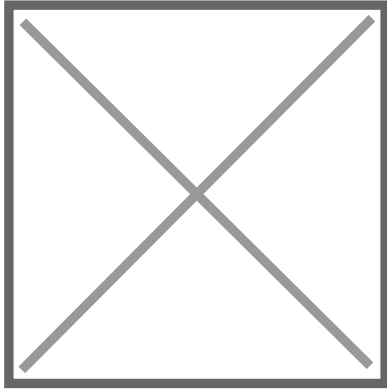




Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill: Witnessing 'Strange Fruit'

Description

Salt Lake City, UT On September 19, I saw Lanie Robertson's *Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill* at the Grand Theatre, with Noelani Brown as Billie Holiday and Myles Anthony Mann as her pianist, Jimmy Powers. I'm a musician, and it was the first time I had ever heard 'Strange Fruit,' one of the most celebrated protest songs in American music. I now think it's a song you have to witness in person, not just listen to. I wasn't there to review the show. But I came home and felt compelled to write about it.

This isn't a typical musical. There's no plot in the usual sense. It's structured like one of Holiday's last club sets, in a seedy Philadelphia bar in 1959, about four months before she died. Between the songs, she tells stories, funny and salty at first, then more painful, and you slowly learn how hard her life was. Director Toni Byrd turned the back of the Grand's stage into a small black-box club, complete with tables, drinks, and a marquee at the door. There's no intermission, so you stay in the room as Holiday unravels. The songs include 'What a Little Moonlight Can Do,' 'God Bless the Child,' and, of course, 'Strange Fruit.' (The full list is at the bottom of this post.)

Robertson's play with music premiered at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta in April 1986 and soon moved Off-Broadway, where it ran for 281 performances at the Westside Theatre, starring Lonette McKee and later S. Epatha Merkerson. It reached Broadway in 2014, and Audra McDonald won a record-breaking sixth Tony Award for the role, making her the only performer to win in all four acting categories. HBO broadcast a filmed version in 2016, and she took the play to London's West End in 2017. The Grand's production joins that lineage.

A singer in a vintage dress performs emotionally at a microphone, illuminated against a dark background.
Noelani Brown, in a vintage dress, performs emotionally at a microphone, illuminated against a dark background.

Brown does a fabulous job inhabiting Holiday at the end of her life: the frankness, the humor, and the brokenness underneath. Some moments are so intimate that you feel like you shouldn't be watching. At one point, Billie leans over to her pianist and quietly says she's not doing so well. It's small and unshowy, and it lands as authentically as the music does.

A shout-out to Myles Anthony Mann, whose piano playing is exceptional. He's more than accompaniment. He's a steady presence beside her, and the music and the stillness between the songs are part of why those quiet moments land.

Abel Meeropol, a Jewish schoolteacher, wrote the poem that would become "Strange Fruit" in the 1930s after seeing a photograph of a lynching. Holiday began singing it at Café Society in 1939, closing her sets in a darkened room, the waiters stopping service, with a single spotlight on her face. She was apprehensive at first, worried that patrons wouldn't want a political song and fearing harassment from racist listeners. Her label, Columbia, wouldn't release it, reportedly fearing a backlash from Southern retailers and radio, though it let her record it for the small Commodore label. Many mainstream stations and labels considered it too hot to touch, but it became a hit, and in 2002 the Library of Congress selected that 1939 recording for the National Recording Registry. As a musician, it stings to learn that a song about lynching was so widely shunned. To me, that feels like censorship.

The song moves in three steps. It opens on a Southern landscape and quickly turns it into something else: the trees are hung with the bodies of Black lynching victims. Then it sets the region's gentle, romantic image of itself against the physical reality, with the sweetness of flowers giving way to the smell of burning. Finally, it treats the body as a harvest, left to birds, weather, and time. It never names a killer or a victim. The song doesn't argue or explain.

So when the song arrives in the show, you aren't hearing a famous protest song from a distance. You're hearing it from someone whose life you've just listened to unfold. Brown was crying through it, and her voice was just as gorgeous as ever. The grief didn't break the song. It seemed to carry it.

The room was completely silent. Even the applause was polite and soft, the way I imagine it would have been back in the day. Nobody wanted to break the spell. It felt less like a crowd reacting to a performance and more like a room of people sitting with something together.



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Why it matters now

This song matters because lynching never really stopped. The crowds thinned and the souvenir photographs stopped circulating, but the violence did not disappear. Jill Collen Jefferson, the civil rights lawyer who founded the organization [Julian](#), has argued as much for years, and the NAACP counts killings like James Byrd's and Ahmaud Arbery's as modern-day lynchings. Then there is Craig Anderson, killed in Jackson, Mississippi, in 2011 by a group of white teenagers. The federal judge who sentenced them tied the killing to the state's history of lynching. But this history is not in the past tense. Shockingly, and not shockingly, this country is still coming to terms with anti-Black racism.

The numbers differ by source. The NAACP counts 4,743 lynchings between 1882 and 1968. The Equal Justice Initiative, cited by the Associated Press, counts more than 4,400 from Reconstruction to World War II, and the Washington Post cited its figure of more than 4,000 Black victims between 1877 and 1950. Those gaps come from different date ranges, definitions, and geography, not from contradictions: EJI's own report counts 4,075 lynchings of Black people in twelve Southern states between 1877 and 1950, and more than 4,440 nationwide. No one can give an exact total, because there was no formal tracking, and many historians think even the highest counts fall short. Anyone citing a figure should name the source and the period.

The definition has widened. The NAACP defines a lynching as the public killing of someone denied due process, including killings in which police took part. That's why it counts George Floyd's death alongside Byrd's and Arbery's. It's the organization's position, and it's broader than the historical definition of a mob killing. These cases also differ from the recent hangings. For Byrd, Arbery, and Floyd, courts established what happened, and the argument is over the label. For the hangings, what happened is still unresolved.

I didn't walk in thinking of a single headline. I've been carrying all of it: the news, the history, and the weight of living in a country where it often feels like nothing we do matters. Some of it is recent. On August 3, 2026, Tasia Fortune, a 29-year-old Black woman, was found hanging from a tree behind an

abandoned house in Jackson. As of September 20, 2026, her death has been ruled a homicide, and Jarques Ratliff, who is also Black, has been charged with murder. He has pleaded not guilty, and his next court date is September 25. Her mother, who is white, has said she doesn't believe race played a role. Over the past two years, about a half-dozen Black people have been found hanged across the South. Some were quickly ruled suicides, and families have disputed those rulings. Nolan Wells, an 18-year-old, vanished on a Fourth of July trip to Horn Island, off the Mississippi coast, and was found dead two days later. An independent autopsy found the cause and manner of his death undetermined, and the investigation remains open.

I don't know what happened in most of these cases, and I won't pretend to. Some may turn out to be crimes, and some may not. But the image of a body hanging from a tree carries its own history. Historian Karlos Hill notes that lynchings were public on purpose, meant to terrorize a whole community, not just the victim. And communities that have watched authorities dismiss racial violence have reason to distrust a quick ruling backed by little evidence. That distrust is decades old, built through cases like the Mississippi deaths since 2000, where families never felt their questions were answered.

What the song taught me is a way of looking. In 1916, W.E.B. Du Bois printed photographs of a lynching in *The Crisis*. Mamie Till-Mobley chose an open casket for her son. Abel Meeropol turned a photograph into a poem, and the poem into a song. Each forced a society to look at what it had arranged not to see. From 1920 to 1938, the NAACP also flew a flag from its New York headquarters reading "A man was lynched yesterday," so the song arrived in the middle of a long campaign to make the violence undeniable. But looking is not the same as knowing. The work now is slower and less dramatic: autopsies, evidence, court dates, and a demand that every case be investigated honestly, whatever the outcome.

How to show up

We're bombarded with traumatic news, and most of us are exhausted. Social media feeds give us everything and let us hold on to none of it. That silent room, with one song and nowhere to scroll, was the opposite. Exhaustion is understandable, but it isn't permission to look away.

To my Black friends: I'm here for you. I know I can't carry this the way you do, but I'm not looking away, and I'm not going anywhere.

Many people are wondering in this political moment how to do the work, how to show up. Supporting shows like this is one way. Letting a story you'd rather not hear reach you, and then carrying it out the door, is part of it.

This show is critical. It gives you Billie Holiday's life before it gives you her song.

This midterm, I'm showing up to the polls more invigorated than ever, and I hope you will too. The arts are politics embodied.

Not registered, or not sure? [Register or check your registration at vote.gov](#). In Utah, use [vote.utah.gov](#). The deadline is October 23, and if you miss it, you can still register in person at an early voting location

or on Election Day with two forms of ID.

Please support this show.

Want a taste of the show? [Here's the teaser](#) for the 2016 HBO filmed version, starring Audra McDonald. It's not the Grand's production, but it gives you a feel for the material.

Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill runs Thursdays through Saturdays at the Grand Theatre through September 26. [Get tickets here.](#)

The songs

The published script includes these numbers. Productions can vary, so the Grand's setlist may differ slightly.

1. I Wonder Where Our Love Has Gone
2. When a Woman Loves a Man
3. What a Little Moonlight Can Do
4. Crazy He Calls Me
5. Gimme a Pigfoot (And a Bottle of Beer)
6. Baby Doll
7. God Bless the Child
8. Foolin' Myself
9. Somebody's on My Mind
10. Easy Livin'
11. Strange Fruit
12. That's ain't Nobody's Business If I Do
13. Don't Explain
14. What a Little Moonlight Can Do (Reprise)
15. Deep Song

Further reading

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