

Sunday, February 28: Billie Holiday



Billie Holiday, was born Eleanora Fagan on April 7, 1915 in Philadelphia, PA. When Billie was a toddler, her mother moved her to a poor neighborhood in Baltimore. At the age of 10, Billie was raped by one of her neighbors. Soon thereafter, she was sent to the House of the Good Shepherd, a reform school known for abusive treatment for even minor transgressions. Holiday moved to New York with her mother in 1928.

In New York, Billie eventually began showing up at jazz clubs to audition and sing with resident pianists. She spent her early teens, as an apprentice, singing along with iconoclasts Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong. She made debuts in obscure Harlem nightclubs, sharing tips with other dancers and comedians on the bill.

At age 18, Holiday was spotted by producer John Hammond with whom she cut her first record as part of a studio group led by clarinetist Benny Goodman. From 1935 to 1941 Holiday's career accelerated, recording hit after hit with pianist/arranger Teddy Wilson. Simultaneously, in 1936 she began a legendary string of collaborations with tenor sax giant Lester Young, who's complimentary tone was a perfect trading partner for Billie. They became the best of friends and inseparable. Lester would famously christen her "Lady Day". By the time Holiday joined Kansas City's phenomenal Count Basie Orchestra for tours in 1937 she was an unstoppable force, suited for top billing across the United States. In 1938 Artie Shaw invited her to front his Orchestra, making Billie the first black woman to work with a white band, a courageous accomplishment.

In the 1930's, she was introduced to the poem "Strange Fruit," a horrific depiction of lynching in the Southern United States. The music was written just for Billie and it became the hallmark of her concerts. It's considered by scholars to be the first protest song of the civil rights era. The lyrics were so controversial that her record label wouldn't record it. So she jumped over to the independent Commodore Records where she could record and sing as she pleased. "Strange Fruit" immediately became a cultural spark-point and a hit record.

Holiday married James Monroe in 1941. Already known to drink, Holiday picked up her new husband's habit of smoking opium. The marriage didn't last but Holiday's problems with substance abuse continued.

Billie Holiday is considered one of the best jazz vocalists of all time. She had a thriving career as a jazz singer for many years before she lost her battle with substance abuse. She died on July 17, 1959. Also known as Lady Day, her autobiography was made into the 1972 film *Lady Sings the Blues*. In 2000, Holiday was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Sunday, Feb 21: The Harlem Renaissance



A black neighborhood established in the Harlem section of New York City gave birth to the Harlem Renaissance,

a black cultural mecca in the early 20th Century and the subsequent social and artistic explosion that resulted. Lasting roughly from the 1910s through the mid-1930s, this period is considered a golden age in African American culture, manifesting in literature, music, stage performance and art.

In the early 1900s, a few middle-class black families from a neighborhood known as Black Bohemia moved to Harlem, and other black families soon followed. Some white residents initially fought to keep African Americans out of the area, but failing that, many fled.

During this same time period, the Great Migration was occurring. Between 1910 and 1920, African American populations migrated in large numbers from the South to the North, many landing in New York City.

This considerable population shift resulted in a Black Pride movement with leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois working to ensure that black Americans got the credit they deserved for cultural areas of life. Two of the earliest breakthroughs were in poetry, followed by famous fiction writers, such as James Weldon Johnson. Sociologist Charles Spurgeon Johnson, who was integral in shaping the Harlem literary scene, organized resources to create a National Urban League magazine, called "Opportunity", which he founded and edited. The success of this magazine bolstered writers like Langston Hughes. Soon many writers found their work appearing in mainstream magazines such as Harper's.

The music that flourished in Harlem in the 1920s was jazz, often played at speakeasies offering illegal liquor. Jazz became a great draw for not only Harlem residents, but outside white audiences as well. Some of the most celebrated names in American music regularly performed in Harlem – Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Bessie Smith, Fats Waller, Cab Calloway, and many others, often accompanied by elaborate floor shows. With the groundbreaking new music came a vibrant nightlife. The Savoy opened in 1927, an integrated ballroom with two bandstands that featured continuous jazz and dancing well into the night.

While it was fashionable to frequent Harlem nightlife, entrepreneurs realized that some white people wanted to experience black culture without having to socialize with African Americans so they created clubs to cater to them. The most successful of these was the Cotton Club, which featured frequent performances by Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway.

Many other very popular artists were birthed during this Renaissance, such as Paul Robeson, Josephine Baker, and Billie Holiday, to name a few. Harlem's creative boom declined significantly with the stock market crash, followed by the Great Depression. In addition, the Harlem Race Riot of 1935 broke out, resulting in three dead, hundreds injured and millions of dollars in property damage. The riot was a death blow for the Harlem Renaissance.

Sunday, February 14: The Tulsa Massacre



While black migrants from the south headed north to escape Jim Crow laws, other parts of the country had adopted those same laws. Oklahoma was one such state. The Greenwood area of Tulsa, Oklahoma was developed on Native American territory, the vast area where Native American tribes had been forced to relocate. Some Africans and AA's had integrated into tribal communities and acquired allotted land in Greenwood, a section of Tulsa, Oklahoma. In addition, many black sharecroppers fleeing racial oppression relocated to the region, in search of a better life.

In the early 1900's, "Oklahoma was promoted as a safe haven for African Americans..." While segregation was the law of the land here, O.W. Gurley, a wealthy black landowner, purchased 40 acres of land in Tulsa, naming it Greenwood. His goal was to provide a safe haven for blacks and an opportunity for black owned businesses to thrive. He would actually loan money to people who wanted to start a business. Soon thereafter, other prominent black entrepreneurs followed suit.

Greenwood Avenue became populated with luxury shops, restaurants, grocery stores, hotels, jewelry and clothing stores, movie theaters, barbershops, salons, a library, pool halls, nightclubs and offices for doctors, lawyers and dentists. Greenwood also had its own school system, post office, a savings and loan bank, a hospital, and bus and taxi service. All black owned.

With the resurgence of the Klu Klux Klan, blacks in Greenwood feared racial violence and the removal of their voting rights. The Oklahoma Supreme Court for years routinely upheld the state's restrictions on voting access for African Americans, subjecting them to the poll tax and literacy tests.

But the heightened racial animosity in Tulsa erupted in 1921 when 19-year-old Dick Rowland, a black shoe shiner was accused of attempted sexual assault of a 17-year-old white elevator operator named Sarah Page. Dick had rushed into the elevator to visit the blacks only restroom and after he entered, Sarah screamed. Despite Sarah's insistence that nothing happened (it was thought he accidentally stepped on her foot when rushing into the elevator), the sheriff arrested young Dick Rowland. An angry white mob went to the courthouse to demand that the sheriff hand over Rowland, but the sheriff refused. A group of about 25 armed black men went to the courthouse to offer help guarding Rowland.

Mobs of armed, white men then descended on Greenwood, looting homes, burning down businesses and shooting blacks dead on the spot. There were eye witness reports of airplanes dropping bombs on Greenwood.

The massacre, which began on May 31, 1921 left hundreds, if not thousands, of black residents dead and thousands of houses destroyed. The entire area, known as Black Wall Street, was leveled!

This short video of an eyewitness' account will give you a feel for just what happened during that dreaded period in US history. [Click here.](#)

Sunday, February 7: The Great Migration



The period between 1916 and the 1970's when Africans and African Americans decided to escape the oppressive conditions of the south is known as The Great Migration.

When slaves were freed in 1865, southern slaveholders did not free their minds of dominion over them. They were extremely reluctant to release their free labor. So, to hold freed Africans dependent, they established the black code, requiring blacks to sign yearly labor contracts, which bound them to work for next to nothing. If they refused, they were subject to arrest, fined and forced into unpaid labor. Lynching of blacks was performed for the slightest infractions or perceived infractions of white laws or rules.

The black codes lost their power when the 14th and 15th Amendments were passed, affording blacks equal protection and the right to vote. However, black codes were replaced by Jim Crow laws, strongly restricting the movements and rights of Africans and their descendants. Under Jim Crow, blacks were not allowed to use the same restrooms as whites, eat in the same restaurants, drink from the same water fountains, etc.

Many were still employed as sharecroppers, working for a share of the crops harvested but unable to sell any of their shares. These laws remained in effect until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

So, by 1916, exhausted with the cruel policies of the south and fearing for their lives, African Americans began to exit the South by the millions. Over a period of six decades, over 6 million blacks fled the South to other parts of the country. Yet, as many fled to major cities throughout the United States, they found themselves forced to live in certain neighborhoods by realtors who abided by redlining laws.

As Isabel Wilkerson explains in her book, "Warmth of Other Suns", this migration "would force the South to search its soul and to finally lay aside a feudal caste system". She goes on to explain how "the language and music of urban America sprang from the blues that sprang from the migrants and dominates our airwaves to this day. It was the first huge step the nation's servant class took without asking." The reverberations of this movement had a lasting impact and ultimately gave birth to the civil rights movement...a struggle that continues to this day!