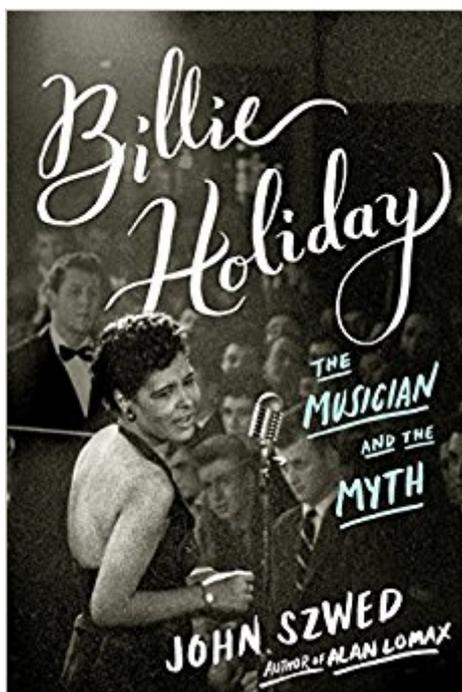


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Billie Holiday: The Musician And The Myth



Synopsis

â€” Kirkus Best Books of 2015 selection for *Biography* â€” Published in celebration of Holiday's centenary, the first biography to focus on the singer's extraordinary musical talent. When Billie Holiday stepped into Columbia's studios in November 1933, it marked the beginning of what is arguably the most remarkable and influential career in twentieth-century popular music. Her voice weathered countless shifts in public taste, and new reincarnations of her continue to arrive, most recently in the form of singers like Amy Winehouse and Adele. Most of the writing on Holiday has focused on the tragic details of her life—her prostitution at the age of fourteen, her heroin addiction and alcoholism, her series of abusive relationships—or tried to correct the many fabrications of her autobiography. But now, Billie Holiday stays close to the music, to her performance style, and to the self she created and put into print, on record and on stage. Drawing on a vast amount of new material that has surfaced in the last decade, critically acclaimed jazz writer John Szwed considers how her life inflected her art, her influences, her uncanny voice and rhythmic genius, a number of her signature songs, and her legacy.

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Customer Reviews

Billie Holiday inspired countless singers and hobnobbed with the likes of Miles Davis, and Orson Welles and even spent an evening on the town with Frank Sinatra, who later claimed she had helped him in his own career with her advice. Nevertheless, Holiday remains an elusive figure, full of contradictions, whose own autobiography was less a work of fact than a story based on true events.

In an effort to get at the true Billie Holiday, Szwed approaches her life as it was, accepting the choices and influences that helped make up who she was and focusing on the symbiotic nature of the music that wove throughout her life, binding it together in a way no other influence could. Szwed seeks to dispel the myth that all of her life was a tragedy that chose her songs for her and instead argues that she chose the songs she did because they spoke to her emotionally. Szwed also analyzes the way that Holiday imbues her music with a part of herself, while at the same time keeping her singing a performance. In essence, stating that while Holiday emotionally connected to the songs that she sang, she was at the same time portraying a stage personality for the audience, not necessarily her personal life. It was this gift that allowed her to sing a song different ways each time, while at the same time making the audience believe she was telling her personal story to them each time. Szwed clearly knows his subject and expertly alludes to other works written about Holiday, comparing and contrasting the different views they presented. By incorporating an in-depth analysis of the musical style and songs of Holiday into the account of her life, Szwed provides a fresh perspective to Holiday's life.

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