



FILM: **THE UNITED STATES VS BILLIE HOLIDAY**

FDG RATING: 3.7 ☺☺☺☺○

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Lee Daniels: *director*

Andra Day: *actress, Billie Holiday*

Trevante Rhodes: *actor, Jimmy Fletcher*

DATE: July 18 20, 2021

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **THE UNITED STATES VS BILLIE HOLIDAY**

Andra Day is sensational as the legendary Billie Holiday, deservedly winning the Best Actress 2021 Golden Globe. Day is an award winning, alluring, brassy blues singer/songwriter by profession but this was her debut film performance. It was meant to be starting with the fact that at 11 years old, Cassandra Monique Batie became an instant fan of “Lady Day” and later, as a tribute to her idol, took the stage name Andra Day.

The story takes place in the 1940s and Lady Day is experiencing the wake of political backlash for singing Strange Fruit, a powerfully haunting song alluding to the bodies of lynched black men hanging from the branches of trees. Her soulful voice filled the airwaves and concert halls upsetting the white establishment as it stirred up the wounds and terrors of Black people. The government’s response was to suppress the woman who was singing the heartbreaking lyrics, re-exposing those ugly crimes. The film focuses on this specific segment of her career. She is targeted by the Federal Department of Narcotics with an undercover sting operation led by Black federal agent Jimmy Fletcher, with whom she has a tumultuous affair. The Feds concede that they can’t arrest a performer for singing a song, but they know that Day is a heroin addict, so they decide to go after her on drugs.

We see the sad tragedies of her life: drug abuse, romantic abuse, industry abuse. She spends her life surrounded by forces that want to control her. But she claws her way through every setback, to the point that she’s on a glittering concert tour of Europe. Some discussion participants thought that the film over embellished her story to the point it was unbelievable and too manipulative, even criticizing the swelling sound track. Others were completely drawn in by the range of emotions expressed by Day. As one published critic noted, “Billie Holiday was such a revolutionary artist, and such a gutsy addiction-prone life-on-the-precipice human being, that just about the only way to approach her is with a staggering intensity of dramatic commitment. Andra Day gives Billie a voice of pearly splendor that, over time, turns raspy and hard, and we see the same thing happening to Billie inside.”

Published reviews were a bit critical of the film but they unanimously agreed the film is worth watching for Day’s performance alone. Seeing her on stage with the signature white gardenia in her hair, belting out those songs was almost mesmerizing. And watching her struggle to overcome so many obstacles while sadly succumbing to the sickly pleasures of heroin was heartbreaking.

Despite a couple raspy lower scores in our discussion group, a vocal majority of 4s and 4.5s resulted in a melodious 3.7 on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best).



See you at the movies!

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