Billie Holiday

BY ARIEL SWARTLEY

BILLIE HOLIDAY DIDN'T just sing a song, she took possession of it. And she repossessed it every time she sang. From the beginning, even in 1933 when she was eighteen, recording for the first time (with Benny Goodman), and "scared half to death" by the big studio microphone, she liked to move in slowly. She would feel out the bones of a tune, lift up a lyric (something as mundane as "out of the frying pan"), shake it out, then smooth the words like a glove over the contours of her own heartache.

As Carmen McRae once observed about the woman affectionately known as Lady Day, "she sings the way she is." And she never stopped showing the song who was boss. Bobby Tucker, who played piano for Holiday in the 1940s, said she had "the greatest conception of a beat" he'd ever heard. Strolling just a little behind, or slipping her tongue over a few words, in a hurry to catch up, she was, by her very insouciance, acknowledging exactly where the song's pulse lay.

She was born Eleanora Fagan in Philadelphia on April 7, 1915, to a teenaged mother, Sadie, whom she revered. Her father, Clarence Holiday, who gave the nickname Bill to his big-boned tomboy child (she lengthened it in homage to actress Billie Dove), had studied trumpet, but after being gassed during World War I, switched to guitar and later traveled with Fletcher Henderson's band. Billie liked to tell the story of her own early musical training: an ambitious girl scrubbing floors at a Baltimore cat house and bartering her wages for a chance to sit alone in front of the madam's expensive Victrola, mesmerized by recordings of Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith. Later, looking for ways to explain her genius, she would say she wanted to combine "Smith's big sound and Pop's feeling."

The whole trajectory of Billie's life was in her voice. There was the cocky verve of the early recordings, and later, in 1937, the pure authority of musicianship in her sessions with Lester Young, saxophone and singer gliding around each other like angels on greased wings. Her delivery got even slower in the Forties as she came into her own as a star, a songwriter ("God Bless the Child," "Don't Explain") and, less happily, as a poster child for segregation's horrors, thanks to her brooding signature ballad "Strange Fruit."

Those were also the years she came into the heroin habit that pursued her – along with Jim Crow and dogged narcotics agents – until she died in 1959. At the last "Lady in Satin" sessions, gin and disillusion had seeped into all the cracks of her voice, but she stepped around the ruins with almost unbearable gallantry. She didn't live to see forty-five.

There's probably not a singer alive who hasn't learned something about phrasing from Billie Holiday's records. She changed the prevailing notion of a singer's relationship to the material. No longer an entity to be interpreted or a tradition to be belted, the singer's song became real life – or an intensely distilled experience of it – immediate, authentic, wholly owned. That sense of ownership paved the way for Elvis Presley, Laura Nyro, Janis Joplin, maybe even the Sex Pistols. In fact, Billie Holiday is here, in memory, tonight for the same reason that the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame exists at all. Like rock & roll, she changed people's notion of what was possible.