

Langston Hughes

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers”

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as
the world
and older than the flow of
human blood in human veins.
My soul has grown deep like
the rivers.
I bathe in the Euphrates when
dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo
and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and
raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the
Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New
Orleans,* and I've seen its
muddy
bosom turn all golden in
the sunset.
I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers. My soul
has grown deep like the
rivers.

**Lincoln's determination to end slavery
was said to have started when, as a young man,
he visited New Orleans for the first time.*

“I, TOO”

I, too sing America.
I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the
kitchen
When company comes.
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.
To-morrow
I'll sit at the table
When company comes
Nobody 'll dare
Say to me,
“Eat in the kitchen”
Then.
Besides, they'll see how
beautiful I am
And be ashamed, --
I, too, am America.

Langston Hughes

“The Weary Blues”

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
Rocking back and forth to a mellow
croon,

I heard a Negro play.
Down on Lenox Avenue the other
night
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas
light

He did a lazy sway....

He did a lazy sway....

To the tune o' those Weary Blues.
With his ebony hands on each ivory
key
He made that poor piano moan with
melody.

O Blues!

Swaying to and fro on his rickety
stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a
musical fool.

Sweet Blues!

Coming from a black man's soul.

O Blues!

In a deep song voice with a
melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old
piano moan--

"Ain't got nobody ain all this world,

Ain't got nobody but ma self.

I's gwine to quit ma frownin'

And put ma troubles on the shelf."

Thump, thump, thump, went his
foot on the floor.

He played a few chords then he sang
some more--

"I got the Weary Blues

And I can't be satisfied.

Got the Weary Blues

And can't be satisfied--

I ain't happy no mo'

And I wish that I had died."

And far into the night he
crooned that tune. The stars
went out and so did the moon.

The singer stopped playing
and went to bed
While the Weary Blues echoed
through his head.
He slept like a rock or a man
that's dead.

Claude McKay
"The Lynching"

HIS Spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven.
His father, by the cruelest way of pain,
Had bidden him to his bosom once again;
The awful sin remained still unforgiven.
All night a bright and solitary star
(Perchance the one that ever guided him,
Yet gave him up at last to Fate's wild whim)
Hung pitifully o'er the swinging char.
Day dawned, and soon the mixed crowds came to view
The ghastly body swaying in the sun
The women thronged to look, but never a one
Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue;
And little lads, lynchers that were to be,
Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee.

"America"

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
Giving me strength erect against her hate.
Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.
Yet as a rebel fronts a king in state,
I stand within her walls with not a shred
Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.
Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,
And see her might and granite wonders there,
Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,
Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.

Born during the Harlem Renaissance, James Baldwin grew up and matured during this dynamic period. His writing was an outgrowth of his life experience and was also influenced by writers of the period. The Harlem Renaissance helped foster a literary tradition—a literary tradition that continues to influence writers today.

“Sonny’s Blues”, by James Baldwin. 1957.

All I know about music is that not many people ever really hear it. And even then, on the rare occasions when something opens within, and the music enters, what we mainly hear, or hear corroborated, are personal, private, vanishing evocations. But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air. What is evoked in him, then, is of another order, more terrible because it has no words, and triumphant, too, for that same reason. And his triumph, when he triumphs, is ours....I had never before thought of how awful the relationship must be between the musician and his instrument. He has to fill it, this instrument, with the breath of life, his own. He has to make it do what he wants it to do. And a piano is just a piano. It’s made out of so much wood and wires and little hammers and big ones, and ivory. While there’s only so much you can do with it, the only way to find this out is to try; to try and make it do everything.

...

Then they all gathered around Sonny and Sonny played. Every now and again one of them seemed to say, amen. Sonny’s fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others. And Sonny went all the way back, he really began with the spare, flat statement of the opening phrase of the song. Then he began to make it his. It was very beautiful because it wasn’t hurried and it was no longer a lament. I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did.

STRANGE FRUIT

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black body 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 magnolia sweet and fresh,
And the sudden smell of burning flesh!

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for a tree to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

“Strange Fruit,” the haunting song about lynching in America that was written more than 60 years ago, was first recorded by the famed jazz singer Billie Holiday in 1939. Since then it has been recorded by some three dozen other performers, including black folk singer Josh White, the great jazz artists Abbey Lincoln, Carmen McRae and Nina Simone, pop performers Sting and UB40, operatic soprano Shirley Verrett, and contemporary vocalists Tori Amos and Cassandra Wilson.

The almost iconic status of this unusual song—not in the folk-song tradition, not quite jazz—was reflected in the inclusion of a segment of Holiday’s rendition of it in Ken Burns’ flawed but nonetheless comprehensive “Jazz” history broadcast on public television last year. The song has also been the subject, within the last couple of years, of a new book as well as a film documentary.

“Strange Fruit” has been called the original protest song. It is simple, spare but effective poetry. At a time when political protest was not often expressed in musical form, the song depicted lynching in all of its brutality. The three short verses are all the more powerful for their understated and ironic language. The juxtaposition of a beautiful landscape with the scene of lynching, the smell of magnolias with that of burning flesh, the blossoms more typically associated with the Southern climate with the “strange fruit” produced by racial oppression—this imagery conjures up the essence of racist reaction. Racism in America stands indicted and exposed by these lines, with no need at all for a more didactic or agitational message.

“Strange Fruit” was released on record in 1939, and quickly became famous. It had a particular impact on the politically aware, among artists, musicians, actors and other performers, and on broader layers of students and intellectuals. David Margolick’s book, *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society and an Early Cry for Civil Rights*, quoting numerous prominent figures,

demonstrates how the song articulated the growing awareness and anger that was to find expression in the rise of the mass civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s.

Nevertheless, few of the millions who have heard “Strange Fruit” are aware of its genesis and history. It was written in the mid-1930s by a New York City public school teacher, Abel Meeropol, who was at that time a member of the American Communist Party, and who later became better known as the adoptive father of the two sons of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the Jewish couple who were executed in 1953 for the alleged crime of giving the secret of the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union.

Recently, the story of Billie Holiday and her struggles as a result of singing “Strange Fruit” was immortalized in a film by Lee Daniels. Click here to see more about this:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F6ipAtdTpIo>