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Racial Discrimination, Exploitation, and Singing the Blues in August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

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ABSTRACT

This essay concerns the exploitation of African-American musicians by White businessmen in August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*; it serves as a microcosm of institutional racism in America. In Wilson's play, the famous blues singer Ma Rainey, in the zenith of her career in the 1920s, makes a fortune for record producer Sturdyvant and agent Irvin, who treat her badly because they are racists with little respect for her talent and little understanding of the blues. Sensing their disrespect, Rainey comports herself like a diva to show them that she earns money for them and should be in charge of the song list and recording session. Levee's impetuous stabbing of band mate Toledo over the innocuous stepping on his shoes manifests how the exploitation of Black workers by Whites leads to rage and Caucasians successfully turning Blacks against themselves. Levee's shoes are important in the play, for they symbolize his dream of upward mobility, which will never take place after Sturdyvant steals his songs and Toledo dies. The attempt by trumpet player Levee to write his own arrangement of Rainey's signature song signals his ambition to supplant her and his willingness to corrupt the blues for his own gain. The essay concludes with an exploration of why Wilson chooses to write about the blues in this play. The blues are integral to African-American culture—deriving from their African heritage and a source of comfort when working on plantations during slavery in America. In this play, like in most of his others, Wilson pairs two protagonists—one devoted to African-American culture of the past (Rainey) and an ambitious and mercenary character who looks toward the future and willingly sacrifices his heritage for financial gain (Levee).

KEYWORDS

blues, music, singer, racism, exploitation, shoes, culture, heritage, African-American, commercialize, commodity

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Introduction

August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984), set in 1927, concerns the exploitation of legendary blues singer Ma Rainey and other African-American musicians by White music record producers, who garner wealth at the expense of those who lack power and financial opportunities in the industry because of their race. Wilson dramatizes how Whites take advantage of their superior status in Jim Crow society in their business relationships with Blacks. Wilson shows that in a White-dominated culture, racial privilege in the music industry supersedes talent and diligence in the effort to thrive socioeconomically, with the advantages that Whites enjoy over Blacks serving as a microcosm for all professions and segments of American capitalistic society. Institutionalized racism enables White businessmen to turn Black workers against themselves, as we see in the murder that concludes Wilson's drama. Furthermore, Wilson demonstrates that the financial exploitation of African Americans can lead to Black rage, which, in turn, hinders their ability to succeed socioeconomically and leads to self-destruction. This essay concludes by demonstrating Wilson's purpose in selecting the blues not only as a theme in the play but also as an archetype that demonstrates the blue singer's essential role in African-American culture. Wilson feels compassion and admiration for blues singers; he claims that their singing and "music [contain] a cultural response of black Americans to the world they find themselves in. Blues is the best literature we have" (Shannon, "Blues" 540) because it brings African Americans closer to their roots and heritage. In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, as in most of his other plays, such as *The Piano Lesson*, *Fences*, *Two Trains Running*, and *Jitney*, Wilson creates a pair of African-American characters going in opposite directions, one remaining linked to the past and cultural heritage, with the other looking ambitiously toward the future and wealth, to show his audience the importance of preserving and valuing Black culture.

Rainey's Conflict with Her White Music Producer and Agent

In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, two White businessmen (record producer Mel Sturdyvant and Rainey's business manager Mr. Irvin) record four songs by the blues singer and her band in Chicago. The friction between Sturdyvant and the Black singing star derives from racial tension, disrespect, financial exploitation, and a dispute concerning who controls the recording session. Wilson's play links the blues, capitalism, power, and institutionalized racism. Clearly the music industry, like virtually all businesses and capitalistic pursuits in 1920s America, is controlled by White entrepreneurs such as Sturdyvant, who owns the studio and equipment but lacks the blues singer's talent. Wilson mentioned in an interview that White people do not understand the blues

and mistakenly consider it sad and negative, not realizing that the "blues are life-affirming music that guides you throughout life" (Shepard 111). Ralph Ellison considered the blues "a transcendence of those conditions created within the Negro community by the denial of social justice. As such they are one of the techniques through which Negroes have survived and kept their courage" (256-257). Wilson's drama explores the tension between African Americans who are inspired by and find their courage in the blues and the White businessmen who profit from it as a capitalistic enterprise. Although both groups need each other, the relationship, as Wilson portrays it, is parasitic because Caucasians control the power and exploit the talented African-American musicians who work for them.

From the onset of the play, Sturdyvant and Irvin clearly despise Rainey and dislike being in a business relationship with the blues singer. The two White businessmen engage in the following heated discussion:

> **STURDYVANT**: "[Y]ou keep her in line, okay? I'm holding you responsible for her[. . . .] [Y[ou're her manager. . . . She's your responsibility. I'm not putting up with any Royal Highness. . . . Queen of the Blues bullshit!
>
> **IRVIN**: Mother of the Blues, Mel. Mother of the Blues.
>
> **STURDYVANT:** I don't care what she calls herself [. . .] I just want to get her in here [. . . to] record those songs on that list [. . .] and get her out. (18)

Sturdyvant's diatribe, holding Irvin responsible for the singer, indicates his disdain for Ma, as if she is a petulant child for whom he does not want to babysit (as opposed to the valuable money-making blues star she is). The producer tells Irvin to be responsible for Ma because he doesn't want to interact with her himself. He simply wants to make money off her talent. It is difficult to believe that Sturdyvant would feel such disdain for a White singer; clearly his abhorrence of the star derives from racism. Sturdyvant knows little about the music business and even considers switching to the textiles industry. He definitely prefers the financial to the artistic aspect of the music business, which is clear when he emphasizes not Ma's singing but rather the sheets (lists of record sales in major American cities). His sardonic reference to Ma Rainey as "Royal Highness" and "Queen of the Blues" manifests not only his contempt of her but also his ignorance of his own vocation and failure to recognize how much her blues singing means to her Black audience. He does not realize that "Ma" is an abbreviation for "Mother" and "Madame," not "Queen." "Queen of the Blues" was, historically, the nickname Columbia Records gave to their recording star, Rainey protégée and rival, Bessie Smith. Sturdyvant does not know the nickname given to his biggest recording star. Furthermore, his confusion between the nicknames of Rainey and Smith suggests that all Black singers are the same to him. And Sturdyvant

misleads Irvin when he declares that she calls herself "Mother of the Blues." As Ma states to her pianist Toledo, fans say "I started it [the blues] . . . but I didn't. I just helped it out [. . . .] But if they wanna call me the Mother of the Blues, that's all right with me. It don't hurt none" (83). Her humility contradicts Sturdyvant's claim that she arrogantly demands to be called "Mother of the Blues." Sturdyvant's disdain for her manifests his jealousy that a Black woman became famous and could potentially dominate him in their business relationship.

The friction between Sturdyvant and Rainey plays out during the recording session with the record producer resorting to impotent threats. He fails to realize that Ma behaves like a diva to punish him for his rudeness and protect her limited rights as an African-American blues star. When Ma threatens to walk out of the studio without recording her songs because of his inadequate equipment (the first song is not recorded because the cord is chewed up), he yells, "Ma, if you walk out of this studio. . . You'll be through. . . washed up! If you walk out on me" (88). The fragmented sentences, with the ellipses and poor syntax, indicate his frustration because he will lose money if she leaves the studio and because during the Jim Crow era, the thought of a Black woman walking out on a White businessman humiliates him. The impotence of his threat suggests his lack of power since he needs her singing talent. The audience witnesses her domination when she refuses to sing trumpeter Levee Green's arrangement of her song. Levee insists that Sturdyvant will choose his arrangement and make Ma sing it: "[T]he man's the one putting out the record! He's gonna put out what he wanna put out!" (37); yet Rainey declares, "I don't care what you say, Irvin. Levee ain't messing up my song . . . I'm singing Ma Rainey's song. I ain't singing Levee's song" (62). Ma tells Irvin that he and Sturdyvant cannot force her to sing the song in a way that displeases her and corrupts her conception of the blues. Sturdyvant and Irvin feel helpless and passively concede victory to her because they fear that she will leave. They are so much in her power that they fail to realize that she cannot leave because her car is being repaired and White cab drivers decline to transport Black passengers.

Wilson suggests that White businessmen make large profits by benefitting from the fruits of the labor of Black entertainers such as Ma and her band. Sturdyvant even attempts to cheat Sylvester out of twenty-five dollars for speaking the introduction to her song—initially refusing to pay him and then subtracting Sylvester's pay from Ma's salary. As Rainey astutely declares, "If I wanted the boy to have twenty-five dollars of my money, I'd give it to him. . . . He supposed to get paid like everybody else" (103). Sturdyvant reluctantly acquiesces only because Ma has yet to sign the release forms, so he deceitfully blames his initial refusal to pay Sylvester on Irvin. The twenty-five dollars for Sylvester is important to Ma, who hopes that by earning money, her nephew will gain the confidence to overcome his stuttering problem and become a

productive part of the workforce. Furthermore, as Mary Bogumil astutely notes, by demanding that Sylvester speak the introduction, "Ma quite literally gives voice to those African Americans who previously had no voice, no venue as she has had through her music to articulate the burden of marginalization" (29). Thus, the record producer's attempt to withhold the money serves, in Rainey's opinion, not only as an effort to cheat Sylvester but also to hinder her nephew's progress and restrict his voice. Sylvester's attempt to find his voice represents the struggle of many Blacks during the Jim Crow era who wanted to participate actively in American society.

Irvin consistently attempts to appease both Sturdyvant and his client (Rainey), which proves impossible because the two feud incessantly. Ma needs a Caucasian manager because a Black manager in the 1920s would not be allowed to work with a White record producer given the racism inherent in the music industry. Even if a Black manager would have the opportunity, that person would no doubt be treated with much condescension and rudeness. Because of his prejudice, Irvin does not have Ma's best interests at heart, which he should as her agent, and often sides with Sturdyvant against his own client. The manager manifests his prejudice toward his client by blaming Rainey's lateness on her skin color, telling Sturdyvant, "You know they're always late, Mel" (47). Irvin exploits Ma to show off to his friends: Ma laments to Cutler, her guitarist and trombonist, that "Irvin don't care nothing about me either. He's been my manager for six years. . . and the only time he had me in his house was to sing for some of his friends" (79). She recognizes that Irvin does not want any Black person in his house as his guest, only as a worker whom he may treat as an object. He is supposed to work for her, yet when he invites her to his home, she works for him as a spectacle or servant.

Racial Exploitation and the Blues

The conflicts in the recording studio, Ma believes, emanate from the failure of the White businessmen to understand her music or livelihood, and their refusal to respect her because of her skin color. The racial barrier becomes a significant issue in their relationship, leading to distrust, disrespect, and conflicting attitudes about music and other aspects of culture. Rainey explains to Cutler:

> White folks don't understand about the blues. They hear it come out, but they don't know how it got there. They don't understand that's life's way of talking. You don't sing to feel better. You sing 'cause that's a way of understanding life. . . . The blues help you get out of bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain't alone. There's something else in the world. Something's been added by that

> song. This be an empty world without the blues. I take that emptiness and try to fill it up with something. (82-83)

Through her music, Ma pleases thousands of people, primarily the Black community but also anyone who loves the blues. Her songs give solace, pleasure, and hope to many in the Black community who suffer because of poverty and racial injustice. She fills up the emptiness in their world with her soulful singing and improves their lives. Wilson claimed, "what's contained in the blues is the African American's cultural response to the world. . . . [W]hatever you want to know about the Black experience in America is contained in the blues. . . . It is our sacred book. Every other people has a sacred book, so I claim it as that" (Livingston 58). The culturally and emotionally enriching experiences that Rainey provides for her fans are quite important to her and give her a purpose. Yet Sturdyvant and Irvin fail to recognize her gift, hurting her feelings by commercializing her music. Sturdyvant also diminishes her music by paying her "a fee rather than receiving contractual residuals, reducing her art to mere labor" (Nadel 105). He and Irvin myopically fail to see the profound effect of her music upon her fans. The cultural and spiritual significance of her music is reduced to dollars and cents. Sturdyvant and Irvin's exploitation of her resembles other Caucasian music entrepreneurs' victimization of Black musicians. Wilson explains: "White people went down [South] with their recorders, gave these guys a bottle of whiskey and three dollars, and had them sing twelve or fifteen songs, took the songs back to Chicago and sat down and decided which of these twelve or fifteen songs had any worth or value to them" (Sheppard 111).

Ma is bitter because the White businessmen treat her not as a partner or equal but rather as a prostitute. She remarks that Sturdyvant and Irvin

> 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. . . 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 I'd be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on. Ain't got no use for me then. (79)

Discerning their disrespect and bigotry, she protects herself from racist exploitation as best she can. Just as a prostitute withholds sex until she is paid, Ma refuses to give them her voice (which Sturdyvant records, captures, and then sells for his profit) until he heats the building and buys her a Coke. She sagaciously avoids signing the release form, which gives Sturdyvant permission to sell her music, until he pays all the band members, including Sylvester. In Wilson's dramas, "Written texts such as legal documents often function as tools of White hegemony that Black survival skills must confront or even circumvent. . . . Her delay in signing is an exercise of

resistance to the power of the written document" (Elam 42). Although Elam correctly observes that Whites used legal documents to control African Americans, Rainey employs documentation to her advantage, refusing to sign until Sturdyvant treats her respectfully. Alan Nadel believes, however, that her advantage is temporary because although the blues star sings the songs, "not even Ma Rainey[,] at the peak of her power, can control the record. For the record to be produced, in fact, Ma Rainey must sign away her voice. The play thus pivots around the historical moment when her song, in its unique moment of production, becomes the property of the White company" (105). Although she cannot earn their respect because of their prejudice, she can make them temporarily dread her power in their business relationship.

Ma's Conflict with Levee

Ma clashes with Levee, who also spars with the other band members. These battles, like all the other arguments in this drama, concern the blues, money, and power. The friction between Levee and Rainey begins when Green creates his own arrangement of the blues singer's signature song, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." Ma is insulted when she discovers that Levee, merely a trumpet player in *her* accompaniment band, revised her eponymous song and convinced Sturdyvant and her own manager to replace her traditional version with his. Ma realizes that to maintain her authority over the band, she must control the song that bears her name. Levee's arrangement differs from hers in various ways, such as his removal of the introduction. Rainey sees the removal of the introduction as a threat to her because she has promised her sister that she will help Sylvester (Ma's nephew) gain confidence by speaking it. As the band practices the song, Ma learns that Sturdyvant plans to use Levee's arrangement, thereby eliminating her nephew's part and removing him from the enterprise. Levee mocks Sylvester and insists that Ma's nephew is incapable of speaking the introduction: "How In the hell the boy gonna do the part and he can't even talk!" (65). He then mocks Ma's nephew for stuttering, telling Sylvester, "B-b-b-boy, ain't nobody studying you" (66), and he refuses to rehearse Rainey's version. Ma seems to be close to her family, so insulting Sylvester constitutes an attack on her.

After several takes, Sylvester finally speaks his part correctly, but the song is not recorded. Irvin claims, "Levee must have kicked the plug out" (87). Angry that his song arrangement is not being used, the petulant trumpeter kicks out the plug. Knowing that the penurious Sturdyvant does not allow many "takes" and that the odds of Sylvester reciting the introduction correctly twice are unlikely, Levee sabotages the recording of the song to force the record producer to use his arrangement. Furthermore, Levee composes his arrangement so that

Ma has difficulty singing the beginning of it: "She got to find her own way in"(38), Green says, indicating that his instrumental music could overpower her voice. It would be a way for his art to supersede hers.

Levee's attempt to steal Dussie Mae from Ma serves as a microcosm of his attempt to steal Rainey's glory and financial success as a blues legend. The trumpeter tells Dussie Mae: "A man what's gonna get his own band need to have a woman like you" (81). To Levee, the beautiful Dussie Mae symbolizes the power and wealth he can attain at Ma's expense. As bass guitarist Slow Drag reports, Dussie Mae "told Levee he'd have to turn his money green before he could talk with her" (22). Levee is poor; the only thing green about him is not his money but rather his cognomen, so he purchases expensive shoes to provide the illusion of financial security. Green impresses Dussie Mae when he tells her that he writes his own songs (80) and will soon create his own band—Levee Green and his Footstompers (81). This name for his musical group is ironic considering that he becomes irate when anyone stomps on his feet and that Toledo's accidental stepping on Levee's shoe leads to the murder of the pianist and the destruction of Levee's life. Dussie Mae treats herself (and in turn is treated) as an object of commerce, offering herself to Levee only if he can start his own band and buy her presents. Just as Doaker tells Lymon in Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* that women are only interested in men who can buy them presents (65), Levee acknowledges to Dussie Mae that he understands:

> **DUSSIE MAE:** A woman like me wants somebody to bring it and put it in my hand. I don't need nobody wanna get something for nothing[. . . .]
>
> **LEVEE:** I knows how to treat a woman. Buy her presents and things. . . treat her like she wants to be treated.
>
> **DUSSIE MAE**: When you getting your own band?
>
> **LEVEE**: (*Moves closer to slip his arm around her.*) Soon as Mr. Sturdyvant say.
>
> **DUSSIE MAE**: (*Moves away.*) Go on now. I don't go for all that pawing and stuff. When you get your own band, maybe we can see about this stuff you talking [. . . .]
>
> **LEVEE**: [C]an I introduce my red rooster to your brown hen?
>
> **DUSSIE MAE**: You get your band, then we'll see if that rooster knows how to crow. (81-82)

Although Levee assures her that he will have his own band, his promise is beyond his control, contingent on the promise of a White man who controls his future. As a Black musician dependent upon the whim of a prejudiced White businessman, Levee has little power over his career—and thus over his ability to win over Dussie Mae.

Not coincidentally, Ma offers to buy Dussie Mae nice shoes on the same day that Levee purchases and shows off his prized new Florsheims (60). Dussie Mae might leave Ma for the trumpeter if he proves successful and generous. The victor in Levee's struggle to replace Ma's arrangement of her eponymous song with his version and to supplant Ma as a blues star will earn the body and "love" of Dussie Mae. Rainey wins because she relies on her own talent while Levee naively places his career in Sturdyvant's hands.

The friction between Levee and Ma and her band involves his vision of the future of blues music, his condemnation of her songs as old fashioned, and his desire to break free from his colleagues so that he can capitalize financially on modern music. Toledo complains that "Levee think he the king of the barnyard. He thinks he's the only rooster know how to crow" (59). Toledo means that Levee arrogantly believes that he should rule, like a king, over Rainey and her band because he is smarter than they are and knows more about the blues than they do. Like the trumpet he plays, Levee is brassy—as in brazen and loud. According to Toledo, Levee uses his male bravado to try to dominate Ma. The reference to Levee being a rooster is significant in that Toledo claims that Levee believes he is the only rooster in the barnyard—that the other male musicians in the studio are irrelevant. Levee employs the rooster metaphor when he brags about his masculinity to Dussie Mae and intends to have sex with her after he surpasses Rainey and his fellow musicians by starting his own band (82). In both cases, the rooster reference suggests male authority, the seizure of control over a situation, and ultimately financial and professional success. Levee exemplifies this control in the band sessions.

In his stage directions, Wilson describes Levee as ("*somewhat of a buffoon. But it is an intelligent buffoonery, clearly calculated to shift control of the situation to where he can grasp it. . . . He plays wrong notes frequently. He often gets his skill and talent confused with each other.*") (23).

> **MA**: Why you playing all them notes? You play ten notes for every one you supposed to play. It don't call for that. . . . You supposed to play the song the way I sing it. The way everybody else play it. . . .
>
> **LEVEE**: I was playing the song. I was playing it the way I felt it.
>
> **MA**: I couldn't keep up with what was going on. I'm trying to sing the song and you up there messing up my ear. That's what you was doing. . . .
>
> **LEVEE**: I know what I'm doing. . . . You all back up and leave me alone about *my* music.
>
> **CUTLER**: [I]t ain't about *your* music. It's about *Ma's* music. . . .
>
> **MA**: That's all right, Cutler. I done told you what to do.

> **LEVEE**: I don't care what you do. You supposed to improvise on the theme. Not play note for note the same thing over and over again. (101-102, "my" is my emphasis)

By playing extra notes and improvising, Levee intentionally distracts Ma. Green is bitter that she refuses to sing his arrangement because he wants his version of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" recorded and sold throughout the country. Wanting to surpass and intimidate her, Levee ruins her concentration so that she cannot sing the song as well as she wants. He considers himself her superior, which is why he claims that Ma should "leave me alone about *my* music." Realizing that Levee poses a threat to Ma's hegemony over the group, Cutler corrects him by declaring that it is Rainey's music, not his. The personal pronouns indicate Levee and Cutler's viewpoint concerning who is the blues authority. Feeling threatened, Ma reminds Cutler to remove this menace to her power by firing Levee when they reach Memphis.

Sturdyvant Exploits Levee and Takes His Songs

It is impossible to discern whether Levee is excited or upset when Ma, tired of Levee's quest to usurp her authority, fires him. Levee responds, "You think I care about being fired? I don't care nothing about that. You doing me a favor. . . . Good! Best thing that ever happened to me" (102). Although hurt because he has lost his job and income (just after spending a large amount of money on shoes), and although his happiness at being fired might indicate false bravado, he now is free to pursue the golden opportunity that Sturdyvant promised him. He is quite optimistic because he is too naïve to understand that talented Black workers are easily and often exploited by White businessmen in a nation where racial discrimination and Jim Crow laws are prevalent and where solid financial opportunities for African Americans are rare.

In the beginning of the play, Sturdyvant asks Irvin excitedly if Levee will be playing in the recording session:

> that horn player. . . the one who gave me those songs. . . is he gonna be here today? Good. I want to hear more of that sound. Times are changing [. . .] We've got to jazz it up. . . put in something different. You know, something wild. . . with a lot of rhythm. (19)

Sturdyvant is excited about Levee's songwriting ability and intends to cheat him; in fact, Wilson manifests that Sturdyvant does not care about Levee when the record producer, despite his earlier conversations with the trumpet player, does not even know his name, labeling him "that horn player." To Sturdyvant, Levee is merely a Black musician, not an individual with rights and

feelings. To the record producer, all African Americans are alike, and he cares only about how much money he can make off their talent.

Wilson clearly delineates that Sturdyvant has praised Levee and requested his songs, promising Green that he could record them himself. Yet after gaining possession of the songs, Sturdyvant destroys Levee's dream, claiming falsely that he had a band play them and that he does not "believe people will buy them. They're not the type of songs we're looking for" (107), contradicting his previous statement to Irvin that he covets these songs. To assuage his guilt, Sturdyvant gives Levee five dollars per song—a mere pittance because he can have another music ensemble record the song and make thousands of dollars for each one, not having to pay Levee anything more:

> 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. (*He attempts to hand LEVEE the money, finally shoves it in LEVEE's coat pocket and is gone in a flash. LEVEE follows him to the door and it slams in his face. He takes the money from his pocket, balls it up and throws it on the floor*.) (109)

Although Sturdyvant essentially steals the promising songs from Levee, he falsely claims that he is doing the trumpet player a favor and that the musician is getting the better end of the deal, just as minutes earlier, Levee declares that Ma has done him a favor by firing him.

Because Levee wants to record the songs as he was promised, he refuses to accept the money. Sturdyvant shoves the cash in Levee's pocket so that Green can never claim that he has not been paid for the transaction and that the songs still belong to him. The door slamming in Levee's face resembles the door of job opportunities being shut in the face of many Blacks in the 1920s. It is Sturdyvant's way of terminating the transaction and his relationship with Levee, for he knows that Green is not stupid enough to write him any more songs. The door slam, with Levee's incapacity to respond, symbolizes Green's inability to have any legal recourse to regain ownership of the songs and his dismal future in the music industry. Levee knows in 1927, as Wining Boy claims in the 1930s in *The Piano Lesson,* "That's the difference between the colored man and the white man. The colored man can't fix nothing with the law" (38).

Levee Green is left with no job, no band, no contract with Sturdyvant, no Dussie Mae, and no future. He wants to hurt Sturdyvant for destroying his future in the music business, but he cannot act because he views White people as being of a superior social status, people whose approval he needs. In his lucidity, Toledo astutely observes that Blacks rely too heavily and subserviently on the approval of Whites: "As long as the colored man look to white folks to put the crown on what he say. . . as long as he looks to white folks for approval. . . then he ain't

never gonna find out who he is and what he's about. He's just gonna be about what white folks want him to be about" (37). Like his colleagues, Levee speaks in a familial and aggressive manner to his fellow band members, but he, like them, calls Sturdyvant and Irvin "Sir" and converses with them in a deferential and subjugated tone. Levee claims previously, when discussing the time eight or nine White men gang raped his mother, that he acts politely toward White men while he bides his time, but when one crosses him, he will kill that man: "I studies the White man. I got him studied good. The first time one fixes on me wrong, I'm gonna let him know just how much I studied" (67). Wilson dramatizes, however, what Levee actually does when he is being hurt by a White man—nothing. He accepts the door slam, drops the money, and walks away. He wants to stab Sturdyvant for stealing his songs and falsely promising him a job as a bandleader and songwriter—a gig so promising that Levee has allowed himself to get fired. Although Levee wants to plunge his knife into the body of the record producer, he cannot because the man is White. The murder of a White man by a Black man in the 1920s was an act that would surely lead to very harsh and quick consequences, with life imprisonment or even capital punishment. He feels intimidated and is thus afraid to act.

Black Rage

Although Levee decides not to pursue Sturdyvant, he seethes with Black rage. This insult, like the gang rape of his mother and murder of his father, burns inside of him. Throughout his life, he has suffered racial discrimination and bigotry at the hands of Whites. Then Toledo accidentally steps on his shoe. Although the mistake is accidental, it unleashes the Black rage burning inside of Levee. His band members express no sympathy for the loss of his job, and they are clearly glad to get rid of this troublemaker. Levee has hoped to impress Sturdyvant with his songs and shoes, but Levee Green and his Footstompers will never come to fruition, and now Toledo dirties his expensive shoes. Levee grabs his knife and stabs Toledo in the back, slaying him: ("*All the weight in the world suddenly falls on LEVEE and he rushes at TOLEDO with his knife in his hand*") (110). Levee kills a fellow Black musician who, like him, never has been able to thrive because of racism. They are like brothers, so the murder gives new meaning to Levee's first speech in the play about not being his brother's keeper (23); although Levee's comment does not refer specifically to Toledo, it clearly refers to Cain's murder of his brother Abel. Tragically, Levee stabs Toledo shortly after the band colleague has stressed to him that the only way for Blacks to thrive financially and to achieve happiness is by working together as brothers (42). Wilson dramatizes how racial discrimination, financial exploitation, and the crushing of dreams victimize Blacks, how the rage within them causes them to self-destruct and become

what Toledo calls a "leftover" of history (58). The culmination of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* also demonstrates that during the 1920s and other times when Jim Crow laws prevailed, the inability of Blacks to achieve social justice and equality in business sometimes incites them to turn against each other. Levee and Toledo will never play the blues again.

The Blues

Wilson could have selected any theme to represent the African-American experience in the 1920s, but he purposefully chose the blues because it is so integral to Black culture, dating back to slavery in America and even their African heritage. Oppressed American slaves attempted to cope with their horrific suffering by singing the blues and hymns. Slaves composed these songs on plantations or derived them from their African culture. Speaking in an interview about the history and cultural significance of the blues, August Wilson claims:

> If you look at the singers, they actually follow a long line all the way back to Africa. . . They are carriers of the culture, carriers of ideas—like the troubadours in Europe. Except in American Society they were not valued, except among the black folks who understood. I've always thought of them as sacred because of the sacred tasks they took upon themselves—to disseminate this information and carry these cultural values of the people. And I found that white America would very often abuse them. I don't think it was without purpose, in the sense that the blues and music have always been at the forefront in the development of the character and consciousness of black America, and people have senselessly destroyed that or stopped that. Then—you're taking away from the people their self-definition—in essence, their self-determination. (Shannon 540-541)

They were not merely songs but rather a significant aspect of African-American culture that comforted them and helped them survive their tribulations. The blues were a part of their essence.

The blues embodies African-American rituals and culture. Wilson uses the blues to create a past and future dichotomy, as he does with the piano in his Pulitzer-Prize-winning drama, *The Piano Lesson*. In that play, Berniece wants to keep the piano because the Charles family's history and African-American rituals, such as jumping the broom, are carved into it, while Boy Willie wants to sell it to purchase land and be a farmer. Berniece treasures the piano because she considers her family's history as slaves, which she plainly sees on the musical instrument, while Boy Willie views it as a commodity that he can sell to make money. Similarly, in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the blues is precious to Ma because her singing gives pleasure to her fans, as the

blues comforted slaves a century before. Levee, although seemingly inspired, views the blues as passé and his "improvements" as a commodity to attain wealth and have sex with beautiful women like Dussie Mae. Rainey believes that her power to sing the blues comes from her ancestry and her heart and soul. Levee, on the other hand, asserts that his musical talent comes from within and from his expensive shoes. Bragging about his Florsheims, Levee sings, "When the world goes wrong and I have the blues/ He's the man who makes me get on my dancing shoes" (40). Green commercializes the blues, with his foot stomping songs of the future, for his own benefit, while Rainey, in contrast, reflects back on her ancestral and archetypal past.

Wilson transforms images (such as a piano and blues singer) into an African-American archetype. The playwright allows us to see the archetype from a Black perspective rather than the typical White racist or paternalistic stereotype. (Drowning 76) After hearing from White music business functionaries (Sturdyvant and Irvin) how rude and immature Ma Rainey is, audiences see, upon her entrance, how charming and intelligent she is. She is not combative but defends her rights, which her White bosses find offensive. After August Wilson tricks audiences into briefly accepting Sturdyvant and Irvin's bigoted perspective, the dramatist then allows the blues singer to enter and charm them, allowing theatre attendees to comprehend that perceiving African Americans from a White perspective can be deceptive and unreliable. Audiences see that Rainey is talented, funny, and dedicated to the blues and her nephew. She exhibits much more patience than the White music employees, who consider themselves superior to her. The blues is sacred to her, so she will not sing until she is ready and will not allow White businessmen who commercialize the blues to dominate her. She sings the blues not for money but for the benefit of her fans.

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BIO

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