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Jazzletter

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Intro

For nearly fifty years, it seemed that whenever a visiting American jazz performer arrived in England, Max Jones was at the dock or railway station or, later, airport to extend the hand of friendship and then, that being done, whip out his notepad and pencil and begin the faithful chronicling of whatever the annointed one had to say about music, food, England, anything. The results of this Boswellian dedication appeared for decades in the *Melody Maker*, and, more recently, in *Jazz Express*. Max was always there to ease the path of the visitor, and the number of friendships collected by this loving man are legion.

One of his gifts is a good ear. Faithful to the American speech he was transcribing, he never makes his subjects sound like projections of himself. Each speaks in his or her own voice, and its cadence rises right up from the dead flatness of printed paper. He's good, very good, at this, and self-denigrating to a fault. "No pundit I," he wrote me recently, "or critic really. Couldn't do like Balliett if I wanted to; mine in the main has been penny plain English in style, but fairly clear (I hope)." He need have no fear on that account.

This fall Macmillan in the U.K. and W.W. Norton in the U.S. will bring out a book titled *Talking Jazz*, derived from Max's interviews over the years. It is a treasury of jazz history — portraits of Dinah Washington, Stan Getz, Johnny Griffin, Johnny Hodges, Gerry Mulligan, Flip Phillips, Zoot Sims, Red Allen, Benny Carter, Sweets Edison, Bobby Hackett, Wingy Manone, Jimmy McPartland, Jimmy Witherspoon, Sy Oliver, Coleman Hawkins, Eddie Condon, and more. Thirty pages of the book are given over to a striking autobiographical monologue by Mary Lou Williams, the longest interview ever run by *Melody Maker*.

When Allyn Shipton, Max's editor at Macmillan, asked if I would be interested in printing an excerpt from the book, I accepted the offer with — as they used to say in nineteenth century fiction — alacrity. After reading the book carefully, I settled on the memoir of Billie Holiday, for several reasons. This piece (which I have condensed somewhat, with Max's permission) presents a vivid picture of a figure who has taken on a cult status in jazz. Much of the essay derives from four days Max and his wife spent with her at the end of a tour of Europe by a jazz troup organized and conducted by Leonard Feather. During those few days a friendship took shape between the singer and the British reporter.

It will help you in reading the piece if you know a number of things.

The British musician's union at that time would not allow American musicians to play England unless an equal number of British musicians played in the United States. And since there were few if any British musicians who could draw even ten customers to an American nightclub, nobody would book them, and therefore the British musicians' union in effect barred Americans. That's why Leonard Feather could not take his full troup to England.

Louis McKay is described as Holiday's husband. He wasn't — not at that time, although Leonard says that he and everyone else was under the impression that they were married. It has always been widely rumored that this "husband" and "manager" was her connection, one of the sundry pushers with whom she involved herself over the years. Like Edith Piaf, whom she so resembles in so many ways — the insecurities, the dope, the liquor, the lovers, the self-involvement and self-destructiveness, the arrogance, the coarse language, the childlike naivete, and the remarkable sirenic control over men — she had a gift for getting others to do for her, to run her errands and clear her way.

Leonard said that during that tour, she was in good shape. She was either off dope, he said, or she was being so well taken care of by Louis McKay that she was comfortable. She got drunk a few times, he said, but that was all.

It is often difficult to tell whether someone who is really good at it is on heroin. Larry Bunker says he was never able to tell whether Bill Evans was using or not. I was startled to learn that the fine bassist Hal Gaylor, one of my close friends since our youth, had been strung out, and the only reason I know even now is that Hal told me. Another friend who was addicted without my knowing it was the pianist Bill Rubenstein. And I lived with Bill when I first arrived in New York in 1962.

Even language has changed enormously since Billie Holiday died, thirty years ago next summer. The term "ofay" has all but faded away, even in the black population, whose younger members may give you a blank stare if you use it. But it was the generic term for whites, supposedly the pig Latin for "foe". "Spook" still has a measure of currency, but in any case it was the black term for blacks. Because both words were so widely used in those days, they were weakened to the point of losing pejorative connotation. Even ofays in the jazz world said "ofay." "Negro" was still used as a polite and deferential term; "black" was not used and had a tone of condescension. The terms were deliberately reversed by leading black militants, probably as much as anything to confuse and discomfit the white population. In one of the most curious linguistic developments of our era, the term "black" has become accepted by even the white population and "Negro" rejected, although the United Negro College Fund has not changed its name, nor for that matter has the NAACP. "Negro" of course is Spanish and Portuguese, and means nothing more nor less than "black." In any case, it now seems strange to hear Billie Holiday using the older terminology. And she uses another term that has faded from use, "viper." A viper was a pot smoker.

Many people have taken note of the effect of the English language on jazz itself. The music's rhythmic character — strong dynamic stresses alternating with weaker notes, and a generally syncopated feeling — has interesting parallels to what became an

American language. The fact that the music was developed by involuntary immigrants from Africa does not obviate this. By the time jazz began to evolve, they were speaking English, a language they affected as profoundly as it affected them. Art Blakey, who may know a thing or two about rhythm, is adamant on the point that this music is not African, it is American. That American mutated into almost a different language from English is evident in Max's writing — "interval" for "intermission," for example. But in the age of television and radio and movies and records, the divergence between the two seems to be ending, and many regionalisms in both England and North America are disappearing. Note the integration of jazz slang, originally black patois, into Max's diction.

Max, quoting Stanley Dance, makes an interesting point about speech rooted in time rather than in place. Even in reading 1940s newspapers, one is aware of the change not only in diction but also of rhythm. The English language may be going through an evolution as rapid as that which occurred in the time of Chaucer. Whether this is good or bad may be debated, but it is assuredly occurring. The black southern habit of dropping the s from verbs in the third-person singular is *not* a debasement of English, it is an improvement. We have substituted nouns and pronouns for inflected endings, and that s is a useless vestige of the old forms.

Also requiring explanation is the reference to cabaret cards. In that time, anyone wanting to work anywhere in New York City where alcoholic beverages were dispensed had to have a "cabaret card" — musicians, comedians, even waiters and bus boys. People with any sort of police record weren't issued these cards. The process of getting one was humilating, requiring mug shots and fingerprinting. Holiday at one point seems to be suggesting the discrimination was racial, although later she intimates that it wasn't. In this at least the law seems to have been even-handed: black and white musicians alike were subject to this vicious police control.

One of them to be denied a cabaret card was Bill Rubenstein, who'd had some sort of marijuana bust in his high-school years. That was all "the authorities" had on him. Evidently for all their sanctimonious diligence in protecting the public from being corrupted by bus boys and jazz musicians, the New York fuzz was no more aware than I that Bill — a wonderful musician, by the way, and a hell of a nice guy — was a stone junkie.

Billie in Britain

by Max Jones

LONDON

Even to think of Billie Holiday is to fill my mind with recollections of a love affair with a voice. In the middle 1930s, this was no exceptional thing. I had dug Bessie Smith, was strongly attached to Mildred Bailey, and occasionally entranced by Ivie Anderson, Ella Fitzgerald and Connie Boswell. And Lee Wiley was inspiring lovely emotions. But with Billie it was different, and almost instantaneous. I was hooked on all her qualities of sound and style, on her almost indolent improvising, on that curiously expressive voice and lagging delivery, on the fact that she never came across as slick, artificial, or winning in a little-girl way.

In those days it was something to hear a vocal chorus which stood shoulder to shoulder with instrumental contributions by Eldridge, Wilson, Webster, Goodman. The records were easy to love, and I quickly came across other receptive listeners in other parts of the country.

I met a collector who specialized in lecture-recitals on Billie Holiday. Within minutes he was telling how he had acquired four very rare Billies. "I could get copies for you and bring them over on the bike next weekend," he said. He was as good as his word. None of us then would have believed that when the records were made, our heroine was broke.

It is not possible for today's younger listeners to experience the revelation Billie's recordings provided in those far-off, memorable times. But those records confirm that she was as good and original as we thought, and worth the praise heaped upon her by other singers as well as writers and those many thousands grateful simply to have seen or heard her. The "group" recordings made under Teddy Wilson's or Holiday's own name between 1935 and 1939 include some of the best of small-band-with-vocal jazz put on wax before the advent of the LP. Quite a few rank with the most delightful jazz-song performances ever cut.

The records show too how influential Billie was in reshaping jazz and popular singing. Though she was inimitable, her style affected performers as disparate as Frank Sinatra and Dinah Washington. Her influence worked in varied and subtle ways, not only in her approach to lyrics, her use of tone, pitch and vibrato, her reconstruction of a melody and laid-back swing, but in her visual delivery of a number. Among scores who inherited fragments of her artistry are Peggy Lee, Carmen McRae, Abbey Lincoln, Annie Ross, Marilyn Moore, Cleo Laine, Carole Sloane, Norma Winstone, Anita O'Day, Maria Muldaur, Phoebe Snow, Sylvia Sims, Marie Bryant, and Maxine Sullivan. Even Mildred Bailey's phrasing was never quite the same after she heard Lady Day. The same could be said for dozens more, especially if we delve into the vocalizing of many lesser-known women singers in Britain, Germany, Scandinavia, Canada, and even (I'm told) Japan.

Jazz singing, however, being founded on American speech, is the hardest jazzcraft for Europeans to master; thus the paucity, and some would say total absence, of non-American authentic jazz voices.

To prove Billie the most complete *jazz* singer of all time is no easy thing. Unquestionably her singing was a natural extension of her speech, as indeed was Armstrong's, and was unique because *she* was unique. Stanley Dance pointed out to me that many women of that time — Billie, Cue Hodges, Helen Procope were examples — spoke in a way that now seems peculiar to their period; and it went into their music. The same could be said of such people as Jelly Roll Morton, Sammy Price, and Earl Hines, from different parts of the country, who had a way of speaking that belonged to a time rather than a place.

When we discovered Billie, and the delectable taste of her talking voice, she was three parts mystery. Career details were not then known to us, and her age was uncertain. She just arrived from nowhere, sounding almost fully mature. Her personality, her nature were uniquely laid bare on records from the start. And, growing up with her disembodied voice, we became exceedingly interested in the charmer so generously exposed on shellac. When the first photograph appeared in a Vocalion catalogue, I was surprised though not displeased by the smiling chubby face

surmounted by a large-brimmed tilted hat. Later, her looks became more familiar from images of a slimmer, beautiful woman usually sporting a white gardenia in her hair. Years passed and I naturally wished to meet the object of my infatuation and I knew she wanted to visit Britain, but I had a long wait. By the early 1950s I had learned a great deal about her from books and periodicals — also from sightings in musical shorts and in the mock jazz film *New Orleans*. I knew the seductive voice had changed with her appearance, the revolutionary vocal approach had become mannered, and that the dramatic power had managed to increase as a compensation. In some respects at least, her craftsmanship was improved; and when finally I met the Lady she spoke with assurance of being able to do things with a song that she could never have achieved in girlish days.

One day late in 1953, I received news from Leonard Feather that Billie would hit Britain in February 1954 at the close of his *Jazz Club USA* package, of which she was the star.

The rest of the company couldn't play here, because of the policy of the musicians' union involved, but concerts were fixed for Billie and she was able to use her pianist, Carl Drinkard.

She was due to arrive at London Airport from Paris on Monday, February 8. I made arrangements with *Melody Maker* to drive out to Heathrow to greet her and to cover her in general, as chance permitted. Reports of the tour had been favorable.

I drove to the airport well before mid-day, armed with a photographer and half a bottle of whisky. Both could be useful, I knew, as means of breaking the ice, and both were to come in handy. Stories of Lady Day's uncertain temper and "unreasonable behavior" crossed my mind. Parking near the Arrivals lounge, I felt the *frisson* of an imminent adventure — eager anticipation tinged with apprehension.

I had not long to wait. A commanding figure emerged from the Customs hall. She was clad almost from neck to foot in a luxurious blond fur coat topped by a tight-fitting woolly hat, and was followed through the barrier by three men. They were —in priority order — husband-manager Louis McKay, pianist Carl Drinkard, and dancer Taps Miller who chanced to share the same plane from Paris.

The Princess of Harlem, as they were calling her in France, looked tired, cold, and resentful, as though she had suffered many fools in the past. Not wanting to be added to the total, I greeted her with measured warmth, politeness, and a degree of reserve I was far from feeling. I was honored, I said, to make her acquaintance. I saw an imposing woman of average height —she was five foot five, I believe — with handsome wellboned features and an intolerant, faintly mocking expression. She seemed to me less lean in the face than I had gathered from the *New Orleans* screen image. Her speaking voice was slurry, a little cracked in tone, and meanly attractive. What she said inclined to the brief, hip, and pithy. She had dignity and natural magnetism and I thought I perceived in her an odd amalgam of naivety and experience.

She was moderately friendly, though understandably detached, and her manner thawed when I referred to mutual acquaintances such as Marie Bryant, Helen and Stanley Dance, and Mary Lou Williams. Everyone who warranted it was introduced to everyone else and we secured a few photographs.

I got off to a poor start by suggesting a shot with Carl Drinkard and Taps Miller (the latter had caused a hold-up at French customs by being checked for drugs, which had infuriated Billie). In addition, this delayed her progress to the waiting limousine. She signalled her impatience to be moving but something guarded me that morning and she agreed to the picture with a resigned lift of the eyebrows. Her glance clearly warned me: "You're taking chances, buster. Let's get it over and blow."

Now it isn't the simplest act in the world to present a half of Scotch to a proud-looking woman who is at once your jazz heroine and a virtual stranger — and, by now, also shut away in the rear of a hired car. Worse, she was refusing to look in my direction. But faint heart never won fur-coated lady.

Opening the door gingerly, I proferred the bottle, asking whether it was too early for a taste and apologizing for the lack of glasses. The look of menace was replaced by a smile. I don't think she spoke but she slid forward and the bottle vanished into the mink just as her retinue entered the limo. Then the car was driven away in the direction of London.

A press reception had been fixed for early afternoon at the Piccadilly Hotel, where Billie was staying. The questioning was under way when I arrived. Already she was looking harassed. the lay press gents — minimally concerned with her musical accomplishments — wished to know about her drug habit. The reporters knew she had been imprisoned on narcotics charges, and that she was not allowed to sing in any New York "cabarets" because the police department had withdrawn her cabaret card. They questioned her closely — and exclusively, so far as I recall — about her troubles. "Are you still on dope, Miss Holiday?" asked one.

Billie ignored the question but explained that she had served her time for the offense and expected to be able to start off again with a clean slate. "I can't work in any places in New York that sell whiskey," she said. "Why whisky? It's a city ordinance or something. I guess they're stuck with it. I'm trying to get my police card back. You know, I'm not the only one: *some* kids have been in trouble two, three times. . . " she named a well-known girl singer who was not, as it happened, black " . . .and are still working. So why pick on me? Somebody's got a hand in it somewhere; some kind of politics. That's what I'm squawking about."

Interrupting another question, she answered: "No, I don't think it's because I'm a Negro. I just don't dig it. I guess somebody has to be the goof."

By what I knew of her, Billie was not obsessed with race relations and color bias. She was, I think, a "race woman" in that she refused to imitate "white" manners, modes of speech, and standards of conduct, and ridiculed those that did. But she was in

Notice

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no way a "professional Negro" or, for that matter, a professional personality of any kind. What she believed, she said. And what she believed was most likely to be the result of her personal experience. In Billie's experience, the police were part of a system which was subject to bribery, political pressure, gangster pressure, moral prejudice, and all the weaknesses of mankind. She thought withholding of the cabaret card was unfair, but she wasn't prepared to attribute it to Jim Crowism on the part of the cops.

Whatever the Police Department's motives may have been, Billie didn't want to talk about them this first afternoon in London. Her face often bore an expression of deep sadness and, as often, one of dissatisfaction tinged with a smouldering kind of explosiveness. At this early stage in our acquaintance I thought I could detect danger signals.

Her answers were becoming briefer now.

"I suppose your friends are still fighting for you," said one Daily.

"You know, we don't talk about it, we *forget* it," she told him.

Rescue was urgently called for and I told the company at large that I didn't suppose Miss Holiday had traveled all this way to give a lecture on narcotics. I asked how she had come by her nickname, Lady Day (though I knew the answer), and she shone upon me a smile of gratitude. Would she be singing *Strange Fruit* at her concerts? I followed up. Then, whenever a drugs question began to rear its head, I interposed a query about her program or records or accompanists.

Billie saw what I was up to and seemed appreciative. Though able to look after herself, physically and verbally, she felt uncertain in strange surroundings. She told us how Lester Young named Her Lady (Day) and her mother Duchess. "I named him the President, and actually I was also Vice President — of the Vipers Society, you know. We were the Royal Family of Harlem."

As the conversation warmed up, with assorted references to ofays and spooks, Prez and Pops, Bessie and the Queen — Dinah Washington — a few pressmen left. "Who the hell was *that* guy?" she asked about the principal inquisitor. "He couldn't say nothing but 'dope'."

When I told her he was the *Daily Blank*, she did a bit of snorting. "Well," she said with finality, "I was just about ready to run his *Daily Blank* ass out of here." She laughed, drank a little Scotch, and looked offended. "I hate it without ice," she said.

While somebody rang down for ice water, Lady Day mused over Lester:

"Now that's been going on since around 1938," she told us. "I was given that title by Lester Young, the President. I was with Basie's band for a time, and Lester used to live at home with my mother and me. I used to be crazy about his tenor playing, wouldn't make a record unless he was on it. He played music I like, didn't try to drown the singer. Teddy Wilson was the same, and Buck Clayton.

"But Lester's always been the President to me; he's my boy — and with him I have to mention Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith. Many's the whipping I got for listening to their records when I was a child.

"I used to run errands for a madam on the corner. I wouldn't run errands for anybody, still won't carry a case across the street today, but I ran around for this woman because she'd let me listen to all Bessie's records — and Pops's record of *West End Blues*.

"I guess I was nine years old then. Been listening to Pops and Bessie ever since that time. Of course, my mother considered that kind of music sinful; she'd whip me in a minute if she caught me listening to it. Those days we were supposed to listen to hymns or something like that."

By this time most of the daily press had stolen out. Billie didn't seem worried by their departure. "Some of these guys were getting me a little salty," she said. "I didn't come three thousand miles to talk about that shit. It's ended."

We asked Billie when her British visit would be over.

"I'll be here until Tuesday, I reckon. After that I'm not sure. We've been offered so many jobs, Paris, Africa, even some Variety in England. Daddy — "here she looked across at husband Louis" — hasn't made our plans yet, but we have a good offer back home."

Louis McKay added that getting back into New York cabaret could mean upward of $75,000 a year. Billie said, "It's not just the dough, it's the principle of the thing. To me, it's unfair."

On the way out of the hotel, we said goodbye to Carl Drinkard. He had joined Billie in Washington in 1949. Said Carl, "I've been with Lady nearly five years. You know something? Her singing still amazes me."

That evening, at her invitation, I returned to the hotel with my wife Betsy, a record player, and a bunch of new and old Holiday recordings. She and Louis were in bed, but not sleepy. For a few hours we played music, smoked and drank a little, and chewed the fat. Billie loved hearing the old sides, and reflected a stream of thoughts about songs and musicians she had worked with. All fascinating to us, of course, and rewarding to someone who had hoped fervently to strike up a sympathetic relationship with the prime enchantress of his first jazz decade.

Of Lester Young, Teddy Wilson, Louis, Freddie Greene, Bobby Tucker, Annie Ross, and Ben Webster she spoke fondly, ladling praise to instrumentalists who accompanied a singer unselfishly and helpfully. Now and then a bitter note intruded. She was contemptuous of phonies in any walk of life. Of Buck Clayton she announced, "Prettiest cat I ever saw." When Roy Eldridge cropped up in the conversation, she surprised us by confiding, "He stole my cherry, you know." But she smiled appreciatively when Little Jazz's mean trumpet snaked from the grooves. Almost more abrupt was her comment on Sid Catlett. "Honey," she said in solemn tones, "Big Sid . . . biggest dick I saw in my whole life." I was certainly impressed.

I never heard her put down a really good singer, though she could be cutting about the duds and those she supposed had slighted her. Some entertainers, Lena Horne and Ella Fitzgerald among them, she evidently loved as friends. On the subject of people who were generally acknowledged to have copied aspects of her style, she was strikingly tolerant. She viewed the imitations as a form of fondness and admiration, and she spoke affectionately of Peggy Lee.

In the next few days I traveled around with Billie and her husband, and got to know her quite well. I saw a good deal of her "temperament," but during that week she was more often happy than low, though the smallest upsets would get her storming. At her first rehearsal, with Carl Drinkard and several British musicians in a Leicester Square club, she was angry about some mislaid music parts. She settled down grimly to the job of running

through her program, saying nothing except what was relevant to it, and singing only the minimum necessary to a good productive rehearsal. Even so, it was my first "live" audition and I was absorbed and moved by it.

As soon as it ended, I had to return to work. And I left without speaking to Billie, who was arguing and looking thunderous. Maybe her pianist was having a hard time that day. He took me aside and explained, "If Lady likes you, she'll do anything in the world for you. But if she don't — look out. I mean, when she's feeling evil, don't cross her. Because if you do, she's going to hit you." He weighed me up in his mind before continuing: "And if she hits you, let's face it, she's going to knock you down."

Next time we met she said, "I saw you digging me." And after her opening concert in Manchester, she remarked on the awareness of the English audience. I realized she was gratified but nevertheless puzzled by the extent of our admiration for and knowledge of her work.

For me it was the start of a friendship I found as touching as it was surprising. I chauffered her when needed, ran errands, took her out for food and drinks, and visited her and McKay at the hotel. I saw as much of her as I could — and hold on to my job — and as she had taken instantly to my wife Betsy we were able to go on the town as a foursome, invariably augmented as soon as the first few glasses had been emptied. Mostly we talked about music, booze, sex, drugs, politics, gangsters, film actors, club owners, writers, and cafe society; about dogs, or clothes, and shopping. Billie nursed a belief that many of the mishaps and misfortunes befalling her were due to "politics," by which she seemed to mean the machinations of nebulous forces connected with an underground fellowship of bookers, managers, cops, lawyers, taxmen, pushers, and assorted authorities.

Her own life style, probably responsible for much of the disorder swirling about her person, she defended stoutly as "my own damn business." Sadly, she accepted responsibility for her habits, while fully conscious of the fact that dope suppliers — at times husbands or lovers — had leeched most of her earnings, and continued to amuse herself in her chosen fashion. I say "sadly" only because the immoderate use of stimulants shortened her life. This she foresaw, and accepted. She wasn't unhappy about it while we were with her in '54, and it is necessary to correct impressions of a tragic lady with morbid interests, very rough language, and a taste for bad husbands and depressing songs.

Some of these things, yes. But she enjoyed drinking and narcotics, and the men while they lasted, and smiled —inwardly, at any rate — while singing *What a Little Moonlight, I Only have Eyes for You, Them There Eyes*, and one or two others. More wistful items like *Willow Weep for Me* were uplifting too. Her bearing on stage was something to see; in the street she looked stunning. Her language was savage, it's true, but usually to the point. She was bright, tough, realistic, stylish, transparently sincere most of the time and lovable for much of it.

She fitted comfortably into a quiet corner of the Studio Club in Swallow Street late one afternoon, looking swish in a ski suit newly purchased from Simpson's, plus the familiar knitted cap, and making cute faces for "Daddy" as he popped off a few shots for the family album. She took a sort of child-like pleasure in the open admiration she found in England, and accepted the compliments without demur. When my brother-in-law paid his respects and asked if he could have the honor of getting her a drink, she said, "Yes, I'll have a triple brandy with a cointreau float."

Later that night we moved on to the Stork Club, almost next door, for food and drink "on the McKays." Eventually Billie was persuaded to sing two or three songs with pianist Denny Turner's trio. When we collected our coats in the small hours, I heard her remonstrating with the captain to the effect that if those goddamn people knew what she was paid to sing professionally, they'd have brought champagne on the house. Instead they had given Louis the whole bill. I never discovered the outcome of that dispute but Billie was accustomed to winning her fights, and I thought her to be in the right. In any event, the night was not over.

When I had invited the McKays to our home, she had explained that she never went to people's houses: "Because the drinks don't come up fast enough, honey, and you can't leave when you want to." But at the Stork we had met Dick Kravitz from *Esquire* magazine, who spoke about getting her on the cover — a big deal to her. He twisted her arm, or McKay's, and it was agreed we'd all motor over to Regents Park and sink a bottle or two at the elegant home of Vasco Lazslo, the noted painter, who not unnaturally had to be prised from his bed in order to receive the unexpected revelers. Soon after we were seated a plaintive voice demanded, "Who's pouring the damn drinks here? They ain't coming up very fast."

Another day, when Billie was pursuing the idea for an evening binge, I told her we were booked for a dinner convention laid on by a trade organization known as the Jazz Record Retailers Association. It sounded a stiff affair, I warned, guessing she wouldn't want to go, but of course she would be welcome to accompany us. They were jazz people, after all, including several Holiday freaks. To my astonishment she accepted on the spot. The JRRA committee, after initial consternation, readily agreed to lay on an extra place at the set dinner. Made a last-minute guest of honor and treated with reverent courtesy by the record dealers, Billie exuded charm and patience during the business hocus pocus and established an easy rapport with the company on her own serene terms. Taking her there was, I guess, one of the quietly spectacular achievements of my jazz-hacking years.

Her concert tour kicked off on Friday, February 12. When she stepped onto the stage of the Free Trade Hall, the applause must have frightened the porter in the Midland Hotel up the street. The almost unbelievable had happened. Lady Day was behind a Manchester microphone, wearing a black dress with a gold thread in it, diamond necklace and earrings, and a patch of silver-sprayed hair a little to one side — where the gardenias used to be pinned.

She smiled slightly in acknowledgment and rocked into *Billie's Blues*, then a fastish *All of Me*, a beautiful *Porgy*, *I Cried for You* (which began slowly, then whipped up), and a rather weird *Them There Eyes* on which she and Carl Drinkard seemed to travel separate ways. This was really it — for me and, I'm sure, most of the two thousand people there. I had gone into the hall with the conviction that Billie was the best lady singer still on the jazz scene. So the performance was a confirmation rather than a discovery. She looked calm and happy until the microphone gave up on *Blue Moon*, her eighth number. She then gave us *My Man* unaided by electricity, and retired before doing the encores, *I Only Have Eyes for You* and *Strange Fruit*. The band provided

what I thought was the best support she got on her short tour.

And Billie's own performance moved me more than any of her others — perhaps because it was my first Holiday concert; perhaps because the hall was good, the crowd dead silent, and I was positioned to catch every vocal inflection and every gesture of face, hand, and shoulder.

Now and again she announced a song, looking surprised the first time when applause broke out before she had reached the title. Afterwards she told me, "I never speak on the stage. I once did thirty-six songs at Carnegie Hall and didn't say a damn word. I just felt happy with this English audience — diggin' everything I was doing. I guess they wanted to hear my talking voice as well as my singing." This idea seemed completely new to her.

We went back to the hotel and celebrated. Later Harold Pendleton came over from the hall, full of regrets for the faulty mike.

"Forget about it," said Billie. "That was such a sweet little guy who came out and apologized and brought me another mike." (That one hadn't worked either). "He apologized so much I left sort of as if I'd ruined his show. When you go back, be sure to tell him I love him."

She was in top form for the celebration, posing for innumerable pictures taken by Louis McKay, taking photos herself, and talking with relish about Basie band days. She spoke of Lester Young's battles with section-mate Herschel Evans. "Normally I don't go for those saxophone battles," she said. "But those cats really hated each other, and it kept them both blowing all the time.

"They were forever thinking up ways of cutting the other one. You'd find them in the band room hacking away at reeds, trying all kinds of new ones, and anything to get ahead of the other.

"Of course Herschel had the great big beautiful tone. Lester had less tone, but a whole lot of ideas. Once Herschel asked Lester, 'Why don't you play alto, man? You got an alto *tone*.' Lester tapped his head: 'There's things going on up there, man,' he told Herschel. 'Some of you guys are all belly.'"

On Saturday, soon after midday, we left for Nottingham, where Billie was appearing at the Astoria Ballroom. Rehearsal was called for five and Carl Drinkard went through the routines with the rhythm men from the resident Derek Sinclair orchestra. As things were going smoothly, Billie slipped out to boost her spirits, with a tomato juice and several milk chocolates. Like most performers, she never ate a meal for some hours before a concert.

Then she went off on a shopping expedition, via the local pubs, with Betsy, and took considerable pleasure in buying pajamas and other things for "my Louis." Presented with the bill at Marks and Spencer, Billie hauled up her skirt and produced a roll of notes from the top of her stocking (shades of Bessie Smith), observing that it was safer there.

The two women had escaped while I watched rehearsal, so I started doing the round of local taverns. I had checked out only three before I found them in the far corner of a bar, laughing at life over two large drinks. "I knew he'd track us down, honey," Billie observed in the special voice that conveyed a kind of fond derision.

I called up liquid reinforcements and joined the table in the Horse and Groom, which Billie thought looked just like all the pubs she had seen in films made in England. Soon we got onto her nickname, Billie.

"I was a real tomboy when I was young," she explained. "And my old man called me Bill. You see, he wanted a boy and Mama a girl, so they were both satisfied. My real name's Eleanor, but almost everyone calls me Billie, excepting Basie and Billy Eckstine. To this day they still call me William.

"Of course, if I go to my home town, Baltimore, someone will shout out 'Eleanor!' And nobody answers. I'm looking around and thinking, 'Where the hell's Eleanor?'"

That evening Billie did two sets at the Astoria, one around nine and the other about 10:45. Each was of five songs, and for the second spot she brought out three we hadn't heard at Manchester: *What a Little Moonlight Can Do*, *You're Too Marvelous*, and *I Only Have Eyes for You*.

Being a ballroom, the place was noisy: too noisy for proper appreciation of Billie's subtleties. But it was packed, the atmosphere was festive, and nobody got too upset when the mike acted up through a couple of numbers. I think Billie was expecting it by now.

Drawing by John Heard, 1973

In Nottingham there was a surfeit of girls and women — because of the lace industry, I was informed. Walking around the balcony between sets, Billie eyed the dancing throng with a sardonic expression. "Hey! Look at those bitches dancing together," she told Betsy with enthusiasm. The scene added something to her knowledge of the Old Country, and you got the feeling that these were the kind of ordinary people she understood and felt to be square and not too corrupted.

I had offered the McKays a lift in my car back to their London hotel, wishing to save them time and trouble. I should not have done it.

With a Sunday rehearsal before them, she and Louis packed

quickly and got into the car, expressing the hope that Jones would find the swiftest night route to London. "You probably won't hear a word out of me until we get to that hotel," Billie promised, and fell immediately to sleep.

She was awakened only too soon, in deep dark country, to find the car stationary, bonnet up and wreathed in steam. In an effort to promote American standards of heating I had shut the radiator blind for too long. The hose had blown off, and the last of the water was now gone.

There was no garage open for forty-six miles, the way we were going, and only the unstinted help of a Bingham policeman who, clad in pajamas, coat, and slippers, brought up reserves of water and tools, and got us mobile by one in the morning.

Lady Day, I could sense, was sorry she hadn't gone by train, even though she didn't care much for trains. "I like flying," she'd told me. "I'd fly across the street if they ran a service for it."

As we lumbered off, hissing like a Stanley Steamer from the leaks in the joint, I asked incautiously if Lady was all right.

"No I ain't," she said promptly. "I'm cold and disgusted. Take me to an air station, a railroad station, anywhere there's something goin'! Only get me out of this car." After a resigned silence, she inquired: "How much damn farther we got to go?"

I dipped the headlights in time to miss a sign post. It read: "London 110 miles."

We stopped repeatedly to replenish the cooling system, and when the cans were empty I resorted to extreme measures to get us to a cafe on the North Road. Waking up again, Lady demanded suspiciously, "What's he up to now?" Betsy admitted I was peeing into the radiator. Billie subsided with some profanity, but I believe she liked me for that. At the cafe Louis and the Joneses slunk inside for refreshments, leaving the legendary body sleeping and dishevelled on the rear seat of the Ford. We looked up apprehensively every time the doors swung open, McKay seeming to be as scared as we. Billie slept on, and we resumed the stop-start progress.

We bade the McKays a brief goodbye at the Piccadilly Hotel at 5:30 a.m. on Sunday. That afternoon, Billie rehearsed hard with Jack Parnell's band. She had discarded some of her underclothes during the long night (while feeling unwell), and these Betsy had washed and pressed in time to return to their owner at the Albert Hall. Lady reacted with genuine gratitude and surprise, as though such little kindnesses were still unexpected. In the evening she gave a splendid performance of fifteen songs, ending, as she liked to do, with *Strange Fruit*.

Despite bad lighting and the odd tricks of the hall that make drummer's off-beats hit the ears like bad on-beats, Billie gripped an audience of some six thousand.

Before she left, she told someone, "I still love Max, in spite of that car ride." I hope she meant it.

She enjoyed the acclaim she received in Europe. Later she said the crowd of six thousand at the Albert Hall had given her one of the greatest receptions of her life.

Saying goodbye to her was like saying goodbye to an old friend who values you despite your faults. She said to Betsy one day, "I know Max loves me, but can you stop him talking me to death?"

On November 11, 1958, I received a telegram from Paris. It read: AT HOTEL DE PARIS TILL THUR EVENING LOVE BILLIE HOLIDAY. Next day I telephoned her there. She sounded dragged, said there was nobody who spoke the damn language, and asked, "Why aren't you here?" I should have gone at once, but the paper didn't want to release me or pay expenses and I was as usual strapped for cash. Betsy's advice was to draw out what savings I had, sod the *Melody Maker*, and do what I could for the disspirited singer. I have always regretted not taking her advice.

Soon I heard she wanted to come to London to stay. Since separating from Louis McKay she no longer wished to live in the States. "I want to settle in Britain because I love the people," she declared. "They do not just call me a singer; they call me an artist, and I like that." After a tour round France, she was to go to Italy, then probably to come to London.

Late in February 1959, I heard that she was scheduled to appear in a London TV show. I checked arrival time, hotel booking and so on, then drove out to meet her plane. "The whole thing was a rush," she said. "That's why I couldn't let you know in time. I knew damn well you'd be here anyway."

It was the prelude to a few more hectic days in her extraordinary presence. And the lasting friendship I felt had been struck in 1954 resumed as if there had been no interruption. But this time Billie was separated from Louis and from the mink coat. She was showing signs of increasing strain, and was clearly dissatisfied with her domestic and professional life. Nevertheless, she was an often diverting, always interesting, companion. I guessed she was ill but her defiant nature would not allow her to give in, just as it would not allow her to feel apologetic about her need for drugs. She spoke repeatedly of her desire to live over here and, at the time, she was serious. Back home again it might have been a different matter. I never really knew. I tried to arrange record dates but had no luck. It was a sort of tragedy that she couldn't have got over here while there was a chance of regular work.

Again, I spent most of my waking hours with her, collecting her on the morning of the program to take her to rehearsal (nobody had laid on a car), shopping for vodka when we reached the studio (she was meticulous about paying for bottles, handing me the cash in dollar bills), and lending support through the day. Singers Beryl Bryden and Yolande Bavan, and the faithful Betsy, all turned up at Granada television to lavish help and attention on their favorite. In fact, we formed an ad hoc Holiday Supporters Club, bent on giving her the best care we could. One event I cannot forget was taking Billie to the Downbeat, a musicians' hangout in Soho. She wanted to sing, and a spontaneously formed group accompanied her in several songs. The club telephone rang in mid-song, and when a Hooray Henry customer prolonged his phone conversation, an enraged Kenny Graham — bandleader, tenor man, and Holiday worshipper — moved swiftly towards him and carried the protesting Hooray bodily away to enforced silence. The act somehow typified the hold Billie exercised on all *her* people.

The TV date was for *Chelsea at Nine*. On Tuesday, she sang *Porgy*, *Please Don't Talk About Me*, and *Strange Fruit* at the Granada Theatre in King's Road. The last was accompanied by her pianist, Mal Waldron. The other songs had the support of Mal and Peter Knight's orchestra.

On a song that measured up to her, she could communicate with an almost painful intensity. Part of it is "soul," part of it is expert timing. Then there is the troubled tone — Ethel Waters said she sings as though her shoes are too tight — and what Steve Race described as "the curiously instrumental quality of her

vibrato."

The subject of vibrato came up spontaneously, while the Lady relaxed one evening at the Club Caribe in Leicester Square. A record was playing. Billie demanded to know, "Who is that? Sounds as though she's crying. She reminds me of Judy Garland with that vibrato." It turned out that the owner of the vibrato was Roberta Sherwood, and Billie said, "When I got into show business you had to have that shake. If you didn't, you was dead. And when I sang, people said, 'What's she putting down?'

"I always did try to sing like a tenor, or some horn. That big vibrato fits a few voices, but those that have it usually have too much. I just don't like it. You have to use it sparingly. You know, the hard thing is *not* to sing with that shake."

I read Billie some of the things Miles Davis said about her to Nat Hentoff in *The Jazz Review* in December 1958. Among them: "I love the way she sings . . . like Lester Young and Louis Armstrong play . . . she doesn't need any horns. She sounds like one anyway."

Billie smiled faintly and said, "That's how I try to sound; I didn't know I succeeded."

The possibility of making Europe her headquarters remained much in her mind. I reported in November that she was contemplating settling here, insisting that she would buy a house in London and work in Britain, France, Sweden. The reason was simple: "I can't get my police card in New York."

I was writing a letter to her when friends telephoned to say she was dead.

— Max Jones

Codetta

She and Louis McKay were married in 1957, and hardly had he established legal claim on her than they separated. This was the period when she talked so much of moving to England.

It was widely believed that the true love of her life was Lester Young. At one time, they were on the outs. They apparently had not spoken for months. Then they were both booked to appear on a show in the CBS television series titled *Seven Lively Arts*. Also on the show was the Gerry Mulligan Quartet, whose bassist at the time was Bill Crow. Prez and Billie did not speak. Then she went on camera and sang. Prez picked up his horn, walked out, and played for her in loving support. Whatever their spat, it was ended. Bill said that he and almost every other musician who watched them from the wings was on the verge of tears.

On March 15, 1959, Lester Young died in New York of a combination of ailments, caused or compounded by alcohol. Billie told a number of friends, "I'm next."

In early June, Mrs. Eleanora McKay was admitted to Metropolitan Hospital in New York with serious liver and heart conditions. But all the staff and many of the patients knew that she was Billie Holiday. She had been sick for some time, and on a diet of custard and oatmeal on the order of her doctor, Eric Caminer. One New York newspaper ran a headline, "Singer Billie Holiday Is Dying." This sent George Hoeffer, *Down Beat*'s New York editor, to his typewriter to write an outraged refutation of the story, saying she was sitting up talking to Bill Dufty, author of her biography, *Lady Sings the Blues*, and talking about recording the sound track of the film that was to be made from it later in the summer. But George, as it turned out, was wrong; the headline was correct.

Bill Dufty said that she spoke often and fondly of Max Jones during those waning days.

By this time Louis McKay was back — "back for the kill," as Leonard Feather puts it. Bill Dufty and other friends claimed she was free of drugs, but the New York police with incredible callousness busted her right in her hospital bed for possession of a needle. The word in the business was that Louis McKay was still supplying her. The New York *Post* — the paper for which Dufty worked — headlined, "Billie Holiday Dies." Someone pasted it on a wall, crossing out the headline and substituting "Billie Holiday Expires — She Will Never Die." In Harlem, someone scrawled on a newsstand:

On the morning of July 17, Lady Day split the scene.

And downtown someone wrote on a wall:

Billie Holiday at 44 couldn't make it no more.

"For fifteen years," Bill Dufty wrote in the *Post*, "the government had paraded her through a whirligig of courts, jail, bail, as a horrible example of something called a drug addict."

The celebrity of whom they had made such an example had seventy cents in the bank when she died, and a few hundred dollars on her person. But she had a considerable estate, the records she left behind, and in time it amounted to a very great deal of money. Louis McKay got it all. Billie is buried in a cemetery just north of New York City. The grave went unmarked for a long time until Leonard Feather and other of her friends raised so much ruckus that McKay was forced to put a marker on it. He died some years ago. There were those who did not mourn.

(Her indignities were not done. Years later *Lady Sings the Blues* was turned into one of the most dishonest movies ever made about jazz, a picture that enraged every one of her friends who saw it, including Artie Shaw, Carmen McRae, Bobby Tucker, who had at one time been her accompanist, and Billy Eckstine. Eckstine was so incensed by the film that he took to denouncing it in his nightclub act.)

Her death infuriated a great many people, including Chuck Suber, the publisher of *Down Beat*, and me. Chuck and I began to slam the New York Police Department and the city itself over the cabaret card law. Scanning those old issues, I am amazed at the intemperate fury of the pieces we printed. But it was justified.

A scrappy New York attorney named Maxwell T. Cohen took up the cause, filing suit against the city on behalf of Bill Rubenstein and J.J. Johnson, both of whom had been denied cabaret cards. When Max Cohen got police and other city officials on the witness stand, he lacerated them. In due course he managed to get the cabaret card law thrown out.

Though the change came too late to do Billie Holiday any good, Bill Rubenstein, J.J. Johnson, and other musicians who had previously been denied work were now able to ply their trade where liquor was sold.

Hal Gaylor, known for his excellent work with Chico Hamilton, Bill Evans, Benny Goodman, and on one occasion with Billie Holiday, kicked heroin, left the music business, and — old friends will be pleased to know — is well and happy and living with his wife Evelyn in Greenwood Lake, some sixty miles north of New York. He is a full-time professional drug counselor now, a musician on weekends. He and Evelyn live in a house that Hal designed and built with his own hands on the top of a high wooded mountain. It's a peaceful gentle place of high-tailed inquisitive squirrels, raccoons, foxes, and deer.

Bill Rubenstein died of his heroin addiction. Hal took the urn containing Bill's ashes home to Greenwood Lake and buried it on his property, which is astride a historic Indian trail. There are those who swear that on certain nights figures come filing out of the woods, pass right through the house, and travel on.