

Brad Gooch On "The Day Lady Died"

The news of Holiday's death led O'Hara to think back to the last time he had heard her sing. Ms fullest exposure to her had been two years earlier at Loew's Sheridan on Seventh Avenue and Twelfth Street in the summer Of 1957 when she had appeared a few hours late for her midnight show. She was forced to perform in the cavernous old movie theatre because she was not permitted--due to an arrest for heroin use--to sing in a bar that served drinks. "We didn't leave," recalls Irma Hurley, who accompanied O'Hara along with Mike Goldberg, Joan Mitchell, and Norman Bluhm. "Frank said, 'I will wait.' I think she was coming from Philadelphia. She finally arrived pretty zonked out. But she did sing." O'Hara's reaction to her performance was as exhilarated as his reaction to Judy Garland's show at the Palace Theatre, after which he had commented to John Button, "Well, I guess she's better than Picasso." But the last time O'Hara had heard Holiday sing was at the Five Spot, a jazz bar on Fifth Street and Third Avenue at Cooper Square, which was beginning to replace the Cedar as the gathering spot of the artists. Like the San Remo a few years earlier, the Cedar had been picked up by the media and was now overcrowded with tourists on the lookout for Pollock-like painters, and young guys cruising for loose "art girls." At the Five Spot the painters could mellow out listening to the jazz of John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Thelonious Monk, or Charlie Mingus. Kenneth Koch and Larry Rivers had begun staging jazz-and-poetry evenings there in response to similar events in San Francisco initiated by Allen Ginsberg and Kenneth Rexroth. One night Koch had read his poems with the accompaniment of Mal Waldron, a black pianist who usually accompanied Holiday. She showed up to visit with Waldron and later in the night was persuaded to break the law by singing. "It was very close to the end of her life, with her voice almost gone, just like a whisper, just like the taste of very old wine, but full of spirit," recalls Koch. "Everybody wanted her to sing. Everybody was crazy about her. She sang some songs in this very whispery beautiful voice. The place was quite crowded. Frank was standing near the toilet door so he had a side view. And Mal Waldron was at the piano. She sang these songs and it was very moving."

O'Hara had written his poem on his lunch hour. Later he caught the train with LeSueur to East Hampton where they were met by Mike Goldberg in the olive-drab Bugatti he had bought the year before when he and Southgate were in Italy on their honeymoon. Ready with a thermos of martinis and plastic cups, both a welcoming gesture and a self-protective ploy so that he could drink while waiting for the inevitably delayed train, Goldberg explained in the parking lot, "We're eating in, the dinner was called off." On the drive to the house Goldberg was renting that summer on Georgica Pond, the only topic of discussion was the tragedy of Billie Holiday's death at the young age of forty-four. "I've been playing her records all afternoon," said Goldberg. Arriving back at the house, Goldberg put a Billie Holiday record on the hi-fi while Patsy Southgate, having finished putting the two kids to bed, brought out a tray of hors d'oeuvres. O'Hara, who had been silent about the matter throughout the trip, pulled a poem out of his pocket that he announced he had just written that afternoon and read it straight down to its concluding stanza:

and I am SWEATING A LOT ^[1] by now and thinking of leaning on the john door in

the 5 SPOT while she whispered a song along the keyboard to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing

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Links

[1] http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/ohara/ladydied.htm#

[2] http://www.amazon.com/City-Poet-Times-Frank-OHara/dp/0060976136/ref=sr_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1292374746&sr=1-2

[3] <http://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

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