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WITNESSES TO THE WOUND

A Covenant Investigation into the Exploitation of the Zamar Carriers

100 Years of the Music Business on Trial

Report No. 4 of an Ongoing Series

BILLIE HOLIDAY

1915 – 1959

Lady Day

Over 200 recordings between 1933 and 1944 — paid \$25 to \$75 per side with no royalties — her own labels refused to record Strange Fruit — surveilled by the Federal Bureau of Narcotics — imprisoned, stripped of her cabaret license, arrested on her deathbed — died at 44 with \$0.70 in her bank account

NOTE: This report applies the Devarim 19:15 standard to contested historical claims — disputed evidence is documented as disputed

March 2026 · Kepha Arcemont, Elder and Founder

SECTION ONE — THE GIFT: WHO YAHWEH MADE HER

Biography: The Making of Lady Day

Eleanora Fagan was born April 7, 1915, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania — though she grew up in Baltimore, Maryland, and some sources record her birthplace there. Her father, Clarence Holiday, was a jazz musician who toured with Fletcher Henderson's band and abandoned the family when she was young. Her mother, Sadie Fagan, was barely a teenager when she gave birth. The circumstances of Holiday's childhood were not merely poor — they were violent, chaotic, and marked by abuse that she documented in her own autobiography.

She was sent to a reform school at approximately nine years old. She was sexually assaulted as a young teenager and returned to the same institution after the assault. She worked briefly in a Harlem brothel as a young woman to survive. By 1930, facing eviction with her mother, she walked into a Harlem nightclub, lied that she could dance, and when asked to prove it simply stood at the piano and sang. The room went quiet.

The gift announced itself without introduction. She was fifteen or sixteen years old. Producer John Hammond discovered her at 18 at a Harlem club called Monette's. He arranged her first recording sessions, pairing her with Benny Goodman's ensemble in 1933. Over the following decade she recorded with Teddy Wilson, Count Basie, Artie Shaw, and virtually every major figure of the Swing era. Lester Young — her closest musical companion — gave her the name *Lady Day*. She called him *Prez* — President of the tenor saxophone. The friendship was covenant in the deepest sense: two people who understood each other's gifts and protected what the other carried.

What Billie Holiday did to a song has never been replicated. She did not sing melody. She inhabited it, moved around it, bent it into shapes that expressed the emotional truth beneath the written note. Frank Sinatra — who listed her as his most important influence — described her approach as the most instructive he had ever encountered. She had, as *Life magazine* wrote in 1943, "*the most distinctive style of any popular vocalist.*" She was imitated by everyone and equalled by no one.

◆ *I grew up in New Orleans listening to everything. Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Louis Armstrong, and Billie Holiday. When I first heard Lady Day sing, I understood something about what a voice can do that I have never been able to fully explain. She was not singing at the audience. She was singing from inside the song — from inside the experience the song was trying to describe. That is what the zamar does at its highest level. It does not perform. It witnesses. It testifies. She was the finest testifier of the 20th century.*

Born	April 7, 1915 — Philadelphia, PA (grew up Baltimore, MD)
Parents	Clarence Holiday (jazz musician, abandoned family) and Sadie Fagan (teenage mother)
Early life	Reform school at age 9. Sexual assault as teenager. Worked in Harlem brothel briefly to survive.

Discovery	Age 18 by producer John Hammond at Monette's club, Harlem, 1933
Recording career	1933–1959 across Columbia/Brunswick, Commodore, Decca, Verve/Clef, MGM — approx. 350+ recordings
Key relationships	Lester Young (musical soulmate), John Hammond (first producer), Milt Gabler (Commodore/Decca)
Contract terms	\$25–\$75 per side 1933–1944, no royalties; royalties began with Decca 1944
Strange Fruit	Recorded 1939 on Commodore Records (Columbia refused). Sold over 1 million copies.
Imprisonment	Federal Reformatory for Women, Alderson WV, 1947–1948. Cabaret card revoked on release.
Final royalty	1958: received royalty check for \$11.00
Death	July 17, 1959 — Metropolitan Hospital, New York — cirrhosis of the liver. Age 44.
Estate	\$0.70 in her bank account at time of death
Recognition	Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (2000). Grammy Hall of Fame. Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award.

SECTION TWO — THE WOUND: WHAT WAS DONE TO HER

Two Wounds Running Simultaneously

The Billie Holiday case is unique in this series because she faced two distinct systems of exploitation operating simultaneously and reinforcing each other: the music industry's economic extraction of her creative labor, and the federal government's targeted persecution of her person. This report documents both, and applies the Devarim 19:15 standard separately to each — distinguishing clearly between what is documented and what remains disputed.

Wound One: The Music Industry — Over 200 Recordings, No Royalties

Billie Holiday's own words, recorded in her autobiography *Lady Sings the Blues* (1956), state the economic reality without ambiguity: *"I made over 200 sides between 1933 and 1944, but I don't get a cent of royalties on any of them. They paid me \$25, \$50, or a top of \$75 bucks a side, and I was glad to get it."*

This is testimony from the artist herself. More than 200 recordings. Maximum \$75 per side. No royalties. Ever. For any of them. The same structure that governed Ma Rainey

and Bessie Smith governed Holiday: flat fee payment, label owns the masters in perpetuity, artist receives nothing from ongoing commercial exploitation of the recordings.

John Hammond, the producer who discovered her and arranged her early Brunswick sessions, acknowledged openly that the Holiday-Wilson sides from 1935 to 1938 were "*a great asset to Brunswick,*" which was otherwise financially struggling. The recordings were cheap to make — no written arrangements, musicians improvising in the studio to cut costs. The label saved money on production. Holiday received a flat fee. The recordings became jazz standards that Brunswick exploited commercially for decades.

The single royalty payment Holiday documented receiving in her later years: \$11.00 in 1958. She was 43 years old. She had been recording since she was 18. Over 350 recordings across multiple labels. Her 1958 royalty: eleven dollars. Wikipedia's documented figure, drawn from Holiday's own biographical sources. **This is not metaphor. This is a number.**

Her lawyer in the late 1950s, Earle Warren Zaidins, registered with BMI only two songs she had written or co-written — a failure of legal representation that cost her additional revenue in her final years. The men surrounding her throughout her career — managers, lawyers, label representatives, husbands — consistently served their own interests at the expense of hers.

Strange Fruit: When the Label Refused the Covenant Song

In 1939, Billie Holiday first performed *Strange Fruit* at Café Society, New York City's first racially integrated nightclub. The song — a poem by Abel Meeropol (writing as Lewis Allan), set to music — described the bodies of lynched Black men hanging from Southern trees with unflinching directness. Holiday's performance protocol was absolute: waiters stopped all service, the lights went dark, silence followed the last note, and it was always the final song of the set. It was not entertainment. It was testimony.

Columbia Records refused to let Holiday record it. Her primary label — the company that had been profiting from her voice for six years — judged the song too controversial and would not touch it. Holiday took it to Milt Gabler's independent Commodore Records, which released it in 1939. **Strange Fruit sold over one million copies.** The song that Columbia refused generated a million-copy catalog title for an independent label. Columbia's calculation was commercial and racial: the controversy was not worth the risk. Holiday's testimony was not worth the risk. The covenant song went elsewhere. This is a pattern established in the Torah: the covenant word is often refused by the institutions most positioned to benefit from it. The prophets were not received by the courts they addressed. The song that told the truth about America was not welcomed by the label that sold American music. **Strange Fruit survived because Holiday would not let it die, not because the industry supported it.**

Wound Two: The Federal Government — What Is Documented and What Is Disputed

This report applies the Devarim 19:15 covenant research standard with full honesty to the Anslinger/Strange Fruit narrative. Several things are documented and undisputed. Several things are actively disputed by scholars who have reviewed the actual government archives. Both are recorded here. The covenant demands the truth, not the most compelling version of it.

What Is Undisputed and Documented:

One: Harry J. Anslinger served as Commissioner of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics for 32 years (1930–1962). His documented writings and internal memos expressed virulent racism toward Black Americans and Black jazz musicians specifically. His files included a category labeled "*Marijuana and Musicians*" containing surveillance records on major Black artists including Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, and Billie Holiday.

🔗 FEDERAL BUREAU OF NARCOTICS RECORD: *Anslinger's documented memo language regarding jazz: the music 'reeks of filth.' Jazz sounded 'like the jungles in the dead of night.' These are documented internal memos from the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, cited in multiple independent sources.*

Two: Holiday was placed under federal surveillance. An undercover agent named Jimmy Fletcher was assigned to her neighborhood in Harlem. Her FBI file exists and has been reviewed by scholars. A documented memo in Holiday's FBI file from a confidential source in Anslinger's office states that it was Holiday's "*notoriety*" that brought her under surveillance, and that it was Bureau policy "*to discredit individuals of this caliber.*" This is from the federal file itself.

Three: Holiday was arrested for narcotics possession in 1947, convicted, and sentenced to a year and a day at the Federal Reformatory for Women in Alderson, West Virginia. Her manager at the time refused to arrange legal counsel for her and she pleaded guilty. Upon release she was denied a New York Cabaret Card — a license required to perform in any venue serving alcohol. **This revocation stripped her of her primary income source in the city that was the center of the jazz world.** She was forced to perform in concert halls and amphitheatres, which she did — including a sold-out Carnegie Hall appearance.

Four: In 1959, as Holiday lay dying in Metropolitan Hospital of cirrhosis of the liver, federal agents came to her hospital bed, took her fingerprints and mugshot, and charged her with drug possession. She was under arrest while dying. Her prescribed medication was reportedly stopped. She was denied certain visitors. She died on July 17, 1959, with \$0.70 in her bank account. **The federal government arrested her on her deathbed.** This is documented.

What Is Actively Disputed by Scholars:

⚠️ DEVARIM 19:15 EVIDENTIARY NOTE: *The specific claim that Anslinger ordered Holiday to stop singing Strange Fruit in 1939 and that her federal persecution began the very next day as a direct response to the song derives primarily from Johann Hari's book Chasing the Scream (2015). Musicologist Lewis Porter, who has reviewed the actual federal archives, states: 'There is no record in U.S. government files of such a campaign; its presumed director Harry Anslinger only mentioned Holiday two or three times in all his writings,*

and always sympathetically.' Wikipedia's article on Anslinger also notes: 'There is no record of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics under Anslinger ever targeting Billie Holiday in response to her 1939 song Strange Fruit.' The causal link between Strange Fruit and the initiation of federal surveillance is disputed. The federal surveillance itself is not disputed. The covenant research standard requires this distinction to be stated clearly.

The covenant indictment of the federal government does not depend on the Strange Fruit causal narrative. What is documented and proven is sufficient: a federal agency with a documented racist commissioner kept a surveillance file on Billie Holiday, assigned an undercover agent to her neighborhood, contributed to her 1947 arrest and imprisonment, and sent agents to arrest her on her deathbed. **These things are not disputed. They are in the federal record. They are sufficient for the covenant charge.**

SECTION THREE — THE THREE WITNESSES (DEVARIM 19:15)

Corroboration of the Record

WITNESS One: *Billie Holiday's own testimony in Lady Sings the Blues (1956, Doubleday): 'I made over 200 sides between 1933 and 1944, but I don't get a cent of royalties on any of them. They paid me \$25, \$50, or a top of \$75 bucks a side, and I was glad to get it.' Also: 'I didn't even know what royalties were when I went into the studio with Teddy Wilson. I was glad to get the thirty bucks.'* The artist's own sworn testimony in her own published autobiography. First person. Primary source.

WITNESS Two: *Wikipedia (Billie Holiday article, sourced from multiple biographical works) documents: royalty of \$11 received in 1958 after career spanning 1933–1959; Columbia Records refused to record Strange Fruit in 1939; Commodore Records released it instead; it sold over 1 million copies; Holiday's lawyer registered only 2 BMI songs in her final years costing her revenue; she died with \$0.70 in her bank account. These facts are corroborated across the multiple biographical sources cited in the Wikipedia article including Chris Albertson's definitive biography.*

WITNESS Three: *Holiday's FBI file (cited in The Revealer's scholarly analysis of the historical record): A memo from a confidential source in Anslinger's office states it was Holiday's 'notoriety' that brought her under federal surveillance, and that it was Bureau policy 'to discredit individuals of this caliber.' This is from the government's own file on Holiday. Additionally: WBSS Media biography documents producer John Hammond's acknowledgment that the Wilson-Holiday Brunswick sides were a 'giant asset' to the financially struggling label, while Holiday received no royalties.*

Additional corroboration: The Syncopated Times (detailed biographical series citing primary sources); EBSCO Research Starters historical summary; Official Billie Holiday website (billieholiday.com); Kennedy Center biography; and the Den of Geek documented analysis of Anslinger's filed racism, all independently confirm the core facts of Holiday's exploitation and persecution.

SECTION FOUR — THE COVENANT ANALYSIS: WHAT THE TORAH SAYS

The Torah Charges — Applied to Billie Holiday

Charge One: No Royalties on 200 Recordings — Vayikra 19:13

"You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning."
— Vayikra (Leviticus) 19:13

More than 200 recordings. \$25 to \$75 per side. No royalties. Her own words. **The wages were withheld permanently, not just overnight.** The Hebrew *lo ta'ashoq* — do not oppress — governs every employment relationship in the covenant. The flat fee system that governed Holiday from 1933 to 1944 was the same system that governed Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Scott Joplin before her. The series is documenting a pattern, not isolated incidents. **The systematic withholding of royalties from Black artists across multiple labels, multiple decades, and multiple contracts is not a series of individual wrongs. It is an institutional covenant violation maintained by the American music industry as standard business practice for at least forty years.**

Charge Two: The Cabaret Card System — Devarim 24:14–15

"You shall not oppress a hired worker who is poor and needy... You shall give him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets... lest he cry against you to Yahweh, and you be guilty of sin."
— Devarim (Deuteronomy) 24:14-15

The New York Cabaret Card system — which required performers to hold a municipal license to work in any venue serving alcohol — was revoked for Billie Holiday upon her release from federal prison in 1948. This revocation was not a natural consequence of her conviction under Torah's covenant law. It was a structural punishment designed by a system that made the primary income source of jazz musicians contingent on the approval of the same government that had imprisoned her. **The system withheld her wages by revoking her right to work** in the venues where her gift could generate income. She was poor. She was needy. She cried out. The Torah says ****Yahweh**** heard.

Charge Three: The Government as Oppressor — Shemot 1:11–12

"Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens... But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the Israelites."
— Shemot (Exodus) 1:11-12

The Shemot parallel is not forced. The covenant people under Pharaoh were subjected to institutional oppression by the governing authority, not merely by individual bad actors. Harry Anslinger's Federal Bureau of Narcotics functioned as an institutional oppressor of Black musicians — documented in its own memos, its own surveillance files, its own policy of discrediting artists of Holiday's "notoriety." **When the government uses its legal authority to surveil, arrest, imprison, and ultimately arrest on the deathbed a woman whose primary offense was singing the truth publicly** — the Torah names the power that does this. It is Pharaoh's spirit: the fear of a people who will not be silent, dressed in the language of law enforcement. And the Shemot text gives the covenant response: **"the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied."** Strange Fruit still sells. Lady Day still plays. Anslinger is remembered as a racist bureaucrat. The zamar outlasted the oppressor.

Charge Four: Arrested on Her Deathbed — Yirmeyahu 22:3

"Thus says Yahweh: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place."

— Yirmeyahu (Jeremiah) 22:3

Yirmeyahu's charge to the house of the king applies to every governing authority: do justice, deliver the robbed from the oppressor, do no wrong or violence to the vulnerable. The agents of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics who came to Metropolitan Hospital in 1959 — took the fingerprints and mugshot of a dying woman, charged her with drug possession, denied her certain visitors, and allegedly caused her prescribed medication to be stopped — did the opposite of every charge in this verse. **This is documented. This happened. A woman lay dying and federal agents came to arrest her.** The Torah does not have a statute of limitations on this charge. ****Yahweh**** does not forget what was done to the fatherless, the widow, and the vulnerable. Billie Holiday was all three: fatherless from birth, her personal life a record of abusive men who consumed her wealth and stability, and at the end — utterly vulnerable and still not left alone.

SECTION FIVE — THE LIVING WITNESS: KEPHA ARCEMONT, 2026

A Blues Guitarist Reads the Record

\$0.70. I want to stop there. Seventy cents. In her bank account when she died. She had been one of the most famous singers in the world for twenty years. She had recorded over 350 sides. She had sold over a million copies of Strange Fruit alone. She had filled Carnegie Hall. Frank Sinatra called her his most important influence. And when she died at 44, she had seventy cents in her bank account.

◆ *I am a blues guitarist who has been playing since I was fourteen. I have not always been flush. I have driven to gigs for less than my gas money. I*

have played in rooms where the promoter disappeared before paying the band. But I have never been reduced to seventy cents by an industry that made fortunes from what Yahweh placed in me. The covenant research standard requires me to say what I see clearly: what was done to Billie Holiday was not the result of her personal failures. It was the predictable outcome of a system designed to extract maximum value from the gifted while returning minimum compensation to them. Her addiction was real. Her suffering was real. And the system that surrounded her, exploited her, imprisoned her, and arrested her on her deathbed was also real.

The covenant dimension of **Strange Fruit** cannot be overstated. Abel Meeropol wrote a poem about lynching. Billie Holiday set it in her voice and carried it into rooms full of white audiences who had never been forced to look at what was being done in their country. She did this every night. She cried every time she sang it — documented by multiple witnesses. She did not enjoy singing it. She sang it because **the truth demanded a carrier**, and she was the one willing to carry it.

This is the covenant musician functioning as prophet — not predicting the future but speaking the present truth that no one else would say. Devorah sang the battle. Channah sang the overturning of the powerful. Billie Holiday sang the bodies in the Southern trees. The zamar tradition is not always beautiful. Sometimes it is terrible in the original sense of the word: it fills you with terror because it is true. **That is what the covenant musician does when the Spirit moves through them in full force.** Elisha needed a musician before he could prophesy. Billie Holiday was prophesying whether she knew the Torah name for it or not.

◆ *When I play the blues in New Orleans or anywhere else, I am standing in a tradition that runs from Yuval's kinnor in Bereishit through Dawid's tent through Ma Rainey's Georgia tent shows through Bessie Smith's Columbia sessions through Billie Holiday's Cafe Society performance of Strange Fruit straight into whatever room I am standing in. The zamar does not die with the carrier. It passes forward. It finds the next person who will carry it faithfully. That is what Yahweh designed it to do. And it is the covenant indictment of every system that has tried to silence it: the music survives. The carriers die broke, die imprisoned, die with seventy cents. And the music plays on.*

SECTION SIX — THE COVENANT VERDICT: THE JUDGMENT OF YAHWEH

Yahweh's Record on Billie Holiday

This report carries two covenant indictments: one against the music industry and one against the government that persecuted her. They are entered separately because they are separate covenant violations, though they operated simultaneously and each made the other more effective.

COVENANT VERDICT ONE — THE MUSIC INDUSTRY: Billie Holiday recorded over 200 sides between 1933 and 1944 with no royalties on any of them. Her own label refused to record Strange Fruit. She received \$11.00 in royalties in 1958. She died with \$0.70. The industry that made fortunes from her voice gave her a flat fee and kept everything else. This stands in violation of Vayikra 19:13 — ashaq — the systematic oppression of the hired worker by those who hold the wage. The judgment of Yahweh on this covenant violation is entered. It does not expire.

COVENANT VERDICT TWO — THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT: The Federal Bureau of Narcotics, under a commissioner whose documented racism is a matter of public record, placed Billie Holiday under surveillance, assigned an undercover agent to her neighborhood, contributed to her imprisonment, revoked her right to work, and sent federal agents to arrest her on her deathbed. This stands in violation of Shemot 1:11 — the institutional oppression of those the governing power fears — and Yirmeyahu 22:3 — the covenant charge to do justice and deliver the robbed from the oppressor. The United States federal government did the opposite. The judgment of Yahweh on this covenant violation is entered. It does not expire.

Harry Anslinger retired in 1962. He died in 1975. His legacy is a drug war that has imprisoned millions of Americans, disproportionately Black and brown, for the remainder of the 20th century and into the 21st. **The covenant pattern documented in Shemot 1 is exactly this: the more you oppress the people Yahweh gifts, the more they multiply.** Strange Fruit was banned from radio stations. It sold over a million copies. It was named one of the most important songs of the 20th century. It is still sung. **The FBN is gone. Billie Holiday is eternal.**

"Surely the wrath of man shall praise You; the remainder of wrath You will restrain."

— Tehillim (Psalms) 76:10

The wrath of Anslinger. The wrath of the Columbia label executives who refused Strange Fruit. The wrath of the managers who took her money. The wrath of the husbands who consumed her. All of it became material for the testimony she carried. **Yahweh restrained none of it in her lifetime. But He did not forget one dollar she was owed, one night she was surveilled, one fingerprint taken from her dying hand.** The record is open. The covenant account is complete.

SERIES NOTES

Next in series: Report No. 5 — Robert Johnson: The Delta Foundation (c. 1911–1938). The man whose recordings in 1936–1937 paid him a few dollars per session, who died

at 27 under disputed circumstances, and whose catalog was commercially exploited for decades while his heirs received nothing. The foundation the entire blues industry was built upon.

Research standard: All charges in this series require a minimum of two to three independent authoritative sources per Devarim 19:15. Where evidence is disputed, both the claim and the dispute are documented. The covenant demands the complete truth — not the most convenient version of it.

Selah.

*Miqdash Bethel Covenant Assembly · Pearl River, Louisiana · March 2026
miqdashbethel@gmail.com · Doctrinal Authority: The Tanakh Alone*