

Seeing and Singing “Strange Fruit”: Billie Holiday’s Creation of a Bitter Crop

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Southern trees bear a strange fruit
 Blood on the leaves and blood at the roots
 Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
 Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees
 Pastoral scene of the gallant south
 Them big bulging eyes and the twisted mouth
 Scent of magnolia, clean and fresh
 Then the sudden smell of burning flesh

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck
 For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
 For the sun to rot, for the leaves to drop
 Here is a strange and bitter crop.

When the song “Strange Fruit” made its appearance in Billie Holiday’s repertoire in the late 1930’s, it was met with immediate rejection, by white people and people of color alike. Many people walked out of the performance venues, threatened and carried through with physical violence on Holiday, and refused to let her perform at all in clubs. One woman ripped Holiday’s dress and screamed at her to never sing the song again, its haunting nature evoking memories of a lynching she herself had seen in the South. Holiday’s own mother told her not to perform the song. As the song gained renown, Holiday said it “made her sick to perform it” and might have facilitated her decline into and struggle with drug addiction. ¹

The lyrics of “Strange Fruit” were written initially as a poem by a Jewish man, Abel Meeropol, in reaction to a photograph of the lynching of a young African American man. While the poem on its own gained some attention, it was only when Meeropol set the poem to music and Billie Holiday began to sing it in her live performances that its messages and gory imagery

¹ David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2000), 22, 62, http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzMzMzMDMyX19BTg2?sid=607abcf-fbd8-4f62-a974-326720d6b6fc@pdc-v-sessmgr04&vid=0&format=EB&lpid=lp_3&rid=0.

began to truly affect the American public. ² Even now, “Strange Fruit” still proves its timeless impact through Pearl Primus’ well known choreographed dance to the poem that, when performed, “cast[s] a harrowing spell over audiences whether the text [is] heard or simply implied.” ³ Despite countless reproductions and covers of the song, audiences can detect the same haunting energy in every version and react accordingly to its vivid images.

What makes the reaction to “Strange Fruit” so extreme? Why specifically is Holiday’s performance so powerful? In order to understand the song’s emotional effectiveness, it is important to examine Holiday’s musical choices in light of how live performance functions for both audience and performer, and how musicality amplifies and intensifies said function. Apart from its debut occurring in a tense period of racial segregation and conflict in the United States and its inflammatory lyrics, Billie Holiday’s musical rendition and her live performance choices transforms the words of Meeropol’s poem. Musical and harmonic structure plays an important part in creating an almost tangible image of a lynching inside the listener’s mind and viewing the clear physical exertion it takes Holiday to sing “Strange Fruit” enforces this process.

The physical act of performing plays a large role in the emotional understanding of it, especially in terms of rhythm. ⁴ In an experiment studying the emotional effects of asynchronized and synchronized rhythms, children were told to tap a simple beat. An experimenter then tapped either a synchronized or asynchronized beat along with the children. The subjects were asked to recognize an emotion, either happy or sad, on a series of human

² “The Strange Story Of The Man Behind ‘Strange Fruit,’”
<https://www.npr.org/2012/09/05/158933012/the-strange-story-of-the-man-behind-strange-fruit>

³ “Nimbus Dance Works: Strange Fruit,” *Jacob’s Pillow Dance Interactive* (blog),
<https://danceinteractive.jacobspillow.org/nimbus-dance-works/strange-fruit/>.

⁴ Tal-Chen Rabinowitch and Ian Cross, “Joint Rhythmic Tapping Elicits Distinct Emotions Depending on Tap Timing and Prior Musical Training,” *Emotion* 19, no. 5 (August 2019): 810, 814.

faces. Those children who tapped in a synchronized beat labelled more faces as happy, and those in the asynchronized group labelled more faces as sad. Distressing and uneven rhythms caused stress in the children, and they then focused more on negative emotions.⁵ By having to acknowledge a rhythm different to the one they were tapping out, subjects had to multitask in not only tapping out their own rhythm but also keeping time with the asynchronous rhythm. The rhythmic stability of a musical line and its relationship to other musical lines within the piece, then, can affect a performer's perception and emotional understanding of the song.

Aside from tension from the foundational rhythmic patterns, performers turn to facial expressions to hone in on the emotional content of the piece. In David Havas' experiment on the effect of facial expression on emotional-language processing, experimenters temporarily hindered subjects' expressive muscles with botulinum toxin and asked them to read a series of pleasant and unpleasant phrases. The results found that "reading time for sentences describing pleasant situations were faster while participants were smiling than while they were prevented from smiling, while the reverse was found for reading time for sentences describing unpleasant situations."⁶ When subjects' facial muscles were inhibited, reading times were slower, especially for angry or sad sentences, indicating that subjects were forced to take more time to understand the emotional content and connotations of a given sentence. When they could not use their facial expressions as an emotional outlet, they were forced to rely more on the sentence itself for indications of emotional value. Performers who allow their facial expressions to reflect the emotional content when singing lyrics can understand the emotional significance of those

⁵ Tal-Chen Rabinowitch and Ian Cross, "Joint Rhythmic Tapping Elicits Distinct Emotions Depending on Tap Timing and Prior Musical Training," *Emotion* 19, no. 5 (August 2019): 810, 814.

⁶ David A. Havas et al., "Cosmetic Use of Botulinum Toxin-A Affects Processing of Emotional Language," *Psychological Science* 21, no. 7 (July 2010): 895.

lyrics faster, because their physical expression and the words work together to instill emotional value to the phrases.

When Holiday performs “Strange Fruit,” she and the piano accompaniment use asynchronistic rhythms, her facial expression mimicking the distressing content of the lyrics.⁷ Each phrase begins and proceeds on the second beat of each measure instead of the strong first beat, increasing the instability of the structural integrity of the song. In Emily J. Lordi’s book chapter “Haunting: Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* and Billie Holiday’s ‘Strange Fruit’”, she points out the discrepancies between piano accompaniment and singer, that the “interplay between vocal and piano lines is not ironic and affirmative, as in collaborative understatement; instead, it is uneven and intense.”⁸ Holiday’s facial expressions become more distraught throughout the song, which is in line with Rabinowitch’s asynchronization hypothesis: with each unsteady verse and unmatched accompaniment phrase, Holiday visibly becomes more uncomfortable. The task of juggling an uneven rhythm combined with her increasing facial distress through the song causes her to dramatize, almost theatrically, her musical expression. She stresses “bulging” in “them bulging eyes,” and her mouth turns down when she sings it, almost forcing the note out of her mouth. When she sings, “then the sudden smell of burning flesh” in the eighth line, she scrunches her nose on “smell”, as if smelling the scent in that moment and disgusted with it.⁹ The facial expressions goad her attitude towards the subject of the song as she associates her downtrodden face to the jarring image of the smell of burning flesh.

⁷ Joel Katz, *Strange Fruit*, accessed April 8, 2020, <http://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/strange-fruit>.

⁸ Emily J Lordi, “Haunting: Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* and Billie Holiday’s ‘Strange Fruit,’” in *Black Resonance, Iconic Women Singers and African American Literature* (Rutgers University Press, 2013), 160.

⁹ Katz, *Strange Fruit*.

When audiences experience music, they rely not only on the performer's gestures, but also on the music itself to understand the piece's intended emotional expression. In an experiment conducted by William Thompson, subjects watched a series of singing clips, of which the singers were singing either a major third or a minor third, and then asked to rate the performances as "very happy" or "not happy". Audio and visual components were then switched, so that the major triad audio was matched with the singer singing a minor triad, and vice versa. The results found that

"major-thirds paired with the matching facial expressions were assigned high ratings ("very happy"), whereas minor thirds paired with matching facial expressions were assigned low ratings ("not happy"). When audio-visual information was incongruent, emotion ratings were intermediate, reflecting a balance between the two sources of information."¹⁰

While a major-third interval and a minor third interval in music have the natural association of being a "happy" or "not happy" interval respectively, it is clear through this experiment that the visual component of seeing the singing works with the audio in encouraging precise emotional processing of music. When listeners see the face of a performer singing, they expect the sung music to match. If the audio-visual information does not match, listeners must depend on each source equally to obtain more knowledge about what they are experiencing. When both the audio and the visual are incongruent, listeners are more uncertain of the emotion they are feeling,

"Strange Fruit" is so tense because of its visual-auditory unpredictability. Thompson's experiment tested on pure major and minor triads, and Holiday's mixing of the two forces the

¹⁰ William Forde Thompson, Frank A. Russo, and Lena Quinto, "Audio-Visual Integration of Emotional Cues in Song," *Cognition & Emotion* 22, no. 8 (December 2008): 1462, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02699930701813974>.

audience to pay close attention to Holiday's face and the music together. The lyric "Southern trees" starts out the piece in the key of B flat minor on the primary note of the tonic, or main chord. Both the minor chord structure and the forlorn look on Holiday's face establish the song as sorrowful. The next phrase "bear a strange fruit" is accompanied by G flat and F major triad chords, which should suggest a happier connotation. However, Holiday's frown during this melody line creates an audio-visual mismatch; this presentation forces the audience to await further information that might guarantee a more stable emotional understanding of the piece. But in the next phrase, "blood on the leaves/and blood on the root," Holiday repeats the same chord progression, with the same ambiguous facial expression. As a result, she captures the audiences' full attention in the first half of the song; with her incongruent gestures and chord structures, listeners have no sense of audio-visual security, and must use both stimulators to find clues when identifying their emotional reactions to Holiday's performance. Lordi analyzes Holiday's tactic as "[aiming to] confront listeners with a statement that [is] familiar yet foreign in execution" in a "mixture of the recognizable and unpredictable."¹¹ Here, Lordi confirms Holiday's use of visual-auditory balancing; Holiday uses the B minor key, recognizable to audiences as evoking sorrow, and introduces the unpredictability with the incongruent expression on the major triads.

¹²

Not only does physical and auditory congruency play a role in the audience's understanding of the musical performance; descriptive lyrics also facilitate emotional mental imagery. In an experiment testing listeners' ability to mentally create sounds, subjects were

¹¹ LORDI, "Haunting," 159.

¹² "BILLIE-HOLIDAY-Original-Keys-For-Singers-S.Pdf," accessed April 14, 2020, 67, <http://ekldata.com/UfoHPpksi9ek3YI5UtOhF-iYkWE/BILLIE-HOLIDAY-Original-Keys-For-Singers-S>.

asked to read sentences that “conveyed details that could provoke auditory imagery”, namely, sound-generating action verbs, and then asked to categorize a series of sounds as ‘real’ or computer generated. According to the experiment, “readers were faster to correctly categorize sounds as ‘real’ when the sounds had been implied by a preceding sentence.” When introduced to a physical action in a visual sense, listeners automatically form a mental image of that action. If readers are introduced to the physical label of an action, such as “clatter,” they are much more accurate in identifying the respective real sound of that action, i.e., the sound of clattering.¹³ Therefore, the reading of implicit auditory action verbs cause the listener to form a mental prediction of what the audio might sound like, and intensifies their ability to recognize the real sound when created.

Holiday utilizes visual clues in her performance to enhance the audience’s mental images of the lyrics. The song intensifies in the last four lines, closing the space between performer and listener. The first two lines, “here is a fruit for the crows to pluck/for the rain to gather, for the wind to suck” begins the action verb stimulation. Holiday sings “pluck” in the end of the first phrase as staccato, a note that ends as abruptly as it starts. The piano then copies her style with a staccato chord, making the unmistakable sound of a crow plucking fruit. She does this technique again in the next phrase; she lingers on the word “gather,” and the piano echoes her by playing a series of arpeggios, like an accumulation of rain as it gathers the fruit. On “suck” her voice rounds off with the piano, and she and the piano visibly pause to suck in a breath before beginning the next phrase.

¹³ Tad T. Brunyé et al., “You Heard It Here First: Readers Mentally Simulate Described Sounds,” *Acta Psychologica* 135, no. 2 (October 2010): 209.

The climax comes in the next few lines; “for the sun to rot” provides a jarring image of the sun as scorching heat burning the ‘fruit’ or body of the victim. Holiday brings this image to life as she spits out “rot”; as soon as she sings the note it fades away, like decaying matter. On “for a tree to drop”, her voice swoops up on the word “drop”, evoking the feeling of something falling. This musical choice confronts listeners with the mental image of hanging that is unmistakable and unavoidable. Holiday herself admits this musical choice is on purpose; in her autobiography *Lady Sings the Blues*, she says that “When I said, ‘. . . for the sun to rot,’ and then a piano punctuation, ‘. . . for the wind to suck,’ I pounced on those words like they had never been hit before.”¹⁴ The final line, “here is a strange and bitter crop”, solidifies this image, bringing it front and center in the audience’s minds. However, instead of returning to the root note of B flat as the listener anticipates, “crop” swoops up to F, just above the D flat and C. Holiday sings this last note like a scream, intensifying the discordance of the F and confirming with a bitter sense of loss the audience’s image of a dead body, plucked, decaying, and rotting, finally dropping to the ground.¹⁵

It is clear the impact that Holiday’s performance had on its contemporary viewers. American author Studs Turkel’s recalls of one of Holiday’s live performances of the song, remembering that

“[Billie’s] voice goes up—crahaahOP!—like a scream. . . It’s like that painting by Münch of the woman screaming, only in this case, you hear it. She leaves the last note hanging.

¹⁴ Billie Holiday and William Duffy, *Lady Sings the Blues* (repr. New York: Harlem Moon, 1956), 96.

¹⁵ “BILLIE-HOLIDAY-Original-Keys-For-Singers-S.Pdf,” accessed April 14, 2020, 67, <http://ekladata.com/UfoHPpksi9ek3YI5UtOhF-iYkWE/BILLIE-HOLIDAY-Original-Keys-For-Singers-S>.

And then—bang!—it ends. That's it. The body drops. I don't know of any other song, jazz or pop, that has that kind of ending.”¹⁶

Here, Turkel clearly experiences a kind of mental stimulation similar to that of the subjects in the action verb stimulation experiment. The use of strong active verbs such as “suck” “pluck” “rot” “drop”, combined with Holiday’s physical expressions allows Turkel to instantly recognize Holiday’s final note as a scream and to form the image of a hanging body at last dropping from the tree’s limbs. What more, his ability to articulate and compare Holiday’s performance to the specific visual image of Munch’s *The Scream* indicates he receives a clear image and message from Holiday’s performance. Author Josh White claims that “when Billie sings [Strange Fruit], you feel as if you’re at the foot of the tree.”¹⁷ By attributing the song’s corporeal nature to Holiday, it is clear that it is her technique specifically that brings “Strange Fruit” to life.

It is hard to pinpoint the exact moments and choices that makes Holiday’s performance so memorably haunting. Talking about distressing topics, particularly taboo topics, is already difficult enough, and so singing about them live complicates the messages even more. There are several forces at play that appear, disappear, and reappear when both watching and listening to Holiday sing. When Holiday sang it live, she made sure she emphasized its importance; all food service in the venue stopped, everyone was silent, and the entire room was dark, save for one spotlight on her.¹⁸ The fact that this song was so important to Holiday that she would not perform it unless she could express it on her own terms shows that she herself believed that

¹⁶ Margolick, “Strange Fruit,” 88.

¹⁷ Margolick, “Strange Fruit,” 101.

¹⁸ Emily J. Lordi, “Haunting: Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and Billie Holiday's 'Strange Fruit',” in *Black Resonance: Iconic Women Singers and African American Literature*, American Literatures Initiative (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 157, <https://ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=662835&site=ehost-live>.

“Strange Fruit” could not be understood completely without the audience seeing her sing it. ¹⁹ By placing her body front and center for an audience when singing this song, Holiday created a physical, tangible representation of the horrors and trauma of lynching through the revealing nature of music, making it hard for audiences to ignore her presence. Because of Billie Holiday’s deliberate consideration of “Strange Fruit,” many artists still cover and reference the song through a variety of mediums, many of which incorporate elements of her original performances. Billie Holiday’s perception of and attention to the song is what makes “Strange Fruit” and its messages so impactful and profound even today.

¹⁹ Brandon Weber, “How ‘Strange Fruit’ Killed Billie Holiday,” Progressive.org, February 20, 2018, <https://progressive.org/api/content/f4abb822-15a8-11e8-a0f9-121bebc5777e/>.

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