

# 'Strange Fruit' documentary biographical, myopic

By Natasha Grant

Special to Sentinel-Voice

NEW YORK (NNPA)—The authorship of "Strange Fruit" has been hotly contested for years. Many have thought that this well-known poem-turned-song, made popular by Billie Holiday, was actually written by Holiday. Others shared Amina Baraka's sentiment when she admitted that she thought a Black person wrote the poem.

According to the new documentary, "Strange Fruit," directed by Joel Katz, the poem was penned in 1939 by an unknown Jewish English teacher, Abel Meeropol, who used the pseudonym Lewis Allen.

"I made this film because I wanted to honor people like Billie Holiday and Abel Meeropol who were brave enough to speak out about injustice in their times, even when such protests were often met with opposition," said producer/director/editor Joel Katz of his new documentary. "'Strange Fruit' is a film about a song that protests a human atrocity," continued Katz.

In making the documentary, Katz interviewed Meeropol's adopted sons, his former teaching colleagues and a number of noted scholars, historians, musicians and writers in this documentary, among them, poet/activist Amiri Baraka and singer Abbey Lincoln.

"What is interesting for me is how different types of audiences bring different needs to the film," said Katz. He has shown "Strange Fruit" at a number of film festivals, and he talked about the feedback he's received rather candidly in a recent Q&A:

"I've shown [the film] in quite a few Jewish film festivals, and there, the questions are often about the Meeropols, the Rosenbergs, the Jewish left."

But the questions are quite different when shown to predominantly Black audiences. "In these contexts, the questions are more often about lynching, the anti-lynching movement," said Katz.

## Framed

(Continued from Page 5)

"What are the two flags ma'am?"

"American flag and that flag that got that big ol' 'X' with all them stars...that Confederate flag. That Confederate flag is the same flag I heard that the KKK flies. That's all I could say. You know, America flies two flags.

"So you put that down as what I said. Just say I said, 'Why does America fly two flags?' You know? That's all I want to know. Why they fly two flags and what (does) that flag stand for? Does it stand for the same things that it stands for all those years back? Or does it mean something different?"



Billie Holiday's song reflected southern lynchings by whites.

Though Katz asserted that he made the film to give hope to those who want to create art that can change the world, "Strange Fruit" views more like a tribute to Meeropol than a film about the song's context—lynching.

"Strange Fruit" does little to address lynching as a tool of White violent repression of Black communities, nor does it tackle the racial and sexual implications of lynching. What it does is glide over the history of lynching and, for most of its 57 minutes, tells the story of Meeropol and his ties to the Communist Party. It also explores the history of the song's transformation from a radio-banned song to an international hit sung by the likes of Sting and Miki Howard.

While it may have been Katz's intention to do just that, it seems almost odd to not fully address the rationale and history of lynching, as the poem itself is about lynching.

However, one of the truly poignant moments in the documentary is Billie Holiday's 1958 television appearance on BBC Television, where she sings her infamous rendition of the haunting poem. It was her last televised performance of the song before her death less than a year later.

"Strange Fruit" does well in introducing the world to this relatively unknown poet who wrote a poem about one of the many atrocities that White America has heaped on Black bodies.

The documentary recently

was screened at a workshop sponsored by Manhattan Neighborhood Network, the public-access television station, as part of its new series of free monthly workshops and programs by celebrated video and film makers. The workshop included an interview of the creator of the documentary, Joel Katz, by noted director/editor David Van Taylor, who discussed how the film's story line was developed.

Natasha Grant writes for AmNews.

*"Southern trees bear a strange fruit:  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root;  
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze;  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.*

*Pastoral scene of the gallant South:  
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth;  
Scent of magnolia sweet and fresh;  
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.*

*Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck;  
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck.  
For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop;  
Here is a strange and bitter crop."*



# WHAT WILL YOU LEAVE YOUR CHILDREN?

Sometimes it's easy to forget we're in the middle of the worst drought on record. If we don't conserve now, our children will be the ones left high and dry. For smart ways to prevent overwatering your landscape, call 258-SAVE or log on to [snwa.com](http://snwa.com). Because it's time we saved some for them.

This message sponsored by the Southern Nevada Water Authority and the Water Conservation Coalition.

**BE THE SOLUTION.  
WATER  
SMART**  
258-SAVE • [snwa.com](http://snwa.com)