



Gertrude "Ma" Rainey
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Rainey, Gertrude ("Ma") (1886-1939)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Short, fat and country to the core, Ma Rainey may not have appeared very impressive to someone passing her on the street. However, when she took the stage, dressed in one of her trademark sequined gowns and her necklace of gold coins, and began to belt out a song such as "See See Rider," Rainey captivated every audience that heard her.

In the process, she introduced them to one of the most powerful forces in American music--the blues.

Born Gertrude Pridgett in Columbus, Georgia on April 26, 1886, Rainey was initiated into show business by her family, who performed in minstrel shows. She first sang and danced for an audience when she was fourteen years old.

Two years later, in 1902, she heard her first blues song, in St. Louis, and made the warm, earthy rhythms a part of her style. In 1904, she married comedian and song-and-dance man Will Rainey. Since Will had long been billed as "Pa" Rainey in his act, it was only natural that Gertrude would be called "Ma" when she joined him, and the name stuck throughout her career.

Billed as "Ma and Pa Rainey and the Assassimators of the Blues," the Raineys played the Southern minstrel circuit for two decades with a show called the Rabbit Foot Minstrels. Ma Rainey not only sang the blues, but also actually created them, blending the raw country sound of her youth with the more sophisticated urban music she heard on the circuit.

When Paramount Records signed her to a recording contract in 1923, she became virtually the first artist to record the blues, and the sound became identified with the powerful, gutsy voice of Ma Rainey.

Variouly nicknamed "the Mother of the Blues," "the Paramount Wildcat," and "Madame Rainey," Rainey recorded over 100 songs for Paramount between 1923 and 1928. Her music, beloved for years across the South, had finally come North.

Accompanied by her "Georgia Band," which included such jazz greats as Louis Armstrong, Thomas Dorsey, and Coleman Hawkins, she belted out song after song with titles like "Rough and Tumble Blues," "Jealous Hearted Blues," and "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom Blues."

In spite of her marriage to "Pa," Rainey made no secret of her relationships with women. Indeed, her famous "Prove it on Me Blues," recorded in 1928, sounds more like the testimony of a lesbian than a bisexual:

Went out last night with a crowd of my friends,
They must have been women, 'cause I don't like no men.

Wear my clothes just like a fan, Talk to gals just like any old man
'Cause they say I do it, ain't nobody caught me,
Sure got to prove it on me.

Rainey was a close friend (and a friendly rival) with another bisexual blues singer, Bessie Smith. The Raineys had "discovered" Smith when their minstrel show passed through Smith's home state of Tennessee. Smith had joined the show, and many credit Ma Rainey as a major influence on Smith's career.

In fact, Smith bailed Rainey out of a Chicago jail in 1925, after police raided a women's party hosted by Rainey. There is no proof, but much suspicion, that Rainey and Smith were lovers.

Ma Rainey retired from performing in 1935 and moved back to Columbus. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Rainey had maintained control of her own career and her own money (the famous necklace of gold coins was one of her "savings accounts"); and when she retired, she owned her own house as well as two theaters, the Airdrome in Columbus and the Lyric in Rome, Georgia.

She operated the theaters herself up until her death on December 22, 1939 from a heart attack.

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Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.