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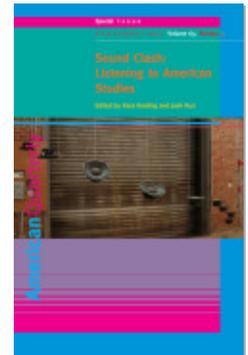
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## The Recording Studio on Stage: Liveness in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

Jessica E. Teague

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. . . . 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.

—Ma Rainey, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

August Wilson has noted in several interviews that when he first set out to write a play about the blues singer Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, he was interested in writing about the economic exploitation of black musicians.<sup>1</sup> With the sounds of blues singers emanating from his record player, he began to find the voices of his characters. The explosive themes alongside the musical language of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984) became the vehicle that launched Wilson's career. As the play went from a staged reading at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center's National Playwright Conference in 1982 to the Cort Theatre on Broadway in 1984, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* proved the catalyst for Wilson's ten-play “Pittsburgh Cycle” on the history of African Americans in the twentieth century. Critical discourse about the play has centered on the themes of racial exploitation, especially the struggle between the black musicians and the white producer, white manager, and white police officer.<sup>2</sup> However, the importance of Wilson's message has overshadowed his nuanced treatment of the problematic tension between *live* and *recorded* sound in the twentieth century.

Borrowing its title from one of Ma Rainey's most famous songs, the play dramatizes the 1927 Chicago recording session that produced several of her most well-known recordings, including “Ma Rainey's Black Bottom,” “Hear Me Talking to You,” “Moonshine Blues,” and “Prove It On Me.” But although Ma Rainey carries the title role of Wilson's play, much of the action takes place in the dialogue between the musicians in her band as they await her arrival at the studio. The discussion among the band members leading up to and following the recording session foreground the many tensions at play between the black musicians and the white recording company, as well as between the changing

desires of jazz in the face of older blues traditions. As recordings became more popular and began to play a more prominent role in the musical economy, the priorities of musicians necessarily shifted. Thus the play raises important questions about the relationships between black musicians within an exploitative economic system, but it also stages questions about the relationship among media: between recordings and live performance, and specifically theater. What does it mean to *stage* a recording session, we might ask?

To answer this question requires that I bring into dialogue two fields that do not often meet: jazz studies and performance studies. I argue that it is precisely by locating a recording session within a play—by exploring the intermediality of theater as live and recording as not live—that Wilson is able to perform the fraught tension in blues and jazz history between live improvised performance and recordings. I begin this investigation by situating the play within the ongoing conversation among jazz scholars about the status of recordings as historical evidence and the aesthetic of “the break.” I then explore how the text and action of the play might be said to *evade* the recording and translate the break to theater. And finally, I look at how various productions have addressed the embedded issue of how to deal with recordings in light of the “musicians” onstage.

### Liveness and “the Break”

Of the many theoretical debates surrounding jazz and blues music, it is an endemic irony that although improvisation is one of the defining qualities of jazz, so much of what we think of as jazz stems from “definitive” recordings—that is, frozen versions of a music that *moves*. A record may capture a particular performance of an improvised solo, but the act of recording transforms the nature of the performance from one that was temporally bound—or *live*—to one that can be repeated. As Jed Rasula puts it, “Recording tends to reify improvisation, converting the extemporaneous into scripture” leading to the cult of the recording.<sup>3</sup> Official jazz history often reads like a discography, and the fetishization of the record by musicians and fans alike has led to a strange conflation of jazz with its recordings. Even the practice of improvisation paradoxically relies on recordings as one of its primary pedagogical strategies, and generations of aspiring musicians have learned to play and to improvise by listening repeatedly to certain recordings and imitating the solos. Famous examples of this practice include young musicians learning Coleman Hawkins’s improvisation on “Body and Soul” or John Coltrane’s “Giant Steps.”

While Rasula writes specifically about jazz, his arguments echo broader discussions about the relationship between recording technologies and performance. For the burgeoning field of sound studies, the common wisdom has suggested that sound-reproduction technologies separate sound from the source that produces it, allowing us to hear the voices of the dead.<sup>4</sup> Associating sound-recording technology with death has created a dualistic relationship between recorded sounds and what we now call live sounds. In his book *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (2008), the performance studies scholar Philip Auslander has argued that “the meaning of liveness be understood as historical and contingent rather than determined by immutable differences.”<sup>5</sup> Liveness, according to Auslander, came into being as a concept with the age of recording and broadcast technologies and therefore has no inherent qualities. As such, liveness can be defined only as what recording is not. Auslander’s definition of liveness responds to the prevalent discourse among performance studies scholars, who, like Rasula, have tended to treat live events as “real” and recorded or broadcast events as secondary or unreal.<sup>6</sup> While Auslander rightfully points out the flimsiness of this argument, he is unable to escape the dichotomy inherent in these debates that poses so-called live events against the recorded ones. The result of this antagonistic dialectic is that one cultural form necessarily dominates and subordinates the other. However, this dichotomy does not withstand scrutiny in the face of jazz and blues practices, in which the relationship between the live and the recorded are intertwined. For jazz, as a musical tradition that developed in tandem with the evolution of recording technologies, it would be difficult to say that one media simply dominates or determines the other. Such an assertion would exclude important aspects of the tradition. Perhaps nowhere are these tensions more evident than in Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*.

Discourse about the status of the recording within jazz studies has always been fraught.<sup>7</sup> In his essay “The Media of Memory: The Seductive Menace of Records in Jazz History,” Rasula has noted that jazz historiography tends to submerge its reliance on records and “obscure the fact that recordings are the actual subject, not the music as such.”<sup>8</sup> As Rasula attempts to untangle the recordings from the *music* in these histories, he argues that the records themselves are their own history. However, this difference is not so much between recordings and the music as it is between recordings of the music and live performances of the music. By Rasula’s logic, the truth of the music is somehow located in the live performance, but that the live performance is always *lost* amid the recorded archive.<sup>9</sup>

“Jazz has been a constant testimony to things that will never be known, people that will forever go unheard,” says Rasula.<sup>10</sup> This sense that the recordings are somehow always in relation to absence and loss—or what is *not* recorded and *not* said—draws from a larger thematic interest within jazz and African American studies that has been addressed by the likes of Nathaniel Mackey, Albert Murray, Fred Moten, and Brent Edwards. Though there are a number of ways critics talk about the aesthetic move that mirrors this loss, most simply refer to it as *the break*. Within jazz, the break is usually defined as the moment within the music when the ensemble stops playing momentarily while the soloist improvises. This suspension of time and disruption to the rhythmic flow of the music enables moments of musical freedom. Murray has noted the centrality of the break to improvisation, for “it is precisely in this disjuncture which is the moment of truth . . . . It is when you establish your identity; it is when you write your signature on the epidermis of actuality . . . that is how you come to terms with the void.”<sup>11</sup> In my own experience as a singer, I have compared it to being thrown into freefall where you are the only one to catch yourself—you and your imagination of the chords that might be there.

Within music, the metaphor of the break almost always carries a temporal valence and is sometimes called *stop-time*, for it creates the effect of time stopping even as the music moves forward. Although the break does not literally *stop* the time of the song, it conveys this effect by rupturing the flow of the tempo as the rhythm section drops out. But the break can also refer to a more general loosening of the music to allow for greater improvisation. In his book *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, Moten extends this idea beyond its temporal dimensions to describe a broader Afro-Diasporic aesthetic practice of disjuncture across the arts, including performance, literature, and photography. Moten points specifically to Amiri Baraka, whose work operates in a space that is at once “internal and interstitial” as it creates openings in which to perform black radical resistance.<sup>12</sup> In this context, the break offers a “liberatory possibility,” and Moten points to the “generative forces there are in the asymptotic, syncopated nonconvergence of event, text, and tradition.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, the break is the creation of an opening or space for creative exploration where none existed before and, like an asymptote, is an opening that cannot be closed. Moten’s use of the term reveals the flexibility of *the break* as a metaphor that reaches beyond the music and characterizes a range of aesthetic practices. As we see in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, establishing a break in the convergence between the recording and the live theatrical event becomes one of the driving challenges for Wilson.

If Auslander's assertion is true, and liveness is to be defined in a negative relationship to recording, is there a way to reanimate the recording and make its sounds live again in the context of theater? Does the existence of the recording mean that the music is dead or hermetically sealed? The answer proves problematic. By fictionalizing the life of a real person and staging a famous recording session, Wilson is faced with competing evidence: records, film, and photographs of Ma Rainey. As a result of these competing media, Wilson has less freedom to fictionalize her sound, but also cannot simply re-create the 1927 recording—to truly participate in the jazz tradition he must find a place in the break where he can improvise. Part of his strategy to create a break is to privilege fiction over biography. As Wilson noted in a 1984 *New York Times* interview, he deliberately chose not to base his play on extensive research, arguing that “too much research puts a straitjacket on—you feel compelled to address specific points.”<sup>14</sup> To combat the straitjacket effect, he assigns most of the dialogue to fictionalized band members whose identities would have been obscured by the celebrity of Ma Rainey and instead makes Ma Rainey a more peripheral character whose presence is *felt*, even in her absence.<sup>15</sup> Importantly, the play's action is built on an *evasion* of the recording, or we might say, a break.

### **An Evasion Plot: The Recording We Never Hear**

During the play, Ma Rainey expresses no eagerness to record. To her, making a recording is to take her “voice and trap it in them fancy boxes with all them buttons and dials.”<sup>16</sup> Yet the “Mother of the Blues” (as she was frequently called) was one of the first female blues singers to record and have a record deal with a major label, Paramount Records. During the 1920s she recorded more than a hundred songs and mentored other young blues singers, including Bessie Smith. Although she acknowledges the monetary value of making recordings, ultimately recording is a form of entrapment and exploitation, which she likens to captivity and prostitution. Unconcerned with record sales, Ma Rainey's allegiance is to her fans, and her skepticism of recordings implies that they are merely a way to advertise for her tour. As her moniker suggests, Rainey's life and her music are firmly situated among the origin stories of blues and jazz, but as one who grew up in vaudeville and only later made the transition to a recording career, Rainey has a conception of the music that privileges live performance. To represent this resistance on stage, the plot revolves around the ancillary activity that takes place while *not* recording: the arrival of the band, rehearsals, and mostly waiting. Waiting for Ma to arrive and waiting for technical issues to be resolved.

In this way, the play operates in an aesthetic of interruption and false starts, which affects the sense of time and its progression. Wilson's are a hesitating blues. During the first act, much of the dramatic tension arises from the question of whether Ma Rainey will actually show up for the recording session. As the white manager, Irvin, and the producer, Sturdyvant, set up the recording equipment and test the microphones, Sturdyvant complains about Ma's "shenanigans." Ma is conspicuously absent, but Irvin tries to assure Sturdyvant that he will take care of everything. Throughout the musicians' rehearsal, Irvin repeatedly interrupts to ask the band if they know anything about when Ma will arrive. "Irvin: Say . . . Uh . . . look . . . one o'clock, right? She said one o'clock?"<sup>17</sup> Time passes in the play, but the characters are caught in a state of suspended action as they await Ma's arrival. The temporal disjuncture built into the plot is one of the central methods by which Wilson creates the break. Although the rehearsal was set to begin at one o'clock, there is the sense in which one o'clock is whenever Ma arrives. This manifests itself in Irvin's pauses and tentative tone, and creates anxiety not only among the white producers but among the band members, who have received conflicting information about the set list.

Levee, the young upstart trumpeter, insists that they will be recording his arrangement of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," but Cutler, the band's leader, argues that Ma will stand for no such thing. Ma's authority is needed to resolve the discrepancy. In the meantime, the band attempts to rehearse, but Levee's diversionary tactics prevent them from starting:

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! <sup>18</sup>

The conversation leads to a longer debate about the difference between "just playing the music" the way Ma wants it and making "art," and meanwhile the rehearsal is delayed yet again. The interchange is indicative of the action in the play's first act: a series of digressions as the band members kill time waiting for Ma. Even though she is not present onstage, Ma Rainey's phantom presence is *felt* precisely because she is absent. She is even strangely evoked through impersonation as Slow Drag flamboyantly performs Ma's part during a rehearsal of "Hear Me Talking to You." Slow Drag's caricatured imitation of Ma prior to her arrival helps establish the authenticity of the Ma Rainey who will soon arrive onstage, but again serves to increase the dramatic tension of her absence.

Most audience members, we can assume, will be familiar with the original Ma Rainey recordings, alerting them to the fact that the recording session will eventually happen (because history demands it), but Wilson introduces the tensions of a history that *might* have been. As Alan Nadel has commented,

The fact that history might have been very different informs all of Wilson's works, which manifest an acute awareness of the plasticity of the official record. . . . The problem of history, in other words, is how the record is produced, whose voices it includes, what arrangements it uses, and who has the rights to control its distribution and accrue its revenues.<sup>19</sup>

Nadel, of course, is speaking to the issues related to African American history being excluded from the official record, but his comment also suggests that Wilson treats the sound recordings and the historical record as interchangeable metaphors that share temporal characteristics. Prior to the invention of sound-reproduction technologies, all sounds were bound to the particular moment in which they were produced and died off not long after they sounded. Friedrich Kittler has remarked on the seeming immortality of speech and sound made possible by sound-reproduction technologies, stating that "what phonographs . . . were able to store was time: time as a mixture of audio frequencies in the acoustic realm."<sup>20</sup> As a device for storing time, phonograph recordings are inherently engaged in a historical project. Thus Wilson maps these theoretical principles of sound reproduction and their effect on our sense of temporality to the theater.

By delaying Ma's arrival and effectively suspending the sense of time in the play, Wilson has created a break in which he can fictionalize the events surrounding the recording. As the band members wait for Ma's arrival, they *riff* and improvise on themes ranging from shoes and women to art, black exploitation, and African history. The conversations that seem like digressions or interruptions of the rehearsal in fact become the primary action of the play. Through jokes and storytelling, Wilson is able to create a complex dynamic between the band members and Levee the trumpeter as they attempt to negotiate between the music's traditions and its future. The effect of this suspension of time is that the conversations sound and feel like improvised solos—and of course, it is the improvisational nature of jazz performance that primarily distinguishes the live from the recorded.

While the band continues to wait, they attempt to rehearse Levee's version of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." Since the band members do not read music, they must learn by ear. Rather than play the music so the band can repeat it, Levee attempts to describe it: "Me and Cutler play on the breaks. (*Becoming*

*animated*) Now we gonna dance it . . . but we ain't gonna countrify it."<sup>21</sup> The description expresses Levee's enthusiasm, but does little to elucidate what the music should sound like. When the band fails to play the piece as Levee imagines it, he lashes out, saying, "You all got to keep up now. You playing in the wrong time. Ma come in over the top. She got to find her own way in."<sup>22</sup> Here, the wrong time carries a double meaning. Not only is the band in the wrong tempo, they are also old-fashioned—or one might say, behind the times. From Levee's perspective, the rest of the band members are stuck in the past. On a certain level, their playing is no different than a phonograph record; they play the music the way they have always played it. The central conflict of the debate between Levee and the band mirrors the conflict between the record's repeatability and improvisation. The music demands that it be repeatable, but also that it retain the flexibility to change. In exploring this tension, Wilson weaves together the multiple senses of time and its mutability.

Once Ma Rainey does arrive, other factors emerge to disrupt the recording session. As she enters the studio, Ma is accompanied by a policeman, along with her nephew Sylvester and her "girl" Dussie Mae.<sup>23</sup> We learn that her delayed arrival was caused by a car accident and that the officer wants to arrest her for assault and battery against a cab driver who refused to give her a ride. Although Irvin is able to pay off the officer, other factors that delay the recording session begin to accumulate. The studio is too cold, so she will not sing. They did not bring her a Coca-Cola, so she will not sing. Then, Ma's insistence that Sylvester perform the introduction on the recording nearly derails the project because Sylvester suffers from a severe stutter. Debate about this stutter and whether Sylvester should be allowed on the recording bears witness to the kinds of voices that are deemed *unrecordable* and are thus written out of the recorded history. Nathaniel Mackey has referred to the stutter as "the most appropriate, self-reflexive feature of an articulation that would appear to be blocked in advance."<sup>24</sup> Although the stutter is an impediment that disrupts the flow of speech, for Mackey, this stammering state of unresolve can be productive. The performance of this stutter within the play allows Wilson to introduce an alternate history as the recording is delayed yet again. In this light, we might view Sylvester's stutter as the aesthetic manifestation of the blockage threatening the recording before it even begins.

After several ruined takes, Sylvester finally overcomes his stutter long enough to say the introduction: "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."<sup>25</sup> The band plays and Ma sings, but Sturdyvant discovers that there was a mal-

function with the cable and nothing was recorded. While the producers take fifteen minutes to reset the microphones, the band retreats to the rehearsal room where Cutler proceeds to recount a tragic tale about the mistreatment of a black reverend by white men. The story causes the explosive Levee to start raging at God while stabbing his pocket knife into the air, but the scene ends abruptly, fades to black, and shifts quickly to a point in the near future as the band is wrapping up the recording session in the studio. It is as though Levee literally *cuts* the scene with his knife—catapulting the audience ahead in time. Therefore, when the recording of “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” is made at last, the audience neither sees or hears it. Instead, it ostensibly occurs outside the time of the play, and as the stage directions indicate, “*Lights come up in the studio. The last bars of the last song of the session are dying out.*”<sup>26</sup> In this way, Wilson translates the blues *break* into a theatrical *break* by employing a method specific to the medium of theater: the blackout.

As I have shown, Wilson translates the jazz aesthetic practice of the break to the theater on several levels, including plot and character, by delaying the recording session and Ma’s arrival onstage. However, the blackout, as a theatrical technology, has a particular power to create a feeling of absence as it severs the recording from the drama of the play and makes the recording itself a kind of *phantom limb*. Borrowing the term from Wilson Harris, Mackey has described the phantom limb as “a feeling for what is not there that reaches beyond as it calls into question what is.”<sup>27</sup> It is as though the negative spaces not only imply what is absent but how what we take to be whole may reflect only a fragment of a larger reality. Thus the 1927 recording of “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” haunts the play and asserts a ghostly presence as it simultaneously highlights the seemingly unbridgeable gap between the theatrical performance and recordings.

On a more practical level, Wilson’s decision to leave out the recording that gives its title to the play illustrates the fundamental impossibility of staging a recording. By their nature recordings are infinitely repeatable and exact. Even the most skilled musicians cannot give the exact same performance twice, and it is this infinite repeatability of phonographic technologies that marks the primary difference between recorded and live performances. Not only would staging the “real” recording be redundant, no performance could ever perfectly replicate the phonographic duplicate. Therefore Wilson sets up the scenario for intermediality between theater and the recording, but ultimately avoids it—creating a break where none existed before. What we are left with instead are a number of different versions of “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” none of

which attempt to approximate the recording. In addition to the “alternate take” that was not recorded, the play contains fragmented versions in the form of rehearsals, as well as the hypothetical arrangement Levee had written.

The practice of “versioning,” like the “break,” is a key tenet of jazz improvisation that stresses how music is always coming into being and never settles. The term *versioning* emerged from dub practices in reggae music, but is now commonly used to describe the jazz and blues tradition of playing standards, whereby the music’s originality is judged on creative modification of the song, rather than a new composition.<sup>28</sup> Versioning can be as simple as changing and shifting a few notes of the melody, or creating a radically inventive arrangement of a piece. It is a move that stresses variation, avoids reification, and thus works against recording. By giving these versions performance in the space of the play, Wilson imagines and improvises on the tune “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.” The play makes these versions primary—thus seemingly privileging the *live* over the recording. But then again, there is also the sense in which the practice of versioning is in fact made possible by the existence of recordings. Wilson never allows the recordings to be one thing or the other. In one brief interchange between Cutler and Ma, Cutler points out that “Moonshine Blues,” a song that appears on the set list, is “one of them songs Bessie Smith sang.” To which Ma responds, “Bessie what? Ain’t nobody thinking about Bessie. I taught Bessie. She ain’t doing nothing but imitating me.”<sup>29</sup> What Cutler means, of course, is that “Moonshine Blues” is a song that Bessie Smith recorded. While the practice in performance encourages versioning, this interchange illustrates how the recording industry was beginning to shape how people thought about ownership in music. Ma might have sung the song first, but Bessie recorded it first with Columbia Records in 1924. And while the blues actively call out for versioning, recordings simultaneously resist and enable repetition and variation. In staging a phantom *version* of “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” Wilson seems to be arguing, as Ma does, that there is room, even amid the most definitive and famous recordings, to improvise and elaborate.

### Who Plays the Blues: Difficulties of Staging

While the text of the play reveals Wilson’s use of the break to evade the recording at the level of plot, staging *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* raises additional tensions between *liveness* and recordings. As directors and producers have confronted the conflicting demands of a jazz aesthetic in a theatrical medium, one finds that Wilson has created a play that is deliberately difficult to stage. Although Wilson makes explicit that his play is *not* a musical, it is a play that calls for

music. When confronted with staging music for which the “source” recordings exist, how ought one deal with these recordings? Should they be a part of the production? What kinds of casting considerations must be made for a play that calls on its actors to “play” instruments? In addressing these questions, a director has essentially three options. The first is to cast actors who do not necessarily play instruments, but who mime to the original 1927 Ma Rainey recordings. The second is to cast actors who do not play instruments but who mime to prerecorded music. The third is to cast actor-musicians who can also perform the music. In a survey of reviews of major productions of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, most directors opt for one of the latter two possibilities—I have not found one that has attempted to synchronize the performance with the 1927 recording. That no productions have done so is telling and demonstrates the strength of Wilson's resistance to the mechanical repetitions built into theatrical performance. As I show, there are benefits and drawbacks to each staging possibility. When executed by smaller theater companies with fewer resources, the results of bad dubbing can be, as one Ohio reviewer put it, “deadly.”<sup>30</sup> When done well, it can create fruitful relationships between the characters and their instruments.

In the original production that moved from the Yale Repertory to Broadway in 1984, there was some discussion as to whether to cast musicians or actors in the roles of the band members, but ultimately it was deemed more important to cast the right actors and work on the musical aspects later. According to a 1984 *New York Times* review, when the actors were initially brought together for a staged reading at the 1982 National Playwrights Conference, they were not asked to play or even mime instruments. The play was performed “a cappella” (i.e., without accompaniment), and the actors approached the reading as “vocalizing together like a jazz group.”<sup>31</sup> The following year, the same actors were brought together again at the Yale Repertory Company for a full staging, and it was decided that the production would incorporate tape recordings and train the actors to mime appropriately. For a play that directly addresses the problems of sound recording, there is something inherently problematic about seeing the bodies of the musicians onstage and seeing the instruments in their hands, but hearing the music come from elsewhere. If done purposefully, one could argue that displacing the sound from the band members highlights the exploitative nature of recordings that “trap” sound (as Ma says) out of reach of the musicians. It stresses how the recorded music does not belong to them. However, staging directions to this effect are absent from Wilson's script and are more likely the accidental result of casting priorities. This much is evidenced by later productions that have attempted to incorporate more live playing.

When the production moved to Broadway, significant pressure was placed on the actors, especially the two horn players, to learn to play their instruments. Joe Senneca, who played Cutler, the trombonist, was submitted to a series of what he called “painful” lessons so that he would be able to play during the show.<sup>32</sup> The result was a combination of some live playing by Cutler (trombone) and Levee (trumpet), and tape recordings. Frank Rich referred to the playing as “nearly convincing,” and indeed, archival video of the performance held by the New York Public Library reveals it to be just that.<sup>33</sup> As the musicians prepare to rehearse, they play a few tentative notes on their instruments, just to get the sound going. The rustling of air moving through the trumpet and the vibrating pluck of the bass establish a sense of authenticity to their playing, regardless of their skill. However, in this way, their playing is more decorative than musical. It announces to the audience that the instruments are real, but does little more than that. In particular, Cutler’s trombone playing during the rehearsal scenes verges on distracting as he fumbles for the notes. On the whole, the production does a reputable job of masking the miming of Toledo (piano) and Slow Drag (bass) by placing them just outside the stage lights, with the instruments turned away from the audience.<sup>34</sup>

But what kind of jazz band is it when the players are not responsive to one another, but instead are responsive to a recording? It is a band that *sounds* convincingly live, even if it is not—and perhaps that is the point. To ask the actor-musicians to play along to a static, repeatable recording unfortunately limits the improvisatory possibilities. The difficulties embedded in the staging of Wilson’s play point to important differences between a scripted theatrical performance and a jazz performance. Wilson may desire the improvisatory feeling of live jazz—and he is able to stage this feeling in the conversational interaction between the band members—but the fact of the matter is that theatrical performances strive to be repeatable in the way that recordings are. This again challenges the duality set up by Auslander that defines the theater as live and recordings as not live. The action of the play may attempt to evade the recording, but ultimately the medium of the theater is inextricably caught in the necessity of repeatability. By juxtaposing live players with recordings, it simultaneously evokes the presence of the live musicians and their absence, and retangles the music’s live and recorded manifestations.

More recent productions of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* have attempted to break away from the constraints of taped music altogether and bring more of the jazz aesthetic into the theater by hiring actor-musicians who can reputedly play the instruments their roles require. One such example was a production

by the Seattle Repertory Theater, which I saw in 2005. Although the decision was made to cast “actors,” the Seattle Rep found actors who could also play the instruments ascribed to them. But in any production where actors are required to play instruments, decisions must be made about which skill to prioritize, and acting is usually the winner. If at times the playing in the Seattle Rep production sounded a bit rough, the fact that the music is part of a rehearsal helped carry it through. The band’s playing was credible, and without the distraction of apprehensive miming, the director could explore the relationship between the actors and their instruments. As Joe Adcock of the *Seattle Post* notes:

Don Mayo, as the pianist, is as versatile and complex as his instrument. He offers big chords of philosophy, history, detachment and passion. As Cutler, the trombonist and the band’s leader, Wendell W. Wright provides emphatic depth. Chic Street Man, as the bassist, adds staccato rhythms.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, Wilson’s stage directions suggest that the characters are extensions of their instruments. For example, Toledo “is the piano player. In control of his instrument, he understands and recognizes that its limitations are an extension of himself,” and Levee “plays trumpet. His voice is strident and totally dependent on his manipulation of breath. He plays wrong notes frequently.”<sup>36</sup> The directions not only indicate how the instrument extends to the character but also the style of the character’s playing. To demonstrate the fluidity between the instruments and the characters’ personalities, however, requires that the actors both play and act. In the Seattle Rep production, the audience could begin to associate the sounds of the instruments with the actors who played them, not only reading the instruments into the bodies but hearing what Roland Barthes calls the “grain” of the player in the instrument.<sup>37</sup> The “grain” is that distinct quality of the individual body that one can hear in the music (or writing). It is linked to uniqueness of sound beyond the quality of the music or text itself. Writing specifically about listening to recordings of singers and not live performances, Barthes’s grain is a quality that can be heard regardless of whether the body is present.

We tend to think of recordings as something that abstracts the voice from the body, but for Barthes, this is not necessarily the case. The importance of the embodied and lived aspects of the blues are also important to Wilson, and to how the character of Ma Rainey understands her music. “White folks don’t understand about the blues,” she says. “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."<sup>38</sup> The problem with "white folks"—and here we may presume she means the record producers Sturdyvant and Irvin—is that they divorce the voice from its source. They do not hear the blues as the expression of an individual life. All they hear is the resulting sound with no understanding of its context. If the blues were merely an emotionally bound music that makes one feel better, it would be easier to separate the music from the person who produces it. By making the blues a process for understanding, Wilson links the blues to rationality and the articulation of lived experience. If a stutter blocks articulation, the blues is the method out. Wilson recognizes that the blues and the sound associated with it are always intertwined with the individual life, whether they are performed in a juke joint or on a phonograph record. Although recording technology has the power to separate the voice from the body, it cannot erase the presence of the embodied life in the voice.

It is precisely this dynamic that makes Wilson's staging of the tensions between liveness and recordings, presence and absence so interesting: with a blues figure like Ma Rainey, it is difficult to extract her life from her music. Her *liveness* is neither contingent on the recording nor her physical presence onstage, for she exudes a magnetic pull even when absent. The best singers of the blues, from Ma Rainey to Billie Holiday, have voices that sound like they have been *through* something. They represent voices that have *lived*. It is this aspect of liveness that Auslander and scholars of performance studies do not address, for it does not fall neatly into the dichotomy between the so-called live and the recorded. When sound is recorded and taken out of its temporal dimension, the sound is no less live even long after the performer's death. The theater, as venue with its own fraught relationship to *liveness*, is a particularly apt space in which to explore the aspect of the *lived* in the blues.

As a medium, the theater enables Wilson to develop a critical relationship to the recording, and its place in the jazz and blues tradition. For what I find that Wilson is doing particularly well is using the theater to rearticulate jazz practices and stage the tensions between the recording and the notion of liveness in jazz and blues. Wilson's play demonstrates the importance of the presence of the human body—and in his case, the black body. It is only with the presence of live bodies in juxtaposition with phantom presence of the records that Wilson can express what it means to have lived the blues and reclaim the music from an exploitative white recording industry. It is important for Wilson that the audience both feels Ma Rainey's absence, as well as her presence.

## Concluding Thoughts

In the course of this article, I have explored how *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* may be said to employ the aesthetic practice of the “break” as a way to approach the staging of a recording session. Wilson achieves this in several ways: first, by delaying Ma Rainey’s arrival and thus suspending the play’s time line; second, by creating disruptions that prevent the recording session from starting; and third, by purposefully *not* staging the “take” that gave us the 1927 version of “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.” It is in this third method that Wilson finds an analogue to the musical break in the theatrical vernacular by employing a blackout in the place of recording session. The feeling of *absence* that this blackout creates illustrates how Wilson inverts the trope of the “phantom limb” by playing in all the places where the limb—the 1927 “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom”—is *not*. Therefore much of the action derives from improvising around the recording itself, but never actually replicating it or playing it. Of course, it was the absence that surrounded the 1927 recording that initially called out to Wilson to improvise. Wilson therefore is able to both resist the constraints of the definitive recording and invert the argument that the recording was something to be resisted in the first place.<sup>39</sup> By avoiding the staging of the recording, he acknowledges the dichotomy between the live and the recorded within the contemporary discourse, and is able to move the conversation forward by worrying the line between the recorded and the live, illustrating an interplay between the media that does not necessitate subordination of one to the other.

Wilson’s play is indicative of what Rasula alludes to and other jazz scholars are beginning to notice, which is that although jazz studies tends to treat the recording as definitive, artists themselves have long been working against this. For example, in 1957 Louis Armstrong recorded a four-LP box set titled *Satchmo: A Musical Autobiography* in which he rerecords many of his most famous recordings, informing the listener about the history behind the recordings in the interceding tracks. Many of the songs are in a similar spirit to the original recordings, or re-create the improvised solos he would have played, but he also takes many liberties in creating new versions of the tunes. Which is to say, of course, that even in the most definitive of recordings, one can make room to play in the margins and to version again. In reimagining, but never replaying “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” Wilson wields the medium of theater to stage the complicated tension between recordings and the phantom limbs of all the possible recordings that might have been.

## Notes

1. Samuel G. Freedman, "What Black Writers Owe to Music," *New York Times*, October 14, 1984, A1.
2. See Sandra G. Shannon, "The Blues on Broadway: Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," in *The Dramatic Vision of August Wilson*, 65–88 (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1995).
3. Jed Rasula, "The Media of Memory: The Seductive Menace of Records in Jazz History," in *Jazz among the Discourses*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 144.
4. See "Introduction," *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde*, ed. Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994); and Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003).
5. Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 8.
6. *Ibid.*, 3.
7. See Peter Elsdon, "Jazz Recordings and the Capturing of Performance," in *Recorded Music: Performance, Culture, Technology*, 146–63 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
8. Rasula, *Media of Memory*, 140.
9. There are a number of ways that writers have attempted to explore this sense of loss. In the space of a recording's absence, Michael Ondaatje's 1976 novel *Coming through Slaughter* fictionalizes the life of the legendary Buddy Bolden. As Ondaatje has noted, the lack of records by Bolden allowed him to *improvise* to "suit the truth of fiction." Michael Ondaatje, *Coming through Slaughter* (New York: Random House, 1996), 157.
10. Rasula, *Media of Memory*, 152.
11. Albert Murray, "Improvisation and the Creative Process," in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 112.
12. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 85.
13. *Ibid.*, 87.
14. "A Playwright Talks about the Blues." *New York Times*, April 13, 1984, C3. See also August Wilson, "Preface to Three Plays," in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally, 563–68 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).
15. The 1927 Chicago recording session would have likely featured Johnny Dodds and Kid Ory—both of whom hold a place in jazz history—however, the Paramount recording merely lists Ma Rainey and her Georgia Jazz Band.
16. August Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 79.
17. *Ibid.*, 47.
18. *Ibid.*, 25.
19. Alan Nadel, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom: Cutting the Historical Record, Dramatizing a Blues CD," in *The Cambridge Companion to August Wilson*, ed. Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 104, Cambridge Collections Online, <http://cco.cambridge.org> (accessed April 17, 2010).
20. Friedrich A. Kitter, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 3.
21. Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, 38.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Although never made explicit, it is clear that Dussie Mae is Ma Rainey's lover. Throughout the play, the characters refer to her as "Ma's girl."
24. Nathaniel Mackey, "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol," *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 616. In this essay, the stutter is discussed in the context of William Carlos Williams's *Man Orchid*, whose stuttering protagonist is half black, half white, and represents "America's yet-to-be-resolved identity." The stutter is the manifestation of a productive unresolved state.
25. Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, 85.
26. *Ibid.*, 100.
27. Mackey, "Sound and Sentiment, Sound and Symbol," 606. Wilson Harris positions the phantom limb as an Afro-Diasporic practice akin to limbo, as it stages the African dislocation. See Wilson Harris, "History Fable and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas," *Explorations: A Selection of Talks and Articles*, ed. Hena Maes-Jelinek (Mundelstrup, Denmark: Dangaroo Press, 1981), 26–28.

28. Mackey has also referred to this idea as “othering” and the practice in black vernacular culture of privileging the verb. Nathaniel Mackey, “Other: From Noun to Verb,” *Representations* 39 (Summer 1992): 53.
29. Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, 78.
30. Fran Heller, “‘Ma Rainey's Black Bottom’ at Beck Falls Short,” *Cleveland Jewish News*, February 6, 2009, 22.
31. Enid Nemy, “A Ma Rainey Quartet Plays Its Own Special Music,” *New York Times*, October 28, 1984, A1.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., C1. An archival video of the original 1984 Broadway Production of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* at the Cort Theater is available at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts—Theater on Film and Tape Archive (viewed May 2010).
34. One problem with viewing an archival video rather than seeing the performance in the theater is that it necessarily flattens the sound, making it difficult to discern whether there would have been acoustical inconsistencies in the hall. For instance, depending on the placement of the speakers, the sound may or may not have seemed to come from the piano.
35. Joe Adcock, “‘MA RAINEY’ Is a Rich Weaving of Contrasts,” *Seattle Post—Intelligencer*, January 29, 2005, E1.
36. Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, 20, 23.
37. See Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice,” in *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard, 269–74 (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985).
38. Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, 92.
39. It is a move that Ralph Ellison would call to change the joke and slip the yoke.