Billie Holiday Biography

Billie Holiday (April 7, 1915 – July 17, 1959) was an American jazz singer and songwriter. Nicknamed Lady Day by her loyal friend and musical partner, Lester Young, Holiday was a seminal influence on jazz and pop singing. Her vocal style, strongly inspired by jazz instrumentalists, pioneered a new way of manipulating phrasing and tempo. Above all, she was admired for her deeply personal and intimate approach to singing.

“You can’t copy anybody and end with anything. If you copy, it means you’re working without any real feeling. No two people on earth are alike, and it’s got to be that way in music or it isn’t music.”

– Billie Holiday

She co-wrote a few songs, and several of them have become jazz standards, notably “God Bless the Child”, “Don’t Explain”, and “Lady Sings the Blues”. She also became famous for singing jazz standards written by others, including “Easy Living” and “Strange Fruit.”

Her early career is hard to track down with accuracy. But, it is said that from an early age she worked as a prostitute for a Harlem brothel and was imprisoned for a short period of time for soliciting.

I never had a chance to play with dolls like other kids. I started working when I was six years old.

– Billie Holiday

She later gained work singing in local jazz clubs before being spotted by a talent scout, John Hammond, in 1933, aged 18.

Her voice and recordings are loved for the depth of emotion and intensity she could bring to classic standards. Her range of voice was not the greatest, but, her distinctive gravelly voice was soon to become very famous and influential.

She was an important icon of the jazz era and influential in the development of jazz singing. In the late 1930s she began singing a civil rights song called “Strange Fruit” – a song which told the
tale of a lynching of a black man in the deep south. It was very controversial for that period and it was not played on radios. It was recorded for Commodore records and she performed it many times over the next 20 years.

Billie Holiday had a difficult upbringing which influenced her perspective on life. She was drawn to abusive men and she experienced many tempestuous relationships. She also became increasingly dependent on various narcotics which contributed to her premature death in 1959, aged just 44.

Citation: Pettinger, Tejvan. “Biography of Billie Holiday”, Oxford, www.biographyonline.net, 28th May. 2010