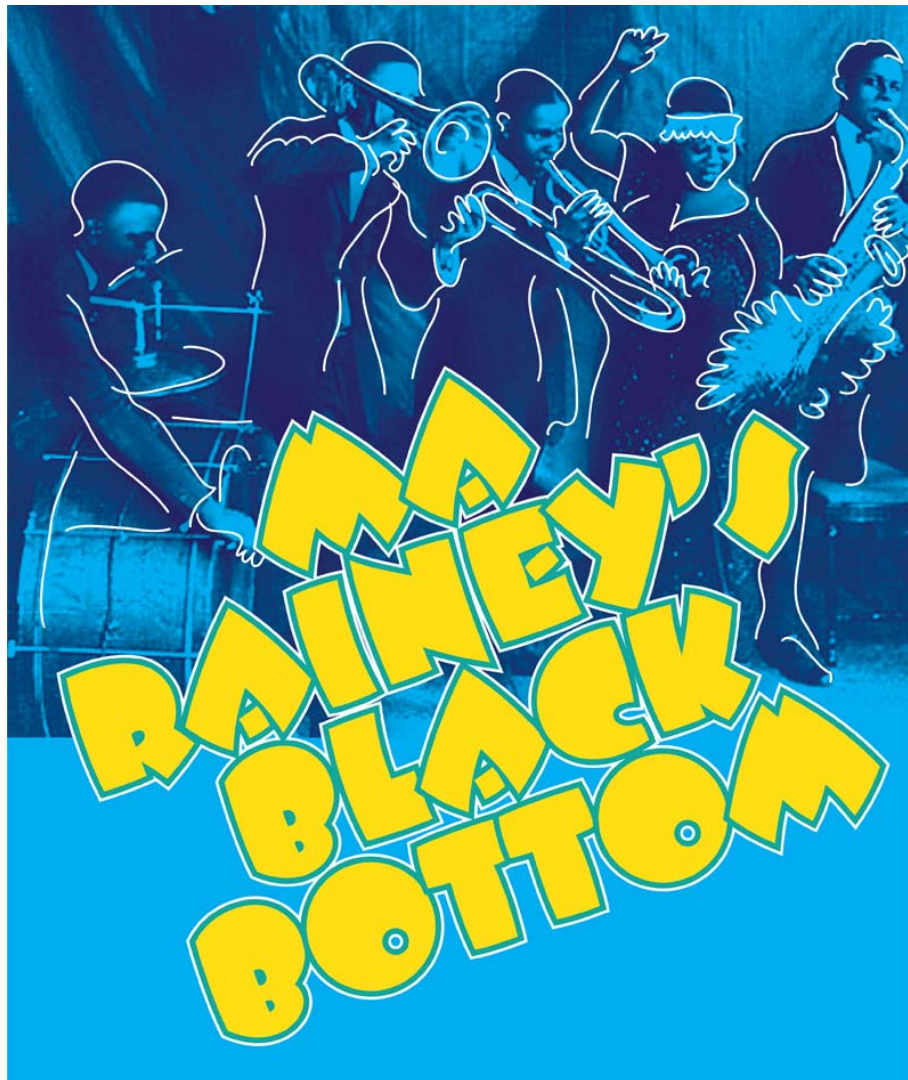




# Play Guide



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# American Stage Theatre

American Stage is Tampa Bay's best professional regional Equity theatre. Founded in 1977, the company's mission is to create the most satisfying live theatre in the Tampa Bay area, accessible to all members of the community. The vision of American Stage is



to preserve the greatest human stories from our past, while creating the most defining stories and storytelling of our time.

American Stage presents its six-play Mainstage Series in its, 182-seat Raymond James Theatre each year. The very popular American Stage in the Park celebrates its 26th Anniversary year. The theatre's other programming includes: "After Hours" Series, School Tour, and camps and classes for children and adults.

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It is American Stage Theatre Company's goal to share the enriching experience of live theatre. This play guide is intended to help you prepare for your visit to American Stage. Should you have any comments or suggestions regarding this guide, or if you need more information about scheduling trips to see an American Stage production, please feel free to contact us:

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# *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

## *Exploring the Play*

### About the Playwright – August Wilson



August Wilson was born Fredrick August Kittel, Jr. in 1945 to a white father, Fredrick August Kittel, Sr., and an African-American mother, Daisy Wilson, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He was the fourth of six children. His father was a German immigrant baker, and his mother was a cleaning woman from North Carolina. His parents stayed together until he was 5 years old. When he was a teenager, his mother remarried and moved the family from the Hill District, a predominately African-American section of Pittsburgh, to a primarily white working class neighborhood where Wilson encountered severe racial hostility. A voracious reader who credits his mother for his love of language, Wilson dropped out of school in the ninth grade due to the threats and abuse he encountered there. Not wanting to tell his mother about his decision to leave school, he spent his time at libraries, educating himself through books.

In 1962, Wilson enlisted in the U.S. Army but was discharged a year later. In 1965, he decided to become a writer, buying his first typewriter for \$20. That same year, he legally changed his name to August Wilson to honor his mother after his father's death. In 1968, he helped to found Pittsburgh's Black Horizons on the Hill Theater, with the goal of "politicizing the community." *Recycling*, his first play, was performed there. His next two plays, *The Homecoming* and *Sizwe Banzi is Dead*, were produced at Pittsburgh Public Theatre. Wilson was also heavily involved in the civil rights movement and described himself as a "Black Nationalist." After he moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1978, Wilson's career began to gather steam. In 1980, he received a fellowship at the Minneapolis Playwrights Center. Following the oft-given advice to write what you know, Wilson created characters that spoke like people he knew from his childhood.

## About the Playwright – August Wilson (continued)

In 1982, the prestigious Eugene O'Neill Center produced *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. The success of this play helped catapult Wilson into the national limelight. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* received the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best play and a Tony Award nomination from the League of New York Theatres and Producers. Wilson's next effort, *Fences*, was even more successful, garnering an Outstanding Play Award from the American Theatre Critics, a Drama Desk Award for Outstanding New Play, a Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and a Tony Award for best play. He would later win another Pulitzer for his play *The Piano Lesson* and be awarded the National Humanities Medal in 1999. August Wilson died on October 2, 2005 in Seattle from liver cancer. Fourteen days later, the Virginia Theater in New York's Broadway district was renamed the August Wilson Theatre. This is the first Broadway theater to be named after an African-American.

### The Pittsburgh Cycle

August Wilson is best known for his 10-play "Pittsburgh Cycle." Nine of the 10 plays take place in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, the neighborhood where Wilson spent the majority of his childhood. Each play is set in a different decade during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and together they chronicle the Black experience in America. Here is a list of the plays and the decade in which they take place:

- 1900s: *Gem of the Ocean*
- 1910s: *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*
- 1920s: *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*
- 1930s: *The Piano Lesson*
- 1940s: *Seven Guitars*
- 1950s: *Fences*
- 1960s: *Two Trains Running*
- 1970s: *Jitney*
- 1980s: *King Hedley II*
- 1990s: *Radio Golf*

Wilson did not write the plays in order, and they are not meant to be a serial story, although some characters appear or are mentioned in more than one play.

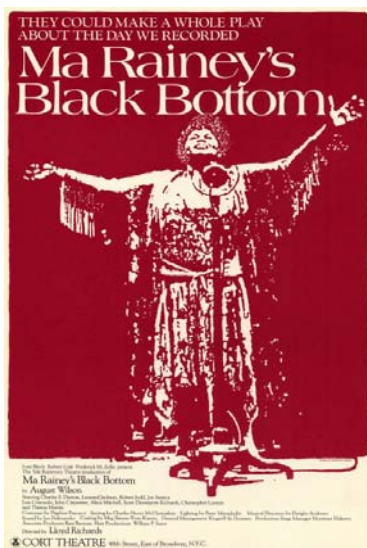
"What I want to do is place the culture of Black America on stage, to demonstrate that it has the ability to offer sustenance." – *August Wilson*

## *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* - Introduction

*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, was the first play August Wilson wrote in his 10-play century cycle. It is the only play not set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh. It was first performed at the Yale Repertory Theater in 1984, although Wilson began writing the play in 1976. Set in a Chicago recording studio in 1927, the two act drama tells the story of a recording session with blues legend Ma Rainey, her band members and their white producer and manager who have made themselves wealthy through Ma Rainey's recordings. The play explores relations with blacks and whites in 1920s America and the African- American search for identity. The title comes from the song of the same name, which also serves as the major point of conflict throughout the play. Wilson's character, Levee, embodies the aspirations and disappointments of black males during this era and, arguably, today. Wilson pits Levee against Rainey, the band members, and the whites, examining various levels of inter- and intra conflict.

Wilson finished the first version of the play in 1981 and had it accepted to the Eugene O' Neil Theater Center's National Playwrights Conference in the summer of 1982. In 1985, the play opened on Broadway at the Court Theater, and it subsequently won numerous awards, including the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best American play. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is considered Wilson's first major play and helped to cement his reputation as an important American playwright.

## Plot Overview



The play opens on the South Side of Chicago in a recording studio where Ma Rainey's band - Cutler, Toledo, Slow Drag, and Levee – wait to record a new album. They tell stories, joke and argue as they wait for Ma Rainey to arrive. As the play unfolds, it becomes clear that there is a lot of tension between the youngest band member, Levee, and the rest of the group. Levee, the young, hot-headed trumpeter who dreams of producing his own music and having his own band, clashes with Cutler and Toledo, veteran players who think that Levee has a lot to learn about music and the world.

After some time, Ma Rainey finally arrives with entourage in tow. They have fallen way behind schedule at this point and the white producer, Sturdyvant, is very unhappy. Ma insists that her nephew Sylvester perform the intro to the title song and this throws Ma's white manager, Irvine, and Sturdyvant into disarray. The conflict between Levee and Cutler continues to escalate and violence ensues. Ma then fires Levee for his insubordination, at which point Sturdyvant tells Levee that he will be unable to help him record his songs at the studio. Overcome by anger, disappointment and frustration, Levee responds by fatally stabbing Toledo, thus destroying his future.

## Characters

### Sylvester Brown

- Ma Rainey's nephew
- Young, built like an "Arkansas fullback"
- Stutters
- Driver during the car accident



### Cutler

- Guitar and trombone player
- Leader of the instrumentalists
- Loner, in his mid-fifties
- Plays his music straight without any embellishments
- Believes in getting things done quickly
- Thinks that black men have to do what's necessary to survive

### Dussie Mae

- Ma Rainey's beautiful young female lover
- Flaunts her assets
- Deferential to Ma but kisses Levee when she is alone with him
- Opportunistic

### Irvin

- Ma Rainey's white manager
- Prides himself in his knowledge of blacks and his ability to deal with them
- Chiefly motivated by money, although he seems to genuinely enjoy spending time with the band and Ma Rainey
- Spends most of his time settling conflict between Ma and Strudyvant
- Acts as a liaison between the white characters (Strudyvant, the police officer) and the black characters (Ma and the band)

### Levee

- Talented but temperamental young trumpet player
- In his early thirties
- Prides himself on his appearance especially his expensive, new shoes
- Wants to put a band together to record his own songs and thinks that Strudyvant will help him
- Plays his own version of the song "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom", which is faster and more modern than the other band members would like
- Frustrated and argues with all the other band members
- As a child, he witnessed his mother being raped by a gang of white men

## Characters (continued)



### Ma Rainey

- Based on the historical Ma Rainey, a famous blues singer
- Hailed as the “mother of the blues”
- Has the final say in all band decisions
- Has no illusions about the fact that her producer, Sturdyvant, and her manager, Irvin, are just trying to make money off of her
- Wields her power through, what are often seen as, petty demands

### Slow Drag

- Talented bass player in Ma’s band
- Slow moving
- In his mid-fifties, very professional and focused on his music
- Name comes from a story in which he slow-danced with a woman in an endurance contest for money
- Critics have said that his playing “reflects the fundamental rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic nuances found in African music”

### Mel Sturdyvant

- Overworked white owner of the recording studio and Ma Rainey’s producer
- Penny-pinching tightwad concerned only with money
- Uncomfortable dealing with black performers
- Represents white exploitation of black labor

### Toledo

- The only literate one in the band
- Plays the piano and is the most reflective of the group
- Believes style and musicianship are important to performance
- Often discusses abstract concepts such as racial memory and the plight of the black man throughout the play, but is taken literally by other band members when trying to make a philosophical point, thus confusing them
- Lost his wife and children in a divorce

“They don’t care nothing about me. All they want is my voice. Well, I done learned that, and they gonna treat me like I want to be treated no matter how much it hurts them.” – *Ma Rainey*

## Themes

### **Power**

Many struggles for power occur in the play and propel the dramatic question of whether or not the band will complete the recording session. The battle of wills between Rainey and Sturdyvant echoes the historical battle between capitalists and workers; only in this case, Rainey holds the rights to the music (the goods) that she produces until she gets what she wants from the producer. It is only after her demands are met and her musicians have been paid that she signs the contract. The power struggle between Levee and the other band members over which version of “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” they will perform reflects a generational conflict defined by different attitudes towards music. Rainey and the band represent the elder generation, wanting to play the song the way they always have. Levee, representing the younger generation, prefers a more improvisatory, jazz-like version of the song.

### **The Great Migration**

The Great Migration refers to the movement of large groups of African Americans who moved from Southern states to Northern states from 1915 – 1960. While many freed African American slaves did migrate to the North before this time period, the sheer number of African Americans exiting the South increased dramatically during World War I (1914-1918). The North offered more opportunity for blacks to earn a decent living and live better lives. In the North, factory and manufacturing jobs were plentiful. African Americans left the South in search of a better life. Between the years 1915 and 1960, more than 4,809,000 African Americans fled the South’s poor economy, as well as its’ racially motivated lynchings and Jim Crow laws. The band members and Ma Rainey were all part of this migration, and the music industry gave them hope for a more prosperous future. However, racism was still present in the North and finding work was not as easy as many had thought it would be. The blues music became a way for many African Americans to express their disappointment and struggle.

### **Black Identity**

The band members engage in a process of self-definition through the stories they tell, as well as through their interaction with each other and with the white Strudyvent and Irvin. Each band member’s story reveals something about their character, while tying them into the underlying blues that they play. Toledo defines himself through his ability to read (he is the only literate band member) and through his failed relationships with women. Levee defines himself through his appearance (his shoes become a central issue), through his womanizing, and through his musical differences with the other members of the band. His story about the rape of his mother and the murder of his father helps to explain Levee’s rage and argumentative nature. Cutler’s story is a typical one for most African American’s at that time, in theme if not in plot: Appeasing white power to survive.

# *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

## *Exploring the Context of the Play*

### Chicago in the 1920's

"It is early March in Chicago, 1927...Chicago in 1927 is a rough city, a bruising city, a city of millionaires and derelicts, gangsters and roughhouse dandies, whores and Irish grandmothers who move through its streets fingering long black rosaries. Somewhere a man is wrestling with the taste of a woman in his cheek. Somewhere a dog is barking. Somewhere the moon has fallen through a window and broken into thirty pieces of silver." – From the introduction to *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

The Great Migration from 1910-1960 brought hundreds of thousands of African Americans from the South to Chicago, where they settled, creating churches, community organizations, important businesses, and great music and literature. African Americans of all classes mainly settled on the South Side of Chicago. Their goal was to build a community where blacks could pursue life with the same rights as whites.



*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* takes place during the beginning of The Great Migration. African Americans had begun moving from the South to Chicago as early as 1840, but their numbers began increasing rapidly starting in 1910. Before 1915, Chicago enjoyed a reputation as being one of the more racially inclusive cities. However, with the sudden influx of such a large number of African Americans, tensions began to rise. African Americans found that racism was as real here as it had

been in the South. It was difficult for many African Americans to find jobs and decent places to live. There was fierce competition for housing among different groups of people at a time when the city was expanding in population. At the same time that African Americans moved from the South, Chicago was still receiving tens of thousands of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. The groups competed with each other for working class wages and housing. Though Chicago had been a mixed-race city since before the turn of the century, many established European immigrant families were still prejudiced against their African American neighbors. Ethnic gangs were prevalent during this time, with Irish gangs, in particular, being fiercely possessive of the territory they believed their families had established.

## Chicago in the 1920's (continued)



African American men gather on a street corner during the 1919 Chicago Riot

Because housing was so difficult to come by as masses of both African Americans and Europeans descended on the city, many African Americans had to look outside the South Side of Chicago for a place to live. This increased racial tension eventually came to a head on July 27, 1919 when an African American youth was drowned (the exact cause is disputed). Rioting began and was allowed to continue for seven days before finally ending on August 3.

Police officers, many who sympathized with the white rioters, proved useless at stopping the violence. Eventually the state militia was called in to stop the rioting. After seven days of beatings, shootings, arson and murders, 23 African Americans and 15 whites were dead with an additional 537 people injured (342 African American, 195 white).

Despite the riot and a recession in 1924, African American fortunes rose in the 1920s. Between 1925 and 1929, black Chicagoans gained unprecedented access to city jobs, expanded their professional class, and won elective office in local and state government. These years also marked the peak of Chicago jazz, which had begun its development well before World War I.



A white gang attacks an African American during the 1919 Chicago Riot

## The Real Ma Rainey



Ma Rainey was one of the most popular entertainers of the 1920's. She is often referred to as "The Mother of the Blues" due to the fact that she was the first popular entertainer to incorporate authentic blues into her song repertoire. Described by African American poet Sterling Brown in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* as "a person of the folk," Rainey sang about the black experience in America during that time.

Ma Rainey was born Gertrude Pridgett on April 26, 1886. Her parents, Thomas Prigett, Sr. and Ella Allen-Pridgett, were both performers on the minstrel circuit. Gertrude (as she was called then) broke into show business at the age of 13 when she won a talent competition in her hometown of Columbus, Georgia. A year later, she began singing and dancing in a local talent show titled, "A Bunch of Blackberries." Four years later, at the age of 18, she met and married singer William "Pa" Rainey, taking on the name of "Ma" Rainey as the two traveled throughout the South performing on the minstrel circuit with a group called the Rabbit Foot Minstrels. Though she did not hear blues in Columbus, her extensive travels with Pa brought her into contact with authentic country blues, which she worked into her song repertoire.

While performing with the Moses Stokes troupe in 1912, the Raineys were introduced to the show's newly recruited dancer, Bessie Smith. Eight years older than Smith, Ma befriended the young performer. There are many theories regarding Ma's role in shaping the young Smith. Some say that she was merely a friend. Others claim that she was Smith's mentor and possibly even her lover. (Bessie Smith was openly bisexual and many suspected Ma of being bisexual as well.) Whatever the truth is, these two women fundamentally influenced the development of the blues as popular music in their own unique ways. Ma Rainey was called "The Mother of the Blues," while Bessie Smith was dubbed "The Queen of the Blues."



## The Real Ma Rainey (continued)



Ma Rainey separated from her husband in 1916 but continued to build her career, performing with her own band and touring as the centerpiece of her own show. In 1923, she recorded her first album with Paramount, “Bo-Weevil Blues.” While she was already well known in the South, her recording career spread her fame across the country. It also partnered her with some of the greatest jazz musicians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Louis Armstrong, Tommy Ladnier, Joe Smith and Coleman Hawkins. Telling tales of the pain of jealousy, poverty, sexual abuse, and the loneliness of sharecroppers, people across the country could relate to her soulful songs which told the story of the life of African Americans in the 20s.

During her five year contract with Paramount, Ma made a total of 92 records.

Unlike many other blues musicians, Ma Rainey also earned a reputation as a business woman. According to Mayo Williams, as quoted in the liner notes to the album *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, “Ma Rainey was a shrew business woman. We never tried to put any swindles on her.”

Ma continued to perform until 1935. After retirement, she owned and operated two theatres, the Lyric Theatre and the Airdome, in her hometown of Columbus, Georgia. Ma Rainey died on December 22, 1939 of heart disease. She was 53 years old.

“They say I started it...but I didn’t. I just helped out. Filled us that empty space a little bit. That’s all. But if they wanna call me the Mother of the Blues, that’s all right with me. It don’t hurt none.” – Ma Rainey, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*

## History of the Blues

The blues originated in America during the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It combines the tonality of African-American work songs with European derived harmonic structures. The blues is said to be the first musical genre that was conceived in America. Before the blues, American popular music was imported from Europe. The blues is not just a generic term that applies to any music that addresses suffering and loss. Instead, classic blues songs are almost always composed of the “well known three line verse, in twelve measures of 4/4 rhythm, with an A-A-B rhyme pattern and a line length usually measured by five stressed syllables.” (From *Nothing but the Blues* by Lawrence Cohn, Abbeville Press, 1993.)

A product of the black experience in America and the tradition of slavery, the blues draws from the massive mistreatment of African Americans during the time of slavery and beyond. The blues is inspired by many factors, including the African call-and-response tradition, unaccompanied vocal music, the oral tradition of storytelling, and the European harmonic structure. The blues evolved slowly from spirituals and work songs sung by slaves. Where its exact roots were formed is still a mystery. However, it is thought that the blues may have taken shape in Mississippi. The state had a large, isolated, and impoverished African American population where they were forced to create their own entertainment. In northern Mississippi, the concentration of African American communities was so dense that the musical life preserved elements of African melody and instrumental style that had all but vanished elsewhere in the South. We will never know who sang the very first blues song. Who ever did, changed American music forever.



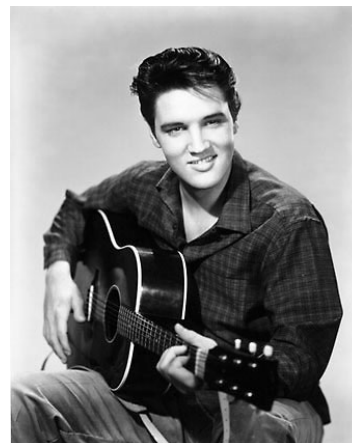
Early blues musician W.C. Handy known as “The Father of the Blues,” claims the blues was revealed to him by a man playing a guitar on the street.

While the blues originated in the South, it soon spread across the country thanks, in part, to The Great Migration. People from the South took the blues with them and the blues evolved in each place that they settled. There are now many types of blues. They include Country Blues, Piedmont Blues, Delta Blues, Memphis Blues, New Orleans Blues, Chicago Blues and West Coast Blues. However, they all represent a state of mind, a way of working unhappiness out of one’s system through song. Fredrick Douglas wrote, “Slaves sing to make themselves happy rather than to express their happiness through singing.” The blues doesn’t come from a mood. It strives to produce one.

“The blues help you get out of bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain’t alone. There’s something else in the words. Something’s been added by that song. This be an empty world without the blues. I take that emptiness and try to fill it up with something.”— Ma Rainey, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*

## Influence of the Blues

The blues has had a profound affect on other types of music. It has influenced many famous musicians and paved the way for new types of music like rock and roll. One of the most well known musicians of all time, Elvis Presley, was influenced by blues greats like B.B. King, Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, Little Richard, Fats Domino and many more. Elvis would often frequent blues clubs on Beale Street in Memphis, Tennessee. That area of town had a primarily African American clientele, so Elvis was defying convention (one of many times) by going there. By ignoring the status quo, Elvis was introduced to a type of music that would later help him define his own style eventually leading him to become known as the King of Rock and Roll.



Other artists that have been heavily influenced by the blues include: The Beatles, Jimmy Hendrix, The Rolling Stones and Eric Clapton. Many modern types of music would not be what they are today without the blues. Soul, Hip-Hop, R & B, Funk, Jazz, and Rap all draw inspiration from the blues. Blues also helped pave the way for African American musicians. Early blues artists broke barriers and fought to be defined not by the color of their skin but as artists. If they hadn't done so, modern day African American musicians would not have the status and respect they do today.

## The Recording Industry in the 1920s

### White Appropriation of Black Art

By the 1920s, the music industry was centered in Chicago, with its clubs, live jazz radio broadcasts and numerous recording studios. Beginning around 1914, leading jazz players gravitated towards Chicago, and the influx was sped by the closure of New Orleans' fabled Storyville district in 1917 forcing many of jazz's innovators north in search of work.

Paramount Records was an outgrowth of the Wisconsin Chair Company, a furniture company based in Port Washington, Wisconsin. The company first started producing records as a tactic to promote the sale of phonographs, with every purchaser getting between five and ten free records. They started importing masters from Europe when they noticed there was a demand for German language music, and then tried to record artists with a more popular appeal. However, they simply could not compete with larger companies. In 1922, a year after Mamie Smith became the first African-American woman to be recorded, they launched a series of "race music" that comprised about a third of their recordings and became their key to success.

## The Recording Industry in the 1920s (continued)



Mamie Smith

These records were aimed at African American consumers and were advertised in the black newspapers. Because most of the retail outlets for records had limiting contracts with the major record companies that did not allow them to sell other company's records, Paramount offered their records through mail order or independent dealers.

Richard M. Jones came from New Orleans and owned a music store in Chicago and was instrumental in bringing together artists and record companies. The store was a hangout for black musicians, and Jones would recommend artists, including Ma Rainey, to various record companies.

Many singers and songwriters were more interested in cash-in-hand than royalties, allowing recording managers to pay them outright and then capitalize on the situation by copywriting the artists' songs in their own name. Black artists were generally paid \$25 to \$50 per title, accompanists receiving between \$5 and \$10. Best-selling artists received \$75 to \$200 per recorded side. Ma Rainey was paid \$200 per side at the height of her career and quit the company when they wanted to reduce it to \$100. In contrast, Al Jolson, a white performer of jazz, blues, and ragtime, was paid \$10,000 per record in 1924.

New artists and material were discovered in Chicago through

**"They don't care nothing about me. All they want is my voice. Well, I done learned that, and they gonna treat me like I want to be treated no matter how much it hurts them."— Ma Rainey, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom***

venues like Jones' music store, as well as scouted in cities and small towns in the South by recording directors and independent scouts. Recording directors were generally more interested in the songs than the singers. They would bring in singers to audition, and then pay them for the songs if they thought they were more suited to one of their other artists. Independent writers were paid \$50 to \$60 per song, but composers that already worked at Paramount (usually the performers themselves) were only paid between \$5 and \$10. The majority of scouts and directors were white, with the exception of J. Mayo Williams, a black scout who was instrumental in recording many of Paramount's top musicians.

## Interesting Facts About 1927

- Coca-Cola contained actual cocaine at this time.
- The \$11 Levee pays for his shoes in 1927 equals approximately \$136 today.
- The American actor Sidney Poitier was born in 1927; he would later go on to become the first African American man to win an Oscar.
- On March 7, 1927, the Supreme Court declared a Texas law unconstitutional that was designed to keep African Americans from voting.
- In 1927, the Harlem Globetrotters were established.

# *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

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