

# “See See Rider Blues” –Gertrude “Ma” Rainey (1924)

Added to the National Registry: 2004

Essay by Jas Obrecht (guest post)\*



“Ma” Rainey



Original label

In the early 1920s, the first wave of African-American blues recordings were devoted almost exclusively to women singers. These were not the down-home country women who’d record later in the decade, but the glittering, glamorous, and savvy veterans of tent shows and vaudeville. Those who became the most influential, such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Ida Cox, had been performing blues for many years before they had their first recording sessions.

Bessie Smith is often cited as the early blues’ greatest singer, but Ma Rainey holds the distinction of being its greatest performer. This intense, warm woman was a living link between minstrelsy, the earliest blues, and vaudeville. Her deep, almost-vibratoless contralto sounded rough and unsophisticated compared to other commercial blueswomen but she projected a great depth of feeling and was adored by audiences. Her Paramount label 78s sold well, especially in the rural South, where she had long captivated the hearts of the rugged workers in fields, levee camps, and lumber yards. Her audiences especially appreciated her earthy, beautifully sung lyrics:

*Grand opera and parlor junk,  
I’ll tell the world that it’s all bunk,  
That’s the kind of stuff I shun,  
Let’s get dirty and have some fun*

Born Gertrude Pridgett in Columbus, Georgia, on April 26, 1886, Rainey displayed singing talent at an early age. Around 1900, she made her debut with the Bunch of Blackberries revue at the Springer Opera House and soon afterward joined a tent show. In 1904, Will “Pa” Rainey, a singer, dancer, and comedian, became smitten by her charms. She accepted his proposal, and became “Ma” to his Pa. The couple, who stayed together about a dozen years, performed song-and-dance routines for a variety of black minstrel troupes. As her fame spread, “Madame Gertrude Rainey” became a headliner

with the Smarter Set, the Florida Cotton Blossoms, Shufflin' Sam From Alabam', and the Rabbit Foot Minstrels. Accompanied by a jug band, jazz combo, or pianist, Ma sang pop and novelty numbers in addition to blues songs, and she was renowned for her dancing and comedy.

By 1917, Ma Rainey was packing them in. The fact that her shows were integrated--half the tent reserved for whites, half for blacks--testifies to her drawing powers in the South. Her two-hour show typically opened with three jazzy numbers by the band. Then, with a crescendo and flash of lights, the curtains opened on a line of dazzling chorus girls. After comedy routines and other features, Ma Rainey would make a grand entrance. Her voice big and powerful, she'd sing songs such as "Walkin' the Dog," "I Ain't Got Nobody," "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," "Tishimingo Blues," "Jelly Roll Blues," "Memphis Blues," and her favorite encore, "See See Rider Blues."

In December 1923, Ma Rainey made the leap from minstrel star to recording artist. Composing or collaborating on at least a third of the 92 songs she'd record for Paramount Records, she specialized in storytelling lyrics that often presented an unflinching view of life from the perspective of a woman in turmoil. Usually set to a 12-bar, AAB pattern, her most striking lyrics dealt with abandonment by her man, prostitution, lesbianism, drunkenness, superstition, and murder.

While some of Ma's records were set to the streamlined accompaniment of guitar, banjo, or piano, the majority of her 78s featured jazz ensembles, some quite extraordinary. Such was the case in mid-October 1924, when she was accompanied in a New York studio by Louis Armstrong on cornet, Charlie Green on trombone, Buster Bailey on clarinet, Fletcher Henderson on piano, and Charlie Dixon on banjo. Their spirited accompaniment helped transform Rainey's heart-rending "See See Rider Blues" into a blues masterpiece. Her lyrics were fuelled, in turn, by sorrow and longing, hope, and rage:

*I'm so unhappy, I feel so blue, I always feel so sad,  
I made a mistake, right from the start,  
Oh, it seems so hard to part. . .*

*See, see, rider, see what you done done, Lawd, Lawd, Lawd,  
Made me love you, now your gal done come,  
You made me love you, now your gal done come*

*I'm goin' away, baby, won't be back till fall, Lawd, Lawd, Lawd,  
Goin' away, baby, won't be back till fall,  
If I find me a good man, I won't be back at all*

*I'm gonna buy me a pistol just as long as I am tall, Lawd, Lawd, Lawd,  
Gonna kill my man and catch the Cannonball,  
If he don't have me, he won't have no gal at all*

Louis Armstrong was especially impressed by her. Thomas Fulbright, a traveling actor who saw them both perform, recalled, “His facial expressions, his singing, his very stage presence were all vivid reminders of Ma.”

Ma Rainey made her final recordings in December 1928. By then, her style had gone out of fashion and it was thought she was too set in her ways to change. Rainey soldiered on for several years, eking out a living playing Southern tent shows with a variety of minstrel troupes. With the deaths of her mother and sister in 1935, she retired from the road to live with her brother Thomas in a house she’d built for her mother at 805 Fifth Avenue in Columbus, Georgia. A good businesswoman, Rainey reportedly owned two theaters in the area, and she became active in the Friendship Baptist Church, where her brother was a deacon.

Ma Rainey died of heart disease on December 22, 1939, and was buried in Columbus’ Portersdale Cemetery. In an ironic postscript for the woman who’d been hailed as “The Mother of the Blues,” the death certificate listed her profession as “housekeeping.” Six months later, Memphis Minnie recorded a tribute record entitled “Ma Rainey”:

*She was born in Georgia, traveled all over this world,  
She was born in Georgia, traveled all over this world,  
And she was the best blues singer, peoples, I ever heard*

During the ensuing years, Ma Rainey’s records inspired many other singers, including Big Mama Thornton, Dinah Washington, and Janis Joplin. August Wilson’s musical *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* became a Broadway hit in the 1980s. In 1994, Ma Rainey was honored with a U.S. postage stamp, and, in 2004, her original recording of “See See Rider” received a Grammy Hall of Fame Award. Today, her former home serves as the Ma Rainey House and Blues Museum, where visitors can view the great blues singer’s piano, photos, contracts, and other memorabilia.

In all, more than a hundred versions of “See See Rider” have been recorded, but none surpass Ma Rainey’s original.

*Jas Obrecht is a longtime editor for “Guitar Player” magazine and is the author of “Rollin’ & Tumblin’: The Postwar Blues Guitarists” (Miller Freeman, 2000), “Early Blues: The First Stars of Blues Guitar” (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), and “Talking Guitar: Conversations with Musicians Who Shaped Twentieth-Century American Music” (University of North Carolina Press, April 2017).*

\* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

