

The United States vs. Billie Holiday

The United States vs. Billie Holiday is a 2021 American biographical drama film about singer Billie Holiday, based on the book *Chasing the Scream: The First and Last Days of the War on Drugs* by Johann Hari. Directed by Lee Daniels, the film stars Andra Day in the title role, along with Trevante Rhodes, Garrett Hedlund, Leslie Jordan (in his final film appearance), Miss Lawrence, Adriane Lenox, Natasha Lyonne, Rob Morgan, Da'Vine Joy Randolph, Evan Ross, and Tyler James Williams.

Initially set to be released theatrically in the United States by Paramount Pictures, the film was sold to Hulu in December 2020 and digitally released in the United States on February 26, 2021. *The United States vs. Billie Holiday* received mixed reviews from critics; while Day's performance was praised, the direction and screenplay were criticized as unfocused. For her performance, Day was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actress and won the Golden Globe Award for Best Actress – Motion Picture Drama. The film was also nominated for the Golden Globe Award for Best Original Song ("Tigress and Tweed") and the soundtrack won the Grammy Award for Best Compilation Soundtrack for Visual Media, for Andra Day, Salaam Remi, and Lynn Fainchtein.

Plot

In 1957, Billie Holiday meets with a radio journalist, Reginald Lord Devine, for an interview. He asks her what it is like to be a "colored woman" and about the trouble she keeps getting into because of her hit song "Strange Fruit". Billie says it is about human rights, something the government often forgets.

In 1947, Billie's husband Monroe and her manager Joe Glaser try to get Billie to cut "Strange Fruit" from her set list, saying people high up in the government do not want to hear her sing it. Lester Young, Billie's sax player, supports her in playing it.

In the 1940s, FBN chief Harry J. Anslinger tells agents that Billie is a threat, her song promotes the wrong ideas, and she has not stopped singing it. Unable to arrest her for singing, they decide to go after her on drug charges. After Billie's next show, Agent Jimmy Fletcher, disguised as a soldier, witnesses her

The United States vs. Billie Holiday



Official promotional poster

Directed by	Lee Daniels
Screenplay by	Suzan-Lori Parks
Based on	<i>Chasing the Scream: The First and Last Days of the War on Drugs</i> by Johann Hari
Produced by	Lee Daniels Jordan Fudge Tucker Tooley Joe Roth Jeff Kirschenbaum Pamela Oas Williams
Starring	Andra Day Trevante Rhodes Garrett Hedlund Leslie Jordan Miss Lawrence

doing drugs. The FBI arrest Billie and her lover [Joe Guy](#) for drug use and possession. The judge sentences Billie to a year in jail. It is later revealed that Anslinger paid off Guy.

Anslinger tells Jimmy that they need to make sure Billie never sings again. Jimmy questions why Billie is such a problem. Anslinger tells Fletcher to go to the prison to get back in with Billie. Instead, he tells her to not trust anyone and warns her the FBI will continue to try to set her up.

After Billie is released from prison, she does a [Carnegie Hall](#) show, where an audience member asks her to sing "Strange Fruit" and she sadly declines. Billie meets John Levy, who tells her that he will pay off the right people to make sure she can keep singing in his clubs. They begin a relationship. Levy proposes to her, then slips drugs into her pocket just in time for the FBI to enter. In court, Fletcher admits that Billie was possibly framed, and she is freed. Anslinger sends Fletcher to follow Billie on her tour.

In 1949, Jimmy comes to see Billie after a successful tour stop and tells her the agency wants her to think he was fired. Suspicious, the whole crew has Jimmy do [heroin](#) to show he can be trusted. Over the course of the tour, Jimmy and Billie fall in love. One day, after the bus breaks down, Billie breaks up with Jimmy, telling him he needs to find a nice girl, and that is not her. Jimmy returns to work, where he finds he has been replaced.

Billie marries Louis McKay, later returning to Jimmy. Later, Billie tells Jimmy she has liver failure. In the hospital, Anslinger tells Billie and McKay that if she cooperates, she will never see them again. Billie tells him that his grandkids will be singing "Strange Fruit" one day.

Cast

- [Andra Day](#) as [Billie Holiday](#)
- [Trevante Rhodes](#) as Jimmy Fletcher
- [Garrett Hedlund](#) as [Harry J. Anslinger](#)
- [Leslie Jordan](#) as Reginald Lord Devine
- [Miss Lawrence](#) as Miss Freddy
- [Adriane Lenox](#) as Mrs. Fletcher
- [Natasha Lyonne](#) as [Tallulah Bankhead](#)
- [Rob Morgan](#) as Louis McKay
- [Da'Vine Joy Randolph](#) as Roslyn
- [Evan Ross](#) as Sam Williams
- [Tyler James Williams](#) as [Lester Young](#)
- [Tone Bell](#) as [John Levy](#)

[Adriane Lenox](#)
[Natasha Lyonne](#)
[Rob Morgan](#)
[Da'Vine Joy Randolph](#)
[Evan Ross](#)
[Tyler James Williams](#)

Cinematography	Andrew Dunn
Edited by	Jay Rabinowitz
Music by	Kris Bowers
Production companies	Lee Daniels Entertainment New Slate Ventures Roth/Kirschenbaum Films
Distributed by	Hulu
Release date	February 26, 2021 (United States)
Running time	130 minutes
Country	United States
Language	English

- [Blake DeLong](#) as Agent Carter
- [Randy Davison](#) as Senator J. McCarthy
- [Dana Gourrier](#) as Sadie Fagan
- [Melvin Gregg](#) as Joe Guy
- [Erik LaRay Harvey](#) as Jimmy Monroe
- [Ray Shell](#) as Carl the Drummer
- [Furly Mac](#) as James (Elevator Attendant)

Production

Development on a new [Billie Holiday](#) biopic was announced in September 2019, with [Lee Daniels](#) directing. [Andra Day](#) was set to play the title role, with [Trevante Rhodes](#), [Garrett Hedlund](#) and [Natasha Lyonne](#) also cast.^[1] [Evan Ross](#), [Dana Gourrier](#) and [Erik LaRay Harvey](#) were also added later that month.^[2] Additional casting was announced in October.^[3] Daniels was hesitant to cast Day, owing to her limited acting experience, but became convinced following a clip of her sent to him by her acting coach.^[4]

Filming began on October 6, 2019, in [Montreal](#).^[5]

[Andra Day](#) revealed that she lost almost 40 pounds and started drinking and smoking to portray Billie Holiday in this film.^[6]

Music

Release

The film was released on February 26, 2021.^[7] In July 2020, [Paramount Pictures](#) acquired distribution rights to the film in a bidding war which also included [Focus Features](#), [Sony Pictures](#) and 101 Studios.^[8] It was originally scheduled to be released on February 12, 2021,^{[9][10]} but in November 2020, it was moved two weeks to February 26.^[11] In December 2020, [Hulu](#) acquired distribution rights to the film in the United States.^[12]

Reception

Audience viewership

Hulu reported the film was the most-watched title over its first three days of release, with [Samba TV](#) estimating that 287,000 U.S. households watched the film.^[13]

Critical response

Review aggregator website [Rotten Tomatoes](#) reported that 55% of 185 critic reviews were positive, with an average rating of 5.4/10. The website's critics consensus reads, "Although *The United States vs. Billie Holiday* often falls shy of its subject's transcendence, Andra Day's performance offers brilliant compensation."^[14] On [Metacritic](#) the film has a weighted average score of 52 out of 100, based on 43 critics, indicating "mixed or average reviews".^[15]

David Rooney of *The Hollywood Reporter* wrote, "Day mesmerizes even when Lee Daniels' unwieldy bio-drama careens all over the map with stylistic inconsistency and narrative dysfunction, settling for episodic electricity in the absence of a robust connective thread. It's a mess, albeit an absorbing one, driven by a raw central performance of blistering indignation, both tough and vulnerable."^[16] Reviewing for *Variety*, Owen Gleiberman praised Day's performance and said, "In this sprawling, lacerating, but at times emotionally wayward biopic set during the last decade of Holiday's life, Day gives Billie a voice of pearly splendor that, over time, turns raspy and hard, and we see the same thing happening to Billie inside."^[17]

For *Deadline Hollywood*, Pete Hammond wrote, "You simply cannot say enough about what Day achieves in this role, particularly being a first-time actor. She gets beneath the skin of Holiday, giving a raw and honest portrait of an artist under duress but determined in her belief that she can use that art and talent to make the world a more just place."^[18] Peter Bradshaw of *The Guardian* gave the film 2 out of 5 stars, detailing, "Day's rendition is heartfelt. But the direction and storytelling are laborious, without the panache and incorrectness of earlier Daniels movies such as *Precious* (2009) and *The Paperboy* (2012). A cloud of solemnity and reverence hangs over it, briefly dispelled by the music itself."^[19] *DiscussingFilm* also praised Day in their 3/5 review, saying that her work is the only memorable aspect in an otherwise forgettable, muddled film.^[20]

Several jazz critics and musicians have had negative reactions to the film for its rewriting of history. Writing in *JazzTimes*, historian and musician Lewis Porter critiqued the ahistorical premise of the film:

In Lee Daniels' film *The United States vs. Billie Holiday*, the words "Earle Theater, Philadelphia, May 27, 1947" flash onscreen, and one sees a row of policemen, with Holiday's manager Joe Glaser standing at the center of them. Billie comes onstage and sings the first words of "Strange Fruit," solo. Immediately, Glaser orders the police, "Get her off that stage!" and they storm forward.

But wait! Holiday was not at the Earle Theater on that date. She never sang "Strange Fruit" as the first number in a set, and never sang that or anything else a cappella . . . Most significant, never in her entire career was Billie stopped while performing "Strange Fruit." Yes, the Federal Bureau of Narcotics pursued Holiday for her drug use. But there was no federal objection to the song "Strange Fruit," nor was there any campaign to suppress it.

If you believed this film—and so far as I can tell, almost everyone did, even the many critics who rightly panned it—you have been the victim of one of the worst instances of rewriting history in the annals of Hollywood. Even the usual spate of articles about "what's true in this based-on-fact movie" missed the boat. The *Los Angeles Times* stated that "[a]lthough some details of the relationships have been fictionalized ..., the ... conspiracies are well documented." Documented where exactly? *In the movie*, and nowhere else.^[21]

In their *Jazz United* podcast on WBGO, critic Nate Chinen and musician and radio host Greg Bryant, too, objected to the film's false premises, but also its let down to the jazz community for its inauthenticity and "exploitative nature", saying, for example "its the attempt to co-opt the name to sell films, what we have

again what we have is the *image* of jazz, of black American music, whatever you call it, being used to promote certain stereotypes not only about the music, but the players, the people, who gave their lives to embody it."^[22]

Accolades

Award	Date of ceremony	Category	Recipient(s)	Result	Ref.
<u>AARP's Movies for Grownups Awards</u>	March 28, 2021	Best Movie for Grownups	<i>The United States vs. Billie Holiday</i>	Won	^[23]
		Best Director	<u>Lee Daniels</u>	Nominated	
		Best Time Capsule	<i>The United States vs. Billie Holiday</i>	Nominated	
<u>Academy Awards</u>	<u>April 25, 2021</u>	<u>Best Actress</u>	<u>Andra Day</u>	Nominated	^[24]
<u>African-American Film Critics Association Awards</u>	April 7, 2021	Best Picture	<i>The United States vs. Billie Holiday</i>	Nominated	^[25]
		Best Actress	Andra Day	Won	
<u>BET Awards</u>	<u>June 27, 2021</u>	<u>Best Movie</u>	<i>The United States vs. Billie Holiday</i>	Nominated	^[26]
		<u>Best Actress</u>	Andra Day	Won	
<u>Black Reel Awards</u>	<u>April 11, 2021</u>	<u>Outstanding Actress</u>		Nominated	^[27]
		<u>Outstanding Breakthrough Performance, Female</u>		Won	
		<u>Outstanding Costume Design</u>	Paolo Nieddu	Nominated	
		<u>Outstanding Original Song</u>	"Tigress & Tweed" – Andra Day & <u>Raphael Saadiq</u>	Nominated	
<u>Critics' Choice Movie Awards</u>	March 7, 2021	<u>Best Actress</u>	Andra Day	Nominated	^[28]
		<u>Best Hair and Makeup</u>	<i>The United States vs. Billie Holiday</i>	Nominated	
		<u>Best Song</u>	"Tigress & Tweed" – Andra Day & Raphael Saadiq	Nominated	
<u>Dallas–Fort Worth Film Critics Association Awards</u>	February 10, 2021	<u>Best Actress</u>	Andra Day	5th Place	^[29]
<u>Golden Globe Awards</u>	<u>February 28, 2021</u>	<u>Best Actress in a Motion Picture – Drama</u>		Won	^[30]
		<u>Best Original Song</u>	"Tigress & Tweed" – Andra Day & Raphael Saadiq	Nominated	
<u>Grammy Awards</u>	<u>April 3, 2022</u>	<u>Best Compilation Soundtrack for Visual Media</u>	The United States vs. Billie Holiday	Won	^[31]

<u>Hollywood Music in Media Awards</u>	<u>January 27, 2021</u>	<u>Best Original Song in a Feature Film</u>	"Tigress & Tweed" – Andra Day & Raphael Saadiq	Nominated	[32]
		<u>Best Music Supervision – Film</u>	Lynn Fainchtein	Nominated	
<u>Make-Up Artists and Hair Stylists Guild Awards</u>	<u>April 3, 2021</u>	<u>Best Special Make-Up Effects in a Feature-Length Motion Picture</u>	<u>Adrien Morot</u>	Nominated	[33]
<u>NAACP Image Awards</u>	<u>February 26, 2022</u>	<u>Outstanding Motion Picture</u>	<i>The United States vs. Billie Holiday</i>	Nominated	[34]
		<u>Outstanding Actress in a Motion Picture</u>	<u>Andra Day</u>	Nominated	
		<u>Outstanding Soundtrack/Compilation Album</u>	<i>The United States vs. Billie Holiday Soundtrack</i> (Salaam Remi, Andra Day, Raphael Saadiq, Warren Felder)	Nominated	
<u>Palm Springs International Film Festival</u>	<u>February 11, 2021</u>	<u>Breakthrough Performance Award</u>	Andra Day	Won	[35]
<u>Women Film Critics Circle Awards</u>	<u>March 7, 2021</u>	<u>Best Woman Storyteller</u>	<u>Suzan-Lori Parks</u>	Nominated	[36]
		<u>Best Actress</u>	Andra Day	Nominated	
		<u>Karen Morley Award</u>	<i>The United States vs. Billie Holiday</i>	Won	

See also

- *Lady Sings the Blues* – A 1972 biopic of Billie Holiday, starring Diana Ross.
- *Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill* – A 1986 play and 2016 television movie, starring Audra McDonald.
- Federal drug policy of the United States

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External links

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 - Official screenplay (<https://deadline.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/USvsBH-MASTER-SCRIPT-111920Hulu-converted4.pdf>)
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