

[The Dead Guy Interview]

Billie Holiday
(1915-1959)

WITH
MICHAEL A. STUSSER

BELATED OBITUARY: Without any formal training, Billie Holiday developed a singing style that had jazz musicians the world over falling at her feet. Performing in Harlem nightclubs and speakeasies when she was just 16 years old, Billie was recognized by music producer John Hammond, who helped land her recording sessions with greats such as Benny Goodman and Count Basie. Her career took off, and from 1933 to 1942, Holiday sang with some of the finest jazz musicians ever to bang a gong. Transforming into “Lady Day” on stage, Holiday wore a trademark white gardenia in her hair and belted classics such as “God Bless the Child” and “The Man I Love” with an emotional power most actresses could only dream of. Using her voice as a solo instrument, Holiday produced phrasing and impeccable timing that rewrote the book on Jazz 101. Sadly, heroin use spelled an early end for Holiday (doesn’t it always?). She started using drugs in the early 1940s and developed liver and heart problems “trying to live a hundred days in one day.” When Holiday passed away in 1959 from cirrhosis of the liver, she was under house arrest for narcotics possession. She was 44 years old, with only 70 cents in the bank.



mental_floss: You were born Eleanor. How’d you wind up Billie?

BH: I’m not answering any questions without my lawyer.

MF: It’s cool, Billie. I think they dropped all your drug-possession charges when you died.

BH: Well, in that case, go ahead.

MF: You were arrested in 1947 on a narcotics violation and spent a year in a rehab center. Did that hurt your career?

BH: I played a sold-out show at Carnegie Hall 10 days

after leaving the joint. You call that a buzz kill?

MF: Good point. But the smoking and heroin couldn’t have been great for your voice.

BH: Hey, my technique was still cookin’. When you sing the blues, it helps if you’ve had the blues.

MF: And you had more than your share, huh? One critic called you “Our Lady of Perpetual Suffering.”

BH: And I’m calling you out of line, mister. My daddy left home when I was a kid and didn’t show back up until I’d made it big.

MF: Is it true that for a time you worked as a prostitute alongside your mother?

BH: Right as rain. Not proud of it, but a girl with no schooling tryin’ to make it in New York City in the 1920s hasn’t got a lot of choices.

MF: Your love life could have been a soap opera, too.

BH: Well, not that it’s your business, but yeah, I married a few, lived with a few others. You gotta live a little to learn a little.

MF: In 1942, you married mob enforcer Louis McKay, an abusive brute.

BH: You know, there’s good in everybody, though. He smacked me around with one hand and tried to get me off the smack with the other. It’s just too bad I didn’t listen. I got my NYC Cabaret Card revoked on account of the drug arrests and couldn’t work in clubs in the Big Apple for the last decade of my life.

MF: What about the ladies? Is it true you dated film star Tallulah Bankhead?

BH: Listen, sugar, I’m gonna take my sex life with me to the grave.

MF: You’re well known for breaking the color barrier by performing with white musicians, starting with Artie Shaw in 1938.

BH: Yeah, that’s a nice story and all, but things weren’t exactly equal. They made me

use back entrances at the clubs, and I got the privilege of waiting in broom closets before hittin’ the stage. Got to the point where I hardly ever ate, slept, or went to the john without it being an NAACP-type production.

MF: A lot of your autobiography (*Lady Sings the Blues*, 1956) was, shall we say, embellished.

BH: The juicier the better. And I needed the money, man. Things ain’t free, you know. Besides, William Dufty wrote it. I never even read it.

MF: Care to clear up some of the myths?

BH: My folks never got married, for one, and we probably weren’t the first house around to have electricity. Also, my mom was 19 when I was born, not 13. But getting raped at 11, turnin’ tricks at 15, the drugs, the arrests—all that’s true blue. But don’t feel bad for me, now, baby. I gave as good as I got.

MF: In 1972, they made a movie from your autobiography.

BH: Who played me? No, wait! Lemme guess: Whitney Houston.

MF: No. Diana Ross.

BH: Too bad. Don’t matter, though. I heard the movie was bunk, makin’ a love story out of it and all. Shoot, if you wanna know me, play my songs, and start with “T’ain’t Nobody’s Business If I Do.” 🎵