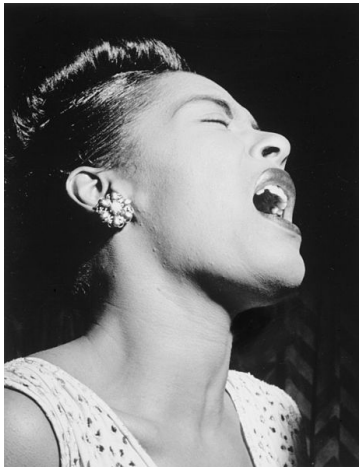




Billie Holiday, “Strange Fruit”



Source: William P. Gottlieb

“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 most often 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.

Blues 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.

Excerpt from Lyrics

*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*

Questions for Discussion

1. What do the words “strange fruit” in the song refer to?
2. What kind of images does the song create? How does it make you feel?
3. What is the general mood created by the song? How does the music contribute to the overall effect?
4. Why might this song have become popular during the Civil Rights movement?