

Mosaic, The Big Beat, Indestructible (all on Blue Note); *The Jazz Messengers, Hard Bop, Drum Suite* (on Columbia); *Caravan, Ugetsu, Kyoto* (on Riverside). In 1981, *Timeless* issued the combatively titled, *Album of the Year*; other jaunty records followed, including *Straight Ahead, Keynote 3, New York Scene, Live at Kimball's* (on Concord Jazz); *In My Prime I and II, Reflections in Blue, Oh—By the Way, The Jazz Messengers Big Band* (on Timeless); *In Sweden* (Amigo); and *Not Yet* (Soul Note).

Yet Blakey was preeminently a concert musician, which is to say a nightclub musician. As much as anyone else, he defined the kind of music that best suited the postwar, no-dancing-allowed jazz clubs of the '50s and '60s. And because he was tireless and never had to beg for an audience, he played more regularly than almost anyone else—downtown at Sweet Basil one week, uptown at Mikell's the next. Virtually every set ended with a plea for more understanding and respect for music, for his music, for everybody's music. He was so faithful a propagandist that he became the subject of an apocryphal tale. This is the way Bill Crow tells it in his book, *Jazz Anecdotes*:

Art was driving to an out-of-town job and passed through a village where traffic was completely tied up because of a funeral procession. Since he couldn't get past the cemetery until the service was over, he got out and listened to the eulogy. The minister spoke at length about the virtues of the deceased, and then asked if anyone had anything else to add. After a silence during which nobody spoke up, Art said, "If nobody has anything to say about the departed, I'd like to say a few words about jazz!"

41 ❖ Billie Holiday (Lady of Pain)

Lady Day is unquestionably the most important influence on American popular singing in the last twenty years.

Frank Sinatra, 1958

And yet the matter of influence seems almost academic today. Sinatra was speaking a few months before Billie Holiday died, at forty-four, when countless singers considered themselves directly in her debt, and when her gutted voice, drawled phrasing, and wayworn features were

widely construed as evidence of a self-immolating decline. Now the verdict is less dependent on what we know of her story and more on what we perceive in her music. Now it's obvious that, like Lester Young, whose career paralleled hers, Holiday achieved two discrete musical styles in a short, calamitous life. That their later styles were forged in response to outrageous fortune is a fact that continues to offend naive listeners who look to art as an expression of innocence and youth. Holiday's later recordings are all the proof we need of her ability to transfigure hurt and confusion into theme and variation. Had she been able to sing "What a Little Moonlight Can Do" at the end of her life as she did at twenty, she wouldn't have counted for much—she'd have been what Young contemptuously called a "repeater pencil."

Holiday's influence can be calibrated in the language of musical technique: in her use of legato phrasing, ornamentation, melodic variation, chromaticism. But musicology cannot do justice to the primary impact of her singing, which is emotional. Even in her apprentice years as the golden girl in a man's world, taking no more than the single chorus allotted each instrumentalist and transcending the material no less completely, her technique was limited by any standard, blues or bel canto. Paul Bowles wrote in 1946 that "one of the chief charms in Miss Holiday's art is that she makes absolutely no attempt to approach any of the elements of art singing, at the same time cannily making the most of all the differences that exist between that and her own quite personal style." Despite a thin voice and a range of about fifteen notes, she seduced listeners with her multilayered nuances. She embellished melodies, tailoring them to her own needs and limitations; lagged behind the beat, imparting suspense; harmonized well above the range of the composition, projecting a bright authority; and inflected words in a way that made even banal lyrics bracing.

Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong refurbished pop songs with blues and improvisational devices, and Bing Crosby intoned lyrics as though they meant everything even when they meant nothing (he could elicit tears with doggerel like "The Sweetheart of Sigma Chi"). Holiday combined those achievements, pushing song into the realm of unmitigated intimacy. Hers was the art of reflection and not of melodrama. In that respect and others, she was a beacon for her exact contemporary, Sinatra, who scaled down her example even further, redefining the good singer as one who subordinates instrument and technique to the art of interpretation (of course, unlike Holiday, he usually got flustered when attempting to embellish a melodic phrase). But the paradigms she offered applied no less stringently to singers who could match her improvisational skills. No singer was more stubbornly verbal than Carmen McRae,

who inflected words as though she were giving them a tongue-lashing. McRae was famously outspoken and her songs had a similarly tart appeal. You didn't necessarily turn to her for profane insight into the songwriter's art, but you occasionally got it anyway. This is especially true of the numerous Holiday tunes she covered. If Holiday made the word *love* shimmer with unrequited longing, McRae cast it in caustic languor. Consider her 1965 live recording of "No More": Holiday sang the line, "you ain't gonna bother me no more no how," as if trying to key up her resolve; McRae phrased those words as if she had a gun in her purse.

The Columbia recordings on which Holiday's legend primarily rests were produced by John Hammond and directed by Teddy Wilson, a brilliant pianist with an instantly recognizable bell tone attack and melodic, caroling style. Hammond recruited the finest musicians of the era from whatever big bands happened to be in town. The idea was to make quick and relatively inexpensive sides for the jukebox trade, particularly in the South; the Holiday-Wilson discs proved so successful that RCA hired Lionel Hampton to do the same. (Hampton's sessions were not distinguished by the singing, often by Hampton himself, but were instrumental milestones that documented the best of the swing stylists and the shift—with offerings from Charlie Christian, Dizzy Gillespie, and Nat King Cole—toward the modernism of the '40s.) Hammond, out on the town with Red Norvo, had originally heard Holiday in Harlem and added her to a couple of Benny Goodman numbers in 1933. Nothing much happened, although Duke Ellington used her anonymously for his 1934 Paramount film short, *Symphony in Black*. Norvo, in whose home Wilson first performed with Benny Goodman, may have suggested the match with Holiday. In any case, when she finally resumed recording after two long years, at the first Wilson session in the summer of 1935, she was an undoubted original whose time had come.

Oddly, she did not especially impress Wilson, or so he insisted in his later years. His preferred vocal style, he told the Smithsonian Oral History project, ran more to the school of Ella Fitzgerald, who began recording that same summer. Holiday was a novelty, he thought—a girl who sang like Louis Armstrong, though she was immediately identifiable and that was a good thing, he conceded. If the implied criticism is difficult to fathom, his perception in linking her to a musician whose recordings she had studied for years, was not. For Armstrong helped teach Holiday to swing. Beyond that, he taught her how to recompose a tune to suit her range, while improving the melodic line and projecting the emotional candor of an instrumentalist. The other singer she named as an inspiration was Bessie Smith, whose blues tonality was formative, even though Holiday rarely sang the blues *per se*. She didn't speak of

Ethel Waters, but Waters's influence is also unmistakable, in Holiday's diction and shading and vibrato.

The first Wilson-Holiday session was a benchmark. The band included Goodman, Roy Eldridge, and Ben Webster, and three of the four songs became Holiday classics: "I Wished on the Moon" (recorded two months before Bing Crosby introduced it in *The Big Broadcast of 1936* and forever identified with her despite Crosby's unmatched fame), "What a Little Moonlight Can Do," and "Miss Brown to You." Wilson and Holiday were back in the studio four weeks later and, then, on an almost monthly basis. After a year, Holiday was given the first of her own sessions (with Joe Bushkin on piano and Artie Shaw and Bunny Berigan as soloists). At a Wilson date in January 1937, he, Holiday, and Goodman were the ringers in an ensemble that included five members of the Count Basie band—its rhythm section; Buck Clayton, who would become her lover; and Lester Young, who would become her instrumental doppelgänger. At their first encounter, Holiday's voice and Young's tenor entwined like ivy around the trellises of "This Year's Kisses" and "I Must Have That Man."

In song after song, Holiday adapted written melodies with a taste and economy worthy of Armstrong. "A Sailboat in the Moonlight" is a characteristic and sensational example of the way she worked. The song, written by Carmen Lombardo, was the number one hit in the country for Guy Lombardo and His Royal Canadians in the summer of 1937; Holiday's version enjoyed an exceedingly modest success. Today, Lombardo's recording is unlistenable chiefly because the song's cadences are so sentimentally feeble that they underscore the banality of the lyric. In Holiday's version, supported by Young and an expert Wilson-imitator (Jimmy Sherman), the melody is charmingly suggestive and the lyric is unreasonably touching. How did she do it? The transformation begins with the first three notes, as she eschews a corny ascending figure in favor of a single repeated pitch, each note ("a/sail/boat") shaded for maximum rhythmic effect, not unlike the beginning of many Young solos. From that point, she alters a note here, a note there, stretching one at the expense of another—never for a moment obscuring the sweetness of the Lombardo song (which has the saving grace of pretty chord changes), yet demonstrating that the heavenly dream of sailing away with her lover to a remote place of their own is profoundly, deeply, urgently important.

Before long, her recordings lost much of their impulsive, huddling spontaneity. The singer became the star, not just one of the gang singing one chorus among many, but the performer around whom the entire record-

ing was built. The switch was inevitable, and Holiday's craftsmanship rarely failed her. But life did, and latter-day Holiday is formed in part by those failings. Some of her last records, recorded when the instrument was worn to the nerve endings, are painful, yet the overwhelming body of work from her last fifteen years is as rewarding as jazz singing gets. The early records wear a golden-age sheen of sunny rhythms and instrumental bravura; later records are built entirely around the singer. The tempo is slower, the mood more conversational. The alterations remain provocative and full of surprise. The enunciation is, if anything, more compelling—the emotions more urgent. The differences between early Holiday (the Columbias, 1933–42) and late Holiday (the Verve 1952–59) is emphatic in the different moods they evoke, and a listener could no more confuse their respective values than those of, say, Beethoven's early G major and late A minor string quartets. The artist has undergone a sea change, no matter whether the cause involved heroin addiction or deafness, and while the parallel withers at this point—Beethoven did not lose his technique—the fascination with later Holiday stems from her ability to mine her compromised technique for expressive value. We don't attend her pain out of pity, but out of recognition. Her voice retained its enchantment, a lapsed beauty, a thin, pure, noble siren gleam.

The change in Holiday took place during the decade between those two major label affiliations and began in 1942. That was the year she apparently began using hard drugs to alleviate difficulties with her first husband, an addict she had married the previous year. It was also in 1942 that she worked two months at Billy Berg's Trouville Club in West Hollywood with Lee and Lester Young, during which she met Jimmy Rowles, the band's pianist and sole white member (Lester had to assure her "this cat can blow"), and the young producer of the club's jam sessions, Norman Granz. She recorded "Travelin' Light" with Paul White-man, a hit, though she received no royalties, and a few months later, in Chicago, had her first encounter with the police. That was the pattern for the rest of her life: triumph alternating with catastrophe.

She recorded for Milt Gabler, first at Commodore with written band arrangements, then at Decca, where she became the first jazz singer to record with strings—a gamble that paid off handsomely with such milestone performances as "Lover Man," "I Loves You Porgy," "Good Morning Heartache," "Don't Explain," "No More," "Ain't Nobody's Business If I Do," and "God Bless the Child." Underpaid and underappreciated (she never won a *Down Beat* poll), Holiday may have felt that the complement of strings was a compliment to her showbiz stature. These are transitional recordings—her voice, still in flower, meets the challenge of

the imposing repertoire, but the staid settings dilute the expressive content of her singing.

The addiction began to take over; her marriage broke up and she canceled engagements. Yet she remained unbowed. At the same time she seemed to be retreating from life, she asserted herself in ever bolder directions: embarking on her first solo concerts in 1946 (the second of which was recorded as part of Granz's Jazz at the Philharmonic package), undertaking an acting role in the odious 1947 movie *New Orleans* as a maid (she walked out in the middle of filming), and hooking up with an expert accompanist, Bobby Tucker. In 1947, she took a voluntary cure for addiction, but shortly after she was discharged, she resumed her habit and was arrested in Philadelphia and sentenced to a year and a day at the Alderson Reformatory in West Virginia. She served nine and a half months.

Upon release, she returned to New York for a glorious concert at Carnegie Hall. Newspapers that previously ignored her singing now sensationalized her troubles. A few radio stations blacklisted her. Worst of all, the City of New York refused her a cabaret card (La Guardia's cabaret law was in effect until 1967), which meant she would never again sing in a New York room that served liquor; it meant that the only work she could get was on the road or in theaters. More arrests followed, though none of them stuck, and the bad publicity tripled, then quadrupled, her salary. In 1950 a *Down Beat* hack referred to her as "Lady Yesterday." She continued to cast dangerous playmates in the role of Lover Man, resulting in betrayals and beatings—her second husband, the unmourned John Levy, framed her on a drug rap, which she beat at the cost of permanent insolvency. After Decca dropped her in 1951, she recorded one session for Aladdin and drifted until Norman Granz signed her to his Mercury label (the parent company of Clef and Verve) a year later. Except for one Columbia album, he supervised her records for the remaining seven years of her life.

The jazz art is ever at the mercy of the record companies that own its recorded legacy. In the '80s and '90s, Verve did an excellent job in collecting all of Holiday's work for that label, while Columbia did a terrible job, reversing their track record in the '60s and '70s. For the first time, the later work achieved more prominence than the youthfully dazzling masterworks of the '30s. The work is extremely uneven, including some of her best as well as unlistenable recordings made when she could barely find energy to enunciate or keep in tune. The lapses, poses, and clichés—at least two dozen songs end with her most overworked tic, the interval of a ninth or major second down to the tonic—are trounced by

numerous glories that neither demand nor require a morbid or sentimental response. The musical elation she affords is often inseparable from the pleasurable tension of hearing a great artist wrestle with and frequently surmount technical and personal cumbrances. Billie Holiday never stopped wrestling.

Consider two performances: the 1952 "These Foolish Things" (which André Hodeir singled out for praise) and the 1956 "All or Nothing at All" (which John Chilton singled out as "the nadir"). In the earlier recording, her voice is strong and the inspiration of the opening paraphrase is sustained throughout the chorus; in the later one, she's hoarse and her variations are occasionally tremulous. Yet in both instances the overriding impression is of a singer intent on making variations, of an artist refusing to accede to what Holiday called "close-order drill." She's feeling her way through both songs, refurbishing melodies and lifting rhythms, and if her artistic control is surer in "These Foolish Things," as it surely is, "All or Nothing at All" is compelling—and frequently risky, as in the extremely legato swing of the release.

For all but one of the Verve albums, Holiday returned to a setting that superficially resembled her Columbia recordings. Once again she was surrounded by an intimate coterie of superb improvisers. But the resemblance stops there. The tempos have stalled to a medium nod-time, fit for ruminating, often sensuous. The singing is economical and so are the arrangements, which were mostly ad lib. Instead of a couple of winds escorting her through the changes, as on many of the Teddy Wilson classics, she is usually heard in dialogue with one soloist. (Harry Edison's obbligati throughout are ingeniously alert.) Holiday is at the musical and emotional center of nearly every performance; when she is radiant, the musicians are correspondingly radiant. When she falters, the entire session is as a rainy day (come back tomorrow, fellas, we'll get it right then). The instrumentalists now take their cues from her. The spectacle of Young and Holiday jogging shoulder to shoulder could never be duplicated. She is no longer the girl singer, a member of the band, one of the boys. She is a diva surrounded by gentlemen in waiting. The rehearsal banter, much of which has been preserved, may suggest otherwise, but the music doesn't lie: the obbligato is respectful, which is to say unequal.

Holiday draws you into these songs as if they were translucent baubles to be held to the light and languidly examined. And whereas once she transcended silly lyrics with the intensity of her rhythmic and melodic skills, now she makes them work for her. What a gorgeous irony that the dog tunes she got stuck with in the '30s became so immutably associated with her that twenty years later people requested them of her

as though they were Holiday's greatest hits. Every stanza seems autobiographical. When she was twenty, she made "What a Little Moonlight Can Do" a boisterous jaunt, precocious and exhilarating; twenty-two years later, worn down by numberless ills, she makes a valiant and winning effort to sing it for the crowd at Newport. For the first time you hear the words, and suddenly what was trite—"You only stutter cause your poor tongue/Just will not utter the words/I love you"—is made jarring.

Holiday had lost nothing of her technique when she first signed with Verve, as witness her 1946 appearance at a JATP concert in Los Angeles. She is scintillating and robust. Her alterations on "The Man I Love" are as ingenious as those on the Columbia version, although this time Lester Young's contribution is confined to obbligati in the second chorus; listen to the way she glides over "seems absurd" or rushes "someday, one day" or drapes "my" over two notes. The 1952 and 1954 studio sessions are ornamented with masterly work by Charlie Shavers and Flip Phillips, though Oscar Peterson is heavy-handed and oblivious. It hardly matters; nothing could bring Holiday down when she was singing so well. (By contrast, at a 1954 German concert, a direct if rather wan Holiday skims the surface of Carl Drinkard's hyperventilating piano.) In 1955, she was feted by a more orderly Tony Scott unit (with Shavers at his peak) and consistently worthy material: she freely reharmonizes key phrases in "Always" and "Ain't Misbehavin'," italicizes the fine lyric of "Everything Happens To Me" (hear the inflection on "measles" and the percussive push on "thought you could break this jinx for me"), adds the verse to her classic "I Wished on the Moon," and debuts the first of her two acutely personal versions of "Do Nothin' Till You Hear From Me," on which Budd Johnson echoes her mood.

Perhaps the best sessions are those with Jimmy Rowles, Harry Edison, and either Benny Carter (his "What's New" solo is a song in its own right) or Ben Webster (wailing on the second and superior "Do Nothin'"). In a rehearsal conversation Verve recovered from the public domain—and expanded by thirty minutes for its ten-disc *The Complete Billie Holiday on Verve 1945-1959*—Holiday says to Rowles, "It's a pleasure working with you again. Jesus Christ! I've been with some pretty big shots and they don't dig me no kinda way." Rowles trails her like a bloodhound, his footing as light and sure as hers—for example, "Day In, Day Out" and "I Didn't Know What Time It Was" (with verse). Edison is startling, booting her final chorus on "I Get a Kick Out of You," feeding her shots on "One for My Baby," and answering her every phrase on "Do Nothin'." Holiday occasionally sounds exhausted, but she regularly comes up with fresh twists, such as the curtailed rest at the

opening of a shyly romantic "Isn't This a Lovely Day." A 1956 session with Tony Scott and Wynton Kelly is sluggish, and the big band album with Ray Ellis, recorded four months before her death in July 1959, is a matter of taste. The voice is haggard, but its soulful cry remains penetrating and I find several of these performances heartrending.

If a turnabout is in the making, with people saying they prefer the Verves to the Columbias (I don't mean to disparage the great Commodores or the less consistent Deccas and Aladdins, but they are transitional recordings between the polarities of early and late Holiday), that will be redressed as Columbia goes back to its vaults and remasters its cache. But the change in heart is not entirely novel. Several of the original Verve albums, especially *Body and Soul* and *Solitude*, were rarely out of print and were favored by her public and musicians. A musical adjunct to postwar noir, they spoke to audiences directly, without explanations or apologies. The best of the earlier Columbias are beyond praise: intrepid explosions of youthful genius, the work not merely of an inspirational singer but of an entire generation of princely musicians who burnished her vigilant joy with a glowing, compassionate optimism. Holiday is the lynchpin, but the results outshine any one participant, even her. The later recordings incarnate her indictment of the world as well as the spirit and dignity she sustained through all its blows.

42 ❖ Modern Jazz Quartet (The First Forty Years)

"In creating, the only hard thing is to begin," wrote James Russell Lowell. For the Modern Jazz Quartet, the world's most venerable chamber group in or out of jazz, the beginning was a three-year trial. Few people in the early '50s would have entertained the idea that a small jazz band could flourish over four decades, bridging generations and styles. Big bands had proved durable in part because, like symphony orchestras, they could withstand changes in personnel, and because they counted on dancers to sustain their appeal. No jazz chamber group had ever lasted more than a few seasons.

When the MJQ first convened, American music was in one of its many transitional phases. The public's taste changed with frightening alacrity. A decade earlier, the country was jitterbugging to swing. After the war, bop ruled jazz, while big bands struggled for survival and pop songs

grew increasingly bland. In 1952, there was talk of a cool school in jazz, while younger listeners were drawn to rhythm and blues. A couple of years down the road, there would be hard bop, soul, and rock and roll. Then the deluge: third stream, free jazz, neoromanticism, acid rock, new music, fusion, neoclassicism, disco, original instruments, hip hop, grunge, and more.

Yet through it all, the Modern Jazz Quartet persisted and prospered. We do well to remember that the fortieth anniversary of the MJQ in 1992 was only the seventy-fifth anniversary of jazz on records, if we honor as genesis the sensationally successful 1917 Victor release of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band's "Livery Stable Blues" b/w "Dixie Jazz Band One-Step." Thirty-five years later, on December 22, 1952, John Lewis, Milt Jackson, Percy Heath, and Kenny Clarke met at a Manhattan recording studio leased by Prestige Records and recorded two standards ("All the Things You Are" and "Rose of the Rio Grande") and two Lewis originals with exotic names: "La Ronde," which had its origins in a piece recorded by the Dizzy Gillespie orchestra, and "Vendome," which prefigured the merging of jazz and fugal counterpoint that became an abiding trademark of the MJQ. The records were widely noted, but less widely embraced. With Lewis spending most of his time working toward a master's degree at the Manhattan School of Music, the first session was—withstanding a gig in an obscure Greenwich Village bistro called the Chantilly—an isolated foray.

The world was a different place that chilly day. At the very moment the quartet cut those records, President-elect Eisenhower was at the Commodore Hotel a few blocks away, meeting with a group of Negro clergymen to whom he expressed "amazement" that discrimination was widely practiced; he promised to appoint a commission to study the matter, adding that he was determined to abide by the law even if every Negro in America voted against him. Also in the news: the Soviets accused the U.S. of murdering eighty-two North Korean and Chinese POWs; allied fighter-bombers strafed Korean supply depots; more than seven hundred protesters staged a rally for the Rosenbergs at Sing Sing; Sugar Ray Robinson announced his retirement from the ring. *The New York Times's* music pages noted a concert by George Szell and Guiomar Novaes and two debuts by Stravinsky, but, as was customary, expended not a word on jazz or popular music, and devoted twice the space to radio listings as to television.

In jazz, 1952 is best remembered for the formation of the MJQ, but it was also the year Count Basie (a profound influence on Lewis) returned to big band music after leading an octet for two years; Gerry Mulligan started his pathbreaking quartet; and Eddie Sauter fused with Bill Fi-