

Billie Holiday's Strange Fruit Is Both A Testament to the Power of Dissent And An Illustration of Government Hostility to Black Political Power

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July 17 marks the 59th anniversary of Billie Holiday's death. We recall Holiday's "Strange Fruit", a musical protest against this country's white supremacist violence. "Strange Fruit" is a testament to the power of music as an impetus for social change. The government's reaction is also a story about the repression of dissent. It is for both of these reasons why we at Defending Rights & Dissent continue to defend the right to dissent.

During a time of heightened repression of dissent, we remember Billie Holiday, a jazz singer whose song "Strange Fruit" highlighted the atrocities of lynching in America. Holiday's performance was significant because it represented one of the earlier high-profile musical protests against racism, which helped garner [support](#) for the civil rights movement. The poignant song solidified Holiday's legacy and remains a dominant force of art today.

"Strange Fruit" was written by American songwriter and poet Abel Meeropol in 1937. Holiday popularized the song by singing [three brief stanzas](#) in 1939, thus embracing it as her own. "Strange Fruit" was a haunting tune that evoked curiosity, the lyrics prompted listeners to investigate further until they came to the morbid realization that the "Strange Fruit" happened to be the bodies of lynching victims eerily swinging from a tree. Holiday's soft and powerful voice offered a chilling intimacy as it visualized and documented the harsh realities that African Americans faced in post-Reconstruction America, especially in the south. Holiday was initially reluctant to perform the piece in fear of retaliation, but gathered the courage to do so in memory of her father, who died at age 39 after being denied treatment at a "whites only" hospital. Holiday had a [specific set of rules](#) that nightclubs had to follow when she performed "Strange Fruit". Waiters would stop serving drinks, the venue would be dark except for one sharp, bright spotlight on her face and there would be no encores. Holiday closed all three of her nightly sets with it so it would resonate with the audience. The peculiar setup created a chilling and uncomfortable atmosphere, jolting the audience out of complacency and forcing them to confront the lynching issue. The poetic words presented a stark juxtaposition between the gallant south and the devastating impacts of racism displayed there. The song's ending was typically followed by shocked silence from Holiday's predominately-white audience and then a roar of approval. Some racist audience members, disgusted with the lyrics, would abruptly leave.

Holiday recorded "Strange Fruit" at Commodore Records, a small independent studio, after Columbia Records refused to record it. The song became a hit and received nationwide attention, which further motivated supporters to campaign for anti-lynching legislation, citing the song to members of congress. Holiday added a clause to her contract that guaranteed her the right to sing the song after some club promoters ordered her not to. The song would haunt Holiday for the rest of her life as it became synonymous with her name. Despite her rapid stardom and success, she still experienced racism and began to use "Strange Fruit" as a weapon and shield.

"Strange Fruit" eventually killed Holiday after Harry J. Anslinger – commissioner of the Treasury Department's Federal Bureau of Narcotics – led a witch hunt against her while she struggled with heroin addiction. Anslinger was extremely racist and claimed that narcotics made "black people forget their place." He specifically targeted jazz singers, alleging they were dangerous and made satanic music under the influence of marijuana. At the time, Holiday, in her 40s, battled heroin addiction. Some have suggested the dark nature of the song matched her mood. David Margolick, author of "Strange Fruit": the Biography of a Song, writes, "she had grown oddly, sadly suited to capture the full grotesqueness of the song. Now, she not only sang of bulging eyes and twisted mouths. She embodied them."

Anslinger ordered Holiday to stop performing the song, when she refused, he doubled his efforts to silence her. He paid one of his men to track Holiday and frame her with purchasing and using heroin, she was later sentenced to 18 months in prison. After her release in 1948, the federal government refused to renew Holiday's cabaret performer's license, which allowed her to sing at venues that serve alcohol. This revocation was detrimental to her career because she could no longer travel the nightclub circuit. Depression and past childhood trauma caused Holiday to have a drug relapse and she was admitted into a New York hospital in 1959. Holiday's liver was cancerous and failing, she was emaciated and she faced numerous health complications. Holiday was paranoid and told a friend that narcotics agents were going to kill her. Anslinger's team entered the hospital room two days later and proceeded to torture her. They threatened to arrest her after planting a small ounce of heroin at the bottom of her bed. Agents handcuffed Holiday to her hospital bed, took mugshots, interrogated her without a lawyer, fingerprinted her, removed gifts that people brought to her room and stationed two police officers at her door. Agents also forbade any visitors unless they had a written permit. Doctors began giving Holiday methadone treatment, which gradually improved her condition and caused a healthy weight gain. Agents barred the hospital staff from providing her anymore methadone and she succumbed to her withdrawal symptoms a few days later. Holiday's best friend Maely Duffy insisted that Billie was effectively murdered by a conspiracy theory to break her, orchestrated by the narcotics police. The song was effectively blacklisted, the only surviving filmed version of Holiday performing the song is from the British Cabaret television show "Chelsea at Nine," recorded on February 25, 1959 and released in March, a few months before she died.

Holiday's harassment was only one in a series of government-orchestrated attacks against prominent black activists. Anslinger's tactics were similar to J Edgar Hoover's

COINTELPRO, an FBI-ran program initiated in 1956 to “neutralize auspicious persons and organizations.” The program was used as a justification for unchecked targeting of the Civil Rights movement. The program used government surveillance, threats and intimidation on notable black leaders and organizations (i.e. Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Dr. T.R.M Howard, and the Black Panther Party). The FBI’s predecessor, the Bureau of Investigation (BOI) also monitored black activists such as Marcus Garvey, W.E.B Dubois and the NAACP. The FBI collaborated with local police to suppress targeted groups. These Black organizations were disabled with arrests, raids, planted evidence, false rumors, killings and burglaries. The FBI was directly implicated in the assassination of Black Panther Party leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. In 1976 investigation was conducted by Senator Frank Church’s Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations, where it was discovered that the practices of both the FBI and other U.S Intelligence Agencies were illegal and unconstitutional. They were nefarious acts used to suppress dissent and first amendment rights. They also promoted institutionalized racism and white supremacy.

Anslinger believed that certain activists or performers could boost African American morale and inspire them to fight back against the system, which is why he chose to effectively silence Holiday. The efforts taken to neutralize Holiday were more tremendous than the efforts taken by southern legislatures to combat lynchings. For the first half of the 20th century, law makers tried to address lynching on a federal level 200 times. Anti-lynching legislation was supported by seven presidents, with President Ulysses Grant being the first to initiate federal efforts in 1870. He mainly focused on the actions of the Klu Klux Klan though and not ordinary white citizens, who used lynchings as their own form of vigilante justice. Federal anti-lynching legislation received majority support in the House of Representatives in the 1920s but was blocked in the Senate by southern Democrats. Leonidas Dyer (R-Mo) introduced a bill in 1918 that would fine officials who refused to enforce anti-lynching laws and provide financial relief to affected families. The bill, with support from the NAACP, passed through the House and made it to the Senate floor, but was filibustered by Southern democrats. Southern Senators said that the legislation was uncalled for because “the decent, hard-working Negroes of the South enjoy every safeguard of the law,” although this proved to be untrue. The opposing side also alleged that the bill was written by a “Negro” who wanted to solidify the African American voting block for northern Republicans. Some southern jurisdictions enacted their own anti-lynching laws to demonstrate that federal intervention was unnecessary, but didn’t enforce them. From 1882-1968, 4,743 people were lynched with the primary targets being African Americans. One hundred lynchings were reported each year and less than one percent of perpetrators were brought to justice. The lynchings were a product of overt racism and hatred, and were orchestrated to instill fear and humiliation into the victims and their families. In 2005, the senate formally apologized for failing to enact federal anti-lynching legislation decades ago.

Three black senators – Kamala D. Harris (D-Calif.), Cory Booker (D-NJ), and Tim Scott (R-S.C.)- recently introduced a bill titled the Justice for Victims of Lynching Act 2018. If passed lynching would finally be considered a federal crime. Although lynchings aren’t as common anymore, the three senators say that the bill is symbolic because it rights historical wrongs and implies that the U.S. will never resort back to its dark past. A similar bill was

introduced in June by Rep. Bobby Rush (D-Ill) and co-sponsored by 35 members of the Congressional Black Caucus.

Holiday's open protest and the scrutiny she received from the federal government is reminiscent of the government's attempts to repress Black dissent today. The government still spies on outspoken Black activists in an effort to incriminate or silence them. This is evident in the FBI's leaked August 2017 Black Identity Extremist (BIE) report, which falsely labels Black Lives Matter protesters as domestic terrorists and "violent extremists." Local law enforcement is conducting trainings on how to handle "domestic terror groups," with "black identity extremists" being one of the groups listed. Rakem Balogun was apprehended in December 2017 after FBI agents said that they had been monitoring him for years and were arresting him in part because of his Facebook posts criticizing the police. U.S. attorneys alleged he was a "black identity extremist" and tried to prosecute him, which ultimately failed. Balogun is the first person targeted and prosecuted under the secret U.S surveillance program, which some activists have coined "COINTELPRO 2.0." Billie Holiday was a musical icon who used her platform and art to express the racial injustices being done in this country. She performed a song that had explicit and graphic content in order to detail the horrors of lynching. Holiday continues to be a civil rights hero and shows how impactful dissent can be.