

Behind the song: “God Bless the Child”

Billie Holiday’s “God Bless the Child” – one of the many Holiday songs featured in the Syracuse Stage production of *Lady Day at Emerson’s Bar and Grill* as sung by actress Tracey Conyer Lee – was inspired by a quarrel with her mother over money.

While working with Count Basie in the late 1930s, Holiday was hardly making enough for food and lodging. As she explains in her memoir *Lady Sings the Blues*, Holiday often asked Lester Young, a saxophonist and friend who gave her the moniker Lady Day, to use the money she had left in the nightly crap games some members of the band would play on Basie’s tour bus. Once, when down to her last few bucks, Holiday took the dice herself, and by the time the bus was back in New York, she had raked in over \$1,600. That money, along with an angel investment from an acquaintance, allowed the Duchess, a name Holiday and friends used to address her mother, to achieve a long-held dream of opening a diner.

Holiday helped with the restaurant over the years, providing financial relief to keep health inspectors at bay. She describes Mom Holiday’s, as the diner was called, as a place where anyone was welcomed, and where musicians often ate for free. In *Lady Sings the Blues*, Holiday recalls asking her mother for money only once. “Mom turned me down flat,” she wrote. “She wouldn’t give me a cent. She was mad with me and I was mad with her. We exchanged a few words. Then I said, ‘God bless the child that’s got his own,’ and walked out.”

A few weeks later, Holiday was struck with inspiration, and enlisted Arthur Herzog to help shape the piece that, as she explained, “fell into place in my head” all at once. The song that came from their sessions feels like a reverie, a warm reflection on the bumps that accompany growing up, but Holiday’s expressive performance of this deeply personal work transforms the simple poetry – three verses, and a brief bridge – into a bruised but buoyant recitation of hard-learned truths.

The authorship of the song has been debated over the years, by writers and historians, with Herzog himself claiming complete ownership. But even if Herzog was the writer, it was still the relationship between Holiday and her mother that provided the ammunition behind the song’s subtle power, and Holiday’s own interpretation that gives the otherwise soothing music its comedic wink.

Holiday put the song onto disc three times, and depending on the recording, her emphasis on certain phrases seems to change the mood and moments of the piece. On the single recording released in 1942, her vocals bounce with the words “momma” and “poppa,” almost cradling them like a baby, as if to poke fun at the

reversed roles she and her parents often played. On *Lady Sings the Blues*, the album that accompanied the release of her autobiography, she bites hard when she sings “child,” stretching the vowel like taffy, and sounding like a kiddish admission of the low blows the song delivers. As Karen Perry, costume designer for *Lady Day at Emerson’s Bar and Grill* at Syracuse Stage, said: “Billie never sings the same song the same way, ever.”

And indeed, one can hear that improvisation and emotional pull in Tracey Conyer Lee’s performance of “God Bless the Child” at Syracuse Stage. Lee’s version still retains the soft edge of petulance, yes, but it doesn’t so much aim to wound her mother as to celebrate their relationship (which, for better or for worse, shaped Holiday’s life, and her art). It’s a tribute by way of loving criticism, an honest reflection that – in true Holiday fashion – doesn’t shy away from the heart of the matter.

Listen to these recordings, and Lee’s rendition, and it’s easy to make the argument that Billie Holiday was amongst the first method actors. Her venue was not Broadway, or the silver screen – even though she did appear in several radio plays, a short film by Duke Ellington, and the 1947 Louis Armstrong starring feature *New Orleans* – but nonetheless her vocal performances, which never lingered in the same mode twice, channeled her inner life, and elevated the music past entertainment. As Khanya Mtshali wrote in her introduction to *Billie Holiday: The Last Interview*. “While other singers delivered unrequited love songs in a direct one-dimensional way, Holiday layered her performances with high emotional stakes, giving the songs a life-or-death quality,”

Or, to hear it from Lady Day herself: “Without feeling, whatever you do amounts to nothing.”