

Billie Holiday Visits Her Song

by Sean Lovelace

“One night in Los Angeles, a bitch stood up in the club where I was singing and said, ‘Billie, why don't you sing that sexy song you're so famous for? You know, the one about the naked bodies swinging in trees.’”

Billie Holiday

Southern trees bear strange fruit Blood on the leaves and blood at the root

She was thirty nine years old and with a full and drifting face—here, there, away—like spotlight caught in cigarette smoke and she didn't like being in the hotel room, being with them, sitting on the bed, gazing out the window, alone, is how she thought about it—with them, yes, but *alone*—and eventually they would ask something, eventually want to know.

“They,” she whispered, a collective.

—They don't tell me where I've been.

—They don't slum me.

—They can't threaten me with love.

They: Joe Guy, Louis McKay, John Levy, Jimmy Monroe—trumpeters, piano players, pushers, talent agents, actors, club owners, bartenders, ex-cons, hustlers of every good-time joint and love shack and barrelhouse and dimly lit New York City backroom/backstage/speakeasy/flophouse/alley.

All the men wanted to know:

Why you keep calling me “daddy”?

Why you got that white gardenia in your hair?

Why you keep a razor blade in your stocking?

Why you got to be so stuck on that song. Saying you wrote that song? That it's your song; that you'd rather see a woman in my own bed than up on the stage at Hot-Cha, J-Jarvis, the Alabama Grille, any kind of place, butchering that tune, *your* song. That you own it. Wrote it, baby, come now. Lewis Allan wrote that song. A white man. Tell the truth.

—Truth?

There was something in her voice now, blue lightning, high and low and electric.

—Let me set your ass straight on truth. I own every song come outta this throat, outta these lips. I live it. Don't you motherfuckers ever wonder? Every song I sing is some third-rate melody, some sad ass lyric already looked over, tossed aside, by somebody white: society orchestra, big band, some careful crooner. That's how it works in this business, this show business, this life, what I seen. They get first choice; I get shit, and I make it my own—make it good shit. Now, don't you wonder? How 'bout I tell you cook me a big-ass fancy meal, the best, a fine dinner, then I go and give you a sack of corn flour. Listen: When you say about me, read about me, see me, or think you see me, when you say art, that word, *artist*, when I'm up there and you think, *timing, rhythm, intensity, soul*, all that square-ass shit you read in the papers, on and on, you just remember, I'm not even singing a first class song. They hardly let me, so if I get one, if I do—it's *mine*. You see? I got to make it mine.

**Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees**

RELEASE FROM
CAPP-JOHNSON Publicity
545 Fifth Avenue, New York City, 17

From: Greer Johnson

Exclusive to: Walter Mitchell

For the second time in a month, St. Louis' popular Plantation Club has dealt tolerance and democracy a blow below the belt. This time it involves the great blues singer, Billie Holiday, whom Esquire magazine singled out this very month with a full-page color photograph a/caption lauding her as the outstanding singer of her field. Miss Holiday was scheduled to open at the Plantation last week, following a recent altercation over color in which a member of Benny Carter's band was severely injured by the blow of a pistol butt on the head. When the singer had finished the first show of her opening night, she prepared to leave the club with a white friend. This man had befriended her several years ago when she was in the city with Artie Shaw's band. The manager stopped them at the door, delivered several unpleasant remarks, and forcibly threw the white man out. When Miss Holiday returned for her second show, she was told to read the signs which forbid any "mixing". She was then told she needn't go on for the second show. At this writing, she is sitting in a St. Lois hotel, waiting for her manager (Joe Glaser) to arrive and straighten things out. The club has called her to return--but on the old terms of humiliation, scorn, and prejudice. A fine thing, that in the mother city of the river which gave jazz to the world, an outstanding figure of the jazz world should be ridiculed for the color of her skin.

**Pastoral scene of the gallant south
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth**

It was something she didn't know what to make of.
It was long pale petals.
It was banned from the radio.
It was a sleeping hound.

It was clinging weeds dredged from the bottom.

It wasn't understood by some people. It was clearly understood by some people.

It was something that closed the show. Her eyes went full and overfull. Then it filled the room. That thing so large and low and a weight like deep inside. And the room blacked out and the service paused, hands frozen—ice melting, ashes growing—and this thing floating and crushing and *there*, a presence: sure as music, the crowd, sure as Lady Day. Frozen in the spotlight, hands clasped, frozen. Only tears.

It was flatly refused by Columbia.

It was lightning wrist-snap.

It would make them shout, "Please sing it!"

It was half-expecting blood.

It was silence stretched.

It would make them shout, "Never sing it! Don't you ever!"

It left a long pause at The Apollo, then the sorrow of a thousand sighs.

**Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh**

You played the Blue Room and it was very blue and they all expected the blues from the blue room because that's what black people sing, the blues. The Blue Room, Lincoln Hotel, New York City. You've come a long way. Only you can't sit on the bandstand; we can't have a black girl just sitting there. You can sing a song, a request, and then return, return to where you belong, because you've already risen above—black girl in a blue room owned by white men—already risen from some vague suffering, some grimy ash, some thick mud, a Chicago ghetto or a slanted shack on a Mississippi farm, who knows, but you've escaped that, we let you escape—so sing us a song: How about that Old Gold commercial? Only you can't sing that tune for money, not on the radio—we allow your kind to buy our cigarettes, not to sell them. But at least you

escaped. Smile! Dance for us! Shake your hips. This is 1938! This is New York City! This is the Lincoln hotel, only do you mind stepping this way, careful, watch the stairs, that wet spot, over here: the freight elevator. You understand? The customers stay here; they wouldn't want to see...the elevator, please, Lady. Watch yourself; I said watch your step, in the Lincoln Hotel. Lincoln, remember—he's the one who tried to free your people.

**Here is fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck**

The guitarist was a man glowing, sweat-shined, who seemed to suppress a cough, seemed to shudder, his form bent low over the guitar, the edge of the spotlight, hunched, drawn up and within, and he swept the strings with his fingers, stop-time, and the crowd listened and swayed in their seats and some of them mumbled he might topple over, that man might fall over, and why are his eyes so yellow?

The guitarist was name of Clarence and he was proud of his daughter and he was miles away—physically, psychologically, emotionally—touring with Don Redman in deep, deep Texas and he was terrified and very alone.

He'd felt this way before, long ago, fought for his country, but now he was in Texas and his lungs were scarred from a gas attack, long ago, as a soldier, and he had this respiratory infection and no one to see him at the hospital because of his skin—a dusty, cold corner, coughing up blood and yellow pain—yes, his skin, the particular hue of it, they just wouldn't see him, and so his daughter, the celebrated jazz singer, was given a crumpled telegram while shivering in a van, scraping with her fingers at a paper plate of biscuits and runny eggs.

Why in the van?

Because she ain't allowed inside this-here diner! None of them's allowed!

Why a paper plate?

Good God Almighty! You can't wash shit off a plate!
Why with her fingers?
Why the hell not?
Why runny eggs?
Cause I done cooked 'em wrong. Then I spit in them!
Why shivering?
*Cause it gets cold round here in December. Real cold. And
somebody said her daddy just died.*

**For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop**

