

Holiday at 100: Lady has her day

Reich, from Page 1

"Good Morning Heartache," complete with exquisitely polished scat singing that justly earned ovations before the tune was finished. The unhurried tempo and sweeping lines Grimm mined in "Crazy He Calls Me" were similarly effective. Imagine the art of Holiday filtered through the sensibility of the great Doris Day, and you have a sense of where Grimm was coming from.

And then there was Lynne Jordan, who dared to take on the toughest song in Holiday's repertoire, "Strange Fruit." This eyes-wide-open portrait of lynching is devastating to hear under any circumstances, but Jordan went a step further, offering a shattering spoken soliloquy about her own family's link to this terrible subject. Jordan wasn't the only one whose eyes and cheeks were wet before she had begun to sing a note. Yet she pulled herself together to deliver the song, which started big, got bigger and culminated in a kind of outcry.

Each singer, really, had something distinctive to add to what we know and value in Holiday's oeuvre. Tecora Rogers addressed "Pennies From Heaven" in the manner of a robust blues shouter and made a hyperdramatic aria of "Easy Living." Liz Mandeville summoned considerable intensity in "You Go to My Head," though she teetered dangerously close to camp in an overwrought version of "Lover Man."

By sharp contrast, Jeannie Tanner could not have sounded more sophisticated in her phrasing or nuanced in her vocals in "Body and Soul." That she made her own tune, "Promise Me the Moon," sound like an established standard and played trumpet with comparable lyricism attested to her uncommon versatility as a Chicago jazz musician.

Kimberly Gordon clearly has been practicing, showing polish and craft in "What a Little Moonlight Can Do" and, especially, "Gloomy Sunday." And Amy Armstrong broke your heart in the bridge to "Don't Explain," the bloom of her sound something to savor.

Strangely, though, some of these singers opened with extended monologues suggesting they believed they also could do stand-up comedy. They cannot.

All of this was beautifully directed by Daryl Nitz, who dedicated the evening to the late cabaret icon Julie Wilson (more on her below) and chose his cast well, including the band. Cabaret pianist Johnny Rodgers can play just about anything; bassist Jim Cox knows how to listen to singers; and saxophonist-clarinetist Eric Schneider referenced Holiday's profound musical relationship with Lester Young.

"Ladies Sing the Blues: A Billie Holiday Centennial Birthday Celebration" plays at 8 p.m. June 12 at the Skokie Theatre, 7924 N. Lincoln Ave., Skokie; \$28-\$32; 847-677-7761 or skokie.theatre.com.

The world of recordings, too, is paying tribute to the Holiday centennial, with several major



BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS

Lynne Jordan performs Monday at Davenport's. She took on Billie Holiday's dark "Strange Fruit," which confronts the terrible subject of lynching.



Liz Mandeville sings at Monday's show, which featured jazz, blues and cabaret artists. The tribute concert will repeat June 12 in Skokie.

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releases worthy of attention.

"**Billie Holiday: The Centennial Collection**" (Columbia/Legacy) gives listeners an introduction to the singer's work on a single CD, spanning 1935 to 1944. This is mostly classic Holiday, the singer taking dance-band tempos in tunes such as "What a Little Moonlight Can Do" and "These Foolish Things." Even within the confines of a pulsing backbeat and orchestral flourishes, Holiday sounds like no one else on Earth, the sighing phrases, imploring high notes and penetrating tone dominating. The album offers a few glimpses of darkness, as in the crying lines of "Gloomy Sunday" and, of course, the harrowing strains of "Strange Fruit."

For those who would like to get a fuller look at Holiday's contributions, there are more riches to be found in a boxed set released years ago, "**The Complete Billie Holiday on Verve, 1945-1959**" (Verve). On these 10 CDs, we hear the artist Holiday became, plumbing more deeply into the meaning and subtext of a song than any female jazz singer had done before. Conventional wisdom holds that Holiday's battered voice rendered her late recordings inferior, but the reverse is true. Despite vocal

shortcomings, Holiday's late-1950s readings of songs such as "One for My Baby (And One More for the Road)" and "Body and Soul" expressed pain and yearning with equal rawness and eloquence.

Cassandra Wilson, a superb singer whose musical lineage surely draws from Holiday and Abbey Lincoln, has released a welcome homage in "**Coming Forth by Day**" (Sony Legacy). As always, Wilson's husky, evocative vocals are swathed in richly atmospheric instrumental settings that underscore the essence of the songs. Who else could bring such vibrant, Southern blues context to "Don't Explain," Wilson's incantatory phrases enveloped by soaring guitar lines and radiant saxophone solos? Who else could float a melody line so delicately over a transparent orchestral setting in "What a Little Moonlight Can Do"? Or express Holiday's deep-rooted feelings for saxophonist Lester Young in an original, otherworldly composition, Wilson's "Last Song (For Lester)"? By any measure, a musical tour de force.

Finally, singer Jose James has fashioned an utterly disarming homage, "**Yesterday I Had the Blues: The Music of Billie Holiday**" (Blue Note Records). This slow-burn take on Holiday standards offers a less-is-more approach, James understating his case in songs such as "Good Morning Heartache" and "Fine and Mellow." The directness of expression he brings to "Body and Soul" and the intimacy and fervent blues phrase-making he offers on "Lover Man" speak to



Tecora Rogers salutes Holiday on Monday. Vocalists drew inspiration from "Lady Day," whose 100th birthday would have been Tuesday.

his affinity for Holiday's world. Pianist Jason Moran makes matters interesting with various counter-motifs, joined by bassist John Patitucci and drummer Eric Harland.

Farewell, Julie Wilson

The last time I heard cabaret diva Julie Wilson, who died Sunday in Manhattan at age 90, she was shaking up the Empire Room at the Palmer House Hilton during the 2003 Chicago Cabaret Convention. "Hard-Hearted Hannah" never sounded harder, and "Don't Ask a Lady" brimmed over with lusty anticipation.

That's what Wilson always was like: ferocious, unstoppable, wise to the world. Having grown up poor in Omaha, Neb., and having endured three marriages that she told me she considered "pitiful mistakes," Wilson knew a lot about life and brought every drop of it to the stage. She always wore a gardenia in her hair in homage to the singer she considered her greatest influence, another artist who knew a few things: Billie Holiday.

Wilson got her first break in 1942, playing the road-show version of "Earl Carroll's Vanities," in which barely clad women cavorted onstage in practically every town between Omaha and New York.

"It was my first big-time job in show business, and I was not prepared for all the bickering and swearing backstage, the vulgarity of it all," Wilson told me in 1994. "I was not used to wearing white makeup so thick that it went out to here and fake

eyelashes so long they went out to there.

"I was not used to sharing a room with another girl, and when the girls in the show told me my roommate was a lesbian, I didn't know what that meant."

Wilson soon learned a great deal, particularly in Chicago, where she performed regularly through the decades and played all through the night.

"Take the Latin Quarter — that was a real nightclub," Wilson recalled, referring to the Loop nightspot. "You had to walk up this huge staircase to get in, and along the walls you'd see these huge blowups of the show-girls inside. They had three shows a night, at 8, midnight (and) 2:30. The money flowed, the booze flowed.

"After working there all night, we'd go over to the Singapore on Rush Street for spare ribs, and then maybe we'd go to some strip joint where you could see Carrie Finnell gyrate.

"And there were jazz joints — the Blue Note, where you could hear someone great any and every night of the week. That's how it was."

And Wilson helped make it so.

"*Portraits in Jazz*": Howard Reich's e-book collects his exclusive interviews with Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Lena Horne, Ella Fitzgerald and others, as well as profiles of early masters such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Billie Holiday. Get "*Portraits in Jazz*" at chicagotribune.com/ebooks.

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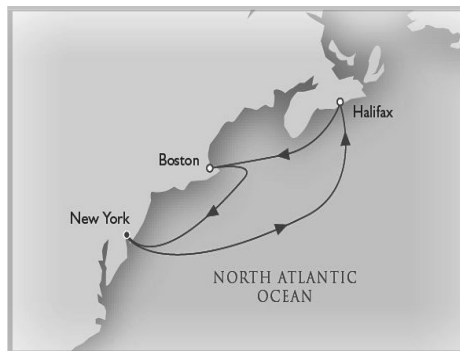
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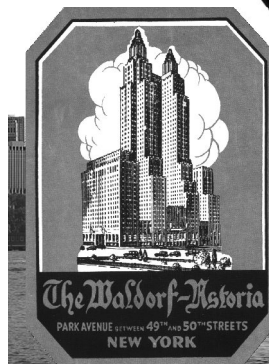
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