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Billie Holiday: The Life and Artistry of Lady Day (review)

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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).

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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