

# HAPPY BIRTHDAY BILLIE FROM MADELEINE PEYROUX

**LADY DAY AT 100**

The acclaimed singer, songwriter and guitarist from Athens, Georgia reflects on the influence of Billie Holiday.



Photo by Rocky Schenck

I don't think any sound can stop you in your tracks like the sound of Billie Holiday. It's instant immersion, no distractions. When she did it to me, I was a teenage runaway aspiring to be a singer, or just to be somebody. I was struck with her simplicity, her power of suggestion, and a sense that we weren't so different, she and I. Vulnerable and tough, blissful and forlorn, naive and bitter. I dug in deep. Wherever I looked, I found more

and more Billie. Ten volumes on Columbia Records with the small group sessions that would define an era's sound and material. From the late thirties to early forties she recorded every song under the sun with the masters of understatement at her side: Teddy Wilson, Lester Young, Freddie Green, Jo Jones. Each song has an alternate life below the surface, sometimes its best life, in her reading. In 1939 she stood still, bold, and strong, and performed

*Strange Fruit* at every show. She was a force! It unleashed a racist campaign against her that would eventually take her life.

As I grew into singing, I wanted to dig deeper into Billie. I explored her later arrangements with Decca and Verve, and her final masterpiece, *Lady in Satin*. I had to watch out. With her, you could be swept away on a wild ride through the whole of comedy and tragedy. It was a ride

from which, at times, I was afraid I might never return. There is a kind of despair that teens know well, and though I was singing her songs, I faced my own fears and tragedies. My inner demons and their voices overtook hers, and at eighteen I had to stop, to step back and deal with depression. But, as a dark and scary path becomes the path to triumph, I came through and I was given the chance to sing again.

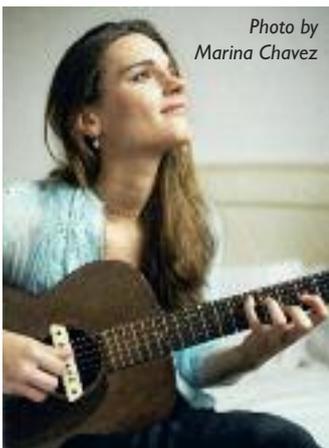


Photo by  
Marina Chavez



Photo by  
Rocky Schenck

Unbeknownst to me at first, my career would be an *homage* to Billie Holiday. By career I mean identity, sisterhood, tenacity and strength. In her company I'd found self-worth, kindness and love. This is not a wild ride from which one wants to return. No! It urges us onward! Pioneer, poet, martyr, woman: Happy Birthday Billie! In our ears you are still singing. In our hearts, you live forever.

**MADELEINE PEYROUX**