

Ross acts, sings well in film debut

Review by Larry Kubert

When it was announced that Diana Ross was going to play Billie Holiday in Paramount's *Lady Sings The Blues*, many people ran their fingers through their hair, looked silently at the floor and shook their heads in disbelief.

Now Ross has the last laugh, and a new facet of show business is open to her—acting.

Yes, Ross can act, and she does an admirable job of it in *Lady Sings the Blues*. But *Lady* still has some problems.

Foremost of these is its script. The liberty that has been taken with Holiday's life is amazing. Billie seems to jump magically from teenage prostitute to mature nightclub entertainer.

Not much of an attempt is made to show the contributions which Holiday made to both musical and the cultural attitudes of the period.

Except for a few still montages using theater marquees, no mention is made of Holiday's association with Count Basie and his band. And the musical influences of John Hammond, Artie Shaw, Lester Young and Benny Goodman on her are completely ignored.

Although extremely effective, the triumphant 1939 Carnegie Hall climax is also inaccurate. It's complete with overlay montages of newspaper headlines showing her re-arrest on drug charges, her failure to get a New York City cabaret work permit and finally her obituary. Holiday didn't play Carnegie Hall until nearly a decade later. But the tampering with history certainly made for a nice, flashy finish to the film.

So history was played with—this can be forgiven. What cannot be forgiven however, is the script's lack of character continuity.

Many times, the viewer can't understand why Holiday reacts to situations as she does. Usually it's inferred that narcotics is the demon controlling her soul. But this is too easy.

Agreed, narcotics played a big part in Holiday's life. She was arrested several times and served a jail sentence, but to use narcotics as an excuse for unexplained character changes is too much.

However, none of the above problems can be blamed on Ross's performance. In her screen debut, she does a credible job of portraying Holiday. The difficult change from adolescent teenager to mature woman is handled surprisingly well by Ross, especially considering script difficulties.

Mostly cause by her inexperience, Ross's weakest scenes are those which are emotionally dramatic. But in spite of this, Ross probably will be considered when Academy Award time rolls around.



Again to her credit, Ross doesn't try to imitate Billie Holiday's singing style. That would have been disastrous. Instead, the dozen or so Holiday songs included in the movie are sung by Ross in her own style; certainly reminiscent of Billie—and a long, long way from the Supremes.

Ross is backed by a solid supporting cast. Billy Dee Williams gives a powerful performance as Louis McKay, Billie's gambler lover, and husband (in reality McKay was Holiday's third husband). Williams' sheer character strength is an underrated highlight of the film.

Richard Pyror does well as Piano Man, Holiday's longtime friend who eventually is beaten to death by two pushers.

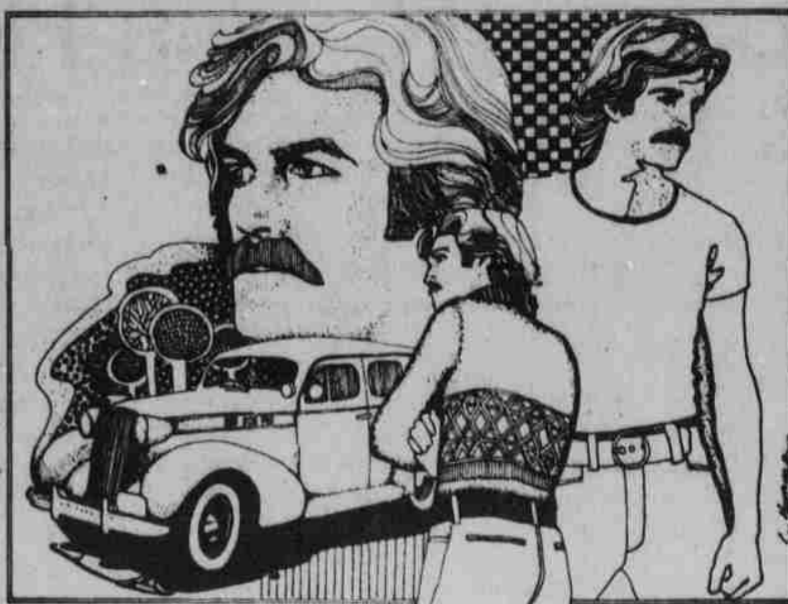
Commendable jobs are done by James Callahan as Reg Hanley, leaders of a white band which tours the South with Holiday, and Virginia Capers as Billie's mother.

The big-band music is well-handled, but the fluffy, all-violins background music by Michel Legrand is nauseatingly out-of-place in the film.

Opinions of *Lady Sings The Blues* vary depending upon the viewer's knowledge of the period and what is expected from the film. As a true portrayal of Billie Holiday's life, it fails.

As an entertaining interpretation of Billie Holiday's life it's indeed very satisfying.

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