

MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM

Screenplay by

Ruben Santiago-Hudson

Based on the play by August Wilson

Directed by

George C. Wolfe

IN BLACK WE HEAR:

A RAW, GUTTERAL, BLUES MOAN...GROAN...GROWL.

THE BLACK COMES IN TO FOCUS TO REVEAL-

The blue-black, full moon-of-a-face of **MA RAINEY**. The source of this ethereal sound. She opens her mouth to wail and her imperfect gold teeth sparkle.

EXT. SHOW TENT - GOD'S POV

We look down on a huge "show tent". People from every direction, drawn to the magic of Ma Rainey's sound like flies to stank, make their way to the event.

- People piled inside busted up jalopies.

- Riding on "buckboard wagons".

- Dressed in their Sunday best, and even if they don't have a Sunday best, it's been starched and pressed within an inch of its life.

AT THE ENTRANCE:

The sign reads **"The Mother Of The Blues Madame Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and her Georgia Smart Set"**.

We see black hands passing money to other black hands. Day laborers digging deep into their pockets pulling out their hard-earned cash.

INT. SHOW TENT

The place is packed with levee camp workers, cotton pickers, preachers, gamblers, and share croppers. Hard working Negro's feeling no pain. Sanctified by her blues, shouting "Well", "Tell the truth", "Go on Ma!"

And center stage, illuminated by the rickety footlights, is MADAME RAINEY wringing the mess out of them blues. Her necklace of \$5, \$10 and \$20 gold pieces shining bright. She and her Jug Band working their number.

MA RAINEY

(sings)

*My bell rang this morning, didn't
know which way to go / My bell rang
this morning, didn't know which way
to go. / I had the blues so bad / I
sat right down on my floor...*

Sweat pours down the ebony faces of the people. Whether laughter or tears it doesn't matter. It's Saturday night and these folks are colored and there ain't no better place or thing to be.

MA RAINEY (CONT'D)

*I felt like going on a mountain,
jumping over in the sea / I felt
like going in a mountain, jumping
over in the sea / When my daddy
stay out late he don't care a thing
for me...
Daddy, Daddy, please come home to
me. / Daddy, daddy, please come
home to me. / I'm on my way, crazy
as I can be.*

The bellow of Ma Rainey's powerful voice blends into a train whistle.

MA RAINEY (CONT'D)

Mmmmmnn, mmmnn / Mmmmmnn, mmmnn...

MONTAGE:

A SERIES OF ARCHIVAL IMAGES FROM THE GREAT MIGRATION.

-Black folk on train cars packed to the gills.

-Beat up pick-up trucks, buckboard wagons stacked with families, a chicken or two and a bunch of hopes and dreams.

-All traveling past Negroes working in the fields. Their heads pop up, watching their friends and kin leaving the rich soil of the south for something better up north far away from Jim Crow.

-The field workers watch the trucks and wagons disappear up the road fueled by Ma Rainey's song.

- We see a couple of men hopping aboard a moving freight train. Doesn't matter where it's going, so long as it's headed north.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. CHICAGO'S GRAND THEATER

The blinding footlights of Chicago's Grand Theater as MA RAINEY slays the crowd! The place packed with Northern Colored people (formerly Southern Colored people).

MA RAINEY

Daddy, daddy, please come home to me. / Daddy, daddy, please come home to me. / I'm on my way, crazy as I can be.

MA RAINEY with her band and show girls are tearing up the stage, as LEVEE, young and brash, Ma's trumpet player, boldly snatches a solo.

MA RAINEY cuts her eye at LEVEE and snatches back her blues..

MA RAINEY (CONT'D)

Hey! Hey Daddy! / Please come home to me. / Hey! Oh yeah! / I'm on my way, crazy as I can be.

Her chorus girls begin to dance an exuberant "Charleston". MA RAINEY joins them, stretching out!

IN THE WINGS:

DUSSIE MAE, early 20'S, A bronze beauty, Ma's gal, dances the show girls routine. She and LEVEE trade looks.

The blue lights hit Ma Rainey's black sequined dress, she shimmies and shakes and the crowd roars as the number ends.

EXT. BRONZEVILLE - CHICAGO. 1927.

A SCORCHING HOT SUMMER SUN LOOMS OVER BRONZEVILLE BEARING DOWN ON THE HEADS AND FACES OF NEGRO FACTORY WORKERS AND DAY LABORERS HUSTLING TO WORK.

ACROSS TOWN--

EXT. AN INDUSTRIAL NEIGHBORHOOD

WHITE shop owners with their customers handling their business in the sweltering heat. Finding shade in their doorways and under their awnings as the sun continues to pound.

INT. RECORDING STUDIO - BOOTH

STURDYVANT, White, 60'S, the manager of the studio, works the knobs and dials. Preoccupied with money, he prefers to deal with the colored performers at arms length. He looks down at IRVIN, White, 40's, Ma's manager, a tall, fleshy man who prides himself on his knowledge of colored artists and his ability to deal with them.

IRVIN

Testing, one, two, three...Testing,
one, two, three.

STURDYVANT

You got that list?

IRVIN

I got it. Don't worry about...

STURDYVANT

(over the horn)

You keep her in line. I'm holding
you responsible. I'm not putting up
with any shenanigans. You hear,
Irv?

INT. RECORDING STUDIO - CONTINUOUS.

IRVIN

Okay, okay, Mel...let me handle it.

IRVIN crosses over to the piano and mindlessly runs his
fingers over her keys.

STURDYVANT

(over the horn)

I'm just not gonna stand for it. I
want you to keep her in line. Irv?
Irv?

EXT. INDUSTRIAL NEIGHBORHOOD

We hear the metal wheels of the "L" rattle along the tracks.

THREE COLORED MUSICIANS descend the "L" platform stairs
toting their instruments. They find themselves in an all
White working class neighborhood. An ICE TRUCK passes as they
hurry across the street trying to ignore the stares and
awkward glances aimed their way. Clearly, hauling those
instruments in the bruising summer heat has been kicking
their asses. They are-

SLOW DRAG, hauling a bass fiddle.

CUTLER, carrying a trombone case.

TOLEDO, a newspaper under his arm.

INT. RECORDING STUDIO

STURDYVANT enters from the control booth.

STURDYVANT

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?

IRVIN

Like clockwork, Mel.

EXT. RECORDING STUDIO BUILDING - ALLEY

The three musicians turn down an alley to the side entrance of the building.

CUTLER

You ought to have heard Levee at the club last night, Toledo. Trying to talk to that gal Ma had with her.

TOLEDO

You ain't got to tell me. I know how Levee do.

SLOW DRAG

Levee tried to talk to that gal and got his feelings hurt.

INT. RECORDING STUDIO

Door buzzer sounds. IRVIN is immediately on the move to answer it, STURDYVANT on his tail.

STURDYVANT

...and that horn player...the one who gave me those songs, is he gonna be here today? I want to hear more of that sound.

EXT. RECORDING STUDIO BUILDING - ALLEY

IRVIN snatches open the door.

IRVIN

How you boys doing, Cutler?

CUTLER

Oh, fine, Mr. Irvin.

IRVIN

(stepping into the alley)
Where's Ma? Is she with you?

CUTLER

I don't know Mr. Irvin. She told us to be here at one o'clock. That's all I know.

IRVIN

Where's...uh...the horn player?

CUTLER

Levee's supposed to be here same as we is. I reckon he'll be here in a minute.

IRVIN

Well, come on in. I'll show you the band room. I'll get you fed and ready to make some music.

INT. RECORDING STUDIO

IRVIN heads down the dimly lit back Hallway, the men behind him. STURDYVANT hovering nearby.

STURDYVANT

Where's Ma? How come she isn't with the band?

IRVIN

(on the move)
She'll be here.

IRVIN stops at the top of THE BASEMENT STAIRS THAT LEAD TO THE REHEARSAL ROOM and hits the light switch.

IRVIN (CONT'D)
Cutler, here's the list of songs
we're gonna record.

Cutler's hands are full. Irvin stuffs the paper in his jacket pocket as the FELLAS head down the stairs.

INT. BAND ROOM - BASEMENT

Darkness. The door swings open. CUTLER, backlit by the stairway light, steps in and fumbles around for the light switch. He mashes the "on" button.

IT IS A WINDOWLESS SUBTERRANEAN ROOM. ONCE A STORAGE ROOM. NO AIR. NO LIGHT. A BENCH, LOCKERS, SOME FOLDING CHAIRS AND CRATES. BUT THANK GOD THERE IS A CEILING FAN.

The FELLAS ease into the hot ass room.

CUTLER takes off his jacket and hands TOLEDO the song list.

CUTLER
What we got there, Toledo?

CUTLER goes over and pulls the cord of the ceiling fan. Nothing happens.

TOLEDO
We got..."Prove It On Me"... "Hear Me Talking To You"... "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" and "Moonshine Blues"

CUTLER
Them ain't the songs Ma told me.

CUTLER pulls the fan cord again and the fan begins slooowly turning. Barely enough to stir the air.

SLOW DRAG
I wouldn't worry about it if I was you, Cutler. Ma will get it straightened out.

CUTLER
"Moonshine Blues." That's one of Bessie's songs.

TOLEDO
Slow Drag's right. Let them straighten it out.

CUTLER

Levee know what time he supposed to be here?

SLOW DRAG

Levee gone out to spend your four dollars.

EXT. BRONZEVILLE BUSINESS STREET

A MAN stands on the corner of 44th & S State St, holding a trumpet. Clearly, a stranger in a new land. He is "country boy sharp". His flamboyance is sometimes subtle and sneaks up on you. His temper is rakish and bright. He lacks fuel for himself and is somewhat of a buffoon. But it is an intelligent buffoonery, clearly calculated to shift control of the situation to where he can grasp it. He is enthralled by the citified Negroes stylishly dressed, until he turns and sees a SHOE STORE.

SLOW DRAG (V.O.)

He left the hotel this morning talking about he was gonna go buy some shoes. Say it's the first time he ever beat you shooting craps.

A DOOR BUZZER SOUNDS and--

INT. BAND ROOM - BASEMENT

CUTLER

I ain't thinking about no four dollars.

TOLEDO

Let me get a hit of that, Slow Drag.

SLOW DRAG

Levee sure was thinking about it. That four dollars liked to burn a hole in his pocket.

CUTLER

Well, he's supposed to be here at one o'clock.

TOLEDO

That's some good Chicago bourbon!

The door swings open and LEVEE strides in. He drops his trumpet case on top of the piano, aggravating TOLEDO.

LEVEE

Look here Cutler...I got me some shoes!

CUTLER

Nigger, I ain't studying you.

LEVEE ceremoniously pulls the shoes out of the box as if they were the crown jewels and starts to put them on.

TOLEDO

How much you pay for something like that, Levee?

LEVEE

Eleven dollars. Four dollars of it belong to Cutler.

SLOW DRAG

Levee say if it wasn't for Cutler...he wouldn't have new shoes.

CUTLER

I ain't thinking about Levee or his shoes. Come on... let's get ready to rehearse.

SLOW DRAG

(gets a grip on his bass)
I'm with you on that score, Cutler.
I don't want to be around here all night.

TOLEDO

Ain't but four songs on the list.
Last time we recorded six.

The "proud rooster" struts about.

LEVEE

Yeah! Now I'm ready! I can play some good music now!

He sees a side door and goes over to let some air into the room. He yanks on it but the door is sealed tight.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

Damn! They done changed things around. Don't never leave well enough alone.

TOLEDO takes LEVEE'S trumpet off of the piano and plops it down on the floor.

SLOW DRAG tunes his bass.

Note: The thumping and sliding of the bass strings underscore LEVEE and TOLEDO's debate. An intricate trio.

TOLEDO

Everything changing all the time.
Even the air you breathing change.
You got, monoxide, hydrogen...
changing all the time. Skin
changing...different molecules and
everything.

LEVEE

Nigger, what is you talking about?
I'm talking about the room. I ain't
talking about no skin and air. I'm
talking about something I can see!
I ain't talking about no molecules
or nothing.

TOLEDO

Hell, I know what you talking
about. I just said everything
changing. I know what you talking
about but you don't know what I'm
talking about.

LEVEE

That door! Nigger, you see that
door? That's what I'm talking
about. The door wasn't there
before.

CUTLER takes out some papers and starts to roll a reefer.

CUTLER

Levee, you wouldn't know your right
from your left...and damn if that
door wasn't there. Now, if you
talking about they done switched
rooms, you right. But don't go
telling me that damn door wasn't
there!

SLOW DRAG

Damn the door and let's do this. I
wanna get out of here.

LEVEE

Toledo started all that about the
door. I'm just saying that things
change.

TOLEDO

What the hell you think I was saying? Things change. The air and everything. Now you gonna say you was saying it. You gonna fit two propositions on the same track, run them into each other, and because they crash, you gonna say it's the same train.

LEVEE

Now this nigger talking about trains! We done went from the air to the skin to the door...and now trains. Toledo, I'd just like to be inside your head for five minutes. Just to see how you think. You done got more shit piled up and mixed up in there than the devil got sinners. You been reading too many goddamn books.

LEVEE, checking himself out in the broken full length mirror, admiring his shoes.

TOLEDO

What you care about how much I read? I'm gonna ignore you 'cause you ignorant.

SLOW DRAG

Come on, let's rehearse the music.

LEVEE

You ain't gotta rehearse that... Ain't nothing but old jug-band music. They need one of them jug bands for this.

SLOW DRAG

Don't make me no difference. Long as we get paid.

LEVEE

That ain't what I'm talking about, nigger. I'm talking about art!

SLOW DRAG

What's drawing got to do with it?

LEVEE

Where you get this nigger from Cutler? He sound like one of them Alabama niggers.

CUTLER

Slow Drag, all right. It's you talking all that weird shit about art. Just play the piece, nigger. If you wanna be one of them...what you call...virtuoso or something, you in the wrong place. You ain't no Buddy Bolden or King Oliver... you just an ol' trumpet player come a dime a dozen. Talking about art.

LEVEE

What is you? I don't see your name in lights.

CUTLER

I just play the piece. Whatever they want. I don't go criticizing other people's music.

LEVEE

I ain't like you, Cutler. I got talent!

He opens his case and takes out his silver plated trumpet.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

Me and this horn, we's tight. If my daddy knowed I was gonna turn out like this, he would've named me Gabriel.

He hits a couple riffs.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

I'm gonna get me a band and make me some records. I done give Mr. Sturdyvant some of my songs I wrote and he say he's gonna let me record them when I get my band together.

LEVEE grabs his sheet music from the trumpet case.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

I just gotta finish the last part of this song. I knows how to play real music, not this old jug-band shit. I got style!

TOLEDO

Everybody got style. Style ain't nothing but keeping the same idea from beginning to end. Everybody got it.

LEVEE

But everybody can't play like I do.
Everybody can't have their own
band.

CUTLER

Well, until you get your own band
where you can play what you want,
you just play the piece and stop
complaining. I told you when you
came on here, this ain't none of
them hot bands. This is an
accompaniment band. You play Ma's
music when you here.

LEVEE

I got sense enough to know that.
Hell, I can look at you all and see
what kind of band it is. I can look
at Toledo and see what kind of band
it is.

TOLEDO

Toledo ain't said nothing to you
now. Don't let Toledo get started.

SLOW DRAG

Is you all gonna rehearse this
music or ain't you?

LEVEE

How many times you done played them
songs? What you gotta rehearse for?

SLOW DRAG

This a recording session. I want to
get it right the first time and get
on out of here.

LEVEE

You all go and rehearse then. I got
to finish this song for Mr.
Sturdyvant.

LEVEE pulls out a pencil and starts working on his
masterpiece.

EXT. RECORDING STUDIO BUILDING

IRVIN, paces, checks his watch.

A pack of white kids runs past, stolen apples and candy in their hands, a sweat-drenched, whistle-blowing POLICEMAN in pursuit.

INT. BAND ROOM - BASEMENT

TOLEDO, CUTLER and SLOW DRAG have their instruments in hand, ready to play.

CUTLER

Come on, Levee...I don't want no shit now. You rehearse like everybody else. You in the band like everybody else. Mr. Sturdyvant just gonna have to wait. You got to do that on your own time. This is the band's time.

LEVEE

Hell, I'm ready if you wanna rehearse.

He picks up his trumpet.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

I just say there ain't no point in it. Ma ain't here. What's the point in it?

CUTLER

"Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." Ah-One...Ah-two...you know what to do.

TOLEDO plays a short intro and the band strikes up.

LEVEE

Nawh! Nawh! We ain't doing it that way. We doing my version.

They come to a raggedy stop.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

That's what Mr. Irvin told me...say it's on the list he gave you.

CUTLER

Let me worry about what's on the list.

LEVEE

What kind of sense it make to rehearse the wrong version of the song?

SLOW DRAG

You supposed to rehearse what you gonna play. That's the way they taught me.

LEVEE

That's what I'm trying to tell the man.

CUTLER

You trying to tell me what we is and ain't gonna play. And that ain't none of your business. Your business is to play what I say.

LEVEE

Oh, I see now. You done got jealous 'cause Mr. Irvin using my version.

CUTLER

What the hell I got to be jealous of you about? The day I get jealous of you I may as well lay down and die.

TOLEDO

Levee started all that 'cause he too lazy to rehearse.

LEVEE

Where's the paper? Look at the paper! See what it say. Gonna tell me I'm too lazy to rehearse.

CUTLER

We ain't talking about the paper. We talking about you understanding where you fit in when you around here. You just play what I say.

LEVEE

I don't care what you play! Mr. Irvin gonna straighten it up! I don't care what you play.

IRVIN barges in.

IRVIN

Any of you boys know what's keeping Ma?

CUTLER

Can't say, Mr. Irvin. She'll be along directly, I reckon.

IRVIN

Well, you boys go ahead.

CUTLER

Mr. Irvin, about these songs...Levee say...

IRVIN

Whatever's on the list, Cutler.

CUTLER

I'm asking about this "Black Bottom"...

IRVIN

It's on the list.

CUTLER

Yessir, I know it's on the list. I want to know what version. We got two versions of that song.

IRVIN

Oh. Levee's arrangement. We're using Levee's arrangement.

LEVEE sits taller, anointed by those words.

CUTLER

Ok. I got that straight. Now this "Moonshine Blues"...

IRVIN

We'll work it out with Ma, Cutler. Just rehearse whatever's on the list.

IRVIN exits. LEVEE leaps up.

LEVEE

See, I told you! It don't mean nothing when I say it. You got to wait for Mr. Irvin to say it. Well, I told you the way it is.

CUTLER

Levee, the sooner you understand it ain't what you say, or what Mr. Irvin say...it's what Ma say that counts.

LEVEE

Look, I don't care what you play! All right? It don't matter to me.

(MORE)

LEVEE (CONT'D)

Mr. Irvin gonna straighten it up! I don't care what you play.

CUTLER

Thank you...Let's play this "Hear Me Talking to You" till we find out what's happening with the "Black Bottom". Ah-One...Ah-Two...You know what to do.

WE INTERCUT: THE BAND PLAYING "HEAR ME TALKING TO YOU" WITH MA RAINEY'S JOURNEY TO THE RECORDING STUDIO.

INT. COLORED ONLY HOTEL - LOBBY

GERTRUDE "MA" RAINEY DRESSED LIKE SHOWBIZ NEGRO ROYALTY, MAKING HER WAY THROUGH THE LOBBY OF A COLORED ONLY HOTEL. PASSING NORTHERN HIGH YELLA'S TOSSING AN ATTITUDE AT MA WHO TOSSES IT RIGHT BACK.

SLOW DRAG

Don't nobody say when it comes to Ma. She's gonna do what she wants to do.

LEVEE

Hell, he the one putting out the record!

SLOW DRAG

And he gonna put out what Ma want him to put out.

EXT. COLORED ONLY HOTEL

MA RAINEY EXPLODES THROUGH THE LOBBY DOORS OF THE HOTEL, DUSSIE MAE IN TOW. SYLVESTER, 16, MA'S NEPHEW, HUSTLING TO KEEP UP.

AS THE BAND PLAYS--

LEVEE

You know how many records she sold in New York? Huh? And you know what's in New York? Harlem. Harlem's in New York.

SLOW DRAG

We packed them in, in Memphis, Birmingham, Atlanta...

LEVEE

We ain't in Memphis. We's in Chicago. We at a recording session. Mr. Sturdyvant and Mr. Irvin say what's gonna be here!

CUTLER

Levee's confused about who the boss is. He don't know Ma's the boss.

LEVEE

Ma's the boss on the road!

MA USHERS A NERVOUS SYLVESTER TO THE DRIVERS SIDE OF THE CAR, A BELLMAN OPENS THE DOOR. SHE SASHAYS AROUND TO THE PASSENGER SIDE, INSTRUCTING SYLVESTER TO TIP THE BELLMAN WHO HOLDS THE DOOR FOR HIM, USHERS HIM INSIDE THEN SLAMS THE DOOR SHUT.

Which brings LEVEE and the band to a stop. **END INTERCUT.**

LEVEE (CONT'D)

You heard what the man told you... "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom", Levee's arrangement. There you go! That's what he told you. I don't know why you all want to pick with me about it, shit! I'm with Slow Drag..lets go on and get it rehearsed.

CUTLER

All right. All right. "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom", *Levee's* version.

TOLEDO

How that first part go again, Levee?

LEVEE

It go like this.

LEVEE plays his rollicking intro.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

That's to get the people's attention. That's when you and Slow Drag come in with the rhythm part. Me and Cutler play on the breaks. Now we gonna dance. We gonna play it like...

CUTLER

The man ask you how the first part go.

(MORE)

CUTLER (CONT'D)

He don't wanna hear all of that! Ma Rainey's Black Bottom. Levee's Version. Ah-One...Ah-Two...You know what to do.

LEVEE plays his intro but the band drops in their version.

LEVEE

You all got to keep up now! You playing in the wrong time.

CUTLER

Nigger, will you let us play this song? I was playing music before you was born. Gonna tell me how to play. All right. Let's try it again. Ah-One...Ah-two...

SLOW DRAG

Cutler, wait till I fix this. This string starting to unravel.
(dripping with sarcasm)
And you know I want to play Levee's music right.

SLOW DRAG begins removing his broken string.

LEVEE

If you was any kind of a musician you'd take care of your instrument. Keep it in tip-top order. If you was any kind of musician...I'd let you be in my band.

SLOW DRAG

Shhiit!

SLOW DRAG crosses to get a new string passing by LEVEE brushing his shoe.

LEVEE

Damn, Slow Drag! Watch them big-ass shoes you got.

SLOW DRAG

Boy ain't nobody done nothing to you.

LEVEE

You done stepped on my shoes.

SLOW DRAG

Move them the hell out the way
then. You was in my way...I wasn't
in your way.

CUTLER crosses over and opens and closes the door trying to
create a breeze.

CUTLER

Any man who takes a whole week's
pay and puts it on some shoes—you
understand what I mean, what you
walk around on the ground with—is a
fool! And I don't mind telling him.

LEVEE

What difference it make to you,
Cutler!?

SLOW DRAG

Ain't nothing wrong with having
nice shoes. Look at Toledo.

TOLEDO

What about Toledo?

LEVEE

Nigger got them clod-hoppers! Old
brogans! He ain't nothing but a
sharecropper.

SLOW DRAG and CUTLER get a kick out of this.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

Play something for me, Slow Drag.

SLOW DRAG starts swinging a version of JELLY ROLL MORTON'S
DOCTOR JAZZ.

LEVEE begins prancing and dancing, "barnyard style".

LEVEE (CONT'D)

A man got to have some shoes to
dance like this! You can't dance
like this with them clod-hoppers
Toledo got.

TOLEDO

That's the trouble with colored
folks always wanna have a good
time. Good times done got more
niggers killed than God got ways to
count.

LEVEE

(singing)

*When the world goes wrong and I got
the blues... / He's the man who
makes me get on both my dancing
shoes.*

TOLEDO

What the hell having a good time
mean? That's what I wanna know.

LEVEE keeps right on dancing, **RESPONDING TO TOLEDO THROUGH
HIS TRUMPET.**

TOLEDO (CONT'D)

There's more to life than having a
good time. If there ain't...then
this is a piss poor life we're
having...if that's all there is to
be got out of it.

LEVEE riffs. *"Man, shut the hell up."*

CUTLER

Niggers been having a good time
before you was born, and they gonna
keep having a good time after you
gone.

He riffs. *"That's right."*

TOLEDO

Yeah, but what else they gonna do?
Ain't nobody talking about making
the lot of the colored man better
for him here in America. Everybody
worried about having a good time.
Ain't nobody thinking about what
kind of world they gonna leave
their young'ns. "Just give me a
good time, that's all I want." It
just makes me sick.

LEVEE spits a riff at TOLEDO. *"Nigger, please!"*

SLOW DRAG

Good times is what makes life worth
living.

TOLEDO

I know how to have a good time as
well as the next man. I said,
there's got to be more to life than
having a good time.

(MORE)

TOLEDO (CONT'D)

I said the colored man ought to be doing more than just trying to have a good time all the time.

He puts a period on it. BLOP! "Enough."

LEVEE

Well, what is you doing, nigger? Talking all them highfalutin' ideas about making a better world for the colored man. What is you doing to make it better? You playing the music and looking for your next piece of pussy same as we is. What is you doing?

TOLEDO

It ain't just me, fool! It's everybody! What you think...I'm gonna solve the colored mans 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. I ain't talking about what I'm gonna do...or what you or Cutler or Slow Drag or anybody else. I'm talking about all of us together. What all of us is gonna do. That's what I'm talking about, nigger!

LEVEE considers this...

LEVEE

Well, why didn't you just say that then?

TOLEDO, goes back to his newspaper.

CUTLER

Toledo, I don't know why you waste your time on this fool.

LEVEE

I ain't gonna be too many more of your fools.

CUTLER

Boy, ain't nobody studyin' you.

LEVEE

All right, I ain't nobody. Don't pay me no mind. I ain't nobody.

TOLEDO

Levee, you ain't nothing but the devil.

LEVEE

There you go! That's who I am. I'm the devil. I ain't nothing but the devil.

SLOW DRAG

I know a man sold his soul to the devil. Name of Eliza Cotter. Lived in Tuscaloosa County, Alabama. The devil came by and he done upped and sold him his soul.

CUTLER

How you know the man done sold his soul to the devil, nigger? You talking that old-woman foolishness.

SLOW DRAG

Everybody know. It wasn't no secret. He went around working for the devil and everybody knowed it. Carried him a bag...one of them carpet bags. Folks say he carried the devil's papers and what not where he put your fingerprint on the paper with blood.

LEVEE

Where he at now? That's what I want to know. He can put my whole handprint if he want to!

SLOW DRAG takes charge.

SLOW DRAG

Showed up one day all fancied out with just the finest clothes you ever seen on a colored man. Had a pocketful of money, just living the life of a rich man. Had him a string of women he run around with and throw his money away on. One of the fellows of them gals he was messing with got fixed on him wrong and Eliza killed him.

LEVEE leans in.

SLOW DRAG (CONT'D)

And he laughed about it. Sheriff
come and arrest him, and then let
him go. Trial come up, and the
judge cut him loose. Cut him loose
and give him a bottle of whiskey!
Folks ask what done happened to
make him change, and he'd tell them
straight out he done sold his soul
to the devil and asked them if they
wanted to sell theirs 'cause he
could arrange it for them.

CUTLER

Well, whatever happened to this
fellow? What come of him?
That's what I want to know.

SLOW DRAG

Last I heard, he headed up north
with that bag of his handing out
hundred dollar bills on the spot to
whoever wanted to sign on with the
devil.

LEVEE

I sure wish I knew where he went.
He wouldn't have to convince me
long. Hell, I'd even help him sign
people up.

CUTLER

Nigger, God's gonna strike you down
with that blasphemy you talking.

LEVEE

Oh, shit! God don't mean nothing to
me. Let him strike me! Here I am
standing right here. What you
talking about he's gonna strike me?
Here I am! Let him strike me! I
ain't scared of him. Talking that
stuff to me.

CUTLER

All right. You gonna be sorry. You
gonna fix yourself to have bad
luck. Ain't nothing gonna work for
you.

LEVEE prowls around the room.

LEVEE

Bad luck? What I care about bad luck? You talking simple. I ain't had nothing but bad luck all my life. Couldn't get no worse. What the hell I care about some bad luck? Hell, I eat it everyday for breakfast! You dumber than I thought you was...talking about bad luck.

DOOR BUZZER sounds upstairs in the distance.

CUTLER

All right, nigger, you'll see!
Can't tell a fool nothing. You'll see.

INT. MA RAINEY'S CAR

MA rides, not so relaxed, in the passenger seat. One eye on the street signs of this foreign landscape the other on SYLVESTER who is nervously white knuckling the steering wheel. DUSSIE MAE sits in the back, ramrod straight, watching SYLVESTER navigate this beast to their destination.

SUDDENLY: A cacophony of horns...then BAM!

INT. RECORDING STUDIO - HALLWAY

IRVIN opens the door. A delivery boy stands with a box of sandwiches.

IRVIN

(calls out)
Cutler...you boys' sandwiches are up here...Cutler?

STURDYVANT

(shouting from his office door)
Irv, what's happening?

IRVIN steps out to pay for the sandwiches when he sees...

EXT. RECORDING STUDIO BUILDING

MA RAINEY and a WHITE POLICE OFFICER (the sweaty one we saw chasing the kid earlier) in the middle of the street roaring at each other. DUSSIE MAE and SYLVESTER, MA'S "amen corner", right behind.

IRVIN, dashes up to the fracas. And like a referee in a prize fight, works to keep them apart.

MA RAINEY

Irvin, you better tell this man who I am! You better get him straight!

IRVIN

Ma, what the hell happened?!

MA RAINEY

Tell the man who he's messing with!

IRVIN

(to the policeman)

What's going on here? Officer, what's the matter? What's the problem?

POLICEMAN

Well...when I walked up on the incident...

DUSSIE MAE

Sylvester wrecked Ma's car.

SYLVESTER

I d-d-did not! The m-m-man ran into me!

POLICEMAN

(To Irvin)

Look, buddy...if you want it in a nutshell, we got her charged with assault and battery.

MA RAINEY

Assault and what for what!

DUSSIE MAE

(to Irvin)

See...Sylvester was driving and he don't know...

MA RAINEY

Wait a minute! I'll tell you if you wanna know what happened. Now, that's Sylvester. That's my nephew. He was driving my car...

POLICEMAN

Lady, we don't know who's car he was driving.

DUSSIE MAE
That's Ma's car!

SYLVESTER
That's Ma's car!

MA RAINEY
What you mean you don't know whose
car it is? I bought and paid for
that car.

POLICEMAN
That's what you say, lady...We
still gotta check.

STURDYVANT hurriedly pays the delivery boy and passes the
sandwiches onto Toledo, before flying down the alley. The
crowd of white onlookers thickening.

STURDYVANT
Irv, what's the problem...what's
going on? Officer?!

IRVIN
Let me handle it, Mel, huh?!

IRVIN turns STURDYVANT back toward the recording studio and
quickly bounces back to the officer.

POLICEMAN
The guy said the kid ran a
stoplight.

SYLVESTER
What you mean? The man c-c-come
around the corner and hit m-m-me!

POLICEMAN
While I was calling a paddy wagon
to haul them to the station, to
straighten it all out, she gets
aggressive with the other driver...

MA RAINEY
He got ugly with me!

POLICEMAN
...causing a disturbance...

MA RAINEY
I don't know why you wanna' tell
that lie.

POLICEMAN
Look lady...will you let me tell
the story?!

MA RAINEY

Go 'head and tell it then. But tell
it right!

POLICEMAN

Like I said...as I'm waiting on the
paddy wagon, I turn to hear this
guys side of the story and she
won't let him get a word in
edgeways. He steps in front of her
to explain his side of the
situation...and she knocks him
down.

DUSSIE MAE

She ain't hit him! He just fell!

SYLVESTER

...s-s-slipped!

POLICEMAN

He claims she knocked him down...

MA RAINEY

If that don't beat all to hell. I
ain't touched the man!

IRVIN

Okay. Okay...I got it straight now,
Ma. You didn't touch him.

MA RAINEY

The man was trying to block my
path...I got things to do...he
bumped into me and fell down.

IRVIN

All right, Ma... Officer, can I see
you for a minute?

They step to the side for a private conversation.

MA RAINEY

Flopping on the ground like a rag
doll...I ain't touched the man!

A disapproving white crowd watches MA, watching IRVIN and the
POLICEMAN negotiate.

IRVIN discreetly passes him a wad of bills.

The POLICEMAN pockets the money. He turns to the crowd waving
the gawkers away.

POLICEMAN

Okay...move along! Let's go...come
on folks, let's move it...

IRVIN hurries over to MA RAINEY and her entourage, escorting them down the recording studio alley. Passing STURDYVANT along the way.

STURDYVANT

What's going on Ma? What'd you do?

MA RAINEY

Sturdyvant, get on away from me!
That's the last thing I need...to
go through some of your shit!

Pushes past him and into-

INT. RECORDING STUDIO

MA RAINEY marches in like she owns the place.

DUSSIE MAE prances in examining the surroundings.

SYLVESTER, still shaken, ambles over to the piano admiring it.

IRVIN scurries in behind them.

IRVIN

Here, Ma let me take your things.
(to Sylvester)
I don't believe we've met.

MA RAINEY

That's my nephew Sylvester, and
that there's Dussie Mae.

IRVIN

Hello.

MA notices TOLEDO standing there holding the sandwiches.

MA RAINEY

Everybody here?

TOLEDO

Yeah, they down in the band room

IRVIN

Listen, Ma, just sit there and
relax.

MA RAINEY
I ain't for no sitting.

DUSSIE MAE
Where's the bathroom?

IRVIN
It's down that hall.

MA RAINEY
Irvin, call down there and see
about my car. I want my car fixed
today. And why ya'll keep it so hot
in here? You all want to make some
records, you better get a fan on in
here.

IRVIN
(as he goes)
I got it. I'll take care of
everything, Ma.

INT. RECORDING STUDIO - BATHROOM

DUSSIE MAE primps in the mirror-fixes herself up-checks her
stockings, her garters.

INT. STURDYVANTS OFFICE

IRVIN struggles to unplug a portable fan.

IRVIN
I talked to her last night. I got
everything straight, Mel. You just
stay out of the way and let me
handle it.

STURDYVANT
Yeah...yeah...you handled it last
time remember? She marches in here
like she owns the damn
place...complains about the
building being cold...trips over
the mic wire and then threatens to
sue me...

INT. RECORDING STUDIO

MA RAINEY sits fanning herself. She takes off her shoes, rubs
her feet. DUSSIE MAE wanders around.

DUSSIE MAE

I ain't never been in no recording studio before. Where's the band at?

MA RAINEY

They off somewhere rehearsing. Come here...let me see that dress.

DUSSIE MAE comes over. MA RAINEY pulls her in close.

MA RAINEY (CONT'D)

That dress looks nice. I'm gonna take you tomorrow and get you some more things before I take you down to Memphis. They got clothes up here you can't get in Memphis. I want you to look nice for me. If you gonna travel with the show you got to look nice.

DUSSIE MAE

I need me some more shoes. These hurt my feet.

MA RAINEY

Don't you be messing around with no shoes that pinch your feet. Ma know something about bad feet. Hand me my slippers out my bag over yonder.

DUSSIE MAE fetches Ma Rainey's slippers from her tote bag. MA drinking in her every move.

MA RAINEY (CONT'D)

(singing)

*Oh, Lord, these dogs of mine /
They sure do hurt me all the time /
The reason why I don't know...*

Dussie Mae brings the slippers over.

MA RAINEY (CONT'D)

*Lord, I beg to be excused / I can't
wear me no sharp toed shoes / I
went for a walk / I stopped to talk
/ Oh, how my corns sure did bark...*

DUSSIE MAE

I just want to get a pair of those yellow ones. About a half size bigger.

MA RAINEY

We'll get you whatever you need.
Sylvester, too...I'm gonna get him
some more clothes.

SYLVESTER slouches on the piano bench.

MA RAINEY (CONT'D)

Sylvester, tuck your clothes in.
Straighten them up and look nice.
Look like a gentleman.

DUSSIE MAE

Look at Sylvester with that hat on.

MA RAINEY

Sylvester, take your hat off
inside.

SYLVESTER bangs on the piano.

MA RAINEY (CONT'D)

Come on over here and leave that
piano alone.

SYLVESTER

I ain't d-d-doing nothing to the p-
p-piano. I'm just l-l-looking at
it.

We hear faint sounds of the band rehearsing.

MA RAINEY

Well. Come on over here and sit
down. As soon as Mr. Irvin comes
back, I'll have him take you down
and introduce you to the band...

SYLVESTER comes over.

MA RAINEY (CONT'D)

...have Culter show you how your
part go. And when you get your
money, you gonna send some of it
home to your mama. Let her know you
doing all right.

IRVIN enters with the portable fan.

IRVIN

Ma, I called down to the garage and
checked on your car. It's just a
scratch.

(MORE)

IRVIN (CONT'D)

They'll have it ready for you this afternoon. Send it over with one of their fellows.

MA RAINEY

They better have my car fixed right too. I ain't going for that. Brand-new car...they better fix it like new.

DUSSIE MAE peeks out the door. The sound of the band rehearsing echos through the halls.

MA RAINEY (CONT'D)

Irvin, what is that I hear? I know they ain't rehearsing Levee's "Black Bottom." I know I ain't hearing that?

IRVIN

Ma, listen...that's what I wanted to talk to you about. Levee's version of that song...It really picks it up...

MA RAINEY

I ain't studying Levee nothing. I know what he done to that song and I don't like to sing it that way. I'm doing it the old way. That's why I brought my nephew to do the voice intro.

IRVIN

Ma, that's what people want now. They want something they can dance to. Levee's arrangement gives the people what they want. It gets them excited...makes them forget about their troubles.

MA RAINEY

I don't care what you say, Irvin. Levee ain't messing up my song. If he got what the people want, let him take it somewhere else. I'm singing Ma Rainey's song. I ain't singing Levee's song. Now that's all there is to it. Carry my nephew on down there and introduce him to the band. I promised my sister I'd look out for him and he's gonna do the voice intro on the song...my way.

IRVIN

Ma, we just figured that...

MA RAINEY

Who's this we? What you mean "we"?
Come talking this "we" stuff. Who's
"we"?

IRVIN

Me and Sturdyvant. We decided that
it would...

MA RAINEY

You decided, huh? I'm just a bump
on the log. I'm gonna go which ever
way the river drift. Is that it?
You and Sturdyvant decided.

IRVIN

Ma, it was just that we thought-

MA RAINEY

I ain't got good sense. I don't
know nothing about music. I don't
know what's a good song and what
ain't. You know more about my fans
than I do.

IRVIN

It's not that, Ma. It's just more
of what the people want.

MA RAINEY

I'm gonna tell you something,
Irvin...and you go on up there and
tell Sturdyvant. What you all say
don't count with me. You
understand? Ma listen to her heart.
Ma listen to the voice inside her.
That's what counts with Ma. Now,
you carry my nephew on down there
and tell Cutler he's gonna do the
voice intro on that "Black Bottom"
song and that Levee ain't messing
up my song with none of his music
shit. Now, if that don't set right
with you and Sturdyvant then I can
carry my black bottom on back down
South to my tour, 'cause I don't
like it up here no ways.

IRVIN

O'kay Ma...I don't care. I just
thought-

MA RAINEY

Damn what you thought! What you look like telling me how to sing my song? This Levee and Sturdyvant shit...I ain't going for it! Sylvester, go on down there and introduce yourself. I'm through playing with Irvin.

SYLVESTER

Which way you go? Where they at?

MA RAINEY

Here...I'll carry you down there myself.

She puts on her shoes and starts out in a huff.

DUSSIE MAE

Can I go? I wanna see the band.

MA RAINEY

You stay your behind up here. Ain't no cause in you being down there. Come on Sylvester.

DUSSIE MAE flops down in a chair.

IRVIN

Okay, Ma. Have it your way. We'll be ready to go in fifteen minutes.

MA RAINEY

We'll be ready to go when Madame says we're ready. That's the way it goes around here.

She marches out, SYLVESTER close behind.

INT. BAND ROOM - BASEMENT

MA RAINEY and SYLVESTER enter and the band stops. LEVEE defiantly plays a few more licks. MA dives in, ignoring him.

MA RAINEY

Cutler, this here is my nephew Sylvester. He's gonna do that voice intro on the "Black Bottom" song using the old version.

LEVEE

What you talking about? Mr. Irvin say he's using my version. What you talking about?

MA RAINEY

Levee, I ain't studying you or Mr. Irvin. Cutler, get him straightened out on how to do his part. I ain't thinking about Levee. These folks done messed with the wrong person this day. Sylvester, Cutler gonna teach you your part. You go ahead and get it straight. Don't worry about what nobody else say.

MA RAINEY cuts LEVEE half-n-two with a look as she exits.

LEVEE stands there fuming. CUTLER soldiers on.

CUTLER

Well, come on in, boy. I'm Cutler. You got Slow Drag...Toledo...and that's Levee over there. Sylvester, huh?

SYLVESTER

Sylvester Brown.

LEVEE

I done wrote a version of that song what picks it up and sets it down in the people's lap! Now she come talking this! You don't need that old circus bullshit! I know what I'm talking about. You gonna mess up the song, Cutler, and you know it.

CUTLER

I ain't gonna mess up nothing. Ma say...

LEVEE

I don't care what Ma say! I'm talking about what the intro gonna do to the song. The peoples in the North ain't gonna buy all that tent-show nonsense. They wanna hear some music!

CUTLER

Nigger, I done told you time and again...Ma says what to play!

(MORE)

CUTLER (CONT'D)

Not you! You ain't here to be doing no creating. You play whatever Ma says!

LEVEE

I might not play nothing! I might quit!

CUTLER

Nigger, don't nobody care if you quit. Whose heart you gon' break?

TOLEDO

Levee ain't gonna quit. He got to make some money to keep him in shoe polish.

The FELLA'S crack up, all but SYLVESTER, a boy caught in the middle of a "grown folks" situation.

LEVEE

I done told you all...you all don't know me. You don't know what I'll do.

CUTLER

I don't think nobody too much give a damn.

CUTLER gets to work.

CUTLER (CONT'D)

Sylvester look here, here's the way your part go. The band plays the intro...I'll tell you where to come in. The band plays the intro and then you say, "All right, boys, you done seen the rest...Now I'm gonna show you the best. Ma Rainey's gonna show you her black bottom." You got that?

SYLVESTER nods.

CUTLER (CONT'D)

Let me hear you say it one time.

SYLVESTER

"All right, boys, you done s-s-seen the rest n-n-now I'm gonna show you the best. M-m-m-m-Ma Rainey's gonna s-s-show you her black b-b-bottom."

LEVEE

What kind of...All right, Cutler!
Let me see you fix that! You
straighten that out! You hear that
shit, Slow Drag? How in the hell
the boy gonna do the part and he
can't even talk!

SYLVESTER

(swelling up)

W-w-w-who's you to tell me what to
do, nigger! This ain't your band!
Ma tell me to d-d-do it and I'm
gonna do it. You can go to hell, n-
n-n-nigger!

LEVEE

B-b-b-boy, ain't nobody studying
you. You go on and fix that one,
Cutler. You fix that one and
I'll...I'll shine your shoes for
you. You go on and fix that one!

LEVEE sits, smiling like a Cheshire Cat.

TOLEDO

You say you Ma's nephew, huh?

SYLVESTER

Yeah. So w-w-what that mean?

TOLEDO

Oh, I ain't meant nothing...I was
just asking.

SLOW DRAG

Well, come on and let's rehearse so
the boy can get it right.

LEVEE

I ain't rehearsing nothing! You
just wait till I get my band. I'm
gonna record that song and show you
how it supposed to go!

CUTLER

We can do it without Levee. Let him
sit on over there. Sylvester, you
remember your part?

SYLVESTER

I remember it pretty g-g-g-good.

The FELLA'S share a look.

CUTLER

Well come on, let's do it then.
Levee!

LEVEE doesn't move. SYLVESTER takes his spot. The band strikes up.

STURDYVANT enters. LEVEE jumps up, trumpet in hand, like he was rehearsing.

STURDYVANT

Good...you boys are rehearsing, I see.

LEVEE

Yessir! We rehearsing. We know them songs real good.

STURDYVANT

Good! Say, Levee, did you finish that song?

LEVEE

Yessir, Mr. Sturdyvant. I got it right here.

LEVEE grabs the sheet music from his case.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

I wrote that other part just like you say. It go like:
(singing with gusto)

*You can swing it, you can bring it
you can dance at any hall / You can
slide across the floor you'll never
have to stall / Oh my jelly roll
Oh my jelly roll / My jelly roll
Please, baby, let me have it all.*

The FELLA'S watch the "skinnin' and grinnin'".

LEVEE (CONT'D)

Then I put that part in there for the other people to dance, like you say, for them to forget about their troubles.

STURDYVANT

Good! Good! I wanna see you about your songs as soon as I get the chance.

(MORE)

STURDYVANT (CONT'D)
(takes the sheet music)
Let me take this.

LEVEE
Yessir! As soon as you get the
chance, Mr. Sturdyvant.

STURDYVANT exits.

Everyone busts out laughing, even SYLVESTER.

CUTLER
You hear, Levee? You hear this
nigger? "Yessuh, we's rehearsing,
boss."

SLOW DRAG
I heard him. Seen him, too.
Shuffling them feet.

TOLEDO
Aw, Levee can't help it none. He's
spooked up with the white man.
Ain't had the time to study him.

LEVEE
I studies the white man. I got him
studied good. The first time one
fixes on me wrong, I'm gonna let
him know just how much I studied.
Come telling me I'm spooked up with
the white man. You let one of them
mess with me, I'll show you how
spooked up I am.

CUTLER
The man come in here, call you a
boy, tell you to get up off your
ass and rehearse, and you ain't had
nothing to say to him except,
"Yessir!"

LEVEE
I can say "yessir" to whoever I
please. What you got to do with it?
I know how to handle white folks.
I been handling them for thirty-two
years, and now you gonna tell me
how to do it. Just 'cause I say
"yessir" don't mean I'm spooked up
with him. I know what I'm doing.
Let me handle him my way.

CUTLER

Well, go on and handle it then.

LEVEE

Toledo, you always messing with somebody! Always agitating somebody with that old philosophy bullshit you be talking. You stay out of my way about what I do and say. I'm my own person. Just let me alone.

TOLEDO

You right, Levee. I apologize. It ain't none of my business that you spooked up by the white man.

LEVEE

All right! See! That's the shit I'm talking about. You all back up and leave Levee alone.

SLOW DRAG

Aw, Levee, we was all just having fun. Toledo ain't said nothing about you he ain't said about me. You just taking it all wrong.

TOLEDO

I ain't meant nothing by it Levee.

LEVEE

Levee got to be Levee! And he don't need nobody messing with him about the white man... 'Cause you don't know nothing about me. You don't know Levee. You don't know nothing about what kind of blood I got! What kind of heart I got beating here!

He pounds his chest.

NOTE: AS LEVEE TELLS THIS STORY WE SEE FLASHES THROUGHOUT. SNIPPETS OF LEVEE'S MEMORY THAT ARE NOW HIS REALITY. AS MUCH OR AS LITTLE AS WE NEED TO PAINT WITH. QUICK PIECES. AS GRAPHIC, VIVID OR OBSCURE AS NEED BE. NO FACES. ALL CONVEYED WITH HANDS, FINGERS, ARMS, TORSOS: i.e. A NOOSE, HAND SHAKES ON THE CHURCH STEPS, A HUNTING KNIFE, BLOOD DRIPPING ON THE FLOOR, BULLETS ON TABLE...THE REMAINS OF A CHARRED BLACK BODY.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

I was eight years old when I watched a gang of white mens come into my daddy's house and have to do with my mama any way they wanted.

He pauses.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

We was living in Jefferson County, about eighty miles outside of Natchez. My daddy's name was Memphis...Memphis Lee Green...had him near fifty acres of good farming land. I'm talking about good land! Grow anything you want! He done gone off of shares and bought this land from Mr. Hallie's widow woman after he done passed on. Folks called him and uppity nigger 'cause he done saved and borrowed to where he could buy this land and be independent.

Pauses.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

It was coming on planting time and my daddy went into Natchez to get him some seed and fertilizer. Called me, say, "Levee, you the man of the house now. Take care of your mama while I'm gone." I wasn't but a little boy, eight years old.

Pauses.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

My mama was frying up some chicken when them mens come in that house. Must have been eight or nine of them. She standing there frying that chicken and them mens come and took hold of her just like you take hold of a mule and make him do what you want.

Pauses.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

There was my mama with a gang of white mens.

(MORE)

LEVEE (CONT'D)

She tried to fight them off, but I could see where it wasn't gonna do her any good. I didn't know what they were doing to her...but I figured whatever it was they may as well do to me, too. My daddy had a knife that he kept around there for hunting and working and whatnot. I knew where he kept it and I went and got it. I'm gonna show you how spooked up I was by the white man. I tried my damndest to cut one of them's throat! I hit him on the shoulder with it. He reached back and grabbed hold of that knife and whacked me across the chest with it.

LEVEE raises his shirt to show a long ugly scar.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

That's what made them stop. They was scared I was gonna bleed to death. My mama wrapped a sheet around me and carried me two miles down to the Furlow place and they drove me up to Doc Albans. He was waiting on a calf to be born, and say he ain't had time to see me. They carried me up to Miss Etta, the midwife, and she fixed me up. My daddy came back and acted like he done accepted the facts of what happened. But he got the names of them mens from mama. He found out who they was and then we announced we was moving out of that county. Said good-bye to everybody...all the neighbors. My daddy went and smiled in the face of one of them crackers who had been with my mama. Smiled in his face and sold him our land. We moved over with relations in Caldwell. He got us settled in and then he took off one day. I ain't never seen him since. He sneaked back, hiding up in the woods, laying to get them eight or nine men.

Pauses.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

He got four of them before they got him. They tracked him down in the woods. Caught up with him and hung him and set him afire

Pauses.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

My daddy wasn't spooked up by the white man. No sir! And that taught me how to handle them. I seen my daddy go up and grin in this cracker's face...smile in his face and sell him his land. All the while he's planning how he's gonna get him and what he's gonna do to him. That taught me how to handle them. So you all just back up and leave Levee alone about the white man. I can smile and say "yessir" to whoever I please. I got my time coming to me. You all just leave Levee alone about the white man.

There is a long pause, then-

CLOSE ON:

TOLEDO'S long, black fingers softly land on the piano keys and begin a blues/spiritual lament- "If I Had My Way" as we see-

EXT. BRONZEVILLE

A BLAZING HOT SUN MOVING TOWARD EARLY AFTERNOON. ILLUMINATING, PENETRATING, THE BROWN, BLACK, COPPERTONE FACES OF COLORED PEOPLE TREDGING THROUGH THE NEIGHBORHOOD. (MAYBE OUT OF TIME) THE NORTH HAS NOT BEEN SO KIND TO THESE BLACK PEOPLE. LEANING OUT OF TENEMENT WINDOWS, SITTING ON STOOPS, LISTLESS, STIFLED BY POVERTY, HEAT AND FALSE HOPE.

TOLEDO (V.O.)

You see... everybody come from different places in Africa, right? Come from different tribes and things.

INTERCUT: Close shots of STURDYVANT and IRVIN'S hands, fingers, getting everything prepared to capture MA RAINEY'S voice on disc.

INT. BAND ROOM - BASEMENT

TOLEDO

(as he plays)

Soonawhile they began to make one big stew. You had the carrots, the peas, and potatoes and whatnot over here. And over there you had the meat, the nuts, the okra, corn...and then you mix it up and let it cook right through to get the flavors flowing together...then you got one thing. You got a stew.

-HANDS SELECT A RECORDING DISC.

TOLEDO (CONT'D)

Now you take and eat the stew. You take and make your history with that stew. All right. Now it's over. Your history's over and you done ate the stew.

-HANDS WIPING OFF THE DISC.

TOLEDO (CONT'D)

But you look around and you see some carrots over here, some potatoes over there. That's stew's still there. You done made your history and it's still there. You can't eat it all. So what you got? You got some leftovers.

-FINGERS FIDDLE WITH THE KNOBS AND DIALS.

TOLEDO (CONT'D)

That's what it is. You got leftovers and you can't do nothing with it. You already making you another history...cooking you another meal, and you don't need them leftovers no more. What to do?

-FINGERS TAP THE BOOTH'S MICROPHONE, TESTING.

TOLEDO (CONT'D)

See, we's the leftovers. The colored man is the leftovers. Now, what's the colored man gonna do with himself? That's what we waiting to find out. But first we gotta know we the leftovers.

INT. RECORDING STUDIO - BOOTH

There is a soft tap on the door.

IRVIN

Yes?!

INT. RECORDING STUDIO - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

CUTLER

Mr. Irvin, I ain't got nothing to do with it, but the boy can't do the part. He stutters right through it every time.

INT. RECORDING STUDIO

The BAND and ENTOURAGE all gathered in the studio. SLOW DRAG and TOLEDO going over the music. MA RAINEY , shoeless, singing softly to herself.

SYLVESTER, nervous, is in the corner quietly practicing his part. CUTLER joins TOLEDO and SLOW DRAG.

DUSSIE MAE saunters in, "dolled up", and sits, crossing those big fine pretty legs, fanning herself. Her dress "scooped up" a little too high. LEVEE blows into his mouthpiece, eyeing her.

MA RAINEY

Cutler!

CUTLER

Ma'am?

MA RAINEY

Levee's got his eyes in the wrong place. You better school him, Cutler.

CUTLER

Come on, Levee...let's get ready to play! Get your mind on your work!

NOTE: all of the dialogue from the booth comes over the horn unless otherwise indicated.

IRVIN

Okay, boys...we're gonna do "Moonshine Blues" first. "Moonshine Blues", Ma.

MA RAINEY

I ain't doing no moonshine nothing.
I'm doing the "Black Bottom" first.
Come on, Sylvester. Where's
Sylvester's mic? You need a mic for
Sylvester. Irvin...get him a mic.

IRVIN

Uh...Ma...the boys say he can't do
it.

MA RAINEY

Who say he can't do it? What boys
say he can't do it?

IRVIN glances down to CUTLER, who avoids his look.

IRVIN

The band, Ma...the boys in the
band.

MA RAINEY

What band? The band work for me!

IRVIN

He stutters, Ma. They say he
stutters.

MA RAINEY

I don't care if he do. I promised
the boy he could do the part...and
he's gonna do it! That's all there
is to it. He don't stutter all the
time. Get a microphone down here
for him.

IRVIN

Ma...we don't have time. We
can't...

MA RAINEY

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
don't need to go through all of
this. Just go and get the boy a
microphone.

IRVIN

All right, Ma...we'll get him a
microphone.

STURDYVANT enters and swiftly hooks up a mic for SYLVESTER.

MA RAINEY

Levee...I know you had something to do with this. You better watch yourself.

LEVEE

It was Cutler!

SYLVESTER

It was you! You the only one m-m-mad about it.

LEVEE

The boy stutter. He can't do the part. Everybody see that.

MA RAINEY

Well, can or can't...he's gonna do it! You ain't got nothing to do with it!

LEVEE

I don't care what you do! He can sing the whole got-damn song for all I care!

MA RAINEY

Well, all right. Thank you.

STURDYVANT

He's only getting one chance...the cost...

MA RAINEY

Damn the cost! You always talking about the cost. I make more money for this outfit than anybody else you got put together. If he messes up he'll just do it till he gets it right.

STURDYVANT zips back up to the booth.

She ushers SYLVESTER to his microphone.

MA RAINEY (CONT'D)

Come on, Sylvester. You just stand here and hold your hands like I told you. Don't worry about messing up. If you mess up we'll do it again. Play it for him, Cutler.

CUTLER

Ah-One. Ah-Two. You know what to do.

THE BAND strikes up "MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM".

SYLVESTER braces himself clasping his hands tight in front of his chest.

CUTLER gives him a nod.

SYLVESTER

All right, boys, you d-d-d-done s-s-s-
s-seen the best...

LEVEE stops playing.

SYLVESTER (CONT'D)

...now I'm gonna show you the
rest...Ma Rainey's gonna show you
her b-b-black b-b-bottom.

The rest of the band staggers to a halt.

MA RAINEY

That's real good. You take your
time, you'll get it right.

IRVIN

Okay, Ma. We're all set up to go up
here. Ma Rainey's Black Bottom,
boys.

MA RAINEY

Where's my Coke. I need a Coke. Hot
as it is. Where's my Coke?

IRVIN

What's the matter Ma?

MA RAINEY

Where's my Coke? I need a cold Coca-
Cola.

IRVIN

Uh...Ma...look...I forgot the Coke,
huh? Let's do it without it, huh?
Just this one song. What say, boys?

MA RAINEY

Damn what the band say! You
supposed to have Coca-Cola. Irvin
knew that. I ain't singing nothing
without my Coca-Cola!

She walks away from her microphone and switches on the portable fan. SYLVESTER is left just staring at his mic.

LEVEE leans against the piano enjoying this.

STURDYVANT bursts in.

STURDYVANT

Now, just a minute here, Ma. You come in an hour late...we're way behind schedule as it is...

MA RAINEY

Sturdyvant, get out of my face.

IRVIN enters.

MA RAINEY (CONT'D)

Irvin, I told you keep him away from me.

STURDYVANT

I'm tired of her nonsense, Irv. I'm not going to put up with this!

IRVIN

(to Sturdyvant)
Let me.

IRVIN turns to Ma Rainey.

IRVIN (CONT'D)

Look, Ma...I'll call down to the deli and get you a Coke. But let's get started, huh? Sylvester's standing there ready to go...the band's set up...let's do this one song, huh?

MA RAINEY

If you are too cheap to buy me a Coke...I'll buy my own. Slow Drag!

SLOW DRAG is immediately on point.

MA RAINEY (CONT'D)

Sylvester, go with Slow Drag and get me three bottles of Coca-Cola. Ice cold.

SYLVESTER

Yes, ma'am.

MA RAINEY pulls out a little pouch she keeps close to her breast.

MA RAINEY
Get ya'll something too and keep
the change.

SYLVESTER and SLOW DRAG make a B-line for the door.

IRVIN digs into his pocket to offer Ma Rainey her money back.

MA RAINEY (CONT'D)
Get out of my face, Irvin. You all
just wait until I get my Coke. It
ain't gonna kill you.

IRVIN
Okay, Ma. Get your Coke...
(under his breath)
...for Chrissakes. Get your Coke!

Exasperated, IRVIN and STURDYVANT exit.

TOLEDO, LEVEE and CUTLER head on back to the BAND ROOM.

MA RAINEY
Cutler.

He stops, the other two men keep on stepping.

MA RAINEY (CONT'D)
Come here a minute. I want to talk
to you.

INT. CORNER DELI

SYLVESTER and SLOW DRAG enter and stop in their tracks as the STORE OWNER and all his white customers turn and stare.

INT. RECORDING STUDIO

Warily, CUTLER ambles over.

MA RAINEY
What's all this about "the boys in
the band say"? I tells you what to
do. I says what the matters is with
the band. I say who can and who
can't do what.

CUTLER

We just say 'cause the boy
stutter...

MA RAINEY

I know he stutters. Don't you think
I know he stutters. This is what's
gonna help him.

CUTLER

We just thought it be easier to go
on and let Levee do it like we
planned.

MA RAINEY

He's doing the part and I don't
wanna hear anymore of this shit
about what the band says. And I
want you to find somebody to
replace Levee when we get to
Memphis. Levee ain't nothing but
trouble.

CUTLER

Levee's all right. He plays good
music when he puts his mind to it.
He knows how to write music, too.

MA RAINEY

I don't care what he know. He ain't
nothing but bad news. Find somebody
else. I know it was his idea about
who to say who can do what.

DUSSIE MAE wanders over to were they are sitting.

MA RAINEY (CONT'D)

Dussie Mae! Go sit your behind down
somewhere and quit flaunting
yourself around.

DUSSIE MAE

I ain't doing nothing.

MA RAINEY

Well, just go on somewhere and stay
out of the way.

DUSSIE MAE finds her way into the hall.

INT. BAND ROOM - BASEMENT

TOLEDO sits, reading his tattered newspaper.

LEVEE plays a phrase on his horn then makes a notation on his sheet music.

LEVEE

(singing)

*You can shake it, you can break it.
/ You can dance at any hall / You
can slide across the floor / You'll
never have to stall / My jelly, my
roll...*

The door eases open and DUSSIE MAE peeks in. LEVEE perks up.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

*...sweet mama don't you let it
fall.*

DUSSIE MAE

Oh, hi! I just wanted to see what
it look like down here.

TOLEDO lifts his eyes up off of his newspaper.

LEVEE

Well, come on in...I don't bite.

DUSSIE MAE

I didn't know you could really
write music. I thought you was just
jiving me at the club last night.

LEVEE

Nawh, baby...I knows how to write
music. I done give Mr. Sturdyvant
some of my songs and he say he's
gonna let me record them. I'm gonna
have my own band!

TOLEDO knows trouble when he sees it and heads for the door.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

Toledo...ain't I give Mr.
Sturdyvant some of my songs I
wrote?!

TOLEDO

Don't get Toledo mixed up in
nothing.

He exits.

DUSSIE MAE

You gonna get your own band sho'
nuff?

LEVEE

Levee Green and His Footstompers.

DUSSIE MAE

That's real nice.

LEVEE

A man what's gonna get his own band
need to have a woman like you.

DUSSIE MAE

A woman like me wants somebody to
bring it and put it in my hand. I
don't need nobody wanna get
something for nothing and leave me
standing in my door.

LEVEE

That ain't Levee's style, sugar. I
knows how to treat a woman. Buy her
presents and things...treat her
like she want to be treated.

DUSSIE MAE

That's what they all say...'til it
come time to be buying the
presents.

LEVEE catches her hand.

LEVEE

When we get down to Memphis, I'm
gonna show you what I'm talking
about. I'm gonna take you out and
show you a good time. Show you
Levee know how to treat a woman.

LEVEE slips his arm around her waist and pulls her closer.
She lets him get just enough of a "rub" to keep him in her
web.

INT. RECORDING STUDIO

CUTLER

Ma, This Moonshine Blues...that's
one of them songs Bessie Smith
sang, I believes.

MA RAINEY

Bessie what? Ain't nobody thinking about Bessie. I taught Bessie. She ain't doing nothing but imitating me. What I care about Bessie? I don't care if she sell a million records. She got her people and I got mine. I don't care what nobody else do. Ma was the first and don't you forget it!

CUTLER

Ain't nobody said nothing about that. I just said that's the same song she sang.

MA RAINEY

I been doing this a long time. Ever since I was a little girl. I don't care what nobody else do. That's what gets me so mad with Irvin. White folks try to be put out with you all the time. Too cheap to buy me a coca cola. I lets them know it though. Ma don't stand for no shit. Wanna take my voice and trap it in them fancy boxes with all them buttons and dials...and then too cheap to buy me a coca cola. And it don't cost but a nickel a bottle.

Pause.

MA RAINEY (CONT'D)

They don't care nothing about me. All they want is my voice. Well, I done learned that and they gonna treat me like I want to be treated no matter how much it hurt them. They back there now calling me all kinds of names...calling me everything but a child of God. But they can't do nothing else. They ain't got what they wanted yet. 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. I know what I'm talking about. You watch. Irvin right there with the rest of them. He don't care nothing about me either.

(MORE)

MA RAINEY (CONT'D)

He's been my manager for six years and the only time he had me in his house was to sing for some of his white friends.

CUTLER

I know how they do.

TOLEDO slips into the room.

MA RAINEY

If you colored and can make them some money then you all right with them. Otherwise you just a dog in the alley. I done made this company more money from my records than all the other recording artists they got put together. And they wanna balk about how much this session is costing them.

CUTLER

I don't see where it's costing them all what they say.

MA RAINEY

It ain't! I don't pay that kind of talk no mind.

INT. BAND ROOM - BASEMENT

LEVEE and DUSSIE MAE sit close as Siamese twins.

LEVEE

I done got my fella's already picked out. Getting me some good fella's know how to play real sweet music.

LEVEE slyly places his hand on her thigh. She promptly removes it.

DUSSIE MAE

When you get your own band maybe we can see about this stuff you talking.

LEVEE

I just want to show you I know what the women like. They don't call me Sweet Lemonade for nothing.

LEVEE tries to kiss her. DUSSIE MAE resists...somewhat.

DUSSIE MAE

Stop it now, somebody gonna come in here.

LEVEE

Naw, they ain't. Look here, sugar...what I wanna know is...can I introduce my red rooster to your brown hen?

DUSSIE MAE

You get your band then we'll see if your rooster know how to crow.

LEVEE leans in for another kiss and this time DUSSIE MAN lets him in. Their lips finally part and suddenly she bolts into the stairway. Like a lion on a gazelle, LEVEE is right behind her.

INT. BASEMENT STAIRWAY

LEVEE backs her up against the wall and kisses her passionately, she returns the passion and "It's on"!

LEVEE

Damn, baby! Now I know why my grandpappy sat on the back porch with his straight razor when my grandma hung out the wash.

DUSSIE MAE

Nigger, you crazy!

LEVEE'S hand slides down DUSSIE MAE'S body and he grips her firm backside.

He pulls her back into-

INT. BAND ROOM - BASEMENT

DUSSIE MAN snatches LEVEE in and lays one on him. They stumble back against the lockers in a "liplock".

LEVEE

I bet you sound like the midnight train from Alabama when it crosses the Mason Dixon line.

DUSSIE MAE

How'd you get so crazy?

LEVEE

It's women like you drives me so...
Good God! Happy birthday to the
lady with the cakes

LEVEE grabs a chair and jams it under the door knob. DUSSIE MAE looks at LEVEE. Fire raging in her eyes and in her loins. Suddenly she pushes him down on the bench, hikes up her dress and straddles him. There's only so much a woman can take.

INT. RECORDING STUDIO

MA RAINEY

It sure done got quiet in here. I never could stand no silence. I always got to have some music going on in my head somewhere. It keeps things balanced. Music will do that. It fills things up. The more music you got in the world, the fuller it is.

CUTLER

I can agree with that. I got to have my music too

MA RAINEY

White folks don't understand about the blues. They hear it come out but they don't know how it got there. They don't understand that's life's way of talking. You don't sing to feel better. You sing 'cause that's a way of understanding life. 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. I ain't started the blues way of singing. The blues always been here. But if they wanna call me the Mother of the Blues, that's all right with me. It don't hurt none.

SLOW DRAG and SYLVESTER enter with the Coca Cola's.

MA RAINEY (CONT'D)

It sure took you long enough.
Sylvester, go and find Mr. Irvin
and tell him we ready to go.

SLOW DRAG

I'll grab Levee.

SYLVESTER goes one way, SLOW DRAG the other.

INT. BASEMENT STAIRWAY

SLOW DRAG hurries down the stairs and tries the door.
Curiously, it's jammed. He knocks.

INT. BAND ROOM - BASEMENT

LEVEE and DUSSIE MAE jump up hurriedly straightening out they
clothes.

SLOW DRAG (O.S.)

Ma got her Coke, Levee. We 'bout
ready to start.

After a beat, LEVEE opens the door and peeks out. The coast
clear, he signals DUSSIE MAE who scurries out.

INT. RECORDING STUDIO

MA RAINEY drinks her Coke. Everybody else standing by.

**NOTE: IRVIN and STURDYVANT dialogue comes over the HORN in
the recording studio unless otherwise indicated.**

IRVIN

Okay, boys. "Ma Rainey's Black
Bottom." Take one.

CUTLER

Ah-One. Ah-Two. You know what to
do.

TOLEDO plays his intro and THE BAND strikes up.

SYLVESTER braces himself.

SYLVESTER

All right boys, you d-d-d-done s-s-
seen...

JUMP CUT TO:

STURDYVANT breaks the recording disc and replaces it.

IRVIN
Okay. Take Two.

The Band strikes up again.

SYLVESTER
All right boys, you done seen the
rest...now I'm gonna show you the
best. Ma Rainey's g-g-g-gonna...
(rushing to the end)
Show you her black bottom.

JUMP CUT:

STURDYVANT, changing the disc again.

IRVIN
Take three. Ma, let's just...

MA RAINEY shoots a look up to the booth.

JUMP CUT:

A broken recording disc lands in the garbage pale.

IRVIN (CONT'D)
Take Seven.

The Band strikes up.

SYLVESTER
All right boys, you done seen the
rest...now, I'm gonna show you the
best. Ma Rainey's gonna show you
her black bottom.

IRVIN and STURDYVANT arms raised in a silent cheer. SYLVESTER looks at MA RAINEY, amazed, she casts her gold tooth smile on him, steps up to the microphone and "works her number".

MA RAINEY
(singing)
*Way down south in a Alabamy / I've
got a friend they call Dancin'
Sammy / Who's crazy 'bout all the
latest dances / Black Bottom Stomps
and the new baby prances / The
other night at a swell affair /
Soon as the boys found out that I
was there /*
(MORE)

MA RAINEY (CONT'D)

*They said, come on Ma, let's go to
the cabaret / When I got there they
began to say...*

INT. RECORDING STUDIO - BOOTH

STURDYVANT fiddles with the knobs as the recording equipment flattens the power of MA RAINEY'S extraordinary sound.

MA RAINEY

*I want to see that dance they call
the black bottom / I want to learn
that dance / want to see the dance
you call your big black bottom /
It'll put you in a trance...*

INT. RECORDING STUDIO

MA RAINEY

*All the boys in the neighborhood /
They say / your black bottom is
really good / Come on and show me
your / your black bottom / I want
to learn that dance / I want to see
the dance they call the black
bottom...*

DUSSIE MAE and SYLVESTER dancing as MA RAINEY slays the tune.

MA RAINEY (CONT'D)

*I want to learn that dance / want
to see you do the dance you call
your big black bottom / It'll put
you in a trance / Early one morning
'bout the break of day / Grandpa
told my Grandma, I heard him say /
Get on up and show your old man
your black bottom / I want to learn
that dance...yes sir
I want to learn that dance...*

STURDYVANT

Okay, that's good, Ma. That sounded great. Good job, boys.

The recording light goes off. Jubilation all around. MA RAINEY "bearhugs" SYLVESTER.

MA RAINEY

See! I told you. I knew you could do it. You just have to put your mind to it. Didn't he do good, Cutler? Sound real good. I told you that you could do it.

CUTLER

He sure did. He did it better than I thought he was gonna do.

IRVIN slides in and quickly pulls Sylvester's microphone to the side.

IRVIN

Okay, boys...Ma...let's do Moonshine Blues next, huh? Moonshine Blues, boys.

IRVIN starts out but-

STURDYVANT

(over the horn)

Irv...something happened. We don't have the goddamn song recorded!

Heavy moans and groans from everyone.

STURDYVANT (CONT'D)

Check that mic, huh, Irv.

IRVIN crosses over and taps on Ma's mic.

IRVIN

One...one...one, two...testing, one...

STURDYVANT

No, it's the kid's mic.

IRVIN

Christ almighty! Ma, we didn't record the song.

MA RAINEY

What you mean you didn't record it?
What was you and Sturdyvant doing
up there?

IRVIN goes to Sylvester's microphone, tracing the chord back
to the connection box.

IRVIN

Here...Levee must have kicked the
plug out.

LEVEE

I ain't kicked nothing!

SLOW DRAG

If Levee had his mind on what he
was doing...

MA RAINEY

Levee, if it ain't one thing it's
another. You better straighten
yourself up!

LEVEE

Hell...it ain't my fault. I ain't
done nothing!

IRVIN

It's the cord, Mel. The cord's all
chewed up. We need another cord.

MA RAINEY

This is the most disorganized...

MA RAINEY marches across the room to get her things.
SYLVESTER and DUSSIE MAE in her tail wind.

STURDYVANT

Where's she going?

STURDYVANT is up and out of the booth in a flash.

INT. RECORDING STUDIO HALLWAY.

MA RAINEY, not breaking stride heads to the exit door
followed by a desperate IRVIN.

IRVIN

Ma...Ma...listen. Fifteen minutes.
All I ask is fifteen minutes.

STURDYVANT

Ma...if you walk out of this studio...

IRVIN

Fifteen minutes, Ma!

STURDYVANT

You'll be through...washed up!

IRVIN

Mel, for Chrissakes!!

In an instant he's right behind her.

EXT. RECORDING STUDIO BUILDING - ALLEY

MA makes her way up the alley, IRVIN hurries to get in front of her. She finally stops and stands there fuming.

IRVIN

Ma, listen. These records are gonna be hits! They're gonna sell like crazy! Hell, even Sylvester will be a star. Fifteen minutes. That's all I'm asking! Fifteen minutes.

After a good strong beat.

MA RAINEY

Fifteen minutes! You hear me, Irvin? Fifteen minutes...and then I'm gonna take my black bottom on back down to Georgia. Fifteen minutes. Then Madame Rainey is leaving!

IRVIN jubilantly kisses MA RAINEY on the cheek. She promptly wipes it off as Irvin jets off back into the studio.

INT. RECORDING STUDIO

IRVIN followed by STURDYVANT burst in. The FELLA'S are packing up.

IRVIN

You boys go ahead and take a little break. Fifteen minutes and we'll be ready to go.

CUT TO:

A GIANT BLOOD ORANGE LATE AFTERNOON SUN. THE HEAT OF ITS RELENTLESS RAYS ENGULF THE RECORDING STUDIO BUILDING.

INT. BAND ROOM - BASEMENT

The room is like an oven by now with no air circulating in the stifling summer heat. TOLEDO and CUTLER share Slow Drag's moonshine.

LEVEE is stretched out on the bench, fanning himself with his sheet music, his trumpet on his chest.

SLOW DRAG

Don't make no difference to me if she leave or not. I was kinda hoping she would leave.

TOLEDO

If I was Mr. Irvin, I'd best go on and get them cords and things hooked up right.

CUTLER

If Levee had his mind on his work we wouldn't be in this fix. We'd be up there finishing up. Now we got to go back and see if that boy get that part right. Ain't no telling if he ever get that right again in his life. Nigger, don't you know that's Ma's gal?

SLOW DRAG

Levee up there got one eye on the gal, the other on his trumpet.

LEVEE

I don't care who's gal it is. I ain't done nothing to her. I just talk to her like I talk to anybody else.

CUTLER

Your ass gonna be out here scraping the concrete looking for a job if you keep messing with her.

LEVEE

I ain't done nothing to the gal. I just asked her name. Now, if you telling me I can't do that...then Ma will just have to go to hell.

CUTLER

I'm through with it. Try and talk to a fool...

TOLEDO

Some mens got it worse than others...this foolishness I'm talking about. Some mens is excited to be fools. That excitement is something else. I knows about it. I done experienced it. It makes you feel good to be a fool. But it don't last long. It's over in a minute. Then you got to tend with the consequences.

LEVEE

That's the best sense you made all day. Talking about being a fool. That's the only sensible thing you said today. Admitting you was a fool.

TOLEDO

I admits it, all right. Ain't nothing wrong with it. I done been a little bit of everything. Gonna be a bit more things before I'm finished with it. But I ain't never been the same fool twice. That's where we part ways.

LEVEE

But you been a fool. That's what counts. Talking about I'm a fool for asking the gal her name and here you is one yourself.

TOLEDO

I married a woman. A good woman. To this day I can't say she wasn't a good woman. I married that woman with all the good graces and intentions of being hooked up and bound to her for the rest of my life. I was looking for her to put me in my grave. But you see it ain't all the time what your intentions and wishes are. She went out and joined the church. There ain't nothing wrong with that. But she got up there, got to seeing them good Christian mens and wondering why I ain't like that.

(MORE)

TOLEDO (CONT'D)

Soon she figure she got a heathen on her hands. So she left... And I sat down and figured out that I was a fool not to see that she needed something that I wasn't giving her. Else she wouldn't have been up there at the church in the first place. So yeah, Toledo been a fool about a woman. That's part of making life.

CUTLER

Toledo, what you call a fool, and what I call a fool, is two different things. A fool is responsible for what happens to him. A fool cause it to happen. Like Levee...if he keep messing with Ma's gal and his feet be out there scraping the ground. That's a fool.

LEVEE

Ain't nothing gonna happen to Levee. Levee ain't gonna let nothing happen to him.

SLOW DRAG

You just better not let Ma see you ask her. That's what the man's trying to tell you.

LEVEE

I don't need nobody to tell me nothing.

CUTLER

Toledo, all I gots to say is from the looks of it, from your story...I don't think life did you fair.

TOLEDO

Oh, life is fair...It's just...

LEVEE

Life ain't shit. You can put it in a paper bag and carry it around with you. It ain't got no balls. Now, death...death got some style! Death will kick your ass and make you wish you never been born! That's how bad death is! But you can rule over life.

(MORE)

LEVEE (CONT'D)

Life ain't nothing... Nigger
talking about life is fair. And
ain't got a pot to piss in.

LEVEE jumps up and tries to muscle the exit door again.

TOLEDO

See, now, I'm gonna tell you
something. A nigger gonna be
dissatisfied no matter what.

LEVEE

(struggling with the door)
Niggers got a right to be
dissatisfied. Is you gonna be
satisfied with a bone somebody done
threwed you when you see them
eating the whole hog?

TOLEDO

You lucky they let you be an
entertainer. You lucky and don't
even know it.

LEVEE

I'm talking about being satisfied
with a bone somebody done threwed
you. That's what's the matter with
you all. You satisfied...sitting in
one place. You got to move on down
the road from where you sitting. As
soon as I get my band together and
make them records like Mr.
Sturdyvant done told me I can make,
I'm gonna be like Ma and tell the
white man just what he can do. Ma
tell Mr. Irvin she leavin'...and
Mr. Irvin get down on his knees and
beg her to stay! That's the way I'm
gonna be! Make the white man
respect me!

CUTLER

The white man don't care nothing
about Ma. The colored folks made Ma
a star. White folks don't care
nothing about who she is...what
kind of music she make.

SLOW DRAG

You let her go down to one of them
white folks hotels and see how big
she is.

CUTLER

Hell, she can't even get a cab up here in the North. I'm gonna tell you something. Reverend Gates... You know Reverend Gates?... Slow Drag know who I'm talking about.

CUTLER takes the floor.

CUTLER (CONT'D)

Reverend Gates was coming from Tallahassee to Atlanta, going to see his sister who was sick at that time with the consumption. The train come up through Thomasville, then past Moultrie, and stopped in this little town called Sigsbee...

LEVEE

You can stop telling that right there! Ain't but one train. Ain't but one train come out of Tallahassee heading north to Atlanta and it don't stop at Sigsbee. The only train that stops at Sigsbee is the Santa Fe, and you have to transfer at Moultrie to get it!

CUTLER

Well, hell, maybe that's what he done! I don't know! I'm just telling you the man got off the train at Sigsbee!

LEVEE

All right...you telling it. Tell it your way. Just make up anything.

SLOW DRAG

Levee, leave the man alone and let him finish.

LEVEE

Go on tell it your way.

LEVEE walks out of the band room and into the stairway.

INT. BASEMENT STAIRWAY

LEVEE flops down on the stairs finding his own space but CUTLER words follow him.

CUTLER (O.S.)

Anyway...Reverend Gates got off this train in *Sigsbee*, figured he'd check the schedule to be sure he arrive in time for somebody to pick him up.

INT. BAND ROOM - BASEMENT

CUTLER

All right. While he's there, it come upon him that he had to go to the bathroom. The only colored restroom is an outhouse they got sitting way back two hundred yards or so from the station. All right. He in the outhouse and the train go off and leave him there. He don't know nothing about this town...in fact, ain't never even heard of it before.

LEVEE (O.S.)

(calls out)

I heard of it! And he ain't got off no train coming out of Tallahassee in *Sigsbee*!

CUTLER

(ignoring him)

The man standing there trying to figure out what he's gonna do... Where this train done left him in this strange town. It started getting dark. He sees where the sun's getting low in the sky and he's trying to figure out what he's gonna do, when he noticed a couple of white fellas standing across the street from this station. Just standing there, watching him. And then two or three more come up and joined the other one. He look around, ain't seen no colored folks nowhere. He didn't know what was getting in these here fellows' minds, so he commence to walking. He ain't knowed where he was going. He just walking down the railroad tracks when he hear, "Hey, nigger!" Just like that...

BACK TO:

INT. BASEMENT STAIRWAY

LEVEE's brow tightens.

CUTLER (O.S.)

See, just like that. "Hey, nigger!"

INT. BAND ROOM - BASEMENT

CUTLER

He kept on walking. They call him some more and he just keep walking. And then he heard a gunshot. He stopped then, you know. They crowded around him. He's standing there, got his cross around his neck and his little bible with him what he carry all the time. They ask who he is. He told them he was Reverend Gates and that he was going to see his sister who was sick and the train left without him. And they said, "Yeah, nigger...but can you dance?" He looked at them and commenced to dancing. One of them reached up and tore his cross off his neck. Said he was committing a heresy by dancing with a cross and a bible. Took his Bible and tore it up and had him dancing till they got tired of watching him. That's the only way he...

LEVEE thrusts himself back in the room.

LEVEE

What I wants to know is....if he's a man of God...then where the hell was God when all of this was going on? Why didn't God strike down them crackers with some of this lightning you talking about to me?

CUTLER

Levee, you gone burn in hell.

LEVEE

Why didn't God strike some of them crackers down? Tell me that! That's the question! Don't come telling me this burning-in-hell shit! He a man of God...

(MORE)

LEVEE (CONT'D)

why didn't God strike some of them crackers down? I'll tell you why! I'll tell you the truth! God ain't never listened to no nigger's prayers. God take a nigger's prayers and throw them in the garbage. God don't pay niggers no mind. In fact... God hate niggers! Hate them with all the fury in his heart. Jesus don't love you, nigger! Jesus hate your black ass! Come talking that shit to me. Talking about burning in hell! God can kiss my ass.

CUTLER can stand no more. He jumps up and punches LEVEE in the mouth. The force of the blow knocks LEVEE down and CUTLER jumps on him.

CUTLER

You worthless...that's my God!
That's my God! That's my God! You
wanna blaspheme my God!

TOLEDO and SLOW DRAG grab CUTLER and try to pull him off LEVEE.

SLOW DRAG

Come on Cutler...let it go! It
don't mean nothing!

CUTLER has LEVEE down on the floor and pounds him with a fury.

CUTLER

Wanna blaspheme my God! You
worthless... talking about my God!

TOLEDO and SLOW DRAG succeed in pulling CUTLER off LEVEE, who is bleeding at the nose and mouth.

LEVEE

Naw, let him go! Let him go!

He pulls out a knife.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

That's your God, huh? That's your
God, huh? Is that right? Your God,
huh? All right. I'm gonna give your
God a chance. I'm gonna give your
God a chance. I'm gonna give him a
chance to save your black ass.

LEVEE circles CUTLER with the knife. CUTLER picks up a chair to protect himself.

TOLEDO

Come on, Levee...put that knife up!

LEVEE

Stay out of this Toledo.

TOLEDO

That ain't no way to solve nothing.

SLOW DRAG

Watch him, Cutler! Put that knife up, Levee!

LEVEE alternately swipes at CUTLER during the following.

LEVEE

I'm calling Cutler's God! I'm talking to Cutler's God! You hear me? Cutler's God! I'm calling Cutler's God. Come on and save this nigger! Strike me down before I cut his throat!

CUTLER

You gonna burn in hell, nigger!

LEVEE

(to Cutler)

I'm calling your God! I'm gonna give him a chance to save you! I'm calling your God! We gonna find out whose God he is! Cutler's God! Come on and save this nigger! Come on and save him like you did my mama! Save him like you did my Mama! I heard her 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?

LEVEE becomes so caught up in his dialogue with God that he forgets about CUTLER and begins to stab upward in the air, trying to reach God.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

Come on! Come on and turn your back on me! Turn your back on me!

(MORE)

LEVEE (CONT'D)

Come on! Where is you? Come on and
turn your back on me! Turn your
back on me, motherfucker! I'll cut
your heart out! Come on, turn your
back on me! Come on! What's the
matter? Where is you? Come on and
turn your back on me! Come on, what
you scared of? Turn your back on
me! Come on! Coward, motherfucker!

LEVEE folds his knife and stands triumphantly.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

Your God ain't shit, Cutler.

THE SOUND OF THE L TRAIN VIOLENTLY ROARING, GIVES WAY TO A
TRUMPET'S WAIL--

INT. RECORDING STUDIO

THEY ARE IN SESSION, SWINGING THE END OF "HEAR ME TALKING TO
YOU". DUSSIE MAE DANCES AROUND SEDUCTIVELY AS MA RAINEY WORKS
HER BIG FINISH.

MA RAINEY

(singing)

*Hello Central / Give me 609
What it takes / to get it in these
hips of mine
You hear me talking to you / I
don't bite my tongue
You want to be my man / you better
bring it with you when you come
You want to be my man / bring it
with you when you come.*

INT. RECORDING STUDIO - BOOTH

STURDYVANT lifts the recording needle. IRVIN checks the
recording. Everyone below still, with anticipation.

IRVIN

(into the the mic)

Good! Wonderful! We have that,
boys. Good session. That's great,
Ma. We've got ourselves some
winners.

INT. RECORDING STUDIO

The FELLA's start packing up.

MA RAINEY

Slow Drag, where you learn to play the bass at? You had it singing! I heard you! Had that bass jumping all over the place.

SLOW DRAG

I was following Toledo. Nigger got them long fingers...striding all over the piano. I was trying to keep up with him.

TOLEDO

That's what you supposed to do, ain't it? Play the music.

MA RAINEY

Cutler, you hear Slow Drag on that bass? Spank it just like you spank a baby.

LEVEE strokes his horn with a cloth, cutting his eye at DUSSIE MAE. Blowing spit from the valve.

MA RAINEY (CONT'D)

Levee...what is that you was doing? Why you playing all them notes? You play ten notes for every one you supposed to play. It don't call for that.

LEVEE

You supposed to improvise on the theme. That's what I was doing.

MA RAINEY

You supposed to play the song the way I sing it. The way everybody else play it.

LEVEE

I was playing the song. I was playing it the way I felt it.

MA RAINEY

I'm trying to sing the song and you up there messing up my ear. Call yourself playing music.

LEVEE

Hey...I know what I'm doing. You all back up and leave me alone about my music.

CUTLER

I done told you...it ain't about your music. It's about Ma's music.

MA RAINEY

That's all right, Cutler. I done told you what to do.

LEVEE

What I care what you or Cutler do? Go ahead and fire me. I don't care. I'm gonna get my own band anyway.

MA RAINEY

You keep messing with me.

LEVEE

Ain't nobody studyin' you.

MA RAINEY

All right, nigger...you fired!

LEVEE

You think I care about being fired? I don't care nothing about that. You doing me a favor.

MA RAINEY

Cutler, Levee's out! He don't play in my band no more!

LEVEE

I'm fired...good! Best thing that ever happened to me. I don't need this shit!

He exits.

INT. BAND ROOM - BASEMENT

LEVEE burst through the door and crosses into the pressure cooker of a room.

Feeling trapped and humiliated, he rushes to the side exit door, and pounds it with his fists, yanking at the knob. It gives way and Levee snatches it open and bolts outside, looking for air. Nothing.

He stands there, trapped in the tiny, barren, enclosed space with high walls. No air. A pit.

INT. RECORDING STUDIO HALLWAY

IRVIN pops out of Sturdyvant's office sees CUTLER standing there.

IRVIN

Mel is on his way with your money
in a minute.

CUTLER

That's cash money, Mr. Irvin. I
don't want no check.

IRVIN

(as he goes)

I'll see what I can do. I can't
promise you nothing.

CUTLER

As long as it ain't no check. I
ain't got no use for a check.

INT. RECORDING STUDIO

IRVIN enters.

IRVIN

Ma, listen, I talked to Sturdyvant,
and he said...now, I tried to talk
him out of it...he said the best he
can do is take twenty-five dollars
of your money and give it to
Sylvester.

MA RAINEY

Take what and do what?

SYLVESTER tunes in.

MA RAINEY (CONT'D)

If I wanted the boy to have twenty-
five dollars of my money, I'd give
it to him! He supposed to get his
own money. He's supposed to get
paid like everybody else. And you
go on up there and tell Sturdyvant
he better pay the boy his own
money.

IRVIN

Ma...I talked to him...he said...

MA RAINEY

Go talk to him again! Tell him if he don't pay that boy he'll never make another record of mine again. Tell him that! You supposed to be my manager. Always talking about sticking together. Start sticking! Go on up there and get that boy his money!

She turns away, dismissing him.

IRVIN

Okay, Ma...I'll talk to him again. I'll see what I can do.

IRVIN heads right back out.

MA RAINEY picks up her purse and sits, a monument, waiting for her pay.

IRVIN re-enters this time with STURDYVANT.

STURDYVANT

Ma, is there something wrong? Is there a problem?

MA RAINEY

Sturdyvant, I want you to pay that boy his money.

STURDYVANT

Sure, Ma. I got it right here. Two hundred for you and twenty-five for the kid, right?

STURDYVANT hands the money to IRVIN, who hands it to MA and SYLVESTER.

STURDYVANT (CONT'D)

Irvin misunderstood me. It was all a mistake. Irv made a mistake.

MA RAINEY

A mistake, huh?

IRVIN

Sure, Ma. I made a mistake. He's paid, right? I straightened it out.

MA RAINEY

The only mistake was when you found
out I hadn't signed the release
forms. That was the mistake!
Dussie, Sylvester, let's go.

And she's off, DUSSIE MAE and SYLVESTER in her tailwind.

INT. RECORDING STUDIO HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

IRVIN and STURDYVANT scramble to keep up.

STURDYVANT

Hey, Ma...come on sign the forms,
huh?

IRVIN

Ma...come on now.

MA RAINEY makes her way to the exit door and snatches it
open.

EXT. RECORDING STUDIO BUILDING - ALLEY

MA RAINEY and her ENTOURAGE march up the alley.

MA RAINEY

Irvin, where's my car?

IRVIN

It's right out front, Ma. Here...I
got the keys right here. Come on,
sign the forms, huh?

EXT. RECORDING STUDIO BUILDING/STREET - EARLY EVENING

They finally reach the car. MA RAINEY inspects it.

MA RAINEY

Irvin, give me my car keys!

IRVIN

Sure, Ma...just sign the forms,
huh?

IRVIN presents the contract to her along with the keys.

MA RAINEY snatches the keys and hands them to SYLVESTER.

MA RAINEY

(to Irvin)

Send them to my address and I'll
get around to them.

SYLVESTER quickly opens her door.

IRVIN nudges past SYLVESTER.

IRVIN

Come on, Ma...I took care of
everything, right? I straightened
everything out.

MA RAINEY stops and takes a beat...

IRVIN (CONT'D)

Ma...please...

She snatches the pen.

MA RAINEY

You tell Sturdyvant...one more
mistake like that and I can make my
records someplace else.

MA RAINEY signs with a flourish.

INT. BAND ROOM - BASEMENT

CUTLER gathers his instruments and sets them by the door.

CUTLER

I know what's keeping him so long.
He up there writing out checks. You
watch. I ain't gonna stand for it.
He ain't gonna bring me no check
down here. Man give me a check last
time...you remember...we went all
over Chicago trying to get it
cashed. See a nigger with a check,
the first thing they think is he
done stole it someplace.

LEVEE

I ain't had no trouble cashing
mine.

CUTLER

I don't visit no whore houses

LEVEE

You don't know about my business.
So don't start nothing. I'm tired
of you as it is. I ain't but two
seconds off your ass noway.

TOLEDO

Don't you all start nothing now.

CUTLER

What the hell I care what you tired
of. I wasn't even talking to you. I
was talking to this man right here.

STURDYVANT bursts in.

STURDYVANT

Boys, I got your pay. Mr. Irvin
told me you boys prefer cash, and
that's what I have for you.

STURDYVANT pulls out his wad and starts peeling off some
bills.

STURDYVANT (CONT'D)

That was a good session you boys
put in...

(to Cutler)

...that's twenty-five for you.

(then)

Yessir, you boys really know your
business and we are going to...

(to Slow Drag)

...twenty-five for you...

SLOW DRAG immediately heads to his locker and grabs his hat.

STURDYVANT (CONT'D)

We are going to get you back in
here real soon...

(to Levee)

...twenty-five...

(then)

...and have another session so you
can make some more money...

(to Toledo)

...and twenty-five for you.

STURDYVANT heads out of the room into the STAIRWAY. LEVEE
quickly on his heels.

INT. BASEMENT STAIRWAY - CONTINUOUS

LEVEE

Mr. Sturdyvant, sir.

STURDYVANT stops. LEVEE pulls the door shut behind him for some privacy.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

About them songs I give you?

STURDYVANT

Oh, yes...uh...Levee. I've thought about it and I just don't think the people will buy them...they're not the type of songs we're looking for.

LEVEE steps in closer.

LEVEE

Mr. Sturdyvant, sir...I done got my band picked out and they're real good fella's. They knows how to play real good. I know if the peoples hear the music, they'll buy it.

STURDYVANT

Well, Levee...I'll be fair with you...but they're just not the right songs.

LEVEE

Mr. Sturdyvant, the people is tired of jug band music. The people in big cities want something with some fire to it. Harlem, Detroit, DC...

STURDYVANT

Okay, Levee. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give you five dollars a piece for them.

LEVEE

I don't want five dollars, Mr. Sturdyvant. I wants to record them songs like you say.

STURDYVANT

Well, Levee, like I say...they just aren't the kind of songs we're looking for.

LEVEE

Mr. Sturdyvant, you asked me to write them songs. Now, why didn't you tell me that before when I first give them to you? You told me you was gonna let me record them. What's the difference between then and now?

STURDYVANT

Well, look...I'll pay you for your trouble...

LEVEE

What's the difference, Mr. Sturdyvant? That's what I want to know.

STURDYVANT

I had my fellows play your songs...and when I heard them...They just didn't sound like the kind of songs I'm looking for right now.

LEVEE

You got to hear me play them, Mr. Sturdyvant! You ain't heard me play them. That's what's gonna make them sound right.

STURDYVANT

Well, Levee, I don't doubt that really. It's just that...well, I don't think they'd sell like Ma's records. But I'll take them off your hands for you.

LEVEE

Mr. Sturdyvant, sir. I don't know what fellows you had playing them songs...but if I could play them! I'd set them down in the people's lap! Now, you told me I could record them songs!

STURDYVANT

Well, there's nothing I can do about that. Like I say, it's five dollars a piece. That's what I'll give you. I'm doing you a favor.

(MORE)

STURDYVANT (CONT'D)

Now, if you write any more, I'll help you out and take them off your hands. The price is five dollars a piece. Just like now

LEVEE, stares blankly at STURDYVANT.

Finally, STURDYVANT stuffs the money in LEVEE's breast pocket, turns his back on him and is gone in a flash.

INT. BAND ROOM - BASEMENT

LEVEE comes back into the room seething.

THE FELLA'S avoid eye contact with him. It's clear to LEVEE that they heard it all. They silently gather up their belongings.

CUTLER crosses to get his instruments.

SLOW DRAG takes a little nip from his bottle.

TOLEDO heads over to the piano for his things. LEVEE storms over to get his trumpet and collides with TOLEDO.

LEVEE

Hey! Watch it...shit! You stepped on my shoe!

TOLEDO

Excuse me there, Levee.

LEVEE takes out his hanky and begins to furiously wipe his shoe.

LEVEE

Look at that! Look at that! Nigger, you stepped on my shoe. What you do that for?

TOLEDO

I said I'm sorry

TOLEDO turns his back to his business.

LEVEE

Nigger gonna step on my goddamn shoe! You done fucked up my shoe! Look at that! Look at what you done to my shoe, nigger! I ain't stepped on your shoe! What you wanna step on my shoe for?

CUTLER

The man said he's sorry.

LEVEE

Sorry! How the hell he gonna be
sorry after he done ruint my shoe?
Come talking about sorry! Nigger,
you stepped on my shoe! You know
that!

LEVEE snatches his shoe off his foot and holds it up for Toledo to see.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

See what you done done?

TOLEDO

What you want me to do about it?!
It's done now. I said excuse me.

LEVEE

Wanna go and fuck up my shoe like
that. I ain't done nothing to your
shoe. Look at this!

TOLEDO turns and continues to gather up his things. LEVEE spins him around by his shoulder.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

Naw...naw...look what you done!

He shoves the shoe in TOLEDO's face.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

Look at that! That's my shoe! Look
at that! You did it! You did it!
You fucked up my shoe! You stepped
on my shoe with them raggedy-ass
clodhoppers!

TOLEDO

Nigger, ain't nobody studying you
and your shoe! I said excuse me. If
you can't accept that...then the
hell with it. What you want me to
do?

LEVEE is in a near rage, breathing hard. He is trying to get a grip of himself, as even he senses, or perhaps only he senses, he is about to lose control. He looks around, uncertain of what to do. TOLEDO has gone back to packing, as have CUTLER and SLOW DRAG.

They purposefully avoid looking at LEVEE in hopes he'll calm down if he doesn't have an audience. All the weight in the world suddenly falls on LEVEE and he rushes at TOLEDO with his knife in his hand.

LEVEE

Nigger, you stepped on my shoe!

He plunges the knife into TOLEDO's back up to the hilt. TOLEDO lets out a sound of surprise and agony. CUTLER and SLOW DRAG freeze. TOLEDO falls backward with LEVEE, his hand still on the knife, holding him up. LEVEE is suddenly faced with the realization of what he has done. He shoves TOLEDO forward and takes a step back. TOLEDO slumps to the floor.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

He...he stepped on my shoe. He did.
Honest. Cutler, he stepped on my
shoe. What he do that for?
Toledo, what you do that for?
Cutler...help me. He stepped on my
shoe. Cutler!

He turns his attention to TOLEDO.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

Toledo! Toledo, get up!

He crosses to TOLEDO and tries to pick him up.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

It's okay, Toledo. Come on, I'll
help you. Come on, stand up now.
Levee'll help you.

TOLEDO is limp heavy and awkward. He slumps back to the floor. LEVEE gets mad at him.

LEVEE (CONT'D)

Don't...Don't look at me like
that...don't look at me like
that...

INT. MA RAINEYS CAR

CLOSE ON: MA RAINEY. STOIC, PENSIVE.

THE EARLY EVENING, MERCILESS, SUN ILLUMINATING HER MOIST FACE. STRIPPED OF HER POWER BUT DESPERATELY HOLDING ON TO HER PRIDE. SHE RIDES.

INT. BAND ROOM - BASEMENT

GOD'S POV:

LEVEE on his knees holding TOLEDO'S lifeless body.

LEVEE kneels and desperately pulls TOLEDO tighter into his arms, cradles him like a small child and rocks him.

CLOSE ON HANDS:

-Selecting a record disc.

-Wiping it off.

-Making the final adjustments to the equipment.

AS THE CREDITS BEGIN TO ROLL:

An all White Jazz Band lead by a Paul Whiteman-esque conductor, slightly rotund with a pencil thin mustache, plays a sanitized rendition of Levee's song.

WHITE SINGER

(smiles and sings)

*You can swing it, you can bring it
/ You can dance at any hall / You
can slide across the floor / You'll
never have to stall / Oh my jelly
roll / Oh my jelly roll / Oh my
jelly roll / Please, baby, let me
have it all.*

*You can break it, you can shake it
/ you can move and I will crawl /
you can leap across the floor /
I'll never let you fall / Oh my
jelly roll / Oh my jelly roll / Oh
my jelly roll / Please, baby, let
me have it all.*

END