

MUSIC

Chanteuse of Strange Fruit

By Ralph de Toledano

HOW MANY ARE LEFT of the old jazz aficionados who listened to Billie Holiday decades ago in New York's West 52nd Street nightclubs? Not many. I still remember Billie singing "Strange Fruit" in the eddying smoke of Café Society. It was a Popular Front song about lynching—"strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees"—sung for a Popular Front audience in a Greenwich Village club. But it had its power and validity in the exquisite torture of her singing, in the ungainly beauty of a dark face flatly delineated by the baby spots.

Those were Billie's great days, when jazz was the real and the true, when she was recording to the sprung rhythms of Teddy Wilson's piano, the outbursts of Artie Shaw's clarinet, or the clean line of Bunny Berigan's cornet. Those were the days of "Billie's Blues," out of the deep south via Harlem; of "Summertime" in pounding accents that would have startled George Gershwin; of two evocative pop tunes, "Easy Living" and "Foolin' Myself"; of the great Commodore recordings. They can still be heard scattered throughout today's CD reissues—Billie before the demons moved in.

Then the rich boys of the Left took over, and so did the drugs. Billie continued to sing, but she had a monkey on her back—and the corruption of courts and hospitals and the futile "cures"—a story of degeneration and regeneration and ultimate collapse, a chronology not new to those who lived in jazz.

Billie is long dead, but to those of us who knew her she left an unforgettable legacy of memories and music. For there was no one quite like Billie as a singer of jazz or pops. Any song, good or bad, acquired a new dimension when she sang

it. Her phrasing was impeccable, and her sense of the *rubato*—that straying behind or around the beat that characterizes the best jazz—was perfect. She could wander from the melody until that split second those with a trained ear know and then return with a glorious resolution. Toward the end, her plangently full voice developed a kind of astringency, but she never lost the mastery of phrase or the sense of a song's inner logic.

Her old album "Solitude"—named after Duke Ellington's seductively velvet ballad—is a case in point. From Cole Porter's adolescently ironic "Love for Sale" to the Princeton Triangle Club's "East of the Sun," Billie took over these songs, and "Love for Sale's" somewhat mawkish lyrics of vice as seen by undergraduate eyes became poignant and hard as vice can be. "Easy to Love" and "Everything I Have Is Yours," which in the '30s I hummed on forgotten dance floors, became jazz *lieder* when they were transfigured by Billie.

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"Body and Soul," another old album, allowed her to elaborate on that great standard, to illuminate "Embraceable You," and to invigorate those two Gershwin movie tunes, "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off" and "They Can't Take That Away From Me." Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers made those tunes popular in a musical you could once see on the Late Show, but Billie stole them. In an album inappropriately called "Billie's Blues," an oldie like "Just One More Chance," which that gusty crooner Russ Columbo mooed into prominence, became a plea for the return that parted lovers seek. And "You Took Advantage of Me," a specialty of Bing Crosby in his soprano days with the Paul Whiteman hot section, surrendered to Billie.

With her death, who was there to take Billie Holiday's place? There was, of course, Ella Fitzgerald—in the 1930s the tall and gawky singer who belted out

songs with Chick Webb's Savoy Ballroom band to the delight of Harlem and points south. With success, Ella acquired *embonpoint* and placidity, with nowhere any of Billie's *cri de coeur* intensity or artistry. There was Lena Horne, svelte and fashionable, who sang many of the songs that Billie made real. But neither the phrasing nor the instrument nor the emotion were there. Close your eyes and you saw the attractive figure and the formidably regular teeth. But you also heard a voice that occasionally wavered in pitch and tended to harshness. Lena Horne made Noel Coward's "Mad About the Boy," with its faux sophistication, a kind of signature—but it was neither Gertrude Lawrence (thin-textured, cold, and sardonic) nor jazz. It was a pale carbon copy of a pale carbon copy, with a touch of Broadway bitchiness.

You returned inevitably to the memories of Billie—the Billie we loved and applauded in smoky nightclubs; the

Billie in white satin who stood before big-name bands in the vast caverns of now vanished movie palaces; the Billie who all her life could sing and mean it, "If you let me love you, it's for sure I'll love you all the way"; the Billie whose records we had waited for and spun until the 78 rpm steel needles had vanquished them.

If your mind so orders, you remember the excitement of Billie's great days. And as you listen to her again, you may mutter with no *gaudeamus igitur*, "*Post jucundam juventutem, post molestam senectutem, nos habebit humus*"—"After joyous youth, after troubled old age, the earth will have us." And perhaps you smile. ■

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We Need to Talk



Five years on from the WTC tragedy, the war on terror is not only far from won, the blunder of Iraq is radicalizing countless young Muslims the world

over. It seems at times that this administration is not only dumb but also deaf. Cheney recently said that they must be doing something right because in the five years since the attack, al-Qaeda has not come back to kill more Americans. In that he's correct, but try telling that to the families of close to 3,000 American soldiers who have died in a useless war and the tens of thousands lying crippled in their hospital beds.

Only two months ago, the alleged plot to blow up American planes over the Atlantic suggested that the threat to American citizens all over the world is real and very lethal. Faced with the prospect of nonstop war and bloodshed, as those cowardly neocons would have it, what are our options? That's an easy one. Sit down and talk to the bastards, as the great General Douglas MacArthur would have said were he alive.

There are plenty of historical precedents. Talking to terrorists is supposedly a no-no, but everyone, including the unbending Israelis, has done it throughout history. Successive British governments had one mantra where the IRA was concerned: we do not talk to terrorists until they put their guns down. Well, the Iron Lady did, off the record, as did John Major, off the record, and then Tony Blair talked on the record and now there is peace in Northern Ireland. In fact, the war that began early in the 20th century and heated up after 1972 is finally over. Yes, there are bodies of innocents all over the place, but peace has finally come to that miserable part of the world.

In Spain, things are not yet hunky dory, but the Spanish are talking to ETA,

the Basque separatists, and there are fewer assassinations and deaths of innocent people.

And let's not forget the greatest triumph of chatter over machine-gun clatter: South Africa. Who would have believed that the tough-talking, rigid as hell Boers would sit down and deal with the "bloodthirsty terrors," as they called the ANC. It's not perfect, and crime is at an all-time high in South African cities, but at least the massacres are a thing of the past and life goes on much better than before.

Even the Israelis make a semblance of talking to the PLO. All they have to do is also talk to the democratically elected Hamas, something they refuse to do. Instead, they assassinate Hamas's leaders and keep a stranglehold on the

is for U.S. and foreign troops to leave Muslim lands. And the third—the easiest of all to accommodate—is for America to stop supporting "apostate" rulers in Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Pakistan.

Let's just dream for a second. Imagine if my colleague Pat Buchanan had been elected president in 1992, 1996, or better yet, in 2000, none of the above would be demanded because they would not be an issue. We would have remained a loyal ally of Israel, but we would have restrained the wild ones now running the show. (Israelis are anything but dumb; they would have gotten the message and played nice. There would now be two countries at peace living side by side.) We would have stopped dealing with the kleptocrats in Saudi Arabia and pulled our troops out of hostile Muslim lands. Fortress America sounds awfully good to me, but then I don't make my living from large oil corporations like the Bushes and the Cheneys.

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Gaza Strip. This small strip of land where 1.5 million Palestinians live has been under siege by the Israelis for three months. 251 Palestinians have been killed in 270 air raids. But one hears people say that Gaza is a terrorist state run by terrorists. It is in Israel's long-term interest to talk, but no one at this time is listening.

Mind you, fanatics like the neocons aside, the first thing to consider before launching any conversation is what does al-Qaeda want? Its agenda seems quite clear. The first is for America to take an equitable stance where Israel and the Palestinians are concerned. The second

Let's face it. Bin Laden has made overtures. He is on record as calling on Americans in October 2002 over the Internet to "deal with us and interact with us on the basis of mutual interests and benefits." A cynic might laugh, but at least it's an opening. Engagement with an enemy is not an endorsement of him. Sadat, after all, talked to his sworn enemy, the one-time terrorist Menachem Begin. He paid for it with his life, but he will go down in history as a man of courage who gave his life in the cause of peace. That's more than the clowns who are reveling in nonstop war fought by others will be known for. ■