

# Billie Holiday's *Strange Fruit*: Using Music to Send a Message

By Donna Hendry

## Overview

Music can help people express a range of feelings and topics. Many early African-American songs, such as "The Drinking Gourd," were used to pass secret messages during the period of slavery. As Reconstruction passed into the Jim Crow Era, predominately African-American music such as jazz and blues evolved. This music explored the feelings of frustration, poverty, and depression that many African-American communities experienced. This music also began advocating for social change. Songs that promoted social activism were rare before the mid 1960s. One of the earliest of these songs, "Strange Fruit," was sung by the blues singer, Billie Holiday--she first sang it in a New York club in 1938. Though it was popular, Holiday's recording company, Columbia Records, refused to produce the song due to its controversial nature. A small record company picked it up, and it has now been commonly accepted as Holiday's signature song.

## Curriculum Standards

For a list of standards that this unit addresses, [click here](#).

## Time Required

This unit will take four class periods to complete according to the content structure below:

- Day 1: Anticipatory Set. Have the class discuss the unit and the connection between music and the historical period.
- Day 2: View *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*, Program Three: *Don't Shout Too Soon (1918-1940)*.
- Day 3: Introduce the songs, "Strange Fruit" and "The Death of Emmet Till." Give students time to research their arguments.
- Day 4: Have students debate their arguments.

## Materials Needed

Videos:

- *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*, Program Three: *Don't Shout Too Soon (1918-1940)*
- The video, *Jazz*. Show the sequence from Episode Four of *Jazz* in which Billie Holiday sings *Strange Fruit*. It appears approximately 119 minutes into the video and begins with the title on the screen *Strange Fruit*.

Web Sites:

- [jimcrowhistory.org](http://jimcrowhistory.org) Web Site
- [jimcrowhistory.org](http://jimcrowhistory.org) Lynching Map
- <http://www.strangefruit.org>
- [http://www.eye.net/eye/issue/issue\\_12.04.97/music/oldschool.html](http://www.eye.net/eye/issue/issue_12.04.97/music/oldschool.html)
- [http://www.pbs.org/jazz/biography/artist\\_id\\_holiday\\_billie.htm](http://www.pbs.org/jazz/biography/artist_id_holiday_billie.htm)
- [http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/holiday\\_b.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/holiday_b.html)
- The book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* by Angela Daus

Copies of these songs:

- *Strange Fruit* by Billie Holiday (lyrics and audio at <http://www.strangefruit.org>)
- *The Death of Emmet Till* by Bob Dylan (lyrics and audio at <http://www.strangefruit.org>)
- *Waterfalls* by TLC (lyrics at: <http://www.lyricscafe.com/t/tlc/waterfalls.html>)

Textbooks, encyclopedias, newspaper articles, and magazines

## The Lesson

### Anticipatory Set

Have the students listen to the song *Waterfalls* by TLC. (Teacher may substitute *The Death of Emmet Till* instead) Ask the students:

- What are the singers talking about?
- Are the problems social or political?
- Is the group advocating a change?
- What other current songs or artists address social issues?
- How does this song relate to the Jim Crow Era?

As a class, have students brainstorm current social issues, then brainstorm social issues that existed during the Jim Crow Era. Issues should include **voting rights**, segregation, poverty, and/or **lynching**.

### Procedures

**Option 1:** (More demanding option)

1. Have students view *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*, Program Three: *Don't Shout too Soon (1918-1940)*. Play the song, *Strange Fruit*. Ask the class the following questions:
  - When do you think this song was recorded?
  - What social problems is the singer addressing?
2. Discuss lynching and who Billie Holiday was with students. Have students discuss how Holiday's song, *Strange Fruit*, relates to what they have viewed. Consider the following questions:
  - Why were blacks lynched?
  - What reasons would people give to "justify" doing it?
  - What responses could blacks have to lynching?
  - What response did Billie Holiday choose? Why?
  - Do you think this was a safe thing for her to do? Why?
  - What was Holiday's life like?
  - Did *Strange Fruit* have a good message?
  - Do you think it was effective?
3. If students have trouble with these questions, have them look at some of the resources listed on these Web Sites:
  - **jimcrowhistory.org Web Site**
  - **jimcrowhistory.org Lynching Map**
  - **<http://www.strangefruit.org>**
  - **[http://www.eyenet.net/eye/issue/issue\\_12.04.97/music/oldschool.html](http://www.eyenet.net/eye/issue/issue_12.04.97/music/oldschool.html)**
  - **[http://www.pbs.org/jazz/biography/artist\\_id\\_holiday\\_billie.htm](http://www.pbs.org/jazz/biography/artist_id_holiday_billie.htm)**
  - **[http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/holiday\\_b.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/holiday_b.html)**
4. Once the students exhibit a reasonable knowledge of the above questions, split the class into two groups.

- One group represents Billie Holiday, who is attempting to get *Strange Fruit* recorded. What challenges is she facing? How can she get it recorded? Why is it important?
  - The second group represents the record company executives who don't want to record it. Why wouldn't they? What are their reasons? How can they justify not recording it? What pressures might they face if they did record it?
5. Allow students time in class to research their side. The teacher might choose to assist groups as they brainstorm arguments for their side of the issue and assist them in organizing their arguments from strong to weak points. Set up a debate where the groups use their research to support their view.

**Option 2:** (Less demanding option)

Students can compare two of the three songs listed in the "Materials Needed" section using a Venn Diagram format. They could explore, among others, these questions: Which song is more effective and why? Which song is more authentic and why?

**Assessment**

Students will be assessed on the following curricula. The student:

- Exhibits understanding of social issues
- Works well cooperatively
- Practices acceptable research skills
- Integrates present day knowledge with historical background
- Contributes to class discussions

**Extension Activity**

In groups or individually, students can write a song addressing a modern social issue.

**Interdisciplinary Connections**

This project could be used with Music, Poetry, Civics, Current Events, American History, Women's Studies, and Minority Studies.

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