

Author: Stuart Nicholson  
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Perhaps the most poignant passage in Stuart Nicholson's "Billie Holiday" is his account of Holiday's first performance of "Strange Fruit" at the Café Society in 1938. The performance, to a predominately white crowd in a very racially tense time, held the room frozen long before the song's last line: "Here is a strange and bitter crop." Nicholson's inclusion of this event is important, for the song and its performance made Billie Holiday a legend, and also announced the "first" daring cry against racism in words and music. (Nicholson mentions other "protest" songs existed, but none held the weight of "Strange Fruit.") The song helped define Holiday's style of carefully choosing her music, and proved that her dramatic libretto was impossible to emulate.

Nicholson's book is thorough in this respect; he gives us the items a biography should include: a broad history of Holiday's life, good references and discography; the course of the artist's music and the events that affected it. True, any formal biography on a great jazz artist should include these things, but how it's finally delivered is the core of a good biography. Here Nicholson falters; his writing often comes across devoid of feeling, and too succinct. Though Nicholson clearly did his research - and you will understand Holiday's music and this period of jazz after reading this book - the way he composed it is sometimes dry and technical. While the music is meticulously covered, not enough personal material on Holiday is. (The singer's own biography, "Lady Sings

the Blues” may be the best source for this.) One may come away from this biography knowing Holiday’s music, but not the jazz artist herself. After all, Billie Holiday’s emotional, dramatic life was what made her music legendary.

–Timothy Agnew