

Billie Holiday: The Last Interview and Other Conversations

Introduction by Khanya Mtshali

Over a montage of photos featuring white crowds gathered under trees bearing the hanged bodies of black men and women, I heard the opening lines to Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit." At the time, I was 16 and home alone, watching back-to-back documentaries on TV because I assumed that's what serious and smart adults did in their free time. The name of this particular documentary escapes me, but I do recall feeling briefly disconnected from my mind and body, as I listened to this haunting, melodic voice drone over each lyric of this violent southern gothic. Delivered with an intense and stirring moral clarity, something seemed eerily familiar about the violence described by Holiday in this "pastoral scene of the gallant South."

Though my upbringing in post-apartheid South Africa had been an entire world away from Billie Holiday's America, "Strange Fruit" reminded me of the times my grandmother would recount the tyranny of living under the apartheid regime, where she was forced to bury the bodies of school-going children, wake up to the smell of gunpowder and teargas, and hear about the death of a loved one over the radio. What Holiday created was something akin to a communal obituary for the premature deaths of black people at the hands of white supremacy. "Strange Fruit" may have been a black American meditation on the brutality of racism, but to me, it also came to represent the suffering and survival of all descendants of the African continent.

From that moment on, I decided I needed to hear more of Billie Holiday. I proceeded to download every single song of hers I could find on the free mp3 platforms of my youth, hating myself for letting her brilliance be filtered through this illicit world of terribly designed websites riddled with computer viruses. I felt guilty for allowing someone of Holiday's stature to fall victim to the post-album, free-for-all mess of early-aughts internet culture, but at least, I selfishly reasoned, I now owned some of her music.

Holiday didn't make too many film appearances, and some of the footage from her TV appearances has been lost, leaving just a trail of audio behind. But as YouTube began to stretch its wings, I searched high and low for anything video-like, stumbling on a clip of hers which struck me as one of her finest performances. In *Symphony in Black: A Rhapsody of Negro Life*, a short musical film directed by Fred Waller and composed by Duke Ellington in 1935, Holiday makes a brief and uncredited cameo. She was just 19 at the time. The film, which explored the realities of everyday black life in America, spliced shots of Ellington's orchestra in performance, and ordinary black people working, dancing, and singing. Holiday comes into focus about three minutes in, emerging from the black of the night, and staring into the apartment window of her former beau dancing with his current belle. As her old lover comes out of his apartment building, Holiday throws herself at him, begging

for his affections. He, in turn, rejects her advances, and pushes her to the ground.

Dejected, Holiday eventually lifts her face, and launches into the opening lines of Ellington's "Saddest Tale:"

*"The saddest tale on land or sea
Was when my man walked out on me"*

Holiday is captivating in her role as the forlorn lover whose man has moved on while she still mourns their relationship. While other singers delivered unrequited love songs in a direct, one-dimensional way, Holiday layered her performances with high emotional stakes, giving these songs a life-or-death quality. Her appearance in *Symphony in Black* would define her as the unofficial queen of torch songs, typical of the Tin Pan Alley era of the early 20-century. While these sometimes thin and formulaic songs about romance and heartbreak may have been beneath Holiday's crisp phrasing and horn player's knack for improvisation, she was able to elevate them into dramatic ballads worthy of an imperial romance.

Like many Billie Holiday fans, the more I learned about her personal history, the more protective I got over her legacy — so much so, that I refused to watch Diana Ross's performance in the 1972 film, *Lady Sings the Blues*, because I'd read that it depicted her life as a tragic pantomime. Holiday was born Eleanor Fagan Gough (or Elinore Harris, according to some records) on April, 7, 1915 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She spent her formative years in Baltimore, Maryland where she was shuffled between different relatives while her mother struggled to get regular work as a maid. In one of the interviews included here, Holiday claims her father, Clarence Holiday of the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra, became less present in her life after he remarried when she was 10. Around that time, Holiday was reported to have been raped, and sent to Catholic reformatory school for about two years. After leaving with the help of relatives, she moved to New York with her mother, where they began engaging in sex work to make ends meet. Holiday was only 14.

As I began writing the introduction for this set of interviews, I worried about falling into the trap of treating Holiday as symbol for the sordid dangers of celebrity. Any discussion of her life, in my mind, could be used to further myths about her image as a tragic heroine who made sad and soulful music about how life had done her in. Yet it would be disingenuous of me to leave these details out under the rather condescending guise of championing the brilliance of her music — something not even the most contrarian of us could deny. Holiday wasn't one to shy away from being frank about the dire circumstances that she'd lived through.

And so I realized that one cannot write Billie Holiday without mentioning her drug offenses. In May 1947, law enforcement discovered heroin in her room at the Attucks Hotel in Philadelphia, where she was due to play with Louis Armstrong at the Earle Theater. She was sentenced to a year and a day at the Federal Reformatory for Women in Alderson, West Virginia. In a 1947 interview Holiday conducted with *DownBeat* magazine just ten days before her hearing at a Philadelphia federal court, she instructs interviewer, Michael Levin, not to blame her troubles on show business. “When you’re writing, straighten them out about my people,” she tells Levin. “Tell ‘em I made my mistake but show people aren’t all like that. Whatever I did wrong, nobody else but me was to blame.” Holiday then launches into a critique of the double standards applied to black people who happened to make regrettable mistakes in life. “I’m a Negro,” she says, “I’ve got two strikes against me, and don’t you forget it.” Yet Holiday is adamant on the right to be flawed and messed up while black, going on to say, “I’m proud of those two strikes. I’m as good as a lot of people of all kind.”

When I first came across Holiday’s candid discussions about her struggles with substance abuse, I felt a piercing familiarity which quickly gave way to an intense shame. In my early twenties, I came into my own troubles with substance dependency, and Holiday had become much more to me than just the gifted vocalist whose chilling protest song about American racism had moved me as a teenager. I didn’t want to think of myself as the kind of person who found Holiday’s heroin addiction dark and glamorous, or her alcoholism the true mark of genius. But she was someone I could admire for trying and failing, and trying and failing to fight and understand her addictions in full view of the public. I realized that Holiday, like all addicts and addict-adjacents, was a human being who’d fallen into a habit she couldn’t live without. For me, separating Holiday from her addiction would tell addicts, particularly black women addicts, that no matter how talented or beloved they are, they’d still fall short of being afforded full humanity. It would seem to cast judgement on those who, like Holiday, discovered the best and worst versions of themselves at the bottom of a bottle, or the sharpest end of a needle. Addiction is lonely, hard, and exhausting, especially for women addicts born poor or working-class, who are rarely given any real shot at redemption. I decided it’d be callous and unhelpful to treat Holiday’s addictions as an unnecessary distraction.

In the rest of the 1947 *Downbeat* interview, Holiday not only blames herself for her addictions, but she also displays an allegiance to “show people,” or jazz musicians, who she loved and respected deeply. At the time, the jazz world was dealing with a pervasive substance abuse problem, with the likes of Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, and Miles Davis famously becoming hooked on “junk,” and nodding off at gigs, or missing them entirely. Holiday, who drank alcohol and smoked marijuana throughout the 30s, was allegedly introduced to opium by her first husband, trombonist Jimmy Monroe, whom she married in

1941, and later divorced in 1947. During their marriage, Holiday had begun an affair with trumpeter, Joe Guy, whom she'd later marry in 1951 and divorce in 1956. In the interview, Holiday expresses her devotion to Guy, despite admitting that her manager, Joe Glaser, disapproved of him because he felt Guy had a bad influence on her. But she refuses to make her lover the face of her downfall, even though he was alleged to have supplied her with drugs while they were together.

In his book, *Chasing The Scream: The First and Last Days of the War on Drugs*, journalist Johann Hari writes that the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, led by an ambitious, jazz-loathing man named Harry Anslinger, had started pursuing jazz musicians suspected of drug use. Holiday's profile had risen dramatically after her performance of "Strange Fruit" at the nightclub Café Society in Greenwich Village in 1939. This, according to Hari, made her an attractive target for the FBN. Following her release from the women's reformatory in West Virginia, Holiday made a triumphant comeback at Carnegie Hall on March 27, 1948, where she performed two concerts for a sold-out crowd. But nonetheless, she would struggle to make the same earnings she'd made before prison. Because of her conviction, she'd been stripped of her New York City cabaret card, which prevented her from performing in establishments where liquor was sold — in other words, most of the places where jazz was played.

In January 1949, Holiday was arrested in San Francisco, this time for opium possession. Months later, a jury would drop the charges against her on a technicality issue. Holiday would later tell *Ebony* Magazine in 1949 that she was sick of the "vindictive, hounding, heckling and harrassing" of law officials. But as Hari later points out in his book, this increased surveillance did nothing but foster a sense of community on the jazz scene, which collectively came to view law enforcement as the enemy.

Holiday's feelings of comradery towards her peers weren't just limited to protecting them from public scrutiny. In a 1956 radio interview for "Voice of America Jazz Hour," included here, she discusses her music in relation to the musicians who she saw herself as an extension of. She describes her singing style as being a combination of Louis Armstrong, whose improvisational style she admired and emulated, and Bessie Smith, whose big voice and emotional expression she enjoyed.

Armstrong and Holiday, who were both friends and collaborators, were also label mates on Decca Records in the 40s, and later Verve in the 50s. In 1947, they performed together in *New Orleans*, a comically ambitious and plotty movie about the The Jazz Age as told through a 40-year love story. Holiday's devotion to Satchmo was so strong, that when he was accused of "Tomming" for white audiences, she came to his defense, albeit awkwardly,

remarking, “God bless Louis Armstrong! He Toms from the heart!”¹

It wasn't just Satchmo who Holiday held in high regard. Lester Young, the tenor sax player who she nicknamed “Prez,” was often referred to as Holiday's musical soulmate and best friend. In the “Voice of America” interview, Holiday says that when Young, who gave Holiday the moniker “Lady Day,” came onto the scene, his delicate and light tone was regarded as unusual, if not undesirable, for a tenor saxophonist. She claims she was one of the few people to declare his sound brilliant and innovative, foretelling how widely it would be mimicked by his peers.

While Holiday could speak highly of her musical comrades, she could be just as harsh and scathing to those who crossed her. This prickliness is on display in her 1939 interview for *DownBeat Magazine*, straightforwardly titled, “I'll Never Sing with a Dance Band Again.” Here she discusses her time with the big swing bands of the 30s. Holiday was only 24, which becomes evident in her youthfully brash criticisms of legends like Count Basie and Artie Shaw. With Basie, she accuses him of having “too many guys behind the scenes who told everybody what to do,” though she does mention getting along with the Count himself, and the band, swimmingly.

Shaw, on the other hand, gets the shorter end of the stick. As the interview progresses, we discover that her ill-feelings towards him aren't simply because of his “snooty, know-it-all mannerisms.” For an engagement at the Lincoln Hotel in New York, Shaw allegedly made Holiday wait upstairs by herself until her number, while the rest of his all-white band remained on stage. She was also forced to use the freight elevator and back door, which contributed to her quitting the band altogether.

Holiday didn't always answer questions in the greatest detail, usually opting for concise responses when the opportunity presented itself. But as the lack of nightclub engagements made it difficult for her to make a living, she turned to burgeoning world of television, notching up appearances on shows like ABC's “The Comeback Story” in 1953, and NBC's “The Tonight Show with Steve Allen” in 1956. Besides performing, the aim was to present her as a reformed addict, as part of an effort to get her cabaret license back. In an interview with journalist and TV personality, Mike Wallace for his show “Night Beat” in 1956, included here, Holiday reveals how much she desires a quiet, domestic life with children in a beautiful home where she'd cook often. Wallace had a reputation for conducting thorough research on their subjects for more revelatory interviews, and elsewhere in the interview, he coyly probes Holiday on her “friendships” with the actress Tallulah Bankhead, actor Charles Laughton, and director and writer, Orson Welles, who were all rumored to have had affairs with Lady Day. Holiday appears caught off guard, offering a wishy-washy response

¹ *Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong*, by Terry Teachout (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009) Page 324

before getting into more coherent detail on how she became acquainted with the three Hollywood stars.

Though not all of these interviews will shock or surprise the most ardent Billie Holiday fans, it's exciting to see her discuss her music, life, and dreams without the interference of biographers and writers who, in the efforts to distract from the more depressing chapters of her biography, can drift into a convoluted, over-compensatory academese about her vocal abilities, and emotional expression.

In a 1951 CBC radio interview, Holiday explains the origin story behind her playful and soothing number, "God Bless The Child," which she wrote with Arthur Herzog, Jr. According to Holiday, the idea for song came from a disagreement she had with her mother about loaning her some money. Following the spat, Holiday quipped, "that's alright. God bless the child that's got his own," and later decided to turn the argument into a song with her piano player.

Herzog, on the other hand, told a different story. In *Billie Holiday: Wishing on The Moon*, he tells writer Donald Clarke that he'd asked Holiday for an "old-fashioned Southern expression," which he could make a song out of. Stumped, Holiday allegedly couldn't come up with anything. She eventually began recounting a story about her mother wanting some money from her, to which she said in a huff, "God bless the child that's got his own." Herzog said he decided to use the line as the basis of the song, giving Holiday half of the songwriting credits so she'd be incentivized to record it. He went on to state that Holiday had "never written a line of words or music." Clarke appears to side with Herzog's retelling of events, writing that Holiday's claims about "God Bless the Child," which also feature in her memoir, *Lady Sings the Blues*, couldn't be trusted since the book, ghostwritten by William Dufty, was "hopelessly unreliable."

The veracity of *Lady Sings the Blues* has been questioned because it was wholly written by Dufty, based on his interviews of Holiday (a fact Holiday confirms in these pages in her 1956 interview with George Walsh for KNX radio's The Green Room). In *If You Can't be Free, be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday*, scholar and academic Farah Jasmine Griffin, argues for a more complex reading of *Lady Sings the Blues*, acknowledging how it "establish[ed] myths on Holiday," but also recognizing how much the book wanted to challenge incorrect narratives on Lady Day. Anthropologist and jazz scholar, John Szwed, argues in his 2015 book, *Billie Holiday: The Musician and the Myth*, that the memoir should be treated "as a form of autobiographical fiction," because even though it contained "fabrications and misrememberings," most of the important sources came from "newspaper and magazine interviews with Holiday."

Regardless of where one stands in relation to *Lady Sings the Blues*, Herzog's dismissive attitude towards Holiday's ability to write songs, and Clarke's automatic support of that dismissal, brings to mind a history of white jazz men having little regard for the intelligence and technical capabilities of black jazz musicians. Throughout her career, Holiday had been credited with writing 18 songs, some of which include classics like "Billie's Blues," "Fine and Mellow," "Don't Explain," and "Lady Sings the Blues." Had she been surrounded by men who thought more of her innate and intuitive grasp of song structure, phrasing, and melody, who knows what sort of material she could've produced.

When Holiday talks about her repertoire, she comes across as bashful and embarrassed, admitting to disliking some of her records in the 1956 Green Room interview. Curiously, the segment never aired because Holiday was thought to sound like she was under the influence. When I listened to the audio, I did notice her speaking more slowly than usual. But overall, she sounded cogent (though it is quite possible for some people to be lucid on a substance). Perhaps the refusal to air the interview had more to do with the fear that she was falling off the wagon again.

Holiday cites "Deep Song" and "You're My Thrill," among others, as the songs she liked the most from her discography. The latter is a moody and wistful song about the intensity of infatuation, and a shining testament to the way Holiday was able to convey the emotional ebb and flow of romantic relationships in a seemingly basic love song. Being in love is not an easy and ideal experience, she seems to say. Instead it can be terrifying, obsessive, manic, and all-consuming, with little to no payoff. Holiday intersperses the number with a hum that sounds like the grim reaper's lullaby, managing to be soothing, sensual, and thrilling against the operatic string arrangement.

Arguably, the most revealing interview takes place between Holiday and a "Supervising Custom Agent" in New York on January 15, 1959 – five months before her death. In an interesting intersection of feminist politics, her lawyer in the interrogation room happens to be Florynce Kennedy, future women's liberation leader and pro-choice advocate, who went on to be the executor of Holiday's estate. As the questioning begins, Lady Day is informed that, on a recent trip to Europe, she violated a law so new neither she nor her attorney knew about it: it required her to declare her narcotic offences not only upon departure as usual (which Holiday had done) but also upon return (the new part Holiday hadn't known to do). She appears bewildered and frustrated throughout the interrogation, repeating that her team hadn't informed her about the law. Though she's polite and restrained throughout the process, one senses how worn out she feels. She concludes the interview by making a broader comment about being an addict in the criminal justice system, proclaiming that "once you get in trouble for narcotics, it's the end."

This quiet but gracious acceptance of her fate would come through in her final television performance in February 1959 on the British variety show, "Chelsea At Nine," performed at the Chelsea Palace theater for Granada TV. Holiday, who looked less gaunt in comparison to her appearances in 1958, wore a knee-length glitter dress and long diamond chandelier earrings with her hair slicked back into a ponytail. In this particular performance, she is more understated than usual, with her arm gestures resembling more of a stride than the tightly controlled rock of her youth. Her voice is coarser and shakier, and her phrasing fuzzier and slower, giving her already distinctive voice an unusual layer of character. In hindsight, it's easy to view this recital with more finality and sorrow, given how close Holiday was to her own death. But her renditions of "I Love You Porgy" and "Please Don't Talk About Me When I'm Gone" are slower and more pronounced, sung with the same heart and wit, but with an additional measure of maturity and experience. In this version of "Strange Fruit," arguably Holiday's best, it sounds like she's delivering a warcry from the underworld, with her gravelly voice partnering well with her unhinged approach to singing the song's notes. Vocally, it's a messy and bizarre performance, but somehow it gives the number more emotional depth and gravitas.

The last interview, "I Needed Heroin to Live," reads like a fatalistic, editorialized monologue. Published posthumously, Holiday was alleged to have dictated these final words to William Dufty, the ghostwriter of her *Lady Sings the Blues*, from her bed at New York's Metropolitan Hospital, where she died on July 17 with \$750 strapped to her leg and \$0.70 in her bank account. In the interview, Holiday laments the tabloids which sensationalized her drug use, criticizes the music people who took advantage of her, berates America for its treatment of black people, and bemoans the bad hand she'd been dealt in life. Her understanding of addiction seems more considered, even ahead of her time, as she calls for professionals to see "the 'human' side of the drug addict." Much like *Lady Sings the Blues*, the interview does bring up issues of authorship and reliability because we don't know how much of the piece came from Holiday, or Dufty. But it does capture an idea which non-addicts might struggle to understand: Addiction does bring about turmoil, pain, and loss but it can also be something in which the addict finds joy and reprieve. What Holiday shows, as she had in some of her previous interviews, is a defiant refusal to simply cast regret over her actions. Here, she seems to speak for addicts who have experienced a range of conflicting emotions around substance abuse. Her underlying sentiment aligns with Holiday's sensibility, perfectly captured in the line, "I hold no regrets and I carry no shame."

There's no way of talking about Billie Holiday without acknowledging the events that drove her to self-destruction. Yet what these interviews seem to suggest is that more than anybody else, Holiday was able to hold conflicting and unresolved feelings about how her life ended up. Yes, it was tragic, but it was her tragedy to bear. Yes, she inflicted pain on herself, but she was able to make art from it. For those of us who feel like she was cheated

out of so much, it can be difficult to be at peace with this. But Lady Day seemed to know better.