

Uncaged bird

By John MacCalkies



THE DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF THE "DIVA" ARE MORE NEBULOUS THAN POPULAR CULTURE WOULD HAVE US BELIEVE.

The feminine of "divus," meaning "god," diva refers to a "distinguished female singer; a prima donna," and generally attaches to a woman with powerful lungs and magnetic stage presence able to transcend the banal by sheer physicality and strength of personality. Whitney Houston's "The Greatest Love of All" ranks as the quintessential diva anthem in recent years, which makes

entire sense, since "self love as the greatest love" connects with the prima donna attitude of taking adulation and privileged treatment as a right. In a way, Billie Holiday's "God Bless the Child" makes a similar point about emphasizing self-worth against the odds, but what about "Don't Explain"? This bleak right-or-wrong-don't-matter reality check is only transcendent in its confrontation of bald fact, it is not prima donna material.

As Abbey Lincoln has said, without Holiday's sociological inspiration, she herself would be an entirely different singer: "I met Billie in 1953 when I was in Honolulu. She was working at a club that was a little slower than the place I was at so she dropped by on a couple of nights. I'm not crazy, I know she didn't come to see me, she just needed to get away from where she was. She sat at the bar. I was too scared to venture towards her but ran over to catch her show and remember how everybody was silent—I never saw it before in my life—absolute magic on stage. Billie was a philosopher and it was painful for her to witness what she was witnessing. She sang "Strange Fruit" at a time when women weren't doing that. They sang about a man that was no good and everything but they weren't doing social things like that. She was a queen without a throne. Her mother was 13 when she had her and she was an only child, unlike me who was the tenth of twelve children."

On Lincoln's star-studded Riverside debut, 1957's "That's Him," her rendition of "Don't Explain" exposed her Holiday influence, but her pure tone and Sarah Vaughan-like vibrato had a different impact. Her future husband, drummer Max Roach, introduced her to many important musicians of the day including Coleman Hawkins, Benny Carter and Booker Little. "I also had the chance to know Thelonious Monk and John Coltrane. I wrote words to Monk's 'Blue Monk' and Coltrane's 'Africa.' But Monk told me I didn't need to write lyrics for other people's songs, that I could compose myself, and once said he thought I was not only a great singer and actress, but a great composer. And I believed him! So I started taking seriously the melodies I heard."

Scrolling forward some forty years, Lincoln's sound has changed dramatically and her aura has accrued something of the timeless gravitas of Holiday. Her voice is not pretty and lithe as it once was, the vibrato is gone, but it has grown in character. The notes she can't make are as crucial as those she can because she reaches for them unapologetically. She favors languid tempos and, oracle-like, never hurries the exposition of her poetic pronouncements. She has become sorceress, clairvoyant, an inimitable whose mortal flaws can morph into implacable strengths. She can get away with murder.

"I'm an obedient worshipper of my ancestors near and far. I try to live life in a way that they can be proud of me and I can show them that everything is all right and I'm doing my best. They call it spiritual when you are like that. If I hated everybody they wouldn't call it spiritual but it still would be spiritual."

Lincoln's infectious sense of humor adds to her worldliness and gives the impression she's figured a few things out... the battle of the sexes for instance. The African names Aminata and Moseka were conferred on her by the President of Guinea and the Zairean Minister of Information respectively in 1973, when she was on tour with Miriam Makeba. Aminata is the feminine of Amen and Moseka means "god of love in the form of a maiden."

"Christianity teaches that there's only one God and it's a man. Even though his mother brought him into the world, she's not a god—but that's not for everybody. In Africa a god was always both female and male.... I do not want to be everything to a man here, nor for him to try and be everything to me. I'm a polygamist. A man ought to have his own damn house and if he takes a wife he ought to build her one too. (I need the brideprice, bring me something to put in my hand that says you can afford me!) But people don't understand that today, that a man and a woman need their own personal space when they feel like it."