

Before there was Mamie Smith and “Crazy Blues,” even before W.C. Handy first encountered the blues in Tutwiler Mississippi, there was an artist who had already embraced the music.

Ma Rainey recalled first coming across the genre in a small Missouri town around 1902, where she heard a young girl singing a sad song about a man leaving his woman.

Rainey was so impressed she learned the song from the girl - and began using it as an encore in her own act. When someone asked her ‘what kind of song she was singing?’ Rainey claimed to have spontaneously coined the term “the blues.”

Gertrude Pridgett aka Ma Rainey was one of the first artists to embrace blues music.

According to the 1900 Census Pridgett was born April 26, 1886 in Columbus GA. The 1910 Census however lists her birth as 1882 in Alabama.

Gertrude was a child prodigy - she began her career in 1900, appearing in a Springer Opera House talent show, in Columbus, GA - as part of a group called “The Bunch of Blackberries.” After the talent show Pridgett continued to sing wherever she could.

Columbus was a regular stop on the Minstrel circuit. A lot like social media today, the minstrel circuit covered the nation. Everyone knew the songs, jokes, dances, and artists that were trending.

It was in this environment that a Minstrel Show producer named William “Pa” Rainey first noticed Gertrude Pridgett.

On February 2nd 1904 Gertrude Pridgett married William Rainey – and the pair formed a song and dance duo touring the minstrel circuit. Gertrude became “Ma” Rainey to William’s “Pa.”

They joined Pat Chapelle’s Rabbit Foot Minstrels where they were billed as Jubilee Singers and Cake Walkers – referring a popular dance at the time. From 1914 thru 1916 the Rainey’s toured with Tolliver’s Circus and Musical Extravaganza, initially billed as “Rainey and Rainey - Assassins of the Blues.”

Today we see minstrelsy as a racist, demeaning genre, with white artists in black face, black artists in black face - and all African Americans characterized in a generally demeaning manner.

Because of its nature – “life had been left out of minstrel music,” says Hettie Jones, in her book “Big Star Fallin’ Mama.” “Ma Rainey made the blues a way to begin putting (that life) back.”

Rainey added the moaning wail of the blues to minstrel music and made it her own statement of life.

She never shied away from the bawdy, directly sexual, or racist nature of her world. She faced it head on – and came out on top. Which makes it odd that she was a laggard in embracing the phonograph - as an art form. Perhaps her love of live performance is why she came to the recording studio well after most of her contemporaries.

In several of her early sessions she used the comedy patter, that was common in vaudeville to connect song, dance and specialty acts - as a way to capture the spirit of the era in her recordings. It offers a rare glimpse - of what the lost musical genre of black vaudeville might have sounded like.

When Ma Rainey began recording, it was for Paramount - then a subsidiary of the Wisconsin Chair Company - and it was 1923 - nearly three years after Mamie Smith. Rainey had been on the road for more than twenty years before she ever set foot in the recording studio.

Her first release was “Bo Weevil Blues,” backed by “Bad Luck Blues,” as the B side.

From the very beginning of “Bo Weevil,” it’s clear that this is a blues record.

The song is a straight twelve bar form. Rainey even does something that would become commonplace among the solo blues men of the ‘30s like Robert Johnson and Charlie Patton. She adds a fifth bar to the first phrase of the first verse - and a bar of 2/4 to the second four bars - creating a thirteen and a half bar form for verse one. Afterwards though - she sings the standard twelve bar pattern - except for the final verse which has a vocal on only the first eight bars - the final four bars of the song finish as an instrumental.

According to Francis Davis’ in “The History of the Blues,” Ma Rainey was probably the first person the black community referred to as a blues singer, and considering the timing of her recordings. Rainey is a clear bridge between the rougher delta blues and the more sophisticated urban jazz.

In fact, Rainey never completely made the leap to jazz. You can hear her leaning that way - with tracks like “See See Rider,” where the band includes Fletcher Henderson on piano, Charlie Dixon on banjo, and Louis Armstrong on trumpet - all future jazz legends.

And the fact that she never completely embraced jazz may have contributed to an earlier end of her career than some of her contemporaries experienced.

While she was working though, Rainey’s shows were legend.

She was a large woman, dressed in sequins. She wore a necklace made of 20 dollar gold coins - reportedly worth more than the average annual income of a white man in 1920’s America.

Pianist Mary Lou Williams described her this way she was - "loaded with diamonds, in her ears, round her neck, in a tiara on her head. Both hands were full of rocks, too: her hair was wild and she had gold teeth!"

Pianist - Champion Jack Dupree once said - "She was really an ugly woman, but when she opened her mouth – that was it! You forgot everything." "Her heart was so big. It made her beautiful."

The poet Sterling Brown told Paul Oliver – "She wouldn't have to sing any words. She would moan and the audience would moan with her... She really knew these people. She was a person of the folk."

Francis Davis summed it up perfectly - "She had a way of being simultaneously one of them (the audience) and one of a kind."

Paramount capitalized on her success by officially dubbing her "Mother of the Blues, and "The Gold Necked Woman of the Blues."

She traveled with her own backdrops, including one with the Paramount logo and another of a giant gold eagle, matching the coins around her neck.

Once her recording career began take off - she would enter the stage from a giant cardboard set of a Victrola.

Ma Rainey's success - and her song selection - demonstrated to black women that they could be equal to men. She offered an opportunity to overcome the social norms for black women in America.

The female characters in Rainey's songs often left home as independent, self-assertive women - who controlled their own destinies.

When it was rumored she was bi-sexual - she recorded "Prove It On Me," with a lyric declaring.

"They Say I done it.
Ain't nobody caught me.
Gonna have to prove it on me."

One of Ma Rainey's most famous tracks was a murder song called "Stack O Lee." Or "Stagger Lee," which sounds remarkably like the most famous murder song of all time - Frankie and Johnny.

Murder songs were a feature of the era - usually written by street musicians capitalizing on headlines of the day.

Stack O Lee was a real man named Lee Sheldon.

On Christmas Day 1895 he walked into a St Louis bar wearing a white Stetson. He and his friend Billy Lyons got into an argument. When Lyons took Lee's hat – Lee pulled a gun and shot his friend dead.

The story gripped the headlines in St Louis and the song grew in popularity. By the time Sheldon got out of prison in 1909 - his story was widely known across the country.

Stack - the character from the song - became a trickster hero among southern blacks – the Loki of black folklore. The character Stack was the ultimate bringer chaos – he killed a man for taking his hat - and that made him legend.

After she retired Ma Rainey moved home to Columbus, GA where she bought and ran several theaters.

She died three days before Christmas 1939. Her death certificate listed her occupation as "housekeeper."

In all Ma Rainey recorded 94 tracks for Paramount, but the company's sub-standard recording system made the lacquers unacceptable for re-release. So, Rainey's recordings sat in storage for nearly 25 years - until the ability to restore them became feasible.

The legacy of Ma Rainey was one of transforming the blues from a regional folk art form to an international genre that would eventually spawn, jazz, swing, r&b, rock and roll.

Her record "See See Rider," was covered by The Animals, and The Grateful Dead. Elvis Presley opened and closed every show for years with his own - countrified rock version of the Rainey record.

In 1984 August Wilson premiered a play called "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," a fictionalized account of a recording session. The play was made into a movie in 2020 - winning two Academy Awards for Make Up and Costume Design - and a posthumous Golden Globe for Chadwick Boseman.

There have been persistent rumors over the decades that Ma and Pa Rainey kidnapped a young Bessie Smith and forced her to sing in their shows. There's zero evidence for the accusation - but Smith was a protege' of Rainey's and they likely met sometime during World War One.

In the 40s an artist named Ma Rainey II appeared - sparking rumors that Rainey had faked her death.

But Ma Rainey II was actually Lillie Mae Glover – who may have appeared with her namesake in the 1920s - and later recorded at Sun Studios in Memphis.

The Original Ma Rainey was inducted into the Blues hall of fame in the early 80s and the Rock N Roll Hall of Fame in 1990.

A commemorative stamp of Rainey was issued by the U. S. Post Office in 1994.

In 2004 - Her record “See See Rider,” was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame and the National Recording Registry of the Library of Congress.

Since 2016 there’s been an annual Blues festival in Columbus GA that bears her name.

And in 2023 Gertrude “Ma Rainey” Pridgett - was posthumously awarded the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award.

To hear all the music discussed in this episode and more - check out the Ma Rainey - Founding Mothers Playlist - on Blues Alley’s Spotify channel. There’s a link in the episode notes.

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/6psqZUAOaTsu6CefYPBHii?si=c6da3ecbefbc4d88>