

Chapter III

The Politics of the Culture Industry: *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

In the 1920s blacks became self-assertive and racially conscious as if for the first time. The clearest expression of that moment of change is found in the remarkable outpouring of blues music. It seemed that blacks discovered themselves through their music, and it was their spirit, which heralded the Jazz age. But ironically, while black performers were denied access to public facilities, their white fans were welcomed in the exclusively white entertainment halls where blacks danced and played their Jazz for them. Needless to say, blacks were still hardly more independent than they had been a century ago. While they had a vision of social and economic freedom, they were mostly reliving the same unhappy experiences.

It is this era in which Wilson sets *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984). The action of the play centers on a recording session by Ma Rainey, the blues singer, and her band in a Chicago studio. As the drama unfolds, we observe the vulnerable state of African-American blues musicians creating music in a decade when majority of the country's African-American population have been preoccupied with moving to crowded urban areas. Though slavery no longer exists, exploitations continue in newer guises. White producers of recording studios have been

profiting from the "race" division of their enterprise by co-opting black artists and capitalizing on the new market of consumers. In so doing, they have corrupted the blues, a source of African-American cultural knowledge and sustenance, into an instrument of racial exploitation. They have openly turned it into an industry obeying the same rules of production as any other production of commodities. Under the capitalist dominance, they have controlled all the means of blues production, obligating black performers to please them in anyway they like. A glaring instance of a precarious business arrangement made to have an absolute economic control over the black artists and an outstanding denial of faith in the equality of humankind can be observed in the following conversation held between the producer, Sturdyvant, and his manager, Irvin, on the subject of dealing with Ma Rainey:

STURDYVANT. She's your responsibility. I'm not putting up with any Royal Highness . . . Queen of the Blues bullshit!

IRVIN. Mother of the Blues, Mel. Mother of the Blues.

STURDYVANT. I don't care what she calls herself. I'm not putting up with it. I just want to get her in here . . . record those songs on that list . . . and

get her out. Just like clockwork, huh?

(*Ma Rainey's* 12)

The play rejects the conviction of the American Dream on the ground that it has made difficult for African-Americans to achieve a state of self-actualization. It resists the egalitarian myth of America as a land of endless opportunity for everyone, focusing instead on the economic and racial exploitations of African-Americans, and frequently echoes Wilson's reservations about the dangers of assimilation.

Contrary to its title, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is not really about Ma Rainey, the real blues singer. Born in 1886, in Columbus, Georgia, Ma Rainey, says Saunders, was "privy to the work songs, field hollers, and ballads out of which the classic blues tradition grew. By 1900, she had begun her stage career with the Bunch of Blackberries Revue, and for the next two decades she performed with many black minstrel troupes." In those early days, her repertoire included songs such as "I Ain't Got Nobody" and "See, See Rider," the latter a song she would become the first singer ever to record. "Though she was not," Saunders further says, "the first singer to make a recording, she was part of the 'race' record phenomenon of the 1920s that saw blues singers rise to a level of popularity that had heretofore never been achieved" (3). Even though the play

revolves around the life of this blues legend Ma Rainey, Wilson includes her not as a leading lady but rather as a less conspicuous though uninhibited commentator on the callous, white-controlled music industry.

When Wilson's Ma Rainey does appear in the play, she makes a grand entrance. Accompanied by stuttering nephew, Sylvester, and high-style friend Dussie Mae, she enters the studio like an ocean liner entering the port. Once in the studio, she takes charge ordering her manager and the record producer to do her bidding. She refuses to sing until someone goes out to get her Coca-Cola. She demonstrates a practical understanding of the material hierarchy and her place within it. Recognizing that the purpose of the recording session is to record her song, she does not allow herself to be objectified but uses her position as desired musical commodity to legitimate her authority. She reminds Irvin, "What band? The band work for me! I say what goes!" (*Ma Rainey's* 60). But under this ludicrous "imitation" of white stardom, we see Ma Rainey a helpless woman carrying a legacy of unspeakable agony. For her, independence is not without cost. Despite her veneer of indomitability, she must struggle against the interlocking systems of racial and gender oppression. Her entrance in the play is delayed because of an altercation with the police and a white cab driver. As a black

person in Chicago in 1927, she is unable to hail a cab. In a rare reflective moment, she pours out her tale of woe:

They don't care nothing about me. All they want is my voice. . . . 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.

Ain't got no use for me then. (*Ma Rainey's* 64)

Ma Rainey's words reflect the bitterness of a black woman who has to struggle against a hostile society that gives nothing but seeks to grab what she has. In the absence of economic security, she has been left with no option but to submit to the ruling whites--a submission that takes away all direct contracts from her, perpetuating the deprivation. Wherever she goes she gets much the same masters, who have their own ways of running the system with a view to serving their selfish ends. She suffers the double jeopardy that stems from her being a black woman. She has not only been exploited and degraded by white male studio executives but also frequently threatened by the macho rivalry of Levee, the young trumpeter of her band, who is ever ready to replace her music with his flashier rhythms of swing. Her inclination to live in close communion with blues is incessantly thwarted by his autonomous, authorial, and entrepreneurial will.

Fully aware of the extent to which she is being exploited, however, Ma Rainey uses her exploitation to her advantage whenever she can. To cite just one example, although she does not deliberately disrupt Irvin and Sturdyvant's plan to run the recording session "just like clockwork," when she finally arrives at the studio she takes advantage of the commotion caused by the automobile accident that detained her. Ignoring Irvin's remarks about her tardiness, Ma Rainey insists that he talk to the policeman and settle the matter. For Ma Rainey blues has an exchange value. She exchanges the rights to her blues for a right that is denied to most other blacks, including her musicians: the right to be treated as she wants to be treated. But she has no illusion about the limits of that right. She knows that she gets her way because she has something that Irvin and Sturdyvant want--her voice. She knows that they lack any real commitment to her, her music, or the blues tradition and that they will put up with her only as long as it is profitable for them to record her song.

In the absence of other options for survival, no doubt, Ma Rainey merchandizes the blues as commodity in the economic market, but she maintains a fidelity to history, to cultural past. Her solidarity with blues arouses in her the sense of "one true self" hiding inside many other, more superficial or

artificially imposed "selves," which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. This self provides her with an identity, which is African-American. That is why any attempt to tamper her song is tantamount to an attack on her personal as well as communal identity as re-created by that song. She delivers the legacy of black American culture to her community through "Black Bottom," a song that enlivens the African past and establishes a feeling of cultural continuity. Like a traveling blues singer, she tells her experience of joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, strength and weakness, and bittersweet glory to the people both rural and urban. When Levee insists on remolding her song for better commercial reasons, she gets offended and warns him off the act. As Levee is still adamant, she finally counts him out of her band. This conflict between her and Levee is a conflict between proponents of the old and new forms of black music, between the blues and the swing. She does not accept Levee's rendition because she thinks it is not a legitimate means of conveying blues. For her, blues is and will remain an integral part of black life and a means for establishing African-American existence. Commenting on Ma Rainey's life, Sandra R. Lieb says:

Ma Rainey's life symbolizes the confrontation between the black rural South and the change wrought by

industrialization, urban migration, and the development of modern mass communications. She represents a collision between the unchanging aphorisms of folk poetry and the nervous rhythms of modern life. (qtd. in Saunders 3)

Blues gives Ma Rainey strength. It empowers her and provides her with the forum to subvert racial oppression, to revolt against male domination, and to survive outside male social norms. In a private moment, she explains to Cutler, her lead musician, that she sings the blues because "that's life's way of talking. You don't sing to feel better. You sing cause that's a way of understanding life" (*Ma Rainey's* 67). She is, of course, absolutely right in her assessment of the source of her strength:

The blues help 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. This be an empty world without the blues. I take that emptiness and try to fill it up with something. (*Ma Rainey's* 67)

Ma Rainey uses this strength as a countercheck in the unequal war along color and gender lines. Angering white management and annoying her band members, she prolongs the

recording session so that Sylvester can deliver the introduction to her song. It is significant that a nonmusician plays an important role in the recording. The inarticulate Sylvester represents those black people with little or no voice in American society. By letting him to do the introduction, Ma Rainey suggests that they too can participate in the blues--all blacks have a voice through their music--and, in a large sense, that they can contribute to the successful advancement of black culture. When Irvin balks about not having enough time to let her stuttering nephew record the lead-in lines to her "Black Bottom," she does not hesitate to remind him that this recording session is something she does not need to do. She can easily return to her South tour, where over the years she has cultivated large numbers of loyal fans:

If you wanna make a record, you gonna find time. I ain't playing with you, Irvin. I can walk out of here and go back to my tour. I got plenty fans. I don't need to go through all of this. Just go and get the boy a microphone. (*Ma Rainey's* 60)

Ma Rainey does not need to go through the inhibiting ordeal of a recording session because she remains solidly grounded in the tradition out of which her music evolved. Her contract is not with Irvin and Sturdyvant; it is with the people, the down-

home folk who identify most closely with her brand of the blues. Her "Black Bottom" belongs to them, and she refuses to give it up to anyone unless she gets something in return. When Irvin comes out of the control booth after the recording session to pay Sylvester part of the money he owes her, Ma Rainey sends Irvin right back to fetch the boy's pay, and then makes him and Sturdyvant beg her to sign the release form. Just before she makes her exit she signs, but by that time she has gotten everything she can out of Irvin and Sturdyvant and their recording machines, including the satisfaction of making them put everything on hold, of making them wait.

Ma Rainey threatens Levee's idea of manhood with her emphatic declaration: "I'm singing Ma Rainey's song. I ain't singing Levee's song. Now that's all there is to it" (*Ma Rainey's* 51). She adds salt to Levee's injury by favoring Sylvester manifestly less capable than him. This insulting blow is dealt on Levee in full view of the white bosses and Dussie Mae. After the session, Sturdyvant revokes his offer to record Levee's songs, claiming that Ma Rainey's records will sell better, and Dussie Mae rejects the trumpeter, too. Ma Rainey does not beg for the short-lived flattery of people. The values that inform her artistic integrity also make her loyal to friends and family. Her concerns for Dussie Mae and Sylvester

are easily apparent. She supplies clothes and money to them and asks Sylvester to send money to his mother in the home.

A grimmer picture of racist exploitation of blacks in the play is largely conveyed by the story of Levee. Levee believes that music can afford him the opportunity to fulfill his potential and participate in the American dream. He sees Ma Rainey's success without understanding the compromises she has made to achieve it, witnesses her control over her own career without acknowledging the accompanying abuse and humiliation. He also believes he can achieve greater success than Ma Rainey because he has a "vision" for a different sound. At the center of his conflict with Ma Rainey is the interpretation of black music. Ma Rainey understands the value of the blues she sings, how they are rooted in her people, her culture, and her very soul. Levee wants to modify the music to please the white producer looking for better sales. Levee's rejection of traditional blues is in a sense a denial of a cultural connection--a denial he makes in an effort to assimilate and cash in, but a denial which is ultimately self-destructive. Ambitious and volatile, Levee has seen the destruction caused by racial oppression but turns a blind eye to it now, knowing that the prize he longs for can only be awarded by the white man. So he plays by the white man's rules and loses. His loss that

leads him toward self-annihilation perhaps epitomizes the most latent and ultimately the most destructive form of victimization.

Levee is corrupted by the materialistic aspirations at the heart of Western civilization, and his corruption issues forth from his petty little dream. But it is his dream, and it is all he has. And that makes it a matter of life or death to him. Succumbing to Sturdyvant's fatal lure that he can play and record his songs and create a different sound for the new generation, Levee trusts him and hopes to achieve both economic independence and a place in the white world. But his hopes of equality are dashed when the subjugator cunningly plays a dirty trick in the name of generosity and seeks to buy his songs for just five dollars each. Inevitably, the promised door of opportunity slams closed, quite literally, in his face, and the sound has a violent ring that reverberates through the decades. He suffers not just the collapse of his hope but the loss of what is truly his own-- the music. Having played to the white man's tune, he is left with less than nothing. Toledo's comment sums up his condition:

As long as the colored man look to white folks to put the crown on what he say . . . as long as he looks to white folks for approval . . . then he ain't never

gonna find out who he is and what he's about. He's just gonna be about what white folks want him to be about. That's one sure thing. (*Ma Rainey's* 29)

Toledo understands that the complete emancipation of black people is possible only when they fully rely on themselves. He is talking about self-knowledge--the ability to accept the facts about one's position in society at large, no matter how unseemly or unflattering, and then to seek self-affirmation within one's own cultural community. Levee's success depends on the musical tradition and the gratification of his people, not on Sturdyvant. Ma Rainey understands this fully. She knows that her commercial success is the result of an artistic connection with her people and thereby with her cultural roots. The other musicians have also varying degrees of this self-knowledge. They also know their limitations and have a strong sense of their roles as musicians. Aware that no white man will give them a lift, they depend on Ma Rainey, their musical heritage, and their own talents. Content with being her sidemen, they are very successful in those roles and better able to negotiate their way in a white society. Lacking this perspective, Levee is more vulnerable to exploitation.

When Levee finally realizes that naïve enthusiasm and a sense of triumph in gaining white's favor have betrayed him,

he becomes a "Frankenstein" rather than a perceptive "sage." Having been manipulated and shaped by deceptive ideals, he is driven to murder--he stabs Toledo to death. He is unable to effectively challenge Sturdyvant, but he can kill Toledo. Commenting on the event, Shannon writes, "Levee Kills another African man in a blood ritual that provides a temporary catharsis for his hatred of Sturdyvant" ("Good Christian" 381). In fact, Levee kills Toledo not because of his irascibility, but out of frustration caused by Sturdyvant's very attempt to blot out forever the hopes of a man, who had sought to liberate himself from all pain by the power of music. His devastation results from the vain investment he had made in his quest for validation in the world. The violent event makes explicit the death threat white America holds for the blacks.

Despite all shortcomings, Levee is not a character to be blamed fully. History tells us that the most painful aspect of his manhood centers on his own childhood experience of the most fiendish and diabolic outrage of whites on his family--the raping of his mother and eventually the lynching of his father. His perception of destruction, hidden beneath the veneer of white culture, breeds in him a spiritual desolation and cynicism. His passionate hatred is only exorcised when he blasphemes God, for he can still hear his mother's cries for

help: "I heard when she called you! I heard her when she said, 'Lord, have mercy! Jesus, help me! Please, God, have mercy on me, Lord Jesus, help me!' And did you turn your back? Did you turn your back, motherfucker? Did you turn your back?" (*Ma Rainey's* 83).

The stark realities of the world around him produce in Levee a sense of loss and the futility of life. Into the tragic life of Levee's, Wilson, says Pereira,

has distilled the essence of a thousand other disparate lives--sons and daughters of black slaves who grew up legally free but practically enslaved by a system that regarded them as less than human, objects to be used and abused. We do not know all the particulars of this life, but the pattern is familiar: years of poverty without a father or a proper home, living with a mother who had to deal with the harrowing experience of gang rape. (24)

His father's death and the persistent memory of his mother's rape have filled Levee with a deep desire for revenge, and he regards his musical talent as a weapon to beat whites at their own game. The white world owes him a debt, and he is determined to claim it. He wants redress and the respectability his parents never had. Although he rejects *Ma Rainey's*

conventional style, he admires the way she wields her power over the white men. He seeks in his own way to cope with his problems and looks for a track up and out. His trumpet, says Shafer, is "a muted trumpet struggling for the highest of possibilities and blowing pain and warning" (405). It is apparent that his music represents his individual commitment to a certain goal in a society that denies him even a minimal chance for success. He exhibits a rich artistic sensibility. Cutler is well acquainted with his talent. He says, "Levee's alright. He plays good music when he puts his mind to it" (*Ma Rainey's* 63). Unlike his fellow musicians, he knows how to write good songs, how to improvise the music and, therefore, is a potential composer. With such great abilities, he wrestles with life. It is a different matter that his spirit is always crushed by the ugly specter of racism and his ways often prove wrong.

Levee is a more complex character than he seems, almost a foil to Ma Rainey. There is a mythical dimension to this character, which lifts us from the social sphere to a cultural realm of African-American ethos. Harrison suggests that Levee owes his pedigree to the divine trickster figure in Yoruba mythology, Eshu-Elegbara. Precisely because he plays tricks, he represents the rebellious energy that goes against norms and

structure. He creates his own songs and sings them at his own will. In Odugbesan's words, Eshu is "associated with disorderliness and confusion . . . he is the equivalent of the 'tempter' rather than the 'devil' in Christian ideas" (201). From this chaos arises true creativity, the pioneering nerves that will never be contained within the Apollonian parameters of behavior--clear, ordered, rational, and calm--but bursts forth in a wild explosion as a Dionysian force. He has much in common with Dionysius whom Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, credits with having broken the "spell of individuation" that governs the artistic energies of the Apollonian, or the plastic arts, and opening the way for the symbolic expression of what he feels is at the heart of all human experience: the tragic (100). His Dionysic spirit "roves the outskirts of society, the artistic steppenwolf in quest of self-authentication, seeking ways to reshape its destiny" (Pereira 16). In Yoruba myth, according to Gates Jr., this energy found expression in the monkey figure:

It is the presence of the monkey in the Yoruba myth, . . . which stands as the trace of Esu in Afro-American myth, a trace that enables us to speculate freely on the functional equivalence of Esu and his Afro-American descendant, the Signifying Monkey.

(*Signifying* 13-14)

The monkey trickster, says Pereira, "occupied a central position in the [black] consciousness, for his pranks represented the victory of the weak over the strong" (16). This the monkey does with a rhetorical trick, challenging the dominant forces for his own contentious purposes.

It is in this persona of monkey trickster that Levee confirms his behavior. Like the trickster, he reposes no confidence in conventional canons and adopts instead his own ideology. While these canons have, for centuries, provided inspiration, strength, and moral principles for African-Americans, he affirms that they have not and will not suit his need. Therefore, he demonstrates his disavowals by challenging and withdrawing from the norms and structure established by his ancestors. This disparaging attitude of Levee reflects his mythological heritage, for "the one central feature of almost all trickster tales is their assault upon deeply ingrained and culturally sanctioned values" (Levine 104).

Through the image of a trickster, Levee seeks to preserve his appearances. But his incontinent spirit is allowed no room. The culture industry denies him any fulfillment. Even Ma Rainey, or his own people, fails to see that the swing he has created is itself a natural evolution from her "Black Bottom." Each new form is built upon older forms in such a manner that

the earlier forms are often recognizable. But Ma Rainey's blind adherence to a single form does not allow her to perceive the essence of blues in this new guise. In her attempt to perpetuate a tradition, she fails to understand that the legacy itself was kept alive by the griots of her race. Pereira says, their performance "was no mere narrative but an artistic rendition in a communal setting that revitalized culturally sanctioned myths." The performance of the blues, "particularly in its improvisatory aspect," Pereira further says, "[is] part of this tradition in which cultural values and codes are transmitted from generation to generation, and where older performers are looked upon as gurus from whom the younger aspirants may learn and then forge their own artistic destinies" (17).

Trapped by social hatred and discrimination, Levee is alienated from everyone around him, including himself. The trickster, bent on survival and secure in a sense of indestructibility, very easily slips into actions that are destructive to himself and to his community. Commenting on Levee's condition, Wilson in his interview with Moyers says:

I think Levy [Levee] has a warrior spirit. He does a tremendous disservice to blacks by killing Toledo, because he's killing the only one who can read, he's

killing the intellectual in the group. That's a loss we have to make up. We have to raise up another one to take Toledo's place. But I still salute Levy's warrior spirit. It's a progression to the wrong target, but I salute his willingness to battle, even to death. (179)

Unwilling to settle for the white man's crumbs, he will fight for what he believes is his. For all his faults, he has the warrior spirit that launches him into a battle he may or may not win. But against such high odds his only option is to flail away wildly, and in the melee he cannot differentiate between friend and foe.

The fate of every other member of Ma Rainey's band is unmitigatedly tragic by the same token. Non-recognition of their talent disrupts their social lives, making it difficult for them to achieve a state of self-actualization. They are compelled to view themselves, as Toledo says, "just [as] a leftover from history" yet necessary only in order to fill "the white man's belly" (*Ma Rainey's* 46-7). Their predicaments have thwarted all their hopes. They endure fate as designed by whites. They are, in Eileen Crawford's words, "worn out by the battles they have engaged in during a persistent, lifelong quest for authenticity" (36). Essentially, their hopelessness is due

to the common experience of racism. Toledo perceives that black people's plight is only socially caused and therefore can perhaps be ameliorated; but he is unable to bring any change alone: "I'm gonna solve the colored man's problems by myself? I said, we. You understand that? We. That's every living colored man in the world got to do his share. Got to do his part" (*Ma Rainey's* 33). The fate he is unable to escape despite his abilities confirms his status as a black. His personal story, together with the stories of other black characters in the play, is an allegory of black history.

No blacks are spared the ignominy of being "a leftover from history" (*Ma Rainey's* 46). Whether it is Ma Rainey and her band members, or Levee's parents, or even black minister Reverend Gates, everyone is doomed to racial hatred and discrimination. Levee's father struggled hard to establish himself on his own land, but only to have his white neighbors call him "an uppity nigger cause he done saved and borrowed to where he could buy this land and be independent" (*Ma Rainey's* 57). But the same neighbors, finding him away from the house one day, came and raped his wife and nearly killed his son. The lynching of Levee's father is a spectral representation of genocidal "impulse" in whites that was so alive during the days of American slavery. Reverend Gates missed his train to Atlanta at

Sigsbee station and was surrounded by a group of jeering whites, who stripped him off his cross and Bible and made him dance until they grew tired of watching him.

Ma Rainey's "blues understanding" of life, however, provides a protective mantle for Cutler, Slow Drag, and Toledo. But this does not imply a lack of enterprise on their part. Cutler is the master of guitar and trombone. His playing is solid and almost totally unembellished. His understanding of music is limited to the chord he plays. Slow Drag's bass incorporates his innate African rhythms, which underlie everything he plays, and he plays with an ease that is at times startling. Toledo, the piano player, is in control of his instrument; he understands and recognizes that its limitations are an extension of himself. What holds these successful musicians together with Ma Rainey is the blues that gives them steady work and an opportunity to make a living by doing something they understand and love. Thus, by giving his characters musical instruments to suit their personalities, Wilson, says Pereira,

creates a metaphor to explore the specific avenues that each of them has taken to find his identity as a black musician and a black American. The rhythm section of Cutler, Toledo, and Slow Drag walks a

steady, balanced line between the commercially exploitative white world of Irvin and Sturdyvant and the abundant black world of Ma Rainey and the blues. They keep the former at bay by staying close and true to the latter, thus creating harmony out of potential dissonance. Levee, like his strident trumpet, constantly tries to break out on his own. He cannot be contained by either world and is in discord with both. (33)

Adorno says, "the entire practice of the culture industry transfers the profit motive naked onto cultural forms" (99). In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* this culture industry transfers the profit motive onto the blues, which is an integral part of black people's lives and a true element of African-American culture. The play points out the irony: "on most recordings the notes about the [black] music are written by white men" (Shafer 405). Yet Wilson shows that the blues never ceases to display its profundity by rising above disappointment to a vision of black people's freedom. With its indomitable spirit the blues will ever help blacks sort out the mess in any uncongenial situation.