

The Importance of “Strange Fruit”

On August 7, 1930, Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith were broken out of jail only to face a fate far more gruesome and violent than that which they may have otherwise endured (Frederick 40). The tragedy of their story, though, would eventually inspire a work of art so powerful that the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's is considered by some to have been born from it (Margolick 92). The song “Strange Fruit,” written by Abel Meeropol and popularized by Billie Holiday, exemplifies the power of music to move hearts and minds when it is coupled with a noble and urgent cause. This particular song owes its success to both the social context in which it existed and on which it commented, and the aesthetic value of the song itself. Put another way — it was a tumultuous time in American history, and any is a time for great music.

Shipp and Smith's jailbreak was untraditional, and to them, involuntary. The two men had been accused of robbery, murder, and rape and would soon be counted among the thousands of African Americans lynched in our country throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A white mob sought what they considered vigilante justice for crimes yet to be proven. Shipp and Smith were pulled from the jail, brutally beaten to death, and their battered bodies hanged from trees (Frederick 40). One glance at a notorious photograph of the event shows that a kind of sick celebration ensued around their bodies. It looks as if the same psychopathy that lingers in the minds of serial murderers and rapists filled the air. Such was the nature of lynching, and such is the nature of racism. From the late 1890s until around 1930, lynchings were not altogether uncommon (Stovel 884). Black men were most often the victims of this heinous act, and police did worse than turn a blind eye — they sometimes participated. A photograph of this particular scene — grisly, nauseating, and shameful — would eventually find

its way into the hands of Abel Meeropol, and it would sicken him as it does those who look upon it today. In his own words, he was “haunted for days” (Margolick 95).

Meeropol was a poet, songwriter, and schoolteacher in the Bronx. In 1937, upon first viewing the photograph, he was so moved as to write a poem which, unbeknownst to him, would become the anti-lynching anthem. His poem was titled “Strange Fruit,” and it would be immortalized in song by Billie Holiday. One of the most important songstresses of the twentieth century, Holiday was compelled to make the song her own. It became her signature number, and was often requested — when it wasn’t banned outright. Its importance to the movement against racism can not be overstated. It was described by late jazz writer Leonard Feather as “the first significant protest in words and music, the first unmuted cry against racism” (Margolick 92). The initial resistance to the song supports Feather’s claim. Holiday’s request to record “Strange Fruit” was denied by several labels before it was eventually recorded and released by Commodore Records in 1939 (Margolick 99). Famed Civil Rights activist Alice Walker said that the song “almost single-handedly changed the politics of American black culture and put the elements of protest and resistance back at the center of contemporary black musical culture” (Margolick 92). “Strange Fruit” was powerful, indeed, and by paving the way for all songs of protest its effects still echo in all such songs today. The dramatic social context surrounding “Strange Fruit” is one important facet of the song’s story, and equally important is the aesthetic value of the piece.

From a purely musical perspective, social context and lyrics aside, “Strange Fruit” stirs the soul. Minor chords seem to slink effortlessly off the piano keys, almost falling to the floor. They are juxtaposed with the abrupt immediacy of the beautiful, blaring trumpet. The piano is somber and calm, as though it quietly seeks sympathy. The horn, though, demands attention. It

quickly jolts the listener and pulls them in, as if the composer anticipated a listener's urge to withdraw once the subject matter is revealed. Lady Day's voice creaks and croons in a toe-trembling timbre. While ever-powerful, there is a fragility to her voice that seems to echo an anguish lurking just beneath the surface. In the case of "Strange Fruit," this anguish was likely very real. Holiday said that the song reminded her of her father's death, as he suffered from lack of appropriate medical treatment due to the color of his skin (Margolick 94). She sings with unparalleled emotion, and an intensity that befits such deep, dark, and personal material. As noted by journalist David Margolick, she often said it "made her sick to perform it" (99).

The song's simplistic composition allows its emotional complexity to shine. The words paint a picture that many would prefer to look away from, but that all need to see and feel. Simple use of melody and harmony are an appropriate backdrop for lyrics that are sure to conjure such intense emotion. Meeropol wrote of the "black body swinging in the Southern breeze," and graphically illustrated "the bulging eyes and the twisted mouth." He contrasted such harsh visuals by sardonically evoking imagery of the "pastoral scene of the gallant south," and the "scent of magnolia sweet and fresh (Margolick 95). His lyrics are indicative of the utter hatred he held for lynching, a hatred presumably shared by all affected by it. When Holiday sang the song, she was sure to let this hatred seep through. Of her performance, Meeropol wrote "She gave a startling, most dramatic and effective interpretation, which could jolt an audience out of its complacency anywheres," and that her "styling of the song was incomparable and filled with the bitterness and shocking quality I had hoped the song would have" (Margolick 98). Meeropol's words were conveyed with the emotion they warranted, and the anti-lynching movement had its anthem.

From one man seeing one image of one deplorable event, “Strange Fruit” was born. In the able hands or rather, vocal chords, of Billie Holiday, it became the anthem of a people. “Strange Fruit” would eventually be overshadowed by more uplifting songs during the Civil Rights movement. That may have been intentional. “We Shall Overcome” was certainly more palatable to many Americans than was “Strange Fruit.” However, palatability is of no concern to a man who is hanging from a tree. Without “Strange Fruit” and the spirit of protest that it embodied and fostered, such atrocities may have continued much longer than they did, and the Civil Rights movement would have suffered. Meaningful music can be a powerful thing. When the depth of that meaning reaches as far as the righteous call for an end to lynching, and when the medium is treated so beautifully and with such emotion, music is unstoppable.

Works Cited

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