The Kintsugi of Billie Holiday and Judy Garland

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Kintsugi pottery from Japan

“When the Japanese mend broken objects, they aggrandize the damage by filling the cracks with gold. They believe that when something has suffered damage and has a history, it becomes more beautiful.” -- Barbara Bloom

Kintsugi (or Kinsukuroi) is a Japanese art form where broken pottery, rather than being discarded, is mended using a technique of putting the shards back together using a lacquer mixed with gold, silver or platinum in order to make the seams stand out even more, rather than trying to conceal them.

Legend of its origin is that the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimasa sent his favorite tea bowl to China to be mended, and it returned repaired with ugly metal staples. He undid the bowl again and worked with Japanese craftsmen to develop a more aesthetic means of repair.

The philosophy behind Kintsugi is that the history of something should become a part of it, and not erased and that something becomes more beautiful after it has been broken and remade. A sort of badge of honor that resonates very strongly with me as a gay man living with HIV, and I suspect many others. Our weaknesses can become our strengths and can bring us back to some semblance of wholeness as badges of honor and sources of pride and resilience.

I had been thinking about this for quite some time and thought the concept applied very well to two icons

of gay culture, and two of my favorite musicians, Billie Holiday and Judy Garland, and wished to share some of this rumination with you.

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“I hate straight singing. I have to change a tune to my own way of doing it. That’s all I know.” -- Billie Holiday

Growing up in Vermont, a place known for liberal politics, cultural vibrancy and an excellent public school system, I was exposed to all forms art, creativity and expression--from our Mozart, Jazz and Shakespeare festivals to regionally renowned theater; I had a wealth of opportunity and access to creative expression in its myriad forms.

In high school, I was heavily involved in the art studio and photography lab, sang in a renaissance music group, participated in what was considered some of the best theater productions in the region. My school’s jazz band and chorus was repeatedly in top place for regional awards; jazz and the Harlem Renaissance were a huge part of our musical culture and I owe to many wonderful teachers my deep appreciation of artists like John Coltrane, Dizzy Gillespie, Charles Mingus, Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald.

In my circle of friends at the time, Ella was the queen. Our teachers loved her technical precision and three octave vocal range, and an Ella Fitzgerald scat session is just plain fun to listen to. She was the standard to which we were set to, hit the notes, hit them perfectly.

“Even when handed a sad song, Miss Fitzgerald communicated a wistful, sweet-natured compassion for the heartache she described... viewing [it] from afar, she seemed to understand and forgive all. Her apparent equanimity and her clear pronunciation which transcended race, ethnicity, class and age made her a voice of profound reassurance and hope.” --Stephen Holden

I performed to task, I played trumpet and sang in multiple of my school’s bands and took my teacher’s lessons to heart--learning the notes and playing them perfectly. I was the kid who could draw, paint, act, sing, dance and develop a perfect darkroom print. I sought to master every technical discipline in the arts as near to perfect as I could.

But secretly, inside, I rebelled--my heart belonged to Billie. Her naked vulnerability, the pain in her sometimes cracking laconic voice, she simultaneously exposed herself and hid part of herself too, making you want to know more; to know where the pain came from and how she understood your pain. The brutality of the human condition and the tender agony of living.

To a 15-year-old gay kid, the technical perfection of Ella was the face I presented to the world; hitting all the straight notes. Billie was the longing, vulnerable face inside the closet I was so desperate to break out of.

Ella Fitzgerald was a world we wanted; Billie Holiday showed us the world we had.

“Her bluesy vocal style brought a slow and rough quality to the jazz standards that were often upbeat and light. This combination made for poignant and distinctive renditions of songs that were already standards. By slowing the tone with emotive vocals that reset the timing and the rhythm, she added a new dimension to jazz singing.” --PBS

I’m reminded of a remark by Claude Debussy that “music is the space between the notes” and that’s a good analogy to my relationship between these two women. I respect Ella’s technical precision and skills, but listening to a record of hers is something I do to clean my apartment or have an enjoyable cocktail party.

Ella Fitzgerald singing “Stormy Weather” is like listening to the vocal equivalent of Natalie Wood in Rebel Without a Cause, the wistful loss of a teenage girl for the boy she couldn’t hang on to. Listening to Billie Holiday sing “Strange Fruit” or “Gloomy Sunday” is like seeing Blanche Dubois in A Streetcar Named Desire, abused, skirting death and disaster, the heart ripped out and stepped on by the men in her life and maybe part of her likes it. It is suicides and lynchings, the acceptance of a part of the human condition that Ella Fitzgerald’s hippy optimizing at best glosses over or references only obliquely and at worst, outright denies.

When I listen to Billie Holiday there is a visceral gut reaction, I am moved and touched in ways few other artists can move me--because the tortured life she lived between the notes inflects them with such a palpable desire for authentic human connection, want and loss. Ella is the friend you meet for brunch, Billie is the friend you can call in the middle night when the mind closes in and turns on itself.

By being broken, she gave us something better than perfection.

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“I was born at the age of 12 on an MGM lot.” --Judy Garland

My favorite film growing up was The Wizard of Oz. I would watch it three times a day (Lassie was another favorite, maybe I have a savior complex). For years, I had all the toys I could find and would spend hours in the woods pretending I was in Oz; I even had a pair of ruby slippers when I was 6 (I’m still amazed I had to ever come out of the closet). “Over the Rainbow” is sort of the unofficial anthem of my family.

I was into JUDY! JUDY! JUDY!

Much like Billie Holiday, Judy Garland (born Frances Gumm) came from a tumultuous unhappy childhood. Her father was a closeted homosexual whose frequent dalliances forced them to move around, and her mother was basically the stage mom from hell, who dragged her daughters around the country performing vaudeville acts.

She rose through the ranks of the MGM studio system, while constantly being compared to Lana Turner and criticized for her weight and what they considered 'homely' appearance as they pumped her up with speed and benzedrine. But the 'little girl with the big voice' persevered; though the rest of her life was a yellow brick road tinged with loneliness, insecurity, substance abuse failed marriages and suicide attempts.

Nevertheless, she sang for her supper whenever she needed to and even after years of being considered a has-been, struggling with pills and alcohol and her weight, her April 23, 1961, concert at Carnegie Hall was called by some "the greatest night in show business history" and she was billed as The World's Greatest Entertainer. Audiences left their seats to be closer to Judy and even the hyper-critical Hedda Hopper said "I never saw the likes of it in my life."

Someone like Doris Day is probably a better 'technical' singer, but Judy Garland is an icon. Watching Youtube videos of Judy Garland sing "Old Man River" or "Battle Hymn of the Republic" can consistently and reliably bring me to tears--and her rendition of "Over the Rainbow" dressed in hobo drag is hopefully archived in the Library of Congress.

When Judy Garland sings, you hear the divorces, the booze, the cigarettes, the loneliness and the longing for a love she would never find, in between the notes she used as steps to reach great heights--something that transcends just singing, but a full body performance through music that laid everything out to bare and kept audiences begging for more.

Billie Holiday and Judy Garland both had a warble, a raw shaky undercurrent that spoke to everything they had both been through: divorce, drug addiction, loneliness. Both singers gave more than a performance, they gave us completely and utterly of themselves.

They didn't always hit the notes perfectly, but they played the music flawlessly.

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"The world breaks everyone, and afterward, some are strong at the broken places." --Ernest Hemingway

Gay political and social organizations have existed since at least the 1950s--including The Daughters of Bilitis and The Mattachine Society, however a larger social and political visibility for LGBTQ people didn't really begin to take hold until the late 1960's/1970's--a period of great social upheaval for many marginalized groups including women, African Americans and homosexuals. Prior, they typically operated through more conservative efforts of lobbying and orderly protest, however with the rise of the women's liberation and black power movements, became increasingly radicalized.

The primary driving force behind a lot of the early gay movement was for sexual freedom, promiscuity and an avoidance of police and social harassment. With the advent of HIV/AIDS many scholars and

activists assert that a new form of community was formed out of necessity.

Political community, health care, laws and protection and support of our gay, lesbian and queer brothers and sisters in the face of horrifying death became the driving force and a focal point for collective identity.

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“Yet the paradoxical result of the first decade of AIDS was that homosexuality had achieved a voice as never before. As open lesbians and gays were drawn into policy formation and service delivery, and knowledge about gay lifestyles and sexual practices speak as a result of HIV/AIDS, so the homosexual community achieved a new openness and public presence.” --Aviva Leber

HIV/AIDS galvanized the gay community as never before--previously disparate elements united around the indifference of the larger society; lesbians nursed gay men as they lay dying, families came to terms with the sexuality of their children, unbreakable bonds were formed. The powerful coalitions formed to fight social and political indifference have carried us to where we are today, where our love for one another is equal in the eyes of the law and where have gone: from a whispered about menace, to fully proud and often embraced citizens, friends and neighbors.

The AIDS crisis was a terrible time, a plague that ravished an entire generation of people who could have contributed politically and culturally to our nation and the world--but on the one hand it galvanized us and made the LGBTQ community a force to be reckoned with.

By almost breaking us, it made us stronger.

In our wounds, there is gold.

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