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# MA RAINNEY'S BLACK BOTTOM

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FACT SHEET


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ON **NETFLIX** | DECEMBER 18

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# MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM

Director **GEORGE C. WOLFE**  
Starring **VIOLA DAVIS** (MA RAINEY)  
**CHADWICK BOSEMAN** (LEVEE)  
**GLYNN TURMAN** (TOLEDO)  
**COLMAN DOMINGO** (CUTLER)  
**MICHAEL POTTS** (SLOW DRAG)  
**TAYLOUR PAIGE** (DUSSIE MAE)  
**DUSAN BROWN** (SYLVESTER)  
**JONNY COYNE** (STURDYVANT)  
**JEREMY RAMOS** (IRVIN)  
**JOSHUA HARTO** (POLICEMAN)  
Screenplay by **RUBEN SANTIAGO-HUDSON**  
Based on the play written by **AUGUST WILSON**  
Produced by **DENZEL WASHINGTON, p.g.a.**  
**TODD BLACK, p.g.a.**  
**DANY WOLF**  
Executive Produced by **CONSTANZA ROMERO**  
Director of Photography **TOBIAS SCHLISSLER, ASC**  
Production Designer **MARK RICKER**  
Costume Designer **ANN ROTH**  
Editor **ANDREW MONDSHEIN, ACE**  
Composer **BRANFORD MARSALIS**

A person wearing a blue dress is shown from the back, holding a large, light-colored feathered fan high in the air with their right hand. The background is a solid, light blue color. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the feathers and the silhouette of the person.

**Chicago, 1927. A recording session. Tensions rise between Ma Rainey, her ambitious horn player and the white management determined to control the uncontrollable “Mother of the Blues.” Based on Pulitzer Prize winner August Wilson’s play. ♦**

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# SYNOPSIS



**T**ensions and temperatures rise over the course of an afternoon recording session in 1920s Chicago as a band of musicians await trailblazing performer, the legendary “Mother of the Blues,” Ma Rainey (Academy Award® winner Viola Davis). Late to the session, the fearless, fiery Ma engages in a battle of wills with her white manager and producer over control of her music. As the band waits in the studio’s claustrophobic rehearsal room, ambitious horn player Levee (Chadwick Boseman) – who has an eye for Ma’s girlfriend and is determined to stake his own claim on the music industry – spurs his fellow musicians into an eruption of stories revealing truths that will forever change the course of their lives.

Adapted from two-time Pulitzer Prize winner August Wilson’s play, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* celebrates the transformative power of the blues and the artists who refuse to let society’s prejudices dictate their worth. Directed by George C. Wolfe and adapted for the screen by Ruben Santiago-Hudson, the film is produced by *Fences* Oscar® nominees Denzel Washington and Todd Black. Colman Domingo, Glynn Turman, Michael Potts, Taylour Paige and Dusan Brown co-star alongside Grammy® winner Branford Marsalis’ score. ♦

# DIRECTOR'S NOTE

BY GEORGE C. WOLFE

In the blues song “Michigan Water,” jazz great Jelly Roll Morton seductively croons:

*Michigan Water taste like sherry wine, mean sherry wine  
Mississippi Water taste like turpentine...*

For the over one hundred thousand black people who migrated to Chicago from the Deep South during the first twenty years of the last century, the waters of Lake Michigan must have felt intoxicating, indeed. But as Jelly Roll warned, those waters turned brutally mean the summer of 1919, when a seventeen-year-old black boy while swimming, inadvertently crossed an invisible line of racial demarcation, and was attacked and drowned.

When no arrests were made for the young boy's death, Black people took to the street in protest. During the ensuing confrontations, a white mob stormed Bronzeville, Chicago's Black neighborhood. Five days later, 37 were dead, 536 injured, and over a thousand left homeless.

The film *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, adapted from the 1982 play of the same name, is set during the summer of 1927. As the same racial embers which erupted eight years earlier continue to simmer, enter a different kind of explosion – but no less stinging or socially significant. Enter singer/songwriter/ showbiz entrepreneur, the legendary Ma Rainey, a black woman from Columbus, Georgia, who is used to obeying nobody's rules but her own.

Ma Rainey, aka “The Mother of the Blues,” has come north for a one-day recording session. Included in her entourage is her nephew Sylvester, her newest girlfriend Dussie Mae, and band members Toledo, Slow Drag, Cutler and Levee.

Ma Rainey, as crafted by playwright August Wilson, breaks a number of rules, including those of August Wilson himself. She is the only character in August's magnificent ten

## DIRECTOR'S NOTE

play cycle, chronicling the African American existence during the twentieth century, who is based on a real person. She is also the only LGBTQ character – Ma was an out lesbian, who, in her song “Prove It on Me,” unabashedly proclaims:

*Went out last night with a crowd of my friends  
Must have been women cause I don't like men.*

Equally unique about *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, which premiered on Broadway in 1984, is that it's the only play in the cycle which is not set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, the famed Black neighborhood where August Wilson spent his formative years.

But the one quality the piece shares with the rest of August Wilson's work is its stunning language; language which is as exalted as it is visceral and raw.

As the characters in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* sermonize, philosophize, talk shit, confront and condemn, their cascading words become a symphonic composition which celebrates the pain, joy and wonder of being black, human and alive.

As much as Ma Rainey the historical figure was a trailblazer, by 1927, the world was starting to leave her behind. Bessie Smith, Ma's protege and alleged former lover, had eclipsed her in record sales and popularity; and each week The Duke Ellington Orchestra could be heard on the radio, live from The Cotton Club – the modernity of Ellington's harmonics, the polar opposite of Ma Rainey and her jug band blues.

In the film, Levee, Ma's coronet player, who has his own musical sound and vision of the future, sees his time in Chicago as a chance to break free of the strictures which have kept black performers/artists from having the creative careers they deserve. Will Levee have a future full of promise and possibility, or will the demons of his past and ours as a country keep him and us from moving forward, unencumbered and free?

## DIRECTOR'S NOTE

The blues as an art form has always struck me as having the power to transform the paradoxical, (faith versus despair, anguish versus desire) into a balm for the hopeful heart. Or to quote Ma Rainey:

*"The blues helps you get out of bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain't alone. There's something else in the world. Something's been added by that song." ♦*

# ABOUT THE PRODUCTION



- ◆ The film is inspired by August Wilson's play of the same name, which debuted at the Cort Theatre on Broadway in 1984 and was the second in a series of ten plays known as 'The American Century Cycle.' The play won 'Best American Play' at the New York Drama Circle Critics' Awards for the 1984/5 season.
- ◆ An incredible team of filmmakers brought this story to life on screen:
  - Directed by five-time Tony® Award winner and DGA Award winner George C. Wolfe (*Lackawanna Blues*, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*).
  - Produced by Academy Award winner Denzel Washington, Academy Award nominee Todd Black and Dany Wolf.
  - Executive Produced by Constanza Romero (*Giving Voice*).
  - Screenplay by Ruben Santiago-Hudson (*Lackawanna Blues*).



## ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

- With costume design by Academy Award-winning costume designer Ann Roth (*The English Patient*).
  - And production design by Emmy®-nominated production designer Mark Ricker (*Escape from Dannemora*, *Bombshell*, *Trumbo*).
  - Academy Award nominee Andrew Mondschein (*The Sixth Sense*) edited the film.
  - Cinematography by Tobias Schliessler (*A Wrinkle in Time*, *Dreamgirls*).
  - With the exception of Ma Rainey's original songs, the film's music was created by renowned saxophonist, composer, bandleader, music historian and Executive Music Producer Branford Marsalis.
- ◆ *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*'s powerhouse ensemble cast includes:
- Academy Award winner Viola Davis (*Widows*, *Fences*) as Ma Rainey.
  - Chadwick Boseman (*42*, *Get On Up*, *Black Panther*) as Levee.
  - Emmy Award winner Glynn Turman (*In Treatment*, *How to Get Away with Murder*) as Toledo.
  - Tony and Olivier Award nominee Colman Domingo (*If Beale Street Could Talk*) as Cutler.
  - Michael Potts (*Show Me A Hero*, *True Detective*, *The Wire*) as Slow Drag.
  - Taylour Paige (*Zola*, *Hit The Floor*) as Dussie Mae.
  - Dusan Brown (*42*) as Sylvester.

## ABOUT THE PRODUCTION



- The film is about the trailblazing performer, the legendary “Mother of the Blues,” Ma Rainey (Academy Award winner Viola Davis) as she engages in a battle of wills with her white management and ambitious horn player, Levee, over control of her music during a recording session in 1920s Chicago. It is also about the war between Ma’s ambitious horn player Levee and the future he envisions versus the past he cannot escape.
- ◆ The film explores the consequences of the Great Migration, particularly what was lost when Black people left the rural south for the urban north.
- ◆ Much of the story takes place during one hot summer afternoon. Rainey has come north to Chicago to record music and has brought with her four musicians. One of them is Levee, a very ambitious young man who is determined to stake his claim on the music industry.
- ◆ Rainey is the only real person Wilson ever wrote into one of his plays and the only LGBTQ character. Wilson’s work overall was said to have been heavily influenced by the blues.

## ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

- This is not a biopic. While inspired by real life figure Ma Rainey, the film and the play are fiction.
- ◆ *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* producer Denzel Washington previously starred in, produced and directed the 2016 film adaptation of August Wilson's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Fences*. Washington and Viola Davis reprised their roles from the 2010 revival of the play that earned both actors Tony Awards. The film adaptation was written by Wilson and appeared on numerous 2016 top film lists, ultimately winning Davis the 'Best Supporting Actress' Academy Award and Golden Globe. The film also received Academy Award nominations for Best Picture, Best Adapted Screenplay (August Wilson) and Best Performance by an Actor in a Leading Role (Denzel Washington).
- ◆ Davis has a long connection to August Wilson - she was also nominated for a Tony Award for her Broadway debut in *Seven Guitars*. And she won a Tony Award for her role as Tanya in Wilson's *King Hedley*. ◆



# 15 FACTS ABOUT MA RAINY



1. Ma Rainey was born Gertrude Pridgett in 1886 in Columbus, Georgia.
2. She left home as a teenager so that she could perform on the Black minstrel troupe circuit in the American South.
3. She married vaudeville singer William "Pa" Rainey in 1904, which led to her changing her name to "Ma" Rainey.
4. She signed with Paramount Records at the age of 38 and made her first recordings in Chicago, ultimately recording over 100 songs.

## 15 FACTS ABOUT MA RAINEY

- 5.** She was one of the first African American professional blues singers and many of her songs subsequently became blues standards.
- 6.** In 1912, Rainey hired a teenage Bessie Smith as a dancer. Smith went on to become known as the “Empress of the Blues” and the two had a long friendship.
- 7.** Rainey became known as the “Mother of the Blues” and influenced not only countless blues singers like Bessie Smith, but she also had an impact on Black literature and drama from poets Langston Hughes and Sterling Allen Brown to Alice Waters, who based the character of Shug Avery in her novel “The Color Purple” on artists including Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith.
- 8.** Ma Rainey was famous for her flamboyant performing style and costuming which included wearing a necklace made of twenty gold dollar pieces.
- 9.** Louis Armstrong was a member of Rainey’s backing band.
- 10.** Rainey was well ahead of her time, recording songs such as “Prove it on Me Blues” that featured LGBTQ themes that referenced her bisexuality.
- 11.** She was inducted into both the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and Blues Foundation Hall of Fame in 1990.
- 12.** In 1994, Ma Rainey was the honoree of a US Post commemorative stamp.
- 13.** Bob Dylan’s song “Tombstone Blues” was influenced by the blues and references Ma Rainey.
- 14.** Ma Rainey ran three theatres in Columbus, Georgia before she died.
- 15.** She died of a heart attack in Georgia in 1939.

# AUGUST WILSON BY THE NUMBERS

- ◆ **1945** August Wilson born in Pittsburgh
- ◆ **16** plays written and produced by Wilson over the course of his life
- ◆ **10** plays written as part of Wilson's acclaimed 'American Century Cycle' series charting the African American experience throughout the twentieth century. All 10 plays are set in Wilson's hometown of Pittsburgh, except for "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" which is set in Chicago. While these aren't serialized stories, characters reappeared in multiple works.
  - **1982** "Jitney," set in the 1970s, follows the unlicensed drivers of a gypsy-cab company.
  - **1984** "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" takes place in the 1920s and tells the story of the legendary blues singer and her band as they come together to record an album.
  - **1987** "Fences" takes place in the 1950s where a man is fenced out of the major leagues and fenced into a life as a garbage collector.
  - **1988** "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," set in the 1910s is about a man haunted by the memory of a bounty hunter who illegally enslaved him.
  - **1990** "The Piano Lesson" takes place in the 1930s where a brother and sister face the trauma of their family's past as they argue over selling an old family piano.
  - **1991** "Two Trains Running" is set in the 1960s against the backdrop of the civil rights movement.
  - **1995** "Seven Guitars" is set in the 1940s, beginning at a man's funeral and exploring the events leading up to his death.
  - **1999** "King Hedley II," set in the 1980s, is about an ex-con trying to rebuild his life.
  - **2003** "Gem of the Ocean" is set in the 1900s and tells the story of Citizen Barlow who is sent on a spiritual journey aboard a mythical slave ship by the 285-year-old Aunt Ester.
  - **2005** "Radio Golf" takes place in the 1990s and follows a man trying to revive his childhood neighborhood.
- ◆ **1** Tony Award for Best New Play for "Fences"
- ◆ **2** Pulitzer Prizes for "Fences" and "The Piano Lesson"
- ◆ **7** New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards
- ◆ **2005** August Wilson passes away from liver cancer in Seattle, Washington
- ◆ **2005** Broadway's Virginia Theatre renamed the August Wilson Theatre, just weeks after Wilson's death