Lady Day: All Day, Every Day
By Sheil M. Whitley

F rom April 1 to April 15, WKCR radio will feature a 24-hour Billie Holiday Festival.

What’s your favorite: “I Loves You, Porgy” or “God Bless the Child”? Or maybe you fancy is tickled by some of Lady Day’s lesser-known pieces, say, “Swing Brother, swing” or “Your Mother’s Son-in-Law.” Either way, you’re in for a treat.

Broadcast is the celebration of what would have been Lady Day’s 90th birthday, this first-ever radio “Billie-blitz” will include celebrated hits along with some of her more obscure numbers, culled from more than 700 songs she is known to have recorded. The Festival, broadcast in highest audio clarity, will include commentary by noted jazz historians.

Born Eleanora Fagan Gough on April 17, 1915, in Baltimore, Holiday came into her own during the heyday of jazz. She was discovered at age 17 by John Hammond, the music producer who is also famous for having discovered music greats Benny Goodman, Count Basie, Bessie Smith and Avela Franklin.

Holiday’s childhood was punctuated by a number of events that contributed to the self-destructive behavior that would eventually claim her life. Her mother was 17 when Holiday was born, and her father abandoned the family shortly thereafter. Unable or unwilling to care for her, Holiday’s mother left her in the care of her grandparents and moved to New York City. Holiday and her mother were reunited later in life—less than two years after the split. At 17, Holiday became an ex nun in the brothel where her mother worked.

Several early events left an indelible mark on her life. Holiday is known to have made up more social occasions and stories about her childhood in what many scholars say was an attempt to appear respectable. Farah Jasmine Griffin, professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia and director of the Institute for Research in African American Studies, notes, “Holiday told stories that would lend her an aura of respectability.”

Griffin, author of If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday, also points out that Holiday’s inventiveness may have been motivated by a desire to create different public and private personas. “She told stories that she knew would sell,” Griffin says. Her stories and the cloak of mystery they created around her sold almost as well as her records—and they still do today. Her autobiography, Lady Sings the Blues, written with William Dufty, continues to have impressive sales. And jazz aficionados still debate the details of her life. A year before she was born, her relationship with her father and her involvement with prostitution. But there is no doubt about her influence.

“The emotional power of this definitive jazz singer also reaches the hearts of many listeners who appreciate her alone among jazz performers,” says historian Phil Schaap, curator of Jazz at Lincoln Center and one of the experts who will offer historical footnotes during the festival.

Holiday’s behind-the-beat timing and command of her instrument inspired some of this centu-

ry’s greatest musicians, from vocalists Frank Sinatra and Etta James to clarinetist Benny Goodman and saxophonist Lester Young, who gave Holiday the nickname “Lady Day.” These members of jazz royalty all count Holiday as an influence.

“If you’re second only to Louis Armstrong in terms of influence on jazz musicians,” says Griffin, “current popular musicians also cite her as an inspiration.” According to Griffin, “Macy Gray once remarked that she heard Billie Holiday sing, she knew she: herself could sing. You can also hear her (Holiday’s) influence in Norah Jones and Erykah Badu.”

Drug and alcohol abuse contributed to a decline in Holiday’s control of her voice and claimed her life on July 17, 1959. Her death at age 44 marked the end of a tumultuous life; a life that can be relived through her songs, the lyrics of which she infused with the experiences of having lived them.

For more information on the festival, go to WKCR 89.9 FM or online at www.columbus.edu/cw /wkcr.

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—Phil Schaap, curator, Jazz at Lincoln Center

School of Journalism Announces 2005 Lukas Prize Project Awards

By Madeleine Perez

At first hand account from the frontlines of the Iraq war by Evan Wright, a history of California farmworkers by Richard Steven Street, and the true story of a catastrophic coal mine fire by Joan Quigley received this year’s J. Anthony Lukas Book Prize, which also carries a $10,000 award, for Generation Kill: Devil Dogs, Ice民众, Captains Courageous and the New Face of American War.

The most significant panorama of Western—and more broadly American—experience. Deeply researched and movingly written, the book itself is a veritable epic with almost Homeric pathos, bringing to life a lost world whose effects and consequences are felt right to the present day.

The judges also named one finalist: Jason Dax for Living in the Absence: Two Teens and a Nation’s Drive to End Child Squeeze. Steven Wright won the Mark Lyndon History Prize, which carries a $10,000 award, for Generation Kill: Devil Dogs, Ice民众, Captains Courageous and the New Face of American War.

With clear and powerful prose, Wright has written a classic book of war reportage. But while evoking the timeless themes of camaraderie and brutality, he has also produced something deeper and more unique: Generation Kill is an unforgettable and at times chillingly real portrait of the modern American soldier. It reveals both the cultural and military mores that members of the Marines First Recon Battalion carried with them to Iraq and the ways that they adjusted to the brutal realities of war. The vividness of the writing, the straightforward description of men killing while under fire, the struggles...