The main concern of a jazz musician isn’t necessarily the style, the melody or the rhythm. While all aspects are important to a piece, what makes a good jazz piece exceptional in the telling of a story. No piece depicts this better than “Strange Fruit” as performed by Billie Holiday. Holiday’s performance told a very personal story as well as a cultural and national one that reached audiences through its haunting melody, its dramatic imagery and its powerful message.

_Southern trees bear strange fruit,

_Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,

_Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,

_Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees._

It is noteworthy that the lyrics, so vivid in their imagery, were not written by an African American, but rather a Jewish teacher, Abel Meeropol. Meeropol had seen photos of the lynchings that were going on in the South and was horrified. Despite the negative atmosphere of the era, he wrote the lyrics and music for “Strange Fruit.” Meeropol lived what he believed, as in the words of another song he wrote, that, “All races and religions, that’s America to me.”

Billie Holiday had never witnessed a lynching, but she was well aware of it. Every black was touched by a “lore of lynching.” When lynching was mostly an occurrence in the South, Holiday had experience with racism firsthand. When she began singing with Artie Shaw, a white band leader, she would have problems just staying in hotels or even getting on the stage at all. Holiday was very bold, and in one instance, stood up to a hotel manager in Kentucky. She said, “Listen, Artie Shaw has been very nice to me. I know you don’t even have niggers clean up your hotel. But I’m a Negro or
whatever you want to call me, and I’ll make you a bet. You let us open in this damn ballroom, and if I don’t go over better than anyone else, you can throw me and Artie and all of us out. You want to take the bet or don’t you?” Billie herself was at first reluctant to sing “Strange Fruit,” but she knew that it was a song that needed to be sung.

Holiday first sang the song in the Café Society of Greenwich village in 1939, the first integrated nightclub. This was risky; how would the white audience react? Holiday’s performance was met with an awed silence, but it was accepted. The song became an anthem for the anti-lynching movement.

What made strange fruit such a moving piece? Just the subject matter alone was enough to cause record companies to close their doors. Lynching was subject matter that wasn’t discussed. Legislation against lynching was never brought up in Congress again after Southern senators filibustered any bills that entered on the floor. It was easier for most people to just look away. Now Billie Holiday was singing it nightly, and over a million records were sold. Holiday’s performance brought lynching before the moral eye of society once again, not something that could be conveniently ignored.

The lyrics themselves present lynching in a very strong metaphor. This “strange fruit” doesn’t need to be explained. The metaphor takes a very serious subject and turns it into an ordinary object. Perhaps this is what made the song so widespread. Listeners were not directly forced to confront lynching statistics or images, but came to the moral conclusion themselves. Rather than enforcing morals, the song allowed listeners to come to the conclusions themselves. Then the next stanza:

*Pastoral scene of the gallant south,*

*The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,*
Chad Curtis
Strange Fruit

Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,

Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

The two couplets each contrast the beauty, the pride of the South with the disturbing images of lynching. They aren’t compatible. There is irony. America stands for something, for freedom. How could a country that advocates “all men are created equal” could engage in such heinous acts? This wasn’t the “sweet land of liberty” where freedom rings. This forced listeners to confront this irony in their own lives.

Billie Holiday was the one who put a voice to “Strange Fruit.” Meeropol wrote the music himself, a topic that became disputed when Holiday claimed that she had done so. Holiday did bring it to life with her blues feel. It isn’t just the lyrics that call attention, but the tragic sound to the melody itself. Notice how Holiday doesn’t sing the words evenly, but almost drags the timing. The effect isn’t self-pitying or accusatory, but rather an invitation to ponder.

Billie Holiday’s recording if “Strange Fruit” was one of the most influential pieces in the 20th century. It pushed the moral urgency of lynching from the background to the eyes of all Americans. Through a combination of message, music and meaning, it illustrates the tension in composer and performer alike, as well as the African American population as a whole. “Strange Fruit” was before its time in the civil rights movement.