BLOOD AT THE ROOT

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Reviews the book 'Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Cafe Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights,' by David Margolick.

Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Cafe Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights, by David Margolick
(Running Press, 160 pp., $16.95)

THIS small book is the story of a disturbing American song and the African-American woman who owned it. The aesthetic premise is beyond dispute: "Strange Fruit" belonged to Billie Holiday. She did not write a word of the lyrics. Some of those who were present in 1939, when she and the song came together, believe she did not at first know what the lyrics meant. But the song became her professional and emotional property for the rest of her life. The subject, of course, was lynching.

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root.
Black body swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees

More than 60 years later, in a very different America from the one that inspired them, those lyrics retain a chilling, poetic bluntness. They were not written, and were never performed, simply to entertain. Nobody sat at a piano in the Brill Building and concocted "Strange Fruit" in hope of a hit. The song came out of the injuries of the real world, not the need to create romantic illusions, and it was intended to provoke a social and political reaction. That made it a form of agit-prop, of course, but it was agitprop on a very high level. Listen to "Strange Fruit" today, in any of the six versions recorded by Billie Holiday, and you know this is not a musical cartoon out of the New Masses.

The song's context was genuine. In the decades before World War II, lynchings were very real indeed. David Margolick, a staff writer for Vanity Fair (where the substance of the book first appeared) cites a study by the Tuskegee Institute, whose "conservative figures" showed that from 1889 to 1940, 3,833 human beings were lynched in the United States, 90 percent of them in the South. A fifth of those victims of vigilante "justice" were not black. This usually obscured fact was graphically reinforced by the show called Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America, mounted last year at the Roth Horowitz gallery and then moved to the New York Historical Society. In that collection of ghastly souvenir postcards, most lynching victims are black, but among those hanged from trees, shot, or burned alive by self-righteous vigilantes there are also Jews, Italians, and
Latinos, along with women and girls. The lynch mobs—all those grinning and excited men, women, and children—are overwhelmingly white.

Pastoral scene of the gallant South,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh,
And the sudden smell of burning flesh

It was a photograph that actually inspired the writing of the song, which began as a poem written by a New York man named Abel Meeropol (who later added the music). He was white, Jewish, a passionate sympathizer of the Old Left, and taught English for many years at DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx. He was a friend of Earl Robinson, who wrote "Ballad for Americans" (which became a Paul Robeson standard), and his own work was usually light and topical ("Swing Away with Daladier" and "The Chamberlain Crawl" have not survived as part of the canon of American popular music). Margolick explains that Meeropol used the nom de plume "Lewis Allan" for much of his extracurricular writing, combining the names of two of his children who died as infants. At some point in the early 1930s, Meeropol saw a photograph of a terrible lynching in a civil-rights magazine, was haunted by it, and expressed his anger in a poem. According to Margolick, the New Masses agreed in 1936 to publish the poem; but it actually first appeared in a union publication called The New York Teacher.

There is something of a political blur in Margolick's account of the Meeropol story. On page 33, Margolick writes of Meeropol: "He and his wife were closet Communists, donating a percentage of their earnings to the party (the FBI maintained that he had belonged only until 1947, though it continued to follow him for 23 years after that)." On page 70, Meeropol is called to testify before a 1941 state investigation of Communist subversion of New York public schools, and is asked whether the CP paid him to write "Strange Fruit." He says: "I have never done any work for the Communist Party, I have never been paid by the Communist Party, I have nothing to do with the Communist Party."

Margolick doesn't sort out this apparent contradiction, which in any event has little to do with the power of the song. But although "Lewis Allan" remains a vague credit line—even supposed by some musical analysts to be the name of a black man—the Meeropol name became better known in the mid 1950s, when he and his wife adopted the two young sons of the executed Soviet spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. By then, little remained of the passions of the 1930s, when Abel Meeropol's wife would sing "Strange Fruit" at small gatherings, and others (most notably a black singer named Laura Duncan) performed it at fund raisers for the Spanish Republic, all before Billie Holiday held the lyrics in her hands and asked what "pastoral" meant. But Barcelona fell; the purge trials exposed the horrors of Stalinism; the United States entered the war in 1941; the Depression finally ended. Meeropol left teaching, went to Hollywood to work as a writer from 1944 to 1952, "was apparently never blacklisted" (according to Margolick), and came back to New York to work in early television.
Everything faded away from those years when Meeropol was writing his topical poems and songs—except "Strange Fruit."

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

Margolick's essay emphasizes the importance to American popular culture of Barney Josephson's Cafe Society, a Greenwich Village club that existed in ironic counterpoint to the uptown pretensions of the "exclusive" Stork Club and its dreadful owner and clientele. Margolick doesn't explore the lowercase phenomenon of cafe society, when the children of the old rich began to merge with Hollywood celebrities. I wish he had. But in the end, only Cafe Society, the club, could have served as delivery room for "Strange Fruit." It's difficult to imagine the Duke and Duchess of Windsor listening to it at the Stork Club.

Many older Americans interviewed by Margolick remember being stunned when they first heard the song before the war, and this is the basis for a claim that it was a kind of curtain raiser to the civil-rights movement. This proposal strikes me as a bit shaky. To be sure, the Commodore Records single (with "Fine and Mellow" on the other side) was released eight years before Jackie Robinson integrated baseball, and therefore integrated the stands of ballparks; 16 years before Rosa Parks took her seat on that bus because her feet hurt. But the song was not a major hit, and the claim is bit extravagant. After all, most jazz, and all of the blues, could be described as a cry for civil rights, demanding, as all of Holiday's other work demanded, a recognition of individual humanity. "Strange Fruit" differs from jazz and the blues because it argues from the universal to the particular, while most African-American music (certainly not all) does exactly the opposite. Max Roach and other black musicians testify in Margolick's book to the powerful impact the song made on them when they were young. But there were a number of black Americans who hated it, including Robeson, who objected to blacks' being portrayed as victims, and the fine writer Albert Murray, who said: "Who the hell wants to go hear something that reminds them of a lynching?"

The song was not a commercial hit for several reasons, all related to its somber style and searing message. Most radio stations wouldn't play it, and it wasn't available on most Saturday-night jukeboxes. But for Billie Holiday, who was a very old 24-year-old when she recorded "Strange Fruit," the song became very important. As an interpreter of popular music, she had an extraordinary talent for digging her autobiography out of the work of other people; this was the part of Billie Holiday that was absorbed by Frank Sinatra, who was her exact contemporary. (They shared one other accident of biography: In 1945 Sinatra appeared in an Academy Award-winning short film about tolerance called The House I Live In. The title song, heavy with an admirable liberal message, was written by Meeropol.) Holiday could take the banal lyrics of Tin Pan Alley and infuse them with her own terrible experiences, her dark knowledge of men and drugs, racism
and loneliness, and use an astringent irony to save them from syrupy sentimentality. She was a combination of deep feeling and great musical intelligence. The best of her work is full of rue, but no self-pity; it is urban, not rural; it contains some of the virtues of the stoic.

And yet it is hard to think of her music, and the dreadful dissipations of her heroin-poisoned later years, without thinking of "Strange Fruit." In many ways, that song provided the work with a center of gravity. Margolick does an admirable job of disentangling the myths Holiday wove about herself (most of them retailed in the wonderfully written "auto biography" she did with William Dufty). But in the mysterious ways of the genuine artist, Holiday managed to absorb a vast outer experience into her own life, using myth to give it meaning. When she sings, "here is a strange and a bitter crop," snapping off the final four-letter word as if wielding a whip, she could be speaking her own epitaph.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Billie Holiday at the New York Jazz Festival, 1957

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