

JAZZ DAVID YAFFE

Holiday Season

More than 40 years after her death, Billie Holiday still sets the standard for jazz singing, leaving smoothly groomed packages like Diana Krall looking like blues wannabes.

THE RADIO AND THE TELEPHONE, and the movies that we know, may just be passing fancies—and in time may go. But Billie Holiday is here to stay. Forty-two years after her death, *Lady Day* still dominates jazz singing—not to mention coffee bars, dorm-room walls, and cultural-studies curricula—more than any living musician. So latter-day practitioners like Paula West and Diana Krall naturally invite comparisons to the ten-CD set *Lady Day: The Complete Billie Holiday on Columbia, 1933-1944*. But though West shows promise as an original diva and Krall, with her Victoria's Secret posturing, has given a commercial lift to a sagging genre, *Lady Day* still looms over them. In our virtual jazz age, when digital reissues crowd the marketplace for new recordings, Holiday's biggest competition is herself.

For a modern audience often more interested in Holiday as cultural figure than as actual artist, late-career fifties recordings like *Lady in Satin* reveal a depleted technique but an augmented capacity for tragedy that inspired poet Frank O'Hara to recall a moment during her performance at the 5 Spot when "everyone and I stopped breathing." The early recordings on *Lady Day* will knock the wind out of modern-day listeners, too—because of her young, lusty ebullience. On "Swing, Brother, Swing," recorded in 1937, the 22-year-old Holiday sounds all but invincible, accenting each and every syllable with a percussive relentlessness: "There ain't nothing gonna hold me down," she insists, spurred on by a Basie band pulsing out quarter-notes in hypnotic, lascivious syncopation. After rhapsodizing about the "hot rhythm," Holiday hollers to Basie's drummer, "Come on, kill me, Jo"—a death wish as intoxicating as it is prophetic.

With archival meticulousness, *Lady Day* reveals how Holiday developed from the



high-strung teenager warbling alongside Benny Goodman on "Your Mother's Son-in-Law" to the seasoned torch singer on "Gloomy Sunday" and the wise stoic on "God Bless the Child." The collection is a blues-based bildungsroman about an artist who, besides recording gems like "Body and Soul," also mined diamonds from lumps of coal like "What a Little Moonlight Can Do" and reclaimed the material as part of her songbook. Even with her thin tone and limited vocal range, Holiday managed to rule an art form with sheer attack, an attitude that can barely be explained, certainly never taught.

Diana Krall, on the other hand, represents someone who could be not only taught but also marketed, molded, and accessorized with a Fendi bag. A polished pianist and singer who emerged from the Berklee College of Music's jazz program, Krall makes albums that ooze with taste and glossy surliness. On *The Look of Love*,

with solid accompaniment by A-list players like bassist Christian McBride, Krall even pronounces her Spanish correctly on "Bésame Mucho." Holiday could redeem the most banal pop drivel, but when Krall

tries to swing on time-tested standards like "Cry Me a River," the effect is adenoidal and flimsy.

On *Come What May*, Paula West also sings what Louis Armstrong called "the good old good ones," but she makes them new with a voice that coozies up to tradition with startling assurance. She isn't excessively reverential with the gospel according to *Lady Day*. Her version of Leonard Bernstein's "Big Stuff," which the composer wrote for Holiday as part of his orchestral interpretation of W. H. Auden's *Age of Anxiety*, barely evokes Holiday at all. Instead, West finds her own approach in an array of vocal effects—a controlled contralto, a playful digging into the lower reaches that recalls Sonny Rollins's tenor—that reach well beyond Holiday's technical arsenal. Yet West doesn't explore any emotional territory that Holiday didn't already claim long ago on the recordings collected on *Lady Day*.

We long for the human voice to speak for our time, but in a way that transcends the moment. For better or worse, Holiday left jazz singing at something of a standstill, setting a standard no one since has matched. When Holiday was among us, it might have seemed like forever and a day, but *Lady Day* reminds us that we were lucky that such a moment ever existed at all. ■

Billie Holiday
Lady Day: The Complete
Billie Holiday on Columbia,
 1933-1944
 (Columbia/Legacy)

Diana Krall
The Look of Love
 (Verve)

Paula West
Come What May
 (Hi Horse)