

**Billie Holiday:
A Biography**

Meg Greene

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BILLIE HOLIDAY

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BILLIE HOLIDAY

A Biography

By Meg Greene

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SERIES FOREWORD

In response to high school and public library needs, Greenwood developed this distinguished series of full-length biographies specifically for student use. Prepared by field experts and professionals, these engaging biographies are tailored for high school students who need challenging yet accessible biographies. Ideal for secondary school assignments, the length, format, and subject areas are designed to meet educators' requirements and students' interests.

Greenwood offers an extensive selection of biographies spanning all curriculum-related subject areas including social studies, the sciences, literature and the arts, history and politics, as well as popular culture, covering public figures and famous personalities from all time periods and backgrounds, both historic and contemporary, who have made an impact on American and/or world culture. Greenwood biographies were chosen based on comprehensive feedback from librarians and educators. Consideration was given to both curriculum relevance and inherent interest. The result is an intriguing mix of the well-known and the unexpected, the saints and sinners from long-ago history and contemporary pop culture. Readers will find a wide array of subject choices from fascinating crime figures like Al Capone to inspiring pioneers like Margaret Mead, from the greatest minds of our time like Stephen Hawking to the most amazing success stories of our day like J. K. Rowling.

Although the emphasis is on fact, not glorification, the books are meant to be fun to read. Each volume provides in-depth information

about the subject's life from birth through childhood, the teen years, and adulthood. A thorough account relates family background and education, traces personal and professional influences, and explores struggles, accomplishments, and contributions. A timeline highlights the most significant life events against a historical perspective. Bibliographies supplement the reference value of each volume.

INTRODUCTION

Legends are made, not born. Sometimes they are forgotten and disappear, fade away and die. Sometimes, though, they are larger than death and grow still larger after the subjects are gone, especially if death has taken them too violently and too soon. The music world is filled with such larger-than-life figures: Elvis Presley, John Lennon, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and the blues singer Robert Johnson come immediately to mind. Their lives and their music were so intertwined that it becomes impossible to separate the music from the personality. It was that way with Billie Holiday. Dead for nearly a half century, Billie Holiday haunts us still. We can see her face, the dark eyes shining, the white gardenias bound in her hair. We can hear her voice, and sometimes, we can almost feel her presence.

Billie Holiday, or “Lady Day” as she was known, is the iconic female jazz singer. She has the timeless quality of a legend. Why? What has made her persona and her music so enduring? What has made her so dear to so many? Perhaps it is the mystery and the complexity of her life that continues to fascinate, for she is a study in contrasts. She was both sophisticated and unrefined, both guilty and innocent. Her voice is familiar, yet elusive. She was one of a kind, unique and inimitable. No one sounds like Billie Holiday; no one can.

As a singer, and no doubt as a woman, Billie Holiday was at once intimate and aloof. Her love songs express basic, even primal, emotions. Her versions of such standards as “You Go to My Head,” “The Very Thought of You,” “The Man I Love,” and “Until the Real Thing Comes Along” convey the bewilderment, vulnerability, and yearning that come

with falling in love. Yet, no jazz singer has ever captured more fully the devouring sense of loneliness and loss, as she did, for example, in her haunting renditions of “I Cover the Waterfront” or “I’ll Be Seeing You.” A tone of melancholy longing and resignation finds its way into even some of her more upbeat and joyful tunes, such as “What a Little Moonlight Can Do,” “All of Me,” or “Me, Myself, and I.” This mixture of happiness and sadness, she suggested, is the common lot of humanity.

Her life did not consist of equal parts; in her four decades, she knew more sadness and tragedy than joy or love. As other writers have pointed out, however, if not for the sorrow, there would be no legend, and if not for the suffering, there would be no sainthood. The legend and the saint are inseparable.

Yet, there is more to Billie Holiday than myth and legend. Her contributions to jazz are real and tangible. Holiday transformed the art of jazz singing, and it is no exaggeration to say that modern jazz singing began with her. Before she appeared on the scene, jazz singers rarely personalized their tunes. Only blues singers, such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Dinah Washington, did not sound generic and interchangeable. Bored by the popular songs that she had to sing and record early in her career, Holiday experimented by altering both the rhythm and the melody. She phrased behind the beat and added harmonies derived from her favorite horn players, such as Louis Armstrong and Lester Young. The results were often magical.

Jazz musicians speak through their instruments. Holiday’s genius as a vocalist lay in how she used her voice. She phrased her vocals like an instrumentalist and was as much a musician as any of her accompanists. “I don’t think I’m singing,” she once reflected. “I try to improvise like Les Young, like Louis Armstrong, or someone else I admire. What comes out is what I feel. I hate straight singing. I have to change a tune to my own way of doing it. That’s all I know.”¹

Not only was she the first to make an instrument of her voice, but she was also the first to sense that technology had changed musical performance. Perhaps instinctively, she understood that the microphone made possible a new style of singing. Technology can sometimes enhance human qualities and extend human purposes, and so it was with Billie Holiday. The microphone humanized her voice, enabling her to develop the expressive style for which she became famous. Without the microphone, the sensitive, emotional nuances of her voice would have remained inaudible and been lost.

According to Robert O’Meally, one of the many Holiday biographers, Holiday’s life and career is divided into three periods.² The first phase brought

the emergence of Holiday's distinctive singing style during the 1930s. The second phase began with her recording of "Strange Fruit" in 1939, which many believed marked the beginning of her decline. The third phase encompassed the last decade of her life, between 1949 and 1959, in which Billie Holiday was reduced to portraying Billie Holiday on the stage—in which, in other words, she came to caricature herself. Many music critics take issue with this overview and instead view Holiday's career as divided into periods of intense creativity and innovation. To compare Holiday as a young woman singing in speakeasies with Holiday at the end of her career, when her voice reflected not only the passage of time but also the ravages of drugs and alcohol, is unfair. Each period of Holiday's career was marked by highs and lows, all of which she poured into her music.

An old friend of Holiday's once remarked: "You know the kind of people that say, 'I'm gonna get cussed out anyways, so what's the difference? What the hell?' Well, Eleanora [Billie] just went out and done what she felt like doing 'cause she was just don't care-ish."³ Billie Holiday was "just not care-ish" about many things in her life. A child of poverty, hard luck, and racism, Holiday could have turned into a hardened, bitter woman and a singer who could hide her emotions safely behind banal lyrics. She did not, and that she chose instead to create an art drawn from deep within her tormented soul is testimony as much to Holiday's talent as to her courage.

Frank O'Hara ends his elegiac poem "The Day Lady Died" with the lines "she whispered a song along the keyboard ... and everyone and I stopped breathing."⁴ Such was the power, emotion, and intimacy of Holiday's music. Her troubled private life and early death have undoubtedly contributed to the aura of myth and legend that still surrounds her. Her finest performances, on the stage or in the studio, however, are among the most accomplished in the history of jazz. Her uncompromising artistry places her in the company of the best jazz and popular vocalists of the twentieth century. Billie Holiday is an American original.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Joachim-Ernst Berendt, *Jazz: A Photo History*, trans. William Odom (New York: Schirmer Books, 1979), p. 315.

2. Robert O'Meally, *Lady Day: The Many Faces of Billie Holiday* (Cambridge, MA: DeCapo Press, 1991), p. 97.

3. Buzzy Jackson, *A Bad Woman Feeling Good* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), p. 89.

4. Frank O'Hara, "The Day Lady Died," <http://www.cs.rice.edu/~ssiyer/minstrels/poem/722.html>.

TIMELINE: EVENTS IN THE LIFE OF BILLIE HOLIDAY

- 1915** Born Eleanora Fagan on April 7 in Philadelphia
- 1927** Moves with her mother Sara (Sadie) to Harlem, New York City
- 1929** Holiday and mother are arrested for prostitution in New York
Starts singing career at the tables of Harlem clubs
- 1932** Opens at Covan's nightclub on W. 132 St.
- 1933** Is discovered by producer John Hammond
First studio session: records first single "Your Mother's Son-in-Law"/"Riffin' the Scotch"
Signs with talent agent Joe Glaser
Records with Teddy Wilson's band under the Columbia label
- 1934** Performs with pianist Bobby Henderson in her first appearance at the Apollo Theatre, November 23
- 1935** Stars in the film *Symphony in Black* with Duke Ellington
- 1936** Records "Billie's Blues," her first recording as a featured solo artist
- 1937** Meets tenor saxophonist and lifelong friend Lester Young
Holiday's father, Clarence Holiday, dies in Texas
Tours with the Count Basie Orchestra
- 1938** Tours with Artie Shaw's band
- 1939** Opens at Café Society and records "Strange Fruit"
- 1941** Elopes with James Monroe
Monroe arrested on drug charges in California; Holiday goes to Hollywood to help
- 1942** Meets Joe Guy; begins experimenting with heroin

- 1944** Signs with Decca and records “*Lover Man*,” using a string arrangement; the song is the only one she ever recorded to make the *Billboard* charts
- 1945** Sadie Fagan, her mother, dies
- 1946** First solo appearance in concert
Goes to Hollywood to star in the film *New Orleans* with Louis Armstrong
- 1947** Enters hospital for drug treatment
Re-signs with Decca
Arrested for drug possession and sentenced to a year in federal reformatory in Alderson, West Virginia
- 1948** Released from prison
Performs at a comeback concert at Carnegie Hall
Appears at the Strand Theater in “*Holiday on Broadway*”
- 1949** Arrested a second time for drug possession; is tried and acquitted
- 1950** Obtains divorce from Jimmy Monroe
Meets and enters into a common-law marriage with Louis McKay
- 1952** Begins recording for Norman Granz
- 1953** “*Billie Holiday’s Comeback Story*” airs on national television
- 1954** Makes first concert tour of Europe
Performs at the first Newport Jazz Festival
- 1956** *Lady Sings the Blues* is published
Arrested for drug possession
- 1958** Enters studio for the last time to record *Lady in Satin*
- 1959** Collapses with cirrhosis; is arrested in hospital for possession of narcotics
Dies July 17, at age 47, in New York City

Chapter 1

ELEANORA

On the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue between Lanvale and Lafayette streets in Baltimore is a statue of Billie Holiday. She appears frozen in time, as if the artist had only seconds to capture the essence of his subject before she faded away. Even cast in bronze, fixed and immovable, she remains elusive and enigmatic. Baltimore claims her now, but once, almost a century ago, Billie Holiday was among the nameless and faceless black people who lived and died without a trace. Being black and poor in Baltimore, as elsewhere throughout the United States, during the first decade of the twentieth century promised just this sort of anonymity, punctuated by hardships of various kinds. Although Maryland had remained in the Union during the Civil War (1861–1865), many white residents of the state maintained the prevailing Southern view of blacks: they were lazy, immoral, and stupid, justly consigned to lives as the hewers of wood and the drawers of water. In other words, they were suited only for performing menial tasks, and not always very reliably.

Even in freedom, blacks were condemned to lives of misery and despair. A journalist captured this sense in his description of one of the many black ghetto neighborhoods in Baltimore, very much like the one into which Billie Holiday was born. There were, he wrote “open drains ... ashes and garbage ... cellars filled with filthy black water ... villainous-looking negroes who loiter and sleep around street corners and never work ... foul streets, foul people in foul tenements filled with foul air.”¹ Yet, many blacks in Baltimore did not give up hope. The promise of employment in the booming canning and shipping industries or in service to wealthy and middle-class families led many to believe they could make a better life, if

not for themselves, then for their children. Among the hopeful was a luckless young woman named Sara Harris, the mother of Billie Holiday.

A ROUGH BEGINNING

Sara Harris's life began in humble circumstances. Born on August 18, 1896, to Charles Fagan and a woman now known only by her surname, Harris, Sara herself knew little about her origins or background. Soon after her birth, her father had left Baltimore, but he later returned and married a laundress from Virginia named Martha "Mattie" Dixon. Throughout most of his life, Charles Fagan worked as a waiter in several Baltimore hotels. At some point, he found a job as an elevator operator in the B&O (Baltimore and Ohio Railroad) Building in the heart of Baltimore's downtown business district. Through their labors, Charles and Mattie not only attained a certain measure of financial security, but they also in time were able to move from the East Side slums to a home in a respectable black neighborhood in West Baltimore.

Mattie Fagan ruled her household. Not only did she persuade her husband to convert to Catholicism, but she also made certain that he worked hard and regularly brought home a paycheck. Mattie wanted her family to be prosperous and respectable. She had no time for her in-laws, whom she regarded as ne'er-do-wells, and she rarely accompanied her husband to visit the old neighborhood or to see his siblings. She did not extend the hospitality of her home to the Fagans. Of course, she had nothing whatsoever to do with Charles's illegitimate daughter, Sara Harris.

GOD BLESS THE CHILD

In an attempt to draw closer to her father, Sara, or Sadie as she became known, converted to Catholicism. It did her little good; for the rest of her life she remained outside the family. Even the Fagans did not accept her.

Eventually, Sara Harris found work as a live-in maid for a wealthy white family. Sometime during the summer of 1914, when she was 18, Sara went to a carnival or a dance where she met and was seduced by Clarence Holiday, a 16-year-old grocery delivery boy and aspiring musician who lived at home with his parents. Shortly thereafter, Sadie learned that she was pregnant. She left Baltimore for Philadelphia, paying for her trip by taking what was known as a transportation job, a form of employment in which a white person paid for the travel of an African American in exchange for services rendered on the trip. Upon her arrival in Philadelphia, Sadie

moved into a room at 1131 South Broad Street and soon found work as a domestic.

However, her pregnancy and her status as a single woman soon led her employers to fire her. With no money and no one to turn to, Sadie went to Philadelphia General Hospital, where in exchange for scrubbing floors and waiting on patients, she received medical care during the remaining months of her pregnancy.

In Philadelphia General Hospital at 2:30 on the morning of April 7, 1915, Sara Harris gave birth to a daughter, whom she named Eleanora. The father of record listed on Eleanora's birth certificate was Frank DeViese, a 20-year-old waiter who had befriended Sadie and who was at the hospital when Sadie gave birth.

Not long after, Sadie turned to her half-sister Eva in Baltimore, asking for her help in taking care of Eleanora. Eva agreed and sent her husband, Robert Miller, to Philadelphia to pick up the infant and return to Baltimore. His trip marked the beginning of an unhappy pattern in Eleanora's life, as she was often shunted between relatives and friends while Sadie was off working. She did not stay with the Millers long; Eva and Robert were trying to start their own family. Eleanora was then placed with Miller's mother, Martha, who took care of the child for the first 18 months of her life.

“AMERICA'S CLASSICAL MUSIC”

“If the truth were known about the origin of ‘jazz,’” wrote musician Clay Smith in 1924, “it would never be mentioned in polite society.”² The word was African American slang for copulation, used both as a noun and a verb. The term later came to mean a sense of excitement, energy, and invigoration. In its various forms—jass, jasz, and jaz are among the early spellings—jazz may have derived from a West African dialect, though no connection has ever been proven.

The association of *jazz* with a particular kind of music is hardly surprising, considering that music played in the jazz style originated in the steamy atmosphere of New Orleans bars and bordellos. One of the first recorded identifications of jazz as a musical form came in 1917 from reporter Lafcadio Hearn, who worked for a Cincinnati newspaper. Filing dispatches from New Orleans, Hearn reported that the “word ‘jaz,’ meaning to speed things up, to make excitement, [was] common among the blacks of the South and had been adopted by the Creoles as a term to be applied to music of a rudimentary syncopated type.”³

It was against the backdrop of deepening racial animosity and violence that jazz emerged. The promise of racial emancipation and equality had

disappeared with the end of Reconstruction in 1877, and, as a result, blacks, especially in the South, witnessed the erosion of their rights. The Supreme Court decision in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) legalized racial discrimination by formally embracing the doctrine of “separate-but-equal.” Violence against blacks increased dramatically; even those spared the worst abuses suffered the misery of poverty, fear, and hopelessness. According to writer Richard Knight, for these reasons jazz is a “heroic” music. An original American art form, jazz, Knight declared, told the story of how:

The USA’s most marginalised and oppressed people, black slaves and their descendants, defied the indignity of their situation to make, through music, a contribution to world culture which would eclipse every other art form in the USA. So great was this sound, jazz and blues, it has informed the subsequent development of all popular music.⁴

In addition, he continued, jazz revealed the dignity and feeling of a people and a race:

Jazz is something Negroes invented, and it said the most profound things.... It is the nobility of the race put into sound.... Jazz has all the elements, from the spare and penetrating to the complex and enveloping. It is the hardest music to play that I know of, and it is the highest rendition of individual emotion in the history of Western music.⁵

Jazz is a hybrid; it has no single origin. It combines African rhythms with Western harmonies. However, it was African music, with its complex polyrhythmic structure, that provided the heart and soul of jazz. Thus, even as it incorporated many elements of Western music, jazz represented a break from Western musical styles and traditions. The music of an oppressed and downtrodden people, jazz allowed for a great deal of freedom to express ideas, moods, and emotions—freedoms otherwise denied to black people. To some extent, all music is improvised; even classical musicians rarely, if ever, play the same piece in exactly the same way. Yet, it is hard to imagine any music that gives the players as much freedom to improvise as jazz does. For example, the great tenor saxophonist Lester Young, who collaborated with Billie Holiday on some of her most memorable work, developed his own improvised system of harmony that he applied no matter what the key or the chords of the song.⁶ Jazz was

more than a mixing of styles and rhythms. It was the result of distinctive ethnic, cultural, and social conditions found only in the United States, and specifically, in New Orleans.

THE SPIRITUAL CENTER

Jazz arose in the United States not by chance, but because of a unique set of social, economic, intellectual, and spiritual conditions that existed nowhere else. At the turn of the twentieth century, blacks constituted approximately 10 percent of the American population. Largely excluded from the mainstream of national life, these people had developed a culture of their own, which included distinctive musical forms that in time became popular with other groups. One theory to explain why New Orleans was the birthplace of jazz is that the men and women, black, white, and mixed, who lived there had long heard ragtime being played and were prepared to take the next step in the evolution of music.⁷

With the establishment of Storyville, the legendary red-light, or prostitution, district of New Orleans, in 1897, jazz took root and flourished. Bounded by Basin and Robertson streets, and extending from Perdido to Gravier streets, Storyville was home to more than 2,000 registered prostitutes who plied their trade in dozens of brothels. In such houses of ill repute, and in the dance halls and dives they supported, jazz was born.

Yet, New Orleans, with its diverse population that includes French, Spanish, and English peoples as well as Africans, is more a Caribbean than a North American city. Jazz might have remained a local phenomenon, like so many other New Orleans specialties from jambalaya to etouffée, from boudin to voodoo, had not attitudes throughout the United States become more accommodating to jazz. The emergence of a complex set of ideas and values called *modernism* made jazz acceptable to a wider audience. Modernism helped to break down an older way of thinking and living known as Victorianism, which emphasized order, decency, honor, self-control, hard work, and respectability. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many Americans, especially members of the younger generation, found Victorian reserve unbearably staid and oppressive. They sought the freedom to express themselves intellectually, emotionally, artistically, and sexually. Because it seemed to embody this new spirit of freedom, jazz appealed to those who embraced modernism.

As the South became less attractive to blacks, many decided to move North. They brought jazz with them. In the northeastern United States, a "sizzling" new style of playing developed. Although the center of the new

music was New York City, it appeared elsewhere, including Baltimore. This music was characterized by rollicking rhythms, but lacked the distinctly bluesy influence that dominated southern jazz. In Baltimore's black community, jazz was soon heard everywhere. Jazz singer Ruby Glover recalled the energy of "the Avenue," the main thoroughfare of Old West, one of the city's oldest black neighborhoods:

When you went in there they were always talking about who was up the street, or who was playing, or don't forget there's a dance at the corner. There was always a conversation in every little pocket, where you saw people talking. They were telling each other, remember to come out because so and so is going to be there. Don't forget to go up the street because the Casino's got so and so.⁸

Baltimore produced a number of prominent young jazz musicians, including pianist Eubie Blake, drummer Chick Webb, bandleader Elmer Snowden, and a young guitarist named Clarence Holiday.

"I'M A DADDY NOW"

The son of Nelson Holliday, a hospital laborer, and Mary Johnston, a laundress, Clarence Holliday was born on July 23, 1898. It is unclear how or when Clarence became interested in music, but by 1917, though still living with his parents, he began to find jobs playing banjo and guitar. Clarence delivered groceries to pay for music lessons.

In 1917 at the height of hostilities in Europe, Clarence, then working as an elevator operator, decided to enlist in the U.S. Army under the name Clarence Holiday, dropping the second "l" in his surname. In addition, he gave military officials his birth year as 1895 instead of 1898, which would have made him too young to sign up. On November 27, 1917, two days after being assigned the rank of private, Holiday deserted his regiment in Washington, D.C. A year later in August, Holiday was inducted into the army again and sent to the 54th Company, 153rd Depot Brigade. By October 1918, Holiday was settled into his new job as bugler for Company I, 811 Pion Infantry and headed to France. Not long after their arrival, the war ended. Holiday would leave France in June 1919 and return home to Baltimore.

Later in life, Holiday claimed he had been the victim of a poison gas attack. In fact, his daughter would later claim that her father died as a result of lingering complications from that experience. However, there is

no record of Holiday having suffered from such an attack; his tale became one more legend interwoven within Billie Holiday's own tangled life.

Soon, Clarence found steady work as a banjo and guitar player, playing with different bands. He toured with Billy Fowler, Fletcher Henderson, Don Redmon, and McKinney's Cotton Pickers. His playing abilities were such that his stature as a musician rose.

In 1920, Sadie returned to Baltimore and took up residence at Eva and Robert's house near the city's downtown, where she was reunited with her daughter. Under the name of Sadie Fagan, she found work in a shirt factory. Eva, who now had two children of her own, tended to Eleanora. Although Sadie's father, Charles, was unhappy at Sadie's taking on the Fagan name, his concern for the welfare of his daughter and granddaughter led him to look in on them on rare occasions. Charles was not the only visitor; Clarence Holiday, hearing that Sadie had returned to Baltimore, occasionally visited the Miller home, though he discouraged Sadie's attempts to draw him back into a relationship or, worse, matrimony.

Her father's refusal to marry Sadie preyed on Billie Holiday's psyche. In her autobiography, *Lady Sings the Blues*, Billie recalled that her parents finally married when she was three. "Mom and Pop were just a couple of kids when they got married," she wrote. "He was eighteen, she was sixteen, and I was three." But the fact remains that her parents never married. Even when her mother died, Holiday asked that she be acknowledged as Clarence's widow. The harsh reality remained that Clarence kept both Sadie and Eleanora in the background, refusing to acknowledge to his family that he even had a daughter, though he told his friend Elmer Snowden, "You know, I'm a daddy now." Snowden later met Eleanora when she was three, and described her as "an ugly little thing, a homely looking baby."⁹

Clarence Holiday's rising fame as a musician gave him the excuse he needed to be away from Sadie and Eleanora. For his young daughter, he remained always a shadowy presence. Sadie did her best to keep track of her wayward lover. She took transportation jobs, not only because they paid better than domestic service, but also because they enabled her to keep an eye on Clarence. Clarence did his best to hide from Sadie, sometimes going so far as to change the spelling of his name. In 1922, he married Helen Boudin and moved to Philadelphia and out of his daughter's life.

SEARCHING FOR RESPECTABILITY

After learning of Clarence's marriage, Sadie returned to domestic service and did her best to support Eleanora. She refused to allow poverty to

dampen their spirits or destroy their lives. But no matter how hard Sadie worked, there was never enough money.

In October 1920, life seemed to take a turn for the better when Sadie met and married a 25-year-old longshoreman named Philip Gough. To help out the newlyweds, Charles Fagan offered them a house, located on North Fremont Street in West Baltimore. For almost three years, Sadie and Eleanora had some security. Then Gough abandoned his family. As Sadie fell further behind on the house payments, Charles Fagan took over the mortgage. Sadie and Eleanora, however, had to move out. For Eleanora, the Fagans' rejection of both her and her mother was a wound that never healed. Years later, when, as a famous singer, Billie Holiday returned to Baltimore, she made no effort to see her Fagan relatives.

THE POINT

Despite the collapse of her marriage, Sadie had to think about her daughter's welfare. She was concerned about Eleanora's education, for by the time Eleanora was in the fourth grade, she began skipping school as often as possible. Caught by a local truant officer, Eleanora was ordered to appear in juvenile court. The judge deemed that the nine-year-old lacked proper parental care and supervision, and in January 1925 sent her to the House of Good Shepherd for Colored Girls, a Catholic school for wayward girls and young women. As the youngest of the girls at Good Shepherd, Eleanora was easy sexual prey for the older girls; several writers have suggested that Eleanora was introduced to lesbianism at Good Shepherd, which may in part explain her bisexuality.

In October 1925, after 10 months at Good Shepherd, Eleanora returned to her mother's custody. The two moved again, this time to an area near the docks known as Fells Point, which was then a red-light district filled with brothels and bars. Sadie arranged to sublet a small apartment, which allowed her kitchen privileges. Residents of the neighborhood remember her as a small, neat woman, a good cook, and a churchgoer who attended Mass at the nearby Catholic Church. Sadie still worked as a domestic whenever she could. However, because money was scarce, she relied more fully on better-paying transportation jobs, which kept her away from home for several days at a time. During Sadie's frequent absences, neighbors looked in on Eleanora.

At some point, Sadie began a relationship with a local tough named Wee Wee Hill. Hill moved mother and daughter to a second-floor apartment in a building that his mother owned. Sadie tried various ways to

increase her income. Not only did she continue to work as a domestic, but for a short time, she may also have operated a small restaurant out of her apartment. The fare was pig's feet, red beans, and rice, with bootleg whiskey served in the living room. The restaurant was only open in the evenings, which allowed Sadie to work during the day. Sadie's hard work made her one of the few neighborhood residents who could afford both gas and electricity.

Yet, Sadie's bad luck with men continued. Hill refused to marry her and continued to see other women. Sadie eventually went to New York to look for better-paying work. Eleanora stayed behind in the care of Hill's mother, Lucy.

LEARNING LIFE'S LESSONS

For the most part, 10-year-old Eleanora was left to fend for herself. Miss Lu was infirm and could do little to control her. Mature for her age, and already showing signs of becoming a beautiful woman, Eleanora looked elsewhere for a role model. She found one in Ethel Moore, a successful businesswoman who owned one of the more profitable brothels in the Point. To earn extra cash, Eleanora worked for Ethel, doing odd jobs and domestic chores. Without much supervision of any kind, Eleanora did what she wanted, when she wanted. Her mother's misfortunes with men made a deep impression on Eleanora. She did not want to be pushed around, subject to the whims of others. She began to develop a tougher, harder view of life, the world, and men. Resolving never to endure rejection from a man, Eleanora had a series of brief relationships and broke up with her boyfriends before they had the chance to break up with her.

THE EVOLUTION OF A SINGER

Busy as she was, Eleanora found time to pursue the one interest that she seemed to love: singing. Taking advantage of every opportunity to sing, Eleanora began to perform in local amateur shows at movie houses as well as in a number of the storefront churches located throughout black neighborhoods. She also spent time at Ethel Moore's brothel, which housed a Victrola. Sitting in the upstairs bar, she first heard the music of such artists as Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong.

These recordings were "race records," which recording companies had developed in the 1920s to expand sales to blacks. The phenomenal success of Mamie Smith's 1920 hit "Crazy Blues," which sold more than 500,000

copies, boosted the careers of other black singers and musicians, whose talents the record companies had previously ignored. Of all the singers she listened to, Bessie Smith was Eleanora's favorite. Although Holiday always denied that she was a blues singer, her style, strongly influenced by Bessie Smith, was grounded in the blues tradition. Horn players, such as trumpeter Louis Armstrong, also influenced Holiday's singing. Armstrong was among the first to develop improvisation and scat singing. According to jazz critic and historian Stanley Crouch, "Armstrong, like Bessie Smith, was a master of inflection, capable of coming down on a note in almost endless ways, to the extent that one tone could jab, bite, simmer, dissolve, swell, yelp, sizzle, or grind."¹⁰ Holiday always credited the development of her singing style to both Smith and Armstrong, stating in one interview that "I got my manner from Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong, honey. I wanted [Bessie's] feeling and Louis' style."¹¹

Eleanora picked up singing jobs wherever she could, sometimes performing at several clubs in one evening. She took care of herself, rarely drinking and only occasionally smoking marijuana. Her light complexion, almost straight black hair worn in a bun or a pageboy, statuesque figure, and comely face made her a favorite with the men who frequented the Point. Women, however, were jealous of her, and Eleanora learned early on how to defend herself against their attacks.

Concerned with Eleanora's behavior and for her welfare, Miss Lu wrote to Sadie, asking her to send for her daughter. According to Wee Wee Hill, Eleanora was happy to go to New York. And so it was that in early 1929, wearing a white voile dress with a red shiny belt, Eleanora Harris left Baltimore for New York City. It was almost four years before she would return to Baltimore, not as Eleanora Harris, but as Billie Holiday.

NOTES

1. Donald Clarke, *Wishing on the Moon: The Life and Times of Billie Holiday* (New York: Viking, 1994), p. 6.

2. Hugh Rawson, "Jazz," *American Heritage* (October 2004): p. 18.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Richard Knight, "All That Jazz," *Geographical* (October 2001): p. 14.

5. Wynton Marsalis, quoted in Ken Burns and Geoffrey C. Ward, *Jazz—A History of America's Music* (New York: Knopf, 2000), p. 25.

6. Lewis Porter, *Lester Young* (Boston: Twayne, 1985), pp. 66–67. Despite the prevailing emphasis on improvisation, James Lincoln Collier argues persuasively that most "improvised" jazz solos are transcribed and memorized, and that not until 1923 did the improvised solo become the central component of jazz. Before 1923, ensemble playing predominated. See *Jazz: The American Theme Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 25–27.

7. See James Lincoln Collier, *The Making of Jazz: A Comprehensive History* (New York: Delta, 1979), pp. 57–71.
8. Joel D. Miller, “The Rise and Fall of Jazz in Baltimore,” [http://www.american.edu/bgriif/h481 web/History%20Day%20Power%20Points/miller.ppt](http://www.american.edu/bgriif/h481web/History%20Day%20Power%20Points/miller.ppt).
9. Clarke, *Wishing on the Moon*, p. 11.
10. Stanley Crouch, “Louis Armstrong,” *Time*, June 8, 1998, p. 170.
11. Clarke, *Wishing on the Moon*, p. 36.

Chapter 2

BILLIE

Uncertainties, inaccuracies, and discrepancies abound in the story of Billie Holiday. No one, for example, knows exactly when she arrived in New York City. Some accounts give the date as 1927; others place her arrival sometime in 1929. Whatever the date, her trip was not without mishap. She missed her original stop, where Sadie was waiting, and instead got off the train in Harlem, where she became lost. When local authorities picked her up, Eleanora refused to cooperate. She would not even tell them her name.

Finally reunited with her mother, Eleanora moved to Harlem where Sadie had rented rooms at 151 West 140th Street, between Lenox and Seventh avenues. The building was home to Florence Williams, a noted Harlem madam. To earn money, Sadie had begun to work for Williams, and in a short time, Eleanora also became one of Williams's girls. At 14, she earned five dollars for every trick she turned.

THE NEGRO CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

Harlem in the 1920s was the most famous black neighborhood in the United States. Bounded by 110th Street and running north to 155th Street, bordered on the west by Morningside Drive and St. Nicholas Avenue and on the east by the East River, Harlem had once been a white neighborhood, populated, as the name suggests, mainly by Dutch immigrants. With the introduction of commuter rail service during the 1870s, Harlem evolved from an isolated, impoverished village in the northern reaches of Manhattan into a wealthy residential suburb.

When the Lenox Avenue subway line opened in the early years of the twentieth century, a flurry of real estate speculation contributed to a substantial increase in construction. At that time, the population of Harlem was largely English and German, with increasing numbers of Jewish immigrants. By 1904, however, the economic prosperity had come to an end, largely as the result of high rents and excessive construction. In that same year, Phillip A. Payton, Jr., a black realtor, founded the Afro-American Realty Company with the intention of leasing vacant white-owned buildings and then renting them to blacks. Although Payton's company survived only four years, it played a pivotal role in opening Harlem up to black residents.

The massive exodus of blacks from the South during the early years of the century also dramatically altered the ethnic composition of Harlem, until, by 1930, it had become a predominately black enclave. In 1890 there had been approximately 25,000 blacks living in Manhattan. By 1910 that number had more than tripled to 90,000. In the following decade, the black population increased to approximately 150,000 and, by 1930, had more than doubled to 325,000. In Harlem itself, the black population rose from approximately 50,000 in 1914 to about 80,000 in 1920 to almost 200,000 by 1930. From a social perspective, Harlem was a city within a city. By the 1920s, moreover, Harlem had come to occupy an important place in American intellectual and political history, thanks in part to the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural ferment that gained black art, music, and literature a wider audience and greater acceptance.

By the 1910s, Harlem had already become the entertainment capital of black America. Ballrooms, speakeasies (places where customers could buy illegal liquor), nightclubs, whorehouses, and drug dens proliferated. With the coming of Prohibition in 1919, whites converged on Harlem. "Slumming" in search of illicit excitement and illegal pleasure became a favorite pastime for uptown whites. Eleanora was swept up in the energy of her new home. "Every night limousines would wheel uptown," she recalled. "The minks and ermines would climb over one another to be the first one through the coalbins or over the garbage pails into the newest spot that was 'the place.'"¹

A NEW WORLD

Like black writers and artists, black musicians also gravitated to Harlem. Willie "the Lion" Smith, Fats Waller, and James P. Johnson created an early version of jazz piano known as the Harlem Stride around the time

of World War I. After 1920, bandleaders such as Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, and Chick Webb laid the foundation for swing and big-band jazz. Whites flocked to Harlem to hear jazz. When Duke Ellington and his orchestra played at the Cotton Club—the most famous nightclub in Harlem located at 644 Lenox Avenue—wealthy white New Yorkers filled the place, enthralled by the music and at the spectacle of the feathered black and tan dancers.

Just down the street from the Cotton Club, at 596 Lennox Avenue, was the Savoy Ballroom. Nicknamed “the Home of the Happy Feet,” the Savoy became the hottest dance hall in town, drawing throngs of blacks and whites alike.² Many dance crazes of the 1920s and 1930s originated there. The ballroom itself was majestic. Patrons entered by a marble-pillared staircase lit by cut-glass chandeliers that led into the massive orange and blue dance hall. The management of the Savoy was known for having invented the “Battle of the Bands,” which pitted one band against another. Each band played on a revolving stage located at opposite ends of the hall; as one band ended a song, the other band began to play, guaranteeing that the music was nonstop. For an aspiring singer such as Eleanora Harris, Harlem was the place to be. There was no place on earth quite like it.

WORKING GIRL

On May 2, 1929, Eleanora was arrested on charges of prostitution. In *Wishing on the Moon*, Donald Clarke, one of her biographers, explained that the incident occurred when she refused to serve a wealthy black customer who retaliated by having her arrested.³ Other sources give a different account of the episode. They state that Eleanora, her mother, Florence Williams, and 22 other prostitutes were arrested during a police raid on the Williams establishment. In the police report, Eleanora gave her name as Eleanora Fagan, declaring that she was 21 years old.

All the women were jailed overnight; the following morning, all were scheduled to appear in the Women’s Night Court of the Magistrate’s Court for the Ninth District of Manhattan. All were charged with vagrancy; however, the sentences varied. Some of the women were released; two others, including Florence Williams, were sent to the workhouse. Facing the wrath of a stern woman judge, Eleanora was sentenced to 100 days at Welfare Island, now Roosevelt Island, located in the East River. The island facilities consisted of a workhouse and a hospital; most of its residents were prostitutes and drug addicts. By October, Eleanora was back with Sadie, who had moved to a new apartment at 7 Glenada Avenue in Brooklyn.

Billie Holiday was an American jazz musician, singer and song writer. This biography profiles her childhood, life, music career, achievements and timeline. Her autobiography "Lady Sings The Blues" was published in 1956 by Doubleday. Her final album "Billie Holiday" was released with MGM in 1958. Quotes: You , Music. Recommended Lists: Recommended Lists: American Female Musicians. Women Lyricists & Songwriters. American Female Jazz Musicians.