

## STAGE REVIEW

# Rubin's Good, But Not Like Billie, In 'Yesterdays'

By **SUSAN HOOD**  
Special to the Courant

**T**he legendary jazz vocalist Billie Holiday, a "swing-sing" stylist of sweet, soulful intimacy and riveting intensity, gave her final concert 50 years ago, on May 25, 1959, in New York City. Less than two months later, at age 44, she was dead, the result of heroin and alcohol dependency. Holiday recorded extensively between 1933 and 1958, however, and her recordings are a remarkable legacy.

Reenie Upchurch was a teenager in Philadelphia when she first heard "Lady Day" singing on the radio and then snuck into local bars in the late 1950s to see Holiday perform. Based partly on her memories, she wrote "Yesterdays — An Evening With Billie Holiday," her imagining of her idolized singer's last nightclub appearance.

In a production mounted by the National Black Touring Company and directed by Woodie King, Jr., "Yesterdays" is playing at Hartford Stage, with the likable jazz singer Vanessa Rubin portraying the bluesy songbird.

Holiday's short life was horrific but not heroic. An original and great artist, she drew on a deep well of worldliness in her singing. But just as meeting the duck before you taste the paté doesn't enhance a gustatory experience, watching a depiction of Holiday's imminent immolation detracts from her, and Rubin's, gifts as storytellers in song.

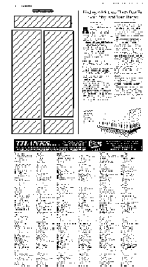
Rubin's voice is nothing like Holiday's. How could it be? Billie had a unique timbre, often described as spanning "pearly" to "horn-like," and a small range, which she used with heart-piercing effect through inimitable phrasing.

Rubin, whose major influence was the late Carmen McRae, sings 15 songs in the Holiday catalog, including the two most famous, "God Bless the Child" and "Strange Fruit," in her own honest and compelling way.

Solidly backing her, and portraying

Holiday's musicians, are music director and pianist Levi Barcourt, drummer Bernard Davis (who takes a turn singing "Unchained Melody"), and bassist David Jackson.

**>> "YESTERDAYS — AN EVENING WITH BILLIE HOLIDAY,"** at 2 hours and 15 minutes with one intermission, runs through Aug. 22 at Hartford Stage, 50 Church St., Hartford. Performances are Tuesday through Thursday at 7:30 p.m., Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. Matinees are on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays at 2 p.m. There is no evening performance on Aug. 16. For tickets, visit [www.hartfordstage.org](http://www.hartfordstage.org) or call (860) 527-5151.





TINA ENCARNACION

**JAZZ SINGER VANESSA RUBIN** sings 15 Billie Holiday songs in her own compelling way in "Yesterdays — An Evening With Billie Holiday," through Aug. 22 at Hartford Stage.