

A Plea for Artists to Be Activists for Women's Rights: Don't Explain

by Heather Fowler

When I feel the sort of longing that sneaks up on me unawares, the sort held for the wrong kind of person that can make a woman clutch her heart in the night and sullies her blood with unwanted dreams in a thinking person's landscape, I hear, too, the deep throaty voice of Billie Holiday, and her constant reminder to pull myself together. Most of the time, I hear the song "Don't Explain," specifically the version of this song she sang on Art Ford's Jazz Party in 1958, with Mal Waldron on piano, Mary Osborne on guitar, Harry Sheppard on vibes, Vinnie Burke on bass, and Osie Johnson on the drums.

So bluesy and painful sweet, it becomes an anthem—a cautionary tale still played out in these deceptively liberated times. As an artist, I often tell a sad story, too, for similar reasons as Billie's songs lament, but please don't mistake my pain for resignation, for it is never that.

What it must be is a plea or a prayer made with art for women readers or listeners, asking them to listen closely to the subtext behind the stories, to hear me, or to act—to recognize the subtle struggle we as women must engage and to pick up our largest functional hammers to break down the walls of either societal or self-limitations. Due to some prevalent apathy I've experienced in the last few years, I'd say nothing bothers me more than when women today trounce or treat the ideals of feminism as man-hating causes, causes counter-themselves and their rights to be considered "normal" (rather than as ball-busting commandos of doom, as it is presumed their feminism can be defined). This can also be seen in

the case of young girls who have not yet lived long enough to see how deeply equality has not thusfar been attained.

Defensive at my inquiries about their lives, as if men needed their defense, they often proclaim: "There's nothing wrong with men. Men are our friends and husbands. Men are free. We are free. Everything is good."

But are they, and are we, and is it? Into my torn mind again comes the piano, the voice:

Hush now, I think, don't explain.

I know you raised Cain.

Rationally, I may reply to such assertions, especially when from students, with: "This is true. Many men are supporters of women's rights. But what you don't understand may be the invisible expectations of society and double standards under which you still live and breathe, unaware of how stifled you may be now or in the future. Are you having breathing trouble?" While this may not be politically correct, often I suppress an urge to say: "Have a family. Then you'll know."

Instead of muttering the above or citing personal experience, I often ask peers and colleagues to examine how gender roles work in their own extended families. I ask them if anyone female consistently cheats on her husband in their homes without being subjected to scorn. I ask, too, whether they happen to have an Uncle Albert. You know, the Uncle every girl has who ogles young ladies walking by, who is sometimes seen in the company of loose women, and whose wife waits at home, generally accepting, silently, maybe ironing his shirts. Do they know such a man, or know of such a man?

But I'm glad you're back.

Don't explain.

On occasion, I may ask them whether there are any women in their families who have been left by a louse of a husband or by multiple boyfriends, possibly those women raising children by themselves, fighting with the system for child support payments not

voluntarily sent. No? Really? Look again. What are the questions you have not been asking?

I also ask whether any of their Aunts have taken back an errant husband after he embarrassed them with infidelity. If infidelity is defined as the opposite of fidelity itself, a quantity applicable to both relationships and music, I think it's interesting to note here that the Merriam Webster online dictionary defines fidelity as follows: "1. *a*: the quality or state of being faithful *b*: accuracy in details : exactness" or "2: the degree to which an electronic device (as a record player, radio, or television) accurately reproduces its effect (as sound or picture)." For the purpose of this essay, I wish to underline the definition's focus on accuracy in details, exactness of depiction--the implied and positive lack, with high fidelity, of harmful interference or misrepresentation. Every true music aficionado I've ever known craves clear sound, and with good reason. They can hear it better, understand it more fully. I think women crave fidelity, in general, for a similar sense of clarity, correctness, or rightness in the world.

Quiet, don't explain.

You mixed with some dame.

Many women who've experienced infidelity in one way or another will confess the above ideas are true, or have been. But there seems to be an aura of repression in some modern women's responses, an unwillingness to follow the logical ball into the court. I ask them if any women have been treated poorly in their family, those who have, say, borne a child out of wedlock—and how do they feel about that treatment of women? What if they were in such a position—a one night stand, perhaps? A rape repercussion. Answers vary: "My grandfather would kill me," "My mother would be so unhappy," "I've been on the pill since I was twelve. This would not happen." And Billie sings on:

Skip that lipstick.

Don't explain.

There is the sense that asking oneself such questions is unproductive. What could it possibly change? As a frequent

alternate lyric for this song sardonically states: *What is there to gain?* For some women, to explore such issues just makes them unhappy, unsatisfied with their lot, or worse, ready to isolate blame on a person they know who is not them but may become simply the shadowy embodiment of many more persons, female, whose crowd has a shifty and disappearing face in their awareness. There is a horrible insularism in this culture that makes each person forget that it's the masses who are responsible for protecting the oppressed, must protect the oppressed—that each dynamic in each home is not unique to a special torture found only at the ___'s, but emblematic of a larger problem if that dynamic persists across geographic boundaries, race, and religion.

The lipstick that is requested skipped in this song is never the lipstick of the singer and always the unbodied presence of the other temptation, the visual proof of alternate possession. Billie's use here just echoes many such uses in lyric history. It's sad and telling how saturated American culture is with references to the men's garments so clearly besmirched by the cosmetics of the dangerous and all too villainized “other woman,” but it's the tone in which this song is sung that is so telling. What Billie seems to be saying here is that she does not want to know about how someone else's cosmetics landed on her lover's garments, nor does she want to be lied to, *implied: again*. Are the details important? Skip the unnecessary and cloying exposition. Hush now--be for me who I want you to be, she seems to say. I will pretend. As if to emphasize this surrender, she says next:

You know that I love you

And what love endures

The use of “what love endures” chills me here because of what that means to me about life in America today. It evokes another question in my heart and mind. This asks: How many women live in homes where they don't want such an explanation because: 1. It could cause a fight that endangers them physically, 2. The man could leave again and with him the ability to feed their children, or 3. It

hurts too much to know the details of recurrent violations and doesn't change the man's behavior?

Is it not implied in Billie's reaction to that infidelity that he is an old dog doing an old trick, but one she seems to forgive since what other choice does love leave? Had it been the first time he came home in such a state, would she not have reacted with more anger—with more indignant shock?

These lines pain me even now. Oh, people—do we really still live in a world where men's infidelity or other violations are “what love endures”? This is part of what makes me sad waking up today in 2012 where across America conservative candidates thrive who conspire to put America back in the fifties era of women's rights--and regularly win elections. Every woman who casts a vote for a candidate who wants to cut funding for entities like Planned Parenthood and other women's rights groups is agreeing to her own renewed subjugation, casually slitting the throat of other women, and perpetuating the stereotype that the patriarch knows best.

And you know what really bothers me? It's not that many of these women vote this way just to please their husbands or families. It's the fact that the rare man to be cuckolded by his wife is still looked down on and pitied today—yet viewed as an anomaly worthy of discussion, a victim of a most terrible she-devil, whereas this sort of treatment in women's lives is still so commonplace as to not generally require much remark. Even women's votes cast against themselves could be done so quietly and almost obliviously that such women hardly register the squandering of their rights and privileges, and those of other women, earned by none other than the shed blood and tears of earlier feminists. Where's the gratitude?

All my thoughts are of you

For I'm so completely yours

Yet, what woman is not trained—since childhood, since birth—that she does her best duty to be a loyal princess seeking a single prince, that her true love should involve deep commitment and a soul to soul bond with someone for whom she would give up her world? We have come so far, have we not? Pass the Virginia Slims. Or, better,

the Transvaginal Probe. After all, how many women's magazines published each month have scintillating articles with such intellectual stances as: "50 Way to Best Please Your Man in Bed," "What Does He Really Want Under the Sheets?" and "Make-Up Your Guy Likes—What Your Lipstick Says About You."

I think it would be quite interesting to check, scientifically, whether men's magazines less frequently publish titles regarding a single romantic partner. After all, the *notches on the headboard* notion came from somewhere, but it wasn't from women's lib pamphlets passed out at the supermarket or bridge club.

Cry to hear folks chatter

And I know you cheat

Living in a woman's world is hard, don't I know it? One thing I love about this song in particular is that Billie lays the pain and sorrow right out there so matter of factly. So many times in music pertaining to love, infidelity is alluded to as desirable, glossed over as a lark—but here is the truth: Folks chatter. The truth hurts. Folks chattering hurts. Cheating hurts.

But what's most horrifying about any sexual behavior with outside parties is that it can endanger one's significant other as well as oneself. One person is taking a risk for two, so not only can a person who is cheated upon feel the emotional pain of such violations, but also, sometimes, as a nurse practitioner relayed to me on a recent visit to the Ob-Gyn, "...that poor patient had to find out an HIV positive status on a routine check up...but while in the office documented no partners other than spouse."

This is when the real world meets the need to act. What if you were that woman without access to health care and had to, for example, live with AIDs or a less dangerous venereal disease, or several, because your spouse had cheated—and your state cut off funding to facilities that could have made you well? What if you knew you had such a cheating husband or father prone to molestation and had no access to birth control—but you had to tell your parent or employer why you needed it because you lived in a procreation community? What if you lived in a procreation

community and still didn't want to have a child with a person you felt uncertain about but didn't want to tell them this because they would beat you? Read between, and into, and over, the lines. Would you do what my great grandmother told my mother to do to avoid pregnancy, a long time ago—though granted this pertains only to avoiding pregnancy: “Get the gelatin capsules and fill them with baking soda. Go to the bathroom and put them in right after.” Apparently, if the memory of one family member is true, later, this practice was discovered to create a higher likelihood for generating successful female embryos, though not to halt pregnancies.

Right or wrong, don't matter

When you're with me sweet

Right, because you can stomp on my foot, leave, and later bring flowers as I limp into the kitchen, but you're back. Oh, precious delight of delights! Don't these lines paint a picture of how many sins are washed away by the need to rationalize or diminish their import (or the import of the women attached)? And how many women out there have thought they'd found Prince Charming and fell too deeply in love to self-extricate, even after they knew he was a monster? I've seen this before, so many times. At the battered women's shelter where I've donated proceeds from my first book *Suspended Heart*, it is no surprise to me that there is therapy provided, job-search help, wardrobe help, and any number of services that aid women in desperate straits, those who sometimes show up weeping, mutilated, or dirty in the middle of the night. These are women of all classes, of all races. It used to be that women in San Diego had to go to thirteen or fourteen different offices in order to get the same aid this one shelter now provides.

Hush now, don't explain

You're my joy and pain

It seems these women knew the pain more than the joy, and they were in danger in the former aid or documentation facilities, out in open air, often accosted by their batterers. This is why the services, so many of them, were gathered together and are now provided

from a sheltered, cardkey location high in a downtown building in an office sector that is directly adjacent to a police station. There has been progress. There is still cost.

Many of this often unseen segment of society across the United States and elsewhere have lost their sense of self-worth and their ability to fend for themselves. Maybe the masses need to bring their causes to light. Maybe these women feel or felt this way:

My life's yours, love

Don't explain

Not surprisingly, statistics say one in every three women has experienced some kind of rape or physical violation, a statistic to which I take the liberty of adding that the afflicted one of three has also likely endured the terrifying memory of psychological abuse that is created by such experience. For me, when Billie sings the above lines, the echo of their meaning crystallizes the horror that a lot of survivors must retain upon first arrival at a woman's shelter—and somewhat explains their initial unwillingness to commit to getting out of their homes. Some just stop in for a visit to the place where it's safe, to visualize a different life, dream of salvation, or inquire about the vague possibility of changing their dwelling in the future, but are unwilling to leave their spouse or go to a safe house with any expediency, regardless of whether the center would fund all housing and transportation costs.

“And how many men do you get in here?” I asked the guy giving me the tour as I stopped to leave a copy of my book for their recreation room. This shelter also services the LGBT community.

He paused, thought a moment— and I think what he said was, “Not many. But we do get male teenagers. Runaways.”

Now, no one is saying here that there aren't good men, great men, a good many in fact. It was a man sensing the need for safety and help for women in my city who championed the creation of the very center I discuss. What I am saying is that women must help themselves, too. What I am saying is that art is powerful. Song is powerful. Women's voices can be powerful, but we must address our own concerns out loud and make them heard, whether they are

beautiful or acceptable or not--whether they are ugly as herpes sores or mottled bruises made by crushing hands, male or female.

In my view, Billie Holiday served women's activism when she wrote "Don't Explain" with Arthur Herzog Jr., likely sometime early in 1944, after her husband Jimmy Monroe purportedly came home one night with lipstick traces on his collar. Why, more than fifty years later, you might ask, is this song still haunting and beautiful and evocative? My guess is that it's because it served to tell the truth about a woman's experience in Billie Holiday's day, yet this truth remains no less true today. As Adrienne Rich, a vocal poet and admired member of the literary community who passed this March 27th, stated so well, "When a woman tells the truth she is creating the possibility for more truth around her."

This is why I ask the current arts community to embrace the cause of making women stronger and more visible, why I ask: Will you do something with your art today that makes people feel the struggle of living in a world that is not yet equal for everyone? If you love women, love women. If you want to help women, help women. If you are not an artist, do what you can. Donate. Even small amounts. Myself, I give art. This is why I link my short fiction collections to charities. And listen to Billie's song, to her enduring pain. It belongs to all of us. Bluesy, jazzy, honey, sickly, sweet, the truth is still the truth.

(Please let this gentle letter of request be both your call to action and reminder.)

