

Chapter Six



Lady Day, Billie Holiday

In the late 1940s New York was really jumping. *The Street*, 52nd Street, was hot, Harlem was happening, and there were plenty of gigs for a good jazz musician. But commercial sessions and gigs with Broadway shows were harder to come by for a black man. It bothered me that many doors were closed to us.

I was working steadily, but I was restless. I still had visions of a big desk. Luckily for me, my first attempts to get into the business did not work; if they had, I would never have played with Billie Holiday.



I've always been rather slow and methodical when it comes to making a big move. But once I resettled my home life in Brooklyn, I turned my attention back to my career. I may not have thought of it in terms of a “career” back then, but I knew that I wanted to be involved in the business end of music; it was a natural instinct in me. I didn't consider myself to be that great of a bass player. “I don't want to end up playing in some little joint for the rest of my life,” I explained to Gladys. “I know where the money is, and it's in the business end.”

A few days later I met with Joe Glaser. I had been doing business with him on behalf of Stuff's group for several years. Joe booked all the major acts on Broadway. Today you think that means theater people, but at that time theaters like the Paramount and the Roxy featured stage shows. Joe not only represented all the name big bands, black and white, but he had the hottest individual artists too, like Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Dinah Washington, and Billie Holiday.

As soon as I hit the front door to his suite in the Squibb Building at 745 Fifth Avenue I could hear him cussing as usual in his loud, shrill voice. As I walked down the long hallway toward his office, I passed all the agents working for him. Everyone was on the phone making deals, and most had their free hand over their ear to block out the sound of Joe's voice.

By the time I got to his door he was off the phone. “Let's go, kid. I'm hungry.” There was a back stairway that led directly to the restaurant downstairs in the building. It was a famous delicatessen restaurant, and Joe liked to hold court down there.

“I always wanted to be on the inside of it,” I told Joe while we waited for our sandwiches.

“Got no openings for that,” he said. “I'll put you on to play bass with Louis Armstrong, but I can't help you to get into the agent business.”

I knew what it was about. He didn't have to tell me why he wouldn't help. There were no blacks in the agency business at the time; it just wasn't done. I understood the system and I was trying to break in. He knew me, knew I was responsible and honest, and I thought he might be the one to give me a break. “I'm not really interested in a playing job. I want to be in the business,” I said, and then the conversation turned to other subjects.

Joe Glaser wouldn't give me a job as an agent, so I set to learning about things on my own. A publicist by the name of Dixon Gayer had an office on Broadway and 49th Street, and he let me share some space and use his phones too. It was the beginning of my adventures into the management business, but it was a false start. After a short time I realized that I didn't have the connections or the talent roster; I couldn't compete. I was just out there piddling around, being an entrepreneur, and trying to do my thing. That's when I realized the importance of public relations and publicity, a lesson that served me well later on. I never really got established in anything during that period, but still I knew deep down within that I was meant to be in the business and that someday it would happen for me.



I kept on gigging. One Sunday, pianist Bobby Tucker called me. "Lady Day's getting out of jail tomorrow and she'll be home the day after." When he said *home* I knew he meant the house in Morristown, New Jersey where he lived with his wife and his parents. When Billie had come out of a rehab program at a mid-town hospital the year before, she had stayed at Bobby's house. She couldn't stay clean and when she got busted a few months later, they sent her to a women's prison in Alderson, West Virginia. The newspaper reports and interviews with Billie say that she "spent 10 months in a West Virginia hospital." Bobby said that it wasn't true. It was too late for hospitals. This time it was prison, and she had served her time.

"They've got her booked at Carnegie Hall in two weeks. I want you and Denzil. Can you make it? We'll use Remo Palmieri on guitar." Bobby didn't need to ask.

"Did you say Carnegie? Man, I wouldn't miss it," I said, unable to hide my excitement. I had never played Carnegie Hall before, and that was the hall of all halls in New York City.

Billie couldn't get a permit to work in the clubs. You had to have a permit to work in New York City nightclubs, and you couldn't get one if you had a police record. It seems rather silly now, but it was a law that was enacted during the war as a measure of protection. They didn't want anybody who might be a dope addict or an alcoholic to be working in a nightclub because they might overhear some hush-hush war secrets. When the war was over, the law was still on the books, and of course Billie's permit had been taken away when she got busted. But she didn't need one to play a concert or work in a theater. Perhaps that too was a lucky break. If she'd still had her permit, she probably wouldn't have been booked into Carnegie Hall.

We didn't have much time to rehearse, but we were young and confident, perhaps even a little cocky. We hadn't worked together much before, but we knew each other's music. And I had seen Bobby and Billie working on 52nd Street before she got sent up. Bobby remembers subbing for Jimmy Jones one night at the Three Deuces when we were working there with Stuff, but my first memory of playing with Bobby was on Lucky Thompson's gig, which was also at the Three Deuces.

"How'd Joe book this so fast?" I asked. I knew that Joe Glaser had been booking Billie before, and I assumed that this must be Joe Glaser's date.

"He didn't. Can you come out to the house to rehearse? I'll tell you about it then," Bobby said.

So Denzil and I drove to the house, and I saw Ed Fishman, a big, fat cat who used to work for Joe Glaser. Something had gone down between Joe and Fishman, and they hated each other so much that they'd both cross the street to avoid each other. Now it seemed he was trying to move in on Joe's clients.

It wasn't until I was researching this book that I found out the whole story. Bobby told me that Joe's ex-wife, or soon-to-be-ex, was angry with Joe and wanted to get back at him, and cause as much trouble as she could. She knew that Billie's contract with Joe was up, so she set up the concert and contacted Ed Fishman to handle it. I didn't even know that Joe had been married. I don't think that hardly anyone knew that, so I called Oscar Cohen, a man who had worked for Joe, and eventually became the head of Associated Booking Corp., the agency that Joe founded.

Oscar had quite a story. "Oh yeah, Joe took \$700,000 in cash out of the bank before she could get to it," Oscar told me. "He came back to the office late one afternoon, just before I was to go home. He handed me a paper bag and told me not to look inside it. He said I should take the bag home with me, and bring it back in the morning." Oscar said that he didn't look in the bag until the next morning. "I lived with my mother up in the Bronx and I took this bag with me on the subway. Next morning my mother wanted to know what it was, so we looked." In those days \$700,000 might as well have been \$700 million. I'm glad I never had to ride the subway carrying that kind of money.

The word went out that Billie was back and tickets for the Easter eve concert sold out within days. There was such demand that they added seats in the aisles and chairs in the orchestra pit. And when that wasn't enough, they decided to seat people on stage. I was told that there were as many as 600 chairs on the stage. When the show was about to start and the master of ceremonies, Fred Robbins, told us to get into position, I had to carry my bass up over my head as Bobby, Denzil, Remo and I threaded our way through the seats to get to center stage.



My Carnegie Hall debut, 1948, playing bass for Billie Holiday, with pianist Bobby Tucker, drummer Denzil Best, and guitarist Remo Palmeri. Inset shows the first concert with the overflow audience seated on stage. (Credit: Maurey Garber)

I'm not usually the nervous type, but the level of excitement in the hall that night made my heart pound. Billie was so tense that she drew blood while pinning her trademark gardenia in her hair. Thousands of people were there to see Lady Day, and thousands more came to the repeat performance three weeks later. After those two shows, featuring just an MC and Billie backed by a quartet, the musicians union decided that there had to be a minimum number of musicians on a show at Carnegie Hall. I think they set the minimum number to be 12.

I was always surprised that Fishman tried to take over Billie's career. He must have known that Joe wouldn't stand for it, but perhaps he thought Joe was no longer interested. Or maybe he figured that without a contract, Billie was fair game. But Joe was interested. Someone filed a lawsuit and for some reason they called me to go up to Glaser's office for a deposition. But the suit never went to court. The guy must have gotten scared off and that was the end of that. Joe did all the booking from there on.



On April 27, 1948 I made my Broadway debut. Actually it was Billie's debut as the star of a small revue called "Holiday on Broadway" at the Mansfield Theater on Broadway. Al Wilde, who I think was Leslie Uggams' manager at that time, put on this show. The lineup featured Billie backed by the Bobby Tucker Quintet; Slam Stewart playing "Play, Fiddle Play" backed by piano and electric guitar; the organ and piano duo of Bob Wyatt and Billy Taylor; and Cozy Cole. The Bobby Tucker Quintet consisted of Denzil along with Mundell Lowe on guitar (Remo couldn't make it), Tony Scott on clarinet, Bobby and me. Billie sang 15 fifteen songs in all, including "Strange Fruit," which closed the first half. I'm sure we also did "Lover Man" and "Them There Eyes." "Billie's Blues" was her final number.

Broadway was special and because this was a classy revue, Billie bought tuxedos for us. I don't think I had ever owned a tuxedo before that time, and if I did it was probably threadbare. I was sure that the cost would be deducted from our checks, and that was fine with me.

"How come you didn't take anything out for the threads?" I asked her when I got my money.

"You keep it. You've got a wife and family and need it more than I do," she said. She was a tough broad with a soft spot.

It was during the week at the Mansfield that "the other John Levy" came into the picture. This John Levy was a pimp and hustler who owned part of a nightclub. Years earlier he had owned a club on 52nd Street called Tondaleyo's, but that closed while I was still working with Stuff Smith. Now he was a partner with Dicky Wells and Al Martin in a joint called Club Ebony. He had some shady connections, and he began pulling strings for Lady Day. After the Mansfield run, Billie starting working at Club Ebony without a nightclub permit. He must have made some kind of deal with the police because no one got in trouble. I wasn't on this gig. Billie and Bobby worked there with Buster Hardy's house band.

I worked with Billie on and off that year, but not that summer because she was booked into an 11-week engagement with the Basie Band at The Strand. But we did do some recording during that time, including four tracks from *Porgy and Bess*. After her gig at the Strand, I went on the road with Billie, Bobby and the other John Levy. By this time he really had

his hooks into her. He had started romancing her during her appearances at Club Ebony and eventually Billie began introducing him as “my husband” even though I doubt they ever got married. He was also her manager.

This John Levy was one dreadful character, and to this day there are some who think that I am he. I'm not. I did not marry Billie and I never was her manager. And I certainly never beat her or supplied her with drugs. Peggy Lee was one of the people who couldn't stand me because she thought I was the other guy. “I can't stand your bass player!” she told Shearing one day. “Not after what he did to Billie.” George thought it was funny, but at least he set Peggy straight. That false reputation followed me for years. More than 40 years later I was interviewed by Jim Gosa, a Los Angeles deejay who was sure that I was the bad guy.

I was never in a managerial role with Billie, but I did whatever I could to help. And I learned a lot about working with women during this time. They have a tough exterior but they're all very vulnerable and somewhat insecure on the inside.

Before I worked with Billie, I knew very little about her. I used to see her on 52nd Street. She'd come into a club with her dog, Mister, and she'd sit at the bar before she got ready to go on...always late. When Bobby and I worked with her, we tried to keep her on track. But what I didn't know before was how open she was, how free hearted. She'd give you anything, do anything for you.

She was not what you would call a diva. There was never any unpleasantness, no tantrums. She never bitched about the music or the musicians, the way some other singers did. And surprisingly, I never saw her do any dope. I saw certain people coming around, people who were selling dope, but I never saw her take anything; and she never, ever offered me anything. For some reason she was very protective of us. She'd even warn women off. If some chick would be coming around she'd say “He's got a family bitch, don't be coming in here” and chase them away—unless they were coming to see her. She dominated women. “Sit down, I want you to be here when I get off,” she'd order. She even talked to Peggy Lee like she had a tail, but Peg loved her. All of the singers would come around, and they all loved her.

If ever there was a song stylist who could interpret a song, it was Billie Holiday. She didn't have a great voice or a great range, like Dinah, Ella, Nancy, or Carmen. It was her interpretation of a song that was exceptional, and you felt it. She lived it; for her it was as natural as breathing. Sadly, it was the wrong time for her to be able to cash in on her talent. She came up during a time when blacks were just not allowed into the big time. You had to fight for everything then. Doors that are open today were solidly closed then, and they didn't mind letting you know they were closed. The dope didn't help either. So many people in the music business—agents, producers, everybody—used her. She knew it, so she never really got close to anyone.



Sometime that fall, we went on tour. She wanted to take Denzil along, but couldn't afford it. So it was just Billie, Bobby Tucker, the other John Levy who for some reason was known as Poor John, and I. We worked two weeks at the Rainbow Room of Ciro's in Philadelphia. I had worked there before and one of the columnists remembered me: “With Billie is my old friend, John Levy, former bass fiddler with Stuff Smith. Localites might remember John when he worked at the same spot as a member of the Phil Moore Four two years ago. He is not to be confused with John “Poor John” Levy, who is Lady Day's manager. Of course, Bobby Tucker, friendly guy who is a fine musician, is at the eighty-eights....” Newspaper columns were chattier, and much friendlier, in those days. As unsophisticated as it sounds today, it was much nicer than the attitudes in today's publications.

Black artists played the black circuit. We played a lot of dates including the Howard Theater in Washington D.C., Club Tijuana in Cleveland, and some place in Columbus, before arriving at the Silhouette, a club on the border of Evanston. We stayed at the Southland Hotel where every night Poor John would pick us up in his big Lincoln. John drove this Lincoln so fast that the cops waited for him, stopping him twice every night. First they'd get him on the outer drive south of the loop somewhere between 55th Street down to Soldiers Field. Then after he got past the loop and started on the north end they'd catch him there. Each time he'd hand a \$20 bill out the window to them. The cops would come up to the car, he'd hand them a twenty, and then start off again. Every night this was a ritual, and he never got a ticket. He'd pay 40 dollars a day, but that was nothing to him. He was a pimp, a hustler, and he didn't care.

Bribery was common, and cops might lay for you even if you didn't do anything. You could just be driving along, and maybe you didn't stop a complete stop at a light. While the cops pull you over, you put five dollars on the dash.

“You didn't stop back there on the corner.”

“Sorry officer, I didn't see it.”

And maybe he'd say “OK, you be careful,” and put the five dollars in his pocket. Everybody was on the bribe. It was the normal way in Chicago. Everything was wide open. Gambling was wide-open, clubs stayed open until four or five o'clock in the morning. In those days you could do anything you wanted to do and get away with it in that town.

But I still didn't like what Poor John was doing to Billie, and I didn't like how he did business. He didn't give a damn

about her. He beat her so bad sometimes she could barely stand up and sing. Everyone knew he beat her, but he never hit her in the face so you could see it. One night in Philadelphia she was hurt so badly that Bobby had to wrap her up in tape. But she allowed it to go on, and there was nothing we could do but help patch her up.

It was because of Poor John that I finally had to quit working with Billie Holiday. He started to mess with the money. We never knew when we would get paid—he'd show up, take the money, and we'd just have to wait. I could handle it in Chicago because that was home to me, I knew my way around. But there was no way I was going to go all the way out to California with them. "California is too far away to be stuck without money," I told Bobby. "I'm going back home."

The next night Bobby told me "We'll be doing a single in California. Lady doesn't want any other bass player." I would have loved to stay with her. Musically there were never any hassles, and she was beautiful to get along with. When I left, Billie gave me a picture of herself. She signed it "to my bass man—the best of the best."



The photo that Billie Holiday autographed to me in 1948: "To My Bass Man. The Bestest of the Best. John Levy stay Happy always. Lady Day. Billie Holiday."

I didn't have any gigs lined up, but I wasn't worried either. I knew I could find a gig. I had a lot of confidence in my entrepreneurial spirit, and I knew I would find some way to make a living.



This is chapter six from "Men, Women, and Girl Singers"

© 2000 Devra Hall, All Rights Reserved.

This book is available through bookstores, amazon.com and other online vendors.

Autographed copies may be ordered through lushlife.com