

books

Caged Bird

**IF YOU CAN'T BE FREE,
BE A MYSTERY:
In Search of Billie Holiday**

By Farah Jasmine Griffin
(Free Press, \$25.00)



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Icons emerge out of a people's need. Heroes offer hope; victims, a cautionary tale. The myths that come to shape the legacy, whether noble or notorious, too often reveal more about the teller and the times than the icon and the life.

So argues Farah Jasmine Griffin in *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday*. A former associate professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania, Griffin now teaches at Columbia University, which is assembling a cadre of scholars pioneering work in the emerging field of jazz cultural studies.

But this is no traditional biography tracking a life and its pivotal influences. After all of the salacious tabloid articles; Holiday's own unreliable autobiography, *Lady Sings the Blues*; the 1972 film adaptation that shot Diana Ross into superstardom; and the reams of documentaries, biographies, and poems dedicated to her, the "authentic" Billie Holiday is impossible to know. The name itself is fiction, fashioned from that of her favorite actress, Billie Dove, and her musician father's surname. Rather, this biography is a genealogy of an image — how it has circulated within the culture and to what end.

For Eleanora Fagan — that "precocious Baltimore girl who decided first that she would not be a maid, and later that she did not want to be a whore," the options offered to Black women of her generation — the persona Billie Holiday was "a vision of possibility in spite of the obstacles that seek to limit and in some cases destroy us." Think Billie Holiday today, however, and more often than not, a strung-out torch singer with a penchant for bad men and bad choices comes to mind. Part one of the book

traces the "founding myths" that have kept Holiday a perpetual victim in our cultural memory despite her irrefutable artistry and astounding courage.

On the one hand, in the 1930s, Black woman as musical genius was beyond the imagination of many. Women, especially Black ones, weren't considered capable of brilliance, and jazz, which sprung whole from Black America, wasn't thought "serious" culture. The media's morbid fascination with beautiful women, sex and drugs kept a spotlight on Holiday's personal life, with recognition of her talent a mere afterthought.

A Black feminist project (whose title comes from the Rita Dove poem "Canary"), *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery*, ironically, grows out of paternal longing. Griffin's fascination with Holiday surfaced when she was nine and her father died. A jazz lover who adored Lady Day, he was consumed, it is suggested, by similar demons. Holiday's music allowed Griffin to explore her father's darker side without inheriting it, while simultaneously providing the soundtrack to an admittedly

melodramatic coming of age: "I barely pass a math class, because I am out with my boyfriend all night before a 9 a.m. exam? 'Ain't Nobody's Business If I Do.' ... My mother and I have a tiff over my grades and late hours? 'God Bless the Child.' Said boyfriend has been seen with another woman? 'Don't Explain.'"

But there is only so much of the Holiday legacy as we have come to know it that anyone would want to inherit. Europeans dismissed Holiday's genius as the product of a simple woman who initially didn't understand the political implications of her famous anthem "Strange Fruit." It is no wonder that contemporary beneficiaries to the Holiday legacy — Mary J. Blige, Erykah Badu come to mind — often seem to have distanced themselves and, in so doing, Griffin argues, are disinherited from a birthright. In the second part of the book, Griffin examines the "alternative myths" created by Black intellectuals, such as Amiri Baraka, Ralph Ellison and Angela Davis, who have focused on the political and cultural implications of Holiday's work. She ends with a coda on singer/actress/activist Abbey Lincoln, living proof that, for Black women whose spirits are larger than the societal categories that seek to define them, a tragic end is not a *fait accompli*.

It's been said that Sarah Vaughn had greater range, Ella Fitzgerald more virtuosity, Bessie Smith more power. Yet Lady Day's genius lay in its subtlety, in the way she bent a note or interpreted a phrase. "Listening to her pare down a lyric and melody to the barest minimum, free of pretension, making it impossible not to confront its meaning, became a model for me of a way of doing intellectual work." Indeed, Griffin writes like Holiday sings. Her unadorned prose, soulful in its simplicity, ensures that jazz doesn't become inaccessible "museum music," as it finally finds welcome in the rarefied spaces of concert halls and university campuses. More than scholarship, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery* is a meditation and work song, restoring Holiday's legacy of artistic genius and courage for a generation in need of more heroes.

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