

## THE FAMOUS FIGURE I MOST ADMIRE...

English GCSE speech/presentation

Legendary jazz vocalist Billie Holiday was born Eleanora Fagan Cough in 1915 Baltimore, the direct descendant of a slave (her grandmother) and a plantation owner (her grandfather). Born to a 13-year-old mother and a father who abandoned the family shortly after she was born, her childhood was far from stable. After being raped when she was 10, she was abandoned by her mother, and left to live with uncaring relatives. To support herself she began running errands and scrubbing floors in a brothel - it was there that she first heard jazz, scratchy recordings of Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith played on the house phonograph. At age 12 she moved to New York, where she became trapped in the brutal and bitter world of prostitution. By 1930 she had convinced a club owner to let her sing on an open mic night, taking the stage name Billie Holiday from the name of film star she admired, Billie Dove. After being discovered by musical genius John Hammond, Holiday was introduced to the producer Benny Goodman, who assisted her with her first recording session in 1933; over the next 11 years Holiday recorded over 200 cuts of jazz and swing music.

Despite a lack of technical training, Holiday's unique diction, inimitable phrasing and acute dramatic intensity made her the outstanding jazz singer of her day. White gardenias, worn in her hair, became her trademark.

During the late '30s Holiday performed with Count Basie, Artie Shaw and other jazz greats and between 1939 and 1945 Holiday scored several hits, including "Fine and Mellow," "God Bless the Child," "Lover Man" and the infamous "Strange Fruit."

The darkly, atmospheric lyrics of *Strange Fruit*, are so vivid that they are almost frightening, as they describe a scene picturing a lynched black man and address the injustice of racial hatred and violence.

### STRANGE FRUIT

Southern trees bear strange fruit,  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,  
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,

Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant south,  
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,  
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,  
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,  
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,  
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,  
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

"Strange Fruit" is the controversial ballad that became Billie Holiday's signature tune. In the more than sixty years since its 1939 debut at Café Society, the legendary New York nightclub, "Strange Fruit" has been performed by everyone from Nina Simone and Cassandra Wilson to Tori Amos, Sting, and UB40. The song's lyrics describe a lynched black man hanging from a poplar tree - a terrible reality of the southern racial violence that so many black people had to endure. In 1939, nearly two decades before the beginnings of the American Civil Rights Movement, *Strange Fruit*'s performance sparked controversy (and sometimes violence) wherever Billie Holiday went. It was not until 16 years later that Rosa Parks refused to yield her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama bus. It was 25 years before Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led his famous march on Washington. Yet "Strange Fruit" with its early open opposition to racism, had a fundamental effect on the face of jazz and music in general, -here was a song that foretold a social movement, and said so much about the woman who dared to sing it.

Although by the mid-'40s Billie Holiday was addicted to heroin; somehow she continued to function well enough to perform constantly, becoming one of the best known jazz singers in North America. Nick-named "Lady Day", she built up a formidable reputation as a spirited vocalist, able to captivate audiences with her unusual phrasing despite her lack of formal training. Sadly, though Holiday was recognized as a brilliant performer, her personal life was a growing disaster. She married and divorced three times during the 1940s, often suffering domestic abuse. Though her concerts earned her a respectable income, Billie Holiday was taken advantage of by her record companies, who never paid her any royalties.

After years of addiction Holiday was arrested and jailed on a drug charge in 1947, sidetracking her career. She began touring Europe, where she was more popular than ever, but by 1956 she was arrested a second time and entered rehab. Though she struggled to end her drug and alcohol abuse, Billie Holiday died an untimely death at the age of 44, in July 1959. Despite her early death, she remains one of the most popular and acclaimed female jazz singers of all time. In 1972 Holiday's sordid life was chronicled in the movie *Lady Sings the Blues*, in which she is portrayed by Diana Ross.

When considering which famous person on which to base my presentation I found myself stuck. To find someone important, and worthwhile, with a vivid life-story is no easy task, however in my opinion the late Billie Holiday is worthy of such high esteem. Undoubtedly she is not well known to our generation, however, as arguably the greatest blues singer of all time she certainly made her mark. She may have been essentially a singer, but the immortality of her controversial yet beautiful songs has made her more than that. It was once said of Billie Holiday that her "... voice was the voice of living intensity of soul, in the true sense of that greatly abused word. As a human being she was sweet, sour, kind, mean, generous, profane, lovable and impossible, and nobody who knew her expects to see anyone quite like her ever again."

You may think that you know nothing of Billie Holiday's works, however it is unlikely that you are unfamiliar with at least one of her songs. She sang *Somewhere beyond the Sea*, a song made known to younger generations by Pop Idol Winner, Will Young. Her comprehensive repertoire also includes old classics such as *As Time Goes By* (which was the theme tune for the same-titled comedy series starring Judi Dench), songs from the infamous opera *Porgy and Bess*, for example *Summertime* (which you may remember that Mrs Hunn gave us a lovely rendition of in assembly before she left 2 years ago) and *Jeepers Creepers*, on the soundtrack to the recent same-titled cult-teen horror film.

Billie once famously said, "*You can be up to your boobies in white satin, with gardenias in your hair and no sugar cane for miles, but you can*

*still be working on a plantation."* She is saying that even in these times when we can enjoy relative luxury and liberty, so many people are still not truly free of the shackles of an enslaved mind. This simple quote, for me establishes Billie Holiday as one of the precious few singers who do not sing for themselves, or for fame or fortune but for the knowledge that their words can touch people in a way that only music can.