

INTRODUCTION

I became a fan of Billie Holiday, known famously as Lady Day, at age 15, in 1978, in the 10th grade. My older brother Bobby, age 16 and a half, a music enthusiast, who later became a DJ at the CB Club in the Black entertainment Strip in Jackson, Mississippi, introduced me to Billie Holiday. The old clubs where Stardust and Dorsey's once stood, and Estelle's, the one soul food eatery, are gone now. Today, the entertainment strip which blossomed for decades was crushed by the effects of gun violence during the Crack Cocaine epidemic; the district now contains a series of vacant lots. Nationally other Black entertainment business districts have disintegrated in the past 50 years.

Since Billie Holiday's heyday, over 64 years ago, when she sold out concert seats at Carnegie Hall, established in 1891, by Steel Tycoon Andrew Carnegie, this venue has flourished. In 1947, her concert tickets were on sale at the Carnegie Box Office, Colony Record Shop, 52nd & B' way; and Flaps Record Shop, 125th St. & 7th Ave. Concert seats ranged from \$4.00 to \$2.25. Today, Carnegie Hall concert goers pay \$120 to \$3,000 per seat.

Carnegie Hall on 7th Street between 56th and 57th Streets in NYC has been standing for over 130 years. The Apollo Theater in Harlem, New York which launched amateur contests in 1934 was an extension of the Chitlin' Circuit; it has been standing 89 years and counting. Billie Holiday debuted at the Apollo that year as a rising star and a paid singer. The Royal Theater on Pennsylvania Avenue in Baltimore where Billie Holiday grew up was one of five theaters for Black entertainment during legal segregation. The facility was demolished in 1971 on the eve of its 50th anniversary. The Regal Theater, which opened in 1928 in the Bronzeville community on the southside of Chicago was one of the first premiere complexes in America available to Black audiences. The Regal Theater ran 40 years - until 1968. The facility was torn down in 1973.

Of the five largest theaters, Howard Theater in Washington, D.C., which ran amateur contests in the 1930s for Black people has remained an entertainment spot for over a century. Billie Holiday performed in the major theaters. She also sang in the lesser-known clubs on the Chitlin' Circuit, especially after her drug conviction in 1947 which revoked her Cabaret license and her ability to perform in the jazz clubs in NYC. From age 19 to age 23, she was the featured singer with the Benny Goodman Band, the Count Basie Band, the Artie Shaw Band, and at Café Society.

Billie Holiday was born Eleanora Harris, on April 7, 1915, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania out of wedlock to teenage parents. She grew up in Baltimore, Maryland, the birthplace of both her parents and her fore parents, close to the neighborhood where the famed orator, writer, author, and abolitionist Frederick Douglass (1817-1895) spent his last moments, in 1838, as a slave.

Jazz developed around 1910 in Storyville - the redlight district in New Orleans where wealthy madams who ran brothels hired local musicians to entertain guests in lavish mansion ballrooms and palace parlors.

On Eleanora's second birthday, jazz was thriving in Baltimore. Early in her life, Eleanora gravitated to music and discovered a happy place. As young as six, she laid on the floor in front of the Victrola and sang along with the comforting voices sprouting out of the speakers.

After completing the 5th grade, Eleanora dropped out of school and ran errands for a brothel which was ripe with music. Between errands, Eleanora paused to sing along with the recordings of Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith. Louis had a mellow sound plus he was a skilled scat singer. Bessie Smith was the Empress of the Blues and one the highest paid Black entertainers in the nation. Louis Armstrong was one of the most influential figures of the jazz genre. Louis, a protégé of King Oliver, played the second cornet in King Oliver's Creole Band.

Jazz was an integral part of the Black community when my father, Robert "Bobby Joe" was born in 1939. He played trumpet at Carver High School in Gadsden, Alabama. He played jazz, blues, soul, and gospel music around the house in the 1960s when we were young. We were dancing and bobbing our heads as soon as we could stand on our feet. By age 13, my brother had collected albums by the Ohio Players, Prince, McKinley Mitchel, Jimmie Hendrix, Billie Holiday, The Gap Band, and others. Bobby took every dollar he could rake and scrap to local music stores. He signed his nickname "Bobby" on each album cover. He knew who wrote which songs, which instrument each band member played, and which record labels produced the albums.

One evening, Bobby said smiling with a deep look of excitement on his face, "They say Billie Holiday ruined her voice using drugs. But she sounded better. Listen to this." Then, Bobby played music recorded by Billie Holiday in the 1950s including *Fine and Mellow*. I was hooked. *God Bless the Child* was talking directly to me. "Mama may have, papa may have, but God bless the child that's got his own." The lyrics were my vision of one day owning my own home and being the boss of it. By then, mama was bossing our house. Daddy was gone.

Bobby and I went to the school library at Hinds Agricultural High School to research the greatest jazz vocalist on record. One of the Librarians, Mrs. Alma Fisher, helped us find articles on Billie Holiday, who was quoted saying, "Drugs and alcohol will only kill you slowly." The article noted that Billie Holiday desired to share the perils of drugs and alcohol with youth. I expected to read about her fame and fortune. As far as we knew, when we had a chance to smoke reefer, everyone laughed and laughed and

had fun.

Mrs. Fisher read our expressions and said, “Hum,’ you didn’t expect her to say that did you?” I did not expect Lady Day to make such a profound declaration. She said, ‘kill’ as in self-destruct.

Billie Holiday’s warning went flat over our heads. In fact, not long afterward, Bobby heard about a weed dealer named Blind, who sold reefer in match boxes for \$5 in Virden Addition between Northside Dr., Bailey Ave., and Livingston Road. We collected the money, counted it, and Bobby walked from our street off Watkins Drive to score the reefer. Blind pulled grass from his yard, filled the matchbox up, and beat us out of the money we pooled together.

We walked to Blind’s house multiple times to get a refund on our product. Every day, someone answered the door and said “Blind just left. Come back.” After going back and forth and hearing a new excuse by the same or different family member, we gave up. Retaliation was not an option. As the saying goes, “We charged that \$5 to the game.” The matchbox incident was our first lesson about the streets. Eleanora was younger than us when she faced the wheeling and dealings of the streets. Everyone has a story. Bets on, you will enjoy the story I wrote about Lady Day.

The streets are full of people making quick cash. The hustler’s anthem is *a mark is a mark*. Four or five teenagers from our block were Blind’s mark. Hustlers are cruel. Eleanora grew up in the fast lane in Baltimore in Pigtown in the 1920s. In her mother’s absence, Eleanora snuck out of the window, alone, late at night, and walked to the party scene where blues and jazz music played and where slick talkers, con artists, pimps, and tricksters dwelled.

Her father Clarence started playing the banjo for tips in Baltimore on the same streets. She was fascinated with her father’s work and obsessed with Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith. She saw a different world as an underage participant of Baltimore’s nightlife. She was brave and hardheaded. By age 15, she had formed her own singing style which was slow and soft. Audiences loved the sound of the pie faced, 200 lb. 5’7” teen.

However, a few listeners did not appreciate her style. But she stuck to her grits and her unique singing style. She obtained her musical break at age 18 in Harlem where she moved people in the audience to tears. She was an intimate entertainer and vocalist who made people feel she was singing to them.

Practically, every book and source I read on Billie Holiday from *Strange Fruit* to *Lady Day: The Many Faces of Billie Holiday* discussed her addiction as a part of her demise.

To my knowledge there were no heroin addicts in our southern Black community in Mississippi in the 1970s. But heroin and hard drugs let loose among jazz musicians including Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, and others. Saxophonist Sonny Rollins said youth who followed Charlie Parker started using heroin. Sonny recalled that Charlie hated that his followers picked up his destructive habit. White stars such as Judy Garland, who played Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz* fell prey to addiction too.

During the WWII era the dangers of hard drugs were not widely known. Experts propose heroine is a drug which is practically impossible to kick. Some did. Many did not. Sonny Rollins got clean and stayed clean. He played his saxophone past age 80.

By the time users look for a cure it is too late to find one. Drugs and alcohol can damage bodily organs. Charlie Parker died at age 34. Billie Holiday died at age 44. Judy Garland died at age 47. Billie Holiday was targeted by drug agents under the guise of the War on Drugs. But law enforcement rarely pursued white public figures and entertainers.

Bobby and I saw the 1972 movie *Lady Sings the Blues* featuring Diana Ross and Billy Dee Williams in the late 1970s. For me, the movie portrayed Billie Holiday as *the best that ever did it*. Richard Prior played the piano man. His role was the opposite of Teddy Wilson. Lester Young and Clarence Holiday were omitted completely. Billy Dee's character turned big bad Louis McKay into a saint. Ha' Ha.'

Some books on Billie Holiday in the past 30 years were based on research via interviews recorded in the 1970s by Journalist Linda Lipnack Huehl who planned to write a biography but died before she could finish. She interviewed Count Basie, Tony Bennett, Jo Jones, and others who gave candid interviews about the late Billie Holiday. Several interviews were featured in the 2019 documentary *Billie*.

My late husband Will and I watched *The United States v. Billie Holiday* in 2021 starring Andra Day and directed by Lee Daniels. I introduced Will to Billie Holiday 25 years ago when we moved into our home in South Jackson, Mississippi. He grew fond of the duet *Sweet Hunk o' Trash* by Billie Holiday featuring Louis Armstrong. Several lyrics are below:

*You don't add up to much.
Ain't got that glamour touch...* Billie Holiday sang.

*Look out there, mama.
You carrying me a little too fast.* Louis Armstrong replied.

You're my good for nothin.'

Sweet hunk o' trash. Billie Holiday sang

Will and I played our collection of music religiously on wax, cassette tape, and on CD. And I still do. I can remember like it was yesterday, Will watching me sing *Now or Never* by Billie Holiday before we married.

Several lyrics are as follows:

It's gotta' be yes or no.
It's either you stay or go.
You can't leave me on the shelf.
You gotta' commit yourself.
It's either you will baby or won't fall in love with me...

I stood on my feet 5'3.5" and sang my heart out. I was unstoppable. After I turned 59, I pulled out my college paper, *So Much Jazz: Billie Holiday* which I submitted for my history course July 23, 1986, at the University of West Florida. At that time, I interned for Allbritton & Gant. I am grateful to Attorney Fred Gant because he allowed his legal secretary to type my paper so I could submit it on time. During the summer of 2022, I retyped my college paper and started reading and researching the life and times of the late Great Billie Holiday. What I wrote back then was tiny compared to this full biography. I have advanced from a misinformed fan into an informed fan. The movie *Lady Sings the Blues* only touches the surface of the life and times of Billie Holiday. For 44 years, I have been a fan of Lady Day. From the perspective of a fan, I am sharing the magic moments of a big jazz life well lived.

Finally, I experienced enough in life to understand Lady Day's message about fast living and the consequences of addiction to add a new spin on the Billie Holiday story. Her story offers diverse lessons. Billie Holiday warned Etta James. But Etta James lived long enough – 74 years – to get that monkey off her back, to sing at a Jazz Festival in New Orleans seated on a stool, and to record a final album which introduced Will and I and another generation to her art. Yes, Beyonce's portrayal of Etta James in *Cadillac Records* did the rest.

Billie Holiday admitted in her autobiography, *Lady Sings the Blues*, which was published January 1, 1956, the dangers of drug use; she did not blame anyone for her addiction. She took full responsibility for her choices. Billie Holiday learned while touring in Europe in the 1950s that addiction was treated as a disease abroad, while it was criminalized in the United States. The modern Opioid Crisis changed the landscape on how addiction is treated in America. However, drugs are very lethal.

Today, the warning to youth is: one drug experience can be one's last experience.

Billie Holiday: Jazz Singer by Meredith Coleman McGee

There is no come back for far too many; second chances have become slim to none in a society where drugs are laced with Fentanyl and other fatal synthetic opioids. Too many are gone too soon – Coolio, DMX, Whitney Houston, Amy Winehouse, Prince, Michael Jackson...

Lady Day died July 17, 1959, at age 44. Her story is over the top. Billie Holiday was the late, great, innovative, jazz singer. Read *Billie Holiday: Jazz Singer*, a story about the great vocalist, Billie Holiday, a jazz superstar, who set Jazz on fire, in 1933, in Harlem, New York, over 90 years ago.

By Meredith Coleman McGee