

Billie Holiday

Background information

Birth name Eleanora Fagan

Also known as Lady Day

Born April 7, 1915

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U.S.

Origin Harlem, New York, U.S.

Died July 17, 1959 (aged 44)

New York City, New York, U.S.

Genres Vocal jazz, jazz blues, torch songs, swing, blues, R&B

Occupation(s) Singer and songwriter

Instruments Vocals

Years active 1933–1959

Labels Brunswick, Vocalion, Okeh, Bluebird, Commodore, Capitol, Decca, Aladdin, Verve, Columbia, MGM

Associated acts Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Lena Horne, Carmen McRae, Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Artie Shaw, Lester Young

Billie Holiday (born Eleanora Fagan; April 7, 1915 – July 17, 1959) was an American jazz singer and songwriter.

Nicknamed "Lady Day" by her friend and musical partner Lester Young, Holiday had a seminal influence on jazz and pop singing. Her vocal style, strongly inspired by jazz instrumentalists, pioneered a new way of manipulating phrasing and tempo.

Biography

Early life

Holiday was born in Philadelphia, the daughter of Sarah Julia "Sadie" Fagan and Clarence Holiday. Her father, a musician, did not marry or live with her mother. Not long after Holiday's birth, Clarence left her and her mother to pursue a career as a jazz guitarist. Sarah had moved to Philadelphia aged 19, after being ejected from her parents' home in the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood of Baltimore, Maryland for becoming pregnant. With no support from her parents, Holiday's mother arranged for the young Holiday to stay with her older married half-sister, Eva Miller, who lived in Baltimore. Holiday, who was of African American ancestry, was also said to have had Irish ancestors through her mother's mixed heritage.

Holiday had a difficult childhood. Her mother often took what were then known as "transportation jobs", serving on passenger railroads. Holiday was left to be raised largely by Eva Miller's mother-in-law, Martha Miller, and suffered from her mother's absences and being left in others' care for much of the first ten years of her life. Holiday's autobiography, *Lady Sings the Blues*, first published in 1956, was sketchy on details of her early life, but much was confirmed by Stuart Nicholson in his 1995 biography of the singer. Some historians have disputed Holiday's paternity, as a copy of her birth certificate in the Baltimore archives lists the father as a man named Frank DeViese. Other historians consider this an anomaly, probably inserted by a hospital or government worker. DeViese lived in Philadelphia and Sadie Harris may have known him through her work.

Sadie Harris, then known as Sadie Fagan, married Philip Gough, but the marriage was over in two years. Holiday was left with Martha Miller again while her mother took more transportation jobs. Holiday frequently skipped school and her truancy resulted in her being brought before the juvenile court on January 5, 1925, when she was nine years old. She was sent to The House of the Good Shepherd, a Catholic reform school. She was baptized there on March 19, 1925. After nine months in care, she was "paroled" on October 3, 1925, to her mother, who had opened a restaurant called the East Side Grill, where she and Holiday worked long hours. By the age of 11, Holiday had dropped out of school.

Attempted rape and prostitution

Holiday's mother returned to their home on December 24, 1926, to discover a neighbor, Wilbur Rich, attempting to rape Billie, but failing. She fought back. Rich was arrested. Officials placed Billie in the House of the Good Shepherd under protective custody as a state witness in the rape case. Holiday was released in February 1927, nearly twelve. She found a job running errands in a brothel. During this time, Holiday first heard the records of Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith. By the end of 1928, Holiday's mother decided to try her luck in Harlem, New York, and left Holiday again with Martha Miller.

By early 1929, Holiday joined her mother in Harlem. Their landlady was a sharply dressed woman named Florence Williams, who ran a brothel at 151 West 140th Street. Holiday's mother became a prostitute and, within a matter of days of arriving in New York, Holiday, who had not yet turned fourteen, also became a prostitute at \$5 a client. On May 2, 1929, the house was raided, and Holiday and her mother were sent to prison. After spending some time in a workhouse, her mother was released in July, followed by Holiday in October, at the age of 14.

Early singing career

In Harlem she started singing in various night clubs. Holiday took her professional pseudonym from Billie Dove, an actress she admired, and the musician Clarence Holiday, her probable father.[2] At the outset of her career, she spelled her last name "Halliday", the birth surname of her father, but eventually changed it to "Holiday", his performing name. The young singer teamed up with a neighbor, tenor sax player Kenneth Hollan. From 1929 to 1931, they were a team, performing at clubs such as the Grey Dawn, Pod's and Jerry's on 133rd Street, and the Brooklyn Elks' Club. Benny Goodman recalled hearing Holiday in 1931 at The Bright Spot. As her reputation grew, Holiday played at many clubs, including Mexico's and The Alhambra Bar and Grill where Charles Linton, a vocalist who later worked with Chick Webb, first met her. It was also during this period that she connected with her father, who was playing with Fletcher Henderson's band.

By the end of 1932 at the age of 17, Billie Holiday replaced the singer Monette Moore at a club called Covan's on West 132nd Street. The producer John Hammond, who loved Monette Moore's singing and had come to hear her, first heard Holiday in early 1933. Hammond arranged for Holiday to make her recording debut, at age 18, in November 1933 with Benny Goodman, singing two songs: "Your Mother's Son-In-Law" and "Riffin' the Scotch," the latter being her first hit. "Son-in-Law" sold 300 copies, but "Riffin' the Scotch," released on November 11, sold 5,000 copies. Hammond was quite impressed by Holiday's singing style. He said of her, "Her singing almost changed my music tastes and my musical life, because she was the first girl singer I'd come across who actually sang like an improvising jazz genius." Hammond compared Holiday favorably to Armstrong and said she had a good sense of lyric content at her young age.

In 1935, Billie Holiday had a small role as a woman being abused by her lover in Duke Ellington's short Symphony in Black: A Rhapsody of Negro Life. In her scene, she sang the song "Saddest Tale."

Recordings with Teddy Wilson (1935–1938)

Holiday was signed to Brunswick Records by John Hammond to record current pop tunes with Teddy Wilson in the new "swing" style for the growing jukebox trade. They were given free rein to improvise the material. Holiday's improvisation of the melody line to fit the emotion was revolutionary. Their first collaboration included "What a Little Moonlight Can Do," and "Miss Brown to You (1935)." The record label did not favor the recording session, because producers wanted Holiday to sound more like Cleo Brown. After "What a Little Moonlight Can Do" garnered success, however, the company began considering Holiday an artist in her own right. She began recording under her own name a year later (on the 35-cent Vocalion label), producing a series of extraordinary performances with groups comprising the swing era's finest musicians. The sessions were co-produced by Hammond and Bernie Hanighen.

With their arrangements, Wilson and Holiday took pedestrian pop tunes, such as "Twenty-Four Hours a Day" (#6 Pop) or "Yankee Doodle Went To Town", and turned them into jazz classics. Most of Holiday's recordings with Wilson or under her own name during the 1930s and early 1940s are regarded as important parts of the jazz vocal library. She was then in her early to late 20s.

Another frequent accompanist was the tenor saxophonist Lester Young, who had been a boarder at her mother's house in 1934 and with whom Holiday had a special rapport. He said: "Well, I think you can hear that on some of the old records, you know. Some time I'd sit down and listen to 'em myself, and it sound like two of the same voices, if you

don't be careful, you know, or the same mind, or something like that." Young nicknamed her "Lady Day", and she, in turn, dubbed him "Prez".

Hammond spoke about the commercial impact of the Teddy Wilson-Billie Holiday sides from 1935 to 1938, calling them a great asset to Brunswick. The record label, according to Hammond, was broke and unable to record many jazz tunes. Because Wilson, Holiday, Lester Young, and other musicians came into the studio without any arrangements, which cost money, and improvised the material as they went along, the records they produced were very cheap. Holiday was never given any royalties for her work, instead being paid a flat fee, which saved the record label money. Some of the records produced were largely successful, such as the single "I Cried for You" which sold 15,000 copies. Hammond said of the record, "15,000 ... was a giant hit for Brunswick in those days. I mean a giant hit. Most records that made money sold around three to four thousand."

Working for Count Basie and Artie Shaw (1937–1938)

In late 1937, Holiday had a brief stint as a big band vocalist with Count Basie. The traveling conditions of the band were often poor and included one-nighters in clubs, moving from city to city with little stability. Holiday chose the songs she sang and had a hand in the arrangements, choosing to portray her then developing persona of a woman unlucky in love. Her tunes included "I Must Have That Man", "Travelin' All Alone", "I Can't Get Started", and "Summertime", a hit for Holiday in 1936, originating in the opera *Porgy and Bess* a few years earlier. Count Basie had gotten used to Holiday's heavy involvement in the band. He said, "When she rehearsed with the band, it was really just a matter of getting her tunes like she wanted them, because she knew how she wanted to sound and you couldn't tell her what to do."

Holiday found herself in direct competition with popular singer Ella Fitzgerald, with whom Holiday would later become friends. Fitzgerald was the vocalist for the Chick Webb Band, who were in competition with Count Basie. On January 16, 1938, the same day that Benny Goodman performed his legendary Carnegie Hall jazz concert, the Count Basie and Chick Webb bands had a battle at the Savoy Ballroom. Chick Webb and Fitzgerald were declared winners by *Metronome* magazine. *Down Beat* magazine declared Holiday and Basie the winners. A straw poll of the audience saw Fitzgerald win by a three-to-one margin.

Some of the tunes Holiday performed with Basie were recorded. "I Can't Get Started", "They Can't Take That Away from Me," and "Swing It Brother Swing," are all commercially available. Although Holiday was unable to record in the studio with Count Basie, she did include many of his musicians in her recording dates with Teddy Wilson.

By February of that year, Holiday was no longer singing for Basie. The reason given for her firing varies from person to person. Jimmy Rushing, Basie's male vocalist, called her unprofessional. According to All Music Guide, Holiday was officially fired for being "temperamental and unreliable". Holiday complained of low pay and working conditions and may have refused to sing the tunes requested of her or change her style.

Holiday was hired by Artie Shaw a month after being fired from the Count Basie Band. This association placed her among the first black women to work with a white orchestra, an unusual arrangement for the times. Also, this was the first time a full-time employee black female singer toured the segregated Southern US with a white bandleader. In situations where there was a lot of racial tension, Shaw was known to stick up for his vocalist. Holiday describes one incident in her autobiography where she could not sit on the bandstand with other vocalists because she was black. Shaw said to her, "I want you on the band stand like Helen Forrest, Tony Pastor and everyone else." When touring the American South, Holiday would sometimes be heckled by members of the audience. In Louisville, Kentucky a man called her a "nigger wench" and requested she sing another song. Holiday lost her temper and needed to be escorted off the stage.

By March 1938, Shaw and Holiday had been broadcast on New York City's powerful radio station WABC (the original WABC, now WCBS). Because of their success, they were given an extra time slot to broadcast in April, which increased their exposure. The New York Amsterdam News reported an improvement in Holiday's performance ability while reviewing the broadcasts. Metronome reported that the addition of Holiday to Shaw's band put it in the "top brackets". Holiday could not sing as often during Artie Shaw's shows as she could Basie's. The songs were more instrumental with fewer vocals. Shaw was also pressured to hire a white singer, Nita Bradley, with whom Holiday did not get along but had

to share a bandstand. In May 1938, Shaw won band battles against Tommy Dorsey and Red Norvo with the audience favoring Holiday. Although Shaw admired Holiday's singing in his band, saying she had a "remarkable ear" and an "remarkable sense of time", her time in the band was nearing an end.

In November 1938 Holiday was asked to use the service elevator at the Lincoln Hotel, instead of the passenger elevator, because white patrons of the hotels complained. This may have been the last straw for her. She left the band shortly after. Holiday spoke about the incident weeks later, saying "I was never allowed to visit the bar or the dining room as did other members of the band ... [and] I was made to leave and enter through the kitchen."

There are no surviving live recordings of Holiday with Artie Shaw's band. Because she was under a separate recording label and possibly because of her race, Holiday was only able to record one record with Shaw, "Any Old Time". However, Artie Shaw played clarinet in four songs recorded in New York the 10th of July 1936: "Did I Remember?", "No Regrets", "Summertime" and "Billie's Blues."

By the late 1930s, Billie Holiday had toured with Count Basie and Artie Shaw, scored a string of radio and retail hits with Teddy Wilson, and became an established artist in the recording industry. Her songs "What A Little Moonlight Can Do" and "Easy Living" were being imitated by singers across America and were quickly becoming jazz standards. In 1938, Holiday's single "I'm Gonna Lock My Heart" ranked 6th as the most-played song for September of that year. Her record

label Vocalion listed the single as its fourth best seller for the same month. "I'm Gonna Lock My Heart" peaked at number 2 on the pop charts according to Joel Whitburn's "Pop Memories: 1890–1954" book.

Commodore recordings and mainstream success (1939)

Holiday was recording for Columbia in the late 1930s when she was introduced to "Strange Fruit", a song based on a poem about lynching written by Abel Meeropol, a Jewish schoolteacher from the Bronx. Meeropol used the pseudonym "Lewis Allan" for the poem, which was set to music and performed at teachers' union meetings. It was eventually heard by Barney Josephson, proprietor of Café Society, an integrated nightclub in Greenwich Village, who introduced it to Holiday. She performed it at the club in 1939, with some trepidation, fearing possible retaliation. Holiday later said that the imagery in "Strange Fruit" reminded her of her father's death and that this played a role in her resistance to performing it.

When Holiday's producers at Columbia found the subject matter too sensitive, Milt Gabler agreed to record it for his Commodore Records. That was done on April 20, 1939, and "Strange Fruit" remained in her repertoire for twenty years. She later recorded it again for Verve. While the Commodore release did not get any airplay, the controversial song sold well, though Gabler attributed that mostly to the record's other side, "Fine and Mellow", which was a jukebox hit. "The version I recorded for Commodore," Holiday said of "Strange Fruit," "became my biggest-selling record. "Strange Fruit" was the equivalent of a top twenty hit in the 1930s.

For her performance of "Strange Fruit" at the Café Society, she had waiters silence the crowd when the song began. During the song's long introduction, the lights dimmed and all movement had to cease. As Holiday began singing, only a

small spotlight illuminated her face. On the final note, all lights went out and when they came back on, Holiday was gone.

Holiday said her father Clarence Holiday was denied treatment for a fatal lung disorder because of prejudice and that singing "Strange Fruit" reminded her of the incident. "It reminds me of how Pop died, but I have to keep singing it, not only because people ask for it, but because twenty years after Pop died the things that killed him are still happening in the South," she said in her autobiography.

Holiday's popularity increased after "Strange Fruit". She received a mention in Time magazine. "I open Café Society as an unknown," Holiday said. "I left two years later as a star. I needed the prestige and publicity all right, but you can't pay rent with it." Holiday demanded her manager Joe Glaser give her a raise shortly after.

Holiday soon returned to Commodore in 1944, recording songs she made with Teddy Wilson in the 1930s like "I Cover The Waterfront", "I'll Get By", and "He's Funny That Way". She also recorded new songs that were popular at the time, including, "My Old Flame", "How Am I To Know?", "I'm Yours", and "I'll Be Seeing You", a Bing Crosby number one hit. She also recorded her version of "Embraceable You", which would later be inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 2005.

During her time at Commodore, Billie Holiday also babysat the young Billy Crystal; his father being Jack Crystal and uncle being Milt Gabler, the co-founders of Commodore Records.

Successes (1940–1947)

Holiday's mother, Sadie Fagan, nicknamed "The Duchess," opened a restaurant called Mom Holiday's. She used money from her daughter while playing dice with members of the Count Basie band, with whom she toured in the late 1930s. "It kept mom busy and happy and stopped her from worrying and watching over me," Holiday said. Fagan began borrowing large amounts from Holiday to support the restaurant. Holiday obliged but soon fell on hard times herself. "I needed some money one night and I knew Mom was sure to have some," she said. "So I walked in the restaurant like a stockholder and asked. Mom turned me down flat. She wouldn't give me a cent." The two argued and Holiday shouted angrily: "God bless the child that's got his own," and stormed out. With Arthur Herzog, Jr., a pianist, she wrote a song based on the line "God Bless the Child" and added music.

"God Bless the Child" became Holiday's most popular and covered record. It reached number 25 on the charts in 1941 and was third in Billboard's songs of the year, selling over a million records. In 1976, the song was added to the Grammy Hall of Fame. Herzog claimed Holiday contributed only a few lines to the lyrics. He said Holiday came up with the line "God Bless the Child" from a dinner conversation the two had had.

On June 24, 1942, Holiday recorded "Trav'lin Light" with Paul Whiteman for a new label, Capitol Records. Because she was under contract with Columbia, she used the pseudonym "Lady Day." The song reached 23 on the pop charts and number one on the R&B charts, then called the Harlem Hit Parade.

In September 1943, Life wrote: "She has the most distinct style of any popular vocalist and is imitated by other vocalists."

Milt Gabler became an A&R man for Decca Records as well as owning Commodore Records, and he signed Holiday to the label on August 7, 1944, when she was 29. Her first recording for Decca was "Lover Man" (#16 Pop, No. 5 R&B), one of her biggest hits. The success and distribution of the song made Holiday a staple in the pop community, leading to solo concerts, rare for jazz singers in the late 40s. Gabler said: "I made Billie a real pop singer. That was right in her. Billie loved those songs." Jimmy Davis and Roger "Ram" Ramirez, "Lover Man"'s songwriters, had tried to interest Holiday in the song in . In 1943, a flamboyant male torch singer, Willie Dukes, began singing "Lover Man" on 52nd Street. Because of his success, Holiday added it to her shows. The record's other side was "No More", one of her favorites.

Holiday asked Gabler for strings on the recording. They were associated with Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald. "I went on my knees to him," Holiday said. "I didn't want to do it with the ordinary six pieces. I begged Milt and told him I had to have strings behind me." On October 4, 1944, Holiday entered the studio to record "Lover Man" and saw the string ensemble and walked out. The musical director, Toots Camarata said she was overwhelmed with joy. She may also have wanted strings to avoid comparisons between her commercially successful early work with Teddy Wilson and everything produced afterwards. Her 1930s recordings with Wilson used a small jazz combo; recordings with Decca often involved strings.

A month later, in November, Holiday returned to Decca to record "That Ole Devil Called Love", "Big Stuff", and "Don't Explain". She wrote "Don't Explain" after she caught her husband, Jimmy Monroe, with lipstick on his collar.

Holiday did not return to the studio until August 1945. She recorded "Don't Explain" for a second time, changing the lyrics "I know you raise Cain" to "Just say you'll remain" and "You mixed with some dame" to "What is there to gain?". Other songs recorded were "Big Stuff", "What Is This Thing Called Love?", and "You Better Go Now". Ella Fitzgerald named "You Better Go Now" as her favorite Holiday recording. "Big Stuff" and "Don't Explain" were recorded again but with additional strings and a viola.

In 1946, Holiday recorded "Good Morning Heartache". Although the song failed to chart, it remained in her live shows, with three known live recordings.

In September 1946, Holiday began her only major film *New Orleans*. She starred opposite Louis Armstrong and Woody Herman. Plagued by racism and McCarthyism, producer Jules Levey and script writer Herbert Biberman were pressed to lessen Holiday's and Armstrong's roles to avoid the impression that black people created jazz. The attempts failed because in 1947 Biberman was listed as one of the Hollywood Ten and sent to jail.

Several scenes were deleted from the film. "They had taken miles of footage of music and scenes," Holiday said, "[and] none of it was left in the picture. And very damn little of me. I know I wore a white dress for a number I did... and that was cut out of the picture." She recorded the track "The Blues Are Brewin'", for the film's soundtrack. Other songs included in the movie are "Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?" and "Farewell to Storyville".

Holiday's drug addictions were a problem on the set. She earned more than a thousand dollars a week from club ventures but spent most on heroin. Her lover Joe Guy traveled to Hollywood while Holiday was filming and supplied her with drugs. When discovered by Joe Glaser, Holiday's manager, Guy was banned from the set.

By the late 1940s, Holiday had begun recording a number of slow, sentimental ballads. Metronome expressed its concerns in 1946 about "Good Morning Heartache," saying "there's a danger that Billie's present formula will wear thin, but up to now it's wearing well." The New York Herald Tribune reported of a concert in 1946 that her performance had little variation in melody and no change in tempo.

Legal troubles, Carnegie Hall Concert (1947–1952)

By 1947, Holiday was at her commercial peak, having made 250,000 dollars in the three previous years. Holiday came 2nd in the Down Beat poll for 1946 and 1947, her highest ranking in the poll. She came 5th on July 6, 1947 in Billboard's annual college poll of "girl singers". Jo Stafford came first. In 1946, Holiday won the Metronome Magazine popularity poll.

On May 16, 1947, she was arrested for possessing narcotics in her New York apartment. On May 27, 1947, she was in court. "It was called 'The United States of America versus Billie Holiday'. And that's just the way it felt," she recalled. During the trial, Holiday heard that her lawyer would not come to the trial to represent her. "In plain English that meant no one in the world was interested in looking out for me," she said. Dehydrated and unable to hold down food, she pleaded guilty and asked to be sent to the hospital. The district attorney spoke in her defense, saying, "If your honor please, this is a case of a drug addict, but more serious, however, than most of our cases, Miss Holiday is a professional entertainer and among the higher rank as far as income was concerned." At the end of the trial, Holiday was sentenced to Alderson Federal Prison Camp in West Virginia, popularly known as "Camp Cupcake".

Holiday was released early (March 16, 1948) because of good behavior. When she arrived at Newark, her pianist Bobby Tucker and her dog Mister were waiting. The dog leaped at Holiday, knocking off her hat, and tackled her to the ground. "He began lapping me and loving me like crazy," she said. A woman thought the dog was attacking Holiday. She

screamed, a crowd gathered, and reporters arrived. "I might just as well have wheeled into Penn Station and had a quiet little get-together with the Associated Press, United Press, and International News Service," she said.

Ed Fishman (who fought with Joe Glaser to be Holiday's manager) thought of a comeback concert at Carnegie Hall. Holiday hesitated, unsure audiences would accept her after the arrest. She gave in and agreed to appear.

On March 27, 1948, Holiday played Carnegie Hall to a sold-out crowd. There were 2,700 tickets sold in advance, a record at the time for the venue. Her popularity was unusual because she didn't have a current hit record. Her last hit was "Lover Man" in 1945, her last on the record charts. Holiday sang 32 songs at the Carnegie concert by her count, including Cole Porter's "Night and Day" and her 30s hit, "Strange Fruit". During the show, someone sent Holiday a box of gardenias. "My old trademark," Holiday said. "I took them out of box and fastened them smack to the side of my head without even looking twice." There was a hatpin in the gardenias and Holiday, unknowingly, stuck it into the side of her head. "I didn't feel anything until the blood started rushing down in my eyes and ears," she said. After the third curtain call, she passed out.

On April 27, 1948, Bob Sylvester and her promoter Al Wilde arranged a Broadway show for her. Titled Holiday on Broadway, it sold out. "The regular music critics and drama critics came and treated us like we were legit," she said. But it closed after three weeks.

Holiday was arrested again on January 22, 1949, in her room at San Francisco's Hotel Mark Twain.

She was brought to court over a contract dispute.

Holiday said she began using hard drugs in the early 1940s. She married trombonist Jimmy Monroe on August 25, 1941. While still married, she became involved with trumpeter Joe Guy, who was her drug dealer. She divorced Monroe in 1947 and also split with Guy.

In October 1949, Holiday recorded "Crazy He Calls Me", which was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 2010. Gabler said the hit was her most successful recording for Decca after "Lover Man". The charts of the 1940s did not list songs outside the top 30, making it impossible to recognize minor hits. By the late 1940s, despite her popularity and concert power, her singles were little played on radio, perhaps because of her reputation.

Holiday's New York City Cabaret Card was revoked because of her 1947 conviction, preventing her working anywhere that sold alcohol for the remaining 12 years of her life.

The Cabaret system started in 1940 and was to prevent people of "bad character" from working on licensed premises. A performer had to renew the license every two years. This lasted until 1967. Clubs that sold alcohol in New York were among the highest paying in the country. Club owners knew blacklisted performers had limited work and could offer a smaller salary. This reduced Holiday's earnings. She had not received proper royalties until she joined Decca, so her main revenue was club concerts. The problem worsened when Holiday's records went out of print in the 1950s. She seldom received royalties in her later years. For instance, in 1958 she received a royalty of only 11 dollars. Her lawyer in the late 1950s, Earle Warren Zaidins, did not register with BMI on all but two songs she had written or co-written, costing her revenue.

In 1948, Holiday played at the Ebony Club, which, because she lost her cabaret card, was against the law. Her manager, John Levy, was convinced he could get her card back and allowed her to open without one. "I opened scared," Holiday said, "[I was] expecting the cops to come in any chorus and carry me off. But nothing happened. I was a huge success."

In 1950, Holiday appeared in the Universal-International short film Sugar Chile Robinson, Billie Holiday, Count Basie and His Sextet, singing "God Bless the Child" and "Now, Baby or Never".

Lady Sings the Blues (1952–1959)

By the 1950s, Holiday's drug abuse, drinking, and relationships with abusive men caused her health to deteriorate. She appeared on the ABC reality series *The Comeback Story* to discuss attempts to overcome her misfortunes. Her later recordings showed the effects of declining health on her voice, as it grew coarse and no longer projected its former vibrancy.

Holiday first toured Europe in 1954 as part of a Leonard Feather package. The Swedish impresario, Nils Hellstrom, initiated the "Jazz Club U.S.A." (after the Leonard Feather radio show) tour starting in Stockholm in January 1954 and then Germany, Netherlands, Paris and Switzerland. The tour party was Holiday, Buddy DeFranco, Red Norvo, Carl Drinkard, Elaine Leighton, Sonny Clark, Berryl Booker, Jimmy Raney, and Red Mitchell. A recording of a live set in Germany was released as *Lady Love* - Billie Holiday.

Holiday's late recordings on Verve constitute about a third of her commercial recorded legacy and are as popular as her earlier work for the Columbia, Commodore and Decca labels. In later years, her voice became more fragile, but it never lost the edge that had always made it so distinctive.

Holiday's autobiography, *Lady Sings the Blues*, was ghostwritten by William Dufty and published in 1956. Dufty, a New York Post writer and editor then married to Holiday's close friend Maely Dufty, wrote the book quickly from a series of

conversations with the singer in the Duftys' 93rd Street apartment. He drew on the work of earlier interviewers as well and intended to let Holiday tell her story in her own way.

In his 2015 study, *Billie Holiday: The Musician and the Myth*, John Szwed argues that *Lady Sings the Blues* is a generally accurate account of her life, and that co-writer Dufty was forced to water down or suppress material by the threat of legal action. "In particular, Szwed traces the stories of two important relationships that are missing from the book—with Charles Laughton, in the nineteen-thirties, and with Tallulah Bankhead, in the late nineteen-forties—and of one relationship that's sharply diminished in the book, her affair with Orson Welles around the time of *Citizen Kane*," according to reviewer Richard Brody.

To accompany her autobiography, Holiday released an LP in June 1956 entitled *Lady Sings the Blues*. The album featured four new tracks, "Lady Sings the Blues" (title track), "Too Marvelous for Words", "Willow Weep for Me", and "I Thought About You", as well as eight new recordings of Holiday's biggest hits to date. The re-recordings included "Trav'lin' Light", "Strange Fruit" and "God Bless the Child". On December 22, 1956, *Billboard* magazine reviewed *Lady Sings the Blues*, calling it a worthy musical complement to her autobiography. "Holiday is in good voice now," said the reviewer, "and these new readings will be much appreciated by her following." "Strange Fruit" and "God Bless the Child" were called classics, and "Good Morning Heartache", another reissued track in the LP, was also noted positively.

On November 10, 1956, Holiday performed two concerts before packed audiences at Carnegie Hall, a major accomplishment for any artist, especially a black artist of the segregated period of American history. Live recordings of the second Carnegie Hall concert were released on a Verve/HMV album in the UK in late 1961 called *The Essential Billie Holiday*. The thirteen tracks included on this album featured her own songs, "I Love My Man", "Don't Explain" and "Fine and Mellow", together with other songs closely associated with her, including "Body and Soul", "My Man", and "Lady Sings the Blues" (her lyrics accompanied a tune by pianist Herbie Nichols).

The liner notes on this album were written partly by Gilbert Millstein of *The New York Times*, who, according to these notes, served as narrator in the Carnegie Hall concerts. Interspersed among Holiday's songs, Millstein read aloud four lengthy passages from her autobiography *Lady Sings the Blues*. He later wrote: "The narration began with the ironic account of her birth in Baltimore – 'Mom and Pop were just a couple of kids when they got married. He was eighteen, she was sixteen, and I was three' – and ended, very nearly shyly, with her hope for love and a long life with 'my man' at her side. It was evident, even then, that Miss Holiday was ill. I had known her casually over the years and I was shocked at her physical weakness. Her rehearsal had been desultory; her voice sounded tinny and trailed off; her body sagged tiredly. But I will not forget the metamorphosis that night. The lights went down, the musicians began to play and the narration began. Miss Holiday stepped from between the curtains, into the white spotlight awaiting her, wearing a white evening gown and white gardenias in her black hair. She was erect and beautiful; poised and smiling. And when the first section of narration was ended, she sang – with strength undiminished – with all of the art that was hers. I was very much moved. In the darkness, my face burned and my eyes. I recall only one thing. I smiled."

The critic Nat Hentoff of Down Beat magazine, who attended the Carnegie Hall concert, wrote the remainder of the sleeve notes on the 1961 album. He wrote of Holiday's performance:“ Throughout the night, Billie was in superior form to what had sometimes been the case in the last years of her life. Not only was there assurance of phrasing and intonation; but there was also an outgoing warmth, a palpable eagerness to reach and touch the audience. And there was mocking wit. A smile was often lightly evident on her lips and her eyes as if, for once, she could accept the fact that there were people who did dig her. The beat flowed in her uniquely sinuous, supple way of moving the story along; the words became her own experiences; and coursing through it all was Lady's sound – a texture simultaneously steel-edged and yet soft inside; a voice that was almost unbearably wise in disillusion and yet still childlike, again at the centre. The audience was hers from before she sang, greeting her and saying good-bye with heavy, loving applause. And at one time, the musicians too applauded. It was a night when Billie was on top, undeniably the best and most honest jazz singer alive. ”

Her performance of "Fine and Mellow" on CBS's The Sound of Jazz program is memorable for her interplay with her long-time friend Lester Young. Both were less than two years from death.

When Holiday returned to Europe almost five years later in 1959, she made one of her last television appearances for Granada's Chelsea at Nine in London. Her final studio recordings were made for MGM in 1959, with lush backing from Ray Ellis and his Orchestra, who had also accompanied her on Columbia's Lady in Satin album the previous year—see below. The MGM sessions were released posthumously on a self-titled album, later re-titled and re-released as Last Recordings.

On March 28, 1957, Holiday married Louis McKay, a Mafia enforcer. McKay, like most of the men in her life, was abusive, but he did try to get her off drugs. They were separated at the time of her death, but McKay had plans to start a chain of Billie Holiday vocal studios, à la Arthur Murray dance schools.

Although childless, Billie Holiday had two godchildren: singer Billie Lorraine Feather, daughter of Leonard Feather, and Bevan Dufty, son of William Dufty.

Death

By early 1959 Holiday had cirrhosis of the liver. She stopped drinking on doctor's orders, but soon relapsed. By May she had lost 20 pounds (9 kg). Friends, jazz critic Leonard Feather, her manager Joe Glaser, and photojournalist and editor Allan Morrison unsuccessfully tried to get her to a hospital.

On May 31, 1959, Holiday was taken to Metropolitan Hospital in New York with liver and heart disease. The Federal Bureau of Narcotics, under the order of Harry J. Anslinger, had been targeting Holiday since at least 1939. She was arrested and handcuffed for drug possession as she lay dying, and her hospital room was raided. Police guarded her room. Holiday continued staying under police guard. On July 15, she received the last rites of the Roman Catholic Church, before dying two days later from pulmonary edema and heart failure caused by cirrhosis of the liver on July 17, 1959, at 3:10 am. In her final years, she had been progressively swindled out of her earnings, and she died with \$0.70 in the bank and \$750 (a tabloid fee) on her person. Her funeral mass was at Church of St. Paul the Apostle in New York City on July 21, 1959. She was buried at Saint Raymond's Cemetery.

Gilbert Millstein of The New York Times, who had been the narrator at Billie Holiday's 1956 Carnegie Hall concerts and had partly written the sleeve notes for the album *The Essential Billie Holiday* (see above), described her death in these same 1961-dated sleeve notes: "Billie Holiday died in Metropolitan Hospital, New York, on Friday, July 17, 1959, in the bed in which she had been arrested for illegal possession of narcotics a little more than a month before, as she lay mortally ill; in the room from which a police guard had been removed – by court order – only a few hours before her

death, which, like her life, was disorderly and pitiful. She had been strikingly beautiful, but she was wasted physically to a small, grotesque caricature of herself. The worms of every kind of excess – drugs were only one – had eaten her. The likelihood exists that among the last thoughts of this cynical, sentimental, profane, generous and greatly talented woman of 44 was the belief that she was to be arraigned the following morning. She would have been, eventually, although possibly not that quickly. In any case, she removed herself finally from the jurisdiction of any court here below.

”

Voice

Holiday's delivery made her performances recognizable throughout her career. Her improvisation compensated for lack of musical education. Her voice lacked range and was thin, and years of drug use altered its texture and gave it a fragile, raspy sound. Holiday said that she always wanted her voice to sound like an instrument and some of her influences were Louis Armstrong and singer Bessie Smith. Her last major recording, a 1958 album entitled *Lady in Satin*, features the backing of a 40-piece orchestra conducted and arranged by Ray Ellis, who said of the album in 1997: "I would say that the most emotional moment was her listening to the playback of 'I'm a Fool to Want You.' There were tears in her eyes ... After we finished the album I went into the control room and listened to all the takes. I must admit I was unhappy with her performance, but I was just listening musically instead of emotionally. It wasn't until I heard the final mix a few weeks later that I realized how great her performance really was. "

Frank Sinatra was influenced by her performances on 52nd Street as a young man. He told *Ebony* in 1958 about her impact: "With few exceptions, every major pop singer in the US during her generation has been touched in some way by her genius. It is Billie Holiday who was, and still remains, the greatest single musical influence on me. *Lady Day* is unquestionably the most important influence on American popular singing in the last twenty years. "

Hit records

In 1986, Joel Whitburn's Record Research, Inc. company compiled information on the popularity of record releases from the pre-rock and roll era and created pop charts dating all the way back to the beginning of the commercial recording industry. The company's findings were published in the book *Pop Memories 1890–1954*. Several of Holiday's records are listed on the pop charts Whitburn created.

Billie Holiday began her recording career on a high note with her first major release "Riffin' the Scotch" selling 5,000 copies. The song was released under the band name "Benny Goodman & his Orchestra."

Most of Holiday's early successes were released under the band name "Teddy Wilson & his Orchestra." During her stay in Wilson's band, Holiday would sing a few bars and then other musicians would have a solo. Teddy Wilson, one of the most influential jazz pianists from the swing era, accompanied Holiday more than any other musician. He and Holiday have 95 recordings together.

In July 1936, Holiday began releasing sides under her own name. These songs were released under the band name "Billie Holiday & Her Orchestra." Most noteworthy, the popular jazz standard "Summertime," sold well and was listed on the available pop charts at the time at number 12, the first time the jazz standard charted under any artist. Only Billy

Stewart's R&B version of "Summertime" reached a higher chart placement than Holiday's, charting at number 10 thirty years later in 1966.

Holiday had 16 best selling songs in 1937, making the year her most commercially successful. It was in this year that Holiday scored her sole number one hit as a featured vocalist on the available pop charts of the 1930s, "Carelessly". The hit "I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm", was also recorded by Ray Noble, Glen Gray and Fred Astaire whose rendering was a best seller for weeks. Holiday's version ranked 6 on the year-end single chart available for 1937.

In 1939, Holiday recorded her biggest selling record, "Strange Fruit" for Commodore, charting at number 16 on the available pop charts for the 1930s.

In 1940, Billboard began publishing its modern pop charts, which included the Best Selling Retail Records chart, the precursor to the Hot 100. None of Holiday's songs placed on the modern pop charts, partly because Billboard only published the first ten slots of the charts in some issues. Minor hits and independent releases had no way of being spotlighted.

"God Bless the Child", which went on to sell over a million copies, ranked number 3 on Billboard's year-end top songs of 1941.

On October 24, 1942, Billboard began issuing its R&B charts. Two of Holiday's songs placed on the chart, "Trav'lin' Light" with Paul Whiteman, which topped the chart, and "Lover Man", which reached number 5.

"Trav'lin' Light" also reached 18 on Billboard's year-end chart.

Discography

Billie Holiday recorded extensively for four labels: Columbia Records, issued on its subsidiary labels Brunswick Records, Vocalion Records, and OKeh Records, from 1933 through 1942; Commodore Records in 1939 and 1944; Decca Records from 1944 through 1950; briefly for Aladdin Records in 1951; Verve Records and on its earlier imprint Clef Records; from 1952 through 1957, then again for Columbia Records from 1957 to 1958 and finally for MGM Records in 1959. Many of Holiday's recordings appeared on 78 rpm records prior to the long-playing vinyl record era, and only Clef, Verve, and Columbia issued Holiday albums during her lifetime that were not compilations of previously released material. Many compilations have been issued since her death; as well as comprehensive box sets and live recordings.

Studio LPs

Billie Holiday Sings (1952)

An Evening with Billie Holiday (1952)

Billie Holiday (1954)

Stay with Me (1955)

Music for Torching (1955)

Velvet Mood (1956)

Lady Sings the Blues (1956)

Body and Soul (1957)

Songs for Distingué Lovers (1957)

All or Nothing at All (1958)

Lady in Satin (1958)

Last Recordings (1959)

Awards and honors

Grammy Hall of Fame

Billie Holiday was posthumously inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame, which is a special Grammy award established in 1973 to honor recordings that are at least 25 years old and that have "qualitative or historical significance." Billie Holiday:

Grammy Hall of Fame Awards

Year Recorded	Title	Genre	Label	Year inducted	Notes
1949	"Crazy He Calls Me"	Jazz (single)	Decca	2010	
1944	"Embraceable You"	Jazz (single)	Commodore	2005	
1958	Lady in Satin	Jazz (album)	Columbia	2000	
1945	"Lover Man (Oh, Where Can You Be?)"	Jazz (single)	Decca	1989	
1939	"Strange Fruit"	Jazz (single)	Commodore	1978	Listed also in the National Recording Registry by the Library of Congress in 2002
1941	"God Bless the Child"	Jazz (single)	Okeh	1976	

Grammy Best Historical Album

The Grammy Award for Best Historical Album has been presented since 1979.

Year	Title	Label	Result	
2002	Lady Day: The Complete Billie Holiday	Columbia	1933–1944	Winner
1994	The Complete Billie Holiday	Verve 1945–1959	Winner	
1992	Billie Holiday — The Complete Decca Recordings	Verve 1944–1950	Winner	
1980	Billie Holiday — Giants of Jazz	Time-Life	Winner	

Other honors

Year	Award	Honors	Notes
2004	Ertegun Jazz Hall of Fame	Inducted	Jazz at Lincoln Center, New York
2000	Rock and Roll Hall of Fame	Inducted	Category: "Early Influence"
1997	ASCAP Jazz Wall of Fame	Inducted	
1947	Esquire Magazine Gold Award	Best Leading Female Vocalist	Jazz award
1946	Esquire Magazine Silver Award	Best Leading Female Vocalist	Jazz award
1945	Esquire Magazine Silver Award	Best Leading Female Vocalist	Jazz award
1944	Esquire Magazine Gold Award	Best Leading Female Vocalist	Jazz award

Tributes

1972, Diana Ross portrayed Holiday in the film *Lady Sings the Blues*, which is loosely based on the 1956 autobiography of the same name. The film earned Ross a nomination for the Academy Award for Best Actress.

She was portrayed by Ernestine Jackson in the play *Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill* by Lanie Robertson.

Singer Miki Howard released the Holiday tribute album, *Miki Sings Billie: A Tribute to Billie Holiday* in 1993. Miki Howard also portrayed Lady Day in a club scene in the 1992 motion picture "*Malcolm X*" starring Denzel Washington.

Paula Jai Parker portrayed Holiday in a Season 7 episode of the TV series *Touched by an Angel*, entitled "God Bless the Child," the title derived from a song which Holiday had written and performed.

Jazz pianist Mal Waldron performed as Holiday's accompanist and released several tribute albums including:

Left Alone (Bethlehem, 1959)

Blues for Lady Day (Black Lion, 1972)

Left Alone '86 with Jackie McLean (Paddle Wheel, 1986)

No More Tears (For Lady Day) (Timeless, 1989)

Billie Hollidy, Croatian National Theatre in Split by A.Ostojić & Ksenia Prohaska (2006)

Argentinean comic artists Carlos Sampayo and José Antonio Muñoz made a graphic novel on her life, titled *Billie Holiday* (Fantagraphics Books, 1991; Spanish edition: Ojo de Pez, Buenos Aires, 2007).

Honors

1987, Billie Holiday was posthumously awarded the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award.

1993, R&B singer Miki Howard released an album dedicated to Holiday titled Miki Sings Billie.

1994, the United States Postal Service introduced a Billie Holiday postage stamp.

1999, Holiday ranked No. 6 on VH1's 100 Greatest Women in Rock n' Roll.

2000, she was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Over the years, there have been many tributes to Billie Holiday, including "The Day Lady Died", a 1959 poem by Frank O'Hara, and Langston Hughes' poem "Song for Billie Holiday".

In 1970 Frank Sinatra recorded the song Lady Day as a tribute.

In 1988 the group U2 released "Angel of Harlem" in her honor.

"My Only Friend" by The Magnetic Fields is a tribute to Billie Holiday.

Arthur Phillips features Holiday's 1953 concert in New York in his novel The Song is You (2009).

Filmography

1950: 'Sugar Chile' Robinson, Billie Holiday, Count Basie and His Sextet

1947: New Orleans

1935: "Symphony in Black", short (with Duke Ellington)

1933: The Emperor Jones, appeared as an extra

Television appearances

Year	Program	Host	Songs
1949	Adventures in Jazz	Fred Robbins	Unknown Songs
8/27/1949	Arlene Francis Show, NY (1)	Arlene Francis	"The Man I Love", "All of Me", "Lover Man"
8/27/1949	Eddie Condon's Floor Show, NY (1) Man"	Eddie Condon	"I Love My Man", "Keeps on Rainin'", "Lover Man"
9/3/1949	Eddie Condon's Floor Show, NY (1) "I Love My Man"	Eddie Condon	"Fine & Mellow", "Porgy", "Them There Eyes",
9/10/1949	Art Ford Show, NY (1) Minute Interview, "All of Me"	Art Ford	"Lover Man", "I Cover the Waterfront", Two-
10/15/1949	Art Ford Show, NY (1) Never"	Art Ford	"Them There Eyes", "Detour Ahead", "Now or
1/7/1950	Eddie Condon's Floor Show, NY	Eddie Condon	Unknown
5/24/1950	Apollo Theatre Show, NY (1) -	"You're My Thrill"	
7/25/1951	Apollo Theatre Show, NY (1) -	"My Man"	

12/10/1952	Apollo Theatre Show, NY (1)	Count Basie	"Tenderly"
10/16/1953	The Comeback Story, NY (1)	George Jessel	Twenty-Minute Interview, "God Bless the Child"
2/8/1955	The Tonight Show, NY (1)	Steve Allen	"My Man", "Them There Eyes", "Lover Man"
2/10/1956	The Tonight Show, NY (1)	Steve Allen	"Please Don't Talk About Me", Two-Minute Interview, "Ghost of a Chance"
8/19/1956	Stars of Jazz, LA, CA (2)	Bobby Troup	"Please Don't Talk About Me When I'm Gone", "Billie's Blues", "My Man"
10/29/1956	Bandstand USA, NY (1)	Bert Parks	"Willow Weep for Me", "I Only Have Eyes for You", "My Man", "Please Don't Talk About Me"
11/7/1956	Night Beat, NY (1)	Mike Wallace	Fifteen-Minute Interview
11/8/1956	Peacock Alley, NY (1)	Tex McCrary	Twenty-Minute Interview
11/8/1956	The Tonight Show, NY (1)	Steve Allen	"Porgy"
3/11/1957	Live Broadcast from Mr. Kelly's, Chicago (1)	-	"Good Morning Heartache", "You Better Go Now"
12/8/1957	The Seven Lively Arts: The Sound of Jazz, LA (2)	-	"Fine & Mellow"
4/12/1958	Club Oasis, NY (1)	Martha Raye	"You've Changed", "My Man"

5/26/1958	Telethon, NY	Dean Martin	Unknown Songs
5/29/1958	Art Ford's Jazz Party, WNTA-TV NY (2)	Art Ford	"You've Changed", "I Love My Man", "When Your Lover Has Gone"
6/5/1958	Art Ford's Jazz Party, NY	Art Ford	"All of Me", "Good Morning Heartache", "Travelin' Light"
7/10/1958	Art Ford's Jazz Party, NY (2)	Art Ford	"What a Little Moonlight Can Do", "Foolin' Myself", "It's Easy to Remember"
7/17/1958	Art Ford's Jazz Party, NY (2)	Art Ford	"Moanin' Low", "Don't Explain", "When Your Lover Has Gone"
9/25/1958	Today Show	Dave Garroway	"My Funny Valentine"
11/18/1958	Mars Club, Music Hall Parade Voyons Un Peu, Paris France (2)	-	"I Only Have Eyes for You"
11/20/1958	Gilles Margaritis Programme, Paris France (2)	Gilles Margaritis	"Trav'lin' Light"
1/7/1959	Timex All-Star Jazz Show IV, NY	Jackie Gleason	Unknown
2/23/1959	Chelsea at Nine, London, England (2)	Robert Beatty	"Porgy", "Please Don't Talk About Me", "Strange Fruit"

(1) = Available on Audio (2) = Available on DVD