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# People

weekly

## spotlight on . . . Billie Holiday

**Whenever Billie Holiday sang** "Strange Fruit," her haunting anti-lynching ballad, at New York City's Café Society, it was always the showstopper. Afterward, the club's owner insisted that the lights be turned out. "And when they'd come back on, she was gone," says David Margolick, whose book *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society, and an Early Cry for Civil Rights* (Running Press) hits the stores April 7, the singer's 85th birthday. "The owner wanted people to think about it for a while."

People have been thinking about it ever since. Last year, TIME named "Strange Fruit" as best song of the 20th century. Written in the mid-1930s by Lewis Allan (a pen name for Abel Meeropol, a leftist schoolteacher), "Strange Fruit" was a radical statement for its time. "It still packs a wallop," says Margolick, a four-time Pulitzer Prize-nominated journalist and lawyer. "It hasn't lost

any of its sting after 60 years."

Neither has Holiday's music. In March, the singer, who died in 1959, was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as an early influence. "For a black woman to sing that song in 1939 was an act of colossal courage," says Margolick, 48. "More than we can ever imagine." Debbie Seaman



To honor Holiday (in '47) at her Hall of Fame induction, Diana Ross sang "Strange Fruit" a cappella.