



If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday

Farah Jasmine Griffin

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More than four decades after her death, Billie Holiday remains one of the most gifted artists of our time—and also one of the most elusive. Because of who she was and how she chose to live her life, Lady Day has been the subject of both intense adoration and wildly distorted legends. Now at last, Farah Jasmine Griffin, a writer of intellectual authority and superb literary gifts, liberates Billie Holiday from the mythology that has obscured both her life and her art.

An intimate meditation on Holiday's place in American culture and history, *If You Can't Be Free, Be A Mystery* reveals Lady Day in all her complexity, humor and pain—a true jazz virtuoso whose passion and originality made every song she sang hers forever. Celebrated by poets, revered by recording artists from Frank Sinatra to Macy Gray, Billie Holiday is more popular and influential today than ever before. Now, thanks to this marvelous book, Holiday's many fans can finally understand the singer and the woman they love.

If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday Details

Date : Published April 30th 2002 by One World/Ballantine (first published May 14th 2001)

ISBN : 9780345449733

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Format : Paperback 256 pages

Genre : Music, Nonfiction, Biography, History, Jazz

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Tanji Gilliam says

music scholarship can be as vibrant and passionate as the cultures being studied.

Susan says

The title is taken from a 1989 poem by Rita Dove about Billie Holiday. I have listened in awe to her music carefully and continuously for 47-or-so-years. I have read other books about her life. I have seen the movie. This book tells her story more fully than any other biography I have read. And does so with style and respect, both for Lady Day and for the cultures in which she lived.....that is the culture of jazz and the culture of America during her too brief life. Here's one great quote: "Billie Holiday is the creation of Eleanora Fagan, that young, precocious Baltimore girl who decided first that she would not be a maid, and later that she did not want to be a whore. So she chose the third option available to a black woman of her generation: singer. Furthermore, she picked her name, chose a personal style and dedicated her life to the development of her craft. She is a woman of her own creation."

Megs says

Using transcripts of interviews with Billie's contemporaries; friends and band mates and casual acquaintances Ms. Griffin paints a vivid picture of Lady Day showing the complexities of her life against the back drop of the era.

The writing shows her as a human being (as much as a legend) and through the eyes of those who knew her you see Ms. Holiday's fears, anger, love, violence and courage. It is a biography that gives the reader an opportunity to know more about Billie and determine for themselves who she might have been.

Rebecca McNutt says

If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery is a very compelling story, immersed deeply in both history and the alluring mystery of fame and glamour.

Ceri says

I'm finally getting round to all the books I wanted to read while I was studying. I really enjoyed the module I did on The Harlem Renaissance and was keen to delve more. Farah Jasmine Griffin contributed to the module and I wanted to read more of her writing as I was impressed by her.

Michael Borshuk says

A poetic study about Holiday's complicated legacy, written with great self-consciousness and affectionate by a lifelong Holiday devotee. At times, the discussions were maybe a bit too impressionistic for my academic tastes, but this is a lovely read.

Aiden McDonough says

I am sadly going to have to give this three stars. The facts are great, but it is basically almost autobiographical about the author herself.

Rosemari says

Very informative about Billie from the standpoint of placing her in historical perspective, and directly confronting issues of race and gender. A wonderful read, only wish it was twice as long. Bravo to Farah Jasmine Griffin for dropping this gem into the historical record about Jazz, where too little is written by African Americans and women. Joy to read!

Leigh says

Three stars probably isn't fair because in so many ways this is a great book, an important and necessary one, that gets at the necessity of Billie Holiday's "culture of dissemblance" as a mode of self-protection. Griffin also delves into the ways the categories "black woman" and "genius" are held at arm's length. This is also a great book to teach because it covers a number of black feminist concerns in a very accessible manner. So why 3 stars? I wanted more. I wanted the discussions to be longer, arguments more fully realized and I thought at times the writing seemed a bit rushed and even flat. Maybe I'll change to 4 stars...

Kelly Martinez says

I read this when it was first written and announced in Ebony magazine. It seems it was written from a feminist perspective. I didn't agree with certain things in this book. But as I said it was written from the author's perspective and maybe that is why.

Kalyrohey says

A great book about Billie Holiday and her legacy, and the position of the Black African-American woman in general. Even if you don't know the singer at first, this will make you want to.
