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Woodie Guthrie and Billie Holiday- Revolutionizing Music and Society in the Great Depression

Dr. Mark Naison

The Great Depression was a moment in US history when two features of American life in the 1920's were decisively challenged- the unchecked leadership of the nation by its business elite, and the rigid segregation of Blacks in all areas of social and economic life. As the nation's economy collapsed, and a large percentage of its population experienced poverty and insecurity on an unprecedented scale, radical activists- some of them Socialists and Communists- organized protests which challenged the idea that the leadership by the rich, and the segregation and stigmatization of Black people was good for the nation as a whole. In fact, they argued the opposite- that if the nation was to be saved, its working people, not its wealthy elite had to take the lead, and that Black people had to be an integral part of every movement for progress and national renewal. Little by little, these ideas began to influence political discourse, labor organizing, journalism and literature. and by the end of the decade, popular culture and popular music. Though racism remained virulent in all spheres of American life, the Depression marked a time when a critical mass of whites began to join with blacks in movements to protest lynching, employment discrimination, limitations on voting rights, and segregation in all its forms. These anti-racist protests drew strength from, and were often connected to, an unprecedented upheaval of America's working people, resulting in the funding of government aid to the jobless, the beginnings of a social safety net and the unionization of the nation's largest industries, efforts in which Black people played an important part.

Popular music of the Depression reflected, and at times reinforced these changes in the way the nation saw itself and conducted its business. For the first time in many years, artists began singing about the hardships faced by the poor, the displaced and the homeless; others challenged racial barriers in their lyrics, their choice of accompanists and the audiences they sang for. Songs which would never have seen the light of day in the 1920's turned into some of the most memorable cultural products of the Depression years- in part because of their eloquence, in part because they fit a new vision of American society promoted by intellectuals, academics, and political activists. As the nation's most respected businesses, its banks and largest corporations, either failed or approached collapse, and as white workers who were promised security if they drew the color line fell into poverty and despair, artists who sang of rebels and commoners as the nation's true heroes, or who broke the color line in the way they performed as well as in lyrics, began to attract and audience.

Two artists who best symbolized the reinvention of American identity during the Depression years were Woodie Guthrie and Billie Holiday. Guthrie, a white farmer and laborer who grew up in Oklahoma and Texas, was part of a generation of displaced people who were driven off the land by bankruptcy and dust storms during the early years of the Depression and who tried to make a life for themselves in California, where there was still a demand for hourly workers in the factory like farms of that state which had once heavily depended on Mexican labor. The humiliation of being transformed from proud independent farmers into hoboes riding the rails or migrant laborers living in tents and shanties ruled by over by gun toting straw bosses and foreman was the subject of Guthrie's songs, as they were of John Steinbeck's novel "Grapes of Wrath" First sung around the camp fire to fellow "Okies", they were picked up by a Los Angeles radio station,

and became an instant sensation for their vivid imagery describing the humiliation of the nation's poor along with their angry condemnation of bankers and employers who profited from others misery. Within months, Guthrie found himself invited to perform in union halls where a reinvigorated labor movement was seeing to organize the nation's working poor, and in concert venues where music of the common people was being presented as the musical accompaniment of a popular upheaval that would save the nation. Guthrie, angry and prolific, gave voice to the rage and pathos of the displaced in songs like "I Ain't Got No Home" "Pretty Boy Floyd" and "Do Re Mi" and turned a song about the injustice of private property-"This Land in Your Land," into a new patriotic anthem. Almost a century later, these songs continue to inspire those motivated to sing about injustice:

"As through this land I've traveled, I've seen some funny men, some will rob you with a six gun, some with a fountain pen As through this land I've traveled, as through this land i've roamed, you'll never see an outlaw drive a family from their home" (Pretty Boy Floyd)

"Gambling man is rich and the working man is poor, I ain't got no home, in this world anymore" (I Ain't Got No Home.)

Billie Holiday, whose music had and still has an equal impact to Guthrie's, carved out a career through a voice possessing such emotional power, reinforced by an exquisite sense of timing, that the best jazz musicians of her era wanted her to front their bands even if it meant shattering racial barriers. Raped, sexually exploited, brutalized by police on numerous occasions, starting before she even reached her teens, Holiday, a Harlem resident, had an ethereal, haunting voice that left musicians and audiences equally mesmerized, and she found herself asked, while still in her teens, to front the nation's greatest white swing band, the Bennie Goodman Orchestra.

The Harlem community in which this quiet musical revolution occurred, was one where racial barriers were being shattered on a daily basis-not only were interracial bands of Communists putting the furniture back of evicted families and marching on relief centers; there were "Don't buy where you can't work" campaigns to end discrimination in Harlem stores, led by Black nationalists. and weekly marches to "Free the Scottsboro Boys" (9 Alabama youth facing a death sentence on a trumped up rape charge), When Bennie Goodman put a black singer in front of his white band, and later started adding black musicians to his orchestra, he was responding to an emerging sense that racism was part of the reason why the nation had fallen on hard times. But Holiday, arguably the greatest song stylist in American history, put a face and a sound on this emerging ethos. Holiday began touring with all Black bands, all white bands, and racially mixed ones, leading to a life of turmoil, trouble and brilliant achievement. She never escaped the wounds of racism- and found herself on the verge of addiction and imprisonment on numerous occasions. But she was also called upon to sing the most important song of her era on any subject- "Strange Fruit"-an anti-lynching anthem of such power that it still haunts us. Not only was this song written for Holiday by a Bronx schoolteacher named Abel Meerpool, but it was performed for the first time, in 1939, in the first openly interracial club in the United States-"Cafe Society." For the next 15 years, Holiday would perform this song before hushed audiences in clubs throughout the country, transforming the nation's ugly legacy of racial violence into a sonic memory that no one could ever forget.

These two great artists- products of poverty and hardship and in Holiday's case, the extremes of racist cruelty- are still with us,-their lives and lyrics a critique of how we live that continues to influence some of our best musicians, and our most impassioned fighters for a just nation and a just world.