

# Strange Fruit

Billie Holiday & her Orchestra

Southern trees bear a strange fruit  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root  
Black bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze  
Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant South  
The bulgin' eyes and the twisted mouth  
Scent of magnolias sweet and fresh  
Then the sudden smell of burnin' flesh

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

- Released by the Commodore label in 1939.
- According to the music critic Leonard Feather “the first significant protest in words and music, the first unmated cry against racism.
- Ahmet Ertegun “ a declaration of war...the beginning of Civil Rights Movement”
- Strange Fruit made Billie Holiday well-known and politically controversial”.
- She was denied of singing from New York City’s famous clubs.
- Was constantly hunted by the Federal Bureau of Narcotics especially by its commissioner Mr. Harry J Anslinger.
- Strange Fruit was originally written as a poem in 1937 by a young liberal minded school teacher Abel Meeropol (later changed his name to Lewis Allan).

He happened to see a photograph of this massive lynching – “It was a shocking photo and it hunted me for days. As a result I wrote “Strange Fruit” as a poem. It set it to music and my wife

Anne sang it in Omaha Nebraska in 1919 – 3 dead black men hung mute and eloquent from the branches of a tree, surrounded by a terrifying crowd of eager-filled white men and women and there is even a child present.”

- Billie was introduced to the song in April 1939, was working at a New York night club called Café Society where black and white audience mix freely together.
- Barney Josephson, the club’s owner invited Meeropol to sing this song, which he sung with a piano and Billie was deeply moved by it.
- Wanted to record it through Columbia Label, but did not dare to take it on. So they gave her permission to record it on the “commodore label” – sold more than a million copies and rose to number 16 in charts.
- In the same year that the record was released copies were sent to all members of the U.S Senate as a form of protest against lynching.
- Regarding the performance of Billie Holiday – reflected by a deep introspection in her eyes as if she is watching something atrocious in front of her eyes, she is helpless; yet defiant, marked by a passionate and haunted expression
- The photographs taken during the performance are the most iconic images of her entire career.

Poem:

- They (the bodies) are not the natural fruits of the tree that is why they are called ‘strange’.
- Fruit in natural order symbolize new life, vitality and hope. Here it is lifeless and dead.
- The black bodies hanging from the poplar trees symbolizing the extreme extent of inhuman racial prejudice and hatred.
- Normal, natural picture of life is juxtaposed with the gruesome, grim reality of life.
- The poem also shows how the natural environment itself becomes terrifying and inhospitable. The bodies are not the natural offspring of the tree. They are put there by the inhuman unnatural forces of hate.

- Scent of magnolia's – the sun and the wind, the southern breeze of the gallant South (paradoxically the Deep South-a place notorious for its brutal racial atrocities) is projected as a place of scenic beauty, popular for its civilized refinement and charm. But what is happening in reality is just the contrary of the projected image. The place which is supposed to be the haven of civilization is a dark and hollow chasm of hatred.
- Ends with the image of sun rotting the bodies, crows plucking up the corpse's flesh and branches finally giving way and dropping the bodies to the ground.
- As the fallen fruits decay and decompose along with the soil and how it gets recycled in the process of rejuvenation, these too will be recycled in the organic process of life. Unlike the fallen fruits which are born out of nature's bliss, these are born out of an uncanny hatred – a hatred in the name of race.