



# Wishing on the Moon: The Life and Times of Billie Holiday

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No singer has been more mythologized and more misunderstood than jazz legend Billie Holiday, who helped to create much of the mystique herself with her autobiography, *Lady Sings the Blues*--and this authentic biography sets the record straight. Donald Clarke was given unrivaled access to a treasure trove of interviews from the 1970s with those who knew Lady Day in all stages of her short, tragic life--from her childhood in the streets and good-time houses of Baltimore through the early days of success in New York and the years of fame to her tragic decline and death at the age of forty-four. Accompanied by twenty-four pages of photographs, some of them never published before, this incomparable biography separates fact from fiction to reveal the true Billie Holiday.

## Wishing on the Moon: The Life and Times of Billie Holiday Details

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# **From Reader Review Wishing on the Moon: The Life and Times of Billie Holiday for online ebook**

**Tom Brannigan says**

I have to admit that I thought the reviews I read on the first page were stiff and overly academic. I suppose I'm not suppose to swear, which will be a challenge. Billie Holiday was bigger than life with a mesmerizing voice of pure genius. Like most all great personalities, their flaws are legend. It simply is a great read with plenty of four letter words, which Billie had mastered. For me, the real kicker is the last little account that the late Jimmy Rowles tells the reader. It showed her temper in full swing, but Rowles loves her and injects a great amount of humor in the mix. Just read those comments by Jimmy and it's nothing less than Billie Holiday's story in very short story form.

It ain't a stiff read. Go for it!

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**Francesca Lenti says**

if you wanna know about her, just listen to her voice  
the most useless and boring crap I haven't finished to read....

really... rubbish...

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## **Kirsten (lush.lit.life) says**

First of all, Lady Day was one hot mess. Going in, I knew her life had been tumultuous but I had no idea how deep it all went. I love reading about people who come up from nothing and dazzle the world, but this isn't really a story like that. I didn't expect it to be tidy, I just hoped for some clear sense of her trajectory. She came up from nothing and definitely did what she had to survive, but it seemed like such a joyless existence. And you get that from her music certainly, the pain - and that's what resonates, I just couldn't help but feel empty for her and it hurt. Maybe that's fitting.

I'm not judging her life choices, again I think she just survived most of the time and took whatever pleasure she could out of a pretty frustrating life, but even what she achieved seemed almost accidental and haphazard - and she didn't seem to feel any sense of achievement from it. Possibly because in her lifetime she didn't quite take off in popularity like other artists she knew and possibly because she lived in a barely-conscious haze. I felt like it was a cautionary tale against heroin use with some additional salacious details spread throughout. I hoped to gain more insight about Billie Holiday as a human - her motives, thoughts and feelings, but I gather that level of detail is hard to assess barring the future discovery of her secret diary (which I don't expect). For me she remains enigmatic and I sense that would be her preference since I'm a stranger.

This is probably a fascinating bio for more serious students of jazz than I . It was, primarily, a chronological list of studio sessions with a thorough accounting of each participant (every single one) and the inclusion of which songs were recorded at which session was interesting, especially when placed within the context of her personal life. However, the bare bone details of her life and the reminiscences of acquaintances were not always chronological or very clear. As a plus, you get first hand accounts from people who knew her well, but most of those quotes were inscrutable and meandering. What reduced the rating for me, the detail in these accounts and the recording session minutiae, are probably what the author felt was missing from previous biographies and is probably what more serious students of her work value the most.

I enjoyed the early history of Baltimore in the earlier chapters. It put some context around some of the tensions that still plague the city. And I did get a sense of where BH came from, how her career unfolded and some idea why she wasn't more commercially successful in her lifetime.

I still think she's a musical genius and absolute goddess, but she remains a mystery to me as a person. I feel a little guilty enjoying her music so much now, like I'm enjoying her suffering in a sense because of it. And maybe that's the core of her genius, the way she could express universal suffering through her phrasing, the way it's all tossed off almost like an afterthought and the depth of feeling she almost casually conveys through her unconventional voice. God bless the child.

"You just loved her. She was a free soul. The only thing I regret, and any musician who knew her regretted, was that she got hung up on shit. We lost her because whoever was her man at the time could control her with the drugs." - John Collins, guitarist p. 419

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## **Jeanne says**

Having loved Billie Holiday's vocals for so many decades, I was curious to know something about her life outside of the largely fictionalized (by Lady) "Lady Sings the Blues." Lady, as she preferred to be known, was the product of some mighty interesting cultures; Harlem, drugs (ultimately a heroin addict) and alcohol, prostitution and bisexuality, and Hollywood and the music industry. Lady was very much the product of her own making in her penchant for knowingly choosing crummy men, each worse than the one before. It is theorized in this book that because of Lady's stage fright she would smoke pot and/or drink before every performance, habits that grew over time to consume and ultimately kill her at an early age. Few of her relationships were without tumult, starting with her mother and continuing through every marriage and with every lover. Listening to Lady now will be even more of a look into her open soul. I think I will wait awhile to do so.

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## **Deodand says**

This book starts out a bit on the dry side - but just keep going. You will feel yourself disappear into Lady Day's shoes. This book is amazingly complete, as it builds on the work of another historian who captured oral histories from many people - often just in time.

There were many things I didn't know or that didn't occur to me about her life: She was raised by someone as damaged as herself, had no father, no education and no advantages. Her life was also extremely violent and she lived in continuous poverty, thanks to a revolving door of swindlers coming and going. I mean, you can know these things but after this book you will \*know\* them. How she even made it as far as she did is a miracle. She existed as pure will for a long time.

She was also seriously mentally ill at a time in our history when such a thing didn't matter, especially about a black person.

I enjoyed reading this book with my iPod by my side so I could listen to many of the songs Clarke mentions - most of which are available for free on Youtube.

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## **Marshall says**

Billie Holiday had a gift for singing, but not for living. In this book, we learn of her rise through a natural gift, her career peak during the late 30s-late 40s, her descent into drug addiction.

Holiday had a wretched childhood that ended abruptly when she was forced into a life of prostitution which abruptly ended at 14 with her arrest. Life was so uncertain that life at a Catholic girls reform school in Baltimore was recalled by Billie sentimentally. As is the case with so many artists, it is impossible to grow up without a childhood. Her life was a series of mistakes and misadventures that ended with her dying handcuffed to her hospital bed, dying of alcoholism complicated by drug addiction before she was 50.

Holiday's life on the stage was for the most part where she achieved transcendence. Despite being a bit of a handful, she worked with Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Count Basie, some of the best names in the business at the height of the jazz era. Her romantic life was dreadful, tinged with masochistic entanglements and

heavily fused by substance abuse, with heroin proving to be her downfall.

Billie's horrible wonderful life is ably chronicled in this book, which has to be one of the best biographies ever written. Donald Clark weaves a series of interviews into a fascinating mosaic of an incomparable artist with an intemperate life.

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### **Sarah says**

One of the problems I have with biography is that I want to know the **real** story. With a character like Billie Holiday, though, there is no "real" story, just several different people's version of the story. With that in mind, Clarke does an excellent job exhausting every conceivable source for information on the life of Lady Day. Especially helpful are a series of interviews done in the 1970s with numerous people who were important in her life. Clarke also exposes the inaccuracies and biases of other Holiday biographies, including Lady's own effort *Lady Sings the Blues* which made have had the right spirit, but really just showed off Lady's penchant for embellishing her own history to fit her needs.

While it can be a little exhausting hearing several different versions of the same episode, in the end it feels good knowing that while no one will have a complete picture of Lady's life you've heard as complete a version as exists. A must-read for any serious Billie Holiday fan, but for the more casual fans this is just too long.

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### **Sam Motes says**

What a tragic tell of the train wreck life of a gifted entertainer slowly destroying herself with drugs and men that use and abuse her as she struggles with the oppression of being a black woman in a society that counts that against you. Truly a life soaked in the troubles that gave voice to the blues and an emotional jazz that digs deep into the heart.

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### **Anthea Mills says**

This book needs a good editor.

Billie Holiday lead a life full of drama, and this book contained many interesting insights into her amazing talent and difficult life. However, Billie's life was hidden between lengthy side tracks in this meandering book. In my opinion, the author needed to use notes or footnotes to move additional information from the main text and to reduce quotations from those that knew her to those that were relevant. I think that the obvious love of the author for the subject blinded him to the need to edit the text to increase understanding by people who are familiar with her life.

Despite an ongoing interest in Billie's life, I was unable to finish this book.

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## **Loree Thomas says**

In the beginning of the story, *Wishing on the moon* the book focused on mainly the era itself, in Harlem, and what was socially accepted, through the segregation of the races. Through the beginning it spoke on how African Americans would not give into conformity, and in the era a extreme hatred towards the African American community this was rare, because of the battle of social and racial unjust. Billie Holiday was born in Baltimore, Maryland on April, 7, 1915, she was generally raised by her mother Sadie Fagans. Holiday had little to no connection with her father Clarence Holiday, who was a jazz guitarist in Fletcher's Henderson's band. Due to living in severe poverty, Holiday dropped out of the fifth grade, and began to, running errands for a bordello in Baltimore. A year later at age twelve, Holiday and her mother moved to Harlem, Holiday as soon as she entered Harlem, became involved in another bordello, and was arrested for prostitution. Later it focused on her on the rise, about mid way into the book, because due to the extreme poverty she was in so she began to search for jobs in the entertainment field. Later Billie Holiday looked for work as a dancer at a Harlem speakeasy and did not get in as a dancer she auditioned as a singer. Billie Holiday shocked the owner and found herself with gigs performing at the Harlem Pod and Jerry's Log Cabin. Than in year 1933, Billie Holiday was discovered and signed by John Hammond. Whom was an American music producer, Civil Rights Activist and music critic. *Wishing on the Moon* covered Billie Holiday's collaborations with the greats such as Lester Young, Frank Sinatra, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington, it displayed ow these collaborations helped Billie Holiday establish her own true identity. The book ended with the death of Billie Holiday due to her developed heroin addiction. It was a tough year of 1965 when she performed her last song and soon passed.

The delivery style of this book was utterly amazing, it refrained from using cloudy information and words to make her life seem glorious, it told her life story right to the point. Which on the long run, and it easier to read. The story although very blunt did move me, because although she impacted the souls and hearts of many, she also had to battle her own internal struggle, which made her also human and not above anyone. I did learn something that many should take with them that if they work hard, they can achieve greatness. But, it also taught me to not get so overwhelmed, were the only answer is to put your body in danger, by using harmful chemicals such as drugs etc.

Giving this book a rating 1-5 this book would hands down be a five, although it is lengthy it is worth all the effort in order to read it because, it takes you on a wild journey through the streets of Harlem to the stage. This book gave me full and proper insight about the life of Billie Holiday, and did not leave me with any questions.

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## **Phillip says**

lots of good things to say about this biography, which accessed a good deal more interviews with friends and musicians that knew lady day and worked with her. it seems a popular stylistic choice these days since art pepper's *STRAIGHT LIFE* to use the interview format as a way of offering multiple perspectives on the subject.

what this bio offers that some of the others have not: a more existential perspective on eleanor's early life. a different tale of her childhood, raised by a working mother in baltimore and left to her own devices, she chose a life of prostitution early on - this is different from the "her parents left her in a whorehouse until an uncle rescued her" ... this shows a child growing up in the streets of baltimore and making her own choices

based on limited options.

clarke wisely digs into the family tree, tracing her ancestry to slavery in maryland - a border state between north and south. this gives a context for her difficult upbringing and sows the seeds of the psychological scars that haunted her throughout her life.

given these difficulties, it's strange to see those moments when clarke just can't offer up an understanding of the problems of addiction that marked her later years. as it often happens with ms holiday's biographers, clarke takes the critical role of her late career that many critics have shared: that her early career was brilliant and her later work marred by addiction and a difficult romantic life.

i have never shared those feelings, simply because billie holiday's late recordings are superb. i can't agree that she lost her voice in the 50's - yes, her voice changed. but the emotion that she was able to bring to her late recordings - mostly on the verve label - are testament to a great artist working in the mature period of her professional life.

the book has other redeeming qualities as well - it offers a lively portrait of harlem in the late 1920's when it was a vital cultural center that was friendly to people of all races and persuasions. at the same time, clarke cites the typical (misguided) notion that jazz came up the river from new orleans via louis armstrong - and credits him as one of the central figures of the music, "influencing" harlem composers like fletcher henderson - which is nonsense. henderson's band was thriving and populated with many of the greatest musicians of the day before armstrong came to new york.

other than that, i found the book to be informative - the vast array of interviews are well worth the read on their own. notwithstanding the critical and unsympathetic views on holiday's personal life, i found the book to be a useful addition to scholarship on one of the great artists of the 20th century.

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### **Dejan Dukovski says**

Well, when you find out that lot of facts inside are the real one, winning over those on autobiographical, than you have something in your hands worth reading, especially for those which jazz it's their first choice. There is huge amount of information and especially colleagues and friends interviewed by Linda Kuehl, that you might find this book academical in some way, but anyhow, for those jazz/music addicted readers this is by far best book for B.Holiday,

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### **Brad Hodges says**

Billie Holiday was born in poverty and obscurity 100 years ago, but would become one of the great artists of the century. As Donald Clarke writes in his comprehensive if idiosyncratic biography, *Wishing on the Moon: The Life and Times of Billie Holiday*: "Billie was the first singer who was herself a great jazz musician, as opposed to a musician who also sang. She was singing some of the newer American popular songs the way deserved to be interpreted, and she was discovered just as the Swing Era was coming together."

In the saddest tradition of jazz, though, Holiday died young, after years of abuse from drugs and alcohol. She



had bad relationships with men: "She had continued her pattern of choosing a man each time who was worse than the last one." But over fifty years after her death she is still an icon, still sells records, and still inspires though who weren't even born before she died.

She was born Eleanora Fagan in Philadelphia, but grew up in Baltimore. She was born to teenage and unmarried parents. Her father, Clarence, had the name Holiday, which she took when she broke into show business. But before that she had a spotty childhood, being raped and spending time in a Catholic home for girls and most likely prostituting herself.

After moving to Harlem with her mother, she got jobs singing in nightclubs, and then started recording in 1935. One musician said of her: "One thing attracted me to Billie so much was that she never sang on the beat with the music, she always slurred behind the music, the music was ahead of her at all times, but she sang behind the music."

She toured with both Count Basie's band and Artie Shaw's, and endured a lot of racism. In 1940, she introduced a new song into her act:

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

It was "Strange Fruit" a poem written by Abel Meeropol, which protested lynching of African Americans. Clarke reports on listeners being devastated, completely silent, the first time they heard her sing it. She would close her show for years with it.

Eventually the Swing Era declined, and Holiday became famous for other reasons: "Now Lady was a famous junkie, and she knew that people who came ostensibly to hear her sing were coming, some of them, just to gawp. Yet it was a role she chose willingly. she had been on the wrong side of the fence all her life, and that was where she felt she belonged, or where she felt the most comfortable."

Holiday (her nickname of Lady was bestowed upon her by her great friend, the saxophonist Lester Young, whom she called "Prez") was arrested a few times for possession, and on her deathbed, succumbing to cirrhosis of the liver, the police tried to bring her in. She died in 1959 at the age of 44.

Clarke's book is a soup to nuts biography, just what I was looking for. He covers all bases: not only her life, but a pretty good explanation of the music to a layman like me. At times the details of recordings can be overwhelming, including the song titles and the musicians who played on them, but it's valuable to the right person.

He is also unstinting about her personal life. She was married three times, as mentioned to men who weren't much good for her, including her last, Louis McKay, who stole most of her money. But she was generous and funny (and swore profusely), loved children, though never had any of her own, and was both cordial and bitter to rivals (she loved Lena Horne, but didn't have much nice to say about Dinah Washington).

She also had quite the sex life, which Clarke chronicles without being too nosy. It's fairly accepted that she had relationships with women, including actress Tallulah Bankhead, and she talked frankly about her sexual desires in a time when that just wasn't done. Clarke writes: "Billie tried, and mostly failed, to find love through sex. She had no conventional hangups, but she also had no childhood to speak of, either; she gave love freely, but could not accept it. Her vulnerability was there, everyone knew, but so deep that no one could reach it, for she was afraid to reveal it. As the years went by, she began to make terrible, destructive relationships, each man apparently worse than the last."

Clarke has a somewhat odd writing style; at times it seemed like it was translated from another language. He also doesn't hide his personal feelings, and inserts himself into the book, which takes away from it. At one point he refers to rock music as "hack work," well, the love of jazz and rock are not mutually exclusive, Donald.

But I felt as I knew the woman after reading the book. There are some scintillating chapters, such as the opening of Cafe Society, the first integrated club in New York City, or Holiday's last TV appearance, with Lester Young. Watch her smile and nod her head as he plays. Young died only a few months before she did.

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## **Kathleen Hagen says**

Wishing on the Moon: The Life and Times of Billie Holiday, by Donald Clark, Narrated by Anna Fields, produced by Blackstone Audio, downloaded from audible.com.

This book was written in 1994 and recorded by Anna Fields in 1996, who is no longer alive, and whose narrations I still miss. It is very clear that this biography was written by a jazz buff and someone who knew Billie Holiday's music intimately. In fact, if I had to say anything negative about this book, it is that we discussed and analyzed every song recorded by Billie, who was the band, where it was recorded, etc. In spite of that, there is so much to know that has never been satisfactorily covered. Billie supplemented her own legend by writing her own autobiography, "Lady Sings the Blues" full of inaccuracies and exaggerations. Clark got access in the 1970's to her entire discography, and to interviews done by others concerning Billie. The book is totally one of stories about her life from the people who were her closest friends and confidantes. Billie's life was tragic in many ways. She gave love and money to people who didn't deserve it, got hooked on drugs and supplied by her agent, and mostly didn't have someone just looking out for her interests. She got into fights if she got angry, fights in which she gave as good as she got much of the time. Her last days are unbelievable. She was 44 and in the hospital due to total malnutrition. She managed to get herself fixed up on heroin even in the hospital, so a nurse turned her in. She was arrested in the hospital and no one was allowed to come in to see her for fear she would get more drugs. This all happened while she was in fact dying. She never got the fame she deserved in life, although her audiences loved her even on a bad

day, but Clark says all of her songs are still available on records 50 years later.

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## **Judi says**

Recently got turned on to the music of Lady Day, and really wanted to know more about the woman. I steered clear of her autobiography, *Lady Sings the Blues* after discovering it was really a sugar-coated recounting of her life. "Wishing on the Moon" has all the details you could ever want to know-in fact, a bit too much detail for me. I give the author credit for gently dispelling some of the misinformation in Lady Day's book. Still slogging through it, although I admit I am skimming more than reading. About the same time I got into Holiday's music, I discovered Sarah Vaughan-her bio *Sassy: The Life Of Sarah Vaughan* is next on my list.

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