



**UNIVERSITY THEATRE
DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE AND DRAMA**

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

By August Wilson

Mitchell Theatre, March 2 – March 17, 2012

Directed by Patrick Sims
Scenic Design by William Moser
Costume Design by Katie Gray
Lighting Design by Brandi Mitchell
Sound Design by Joe Cerqua
Stage Management by Lisa Marten
Dramaturgy by Jeff Godsey

Study Guide

By Jeff Godsey

Introduction to the Play

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom is not the story of early blues star Gertrude "Ma" Rainey so much as it is the story of a historical moment so fraught with the potential for change that everyone in the play seems to vibrate with anticipation. Since Mamie Smith had recorded the first blues vocal in 1920 ("Crazy Love"), the stars of the blues, a relatively new genre of popular music, had been women – Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, Ma Rainey, and others. Culled from vaudeville and travelling shows, these women were sassy, sophisticated, and theatrical. Some of them wrote songs, but few played an instrument, at least on stage. They were backed male musicians, many of whom nursed ambitions of their own. By the 1930s, all of this would change as the blues would become dominated by male artists who played their own accompaniments. Men like Robert Johnson and Big Bill Broonzy would become the new stars, paving the way for the giants of the 1940s and 1950s – Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup, Louis Jordan, Big Joe Turner, Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, and the great B.B. King. Though Ma Rainey's biggest year was 1928, the writing was already on the wall. Though the blues would always have a sprinkling of great female performers – Dinah Washington, Ruth Brown, and Big Mama Thornton among them – never again would they dominate the field as they had done in the 1920s.

Perhaps the characters in August Wilson's play can sense the coming change. Levee has talent and big dreams, and he is ready for the next step. Ma just needs him to settle down and tend to the business at hand. Making everyone even tenser is the nature of the recording session. Though Wilson does not state it explicitly, this particular recording session reflects the development of new recording technologies. Ma is recording electric versions of songs she had recorded acoustically earlier in the decade, and it is a new process for everyone. Acoustic vs. electric. Performance know-how vs. musical virtuosity. Female vs. male. Old vs. new. History records the outcome for us, but *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* tweaks the narrative in a very personal manner. By the end of the play, someone's dreams will be irrevocably shattered and a future will go unalterably dark.

The Characters

Sturdyvant: A record producer. Preoccupied with money. Not good with “the talent.”

Irvin: A record producer and talent wrangler. Thinks he’s good with African Americans.

Cutler: Guitarist, trombonist, and band leader. A solid player and man.

Toledo: The pianist. A great reader and something of a philosopher.

Slow Drag: The bassist. Bored, talented, and deceptively intelligent.

Levee: The trumpet-player. More talented than skilled. Big dreams and big arrogance.

Ma Rainey: The singer and the boss. Tough and fiercely protective.

Policeman: A white Chicago cop unimpressed with celebrity shenanigans.

Dussie Mae: Ma’s companion. Young and sensual with aspirations.

Sylvester: Ma’s nephew. Sweet country man not used to suits and studios.

Synopsis

Act One: Sturdyvant and Irvin ready the Chicago recording studio for the arrival of Ma Rainey and her band. Sturdyvant is nervous – nervous about the nature of the record business and nervous about the arrival of Ma Rainey, whom Wilson writes as somewhat demanding and imperious, an interpretation not supported by history. Cutler, Slow Drag, and Toledo arrive, followed soon after by Levee. The initial conversation revolves around Levee's shoes, for which he has paid a price deemed untenable by the others. Other differences are established between the others and Levee; he is contradictory, he feels that he is more talented than the others, and he wants to leave them to form his own band. Levee has an especially cross relationship with Toledo, with whom he argues about minutiae like how to spell the word "music." We also learn that Cutler and Slow Drag have known each other for years, having played on the vaudeville circuit together for over twenty years. The men rehearse a few songs until Slow Drag accidentally steps on Levee's shoes, prompting a skirmish that leads into arguments about race and spirituality. Ma, Dussie Mae, and Sylvester arrive in the company of a policeman, who is holding them after a traffic violation that led to a physical altercation. After Irvin pays the policeman off, Ma immediately begins fussing about the room's cool temperature. She is further incensed when Irvin asks her to sing Levee's new arrangement of her hit "Black Bottom Blues" on a new recording. She demands that her nephew Sylvester, who stutters, be allowed to perform the vocal lead-in on the recording. Meanwhile, we see that Sturdyvant has made a side deal with Levee to buy his new songs. As the act ends, Levee tells a devastating story about his mother's rape, his own mutilation, and his father's murder at the hands of white men in Mississippi.

Act Two: Ma is angry with Levee for flirting with Dussie Mae and with Irvin for telling her that Sylvester cannot record the lead-in to "Black Bottom Blues." She demands to run her own show. Sylvester fails on his first attempt, and Ma refuses to continue until she gets a Coke, bringing the session to a halt. As Slow Drag and Sylvester leave to find an open store, Dussie Mae and Levee drift off alone, and he tries to seduce her with promises of fame when he gets his own band. Ma, Cutler, and Toledo talk together about performing the blues for white men until the men return with Cokes, and the recording session resumes. Sylvester bungles two more takes, but upon the third – with Ma's encouragement, he lays down a perfect intro. Ma and the band perform a great "Black Bottom Blues," but the equipment had not been hooked up properly; the performance has not been recorded. Ma threatens to leave, but Irvin convinces her to give him fifteen minutes to get the problem fixed. The band's conversation drifts to women and then back to race and spirituality, with Levee being typically contrary. When he insults God, Cutler punches him. Levee pulls a knife, but the altercation ends safely. At last, the recording session ends successfully, though Ma accuses Levee of over-playing the trumpet part. Their argument becomes heated, and Ma fires him. Ma, Dussie Mae, and Sylvester leave for their hotel. Levee approaches Sturdyvant about his songs, only to find that Sturdyvant has decided against recording them. He ultimately

offers him five dollars per song. As the musicians gather their belongings, Toledo accidentally steps on Levee's shoe. Though Toledo apologizes, Levee stabs and kills him. The play ends.

August Wilson

August Wilson was born in 1945 in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The fourth of six children, Wilson's birth name was Frederick August Kittell Jr. Son of a German immigrant baker and an African American cleaning woman, he would eventually adopt his mother's maiden name, Wilson, out of respect for her continued presence and support after Kittell abandoned his family. The Hill District in which Wilson grew up would later serve as the setting for most of his major plays.



Wilson dropped out of high school during the tenth grade after a teacher accused him of plagiarism. He continued his education on his own, devouring the works of black authors at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh while working in a series of odd jobs before serving for a short time in the U.S. Army. In 1965, already knowing that he wanted to be a writer, Wilson experienced two significant milestones: he bought a stolen typewriter for \$20 and discovered the music of Bessie Smith, the "Empress of the Blues." He began scribbling down overheard conversations and observations wherever he went in hopes of becoming a poet.

In 1968, Wilson co-founded the Black Horizon Theater in the Hill District, where he would work not only as a playwright but also as an unschooled but eager director. He would not see a professional theatre production until 1976, but this did not stop him from writing and directing his own plays at the Black Horizon. His first professional playwriting credits came in 1978, when he moved to Saint Paul, Minnesota to write educational scripts for the Science Museum of Minnesota. He stayed in that position for three years before leaving to be a full-time playwright.

The Allegheny Repertory Theatre in Pittsburgh produced Wilson's play *Jitney* in 1982. This play – though Wilson did not know it at the time – would mark the beginning of Wilson's *Pittsburgh Cycle*, ten plays chronicling the African American experience of the twentieth century, with each play set in a different decade. Taking place in the 1970s, *Jitney* was set in Wilson's native Hill District, which would become the setting for most of the plays in the cycle. In 1984, Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* arrived on Broadway. Set in the 1920s, this play marked Wilson's first mainstream critical and popular success, receiving Drama Critics Circle and Tony Award nominations for Best Play. By 1987, Wilson had fully conceived the idea of the *Pittsburgh Cycle*, and he scored a major success with *Fences*, set in the 1950s. Perhaps Wilson's most popular play, *Fences* won the Drama Desk Award for Best Play, the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and the Tony Award for Best Play during its original run. It is still frequently performed in regional theatres and is highly anthologized. Wilson would also receive the Drama Desk Award for Best Play, the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Play, and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for his 1990 play *The Piano Lesson*, set in the 1930s. In April 2005, Wilson completed the cycle with *Radio Golf*, set in the 1990s.

The theatre world eagerly awaited Wilson's next project after completing *The Pittsburgh Cycle*. However, he was diagnosed with liver cancer in June 2005. August Wilson died on October 2, 2005.

Production History

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom opened on Broadway on October 11, 1984, with Theresa Merritt as Ma Rainey and frequent Wilson actor Charles S. Dutton as Levee. Both were nominated for Tony Awards, as was the play itself. Not nominated was Director Lloyd Richards, who would direct five more of Wilson's plays on Broadway and win Best Director twice – for *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*. *Ma Rainey* premiered London in 1989 with Clarke Peters (HBO's *The Wire* and *Treme*) as Toledo. *Ma Rainey* was revived on Broadway in 2003 in a poorly reviewed production starring Whoopi Goldberg as Ma and Charles S. Dutton reprising his role as Levee. The show closed after only 68 performances, not a long run by Broadway standards. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* continues to be performed frequently in regional theatres.



Theresa Merritt as Ma Rainey, 1984

Blues

Billie Holiday said they weren't "nothin' but a pain in your heart" ("Lady Sings the Blues," Billie Holiday & Herbert Nichols, 1956) and Georgia White said they weren't "nothin' but a low down heart disease" ("The Blues Ain't Nothin' But," Georgia White, 1938). Robert Johnson called them a "low-down shakin' chill" ("Preachin' Blues, Robert Johnson, 1936) and B.B. King said that he first got them when men stood over him with a whip on the ship they brought him over on ("Why I Sing the Blues," Dave Clark & B.B. King, 1969). We have yet to develop a satisfying, definitive explanation of the blues, but we know 'em when we hear 'em.

The blues seemed to spring up out of nowhere at the beginning of the twentieth century, along with its siblings ragtime and jazz. Unlike ragtime and jazz, however, the blues did not draw much from Western music. Percolating in the South sometime in the 1890s, blues marked the first time that melancholy had been explored in a serious way in popular music.

Musically, we can identify a basic blues verse structure – AAB or 12-bar blues. This means that a song following this structure will contain twelve bars, usually in patterns of two and a half measures of lyric with half a measure of instrumental response. The first line of each verse is repeated twice (AA) and is followed by a different line (B) that finishes the idea of the verse. Tracy Chapman's 1996 hit "Give Me One Reason" is a relatively recent and perfect example of this structure:

A Give me one reason to stay here, and I'll turn right back around
A Give me one reason to stay here, and I'll turn right back around
B I don't want to leave you lonely, but you got to make me change my mind

Chapman won a Grammy for Best Rock Song for her composition, but it is really a blues song.

Classifying a song as blues strictly according to its structure can be unsatisfying, though. Many a song we consider blues does not adhere to the AAB format. The first verse of Billie Holiday's aforementioned "Lady Sings the Blues," for example, is:

Lady sings the blues

I'm tellin' you
She's got them bad
Wants the world to know
Just what the blues is all about

A blues purist might say that this is not a blues song, as it does not follow the “correct” structure. Most people – including many music scholars – would say just the opposite. To us, what makes it blues is its subject and Holiday’s mournful vocal. Chapman’s “Give Me One Reason” is a blues song not only for its structure but for the same reason that Holiday’s song is a blues.

There are other structural components to blues, however. Usually, the blues is a solo expression. Blues singers often employ syncopation techniques, sometimes anticipating the beat and sometimes lagging behind it. Male blues singers usually play an instrument – generally guitar, piano, or harmonica – and use that instrument as another voice rather than strictly as accompaniment. Listen to B.B. King make his famed guitar Lucille cry on his 1969 recording of Roy Hawkins’ “The Thrill is Gone” for clarification.

During its early development, the blues emerged in three distinct regional styles in the South: the Delta blues, the Texas blues, and the East Coast blues. The Delta blues, emerging not just in Mississippi but in all of the Deep South, is known for its passion and intensity both in vocals and instrumentation. The vocals are percussive and rough, and the instrumentation is harmonically minimal, usually relying on a slide guitar technique. Arising as it did in house parties and juke joints, Delta blues often makes use of a shared body of lyrics, mirroring the deep sense of community for which the South is known. In every way except for playing slide guitar, Charley Patton (1887 or 1891–1934) is perhaps the “perfect” representative of early Delta blues.

The Texas blues can be characterized as generally being less intense than the Delta blues. Rather than slide guitar, Texas blues artists rely on a kind of thumping bass guitar. Texas blues artists would also pioneer electric blues guitar in the 1940s. Blind Lemon Jefferson (1893-1929) is a great example of a Texas blues guitarist and singer. The East Coast blues, developing on the Atlantic coast from Florida to Virginia, was influenced heavily by ragtime and is the most

harmonically complex and rhythmically bouncy blues. Try Blind Blake (1896-1934) to get a feel for it.

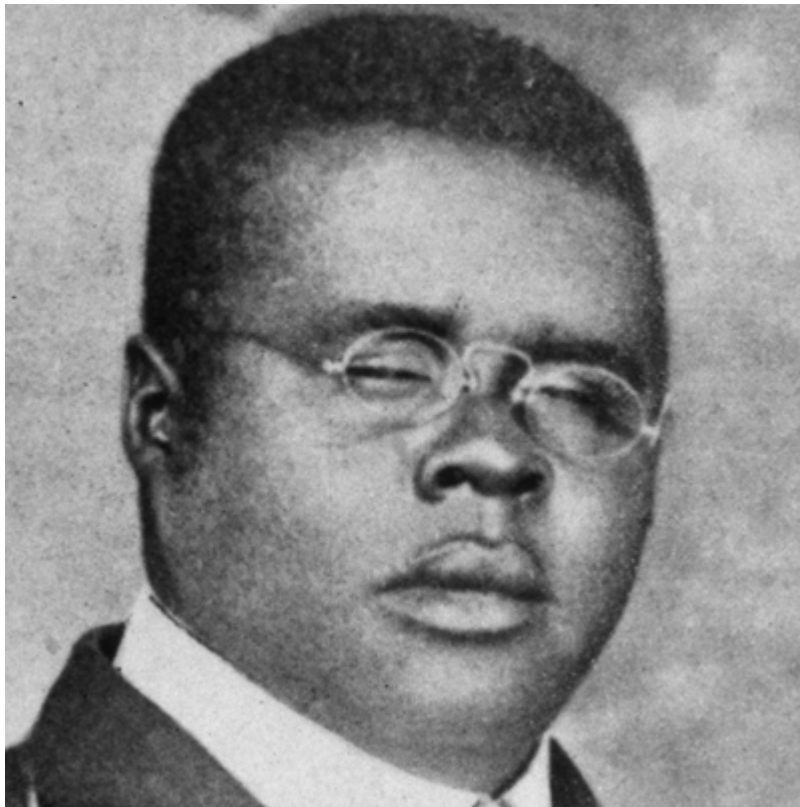
The blues first became professionalized through published sheet music in the 1910s. Some white performers recorded blues songs during this time with little success while black singers were honing their skills on the black vaudeville circuit. Initially, record companies did not think that black Americans had enough buying power to make recording black blues singers worth their time. In 1920, however, Okeh Records took a gamble with Mamie Smith, whose recording of “Crazy Blues” would prove popular enough to open the floodgates. Smith’s man-done-me-wrong song is typical in many respects, but its ending, in which Smith threatens to get drunk and kill a policeman, makes it interesting. The song is not an authentic folk blues number, though; it has a more vaudevillian, theatrical feel. Because of Smith’s success, most of the recorded blues from the 1920s would have a similar feel. Many of the 1920s blues stars – all of whom were women – were better actresses than singers. It is very easy now to locate recordings by the most popular of these singers, including, Mamie Smith, Alberta Hunter, Ethel Waters, Ma Rainey, and Bessie Smith.

A variety of factors brought about the downfall of these early female blues stars, not the least of which was the Great Depression of the 1930s. Almost all of these women had come from vaudeville and continued to perform in it as their records became popular. With the advent of the Depression, however, audiences found that movies and radio were cheaper than vaudeville, and for all practical purposes, vaudeville simply died. Plus, unlike the majority of the female singers, male blues singers accompanied themselves, making them much cheaper to record than the women for whom bands had to be hired. Mamie Smith would retire in 1931. Alberta Hunter turned to jazz and musical theatre but experienced a blues comeback in the 1970s. Ethel Waters, too, turned to jazz and theatre, becoming a major Broadway and film star. Ma Rainey attempted to continue touring until 1935 but then retired and became a theatre manager. Only Bessie Smith would be able to maintain her popularity as a blues artist, and she did that by incorporating a jazz feel into her sound.



Bessie Smith

Since that time, the blues has been a male-dominated field, though individual female artists have certainly enjoyed great success. Blind Lemon Jefferson was the great pioneer of recorded folk blues, though his career was cut tragically short when he lost his way in a Chicago blizzard and died at the age of thirty-six. While Jefferson was recording, record producers began to be intrigued by blues pianists, who had been developing barrelhouse blues and boogie-woogie blues. Barrelhouse is a rough saloon blues while boogie-woogie is a riff-based dance blues. Check out Pinetop Smith's "Pinetop's Boogie Woogie" (1928) for an example. Smith's smash hit was also his last; he died at the age of twenty-four, struck down by a stray bullet in a dance-hall as he played piano. By the 1940s, boogie-woogie would be appropriated by jazz artists, who turned it into a national dance craze.



Blind Lemon Jefferson

Blues continued developing in various ways until the 1940s, when World War II caused a shortage of shellac, the material used to make records. The war also broke up many blues bands, as musicians were either drafted or lured away from music by defense industry jobs. By the time the war ended, resentment toward segregation had coalesced musically into the jump blues, a very assertive style with a driving beat and shouting vocals. Jump blues would be the blues style that would merge with country music to form rock 'n' roll. Elvis Presley was heavily influenced by jump blues artists Wynonie Harris, Roy Milton, and Big Joe Turner.

Another effect of the 1940s was the mass migration to cities due to the rise of mechanized agriculture. Many Southern blues artists would head north to Chicago. There, they built a sort of Southern expatriate community, playing for and with each other and forming musical combos. Chicago also housed several independent recording labels, making it all the more attractive for blues players and singers. During the 1950s, the term "Chicago blues" emerged and became popular. This term has more to do with location than with a particular style, however, and is thus difficult to describe in stylistic terms. Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters were the greatest of the many great artists to emerge from

Chicago in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, and their records still sound fresh today.

Perhaps more than any other artist, B.B. King of Indianola, Mississippi has been the face of the blues for the general public. Often called “The Blues Ambassador,” King has not attained his popularity by “selling out” or by bringing a pop sound into his blues but by being a virtuoso and by arriving at the right time. Born in 1925, Riley B. King arrived in Memphis in the late 1940s and began playing in amateur shows on Beale Street and working as a disc jockey on Memphis’s legendary rhythm & blues station, WDIA. It was there that he acquired the nickname “Beale Street Blues Boy,” which he would eventually shorten to “B.B.” He began recording in 1949 and had already established his sound by his 1952 hit record “3 O’Clock Blues,” originally recorded by Lowell Fulson in 1946. The record is all B.B. – he produces a horn-like sound from the guitar; he does not play while he sings, preferring instead to establish a dialogue between his voice and guitar; and he brings a jazzy, improvisational field to his guitar solos. King’s songs would chart one after the other on the black charts during the 1950s and 1960s, but he would achieve crossover success in the late 1960s as British rock musicians like Eric Clapton, Keith Richards, and Jimmy Page began exploring the blues and incorporating it into rock. As this music became popular, B.B. King was perfectly poised to take advantage of the resurgence of interest in the blues and produce his monster hit, the aforementioned “The Thrill is Gone.” He has never been far from the spotlight since and is perhaps the one blues performer that even the least musically informed average Joe can name.



B.B. King

From the blues would emerge the soul genre in the 1960s. Soul would develop a distinct sound by the 1970s, and the popularity of the blues would decline. It seemed that radio and record companies would deem that only two or three blues artists could be popular at a time after that, and B.B. King was always one of them. A blues preservation movement began in the 1960s and developed in earnest in the 1970s, but it proved a double-edged sword in that it had the unintended effect of freezing blues and preventing it from evolving.

Today, blues sales charts are often topped by reissues or by white revivalist artists. As of this writing, the two top-selling albums on Billboard's blues chart are both by the great Etta James, recently deceased and much-lamented. At number three is an album by 1950s and 60s pop singer Dion (!) and at number four is an album by Gary Clark Jr., an extraordinarily gifted twenty-seven year-old singer and guitarist from Austin, Texas. Though based in a blues idiom, his work is unique but also strangely familiar, with a hint of Howlin' Wolf here and a touch of B.B. King there. His willingness to experiment with form rather than simply pay tribute to his forebears has blues critics placing their hopes for twenty-first century blues innovation on his shoulders.

This essay is constructed from notes the author took in 2003 in the University of Memphis course "Blues," taught by noted ethnomusicologist and Grammy Award winner David Evans.

Recommended Listening

Big Maybelle, *I've Got a Feeling: Okeh & Savoy Recordings 1952-1956* (2007)
Blind Blake, *Ragtime Guitar's Foremost Finger Picker* (1990)
Bobby "Blue" Bland, *Two Steps from the Blues* (1961)
Charles Brown, *Driftin' Blues: The Best of Charles Brown* (1995)
Ruth Brown, *Miss Rhythm (Greatest Hits and More)* (1990)
Roy Brown, *Good Rocking Tonight: The Best of Roy Brown* (1994)
Gary Clark Jr., *The Bright Lights* (2012)
Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup, *That's All Right Mama* (1992)
Bo Diddley, *The Definitive Collection* (2007)
Buddy Guy, *The Very Best of Buddy Guy* (1992)
Wynonie Harris, *Bloodshot Eyes: The Best of Wynonie Harris* (1993)
John Lee Hooker, *John Lee Hooker Plays and Sings the Blues* (1961)
Son House, *The Legendary Son House: Father of the Folk Blues* (1965)
Howlin' Wolf, *Howlin' Wolf/Moanin' in the Moonlight* (1986)
Alberta Hunter, *Young Alberta Hunter: The 20s and 30s* (1996)
Ivory Joe Hunter, *Since I Met You Baby: The Best of Ivory Joe Hunter* (1994)
Elmore James, *King of the Slide Guitar: The Fire/Fury/Enjoy Recordings* (1992)
Etta James, *At Last!* (1961)
Blind Lemon Jefferson, *King of the Country Blues* (1985)
Robert Johnson, *The Complete Recordings* (1990)
Louis Jordan, *The Best of Louis Jordan* (1977)
Albert King, *Born Under a Bad Sign* (1967)
B.B. King, *Live at the Regal* (1965)
Live in Cook County Jail (1971)
Denise LaSalle, *On the Loose* (1973)
Furry Lewis, *Furry Lewis* (1988)
Little Walter, *His Best (Chess 50th Anniversary Collection)* (1997)
Percy Mayfield, *Poet of the Blues* (1990)
Roy Milton, *Roy Milton and His Solid Senders* (1978)
Memphis Minnie, *Columbia Original Masters* (1991)
Charley Patton, *Founder of the Delta Blues* (1969)
Ma Rainey, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1990)
Jimmy Reed, *The Very Best* (2000)
Otis Rush, *Essential Collection: The Classic Cobra Recordings 1956-1958* (2000)
Bessie Smith, *Empress of the Blues: Collectors Edition* (1994)
Mamie Smith, *Crazy Blues: The Best of Mamie Smith* (2004)
Koko Taylor, *What it Takes: The Chess Years* (1977)
Sister Rosetta Tharpe, *The Original Soul Sister* (2002)
Big Mama Thornton, *Hound Dog: The Peacock Recordings* (1992)
Big Joe Turner, *The Very Best of Big Joe Turner* (1998)
Dinah Washington, *The Definitive Dinah Washington* (2002)
Ethel Waters, *An Introduction to Ethel Waters: Her Best Recordings 1921-1940*
(1994)
Muddy Waters, *At Newport* (1960)
Billie Holiday, *Strange Fruit* (2000)

Further Reading

August Wilson:

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Further Discussion

According to all historical accounts, Ma Rainey was a wonderful woman. She was warm, outgoing, and nurturing. Musicians loved working for her because she would often buy them new instruments. August Wilson chooses to write her as somewhat demanding and aggressive. Why do you think he does that? Is there a particular story he is trying to tell that requires it? What does her fussiness do for the story?

Is the audience meant to identify with one of the characters in particular? Do you? Why?

Is it important to understand the history of the blues to enjoy *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*?

Find and read a couple of articles about today's music business. Do you see any parallels between the music business of today and that of Ma Rainey's time?

Does Ma Rainey have as much power over her work as she claims to have in the play? Why or why not?

Ma's musicians tell each other several stories in the play. Explain the function of storytelling in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

At the end of Act Two, Toledo commits the same offense to Levee that Slow Drag had committed in Act One. Why do you think his reaction toward Toledo is so different and so extreme?