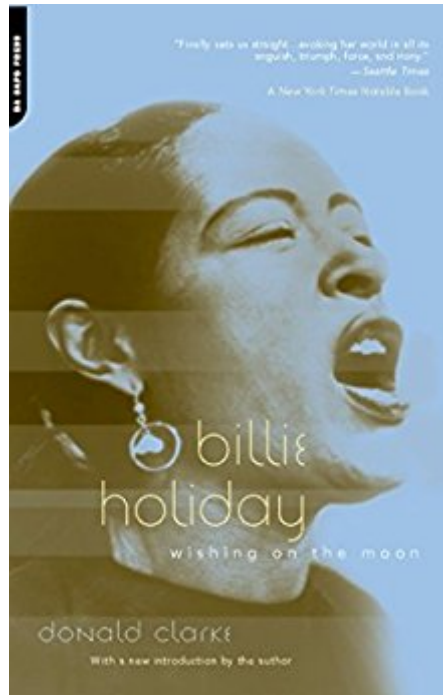


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# Billie Holiday: Wishing On The Moon



## Synopsis

Certainly no singer has been more mythologized and more misunderstood than Billie Holiday, who helped to create much of the mystique herself with her autobiography, *Lady Sings the Blues*. "Now, finally, we have a definitive biography," said Booklist of Donald Clarke's *Billie Holiday*, "by a deeply compassionate, respectful, and open-minded biographer [whose] portrait embraces every facet of Holiday's paradoxical nature, from her fierceness to her vulnerability, her childlikeness to her innate elegance and amazing strength." Clarke was given unrivaled access to a treasure trove of interviews from the 1970s; interviews with those who knew Lady Day from her childhood in the streets and good-time houses of Baltimore through the early days of success in New York and into the years of fame, right up to her tragic decline and death at the age of forty-four. Clarke uses these interviews to separate fact from fiction and, in the words of the *Seattle Times*, "finally sets us straight. . . evoking her world in all its anguish, triumph, force and irony." *Newsday* called this "a thoroughly riveting account of Holiday and her milieu." The *New York Times* raved that it "may be the most thoroughly valuable of the many books on Holiday," and Helen Oakley Dance in *JazzTimes* said, "We should probably have to wait a long time for another life of Billie Holiday to supersede Donald Clarke's achievement."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This was the best Bio I have read on Billie. Previous Bios never were clear on how many times she was married. Actually she was only married twice. There was also quite a bit of detail on her growing up in Baltimore. I always thought that Billie was from the Pennsylvania Ave. section of West Baltimore. But she actually grew up near Fells Point. LATER she moved near to the Royale Theatre in West Baltimore. Also there is clarification of the relationship between her Mother and Father. HOWEVER there was too much description of her later drug use. (If you have read one Junkies life (as in John Belushi) you don't need to read about the drug use in another Junkie.) BUT there was also clarification that her addiction didn't start because of a white Band Member (which was shown in the movie). Of the 4 books that I have read on Billie this was the best.

When writing about American jazz, Donald Clarke's prose style is often that of the hip insider: he captures Billie Holiday's world in a way no other biography or study of the singer has managed to do. This is neither a straightforward narrative or a cautionary tale, and readers attempting to breeze through its pages in order to pick off the highlights may well be thrown by Clarke's casual story telling, which is given to warm-hearted floating asides, including descriptions of sessions and performances, and analysis of individual records, all of it interspersed with vivid and often lengthy comments from his interviewees. Clarke cares deeply for this woman, his patience seems inexhaustible, and his anger at the racism and stupidity of the times can make a page tremble without disrupting the cool assurance of his methods, but he also has a sense of humor in all this: you have to love a biography that gives the last word to pianist Jimmy Rowles, whose affectionate two page monologue ends with Billie tucked into bed with Chinese take-out and a bottle of gin for company.

Wishing on the Moon is a real find for Billie Holiday fans who would like to learn more about her. The book gives a lot of detail from interviews with people who knew and worked with her. At various points the author lovingly corrects errors in Billie's own ghost written autobiography "Lady Sings the Blues". Many of the chapters are as much detailed discography as biography. I really liked knowing who the musicians were who recorded with her on various songs. My only criticism is that I can't always find the page that I want to refer back to for song details. Definitely one of the best biographies I have read in the past few years

I don't think words can truly express how much I loved this book. This is her story, the good, the bad and even the ugly. Like all great artists, she was a complex character, full of contradictions, yet extremely gifted and one of the best vocalists we will ever have known. This isn't an easy read in some parts, but biographies are meant to be honest no matter how tragic they are. If you want to know more about her life and the climate of the jazz music industry during that time period in American history, this is a great read. Highly recommended.

Clarke's work is the best of the many books that came out after Motown's wonderful (if inaccurate) movie based on Holiday's ghost-written autobio, *Lady Sings the Blues*. Rich in detail, but never losing character or flavor (a pitfall of many bios) along the way, *Wishing On The Moon* captures what one can presume to be the essence of this magnificent interpreter of song. The big-picture details of Lady Day's life story are well-known, and Clarke separates fact from fiction while painting a rich and entertaining portrait. One gets the feeling that Billie Holiday presented many faces to many people with deliberate intent, so piecing together the facts of her life is a daunting task. After reading almost everything there is to read about her life, I came away thinking that Clarke got it as close to right as is possible, generations removed from her passing. This is a spellbinding work that would appeal to the Holiday aficionado, the jazz devotee, or anyone interested in the human condition.

Read this book and you'll know about everything one needs to know about this fascinating though tragically damaged woman. Her childhood was broken, which basically led her to become what she became as a person. Billie was brilliant as a vocalist, beautiful when she allowed herself to be, and was manipulated, brutalized, and dependent. At the same time, she produced some of the most incredible and moving vocals in the jazz idiom. Clarke does a fine job sourcing original material. However, his writing, which involves quotes from multiple sources, frequently leaves one in the dark as to who exactly he's quoting, which becomes a bit frustrating over time. However, if you want to know all there is to know about this tragic piece of art named Billie Holiday, read this book and cope with its problems.

"*Wishing On The Moon: The Life and Times of Billie Holiday*" by Donald Clarke is meticulously researched and annotated, drawing heavily on the archives of Linda Kuehl, who from 1970-1972 interviewed nearly 150 people involved with Holiday. Clarke, the editor and principal author of "The

Penguin Encyclopedia of Popular Music," provides a chronological narrative, clarifying or puncturing many of the misconceptions and myths about Billie Holiday. You can read my review in its entirety on the web at allmusicbooks. Ultimately, Holiday's story comes down to both her music and her date with destiny. They are inextricably linked in the Lady Day story; her art and her life cast a huge shadow over the history of music. For now, "Wishing On The Moon" stands as the definitive word on Lady Day.

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