



• *Musician*

#### TIMELINE

**1900** – Debuts at Springer Opera House in talent show: *The Bunch of Blackberries*

**1904** – Marries "Pa" Rainey, begins touring with him

**1917** – Begins tour with her band: Madam Gertrude Rainey and Her Georgia Smart Sets

**1923** – Records with Lovie

## Gertrude Pridgett "Ma" Rainey

1886–1939

**Inducted 1993**

The Mother of the Blues, "Ma" Rainey, was born Gertrude Pridgett in a poor neighborhood of Columbus, Georgia, in 1886. Her family recalled that "she was singin' soon as she was talkin'."

Ma was just 15 when she made her debut at Columbus' Springer Opera House in a talent show called *The Bunch of Blackberries*. She attracted the attention of a traveling showman named "Pa" Rainey, and they married in 1904. Not yet 20 years old, she became "Ma" Rainey.

Pa ran a traveling minstrel show, and that was the medium in which Ma Rainey performed for the next 20 years. At that time, black musicians and dancers took over the old minstrel show that dated back to the Antebellum era. It required taking on a humiliating caricature of their own race, but it was the only opportunity they had in the entertainment business until jazz and blues gained respect and popularity.

Ma traveled a vaudeville circuit confined to the South and the Midwest as far as Missouri, Arkansas and Texas. Her audience was almost entirely black. Every city had its segregated theater, and out in the country there were tent shows.

Ma's musical style was "down-home," or "country" blues. It was more raw and direct than the blues we now know. There weren't always words: sometimes there was only a rising and falling moan in which the audience would join. Ma didn't often have a

skilled jazz band to accompany her, but a primitive assemblage of jugs, kazoo, banjo, tinny piano and musical saw. The down-home blues were largely improvised, seldom written down. Exactly how many

*"You see me ravin',  
you hear me cryin'.  
Oh, Lawd, this lonely  
heart of mine!  
Sometimes I'm  
grieving from my hat  
down to my shoes.  
I'm a good-hearted  
woman that's a slave  
to the blues."*

– Ma Rainey

Austin Blues Serenaders and with her own band on Paramount label

**1924** – Begins tours with her band: Georgia (Wild Cats) Jazz Band

**1927** – Begins tour with her band: Louisiana Blackbirds Revue

**1928** – Records with Tub Jug Washboard Band and other artists on Paramount label

**1930** – Begins tour with her band: Arkansas Swift Foot Revue

**1933** – Begins tour with Al Gaines Carnival Show

**1935** – Spends four years as owner and operator of theaters in Rome and Columbus

blues songs Ma Rainey composed is not known, but it was probably well over 100.

Ma had a deep contralto voice that could be gravelly and rasping when she wished. She could also give her music a comical twist. She described her effect on one audience like this:

“Baby, I come out on that stage dressed down! I had on a hat and a coat and I was carrying a suitcase. I put the suitcase down, real easy like, then stand there like I was thinking—just to let ‘em see what I was about. Then I sing:

*Train's at the station, I heard the whistle blow.*

*Train's at the station, I heard the whistle blow.*

*I done bought my ticket, but I don't know where I'll go.*

“You could just see ‘em wantin’ to go someplace else!”

Ma reached her peak of fame in the 1920s when the phonograph and the radio opened up jazz and blues to a mass audience. Between 1923 and 1928 she made nearly 100 recordings, most of them hits. She performed in Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh and other large theatres, where she would emerge from a large replica of a phonograph box singing the “Moonshine Blues” and wearing a necklace of gold coins. It was in these years that she was able to collaborate with the likes of Louis Armstrong, Fletcher Henderson and Coleman Hawkins.

When traditional jazz and blues decreased in popularity during the Depression, the record company cut her contract, and Ma retired and returned to Columbus. There, she joined Friendship Baptist Church and gave her voice to the church choir. A friend from those days recalled, “With love she gave money, food, and clothing to the needy. For all she would come onto the porch here in Columbus and sing not the blues, but hymns, anthems, spirituals and patriotic songs. She diverted her energies to the crusade which dealt with the hereafter instead of the present age.”

In 1939, at the age of 53, Ma died in Columbus of a heart attack. Her death was little noticed at the time, but in the summer of 1992 the City of Columbus restored her home and nominated it for a place in the national register.

Ma Rainey continues to influence Blues singers today.

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Her inspiration reaches through gospel and contemporary music and will be felt by generations to come.

The poet, Sterling Brown, wrote:

*O Ma Rainey, li'l and low,  
Sing us 'bout the hard luck 'round our do'.  
Sing us 'bout the lonesome road we must go.  
I talked to a fellow, and the fellow say,  
"She jes' catch hold us some kinda way."*

### **Additional Resources**

**Georgia Music Hall of Fame**  
Macon, GA 31201  
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