



City Research Online

City, University of London Institutional Repository

Citation: Priego, E. (2025). Strange Fruit. *La chanson d'Abel* (2025). An Interview with Vincent Hazard. *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*, 15(1), 24077. doi: 10.16995/cg.24077

This is the published version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/36375/>

Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.16995/cg.24077>

Copyright: City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

Reuse: Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.



***Strange Fruit. La chanson d'Abel* (2025). An Interview with Vincent Hazard**

Ernesto Priego, City, St Georges, University of London, efpriego@gmail.com

This interview with Vincent Hazard explores the creative genesis and collaborative process behind *Strange Fruit. La chanson d'Abel* (Dupuis, Aire Libre, 2025), a French language graphic novel illustrated by A. Dan that reimagines the story of Abel Meeropol, who wrote the anti-lynching song “Strange Fruit” (1939), and his connection to jazz icon Billie Holiday. Hazard recounts his journey from sound engineer to screenwriter, radio dramatist, and eventually graphic novel writer, highlighting how his earlier audio drama on Meeropol evolved into a comic. The conversation delves into key challenges of narrative balance, visual representation, emotional authenticity, and political resonance. Hazard reflects on the unique responsibilities of portraying racially and politically sensitive histories, the aesthetics of musicality in comics, and the necessity of research-driven storytelling grounded in archival truth. The interview also addresses the importance of artistic collaboration, transatlantic reception, and the socio-political relevance of such stories today, emphasising the value of complexity, nuance, and transnational solidarity in reclaiming marginalised histories through graphic storytelling.



Vincent Hazard is a French writer and screenwriter with a background in sound engineering and radio drama. He began his career working in film and television sound before transitioning into scriptwriting, with notable work for France Culture and Radio France. Hazard is known for his commitment to storytelling grounded in historical and political contexts, blending documentary research with narrative flair. He co-authored the graphic novel *Strange Fruit. La chanson d'Abel* (Dupuis, Aire Libre, 2025) with illustrator A. Dan, which explores the life of Abel Meeropol and the legacy of the iconic anti-lynching song popularised by Billie Holiday. Hazard continues to pursue projects that uncover overlooked histories through transmedia storytelling.

The interview was conducted in English over Zoom. The transcript has been copyedited for clarity, grammar, and length, with no changes to the speakers' intended meaning. Footnotes and in-text insertions in square brackets are the interviewer's.

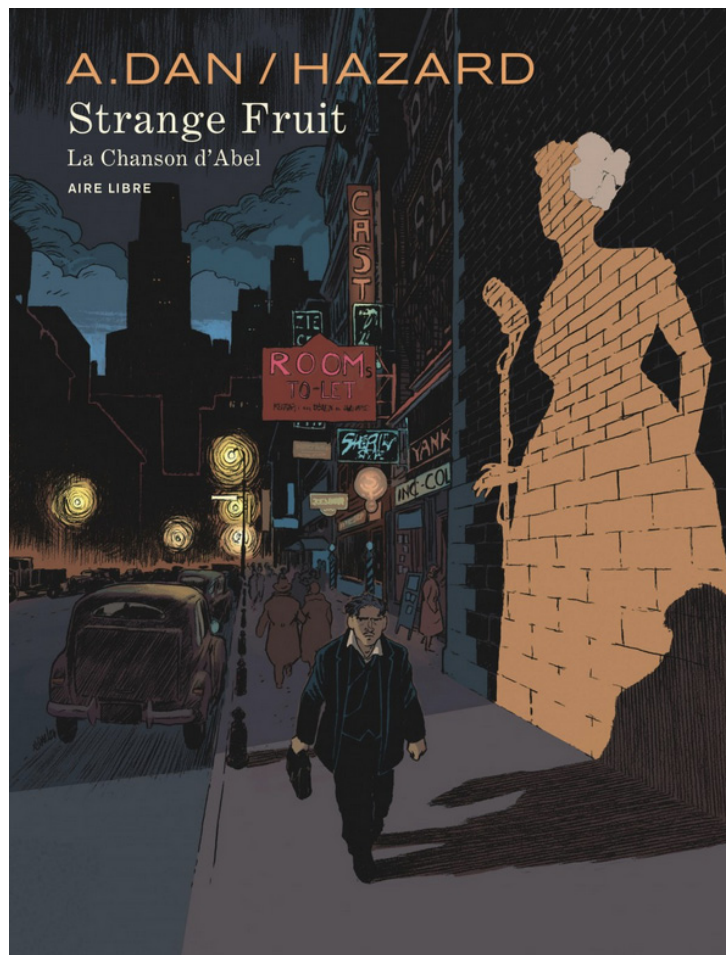


Figure 1: Cover artwork by A. Dan for the first hardcover edition of *Strange Fruit. La chanson d'Abel*, written by Vincent Hazard (2025). © Dupuis, 2025.

Ernesto Priego (EP): It's great to meet you. I've just read *Strange Fruit. La chanson d'Abel* (2025), and I really enjoyed it. I feel it's a very important and beautiful book. It made me want to talk to you about it.

Vincent Hazard (VH): Thank you.

EP: I understand that this book is the result of quite a lot of work in different ways. I was curious about its background. What kind of work were you doing before you started working on the *Strange Fruit* project, even before the radio project?

VH: Originally, I was a sound engineer, working predominantly for films and TV, but I kind of stumbled upon it. I was oriented towards engineering school at first and then I drifted towards sound engineering. I used to play music, so sound engineering was appealing to me at the time; we're talking about 20 years ago. I wanted to do something more creative, something of my own, and then I discovered the world of films and storytelling. I gradually went from a career in sound engineering to one in screenwriting. I did a one-year course at La Fémis (National Film School) and specialised in scriptwriting.

Because of my background in sound, I received commissions from the French National Radio (Radio France) for audio dramas of different kinds. Their editorial line focused on true events, period dramas grounded in historical facts, or true crime, so I specialised in that type of story [see Viet 2018]. But I have always enjoyed comic books and graphic novels, and I wanted to author one if I had the chance. Then through common friends I met Daniel Alexandre [co-author and illustrator A. Dan], and we decided to work together on a comic [*bande dessinée*]. I had a pile of audio projects for which I owned the rights, and I thought they could be interesting as the source material for graphic novels. I had lots of unused material, either because the situation had evolved since I had done the audio drama, or because I thought there was more to it than what the actual drama could cover, as they usually run for only thirty minutes.

EP: So this was therefore also the case with *Strange Fruit*?

VH: That was certainly the case for *Strange Fruit*, which was originally an audio drama I wrote for Radio France (2020), based on a story I first spotted through a documentary on the BBC. It might have been a sort of anniversary of the song, or something that mentioned the writer was this white Jewish guy from New York City whose name was Abel Meeropol.¹ That intrigued me, and I decided to start conducting research about

¹ Abel Meeropol (10 February 1903 – 29 October 1986) was an American songwriter and poet whose works were published under the pseudonym Lewis Allan [EP].

it and proposed the story to Radio France. Eventually I got in contact with, and met, the Meeropol children, Michael and Robert, who were very friendly, helpful, and really pleased that we were talking about their foster father.² They were very happy about that, so they helped a lot. Then I thought that we could carry on doing more research and work on something else with this topic.

EP: Did you know about Michael and Robert before the project?

VH: No. When I was doing the research for the project I learned they were Abel's children. I found them online and managed to get hold of them through their kids. They're not working anymore; Michael is around 80 and Robert about 75. Since then, we've been talking. Michael even came to Paris.

EP: Had [illustrator] Daniel Alexandre listened to your radio play before starting on the project for the comic?

VH: Yes. As a first pitch, I sent him a quick draft of the document I had presented to Radio France. He listened to the radio play [*fiction*], the audio drama, and then said, "Yes, let's do this." I told him the ideas I had to expand the book, and we had long chats about how we could do it. He trusted me. Daniel is not really a big fan of jazz, but he is more into the political aspect of things. He likes stories that are meaningful and politically committed.

EP: In what sense?

VH: Engaged, committed or militant in terms of values, not in the sense of belonging to a political party. The story is about people who fought for justice, which is a value that doesn't belong to one side of the political spectrum. Abel Meeropol happened to be a communist for a time, although he drifted away from the Communist Party after Stalin began torturing people and became a despot in the late 1930s. He didn't enjoy that part. I think that's what convinced him to leave. There was also the appealing job of representing the jazz scene, the clubs, and the New York of that period.

Daniel and I had separate areas of expertise: he would work on the pictures, the *mise-en-scène*, and the layout, and I would work on the script and the meaning of things. We gave each other feedback. I also provided him with a breakdown of each page, each frame, describing, for example, a wider shot with buildings, and then for

² Michael and Robert Meeropol are the birth sons of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. They were only 7 and 3 years old when their parents were arrested for espionage. The Rosenbergs' attorney, Manny Bloch, placed Michael and Robert with Abel and Anne Meeropol. In 1957 the couple legally adopted the boys. Michael and Robert Meeropol coauthored *We Are Your Sons: The Legacy of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg* (1975) [EP].

the dialogue in a balloon I would tell him that this was only a template, because I was coming from a filmmaking approach, like a basic storyboard. I direct films now, so I would say, “This is a straightforward shot, just to give you an idea of what I have in my head. Now you take it and make it better.”

EP: Had you written comics before?

VH: No, this was the first one. I’ve been working scripting for film and audio dramas, which are already slightly different formats, so I wasn’t shy about going into another format as long as I understood what the illustrator needed. We were lucky that we got on very well. His references are very cinematographic, so when I talked about thinking in terms of a storyboard, he was happy with that. He was also happy that I gave him leads without being too rigid. We set the limits of each other’s work in the right place. I’ve seen scriptwriters who decide everything very precisely, and illustrators who don’t want to hear your opinion. This middle ground was much more comfortable for me.

EP: The cover is very evocative [Figure 1]. How did you approach its design?

VH: That was a joint effort. We had a creative director at Dupuis supervising the work and giving very good feedback from the first rough idea. We all agreed we needed a strong cover. In France, when you go to a bookshop, many covers are beautiful, but they don’t stand out. I thought we needed Billie [Holiday] overshadowing Abel. People know Billie, not Abel, so Abel didn’t need to be big. He could be central and small. Billie would be the recognisable figure. I also thought the colours should be adventurous, something that strikes you when you walk past it. The whole dynamic of the light doesn’t make sense physically; it can’t be this way. But it stands out. Daniel understood the concept immediately. The first draft was already close to the final version. For the colours, Daniel did some tints. Someone else did the final colours, because there is an art director specifically for this collection. The publisher works with that person for the covers. We were running out of time a little bit, so Daniel gave the directions and someone else executed them. The colours of the inside pages are all Daniel’s work.

EP: When reading the book, I thought the artwork and the words work extremely well together to tell the story. Were you thinking musically as well? There seem to be examples where you attempt to reproduce the structure of the song, or even the atmosphere of the club or the city, in musical, or lyrical terms [Figure 2].

VH: Yes, we wanted that. The danger was for the book to become too cold, too much like a scientific breakdown of their lives. My whole concern was always to bring more emotion, to emphasise emotional connections between the characters. Music helps with that, and it’s a central component of it. We didn’t want to forget about the music.



Figure 2: Pages 8 and 9 from *Strange Fruit*. *La chanson d'Abel*, written by Vincent Hazard and illustrated by A. Dan (2025). © Dupuis, 2025.

If I had the opportunity to make a transition into something musical, because it reflected what was happening, I would. For example, the song where she talks about the man who comes back with lipstick on his collar (“Don’t Explain”, 1944) is a very sad song, but it reflects very much what Billie was going through at the time. That occurred to me as I was writing the script. I thought, “This is so much ‘Don’t Explain’,” which is something I knew, so I thought, “I’m going to tell that part and then drift into some lyrics.” That provided a parallel and an opportunity for Daniel to express himself visually. There are two lines going, the line of the song and the line of the storytelling, and Daniel could decide how to go from one to the other [for a related example, see Figure 3].

EP: There was the risk of Billie Holiday’s iconic fame overpowering the relatively unknown Abel Meeropol in this story. How did you prevent that?

VH: That was something I wanted to assess early on. Their stories were complementary, but Billie was much more famous, so she drew more attention. The academic sources also varied considerably. For Abel, the sources were very precise, sometimes down to FBI reports and actual dates, whereas the sources on Billie had many unknowns and contradictions. She was almost a compulsive liar, so it was difficult sometimes to know



Figure 3: Page 5 from *Strange Fruit. La chanson d'Abel*, written by Vincent Hazard and illustrated by A. Dan (2025). © Dupuis, 2025.

the truth behind her stories. One way to make Abel as strong a character as Billie was to make him the main character: the one through whom we see the story. He's the one who goes through the story, the one who sees Billie, the one who tells certain things. Structurally, starting in 1956 and using flashbacks allowed us to balance both parts more-or-less evenly. I didn't count pages; it was instinctive. No one has noticed an imbalance yet.

EP: You've touched on this before, but I'm still curious about your research process. There was one kind of research for the radio drama and a different kind for the comic. Did you have to go back to New York for the comic?

VH: For the radio drama, we didn't have the resources to go to the New York and investigate for a long time. I did most of the research online or through books, and spoke to Michael and Robert over the phone. Later on, I got selected for a programme

called *Sounds of New York*. I went to New York to do radio work, and then added an extra week to see the archives at New York University [Figure 4], meet Michael and Robert Meeropol, and visit their old haunts. That was necessary; it allowed me to gather visual documentation for Daniel firsthand. I also found things that even the family didn't know then: who had betrayed Abel, for instance. A cousin of his in the Navy got questioned and gave Abel Meeropol's name as a Communist activist. The sons didn't know that; they'd never seen those archives. I'm not an academic, but I've developed a historian-like habit of going into libraries and archives, finding things, digging, and contacting people. In the United States, people were particularly helpful with me as a French researcher coming with a genuine interest. They helped a lot, even remotely. It was very useful.



Figure 4: Vincent Hazard consulting the Camp Unity archives at NYU in March 2023. Photo by Laurent Hazard. © Laurent Hazard.

EP: The book is a French-language comic that deals cleverly with a politically charged topic. Your characters are not unidimensional. Billie Holiday suffers and is a victim, but arguably also contributes to the conflicts she finds herself in. How did you navigate that? And how do you think the comic would be received in the United States, where cultural paradigms or sensitivities may differ?

VH: One of the assets of the book is that this story hasn't been told in the United States a lot. I thought being French would be a problem, but Americans told me the opposite: that I was legitimate because I had the access to the Meeropol family. That was

reassuring. We know people like [American historian and academic] Robin Kelley, who is well known in the United States for his work on civil rights, and we were confident we could get him to write a preface,³ so we have people that can legitimise what we've done. We're bringing a European perspective.

Graphically, we tried to be as close as possible to the facts. Europeans may be more accustomed to complex storytelling; Billie wasn't just a hero. She had a fantastic voice, she was courageous and paid the price for singing "Strange Fruit", but she also had flaws. The same applies to Abel, his wife, and others. Portraying people as entirely good or evil does a disservice to the story, especially if you carry a political message. People fall into their camps and won't change their minds. The story speaks for itself. You don't have to embellish it or hide things. Readers trust you more if you don't.

EP: There is a long history of serious concerns about representation in comics. Did you and Daniel discuss race and representation while working?

VH: Yes. In films and radio, you're employing people, so representation matters. You need to question your assumptions. Does this character have to be a white male? Often changing that adds something. As a viewer or reader, I enjoy stories I haven't heard before. Denying the possibility of telling other people's stories is dangerous. It implies the reverse: that Black writers can only write about Black lives, women only about women, and so on. That's a dead end. The important thing is to be respectful and truthful.

EP: Do you have hope in comics as a medium? Is this something you want to try again?

VH: Yes. We have a second book on the way. We've been researching the story of a Native American man who was a First World War hero in France. People in Oklahoma told us to make sure it gets published in the United States, which gave us a lot of confidence. We're trying to be genuine, not opportunistic. I've touched on sensitive topics in France, for example jihadism, Islam, Sarkozy going to jail, and I've never been negatively criticised because I balance things and let people draw their own conclusions. The same method applies here.

EP: Thank you for the conversation and for speaking in English with me!

VH: No problem.

³ Kelley has written several books focusing on African-American history and culture, including *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (1994), *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original* (2009), and *Africa Speaks, America Answers: Modern Jazz in Revolutionary Times* (2012), which explores the relationship between jazz and Africa in the context of decolonisation and civil rights [EP].

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

Hazard, V. (writer) and **Alexandre, D.** (A. Dan; artist). 2025 *Strange Fruit. La Chanson D'Abel*. Aire Libre. Marcinelle : Dupuis. Available via <https://www.dupuis.com/strange-fruit/bd/strange-fruit-strange-fruit/121504> [accessed 11 October 2025].

Kelley, R.D.G. 1994. *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. New York: The Free Press.

Kelley, R.D.G. 2009. *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original*. New York: The Free Press.

Kelley, R.D.G. 2012. *Africa Speaks, America Answers: Modern Jazz in Revolutionary Times*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Meeropol, A., 1939. "Strange Fruit" [Song]. Originally published under pseudonym Lewis Allan.

Meeropol, R., with **Meeropol, M.** 1975. *We Are Your Sons: The Legacy of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

RadioFrance/FranceInter. 2020. "Strange Fruit", la chanson manifeste de Billie Holiday, [radio drama] 11 October 2020, available at <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/podcasts/autant-en-emporte-l-histoire/strange-fruit-la-chanson-manifeste-de-billie-holiday-3193847> [accessed 11 October 2025].

Viet, N. 2016. RadioFrance. Vincent Hazard, artisan du son et auteur de fictions. Originally published 1 December 2016; updated 3 May 2018, available at <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/vincent-hazard-artisan-du-son-et-auteur-de-fictions-4840470> <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/vincent-hazard-artisan-du-son-et-auteur-de-fictions-4840470> [accessed 11 October 2025].

