

# LADY DAY

— AT EMERSON’S BAR AND GRILL —

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# DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Denver carries a proud jazz history. In Five Points—once known as the Harlem of the West—legends filled the clubs and streets with rhythm, soul, and truth. To bring *Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill* to life here at the Arvada Center feels like honoring that lineage while celebrating the timeless voice of Billie Holiday.

Billie's story is one of profound beauty and devastating tragedy. She gave the world music that continues to stir the soul, yet beneath the brilliance was a woman carrying an immeasurable weight of pain. Lanie Robertson's play opens a window into that duality—Billie the legend and Billie the woman—capturing her artistry, humanity, and resilience in the face of hardship.

I am grateful to this incredible production team, whose attention to detail, musical aesthetic, steadfast support, and collaboration have been invaluable - to the entire Arvada Center staff, our designers, actors, musicians, and audiences —this work is only possible because of you. This is what community feels like.

We would like to dedicate this production to the late-great Charles "Charlie" Burrell. To Denver. And all who keep the history of the music ALIVE.

**CHRISTOPHER PAGE-SANDERS**

DIRECTOR OF "LADY DAY AT EMERSON'S BAR AND GRILL"



ROSSONIAN HOTEL

# CHARACTER LIST

**BILLIE HOLIDAY** - The great jazz singer in the last year of her life (age 44). Billie is funny, real, and raw.

**JIMMY POWERS** - Billie's piano player and good friend (real good), who calms her and helps her as she becomes increasingly intoxicated throughout the night. He is the glue that keeps her together.

# PLAY SYNOPSIS

In a dark, cabaret nightspot in south Philadelphia, we hear jazz legend Billie Holiday exclaim that she can't do it, followed by piano player Jimmy Powers as he introduces "the legend in her own time, the one and only Lady Day, Miss 'God Bless the Child What's Got His Own'" Holiday. This is the final year that Billie will be alive. She is 44 years old.

She's dressed glamorously, with a long dress, red lipstick, and her signature gardenia corsage is in her hand. The piano plays, and she begins to sing. She goes quickly from one song to the next, showing off the charisma and voice that got her this far. She talks about being happy to be back at Emerson's, and that she and Emerson were good drinking buddies. He always remembered to have gardenias for her hair any time she performed, but she's not going to put them in her hair anymore because "she's the new Billie now."

You see, the critics have gotten critical, and you hear people on the radio talking about the "new Billie" and the "old Billie." All Billie knows is she just wants to sing. And sing she does, adding in anecdotes both funny and sad throughout the show. At this point in her career, she gets tired of singing "God Bless the Child" to everyone requesting it, and just wants to sing what she feels, so her piano player Jimmy Powers keeps her on track, and makes sure she gets through the songs she is supposed to. Billie shares with the audience that one day, she and Jimmy are supposed to get married, but he doesn't want her telling anyone.

Billie continues performing, sharing anecdotes of past loves lost, her childhood and learning to sing, her mother, and even pig's feet. She brings up career milestones like joining Artie Shaw's band and having trouble finding bathrooms she could use as a Black woman during this segregated time.

Billie gets more and more distraught on stage, and Jimmy jumps in to tell the audience that Billie is going to take a quick little break and see what the doctor has to say. Billie comes back from her break with a long glove rolled down so she could do some heroin. She is high as a kite and feeling fine now. Jimmy doesn't think she should perform just yet, but she is not having it. She begins to ramble, almost incoherently, spilling out details of her life as fast as she can. As she finishes her set, her voice stops but the piano plays on.



AN AD FROM THE ORIGINAL EMERSON'S IN PHILADELPHIA, WHICH  
IS THE SETTING FOR "LADY DAY AT EMERSON'S BAR AND GRILL"

# TIMELINE

- 1915** Born Eleanora Fagan on April 17 in Philadelphia to an unwed teenage couple.
- 1929** Joins her mother in Harlem, NYC
- 1930** Holiday appears in various Harlem clubs with singer Laurence Jackson
- 1933** At age 18, Holiday cuts her first record with Benny Goodman & His Orchestra
- 1935** Holiday signs on with John Hammond's label Brunswick
- 1936** Holiday releases major hit "Summertime" from George Gershwin's Porgy & Bess
- 1937** Receives nickname "Lady Day" from musician Lester Young
- 1938** Teams up with Artie Shaw to become first Black woman working with a white orchestra
- 1939** Sings "Strange Fruit" for the first time on Nov. 2 at Cafe Society, an integrated nightclub in Greenwich Village, NYC
- 1941** Co-writes and records "God Bless The Child"
- 1948** Performs a sold-out comeback concert at Carnegie Hall
- 1959** The time of this play. Billie dies on July 15 at the age of 44.

# WHO IS BILLIE HOLIDAY?



**BILLIE HOLIDAY SINGING**

Struggle was always a major factor in Billie Holiday's life. Born Eleanora Fagan on April 17, 1915 to an unwed teenage couple, Billie's mother was kicked out of her house when she got pregnant. Her mother arranged for her older, married half-sister to take care of Billie in Baltimore. Childhood was very difficult for young Billie. She dealt with a lot of abuse from her cousin, and suffered from being in other people's care.

Things got worse as she grew up, and she was brought into juvenile court by age 9. She was then sent to a Catholic reform school, where they locked her in a room with a dead girl overnight as punishment. Billie had nightmares about this the rest of her life. She was then released to her mother who had now opened a restaurant, and dropped out of school to begin working with her mother.

But things did not get any easier for Billie. She was sexually assaulted, and after having to be a protective witness in a case against the man, she began running errands for a brothel. Around this time is when she first heard the music of Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong, and when her mother moved to Harlem, NYC in 1928, Billie moved to the area the next year.

While living in a Harlem boarding house, at 14 Billie turned to sex work to earn money after several failed attempts at being a maid. By 15, Billie was arrested for prostitution. The judge labeled her "a girl of bad character," and after being sentenced for four months at Welfare Island (now Roosevelt Island), she returned to Harlem and began using marijuana, alcohol, and opium to have "good times." As she became engulfed in the Harlem music scene, her substance abuse increased.

She began singing in Harlem night clubs under the name Billie Dove, and when she was 17 she sang in place of singer Monette Moore at Covan's (a.k.a. Covan's Morocco Club), where producer John Hammond stumbled upon her and talked her into recording some songs. The second song they recorded called "Riffin' the Scotch" sold 5,000 copies, and her music career started taking off. Hammond compared her to Louis Armstrong, and she signed with Hammond's record label Brunswick in 1935. She began working with more musicians, and getting into romantic relationships with some. Her intimate but platonic relationship with Lester Young saw them playing together as well as living together for a while, and Young gave her the nickname "Lady Day" while she called him "Prez."

Some of these relationships helped her substance abuse problem dig deeper and deeper, until wartime shortages of opium turned her on to heroin. Her heroin use became a defining aspect of her public image, influencing both the narrative about her, and how audiences and critics perceived her.

# THE UNITED STATES VS. BILLIE HOLIDAY

Billie Holiday was a constant target of the U.S. government and FBI between 1939-1959 after her release of the song "Strange Fruit." Written and composed by Abel Meeropol (under his pseudonym Lewis Allan), "Strange Fruit" is a protest song about the lynchings of Black Americans during the Jim Crow era that ended up playing an important role in the civil rights movement. Holiday had put it in her contract that she would be performing this protest song every time she performed.

Originally written as a protest poem in 1937, Abel was inspired to write it after seeing a photograph of the 1930 lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana. The song is very clear about its theme.

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

There are several stories about how Billie Holiday came to sing the song, but what we know for sure is that she first performed it in 1939 at Cafe Society, an integrated nightclub in Greenwich Village. Her continued performance of the song made her a target, and she had a string of arrests for drug possession. She was ultimately silenced by the continuous drug offenses and two decades of racial persecution, and was even arrested in her hospital bed for possession of narcotics.

As part of her legal sentence, by having her cabaret card revoked, she was permanently banned from singing in venues that served alcohol. After spending ten months in federal prison for drug charges, she made her comeback and sold out Carnegie Hall in 1948.



BILLIE HOLIDAY AT CARNEGIE HALL, 1948.



# BILLIE HOLIDAY'S LEGACY

Billie Holiday's legacy lives on strong, and she remains a household name today. Her presence and voice were raw and real. Her real life became reflected in her performances, reinforcing her authenticity as an artist, but she was unlucky in love, and this ultimately evolved into a life of misfortune. Despite her public persona shaped by her addiction, her artistry and her voice remained powerful, and she continued to captivate audiences to the very end. Her ability to infuse her songs with emotion and make them feel deeply personal contributed to her lasting legacy.

An "unladylike" Lady who did not shy away from her struggles with addiction, she possessed a unique combination of strength, beauty, vulnerability, and tragedy. Before her death, Holiday had attended Lester Young's funeral, and confided to jazz critic Leonard Feather that "I'll be the next to go."



LESTER YOUNG

She died of heart failure due to cirrhosis of the liver from years of substance abuse, although at the time her official diagnosis was death from "drug addiction and alcoholism." At the time of her death, she was under police guard,

arrested for narcotics possession while in her hospital bed. While her death was ultimately caused by complications from drug and alcohol use, ongoing issues such as inadequate care throughout her life and hostile government treatment also hindered her recovery.

Billie Holiday died four months later on 15 July, 1959 at the age of 44. Her music's popularity continues on, and this legend is still influencing musicians today, including Billie Eilish, Lana Del Ray, and Norah Jones.

**A Wasted Shadow**  
**Tragic Blues Singer**  
**Billie Holiday Dies**  
**In City Hospital Bed**

NEW YORK, July 17 (AP)—Billie Holiday died today in a City Hospital bed—a wasted shadow of the once great blues singer who packed night clubs from coast to coast.

Bouts with narcotics and liquor had cracked her fine and mellow style, and she had been in eclipse in recent years.

The Negro entertainer—called "Lady Day"—died at 3:20 a.m. at Metropolitan Hospital. Her husband, Louis McKay, was at her bedside.

The immediate cause of death was given as congestion of the lungs complicated by heart failure.

Miss Holiday, 44, was taken to the hospital unconscious on May 31 after she collapsed in her apartment.

When death came, she was under arrest—charged with possession of a pack of heroin in her bed.

She had been under treatment for liver and heart disease and other ailments.

Miss Holiday, who had a sordid childhood in her native Baltimore, hit the entertainment heights in the 1930's. She made her first recordings in 1933.



**BLUES SINGER**  
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**SONG IS ENDED . . .** Billie Holiday, blues singer, who died today in New York hospital.

## BILLIE HOLIDAY'S OBITUARY

# SET DESIGNS BY BRIAN MALLGRAVE

For *Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill*, we created a mini-immersive setting with bar tables and seating arranged around the band and Billie, who performs on a stage-like platform. Our design was inspired by vintage photographs of the actual street where Emerson's Bar once stood in Philadelphia, as well as interiors of underground venues from the late 1950s. Beyond showcasing Billie's performance and life, we aimed to represent her decline through the image of a deteriorating bar environment. Through lighting, ceiling fans, the hanging Emerson's sign, realistic details, and the shifting moods of the piece, we sought to draw viewers into a deeply personal journey with Billie.



"LADY DAY AT EMERSON'S BAR & GRILL"  
ARVADA CENTER BLACK BOX  
SCENIC DESIGN: B. MALLGRAVE