



STAY WITH ME

BILLIE HOLIDAY

Jack Lenz, writing recently in the *Sunday Mirror* (London), apparently quoted a critic who had said that compared with Billie Holiday, all other women singing about love sound like little girls playing house.

The statement was somewhat in the realm of hyperbole in view of the singing of La Vie en Rose and other extraordinary women of other eras, but in the context of contemporary pop and jazz singing, the comparison makes considerable sense. And it still does. The assumption that the present Lady Day is only a shade of the Billie Holiday of ten and twenty years ago is clearly substantiated by this and a significant percentage of most other Holiday records of this decade.

The point, as a *Times* Best Record review noted a few years ago, is that of course, Billie isn't what she was in the thirties or the forties. "Nobody says the same, least of all in the sort of self-expression. This is a Billie who has experienced a lot of pain and some joy in the years between and a Billie whose life perspective has changed, as there inevitably, with increasing years. . . . It has the right . . . as one put it after to hear Billie as the most emotionally striking singer in jazz, twenty years ago today."

What Davis agrees, she said in *The New Yorker*: "I'd rather hear her now. She's become much more mature . . . you know she's not thinking now what she was in 1942, and she's probably learned more about different things. And she still has more, probably more control, now than then."

Another witness is pianist Mel Weather, who has been her accompanist for two years, in *Blackboard*. Jack Ruby noted that what he had learned from working with the Billie of this decade: "I've learned about spacing, the placing of notes so that they don't clutter the melodic line. . . . Also, melodic phrasing. . . . Mel has learned what underpinning one note is playing, he has learned the value of measure and space. . . . He has learned the value of lyrics, how they affect the very sense of a melody and how they can bring the instrumental closer to the audience."

Billie possesses an penetrating, an ability to reach an audience consciously quickly because she has experienced a wide and deep range of what life can give and take away and doesn't lose position. But that's not enough. Many people have known and lived more in the measure of existence than Billie, but it doesn't, for one thing, bring intelligence to about those experiences into the kind of knowledge that can relate to, let's say, the lyrics of a song, the way one phrases those lyrics, the feel one brings them with. Billie has not only experienced a great deal, but she is very quick and perceptive, and consciously through the years, she has learned to see through them.

Billie, then, has become respected because she is a non-combination of qualities. There is her extraordinary, the just border of her voice and the way she sings even on the radio. There is, moreover, her capacity to feel. She has less of a wall between her and her feelings than most of us. And then, there is her capacity to communicate that feeling, to communicate it with a sometimes pitiless intelligence that tells us more about the song than the composer could have planned and that, in its every sharp creative action, tells us so much about her.

Even in the arts, very few people are able to let us see so far beneath—see so deeply inside. Billie does. Billie cuts beneath the surface—her own and ours.

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Billie Holiday. Illustration by Barry Davis

