THE GOODMAN 100 YEARS

AUGUST WILSON'S

MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM

STUDY GUIDE
2026

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PRODUCER

ANNA ROGELIO JOAQUIN | SCHOOL PROGRAMS MANAGER

WRITERS

JARED BELLOT | CLIFFORD DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT
TYRA BULLOCK | ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION
ANNA ROGELIO JOAQUIN | SCHOOL PROGRAMS MANAGER
CORI LANG | TEMPORARY LITERARY ASSISTANT

DESIGNER

RAFIA AFZAL | GRAPHIC DESIGNER
ALMA D'ANCA | SENIOR GRAPHIC DESIGNER

EDITOR

MICHEN DEWEY | COMMUNICATIONS CONTENT MANAGER

TRANSLATOR

ALEXIS A. TORNEZ MARTINEZ

A WELCOME LETTER TO STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

BY JARED BELLOT, CLIFFORD DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Welcome back to The Goodman for the third and final Student Matinee Series production of our Centennial Season!

We are honored to share with you August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, a powerful portrait of a single afternoon in a Chicago recording studio in 1927. In Director Chuck Smith's production, that studio becomes intimate, volatile and alive. What begins as a routine recording session quickly reveals itself as a collision of ambition, legacy and survival set within an industry—and a society—where those with power often dictate the terms with little regard for those without it. And in that collision, a larger question emerges: **How is power created, and how is it challenged?**

HOW IS POWER CREATED, AND HOW IS IT CHALLENGED?

In our world, power does not always announce itself. More often, it moves quietly—in who sets the agenda, who controls the resources, who decides whose voice carries and whose fades into the background. It lives in policies and practices, in recording studios and classrooms, in the stories we repeat and the ones we overlook. It also lives in the courage of those who dare to challenge it. Though this play is set nearly one hundred years ago, it asks us to look carefully at our present moment and our current relationship to power. The setting may have changed. The systems may appear to have evolved. But the struggles over ownership, voice and authority that Wilson depicts in *Ma Rainey* very much continue to shape our world today and the futures we imagine for ourselves.

Writer Toni Morrison reminds us, "Definitions belong to the definers, not the defined." To define oneself is an act of resistance. It is a refusal to be reduced. In examining Wilson's masterpiece, we watch characters push against the labels already placed upon them, negotiating their identities and their legacies in real time. And, as we continue to look closely, it becomes clear that the struggles in this Chicago recording studio are not only about the music—they are about who holds the authority to define the art, the artist and ultimately, the story itself.

In the pages that follow, we invite you to explore the world of this play—its history, its structure and its resonance today.

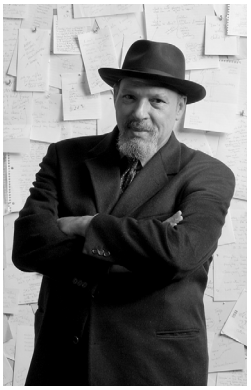
We hope you listen closely.
We hope you notice how power moves.
And we hope you consider how it can be moved.

Thank you for being here.

JARED BELLOT
CLIFFORD DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT

THE GROUND ON WHICH HE STOOD: AUGUST WILSON AND THE CENTURY CYCLE

BY JARED BELLOT, CLIFFORD DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT



"I HAVE COME HERE TODAY TO MAKE A TESTIMONY, TO TALK ABOUT THE GROUND ON WHICH I STAND AND ALL THE MANY GROUNDS ON WHICH I AND MY ANCESTORS HAVE TOILED, AND THE GROUND OF THEATRE ON WHICH MY FELLOW ARTISTS AND I HAVE LABORED TO BRING FORTH ITS FRUITS, ITS DARING AND ITS SOMETIMES LACERATING, AND OFTEN HEALING, TRUTHS."

AUGUST WILSON, PLAYWRIGHT
THE HUNTINGTON

In June 1996, playwright August Wilson stood before an audience at the Theatre Communications Group conference in Princeton, New Jersey and testified: "I am what is known...as a 'race man.' That is simply that I believe that race matters—that it is the largest, most identifiable and most important part of our personality."

Referencing the ideas of Black political leader Marcus Garvey, who championed Black pride and Black self-determination, Wilson used this moment to make a declaration that reverberated across the industry. He made it clear that his Blackness shaped both his life and the stories he chose to tell. Speaking to a national audience, he insisted that he was both unable and unwilling to separate his artistry from his lived experience as a Black man.

At the time of this speech, Wilson was already considered one of the most influential American playwrights of the 20th century. Aware of his platform, he used this address to critique and challenge the theater industry directly. He argued that Black theaters were chronically underfunded, and that Black stories were often overlooked and treated as secondary.

Wilson used the metaphor of "the ground" to explain where his work came from. He said he stood on the "ground of the slave quarters," describing it as sacred and shaped by the labor, suffering and strength of the Black Americans who came before him. This history, he made clear, was not something to distance himself from. Rather, he shared, this history was the foundation of his art.

Through his plays, Wilson insisted that Black artists must have the power to define themselves and tell their own stories. He rooted his work in the complex history of Black life in the United States and made clear that those stories are central to understanding America itself. That belief did not emerge in isolation. It was shaped by Wilson's own childhood, the communities that shaped him and the experiences that taught him who he was.

WILSON'S EARLY LIFE AND INSPIRATION

August Wilson (born Frederick August Kittel Jr.) was born on April 27, 1945 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He was the fourth child of six children born to Daisy Wilson, a Black housekeeper, and Frederick August Kittel Sr., a German immigrant who left the family when Wilson was young. Wilson grew up in Pittsburgh's Hill District, a historically Black neighborhood and vibrant cultural center for African American businesses, musicians and artists that would later become the setting for many of his plays.

In 1958, Wilson's mother remarried, and the family relocated to Hazelwood, a predominantly white neighborhood. As a mixed-race teenager in this new space, Wilson grappled with his own racial identity and struggled to find his place. He attended a school where he was one of only 14 Black students and frequently experienced racial hostility. In a defining moment, a teacher accused him of plagiarizing a paper because she did not believe he could have written it himself. Hurt and frustrated, Wilson left school at the age of 15.

After leaving school, Wilson took his education into his own hands. He spent countless hours reading at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh and returned often to the Hill District where he learned from the stories, voices and lived experiences of the community around him.

In the 1960s, Wilson became involved in the Black Arts Movement, a cultural movement that encouraged Black artists to create work rooted in Black identity and political empowerment. In 1968, he co-founded and served as the director for Pittsburgh's Black Horizons Theatre, an early step in his lifelong commitment to Black storytelling.

Wilson often spoke about what he called "my four Bs": poet Jorge Luis Borges, playwright Amiri Baraka, painter Romare Bearden and, most significantly, the blues (see "August Wilson's 4 Bs on p. 6). For Wilson, the blues were more than music. He described them as "the best literature we have," saying they offered a language of Black community and a deep connection to the ancestors who came before.

Read the full text of August Wilson's *The Ground on Which I Stand* speech here.

CONTINUED ON THE NEXT PAGE

"I LEFT PITTSBURGH BUT PITTSBURGH NEVER LEFT ME. IT WAS ON THESE STREETS IN THIS COMMUNITY IN THIS CITY THAT I CAME INTO MANHOOD, AND I HAVE A FIERCE AFFECTION FOR THE HILL DISTRICT AND THE PEOPLE WHO RAISED ME, WHO HAVE SANCTIONED MY LIFE AND ULTIMATELY PROVIDE IT WITH ITS MEANING."

PITTSBURGH'S HILL DISTRICT, THE HISTORICALLY BLACK NEIGHBORHOOD THAT SHAPED MANY OF WILSON'S PLAYS.

PHOTO BY CHARLIE TEENIE HARRIS, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

THE CENTURY CYCLE

The defining project of August Wilson's playwriting career—often called 'The Century Cycle' or 'The Pittsburgh Cycle'—is a series of ten interconnected plays that document the history, culture and lived experiences of Black Americans across the 20th century. With the exception of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, which is set in Chicago, each play takes place in Pittsburgh's Hill District, the same neighborhood where Wilson grew up. Each play is set in a different decade, together tracing one hundred years of Black life in the United States.

THE GOODMAN'S 2024 PRODUCTION OF *JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE*, DIRECTED BY CHUCK SMITH.

PHOTO BY LIZ LAUREN

Written and staged over more than three decades and completed shortly before Wilson's death in 2005, the Century Cycle offers a portrait of Black traditions as they evolve across generations within a single community. Rather than telling one continuous story, the plays are connected by shared roots. Characters reappear at different stages of their lives, ancestors echo across decades and familiar locations are revisited. The result is not a single narrative but a layered conversation across time.

In a 2000 essay published in *The New York Times*, Wilson explained his goal of the project: "I wanted to place this culture on stage in all its richness and fullness and to demonstrate its ability to sustain us all in areas of human life and endeavor and through profound movements of our history in which the larger society has thought less of us than we have thought of ourselves."

"I WANTED TO PLACE THIS CULTURE ON STAGE IN ALL ITS RICHNESS AND FULLNESS AND TO DEMONSTRATE ITS ABILITY TO SUSTAIN US ALL IN AREAS OF HUMAN LIFE AND ENDEAVOR AND THROUGH PROFOUND MOVEMENTS OF OUR HISTORY IN WHICH THE LARGER SOCIETY HAS THOUGHT LESS OF US THAN WE HAVE THOUGHT OF OURSELVES."

Wilson's writing focused on everyday working-class Black families. By grounding his plays in what he described as "the most important issues confronting Black Americans" in each decade, he illuminated larger historical forces through intimate, personal stories. Across the Century Cycle, audiences encounter the lasting trauma of slavery, racial violence, redlining, gentrification, stagnant wages and the complicated pursuit of the American Dream not as abstract concepts but as lived experiences.

Drawing on a rich African American literary tradition, the Century Cycle also blends realism with spiritual and supernatural elements juxtaposed against the naturalism of its urban backdrops. Visions appear. Ancestors speak. The past refuses to stay buried. In Wilson's writing, the past is always present.

Wilson believed deeply that Black theater, like the Black experience itself, is distinct and should be shaped by Black artists. For that reason, he insisted that his plays be produced by theaters committed to hiring Black directors and designers. While this limited which theaters could stage his work, Wilson stood firmly by his belief that "[Black people]

CONTINUED ON THE NEXT PAGE

cannot allow others to have authority over our cultural and spiritual products." In doing so, he helped create opportunities for Black theatermakers who had long been excluded from mainstream American theater.

The Goodman holds a unique place in this history. It was the first theater in the world to produce the entire ten-play Century Cycle, staging the works between 1986 and 2007. In recent years, The Goodman has revisited Wilson's legacy with productions such as *Two Trains Running* (2015), *Gem of the Ocean* (2022) and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (2024) – all celebrated productions directed by Goodman Family Resident Director Chuck Smith.

THE GOODMAN'S 2022 PRODUCTION OF *GEM OF THE OCEAN*, DIRECTED BY CHUCK SMITH.
PHOTO BY LIZ LAUREN

WILSON'S LEGACY AND IMPACT

Widely celebrated during his lifetime, Wilson received numerous honors and awards, including a Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize for *Fences*, a second Pulitzer Prize for *The Piano Lesson* and seven New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards for Best Play. Two weeks after his death in 2005, Broadway's Virginia Theatre was renamed the August Wilson Theatre, the first Broadway theater to bear the name of an African American individual.

"I BELIEVE IN THE AMERICAN THEATRE. I BELIEVE IN ITS POWER TO INFORM ABOUT THE HUMAN CONDITION, I BELIEVE IN ITS POWER TO HEAL, 'TO HOLD THE MIRROR AS 'TWERE UP TO NATURE,' TO THE TRUTHS WE UNCOVER, TO THE TRUTHS WE WRESTLE FROM UNCERTAIN AND SOMETIMES UNYIELDING REALITIES. ALL OF ART IS A SEARCH FOR WAYS OF BEING, OF LIVING LIFE MORE FULLY. WE WHO ARE CAPABLE OF THOSE NOBLE PURSUITS SHOULD CHALLENGE THE MELANCHOLY AND BARBARIC, TO BRING THE LIGHT OF ANGELIC GRACE, PEACE, PROSPERITY AND THE UNENCUMBERED PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS TO THE GROUND ON WHICH WE ALL STAND."

Wilson's impact on American theater is undeniable. Between 1959, when Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* premiered on Broadway, and 1984, when Wilson made his own Broadway debut with *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, no play written by a Black playwright achieved success on Broadway. Wilson's critical and commercial successes helped shift that reality. His work opened doors for Black artists who had long been excluded from the mainstream stage.

BROADWAY'S AUGUST WILSON THEATRE DURING A PERFORMANCE OF ANTOINETTE NWANDU'S *PASS OVER*, CONTINUING THE LEGACY OF BLACK STORYTELLING ON THE STAGE.
PHOTO BY PATTI MCCONVILLE, FLICKR

Many artists who collaborated with or were influenced by Wilson went on to shape the field in their own right, including Kenny Leon, Samuel L. Jackson, Courtney Vance, Angela Bassett, Ruben Santiago-Hudson, Laurence Fishburne, Suzan-Lori Parks, Lynn Nottage and Charles Smith.

Yet Wilson's legacy is not only about awards or recognition. In his keynote speech "The Ground on Which I Stand," he challenged the American theater to create space for Black artists to define themselves and control their cultural narratives. More than 25 years later, that challenge remains unfinished.

While more Black theater artists are building careers today than ever before, inequities within the industry persist and Wilson's words still resonate: "Let us be the catalysts of our future and our images. Let us be the custodians of our culture, of when it's dispersed, how it's dispersed, when it's disseminated, and to whom."

As audiences, artists and institutions continue to engage with Wilson's work, the question remains: *How do we build a stronger foundation for the ground on which we stand, and what does self-definition mean in an industry shaped by tradition and power?*

AUGUST WILSON'S **4 Bs**

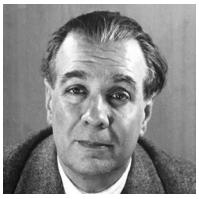
BY TYRA BULLOCK,
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

Throughout his career, August Wilson took inspiration from what he referred to as the "4 Bs:" Baraka, Borges, Bearden and the Blues. Read the article below to learn more about how these artists and musical genre contributed to the ideas and themes explored in Wilson's ten-play Century Cycle.

AMIRI BARAKA ADDRESSES THE NEWARK CITY COUNCIL IN 1972.

NEWARK EVENING NEWS, THE INTERNET ARCHIVE

AMIRI BARAKA, born Everett Leroy Jones, was one of the main leaders and inspirations of the Black Arts Movement. Beginning in the late 1950s, Baraka wrote poetry and plays that captured the experience and anger of African Americans. In 1964, he won an Obie for his play *The Dutchman*. His writings often involved explorations of racial and national identity. Baraka incorporated music into his work, even writing a few librettos. He has said, "Poetry is music, and nothing but music. Words with musical emphasis." His work attempts to turn from a Western cultural background to a new Black aesthetic, flowing from the alternative cultural movements of Africa and the United States. Even after his death 2014, Baraka remains one of the most influential literary figures of the 20th century.



JORGE LUIS BORGES IN 1951.

PHOTO BY GRETA STERN, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

JORGE LUIS BORGES was an Argentine writer and is considered one of the top literary figures of the 20th century. He is best known for his short stories and fiction essays, but he was also a poet, critic and translator. His worked is filled with multi-cultural allusions and elements of magical realism stemming from his life in Argentina; his work is also full of influences of Christian, Buddhist, Islamic and Jewish faiths—including mainline religious figures, heretics and mystics, as well as fantastical elements. Borges spent much of his later life without eyesight due to glaucoma, yet continued to write with the help of his mother. He died in 1986 of liver cancer.

ROMARE BEARDEN IN HIS STUDIO.

PHOTO BY NANCY LEE KATZ, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

ROMARE BEARDEN was an American artist and writer who famously used Cubist style artwork to highlight aspects of Black culture during the Harlem Renaissance. He struggled to find his artistic voice in his paintings until he returned from serving in WWII. When he returned, he studied great works of art both in America and Paris, and developed his own style, freely using vibrant color. His great success in painting occurred after he abandoned abstract art and then tried (and failed) at a career in music. He began to create collages. By 1971, he was considered an important contemporary artist. He continued to create until his death in 1988.

OKEH ADVERTISEMENT OF THE FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN TO RECORD A BLUES RECORD, MAMIE SMITH, IN 1921.

PHOTO BY TALKING WORLD MACHINES, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

THE BLUES is a musical form that can be traced back to African rhythms, African American slave songs, spirituals and dance tunes known as "jump-ups." Blues performers such as Mamie Smith, Bessie Smith and Gertrude "Ma" Rainey helped popularize this musical continuation of the oral tradition. The blues remains a strong influence in many other popular musical forms, including jazz, country, rock and soul music. For Wilson, each character's ideas and attitudes are rooted in the blues; the philosophies in the music teach the characters how to live their lives.

Read "Everything Changing All the Time" on p. 7 to learn more about the evolution of blues music.

EVERYTHING CHANGING ALL THE TIME: THE WORLD OF MA RAINEY

BY TYRA BULLOCK, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND
JARED BELLOT, CLIFFORD DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Set in 1927 Chicago, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is a cultural portrait into the lives of Black Americans during the Great Migration. Read on to learn more about the blues, 1920s Chicago and the legendary "Mother of the Blues," Ma Rainey.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE BLUES

The blues originated in the rural American South (particularly in Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas), but their roots stretch back to West Africa where, across many cultures, music was inseparable from daily life. Enslaved Africans, forcibly taken from their homes and brought to the United States, carried with them musical structures shaped by improvisation, call-and-response patterns and expressive "blue notes." In the years after Emancipation, as newly freed Black communities confronted a freedom constrained by segregation, economic exploitation and racial violence, a new musical language, informed by these West African traditions, began to take shape.

BLUES MUSICIAN FRED MCDOWELL IN SENATOBIA, MISSISSIPPI IN 1960.

PHOTO BY LEE FRIEDLANDER, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

By the late nineteenth century, lynching and vigilante "justice" were widespread, and systems such as sharecropping kept many Black families tied to land they did not own. In regions like the Mississippi Delta, where cotton farming dominated the economy and segregation was deeply entrenched, the blues developed as a way to document the lives and challenges of freed Black Americans. Lyrics referenced real world hardships like prison farms, levee labor along the Mississippi River, and the devastation of the boll weevil, which ravaged cotton crops and helped spark migration out of the South. Drawing from spirituals, field hollers and work songs, the early blues transformed inherited musical forms into a new style capable of holding contradiction – grief and humor, exhaustion and resilience, loss and love.

As the music spread beyond rural communities, it adapted to new audiences and environments. Some performers accompanied themselves on guitar, using rhythmic strumming or intricate fingerpicking to punctuate their vocals. Others foregrounded the harmonica, bending notes to mirror the human voice. In many performances, instruments and voice engaged in call and response, with the singer's emotional delivery remaining central. Though the blues often followed a repeating twelve-bar structure built on three primary chords, its depth came from how artists shaped phrasing, tone and rhythm within that framework.

Gender and geography also shaped blues careers. Women such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith and Ethel Waters built powerful stage personas in theaters, clubs and touring shows, sometimes holding matriarchal authority in their performance spaces. Many male blues musicians lived more itinerant lives, traveling between plantations, lumber camps and growing cities in search of work. As migration accelerated in the early twentieth century, the blues moved north with Black communities. In cities like Memphis and Chicago, amplification reshaped the sound, giving rise to new electrified styles. Artists such as Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf came to define Chicago blues, while later figures including Buddy Guy extended its influence into rock and beyond.

B.B. KING, A PIONEERING BLUES GUITARIST WHOSE ELECTRIFIED STYLE HELPED SHAPE MODERN BLUES AND ROCK MUSIC.

PHOTO BY TOM BEETZ, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Recording technology expanded the blues' reach nationwide. Early recordings in the 1920s introduced the music to wider audiences and transformed it into a commercial product. Over time, the blues would shape jazz, R&B and rock 'n' roll, influencing musicians across the United States and internationally.

CONTINUED ON THE NEXT PAGE

CHICAGO'S STATE STREET CIRCA 1910.
PICRYL

THE ROARING TWENTIES IN CHICAGO

In the 1920s, the Great Migration brought approximately 800,000 to 1 million Black Americans from the rural South to urban cities in the North and West. With increasing demand for industrial labor, many Black families saw this movement as an opportunity to escape racial violence, systemic oppression and limited economic opportunity under Jim Crow. Chicago, one of the nation's fastest-growing industrial centers, experienced a dramatic rise in its Black population from roughly 110,000 Black residents in 1910 to nearly 200,000 by 1920. While many white migrants from the South settled in suburban neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city, Black newcomers were largely confined to Chicago's South Side, where housing discrimination and restrictive covenants limited where they could live.

As Black communities expanded, so too did Black cultural life in the city. Along South State Street (known to residents as "The Stroll"), theaters, clubs and cabarets flourished. These spaces served not just entertainment venues but became economic engines and political gathering places for Black Chicagoans within the segregated city. Musicians, entrepreneurs and community leaders built networks of support and creative exchange, even as overcrowded housing options, steep job competition and deep seeded racial resentment heightened tensions between Black and white communities.

Those tensions erupted violently in 1919 during the Chicago Race Riot, part of what came to be known nationwide as the "Red Summer." After Eugene Williams, a 17-year-old

A MARKER COMMEMORATING THE 1919 CHICAGO RACE RIOT IN CHICAGO.

PHOTO BY STEPHEN HOGAN, FLICKR

Black teenager was killed for drifting into a segregated section of Lake Michigan, days of unrest followed, leaving dozens dead and hundreds more injured. Although the violence subsided, its impact lingered, shaping the social and political landscape of Chicago well into the 1920s.

The decade was also marked by the 18th Amendment and the onset of Prohibition, which legally outlawed the sale and production of alcohol across the country. In Chicago, Prohibition fueled underground nightlife and the rise of organized crime organizations. Speakeasies thrived, political corruption flourished and figures like Al Capone

CONTINUED ON THE NEXT PAGE

became synonymous with the city's reputation for glamour and lawlessness. The era became known as the "Jazz Age," but for Black musicians, jazz and the blues were not passing trends. They were working-class art forms rooted in migration, economic survival and the realities of Black urban life.

By the mid-1920s, Chicago had become a major recording hub in the music industry. New technology allowed record companies to distribute music nationwide, and producers recognized that "race records" marketed to Black audiences could generate significant profit. While Black musicians gained visibility through recordings, ownership, financial control and decision-making power often remained in the hands of white executives. Even as Black artists shaped the sound of the decade, they rarely controlled the business behind it.

MA RAINEY, MOTHER OF THE BLUES

Ma Rainey (born Gertrude Malissa Nix Pridgett; April 26, 1886) grew up in Columbus, Georgia. She was introduced to the performing arts at a young age by her parents, Thomas and Ella Pridgett, who worked as traveling minstrel performers. As a teenager, Rainey performed in local talent shows and followed the career path of her parents as a minstrel performer. In 1904, she married a showman named William "Pa" Rainey and adopted the famous stage name "Ma" to complete the duo's traveling act as vaudeville performers. The two found success touring to rural southern towns, often performing in tent shows and vaudeville theaters alongside the long-running Rabbit Foot Minstrels company. In an interview later conducted by musicologist John Wesley Work Jr., Rainey recalled touring in Missouri as her first encounter with Blues music. After hearing a woman sing woefully about an ex-lover, she committed herself to learning the song and performed it as part of her closing act. Rainey was instantly praised by audiences for her interpretation of "country blues," delivering a forceful blend of traditional West African "call and response" rhythms with her signature "moaning" style of singing. Though she did not originate the genre, Rainey understood the power of Blues music and its ability to break racial barriers. By the time she separated from her husband in 1916, Rainey was well on her way to having an established career as a solo act.

PROMOTIONAL IMAGE OF MA RAINEY CIRCA 1923.
WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

In December 1923, Rainey signed a recording contract in Chicago with Paramount Records, spawning popular singles like "Bo-Weevil Blues" and "Moonshine Blues." She astounded audiences with her emotional grit and cutting-edge lyrics that echoed the laments of womanhood in all its glory. Rainey didn't just sing about the struggles of everyday life (a common practice in Blues music) but spoke openly about her bisexuality, revenge, infidelity, female liberation and other themes that were considered taboo at the time. This, in addition to her dynamic personality and flamboyant fashions—bedazzled costumes, gold-capped teeth and gaudy jewelry—made her a massive success and secured her place in history as one of the first professional Black female recording artists.

When we meet the blues singer in August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, she is in the process of recording her 1927 single of the same title at Paramount Records. While the play is a dramatization of this event, it carefully depicts the real-life challenges experienced by Ma Rainey and other Black musicians signed to major labels. By the late 1920s, tension had grown between Ma Rainey and Paramount due to differences in creative control, artistic integrity and financial exploitation. As new musical genres like swing and jazz grew in popularity, the "blues craze" had declined in fashionability. Paramount had taken notice of these trends and insisted Ma Rainey transform her sound to meet these new demands of the consumer. In true Ma Rainey fashion, she refused to compromise her classic blues sound for the sake of maintaining mainstream relevance. After nearly 100 studio recordings, the label decided not to renew her contract, terminating their relationship in 1928.

SCAN THE QR CODE TO HEAR MA RAINEY'S MUSIC FEATURED IN THE PLAY AND BEYOND!

In between recordings with her former label, Ma Rainey would tour as a headline act with the Theater Owners Booking Association (TOBA), a vaudeville circuit for black entertainers. She continued touring with the company alongside her Georgia Jazz Band, performing at private parties until her retirement in 1935. That same year, Rainey returned to her hometown in Columbus, Georgia to live with her brother. She became an active member of the Friendship Baptist Church, where her brother was a deacon. Ma Rainey also purchased two theaters, the Lyric Theater and the Airdome. She maintained these businesses until her fatal heart attack in 1939.

Self-proclaimed "Mother of the Blues," Ma Rainey's impact is one that exceeds the blues genre. She is one of the first Black artists in music history to sign with a major label, making her a pioneer female recording artist. Her fashion-forward appearance, charismatic personality and provocative lyricism helped solidify her as a cultural icon for feminism, Black artistry and queer pride. She encouraged the legendary talents of Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Thomas A. Dorsey and other artists of the 1920s and 1930s. Ma Rainey helped create a lane to stardom for Black female musicians and is credited for helping demonstrate the profitability of Black music amongst multiracial consumers—successfully transcending racial barriers and societal expectations of her time.

INSIDE THE STUDIO:
CHARACTER BREAKDOWN

BY ANNA ROGELIO JOAQUIN,
SCHOOL PROGRAMS MANAGER

MA RAINEY

Blues singer. Demands respect. Black.

PLAYED BY E. FAYE BUTLER

STURDYVANT

Music executive. Condescending. White.

PLAYED BY MATT DECARO

LEVEE

Trumpet player. Ambitious and hot-headed. Black.

PLAYED BY AL'JALEEL MCGHEE

IRVIN

Ma Rainey's manager. Money-driven. White.

PLAYED BY MARC GRAPEY

CUTLER

Guitar and trombone player. Obedient. Black.

PLAYED BY DAVID ALAN ANDERSON

SYLVESTER

Ma Rainey's nephew. Stutters. Black.

PLAYED BY JABARI KHALIQ

TOLEDO

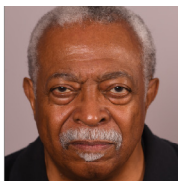
Piano player. Philosophical. Black.

PLAYED BY KELVIN ROSTON, JR.

DUSSIE MAE

Ma Rainey's lover. Eager. Black.

PLAYED BY TIFFANY RENEE JOHNSON



SLOW DRAG

Bass player. Practical. Black.

PLAYED BY CEDRIC YOUNG

POLICEMAN

Officer. Opportunistic. White.

PLAYED BY SCOTT AIELLO

IT'LL PUT YOU IN A TRANCE: *MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM* SYNOPSIS

BY CORI LANG, TEMPORARY LITERARY ASSISTANT

ACT ONE

In a Chicago recording studio in 1927, two white music producers, Irvin and Sturdyvant, are preparing for the arrival of successful Blues singer Ma Rainey and her band. Sturdyvant is stressed about recording, as Ma Rainey's last record didn't perform as well as expected. Irvin reassures Sturdyvant that he will handle the session and the band.

Members of the band begin to arrive: Cutler, who plays guitar and trombone, Slow Drag on bass and Toledo at the piano. Ma Rainey and the trumpet player, Levee, are not with them. The musicians tell Irvin and Sturdyvant they don't know when Ma Rainey will arrive but say Levee will be arriving presently.

In the band room, Cutler, Slow Drag and Toledo are reviewing the song list for the recording session, which is different than they expected. Levee, the youngest member of the band, enters sporting new shoes that cost him $11, about a week's salary for the band.

The band tries to rehearse but keeps getting off track and bickering with each other. Levee and Toledo are especially at odds. Levee thinks Toledo is high-and-mighty since he is the only one of them who can read, and Toledo thinks Levee is self-centered and doesn't understand how the world works.

The band begins to rehearse the song "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," but immediately they get into a disagreement about which version they should rehearse: the old version they all know, or Levee's new version. They decide to rehearse a different piece instead. Irvin enters, asking where Ma Rainey is. He confirms that they will be recording Levee's version of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom."

After Irvin leaves, the band begins to rehearse again, but when Levee tries to tell the rest of the men how to play, the process derails. Toledo criticizes Levee's attitude and what he sees as a broader pattern among Black men who put more emphasis on "having a good time" rather than working to make the world a better place for the generations to come. Slow Drag shares a story about a man who sold his soul to the devil. Levee responds saying he would do the same and even help the man recruit new souls if it meant becoming rich and successful.

Irvin calls out to the band to say that the sandwiches he ordered for them have arrived. Toledo goes to the studio to receive them, where he overhears Irvin and Sturdyvant arguing about why Ma Rainey hasn't arrived yet. In the middle of their argument, the door buzzer rings. Ma Rainey arrives accompanied by Dussie Mae, a young woman Ma Rainey has taken under her wing, and Sylvester, Ma Rainey's nephew. The group is escorted by a police officer.

The police officer explains to Irvin that Sylvester allegedly hit a car, and Ma Rainey allegedly assaulted a cab driver. His story is interrupted by Ma Rainey multiple times, as she tries to set the story straight. In the end, Irvin pulls the officer aside, hands him some cash, and promises to stop by the precinct to smooth anything over. The officer, satisfied with this arrangement, leaves.

The band begins rehearsing Levee's version of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," again. Dussie Mae opens the door to the band room, and Ma Rainey hears them rehearsing. She is not pleased that they are rehearsing Levee's version of the song and gets into an argument with Irvin about it. Ma Rainey wants to sing her version of the song and have Sylvester do the speaking part at the top of the number. Ma Rainey gives Irvin an ultimatum: record the old version of the song or she walks. Irvin relents, and Ma Rainey brings Sylvester to the band room.

Ma Rainey introduces Sylvester to the band and tells Cutler to teach him the speaking part at the beginning of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." Levee is enraged by this. When Cutler tries to teach Sylvester his part, it is discovered Sylvester has a bad stutter, which enrages Levee even more. The band begins to rehearse without Levee, but when Sturdyvant comes down, Levee eagerly jumps up to receive him. Levee hands over a song he wrote to Sturdyvant hoping it will be considered for recording. After Sturdyvant leaves, the other men make fun of Levee for being "spooked up by the white man."

Levee shares a painful story from his childhood. When he was eight years old, a group of white men assaulted his mother. Levee tried to stop them with a knife and was left with a large scar across his chest. In the aftermath, his father sold their land to white people and moved the family away. Later, Levee's father returned and killed several of the men responsible before he was captured and lynched by the remainder of the men.

CONTINUED ON THE NEXT PAGE

ACT TWO

Ma Rainey and the band are set up to start recording. Cutler pulls Irvin aside and tells him Sylvester has a stutter and cannot do the speaking part in "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." Irvin says they can just do Levee's version instead, but Ma Rainey refuses. They start to record the old version, and when Sylvester stutters through the opening, the whole room goes into an uproar of frustration. Still, Ma Rainey won't budge on her position.

Ma Rainey says she won't record again until she gets a Coca-Cola. Despite Sturdyvant and Irvin's protests, she sends Slow Drag and Sylvester down the corner store to get her a few bottles. While they are waiting, Ma Rainey pulls Cutler to the side and tells him to find a new trumpet player once they're back in Memphis.

In the band room, Levee flirts with Dussie Mae, saying that he's going to form his own band soon, once he gets the go-ahead from Sturdyvant to record. Levee kisses Dussie Mae. Upstairs, Slow Drag and Sylvester return with Ma Rainey's Coke. Slow Drag stops in the band room for a drink and walks in on Levee and Dussie Mae kissing.

Everyone rejoins the group in the studio, and they begin recording again. On the third take, Sylvester gets the speaking part perfect, and they get through the whole song. However, Irvin and Sturdyvant quickly realize the song was never recorded because of a faulty cord. Ma Rainey threatens to walk out, but Irvin stops her, saying they only need 15 minutes to fix the problem. Back in the band room, the band tells Levee to be careful messing around with Dussie Mae, because Ma Rainey will fire him if she finds out.

Levee boasts about starting his own band and getting the white men to respect him, like how they respect Ma Rainey and grovel for her. Cutler refutes this point, saying that white people don't care about Black people at all, unless they can make money off of them. He then shares a story about a Reverend who got surrounded by white men who made him dance.

Levee asks why God didn't save the Reverend that served him and then goes on to say that God is a white man's god and that he hates Black people. Cutler punches Levee for blaspheming, and the other men pull Cutler off. Levee draws a knife, welcoming the fight. Cutler tries to disengage. Levee continues to swipe at Cutler, mocking him and his God. He then begins swiping at the air, at God, before putting the knife away and declaring that Cutler's God "ain't shit."

At the end of the recording session, Ma Rainey criticizes Levee for improvising during her song. He talks back and she fires him. Irvin tells Ma Rainey that they will have to take Sylvester's pay out of her paycheck. She makes him go and talk to Sturdyvant again. Sturdyvant returns and gives her what she's owed. Ma Rainey packs up and leaves with Dussie Mae and Sylvester.

Sturdyvant goes to the band room to pay the band and tells Levee that they are no longer interested in recording his songs with him. Sturdyvant offers to buy the songs from him for $5 a piece instead. Levee refuses, but Sturdyvant forces him to take the money and leaves before Levee can say anything else to him.

Toledo accidentally steps on Levee's shoe, which sends Levee into a rage. Levee stabs Toledo, killing him, before finally realizing what he's done. Cutler asks Slow Drag to go get Irvin.

THE **MUSIC**, THE **CHICAGO**, THE **GREAT TIME** WE'VE HAD WITH IT

A CONVERSATION WITH CHUCK SMITH AND HARRY J. LENNIX

In this excerpt of a discussion with Goodman Theatre staff, BOLD Artistic Producer Malkia Stampley chats with Director Chuck Smith and Associate Director and Music Director Harry J. Lennix about their history with *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, including their friendship that grew as a result.

CHUCK SMITH
DIRECTOR

HARRY J. LENNIX
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR
AND MUSIC DIRECTOR

MALKIA STAMPLEY: I'm going to start us off with a question for you, Chuck. Why *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*? What drew you to this piece?

CHUCK SMITH: There's a couple of reasons on this one. The first one is that *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is the August Wilson play that really sort of hits me in the heart, because it was the actually first time that I directly worked with August Wilson on one of his shows. This was many years ago, in 1997, back at The Goodman's old theater. Wilson liked what we were doing, and he stuck with us through the preview period until the show opened to help us make it the hit that it was. Everybody came to see it: Michael Jordan, the Vice President of the United States, the mayor. It was quite an occasion. Other than *A Christmas Carol*, it was also the first mainstage show I did at The Goodman.

M: Thank you, Chuck. It's hard for me not to just imagine how special that room must have been. Harry, can you talk about your connection to *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*?

HARRY J. LENNIX: Yes, before we did it at The Goodman, we did it at the Pegasus Players. We had quite a hit with it, and it sort of put me on the map. And I met August Wilson. I had done the play in Pittsburgh, where most of his plays are set. The uniquity of this is that it is set in Chicago. I think it's the most accessible in some way. It has less of the—even though I think it exists on a certain level—kind of metaphysical, supernatural aspects of many of the other plays. Many of those other plays are tied together either through location or family ties. The intertextuality of those other plays are not of influence here. But, nevertheless, my thinking of how special it is—why it remains my favorite of his plays—is because of the music, the Chicago, the great time we've had with it.

M: I agree about *Ma Rainey* being accessible. It's the music, the love interest, the history, all of those things. Have you and Chuck worked together since that 1997 production?

C: Harry and I have been working together ever since he started! Then Harry got so popular in movies and everything else, I couldn't touch him. But we always remain in touch, you know. Harry and I are good friends, period.

H: You know, he's directed me, and when I'm directing something, Chuck is the first person whose input I want. And I think those bonds that we made all those years ago, you can't dissolve those. I'm not a director unless I had worked with Chuck. I'm not the actor that I am now without that entanglement.

M: I love the admiration that you two have for each other. I also know the two of you have plans when it comes to the music and uplifting Chicago elements of the piece through our set.

C: Many might question the fact that I'm using Harry as my music director in this show. And what people don't know is that he has a huge history of music. When I met Harry, he was teaching music at Chicago Public Schools. So, he knows his music. One of the highlights of our last production was that Harry played the role of Levee, the trumpet player, and he learned to play the trumpet and was live on stage. We taught all of the actors how to play something on their instruments, and we're going to do the same thing on this production. All the actors are going to have a really good feel of the instruments and be able to play something so the audience can hear them play before they really get to the nitty gritty music with Ma Rainey.

M: What do you hope our students leave *Ma Rainey* thinking about?

C: What it was like for Black musicians in the 1920s. I think that's the lesson that is sort of taught in this play, the lack of control over their music they had in those days. I mean, the studios had total control. The only time Black musicians had any kind of control on the music was when they were doing it live on a tour that they produced. But if they went to make a record, they maybe got whatever this producer wanted to give them, and that's it. I think that was the lesson that Wilson wanted to share with this play.

H: In addition to everything Chuck said, I think the most immediate takeaway is there's a lot different in today's industry, and a lot that has not changed at all. But what I really want them to take a look at is archetypes of almost folkloric figures in the Black community—the strong Black woman who actually has more agency in a given dynamic than the Black man, even though in the predominant culture it might be a different balance of power. There are also four men in that band room, and I think each one fits the archetypes of king, warrior, magician and lover. And while it's a shocking ending, it's not a surprising ending. So, I want them to think about the structure of how Wilson laid this out using these kind of classical figures because he was a great student of the great playwrights. He looked at all of that stuff a lot—the Greeks, his contemporaries. I think the way he's structured this is an extraordinary opportunity for anybody that's interested in how stories are told dramatically, that there's a great deal to take away from a literature point of view, from a societal point of view, from a political point of view, a spiritual point of view.

BEHIND THE SIGHTS AND SOUNDS: MEET THE DESIGNERS

BY ANNA ROGELIO JOAQUIN,
SCHOOL PROGRAMS MANAGER

When you see a show, you may notice several ways you are transported to the world of the play. Perhaps you have experienced lights that signal a shift in time or sound that alters the mood. Behind the sights and sounds of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* are a team of designers helping bring the show to life.

On The Goodman's team for this production are Set Designer **Linda Buchanan,** Costume Designer **Evelyn M. Danner** and Lighting Designer **Jared Gooding**. Read on to learn about their vision for the show and what they hope you notice!

LINDA BUCHANAN
SET DESIGNER

It's a blustery March day on Chicago's south side. Ma Rainey and her musicians have come to the studio to create an artistic product, for which they will be badly paid, and over which they have little control. It's an intimidating, unfriendly world, but one they know well. Creature comforts are minimal, just what's needed.

I pictured a small industrial building that has been re-purposed.

A challenge to this design is that there are two playing spaces: the studio, and the band room in the basement. Both spaces need to be onstage, but one needs to feel "lower" than the other. The studio control room is the highest space. Director Chuck Smith also asked for a street corner for people to pause in before entering the space.

EVELYN M. DANNER
COSTUME DESIGNER

I wanted Ma Rainey to look like the extraordinary, no-nonsense character that she is, demanding respect in whatever space she is in. To this end, I've used context from the social, racial and economic environments of Chicago in 1927 to shape her look. Ma Rainey commands this space with confidence and shine.

JARED GOODING
LIGHTING DESIGNER

My lighting for *Ma Rainey* is based in naturalistic lighting. While we would like the place to feel as real and lived in as possible, it's not as simple as just putting a few table lamps on stage. We have to use tricks and techniques to get the light in just the right places, and we also have to use high intensity lights to make the stage bright enough to be seen from the farthest seat in the back of the balcony. And that's just the lighting for the inside of the studio. Our concept for the outside of the studio was to give an abstracted sense of Chicago winter taking place just outside the studio walls.

PITCH AND PROFIT:
S.T.E.A.M. ACTIVITIES

BY ANNA ROGELIO JOAQUIN,
SCHOOL PROGRAMS MANAGER

How can biology, physics and math help illuminate key ideas of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*? Try the activities below to find out!

TECHNOLOGY: RECORDING THROUGH THE YEARS

Ma Rainey was a prominent artist between what is now considered the Acoustic and Electrical eras of sound recording. What do these eras mean for Ma Rainey and her band? What do they mean for artists after them?

Assign small groups one of four eras to research:

- The Acoustic era (1877–1925)
- The Electrical era (1925–1945)
- The Magnetic era (1945–1975)
- The Digital era (1975–present)

Have each group design a poster visualizing the key technology of their assigned era. Students should prepare to present and cover the following questions: What pieces of technology were used? How did they work? What criteria did they meet? What constraints did they have? How did they impact artists and consumers? Encourage students to cite their sources.

After presentations, discuss similarities and differences between eras. What was consistent? What changed? How might Ma Rainey and her band have felt about these transitions? Which era might Ma Rainey and her band prefer? Why?

NEXT GENERATION SCIENCE STANDARDS

- **MS-ETS1-2:** Evaluate competing design solutions using a systematic process to determine how well they meet the criteria and constraints of the problem.
- **HS-ETS1-1:** Analyze a major global challenge to specify qualitative and quantitative criteria and constraints for solutions that account for societal needs and wants.
- **HS-ETS1-3:** Evaluate a solution to a complex real-world problem based on prioritized criteria and trade-offs that account for a range of constraints, including cost, safety, reliability and aesthetics as well as possible social, cultural and environmental impacts.

ILLINOIS ARTS LEARNING STANDARDS: THEATER

- **TH:Cn11.2.a**: Research societal, historical and cultural context for a performance.
- **TH:Re8.a**: Use personal experience and background knowledge to create or interpret a drama/theater work.

BIOLOGY: THE ANATOMY OF SINGING

We know Ma Rainey was a singer, but do we know how singing happens in the first place? How do the intricacies of singing elevate the value of a voice?

As a hook, have students hum a low note while gently touching the front of their throat. Then, have students switch to a high note. How did the vibrations change? Note that vocal cords vibrate more rapidly when producing a higher pitch; more details can be viewed here.

Then, show students this video about the anatomy of singing. After watching, create a list as a class of which parts of the body are involved in singing. Then, in small groups, have students create a movement sequence that depicts the singing process, from inhalation to exhalation. Each student should embody at least one key body part. Once small groups have created their movement sequences, have them perform for the class. Ask students watching to interpret what each performer was embodying.

CONTINUED ON THE NEXT PAGE

NEXT GENERATION SCIENCE STANDARDS

- **MS-LS1-3:** Use argument supported by evidence for how the body is a system of interacting subsystems composed of groups of cells.
- **HS-LS1-2:** Develop and use a model to illustrate the hierarchical organization of interacting systems that provide specific functions within multicellular organisms.

ILLINOIS ARTS LEARNING STANDARDS: THEATER

- **TH:Cr2.b:** Demonstrate collaborative & interdisciplinary skills in a drama/theater process.
- **TH:Pr6.a:** Perform a drama/theater work with a defined purpose or intent.
- **TH:Re8.a**: Use personal experience and background knowledge to create or interpret a drama/theater work.
- **TH:Re9.c**: Establish an active relationship between audience and performer.

To close, share the following line from Act II of *Ma Rainey*:

> MA RAINEY: They don't care nothing about me. All they want is my voice. Well, I done learned that, and they gonna treat me like I want to be treated no matter how much it hurt them. They back there now calling me all kinds of names . . . calling me everything but a child of god. But they can't do nothing else. They ain't got what they wanted yet. As soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it's just like if I'd be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on.

Invite students to discuss. Why is Ma protective of her voice? How is the voice an instrument? How has their perspective of singing changed knowing more about all that goes into it?

MATH: A PIECE OF THE PIE

Like many artists, Ma Rainey was exploited by music executives. Who were other stakeholders at play in her time? What about now?

Review the term "stakeholder" with the class. What is a stakeholder? As an example, ask students to list the stakeholders of their school. Then, ask half the class to read about the music industry back then, and the other half to read about the music industry now. Students reading about the music industry back then should focus on passages about the 1920s. After reading, have students create a list of music industry stakeholders with a small group of students who read about the same time period. Then, invite small groups to share with the class.

From there, have students draw a pie chart representing music industry profits in their assigned time period. Note that there will not be exact answers, but they should make statistical inferences based on the data given to them. Require students to list at least three statistics to support their conclusions. Once finished, have students present their pie charts and supporting statistics to the class.

Invite students to discuss. What similarities and differences did they notice within the time periods? Across time periods? What might account for them? Might Ma Rainey and her band prefer to be in today's music industry? Why or why not?

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS: MATHETMATICS

- **CCSS.Math.Content.6.SP.B.4:** Display numerical data in plots on a number line, including dot plots, histograms and box plots.
- **CCSS.Math.Content.6.SP.B.5:** Summarize numerical data sets in relation to their context.
- **CCSS.Math.Content.7.RP.A.2:** Recognize and represent proportional relationships between quantities.
- **CCSS.Math.Content.HSS.IC.A.1:** Understand statistics as a process for making inferences about population parameters based on a random sample from that population.
- **CCSS.Math.Content.HSS.IC.B.4:** Use data from a sample survey to estimate a population mean or proportion.

ILLINOIS ARTS LEARNING STANDARDS: THEATER

- **TH:Cn11.2.a:** Research societal, historical and cultural context for a performance.
- **TH:Re8.a:** Use personal experience and background knowledge to create or interpret a drama/theater work.

ONE...TWO...YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO: HUMANITIES ACTIVITIES

BY ANNA ROGELIO JOAQUIN, SCHOOL PROGRAMS MANAGER

Want to dive into Ma Rainey's world through music, social studies and English? Check out the activity ideas below!

ENGLISH: POWER LINE

NOTE: Students should read the synopsis (see p. 11) or read/see the play before completing this activity.

The characters in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* have different levels of power. How might this impact how they are treated?

Write the names of *Ma Rainey* characters on sticky notes to be placed on students' foreheads (use tape to supplement if need be). Multiple students can be assigned the same character—just make sure they don't see who they're assigned! Once all students have a sticky note on their head, ask them to walk around and react to each other as though they are reacting to the character whose name they see. Once students have all had a chance to react to each other, ask them to line up in their perceived order of least to most power. Go down the line and ask students to predict who they are. Then, on the count of three (or "one...two...you know what to do"), have students view their sticky note. After the reveal, give students the option to rearrange themselves in line as they see fit.

As a class, reflect on why students thought they were a certain character. How did people treat them? How did they react to other characters? Did they have a specific moment of the play in mind? Were certain characters dispersed throughout the line? Did they move when given the option? Why or why not? Encourage students to cite specific textual evidence.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS: ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.1:** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.2:** Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.3:** Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters and advance the plot or develop the theme.

ILLINOIS ARTS LEARNING STANDARDS: THEATER

- **TH:Re7.a:** Identify choices in a drama/theater work to understand personal reactions as a participant in a drama/theater event.
- **TH:Re8.a:** Use personal experience and background knowledge to create or interpret a drama/theater work.

MUSIC: THE BLUES

The blues are key to Ma Rainey and August Wilson's work more broadly (see "Everything Changing All the Time" on p. 7 and "August Wilson's 4 Bs" on p. 6). What is the history of the blues? What is its typical structure?

Invite students to learn more about the history of the blues here. What are the genre's origins? How did it change over time? Then, delve into its structure here. After breaking down the structure, hand out the lyrics to "Dust My Broom" and play it out loud twice, asking students to mark changes in chord progressions and to label the "AAB" patterns as they hear them. Review together. Then, do the same for "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." How is "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" structured similarly? How is it different? Based on the history of the blues and what students may know from the play, what might account for variations in structure?

Time permitting, invite students to write their own blues lyrics for a 12-bar blues track. Students should follow standard "AAB" patterns and include intentional variations. Hold a listening party for students to present and play their music.

ILLINOIS ARTS LEARNING STANDARDS: MUSIC

- **MU.Cn10.1.I.a:** Demonstrate how interests, knowledge and skills relate to personal choices and intent when creating, performing and responding to music as developmentally appropriate.
- **MU:Re7.1.I.a:** Apply teacher-provided criteria to select music for specified purposes, supporting choices by citing characteristics found in the music and connections to interest, purpose and context.
- **MU:Re7.1.I.b:** Compare passages in musical selections and explain how the elements of music and context inform the response.
- **MU:Re7.1.I.c:** Identify and compare the context of programs of music from a variety of genres, cultures and historical periods as developmentally appropriate.

ILLINOIS ARTS LEARNING STANDARDS: THEATER

- **TH:Pr5.b:** Integrate design elements that create an emotional impact or convey meaning.
- **TH:Cn11.2.a:** Research societal, historical and cultural context for a performance.
- **TH:Re8.b:** Interpret how culture influences a performance.

CONTINUED ON THE NEXT PAGE

SOCIAL STUDIES: THE MUSIC INDUSTRY

In a conversation with Line Producer Malkia Stampley (see p. 13), Associate Director and Music Director Harry J. Lennix shares, "There's a lot different in today's industry, and a lot that has not changed at all." What has changed? What has stayed the same?

Draw two columns on the board labeled 1920s and 2020s. To the left of the columns, label three rows: Artists, Record Labels and Distributors (radio, streaming, concert venues, etc.). Split students into six groups—one to cover each section. First in small groups, then as a class, ask students to brainstorm things each of those parties might say in their assigned time period. Students may refer to the script and/or "Everything Changing All the Time" on p. 7. For instance, artists in the 2020s might say, "I wrote this music—I deserve all the rights" and record labels in the 1920s might say, "Your music wouldn't have gotten popular without me." Discuss what groups come up with.

Then, have each small group create a short skit depicting a power struggle between an artist, record label and distributor(s). Have each group present their skits once, then another time with other students tapping in to take the place of an actor and see if the power struggle resolves differently. After the skits, reflect. What was different in the 1920s music industry? What has persisted? How do different stakeholders gain or lose power?

ILLINOIS LEARNING STANDARDS: SOCIAL SCIENCE

- **SS.9-12.H.1:** Evaluate the context of time and place as well as structural factors that influence historical developments.
- **SS.9-12.H.2:** Analyze change and continuity across historical eras and identify what perspectives have typically influenced how historical eras are constructed.
- **SS.9-12.H.8:** Analyze key historical events and contributions of individuals through a variety of perspectives, including those of historically underrepresented groups.
- **SS.9-12.H.13:** Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.

ILLINOIS ARTS LEARNING STANDARDS: THEATER

- **TH:Cr2.b:** Demonstrate collaborative and interdisciplinary skills in a drama/theater process.
- **TH:Cr3.a:** Prepare a unified drama/theater work for performance that conveys meaning.
- **TH:Pr4.a:** Demonstrate that there are multiple choices for every drama/theater work and select the most supportable choice for the moment.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

BY ANNA ROGELIO JOAQUIN,
SCHOOL PROGRAMS MANAGER

BEFORE OR AFTER WATCHING

- *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* takes place in Chicago in 1927. Read "Everything Changing All the Time" on p. 7. What was Chicago like then? Compare and contrast it to Chicago today.
- What do you know about the music industry today? Who has control (artists, record labels, streaming platforms, venues, etc.)? Who gets exploited? How do you think the industry has changed since the 1920s? What do you think has stayed the same?
- Describe a time you felt powerful. Describe a time you felt less powerful. What made you feel that way? Is power earned and/or granted? How is power lost?
- Do you think it's more important to preserve tradition or adapt to change? Does it depend? How so?
- In what ways is it good to be ambitious? When can ambition be a fault?

AFTER WATCHING

- What stood out to you? What characters, moments, language, design elements, etc. are sticking with you?
- Who has power in the play? When? When and why does power shift in the play?
- Which character do you relate to most? Why? How do you differ from this character?
- How does Levee's view of music differ from Ma Rainey's? Do you side more with Levee or Ma Rainey? Why?
- How do you feel about the ending? Did it surprise you? Why or why not?
- Which characters did you relate to the most? Which characters did you relate to the least? Why?

GLOSSARY

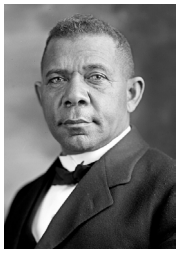
BY ANNA ROGELIO JOAQUIN,
SCHOOL PROGRAMS MANAGER

BALKY
Uncooperative or stubborn.

BLACK BOTTOM
A lively dance popularized in the 1920s; originated in Black American communities in the South.

BLASPHEMY
Disrespectful speech about God or something sacred.

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON
1856–1915; prominent African American leader who promoted education and economic security.



BOOKER T. WASHINGTON IN 1905.

PHOTO BY HARRIS & EWING, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

BROGANS
Heavy-duty, ankle-high shoe.

BUDDY BOLDEN
1877–1931; cornet player from New Orleans who helped shape the development of early jazz music.

CLODHOPPER
Large, heavy shoe.

FLORSHEIMS
A brand of nice shoes.

1925 FLORSHEIM SHOE ADVERTISEMENT.

THE ELKS MAGAZINE, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS.

IMPROVISE
Perform spontaneously instead of following something pre-planned.

JUG-BAND
A band of conventional and homemade instruments such as a jug, washboard and spoons; historically made up of Black vaudeville musicians.

JUKE JOINT
Casual Black establishment for music, dancing and drinking.

MISSISSIPPI JUKE JOINT IN 1939.

MARION POST, WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

KING OLIVER
1881–1938; cornet player, bandleader and jazz pioneer.

MOONSHINE
High-proof liquor made and distributed illegally, often at night.

RAKISH
Dashing, unconventional.

SLOW DRAG (DANCE)
Popular slow-tempo dance originating in late 19th century New Orleans.

VIRTUOSO
Highly skilled artist.

WINDBAG
Someone who talks too much about boring things.

THE GOODMAN

2025/2026 **TEEN STUDIO SERIES**

YOUR THEATER. YOUR WORLD.

Calling all teens! The Goodman's Teen Studio series invites you to explore the world of performing arts alongside some of Chicago's coolest theater artists—for free! Each workshop will focus on a different area of theater. From monologue coaching to costume construction, our workshops give you a chance to explore new skills and take your passion to the next level.

ALL WORKSHOPS ARE FREE OF CHARGE FOR STUDENTS. REGISTRATION IS REQUIRED.

UPCOMING WORKSHOPS

SATURDAY, **APRIL 25** | 12:00-1:30PM
SATURDAY, **MAY 9** | 12:00-1:30PM

Want to be notified when registration opens?
Email **Education@GoodmanTheatre.org.**
For more details, scan the QR code!

2025/2026 EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT SPONSORS

SUPPORT FOR THE SCHOOL MATINEE SERIES

POLK BROS FOUNDATION

MAJOR SUPPORT

BMO

MAJOR CORPORATE SPONSOR

pwc

CORPORATE SPONSOR PARTNER

KPMG

PEOPLES GAS
NATURAL GAS DELIVERY

CROWN FAMILY PHILANTHROPIES

MAGGIE AND SCOTT PHILLIPS

ROBERT AND CHERYL KOPECKY

ANTHONY AND JULIANNE MAGGIORE

SUPPORTERS

SUPPORT FOR GENARRATIONS

EFROYMSON FAMILY FUND
A CICF FUND

SUPPORT FOR SUMMER YOUTH PROGRAMS

QUAKER
EST'D 1877

CORPORATE SUPPORT OF PLAYBUILD YOUTH INTENSIVE

ANONYMOUS
BRUCE B. BOYD FOUNDATION
RICHARD AND ANN CARR
KATHLEEN AND JAMES COWIE

WALTER E. HELLER/
ALYCE DECOSTA FUND
CHRISTINE FINZER
ELAINE R. LEAVENWORTH

CYNTHIA AND MICHAEL SCHOLL
MICHAEL STEINBERG AND
SALME HARJU STEINBERG

SUPPORTERS

OVERALL SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT

THE GOODMAN WOMEN'S BOARD

SACHS FAMILY FOUNDATION

CAROL PRINS AND JOHN HART

FRUMAN AND MARIAN JACOBSON

KIMBRA AND MARK WALTER

MAJOR SUPPORTERS

Abbott Fund

CUSHMAN & WAKEFIELD

A&A FUND

CAROL AND DOUGLAS COHEN

DR. SCHOLL FOUNDATION

SCOTT AND LENORE ENLOE

exelon

THE HEARST FOUNDATION, INC.

ILLINOIS ARTS COUNCIL AGENCY

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT for the ARTS
arts.gov

THE MURIEL POLLIA FOUNDATION

STEVEN AND LAUREN SCHEIBE

SIRAGUSA FAMILY FOUNDATION

JUDY AND ALEXANDER TOLAND

usbank

SUPPORTERS

COMMITMENTS AS OF FEBRUARY 19, 2026