

# *Celebrating African-American Music and Spirituality in August Wilson's Joe Turner's Come and Gone, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, and The Piano Lesson*

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"You sing 'cause that's a way of understanding life."  
(Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* 491).

August Wilson's plays reflect his understanding of life, capturing the power of song and the might of the spirit on the page and the stage. This understanding is one reason why he was able to tell, so vividly, the fractured and varied stories of Africans in America through theatre. In the play that first brought Wilson to national attention, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1981), Ma Rainey delivers the above line. This statement suggests something valuable about Wilson's perspective on how to march through life. With his untimely death on October 2, 2005, the time seems ripe to re-examine Wilson, his works, and his legacy in order to continue to mine his knowledge about life. Music and spirituality are integral components of Wilson's legacy; both recur as constant themes in his works as they also serve as support systems for both his characters and his audience. When Ma talks about understanding life through music, one aspect of that life that she evokes is spiritual. Spirituality, like music, has been integral to African-American life since the first African was brought to America.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I will demonstrate how Wilson utilizes music and spirituality to empower his characters, his audience, and the African-American community at large as evidenced in three of his works: *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988), *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and *The Piano Lesson* (1990).

Before his passing Wilson completed his legendary ten-play cycle chronicling African-American life. With each play in the cycle, Wilson examines a specific decade of the twentieth century. Through his opus, Wilson shines a spotlight on an African-American family tree, illuminating those niggers, Negroes, Coloreds, Blacks, and African Americans who made American history simply by existing and surviving, paving the way for contemporary African Americans. With each decade, Wilson tracks a slice of black life, often illustrating the importance of music and/or spirituality in the African-American

community; in addition, Wilson uses his characters to demonstrate the empowerment that comes from discovering one's true identity and/or the ancestors who came before.

From beating out messages on a drum to coded Negro spirituals to the use of rap as a contemporary battle cry, music and spirituality have always been significant to the African-American story because these two cultural components have oftentimes strengthened African Americans' position within American society. Because of the significance of song and spirit to African Americans, music plays a strong role in all of Wilson's works; in his plays, music often serves as a character, but more importantly, as a spiritual link to the ancestors, as well as a mode to navigate the present and future and discover (or recover) one's identity. Most of Wilson's characters (as well as some of his audience members) are searching for their unique, individual songs—songs that have been suppressed or repressed because of their placement in American society. Once Wilson's characters find their respective songs, often with the help of some form of spirituality, this recovery usually stimulates the discovery their identity as well. Detecting one's song allows the character the ability to move on with their lives, with the empowerment of spirituality and the past guiding said character. The significance of one's song and how one discovers it speak to music and spirituality's centrality to African-American life. This is Wilson's goal with his cycle of plays—showing how song and spirit help African Americans learn about and observe themselves, and move onto positive futures. The vitality of music and/or spirituality in relation to the African-American story is most evident in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and *The Piano Lesson*, and so they are the plays examined here.

In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, set in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1911, Wilson uses his protagonist, Loomis, to clarify the connection between oppression and identity, using an old song and ancestral spirits to facilitate this understanding. When Bynum is introduced, he and Loomis have an antagonistic relationship. By the end of the play, however, it is clear that Bynum is actually Loomis's guide to self-discovery. To facilitate this self-discovery, Bynum attempts to bind Loomis to his African identity and his ancestors in two ways. First, Bynum ties Loomis to his heritage with the Juba, a ritual dance that involves drumming and singing; the goal of the Juba is to invite the presence of ancestral spirits (Nobles 116). Heavily influenced by African circular dance ceremonies called the "ring shout," the Juba's dancing and singing are directed to the ancestors and gods. The tempo and revolution of the circle should quicken during the course of movement. Demonstrating the significance of this dance (and the vision that follows it), Wilson places it towards the end of Act One—an enticing cliffhanger. After the Juba, in Act Two, Bynum binds Loomis to his ancestors by singing about Joe Turner; Bynum hopes to make Loomis acknowledge his past with this song about a fictional white man who imprisoned black men. Wilson also uses Joe Turner as a symbolic representation of white oppression. In response to Bynum's song, Loomis delivers a monologue that reveals where he has come from, and to whom he is connected. Loomis does not recognize at this point that he is housing an internal battle over his identity, with his wife, Martha, on one side, representing his Christian identity, and his ancestors and Bynum on the other, representing Africa. At this point in the play, Loomis erroneously believes that Martha is where his identity rests. By the end of the play, Loomis is able to leave the Holly boardinghouse and face White America because Bynum was successful

in assisting him to discover his true identity as an African. When Loomis slashes himself with a knife, he realizes that he has to stand on his own two feet, supported by his ancestors. This is Loomis's revolutionary breakthrough. Thus, motivated by Bynum, music—most specifically the Juba and a song about Joe Turner—leads Loomis to locate himself and his connection to his ancestors.

Bynum subtly challenges Loomis to think about who he is, beginning with the Juba. In the play, the Juba actually begins when Bynum gives the “word.” He calls the dance because he is the character most connected to Africa and Yoruba culture, both of which are heavily linked to the Juba. For example, in the Yoruba language, “juba” is a verb that means “to pay homage to” (Nobles 114). Paying homage to the ancestors begins Loomis (and other characters) on his (their) journey towards self-discovery. Following Yoruba ideology, the Juba dance is highly significant to the characters' respective lost identities in *Joe Turner*; the dance is done in ring formation, with the participants singing and shouting, and demonstrates a major connection to African history and culture. The ring in which Africans dance and sing, their ancestral ties, and cultural legacy are all keys to understanding the means by which the boardinghouse residents achieve oneness in America (Anderson 452; Pereira 75). These Africans in America achieve unity within duality with the help of the Juba/ring because the Juba connects them to Africa while they are in America (Harrison 312). After and during the Juba, one should recognize that these boardinghouse residents are divided, split in two, and looking for *something*.

The characters in the Holly boardinghouse are bisected as they try to navigate spirituality and their own pasts. They are trying to connect with their African ancestors, as well as an American Christian God, as evidenced by invoking the Holy Ghost (Hayes 202). The characters are searching in their collective pasts for identity; what they find is rooted in the past (in music and dance from Africa) as well as the present (American Christianity). Thus, the characters achieve a unity that is two-fold: one, they engage with each other in the midst of this African ritualistic event; two, within the Juba, they straddle their own dualities—they are Africans in America (Hayes 201; Rich, “Panoramic History” 318). In other words, the Juba allows the characters to engage in both of their worlds—the “Americanness” symbolized through the Holy Ghost, and the “Africanness” represented by the singing, dancing, and circularity of the Juba (Hill 27). In the midst of this bonding with Mother Africa, Loomis has an outburst, which Bynum expects.

The Juba triggers Loomis's reaction for a couple of reasons: one, it presents an alternative to Loomis's “Martha is my identity” argument, demonstrating that the past (Africa) is present (in America), and has nothing to do with Martha. The Juba suggests to Loomis that his true identity is connected to his ancestors, not his wife. His resistance to this information triggers his strong, inappropriate response. Two, the Juba represents the two conflicting spiritual aspects of Loomis's life—his former Christianity (when he was a Deacon and living with Martha) and his more recent African Traditional Religion. Africans participated in ATRs before their conversion to Christianity; Bynum's root doctoring, seen at the beginning of *Joe Turner*, is one example of an expression of this religion. Another example is the vision Loomis has when he attempts to leave the Holly boardinghouse, after he denigrates God and African spirits.

As Mary L. Bogumil suggests in her article “‘Tomorrow never Comes’: Songs of Cultural Identity in August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*,” as Loomis

resists submitting to a higher power, it becomes clear that this is why he cannot be a part of the Juba (467). It makes sense that he cannot participate in a unifying activity. Because Loomis is the character who is most conflicted about his true self at this point in the play, he is unable to handle his duality, unlike the other characters engaged in the Juba. Continuing the differentiation between Loomis and the other characters, one must realize that although the Juba-dancing characters are calling on a Christian Holy Ghost, they are encasing their Christian call in an African context. This leads to African spirits coming into the Holly boardinghouse as well as the Holy Ghost; these spirits start Loomis on his journey. Initially, these spirits enter the boardinghouse because they were called on by the characters engaged in the Juba; they stay because Loomis not only disparages Christianity when he interrupts the Juba, he also denigrates Africa. It is at this moment that the spirits recognize they have to intervene. Once this happens, the Juba has connected the ancestors to the present, which is the dance's original function. In addition, the African spirits use Loomis at this particular moment to be their "spokesperson." At this point in the play, the setting (both literally and metaphorically) becomes ripe for a spiritual intervention (Pereira 73). It is at this time that Loomis really begins his journey to self-discovery. Thus, the Juba triggers Loomis's outburst, which leads him to a confrontation with his spiritual ancestors, but he is not ready to face and/or deal with them at the end of Act One.

In Act Two, Bynum continues to push Loomis's buttons, only this time Wilson does not use a dance, he uses a literal song about Joe Turner to make Loomis face his lost identity and the song that he has been suppressing for a long time. The mention of Turner's name in Bynum's song triggers another response from Loomis, and leads Bynum to state openly that Loomis does not know who he is. Basically, Bynum tells Loomis all he has to do to solve this dilemma is sing his song. Of course, Loomis does not trust in this, as he still believes that all he needs is Martha. Bynum subtly tells Loomis that he has to turn to the ancestors if he wants peace. Thus, Wilson uses a song to trigger a reaction from Loomis, moving him closer to his ancestors.

Using a song, Wilson revives the connection between Africans and African Americans that was lost during and after slavery. Towards the end of Act Two, scene two, Bynum informs Loomis and Seth that when a man forgets his song and goes off in search of it, the song is usually with the man all the time (*Joe Turner* 71). This tells the audience that Loomis always had his song—revealed at the end of the play to be the song of self-sufficiency (73). Unfortunately, at this point in the play, Loomis believes that Martha is his song. Bynum realizes when he first meets Loomis that in order for Loomis to accept his true song and destiny, he needs to come face to face with Martha in order to recognize that she is neither his song nor his future. Bynum manipulates Loomis into asking Selig to "find" Martha to facilitate this moment.

When Martha and Loomis reunite in the Holly boardinghouse, at the end of the play, this leads to a spiritual reversal (rooted in Africa) for Loomis (Burton 21). Loomis understands that he can no longer say Martha is his starting place, when she is standing right in front of him, yet he is still lost. Loomis has reached the end of his journey and believes he has nothing to show for it. As a result, he has to do *something*; he needs to engage in some action to combat this ineffectiveness. When Martha mentions the blood of the lamb, referring to Jesus, Loomis instinctively knows what he must do—he

has to show himself and the others that depending on a white savior instead of one's own ancestors or oneself is problematic. The fact that Loomis's most heightened moment in the play involves a ritual sacrifice speaks to the Africanness that was always within him, but simply suppressed. With this moment Loomis grasps that he can bleed for himself, and does not need anyone to do it for him. Loomis perceives that the Christianity he had been following before his imprisonment failed him, thus he falls back on the African Traditional Religion that led him to this point and gave him the strength to stand. Once Loomis comprehends that he has to stand on his own two feet (with help from his ancestors), Bynum tells him he shines like new money, referencing the "shiny man" Bynum talked about at the beginning of the play. According to Bynum, a shiny man is "One Who Show the Way"; Loomis is now one of these men as he moves out into the world to help other lost souls who do not know their songs, their history, or their stories. Thus, Wilson uses the Loomis character to demonstrate how music and spirituality can lead one to their true, strong, empowered identity/song; Wilson hopes that Loomis's story will do the same thing for his audience.

While Loomis serves as a positive example for Wilson's audience, in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Wilson uses a character's negative example to educate them. With *Ma Rainey*, Wilson creates black characters in 1927 Chicago who are allegorical representations, musicians suffocating under an oppressive American social structure that continuously tells them they are nothing. Wilson adapts the real Ma Rainey's story to aid him in creating his fictional singer. By using a real blues figure, Wilson's message takes on more weight; the play becomes not just a figment of his imagination, but rather a quasi-historical document with some fictional, illustrative characters. Wilson examines representations of the religious black man (Cutler), the sassy black mama character (Ma Rainey), and the confused black man (Levee) in this play. As is his usual mode of operation, Wilson shows the necessity of embracing one's personal and ancestral past and the people who reside in this circle in order to alleviate present persecution. In *Ma Rainey*, Levee attempts to run away from his past. As with Loomis, any Wilson character who avoids or does not respect his/her past is going to be used to teach a lesson. Levee's repression of his past is metaphorically represented by his choice of music—jazz. Although music is used in the majority of Wilson's plays, it is used most explicitly in *Ma Rainey*.

While Wilson's other cycle plays are set in Pittsburgh, *Ma Rainey* takes place in Chicago, allowing the playwright to examine the ideological battle between the blues and jazz. According to Ma Rainey scholar Sandra R. Lieb, 1927 was a year of crossroads for the blues and jazz. It was during this year, in Chicago, that jazz wrestled the popular musical crown away from the blues (Lieb 37, 39, 42; Stewart-Baxter 44). In addition to popularity, the progression from the blues to jazz was not just about music, but connected to how African Americans dealt with their lives. As Ma tells Cutler, the blues are "life's way of talking. You don't sing to feel better. You sing 'cause that's a way of understanding life" (491). Ma, who sings the blues, understands life. Levee, who does not want to sing the blues, does not want to accept his being. This is his fatal mistake. Levee could have learned about himself by simply looking around the band room—for kernels of both music and spiritual knowledge.

In *Ma Rainey*, Wilson encourages African Americans to embrace the blues as a time-honored way of dealing with the negative parts of their lives. Throughout the

course of the play, the music—in addition to serving as quasi-dialogue (when characters sing)—is often used as a plot point: the music motivates the action, moving the plot along through the battles between Levee and Ma, who personify the conflict between the blues and jazz. Ma's music enriches her southern audience, while Levee is looking to be relevant in the white world, completely ignoring majority oppression, which has plagued him most of his life. By gravitating towards jazz and ignoring the blues, Levee does not manage the cultural, relational, and aesthetic balancing act that Ma does, partly because he is too eager to please dominant culture.

Wilson uses music to establish combat lines, creating musical battles between the blues and jazz in the play. Most characters express their resentment toward American society as they sing the blues, while the newer form of jazz encourages Levee to flee from his oppression. In the south, from post-Civil War through the 1920s, the blues allowed an oppressed people to obtain strength in the midst of their tribulations. On the other hand, as Philip E. Smith II suggests in his article, "*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom: Playing the Blues as Equipment for Living*," the newer jazz asked a burdened people to party their blues away (181). This dismissive quality attracts Levee to jazz. At the end of the play, when a white producer (Sturdyvant) rejects Levee's jazz music, the character crumbles; Wilson argues that the blues could have helped Levee temper his emotions and suppress his self-destructive and violent reaction. Wilson's characters and their actions are defined by musical choices, making *Ma Rainey* a blues-as-drama presentation.

In his quest for success, Levee avoids his past because of the death and destruction it holds, while Ma, throughout the course of the play, constantly uses the power of her past and her audience to make demands of Sturdyvant and Irvin (Ma's manager). There is a link between Ma and her audience, which allows her and them to acknowledge and deal with the oppression in their lives; this musical connection about oppression ironically empowers Ma. Ma's music and its connection to her past give her power, and define her character. Her blues are about forming community with others who are suffering the same problems. It should not be surprising that Levee shuns the old forms, as did the 1920s black bourgeoisie, since he himself aspires to enter the black middle class. Levee feels that he is entitled to something—possibly respect, definitely success as it is defined in America—to some extent because white men killed his father, but also because he is a black man with talent. Instead of finding this success within himself and his past, however, Levee hopes to re-invent himself, to hide his old self in the new middle class Levee. Levee depends on the new jazz to achieve this, not recognizing its intricate connection to the old blues.

In structure, both types of music are similar; it is the ideology behind the two types of music that are different. The blues are an older form of music, from which the later jazz metamorphoses. Ironically, Levee's jazz music can be disseminated to a popular audience *because of* the success of Ma's blues. Levee does not recognize that his new music is really the old music transformed. He also does not acknowledge that he owes the blues a debt of gratitude; instead of offering this acknowledgment, he belittles the blues and runs from the past it denotes. Levee's music looks toward the future; in his mind, the future has to be better than the past he endured.

In her dissertation, "Emi: The Concept of Spirit in Selected Plays of August Wilson," Vera Lynn Nobles explains the difference between Levee and Ma and the other

band members, and how this difference relates to cultural identity. Nobles states:

Rainey and the three older musicians identify with *their musical heritage* and so indicate by refusing to adopt the innovations desired by Levee, who is driven by his strong sense of individualism and *disconnection to other humans* because of his lack of *cultural identity* and allegiance to tradition. (82, emphasis added)

Levee's passion for jazz and innovation would, under different circumstances, be a perfectly legitimate choice. But he chooses to adopt jazz, individuality, and improvisation in order to run away from his heritage, which disconnects him from his fellow band members. So, even when Levee is using something from his past (improvisation), he is not using it in a positive, communal way, but rather in a disruptive, destructive way. Levee's negative co-opting of the blues, and his gravitating to jazz in general, is indicative of how he deals with racism. Unlike Ma and the other band members who *live in* their oppression through music, Levee's music allows him to run away from his grief and pain. Levee's strategy is to ignore his anguish and suffering. Smith writes that: "Levee's solution for the problems of black people is to forget them, as Irvin and Sturdyvant have urged; he sings and dances a few lines of 'Doctor Jazz': 'when the world goes wrong and I have got the blues / He's the man who makes me put on my dancing shoes'" (181). This is unlike Ma, whose blues music allows her and her audience members to live within the pain of oppression in order to learn how to cope with it. Levee, on the other hand, is attracted to jazz because this type of music is about putting on your dancing shoes, ignoring your blues and going out to party. Levee's utilization of jazz recalls the ancient Roman use of bread and circus: if we (those in power) distract with flash, maybe the people will not see or address their very real problems. Ma and her "family" realize that pretending a problem is not there is not the solution, the fix is to trumpet the problem, which is what she does with her music.

Continuing Wilson's belief that music is paramount to African-American life, he uses musical structure to dramatize the most important past moments in his characters' lives. Wilson depicts the band members' confrontations with racism through riffs, vamps, and blues solos, which are actually realized in the play through storytelling and monologue; each band member's riffs/vamps/blues solos also serve as allegories (Elkins 37). In other words, these stories illustrate instances of American history, a history that includes a great deal of oppression. Gena Caponi, borrowing from Albert Murray in *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin', and Slam Dunking*, defines a blues riff as "a brief musical phrase that is repeated, sometimes with very subtle variations, over the length of a stanza as the chordal pattern follows its normal progression" (98). A riff is brief, differentiating it from a blues solo, which, as the name implies, is more like an entire song. Wilson presents blues riffs as brief stories, instead of the more traditional "brief musical phrase" mentioned in the previous quote. With Wilson's riffs, it is not as if the same, specific story is told and re-told in the play, but rather various stories are provided on the same topic of oppression, thus achieving "subtle variations" on a theme. The "length of a stanza" following "its normal progression" is similar to the action of the play progressing forward, occasionally being interrupted by these riffs, which then add substance to the story/action. The action in this play is recording Ma's songs; this activity is punctuated by stories/riffs from the band members and Ma. The characters' actions occur because of the oppression found in

the riffs, vamps, and blues solos.

The riffs that Wilson writes for the band members (and to a lesser degree, Ma) are often about their uncensored perceptions of white Americans and the hardships they (or their peers) endure at the hands of Whites; this is also seen through Wilson's use of vamps. The word "vamp" is defined by Murray as "an improvised *introduction* consisting of anything from the repetition of a choral progression as a warm-up exercise to an improvised overture" (96; emphasis added). The band members' different, though similar, stories about oppression are representative of "the repetition of a choral progression." In Marilyn Elkins's *August Wilson: a Casebook*, Eileen Crawford places the blues term "vamp" within the context of the play: "Their [the band members] narratives told in a vamp-until-ready motif as they await Ma's appearance disclose their encounters with America's virulent racism in the 1920s" (Elkins 36). The difference between a vamp and a riff is placement—vamps occur before an event. Vamps introduce something, in this case, Ma's arrival. So, all of the stories before Ma's arrival can be classified as vamps, while those after her arrival are riffs or blues solos. The riffs and vamps told by the band members can also be referred to as prose blues. Whether these stories are called prose blues, vamps or riffs, they are all indicative of Blacks' equipment for living in White America, and used to deal with the cruelty enacted by Whites (Smith 179). Since music is so crucial to the African-American story, it is not surprising that Wilson structures *his* story this way. As he configures his placement of riffs and vamps, Wilson does what Levee does not—turns back to the past for guidance.

Wilson turns back to Africa and its storytelling tradition, as he creates riffs that allow his characters to talk about their oppression. Wilson uses the oral principal to expose his characters' historical lives. Although there are many ways to realize these characters' histories, Wilson uses the blues to encourage an understanding of their lives. This is the function of the blues in Wilson's plays—to facilitate storytelling, to help African Americans, and to give honor to Mother Africa. Wilson scholar Joan Herrington clarifies the role of the blues-man, and how it connects to Wilson and Africa: "A descendant of the *griote*, an African story teller, the blues-man's role was to voice the truths, ironies, joys, heartbreak, and suppressed anger of the community. Wilson also understands the ways in which people use the blues as comfort and solace" (27). One way in which Wilson utilizes the blues as relief is to show how the blues can heal (Herrington 29). Like the griote and real blues-men, Wilson's fictional blues-men and the blues themselves tell stories; oftentimes these stories bring comfort to fellow sufferers. Wilson uses the oral principal to tell his drama, utilizing the blues and oppression, placing them within storytelling and monologue. Wilson's use of storytelling does not only relay content information, but also tells something about the character's essence, as is seen with Levee's blues solo.

Wilson uses a blues solo, in the form of a monologue, at the end of Act One to detail the racial atrocities that live in Levee's past, and impact his present choices. This monologue, which exemplifies Wilson's affinity for storytelling, attempts to illustrate why Levee is running from the injustices in his past, what his grievances are, and how Levee's past leads to his current resentment. Toward the end of Act One, after Sturdyvant leaves the band members in the band room, they tease Levee about shucking and jiving in front of the producer. Levee responds that he knows how to handle the white man—from experience. Before his past is revealed in the blues solo, most of Levee's comments/lines



are funny or annoying. After his past is revealed, Levee's lines take on a more serious air, and can be understood in a graver manner. Levee is not solely responsible for his circumstances; his worldview did not develop in a vacuum. Wilson explains the trajectory of Levee's life by providing information about Levee's violent childhood. These childhood events leave Levee harboring and repressing a hatred that continues to fester until it is triggered by Sturdyvant's rejection and Toledo stepping on his shoes. Once Toledo steps on his shoes, Levee stabs and kills him. By giving Levee his blues solo, what Wilson does, as Sandra G. Shannon suggests, is weed out the real culprits (those white men who abused Levee in his childhood) in Toledo's murder ("The Long" 144). Childhood abuse shapes how the adult Levee deals with oppression and violent feelings, which is to say—not like Ma and the other band members.

As previously stated, Levee uses jazz in order to run away from his past. It is interesting, yet not surprising, that Levee has to utilize the blues in order to tell his story, which demonstrates, in Wilson's world, the significance of the blues, even for those who reject them. When Levee explains himself to the other band members through storytelling/monologue, he momentarily does what Ma always does—uses the blues to connect with her folk over the terrors of oppression. With Levee's blues solo, this is the closest all of the band members come to being on the same page; this is the function of the blues—to create bridges within communities. As Levee relays a defining moment from his past that shapes his view of American race relations, one can almost imagine Levee in a spotlight singing his song, his blues solo. Unfortunately, Levee does not stay in this space for long; he does not find comfort and solace, the blues do not heal him, mostly because he does not allow it. This is clear the first time Levee actually sings in Act Two: he performs a jazz song. It is as if he has forgotten his blues solo. This is unfortunate, because Levee would not stab Toledo at the end of the play if he could maintain the communal power of his blues solo, as Ma and the other band members do. Music is not the only example that Levee could follow. He could glean a way to live life from Cutler's spiritual example.

If Levee would have looked at his fellow band members, like Cutler, he may have seen another way to handle Sturdyvant's rejection; to demonstrate this, Wilson contrasts Levee with Cutler to show how spirituality in one's life can provide a positive means to survive in an abusive society. Wilson presents Levee and Cutler as spiritual antagonists (just as Ma and Levee are musical antagonists), with Cutler embracing the church and Levee rejecting it. Levee is doomed in Wilson's world, because, as Shannon suggests, "Wilson emphasizes the bleak prospects of African American men who do not embrace Christianity [and] suggests that little good comes to those who totally abandon their God, regardless of how they perceive Him" ("The Good" 131). Unlike Loomis from *Joe Turner*, who did reject Christianity, but in favor of African Traditional Religion (Loomis's "God"), Levee does not replace the rejected faith with any form of spirituality. Thus, "little good" can come to Levee. Basically, using Levee's negative example, Wilson argues for the importance of embracing something larger than oneself (Reed 95).

Cutler's connection to a higher power makes him "sensible," as Wilson describes him in the stage directions; the church gives Cutler some direction and structure (*Ma Rainey* 431). Throughout the play, Levee and Cutler's arguments focus mostly on religion. Cutler is devout; his father is a deacon in the church, and Cutler often evokes God's name. He calls Levee the devil when Levee blasphemes; when Levee begins to denigrate God,

Cutler tells him that “ain’t nothing gonna work for you,” implying that God has control over human destiny (Wilson, *Ma Rainey* 439, 457). Being Black in America does not afford Cutler much political weight, but through his connection to God, Cutler is able to latch on to something bigger than himself, something with a larger purpose. Cutler’s Christianity (with its inherent moral code) also gives him some boundaries that allow him to live a “good” life. The church is a part of his past; it is what he knows, and he embraces it. This belief system tempers Cutler’s oppression.

Levee is at the opposite end of the spiritual spectrum. Levee’s disdain for the African-American church, God, and all things religious highlights his isolation from his people and himself. He refuses to connect with a world greater than his own, an infinite world; this action is ultimately self-destructive (Herrington 38). When Levee witnesses his family’s destruction, he turns his back on God, as he believes God does with his mother. He believes that he can find success without God.

Levee’s lack of faith in a higher being is significant for another reason: it is harder to lose control when there are boundaries. Levee does not realize, as Cutler does, that a relationship with a higher being might give his life more definition and control in a world where Blacks, for the most part, lack any real control. While Levee’s faithlessness does not directly lead to the murder at the end of the play, it does make the path to violence easier to follow. This issue of “something bigger than oneself” is present in both spirituality and music. This point allows both Cutler and Ma to navigate their lives, Cutler through his God, and Ma through her music. Levee, who does not have either character’s power of spirit or song, winds up destroyed. Wilson argues that this fatal mistake might have been avoided if Levee really looked around the band room at his community.

Wilson uses Levee and his choices as an allegorical guide, telling contemporary African Americans that they need to depend on their pasts as they move into their futures. Wilson suggests that Levee’s is not a good path for African Americans to take *because* it is not rooted in the communal. Levee does not want to be a team player; this decision alienates him from his people, both past and present. If Levee had dealt with and understood his past and his oppression, he would not have turned to Sturdyvant for support. Levee is reminiscent of Loomis in a number of ways: both characters serve as allegorical guides; both characters are not able to be a part of their black “villages,” to each character’s detriment; and both characters place their respective identities in the wrong people (i.e., Martha and Sturdyvant). *Ma Rainey* suggests that neither self-discovery nor success (material or otherwise) can be achieved by relying on one’s oppressor. Tragedy can result when the oppressed (Levee) expects his oppressor (Sturdyvant) to provide an escape route from persecution, as opposed to depending on similarly burdened people (Ma and the other band members). Instead of taking Levee’s path, Wilson illustrates that in order to achieve a true sense of self, the pain of the past cannot be subdued; and neither can one’s troubles be easily forgotten, as Levee attempts to do. Levee is a doomed character from the beginning, because he places his undying faith in Sturdyvant. Levee’s fascination with Sturdyvant’s white power blinds him to his own past and *its* power. By writing jazz, Levee is trying to please Sturdyvant and find popular/white acceptance. This quest for white approval, all the while ignoring his past, leads to Levee’s downfall. At the end of the play, destruction and violence surround Levee because he has placed

his search for his song at the feet of the enemy. In order to obtain the identity he strives for, Levee's music has to be consumed by a white audience. When music appropriator Sturdyvant figuratively and literally snatches Levee's song from him, his dreams are crushed, which ruins his future. Because Levee never finds his true song, as did Loomis in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, his character serves as a negative allegory. As such, by the end of the play, Levee has no greater self-knowledge than at the beginning.

*Ma Rainey* is a cautionary tale to African-American audiences about the dangers of oppression: Do not run away from your past, do not depend on your oppressor to help you climb out of oppression, embrace spirituality through a higher power, and depend on your community. Wilson dramatizes each of these points through a music motif, so his audience never loses sight of the significance of music in African-American life—past, present, and future. While music and spirituality are present in all of Wilson's works, in *Ma Rainey*, it seems that music drives more of the story, while in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, spirituality dominates. In *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson weaves both cultural components in order to propel his story forward.

*The Piano Lesson*, set in 1936 Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, tells the story of two protagonists: battling siblings Berniece and Boy Willie Charles. The crux of this battle is the family's piano—what should be done with it: sell it, as Boy Willie wants, or ignore it, as Berniece does? Neither honors the fact that the ghosts of the Charles family are figuratively and literally housed within the piano. In *The Piano Lesson*, the sins of the past control the present. In order to seize the future, both sister and brother must, according to theater critic Frank Rich, take a supernatural journey in history ("A Family" 245). Narratively, ghosts and spirits often are manifestations of the past, so it is highly appropriate that they are present in this play, considering that the past is so crucial to the action. For example, Sutter's ghost plays a major role throughout the play, but especially during the ending, as he fights Boy Willie. At the end of the play, after the battle, the siblings' heritage is finally honored (and their future secured) when Berniece calls on the past (really deceased family members) with a newly remembered and accepted song. Since the Charles family ancestors are benevolent spirits, they remind the protagonists (and Wilson's audience) that spirituality and music are powerful tools to be used to attack an enemy, as opposed to each other; this is Wilson's "piano lesson."

The fight between Sutter (a malevolent ghost representing the family that formerly owned the Charles family) and the siblings is a metaphorical one that depicts how the African-American "family" (meaning the entire community) can work together to triumph over an oppressive past (e.g., slavery) that continues to haunt the present. As with Loomis, this victory occurs when the familial participants respect and depend on their ancestors. At the end of the play, Berniece recognizes that Sutter, not Boy Willie, is her real enemy, and this realization drives her literal move to the long ignored piano, where she plays a song that allows the ancestors to run Sutter out of the Charles family home. At this moment, the battle moves from Sutter's ghost vs. Boy Willie to Sutter's ghost vs. the spirits of the Charles family ancestors. The Charles family remains victorious (and Sutter stays away) as long as the piano and its history do not die. When Berniece sings her song, she accepts her identity as Charles family cultural mother, who now honors and transforms the family's painful past, instead of ignoring it. Once this happens, both Berniece and Boy Willie know that family history should neither be forgotten nor sold.

Although Wilson uses a debate between Berniece (Ignore the piano?) and Boy Willie (Sell the piano?) to structure this play, he does not lose sight of one of his major influences—the blues. The overall structure of the play resembles a blues song, in which verses develop different ideas, but the chorus returns to the same point (Francis 14). The verses can be thought of as exchanges of dialogue, in which the siblings explain why the piano should remain in the house, or be sold. Since Wilson encases their blues within a debate structure, there are two points of view. Each character sings a verse and chorus, and then yields as the other character does the same. It is not until the end of the play (and debate) that both characters sing the same chorus—the piano will stay in the Charles household and must be used. But until this point, the debate follows two tracks. Boy Willie's first verse is, "She [Berniece] ain't got to sell it [the piano]. I'm gonna sell it. I own just as much of it as she does" (Wilson, *Piano* 12). Berniece's first verse counters, "if he [Boy Willie] come up here thinking he gonna sell that piano then he done come up here for nothing" (27). In a blues song, the chorus repeats a single idea, sometimes verbatim. In the play, Boy Willie literally, consistently returns verbatim to the same refrain when he says: "I got one part of it. Sell them watermelons and get me another part. Get Berniece to sell that piano and I'll have the third part" (9). With the sale of the piano, Boy Willie can buy the recently deceased Sutter's land. These verses and chorus define his character's function and his placement within the play—Boy Willie wants to sell his heritage in order to mark out a place in the hierarchy of American capitalism. In addition to staking a place for himself, Boy Willie wants to get some quasi-revenge for his elder male family members. Boy Willie believes that if he owns the land that puts him in a position of power, for everyone to see; this is a privilege his father, grandfather, and other male relatives did not have. Berniece, however, is right behind Boy Willie, waiting to rebut his point. In response to Boy Willie's chorus, Berniece provides various versions of the following counterpoint: "I ain't selling that piano, Boy Willie. If that's why you come up here you can just forget about it" (27).

Continuing the debate between Berniece and Boy Willie, Wilson gives each of his protagonists various tactics to get his/her opponent to their side. For example, in the midst of trying to prevent Boy Willie from taking the piano, Berniece presents a gendered argument. She does not want to feel anymore unnecessary pain, as previous female Charles generations have; it is fear of becoming like these women that motivates Berniece to flee the past, where so much agony dwells. The female Charles members are the ones who are left behind when the Charles men are killed; the women house the pain. Berniece ignores her past so she does not become one of these women. This is similar to the ideology Levee (in *Ma Rainey*) follows; luckily for Berniece, her conclusion is more hopeful.

At the end of the play, right before Berniece saves Boy Willie from Sutter's ghost, she recognizes that these women are in her genes and that they are her destiny, as she is theirs; once Berniece accepts this fact, she accepts the piano as a powerful tool to be used for familial enrichment. Originally, Berniece believed that she did not need her ancestors; she thinks her potential suitor and Christian preacher Avery is enough to exorcise Sutter's spirit from the Charles house. When Avery cannot save her, instinct kicks in.

Wilson writes the following stage directions for the play's climax: "From

somewhere old, [...] Berniece realizes what she must do" (*Piano* 106). Berniece must embrace her family's history in order to save her brother and to become a full person herself. This realization is not provoked by anything dramatic—Avery simply admits his failure. Berniece recognizes that she has to make a connection with the past in order to move into the future, and save Boy Willie's future. It is at this point that Berniece literally calls the ancestors' names and states: "I want you to help me" (107). Once this happens, Berniece connects the past to the present, and realizes (along with Boy Willie) the value of the piano.

Both siblings come to learn how to respect their heritage; once again, this realization is bound up in music and spirituality, as represented through Berniece's song and the ghost-infested piano that has connected the Charles and Sutter families for three generations. Originally, Berniece did not respect the piano and has not touched it since her mother died because the memories, including a husband and father's unnatural deaths, are too painful for her. The past is also painful for Boy Willie; he becomes a black man driven to prove himself equal to the white man. Boy Willie intends to achieve this goal by selling his family history. Wilson shows his audience that both solutions—to sell or shun one's heritage—are problematic; instead, he advocates embracing the past in order to navigate the present and future, all with the help of some familial spirits tickling the ivories.

In this play, familial spirits quell the acrimonious relationship between brother and sister. Eventually, Berniece and Boy Willie respect and embrace their heritage, as both recognize that the piano must remain in the Charles home and be used. Now, Berniece thrives as "cultural mother," as she continues to teach her daughter, Maretha, both piano lessons and Charles family history lessons. With this new worldview, Berniece bestows in Maretha a sense of heritage that strengthens her as she moves into her future. The daughter's future is bound to Wilson's message—do not sell your family history, and do not ignore it, but rather use it to fight your contemporary battles.

In each of these plays, the search for what Wilson calls the character's song is paramount. Characters can either literally find their songs, as Berniece does, or figuratively uncover them, as Loomis does. In each of the plays, characters sing, oftentimes in order to express their pain. Even when his plays do not have an obvious musical angle, the blues dictate how Wilson writes his characters and creates their pasts, pain, and joy. In addition to music, Wilson uses spirituality to tell his characters' stories. At the base of all of his works, Wilson realizes and wants his audience to perceive that one cannot tell the African-American story without couching it within music and spirituality.

Music and spirituality are important in Wilson's entire cycle of history plays, to varying degrees. I tend to divide Wilson's oeuvre into two areas: pre- and post-"rediscovery" of Wilson's "first" play, *Jitney* (1979). This article addressed only three of Wilson's plays, but music and/or spirituality figure significantly into the remaining pre-*Jitney* plays as well. In *Seven Guitars* (1996), the protagonist is a blues musician who is seen ascending to Heaven by other characters. This musician, Floyd Barton, like Levee in *Ma Rainey*, is trying desperately to become a successful black musician in White America. Intriguingly, Wilson uses a song, "Buddy Bolden Blues" to prevent Floyd from ever reaching his goals. In *Fences* (1986), a song about a dog named Old Blue allows a family to survive the patriarch's death, and move on from their fractured status, as his

spirit watches over them from...wherever. And in *Two Trains Running* (1992), as with *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson blends music and spirituality to help contemporary African Americans make choices through his allegorical characters. The music has (temporarily) stopped in this world, symbolized by Memphis's broken jukebox. In a Wilson play, clearly no good can come from the music stopping; the ensuing silence can be equated to a person losing his/her spirit. Aunt Ester is the spiritual focus of this play, and her ethereal presence continues to resonate in all three post-*Jitney* plays, and the 1980s and 1990s plays—*King Hedley II* (2005) and *Radio Golf*, respectively—as well. We actually see Aunt Ester in the first (chronological) play in the cycle, *Gem of the Ocean* (2006). Whatever incarnation Aunt Ester is in, her function remains the same: she is a spiritual (even when she is physical) connection between Africa and America. Without our spirits or the music, Wilson argues that we are just empty husks. The importance of these two cultural components, music and spirituality, fed Wilson as he created his cycle, and they are to feed us as we devour Wilson's theatrical messages.

When one engages in a theatrical experiment that has the scope and breadth of Wilson's project (his writing process spanned at least 26 years!), over the course of time, facets of the project are going to wane and/shift; this is true of Wilson's project as well. Before the rediscovery of *Jitney* (revised in 1996, 1998 and 1999), there was an incandescent heat and glow around Wilson, which is most clearly seen during the *Ma Rainey, Fences, Joe Turner, and The Piano Lesson* hey-day. With *Two Trains Running* and *Seven Guitars*, the heat was cooling. In some ways it is too soon to place *Gem of the Ocean, Jitney, King Hedley II*, and Wilson's last play, *Radio Golf* within this comparison. What will be interesting is, with Wilson's untimely death, will new attention be placed on what I call the post-*Jitney* plays? I would imagine the answer would be "Yes," if Wilson has anything to say about it. What we need to remember is just because Wilson is no longer physically with us does not mean he is not still looking out for his community. In some ways, Wilson's present spirit status puts him in a more powerful position to guide his descendants, and lead us all to our songs.

### Notes

1. For the purposes of this essay I choose the encompassing term "spirituality" over the more common "religion," as the practices of various characters reflect several belief systems and traditions. In America, it is common to equate religion with an organized institution—typically the Christian church. While spirituality can refer to Christianity, it can pertain to African Traditional Religion as well. Also, while religion tends to connote an organized group of people who believe the same thing, spirituality speaks to a more personal relationship between someone and their higher power.

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