

First verse of Strange Fruit played between following narration:

April Southern trees bare such strange fruit,
 Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
 Black bodied swinging in the Southern breeze,
 Strange Fruit is hanging from the poplar trees.

Simeon It makes you think. The person that composed that, they had experienced something like that, to talk about the lynching and the smell of the magnolia or the smell of the flowers in Mississippi and pretty soon you smell the smell of the burning flesh.

Guitar riff

Sylvia Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees. I mean, just think. That's my uncle, lynched, hanging from a persimmon tree in Ocean Springs Mississippi.

Guitar riff

Sylvia My name is Sylvia Wong Lewis. My mother's people are Chinese Caribbean people and my father's people are from the Deep South. I come from a very musical family. My family from Mississippi and Louisiana, they are all musicians. I'm trained in music too. And I've heard the song Strange Fruit all my life.

"Southern trees baring strange fruit..."

Sylvia My family had salons where we had all types of musicians that would come over and play and entertain and perform so I've heard this song many times, but this was not a popular song with the black people, but it was definitely a familiar song.

"...from the poplar trees."

Sylvia We knew this song, just like we knew about all of the things that happened to our people. Whether we wanted to talk about it was something else.

"Pastoral scene of the gallant South..."

Robert My name is Robert Meeropol. I was adopted by Abel and Anne Meeropol. And of course Abel Meeropol is the author of Strange Fruit.

David My name is David Margolick. I am the author of *Strange Fruit: The Biography of a Song*. Billie Holliday's famous lynching song from 1939 and it was written in the mid-1930s by a man named Abel Meeropol, a school teacher in The Bronx, who was very much involved in the politics of his day and was particularly interested in civil rights, and had seen a photograph of a lynching.

Robert I mean lynching was considered a sport in some ways. There were postcards taken of crowds of people picnicking under hanging bodies and they were sent around. And there were also photographs of this, showing people who were proud of what they'd accomplished. He saw one of these photographs of two people being lynched and he was horrified. And that inspired him; he saw these bodies hanging and this image of fruit – strange fruit – hanging from the poplar trees.

Sylvia Now I have 2 brothers, older brothers. And when they were little boys, my parents were always telling them, you boys better behave. You know what happened to Emmett Till. We always heard that story. Everyone knew the story of Emmitt Till.

Guitar riff

Simeon My name is Simeon Wright. I'm also the cousin of Emmett Till. Emmett Till and I, we are second cousins. And I lived in Mississippi in 1955, and Emmett came down there to visit us for a little vacation. So he arrived in Mississippi on a Saturday, at the beginning of the cotton harvest, late August. And, you know, back in those days we was so happy to have someone to visit us from the big cities.

Monday was the beginning of the cotton harvest. So he would be at home all day, with nothing to do, bored and waiting for us to get off. Back in those days we worked from sun to none, it wasn't an 8 hour day. It was from sun up to sun down. And when we get off, we would have supper, and we wanted to go somewhere. Well on a Wednesday night, we wanted to go to this little town, it was called Money. Money, Mississippi. And it was about 3 miles west of where we lived.

So we went to this little store. My nephew Wheeler went into the store first to buy something and Emmitt went in behind him. So wheeler came out of the store leaving Emmitt in there alone with Mrs Bryant, she was the wife of this stall holder. So my brother Maurice immediately sent me in to be with Emmitt. So inside of this store, when I was there, Emmitt said nothing out of line. He said nothing. He paid for his stuff; we both left the store together. And when we got outside the store Mrs Bryant came out and she was headed towards her car. And for some unknown reason, Emmett whistled at Carolyn Bryant. And it scared us so bad. We just couldn't get in our car fast enough to get out of

town, because in Mississippi you didn't whistle at a white woman. That was suicide. Instant death. But Emmitt didn't know that.

He said, "Please don't tell Uncle Malls what I've done. I don't want to go home." Because he was afraid that if we had told Daddy, Daddy was going to have to go back to Chicago. So we, you know, figuring that we was going to get, you know, just a whipping for what he'd done, we didn't tell our Dad what happened.

Thursday came, nothing happened. Friday came, nothing happened. Saturday, we forgot all about it. We got ready to go to Greenwood, this was a little town about 13 miles to the South of where we lived. And we stayed there until about 12 midnight. At 12 midnight we headed home, we arrived home about 1. We went to bed, Emmitt and I. And in my bedroom there was 2 beds. My brother Walter was sleeping on the west wall, Emmett and I was sleeping on the east wall.

"Southern trees bear such strange fruit..."

About 2.30 I heard loud talking in the house and, you know, when I opened my eyes there were 2 white men standing at the foot of my bed. 1 had a 45 and a flash light in his hand. He ordered me to lay back down and go back to sleep. He asked Emmitt a couple of questions. Was he the boy who did that talking back in Money. Emmitt said 'yeah'. And back in those days, you didn't say 'yeah' to a white man. It had to be "yes sir" or "no sir", "yes ma'am" or "no ma'am". And they threatened to whip Emmitt inside the house. I still didn't know what's going on.

About that time, my mother came in the room. And she began to beg and plead and to offer them money to leave Emmitt alone. And this was when I really realised that Emmitt was in grave danger. So they made Emmitt dress, they marched him out of the room. Now Emmitt left my bedroom, he didn't say one word. They marched him out to a waiting truck. They asked the person in the truck: "Is this the right boy." And our lady's boss responded, 'It is'. And they put him in the car and drove away. We never saw him alive again.

It was three days before we found out anything. We found Emmett's body on a Wednesday, three days after they had taken him out of my home. He had been beaten, he had been tortured. Then they shot him in the head. Then they threw him in the Tallahatchie River.

David

What is amazing about Strange Fruit is that it is an attack. It is a rather nasty attack. And Abel Meeropol, when asked about why he wrote Strange Fruit, said: "Because I hate lynching and I hate the people who perpetrate lynching."

Robert I think it was the work that he was proudest of. He wrote it as a poem originally. Then he set it to music. Ultimately, he brought it to the owner of café society in New York City, the only integrated night club in the entire city, introduced it to Billie Holiday and she sang it and the rest is history.

David There are different stories of how Billie Holiday reacted to the song when she first heard it. According to Barny Josephson, the owner of Café Society, she didn't really get the song. It didn't sink in and she didn't get the full import of the song. But she sort of agreed to sing it because he wanted her to sing it. Before long she fully embraced the song and everything that it represented and she took it extremely seriously, to the point where all service in the night club stopped whenever she sang it. It was always the last song she sang in any one of her sets. All the lights went down, and only one light was shining on her when she sang it.

*“Southern trees bear 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.*

*Pastoral scene of the gallant south,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.*

*Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.”*

Whistling, clapping

Robert

I was born Robert Rosenberg but my birth parents were executed by the United States government on June 19th 1953 and after that I was adopted by Abel and Anne Meeropol and took the name Meeropol.

He wrote under the pen name of Lewis Allen. Lewis and Allen were going to be the names of their two children who died, they were still births. They liked children. So when my birth parents, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, were arrested in 1953, when I was 3 and my brother was 7, the Meeropols, Abel and Anne, offered to adopt us. And this was an act of great courage at this point, to take in the children of people who the government claimed and killed because they were communist spies who stole the secret of the atomic bomb at the height of the cold war so you can't imagine people who were more reviled.

The impact that this song had on me as a child, I think it was woven into what happened to my parents. Given the politics, they think that my birth parents were the victims of illegal lynching. And the fact that Abel Meeropol wrote this song about extra-judicial lynchings was woven together for me in this feeling that here were people who were protecting me.

And again, as a little boy, I probably didn't think of this in quite this rational way but it sort of under-laid in an emotional sense, my feeling of security with them.

Piano interlude

Sylvia

My parents had a lot of her [Billie Holiday] music on records, and I've heard this song all my life. And then I finally connected it in my own family. I was about I guess 8 or 9 years old and I had seen a horrible photograph of Emmitt Till in the casket and he's very disfigured and he's bloated and it's just horrible. And I asked my father, who is from Mississippi, if anything had happened like that in our family. And to my shock he said yes. And I said, well, who, what. And he said well, my grandfather's brother was lynched. And, I didn't really ask him any questions, and I just put it in the back of my head. But it became kind of a family secret. Everybody knew but no one talked about it.

So then years later, I was doing some research on family, and I met a cousin who had the news clippings from the lynching.

My uncle's name was Warren Stuart. And according to the articles, it said he attempted to assault a white woman. And he was put in a jail in Ocean Springs Mississippi. And then the whole town, the whole town, formed a mob and they dragged him for a mile and then strung him up in a tree and lynched him.

This is from the Picayune Newspaper in Louisiana: "Negro Themed Lynch by Mississippi Mob. Orderly lynching at Ocean Springs, Mississippi. Negro brute

was dragged about a mile back to town and hanged. Everything was done in an orderly, humane manner, before the execution.”

An Alabama paper in 1901 said: “Ocean Springs citizens take swift vengeance. Warren Stuart, a Negro, who attempted to assault miss Ethel Fontaine, was strung up, his body riddled with bullets. Negro taken from court offices by mob of about 150 determined men. He begs piteously for his life.”

And then another article that was in the New Orleans Sunday daily newspaper said: “Body of Negro Warren Stuart was taken by relatives. The Negro who was lynched last night was found this morning, hanging from a broken limb of a Persimmon tree beside the country road. The verdict was that the death was due to strangulation and gunshot wounds.”

“Pastoral scene of the gallant south,

The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth...”

Sylvia When I started reading about it, I was just so upset. I was enraged, I was angry, I was traumatised.

So, I began to research her family. I found out a lot about her family. In fact, I found out everything about her family.

I know who they are, I know where they live. And then I began to think about, well what am I going to do with all this information? Am I going to go to their house and say ‘see what you did to my Uncle?’ Will that solve anything? Will that help anything? And it just made me stop.

“For the sun to rise...”

Sylvia I mean when you think about it, I didn’t even know my uncle but I was just haunted by his pain, his piteous cries for mercy. And about all of these people doing this to him. And by my family’s impotence. I mean, what could they have done?

That song is such a metaphor for my uncle and so many other uncles and grandfathers and brothers and fathers who were lynched throughout America. So that song was a song that really touched me.

Simeon And that strange fruit is still out there, just in a different form. The smell of the honeysuckle brings all of that back, that memory. That’s what the smell prevalent in the little area we lived in. Because that night, words can’t describe how we felt, how I felt. Words can’t describe it.

It was a combination of grief, combination of shock, combination of fear. And usually when I smell the honeysuckle it's just grief only. You have a sour that grips you for what happened to him.

April

My name is April Shipp and I'm a quilt maker from Rochester Hills, Michigan. I love quilt making. It's my passion I love fabric. I love to sew. I sew every day. I'm obsessed with fabric and sewing and so on. The quilt Strange Fruit was began with this book that dealt with African-American women's imagery, photographs.

And there was one photograph of a woman and her son, a mother and her son, that were lynched, that were hanging from the Canadian River Bridge in Oklahoma. It was dated May 25th 1911. The caption said: "Unidentified mother and child, lynched in Oklahoma."

And seeing that photograph troubled me deeply, that no one knew who she was. And so I began looking for her name. In doing so, I found there were thousands of others who were lynched in this country in a one hundred year period.

The quilt weighs twelve pounds and it is 10 feet long and 10 feet wide. On the quilt there are names embroidered of African-American men, women and children.

I chose differing kinds of fabrics because my thought was you could be from a very poor family or a very well to do family, and this could happen to you. So I chose cottons, I chose satins, and silks and corduroys, all kinds of fabrics that make up this quilt.

And to me, everyone on this quilt, everyone's name that I could find and the ones I had as unidentified, were still precious to me, and so I chose to embroider their names in a gold, metallic thread.

I dedicated the quilt to the woman whose name I could not find. Her name was Laura Nelson. And she and her son were murdered for allegedly stealing a cow. I believe Laura was raped and then she was hung, her body was riddled with bullets, you know, with the bridge.

And the photograph in the book shows you there are school children, little girls with pig tails. It's often what happened. It became a show. They even called it that sometimes: we're going to have a show. So if you see the picture of Laura and her son, on top of the bridge there are mothers and daughters and little boys and grown men watching the show, watching a human life being taken.

"Southern trees bare such strange fruit..."

April You cannot deal with that level of death every day, without crying every day.
 And I cried every day that I touched it. Even when I touch it today. Even when
 I touch it today. And I look at my - I call it my 5000 souls, there are more than
 that, but I call it my 5000 souls. When I look at it, and I touch it, I remember
 that I stand for these people. That if no one else remembers them, or
 remembers their names, I stand for these people.

First verse of Strange Fruit plays out

Second verse of Strange Fruit played between April's following narration:

April Pastoral scene of the gallant south,
 The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
 Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
 Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.
 Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck,
 For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
 For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
 Here is a strange and bitter crop.