

OFFICIAL
SELECTION
FESTIVAL DE
DEAUVILLE
2020

BILLIE

She sang the truth, she paid the price.

ALTITUDE FILM ENTERTAINMENT AND MOTION PICTURE CAPITAL PRESENT A NEW BLACK FILMS AND REP DOCUMENTARY PRODUCTION IN ASSOCIATION WITH CONCORD, BBC MUSIC, BELGA PRODUCTIONS AND POLSKA AGENTURA KINEMATYK
A JAMES ERSKINE FILM "BILLIE" EDITOR ANDREW SHAW DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY TIM CARROLL CO PRODUCERS SHANNE GRIFFIN MUSIC SUPERVISOR KYLE SHRODGE COLORIST MARINA AMARAL CO EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS JARROLD BLACKMON DANIEL BOWLES
EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS MICHAEL SMITH ALEXANDER SMITH SOPHIA DOLLEY WILL CLARK ANDY MARSON MIKE HUNNIGALL DEEPA WARD THE FILM
PRODUCED BY PAPA-ERKINS JAMES ERSKINE VICTORIA GILGARY LAURE WYSSIE WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY JAMES ERSKINE





BILLIE

Ein Film von James Erskine

96 Minuten / Scope / Grossbritannien

Kinostart am 24. Dezember 2020

Im Verleih von
Praesens-Film

VERLEIH

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SYNOPSIS

Ihre ungewöhnliche Stimme und ihre Lieder voll emotionaler Strahlkraft machten sie weltberühmt: Jahrzehnte vor der #BackLivesMatter-Bewegung lieferte Billie Holiday mit ihrem Song „Strange Fruit“ den Soundtrack für die Bürgerrechtsbewegung der amerikanischen People of Colour. Eine selbstbewusste Frau, die mehr war als ein tragisches Opfer von Drogen- und Machtmissbrauch. Als erste schwarze Frau in einer weißen Band machte sich Billie Holiday frei von Stereotypen und entwickelte eine sehr eigenwillige, unverwechselbare Vokaltechnik, durch die sie ihre Stimme wie ein Instrument zum Klingen brachte.

In den späten 1960er Jahren gelang es der Journalistin Linda Lipnack Kuehl, für ihre geplante Biographie über die amerikanische Jazz-Legende mit Größen der Szene wie Charles Mingus, Tony Bennett und Count Basie ins Gespräch zu kommen. Darüber hinaus interviewte Kuehl enge Weggefährten von Billie Holiday wie ihren Cousin und Schulfreunde sowie einen FBI-Agenten, der die Diva einst verhaftete. Die ganze Wahrheit über die Sängerin konnte die engagierte Journalistin jedoch nie veröffentlichen: Denn Lipnack Kuehl starb in den 1970er Jahren unter ebenso tragischen Umständen, wie ihr Idol Billie Holiday im Jahre 1959.

In seinem Dokumentarfilm BILLIE verknüpft der britische Regisseur James Erskine aufwändig restauriertes Archivmaterial und die bisher ungehörten Tonbandaufnahmen von Linda Kuehl mit den Aufzeichnungen der wichtigsten Bühnenauftritte von Billie Holiday. Zum ersten Mal sieht man „Lady Day“ hier in Farbe. Ein Film, der der bedeutenden US-amerikanischen Jazz-Sängerin ein Denkmal setzt.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The story of how this film came about begins with producer Barry Clark-Ewers calling me one day and asking me if there was a film about a musician I had ever wanted to make. Immediately, Billie's story came to mind, I'd always found her voice utterly entrancing and had read widely about her extraordinary life. During those readings, I'd come across the mystery of Linda Lipnack Kuehl and her "lost" tapes. I knew that a couple of writers had been given limited access to a few of Linda's printed transcripts, but I had no idea if the tapes themselves actually existed. Barry said he'd go hunting, and within a few weeks had located the tapes in the possession of a New Jersey based collector who had acquired Linda's work from her family in the late 1980's - including a veritable treasure trove of 125 of the audio tapes, two hundred hours of if interviews, together with Linda's unpublished manuscript. Barry negotiated an option and off we flew to New York - to spend two days listening to the unplayed tapes in a studio, to verify that there was something actually on these nearly fifty year old tapes.

What we heard was wonderful. The voices of Charles Mingus, Tony Bennett, Billie Holiday's childhood pals and FBI agents, drifting and often crackling through time from the cafes, restaurants and night-clubs of the 1970s where Linda recorded them. Some of the tapes fell apart immediately, others were barely comprehensible, but many, many told us gems and insights "straight from the horse's mouth". We knew we were on to something.

Of course the usual months of wrangling and hustling took place to get the budget together but finally we were in a go-position and began the process of digitally transferring the tapes - and most importantly figuring out which dialogues to use to tell Billie's story - to both explore the contradictions of Billie's life and give due place to her genius as a performer.

While we were developing the film, we'd engaged quickly with the Billie Holiday estate to ensure that they were on board with the project and they agreed to share Executive Producers Michele Smith and Sophia Dilley with us to ensure the veracity of the story and provide us with their wealth of research. Also, to make sure that we were going to have the music the film needed - Billie's genius was her voice, and as a film, unlike a book, the great asset we knew we'd have to see and hear Billie - to take the audience back in time to the cabaret clubs' of the 1940s and for a moment feel what it was like to see Billie live.

While we developed the narrative in the editing room in London, and dug deeper and deeper into Linda's material, our team of researchers began looking for the right archive to tell the story. We knew that there was limited footage of Billie - but we wanted to make sure we could go back to source, where possible - tracking down long forgotten 16mm and 35mm prints so that we could include the best image. Stills-wise, contacting not just agencies but hundreds of individual photographers and their descendants to try and find images that hadn't been seen before, striking gold in places such as with some of Jerry Dantzic's stills that are featured and also three stills taken the last time Billie stood a stage.

One of the biggest decisions, was that to colorize the film. We felt strongly that because Billie's life was lived in color we would be doing a dis-service to contemporary audiences and to the resonance of her story to leave it trapped in a world of black and white film. For us what drove this was the desire for the film to feel a great sense of immediacy, for audiences of all ages... Fortunately, I came across the work of the brilliant Marina Amaral and her best-selling *Color of Time* (about which there is more below). Marina did some test images for us, and I was blown away, and it is her brilliance that helps transport us back as if we are seeing with our own eyes Billie's world, not limited by the technology of the day.

Deep in the edit room, however, we were building Billie's story - trying to make sense of her enigma and to ensure that the film wasn't just "about" her, but felt her presence all the way through it. We had the images and footage of course, and we pulled together her surviving audio interviews, but what was essential to me, was to make sure there was enough room in the film to sit back and admire her power, her genius, and also to ensure the audience grasped that Billie's story was told through the songs she

sang. Taking the narrative of Billie, blending it with a coherent music structure and then tracing our her life and her changing image was the essence of the film.

But there was one more angle we were keen to explore, the story of Linda Lipnack Kuehl and why the tapes had never before been heard. The collector from whom we'd acquired the tapes, didn't know much about it, he'd been told she'd committed suicide before finishing the book, but we wanted to know why - what was it that had driven her to this? Was it the book, the tragedy of Billie's story, and was it even suicide?

Again, Barry, the producer, got on the case and began tracking down Linda's relatives by various means, the focus being to make connection with Myra Luftman, Linda's sister, who we knew was a retired high school teacher, but not much more. Barry reached out to various ex-colleagues of hers and we eventually made the connection. The Luftmans were nervous about talking, the loss of Linda was clearly a deep wound in their family, but they kindly allowed me to spend time with them and we struck up a friendship. Myra, her husband Jerry, and their sons Douglas and David, understood that the film was a way of preserving Linda's legacy, and began to tell us stories about Linda - who until that point had merely been a ghostly voice on a tape - they began to explain to us why Linda, as someone who worked to promote women's rights, began her journey and the complications that befell her on the way. It was an incredible story, and a moving one. They also kindly shared their home movie collection so I could really bring Linda into the film visually.

And so on our hands we had the story of two women, and their struggles to tell the truth of the world as they saw it. Utterly fascinating, but highly complex to consider how to bring the two together and also to ensure that the film was very clearly the story of Billie, since that was not just our goal, but had also been Linda's.

And this became the guiding principle of the edit - to make the film of Billie, a genius who fought hard against those that would crush her for daring to sing the truth - a story which holds an often unflattering mirror to society, while still pulsating with the sheer vigour of her powerful spirit, and yet to show the problems that Linda too had, in searching for a way to tell the truth.

It was an incredibly tough edit, that demanded asking deep questions of ourselves as to how to bring Billie's story to the screen in the right way. I was lucky to have my key editorial team of Shianne Brown (co-producer) and Avdhesh Molha (editor) to interrogate the material and of execs Michele Smith (head honcho at the Billie Holiday estate), Alex Holmes (director of *Maiden*) and producers Victoria Gregory and Barry Clark-Ewers to screen and advise on numerous cuts and bolster me through long nights when the spirit weakened.

-James Erskine

NOTES

Technical Notes: Shooting Style

Where possible the film was constructed with archive material, of Billie and Linda. In fact we were fastidious in this and in trying to make sure every image was correct to the period being spoken of, however we were aware that we needed to bind the material together with interstitial shooting of tapes and reel to reel, but we also wanted to give an impression of Linda's journey specifically for the sections when we were reading from her manuscript. Working with Emmy winning DoP Tim Cragg (Three Identical Strangers) we worked to craft a look for the "road trip" shot on Super 8mm (so that it complemented Linda's own home movies which is the only material used when we are talking about Linda) and more alluring 4k images for the tapes themselves, setting up complex but realistic settings for the tape machines to compliment the ambience on the tapes.

Technical Notes: Colorisation

Almost no images of Billie exist in color, and no footage. And yet Billie's world was one of color and therefore we felt if we were to really enter Billie's world, we needed to find a technique to step beyond the artful monochrome images of the period.

The question was how to deal with this - we knew that we needed someone who could not just color in the images, but whose work could vividly evoke the period and make the right artistic choices. It was then that I happened across the work of Marina Amaral - a brilliant young Brazilian artist whose best-selling book *The Color of Time* - had illustrated history in a whole new light. When I got a hold of Marina's number, I was delighted that she was enthusiastic about the project and signed on. The next matter was to figure out how to color the moving footage, an incredibly expensive and time-consuming process - and yet we needed to do this within our budget. Fortunately, I'd spent most of the previous couple of years in India making the theatrical doc *Sachin: A Billion Dreams* and formed a close bond with a company in Mumbai called Red Chillies - and they were up for the challenge.

Therein became an elaborate global work-flow, where key frames were selected in London, sent to Marina in Brazil to set the look, and then these palettes sent to Mumbai for the rotor-scoping and compositing work, before finally being sent back to the UK for final editing and on to Belgium, and our lab there called The Fridge to try and match the overall color grading of the film.

With various film-stocks and lighting conditions for both the still images and moving footage, the artistic challenge was incredible, to harmonise the look. However, what I hope we have achieved, is the narrative intention - which is to make Billie and her world feel arresting and contemporary - and to help her story to resonate with audiences, and particularly younger audiences.

Technical Notes: Audio Restoration

Having secured access to Linda's tapes we now had to listen to them and make sense of them narratively but also overcome considerable challenges on a technical level. Linda's interviews were recorded on a domestic tape recorder in the 1970's, as a writer encountering people on the road, they were often captured in cafes, restaurants, or nightclubs, with heavy background sound and often music. While the revelations of the tapes were worth every cent - how often do we get a chance to delve back and get contemporary interviews of a woman who died 80 years ago - the challenge was how we would elevate these to a standard where they were easily heard. Fortunately, we found a man called Tom Wollaert at a company called Sonhouse who impressed me showing me how he'd done work to remove music on other projects and showed me a whole host of whizz-bangery that I still don't comprehend that, with hundreds of hours of pain-staking work could be used to transform the material.

About the Filmmakers & Production Team

JAMES ERSKINE | Writer & Director

Emmy-nominee James Erskine's theatrical documentary work includes critically-acclaimed hits *The Ice King*, *Pantani: The Accidental Death of a Cyclist* and *The Battle of the Sexes* (which inspired the recent Emma Stone/Steve Carrell movie), as well as *Sachin: A Billion Dreams* which opened at number one at the Indian box office and grossed over \$10million worldwide. James recently served as Lead Director on Amazon's series *This Is Football* and was Executive Producer of Theatrical doc hit *Maiden*.

VICTORIA GREGORY | Producer

Lead producer on Sony Picture Classic's Sundance and TIFF official selection documentary *Maiden*, Victoria's other films as producer include *Building Jerusalem*, *Battle of the Sexes* and *Le Mans: Racing is Everything*. Victoria's last theatrical documentary project before founding New Black Films was with Working Title Films on the BAFTA award-winning *Senna*, having previously co-produced the Oscar-winning *Man on Wire*. Victoria has carved herself a niche maximising the value of documentary and drama-documentary features.

BARRY CLARK EWERS | Producer

Co-founded production and finance company, Mr Wolf, which merged with the global theatrical distribution arm of its sister company, Arts Alliance Media, in July 2014 to create Arts Alliance Ltd, a fully integrated global event cinema production, finance and distribution company. In September 2014, Arts Alliance acquired classic film distributor, Park Circus. Titles included, *Springsteen & I*, *One Direction's Where We Are*, *Arcade Fire's The Reflektor Tapes*, *Brett Morgen's Cobain: Montage of Heck* and *Jonas Kaufmann: An Evening with Puccini* among others.

SHIANNE BROWN | Co-producer

A huge Billie Holiday fan, Shianne studied English and Film at Sussex University before building an impressive career honing her producer skills on a range of documentary films for Channel 4, PBS, ITV. Shianne's films include *Angry*, *White* and *American* with Guardian columnist Gary Younge and PBS's *We'll Meet Again* and she has a passion for American social history.

MICHELE SMITH | Executive Producer

As Vice President of Estate and Legacy Brand Management at Concord, Ms. Smith oversees the STAX brand and the estates of Tammy Wynette and Billie Holiday. Ms. Smith has an enviable track record across the music industry and brings an unparalleled wealth of knowledge and expertise to the production. Ms. Smith advised on ensuring both the authentic representation of the subject and the world around Billie Holiday. In her role as Executive Producer and the executor of the estate she continues to manage the cross-promotional release opportunities surrounding the film such as soundtrack and merchandise.

ALEX HOLMES | Executive Producer

Now best known for his hit documentary *Maiden*, Alex is a versatile filmmaker who has worked extensively in documentary and drama, accruing Emmy nominations and BAFTAs along the way. He created HBO's *The House of Saddam* and also directed the Lance Armstrong documentary *Stop at Nothing*.

AVDHESH MOHLA | Editor

Trained by the legendary documentary editor Chris King, Avdesh worked as an editor on hits including *Senna*, Oscar-winner *Amy* and Kevin MacDonald's *Day in the Life*, as well as Asif Kapadia's forthcoming *Maradona*, before breaking out as lead editor on documentary films for acclaimed director Shekhar Kapoor, Erskine's *Sachin: A Billion Dreams*, and Amazon original series including *Grand Prix Driver* and *Le Mans: Racing is Everything* as well as Netflix's *Ladies First*.

PARTNERS

This film is made with the support of the Billie Holiday estate and independently funded by Altitude, BBC Music and Motion Picture.

END CREDITS

BILLIE

Written and Directed by
James Erskine

Produced by
Victoria Gregory
Barry Clark Ewers
James Erskine
Laure Vaysse

Co-Producer
Shianne Brown

Executive Produced by
Michelle Smith
Alex Holmes
Sophia Dilley
Emma Cahusac
Will Clarke
Andy Mason
Mike Runagall
Deepak Nayar
Emil Elmer

Starring
Billie Holiday
Linda Lipnack Kuehl
Count Basie
Tony Bennett
Agent Jimmy Fletcher
Bobby Tucker
Jimmy Rowles
Sylvia Syms
and many more

Co-Executive Producers for Polygram Entertainment
David Blackman
David Inkeles

Colorist
Marian Amaral

Director of Photography
Tim Cragg

Editor
Avdhesh Mohla

An Altitude and MPC presentation of a New Black Films and Reliance Entertainment Productions
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