

## MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM

### Synopsis

*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is set in a Chicago recording studio in early March 1927. Female blues singer Ma Rainey lives and works under the pressure of a music business that abuses and victimizes its black artists.

### Characters

**CUTLER:** Guitar and Trombone player in Ma Rainey's band, Cutler is also the leader of all the other instrumentalists. A loner type in his mid fifties, he plays his music without embellishment—the same can be said for how he feels about life: he believes in getting things done quickly.

**MA RAINEY:** Based on a real life Ma Rainey with a career in Blues Music in the 1920's, Wilson's character is praised as "Mother of the Blues." She has the final word in everything regarding the band, making all the decisions. Not one to be disillusioned, Ma Rainey was always aware that her manager and producer were set on simply making money off of her.

**SLOW DRAG:** As the slow-moving, yet talented bass player in Ma's band, Slow Drag is a professional in his mid-fifties who is focused on his music. His name is the result of an incident in which he slow-danced with women for hours in order to make some money. Critics have referred to the music that Slow Drag plays as being reminiscent of African music.

**LEVEE:** The talented and temperamental trumpet player, Levee is the youngest member of the band, being in his thirties. He is a man who is confident with his appearance, especially when it comes to the expensive shoes he owns. Perhaps it's because of his age that Levee is also the band member who wants to go off on his own and will begrudgingly play Ma Rainey's music until he's got his own band to do with what he pleases. He is frustrated, bitter, and is usually picking a fight with someone in the band. When he was only eight years old, he saw his mother raped by a gang of white men.

**TOLEDO:** Toledo, in addition to being the piano player for Ma Rainey, also acts as the band philosopher. Literate and reflective, he discusses abstract concepts like racial memory and the plight of the black man throughout the play despite his band-mates' misunderstanding of much of what he says. He believes that style and musicianship are important to a performance. Having been married with children, Toledo lost his family in a divorce.

**STURDYVANT:** Overworked, penny-pinching, and obsessed with making money, he is the white owner of the Southside recording studio where Ma Rainey makes her music. Because he is uncomfortable dealing with black performers, he communicated mainly with Ma Rainey's white manager, Irvin. Because of these reasons, he represents white exploitation of black music.

MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM

Code: 20-01  
Time: 2:00  
Type 1: Serio-Comedic  
Type 2: Dancing  
Type 3: Sexuality

Act 1; Scene 1

CUTLER

Slow Drag don't need you to find him no pussy. He can take care of his own self. Fact is . . . you better watch your gal when Slow Drag's around. They don't call him Slow Drag for nothing. (*Laughs*)

Slow Drag break a woman's back when he dance. They had this contest one time in this little town called Bolingbroke about a hundred miles outside of Macon. We was playing for this dance and they was giving twenty dollars to the best slow draggers. Slow Drag looked over the competition, got down off the bandstand, grabbed hold of one of them gals, and stuck to her like a fly to jelly. Like wood to glue. Man had that gal whooping and hollering so . . . everybody stopped to watch. This fellow come in . . . this gal's fellow . . . and pulled a knife a foot long on Slow Drag. 'Member that, Slow Drag?

Slow Drag ain't missed a stroke. The gal, she just look at her man with that sweet dizzy look in her eye. She ain't about to stop! Folks was clearing out, ducking and hiding under tables, figuring there's gonna be a fight. Slow Drag just looked over the gal's shoulder at he man and said, "Mister, if you'd quit hollering and wait a minute . . . you'll see I'm doing you a favor. I'm helping this gal win ten dollars so she can buy you a gold watch." The man just stood there and looked at him, all the while stroking that knife. Told Slow Drag, say, "All right, then, nigger. You just better make damn sure you win." That's when folks started calling him Slow Drag. The women got to hanging around him so bad after that, them fellows in that town ran us out of there.

Code: 20-02  
Time: 2:35  
Type 1: Dramatic  
Type 2: Men's Status/Identity  
Type 3: Race

Act 2; Scene 1

CUTLER

Reverend Gates... now I'm gonna show you how this go where the white man don't care a thing about who you is. Reverend Gates was coming from Tallahassee to Atlanta, going to see his sister, who was sick at that time with the consumption. The train come up through Thomasville, then past Moultrie, and stopped in this little town called Sigsbee.

Reverend Gates got off his train in Sigsbee. The train done stopped there and he figured he'd get off and check the schedule to be sure he arrive in time for somebody to pick him up. All right. While he's there checking the schedule, it come upon him that he had to go to the bathroom. Now, they ain't had no colored rest rooms at the station. The only colored rest room is an outhouse they got sitting way back two hundred yards or so from the station. All right. He in the outhouse and the train go off and leave him there. He don't know nothing about this town. Ain't never been there before — in fact, ain't never even heard of it before.

The man standing there, trying to figure out what he's gonna do. . . where this train done left him in this strange town. It started getting dark. . . when he noticed a couple of white fellows standing across the street from this station. Just standing there, watching him. And then two or three more come up and joined the other ones. He look around, ain't seen no colored folks nowhere. He didn't know what was getting in these here fellow's minds, so he commence to walking. He ain't knowed where he was going. He just walking down the railroad tracks when he hear them call him. "Hey, nigger!" See, just like that. "Hey, nigger!" He kept on walking. They called him some more and he just keep walking. Just going down

the tracks. And then he heard a gunshot where somebody done fired a gun in the air. He stopped then, you know.

They crowded around him. These gang of mens made a crowd around him. Now he's standing there, you understand . . . got his cross around his neck like them preachers wear. Had his little Bible with him what he carry all the time. So they crowd on around him and one of them ask who he is. He told them he was Reverend Gates and that he was going to see his sister who was sick and the train left without him. And they said, "Yeah, nigger . . . but can you dance?" He looked at them and commenced to dancing. One of them reached up and tore his cross off his neck. Said he was committing a heresy by dancing with a cross and Bible. Took his Bible and tore it up and had him dancing till they got tired of watching him.

That's the only way he got out of there alive . . . was to dance. Ain't even had no respect for a man of God!

MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM

Code: 20-03  
Time: 2:00  
Type 1: Dramatic  
Type 2: Exploitation  
Type 3: Music

Act 2; Scene 1

MA RAINEY

I been doing this a long time. Ever since I was a little girl. I don't care what nobody else do. That's what gets me so mad with Irvin. White folks try to be put out with you all the time. Too cheap to buy me a Coca-Cola.

I lets them know it, though. Ma don't stand for no shit. Wanna take my voice and trap it in them fancy boxes with all them buttons and dials . . . and then too cheap to buy me a Coca-Cola. And it don't cost but a nickel a bottle.

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 hurt them. They back there now calling me all kinds of names . . . calling me everything but a child of God. But they can't do nothing else. They ain't got what they wanted yet. 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. Ain't got no use for me then. I know what I'm talking about. You watch. Irvin right there with the rest of them. He don't care nothing about me either. He's been my manger for six years, always talking about sticking together, and the only time he had me in his house was to sing for some of his friends.

If you colored and can make them some money, then you all right with them. Otherwise, you just a dog in the alley. I done made this company more money from my records than all the other recording artists they got put together. And they wanna balk about how much this session is costing them.

I don't pay that kind of talk no mind.

MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM

Code: 20-04

Time: 1:45

Type 1: Dramatic

Type 2: Conjuring

Type 3:

Act 1; Scene 1

SLOW DRAG

Eliza Cotter is one of them. All right. The man living up in an old shack on Ben Foster's place, shoeing mules and horses, making them charms and things in secret. He done hooked up with the devil, showed up one day all fancied out with just the finest clothes you ever seen on a colored man . . . dressed just like one of them crackers . . . and carrying this bag with them papers and things. All right. Had a pocketful of money, just living the life of a rich man. Ain't done no more work or nothing. Just had him a string of women he run around with and throw his money away on. Bought him a big fine house . . . Well, it wasn't all that big, but it did have one of them white picket fences around it. Used to hire a man once a week just to paint that fence. Messed around there and one of the fellows of them gals he was messing with got fixed on him wrong and Eliza killed him. And he laughed about it. Sheriff come and arrest him, and then let him go. And he went around in that town laughing about killing this fellow. Trial come up, and the judge cut him loose. He must have been in converse with the devil too . . . 'cause he cut him loose and give him a bottle of whiskey! Folks ask what done happened to make him change, and he'd tell them straight out he done sold his soul to the devil and ask them if they wanted to sell theirs 'cause he could arrange it for them. Preacher see him coming, used to cross on the other side of the road. He'd just stand there and laugh at the preacher and call him a fool to his face.

MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM

Code: 20-05

Time: 2:30

Type 1: Dramatic

Type 2: Men's Status/Identity

Type 3: Revenge

Act 1; Scene 1

LEVEE

Levee got to be Levee! And he don't need nobody messing with him about the white man — 'cause you don't know nothing about me. You don't know Levee. You don't know nothing about what kind of blood I got! What kind of heart I got beating here! (*Pounds his chest*) I was eight years old when I watched a gang of white mens come into my daddy's house and have to do with my mama any way they wanted. (*Pause*)

We was living in Jefferson County, about eighty miles outside of Natchez. My daddy's name was Memphis . . . Memphis Lee Green . . . had him near fifty acres of good farming land. I'm talking about good land! Grow anything you want! (*Pause*)

It was coming on planting time and my daddy went into Natchez to get him some seed and fertilizer. Called me, say, "Levee, you the man of the house now. Take care of your mama while I'm gone." I wasn't but a little boy, eight years old. (*Pause*)

My mama was frying up some chicken when them mens come in that house. Must have been eight or nine of them. She standing there frying that chicken and them mens come and took hold of her just like you take hold of a mule and make him do what you want. (*Pause*)

I didn't know what they were doing to her . . . but I figured whatever it was they may as well do to me too. My daddy had a knife that he kept around there for hunting and working and whatnot. I knew where he kept it and I went and got it.

I'm gonna show you how spooked up I was by the white man. I tried my damndest to cut one of them's throat! I hit him on the shoulder with it. He reached back and grabbed hold of that knife and whacked me across the chest with it. *(Raises his shirt to show a long ugly scar.)* That's what made them stop. They was scared I was gonna bleed to death.

My daddy came back and acted like he done accepted the facts of what happened. But he got the names of them mens from mama. He found out who they was and then we announced we was moving out of that county. My daddy went and smiled in the face of one of them crackers who had been with my mama. Smiled in his face and sold him our land.. He got us settled in and then he took off one day. I ain't never seen him since. He sneaked back, hiding up in the woods, laying to get them eight or nine men. *(Pause)*

My daddy wasn't spooked up by the white man. Nosir! And that taught me how to handle them. I seen my daddy go up and grin in this cracker's face . . . smile in his face and sell him his land. All the while he's planning how he's gonna get him and what he's gonna do to him. That taught me how to handle them. So you all just back up and leave Levee alone about the white man. I can smile and say "yessir" to whoever I please. I got time coming to me. You all just leave Levee alone about the white man.

MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM

Code: 20-07  
Time: 1:20  
Type 1: Comedic  
Type 2: Gambling  
Type 3:

Act 1; Scene 1

TOLEDO

There was these two fellows see. So, the one of them go up to this church and commence to taking up the church learning. The other fellow see him out on the road and he say, "I done heard you taking up the church learning," say, "Is you learning anything up there?" The other one say, "Yeah, I done take up the church learning and I's learning all kinds of things about the Bible and what it say and all. Why you be asking?" The other say, "Well, do you know the Lord's Prayer?" And he say, "Why, sure I know the Lord's Prayer, I'm taking up learning at the church, ain't I? I know the Lord's Prayer backwards and forwards." And the other fellows says, "I bet you five dollars you don't know the Lord's Prayer, 'cause I don't think you knows it. I think you be going up to the church 'cause the Widow Jenkins be going up there and you just wanna be sitting in the same room with her when she cross them big, fine, pretty legs she got." And the other one say, "Well, I'm gonna prove you wrong and I'm gonna bet you that five dollars." So he say, "Well, go on and say it then." So he commenced to saying the Lord's Prayer. He say, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep." The other one say, "Here's your five dollars. I didn't think you knew it."

MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM

Code: 20-08  
Time: 2:30  
Type 1: Serio-Comedic  
Type 2: Societal Order  
Type 3: Men's Status/Identity

Act 1; Scene 1

TOLEDO

Now, I'm gonna show you how this goes . . . where you just a leftover from history. Everybody come from different places in Africa, right? Come from different tribes and things. Soon awhile they began to make one big stew. You had the carrots, the peas, and potatoes and whatnot over here. And over there you had the meat, the nuts, the okra, corn . . . and then you mix it up and let it cook right through to get the flavors flowing together . . . then you got one thing. You got a stew.

Now you take and eat the stew. You take and make your history with that stew. All right. Now it's over. Your history's over and you done ate the stew. But you look around and see some carrots over here, some potatoes over there. That stew's still there. You done made your history and it's still there. You can't eat it all. So what you got? You got some leftovers. That's what it is. You got leftovers and you can't do nothing with it. You already making you another history. . . cooking you another meal, and you don't need them leftovers no more. What to do?

See, we's the leftovers. The colored man is the leftovers. Now, what's the colored man gonna do with himself? That's what we waiting to find out. But first we gotta know we the leftovers. Now, who knows that? You find me a nigger that knows that and I'll turn any whichaway you want me to. I'll bend over for you. You ain't gonna find that. And that's what the problem is. The problem ain't with the white

man. The white man knows you just a leftover. ‘Cause he the one who done the eating and he know what he done ate. But we don’t know that we been took and made history out of. Done went and filled the white man’s belly and now he’s full and tired and wants you to get out the way and let him be by himself. Now, I know what I’m talking about. And if you wanna find out, you just ask Mr. Irvin what he had for supper yesterday. And if he’s an honest white man . . . which is asking for a whole heap of a lot . . . he’ll tell you he done ate your black ass and if you please I’m full up with you . . . so go on and get off the plate and let me eat something else.

MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM

Code: 20-09  
Time: 1:30  
Type 1: Dramatic  
Type 2: Relationships  
Type 3: Separation/Loss

Act 2; Scene 1

TOLEDO

Now, I married a woman. A good woman. To this day I can't say she wasn't a good woman. I can't say nothing bad about her. I married that woman with all the good graces and intentions of being hooked up and bound to her for the rest of my life. I was looking for her to put me in my grave. But, you see . . . it ain't all the time what you intentions and wishes are. She went out and joined the church. All right. There ain't nothing wrong with that. A good Christian woman going to church and wanna do right by her God. There ain't nothing wrong with that. But she got up there, got to seeing them good Christian mens and wondering why I ain't like that. Soon she figure she got a heathen on her hands. She figured she couldn't live like that. The church was more important than I was. So she left. Packed up one day and moved out. To this day I ain't never said another word to her. Come home one day and my house was empty! And I sat down and figured out that I was a fool not to see that she needed something that I wasn't giving her. Else she wouldn't have been up there at the church in the first place. I ain't blaming her. I just said it wasn't gonna happen to me again. So, yeah, Toledo been a fool about a woman. That's part of making life.

MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM

Code: 20-10  
Time: 1:10  
Type 1: Dramatic  
Type 2: Exploitation  
Type 3: Money

Act 2; Scene 1

STURDYVANT

Mr. Irvin told me that you boys prefer cash, and that's what I have for you. (*Starts handing out the money*) That was a good session you boys put in . . . That's twenty-five for you. Yessir, you boys really know your business and we are going to . . . Twenty-five for you . . . We are going to get you back in here real soon . . . twenty-five . . . and have another session so you can make some more money . . . and twenty-five for you. Okay, thank you, boys. You can get your things together and Mr. Irvin will make sure you find your way out.

Oh, yes . . . uh . . . Levee. About them songs you gave me. I've thought about it and I just don't think the people will buy them. They're not the type of songs we're looking for.

I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give you five dollars apiece for them. Now that's the best I can do.

There's nothing more I can do about that. Like I say, it's five dollars a piece. That's what I'll give you. I'm doing you a favor. Now, if you write any more, I'll help you out and take them off your hands. The price is five dollars apiece. Just like now.