

# BILLIE HOLIDAY



*"My mother, she gave me something that's gonna tear me through this world"*

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## **Personal introduction**

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Most of my readers know that I have not dared to develop a habit of writing about jazz artists — partly because of being somewhat intimidated with the average size of a jazzman's record catalog, and partly because I still have a very vague idea of how to properly reflect the jazz aesthetics in writing. When it comes to the art of vocal jazz, this issue is exacerbated by the fact that vocal jazz often dwells on the fringes of both jazz and corny traditional pop — and there are only so many different interpretations of *The Great American Songbook* that I could be prepared to digest. Indeed, spending any significant amount of time trying to explain what separates this particular interpretation of a Cole Porter tune by Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, or Rosemary Clooney would be liable to forever kill off any remaining passion I might have for reviewing.

Billie Holiday, however, is a seriously different kind of story. First, even from a formal point of view her choice of material and her singing style were far closer to the tradition of urban blues than any typical style we usually associate with jazz vocalists. While it is sheer coincidence that the start of her recording career took place at around the same time as the death of Bessie Smith, it is an ominous one — in certain ways, she was the most logical and legitimate inheritor of the 1920s tradition of blues queens, and she managed to carry that blues spirit over to just about everything she sang, even her lite-entertainment pop schlock on the early Columbia singles. With this circumstance in mind, I have no problem cross-labeling her as a «blues artist», and writing about her from the same point of view that I reserve for all the pre-war blues greats.

Even more importantly, in an era when pop music — or, in fact, 99% of all recorded music, even including the classical canon — was about *mass entertainment*, Billie was one of the few singers who clearly stood out as Important Artists above all the rest. In a world that has been, for over half a century, quite accustomed to the concept of the individualistic singer-songwriter getting by on the strength of his/her unique personality rather than technical proficiency, it is all too easy to forget how tremendously novel this concept would be for the 1930s. Blues queens were expected to be rough, gritty, powerful, dominant — a submissive male's dream; jazz and pop crooners were expected to be human nightingales with impeccable technique. Billie Holiday had neither the power of the blues nor the seduction of the jazz in her voice. Instead, what she offered was frailty, restriction, shyness, and humanity — she was literally the first one out there to approach the material not from a strictly formulaic, but a purely humanistic side. It would be a stretch to dub her the first rock'n'roll hero, of course, but what she was doing to those pop standards was, in some ways, the same thing that the early rockers, or even the mid-Seventies' punks were doing to their own formulae — she was *living* them, rather than simply reproducing them.

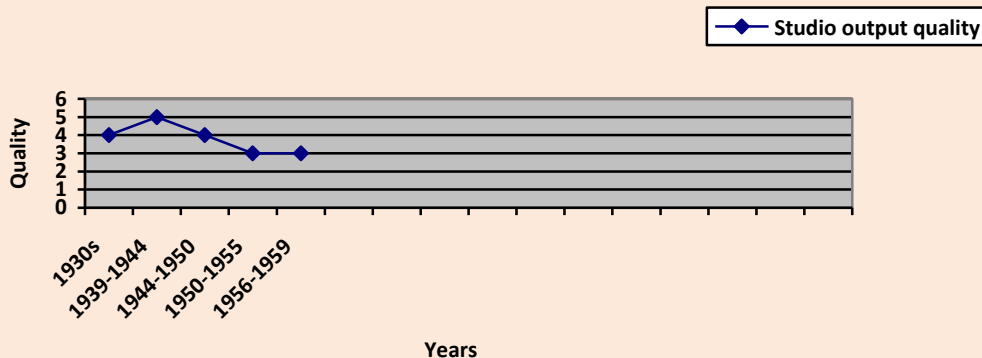
Naturally, once you are on this sort of emotional roll, it is easy to get carried away: for all her uniqueness, Billie was still very much a product of her times, sharing all the common flaws of poor girls turned pop superstars, and significantly dependent on the good will and mood swings of her executives, producers, band leaders, and session musicians. As far as her own stance was concerned, she probably regarded herself as an entertainer first and foremost — she was simply unwilling to, or, perhaps, incapable of molding herself according to the regular entertainer mold, which did not always work out in her favor but, fortunately, always works in ours. Every now and then, though, she could consciously and bravely take that one small extra step — such as, for instance, performing and recording 'Strange Fruit' at a time when very few nightclub owners or

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record executives could dare promote this kind of material. But these impressive moves, though they make for great biographical fodder, will hardly provide enough incentive for the average listener to sit through Billie’s entire catalog, most of which is ‘On The Sentimental Side’ rather than acutely socially conscious. To be able to do that, you have to tune in to all the subtle nuances, the micro-fluctuations in pitch, the little cracks and whispers which she had learned to juggle from a very early age and whose mastery of them was about as fluent as Jimi’s mastery of the various guitar feedback techniques.

Predictably, this also makes the predicament for the reviewer. Billie left behind a fairly large recorded legacy, and although it runs through at least three very distinctly different periods (the early «lightweight» years on Columbia; the «mature» years of Commodore and Decca; and the «twilight» years on Verve), tracing the story of her evolution within each of these periods is hard to do if you are an amateur writer aiming at amateur readers, rather than a fully qualified biographer aiming at the true connoisseur. For the first two periods, I will be therefore utilizing the loophole of reviewing entire collections, or even boxsets, running across entire decades — since they cover the pre-LP era where the only alternative would be to go over Billie’s career single by single, a truly maddening task even if you are a big fan. Starting with the 1950s, it becomes easier to focus on LPs, but distinguishing them from each other in words is still a big challenge (especially since quite a few of them feature the results of the exact same recording sessions, sometimes shuffled around with no underlying principles whatsoever).

In any case, before proceeding on to specific evaluations of separate packages, I must say that the best way to understand Billie and learn to love her is to go all the way in — forget about any best-of compilations and just work your way through *all* her master recordings, from Columbia to Commodore to Decca and on to Verve. Never mind the naysayers complaining about the quality of her voice in her later years, or about the predictably inferior sound quality of her recordings in the early years. Each period of her career has its own ups and its own downs, with the ups always trumping the downs anyway. Probably — *probably* — the Commodore period offers the best balance between the light and the serious, the technical qualities and the vocal freshness — but it is also the shortest period, one that should rather be regarded as a starting point from which you can, and should, go both ways chronologically. Because, among other things, Billie’s creative curve is also one of the most meaningful and fascinating journeys in the career of any pre-war pop artist — and there’s no better way to learn about this than from the actual art of the artist. Reading any of Billie’s biographies will inevitably get you focused on her drug problems anyway; why not cut that out and go straight for the soul?.. And now we’re ready to begin.



## LADY DAY: THE MASTER TAKES AND SINGLES (1933-1944; 2007)


CD I: 1) I Wished On The Moon; 2) What A Little Moonlight Can Do; 3) Miss Brown To You; 4) If You Were Mine; 5) These 'N' That 'N' Those; 6) You Let Me Down; 7) Spreadin' Rhythm Around; 8) Life Begins When You're In Love; 9) It's Like Reaching For The Moon; 10) These Foolish Things; 11) I Cried For You; 12) Did I Remember?; 13) No Regrets; 14) Summertime; 15) Billie's Blues; 16) A Fine Romance; 17) One, Two, Button Your Shoe; 18) Easy To Love; 19) The Way You Look Tonight; 20) Pennies From Heaven.

CD II: 1) That's Life I Guess; 2) I Can't Give You Anything But Love; 3) I've Got My Love To Keep Me Warm; 4) He Ain't Got Rhythm; 5) This Year's Kisses; 6) Why Was I Born?; 7) I Must Have That Man; 8) The Mood That I'm In; 9) You Showed Me The Way; 10) My Last Affair; 11) Moanin' Low; 12) Where Is The Sun?; 13) Let's Call The Whole Thing Off; 14) They Can't Take That Away From Me; 15) Don't Know If I'm Comin' Or Goin'; 16) I'll Get By; 17) Mean To Me; 18) Foolin' Myself; 19) Easy Living; 20) I'll Never Be The Same.

CD III: 1) Me, Myself And I; 2) A Sailboat In The Moonlight; 3) Without Your Love; 4) Trav'lin' All Alone; 5) He's Funny That Way; 6) Nice Work If You Can Get It; 7) Things Are Looking Up; 8) My Man; 9) Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man; 10) When You're Smiling; 11) On The Sentimental Side; 12) When A Woman Loves A Man; 13) You Go To My Head; 14) I'm Gonna Lock My Heart (And Throw Away The Key); 15) The Very Thought Of You; 16) I Can't Get Started; 17) More Than You Know; 18) Sugar; 19) Long Gone Blues; 20) Some Other Spring.

CD IV: 1) Them There Eyes; 2) Swing, Brother, Swing; 3) Night And Day; 4) The Man I Love; 5) Body And Soul; 6) Falling In Love Again; 7) Laughing At Life; 8) Time On My Hands; 9) St. Louis Blues; 10) Loveless Love; 11) Let's Do It; 12) Georgia On My Mind; 13) All Of Me; 14) God Bless The Child; 15) Am I Blue?; 16) I Cover The Waterfront; 17) Love Me Or Leave Me; 18) Gloomy Sunday; 19) It's A Sin To Tell A Lie; 20) Until The Real Thing Comes Along.

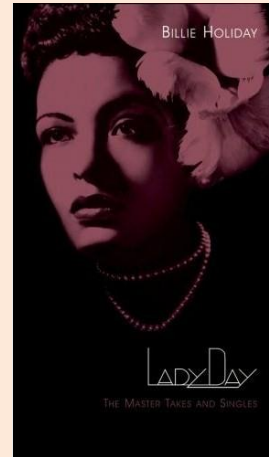
 ['God Bless The Child \(1941\)'](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *Birth of the legend — watch her slowly, but steadily, come into her own as she learns to bring soul and depth to songs that weren't truly supposed to have them in the first place.*

The true fan of vocal jazz music, in starting off his exploration of Lady Day's career, will certainly rather want to own the expansive edition of **The Complete Billie Holiday On Columbia**: ten CDs that flush the archives out completely, with all the preserved alternate takes that allow the listener to explore every subtle nook and notch in the Lady's vocal flow over the years when these vocals were still proverbially fresh and innocent. However, for the humble purposes of rapid reviewing, this abbreviated four-disc version will do just as nicely. Coming out something like six years after the complete edition (because, otherwise, how many people would have binged on the super-expensive package?), it honestly contains what it says it contains — the master takes, originally released on the Brunswick and Vocalion subdivisions of Columbia. And, unless you really *are* a true fan (a.k.a. «committed jazz historian»), these four discs are exactly what you are going to be listening to anyway.

On these eighty recordings that span the first decade of her career, Billie is frequently backed by some of the hottest players on the scene (Benny Goodman, Teddy Wilson, Roy Eldridge, Lester Young, etc.), but she is already making a difference as early as 1935: each of the tracks expressly belongs to her, regardless of the presence of any additional superstars. And it does not matter one



bit that the performed material, as was to be expected of vocal stars, is totally conventional. All of her life, and never as faithfully as on these early Columbia singles, Billie sang very little outside of the regular Tin Pan Alley stuff — and this is just one more occasion to stress that «The Great American Songbook», *per se*, does very little for me: no amount of retro-whitewashing whitewashes away the fact that, on its own (in «neutral mode», so to speak), the Songbook largely consists of safe, cuddly, monotonous, predictable, easy-going, overtly commercial stuff, even without having to deny the melodic talents of the likes of Irving Berlin or Cole Porter. Not that many would disagree, I think, that most of those a-dollar-a-dozen compositions were always fully dependent on the additional talent of their interpreters — and of all those interpreters, few had more individuality and freedom-from-formula than Billie Holiday.

The one thing that makes **Lady Day** so enjoyable is witnessing the actual Lady Day take these mechanical constructions and imbue them with some genuine soul (not in the sense of technical «soul», but rather implying the word's original untainted meaning). We could just as well start off from the very beginning: the 1935 recording of 'I Wished On The Moon'. If you compare it with [Bing Crosby's version](#) from The Big Broadcast (same year), the difference in style and attitude is self-evident: it is the difference between a credible human being and, with all due respect to the King of Croon, a trained mechanical songbird. Our contemporary problem is that today, unless all of your experience is centered around boy bands and pop divas, we are *accustomed* to singers sounding as credible human beings: the impact has worn off and will not be noticeable to those who only compare the phenomenon of Billie with all things post-Billie (so many of which she has actually inspired). But the simple fact is that, without Billie, there may have been no post-Billie: I think that in the mid-1930s, she was sent down to Earth so that she could show the world of popular entertainment how you *could* actually sound like a frail, vulnerable, intelligent flesh-and-blood human being — and get people to empathize on a much stronger level than ever before.

Although the liner notes to the album try to painstakingly differentiate between the «great», the «good», and the «so-so» on these four discs, I am in no position to do that. I suppose that I do feel the difference when it comes to those few cases where Billie also comes forward as a songwriter. Admittedly, on 'Billie's Blues', her first official credit, she does not really do a lot of writing: the song is a fairly generic piece of «urban blues», but what actually makes it special is the fact that it is, indeed, the first true piece of real blues on the record, and, while it may not immediately make Billie into the legitimate heir of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, it does the important job of introducing her frail and subtle personality into the all-too familiar urban blues formula — in the place of strong female characters that did a lot to empower black women in the 1920s, we have here something less explicitly militant, but far more sympathetic and beautiful in all of its unprotected vulnerability.

Later on, the same formula is repeated and pushed a little further, in an even slower, more languid manner on 'Long Gone Blues' (1939), a track that was actually shelved for eight years, possibly because it was deemed too incompatible with Billie's nominally «cheery» Tin Pan Alley material from the same sessions — even despite a first-rate closing trumpet solo from Hot Lips Page who was clearly on the same page (no pun intended) with the singer. Finally, the third and last credit on the album is 'God Bless The Child' (1941) — a song that hardly needs an introduction: Billie's own take on the 'Nobody Knows You When You're Down And Out' vibe, a song of autobiographical character whose lyrics and intonations mix sadness, empathy, cynicism, and a pinch of sly mischief in such a manner as had hitherto never been heard in urban blues.

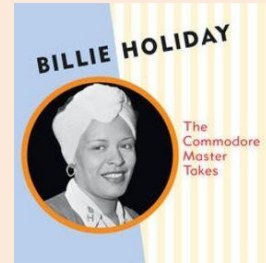
As for the rest... highlights, lowlights, who cares? Some songs are catchier and more playful than others, some moodier, some more romantic, some have pleasant trumpet solos or piano intros, some do not. Since this is only the first decade, Billie's voice is represented here in its freshest and purest form, without the crackling, hissing, and «white noise» that it would be saddled with later on, as her health faded over one self-destructive binge after another. Not everyone finds this an advantage — since Billie never was a master technician in the first place, having next to no range and a rather limited set of moods to sing in, some people actually prefer her struggling with the singing, believing that it adds even more humanity to the overall effect. On the other hand, the neophyte will certainly find more pleasure in listening to a healthy young woman than a raspy wreck, and on no other collection will you find Billie's voice in as great a condition as here.


Understanding all the awesomeness of that voice is always better in comparison, so let us take another one: Annette Hanshaw's '[I Must Have That Man](#)' from 1928 versus [Billie's version](#) that came almost a decade later. Both are fine takes, but Hanshaw is clearly following the lyrics: her tone is delicate, yet firm and stern, closely matching the message of the title. Billie sings the same words, yet she is not going for any sort of explicit «toughness». Listeners could be foolish enough to suggest that she simply does not pay attention to the lyrics, singing everything in the only way her limited possibilities allow her to sing — and while they may be right about the limited possibilities, this is exactly what is so clever about the whole thing: try, somehow, to wiggle it out, to play the part of the tough girl with all the frailty that you can muster. The effect is intriguing, paradoxical, and ultimately effective. After all, it is one thing to hear a tough girl decide that she must have that man — and another one to hear the same decisiveness from a not-so-tough girl. There might even be a lesson in this for both sexes somewhere...



In any case, «reviewing» the individual songs one by one here would be an obvious waste of time and space (I admire Gary Giddins, the author of the liner notes, who had to think of something clever about each single track, but most of the time when he was not simply spewing out trivia about the recording sessions he still ended up repeating himself). The whole experience just has to be appreciated *in toto*. Obviously, nobody is forcing anybody to sit through all the eighty tracks in one sitting, but even if this should ever come to pass, there is nothing painful in the experience — as monotonous as the atmosphere is, I cannot imagine Lady Day's singing become *annoying*: somehow, this perfect vocal set-up of hers does not «overdo» or «underdo» one single parameter. Getting tired of Janis Joplin's screaming, of Joan Baez' shredding, of Ella Fitzgerald's immaculate perfectionism, of Nancy Sinatra's «so-hip-to-the-Sixties» thing — these are concerns that I understand. Getting tired of Billie Holiday? One might just as well get tired of living. Actually, scratch that — Billie works even better for those who *are* tired of living.

## THE COMMODORE MASTER TAKES (1939-1944; 2000)

1) **Strange Fruit**; 2) Yesterdays; 3) Fine And Mellow; 4) I Gotta Right To Sing The Blues; 5) How Am I To Know?; 6) My Old Flame; 7) I'll Get By; 8) I Cover The Waterfront; 9) I'll Be Seeing You; 10) I'm Yours; 11) Embraceable You; 12) As Time Goes By; 13) He's Funny That Way; 14) Lover, Come Back To Me; 15) Billie's Blues; 16) On The Sunny Side Of The Street.



 ['Strange Fruit'](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *That short window in time where Billie got serious, got suitable instrumental backing, and stayed in vocal shape — the perfect star alignment.*

It is practically common knowledge that this disc contains the single most important batch of tunes in Billie history (thus making a fantastic choice for a concise first-time introduction), and also that this importance is mainly due to the presence of 'Strange Fruit'. Furthermore, it goes without saying that, in order to fully appreciate the impact of the song, one would have to stick around in 1939, a time when it actually took real guts to perform this kind of material (and, indeed, Billie *was* genuinely afraid of singing it at first). But if the tune's direct shock impact has gradually dissipated over the years (and thank God for that!), the original recording has still lost none of its smoky mystique.

In fact, on a pure gut level I do not even associate it with the specific issue of Southern lynching (how could I, without ever learning the peculiarities of rural life racism?); all I hear is that Billie is impersonating an ancient sibyl here, clumsily drawing out the syllables in a state of hazy trance, in a semi-dazed, semi-stoned manner, yet still realizing, somewhere deep in the subconscious, that some important and devastating message or prophecy is coming out of her throat. At the very end, the final "bitter... crop!" escapes her like the last agonizing wail of a brought down animal — a far cry from the pretty, but conventional coda flourishes that she had previously given the world from within the walls of Columbia's studios.

'Strange Fruit' was indeed a song like no other, and, whatever one might say, it *is* a standout in her catalog that has no equals — not just because of a rare case of real social turbulence reflected in the lyrics, but also because she rose so admirably to the occasion. However, the brilliance of the song and the particular performance should not, by any means, obscure the brilliance — and importance — of the other fifteen tunes on here: three recorded on the same session of April 20, 1939, and twelve more cut at several dates in March/April 1944. Billie's collaboration with Commodore Records did not last long — first time simply because Columbia refused to accept 'Strange Fruit', second time in a brief interim between the lady's time on Columbia and Decca — but it turned over quite an important page (or two) in her life.

Essentially, Columbia Records had Billie play a significant bit part in upbeat, stompy big-band entertainment, with loud brass, rousing tempos, and lots of soloing, in between which she would often barely have time to throw in a verse or two. As long as the bands were good, the results were likewise, but it would be an understatement to say that Columbia misunderstood Billie's strengths and never offered her the proper support for her talent. The tunes on Commodore, on the other hand, even if they did not always feature a significantly smaller number of players, are overall more quiet, relaxed, and give Billie more room to sing, meditate, and shine. Already on

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the first session, 'Strange Fruit' is followed up by 'Fine And Mellow', another one of Billie's «originals» — in actuality, just another generic urban blues set to new lyrics, but, considering how rarely Columbia let Billie follow in the footsteps of Bessie Smith (remember, three tracks out of eighty in total), it is telling that Commodore gave her this very chance on her very first outing with the label.

It is fun to engage in some more comparisons here. For instance, the original Columbia recording of 'I'll Get By' had more than a minute of trumpet solos before Billie comes in — as opposed to an almost immediate entrance on the Commodore version, with very brief guitar and piano solos in the middle. The nearly rhythmless (next to the Columbia version), bass-less 'I Cover The Waterfront'; 'He's Funny That Way' recast as a dark, melancholic late-night piano ballad instead of a jolly, careless swing like it used to be; and so on — although at least half of the selections on this disc were brand new, never recorded by Billie on any of her Columbia dates. ('How Am I To Know?', with its spine-tingling "ohhh..." rhyming with the title, is a particular highlight).

What makes this short Commodore collection so uniquely valuable is that it represents a perfect sort of crossroads that is likely to satisfy everyone. The Columbia recordings may seem too gay, drowning Billie out in a swarm of swing entertainers. The Decca recordings may seem too sappy because of all the strings. The Verve period is where the lady started going hoarse. All of these potential defects may be easily overlooked, and for many people they might even be virtues rather than defects. But these sixteen tracks, spearheaded by 'Strange Fruit', are pure, blameless, utterly well-balanced perfection. Kudos to Milt Gabler for producing the stuff and for showing Billie in the most suitable light anyone could ever suit to her.

(PS: the review is based on the single-disc edition, but there is also **The Complete Commodore Recordings**, with multiple additional alternate takes spread over two CDs. Inescapable for the completist, but, given my acquaintance with **The Complete Billie Holiday On Verve**, must be a bit of an unnecessary overkill for the layman).






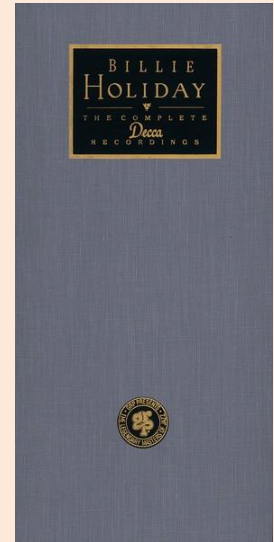
## THE COMPLETE DECCA RECORDINGS (1944-1950; 1991)

CD I: 1) Lover Man (Oh, Where Can You Be?); 2) No More; 3) No More (Alternate); 4) That Ole Devil Called Love; 5) Don't Explain (First Version); 6) Big Stuff (First Version); 7) Don't Explain; 8) Big Stuff (Second Version); 9) You Better Go Now; 10) What Is This Thing Called Love; 11) Good Morning Heartache; 12) No Good Man (Previously Unissued Alternate); 13) No Good Man; 14) Big Stuff (Previously Unissued Breakdown and Chatter); 15) Big Stuff (Previously Unissued Third Version); 16) Big Stuff; 17) Baby, I Don't Cry Over You (Previously Unissued Alternate); 18) Baby, I Don't Cry Over You; 19) I'll Look Around (Previously Unissued Alternate); 20) I'll Look Around; 21) The Blues Are Brewin'; 22) Guilty (Previously Unissued Alternate); 23) Guilty (Previously Unissued Breakdown and Chatter); 24) Guilty; 25) Deep Song; 26) There Is No Greater Love.

CD II: 1) Easy Living; 2) Solitude (Previously Unissued Alternate); 3) Solitude; 4) Weep No More; 5) Girls Were Made To Take Care Of Boys; 6) I Loves You Porgy; 7) My Man (Mon Homme) (Previously Unissued Alternate); 8) My Man (Mon Homme); 9) 'Tain't Nobody's Business If I Do (Previously Unissued Alternate); 10) 'Tain't Nobody's Business If I Do; 11) Baby Get Lost; 12) Keeps On A-Rainin'; 13) Them There Eyes; 14) Do Your Duty; 15) Gimme A Pigfoot (And A Bottle Of Beer); 16) You Can't Lose A Broken Heart; 17) My Sweet Hunk O' Trash; 18) Now Or Never; 19) You're My Thrill; 20) Crazy He Calls Me; 21) Please Tell Me Now; 22) Somebody's On My Mind; 23) God Bless The Child; 24) This Is Heaven to Me.

 ['Lover Man \(Oh, Where Can You Be?\)'](#)

More info:   



General verdict: *Too slow, too brooding, too many strings, but in the end, you can turn it all (except for maybe the strings) in the artist's favor.*

It was Milt Gabler, the man behind the release of 'Strange Fruit', who arranged for Billie's transfer to Decca, where she could hope for at least as efficient a degree of promotion as on Columbia, while at the same time being taken somewhat more seriously than before. True enough, it was only during the Decca years that she became a commercial superstar (and a heroin wreck as a side effect), starting with 'Lover Man (Oh, Where Can You Be)', one of the biggest hits of 1944 and, from then on, one of the lady's signature tunes — even if the song has nothing even remotely approaching the acute snap-and-bite of 'Strange Fruit' (realistically speaking, though, there was not even the slightest chance of 'Strange Fruit' achieving commercial success in 1939).

Strangely, during her six years at Decca, Billie actually did not record all that much. Where Columbia's and Verve's **Complete** boxsets each include around ten CDs, the **Complete** Decca boxset — alternate outtakes and all — only includes two. One of the reasons must have been drug trouble (she spent most of 1947 and early 1948 in court / prison), but even in her law-free years, relatively few sessions were held. Of these, the earliest bunch is the most historically important, because it introduces a new element in Billie's world: orchestration.

In all honesty, I cannot ever bring myself to like these string arrangements. Call them generic, Hollywood-ish, Broadway-ish, whatever — all they add is syrupy sentimentality, unlike the lively and playful jazz arrangements at Columbia. That said, according to legend, Billie requested strings herself for 'Lover Man', and was extremely pleased to finally get them; perhaps she felt she was crossing some sort of line there — the line that separated a local mini-celebrity from a big national star. And if the presence of strings helped her boost her confidence, so be it,

especially given that her vocal work on these mid-Forties recordings is still impeccable (and, at the very least, she is consistently brought high up in the mix, with the strings never outshining the genius singer). But in retrospect, you can listen to these tracks and gradually convince yourself that it sounds as if Billie's very essence were fighting against these strings — that the very unusualness of her vocal style clashes so vehemently against the standard nature of the orchestral arrangements, it seems as if her brain wanted to do it, but her soul was untouched by all the syrquization. And even if this is not true, I still want to believe it.

In any case, the (figurative) strength and uniqueness of Billie's voice is such that, for all we know, she could have been backed by Eighties-style synth-pop arrangements and still left standing at the end of the day. It helps that on all of these recordings, her vocals still show no serious signs of wear and tear, and the human depth of expression that may have peaked during her Commodore sessions remains so intact that individual highlights are unselectable: all of these songs are just about equally great, regardless of the intrinsic melodic potential of each individual tune (which, honestly, is something that I am still unable to comment upon). 'Lover Man' might be a standout just because it is the first track that introduces this new sound — it has its fair share of soul-piercing melancholic vocal jumps, but so does 'No More' and at least half of the tracks that follow, setting pretty much the same mood. It is a different mood now — slow and broody most of the time, bypassing the bouncy-boppy joy of Columbia-era material, gradually moving on from the evening ball hours into post-midnight solitude — but that does not make the overall experience any less monotonous, as gorgeous a kind of monotonousness as it is.

Special reference must only be made to a few particularly unusual stunts pulled off by Lady Day in the late 1940s. First, there is a whole bunch of Bessie Smith covers here, and, frankly, they are the only true disappointment of the set for me: for some reason, she chose to perform some of the «Empress of the Blues'» most aggressive numbers — 'Do Your Duty' and 'Gimme A Pigfoot', in particular — that were no match for Bessie's level of brawn and temper, and could not be easily recast in Billie's own mold; she seems to be stuck somewhere in between a radical reinvention and a faithful tribute, ultimately failing at both. 'T'Ain't Nobody's Business' goes along better, since the song's message is «brawny» only on the surface — at the bottom of it, this is a wife's declaration of her own right to be beaten by her own husband, and Billie rightfully gives it the same vibe she gives her classic number 'My Man' (any feminist extolling Miss Holiday as an icon will have to come to terms with this uncomfortable historical inconsistency).

Far more successful are the two duets with Louis Armstrong — 'My Sweet Hunk O' Trash', in particular, with a heartwarmingly (heartbreakingly?) bittersweet dialog between the two legends, is awesome beyond belief (Billie and Satchmo would also work together in *New Orleans*, Billie's only movie — a disaster in general, but with one [unforgettable scene](#) at least). There are also a few tracks on which Billie is backed by The Stardusters, a proto-doo-wop vocal group, but this approach does not work at all. Lady Day is incompatible with extraneous harmonies. A duet with Louis is welcome by all means, but any attempt at glamorizing her sound belies its essence (this is why this particular version of 'God Bless The Child' should be left in the dustbin of history — stick to the Columbia original).

Summing up, the Decca recordings will be most valuable to those who treasure the lady in fine voice: by 1952 (the beginning of her Verve LP-dominated period), it was already crack(l)ing. The abundance of alternate versions is a bonus for completists and fine specialists only, since the

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alternate takes do not usually differ all that much from the officially released versions. That said, the Armstrong/Holiday duets are priceless; the overall quality of the material is a bit more serious than the Columbia repertoire; 'Lover Man' is a historical watermark that should be familiar to everyone; and even the strings, provided they annoy you in the first place, eventually go away, replaced by steady small jazz combo arrangements like it used to be. Given that for most vocal performers of that era one sub-period was usually hard to distinguish from another, it is pleasant to learn that Columbia, Commodore, Decca, and Verve all had their specificities, and different people will likely have different favorites.

## BILLIE HOLIDAY SINGS (1952)

1) East Of The Sun; 2) Blue Moon; 3) You Go To My Head; 4) You Turned The Tables On Me; 5) Easy To Love; 6) These Foolish Things; 7) I Only Have Eyes For You; 8) Solitude; 9) Everything I Have Is Yours; 10) Love For Sale; 11) Moonglow; 12) Tenderly.



[▶ 'Love For Sale'](#)

More info: [W](#) [M](#) [Y](#)

General verdict: *Worth it for the contributions of Oscar Peterson alone, and sort of marks Billie's transition into the «midnight jazz» phase, too.*

This and almost all of the following LPs that were released for Billie in the 1950s (with the exception of the final small bunch for Columbia) are all available in one package on the monumental **Complete Billie Holiday On Verve** boxset from 1993 (10 CDs); however, unlike the comparably long Columbia or much shorter Decca compilation, I would not dare write about this one in one single sweep. The Verve set covers an evolutionary period that is *way* too long for one single review: starting off with Billie still in perfect form, at the top of her vocal and emotional powers, and ending with a wreck of a woman, although still perversely and hauntingly fascinating. I would also not recommend forking a hundred bucks over for the whole thing unless you are a true history buff — there are too many alternate takes, too many crappy lo-fi session recordings, too much pure banter for those who just want to take in the music. (The 2005 shorter edition, **Complete Verve Studio Master Takes**, like the corresponding Columbia equivalent, is much more accessible, though).

Another reason for splitting this megalithic monster is that, in the 1950s, the concept of an LP (or at least a 10" record if we are talking early in the decade) was already fully fleshed out, and much, if not most, of Billie's recording output was originally put out by Clef Records (later to be absorbed in Verve) as 10" and 12" LPs. Not that there was anything «conceptual» about it, except in a couple of special cases, but, for the most part, the records did correlate with specific mini-sessions and a certain chronology of events. This first one, for instance, was recorded in its entirety on March 26, 1952, and released as **Billie Holiday Sings** with eight tracks, then, four years later, re-released under the title **Solitude**, with four additional tracks from the same sessions. And, with none other than the legendary Oscar Peterson himself manning the piano, the results were bound to be quite distinct from any other session.

Naturally, neither this particular review nor any of the following ones could be too lengthy. Most of the material that Billie recorded with Clef (Verve) was either re-recordings of earlier stuff, or of similar, as of yet uncovered, compositions from the Songbook: all that matters is Billie's own state at the time, the degree of dedication to the material, and, sometimes, the accompaniment. Here, with Peterson at the helm, we get a moody, quiet, nocturnal set for half an hour of melancholic relaxation: sometimes with a lighter punch ('Blue Moon'), sometimes with a darker one ('Love For Sale'). The only thing that can be said about the production is that it is surprisingly echoey, almost as if you were listening to Billie standing in a vast hallway — a little strange, considering that the voice, in early 1952, is still as impeccable as ever.

For me, the obvious highlight here is 'Solitude', particularly when compared with the earlier Decca version — overloaded with strings that overshadowed the singer. Here, even despite the

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confusing echo, the song finally matches its title (although it might have worked even better as a minimalistic duet between Billie and Oscar, without the accompanying trumpet). But, as is almost always the case, there are really no lowlights — here be a must-have for all lovers of «penthouse jazz». Plus, arguably, the best version of 'These Foolish Things' she ever did — so much more passion and tenderness in this midnight-hour rendition than in the early danceable take released on Columbia. And you needn't go further than the intro to 'Love For Sale' in order to understand that the album is also a must-have for all lovers of Oscar Peterson's smooth-flowing, masterfully romantic, yet also wildly inventive playing style.

## AN EVENING WITH BILLIE HOLIDAY (1953)

1) Stormy Weather; 2) Lover Come Back To Me; 3) My Man; 4) He's Funny That Way; 5) Yesterdays; 6) Tenderly; 7) I Can't Face The Music; 8) Remember.



 ['Remember'](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *Just more good stuff for those who liked the previous album.*

Billie's second LP for Clef/Verve contains the results of two further sessions from 1952; one from April 1st, with more or less the same backing band as on **Billie Holiday Sings**, one from July 27th, with several changes (different brass section, and Freddie Green replacing Barney Kessel on guitar), but still musically dominated by Oscar Peterson's piano, so that only serious jazz connoisseurs will be able to sniff out the difference without guidance.

Once again, the material is evenly spread between re-recordings of older numbers (usually from the Commodore age) and introduction of new ones. Of the newly recorded songs, 'Stormy Weather' is the acknowledged highlight: it is one of the very few Billie tunes that she opens herself, with a few *a cappella* notes, immediately placing the emphasis on vocals and nothing *but* vocals, transforming Ethel Waters' original croon-fest into something ten times as intimate, genuine, and artistically unconventional — not that we didn't know how it works with Billie as late as 1952, but each of these reinterpretations still comes across as a surprise regardless.

Of the re-recordings, 'Lover, Come Back To Me' is taken at about twice the tempo of the original Commodore recording, but keeping the brass in the background and Peterson's piano in the foreground still avoids turning the song into an entertaining rave-up *à la* Columbia years — the album was supposed to be as stylistically uniform and mood-setting as its predecessor, so the fast tempo adds diversity without breaking up the vibe. 'Yesterdays' is a stylistic improvement over the Commodore version, with Peterson switching to electric organ (probably the first time ever on a Billie record), and the fast swinging section of the second half much sharper. Not to mention the fact of so much better production — Billie is so much louder and clearer in the mix now that it is almost a crying shame how recording technology in the previous two decades never managed to do justice to her technically weak voice.

On the other hand, re-recordings of 'My Man' and 'He's Funny That Way' are somewhat superfluous; but that is the way, I guess, that it usually goes with The Songbook — every time you switch to a different record label, you are supposed to redo it all over again; after all, why should Columbia and Commodore profit from a 'He's Funny That Way' by B. Holiday, when her current contract is with Verve? If you think about it, it is a bit of a wonder that she still managed to sound so emotionally convincing on each of these re-recordings, no matter how openly they could be geared towards cash flow — some truly great love out there for material which, per se, was mostly mediocre to begin with.

As a small historical bonus, listeners might want to pay additional attention to the closing track, Irving Berlin's 'Remember', which features a lively and skillful guitar solo from the one and only

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Barney Kessel, a jazz pro who later went on to work with The Wrecking Crew and even ended up playing some guitar on The Beach Boys' **Pet Sounds** — just, you know, in case you were wishing for some subtle, but objective, link between Billie Holiday and Brian Wilson (which are notably harder to come by than subjective links between their relative spiritualities).

## BILLIE HOLIDAY (1954)

1) Love For Sale; 2) Moonglow; 3) Everything I Have Is Yours; 4) If The Moon Turns Green; 5) **Autumn In New York**; 6) How Deep Is The Ocean; 7) What A Little Moonlight Can Do; 8) I Cried For You.



 [‘Autumn In New York’](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *Two different Billies for such a small set of songs — interesting that you can sort of see the «breaking point» on this one.*

This unobtrusively titled album from 1954 is mainly notable for containing tracks from two recording sessions that were quite distant chronologically. The first five songs were recorded in April 1952 (the same month that yielded much of the material for **An Evening**); the last three — exactly two years later. The backing band is very much the same, too: Oscar Peterson mans the piano in both cases, Ray Brown is on bass and Charlie Shavers on trumpet (Herb Ellis replaces Barney Kessel on guitar, but the replacement is not particularly noticeable).

What is, however, unmistakably different is Billie herself. The 1952 sessions have already been talked about before; here, of particular note is the exquisite lonesome-melancholic rendition of ‘Autumn In New York’ (comparing *this* to the much more syrupy lounge version of Sarah Vaughan, among others, reveals the utter triumph of simple intelligence and human vulnerability over gloss and operatic technique), although the other performances are first-rate as well.

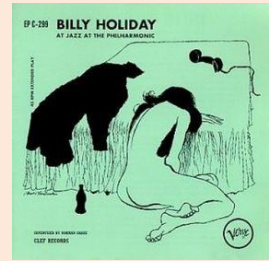
The last three songs, however, feature Billie’s voice in the initial phases of decline – losing some of her older frequencies (never all that abundant to begin with) and beginning to acquire that unmistakable old lady rasp that she had to be saddled with without actually turning into an old lady, due to substance abuse. It is only the beginning, though; here, the main effect is simply that the singing gets a little lower and deeper. It is unclear if they put Shavers’ trumpet on top of everything in order to mask that weakness — probably just a coincidence — but its shrill, sometimes downright overbearing presence breaks up the lonely midnight mood a bit, almost reminding one of the good old dancing days in the Columbia era. Whether this is a welcome retro-change from the Clef style of 1952–53 is up to you to decide.

In any case, the fast, playful versions of ‘What A Little Moonlight Can Do’ and ‘I Cried For You’ are still immaculately performed and passionately sung, and the album as a whole has no lowlights, despite the glaring incoherence of its two parts. Recommendable, if only for the beautiful take on ‘Autumn In New York’.



## AT JAZZ AT THE PHILHARMONIC (1954)

1) Body And Soul; 2) Strange Fruit; 3) Trav'lin' Light; 4) He's Funny That Way; 5) The Man I Love; 6) Gee Baby, Ain't I Good To You; 7) All Of Me; 8) Billie's Blues.



[▶ 'Trav'lin' Light'](#)

More info: [W](#) [🎧](#) [🎵](#)

General verdict: *Historically important and technically impeccable, but marred by the limitations of contemporary recording equipment.*

Although this album was only released in 1954, the actual recordings date from 1945 and 1946, back when Billie was an active participant in Norman Granz's «Jazz At The Philharmonic» touring program (and, since Granz was also the founder of Clef Records, to which Billie was signed in the 1950s, it was only natural for him to eventually make these recordings public on his own label). The precise dates are February 12, 1945 (first two songs) and October 3, 1946 (second two songs) at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles; and June 3, 1946 at Carnegie Hall for the last four songs. All of the material has now been included on the **Complete Verve** boxset, together with a couple more live tracks of *very* scratchy quality from 1946, and four more live performances of far better quality from 1947.

Considering that there are very few live-not-in-the-studio recordings from Billie at all, this is a record of historical importance; considering that these are the earliest available live recordings from Billie, it is a record of *tremendous* historical importance; and, considering that the second track on here is 'Strange Fruit', it is also a record of tense curiosity: how does this go down with the audience? are there any traces of nervousness in Billie's voice (other than a couple of precautionary coughs during the piano intro)? — but not to worry: the applause comes on strong, and the singing matches the slow-burn fire of the original studio recording fairly closely.

The setlist, as you can see, is completely standard; the only «new» tune, 'Trav'lin' Light', was originally recorded by Billie for Paul Whiteman's big band in 1942, and is re-arranged here as a minimalistic lounge ballad, with no one but Ken Kersey at the piano — another case of a «jazz standard» on which Lady Day was but a bit player transformed into a vulnerable confession, spotlight on the frail human soul and all that. Kersey's piano is very pretty *and* very quiet, so that much of the time there is absolutely nothing to distract you from the frail silver threads of Billie's long vowels (though people who find her «pure» voice a bit too high-pitched and shrill for their tastes will probably want to lower their volume for this one).




Unfortunately, live recording was still new and inexperienced in the 1940s, so there is no getting away from the relatively thin vocal sound; hopefully, this will be nobody's introduction to Billie, or one might subconsciously develop an impression of the lady as a «whiner». It goes without saying that the album is rather intended for the seasoned admirer than the novice. But, as the only complete live album to capture her in full control of her powers, it is at least a unique technical phenomenon, if not necessarily a unique emotional experience.

## STAY WITH ME (1955)

1) I Wished On The Moon; 2) Ain't Misbehavin' (I'm Savin' My Love For You); 3) Everything Happens To Me; 4) Say It Isn't So; 5) I've Got My Love To Keep Me Warm; 6) Always; 7) Do Nothing Till You Hear From Me.



 ['Everything Happens To Me'](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *A nostalgic session that tries to combine the gaiety of old with the darkness of the new, but does not fully succeed at either.*

Apparently, the date of release is somewhat shaky: various sources conflict in placing **Stay With Me** either in 1958 or in 1959. But at least chronologically, this is precisely where it belongs: all of these songs were recorded during one session, held by Billie on February 14, 1955, backed by Tony Scott and his Orchestra. On that particular date, the «Orchestra» happened to contain trumpeter Charlie Shavers, already a Billie regular; drummer Cozy Cole, whose talents and personality would later influence a certain Colin Flocks to change his name to Cozy Powell (hey, we *must* build up some connection to our rock audiences); guitar player Billy Bauer, notable for influential avantgarde work with sax player Lee Konitz; and other important musicians with important pedigrees. Not counting Tony Scott himself and his near-unique way of playing the clarinet (to rough post-electronic ears, it may sound like he's using a MIDI interface!).

In short, lots of second-tier talent assembled to record a fairly mediocre album. All of the tunes are generic oldies, most of them already covered by Billie up to several times, and she herself certainly was not in a good enough form to match the lighthearted gaiety of all this Broadway glitz, even if it might have briefly reminded her of the young and (not so) innocent days at Columbia. Her voice keeps cracking, sometimes even in important spots, and its worn-off character gives the whole affair a nostalgic sheen — from now on, you can occasionally get the uncomfortable feeling that Billie is beginning to get «out of time». Not that there wasn't still a huge audience out there for soft lounge vocal jazz, but this *was*, after all, the beginning of the rock'n'roll era, and Billie's ever-worsening health problems could hardly benefit her in these times of tough competition.

Still, taken entirely on its own, the session is not at all worthless. Structurally, the analogy with the good old Columbia days seems dead-on: Billie is just playing the role of yet another instrument in a band setting. On most of the tracks, she takes the lead at the beginning, then cedes her spot to the soloists, then returns at the end — this is why the tracks start getting bulkier, up to nearly seven minutes on 'I Wished On The Moon'. And, given her condition (and also the fact that nobody at this point would give a fig about hearing those actual *songs* one more time), this is just the right way to go about it. There's plenty of tasteful guitar soloing from Bauer, and fine, exquisite parts from Shavers, and, as I already said, those odd, atmospheric, in a way, almost «psychedelic» clarinet exercises from Tony Scott himself. Check out 'I Wished On The Moon' and, particularly, 'Everything Happens To Me' — the playing is as diverse and soulful as it gets on such things.

It may sound sad that, for the first time ever, Billie's backing band may be pulling the attention *away* from her, but if that is what it takes to save the record, so be it. That said, the faster-paced

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numbers, such as 'Always' and 'I've Got My Love To Keep Me Warm', are still unsatisfactory: at this time, Billie is already unable to convincingly communicate lighthearted joy as she was in the 1930s. As far as I am concerned, she should have stuck exclusively to darker stuff — but then again, they might think too much moroseness would damage sales, since, anyway, most record-buyers couldn't tell genuine joy from simulated joy even if each record bore a sticker saying "*WARNING: ALL HAPPINESS ON THIS ALBUM MANUFACTURED FROM ARTIFICIAL MATERIALS. NO GUARANTEES.*"

## MUSIC FOR TORCHING (1955)

1) It Had To Be You; 2) Come Rain Or Come Shine; 3) I Don't Want To Cry Anymore; 4) I Don't Stand A Ghost Of A Chance With You; 5) A Fine Romance; 6) Gone With The Wind; 7) I Get A Kick Out Of You; 8) Isn't This A Lovely Day.



[▶ 'Isn't This A Lovely Day'](#)

More info: [W](#)  

General verdict: *Unexpectedly well-polished and brilliantly controlled performances here — one of the most inspired moments in late Billie history.*

Perhaps I am just groping in the dark, but it seems to me that this session from August 1955 finds Billie in a slightly better state than her previous one, and the entire record is a relative highlight of her last years on Clef/Verve. All of the material, with the exception of 'A Fine Romance' that she had already done earlier for Columbia, is recorded for the first time, even if The Songbook is still the only available source. Of the session players, only Benny Carter stands out on alto saxophone; the rest provide solid backing rather than counterpoints. But that's fine: on this record, Billie had no desperate need of any counterpoints. She carries it all with bravery and finesse.

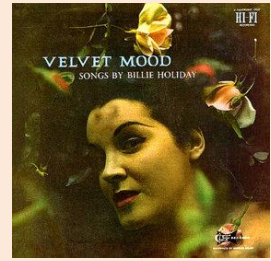
We get as far into the past here as 'It Had To Be You', which was originally recorded in 1924 by several people, including Marion Harris; but in order to appreciate Billie's version, it is, of course, advisable to select something glitzy in contrast — the Barbra Streisand take, perhaps? Or, if this seems unjust and skewed, we *could* do with more respectable earlier interpretations, such as Betty Hutton's. But they are all *normal* in their emotional impact. Billie, on the other hand, with each passing year seems to have been descending into an emotional world all her own — so much so that some might fall for the trap and declare this here singing cold, perfunctory, and passionless.

That would be a wrong move — if anything, her purely technical tricks over the years became more diverse and subtle. The ever-slowng tempos give her plenty of space to stretch out the syllables, practice that little vibrato, and control her «creaky» and «breathy» levels with the same precision that a Jimi Hendrix might control his whammy bar. And it may be that I am writing about it in *this* particular review simply because she is so perfectly captured on this album, too: for once, her voice looms large and heavy over all the instruments without any distracting echo effects. (Then again, I may be just imagining things to fill up space.)




Anyway, as usual, there are no high- or lowlights, and the album is quite aptly titled, even if, upon second thought, something like 80% of all of Billie's recordings are certified «torch songs». (May also be the reason why 'A Fine Romance', with its slightly cheerier attitude and faster tempo, sits here somewhat uncomfortably among all the gloom — but it is still a first-rate recording). Hence, another achievement, and, in addition to it all, *finally* a version of 'Come Rain Or Come Shine' that one can always throw on the player without the faintest hint of embarrassment (so many people tend to oversing and oversugar the sucker). Too bad Billie did not have the time to record *all* the popular songs of the first half of the 20th century — that would be a great excuse for burning up so much schlocky vinyl.

## VELVET MOOD (1956)

1) Prelude To A Kiss; 2) When Your Lover Has Gone; 3) Please Don't Talk About Me When I'm Gone; 4) Nice Work If You Can Get It; 5) I Got A Right To Sing The Blues; 6) What's New?; 7) I Hadn't Anyone Till You; 8) Everything I Have Is Yours.



 ['When Your Lover Has Gone'](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *Basically just 'Music For Torching' Vol. 2.*

Not a lot of new things to say here, since, apparently, all of the songs date from the same session as **Music For Torching** — same players, same type of repertoire, same level of inspiration. So much the same that, apparently, the album has not been re-released since its original market venture (aside from a limited Japanese release — because there is a limited Japanese release for absolutely everything), even if, all things considered, the two records together could have been an excellent choice for a double-LP package on one CD. In any case, all the tracks are out there on the **Complete Verve** package.


Re-recordings here include 'Nice Work If You Can Get It' — another of the lady's old Columbia upbeat rocking horses, and, consequently, another odd choice on an album dominated by smoky melancholy blues; 'Everything I Have Is Yours', which she'd already cut for Verve two years ago, but essays here once again in a slightly higher register; and the Commodore years classic 'I Got A Right To Sing The Blues', taken here at a slower pace, ornated with a pompous trumpet backing and featuring a long guitar solo from Barney Kessel — in other words, treated as «blues-de-luxe» rather than a brief aggressive outburst. Not very convincing, but passable.




Although, as usual, the record is very even, and its predictability is only disrupted in the subtlest of ways (e. g. Jimmy Rowles playing celeste on 'I Hadn't Anyone Till You'), my own tastes choose the 1931 standard 'When Your Lover Has Gone' as the outstanding highlight (a choice in which, surprisingly, I happen to coincide with the late James Dean, who declared it his favorite song). There is just something utterly mysterious about her phrasing on the title line — Billie may not be the master of complex technique, but she is the master of tone and pitch. The 4:32-4:58 segment of the song is, like, the ultimate benchmark in high quality choice of wavelength, if you know what I mean.

## LADY SINGS THE BLUES (1956)

1) Lady Sings The Blues; 2) Trav'lin' Light; 3) I Must Have That Man; 4) Some Other Spring; 5) Strange Fruit; 6) No Good Man; 7) God Bless The Child; 8) Good Morning Heartache; 9) Love Me Or Leave Me; 10) Too Marvelous For Words; 11) Willow Weep For Me; 12) I Thought About You.



 ['Lady Sings The Blues'](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *A career retrospective that mostly consists of re-recordings; largely expendable in these days of individually generated playlists, but historically relevant.*

This is not a very important release for those who, like me, would prefer to follow Billie's career in chronological order; nevertheless, it is still one of her best-known late period albums, since it is somewhat conceptual — released as a companion piece to her famous autobiography of the same name which was ghostwritten, actually, by William Dufty from Billie's recollections, but still historically important for a number of reasons (a black artist candidly writing about the intricacies of childhood abuse and heroin addiction was, to put it mildly, quite a novel thing back in 1956). The franchise then culminated in a couple shows at Carnegie Hall in December, where Billie's performances were accompanied by readouts from the book (a large chunk of the show is available on the **Complete Verve** boxset as well).

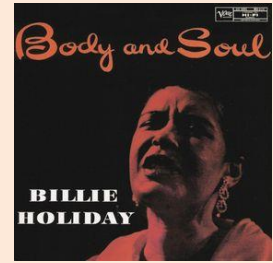
Thus, **Lady Sings The Blues** is somewhat of a retrospective album — all re-recordings, except for the title track, specially written by Billie herself for the occasion, and, today, one of her visit cards, along with 'Strange Fruit' and 'God Bless The Child', which, not coincidentally, had also been re-recorded for this session of June 1956. (Four of the songs are, however, taken from an earlier session in September 1954, again, creating a slightly uncomfortable dissonance between two different stages of the lady's voice).

The backing tracks on the session are nothing outstanding to write home about (where have you gone, Mr. Peterson?), and the old classics are not exactly reinvented, either: the best I can say about this performance of 'Strange Fruit' is that the subtle horror is still there, neither increased nor diminished. One could shyly argue that, as Billie got older, her voice was compensating for extra hoarseness and creakiness with an additional thin thread of wisdom-and-experience, so I could understand someone preferring this version of 'God Bless The Child', burdened with twenty-five additional years of ups and downs, to the original Columbia recording.




But then it may just be better to take this record as one large whole — lady does not so much sing the blues here as she sings out her past, alternating darker and lighter numbers to come up with an adequate representation of her own importance. And 1956 *was* an important year for her: on the heels of clever (and totally justifiable, in this case) marketing, she at least had the pleasure of receiving widespread acclaim and acceptance — crowned with the Carnegie Hall performances — during her lifetime, even if she did not get to enjoy it too long.

## BODY AND SOUL (1957)

1) Body And Soul; 2) They Can't Take That Away From Me; 3) Darn That Dream; 4) Let's Call The Whole Thing Off; 5) Comes Love; 6) Gee Baby, Ain't I Good To You?; 7) Embraceable You; 8) Moonlight In Vermont.



 ['Body And Soul'](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *Drawn-out, hyper-subtle takes on classics that are somehow achingly representative of the "sunset years" of the artist.*

Billie's last recording sessions for Verve (former Clef) were held in January 1957 and yielded enough new material for three albums, but, unfortunately, not enough for even one properly self-sufficient review. They simply continue the trend of **Music For Torching** and **Velvet Mood**, with another batch of re-recordings from old Columbia and Commodore cuts, mixed with barrel-scraping as Lady Day and her backing crew keep searching for Tin Pan Alley material that has, so far, managed to avoid the Holiday touch.

Just as before, the effect of these songs depends on whether Billie and the band decide to cast them in their original «playful» mood, or reinterpret them in a darker and more personal-intimate vein. Thus, the dialectal humor 'Let's Call The Whole Thing Off' works poorly, since Billie is unable to muster the requisite good vibes necessary to make it efficient; 'Gee Baby, Ain't I Good To You?', with its slower tempo and bluesy atmosphere, works better, but ultimately is still cast in a «light entertainment for gentlemen with big purses» manner. However, 'Comes Love', defined here by an ominously suggestive opening electric guitar riff from Barney Kessel and punctuated by Harry Edison's equally ominous trumpet lines, works achingly well — they almost manage to turn it into a somber German cabaret-style vaudeville number *à la* Marlene Dietrich (with a less mannequinish singer), a style not entirely familiar to Billie up to this point.

Other highlights include the title track and 'Embraceable You', both expanded to twice the running length of the original versions, not so much by the instrumental interludes (Barney Kessel does get a nice moody guitar solo in addition to all the trumpets and saxes) as by drastically slowing down the tempos — the slower it gets, the more thin nuances can be squeezed inside the vocalization of each single syllable.

That said, it does seem a little disappointing that, as late as 1957, Billie was so stubbornly clinging to the same old formula. No one would ask her to sing Chuck Berry, of course, but jazz and pop sensibilities, by the late 1950s, had evolved way beyond pre-War Tin Pan Alley. Her early recordings for Verve could, from a certain point of view, still be considered mildly «hip», but these ones almost could be accused of «lazy conservatism» — now that the lady's status as a living legend was codified, she could be covering the entire works of Ira Gershwin and Rodgers & Hammerstein in chronological (or alphabetical) order and there would still be a market for this.

On the other hand, let's face it — Billie Holiday is one of the very few reasons that the entire works of Rodgers & Hammerstein still have to be remembered fondly; and in 1957, there could be no better frontperson for the Tin Pan Alley mindset than Billie. Which makes this strong ignorance of the changing times all the more intriguing — «unyielding old guard», etc. In reality,

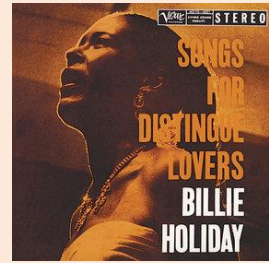
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though, it would be stupid to expect Billie to «modernize» her setlists: the idea that an artist must constantly «progress» in order to retain credibility did not yet exist in the 1950s.



## SONGS FOR DISTINGUÉ LOVERS (1957)

1) Day In, Day Out; 2) A Foggy Day; 3) Stars Fell On Alabama; 4) One For My Baby; 5) Just One Of Those Things; 6) I Didn't Know What Time It Was.



[▶ 'One For My Baby'](#)

More info: [W](#) [M](#) [S](#)

General verdict: *More late night lounge Billie for those who like a subtle shade of grit with their cocktail-style entertainment — what else is there to say, really?*

The second album released from the same sessions as **Body And Soul**, **Songs For Distingué Lovers** commands even fewer words than its predecessor. It also has fewer songs (just six titles), not to mention the exact same backing musicians, general attitude, and chronological set of songs — not a single one going back to anything later than 1943.

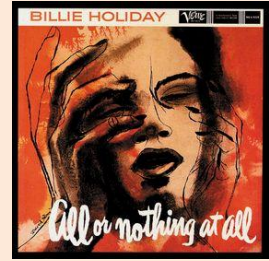
One curious difference is that, on this particular batch, not a single track is a re-recording — all six were selected as brand new «experimental» puppies for the lady to sink her (slowly rottin') teeth in. But that only makes the album harder to assess on its own, since there is nothing to compare it to — unless we start seriously discussing what it is exactly that the lady brings to 'One For My Baby' that is so different from Sinatra's classic version. (Pointless spoiler: just about the same thing that distinguishes *any* other tune tackled by both Holiday and Sinatra — Billie is Billie, and Frank is Frank, and chances of their mutating into each other are slim at best).

For some reason, when re-released forty years later on CD, it was **Songs For Distingué Lovers** rather than the two albums around it that got the first privilege — with six more songs from **Body And Soul** and **All Or Nothing At All** tacked on as bonuses. Perhaps the Verve people thought of the exquisite French epithet as being classier than others; the fact that they even used it at all back in 1957 means that they were consciously trying to market Billie as «penthouse» music for rich romantic couples... which does seem like cheapening the issue, but then it would be hard to argue that Billie herself made any conscious effort to break away from the stereotype. In any case, at this point in her life she was probably way past caring about such things.

The arrangements — yes, all of them typically penthouse arrangements; but the idea of spiritually enjoying Billie sing with half-drawn shades, a glass of Bordeaux, and a «that special someone» in an evening dress is unquestionably corny and much too stereotypical for a singer as dismissive of stereotypes as Billie. Above all else, all of these songs reflect *pain*, and it is rather hard to *enjoy* pain, let alone with a glass of Bordeaux (although, come to think of it, a big enough glass could make it easy to enjoy anything). Even though there is nothing even remotely close in spirit to a 'God Bless The Child' on **Songs For Distingué Lovers**, all of these songs — never mind the syrupy lyrics — are delivered in Billie's usual late-period ragged tones, and these tones are not «enjoyable»: they are «experienceable», and, as such, do not really require any additional settings, substances, or seductions.

## ALL OR NOTHING AT ALL (1958)

1) Do Nothing Till You Hear From Me; 2) Cheek To Cheek; 3) Ill Wind; 4) Speak Low; 5) We'll Be Together Again; 6) All Or Nothing At All; 7) Sophisticated Lady; 8) April In Paris; 9) I Wished On The Moon; 10) But Not For Me; 11) Say It Isn't So; 12) Our Love Is Here To Stay.



[▶ 'Ill Wind'](#)

More info: [W](#) [Y](#) [S](#)

General verdict: *The usual good stuff, if you forgive a tired and unhappy woman a couple ill-fated attempts to sound energized and happy.*

Last of the three albums from the January 1957 sessions, and, consequently, Billie's last album for Verve. Once again, what we have here is a mixed bag, combining songs that were almost tailor-made for Lady Day; songs that may have been not but which she was still able to properly mark with her unmistakable seal of approval; and a few annoying missteps that should have never been tried at all — first and foremost among these is 'Cheek To Cheek', a song that, to the best of my perception, was proverbially corny from the very beginning even for the typically suave standards of Irving Berlin, and one that could not ever be successfully «holidayed» even with a change in tonality: Billie's singing here is in no way allowing me to suspend the required disbelief, what with all her "I'm in Heaven"'s essentially sounding like "I'm really in the queue for the laundromat, and it's just one of those days". For that matter, 'I Wished On The Moon', reprised here from its original 1935 incarnation, also sounds like a bit of sorry nostalgia — at this point in her career, conveying pure, naïve joy must have been an impossibility.

Conversely, the highlights would probably include Duke Ellington's 'Do Nothing Till You Hear From Me' — slow, lazy, subversive, and with just a tiny pinch of sarcasm in the "...and you never will" resolution of each chorus; Harold Arlen's 'Ill Wind', with a mini-epic bluesy arrangement and excellent guitar-vocal dueting between Billie and Barney Kessel; and the cute rumba-jazz of 'Speak Low', which, if I am not mistaken, must be the only time Billie ever took on Kurt Weill in her entire career. I wish I could say the same about the title track (e. g. about how Billie destroys Sinatra's version or something like that), but it sounds fairly hookless to me.




With Ellington, Weill, and the «early blue-eyed soul» representative Frankie Laine ('We'll Be Together Again') sharing the same album with the obligatory G.A.S. representatives, **All Or Nothing At All** is, technically, one of Billie's most diverse LPs; but, of course, all of the songs are processed more or less in the same way, reducing surprise effects and novelty factors. Still, barring 'Cheek To Cheek' — which, for me, is one of the few truly embarrassing moments in Billie's late career period — it proves that the 1957 sessions, as always, were consistent throughout, and I would give all three albums one big happy collective endorsement: simply put all the songs together, filter out and vaporize the ones that sound way too unauthentically happy, and there you have it, Billie is wrapping up with Verve with plenty of verve.

## LADY IN SATIN (1958)

1) I'm A Fool To Want You; 2) For Heaven's Sake; 3) You Don't Know What Love Is; 4) I Get Along Without You Very Well; 5) For All We Know; 6) Violets For Your Furs; 7) You've Changed; 8) It's Easy To Remember; 9) But Beautiful; 10) Glad To Be Unhappy; 11) I'll Be Around; 12) The End Of A Love Affair.



 ['I'm A Fool To Want You'](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *Mushy orchestration, stereotypical songs, and some of the most subtly and sympathetically heartbroken deliveries in the history of pop music.*

It is a bit ironic that Billie's final completed record was recorded for the very same label that hosted her original recordings — by early 1958, she was out of Verve and back on Columbia. Of course, by that time it was already impossible for Columbia to present her the same way they did in the 1930s (meaning «lightweight jazz entertainment with a pinch of intelligence and a shot of individuality») — Billie was so frail that trying to rev her up with a nostalgic twist would, at worst, have killed her, at best, just have made her sound ridiculous.

Instead, to celebrate this new re-beginning and try out something different, the entire album was recorded with strings — a full orchestra, conducted by Ray Ellis. This was not the first time Billie was being backed that way: most of her Decca sessions, for instance, included lush strings. But, odd enough, this seems to be her best known recording on which she has orchestral support — either because it happened to be her last record, or, maybe, because her voice was so thin and crackling, it's almost as if the orchestra were shining through it all the time. On her Decca records, the violins tend to stay in the background; here, Ray Ellis dominates the proceedings at least as much as the lady herself, perhaps more.

Lush orchestral backing was quite *en vogue* at the time for jazz singers and crooners (think Ella's **Songbooks**, among other things), and Billie herself never specifically preferred small combos to big bands — in fact, she seems to have had the time, before her death, to acknowledge **Lady In Satin** as her personal favorite. The arrangements themselves will probably fail to please those who are allergic to syrup: going very heavy on strings and very light on brass, adding a moody (if not to say «ghostly») background choir for most of the songs, conventional, predictable, and completely indistinguishable from each other. So will the songs — just a bunch of additional stuff from the Songbook, all of them new for Billie at the time but still feeling as if she'd already sung them all before. Nothing too sharply bluesy, nothing too playfully jazzy, nothing too fast, almost everything lethargically slow. No obvious mind-blowing highlights, no unexpected mood-breaking lowlights. So why bother at all?

Well, for one thing, the entire album can't help but sound like a testament. She was not explicitly dying yet (still had more than a year to go), but it is clear that all of the systems were failing, and this physical deterioration and pain somehow got... not so much «reflected» in the performance as rather «converted» into the performance, if you can follow the difference. Her voice occasionally quivers as if in silent tears, but these are neither real nor fake tears, more like a slightly mannered, theatrical take on suffering delivered by a genuinely suffering person. If this does not suffice to describe her performance, let me just subjectively state that the performance is simply unique — except it has to be listened to very closely (one or two songs at a time may be enough; there is no

need to sit through the entire session if you do not feel like it), and your mind has to set the orchestra back a few feet to freely suck in all the pain, pain, pain. The Songbook was never really intended for that kind of pain — it's a wonder the whole thing worked in the end.


Note, though, that weak or strong, Billie never ever lost her knack at phrasing, her ability to place her own accents within each performance. This is why her voice, even at its crackliest and feeblest, still stands the test; complaints about her lack of singing power in these late years are useless, since, at this point, it was the weakness itself that gave her extra power, the kind of which she could never have twenty years earlier. It is a power to conjure pity, but «pity» as some sort of noble emotion, rather than just the gut feeling you get when bypassing a legless hobo. If it were the latter, we would just «pity» the lady — «oh God, she must have been in some *real* deep shit back then» — and forget **Lady In Satin** in favor of her earlier records (even the late-period Verve sessions sound like *Ode To Joy* in comparison to this). But there is this deep, weird attractive force here that elevates the record to genuine tragic status; and this, in a sense, almost makes **Lady In Satin** the most important album in her career — despite its numerous flaws, or, rather, *due* to these flaws. It is all summed up perfectly in the lyrics to the penultimate song: "Fools rush in / So here I am / Very glad to be unhappy... / For someone you adore / It's a pleasure to be sad" (one of Lorenz Hart's best moments as a lyricist, actually).




Never make the mistake of making this your *introduction* to Billie (some of the «best-of» jazz lists I have seen were stupid enough to make it «the obligatory B. H. inclusion» instead of the much more diagnostic Commodore sessions), but never make the mistake of bypassing it, either, if you care at all about the history of reflection of pain in art. At a certain point, if you get into it pretty deep, **Lady In Satin** is almost terrifying. But there is probably no need to wind it up to that effect; Billie herself, always the icon of restraint and elegance, would probably not want us to judge it that way. She probably wouldn't say no to a simple thank you, though.

## LAST RECORDING (1959)

1) All Of You; 2) Sometimes I'm Happy; 3) You Took Advantage Of Me; 4) When It's Sleepy Time Down South; 5) There'll Be Some Changes Made; 6) 'Deed I Do; 7) Don't Worry 'bout Me; 8) All The Way; 9) Just One More Chance; 10) It's Not For Me To Say; 11) I'll Never Smile Again; 12) Baby, Won't You Please Come Back.



 ['I'll Never Smile Again'](#)

More info:   

General verdict: *The sunnier side of Lady In Satin, but it is hardly surprising that in the last year of her life, Billie was far better at conveying the cloudier side.*

Perhaps it might be a good idea to forget about this album entirely, and let history record once and for all that it was **Lady In Satin** and nothing else that functioned as Billie's swan song — from a certain technical point of view it did, since this follow-up, originally titled simply **Billie Holiday**, was not released until a few days (or weeks) after the lady's death in July 1959 (for the record, if anybody is too lazy to check encyclopaedic sources, this happened from complications brought about by liver cirrhosis, rather than the stereotypical «overdosing» — not that she never overdosed, of course, and frankly, there is not *that* much substantial difference between dying from an overdose or from a ruined liver, but I feel like alcohol's rights have to be reinstated in this and similar cases).

The sessions, held in March 1959, were again directed by Ray Ellis, although this time, the orchestra took a few steps back, letting a jazz band in. As much as we could all be skeptical about Ray's orchestral sentimentality clashing with Billie's style, I almost sort of *miss* it on this album. Clearly, the idea was to record something a little lighter, poppier, more upbeat and perhaps even optimistic. And maybe — *maybe* — Billie was even up for it: at the very least, it may be noticed how her voice crackles less and sounds a little more vibrant and ringing throughout the sessions, somehow almost free of that old woman rasp, so frequently catching up with her on the last Verve albums and on **Lady In Satin**.

But it does not sound very natural or believable, this attempt at previewing the sound and style of Nancy Wilson. At least, not in the overall context. Billie's voice and strength may have been failing in the Fifties, yet she and her producers countered this with finding the right mood for those levels — all that quiet-nocturnal-melancholy-for-penthouse-clients vibe, etc. Now, just as she was entering the last months of her career, even if nobody knew it (but many still sensed it), Columbia tried to get her to cheer up again, right to the levels of twenty years ago. Even without all this knowledge, the fakeness of the effort shines through; *with* this knowledge, the album stirs up all sorts of unpleasant feelings, starting with pity and ending with contempt (or, rather, vice versa, because the album opener, 'All Of You', beats all the other tracks in terms of upbeatness and happiness, and sounds particularly skewed).

Of course, from a historical point of view, these sessions could be viewed as a sort of musical therapy, and if they made Billie feel happy for three days in the midst of the misery, that is just good enough for us. And it would be ridiculous to say that these performances are «wooden» or «emotionless»: Billie never ever recorded if she didn't feel like recording, as all the huge archive boxsets prove to us these days. But for the «listener», not the «biographer», this **Last Recording** is useless. If you want a genuinely happy Billie, go for the *early* Columbia years; if you want a

genuinely miserable Billie, go for **Lady In Satin**; if you live in a penthouse, go for the Verve collection. Next to all those treasures, this record is just a collector's memento, little more, and, although it is not «awful» by any means, it is hard to think of it as representing anything special, except for the sad realisation that it does not seem at all to come from a person ready to give in to her fate. Then again, perhaps this is for the best: better to go out lively and smiling than broken down and gloomy. Bring down the curtains with a laugh.

*Post-scriptum:*

**Last Recording** pretty much completes the discography runthrough. In addition to the material collected on these LPs and later-issued boxsets, the archives contain numerous alternate takes, demos, etc., most of which you can find on even bigger boxsets, but I do not recommend going for **Complete Verve** and the like unless Billie = your life or unless you are simply attracted to the coolness of having these bulky objects accumulating dust (and, perhaps, collectible value) on your shelves. It is a very good thing that they are available, though: they serve to emphasize Billie's important-legend status and ensure a modest, but stable, level of popularity among future generations of listeners. At the expense of other, unjustly forgotten, legends, perhaps — yet why should we complain that, should there be only *one* female jazz vocalist remembered from the pre-rock'n'roll era, it should be Billie? She was not simply following the rules of the formula, nor was she setting them; all her life, she worked *against* the current, and the fact that for the most part she did so without outstepping the limits of The Songbook only makes it more admirable. Like the Beatles in their professional sphere, or like Shakespeare in his, this is one hell of a legend to deserve unforgettable status, no matter how trite that may sound to hard-working connoisseurs of the genre.