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## 'The United States vs. Billie Holiday' falls flat despite stellar performance

BY MAKENZIE WHITTLE

The Bulletin

Great movies can often save a poor lead performance, at least to an extent. But the reverse, a great performance in a bad film can't save the whole thing from being a waste of two hours.

Unfortunately, the latter is true for Lee Daniels' "The United States vs. Billie Holiday."

With a subject as interesting as the jazz and swing songstress, you would think it would be a gold mine for storytelling, especially one penned by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, but it falls

short in everything but its lead performer, Andra Day as the legendary Lady Day.

Focused specifically on the period of Holiday's career stemming from her first arrest for narcotics in 1947 to her death in 1959, the film weaves the singer's legal issues with the FBI, her relationship with Agent Jimmy Fletcher (Trevante Rhodes) and her insistence at singing her powerful and haunting "Strange Fruit."

The film opens with a graphic photograph of a Black man being burned by a white mob with a title card informing the audience that an anti-lynching bill was considered by congress in 1935 but did not pass,



Andra Day stars as Billie Holiday in "The United States vs. Billie Holiday" now streaming on Hulu.

Takashi Seida/Hulu

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trying the law with the singer in the first few moments (a similar title card is placed at the end of the film informing viewers that congress now considering the Emmett Till Antilynching Act).

We first meet Holiday when she agrees to an interview with campy radio journalist Reginald Lord Devine (Leslie Jordan) and she recounts her life starting with her performances at the Cafe Society in 1947 and when she first meets Fletcher.

In the following scene, we find ourselves in a dark FBI boardroom with Harry J. Anslinger (Garrett Hedlund) and other agents deciding on how best to tackle Holiday's singing of "Strange Fruit" and prevent her from singing it again. They decide to take her down for a narcotics charge since she is a known heroin user.

Using the undercover Fletcher to get close enough to discover the drugs, they bust her and send her to jail for a year and a day.

When she is released, she makes a comeback playing Carnegie Hall, all the while Fletcher is a constant presence as he is asked to find out who is selling Holiday the drugs.

Eventually, Fletcher is put on her tail as she embarks on a national tour and the two begin a relationship that is the apparent first semi-healthy one Holiday has been in.

But nothing good lasts for Holiday.

From about the first 10 minutes of the movie, you can tell this one is a doozy. The script is shockingly basic from someone as

### More Information

"The United States vs. Billie Holiday"

130 minutes

No MPAA rating



stellar as Parks and lacks any nuance going forward.

Daniels makes it abundantly clear that this is literally the United States against Holiday, they want to take her down for singing the controversial song and they'll exploit her addiction in order to do it and they don't care if it kills her.

The soggy pace is even more exacerbated by the inconsistent style choices and so many crossfades and mortgages with the same somber underscoring that feels like a marathon.

Day's performance is the only bright spot in the messy world that Daniels has created. She evokes Holiday through voice and stylistic choices and manages to wade through the film wonderfully especially given that this is the singer's first film. Unfortunately, the rest of the cast is one-note and wooden. But they're not given a whole lot to work with as any of their depth or development is swept aside in this overly sprawling biopic.

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