STEVE INSKEEP, host:

Our series 50 Great Voices continues today with one of the most distinctive voices of all time.

(Soundbite of song, "All of Me")

Ms. BILLIE HOLIDAY (Musician): (Singing) All of me, why not take all of me? Can't...

INSKEEP: Billie Holiday's very personal style continues to inspire singers some five decades after her death. And in the same way, Holiday was herself inspired by great musicians she heard growing up.

Tom Vitale reports from New York.

TOM VITALE: Billie Holiday became famous after she recorded a 1939 protest song about lynchings of African-Americans. It was called "Strange Fruit."

(Soundbite of song, "Strange Fruit")

Ms. HOLIDAY: (Singing) 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.

VITALE: The haunting vocal offers a stark illustration of Billie Holiday's greatest gift: the ability to convey emotion.

Phil Schaap is curator of Jazz at Lincoln Center.

Mr. PHIL SCHAAP (Curator of Jazz, Lincoln Center): She speaks to your heart. She catches your ear. She reaches your mind, and she does this with an emotional power that, of course, is genius and is beyond words.

(Soundbite of song, "God Bless the Child")

Ms. HOLIDAY: (Singing) Mamma may have. Papa may have. But God bless the child that's got his own, that's got his own.

VITALE: The emotional power of Billie Holiday's vocals comes from the way she sings the melodies. It's about rhythm and phrasing that Holiday learned from listening to the best.

Billie Holiday was born in Philadelphia in 1915 and raised in Baltimore. As a girl, her idols were Louis Pops Armstrong and blues singer Bessie Smith.

(Soundbite of song, "T'ain't Nobody's Business If I Do")

Ms. BESSIE SMITH (Musician): (Singing) If I go to church on Sunday, sing the shimmy down on Monday, ain't nobody's business if I do.

VITALE: To hear those 1920s records, Billie Holiday needed a Victrola. And the only place she had access to one was Alice Dean's whorehouse, where Billie worked scrubbing floors.

The late singer Abbey Lincoln reads from Holiday's autobiography, "Lady Sings the Blues."

Ms. ABBEY LINCOLN (Musician): A Victrola was a big deal in those days, and there weren't any parlors around that had one except Alice's. I spent many a wonderful hour there listening to Pops and
Bessie. I remember Pops' recording of "West End Blues" and how it used to gas me. It was the first time I ever heard anybody sing without using any words.

(Soundbite of song, "West End Blues")

Mr. LOUIS ARMSTRONG (Musician): (Singing) Wha-wha-da, wha-wha-lada, wha-la-da-la, la-da-di-di...

Mr. SCHAAP: Her real vocal influence is Louis Armstrong.

VITALE: Phil Schaap has studied Louis Armstrong's influence on Billie Holiday closely. He's been demonstrating how Holiday mimics Armstrong's phrasing on his radio shows at Columbia University's WKCR for more than 30 years.

Mr. SCHAAP: You really have to hear it, is what you have to do. My telling you that the phrasing over the rhythm that Louis Armstrong has is reprised and utilized in Billie Holiday's concept isn't telling you anything unless you actually go hear their records. I'd like you to hear Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong take a chorus of "Yours and Mine."

VITALE: Like a scientist in his laboratory, Phil Schaap takes Armstrong's and Holiday's versions of the same song, recorded in the same year, 1937. Then he adjusts the turntable pitch controls to speed up Armstrong's vocals...

(Soundbite of song, "Yours and Mine")

Mr. ARMSTRONG: (Singing) The stars that shine...

VITALE: ...and slow down Billie's.

Ms. HOLIDAY: (Singing) The stars that shine...

VITALE: Phil Schaap says if you listen closely, you can hear how Billie Holiday learned how to sing and swing at the same time from Louis Armstrong.

Mr. ARMSTRONG: (Singing) The song of springtime, the lullaby of the fall...

Ms. HOLIDAY: (Singing) The song of springtime, the lullaby of fall...

Mr. SCHAAP: She gets so much from Pops.

VITALE: And in 1949, she actually got to sing with him.

(Soundbite of song, "My Sweet Hunk o' Trash)

Ms. HOLIDAY: (Singing) You're very short on looks.

Mr. ARMSTRONG: Here. Here. Here.

Ms. HOLIDAY: (Singing) Dumb when it comes to books.

Mr. ARMSTRONG: Look out, baby. Watch it, honey.

Ms. HOLIDAY: (Singing) And you stay full of corn just like succotash.
Mr. ARMSTRONG: What you want me to do in my idle moments?

Ms. HOLIDAY: (Singing) You're just a good for nothing but my sweet hunk of trash.

Mr. ARMSTRONG: Let me get a word in there, honey. You're running your mouth.

VITALE: Just as Billie Holiday learned from listening to older singers, generations of younger singers have learned from listening to Billie Holiday - from Frank Sinatra to Shelby Lynne.

Singer Joni Mitchell says her two favorite vocalists are Edith Piaf and Billie Holiday, because they use their technical gifts to tell meaningful stories.

Ms. JONI MITCHELL (Musician): I think I took this from Piaf and Billie Holiday; that many of the so-called great singers love their notes more than their text. And those women never forgot what it was that they were singing about, so that the note almost played second position to the text. Not that there was anything wrong with the chosen notes. There was still beauty to them, but the emphasis was on telling the story from the heart.

VITALE: Billie Holiday had plenty of stories to tell, and enough heartache to fill a songbook: years of heroin addiction, a stint in federal prison and a series of abusive relationships with men. She was just 44 years old when she died.

Jazz historian Phil Schaap says too much emphasis has been placed on the tragic aspects of Billie Holiday's life, and not enough on the glorious aspects of her voice.

Mr. SCHAAP: She swings and invents. She innovates. She can compose on the fly. She can make you hear the rhythm section if it's not there, and make them play better if they are. And I think that's it. I think Billie Holiday is the greatest.


(Soundbite of song, "Good Morning Heartache")

Ms. HOLIDAY: (Singing) I've got those Monday blues straight through Sunday blues. Good morning, heartache...

INSKEEP: You can see videos of Lady Day singing the blues on our website, NPR.org.

It's MORNING EDITION from NPR News. I'm Steve Inskeep.

Ms. HOLIDAY: (Singing) Good morning, heartache. You're the one who knew me when. Might as well get used to you hanging around. Good morning, heartache, sit down.