"Strange Fruit": the story of a song

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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.

"Strange Fruit," the haunting song about lynching in America that was written more than 60 years ago, was first recorded by the famed jazz singer Billie Holiday in 1939. Since then it has been recorded by some three dozen other performers, including black folk singer Josh White, the great jazz artists Abbey Lincoln, Carmen McRae and Nina Simone, pop performers Sting and UB40, operatic soprano Shirley Verrett, and contemporary vocalists Tori Amos and Cassandra Wilson.

The almost iconic status of this unusual song—not in the folk-song tradition, not quite jazz—was reflected in the inclusion of a segment of Holiday's rendition of it in Ken Burns' flawed but nonetheless comprehensive "Jazz" history broadcast on public television last year. The song has also been the subject, within the last couple of years, of a new book as well as a film documentary.

"Strange Fruit" has been called the original protest song. It is simple, spare but effective poetry. At a time when political protest was not often expressed in musical form, the song depicted lynching in all of its brutality. The three short verses are all the more powerful for their understated and ironic language. The juxtaposition of a beautiful landscape with the scene of lynching, the smell of magnolias with that of burning flesh, the blossoms more typically associated with the Southern climate with the "strange fruit" produced by racial oppression—this imagery conjures up the essence of racist reaction. Racism in America stands indicted and exposed by these lines, with no need at all for a more didactic or agitational message.

"Strange Fruit" was released on record in 1939, and quickly became famous. It had a particular impact on the politically aware, among artists, musicians, actors and other performers, and on broader layers of students and intellectuals. David Margolick's book, *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society and an Early Cry for Civil Rights*, quoting numerous prominent figures, demonstrates how the song articulated the growing awareness and anger that was to find expression in the rise of the mass civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s.

Nevertheless, few of the millions who have heard "Strange Fruit" are aware of its genesis and history. It was written in the mid-1930s by a New York City public school teacher, Abel Meeropol, who was at that time a member of the American Communist Party, and who later became better known as the adoptive father of the two sons of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the Jewish couple who were executed in 1953 for the alleged crime of giving the secret of the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union.

This history is related in Margolick's book, as well as in the film, *Strange Fruit*, which received its world premiere last month at the Film Society of Lincoln Center. The focus of the book is largely on Billie Holiday and her relationship to "Strange Fruit." The film, directed by Joel Katz, gives greater emphasis to Meeropol's story, and also presents interviews dealing with the historic and contemporary significance of the song. Funded in part by the Independent Television Service, which is connected to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, it may be shown in the future on public television. In the coming months it is scheduled at various universities and at film festivals in Philadelphia, Montreal, Toronto, San Francisco and elsewhere.

It is the role of Meeropol, the composer of this song, that explains why it was shown at the Jewish Film Festival, an annual event at Lincoln Center in New York. A prolific poet and songwriter, Meeropol was born in New York in 1903 into an immigrant family. Like many of his background and his generation, he was radicalized by the Russian Revolution, the danger of fascism, and the Great Depression.

For decades the story has circulated, given credence by Billie Holiday's autobiography *Lady Sings the Blues* (co-written by William Dufty), that the song was written specifically for Holiday, or even that she had a hand in writing it herself. Meeropol credited Holiday for her unique and influential version of the song, but he insisted on setting the record straight when *Lady Sings the Blues* appeared in the 1950s.

The poem was written in the 1930s, after Meeropol saw a gruesome photo of a Southern lynching, and long before he met Holiday. At the time he was teaching at De Witt Clinton High School in the Bronx. "Strange Fruit" was first printed as "Bitter Fruit" in the January 1937 issue of *The New York Teacher*, the publication of the Teachers Union, in which the Communist Party then played a dominant role.

Writing under the pen name of Lewis Allan, the names of his two children who were stillborn, Meeropol set the poem to music on his own. For the first two years after it was written, the song was performed in political circles, at meetings, benefits and house parties. In early 1939, however, Billie Holiday was performing in the newly-opened nightclub Café Society in lower Manhattan. Meeropol got the song to Barney Josephson, the owner of the club, and asked if Holiday would sing it. By some accounts, Holiday was at first not particularly impressed by the lyrics and perhaps not fully aware of the meaning of the song. Her rendition, however, made an enormous impression. She began performing it nightly, and then recorded it in April of that year.

Getting the song on record was not easy. Columbia Records, Holiday's regular label, refused to touch it. It was Commodore Records, a small outfit run by Milton Gabler, which released the song. Gabler, who is interviewed in the film, died last year at 90.

"Strange Fruit" was played only rarely on the radio. This was a period in which the segregationist Southern Dixiecrats played a leading role in the Democratic Party as well as the Roosevelt administration. It would take a mass movement to finally dismantle the apartheid system that played a key role in setting the stage for lynchings. There were, by conservative estimates, at least 4,000 lynchings in the half century before 1940, the vast majority in the South, with most of the victims black. There

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was little outcry over these pogrom-like activities. Socialists and communists were in the forefront of the struggle against lynchings.

Anticommunist politicians generally agreed with the Southern racists that the fight for racial equality was basically a left-wing plot, and anticommunist crusades certainly did not begin with Senator Joseph McCarthy in the postwar period. In 1941, Meeropol was brought before the witch-hunting Rapp-Coudert committee, which had been set up by the New York State legislature to investigate alleged Communist influence in the public school system. He was asked if "Strange Fruit" had been commissioned by the CP, or whether he had been paid by the party to write it.

Despite this political atmosphere, and the virtual banning of the song from the radio, at one point it was number 16 on the pop charts.

During the postwar witch-hunt, the performance of "Strange Fruit" became even more difficult. Some clubs refused to allow Holiday to sing what had become her signature song. She insisted on contracts specifying her right to sing it, but even that did not resolve the issue. Margolick's book relates how at one club on West 52nd St. Holiday cried after her performance. "Did you see the bartender ringing the cash register all through?" she said. "He always does that when I sing."

Interest and awareness of "Strange Fruit" appears to have dropped off, oddly enough, in the decades of the biggest civil rights protests. In recent years there has been a revival of interest in the song, however, as the many more recent recordings attest.

Katz's film sets itself the task of exploring the political significance of the song, and its contemporary meaning. Among those interviewed in the film are Henry Foner and Bernie Kassoy, who were friends of Meeropol; the poet and writer Amiri Baraka (formerly Leroi Jones); singers Abbey Lincoln and Pete Seeger; the Rev. C.T. Vivian, an associate of Martin Luther King, Jr.; and Michael and Robert Meeropol, the sons of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.

For the most part, the history is ably and vividly presented by the movie. While a further examination of the McCarthy period lies outside the scope of the movie, it nevertheless makes some connections clear. The Meeropol sons tell the story of how they came to be adopted by the writer of "Strange Fruit," after their parents had been killed "for a crime they didn't commit," as Michael Meeropol declares, before adding, "but that's a different issue."

Presenting evidence of renewed interest in "Strange Fruit" and the issues it raises, the film goes inside a classroom at De Witt Clinton, the school where Meeropol taught 60 and 70 years ago, and where today an Advanced Literature class is discussing the song written by a former Clinton teacher.

There are also references to much more recent expressions of racist brutality, such as the attack on Abner Louima in Brooklyn, and the case of Mumia Abu-Jamal. The closing images of the movie are also quite effective. As reference is made to the importance of the song, we see photos of Matthew Shepard, the victim of an anti-gay lynching in Laramie, Wyoming several years ago; of Jasper, Texas, the scene of the brutal killing of James Byrd by racists; and of a sign being brazenly displayed in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, declaring "Kill Muslims Now."

An important issue raised by the film is that of the role of the Communist Party and of Popular Front politics (and aesthetics) in relation to the cultural contributions of individuals like Meeropol. The film suggests, without going into greater detail, that it was no accident that socialists and communists were in the forefront of the struggle for racial equality, along with all the great battles for social progress in the twentieth century. This history deserves to be unearthed, in opposition to the anticommunist mythology which asserts that socialism equals Stalinism, and that the members of the American Communist Party were "un-American" agents of a foreign power.

There is also another side to the story. There was a tremendous contradiction inherent in the work of artists, writers and intellectuals who were influenced by the CP in the 1930s and '40s. On the one hand, as part of a leftward moving working class and intelligentsia, they were attracted by the promise of the Russian Revolution. They articulated, to one degree or another, anger at capitalist exploitation and oppression and the hopes for social equality and socialism.

Most of this layer, however, identified the Russian Revolution with the regime in the Kremlin. Only a minority agreed with the socialist opposition to Stalinism articulated by Leon Trotsky. Meeropol was one of the majority on the left who went along with the CP at this period. The creative work of these people could not help but be affected by their blind obedience to the Soviet bureaucracy and its reactionary political line.

From 1935 and 1945 (with the exception of the approximately two years of the Stalin-Hitler pact from 1939-41), the Stalinists demanded, in the name of the Popular Front alliance against fascism, slavish support for the Democratic Party and the administration of Franklin Roosevelt. All principled differences between socialism and Democratic Party liberalism were tossed aside in the interests of the Soviet regime's search for diplomatic alliances. Writers and musicians in the CP orbit were told to forget about socialism and the class struggle, and to produce patriotic material in line with the Popular Front.

The CP brought out the weaker sides of the artists under its influence. Not only that, it drew upon the weakest aspects of populist and radical "native" traditions, in working out its Popular Front operation. Meeropol himself is best known, aside from "Strange Fruit," for "The House I Live In," a complacent hymn to American brotherhood that he wrote with Earl Robinson and that was turned into a short film with Frank Sinatra in 1945. "The House I Live In" also shows the talent of its creators, but this talent is badly used and distorted. The purpose of the song was to sow illusions in capitalist liberalism. The film relates an amusing and revealing incident in connection with "The House I Live In." When Meeropol first saw the Sinatra version in a movie theater, he realized that his line about "my neighbors black and white" had been removed. He was so enraged by the censorship, one of his sons explains, that he was arrested for creating a disturbance.

The film cannot be faulted for not undertaking a more detailed examination of these issues, of course, but there is a definite and more glaring weakness in its treatment of the theme of "Strange Fruit." Lynching is dealt with in a superficial way. There is no attempt to explain its roots in part in the desperation of the poorest Southern whites and the channeling of their desperation into racist atrocities. The class roots of racism as a means of dividing the working class is unmentioned, nor is there any acknowledgment that the progress made, though surely limited, came because of a mass movement that was made possible by the entry of millions of blacks into the industrial working class, and the forging of a mass labor movement in the factories of the 1930s.

Instead, the film suggests that racism is simply a permanent fixture in America, and that every individual is equally responsible. The Rev. C.T. Vivian states that America is "a backward country," and that racism is "a white problem, not a black problem." Someone else comments, "Until the last racist is dead, 'Strange Fruit' is still relevant," but no one considers the fact that racists are not simply born and that there can be no such thing as the death of "the last racist" without attacking the economic, social and political conditions that continue to breed various forms of racism and ethnic hatred all over the world.

The weakness of the film's approach is not necessarily the product of a conscious decision by the filmmaker. There are historical reasons for the virtual absence of any class outlook. The decline and bankruptcy of the old civil rights and labor movements have created a situation in which there is little understanding of the need or even the possibility of uniting the working class. Even past achievements are then misread and portrayed

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in a pessimistic fashion.

Despite this serious flaw, this film is well worth watching. As new generations of young people confront present-day symptoms of the same system that created lynching, they will need to turn to the history this film explores, and to absorb the lessons of past struggles.

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