

Ma Rainey

— Mother of the Blues —



Women of the Blues
by Donna Herula

Women have made tremendous contributions to blues music...

One of the earliest blues superstars was Ma Rainey. Ma was an extraordinary singer and show-woman. She wore lavish costumes including satin gowns, diamond rings and necklaces made of five, ten and twenty-dollar gold pieces. Ma had a warm, wide smile and generously purchased instruments for new musicians in her band. People who knew her said, “she had a heart as big as a house.” She was a mentor and teacher to many younger singers, including Bessie Smith. She was also among the first generation of blues singers and moaners. For these reasons and more, she was known as “The Mother of the Blues.”

Gertrude Pridgett was born on April 26, 1886 in Columbus, Georgia to Thomas Sr. and Ella Allen Pridgett. She was the second of five children. She made her professional debut in a musical review, *A Bunch of Blackberries*, at Springer Opera House when she was only 14 years old. When she was 18, she married a minstrel show performer, William Rainey, and they became a husband and wife singing and dancing team in various traveling vaudeville tent shows across the South, including one of the most popular, *The Rabbit Foot Minstrels*. From 1914 to 1916, the couple was billed as “Rainey and Rainey, Assassimators of the Blues.”

Minstrel shows were a variety show of acts that included singers, dancers, musicians, comedians, acrobats and jugglers. The “Foots” played one-night shows and had portable, small 80 by 110 feet tents with a stage made of boards laid across a folding frame. In their show, Gertrude and William became known as “Ma” and “Pa” – and they would include skit comedy in their act in addition to singing and dancing. When Ma and Pa separated in 1917, Ma started her own company called *Madam Gertrude Rainey and the Georgia Smart Set* and she kept the name Ma Rainey throughout her career.

Ma, with her deep, contralto voice, bridged styles between rural, country blues, vaudeville blues, and early classic blues. Ma knew how to connect with and relate to ordinary people in a simple and direct way. She sang songs about the pain of losing a man and being mistreated but could also joke and laugh about problems she and her audience faced. She incorporated down-home country blues songs into her act and was known as “a person of the folk.”

Ma became a star in the minstrel show circuit and was singing the blues long before the first blues song was published. This was before Sophie Tucker became the first person to record a million-selling blues record in 1917 and before Mamie Smith achieved overnight success in 1920 as the first African-American to have recorded a blues song called “Crazy Blues”, selling seventy-five thousand copies in its first month and over a million in its first year.

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Ma Rainey artwork is on display at the National Blues Museum in St. Louis as a part of the traveling exhibit, *Women Of The Blues: A Coast To Coast Collection* now through March 30th. Ma Rainey was one of the classic blues singers in the 1920s’ who paved the way for the the following generation of Blues Women. The traveling exhibit features over 90 photos of contemporary Blues women photographed by 20 photographers from around the world. The collection is dedicated to the Queen of the Blues, Koko Taylor. March is National Women’s History Month. Visit, www.womenoftheblues.org & www.nationalbluesmuseum.org
MA RAINERY SINGING FOR BESSIE SMITH
Gertrude ‘Ma’ Rainey; Bessie Smith (1886 - 1939); (1894 - 1937)
By: Carol Boss & Sharon McConnell-Dickerson
(collaboration) - 2016 acrylic, mixed media on wood panel (triptych)

The success of these blues records prompted recording companies to find and record other female blues singers. Record producers signed Clara Smith, Bessie Smith and Ida Cox all before Ma, possibly because Ma was based in Chicago and not New York, where most of the producers were located.

In December 1923, when Ma was 37 years old, Paramount Records of Chicago signed a recording contract with her. Ma wrote 38 of the 92 songs that she recorded. Over a period of five years, she performed and recorded with her Georgia Jazz Band, her Tub Jug Washboard Band and musicians including Georgia Tom Dorsey, Louis Armstrong, Blind Blake, Tampa Red, Papa Charlie Jackson and Chicago female bandleader and jazz piano player, Lovie Austin and the Blues Serenaders. Songs included "Bo Weevil Blues" with Lovie Austin, "Daddy Goodbye Blues" with Tampa Red and "Georgia" Tom Dorsey, and "Yonder Come the Blues" with Lois Armstrong. The release of Ma's song "C. C. Rider" with Armstrong (the first version ever recorded of this song) established her as a recording star.

When her records began selling, Ma began touring a circuit of more than fifty theaters in the South and Midwest, set up by the Theater Owners' Booking Agency (TOBA). Tom Dorsey of the Wild Cats Jazz

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Band recalled their debut at Chicago's Grand Theater in April 1924, as the show opened.

"Ma was hidden in a big box-like affair built like an old Victrola of long ago. A girl came out and put a big record on it. Then the band picked up the 'Moonshine Blues.' Ma sang a few bars inside the Victrola. Then she opened the door and stepped out into the spotlight with her glittering gown that weighted twenty pounds and wearing a necklace of five, ten and twenty-dollar gold pieces. The house went wild. Ma had the audience in the palm of her hand."

After Ma sung her last number and the finale, they took seven curtain calls that night. Ma's creative entrance united the old world of on-stage performance and the new world of sound recording.

Ma was a mentor to many young male and female artists. Ma met Bessie Smith in 1912, when Ma was

26 and the new troupe dancer, Bessie, was 18. They performed together regularly. There were some reports that Ma and Bessie may have been lovers, but neither admitted to it.

It was possible that Ma was bisexual. She commonly talked about her liking for younger men or "pig meat" in her show. But in "Prove It On Me Blues", she sang,

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

Ma was very successful. In addition to purchasing instruments for new band members, she bought a thirteen thousand-dollar Mack touring bus in 1927, embellished with her name. Ma also sponsored shows to benefit flood victims, the poor and other people in need.

After the crash of 1929, the TOBA circuit closed shop in 1930, but Ma continued to tour in tent shows and carnivals. She moved back to her hometown of Columbus, Georgia where she had built a home. Years before, she had purchased three theaters in Rome, Georgia -- the Lyric, the Airdome and the Liberty Theatre -- and continued to operate them successfully for several years. She joined the Friendship Baptist church where her brother was a deacon, but stopped touring in 1935.

At the age of fifty-three, Ma Rainey died on December 22, 1939 of a heart attack. The occupation listed on her death certificate was "housekeeping" but it should have been "Mother of the Blues."

Ma was buried in Columbus, Georgia where the Ma Rainey Blues Museum is currently located and where the Second Annual Ma Rainey International Blues Festival will take place on April 29, 2017. Ma was inducted into the Blues Foundation's Hall of Fame in 1983 and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1990. She will forever be known for her kind and generous nature, her show-stopping performances and her influence on generations of blues, folk and popular music performers. ~



Donna Herula is a Chicago blues singer and guitar player who has been influenced by the music of Ma Rainey and regularly plays at Legends. ~

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