

## Billie Holiday, “Strange Fruit” (1939)

“Strange Fruit” was written by Abel Meeropol, a white English teacher from New York City, as a protest against the horrors of lynching. Lynching was a practice that involved mob-style execution without trial, most often by hanging, and almost exclusively of African Americans. Thousands of African Americans were lynched between the end of the Civil War and the 1960s. In spite of the efforts of anti-lynching crusaders such as Ida B. Wells beginning in the 1880s, lynching was never directly addressed by the federal government until the Justice for Lynching Act was passed on December 19, 2018, making lynching a federal crime.



Jazz great Billie Holiday recorded “Strange Fruit” in 1939. Her recording company, Columbia Records, refused to release it, fearing the response in the South. So Holiday released the album with the Commodore label, where it would go on to become her best-selling record. With its harsh indictment of the Jim Crow south, the song enjoyed a revival during the Civil Rights movement, and has been covered by numerous artists in the years since.

### Lyric Excerpt

Southern trees bear a 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 the twisted mouth  
 Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh  
 Then the sudden smell of burning flesh

Here is 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