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)
Mmmn, mmm / Mmmn, mmm...

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, his 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?

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

STUDYVANT enters from the control booth.

STUDYVANT
I’m not putting up with any Royal Highness...Queen of the Blues bullshit.

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

STUDYVANT
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, STUDYVANT 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 sloooowly 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 RAINNEY’S JOURNEY TO THE RECORDING STUDIO.

INT. COLORED ONLY HOTEL - LOBBY

GERTRUDE “MA” RAINNEY 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 RAINNEY 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 RAINY
Irvin, you better tell this man who I am! You better get him straight!

IRVIN
Ma, what the hell happened?!

MA RAINY
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 RAINY
Assault and what for what!

DUSSIE MAE
(to Irvin)
See...Sylvester was driving and he don’t know...

MA RAINY
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.
MA RAINY'S BLACK BOTTOM

DUSSIE MAE
That’s Ma’s car!

SYLVESTER
That’s Ma’s car!

MA RAINY
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 RAINY
He got ugly with me!

POLICEMAN
...causing a disturbance...

MA RAINY
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 RAINNEY 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 RAINNEY
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 RAINNEY 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 RAINNEY
That’s my nephew Sylvester, and
that there’s Dussie Mae.

IRVIN
Hello.

MA notices TOLEDO standing there holding the sandwiches.

MA RAINNEY
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 prims 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 RAINELY
They off somewhere rehearsing. Come here...let me see that dress.

DUSSIE MAE comes over. MA RAINLEY 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-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 RAINNEY
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 RAINNEY 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-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-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 throats! 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 RAINNEY’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 "scooched 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 RAINNEY
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 RAINNEY
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 RAINNEY
What band? The band work for me!

IRVIN
He stutters, Ma. They say he
stutters.

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

LEV EE
It was Cutler!

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

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

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

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

MA RAINNEY
Well, all right. Thank you.

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

MA RAINNEY
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 RAINNEY (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 RAINNEY'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-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 RAINNEY
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 RAINNEY
Where's my Coke. I need a Coke. Hot as it is. Where's my Coke?

IRVIN
What's the matter Ma?

MA RAINNEY
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 RAINNEY
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.

LEVÉE 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 RAINÉE
Sturdyvant, get out of my face.

IRVIN enters.

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

SLOW DRAG is immediately on point.

MA RAINÉE (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 RAINNEY (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 RAINNEY
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 RAINNEY
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.
Sylvestor, 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-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 RAINELY (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 RAINNEY "bearhugs" SYLVESTER.

MA RAINNEY
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 RAINNEY
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 RAINNEY
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 RAINNEY
This is the most disorganized...

MA RAINNEY marches across the room to get her things. SYLVESTER and DUSIE 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 RAINNEY, 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 lightening 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 RAINNEY WORKS HER BIG FINISH.

MA RAINNEY
(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 RAINYE
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 RAINYE 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 RAINYE
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 RAINYE
A mistake, huh?

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

IRVIN
Ma...come on now.

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

EXT. RECORDING STUDIO BUILDING – ALLEY

MA RAINNEY and her ENTOURAGE march up the alley.

MA RAINNEY
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 RAINNEY inspects it.

MA RAINNEY
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 RAINNEY 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