

AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 20, 2026

AUGUST WILSON'S **MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM**

DIRECTED BY
GREGG T. DANIEL



 **aNoiseWithin** ^{YEARS}
35
Classic Theatre. Modern Magic.

Dear School Partner,

Welcome to A Noise Within Theatre! We are thrilled to welcome you to the 35th Anniversary Season—a season in which we look to **Those Better Angels**—a theme inspired by Lincoln’s call to our best selves. In *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, tension rises as a famous 1920’s Black blues singer and her band attempt to record music at a white-owned studio, raising the essential question: *How does an artist maintain dignity and control within a system designed to exploit them?*

In this study guide, you will find articles, classroom activities, behind-the-scenes interviews, and other exciting materials, all crafted to align with the Common Core and the California VAPA Standards. This study guide can be enjoyed by teachers and students alike, our hope being that teachers and students enjoy it together!

We offer this study guide as a free resource for contextualizing the show and drawing parallels with our modern world, and you can find guides from our past seasons available for download on our website.

We hope this study guide will prepare you to enjoy the show to its fullest potential and to create a lasting memory of a fantastic day at the theatre. We are happy to have you!

Warmly,

A Noise Within Education



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Credits

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Character Map

Ma Rainey

A famous blues singer. She is known as the “Mother of the Blues.”

Ma Rainey’s band members:

Cutler

The band leader. He plays guitar and trombone.

Levee

The youngest and most ambitious member of the band. He plays the trumpet.

Toledo

The piano player. He is the only band member who can read.

Slow Drag

The bass player.

Sylvester

Ma Rainey’s nephew.

Dussie Mae

A young woman who travels with Ma Rainey.

Mr. Sturdyvant

A music producer and the owner of the recording studio.

Mr. Irvin

Ma Rainey’s manager.

Policeman

Interesting Fact

Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, which takes place in Chicago, is the only play in August Wilson’s ten-play American Century Cycle that is not set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, PA, where Wilson himself was born and raised.



Play Synopsis



Setting:

A recording studio in Chicago, 1927.
All of the play's action takes place over one afternoon.

Act 1

In the recording studio, **Mr. Irvin and Mr. Sturdyvant** are setting up for a recording session with **Ma Rainey, the “Mother of the Blues.”** Sturdyvant, who owns the studio, is frustrated that Ma is late, and Irvin, who is Ma's manager, urges him to be patient. Three men in Ma Rainey's band arrive—**Cutler, Toledo, and Slow Drag**—and Irvin shows them to the band room. The youngest band member, **Levee**, arrives late, having stopped to buy a pair of expensive shoes that caught his eye. **Levee has become impatient with Ma Rainey's style of music**; he dismisses it as old-fashioned “jug band” music, and he insists that Sturdyvant and Irvin want the band to play Levee's arrangement of the song “Ma Rainey's Black Bottom.” The four men argue, joke, and occasionally rehearse while they wait for Ma.

Ma Rainey arrives with **her nephew, Sylvester**, and **Dussie Mae**, a young woman who travels with her. A policeman is with them, and he demands that they go down to the police station to answer various charges. Irvin pays off the policeman and then takes Sylvester to the band room because Ma has said that **Sylvester will be speaking the introduction** to “Ma Rainey's Black Bottom.” Levee is furious when Irvin tells him that

Play Synopsis *continued*

Ma refuses to allow the band to perform Levee's version of the song. The band quickly discovers that **Sylvester stutters badly**. Levee loses his temper, and **he reveals a deeply traumatic experience of racist violence** that he suffered as a child. The lights go down as Slow Drag sings a few bars from a blues song.

Act 2

Cutler tells Irvin that Sylvester stutters and can't speak the lines, but **Ma insists, overruling the band and standing up to Sturdyvant**. While Slow Drag and Sylvester go out to buy a Coke for Ma, she and Cutler discuss blues music. Dussie Mae wanders down to the band room, which is deserted except for Levee. **They have a flirtatious encounter** that quickly becomes something more. Once the band is reassembled in the recording studio, **they attempt to record the songs, but problems continue**. Back in the band room, Cutler and Levee get into an argument about God that quickly becomes violent, though disaster is averted. The action alternates between the band room and the recording studio, until the session is finally over. **Ma loses patience with Levee and fires him**. Levee remains defiant until Sturdyvant tells him that he can't use the music that Levee wrote after all. As the band members pack up, Toledo accidentally steps on Levee's new shoes. **Levee's frustration and rage boil over once again**, but this time, there is no averting the tragedy that follows.

Interesting Fact

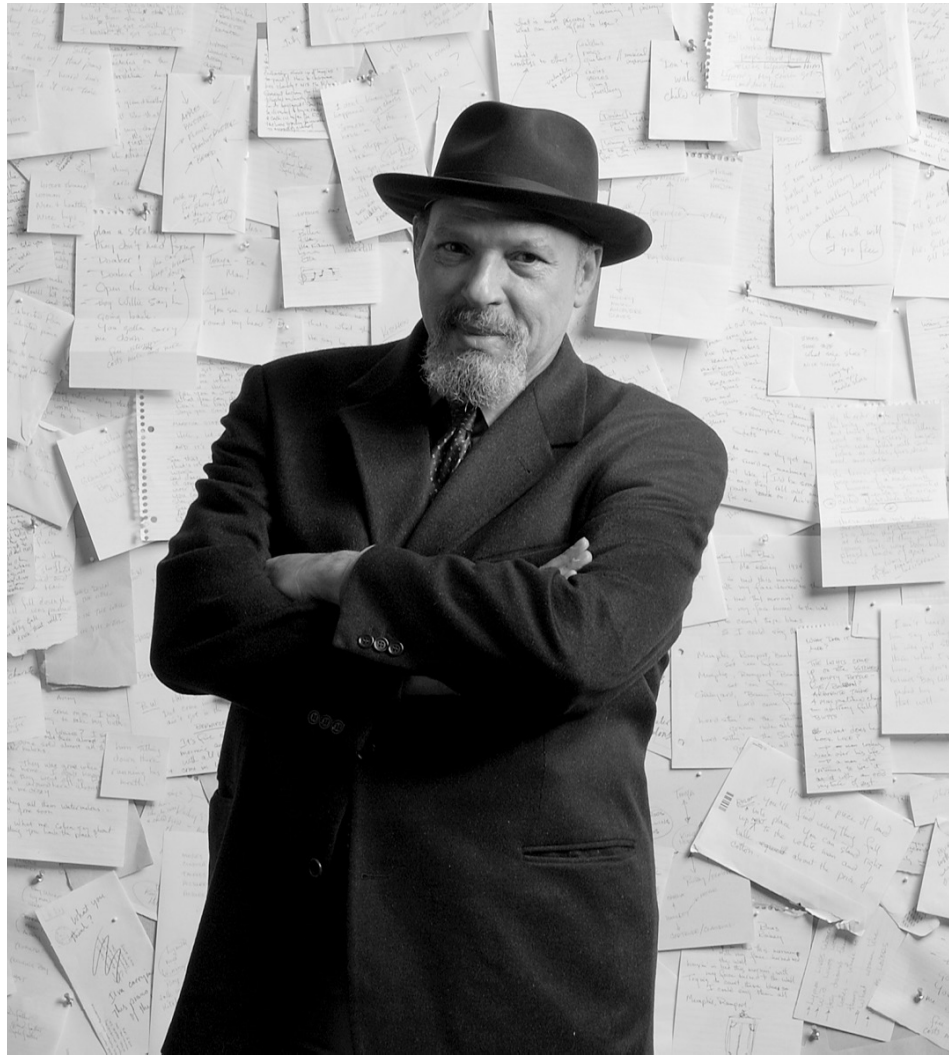
The recording session depicted in August Wilson's play is based on historical fact—Ma Rainey did record many songs for Paramount Studios, which rented recording spaces in Chicago largely to record blues artists—but aside from Ma herself, most of the characters and events in the play are fictitious.

Gertrude Pridgett "Ma" Rainey. 1920s.



August Wilson

August Wilson (1945-2005) was born Frederick August Kittel, Jr., in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, PA. He was the fourth of six children born to Daisy Wilson, a Black woman who cleaned houses for a living, and Frederick August Kittel, Sr., a German immigrant who was a baker and pastry chef. Wilson's parents divorced when he was young, and his father was almost entirely absent during Wilson's childhood. Wilson was raised by his mother, and he changed his name to August Wilson to honor her after his father died in 1965. Wilson and his mother remained very close until her death in 1983.



August Wilson, Playwright. 2011. Flickr.com.

Wilson attended three separate high schools, experiencing racism from his teachers and his fellow students at all three. He finally dropped out in 10th grade, after a teacher wrongly accused him of having plagiarized a paper that he had written on Napoleon I of France. Afraid of disappointing his mother, Wilson did not tell her that he had dropped out of school. Instead, he spent his days reading in various Pittsburgh public libraries, so he was essentially self-taught. He was influenced by the writings of many African American authors, including Malcolm X. In the 1960's Wilson became active in the arts community in Pittsburgh, and he began writing poetry and plays. Wilson said that **his greatest influences were “the four B’s”: poet Amiri Baraka; artist Romare Bearden; author Jorge Luis Borges; and Blues music.**

August Wilson is best known for his American Century Cycle, a collection of ten plays, each set during a different decade of the twentieth century, and all but one set in Pittsburgh's Hill District. Together the plays chronicle the Black experience in twentieth-century America and they form, in the words of drama critic John Lahr, “a kind of fever chart of the unmooring trauma of slavery.” Wilson received numerous awards for his work, including two Pulitzer Prizes (for *The Piano Lesson* and *Fences*) and two Tony Awards.

August Wilson *continued*

Wilson died of liver cancer at the age of sixty, in 2005, shortly before the Broadway opening of *Radio Golf* (the final play in the cycle and the last play that Wilson wrote). After his death, the Virginia Theatre in New York City was renamed the August Wilson Theatre. **It was the first Broadway theatre to be named after a Black American.**

Wilson's widow, Constanza Romero, has said that "August, while seeking out all the beauty, the struggle, the truths and wisdoms in African American Culture, mined the larger themes that make us all human." Wilson's ability to combine the specific with the universal has led many scholars, readers, and theatre professionals to compare him favorably to Shakespeare, whom Wilson greatly admired. Like Shakespeare, Wilson did not avoid tackling uncomfortable topics, nor was he afraid to confront himself and his own anxieties. Wilson's advice to rising artists echoes a line spoken by Shakespeare's Prospero, who says, in *The Tempest*, "This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine." Similarly, Wilson urged young artists to "Confront the dark parts of yourself, and work to banish them with illumination and forgiveness. Your willingness to wrestle with your demons will cause your angels to sing." August Wilson's plays are a testament to his genius and his bravery, and they continue to sing to us today.

"Confront the dark parts of yourself, and work to banish them with illumination and forgiveness. Your willingness to wrestle with your demons will cause your angels to sing."

—August Wilson



The American Century Cycle

The ten plays in August Wilson's American Century Cycle chronicle the experiences of Black Americans in every decade of the 20th century. In chronological order of the decade in which they are set, the plays in August Wilson's American Century Cycle are: *Gem of the Ocean* (1904), *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1911), *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1927), *The Piano Lesson* (1936), *Seven Guitars* (1948), *Fences* (1957), *Two Trains Running* (1969), *Jitney* (1977), *King Hedley II* (1985), and *Radio Golf* (1997).

Interestingly, Wilson wrote the plays in a completely different order. The first was *Jitney*, written in 1982 but set in the 1970's. It was followed by *Ma Rainey*, the only play that is set in Chicago. Moreover, Wilson did not explicitly set out to write a 10-play cycle (as American playwright Eugene O'Neill had attempted to do during the years 1935-1939, although he completed only two). The final two plays that Wilson wrote were the "bookend plays": *Gem of the Ocean* and *Radio Golf*. Wilson died of liver cancer in 2005, only a few months after completing *Radio Golf*.



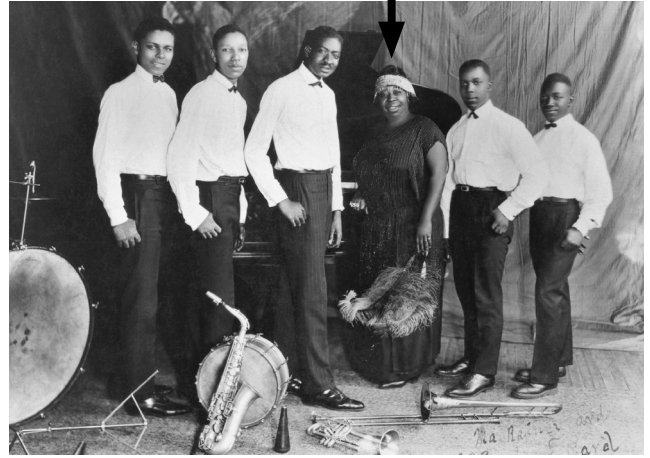
Images clockwise: A Noise Within past productions. Jessica Williams, Veralyn Jones, Alex Morris, and Gerald Rivers in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. Nija Okoro & Evan Lewis Smith in *The Piano Lesson*. Gerald Rivers in *King Hedley II*. Photos by Craig Schwartz.

Themes, Motifs, & Symbols

That's the real
Ma Rainey!



Joe 'King' Oliver and His Creole Jazz Band in Chicago, 1923. Public Domain.



Ed Pollack, Albert Wynn, Thomas A. Dorsey, Ma Rainey, Dave Nelson, and Gabriel Washington in 1923.

Blues music: Blues music is a unique musical genre that was originally developed by Black American musicians beginning in the late nineteenth century. The blues incorporated musical and vocal traditions from African songs and chants; from church hymns and spirituals; and from work songs and “field hollers.” The blues in turn inspired many later musical developments, notably jazz, rhythm and blues music, and eventually “rock and roll.” The blues evolved as a result of Black Americans’ horrific experiences of loss and pain at the hands of white enslavers and their descendants; yet paradoxically, by initiating the intergenerational trauma that gave rise to the blues, the oppressors created the very circumstances that led to the creation of a musical form that was beyond their own abilities to invent, and which they coveted.

The blues represent one of the most powerful examples of resilience in American history, because they are grounded in the power that comes from fearlessly acknowledging the past, and then defiantly refusing to be defined solely by the trauma of that past. For August Wilson’s characters, the blues serve as a metaphor for the process by which a character acknowledges and accepts his or her traumatic past. As blues artist Johnny Shines observed in a 1975 interview, “The blues are not wrote; the blues are *lived*.”

Ma Rainey: Gertrude Pridgett, who became Ma Rainey (1886-1935), was a famous blues singer who recorded many of her songs in the 1920’s. Born in Georgia, she married Will “Pa” Rainey in 1904, and the two developed a vaudeville act that they took on the



Ma Rainey Portrait Disc. OldHatRecords.com.

Themes, Motifs, & Symbols *continued*

road, often with another troupe of musicians and entertainers, touring through Georgia, Alabama, and other southern states. Although they divorced after a dozen years, Ma Rainey continued to tour and record on her own with her band. From 1923-1928, Ma Rainey recorded almost 100 songs with Paramount Records, and she became known as the “Mother of the Blues.” She was famous for her low, deep vocals; her flashy attire; and her rapport with audiences, mostly southern Black Americans. Ma Rainey was also notorious for her sexually suggestive lyrics and her frankness about her bisexuality. In this regard she paved the way for many other Black female blues artists, including Bessie Smith and Memphis Minnie.

Chicago, Racism, and the Roaring ‘20’s: During the 1920’s, Chicago flourished as one of the most vital urban centers in the country. A major hub of everything from industry to transportation to food production, Chicago lured many Americans, and especially Black Americans, with its promise of growth and steady work. Chicago was also a center of the recording industry, with Paramount Records opening up a recording studio there that specifically focused on Black musicians and their music, including blues, jazz, and even commercially recorded gospel music—genres that were gaining popularity with white audiences as well. Chicago was also a major center of organized crime, where the powerful Al Capone ran his empire while paying the police to look the other way. During the Prohibition Era (1920-1933)—when no alcohol was permitted to be purchased, transported, or served in the U.S.—Chicago boasted many “speak-easies,” where alcohol was sold illicitly to customers who thrilled to the new sounds of Black musicians. Aside from recording stars like Ma Rainey, however, most Black Americans who came to Chicago in search of work found their options were severely limited, and they were largely confined to service jobs.



Al Capone.

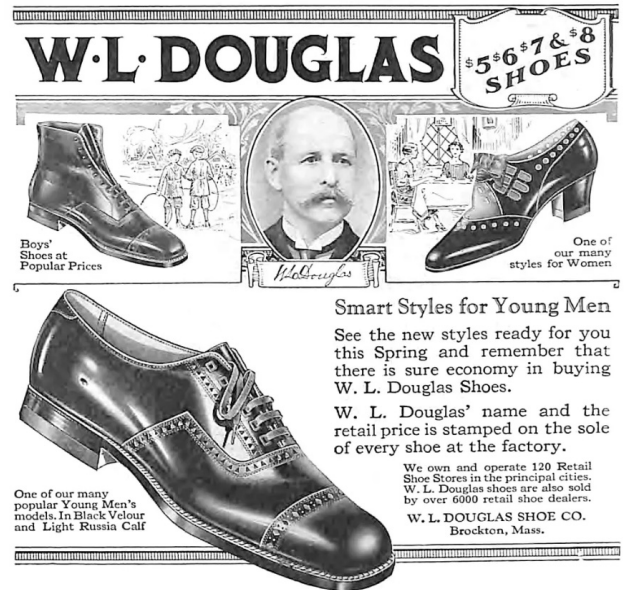
Exploitation in the Recording Industry: A significant theme in the play is the cynical exploitation by white producers of Black recording artists. During the time period of 1920-1940, music producers saw the potential for significant financial gain in recording the work of blues artists, and many white-run studios were quick to record these artists and release

Themes, Motifs, & Symbols *continued*

their work on the studio's so-called "race label." These recordings caught on quickly, first with Black listeners and then with white people. Yet despite selling so well that in some cases these artists made millions of dollars for the white-owned studios that recorded their songs, very few Black artists received any share of those profits. August Wilson addresses this shameful exploitation in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and in at least two other plays in the Century Cycle: *The Piano Lesson* (set in 1936) and *Seven Guitars* (set in 1948).

Levee's New Shoes: Levee is late to rehearsal because he has stopped on the way to buy a new pair of shoes. At \$11 for the pair (which would be approximately \$210 today), the shoes cost more than Levee typically earns in a week. Although we learn from the other band members that Levee wants the new shoes in order to impress Dussie Mae, the shoes obviously represent something much more important to Levee, and his desire for them runs far deeper than impressing a girl. Levee has become impatient with playing Ma's music, and he has begun composing music that is closer to jazz and swing. Clearly the shoes are an unconscious metaphor for Levee's ambitions, and throughout the action of the play, the shoes' condition mirrors Levee's hopes and dreams for a better life. When those desires are ultimately thwarted, Levee has no choice, psychologically, other than to protect the shoes from anything or anyone who seems to threaten them, with horrifying results.

Religion: Questions about spirituality and religion, and the role that the characters' beliefs play in their lives, are among the most complex issues in the play. They are also among the most contentious, as the characters argue with each other about their beliefs. Throughout his American Century Cycle, playwright August Wilson repeatedly explores the tension between Christianity—a religion that some white Americans imposed on enslaved people and then used cynically as a tool of oppression—and the spiritual traditions that many enslaved people brought with them from Africa and then passed down through various channels to the next generations. In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the older band members, especially Cutler and Toledo, are Christians who believe in a powerful, all-knowing God. Levee, however, grapples with the age-old question of how a loving God could allow bad things to happen.



Vintage Advertisement for W.L. Douglas Shoes, printed in the April 1925 issue of The Elks Magazine.

Acts of Defiance: The Blues & Ma Rainey

Interesting Fact

The earliest blues artists to record their music with major studios were women, including Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. Black male blues artists recorded primarily in the 1930's and 1940's.

August Wilson famously listed blues music as among the “four B’s” that had most inspired him (the other three were poet Amiri Baraka; artist Romare Bearden; and author Jorge Luis Borges), and music—especially blues music—features prominently in Wilson’s plays because it has always been an essential part of the Black American experience. Wilson once wrote, “I chose the blues as my aesthetic. I create worlds out of the ideas and the attitudes and the material in the blues. I think the blues are the best literature that blacks have. It is an expression of our people and our response to the world. I don’t write about the blues; I’m not influenced by the blues. I *am* the blues.”

Yet the music industry has also been one of the many spheres where Black Americans have been taken advantage of, particularly Black blues musicians. Beginning in the 1920’s, many Black artists recorded their songs for white producers at white-owned studios,



Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (2020)
Film Poster. Netflix. Fair Use.

Acts of Defiance: The Blues & Ma Rainey *continued*

only to see these same unscrupulous producers pocket the proceeds while the artists themselves faded into impoverished obscurity. Three of Wilson's Century Cycle plays—*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (set in Chicago, 1927), *The Piano Lesson* (Pittsburgh, 1936), and *Seven Guitars* (Pittsburgh, 1948)—focus on the exploitation of Black blues musicians by white producers.

In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Ma Rainey has become such a reliable and lucrative hitmaker that she is accorded some degree of respect by Irvin and (to a lesser extent) by Sturdyvant. But Ma has no illusions about how far her power extends; she tells Cutler that "As soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it's just like if I'd be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on." Ma is equally realistic about the limits of her power in the world beyond the studio; even in a northern city like Chicago, Ma knows perfectly well that once outside, she couldn't even hail a cab to take her to the hotel that caters to Black clientele where she and her entourage must stay. Nevertheless, Ma also knows that she can always return to touring among the audiences that truly understand her: Black Americans in the South. She tells Cutler that "white folks don't understand about the blues. They hear it come out, but they don't know how it got there." She adds, "This be an empty world without the blues."

Interestingly, Ma Rainey herself doesn't seem particularly invested in being called the "Mother of the Blues," because she knows that she didn't invent the genre: "I ain't started the blues way of singing," she tells Toledo; "The blues always been here." Ma's confidence in herself and in her singing, whether she's in a white-owned recording studio or a tent in Georgia, is grounded in her profound understanding of the blues and in her realistic view of white people. Levee, however, rejects the blues as old-fashioned "jug band" music; he has confidence in himself and his music, but he lacks Ma's hard-earned wisdom. Rashly believing that he can succeed in the white man's world, and carrying a crushing weight of unresolved trauma, Levee's bitter disappointment at Sturdyvant's exploitation quickly transforms into fury, and the play ends tragically with a horrifying act of violence.

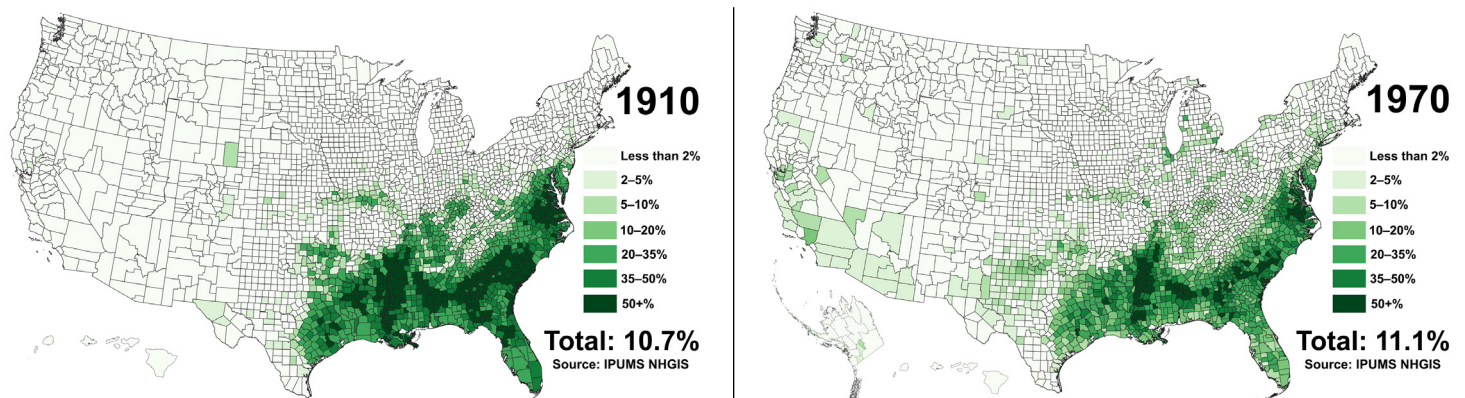
Ma understands, in a way that Levee does not, that the blues are songs of grief and pain, but that the very act of singing them allows the singer and the listeners to move past a terrible inheritance. Wilson seems to suggest that if the past is present only as rage, however justified, then that past may destroy Black Americans, as it destroys Levee. The blues represent acts of defiance, but also of resilience, and they offer a way forward. Ma Rainey recognizes this, and she knows that the blues belong not only to her, but to all Black people, and she certainly doesn't need a fancy, marketable title to remind her listeners of this essential truth.

The Great Migration: “History Speaks”

The city of Chicago, where *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* is set, is strategically located on the southwestern shore of Lake Michigan, the second largest of the Great Lakes. Many other cities in New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania are also located on the shores of the Great Lakes, or at the intersection of major rivers. These advantageously located cities experienced economic booms beginning in the early 1800’s, and they became preferred destinations during the Great Migration, a roughly sixty-year time period (from 1910-1970) when many Black Americans left the South to travel north in search of better economic and social opportunities. In her 2010 book *The Warmth of Other Suns*, journalist **Isabel Wilkerson describes the Great Migration as “the first mass act of independence by a people who were in bondage in this country for far longer than they have been free.”**

The twentieth-century American South was a place of terrible harshness for Black Americans. The infamous Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) had made “separate but equal” the law of the land and provided the legal basis for ongoing racial segregation, especially in the South, but not limited to that region. Landmark Supreme Court decisions that sought to undo the destructive effects of *Plessy*, such as *Brown v. Board of Education*, and legislation such as the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, were still many decades away. “Jim Crow” laws—the state-sanctioned and state-enforced laws that maintained rigid segregation in all areas of society—as well as blatantly racist practices, such as voter suppression (through “literacy tests,” voter ID requirements, and sheer intimidation) and redlining, combined to create nearly insurmountable odds for Black individuals struggling to thrive and prosper. Moreover, the American South was a violent and dangerous place for Black Americans, often fatally so.

These dire circumstances, combined with the prosperous times and plentiful jobs that



African American population distribution during the Great Migration. Creative Commons.

The Great Migration: “History Speaks” *continued*

industry brought to many Northern and midwestern American cities, led countless Black Americans to leave their homes in the South to travel north in search of a better life. Yet even in northern cities most Black Americans found their options were limited, at best. Ma Rainey, despite her success, may have some degree of power and influence in the recording studio, but once outside on the streets of Chicago she can’t even hail a taxicab.



Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson. 2020. Photograph by Lloyd DeGrane.

In 2023, Supreme Court

Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson eloquently summarized the history of Black Americans’ experiences, including the Great Migration and the effects of Jim Crow, in her dissenting opinion in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard* that ended the practice of affirmative action in college and university admissions. She concluded, “History speaks. In some form or another, it can be heard forever.” Significantly, the routes of the Great Migration followed many of the routes established by the Underground Railroad in the pre-Civil War South—a powerful illustration of history speaking across the centuries. More troubling are recent efforts to roll back many of the hard-won advances of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that served the needs of many marginalized groups. History does indeed speak forever, though not always in ways that promote a steady improvement in the lives and circumstances of all Americans (as Justice Jackson’s dissent notes). It is up to each of us to decide whether to regress or to move forward with hope, as so many Black Americans did during the Great Migration.

The Song Behind the Play

ACTIVITY

Objective

Analyze lyrics and song as a primary historical source.

What can music teach us about a particular time and place?

How is music a reflection of culture and the values of a community or society?

Step 1: Listen

Ma Rainey, the “Mother of the Blues,” recorded her famous song ‘Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom’ in Chicago in 1927. August Wilson’s play *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* is a dramatization of this historical event.

Listen to the song ‘Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom’ as performed by Ma Rainey and respond to the following prompts.

- What instruments do you hear?
- What stands out most about the recording?
- Describe the overall mood and tone of the song.
- How would you describe Ma Rainey’s style of singing?

Step 2: Annotate

Read the lyrics of ‘Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.’ While reading, complete the following annotations; then respond to the following prompts.

Circle references to music and dance.

- **Underline** lines that reveal confidence or power.
- **Star** any lines that are surprising or unique.
- Where does the narrative of this song take place?
- How does Ma Rainey present herself in this song? What makes her seem powerful?
- What kind of relationship between performer and audience does this song evoke?

The Song Behind the Play *continued*

WAY DOWN SOUTH IN ALABAMA
I GOT A FRIEND THEY CALL DANCING SAMMY
WHO'S CRAZY ABOUT ALL THE LATEST DANCES
BLACK BOTTOM STOMP, TWO BABIES PRANCING
THE OTHER NIGHT AT A SWELL AFFAIR
SOON AS THE BOYS FOUND OUT THAT I WAS THERE
HE SAID, COME ON, MA, LET'S GO TO THE CABARET
WHEN I GOT THERE YOU OUGHTA HEAR ME SAY

I WANT TO SEE THE DANCE YOU CALL THE BLACK BOTTOM
I WANT TO LEARN THAT DANCE
I WANT TO SEE THE DANCE YOU CALL YOUR BIG BLACK BOTTOM
IT'LL PUT YOU IN A TRANCE
ALL THE BOYS IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD
THEY SAY YOUR BLACK BOTTOM IS REALLY GOOD
COME ON AND SHOW ME YOUR BLACK BOTTOM
I WANT TO LEARN THAT DANCE

I WANT TO SEE THE DANCE YOU CALL THE BLACK BOTTOM
I WANT TO LEARN THAT DANCE
COME ON AND SHOW THE DANCE YOU CALL YOUR BIG BLACK BOTTOM
IT PUTS YOU IN A TRANCE
EARLY LAST MORNING ABOUT THE BREAK OF DAY
GRANDPA TOLD MY GRANDMA, I HEARD HIM SAY
GET UP AND SHOW YOUR OLD MAN YOUR BLACK BOTTOM
I WANT TO LEARN THAT DANCE

NOW I'M GONNA SHOW Y'ALL MY BLACK BOTTOM
THEY PAY TO SEE THAT DANCE
WAIT UNTIL YOU SEE ME DO MY BIG BLACK BOTTOM
IT PUTS YOU IN A TRANCE
AH, DO IT MA, DO IT, HONEY
LOOK OUT NOW MA, YOU GETTIN' KINDA ROUGH THERE
YOU BETTER BE YOURSELF NOW, CAREFUL NOW
NOT TOO STRONG, NOT TOO STRONG
I DONE SHOWED YOU ALL MY BLACK BOTTOM
YOU OUGHT TO LEARN THAT DANCE.

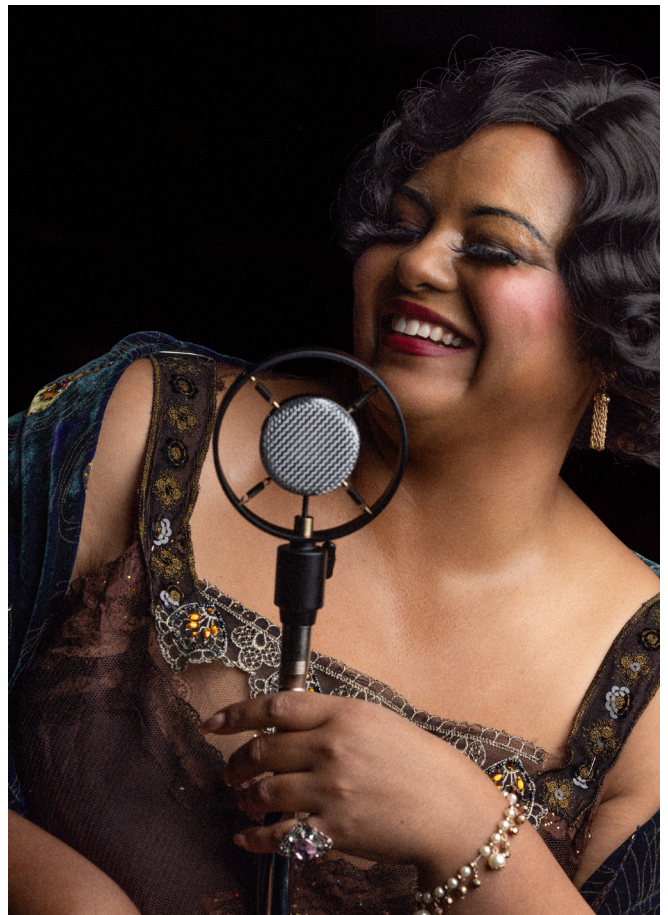
Discussion Questions

Before the Show:

1. What do you already know about **the blues, Ma Rainey, and 1920's Chicago**? What kind of tone, setting, or themes do you expect from a play titled *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*?
2. What do people do when they feel **powerless**? Which responses are most effective?
3. In the creation of a song, film, or piece of artwork, **who holds the most power**: the artist, the producer, or the consumer?

After the Show:

1. Throughout the play, how does Ma Rainey exercise **her power as a Black artist** within a white-run system? Is she the most powerful character in the play?
2. How does *Ma Rainey* explore the theme of **exploitation in the recording industry**? Who benefits from exploitation in the play, or who is harmed by it? How do race and racism contribute to this theme?
3. Why does **Levee clash with Ma Rainey** and the other band members? What do these conflicts reveal about their differing ideas of respect, power, and survival?
4. Cutler and his band members Slow Drag and Toledo spend much of their afternoon at the recording studio enjoying **humor and storytelling**. What might this tell us about the strength of collective power?
5. Does **Mr. Irvin's politeness** excuse him from exploiting the band members? Why or why not?
6. Who holds **responsibility for the play's tragic ending**? Levee, the band mates, the record producers, or a system larger than any one individual?



Amber Liekhus by Daniel Reichert.

The Folks Behind Ma's Sound

We sat down with *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* cast member Amber Liekhus (Ma Rainey) and Sound Designer Jeff Gardner to ask them some questions about bringing the sound of Ma to life!

AMBER – as we all know, Ma Rainey was a real blues singer in the 1920s. What kind of research have you conducted or resources have you tapped to find Ma's sound?

I started by listening to as many of Ma Rainey's original recordings as I could. What struck me immediately wasn't just her voice, it was her confidence. She sings with complete authority, never apologizing for the size or grit of her sound. I also researched her life, the history of the Black vaudeville circuit, and the role Black women played in shaping American music during the 1920s. I wanted to understand not only how she sounded, but why she sang the way she did. Every choice feels rooted in survival, joy, business savvy, and an unwavering sense of self.

This role has also become deeply personal because music is part of my own family history. My grandfather, James "Jimmy" Keith, was a Kansas City jazz saxophonist who performed with some of the great musicians of his era, including Harlan Leonard and Count Basie. My grandmother, Gertrude Keith, studied music before dedicating her life to public service and civil rights. She also helped raise me and was my very first voice teacher. Some of my earliest musical memories are with her, learning not just how to sing, but how to communicate through music. Because of her, I've always understood that music is about more than beautiful sound. It's about truth, resilience, and connection.

As I was preparing for this role, I learned that Ma Rainey's given name was Gertrude. That felt like such a meaningful coincidence. Having been raised musically by my own Gertrude while portraying another remarkable Gertrude has made this journey feel especially personal.



Amber Liekhus, A Noise Within Resident Artist.



Jeff Gardner, A Noise Within Resident Artist.

The Folks Behind Ma's Sound *continued*

Throughout your career as a performer, you have sung in many different musical styles. What genres have shaped you, and what makes the blues unique among them?

I've been incredibly fortunate to build a career that has taken me through opera, musical theatre, jazz, gospel, and concert work. Each genre has shaped me in a different way. Opera taught me discipline and vocal freedom. Musical theatre taught me that every lyric has to serve the story. Gospel taught me to sing from a place of faith, community, and emotional truth. And jazz has always felt like home because of my family's roots.

What makes the blues unique is that it asks you to let go of perfection. It isn't about the prettiest sound or the most polished technique. It's about honesty. The blues gives you permission to be vulnerable, to embrace the cracks in the voice, the weight of the lyric, and the lived experience behind every note.

As a classically trained singer, that has been both liberating and humbling. Preparing for Ma has reminded me that technique should always serve the story, not the other way around. When Ma sings, every note feels earned. She isn't performing to impress anyone; she's singing because she has something she needs the world to hear. That's what makes her music so timeless, and it's what I've tried to bring with me every time I step onstage.

What have you found the most surprising or unexpected in preparing to sing Ma?

What surprised me most is how modern Ma feels. When I first approached the role, I expected to spend most of my time learning a musical style, a southern dialect, and a ton of beautifully crafted language. Instead, I found myself learning from a woman who understood her worth long before the world was ready to acknowledge it.

One of August Wilson's greatest gifts is that he never lets these characters become historical figures trapped in the past. Through his writing, Ma isn't just the "Mother of the Blues"; she's a fully realized woman: brilliant, funny, stubborn, vulnerable, fiercely protective, and deeply aware of the value of her art. His words reveal the humanity behind the legend, and that has been one of the greatest joys of preparing this role.

As performers, we're often taught to be accommodating—to say yes, to be grateful for the opportunity, and to avoid making waves. Ma reminds us that knowing your value isn't arrogance; it's survival. She demands respect for herself, her musicians, and her art because she understands that, in her world, no one else is going to hand it to her.

The Folks Behind Ma's Sound *continued*

Preparing this role has also deepened my appreciation for the artists who came before us. As a Black woman whose own musical journey began with my grandmother, cultivated and supported by my mother, and nurtured by my many mentors, I feel incredibly grateful to stand in a lineage of musicians who paved the way for future generations. Bringing *Ma* to life feels like honoring not only her legacy, but also the legacy of my own family. It's a responsibility I carry with a great deal of pride.

JEFF - How does sound design fit into a play that's already centered around live music?

People are often surprised to learn that the actors cast in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* aren't always trained musicians. Part of my job is to bring Ma Rainey's band to life. Before we even begin technical rehearsals, we'll record a fantastic group of musicians performing the show's music.

Those recordings become an essential rehearsal tool, allowing the actors to practice and convincingly embody professional musicians onstage.

Beyond the songs, the sound design helps immerse the audience in the world of the play. Throughout the production, subtle underscoring and reinforcement of the actors' voices help support the storytelling while keeping the focus on August Wilson's language and the power of the performances.



Portrait of Bessie Smith.

The Folks Behind Ma's Sound *continued*

In what ways does your sound design help establish the time and place of 1920s Chicago?

One of the first things audiences will hear is a celebration of the women who defined the Classic Female Blues era. The pre-show music focuses on recordings from roughly 1925–1928, placing the audience in the same musical world that Ma Rainey inhabited. You'll hear artists like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Lucille Bogan, Victoria Spivey, Fannie Mae Goosby, and Ethel Waters—women whose voices helped shape American music and paved the way for generations of artists.

Beyond the music, I wanted the audience to feel the atmosphere of a working Chicago recording studio in 1927. Rather than relying on clichés or nostalgia, the sound design supports the authenticity of the period, allowing the world of the play to come to life.

What role does the microphone placement or treatment play in bringing Ma's sound to life? Are there other technological or sonic elements that allow for collaboration between sound design and Amber's performance as Ma?

The microphone is almost a character in this production. In 1927, recording technology was still relatively new, and performers had to gather around a single microphone, carefully adjusting their position to create the right musical balance. That physical relationship between the performers and the microphone becomes part of the storytelling.

From a technical standpoint, my goal is to preserve the authenticity of that period while giving today's audience the best possible listening experience. We've incorporated modern technology inside a period-appropriate microphone, allowing Amber's live performance to remain intimate and natural while evoking the warmth and presence of an early recording. Rather than changing her voice, the technology supports it, helping the audience experience the transformation that occurs when Ma steps up to the microphone.

Bonus Material

Want to dive deeper into August Wilson and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*? Resident Dramaturg Miranda Johnson-Haddad has some suggestions:

August Wilson

- For an excellent overview of Wilson's life and works, including a detailed timeline, see: <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand-august-wilson-biography-and-career-timeline/3683/>
- See also The August Wilson African American Cultural Center:
 - <https://awaacc.org/about/about-august/>
- August Wilson's childhood home was restored and opened in 2022 as an arts center: [August Wilson House](#)
- Patti Hartigan's 2023 biography of August Wilson, *August Wilson: A Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2023), although not authorized by the August Wilson estate, nevertheless contains extensive information, some of which is based on Hartigan's interviews with Wilson over many years.
 - For an interview with Hartigan about the biography, see: <https://www.americantheatre.org/2023/08/16/how-patti-hartigan-learned-what-she-learned-about-august-wilson/>
 - For a review of the biography, see: <https://www.americantheatre.org/2023/08/16/a-man-in-full-august-wilson-and-his-plays-in-all-their-complexity/>
- For a series of clips, including interviews, from a number of PBS broadcasts about Wilson and his plays, see: <https://pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/>
- Here's a link to a 2002 interview on *60 Minutes* between Ed Bradley and August Wilson: <https://youtu.be/pwjqrIFoqDE?si=MPoUIZONbL2JuS96>

Bonus Material *continued*

The Great Migration

- To learn more about the Great Migration, see Pulitzer Prize-winning author Isabel Wilkerson's 2010 book *The Warmth of Other Suns*. In July 2024, *The New York Times* published their list of the 100 best books of the 21st century so far. Wilkerson's book came in at number 2.
- For a powerful history of the legacy of racism, including Jim Crow and the Great Migration, see Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson's dissent in the affirmative action case *Students For Fair Admissions, Inc. vs. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, June 29, 2023: https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/22pdf/20-1199_hgdj.pdf
- The groundbreaking 1991 movie *Daughters of the Dust* (which was the first movie directed by a Black woman, Julie Dash, to be distributed theatrically), set in 1902, tells the story of three generations of Gullah women as some prepare to leave St. Helena's Island, off the coast of South Carolina, and head north in search of better opportunities. Beyoncé's 2016 visual album *Lemonade* pays homage to this movie, which led to the film's re-release later that year, twenty-five years after its initial release. Here's the trailer:
 - https://youtu.be/zdMxR2M_ddM?si=uwe5nluTOQ1vbR-t
- For the 1896 Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which legalized "separate but equal" racial segregation, see: <https://guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america-plessy-ferguson#:~:text=The%20U.S.%20Supreme%20Court%20changes,for%20the%20next%20fifty%20years.>

Blues Music and August Wilson

- For a good summary of the influence of blues music on August Wilson and his plays, see: <https://playbill.com/article/august-wilson-and-the-power-of-blues-com-100695>
- For an interview with Kathryn Bostic, who wrote the score for many of Wilson's plays, see:
<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand/3706/#:~:text=KB:%20Blues%20music%20informed%20his,seamlessness%20between%20score%20and%20text.>

Bonus Material *continued*

- For a documentary on the efforts of several young white men to find forgotten Blues singers during the summer of 1968, see the 2016 documentary *Two Trains Runnin'*, produced and narrated by Common: https://www.imdb.com/video/vi1364375065/?ref=vp_rv_ap_0
 - **Content Alert:** This documentary contains disturbing video and still imagery of racist speeches and attacks in the deep South during the 1950's and 1960's.
- The 2025 movie *Sinners* explores the ways in which white society exploited Black music and culture in the Jim Crow South. Michael B. Jordan won the Oscar for Best Actor for playing identical twins, Smoke and Stack, in the movie.

Ma Rainey

- Here is the page about Ma Rainey on the website of the National Women's History Museum: <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/>
- For additional reading, check out: *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* by Angela Y. Davis (1998).
- For a 2019 New York Times obituary of Ma Rainey (in its "Overlooked No More" series), see: https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/12/obituaries/ma-rainey-overlooked.html?unlocked_article_code=1.h1A.7QOC.-KbcoGuEblzZ&smid=url-share
- Denzel Washington has committed to producing all ten plays of Wilson's Century Cycle as films. The 2020 movie of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* starred Viola Davis as Ma Rainey and Chadwick Boseman as a memorable Levee. Tragically, Boseman died of colon cancer in 2020 during the post-production period; *Ma Rainey* was his last movie.
- For more on the history of Ma Rainey's major employer Paramount Studios, and especially on its presence in Chicago, see this review of a 2023 book by Scott Blackwood entitled *The Rise and Fall of Paramount Records: A Great Migration Story, 1917-1932*, <https://www.popcultureshelf.com/the-rise-and-fall-of-paramount-records-a-great-migration-story-1917-1932-by-scott-blackwood-2023/>

ABOUT

A Noise Within

A Noise Within produces classic theatre as an essential means to enrich our community by embracing universal human experiences, expanding personal awareness, and challenging individual perspectives. Our company of resident and guest artists immerses student and general audiences in timeless, epic stories in an intimate setting.

Our most successful art asks our community to question beliefs, focus on relationships, and develop self-awareness. Southern California audiences of all ages and backgrounds build community together while engaging with this most visceral and primal of storytelling techniques. ANW's production of classic theatre includes all plays we believe will be part of our cultural legacy. We interpret these stories through the work of a professional resident company—a group of artists whose work is critical to their community—based on the belief that trust among artists and between artists and audience can only be built through an honest and continuing dialogue.

In its 30-year history, A Noise Within has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

More than 45,000 individuals attend productions at A Noise Within annually. In addition, the theatre draws over 18,000 student participants to its Education Program. Students benefit from in-classroom workshops, conservatory training, subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, post-performance discussions with artists, and free standards-based study guides.



aNoiseWithin
Classic Theatre, Modern Magic

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