Mother of the Blues

Gertrude Pridgett was born on April 26, 1886 in Columbus, Georgia. Her parents, Thomas and Ella Pridgett, had both performed in minstrel shows and are credited with inspiring Gertrude's interest in the field of entertainment. Her stage career got its start with a song and dance troupe when she was only 14. In 1902, she heard her first blues song at a theater in St. Louis. She adopted the blues style for her shows, and quickly made it her own.

Pridgett married traveling entertainer Will "Pa" Rainey in 1904. Together they toured throughout the southern United States as "Ma & Pa Rainey and Assassinator of the Blues." Ma would later become a solo act with a number of addenda to her name, such as "Paramount Wildcat" and "Gold Necklace Woman of the Blues."

From humble beginnings, she went on to become the top recording artist for Paramount Records, and is generally credited with the rise in popularity of blues music in America at the beginning of the 20th century. Today, Ma Rainey is known as the "Mother of the Blues." Also known, though less discussed, is that she was bisexual. Rainey never shied away from her feelings in her music.

Ma Rainey Liked Her Women

"Went out last night with a crowd of my friends,  
They must have been women, 'cause I don't like no men.  
Wear my clothes just like a fan, Talk to gals just like any old man  
'Cause they say I do it, ain't nobody caught me, Sure got to prove it on me."  
"Prove It On Me" - Recorded by Ma Rainey in 1928

The newspaper ad that promoted the release of "Prove It On Me" featured Ma Rainey dressed in a man's suit flirting with two other women. Rainey was also outspoken on women's issues and was seen as a role model for future women entertainers who took control of their own careers.

Ma Rainey was arrested in Chicago in 1925 when police responded to a noise complaint and found a room full of naked women in "intimate" situations. Rainey spent the night in jail for hosting an "indecent party" and was bailed out the following morning by her friend and fellow blues singer Bessie Smith. Some accounts link Smith and Rainey romantically, but no one is sure. But it is clear that Ma Rainey made no secret of her bisexuality.

Ma Rainey - True To Her Roots

The period of history in which Ma Rainey lived did not provide many opportunities for success for an African American woman living in the Southern United States. Rainey didn't sign a recording contract until 1923, after 25 years of performing for her loyal fans. She released over 100 songs during a six year recording career including: "C.C. Rider" (or "See See Rider"); "Jelly Bean Blues," "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom", and "Bo Weevil Blues." In a few short years, Rainey led the transformation of Paramount Records from a subsidiary of a furniture company into a major record label.

Ma Rainey continued performing for another seven years after her last recording in 1928. Quite often her audiences were racially segregated, or exclusive. Her performance attire was extravagantly accessorized with sequins, diamonds and her trademark necklace made of gold coins. She performed with Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, and Thomas Dorsey. Despite all of the trappings of fame, Rainey remained loyal to her southern, rural roots and to her audience.

Ma Rainey: Hall of Famer and ... Housekeeper?

The popularity of the classic women blues singers declined in the 1930's. Rainey retired to her home town of

Columbus after her mother and sister died in 1935. There she managed two theaters that she had purchased with her earnings. She became active in the “Congregation of Friendship” Baptist Church where her brother was a deacon.

When Ma Rainey died on December 22, 1939 from heart disease, the obituary in the local paper listed her as a housekeeper by profession. However, her contribution to American culture and music has been honored by time.

Rainey was inducted into the Blues Foundation's Hall of Fame in 1983, and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1990 as an "early influence." Ma Rainey, "Mother of the Blues." was honored on a U.S. postage stamp in 1994.

Learn More About Ma Rainey

- Listen to audio clips from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.
- Visit one of the many Ma Rainey sites on the Internet. Go to Yahoo and search for "Ma Rainey."

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