lynching. With its horrible images of blacks dangling from trees, the song resonated deeply with blacks and whites alike and became a powerful social commentary on black identity and equality. Billie’s delivery of the macabre lyrics is cold and factual, but her voice is not.

By the 1940s, Billie’s life had deteriorated, the result of alcohol and drug abuse and of ill-chosen relationships with abusive men. She began using opium and heroin, and was jailed on drug charges in 1947. Her health—and her voice—suffered greatly because of her addictions, although she still made a number of memorable recordings. In May 1959, she was diagnosed with cirrhosis of the liver and died several months later, at the age of forty-four.

Billie Holiday had a unique talent that was immediately recognized by other musicians. “You never heard singing so slow, so lazy, with such a drawl,” one band leader reminisced. “I don’t know what it is, but you got to hear her.” Although her voice was untrained and her range small, she had a remarkable sense of pitch and an unfaulting delivery—a style she learned from listening to her two idols, Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong. She was best known for her romantic ballads.

We will hear a blues that Billie wrote and recorded in 1936, with Artie Shaw (clarinet) and Bunny Berigan (trumpet), and which she performed regularly throughout her career. It is a twelve-bar blues, with a short introduction and six choruses, some of which are instrumental (see Listening Guide 79). The first verse is a typical three-line strophe (as shown in the chart above), but as the work progresses, the form becomes freer. In the vocal verses, Billie demonstrates her masterful rhythmic flexibility and talent for jazz embellishments (scoops and dips on notes). In this performance, we also hear Artie Shaw’s creative clarinet improvisations and Bunny Berigan’s earthy, “gutbucket” trumpet playing (this refers to an unrestrained, raspy quality of tone). Shaw remembered this 1936 recording session some years later, saying that Billie was “already beginning to develop that distinctive style of hers which has been copied and imitated by so many singers of popular music that the average listener of today cannot realize how original she actually is.”
WHAT TO LISTEN FOR: Repeated harmonic progression (12 bars), heard 6 times (after introduction). Steady rhythm section keeps the beat under improvisations; slow, languid tempo with syncopated rhythms. First vocal chorus (2) has typical blues text; others are more free. Differing improvisational styles of 3 featured soloists: Holiday (voice), Shaw (clarinet) and Berigan (trumpet). Pitch inflections (bent notes, blue notes, and scoops) typical of blues.

Introduction (4 bars)—bass and piano.

Chorus 1—ensemble (12 bars).

Chorus 2—vocal (12 bars):

Lord, I love my man. tell the world I do.
I love my man, tell th’ world I do.
But when he mistreats me, makes feel so blue.

Opening of first vocal chorus, showing syncopated line, with slide at the end:

Chorus 3—vocal (12 bars):

My man wouldn’ gimme no breakfast.
Woun’ gimme no dinner.
Squawked about my supper’ in put me outdoors,
Had the nerve to lay a matchbox on my clothes;
I didn’t have so many but I had a long, long ways to go.

Chorus 4—solo clarinet improvisation (12 bars):

Chorus 5—solo trumpet improvisation (12 bars).

Chorus 6—vocal (12 bars):

Some men like me ’cause I’m happy.
Some’ cause I’m snappy.
Some call me honey, others think I’ve get money.
Some tell me, “Baby you’re built for speed.”
Now if you put that all together.
Makes me ev’rything a good man needs.