

Billie (Lady Day) Holiday Bows Out

She Had a Right To Sing the Blues

By HAROLD L. KEITH
(Courier Managing Editor)

IT COULD BE argued that death was merciful to the late Billie Holiday.

• Here had been a great talent, shackled perhaps by "pot" and "snow" and "horse," the dread horsemen of narcotics and crippled too, by the ramifications of an unhappy love life and deep personal tragedy, who managed, nonetheless, to rise

into recognition as one of the all-time greats of jazzdom.

Billie was stricken down in her 44th year of life. Born on April 7, 1915, in Baltimore, Md., her singing career began in New York City at Jerry Praxon's Log Cabin Club.

It was not long before she joined the great Count Basie band as a featured vocalist and later, Artie Shaw's big swing outfit.

BILLIE'S EMERGENCE upon the scene presented such a demand for her talents that she began, in 1940, her career as a soloist. All along New York's famed strip of bistros, 52nd St., Billie was starred as one of the top darlings of cafe society.

• To list the many tunes which help waft Billie into stardom would be impossible here. However, it is safe to say that most will never forget her "Lover Man," "Strange Fruit," "God Bless the Child," "Solitude," "I Cover the Waterfront," "Fine and Mellow," "Don't Explain" and "Them There Eyes."

Of these tunes, "Strange Fruit" was perhaps the most controversial ever sung by Billie during her checkered career. The "strange fruit hanging from a poplar tree" depicted a Negro lynched in Dixie and "shook up" quite a few folks. There were those who said that the song was Communist-inspired and others who hailed it as a ballad which was indeed fitting for the times.

CONTROVERSY SEEMED to stick with Billie. As recently as 1956, she was involved in the middle of a ticklish situation regarding the publishing of her book, "Lady Sings the Blues," in which Miss Holiday charged that she was forced to delete certain portions of the story after threats were made against her.

• In fact, her husband and personal manager, Louis Mc-



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Kay, claimed at the time that most of the trouble she had with the law came as the result of "pressure" from "people of importance" who knew that Billie had certain damaging facts about them which would be earth-shaking if she made them public.

In December of 1956 McKay said, regarding the deletions from Miss Holiday's book, "We cut certain chapters out of the original manuscript after several persons involved read them simply because they were just too hot to handle."

Among the people Billie had written about in her original story were a Broadway actress from south of the Mason-Dixon line, a Chicago hotel owner and a top-flight British movie actor.

DESPITE THE FACT that Billie deleted these facts from her story, she often said that one day she just might reveal "the facts I didn't reveal in 'Lady Sings the Blues.'" Death made certain that the persons involved can now breathe easier.

• Even on her death bed, Billie jostled with the "habit" and, when death came was still under arrest on charges of having in her possession in the hospital a "deck" of "horse" (heroin).

The dope bugaboo rode Billie's back through much of her career. She was arrested in more than one state during the past 10 years on charges of being on the "kick." Her habit led her into a Federal hospital for the "cure," but things didn't happen and Billie was back on the scene with lush and, evidently, other things.

IT WAS HARD to say which worked the hardest on Billie, but it seems certain too, that "grog"



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played a major influence in shaping her outlook on things.

• Most certainly, her physical condition was none to the good when she collapsed on Sunday, May 31, and admitted to the Knickerbocker Hospital under the care of Dr. Eric Caminer. Her case was diagnosed by the hospital as "drug addiction and alcoholism." She was then carted off to the Metropolitan Hospital. However, Dr. Caminer knew that Billie's ailments were of another nature. He said that she was suffering from both a heart and liver condition, the latter having degenerated into an acute hepatitis.

Thus, Mrs. Eleanora McKay (Miss Holiday's real moniker) fought hard to "come back" from



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the brink of death. In fact, she had been sitting up and talking recently, telling newsmen that she would return to the "scene" and "talking all kinds of talk."

• But, Billie's bid was to fall short of its mark and death came suddenly on the night of July 15-16. Thus, Billie's name can now be added to a list which includes: Lester Young, Charley Parker, Charley Christian, Herschel Evans, Jimmy Blanton, Ma Rainey, Chano Pozo, "Fats" Waller, King Oliver, Jimmy Lunceford, Bessie Smith, Bix Biederbecke, Ivy Anderson, Chick Webb, Bill Robinson, Fate Marable and Sidney Bechet, to name a few.

What a session they must be having up there with Billie on hand to sing a few of her torchy ballads!



Holiday in Jail—Billie Holiday, on the road back after a series of arrests for dope, is shown leaving a Philadelphia jail in 1956. She and her husband and manager, Louis McKay, had been arrested after a raid on her hotel room. She was charged with being a narcotics user.



RAGS TO FURS



Better Days—This photo, taken in 1956, shows Billie Holiday, second from right, stopping at the Willard Hotel as guest of a Washington (D. C.) women's club. Left to right: Louise Shaw, Doris Haynes, Miss Holiday and Anna Harris.—Cabell Photo.