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The Importance of the History and Relevance of “Strange Fruit”

Billie Holiday’s version of “Strange Fruit” continues to be an anthem against racial injustice. The song is about the atrocities of lynchings in the south. From the first note it is a dark, haunting, and powerful song. Every word and note aches with sadness and gloom. The simplicity of the song forced its original audiences to sit with the realities of racism and was a cry for civil rights long before the civil rights movement. The song is based on the poem *Bitter Fruit*. The story behind its creation, the woman responsible for its notoriety and its modern-day relevance is why this song has left an unforgettable legacy.

The poem *Bitter Fruit* was written by Abel Meeropol under the pen name of Lewis Allen in 1937. Meeropol was a Caucasian Jewish teacher and an activist from the Bronx in New York City. It is important to remember this poem was written during a time when Jim Crow laws and black codes still were in existence (History.com). Segregation, the threat of imprisonment and a biased legal system were some ways used to maintain control over African Americans. The abolition of slave ownership did not remedy the ideas of slavery. Those who could not or would not accept the end of slavery resorted to using fear to monitor and hang on to control over African Americans. The most gruesome act of fear was the use of lynchings. These were public events attended by angry ignorant mobs of people. Photographs of the lynchings were reproduced and sold to the public like postcards. One such postcard was viewed by Meeropol, it is said the photograph depicted two young men, “Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion,

Indiana in 1930. It showed two bodies hanging from a tree as a crowd of white people look on, some grinning” (Pietsch). The photograph moved him to write the poem that he later set to music and turned into a song. The horrific act described in the poem and the song delivers a disturbing emotional impact:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black body 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 magnolia, sweet and fresh
And 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 a tree to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

The lyrics of fruit hanging from the trees is used as a metaphor to represent lifeless black bodies paired with a contrast of romanticized images of the South. The words are ugly but effective in pointing out the sheer vileness of the heinous acts. Meeropol brought Billie Holiday the song and she did not want to perform it at first out of fear of racial backlash, but soon changed her mind.

In 1939, Meeropol and his wife went to a nightclub in New York City. The nightclub Café Society was an interracial nightclub that had booked Holiday. He showed Holiday a

musical version of his poem and she hesitantly decided to make the song her own (Pilgrim). Even though the Café Society was frequented by more open-minded patrons, Holiday was reluctant to perform the song. Holiday was fearful she would become a target of racial retribution, yet she also believed in the power of the song. Reflecting on her first performance of the song, “‘There wasn't even a pater of applause when I finished,’ she later wrote in her autobiography. ‘Then a lone person began to clap nervously. Then suddenly everybody was clapping’” (Margolick). Holiday’s version of the song is best described as haunting, she is accompanied by a very understated band that is careful not to take away from the song’s message. The listener is forced to hear, visualize, and contemplate every word. The song’s message is raw and uncomfortable which makes it impossible for the listener to ignore the racially driven travesty described in the lyrics. Holiday made the song her dramatic ending to all her sets. She demanded food and drink service be stopped and the lights be turned down while she performed “Strange Fruit”. At the end of the performance, she would immediately exit the stage without an encore to deliver an impact that could not be ignored by the audience (Fields).

Holiday approached her record label, Columbia Records, with a request for them to produce the song. The song was so controversial they refused to record it. Holiday had to independently seek out a record company that would agree to record the song, eventually she found Commodore Records. Dorian Lynskey described Commodore Records as “a small, leftwing operation based at Milt Gabler’s record shop on West 52nd Street” (Eschner). “Strange Fruit” became one of Holiday’s best-known songs, despite being banned from several radio stations who refused to play it out of fear or racist opposition. “It became an instant anthem, and Holiday carried the song, like the burden that racism imposes on those in its view, throughout her

career, performing it in numerous circumstances and moods as she struggled with fame, racism and a heroin addiction” (Eschner).

The popularity of the song combined with Holiday’s well known jazz musician persona made her the target of the first commissioner for the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, Harry Anslinger. Due to his prejudiced views, Anslinger held the belief that African Americans would be influenced by activists to actively oppose and vocalize their opposition to racism. “As Johann Hari details in *Chasing the Scream: The First and Last Days of the War on Drugs*, Anslinger claimed that narcotics made black people forget their place in the fabric of American society, and that jazz musicians were dangerous, creating [sic] “Satanic” music under the influence of marijuana” (Weber). Anslinger, a well-documented racist, made it his mission to silence Holiday when she refused to quit singing “Strange Fruit”. For over a decade Anslinger tried to put an end to Holiday and her career. During this time Holiday was in the throes of her heroin addiction, some believe the darkness of the song combined with her past personal upbringing attributed to her struggle with heroin.

Anslinger directed one of his agents to set up Billie Holiday in a heroin purchase, which resulted in her receiving an 18-month prison sentence. After Holiday completed her incarceration, she was denied renewal of her cabaret performers license and was prohibited from performing in nightclubs. This obstacle would cause Holiday to relapse and worsened her health ailments which forced her to be admitted to a hospital for medical care. While hospitalized for liver cancer and other critical health issues, Anslinger’s agents planted heroin in her bed giving cause to handcuff Holiday to her hospital bed rails. She was further tortured by Anslinger’s agents, “Agents handcuffed Holiday to her hospital bed, took mugshots, interrogated her without a lawyer, fingerprinted her, removed gifts that people brought to her room and stationed two police

officers at her door. Agents also forbade any visitors unless they had a written permit” (Collins). After receiving methadone treatments, Holiday began to show signs of improvement until Anslinger had his agents ordered the medical staff to stop providing her treatment. Holiday died a few days later due to her withdrawal symptoms on July 17, 1959. “Holiday’s best friend Maely Duffy insisted that Billie was effectively murdered by a conspiracy theory to break her, orchestrated by the narcotics police” (Collins). After her death the song was blacklisted but it continued to be a source of inspiration for social change for many throughout the years.

“Strange Fruit” marked one of the earliest occasions an African American musician vocalized controversial lyrics that addressed the issue of racism. Holiday and the song are credited with having a pivotal role in the civil rights movement. Several major artists, including Nina Simone, Sting, and India Arie have recorded their own versions of the song. “Atlantic Records founder Ahmet Ertegun called the song "a declaration of war... the beginning of the civil rights movement" (Ayre). In 2020, the song regained significance amid the Black Lives Matter protests after Kanye West sampled Nina Simone’s version of “Strange Fruit” on his song “Blood on the Leaves” on his album *Yeezus*, which is a line of Holiday's original version of the song.

Sixty-three years after Holiday’s death, “Strange Fruit” has continued to represent the intimidation and the cruel treatment endured by many African Americans. While lynchings are not the norm today, racism and the mistreatment of African Americans are still an issue. The book *Billie Holiday: Essays on the Artistry and Legacy* makes the point “We are living in an age where people are being lynched not just with a rope, but with a gun and other weapons as well” (Perez and Mckee). On March 29 , 2022 President Joe Biden signed into law The Emmett Till Anti-Lynching Act. This bill made history as the first bill to specify lynching as a hate crime.

The importance of the bill is it will allow “prosecution of crimes as lynchings if they are done during a hate crime in which the victim is injured or slain” (Williams). . . The truth of modern-day racism can’t be denied with the unnecessary killing of unarmed people of color. "Strange Fruit" continues to remain relevant due to incidents of police violence against unarmed African American individuals. The world watched as law enforcement overstepped their authority causing the death of George Floyd. “I can’t breathe” is this generation’s noose. The corrupt intentions of the insurrection on Jan 6, 2021, brought out pockets of hate mongering groups that prove racism remains to this day. All eyes from around the world witnessed a treasonous scheme transpire that involved mob mentality cloaked with confederate flags that was too eerily similar of the public lynching watch parties of the past. Simeon Wright, cousin of Emmett Till commented “That strange fruit is still out there, just in a different form” (Williams).

Billie Holiday’s "Strange Fruit" continues to be a modern-day anthem that has made its mark through history. In 1999 Time magazine voted it the Song of the Century. Her version originally sold over a million copies and during the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement it was streamed over 2 million times (Browne). The history of the song and Holiday’s life are an important part of its current day relevance. Meeropol and Holiday undoubtedly had no idea “Strange Fruit” would still have such a profound and emotional effect eighty-three years later. Abel Meeropol’s son, Michael Meeropol recently said in an interview with Rolling Stone magazine “The fact that “Strange Fruit” is newly relevant is “a sad, sad commentary” (Browne). Billie Holiday believed in the powerful message of the song. President Biden once said, “With freedom comes responsibility”, that freedom includes standing up and putting an end to racial injustice in hopes that one day “Strange Fruit” is no longer relevant in society.

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