

ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



BILLIE HOLIDAY

[This is the twenty-ninth article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

Eleanora Fagan was born on April 7, 1915 in Philadelphia, and like so many of the early jazz figures I've profiled, endured a tough and turbulent early life. The pattern of a fatherless home, sexual assault, reform school, and often moving from place to place, provided little stability for young Eleanora. Yet, these experiences gave her profound insight into what it took to bring deep emotion to her music later on. She found her "retreat" in listening to, and singing along with, the records of jazz greats Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong.

She moved to New York City in the late 20s, and took on a new persona: Billie (after her favorite film star, Billie Dove) and Holiday (her father is widely believed to be Clarence Holiday, who eventually became a successful jazz musician.) Around 1930, Billie began singing in local clubs. At the age of 18, she was discovered performing in a Harlem jazz club by producer John Hammond, who obtained recording work for her with an up-and-coming clarinetist, Benny Goodman. Billie did the vocals for several tracks, including her first commercial release *Your Mother's Son-In-Law* and the 1934 hit *Riffin' the Scotch*.

With jazz pianist Teddy Wilson and others in 1935, she recorded several singles, including *What a Little Moonlight Can Do* and *Miss Brown to You*. She also appeared with Duke Ellington in the film *Symphony in Black*. Around this time, Holiday met and became fast friends with saxophonist Lester Young, who was part of Count Basie's orchestra. For a while, he even lived with Holiday and her mother. It was Young who gave Holiday the famous nickname "Lady Day" in 1937—the same year she joined Basie's band. In return, she called Lester "Prez," which was her way of saying that he was the greatest. In 1938, Billie sang for the Artie Shaw Orchestra, but due to promoters objecting to both her race and her vocal styling, the arrangement was short-lived; so Billie struck out on her own.

Performing at New York's Café Society, Billie developed some of her trademarks – gardenias in her hair and singing with her head tilted way back. Billie's phrasing was distinctive and meaningful, and her voice always projected a kind of melancholia; not necessarily depression, but certainly sadness. During this gig, she introduced two of her

most famous songs: *God Bless The Child*, and *Strange Fruit*, a potent story about African-American lynchings in the Deep South. The controversy surrounding that recording (some radio stations banned it) helped make it a hit and it became one of Holiday's signature ballads.

By the early 40s, Billie had survived several stormy romantic relationships and was saddled with serious substance abuse, and her songs and her art began to reflect life. Overcome with grief in late 1945 upon the death of her mother, she drank even more and escalated her use of drugs. Yet somehow, she remained a major star in the jazz world, staying sober just long enough to finish a booking. But that led her into a year of jail time for narcotics possession in 1947.

While her hard living was taking its toll, Holiday continued to tour and record in the 1950s. She began recording in 1952 for jazz label owner, Norman Granz, and in 1954 toured Europe to the ovations and accolades of her fans overseas. She shared her life story with her fans in 1956. Her autobiography *Lady Sings The Blues*, written in collaboration with William Dufty, makes for good reading, but may not be totally factual. Holiday was really in rough shape by then and claimed never to have read the book upon its completion. (It's available on Amazon, published by Three Rivers Press, 2006; ISBN-10: 0767923863). On July 17, 1959, Holiday died from complications arising from her abuse of alcohol and drugs.



My favorite album? *The Essential Billie Holiday* available on Amazon, 2 CDs on the Sony Legacy label, 2010, ASIN: B0042OZDPW. In the liner notes resides my favorite quote about Lady Day, written by Gilbert Millstein of the *NY Times*. Millstein served as narrator at her 1956 Carnegie Hall concerts, and wrote in part "...It was evident, even then, that Miss Holiday was ill. I had known her casually over the years and I was shocked at her physical weakness. Her rehearsal had been desultory; her voice sounded tinny and trailed off; her body sagged tiredly. But I will not forget the metamorphosis that night. The lights went down, the musicians began to play and the narration began. Miss Holiday stepped from between the curtains, into the white spotlight awaiting her, wearing a white evening gown and white gardenias in her black hair. She was erect and beautiful; poised and smiling. And when ... she sang – with strength undiminished – with all of the art that was hers. I was very much moved. In the darkness... I recall only one thing. I smiled."

Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as "Just Me 2", a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at www.JustMeLiveMusic.com. See them on Facebook at www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic