

MA RAINEY

b. April 26, 1886

d. December 22, 1939

SINGER

“You sing ’cause that’s a way of understanding life.”

She is recognized as one of the great female blues vocalists.

Ma Rainey, called the “Mother of the Blues,” was one of the earliest known American blues singers and recording artists. She is recognized as one of the first great female blues vocalists.

Born Gertrude Pridgett in Columbus, Georgia, she was one of five children in a family of performers. From age 14, she sang and danced with traveling minstrel shows. At 18, she married singer Will “Pa” Rainey, and took the stage name Ma Rainey. Billed as the Assassinator of the Blues, the couple toured the Southern minstrel circuit. In 1916, Rainey separated from her husband and began touring the nation with her own band.

In 1923, Paramount Records signed Rainey. Over the next five years, she recorded more than 100 songs with some of the great musicians of her era, including Louis Armstrong and Thomas Dorsey, the “father of black gospel music.”

In 1928, Paramount considered Rainey’s classic style of blues no longer fashionable and terminated her contract. Before that, she recorded one of her last songs for the label, “Prove It On Me Blues,” which was cited as a watershed for its lyrics about lesbian desire. In the mid-1930s, she returned to her hometown, where she was the proprietor of two theaters.

Her song “See See Rider Blues” was included by the National Recording Preservation Board in the Library of Congress National Recording Registry, and was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame.

In 1983, Rainey was inducted into the Blues Foundation’s Hall of Fame. Seven years later, she was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

In 2007, the Gertrude “Ma” Rainey House and Blues Museum in Columbus, Georgia, opened to the public.



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