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Eagle Press for the Somaliland Protectorate, 1954.) Also useful is Andrzejewski's translation of Hassan Sheikh Mumin's play *A Leopard Among the Women* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974) and his translation of Faraax Cawl's *Ignorance is the Enemy of Love* (London: Zed Press, 1982.)

12. Somali writer Ali Jimale Ahmed pointed this out to me. The similarity to Joyce's style has also been noted by David F. Beer, "Aspects of Somali Literature in European Languages." In Thomas Labahn (ed.) *Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Somali Studies*, vol.I, (Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag, 1984) 411-428.

13. Reviewer Julie Kitchener, op. cit., notes Nuruddin's internationalist perspective. Nuruddin's pan-Africanism is explicit in his article "The Life and Death of Words" (*South*, April 1984:54) and in an interview by Patricia Morris, "Wretched Life." (*Africa Events*, Sept. 1986:54-55.) In a well-written passage in *Maps* that demonstrates Nuruddin's broad familiarity with African themes, Hilaal cleverly cites the Mwendo and Sunjata epics to puncture the balloon of Askar's fantasy that he was born an "epic child." (p. 21)

14. Bardolph, op. cit., has gone into this in great detail.

15. Hussein A. Bulhan, "The Captive Intelligentsia of Somalia." *Horn of Africa* 1980a:3,1;25-37 and "Partition of Land and Psyche in Somali Society." *Horn of Africa* 1980b:3,4;13-21.

16. Hussein A. Bulhan 1987, op. cit.:78.

17. Hussein A. Bulhan 1980a, op. cit.:36.

A CASE FOR BILLIE HOLIDAY

by
Giorgio G. Campanaro

The exact origins of slavery on the American continent are obscure. It is clear, however, that by 1700 the status of most Africans in North America was settled; they were slaves for life and their children inherited that condition. In American law and custom their dark skin carried the presumption of degradation and slavery. Under the law, slaves were regarded as both property and persons. But the two definitions together were absurd and inconsistent. The concept of property negated the idea of personhood. To be a person is to be in control of one's destiny, it is to be free. This implies the ability to make others recognize one's humanity; which was not the case with slaves. Even after emancipation, American blacks had no true sense of self-consciousness, for according to W.E.B. DuBois, "one ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

America became the land of freedom for white people only; for blacks it was a land of bondage. This bondage became slightly easier to endure through survival techniques, such as music, which blacks developed in their struggle to attain self-respect and self-esteem. DuBois was fascinated by the tension in the spirituals between hope and despair, joy and sorrow, death and life, and the ability of blacks to embrace such polarities in their music. In his own struggle "to attain self-conscious manhood" DuBois came to know and was impressed by the fact that his predecessors never lost their faith that trouble doesn't last forever.

This was the situation that created the blues, the secular version of the spiritual. As Leroi Jones put it

"The Negro could not ever become white and that was his strength; at some point, always, he could not participate in the dominant tenor of white man's culture. It was at this juncture that he had to make use of other resources, whether African, subcultural, or hermetic. And it was this boundary, this no man's land, that provided the logic and the beauty of his music."

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The blues reflects an existential tension and implies a stubborn refusal to go behind the existential problem. In their protest there is an accepted lamentation over hard luck, careless or unrequited love, broken family life, or the general dissatisfaction of a cold and trouble-filled world.

In the case of Billie Holiday we see how the experience of being black in a white racist society pervaded her jazz and blues singing. Her songs demonstrated that no black person could ever escape the blues, because the blues is an inherent part of the black experience in America. As an anonymous blues man put it, "De blues ain't nothin' but a poor man's heart disease"

If the blues expressed a black perspective on the incongruity of life and the attempt to achieve meaning in a situation fraught with contradictions, if the blues experience is always an encounter with life, its trials and tribulations, it's bruises and abuses, then through them a new dimension is created and the individual is transported to another level of experience. Lyrics from innumerable blues songs are like a distillation of different stages of Billie Holiday's life, which could perhaps be considered as a blues song in progress. Her singing was always an encounter with life, an expression of fortitude in the face of her more or less broken existence. On the other hand, it presented the burden implied in being black and the appalling attempt to renew herself for living in a racist society whose hatred for blacks she felt, and eventually became too exhausted to fight against.

Her own personal blues was all about the articulation of the stresses and strains of human relationships. Her art was not abstract, it was concrete. It was an intense and direct response to the reality of the black experience in America. When Billie Holiday sang about 'love' and 'hunger' (meaning sorrow), frustration, and despair, it was always an attempt to take these existential realities upon herself and not to lose her sanity. Her singing was not art for art's sake, it was rather a life style, a wish for survival. To seek the appreciation of her artistry apart from her personal suffering would be to misinterpret it and distort the very creativity which defines her art. Billie Holiday's singing was inseparable from the concept of blackness and trouble. In her tormented solitude and longing for love and for being accepted for what she was, she was exploited both by whites and some blacks as well. Nevertheless, she was able to share her joys and her deep sorrow with such companions as Lester 'Prez' Young and others who sensed the solidarity she needed from other people.

When Lady Sings the Blues was first published in 1956, The New York Times saluted "this searing autobiography of an American legend" as "skillfull, shocking, and brutal". Although Billie Holiday

didn't write the book herself (it was written with William Duffy) this memoir is as poignant, lyrical and dramatic as Billie Holiday's legendary performances. The artist recalls a turbulent adolescence in Harlem during the 1920's, the excitement of working in New York's famous jazz clubs with the musicians who brought jazz to the forefront of American culture, and her dazzling rise to the top. The darker side of the legend is here too, the men who exploited her, the racial prejudices she encountered, and her harrowing struggle with heroin addiction.

Attendance at all New York nightclubs dropped during early 1947, and this recession caused several clubs to close. The free time that Billie suddenly had available became a factor in her decision to attempt to "cure" her heroin addiction. The expensive 'cold turkey' treatment was intended to shock her system into permanent rejection of heroin. Unfortunately it only lasted as long as Billie stayed away from the musical scene. As soon as she re-entered the world of first night nerves and performance tensions she was an easy target for drug pushers. She resumed 'shooting' with a vengeance, almost as though she sensed that time was running out for her. Within six weeks of leaving the clinic Billie was arrested. There were two different reports of what happened when she was arrested, both were told by Billie, one in her autobiography, the other in an interview that Down Beat published soon after the incident (in the June 4, 1947 issue).

She was charged with violation of section 147 of the U.S. Narcotics Act, "that she did receive, conceal and facilitate the transportation and concealment of drugs". She was convicted and sentenced to serve a year and a day in the Federal Reformatory for Women at Alderson, West Virginia. In the "Report on Convicted Prisoners" by the U.S. Attorney, dated May 27, 1947, and made while she was at the Alderson Reformatory, there are a few points which shed some light on Billie Holiday's rather complex personality. To the question which asked whether to regard her "...as a menace to society, an habitual criminal, an occasional offender, a victim of temptation, or a mental case," the answer given was "a victim of temptation". Moreover, to the later question asking if the author had any "...comments which show the extent and intensity of public injury, or other information of use to determine parole risk", we read "[t]hat this prisoner has harmed only herself and we feel that once she is cured of the drug addiction, she will become a useful citizen again."

On March 16, 1948 Billie was released on parole, having served nine and a half months of her sentence. Her debt to society was legally balanced. Unfortunately, for the next eleven years, Billie Holiday was taken advantage of, threatened and abused; but kept fighting as best she

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could, with all her possible strength. In the end, however, she was overwhelmed.

When Françoise Sagan saw Billie Holiday in Paris in 1959, two years after meeting her in New York, she wrote very poignantly:

"It was Billie Holiday and it wasn't Billie Holiday; she had got a lot thinner and much older and on her arms you could notice many needle marks. She no longer had that apparently natural security and that physical balance which left her, armor like, in the middle of the tempests and giddiness of her own existence...I suddenly realized what had happened since our previous encounter; the problem of her race, her struggle against misery and prejudices, alcohol,...against Harlem, against New York...Her voluptuous voice had become the husky, grievous and torn voice of black America...I found her marvelous in spite of the terrible imperfection of the recital I was witnessing...She came to sit a few moments with us, and she said, 'Anyway, darling, you know, I am going to die very soon in New York, between two cops'. I could not and I didn't want to believe her either....A few months later, as I opened the newspaper one morning, I found out that Billie Holiday had died the night before in a New York hospital, between two cops."

In an unpublished autobiography, Tony Scott recounts that

"When I went to her dressing room I got the shock of my life. Since I had seen her last (May 1959), she had lost so much weight that she looked like a skeleton. Her nose was dripping water, her arms were the size of what her wrists used to be, and her wrists were only bones, no meat...She spoke with an effort, slowly, husky and drawling like she did when she was really high, only now she wasn't high...I looked at her skin. It was flaccid, and a grey color had seeped in where before it was always a beautiful chocolate brown...All I could do was to keep my hands on her shoulders and feel a seeking feeling in my body as my soul was shriveling up, as I realized I was listening to a person I had never really known."

Tony Scott also told this author that all the hurts of Billie Holiday's life, her prostitution, her blackness, her suffering, her loneliness which he

had thought he had heard in her 'bluesy' life style wasn't one hundredth of the anguish she was having.

Billie Holiday's singing didn't just describe her own suffering, but the reality of black suffering without seeking to devise philosophical solutions for their problems. In this sense Billie Holiday's themes become existential. The contribution of her singing in relation to the cause of black people was its affirmation in the face of immediate absurdity. Even with her death Billie Holiday refused to allow her perception to be reduced to the sum total of her brutalization. She transcended the restriction of history by affirming that perception of black humanity revealed in and through the historical struggle for being, even if it cost paradoxically, as it did, her own life. As Ralph Ellison put it, "The art, the blues, the spiritual, the jazz, the dance, was what we had in place of freedom." As long as Billie Holiday sang, i.e. until the very end, one could perceive that special quality that Richard Wright called "the endemic capacity to live."

When Billie Holiday died on July 17, 1959, the long, long fight against social environmental problems, racism, hustlers, pimps, pushers, narcotics and booze was over. Yet even in death she was remembered by many reporters for her addiction rather than her artistry. The New York Times, although admitting her wide influence, couldn't help but stress some trade-marks she established, and among others was the use of narcotics. Paraphrasing Leroi Jones, one could say that Billie Holiday represented one of the nation's founding mothers. She was one of the spokeswomen of what was, and is the black experience in America.

A number of poets have tried to convey her legacy in their verses. One is the lyrical prose-poem entitled "Lady Day", written in the persona of one of her close companions, Lester "Prez' Young. In this poem, a road trip brings together the naturally evocative image of rainy nights in a car and Billie's performances under red lights in rooms heavy with smoke and alcohol. The central theme raises the question of "the pain, is that the way it really is?" The question is the same central question for any artist, but more poignant for a black woman blues singer than for any other, or at least the poem makes it seem so. Billie's answer "if you don't know baby, I can't help you sweet-heart" simply implies, that it had to be that way. The persona accepts the simple answer, yet knows also that the pain of Billie's own life is a vital part of her song, that her unquestioning acceptance of life was her power and her beauty. Almost to justify her death the poem ends:

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"Billie

beautiful, the raped child, the spring rape of goddess...

the rape lingering even after

a hot bath at the end of the night.

They walked home drunk, smelling of her smell, the flesh

of the spring goddess being chewed slowly by winter beasts,

Yeah, and some black ones too, the ones you would least expect...

Dear Billie baby, we could not take it..We could not take you...perhaps some gods are better off dead".

"Elegy for a Lady", by Walt Delegall, is a song of lament and praise for Billie Holiday:

"A Lady's dead and a

Gentleman killed her. A

Gentleman named Morality

And now in the eternal indigo

Night as we mourn the passing of

Day, a deluge of blue tears

Falls from a cloudless sky.

Tonight, a gaunt

Black man

Up in some consecrated gutter

And with a pig's foot

Sticky hand, picks up the

Wilted white gardenia beside

Him, which is all that

Remains of a Lady."

The only tangible token of her presence may be a wilted gardenia but "the ubiquitous darkness" of sorrow absorbs us all and "fills our mouths and nostrils with the cold clay of black nothingness." Nevertheless, "as we absorb and become on with the darkness...[w]e see with an inner eye and mark an end to the blind stumbling of paltry existence. Yielding up our lives in order to live; closing our eyes in order to see."

The identification with Billie Holiday's death does not imply empathy only, but also becomes a sort of catharsis and redemption for all struggling people. In his collection entitled Distance Nowhere, Langston Hughes dedicated a "Song for Billie Holiday." The sorrow

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that he speaks of is "dusted with despair" and the poet's lament embodies everyone's heart that must be purged of the "sadness of the song". Billie Holiday's legacy is that her sad songs were not sung in vain. They will never leave those who believe in and fight for human rights and dignity.