

# **Strange fruit: How Billie Holiday's performance of the anti-lynching song politicized Black consciousness**

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Billie Holiday's recording of the anti-lynching song "Strange Fruit" has stirred and haunted generations of listeners. A new [article](#) in the *Journal of African American History*, titled "Professional Mourning: Billie Holiday's 'Strange Fruit' and the Remaking of Black Consciousness," presents a detailed history of the song and argues that Holiday's rendition, released in the 1930s, brought the Black community together at a moment of unique social and political struggle.

"Between 1877 and 1950," writes the article's author, Samuel Galen Ng, "over four thousand Black people in the United States lost their lives to lynching." By the time Holiday launched her singing career, the number of lynchings per year had decreased, due to the migration of Black people out of the South and a formalized criminal justice system that shifted lynching from a vigilante practice to one "more fully integrated into state operations and a white supremacist social order." Nevertheless, lynching remained a real issue, polarizing U.S. citizens down racial and political lines.

A Jewish teacher named Abel Meeropol published the text of "Strange Fruit" as a poem in 1937. White leftists adapted it to music, but Holiday—a 23-year-old Black jazz singer—made the [song](#) famous. Holiday's arrangement of the piece brought it to a slow, dirge-like pace. During live performances, she would hold her body completely still. Audience members who saw Holiday perform the song at venues like Café Society and the Apollo Theater found themselves transformed by the music, and often, implicated in the lyrics. One auditor recalled, "When [Holiday] wrenched the final words from her lips, there was not a soul in that audience, black or white, who did not feel half strangled."

Indeed, Holiday's enactment of the protest song induced a sense of shared mourning and intimacy, particularly among Black listeners. Numerous Black thinkers, Ng avers, have turned to "Strange Fruit" over the years to articulate "an understanding of Blackness as a collectivity demarcated by feelings of shared threat and vulnerability" and to solidify "their commitment to combating anti-Black racism."

Holiday's performance of "Strange Fruit" had particular relevance at the moment of its composition and first recording amid the brutality of lynchings and Jim Crow discrimination. As Ng's article demonstrates, the song continues to speak to its audiences by rendering the violence its lyrics evoked as something that lingers "indelibly strange."

**More information:** Samuel Galen Ng, Professional Mourning: Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit" and the Remaking of Black Consciousness, *The Journal of African American History* (2023). [DOI: 10.1086/726667](https://doi.org/10.1086/726667)

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