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Citation: White, W. (2014). Jazz and junk: The Story of Billie Holiday. Posted at www.williamwhitepapers.com

Jazz and Junk: The Story of Billie Holiday

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NOTE: The original 1,000+ page manuscript for *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America* had to be cut by more than half before its first publication in 1998. This is an edited excerpt that was deleted from the original manuscript.

The urban environment of the post-World War II America produced a “hipster” culture—a culture in which social detachment and emotional control were worn as a badge of personal style and protest. Marijuana and heroin crept into this culture within which everything was judged as either “hep” or “square.” Telling “Bop jokes” and talking “cool” become something of an art form, but it was often the use of marijuana and/or heroin that served as the ritual of initiation into this subterranean club. The “viper” (marijuana user) carefully crafted a lifestyle of hedonism and rejected all traditional role responsibilities. The goal of the hip life was to live for the moment, to seek pleasure and excitement, to smoke “tea” (marijuana) and sample other drugs, and to find nurturing in the musical art forms of blues and jazz—particularly jazz.

The world of jazz was divided by drug preference. There were those who preferred alcohol and those who preferred marijuana and/or opiates. While most jazz musicians agreed that their technical skills decreased

when they were high, they also agreed that being high enhanced both their creativity and their relationship with their music (Winick, 1957). First-hand accounts of the 1940s hipster scene, such as Milton “Mezz” Mezzrow’s *Really the Blues*, describe a subculture enmeshed in the use of marijuana, opium, morphine and heroin—in addition to the ever-present alcohol.

The link between jazz, drugs, and sexuality drew great public attention and even generated movements to legally suppress this new musical art form. The spotlight fell on Jazz in an era of extended concern by social reformers that dances like the tango, the turkey trot, the black bottom, and the Charleston were sexually corrupting the county’s morals. In a climate in which jazz itself was being described as a “mental drunkenness” that should be banned by law, it is not surprising that the association between jazz and drug use would come under particular scrutiny (Abel, 1980, p 198). Drug use among the jazz set often broke into visibility, as it does in the world of rock music today, through the periodic arrest or drug-related death of a noted singer or musician

or through the autobiographies of key figures in the lifestyle.

Louis Armstrong was arrested in 1931 for possession of marijuana, and released with a six-month suspended sentence after spending ten days in jail (Anderson, 1981). Many jazz musicians and singers were also linked to heroin addiction during their careers, including Stan Getz, Chet Baker, John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, and Miles Davis, to name just a few. There were many whose creative genius was snuffed out prematurely because of drugs, such as the incomparable Charlie Parker, who died when he was only 34. But when one thinks of jazz and drugs and the loss of genius as America approached mid-century, one name stands out from all the others: Billie Holiday.

The famed jazz singer Billie Holiday was born in 1915 in Baltimore to a life fit for the blues. She was the illegitimate child of an illegitimate child. She was abandoned by her mother. As a child she worked for nickels, scrubbing steps and running errands in a house of prostitution. She was raped at age 10 and then sent to a reformatory—the Good Shepherd for Colored Girls. By age 15 she was working as a prostitute. Her emergence into the public eye came when she and others discovered the power of her voice. Holiday began smoking opium with her first husband Jimmy Monroe and later became addicted to heroin. Throughout the span of her musical and addictive career, she always seemed to be surrounded by a group of parasitic hustlers (Gourse, 1997). In her biography, she said of her fame and her drug use:

I had the white gowns and the white shoes. An every night they'd bring me the white gardenias and the white junk (Holiday, 1956, p. 137).

“Lady” as she came to be known, was arrested in 1947 and sentenced to a year in the federal reformatory in Alderson, West Virginia. Her arrest greatly injured her career by taking away access to the cabaret card that she needed to sing in the nightclubs of New York City. The card, issued by the police department, was denied to any person “who has been convicted of a felony or any misdemeanor or offense, or is or pretends to be a homosexual or lesbian” (Wakefield, 1992, p. 313). Relapsing after

she was released from prison, Holiday paid \$1,000 a week to go through a private treatment program in New York City. Through much of her career she was plagued by relapses and arrests. In addition to her heroin use, it was said that Billie Holiday “drank a river of hard booze” (DeVeaux, 1980).

Billie Holiday was hospitalized in 1959 for cardiac and kidney failure. While she was on her death bed, she was arrested by the New York City Police, who found heroin in her hospital room. Days later she died in the hospital, under police guard. She was only 44 years old. About Holiday's seemingly unrelenting drug problems, her friend Maely Duffy once noted: “Billie's not a woman, she's a habit” (Gourse, 1997, p. 6). Billie Holiday was the most distinctive and famous singer in the history of jazz, but her brilliance was eroded as her life was cut short by the heroin and the booze that touched many of the jazz greats. She was one of the many, but one of the most famous, of the casualties within the subterranean world of drug addiction in mid-20th-century America.

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