



Billie Holiday: The Musician and the Myth

By John Szwed

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“Revelatory . . . one of the most briskly revealing pieces of jazz biography that I’ve read.” —Richard Brody, *The New Yorker*

When Billie Holiday first stepped into a recording studio 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 popular taste, and today 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 *Billie Holiday* strips away the myths and puts her music front and center, staying close to her artistry, her performance style, and the self she created and put on record and onstage.

Drawing on a vast amount of new material that has surfaced in the last decade, critically acclaimed jazz writer and musician John Szwed presents not just a biography, but a meditation on Billie Holiday’s art and its relation to her life. Along the way, he illuminates her influences, her uncanny voice and rhythmic genius, her signature songs—including *Strange Fruit* and *God Bless the Child*—and her enduring legacy as the greatest jazz singer of all time.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for Billie Holiday: The Musician and the Myth

“A concise and sharply focused critical biography. . . . Szwed is aware of the danger of the Holiday legend, and is determined to show that she was much more than an emotive performer blessed with a unique gift. Tracing her musical influences and analyzing her thoughtful vocal artistry, he makes the case that she is, if anything, underrated as a musician.”

—***The New Yorker***

“[Szwed] offers a portrait of Lady Day as artist and mythmaker rather than tragic victim. . . . As with the best of Holiday’s music, this elegant and perceptive study is restrained, nuanced, and masterfully carried out.”

—***Kirkus (starred review)***

“[This] illuminating account restores to the singer the dignity of a true artist, one who emerges from [Szwed’s] pages—and the records to which they drive you hungrily back—as a revolutionary. Holiday’s originality becomes clear when Szwed examines the ascendancy of black American singers . . . What the reader is left with is not Holiday’s familiar, ravaged private life but the triumph of a unique creative talent.”

—**Neil Spencer, *The Observer***

“A book that goes beyond biography and looks into Holiday’s meaning and reception.”

—**Ben Ratliff, *The New York Times***

“Revelatory. . . . A meta-biography, about the creation of Holiday’s public image in media of all sorts: print, television, movies, and, of course, her recordings, but with special attention to the composition of her autobiography, *Lady Sings the Blues*.”

—**Richard Brody, *TheNewYorker.com***

“Billie Holiday’s fabled personal crises, the struggles against chemical dependency, sexual abuse and racism, have long threatened to overshadow her Promethean stature as an artist. Now, on the centennial of her birth, John Szwed, a veteran biographer and jazz musician, seeks to redress this imbalance . . . Mr. Szwed, the author of acclaimed studies of Miles Davis, Sun Ra and folklorist Alan Lomax, is at his best when excavating hidden stories behind some of the more durable pillars of the Holiday legend. . . . Mr. Szwed writes in a clear, assured style that is particularly revealing when limning the contours of Holiday’s musical world.”

—**David Freeland, *The Wall Street Journal***

“Szwed’s swift, conversational and yet detail-rich new biography, *Billie Holiday: The Musician and the Myth*, communicates its artist-first priorities in the subtitle, and then makes good on them throughout. . . . about as fine a centenary-year gift as anyone had a right to expect.”

—**Seth Colter Walls, *The Guardian***

“A convention-defying biography to watch for.”

—**Vogue.com**

“Unsatisfied with labeling Holiday ‘the greatest jazz singer of all time,’ veteran jazz biographer Szwed

attempts to deconstruct the entertainer and her vocal magic by puncturing her celebrated public image and her legendary performances. . . . Szwed provides an alternative to the gossip and scandal usually associated with Holiday with this highly entertaining, essential take on an truly American original.”

—***Publishers Weekly (Top 10 Music books of Spring 2015)***

“Szwed’s book offers a fresh attempt to understand and explain the nature and scope of Holiday’s achievement.”

—***Times Literary Supplement***

“A musicologist’s appreciation of the jazz singer . . . a marvel.”

—***Independent***

“Insightful, investigative . . . entertaining and illuminating . . . a wonderfully engaging and revealing look at the great Lady Day.”

—***The Scotsman***

“Szwed devotes most of his book to Holiday’s music and musicianship—comparing her singing style to contemporaries like Judy Garland and Marlene Dietrich—rather than her drug problems and other downbeat stories with which most people are already familiar.”

—***Billy Heller, The New York Post***

“[Szwed] is interested in the gap between Holiday’s public image and her artistic achievement. . . . [He] is excellent on Billie’s voice—variously called ‘sad, olive-toned, whisky-hued, lazy, feline, smoky, unsentimental, weird,’ he writes—and on her trademark techniques of ‘falling behind the beat, floating, breathing where it’s not expected, scooping up notes and then letting them fall.’ [Szwed] devotes ample space to the songs with which she is most closely identified. . . . A worthy addition to the bookshelf on this woman whose music has lost none of its enigmatic power.”

—***Tom Beer, Newsday***

“As iconic as Lady Day is, the woman, artist and her personality, her singular jazz artistry is shrouded in misconceptions. Szwed adroitly re-frames the dialogue in his economic and, ultimately vital, understanding of Holiday’s true musical achievements. . . . Lady Day’s real life as an artist, woman and innovator, is given her full musical due, finally.”

—***Lew Washington, The Huffington Post***

Praise for Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World

“Factually tireless and fluently analytical, Szwed gamely corrals a great river of events, efforts, and discoveries into a straight-ahead portrait of an intrepid, culture-defining artist and humanist.”

—***Booklist (Starred review)***

“Szwed is a sensitive interpreter of music. . . he is meticulous about the work, and makes a strong case for Lomax as a central figure in the history of American music.”

—***The New Yorker***

“A keenly appreciative, enormously detailed new Lomax biography.”

—***The New York Times***

“John Szwed has written a graceful and informative cradle-to-grave study that’s a perfect marriage of author

and subject."

—Douglas Brinkley, *Texas Monthly*

Praise for *So What: The Life of Miles Davis*

"Szwed offers crisply detailed backstories to such masterpieces as *Sketches of Spain*, *Round About Midnight* and *Miles Ahead*. His prose has a musical pulse, and he highlights the most significant element of Davis's soul: 'he told every woman he became involved with that music always came first, before family, children, lovers, friends.' Davis's music has been called a 'divine disease,' and this in-depth study clarifies the nature of that compulsive, satisfying malady in a way that will enlighten listeners and musicians."

—*Publishers Weekly*

Praise for *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*

"Szwed has produced a rare jazz biography--one that takes full account of the history that shaped the music and its central personalities. An anthropologist, historian and musicologist who teaches at Yale, Szwed brings an impressive array of skills to this job. He needs them all to track down a subject whose every word seems intended to protect him from scrutiny."

—Brent Staples, *The New York Times Book Review*

From the Hardcover edition.

About the Author

John Szwed is a professor of music and director of the Center for Jazz Studies at Columbia University. As a jazz musician, he played professionally for more than a decade. He is the author of sixteen books, including *So What: The Life of Miles Davis*, *Space is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra*, and *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World*.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jean Young:

Now a day folks who Living in the era wherever everything reachable by connect with the internet and the resources in it can be true or not require people to be aware of each info they get. How a lot more to be smart in having any information nowadays? Of course the answer then is reading a book. Studying a book can help persons out of this uncertainty Information particularly this Billie Holiday: The Musician and the Myth book as this book offers you rich details and knowledge. Of course the knowledge in this book hundred percent guarantees there is no doubt in it you know.

Kelly McDowell:

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Mathew Casillas:

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