

BILLIE HOLIDAY

b. April 7, 1915, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

d. July 17, 1959, New York, New York

SINGER

“I hate straight singing. I have to change a tune to my way of it.”

Holiday sang with the swing era’s greatest musicians and was one of the first African-Americans to work with a white orchestra.

If one has to live the blues to sing the blues, it is no wonder that Billie Holiday became a legendary jazz/blues vocalist and songwriter and a seminal influence in phrasing, tempo and style.

Born Eleanora Fagan in Philadelphia, Holiday was raised in Baltimore. Her mother, Sadie Fagan, was a young teen when she gave birth to Billie. While Billie’s paternity is uncertain, jazz guitarist Clarence Holiday accepted that he was probably her father.

Holiday dropped out of school around the fifth grade when she started housekeeping for a brothel. At age 10, she was sexually assaulted and sent to a reform school. At age 13, she moved to Harlem to be with her mother. Captivated by the 1920s jazz sounds of Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith, Holiday began singing at Harlem night clubs.

At age 18, she recorded songs with Benny Goodman, and by age 20, she had signed as a recording star with Brunswick Records. During this time, she recorded with the swing era’s greatest musicians.

In her mid-20s, Holiday was the lead vocalist for the Count Basie Band. She moved to the Artie Shaw Band, where she was one of the first African-Americans to work with a white orchestra.

Holiday’s best-known recordings include “Summertime,” “They Can’t Take That Away from Me,” “Easy Swing,” “Strange Fruit,” “I’ll Get By,” “Lover Man,” “Lady Sings the Blues,” and many other classics.

Holiday married jazz trombonist Jimmy Monroe. She divorced Monroe and married an abusive mafioso, Louis McKay. Though married, she is said to have had affairs with Hollywood stars and starlets, most notably Tallulah Bankhead.

Due to heroin addiction and fiscal mismanagement, Holiday died destitute at 44 years old.



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