

Billie Holiday





Billie Holiday
1915-1959

THE BASICS



BORN 04.07.1915
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA
DIED 07.17.1959
NEW YORK, NEW YORK
CAREER JAZZ SINGER

Billie singing the blues.

Billie Holiday

BILLIE HOLIDAY WAS AN INTERNATIONAL JAZZ STAR WHO GAVE INTERPRETATIONS OF SOME OF THE GREATEST SONGS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY. SHE WAS ONE OF THE FIRST BLACK JAZZ SINGERS TO PERFORM WITH WHITE MUSICIANS.



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YOU CAN BE UP TO YOUR BOOBIES IN WHITE SATIN, WITH

Singer, jazz vocalist. Born Eleanora Fagan on April 7, 1915, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. (Some sources say Baltimore, Maryland. Her birth certificate reportedly reads "Elinore Harris.") One of the most influential jazz singers of all time, Billie Holiday had a thriving career for many years before her battles with substance abuse got the better of her. Holiday spent much of her childhood in Baltimore, Maryland. Her mother, Sadie, was only a teenager when she had her. Her father is widely believed to be Clarence Holiday, who eventually became a successful jazz musician, playing with the likes of Fletcher Henderson. Unfortunately for Billie, he was only an infrequent visitor in her life growing up. Sadie married Philip Gough in 1920 and for a few years Billie had a somewhat stable home life. But that marriage ended a few years later, leaving Billie and Sadie to struggle along on their own again. Sometimes Billie was left in the care of other people.

Holiday started skipping school, and she and her mother went to court over Holiday's truancy. She was then sent to the House of Good Shepherd, a facility for troubled African American girls, in January 1925. Only 9 years old at the time, Holiday was one of the youngest girls there. She was returned to her mother's care in August of that year. According to Donald Clarke's biography, *Billie Holiday: Wishing on the Moon*, she returned there in 1926 after she had been sexually assaulted. In her difficult early life, Holiday found solace in music, singing along to the records of Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong. She followed her mother who had moved to New York City in the late 1920s and worked in a house of prostitution in Harlem for a time.

GARDENIAS IN YOUR HAIR AND NO SUGAR CANE FOR MILES, BUT YOU CAN STILL BE WORKING ON A PLANTATION.





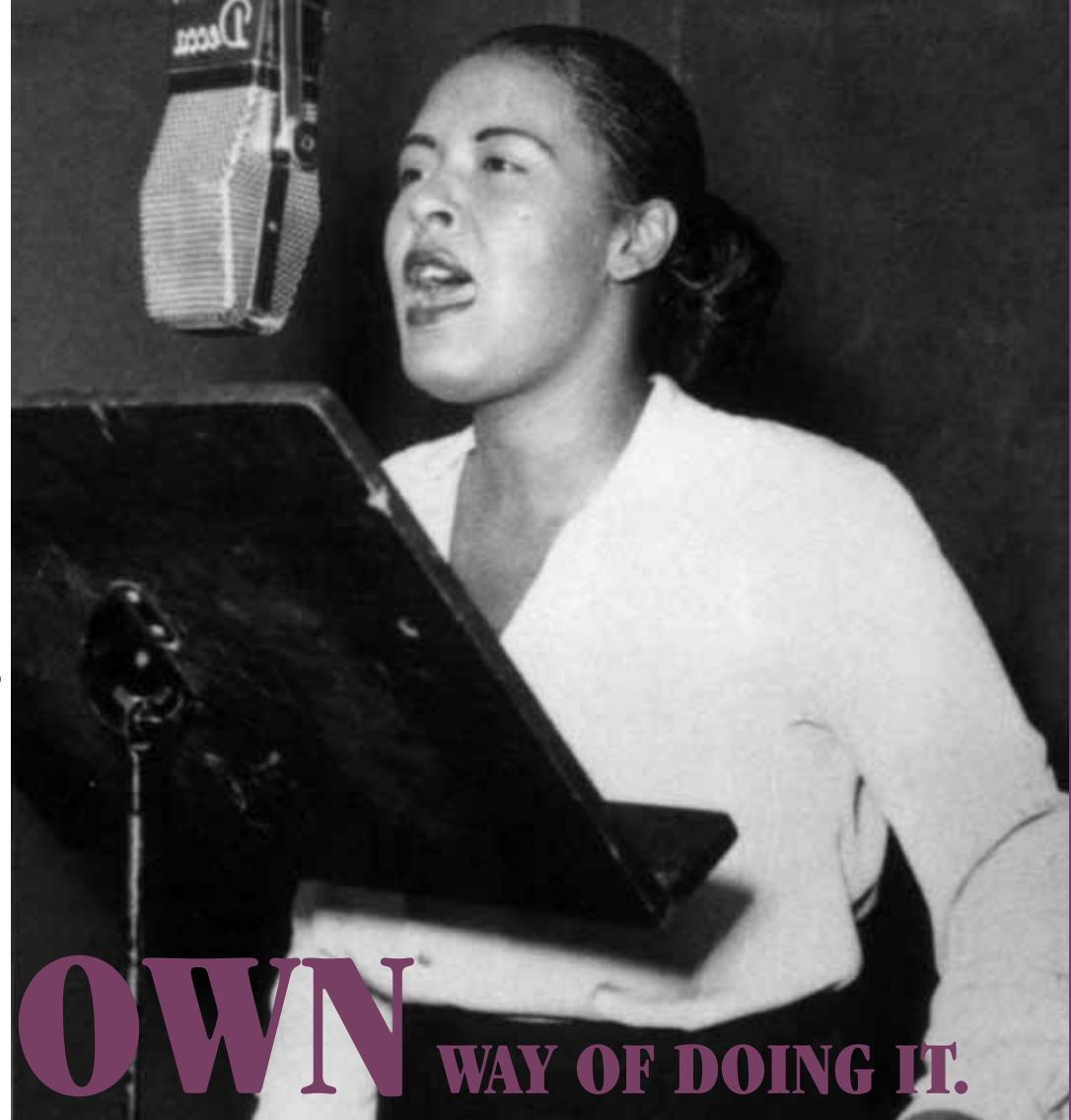
I HATE STRAIGHT SINGING. I HAVE TO CHANGE A TUNE

At the age of 18, Holiday was discovered by producer John Hammond while she was performing in a Harlem jazz club. Hammond was instrumental in getting Holiday recording work with an up-and-coming clarinetist and bandleader Benny Goodman. With Goodman, she sang vocals for several tracks, including her first commercial release "Your Mother's Son-In-Law" and the 1934 top ten hit "Riffin' the Scotch." Never taught, Billie Holiday had an innate musical sense that was to earn her the title First Lady of the Blues. Her combination of skilful phrasing, emotional depth and a laconic poignancy was a unique talent, and many consider hers to have been the most expressive jazz voice of the twentieth century. It seems highly likely that the emotional truth Billie brought to her performances was fuelled by her tempestuous personal experiences. Both an alcoholic and a drug addict, attracted to abusive men and full of behavioral contradictions, Billie was someone whose professional and financial success was

TO MY

OWN WAY OF DOING IT.

THAT'S ALL I KNOW.



Billie recording a song in a recording studio.





Billie Holiday
1915-1959

EARLY LIFE



A nervous Billie Holiday before a performance.

not mirrored in her private life. Unable to conquer her drug addiction, she squandered and was cheated of her money, and her career was punctuated by periods in hospital and prison. When she died, aged 44, her voice was ravaged by her lifestyle, although her technical mastery remained. Her talent lives on in the recordings that are still widely sold today.

Billie was born Eleanora Fagan in Philadelphia, the daughter of a black domestic aged 13 and a professional jazz guitarist aged 15 - a couple who lived together only briefly. She was brought up in Baltimore and New York City. The precise facts of her early life are unknown. She never read her ghost-written autobiography and was a skilful fabricator. It seems she dropped out of school when very young and first came across jazz while carrying out errands for a brothel owner, who allowed her to listen to recordings of Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith. These were to be her role models as she practised singing. Billie

and her mother worked as prostitutes before they moved to New York in the early 1930s, where they struggled to make a living. Settling in Harlem in 1931, Billie found work as a singer in various bars and was an instant success. It was in one of these nightclubs that she was discovered by the producer John Hammond. He gave her an introduction to Benny Goodman in 1933 and she made her first recording with Goodman's band. The professional name she chose for herself came from the first name of the film star Billie Dove and the surname of her father, Clarence Holiday. From 1935 to 1942 Billie gained public recognition through more than 100 recordings she made with small jazz groups, most of which featured the pianist Teddy Wilson. These recordings, made rapidly and at minimum cost, were to become jazz classics. Their success at the time led to Hammond arranging for her to appear with the best musicians of the day, the Count Basie Orchestra in 1937 and Artie Shaw's Band in 1938. However, Billie was not happy



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IF I DON'T HAVE FRIENDS,



Billie at a night club with some of her friend.

THEN I AIN'T GOT NOTHING.



Billie Holiday
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EARLY LIFE

for long with life in a big band and from January 1939 appeared solo for nine months at the new Greenwich Village club, Cafe Society. Here she introduced the extraordinary song with which she is most associated, Strange Fruit - a protest song about lynching written by Abel Meeropol (Lewis Allan). The stark simplicity of the lyrics and Billie's delivery instantly marked Strange Fruit as a part of American, and musical, history. At this time she also made many recordings with the saxophonist Lester Young, with whom she had a relationship. It was Young who gave her the sobriquet Lady Day.

By the end of the 1930s Billie was a well-established star, and was to remain one for 20 years in spite of a highly tempestuous personal life. Her first public solo concert took place in 1946 at New York's Town Hall and she also appeared in several films, including New Orleans in 1947 with Louis Armstrong. Billie's relationships with men were often brief and

disastrous. She was married for a short time in 1941 to Jimmy Monroe, and later to trumpeter Joe Guy, with whom she toured in 1945 - together running a band that lost large amounts of money. These personal and business failures, together with a heroin addiction that began in the 1940s and heavy drinking, combined to produce a decline in Billie's health and circumstances. She spent increasing lengths of time in prison and hospital. In March 1948, immediately after release from a prison term, she gave a triumphant concert in Carnegie Hall and for another ten years she continued to work, although her criminal record meant that she was banned from many New York clubs and her dependence on drugs meant that stage performances were sometimes poor. In 1954 Billie made her first trip to Europe, touring in eight countries with a group of American jazz musicians. She was rapturously received and then went on to perform solo in Britain, where she met with huge success at London's Albert Hall. However,



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Billie Holiday
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EARLY LIFE



Billie on stage during a performance.

some feel this success was due in part to pity from audiences seeing a decline in her talent that seemed to mirror her private sorrows. A further marriage in the mid-1950s to Louis McKay, who had associations with organized crime, quickly went wrong. Her final appearance was in June 1959 at a benefit concert in New York. A few days later, as she lay dying from cirrhosis of the liver in the Metropolitan Hospital, she was arrested for the possession of illegal drugs. When she died she was virtually penniless, apart from a cash advance from a magazine for some articles about her life that was found strapped to her leg. Remembered variously as self-destructive, independent but at times pathetically reliant, Billie was reckless in love and highly promiscuous before her drug addiction set in. However, she was also said by those who knew her well to have been charismatic and to have a deep gift for friendship. The most famous photograph of her is a sophisticated image of her in evening

dress with white gardenias in her hair. Other more candid photographs reveal her pensiveness and vulnerability. Billie Holiday's singing style was distinguished by her ability to bring deeply personal interpretations to her songs. Although she had no technical training and a limited vocal range, by singing slightly behind the beat and subtly altering a melody or the phrasing of a lyric she achieved a vocal effect that resembled a jazz instrument. Her voice could be at once quiet and powerful. Songs such as *Gloomy Sunday* and *God Bless the Child* expressed both her great talent and her incredible pain. Once asked about her skill, she said simply that she did not know any other way to sing: 'I've lived songs like that.' Some critics have argued that her forte was not so much jazz as her ability to bring jazz qualities to other types of popular music. Her voice can be heard at its best in the vintage recordings made between 1936 and 1945, during her professional liaison with Lester Young.



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**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**
**SCENT OF MAGNOLIAS
SWEET AND FRESH**
**THEN THE
SUDDEN SMELL OF
BURNIN' FLESH**



Billie Holiday
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STRANGE FRUIT

“Jazz Royalty” is a term that reflects the great jazz musicians who have some sort of royal title in their name or nickname. Billie Holiday was known as *Lady Day*, Ella Fitzgerald was the *First Lady of Song*. Billie’s autobiography was ghost-written by William Duffy. It was called *Lady Sings the Blues*, but Billie had wanted to call it *Bitter Crop*.



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STRANGE FRUIT

UK music entertainment magazine and Q has identified strange fruit as one of ten songs that actually changed the world.

Southern trees bear strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh!

Here is 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.

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



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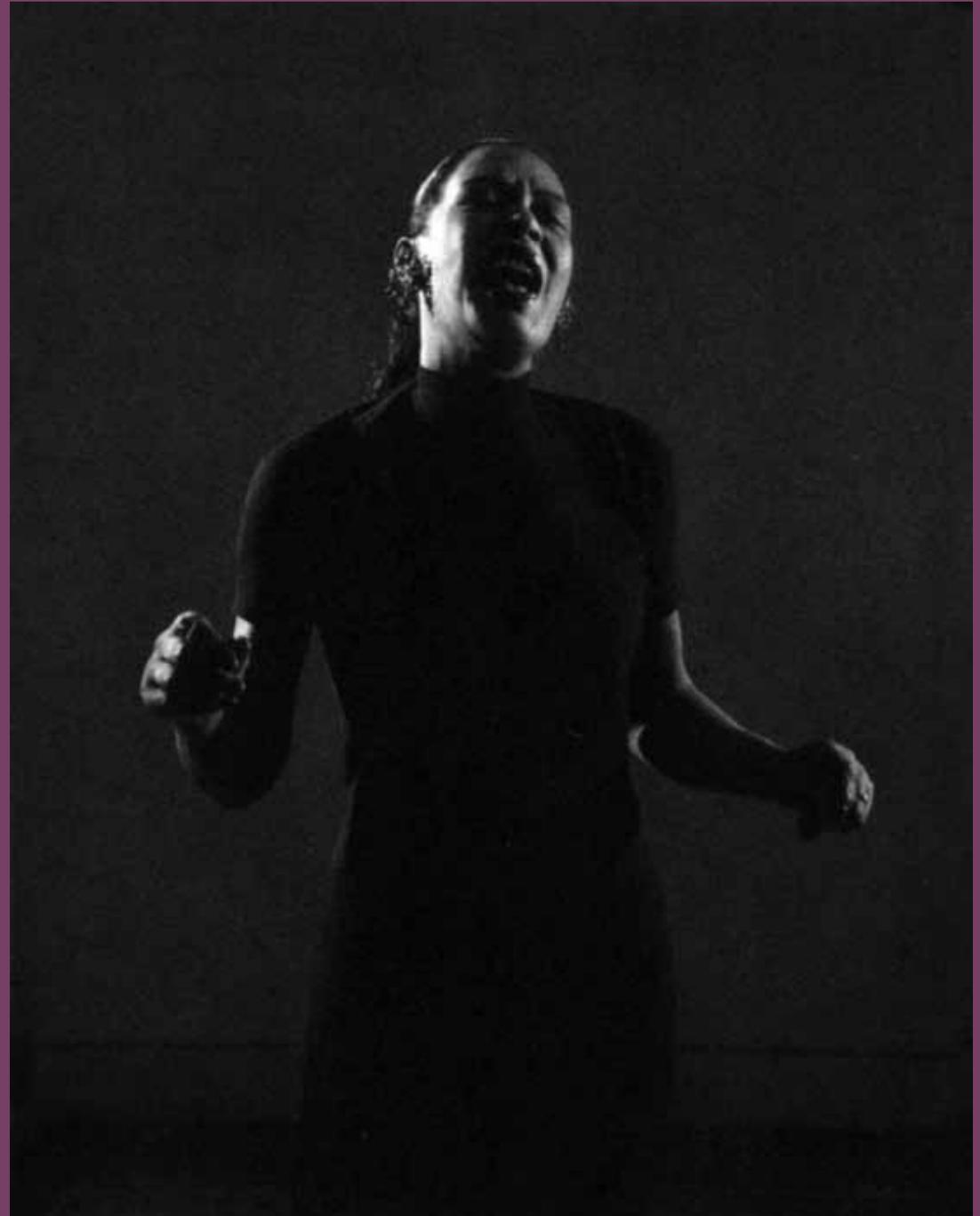


Billie Holiday
1915-1959

CAREER

Known for her distinctive phrasing and expressive, sometimes melancholy voice, Holiday went on to record with jazz pianist Teddy Wilson and others in 1935. She made several singles, including “What a Little Moonlight Can Do” and “Miss Brown to You.” That same year, Holiday appeared with Duke Ellington in the film *Symphony in Black*. Around this time, Holiday met and befriended saxophonist Lester Young, who was part of Count Basie’s orchestra on and off for years. He even lived with Holiday and her mother Sadie for a while. Young gave Holiday the nickname “Lady Day” in 1937—the same year she joined Basie’s band. In return, she called “Prez,” which was her way of saying that she thought it was the greatest. Holiday toured with the Count Basie Orchestra in 1937. The following year, she worked with Artie Shaw and his orchestra. Holiday broke new ground with Shaw, becoming one of the first female African American vocalists to work with a white orchestra. Promoters objected to Holiday—for her race and for her unique vocal style—and she ended up leaving the orchestra out of frustration.

Striking out on her own, Holiday performed at New York’s Café Society. She developed some of her trademark stage persona there—wearing gardenias in her hair and singing with her head tilted back. During this engagement, Holiday also debuted two of her most famous songs “God Bless the Child” and “Strange Fruit.” Columbia, her record company at the time, was not interested in “Strange Fruit” (1939), which was a powerful story about the lynching of African Americans in the South. Holiday recorded the song with the Commodore label instead. This ballad is considered to be one of her signature ballads, and the controversy that surrounded it—some radio stations banned the record—helped make it a hit.



Billie Holiday singing her heart out.



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Billie Holiday
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CAREER

Over the years, Holiday sang many songs of stormy relationships, including “T’ain’t Nobody’s Business If I Do” and “My Man.” These songs reflected her personal romances, which were often destructive and abusive. She married James Monroe in 1941. Already known to drink, Holiday picked up her new husband’s habit of smoking opium. The marriage didn’t last, but Holiday’s problems with substance abuse continued. (They later divorced.)

That same year, Holiday had a hit with “God Bless the Child.” She later signed with Decca Records in 1944 and scored an R&B hit the next year with “Lover Man.” Her boyfriend at the time was trumpeter Joe Guy, and with him she started using heroin. After the death of her mother in October 1945, Holiday began drinking more heavily and escalated her drug use to ease her grief.



Billie Holiday during a performance.



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Billie Holiday with a fellow musician.

Despite her personal problems, Holiday remained a major star in the jazz world—and even in popular music as well. She appeared with her idol Louis Armstrong in the 1947 film *New Orleans*, albeit playing the role of a maid. Unfortunately, Holiday's drug use caused her a great professional setback that same year. She was arrested and convicted for narcotics possession in 1947. Sentenced to one year and a day of jail time, Holiday went to a federal rehabilitation facility in Alderston, West Virginia.

Released the following year, Holiday faced new challenges. Because of her conviction, she was unable to get the necessary license to play in cabarets and clubs. Holiday, however, could still perform at concert halls and had a sold-out show at the Carnegie Hall not long after her release. With some help from John Levy, a New York club owner, Holiday was later to get to play in New York's Club Ebony. Levy became her boyfriend and manager by the end of the 1940s,



Billie Holiday argues about a song.

joining the ranks of the men who took advantage of Holiday. Also around this time, she was again arrested for narcotics, but she was acquitted of the charges. While her hard living was taking a toll on her voice, Holiday continued to tour and record in the 1950s. She began recording for Norman Granz, the owner of several small jazz labels, in 1952. Two years later, Holiday had a hugely successful tour of Europe.

Holiday also caught the public's attention by sharing her life story with the world in 1956. Her autobiography, *Lady Sings the Blues* (1956), was written in collaboration by William Dufty. Some of the material included, however, must be taken with a grain of salt. Holiday was in rough shape when she worked with Dufty on the project, and she claimed to have never read the book after it was finished. Around this time, Holiday became involved with Louis McKay. The two were arrested for narcotics in 1956, and they married in Mexico the following year. Like many other

men in her life, McKay used Holiday's name and money to advance himself. Despite all of the trouble she had been experiencing with her voice, she managed to give an impressive performance on the CBS television broadcast *The Sound of Jazz* with Ben Webster, Lester Young, and Coleman Hawkins.

After years of lackluster recordings and record sales, Holiday recorded *Lady in Satin* (1958) with the Ray Ellis Orchestra for Columbia. The album's songs showcased her rougher sounding voice, which still could convey great emotional intensity. She gave her final performance in New York City on May 25, 1959. Not long after this event, Holiday was admitted to the hospital for heart and liver problems. She was so addicted to heroin that she was even arrested for possession while in the hospital. On July 17, 1959, Holiday died from alcohol- and drug-related complications.





Billie Holiday before a performance.



More than 3,000 people turned out to say goodbye to Lady Day at her funeral held in St. Paul the Apostle Roman Catholic Church on July 21, 1959. A who's who of the jazz world attended the solemn occasion, including Benny Goodman, Gene Krupa, Tony Scott, Buddy Rogers, and John Hammond.

Considered one of the best jazz vocalists of all time, Holiday has been an influence on many other performers who have followed in her footsteps. Her autobiography was made into the 1972 film *Lady Sings the Blues* with famed singer Diana Ross playing the part of Holiday, which helped renew interest in Holiday's recordings. In 2000, Billie Holiday was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame with Diana Ross handling the honors.



Billie Holiday
1915-1959

DEATH



Billie Holiday before her death.



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WOMEN BREAKING BARRIERS