

# The Story Behind Strange Fruit

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This is a fascinating story. Most people are familiar with the Billie Holiday classic *Strange Fruit*, but I suspect that many (including me until I read this) have no idea that the story behind the song includes Julius and Ethel Rosenberg - and Billy Crystal's uncle.

I certainly can't improve on NPR's reporting, so [click here](#) to read the whole story.

And just in case NPR takes the link down, here's a summary (their writing - not mine):

The man behind "Strange Fruit" is New York City's Abel Meeropol. In the late 1930s, Meeropol "was very disturbed at the continuation of racism in America, and seeing a photograph of a lynching sort of put him over the edge."

Meeropol once said the photograph "haunted" him "for days." So he wrote a poem about it, which was then printed in a teachers union publication. An amateur composer, Meeropol also set his words to music. He played it for a New York club owner — who ultimately gave it to Billie Holiday.

(See Billie Holiday sing *Strange Fruit* [here](#).)

"Abel Meeropol's pen name 'Lewis Allan' were the names of their children who were stillborn, who never lived," says his son, Robert Meeropol. He and his older brother, Michael, were raised by Abel and his wife, Anne Meeropol, after the boys' parents - Ethel and Julius Rosenberg - were executed for espionage in 1953.

Robert Meeropol says that in the months following his parents' execution, it was unclear who would take care of him and his brother. It was the height of McCarthyism. Even family members were fearful of being in any way associated with the Rosenbergs or Communism.

Then, at a Christmas party at the home of W.E.B. Du Bois, the boys were introduced to Abel and Anne Meeropol. A few weeks later, they were living with them.

"One of the most remarkable things was how quickly we adapted," Robert says. "First of all, Abel, what I remember about him as a 6-year-old was that he was a real jokester. He liked to tell silly jokes and play word games, and he would put on these comedy shows that would leave me rolling."

There is something else about Abel Meeropol that seems to connect the man who wrote "Strange Fruit" to the man who created a loving family out of a national scandal. "He was incredibly softhearted," Robert says.

For example, there was an old Japanese maple tree in their backyard, which sent out many new seedlings every year.

"I was the official lawnmower," Robert says, "and I was going to mow over them, and he said, 'Oh, no, you can't kill the seedlings!' I said, 'What are you going to do with them, Dad? There are dozens of them.'

"Well, he dug them up and put them in coffee cans and lined them up along the side of the house. And there were hundreds of them. But he couldn't bring himself to just kill them. It was just something he couldn't do."

*Strange Fruit* took extraordinary courage both for Meeropol to write and for Holiday to sing.

(Note: in the comments of the story, I found this: With regard to the courage shown by Meeropol and Holiday in writing and performing the song, a little credit is perhaps due to the man who had the guts to actually record it and issue the record: Milt Gabler, the owner of Commodore Records in New York. As one more fascinating coincidence, Gabler was the uncle of actor/comedian Billy Crystal.