Day with superb accompaniments during her performances. Most of their recordings, beginning in 1935, in which Teddy Wilson made arrangements for skilled jazz artists to record with them, are jazz classics.

Billie Holiday made a minimum of 350 recordings. Although most music critics and writers agree that Billie's earliest recording period was her best, discographic reviews reveal that in each period, from early to late, she accomplished the artistic triumph of making tracks that are unmatched then, and now. She is a major American artist whose musical and recording contributions to American and international societies are numerous. For instance:

- (1) Billie's vocal style was not only a model for modern vocal jazz but also influential for modern instrumental jazz.

- (2) Billie was an innovator in upgrading the role of vocal jazz in bands. The first group of recordings that followed the Goodman-Holiday session was issued under *Teddy Wilson And His Orchestra*. Due to Billie's astute attention to her own financial matters and with the aid of Bernie Hanighen, who was director of The American Recording Company, later recordings were also issued by *Billie Holiday And Her Orchestra*. In most of her recordings, the routine vocal refrain (band-voice-band), which was the standard practice of the day, was reversed to voice-band-voice.

- (3) Billie was a leader among American musicians and recording artists. Billie, with three recorded songs, ("God Bless The Child," "Strange Fruit," and "Lover Man, Oh Where Can You Be?") is the only female three-time award winner from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences. Her only male equals are Duke Ellington, Benny

Goodman, and conductor Leopold Stokowski. The Hall of Fame Awards honor early recordings of lasting, qualitative, or historical significance. "God Bless The Child," co-composed by Billie, is most recently heard in Steven Spielberg's multi-Academy Award winning film, *Schindler's List*. Posthumously, in 1987, The National Academy bestowed one of its Lifetime Achievement Awards on Billie.

(4) Billie was the first African American vocalist to perform at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York.

(5) "Strange Fruit," recorded by Billie, was the first social protest song that was heard in American nightclubs and on American and international radio broadcasts. She performed "Strange Fruit" as many as three times each night in nightclubs.

(6) Jazz ensemble recordings, with Billie as lead vocalist, were a primary factor that reversed the predominantly male lead vocalists' roles in bands and band recordings.

(7) Billie acknowledged lyrics and melodies of female songwriters by recording them, and she was the first female jazz vocalist and recording artist to be accepted as an equal by her male peers.

Although one of the principal historians of *The Swing Era*, (1989), Gunther Schuller, acknowledges that Lady Day was a musical genius, as a whole, the sensational events of her private life have attracted more attention than her artistic accomplishment and hard work. This essay hopes to resurrect the musical achievement of Philadelphia's Lady Day.

## SELECTED RECORDINGS

1933-1938

Billie Holiday, "Back In Your Own Backyard," Billie Holiday and Her Orchestra, Vocalion 4029.

Teddy Wilson, *Billie and Teddy on Microgroove*, D. M. Bakker: Alphen aan den Rijn Micrography, Netherlands 1975.

Lester Young, *The Lester Young Story: A Musical Romance* Vol. 2, Columbia 34837.

1939-1949

Billie Holiday, "God Bless The Child," Billie Holiday And Her Orchestra, Okeh 6270.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Lady Day, The Sixteen Original Commodore Interpretations (1939-1944)*, Commodore Record Co., Inc., CCD 7001.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Lover Man (Oh, Where Can You Be?)" Billie Holiday with Toots Camerata And His Orchestra, Decca 23391.

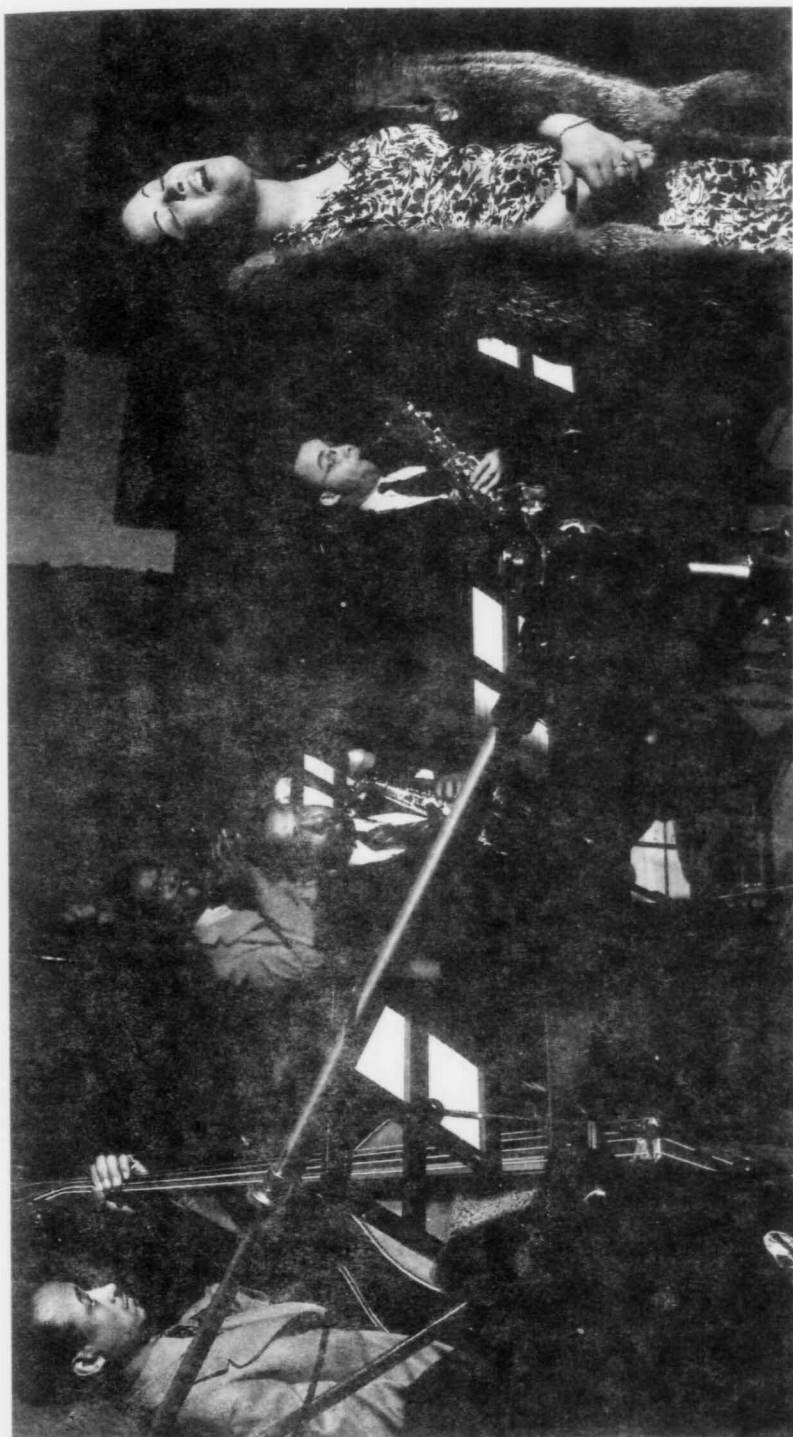
1950-1959

Billie Holiday, "These Foolish Things," Billie Holiday And Her Orchestra, The Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz Vol. 2, RD 033, A5 19477, A19479

\_\_\_\_\_. *Lady Sings The Blues*, Clef MGC LP 721.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Body and Soul*, MG Verve LP 8719.

Courtesy of Don Peterson



*Billie Holiday with Frankie Newton and His Orchestra, Jam session at Ryan's on 52nd Street, New York, 1942. Photo by Charles Peterson.*