

Baltimore statue of Billie Holiday rededicated



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BALTIMORE – A statue of Billie Holiday has returned to the former black entertainment district in Baltimore where the lady once sang the blues.

The statue, depicting a singing Holiday in a flowing, floor-length strapless gown, a gardenia flower in her hair, first graced Billie Holiday Plaza in 1985. It was removed for 18 months for cleaning and now includes, for the first time, panels set in its base that the sculptor originally intended to be part of the work.

One shows a newborn baby — with the lyric "God Bless the Child" engraved below it. The other depicts a man — nude, castrated and with his eyes bulging — hanging from a tree. Below are the words "Strange Fruit," the title of a ballad condemning lynching that Holiday recorded in 1939.

Sculptor James Earl Reid said at Friday's ceremony that the panels demonstrate the idea of stripping away a man's potency in life.

"It was my artistic prerogative," Reid said. "It's the alpha and omega of the black man's experience in America."

While the images are graphic, Mayor Sheila Dixon said people should view the statue and the panels as a depiction of unadulterated history.

"You need to show what happens to people when life begins and where people struggle," Dixon said. "People need to have it raw, straight-up. We don't need to sugarcoat anything."

The city paid \$280,000 to restore the statue, create the base with the panels and refurbish the plaza. The statue was rededicated on the 50th anniversary of Holiday's death.

About 80 people attended the ceremony, hearing the strains of "God Bless the Child," played on a flugelhorn.

One longtime resident of the neighborhood found the lynching image offensive.

"I understand that it's there to spark conversation, but there's other ways to display this," said Edward Jordan, a Baltimore-based music producer.

Born in Philadelphia in 1915 as Eleanora Fagan, Holiday moved to Baltimore's Fells Point neighborhood as a girl. She returned between the world wars to star at The Royal Theater on what was then a vibrant strip of African-American nightclubs.

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