

## Ma Rainey's Lesson Plans

### Lesson #1:

\* **Teacher's Note:** Due to the language and material in the play how you prepare your students will be of great importance as to how they will handle the work.

### Material Needed:

- CD Player
- Music CD (Resource Kit)
- Copies of Ma Rainey Biography
- Copies of Lyric sheet for "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom"

**AIM:** How can music define or describe the era from which it came? Is music able to define or describe the era it came from?

### DO NOW:

1. Write a short paragraph describing your favorite music. Consider the following questions:
  - a. Why do you like it?
  - b. How does it make you feel?
  - c. How does it communicate?
  - d. How do you define it?
  - e. How is it defined by others?
  - f. What image does it project?
  - g. What do you believe your grandchildren will think of your music choices?
  - h. Will they like or dislike it?
  - i. How does the music you listen to now describe what you are experiencing?
  - j. Will your music be different from the music in the future? Describe how?
2. Reflection Activity:
  - a. Have one or two students share their work and ask the class to listen for details that are specific to American culture in the first part of the 21st century and which details seem universal.
3. Create a T-Chart on the board based on class discussion:

<u>Current</u>	<u>I</u>	<u>Universal</u>
-from the streets		-fun to dance to
-shows I'm a goth		-makes me feel happy

### Procedure:

1. Play Ma Rainey CD track: "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom"
2. Ask the class to jot down words or phrases that come to mind when they hear the music.
3. Ask them to consider the following:
  - a. What feelings does the song evoke?
  - b. Who do you think is singing?
  - c. Who do you think is the audience for this song?
  - d. Is this song a positive or negative reflection of Ma Rainey?
  - e. What are we supposed to imply about her character from the lyrics?

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- f. If you sang this song out loud today, would it be appropriate or offend others?
  - g. Is this song racist?
    - i. Why or why not?
4. Have students get into groups of four or five and share their notes. Have students discuss their inferences and then share with the rest of the class
5. Hand out Ma Rainey biography and read. (\*Teacher may edit length as sees fit).
6. Discuss that the class will be exploring the 1920's through a play written by a black playwright. Briefly describe the play themes and what blacks went through at this time.
7. Play the song "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" one more time.
  - a. Hand out Lyrics to the song for homework.

**Homework:** Research: What are The Blues? What is the title of this genre supposed to tell you about the music? Where did this music originate? What are some characteristics of the Blues?

## **Ma (Gertrude Pridgett) Rainey Biography**

**by name of Gertrude Malissa Nix Rainey , née Gertrude Malissa Nix Pridgett (1886 - 1939)**

### **Related Sites**

- [Ma Rainey on the Blue Flame Cafe Web site](#)

Pioneer blues vocalist. Born Gertrude Pridgett on April 26, 1886, in Columbus, Georgia, to minstrel troupers Thomas Pridgett, Sr. and Ella Allen-Pridgett. The first popular stage entertainer to incorporate authentic blues in her song repertoire, Ma Rainey performed during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Known as the "Mother of the Blues," she enjoyed mass popularity during the blues craze of the 1920s. Described by African American poet Sterling Brown in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* as "a person of the folk," Rainey recorded in various musical settings and exhibited the influence of genuine rural blues.

Rainey worked at the Springer Opera House in 1900, performing as a singer and dancer in the local talent show, "A Bunch of Blackberries." On February 2, 1904, Pridgett married comedy songster William "Pa" Rainey. Billed as "Ma" and "Pa" Rainey the couple toured Southern tent shows and cabarets. Though she did not hear blues in Columbus, Rainey's extensive travels had, by 1905, brought her into contact with authentic country blues, which she worked into her song repertoire. "Her ability to capture the mood and essence of black rural southern life of the 1920s," noted Daphane Harrison in *Black Pearls: Blues Queens* "quickly endeared her to throngs of followers throughout the South."

While performing with the Moses Stokes troupe in 1912, the Raineys were introduced to the show's newly recruited dancer, Bessie Smith. Eight years Smith's senior, Rainey quickly befriended the young performer. Despite earlier historical accounts crediting Rainey as Smith's vocal coach, it has been generally agreed by modern scholars that Rainey played less of a role in the shaping of Smith's singing style. "Ma Rainey probably did pass some of her singing experience on to Bessie," explained Chris Albertson in the liner notes to *Giants of Jazz*, "but the instruction must have been rudimentary. Though they shared an extraordinary command of the idiom, the two women delivered their messages in styles and voices that were dissimilar and manifestly personal."

Around 1915, the Raineys toured with Fat Chappelle's Rabbit Foot Minstrels. Afterward, they were billed as the "Assassins of the Blues" with Tolliver's Circus and Musical Extravaganza. Separated from her husband in 1916, Rainey subsequently toured with her own band, Madam Gertrude Ma Rainey and Her Georgia Smart Sets, featuring a chorus line and a Cotton Blossoms Show, and Donald McGregor's Carnival Show.

With the help of Mayo "Ink" Williams, Rainey first recorded for the Paramount label in 1923 (three years after the first blues side recorded by Mamie Smith). Already a popular singer in the Southern theater circuit, Rainey entered the recording industry as an experienced and stylistically mature talent. Her first session, cut with Austin and Her Blue Serenaders, featured the traditional

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number "Bo-Weevil Blues". Fellow blues singer, Victoria Spivey, later said of the recording, as quoted in *The Devil's Music*, "Ain't nobody in the world been able to holler 'Hey Boweevil' like her. Not like Ma. Nobody." 1923 also saw the release of Rainey's side "Moonshine Blues," with Lovie Austin, and "Yonder Comes the Blues" with Louis Armstrong. That same year, Rainey recorded "See See Rider," a number that, as Arnold Shaw observed in *Black Popular Music in America*, emerged as "one of the most famous and recorded of all blues songs. {Rainey's} was the first recording of that song, giving her a hold on the copyright, and one of the best of the more than 100 versions."

In August 1924, Rainey--along with the twelve string guitar of Miles Pruitt and an unknown second guitar accompanist--recorded the eight bar blues number "Shave 'Em Dry." In the liner notes to *The Blues*, folklorist W.K. McNeil observed that the number "is typical of Rainey's output, a driving, unornamented vocal propelled along by an accompanist who plays the number straight. Her artistry brings life to what in lesser hands would be a dull, elementary piece."

Unlike many other blues musicians, Rainey earned a reputation as a professional on stage and in business. According to Mayo Williams, as quoted in the liner notes to August Wilson's 1988 play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, "Ma Rainey was a shrewd business woman. We never tried to put any swindles on her. During Rainey's five-year recording career at Paramount she cut nearly ninety sides, most of which dealt with the subjects of love and sexuality--bawdy themes that often earned her the billing of "Madam Rainey." As William Barlow explained, in *Looking Up at Down*, her songs were also "diverse, yet deeply rooted in day-to-day experiences of black people from the South. Ma Rainey's blues were simple, straightforward stories about heart break, promiscuity, drinking binges, the odyssey of travel, the workplace and the prison road gang, magic and superstition--in short, the southern landscape of African Americans in the Post-Reconstruction era."

With the success of her early recordings, Rainey took part in a Paramount promotional tour that featured a newly assembled back-up band. In 1924, pianist and arranger Thomas A. Dorsey recruited members for Rainey's touring band, The Wild Cats Jazz Band. Serving as both director and manager, Dorsey assembled able musicians who could read arrangements as well as play in a down "home blues" style. Rainey's tour debut at Chicago's Grand Theater on State Street marked the first appearance of a "down home" blues artist at the famous southside venue. Draped in long gowns and covered in diamonds and a necklace of gold pieces, Rainey had a powerful command over her audiences. She often opened her stage show singing "Moonshine Blues" inside the cabinet of an over-sized victrola, from which she emerged to greet a near-frantic audience. As Dorsey recalled, in *The Rise of Gospel Blues*, "When she started singing, the gold in her teeth would sparkle. She was in the spotlight. She possessed listeners; they swayed, they rocked, they moaned and groaned, as they felt the blues with her."

Until 1926, Rainey performed with her Wild Jazz Cats on the Theater Owner's Booking Association circuit (TOBA). That year, after Dorsey left the band, she recorded with various musicians on the Paramount label--often under the name of Ma Rainey and her Georgia Jazz Band which, on various occasions, included musicians such as pianists Fletcher Henderson, Claude Hopkins, and Willie the Lion Smith, reed players Don Redman, Buster Bailey and Coleman Hawkins, and trumpeters Louis Armstrong and Tommy Ladnier. In 1927, Rainey cut

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sides such as "Black Cat, Hoot Owl Blues" with the Tub Jug Washboard Band. During her last sessions, held in 1928, she sang in the company of her former pianist Thomas "Georgia Tom" Dorsey and guitarist Hudson "Tampa Red" Whittaker, producing such numbers as "Black Eye Blues," "Runaway Blues" and "Sleep Talking Blues."

Though the TOBA and vaudeville circuits had gone into decline by the early 1930s, Rainey still performed, often resorting to playing tent shows. Following the death of her mother and sister, Rainey retired from the music business in 1935 and settled in Columbus. For the next several years, she devoted her time to the ownership of two entertainment venues--the Lyric Theater and the Airdome--as well as activities in the Friendship Baptist Church. Rainey died in Rome, Georgia--some sources say Columbus--on December 22, 1939.

A great contributor to America's rich blues tradition, Rainey's music has served as inspiration for African American poets such as Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown, the latter of whom paid tribute to the majestic singer in the poem "Ma Rainey," which appeared in his 1932 collection *Southern Road*. More recently, Alice Walker looked to Ma Rainey's music as a cultural model of African American womanhood when she wrote the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Color Purple*. In *Black Pearls*, Daphane Harrison praised Rainey as the first great blues stage singer: "The good-humored, rollicking Rainey loved life, loved love, and most of all loved her people. Her voice bursts forth with a hearty declaration of courage and determination--a reaffirmation of black life."

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### Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (Lyrics)

All right boys, you done seen the rest  
Now, I'm gonna show you the best.  
Ma Rainey's gonna show you her black bottom.

Way down south in Alabama  
I got a friend they call dancing Sammy  
Who's crazy about the latest dances  
Black Bottom stomping, two babies prancing

The other night a swell affair  
As soon as the boys found out that I was there  
They said, come on, Ma, let's go to the cabaret  
When I got there, you ought to hear them 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 Lat 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

I done showed you all my black bottom  
You ought to learn that dance.

**\*Teachers Note:** (white out or cut out this section when making copies for students)  
August Wilson changed one line in the song Ma Rainey's Black Bottom that occurs within the play. The last line in the second stanza: *Black Bottom stomping, two babies prancing* was originally written and performed in the '20s as: *Black Bottom stomps and the Jew baby prances*. High School teachers might want to explore this with their students as an extension to the work.

- Why did August Wilson change the line when he wrote this in the 1980's?
- How does the change affect the song? What meaning does the original lyric have?

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**\*Teachers Note:** it is important that for each lesson plan in the rest of this unit you play a Ma Rainey song as the students enter and possibly leave. This will help set the tone for the unit.

### Lesson #2

#### Material Needed:

- CD Player
- Ma Rainey CD
- Pack of Playing Cards (normal deck)
- Copies of Play Synopsis

**AIM:** How can music be used as a primary source to make inferences about historical experiences?

#### Do Now:

1. Have the students write out a list of five to ten things each that they could “sing the blues” about.
2. Activity:
  - a. Create a word wall chart of all things that the students felt a Blues song could be about.
  - b. Retain for future use.

#### Main Activity:

1. Hand out Play Synopsis to class and read out loud.
  - a. Have students discuss what they feel the characters are about.
2. The play, as they know it right now, shows the various degrees of status that the characters have.
3. **The Status Exercise:**
4. Ask the students to explain what they think status is.
  - a. Power, wealth, standings in society, etc.
  - b. Using a scale of 1-10, ten being the highest, who in the school is the highest status?
  - c. Who would be next?
  - d. And so on.
5. Have five cards from the deck of playing cards on the side: 2, 4, 6, 8, 10.
  - a. 2 being the lowest, ten being the highest status.
6. Teacher will model The Status Game Exercise:
  - a. Teacher will stand, take a step forward, and say: “Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_” and step back.
  - b. Using the idea of low to high, the first time you do this, slouch over, be low energy, look at your feet, etc. to put into your body the idea of a low status character.
  - c. Repeat two times, giving a mid range status level doing the same thing and then how a ten would say and stand and feel. Upright, projecting confidence, etc.
7. Ask for FIVE volunteers from the students.

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- a. Stand them in a line against the wall.
- b. Shuffle the cards and hand them out, face down. The cards should be in random order.
8. Instruct the students that they must not show the face of the cards to anyone.
9. Repeat the instructions you modeled:
10. Each student will look at their card and hide it.
11. They will, one at a time, take a step, say "Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_" and step back.
  - a. Continue until all five have a chance to go.
12. Tell the students in the audience that they must really listen and look because when the five have finished they will, in small groups, figure out who has which status card.
  - a. Give three groups a chance to put the student volunteers in proper order.
  - b. Then have the students show their cards to the audience.
  - c. Discuss the correct guesses and the ones they were off and why (not strong enough/too strong, etc).
13. Now up the ante:
14. Pull out ten cards, Ace to Ten and get new volunteers.
  - a. Same procedure as above.
  - b. One difference, ask the ten students to remember how they moved, stood and talked as they will have to repeat it a second time after all ten have gone.
  - c. Again, have the audience guess, in groups, where the students should be in correct status, lowest to highest.
15. After a brief discussion of this lineup, come back to the play synopsis.
16. Ask the students if they can pull out, just from this synopsis, the status levels of the characters?
  - a. What is the status between the White owner and manager and Ma Rainey?
  - b. What is the status between the White owner and manager to the musicians?
  - c. What is the status between Ma Rainey and the musicians?
  - d. Is there anything that can change the status relationships?
  - e. Was status change possible for Blacks in the 1920s?

### Homework:

1. Have you ever judged someone by the way they looked?
2. What status did you think they had?
3. How do you treat people you feel are a higher status than you?
  - a. Lower?
4. Have you ever been treated differently because of your status?
  - a. How did you feel?
  - b. How did you react?

## Plot Summary

### Act 1

*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* opens in a Chicago recording studio in early March 1927. Rainey has taken a break from touring to record some songs for Sturdyvant's studio. As the lights come up, Sturdyvant is warning Irvin that he will not put up with any of Ma Rainey's "shenanigans." Sturdyvant characterizes Rainey as a prima donna, someone who expects the world to do her bidding. Irvin's assurances that Rainey will show up on time do not sound convincing, however, and the more Sturdyvant warns Irvin that he won't put up with Rainey's attitude, the more prepared the audience becomes for an inevitable conflict when she does appear.

Cutler and the band appear shortly, and Levee shows up carrying his new shoes, which he paid for in part with money he won from Cutler the night before playing craps, a dice game. Levee's new Florsheim shoes represent a shift in musical taste from blues to jazz and swing, a change that Sturdyvant wants to exploit, at least initially, when he tells Irvin to have the band record Levee's version of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom."

The bulk of act 1 is comprised of bantering between and among band players, with Levee arguing with almost everyone. The stories the band members tell and the subjects of their arguments both reveal their respective characters and outline a particular struggle blacks historically have had with whites.

One of these struggles is exemplified when Rainey finally makes her entrance, along with Sylvester, Dussey Mae, and a policeman, who threatens to arrest her for assaulting a cab driver after the group attempted to leave an automobile accident they were in. Wilson's scenarios are universal enough to appeal to a racially diverse audience and to create empathy for dilemmas specific to blacks. The struggle for financial control of goods made by black labor is evident, for example, in the way in which Rainey responds to Irvin and the way in which Sturdyvant pressures Irvin. Act 1 ends with Levee, the youngest band member, telling the story of his mother's rape and his father's murder at the hands of white men. The important thing to remember about the action in this act isn't what happens, but the emotional effect racial conflict has on how band members interact with one another, as well as with whites.

### Act 2

In this act, Rainey asserts her prerogative in having Sylvester do the introduction to "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," even though band members and Irvin think it's a bad idea because of his stuttering. Rainey's insistence, however, symbolizes the duty she feels in giving powerless blacks a voice, both literally and figuratively. This demand — and her refusal to sing unless she has a Coca-Cola — illustrates almost stereotypical behavior of prima donna celebrities. However, Rainey's motivation for behaving this way is more closely related to her desire to let her white producer and agent know that they cannot take advantage of black people in general and her in particular. Various characters, including Rainey, give speeches about white exploitation and mistreatment of blacks throughout the act. Levee, who Sturdyvant had promised could record some of his own songs, is humiliated by the producer, who now tells him that his

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music isn't what people want. Enraged at a system that has squelched his creative powers, at a people who have shamed and exploited him, and at a man who has lied to him, Levee stabs Toledo. He does so, not because Toledo stepped on his shoe, but because Toledo was unfortunate enough to be in the vicinity just after Sturdyvant's exchange with Levee. By offering no transcendence or resolution at the end of the play, Wilson figuratively "sticks it" to his audience as well, reminding them that the plight of African Americans remains the same.

**Lesson #3:**

**Materials Needed:**

Copies of lyrics to "Strange Fruit"

Copies of selected scenes

**AIM:** How does the effect of hate (oppression) differ when it is felt as opposed to when it is seen?

**Do Now:**

1. Hand out song lyrics to "Strange Fruit".
2. Ask student to jot down what they think the song lyrics are about.

**Main Activity:**

1. Have the students discuss the song lyrics and life was like in the South at that time.
2. Copy pages 66-71 (start when Sturdyvant enters the band room) and hand out.
  - a. *Levee tells the other men what happened to him when he was eight years old.*
3. Have the students read the scene aloud.
  - a. \*Teacher Note: Levee's monologue deals with the rape of his mother and the lynching/burning of his father.
4. Reflect on the scene:
  - a. How does Levee's story connect to the song lyrics of "Strange Fruit"?
  - b. How does Levee change when he is speaking to Sturdyvant and then to the other musicians?
    - i. Is there a shift in status among the characters?
  - c. How do the other musicians deal with Levee?
  - d. How does the scene convey the spirit of the 1920's South for Blacks?
5. Discuss the Great Black Migration.

Points to include:

- The Great Migration occurred primarily between the two world wars. However, between 1910 and 1970, approximately six and a half million African Americans migrated out of the South. While in 1910, 80 percent of blacks lived in the South, less than half lived there by 1970, with only 25 percent in the rural South.
- Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia, as well as other Northern cities, were the initial destinations of most migrants. The West later became a major destination.
- Life in the South was difficult for African Americans for a variety of reasons, including problems associated with sharecropping and the accompanying natural disasters of the late 1910s and '20s; Jim Crow legislation, which resulted in segregated public facilities, transportation, and schools; and violence, symbolized by the Ku Klux Klan and most graphically displayed in public lynchings.
- The North was viewed as the promised land, an idea perpetuated by the need for factory workers and the fact that pay in such factories was typically as much as three times more than what blacks made working the land in the South.

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- While segregation was not legalized in the North, as it was in the South, blacks experienced prejudice and racism in the North, commonly known as "de facto segregation."
- Life in the North presented its own challenges for blacks, including poor living conditions and harsh, often dangerous work environments.

### **Reflect:**

1. What did the blacks who migrated North, then West, find?
2. Do the students think life was better or worse and why?
3. In what ways was life the same?
4. Do artistic works show the brutal truth of reality or gloss over the truth?
5. Do the students feel that Levee's speech reflected reality of the time?

### **Homework:**

1. Find a picture from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that clearly shows hatred, oppression and/or violence to another.
  - a. Print it out (or make a copy from a book) and bring it to class.
  - b. Does the picture tell the story?
    - i. Examples: mobs/rioting against blacks; lynching; cross burnings; segregation signs; etc.

<http://www.iniva.org/harlem/home.html>

Rhapsodies in Black...has info on Harlem Renaissance and much more

<http://www.iniva.org/harlem/blues.html>

About blues/jazz

<http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/exploring/harlem/artsedge.html>

can be used to explore Harlem ren if has smartboard or other computer set up

<http://artsedge.kennedy-center.org/content/3949/>

Jazz Timeline

<http://www.artsedge.kennedy-center.org/content/2208/>

how to create a 12 bar blues song

**Strange Fruit**....(by Lewis Allen; sung and made famous by Billie Holiday)

Southern trees bear strange fruit,  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,  
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant south,  
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,  
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,  
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,  
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,  
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,  
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

## Lesson #4: Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

### Materials:

- Copies of the selected scenes below
- Copy of Ma Rainey explaining the blues page
- Post-it Sheet of Blues subjects from Lesson #2
- Copies of Black on Black Violence articles

\*Teacher's Note: This lesson will continue into the next day's lesson.

**AIM:** How does your anger at a friend differ from your anger at someone who is in charge of you?

### Do Now:

1. Copy pages 82-83.
  - a. Hand out short scene where Ma Rainey, Cutler and Toledo talk about the blues and ask them to read it to themselves.
2. Hang up the Blues sheet the class created in Lesson #2. In small groups, have them collaborate on writing part of a "blues song".
  - a. It can be done in a round robin style (each one in the group writes one line and pass it to the next. Work until they get at least one if not two stanzas done (size of class will dictate this) or just as a joint collaborative piece.
  - b. The idea is to get words and feelings down, not to be the best blues song writer.
3. If you can get them to set up an AB/AB rhyming pattern per group it might work well for them.
4. Activity:
  - a. Have one representative from each group come to the front of the class, one next to the other, and have them read/sing (if they are so inclined) their blues stanza and continue this down the row until done.
  - b. The class has created a Class Blues Song which you may want to rewrite in its entirety on a large post-it pad and hang up in the class at a later time.

### Main Activity

*Pages 62 through 65 in Plum Edition:* The owner of the recording studio wants to do Levee's version of one of Ma Rainey's songs, and Ma Rainey is protesting. Ma Rainey wants Levee to play the song her way, and asks Cutler to make sure he plays it that way. Cutler tells Levee, "Your job is to play whatever Ma Says!" Levee, however, has his own very particular way he wishes to play, and he feels this is truly what the listening public wants to hear.

*Pages 66 - 68 in Plum Edition:* Sturdyvant asks Levee about his songs, takes one of his songs, and says that he wants to see Levee about his songs as soon as he gets a chance. Read up to Levee's monologue (discussed in Lesson #3) which he tells them primarily to justify the way he acts toward Sturdyvant and Irvin, the two white men that run the recording studio. The other members of the band accuse Levee of being "spooked" by the white man

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*Pages 94-95 in Plum Edition:* The band members are having a discussion about black men's position in society. Toledo says that black men have "sold out" to the white man, so they can be like white men. Levee says that he is no imitation white man, and that by producing the records Sturdyvant wants him to, he will make the white man respect him.

*Pages 96-100 in Plum Edition:* Cutler tells story about Reverent Gates, and Levee responds in a way that deeply offends Cutler. Cutler physically confronts Levee, and Levee pulls a knife, and ends up challenging God to turn His back on him.

*Page 101-102 in Plum Edition:* Ma Rainey is unhappy with the way Levee played a particular song, and questions him about the way Levee played the song. Ma Rainey fires Levee from her band.

### **Procedure:**

1. Make copies of the above pages for handouts.
2. Enacting the scenes:
  - a. Break the students into five groups and give each group one section of the play as defined above.
    - i. Have the students read the sections to themselves at first.
    - ii. Tell them to then practice the scenes out loud, choosing characters to play.
      1. Long monologues can be shared by two or more students, depending on the students.
  - b. Depending on size of group, you may choose a director to help them stage.
    - i. This works best with student who may not want to speak out loud. However, it gets them involved.
  - c. Give them time to rehearse at least twice.
  - d. One group at a time, have the students "present" their scene to the class until all five scenes are done.

### **Reflections:**

1. Have the students discuss the scenes as a class.
2. Some guiding questions:
  - a. Who, among all of the black musicians, has the most sway with "management"?
    - i. Support your answer with evidence from the text.
  - b. What, at this point in the play, is causing tension among the black musicians?
  - c. What do you think are the larger issues underlying the particular tension that is occurring now among the musicians?
  - d. How do you think what happened to Levee when he was eight has affected him?
  - e. How does Levee relate to Sturdyvant?
    - i. What are the differences in the way he relates to Sturdyvant and the way he relates to the other members of the band?
  - f. Which historical realities might cause Levee to want to gain the respect of the white man?

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**Homework:** Hand out both Black on Black Violence articles. After analyzing both, have students write an essay explaining why oppression may have made it easier for African Americans to take their anger out on each other rather than on who was oppressing them. Why would that have been possible? Why act out against those who understood them best? Why not fight against the oppressors? Is it difficult to fight against oppression? Why?

## **Black-on-Black Violence**

**By Earl Ofari Hutchinson, AlterNet**

**Posted on June 20, 2006, Printed on February 28, 2009**

**<http://www.alternet.org/story/37858/>**

When the FBI released its latest annual crime report showing that violent crime is on the upswing in many big cities, a bevy of law enforcement, officials, and criminologists prayed that the report was just an aberrant blip on the crime chart.

There was good reason to hope that: murder rates have plunged in big cities during the past decade, and there was every expectation that things would stay that way.

The recent slaughter of five teens in New Orleans and a desperate plea from Mayor Ray Nagin to send in the National Guard to help patrol the streets shattered that hope. While the murder rate in big cities is still lower than it was a decade ago, the terrifying reality is that in New Orleans and other big cities, the victims and their killers are almost always young black males.

In the 25 years of homicide records from 1976 to 2002 by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, blacks are six times more likely to be murdered than whites, and seven times more likely to kill than whites. They are far more likely to be gunned down over gang or drug disputes. New Orleans police speculate that that was the reason the five teens were killed.

President Bush recognized that big city violence was a crisis problem. In his State of the Union Address in 2005, he pledged to shell out \$150 million to youth education and violence prevention programs. It was well intentioned, but it was still a far cry from what was needed to stem the gunplay on urban streets. And as has been the case with other Bush initiatives, unveiled with much public fanfare, the attack on urban violence has fizzled out due to lack of money and lack of will to push it through. But even if the money and will were there, that would not get at the cause of why so many young blacks kill each other.

More police, prosecutors, "three strikes" and mandatory sentencing laws, the death penalty, and the nearly one million blacks behind bars have done little to curb this carnage. Despite the pet theories of liberals and conservatives, blacks aren't killing each other because they are violent or crime-prone by nature, because they are poor and oppressed, or even because they are acting out the obscene violence they see and hear on TV, films, and in gangster-rap lyrics.

The violence results from a combustible blend of cultural and racial baggage many blacks carry. In the past, crimes committed by blacks against other blacks were often ignored or lightly punished. The implicit message was that black lives were expendable. It would be

no surprise if the killer or killers of the New Orleans teens had a long, violent rap sheet but continued to roam the streets.

Many studies have confirmed that the punishment violent blacks receive when their victim is white is far more severe than if the victim is black. This perceived devaluation of black lives by racism has provoked disrespect for the law, and has forced many blacks to internalize anger and misplace aggression onto other blacks -- especially those that are perceived as weak or defenseless.

Far too many young black males have become especially adept at acting out their frustrations at white society's denial of their "manhood" by adopting an exaggerated "tough guy" role. They swagger, boast, curse, fight and commit violent, self-destructive acts. When many black males indulge their murderous impulses on other black males, they are often taking out their pent-up frustrations on those whom they perceive as helpless and hapless. This is a warped response to racism and deprivation, blocked opportunities, powerlessness and alienation.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics noted that the other powerful ingredient in the deadly mix of black-on-black violence is the gang and drug plague. The resurgence of the drug trade in recent years and the flood of felons from prisons have made black gangs even bigger and more dangerous. Drug trafficking not only provided illicit profits, but also made gun play more widespread. Gang members used their arsenals to fend off attacks, protect their profits from predators, and settle scores with rivals. Broken homes, miserably failing inner city schools, and a chronic unemployment rate among young blacks -- which is double and triple that of white males in urban areas -- haven't helped matters.

Other than comedian Bill Cosby and some outraged local black leaders, mainstream civil rights figures haven't said or done much about the black carnage. The sight of the National Guard on New Orleans streets may be a temporary comfort to residents and city officials, but it's only that: temporary comfort.

An impassioned Mayor Nagin put it best: local residents and community groups must put their foot down, say enough is enough, and take back their streets. That's still the best way to stop the violence.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson is the author of *The Crisis in Black and Black* (Middle Passage Press). The Hutchinson Report Blog is now online at [Earl Ofari Hutchinson.com](http://EarlOfariHutchinson.com).

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**Black on Black Violence**

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**Article by Dan Bell**

Whether you call it a health issue or genocide, “Black on Black violence” is an enormous crisis in the Black community. 1 in 146 black males are at risk of violent death, whereas the ratio for white men is 1 in 189. What do we mean by “Black on Black crime?” It may be described as anytime a Black person inflicts violent harm on another Black person. In one study by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (covering reported violent crime that occurred between 1993-98) when the offender had been identified, 76% of the time the violence was intra-racial. The effects of this violence in the Black community is tremendous. Violence is very much part of what it means to be Black in America.

What are some of the reasons for this problem? It is in part how we have historically allowed the system to work in America dating back to slavery, and it is in part how Blacks have responded to systematic operation of oppression and dehumanization. But let's look at some of the factors that have to be considered when trying to come up with solutions.

1) History that leads right up to the present: Since the days that Blacks were involved in the slave system, they have been the recipients of organized violence in this country. When slavery was declared illegal in the 19th century, US laws have often been changed or have been manipulated in order to exclude Blacks from financial success, individual freedom, and public participation in our society. As Reverend Harriet Walden, who works on Black on Black violence in Seattle, WA, has said “We cannot talk about this without talking about white supremacy and racism.” From Jim Crow, to redlining, to racial profiling, these barriers have been effective in frustrating Black people's legal efforts to support themselves and their families. And when people are unable to participate in a legitimate economy, they have at times turned to illegal economies. And those environments support and encourage violence. Since we have not yet achieved a period of true equal opportunity in this country, we are steering some people into illegal activity and lives with more violence.

2) Self-perception: Franz Fanon, the French psychiatrist who treated patients during Algeria's revolt against France, proposed that the ‘oppressed’ after a period of time adopted the point of view of the oppressor. Racism has sent the specific message to members of the Black community (along with other communities of color) that our lives are worth less. By acting out against others in our community with violence, we are acting on the beliefs that have been drilled into our heads that our lives are not precious. Larger institutions echo that belief by not taking crimes against Black people seriously.

3) Turning victims into perpetrators: When the criminal justice system responds to crime in the Black community by minimizing it, it often comes down to the same old perception that it is a “Negro” problem. There are not broad efforts to treat victims well, ensure their long-term health, or to take their harm seriously. Experiencing violence increases the likelihood that a person will use violence against someone else later. So violence in the community is like a snowball rolling down a hill in an avalanche, getting larger as it goes along, sweeping up more and more in its path. Violence is a self-perpetuating problem.

4) All communities reflect the broader community in which we live, and violence or the threat of violence is often used to solve problems. Dr. King, for example, became more outspoken in his opposition to the Vietnam War because he said that he spoke to urban youth who asked him “Why shouldn’t we use violence? Our government does.” Violence in the Black community is part of a broader problem of violence in our culture.

Whether in the Black community, or any community, we know that there are some factors that correlate with a lower rate of violence. Two of the leading ones: economic stability and strong social networks. Communities in which people have their basic needs met correlate with a lower incidence of violence. Both of these will be difficult to achieve until racism is addressed (see reason number one) and Blacks achieve equal opportunity. The work of Reverend Walden in Seattle and others working on this issue has been based on breaking the silence, and promoting Black leadership on this issue.

We are not making excuses for violence by saying that past injustices (like slavery) justify it. Many would agree with the teachings of Martin Luther King Jr., who reminded us that those who have been constantly abused and humiliated can still hold the moral high ground. We can either choose the path of acting out, and respond to violence with violence... which will then likely lead to more violence, what Dr King referred to as the path of mutual destruction. We can devise plans to change this problem. But, we can’t do it alone.

Resources and More Information about Black On Black Violence  
(these resources are primarily available via the Internet)

Bringing the Anti-Violence Message to Young Black Males, By: Bridget Murray:  
Monitor.V34 #Jul/Aug 2003 <http://www.apa.org/monitor/julaug03/bringing.html> [1]

Violence and the African-American Community: Violence in the African-American Community as a Public Health Issue. Vernellia R. Randall Professor of Law and WEB Editor. Article By Kimberly Chipman, Rn 2nd year law student. University of Dayton School of Law. Fall 1998  
<http://academic.udayton.edu/health/01status/98chipman.htm> [2]

Black Genocide? Preliminary Thoughts on the Plight of America's Poor Black Men, By Robert Johnson and Paul Leighton: Journal of African Men, v1#2, Fall1995, <http://www.paulsjusticepage.com/reality-of-justice/backgenocide.htm> [3]

Families Affected by Violence (FAB Violence) is based in Portland, Oregon. You can find them on the web at [www.blackonblackviolence.com](http://www.blackonblackviolence.com) [4], or you email Joe Bean Keller at [joebean@blackonblackviolence.com](mailto:joebean@blackonblackviolence.com)

Reverend Harriet Walden is part of the Silent War Campaign, they're working to break the silence on Black on Black Violence, and are based in Seattle, Washington. You can reach Reverend Walden via email at [harrietwalden@aol.com](mailto:harrietwalden@aol.com).

This article originally appeared in Justice Matters in Fall 2004

## Lesson #5: Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

### Materials Needed:

- CD Player
- CD disc: "Rhapsody in Blue"
- Copies of the final scenes listed below
- Copies of the Playwright's Bio

**AIM:** How did Jazz music reflect positive or negative changes in African American culture of the 1920's?

### Do Now:

1. For the last four days they have listened to Ma Rainey's blues songs and discussed the lyrics of "Strange Fruit".
2. After they listen to the Jazz piece, have them complete a Venn diagram comparing and contrasting the differences in styles between the two musical genres.

### Activity:

1. Students discuss the similarities and differences between Jazz and the Blues.
2. Why do students feel Levee (and Sturdyant) want to move more towards Jazz?
3. Do the students have a preference between the two styles and why?
4. How do these genres of music reflect what is going on in society at the time? How?
5. What do the students feel is each style's place in American musical history?
  - a. \*Teacher's Note: you can briefly discuss the art forms significance to American culture and originality of formation in America.

### Main Activity:

*Pages 107-109 in Plum Edition:* Sturdyant, who runs the recording studio, tells Levee that he doesn't want to record the songs Levee has written, and in fact, *has* written at the urging of Sturdyant.

*Page 110 to end:* Toledo, having already apologized for stepping on Levee's shoe, says excuse me one more time. However, by this time, he is also frustrated and angered by Levee's lack of understanding that the "transgression" was accidental.

### Procedure:

1. Continue discussion from previous day if needed/time ran out.
2. Copy pages 107-111.
3. Hand out final scenes.
4. Get volunteers to read out loud.
  - a. \***Teacher's Note.** The final monologue of Levee's is powerful and deals with a stabbing. How you set this up for the students will enhance the power of the scene. If you feel there isn't a student who will do it justice you may want to read

that last monologue yourself. Try to encourage the students to do it though and give it the weight it deserves.

**Final Reflections:**

*Summary:* One might expect Levee to have lashed out at either Sturdyvant or Irvin, since they can be viewed as the white oppressors in the play. Instead, he kills one of his fellow band members for a seemingly trivial transgression.

1. So the question in the play is what causes Levee to do this?
2. Why do you think Levee reacts so vehemently to Toledo's stepping on his shoe?
3. Do you think his response is reasonable considering the offense?
  - a. Why or why not?
  - b. Have you ever seen a fight started over something small, like looking at someone the wrong way or scuffing someone's "kicks"?
4. The question for society is why do minorities seem to inevitably manifest the role of the oppressor among their own ranks?
  - a. Why is it easier to turn on your own than fight the power keeping you down?
5. What are the cultural, economic, sociological, and psychological mechanisms that result in this self-destruction? Or, can the cause be attributed only to economic realities?
  - a. If we examine the play only through this lens, what conclusions can we draw about Levee's final, desperate act?
  - b. Can any of the students relate the Black on Black violence readings to what Levee did?
6. Hand out August Wilson's Biography sheet.
7. Have class read it.

**Homework:**

1. Do you think August Wilson, the playwright, was aware of these issues when writing this play? How was he trying to address these issues through the play?
2. Support your answer with evidence from the text.

OR

**Homework:**

1. The students should research a Jazz musician of the Harlem Renaissance era (same time frame as this play) and write a short essay on his/her importance and/or contribution to the scene in New York.
2. Extra credit if they can bring in an early recording.

### Author Biography

Born in 1945 to a white father, Frederick August Kittle, and a black mother, Daisy Wilson, August Wilson grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. A voracious reader who credits his mother for his love of language, Wilson dropped out of school in the ninth grade, educating himself at libraries. In 1962, Wilson enlisted in the U.S. Army but was discharged a year later. In 1965, he decided to become a writer, buying his first typewriter for twenty dollars. In 1968, he helped to found Pittsburgh's Black Horizons on the Hill Theater, with the goal of "politicizing the community." Wilson was heavily involved with the Civil Rights movement during this time and described himself as a "Black Nationalist." After he moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1978, Wilson's career began to gather steam. Following the oft-given advice to write what you know, Wilson created characters that spoke like people he knew in black neighborhoods of Pittsburgh.

In 1980, the Playwright's Center in Minneapolis accepted his play, *Jitney*, a drama set in a Pittsburgh taxi station, and in 1982 the prestigious Eugene O'Neill Center accepted *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. The success of this play helped catapult Wilson into the national limelight. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* received the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best play and an Antoinette Perry ("Tony") Award nomination from the League of New York Theatres and Producers. Wilson's next effort, *Fences*, was even more successful, garnering an Outstanding Play Award from the American Theatre Critics, a Drama Desk Outstanding New Play Award, a New York Drama Critics' Circle Best Play Award, a Pulitzer Prize for drama, a Tony Award for best play, and a Best Broadway play award from the Outer Critics Circle. The latest installment in Wilson's ambitious plan to write a ten-play cycle — each dealing with a decade in Black American history — is *King Hedley II*, which opened in 2001 on Broadway. Set during 1985 in Pittsburgh's Hill District, *King Hedley II* explores the relationship between an ex-convict struggling to understand his life and the impoverished community in which he lives. Wilson continues to write and to speak out, from his home in Seattle, Washington, for the creation of and the funding for black theaters.