



## **Billie Holiday: Front and Center Review – A Tarnished Star** **November 8, 2017 Elaine Mura**

Billie Holiday had it all and lost it all. From her earliest days to her final moments, writer and star Sybil Harris lets the audience sneak a peek at the life and times of Billie Holiday in *BILLIE HOLIDAY: FRONT AND CENTER*, a dramatic account of Billy Holiday's life. A trail-blazing musical artist sometimes called Lady Day, Billie Holiday has a respectable list of firsts. She was the first black female vocalist to front for a white band, that of Artie Shaw. She was the first female vocalist to use her voice for jazz improvisation. She had multiple jazz and blues hit recordings. She sang to sold-out houses at Carnegie Hall three times. And, sad to say, she was one of the first famous black female vocalists to succumb to the lure of heroin.

Billie Holiday was born into poverty, the victim of rape as a child. Because of her chaotic childhood, she was unable to attend school. Consequently, she was sentenced by the Court to a Catholic correctional institution for delinquents when only nine years old. When she was 13 years old, she was convicted with her mother of prostitution and again sent to jail. Her life seemed to be on a downward spiral. And yet somehow she was able to overcome these obstacles and rise from poor beginnings to become a musical legend.

Playwright/actor/singer Sybil Harris does a moving and sensitive job of sharing Billie Holiday's triumphs and failures. She has cloned Ms. Holiday to a tee – including Billie's style, vocal pitch, and rhythms. But more importantly, she delves into the core of Billie's soul to extricate her fears and flaws. Those very things which made her great also led to her personal downfall. When she was only 42 years old and at the pinnacle of her career, she died of cirrhosis of the liver.

Director and production stage manager B'anca does an excellent job of moving the story along and keeping the focus where it should be – on Billie Holiday's music. Music director Casey McCoy and his jazz combo (Fritz Wise, drums; Michael Saucier, upright bass; David Patterson, sax) have a sure feel for the music, whether they're backing up Sybil Harris or doing some solo work. Kenneth Williams' sound, of course, enhances the show. The entire cast and production team do a great job of keeping Billie Holiday's legacy alive. This is a presentation meant for all those jazz lovers out there – but also for those theater patrons who hope to understand what makes other people tick.

## **Billie Holiday: Front and Center**

**November 2017 Willard Manus**

Sybil Harris sure knows her way around Billie Holiday's music. The Phoenix native first portrayed Holiday in the touring musical, *Sang Sista Sang*. Now she is impersonating Holiday again in her solo show *Billie Holiday*, which just opened at Barbara Morrison Performing Arts Center in south-central L.A. Harris also wrote and executive-produced the show, which gives her a chance to sing some of Holiday's greatest hits, among them "God Bless the Child," "What a Little Moonlight Can Do," "Good Morning Heartache" and "Strange Fruit," backed up by a terrific jazz quartet.

Clad in a dazzling array of costumes, white camellia pinned to her hair, Harris captures Holiday's unique essence, her way of staying within a single octave's range but broadening its charge by a series of small but effective devices—and of course by her dramatic intensity and emotion. As jazz critic Gary Giddins said, "Her voice retained its enchantment, a lapsed beauty, a thin, pure noble siren gleam."

In telling Holiday's turbulent and tragic life story—she died penniless at 44—Harris touches on many of its important points: mother a prostitute, being raped at ten, growing up in a brothel, fighting her way up through a rough, tough, segregated society to make her mark as a singer. Success came when she sang at the Cotton Club, met Artie Shaw, recorded with Count Basie and Lester Young. At one time she made as much as a quarter of a million dollars a year, only to blow most of it on drink, men and drugs.

In one of the best scenes in the play, Harris recreates the first time a drug dealer (also played by her) sweet-talks her into trying heroin. The resulting addiction resulted in jail time imposed by a puritanical and vengeful society which was especially hard on black musicians and singers. Holiday, after two years in a Federal prison, returned to the jazz world and triumphed in a Carnegie Hall concert, only to be betrayed by her failing health. Billie Holiday incarnates her indictment of the world as well as the spirit and dignity the singer sustained through all its blows.

The Barbara Morrison Performing Arts Center is a fitting place for a show like *Billie Holiday*. Artistic Director Barbara Morrison is a famous jazz and blues singer herself, and the center is located in Leimert Square, once the focal point of L.A.'s illustrious black history. Up through the 1950s, the nearby area was jumping round the clock with jazz and blues clubs, soul-food restaurants, theatres, movie houses and businesses of all kinds. When L.A. was finally de-segregated, it spelled the end of that remarkable period, but some flashes of greatness remain, such as Barbara Morrison's center, the World Stage jazz club, and Ese Won Bookstore. And just recently Morrison raised enough funds to open the California Jazz and Blues Museum, which sits just a few doors from her center. There you will find jazz paintings, photos, artifacts (such as Stax Hooper's drum kit), dioramas, and sculptures from the heyday of black L.A. Prominent is a portrait of Lady Day herself.

## Billie Holiday Comes Alive in Leimert Park

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For those who don't know Billie Holiday, or only heard her in the background, here is a rare chance to hear her songs performed with the same emotion that made her a legend in the few short years of her life. This is not a slick production, but a small stage in the heart of Leimert Park, in a way the essence of how Billie Holiday came up in the Harlem of the 1930s. She was not musically educated, her range was limited and years of abuse made her voice fragile, but by using jazz improvisation Holiday became one of the most influential singers of the 20th century. Sybil Harris captures this perfectly; she inserts some short vignettes of the tragedy of Holiday's life, but truly what we capture you is the emotional feeling of Holiday's performances, which Harris knows so well.



Sybil Harris in "Billie Holiday: Front and Center" at the Barbara Morrison Performing Arts Center. Credit: Scott Morgan Photography,

# *All About the Stage* *Mary E. Montoro*

## **BILLIE HOLIDAY: FRONT AND CENTER**

**“Who’s gonna wanna see me as an inmate, a junkie?”— Billie Holiday**

Billie Holiday was cursed in being one of those tormented, talented souls looking for a little fairness and peace in life. Destined to sing, her personal life was a disaster. But, when she sang, she did it with heart and all the misery she felt stemming from a disastrous childhood to a worse adulthood. In her 1956 memoir, “Lady Sings the Blues”, she described her childhood best, Mom and Pop were just a couple of kids when they got married. He was eighteen, she was sixteen and I was three.

Born Eleanora Fagan on April 7, 1915, in Philadelphia, to Sarah Julia “Sadie” Fagan and musician Clarence Halliday, her father abandoned Holiday and her mother to be on the road. She was passed to her older half-sister to be looked after while Sadie found work. Singer and actress Sybil Harris takes the audience to Holiday’s early beginnings. She holds nothing back no matter how brutal. For example, she reveals how Holiday’s next-door neighbor Wilbur Rich attempted to rape Billie when she was 11 years old but was stopped by Sadie. By age 14, she and Sadie worked as prostitutes and subsequently, went to jail. Billie left to join her mother in Harlem determined to work as a dancer. That didn’t go to well and she was cast aside. Suddenly, this beautiful soft voice started to sing “Ain’t Nobody’s Business” and she was instantly hired as a singer. Harris pauses in between songs to let the audience be aware of what is transpiring in Holiday’s life. The abuse the torch singer endured would have crushed the strongest of spirits. But, she doesn’t dwell on the pain. Instead, Harris uses that pain in her music and her songs and the outpour of sorrow that comes out can fill a 24-gallon barrel. She sings a medley of Holidays’ hits, like “Don’t Explain,” “God Bless the Child,” and the highly recognizable “Good Morning, Heartache.” Harris does an excellent job of reaching deep within and carefully pulling out the most tender and rawest of emotions Holiday felt when she sang. Harris embodied Holiday with dignity, pride and honesty.

Lord knows she didn’t have an easy life. People she trusted took advantage of her innocence. She was raped at ages 10 and 12 and she was the one who got arrested and served time. Eleanora Fagan became Billie Holiday to escape her past. It’s incredible that she lived until 44. She led a turbulent life with two failed marriages, child sexual abuse and died broke. Miss Holiday survived and left a legacy that is truly incredible and moving