Great jazz vocalist dishonored by *The United States vs. Billie Holiday*—Can't we do better?

John Andrews
5 July 2021

Directed by Lee Daniels; screenplay by Suzan-Lori Parks; based on the book by Johann Hari

Sixty-two years ago, on July 17, 1959, Billie Holiday died in Metropolitan Hospital in East Harlem, New York City due to complications of chronic substance abuse, bringing an end to her career as one of the premier jazz vocalists of the mid-20th century. She is the subject of Lee Daniels' *The United States vs. Billie Holiday*, a seriously misguided work.

Holiday overcame an abusive childhood—she grew up with her prostitute mother in Baltimore and Harlem brothels—and a limited vocal range, to become a unique stylist who interpreted the popular songs of her era like a laid-back instrumentalist, delivering their lyrics with an unsettling emotional wallop.

Despite ongoing health and legal problems, Holiday performed from her teenage years until her death at age 44, regularly appearing at New York's Carnegie Hall and other important venues, and touring abroad.

Holiday first recorded in 1933. Only 18, she was backed by the not-yet-famous Benny Goodman on a session organized by John Hammond, a left-wing Vanderbilt family scion with no qualms about integrated ensembles. Two years later, Holiday appeared in a short film featuring the Duke Ellington Orchestra, singing a moving chorus of "Lost My Man Blues" while lying in the street after being rejected and abused by a lover.

Over the next decade, Holiday released dozens of three-minute masterpieces on 78-rpm singles, backed by small groups featuring the best jazz musicians of the period. She was featured on long-playing albums for major labels throughout the 1950s, the last recorded four months before her death and released posthumously.

Although Holiday declined physically during her later years, there is little in her extensive oeuvre, more than two hundred sessions with over 1,100 individual performances, that does not merit close listening today. She was one of a kind.

Holiday's exceptional singing deserves to be savored, and her complex, contradictory life treated seriously, not desecrated and trivialized as it is by *The United States vs. Billie Holiday*, the second biopic purportedly based on her life, released for streaming on Hulu last February.

The first Holiday biopic, 1972's *Lady Sings the Blues* (Sidney J. Furie), was also a miserable film, but for different reasons, a corny, up-by-the-bootstraps Hollywood saga produced as a star vehicle for a miscast Diana Ross.

Both films are populated with historical and entirely fictional characters, blended haphazardly with actual and fabricated historical events, replete with sloppy mistakes and anachronisms too numerous to catalogue. (One obvious example from the recent film: methadone was not used to treat heroin addiction until some years after Holiday died.)

In Daniels' film, Andra Day, a professional singer, approximates Holiday's appearance and forceful personality far better than did Ross. Day does as well as one could expect with the role she has been given, which earned her a Golden Globe award and Oscar nomination for best actress. Her singing, although it sounds superficially like Holiday's, lacks the deep acerbic bite that makes the latter's performances transcendent. Day's sound is far too sweet.

The plot of *The United States vs. Billie Holiday* suffers from a fixation on race, divorced from the social upheavals and traumas of postwar America, expressed both in the growing civil rights movement and official, state-sponsored anti-communism. Significantly, no genuine effort is made to place Holiday within the broader aesthetic developments of that tumultuous period, not only relative to jazz, which was in the midst of the bebop revolution, but also in film, literature and art.

The United States vs. Billie Holiday opens in 1947, around the time *Lady Sings the Blues* ends. In interviews, director Daniels (*Precious*, *Lee Daniels' The Butler*) explained that his inspiration for the title, and the film itself, was the federal government's supposed efforts to stop Holiday from "lighting the fuse of the Civil Rights era" by singing "Strange Fruit," the famed anti-lynching song. This narrow, false premise ignores and belittles ongoing struggles against Jim Crow racism, the complexities of Holiday's life and times, and generally muddies the film.

In an early scene, Holiday's manager Joe Glaser (he also managed Holiday's main influence, Louis Armstrong) prohibits her performance of "Strange Fruit," pointing out it was written by "Meeropol, a commie." Holiday responds, "I don't give a f--k." That is all the film has to say about the political origins of the song.

Abel Meeropol was a New York City school teacher who belonged to the US Communist Party. (Meeropol later adopted Julius and Ethel Rosenberg's two sons after their parents were executed in 1953 for alleged espionage.) In 1937, he published "Bitter Fruit" in the New York teachers' union journal after seeing a photo of a lynching. His lyrics are worth quoting:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
(Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,)
Black bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees.
Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
(The bulgin' eyes and the twisted mouth,)

© World Socialist Web Site

Scent of magnolias sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burnin' 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 the tree to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

Two years later, Meeropol added a simple melody and asked Barney Josephson, the left-wing manager of the racially integrated Café Society in Greenwich Village, to arrange an audition with Holiday, who was then performing nightly.

After hearing Meeropol play his song, Holiday reportedly turned to Josephson and said, "What do you want me to do with that, man?" Josephson insisted that she use the song to end her sets. He arranged for all services in the club to stop and a single spotlight to illuminate Holiday in dead silence. She sang a single chorus, with no instrumentals, and then left the stage. The effect stunned the audience.

When Holiday's label, Columbia, and her producer, Hammond, refused to record "Strange Fruit," Josephson arranged for his friend Milt Gabler, another left-winger, to do so for Commodore Records, a small specialty label that operated out of Gabler's record store. The flip side was a blues with lyrics by Holiday, "Fine and Mellow." The record became a 1939 juke-box hit. From then on Holiday performed both songs regularly. A video of her singing "Strange Fruit" on British television five months before her death can be accessed here.

None of this history appears in the film because it cuts across the generally racialist narrative of the film, grounded on the supposed innate incompatibility of black and white people, rather than the multiethnic struggle against racism expressed by people such as Meeropol, Josephson and Gabler. (Café Society was forced to close in 1949 as a result of anti-communist witch-hunts.)

In the new film, Holiday's insistence on performing "Strange Fruit" outrages a room of white men, including Harry J. Anslinger (Garrett Hedlund), the founder of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics. (Anslinger was, in fact, a notorious racist who deliberately targeted black people with federal narcotics enforcement. However, many white musicians were ensnared in his net as well.)

Because "you can't just stop a n----r from singing a song," Anslinger dispatches African American war veteran and narcotics agent Jimmy Fletcher (Trevante Rhodes) to infiltrate Holiday's circle. His efforts lead to her arrest and prosecution for heroin possession. She is sentenced to a year in federal custody.

Holiday was in fact released several months early, and immediately sang "Strange Fruit" as the closer at a Carnegie Hall "Welcome Back" concert held on March 27, 1948, an historical fact that disproves the film's premise that Holiday was prosecuted and imprisoned to stop her from performing the song.

The film depicts Holiday continuing her career and eventually relapsing. Anslinger is portrayed as obsessed with using narcotics laws to stop Holiday from singing "Strange Fruit," which is just silly. Holiday continued to perform the song, and had several scrapes with the law, but no other substantial incarcerations.

According to the film, Anslinger dispatches Fletcher again to investigate and arrest Holiday. Despite knowing he was responsible for her earlier jailing, Holiday welcomes Fletcher into her inner circle. They inject heroin together. Fletcher's intoxication is used to set up a crude flashback to Holiday's reported rape in a brothel at age 10. Fletcher and Holiday wind up in a protracted sexual affair, much to Anslinger's consternation.

Fletcher follows Holiday to her deathbed, haunted by his own guilt, which is aggravated by the disapproval of his pious mother, for betraying Holiday and, by strong implication, his race.

Yes, the plot is that absurd. Disjointed subplots abound, including a fixation on Holiday's abusive relationships with certain men and her same-sex affair with actress Tallulah Bankhead (Natasha Lyonne). The film's recurring depictions of sex and intravenous drug abuse are for the most part unpleasant and gratuitous.

In 1947, Holiday and Louis Armstrong made a feature film together, *New Orleans*, in which she was forced to play scenes as a maid but was given space to perform with Armstrong while elegantly attired.

None of this history is mentioned. Instead, Holiday introduces Armstrong to a Harlem audience at one point, as if they would not know who he was. The film uses Armstrong's "Struttin' With Some Barbecue" as background for one of the drug-fueled sex scenes.

The great saxophonist Lester Young, one of the key figures in the transition of swing to bebop, fares even worse. He and Holiday met in New York during the mid-1930s. Young, who had a way with words as well as music, nicknamed Holiday "Lady Day." She called him the President, which became shortened to "Prez." Their records together are among the greatest in jazz. Samples can be heard here, here and here.

Young was not Holiday's constant companion and general lackey, as depicted in the film. In fact, the two became estranged, likely due to Holiday's heroin addiction.

Young sadly drank himself to death, dying in a New York hotel room a few months before Holiday. Yet the film depicts him as a fitness fanatic, jumping rope in Holiday's hotel room to stay in shape! When he is depicted playing the tenor saxophone, what comes out is crude 1950s' rhythm and blues, nothing that suggests Young's light tone and unique melodic brilliance.

The United States vs. Billie Holiday purports to address the toxic effects of racism on a great artist by reducing Holiday's well known travails to cliché-ridden tropes that do a great disservice to her legacy. At no point do we get the slightest indication of why Billie Holiday was a renowned singer, or of the source of the joy that infused her work. It's sad, really. Artists of this caliber deserve better.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site