

## *Strange Fruit*

by Lewis Allen (pseudonym)

Southern trees bear strange fruit,  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,  
Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze,  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant South,  
The bulging eyes and twisted mouth,  
The scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,  
Then the sudden smell of burning 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 trees to drop,  
Here is a strange and bitter crop.



The photograph that was cited by the songwriter as the inspiration for the song: Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, August 7, 1930.

"**Strange Fruit**" is a song performed most famously by Billie Holiday, who first sang and recorded it in 1939. Written by the teacher Abel Meeropol as a poem, it exposed American racism, particularly the lynching of African Americans. Such lynchings had occurred chiefly in the South but also in other regions of the United States. Meeropol set it to music and with his wife and the singer Laura Duncan, performed it as a protest song in New York venues, including Madison Square Garden.

The song has been covered by artists, as well as inspiring novels, other poems and other creative works. In 1978 Holiday's version of the song was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame. It was also included in the list of *Songs of the Century*, by the Recording Industry of America and the National Endowment for the Arts.

"Strange Fruit" is a poem written by Abel Meeropol, a white, Jewish high school teacher from the Bronx and a member of the Communist Party, as a protest against lynchings. He sometimes published under the pen name Lewis Allan, after two sons who were stillborn.

The lyrics are under copyright but have been republished in full in an academic journal, with permission. In the poem, Meeropol expressed his horror at lynchings. He had seen Lawrence Beitler's photograph of the 1930 lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith in Marion, Indiana. He published the poem under the title "Bitter Fruit" in 1937 in *The New York Teacher*, a union magazine. Though Meeropol had often asked others (notably Earl Robinson) to set his poems to music, he set "Strange Fruit" to music himself and the piece gained a certain success as a protest song in and around New York. Meeropol, his wife, and black vocalist Laura Duncan performed it at Madison Square Garden.

Barney Josephson, the founder of Cafe Society in Greenwich Village, New York's first integrated nightclub, heard the song and introduced it to Billie Holiday. Other reports say that Robert Gordon, who was directing Billie Holiday's show at Cafe Society, heard the song at Madison Square Garden and introduced it to her. Holiday first performed the song at Cafe Society in 1939. She said that singing it made her fearful of retaliation but, because its imagery reminded her of her father, she continued to sing the piece making it a regular part of her live performances. Because of the poignancy of the song, Josephson drew up some rules: Holiday would

close with it; the waiters would stop all service in advance; the room would be in darkness except for a spotlight on Holiday's face; and there would be no encore. During the musical introduction, Holiday would stand with her eyes closed, as if she were evoking a prayer.

Holiday approached her recording label, Columbia, about the song, but the company feared reaction by record retailers in the South, as well as negative reaction from affiliates of its co-owned radio network, CBS. Even John Hammond, Holiday's producer, refused so she turned to friend Milt Gabler, whose Commodore label produced alternative jazz. Holiday sang "Strange Fruit" for him *a cappella*, and moved him to tears. Columbia allowed Holiday a one-session release from her contract in order to record it and Frankie Newton's eight-piece Cafe Society Band was used for the session. Because he was worried that the song was too short, Gabler asked pianist Sonny White to improvise an introduction so that Holiday only starts singing after 70 seconds. Gabler worked out a special arrangement with Vocalion Records to record and distribute the song.

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