



PROJECT MUSE®

---

*The Robert Cray Collection* (review)

Michael Adams

Notes, Volume 66, Number 3, March 2010, pp. 647-648 (Review)

Published by Music Library Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/not.0.0282>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/376366>

**Billie Holiday: The Life and Artistry of Lady Day.** DVD. Andorra: Idem Home Video, 2002. IDVD 1115. \$19.95.

Is twenty-seven minutes too little time to present the life and artistry of the best jazz vocalist in music history? Certainly, but some contemporary viewers view twenty-seven minutes as a lifetime, itself. It is difficult to convince a modern audience to watch or listen to artists just for what they have contributed, no matter how massive the artistic contributions are. Perhaps the fact that it contains some of her most memorable filmed performances is thanks enough for *Billie Holiday: The Life and Artistry of Lady Day*. All the biographical facts are there, presented in a straightforward manner with archival photographs and narration: rape at age ten, prostitution at fourteen, racism, the drugs and alcohol. But also here are the artistic triumphs that defined a style of music and singing admired by the entire world. Even in here last years, sadly her early forties, her voice ravaged from time and abuse, the best jazz musicians, producers, arrangers still wanted to work with Lady Day. Her voice was never the best. Ella and others outshone her tone. But her masterpiece record album *Lady in Satin* proved phrasing and interpretive creativity wins artistry every time. Not

only is it still in print after fifty years, but also has been reissued dozens of times.

Musical film clips include those from the feature film *New Orleans* in which Billie reluctantly agreed to play a maid in order to appear and perform with her friend Louis Armstrong; rare television appearances including her final one singing "Fine and Mellow" from the *Voice of Jazz* CBS special (1957) with Roy Eldridge, Doc Cheatum, Vic Dickensen, Lester Young, Ben Webster, Coleman Hawkins, Gerry Mulligan, Mal Waldron, Danny Barker, Milt Hinton, and Osie Johnson, and the dazzling though incomplete "Symphony in Black: A Rhapsody of Negro Life" with Duke Ellington. The sound throughout the DVD is remastered (smoothed) and the video quality of the clips varies. Extras like the discography and bibliography are woefully incomplete. Though *Billie Holiday: The Life and Artistry of Lady Day* is a good introduction, a much better choice for a comprehensive collection is *Lady Day—The Many Faces of Billie Holiday* (Kultur, D1292; 2003, 1991).

GERALD A. NOTARO

*University of South Florida, St. Petersburg*

**The Robert Cray Collection.** DVD. Directed by Bill Bowman. London: Cherry Red Films and Pearson Productions Limited, 2009. PPCR025. \$19.95.

*The Robert Cray Collection*, originally released on VHS in 1991, consists of nine music videos, with the singer-guitarist offering brief, mostly banal comments between each number. Cray was one of the first in a short line of younger blues musicians, which later included such performers as Shemekia Copeland and Keb' Mo', who have tried to keep alive the traditions of Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, Jimmy Reed, and Koko Taylor. While traditional blues is gritty and bawdy, full of sex, violence, and the laments of loneliness, Cray offers a much more polished approach, which some might label slick.

Cray's blues lends itself well to the music video format, especially that of the easy-going, non-threatening 1980s. *The Robert Cray Collection* offers a microcosm of music

video styles from that era, a mixture of unadorned performances and those attempting to illustrate what Cray is singing about, as with the feeble dramatizations in "Consequences" and "The Forecast (Calls for Pain)." Much better is the animation of Cray and his beloved in "Acting This Way," featuring primitive efforts to blend animation with live action. The enjoyable "Nothin' But a Woman" features another cliché of the period: the very attractive woman, obviously a model, prancing about to make the music seem sexier and even pretending to play a music instrument, that phallic favorite the saxophone in this instance.

Four of the videos, including "The Forecast (Calls for Pain)" were directed by Oley Sassone, who has gone on to an undistinguished career making direct-to-video

movies and directing episodes of such television series as *Xena: Warrior Princess*. The no-frills treatment, beyond tilted camera angles, of "Don't Be Afraid of the Dark" is by the more accomplished Dominic Sena, auteur of the sublime guilty pleasure *Gone in Sixty Seconds* (2000).

The best of the videos is Peter Care's "Smoking Gun," Cray's most widely known, song because it captures the vitality of Cray's stage performances while having him sing and play in several locations. Unfortunately, most of Cray's comments between the videos are along the lines of "If you're into it, do it" and "Young folks don't hear much blues." Why is that,

Robert, and what can be done about it? He mentions his bandmates only briefly and says nothing about the musicians who influenced him. No direct connection is made between his comments about gospel and rhythm and blues and what is heard in the videos.

This forty-one-minute compilation will serve, nevertheless, as an adequate introduction to Cray's music, though it focuses on only a portion of his career. The videos may also be of interest to students of the stylistic development of the genre.

MICHAEL ADAMS

*City University of New York Graduate Center*

### **Clark Terry Quartet and the Duke Jordan Trio Live in Copenhagen 1985. DVD. [Vista, CA]: Storyville Films, 2009, 1985. 26028. \$14.99.**

While Paris is well known as a refuge for many expatriate American jazz musicians (most notably Bud Powell, Kenny Clarke, Johnny Griffin, and Dexter Gordon), Copenhagen also bolstered a healthy population of veteran American jazzmen from the 1960s up until the 2000s. Among the first were Kenny Drew and Ben Webster, who in the early '60s left their careers in America to settle in the Danish capital, a path on which many American jazz musicians would embark in later years, including Thad Jones and Ed Thigpen. This Storyville Films 2009 DVD release documents a 1985 concert featuring Duke Jordan (piano) and Jimmy Woode (bass), who in the 1980s were among the most notable American jazz musician expats residing in Copenhagen. The concert took place at Club Montmartre in Copenhagen on Easter Sunday, 7April, which also coincided with the birthday of the late Duke Ellington band alum Webster (Webster also served as the leader of the Montmartre house band after moving to Denmark in 1964). Woode and Jordan were joined by trumpet legend and former Ellington sideman Clark Terry.

The DVD features two of the three Montmartre sets performed on that day, the first of which spotlights a quartet comprising Terry, Jordan, Woode (another former Ellington sideman), and Svend E. Nørregaard on drums. Terry and friends honored the occasion by performing a set

of four Ellington classics ("In A Mellotone," "Mood Indigo," "Just Squeeze Me," and "Satin Doll"), and a pair of standards associated with Billie Holiday ("God Bless the Child"), and Ella Fitzgerald ("Oh, Lady be Good"). The second half of the DVD features Jordan's trio set with Jesper Lundgaard on bass and Åge Tanggaard on drums. The trio also paid tribute to Webster with arrangements of Billy Strayhorn's "Lush Life," Ellington's "Solitude," supplemented by two Jordan originals ("Dances a Ball" and "Jordu"), and the 1937 Allie Wrubel standard "Gone with the Wind." Missing from the DVD is what Terry announces during his set as the highlight of the evening, a showcase of seven tunes featuring Terry's longtime friend and Copenhagen resident Ernie Wilkins (Terry and Wilkins had been close friends since their childhood days in 1930s Kansas City). Storyville Records released the Wilkins portion of the concert on CD in 2003.

Sixty-five-year-old Terry is the unequivocal star of the show, alternating effortlessly between trumpet and flugelhorn (often during the same tune) while entertaining the crowd with his signature "mumbles" scat style and eloquent spoken introductions to the Ellington/Strayhorn standards. The trumpeter's seasoned professionalism most notably shines through at a point in the set ("Just Squeeze Me") where Woode's equipment failure throws the bassist into a confused panic. Terry, in classic form,