

## LADY SANG THE BLUES

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This tribute to Billie Holiday by Francis Newton is reprinted, with kind permission of the Editor, from the *New Statesman*, August 15th, 1959.

*BILLIE HOLIDAY died a few weeks ago. I have been unable until now to write about her, but since she will survive many who receive longer obituaries, a short delay in one small appreciation will not harm her or us. When she died we—the musicians, critics, all who were ever transfixed by the most heart-rending voice of the past generation—grieved bitterly. There was no reason to. Few people pursued self-destruction more wholeheartedly than she, and when the pursuit was at an end, at the age of forty-four, she had turned herself into a physical and artistic wreck. Some of us tried gallantly to pretend otherwise, taking comfort in the occasional moments when she still sounded like a ravaged echo of her greatness. Others had not even the heart to see and listen any more. We preferred to stay home and, if old and lucky enough to own the incomparable records of her hey-day from 1937 to 1946, many of which are not even available on British LP, to recreate those coarse-textured, sinuous, sensual and unbearably sad noises, which give her a sure corner of immortality. Her physical death called, if anything, for relief rather than sorrow. What sort of middle age would she have faced without the voice to earn money for her drinks and fixes, without the looks—and in her day she was hauntingly beautiful—to attract the men she needed, without business sense, without anything but the disinterested worship of ageing men who had heard and seen her in her glory?*

*And yet, irrational though it is, our grief expressed Billie Holiday's art, that of a woman for whom one must be sorry. The great blues-singers, to whom she may be justly compared, played their game from strength. Lionesses, though often wounded or at bay (did not Bessie Smith call herself "a tiger ready to jump"?) their tragic equivalents were Cleopatra and Phaedra; Billie's was an embittered Ophelia. She was the Puccini heroine among blues-singers, or rather among jazz-singers, for though she sang a cabaret version of the blues incomparably, her natural idiom was the pop song. Her unique achievement was to have twisted this into a genuine expression of the major passions by means of a total disregard of its sugary tunes, or indeed of any tune other than her own few delicately crying elongated notes, phrased like Bessie Smith or Louis Armstrong in sack-cloth, sung in a thin, gritty, haunting voice whose natural mood was an unresigned and voluptuous welcome for the pains of love. Nobody has sung, or will sing, Bess's songs from Porgy as she did. It was this combination of bitterness and physical submission, as of someone lying still while watching his legs being amputated, which gives such a blood-curdling quality to her Strange Fruit, the anti-lynching poem which she turned into an unforgettable art song. (I need hardly say this superb record, with its companion blues Fine and Mellow, is not available on British discs.) Suffering was her profession; but she did not accept it.*

*Little need be said about her horrifying life, which she described with emotional, though hardly with factual, truth in her autobiography Lady Sings the Blues. After an adolescence in which self-respect was measured by a girl's insistence on picking up the coins thrown to her by clients with her hands, she was plainly beyond help. She did not*

lack it, for she had the flair and scrupulous honesty of John Hammond to launch her, the best musicians of the Thirties to accompany her—notably Teddy Wilson, Frankie Newton and Lester Young—the boundless devotion of all serious connoisseurs, and much public success. It was too late to arrest a career of systematic embittered self-immolation. To be born with both beauty and self-respect in the Negro ghetto of Baltimore in 1915 was too much of a handicap, even without rape at the age of ten and drug-addiction in her teens. But while she destroyed herself, she sang, unmelodious, profound and heartbreaking. It is impossible not to weep for her, or not to hate the world which made her what she was.

