

Madame' Gertrude Rainey was the Mother of the Blues, but everyone knows her as Ma. She wasn't the first woman to sing the blues. She'd actually heard the 'blues' while playing vaudeville, tent shows, and cabarets; she wasn't even the first woman to record the blues. She began recording when she was 38 in 1923, three years after Mamie Smith's 1920 recording of *That thing called love*, *You can't keep a good man down*, and of course the start of it all - *Crazy*.



Ma was born Gertrude Pridgett on April 26, 1886, in Columbus, Georgia, or September 1882 in Alabama, according to a later census. Her parents were the travelling minstrel artists Thomas Pridgett, Sr. and Ella Allen-Pridgett. Gertrude began singing professionally in 1896, after her father died. Her first public performance was in the 1900 stage show, 'The Bunch of Blackberries', at the Springer Opera House in Columbus. After that, Gertrude was soon performing on the same minstrel tent-show as did her mother.

Gertrude first heard country blues in 1902 while she was on the road. At a stop in Missouri, she saw an unnamed young woman singer accompany herself on guitar playing a song in a pentatonic scale with blue notes. She subsequently added the song to her repertoire as an encore. The everyday deprivation and joy of the blues resonated with audiences, often relating to their life experiences. Gertrude would continue to add songs she heard in the towns she played throughout her career.

In 1904, Gertrude married a singer, comedian and dancer named Will Rainey, and they toured as the duo Ma and Pa Rainey or as Rainey and Rainey, Assassinator of the Blues, they played regularly until the pair separated in 1916. Now billed as 'Ma' she went solo, touring with her own tent show as Madam Gertrude Ma Rainey and Her Georgia Smart Set, which included a chorus line of male and female dancers. The travelling show spent winters in New Orleans where Ma mingled with the cream of jazz masters.



In 1923, she was signed to Paramount Records by Mayo Williams, possibly the most successful blues producer of his time, certainly the first Black producer at a major label. Thomas A. Dorsey entered Ma's world in 1924. Dorsey, who would later go on to gain fame as a gospel songwriter, was also her manager and musical arranger, much like the trombone player Cutler (Colman Domingo) in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. He spotted the talent for Ma's later touring ensemble, the Wild Cats Jazz Band. The musicians played blues, but also performed written sheet music to play contemporary jazz.

During her five-year recording career at Paramount, she recorded with a rotating crew of musicians in various musical settings, all of whom played genuine blues songs of heartbreak, betrayal, drinking, superstition, prison road gangs, and hard and easy loving.

Ma or Gertrude wrote or co-wrote about a third of the 92 songs she recorded for her label. With her strong voice, unapologetic sexuality, and onstage abandon, the Paramount Wildcat as she was known devoured contemporary women blues singers like Ida Cox and Sippie Wallace like morsels to be savoured. (A quote) Ma wore that reputation as proudly as the gold she adorned herself with after she became famous, she became the Golden Necklace Woman of the Blues, and even notorious was penned by several



commentators. Around this time her only competition was the formidable and legendary Bessie Smith, the undisputed, Empress of the Blues. Fortunately, the research books tell us their rivalry was friendly and mutually supportive.

Bessie Smith

Ma was performing with the Moses Stokes' Travelling Show when she met Bessie Smith, at the time a chorus girl dancer, in 1912. Ma was

26 and Bessie was 18, Bessie had spent her childhood performing on street corners. Both her parents and a brother died by the time she was nine years old. During her relatively short life she went on to be the highest paid African American performer of the Roaring Twenties.

According to Chris Albertson book 'Bessie', the



legend endures that Ma Rainey kidnapped Bessie, forced her to join the Rabbit Foot Minstrels and taught her to sing the blues. Bessie's sister-in-law Maud Smith contends there is little truth in the legend, but it made for great publicity. In the light of Bessie's known strength of character, the story is at the very least dubious, while there are some authentic accounts that Ma Rainey was Bessie's vocal coach, it appears her coaching was more about vocal styling and performance. Both were jazz/blues singers, each with distinct and personal styles. Ma's slow moaning style and Bessie's vibrant contralto were their signatures. Together with Clara Smith, they performed together regularly, the two artists remaining lifelong friends.

Both expressed themselves boldly, their lyrics were masterpieces of double entendre, and their lives were as risqué as the songs. The two Jazz Age divas proudly proclaimed and even displayed their apparent partially gay lifestyle. While neither confirmed rumours that they were lovers, Bessie bailed Ma out of jail when the Chicago police raided the singer in the middle of some erotic personal entertainment with some of her female dancers. The depth and indeed the truth of these sexual and risqué rumours and performances are difficult to establish in any level of truth, and may well have been promoted in a time when such things were frowned upon in an almost prudish uptown society to emphasise their image and notoriety.

Ma Rainey's personal presence and stage performances are the stuff of legend. Some examples of what people have written about these performances...

- She would arrive dressed in furs and jewels, commanding the attention of the room. The moment she appeared, the atmosphere would shift, and her presence would radiate an aura of confidence and swagger.
- As the 'Mother of the Blues,' her act incorporated a blend of country blues, vaudeville, and her own signature musical style. Her voice was a key element, with performances featuring her powerful singing.
- She would demand the strangest things when appearing on stage, such as bursting out of a packing case or climbing out of an enormous grand piano. Often she would sing in almost total darkness.
- Her off-stage diva behaviour can only be described as outrageous often written as a direct extension of her on-stage power. She understood that as long as she was profitable, she could use her influence to get what she wanted. This included demanding specific conditions for her dressing room and performances, such as specific flowers, food and getting her a Coca-Cola or insisting that her nephew with a stutter provide the spoken intro to a song.

It's one of the things that I really loved about Ma Rainey, a quote from George C. Wolfe, director of the movie version of Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, one of the songs that she records... is called *Prove it on me [Blues]*, the song contains, unapologetic lyrics such as, '*I went out last night with a bunch of friends, must have been women cos I don't like men.*' that was just one of her hit songs in the 1920s.

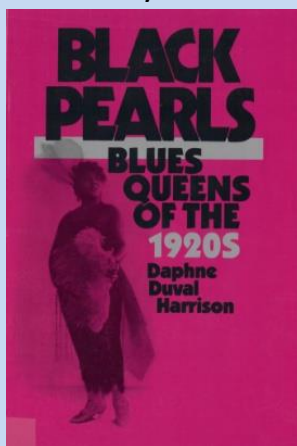
The legend Louis Armstrong was so inspired by Ma Rainey, he mentioned her in some context virtually every time he put down his trumpet to sing. Even his facial expressions were reportedly reminiscent of Ma's. Satchmo played cornet on several of her songs including *Yonder comes the Blues* and *Jelly bean blues*,.



Louis was also part of Gertrude Ma Rainey & Her Georgia Band's rendition of the now-standard blues classic *Stack O'Lee Blues*. Ma's version was one of the song's earliest recordings, though it has been said her version's melody is reminiscent of the song Frankie and Johnny.

Along with Charlie Green on trombone, Buster Bailey on clarinet, Fletcher Henderson on piano, and Charlie Dixon on banjo, Louis also played cornet for Ma in mid-October 1924 for another blues classic *See See Rider Blues*. The song has been covered by many artists over the years many times. Ma Rainey's was the first version, and her recording was added to the Library of Congress' National Recording Registry in 2004. For which her estate still holds the copyright.

The singer, songwriter and astute businesswoman helped make black female autonomy mainstream. The horsehair wigs and the gold teeth she wore on



stage empowered her fans. In 'Black Pearls', author Daphne Harrison said Ma's voice was a reaffirmation of Black life. Alice Walker cites Ma Rainey's music as a cultural model for her novel, *The Colour Purple*, and in the song *Tombstone Blues* from the 1965 album *Highway 61 Revisited*, Bob Dylan pairs Ma Rainey with Beethoven.

Ma's songs inspired poets such as Sterling Brown, whose 1932 poem *Ma Rainey*, describes one of her concerts from the eyes of her audience. *When Ma Rainey comes to*

town, folks from anyplace miles aroun' flocks in to hear Ma do her stuff," he enthused.

Ma retired from music in 1935, after the death of her mother and sister. She settled in Columbus and spent her remaining life running the two playhouses she owned: the Airdome and the Lyric Theater. Ma Rainey died from a heart attack on Dec. 22, 1939 in Columbus, Georgia.



People sure look lonesome since Ma Rainey been gone, blues guitar legend Memphis Minnie bemoaned on her 1940 tribute before humbly promising the good works of the Mother of the Blues would go on. Can there be a more authentic tribute to 'Ma' than Memphis Minnie's recording - Ma Rainey.

'Ma' a legend of the blues was inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame in 1983 and into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1990. 'To tell the truth, if I stop and listen, I can still hear her' Langston Hughes wrote in his 1952 poem *Shadow of the Blues*. Indeed Madame 'Ma' Rainey's legacy still casts a long one.

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Thanks to Ryan in the US.