A Song That Reverberates in the American Soul

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ÖZET (ABSTRACT)

All of 23 years old when she first sang it, [Billie Holiday], who had never tackled anything remotely political before, quickly made it one of her signature songs, and her renditions took on additional power and pathos as her own life spun increasingly out of control. Unlike so many other protest songs, which have come to sound shrill or quaint or dated over time, "Strange Fruit" has survived because of its expansive metaphorical possibilities. The strange fruit of which [Abel Meeropol] wrote no longer hangs from the poplar trees; in fact, lynchings had almost entirely disappeared from the American landscape by the time he composed the song. But with visions of James Byrd Jr. (dragged from the back of a pickup truck in Jasper, Tex.), Amadou Diallo, Patrick Dorismond, Abner Louima and other blacks killed or maimed by whites in a shocking fashion freshly in our minds -- along with the grisly murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay college student in Wyoming -- what "Strange Fruit" evokes doesn't seem like "only yesterday"; it seems like today and, unfortunately, tomorrow.

That "Strange Fruit" still packs an extraordinary punch became apparent at my book party in New York, held at the site of the original Cafe Society in Greenwich Village. (The space is now used by the Axis Theater Company.) We tried to stage the song just as Barney Josephson, the left-wing former shoe salesman who owned Cafe Society, had originally decreed -- the better, he said, to make people "get their insides burned with it." Now as then, everything stopped and all the lights went down, save for a pinpoint on the performer, a young black woman named Melissa Walker. An eerie silence had followed Holiday's first performance of "Strange Fruit" in this very place, she later recalled; no one had known quite how to react. Now, for the first time in 60 years, the sounds of "Strange Fruit" once again filled the room, and when Ms. Walker completed her task, singing of that "strange and bitter crop," another awkward interval uncannily ensued.

To this day, many people think that Holiday herself wrote "Strange Fruit" or had it written for her -- a myth fostered by Holiday herself and exacerbated by the egregiously unreliable film "Lady Sings the Blues," which depicts Holiday happening upon a lynching, then magically hatching the lyrics for the song. In fact, Meeropol -- known professionally as Lewis Allan and more famous, perhaps, for adopting the two orphaned sons of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg -- first published "Strange Fruit" as a poem in 1937, in the magazine of the New York teachers' union. Initially set to music by Meeropol himself, the song was performed in left-wing circles -- for instance, at rallies for the Loyalists during the Spanish Civil War -- before it found its way to Holiday; others, including Holiday, may have later tinkered with the music.

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David Margolick, a contributing editor at Vanity Fair, is the author of "Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Cafe Society and an Early Cry for Civil Rights" (Running Press).

IN his song "What's Really Going On (Strange Fruit)," released earlier this year, the rhythm-and-blues singer Dwayne Wiggins alludes to an ordeal that has become all too familiar to many blacks. As Mr. Wiggins sat chatting with a

friend in front of a club in Oakland, Calif., not long ago, a policeman approached him and, without provocation, yanked him out of his car, placed him in a choke hold and ordered him to spit out whatever was in his mouth. The policeman thought it was drugs. In fact, it was Evian.

Most of the lyrics to "What's Really Going On," a cry of pain and a plea for understanding, come directly from Mr. Wiggins, who was nominated for a Grammy as a member of Tony, Toni, Tone in 1994. But as his story unfolds, a chorus chimes in insistently in the background, repeating a familiar refrain from another songwriter and another singer in another era. "Southern trees bear strange fruit," the chorus chants rhythmically, again and again and again. "Blood on the leaves. Blood on the roots."

Mr. Wiggins's theme -- the police practice of racial profiling, or focusing on suspects strictly because they are black -- could not be more topical; President Clinton decried the policy only a few months ago. But to punctuate his story, to give it some historic context and bite, Mr. Wiggins reaches back to words written more than 60 years ago by a Jewish schoolteacher in the Bronx named Abel Meeropol, words prompted by a ghastly photograph of a lynching. These same words electrified audiences when Billie Holiday introduced them at Cafe Society, New York's first integrated nightclub, in 1939, then sang them three times nightly, then put them out on a record. They have reverberated ever since; and for all the changes in American racial attitudes since those bleak days, the days before Jackie Robinson, Rosa Parks and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., they have never lost their power. "Strange Fruit" is not only one of our first protest songs, but perhaps our most potent and most durable.

Southern trees bear a 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.

Few songs stir souls or give goose bumps, at least for very long. Those that do are usually explicitly political, like the "Marseillaise" or the "Horst Wessel Lied" or the "Internationale"; others, like "Blowin' in the Wind" or "This Land Is Your Land" or "If I Had a Hammer," seem to capture the spirit of an age. Neither national anthem nor jazz nor pop nor folk, "Strange Fruit" falls into a category all its own. Though others songs, like "Black and Blue" or "Supper Time," might vie for the title, it can claim to be the first civil rights protest song -- even, as the record producer Ahmet Ertegun has put it, "the beginning of the civil rights movement." "Strange Fruit" may not have been on the soundtrack as the Freedom Riders boarded buses or college students registered black Mississippians or marchers marched from Selma to Montgomery; "We Shall Overcome," more optimistic and upbeat, better fit the zeitgeist. But it was the song which, by confronting racial injustice in the starkest possible terms at a time when it simply hadn't penetrated popular culture, inspired many to march in the first place.

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That surely helps explain the large number of blacks attending "Without Sanctuary," an exhibition of lynching photographs at the New-York Historical Society. James Allen of Atlanta, who put the collection together, points out that everyone who wants to use these photographs, whether in a documentary or an article or a movie, from Jonathan Demme to the rawest college freshman, wants to call his project "Strange Fruit." "It's at the core of everything when it comes to lynching," he said of the song.

It also helps explain why, after many years in which versions of "Strange Fruit" by Billie Holiday, Josh White and Nina Simone were the only ones around, the song has been picked up by a host of performers, including Siouxsie and the Banshees, UB40, Abbey Lincoln, Dee Dee Bridgewater and Cassandra Wilson. With few exceptions -- Sting being perhaps the most notable -- only blacks have tackled the song; they often do so with reservations, both because of the painfulness of the subject and the lengthy shadow that Holiday herself still casts over it.

Mr. Wiggins said he knew the phrase "strange fruit" -- "It was always something we just said in the 'hood," he recalled -- but didn't think he actually knew the song until his run-in with the police. Only then did he realize that the song, all of it, had somehow worked its way into his subconscious. "When it came to a hook, when it came to writing things down, I just thought, 'This thing is like 'Strange Fruit,' " he said. "They're not hanging us by ropes but they're cutting off everything else around us."

Pastoral scene of the gallant South,

The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,

Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,

And the sudden smell of burning flesh!

More than 60 years later, the experience of hearing Billie Holiday sing "Strange Fruit," particularly on the original 1939 Commodore recording (readily available on CD) remains startling. Meeropol later said that when he first sang her the song, she appeared unmoved, even uncomprehending: the only thing she asked him was what the word "pastoral" meant. Listening to her, though, she sounds utterly confident, convinced and convincing. She is grim and purposeful, yet still with a lovely lightness to her voice, and with none of the cracks and scratches that were to appear only a few years later. Her overt editorializing is minimal; there is no weepiness, nor histrionics. Her elocution is superb, with but a hint of a Southern accent; her tone is languorous but unflinching, raw yet somehow smooth, youthful yet somehow worldly. The prevailing sentiment is not grief or defeat but cockiness and contempt, detectable as she spits out her sarcastic references to Southern gallantry and the sweetly scented magnolias.

Some, like Paul Robeson, thought "Strange Fruit" defeatist, and so it might have seemed in her later, more poignant performances of it; in its original incarnation, though, it was a call to arms.

For people like Steven Bright of the Southern Center for Human Rights in Atlanta, who plays "Strange Fruit" to his law students each year at Emory, Harvard and Yale, it still is. For Mr. Bright, who litigates capital cases throughout the South, the death penalty is, in its arbitrariness and terror and disproportionate impact on poor, uneducated blacks, "the first cousin of lynching." And "Strange Fruit" is not just some historic curiosity. "It just hits like a sledgehammer," he said of the song. Leon Litwack, the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian of African-American life after the Civil War at the University of California at Berkeley, also plays it in his classes. "The song unnerves us because it depicts unspeakable atrocities meted out by people very much like ourselves, and justified in the name of Christianity and a belief system that defines one group of human beings as less human than another," he said. "I should say defines, because it's really not past tense. The whole notion that being black by itself incurs risks in our society -- that's not a matter of the past."

Collecting information for my book, I spoke to dozens of people who heard Billie Holiday sing the song, either in person or on record, and were forever changed by the experience. Lena Horne, who as a young girl touring with her mother in a tent show was spirited away from a Florida town where a lynching had just occurred, was one such witness. "Nobody could say the words even as Miss Holiday did," she recently told Sara Fishko of WNYC in New York. "It wasn't about singing. It was about feeling things artfully in your soul. I sang it for many days in my life until I was able to understand it was part of our country's problem as well as it was mine. I don't mean I sang it out loud. I just sang it in myself, in my heart."

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 a tree to drop,

Here is a strange and bitter crop.

So unusual, so potent, so threatening was "Strange Fruit" that for years it existed in a kind of artistic quarantine: rarely played on the radio, hard to find in record stores, difficult to perform in all but the most politically congenial locales. Holiday's normal label, Columbia, refused to record it, forcing her to go to the far more obscure Commodore (owned by Milt Gabler, Billy Crystal's uncle); even progressive disk jockeys were reluctant to put it on their play lists. Rarely would Holiday perform it down South. In the 1950's, a Miami nightclub owner ordered her to desist after it prompted a walkout by indignant white patrons; Holiday herself said she was once run out of Mobile, Ala., for performing it.

Now, it can be sung anywhere with disconcerting, and perhaps misleading, ease. Francine Reed, who sings regularly with Lyle Lovett, offered up her own rendition of "Strange Fruit" when I signed books in Atlanta in May, to an entirely appreciative audience. When Cassandra Wilson, who recorded "Strange Fruit" on her Grammy Award-winning album "New Moon Daughter" in 1996, performed in Atlanta around the same time, she was surprised by how many people shouted out requests for the song. Its popularity, she theorized, reflected a growing willingness among both blacks and whites to face their respective pasts. "We know deep inside that it's an issue we have to confront," she said. (Still, the song is not to everyone's taste: when United Airlines selected "New Moon Daughter" for its in-flight entertainment, it excised "Strange Fruit" from the album.)

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How many songs have silenced so many rooms for so long?

Photograph

Billie Holiday and the trumpeter Frankie Newton during the recording of "Strange Fruit" in 1939. (Charles Peterson/Courtesy Don Peterson)(pg. 1); Abel Meeropol first published "Strange Fruit" as a poem in 1937. (Culver Pictures)(pg. 27)

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