



MA RAINY

They call them classic-blues singers – women like Ida Cox, Sippie Wallace and Bessie Smith, who sang their way into musical history during the blues boom of the Twenties. The truth is that most of them were simply vaudevillians whose record companies steered them in a popular direction, and the results were often rendered memorable by the accompaniment rather than the vocalist.

A significant exception was Smith, the unchallenged Queen of the Blues, whose voice and delivery no other singer could match.

But if there really was such a thing as a classic-blues singer, it was Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, an artist to whom even Smith owed a considerable debt.

Born in Columbus, Georgia, on April 26th, 1886, Gertrude Pridgett made her performing debut at the age of fourteen in a local show called "A Bunch of Blackberries." She married William Rainey in 1904, and both toured as members of the Rabbit Foot Minstrels. The troupe is said to have featured her singing blues. If true, these performances precede the blues boom by seventeen years, a head start that may very well have earned her the title Mother of the Blues.

The dates may not be exact, but if there was another woman who sang the blues before Rainey, nobody remembered hearing her. Two things are clear: Rainey fostered the blues idiom, and she provided a link between the classic style of Bessie Smith and the country style of street-corner singers and guitarists such as Charley Patton and Blind Lemon Jefferson. Rainey introduced the earthy spirit of country blues to the stage, giving it a tinge of the polish that characterized the work of her female colleagues.

Although Rainey occasionally enjoyed the support of outstanding jazz accompanists – Louis Armstrong and Fletcher Henderson, for example – she seemed more at home with a jug or a washboard band. Not unlike her colleagues, she sang with humor of philandering lovers and female determination, but her songs were also often serious commentaries on a life far removed from the glamour of the big city. Between 1923 and 1928, Rainey made almost a hundred sides for Paramount, a subsidiary of the Wisconsin Chair Company, whose poor recording quality seemed to substantiate a rumor that its claim of

"Electrically Recorded" referred to a light bulb in the studio. Nevertheless, those sessions captured for posterity an artistry, however muffled in transmission, of extraordinary caliber.

With her broad, toothy smile, multidirectional horsehair wig and necklace of twenty-dollar gold coins, Rainey was also a sight to behold. "They said she was the ugliest woman in show business," Alberta Hunter once recalled, "but Ma Rainey didn't care, because she pulled in the crowds. Some of us used to laugh at her, because she was so countryfied, but I think her looks were part of her act – just look at some of the kids out there today, those young men with the wild hair and makeup. Are they pretty? No, but people notice them, and they're making money."

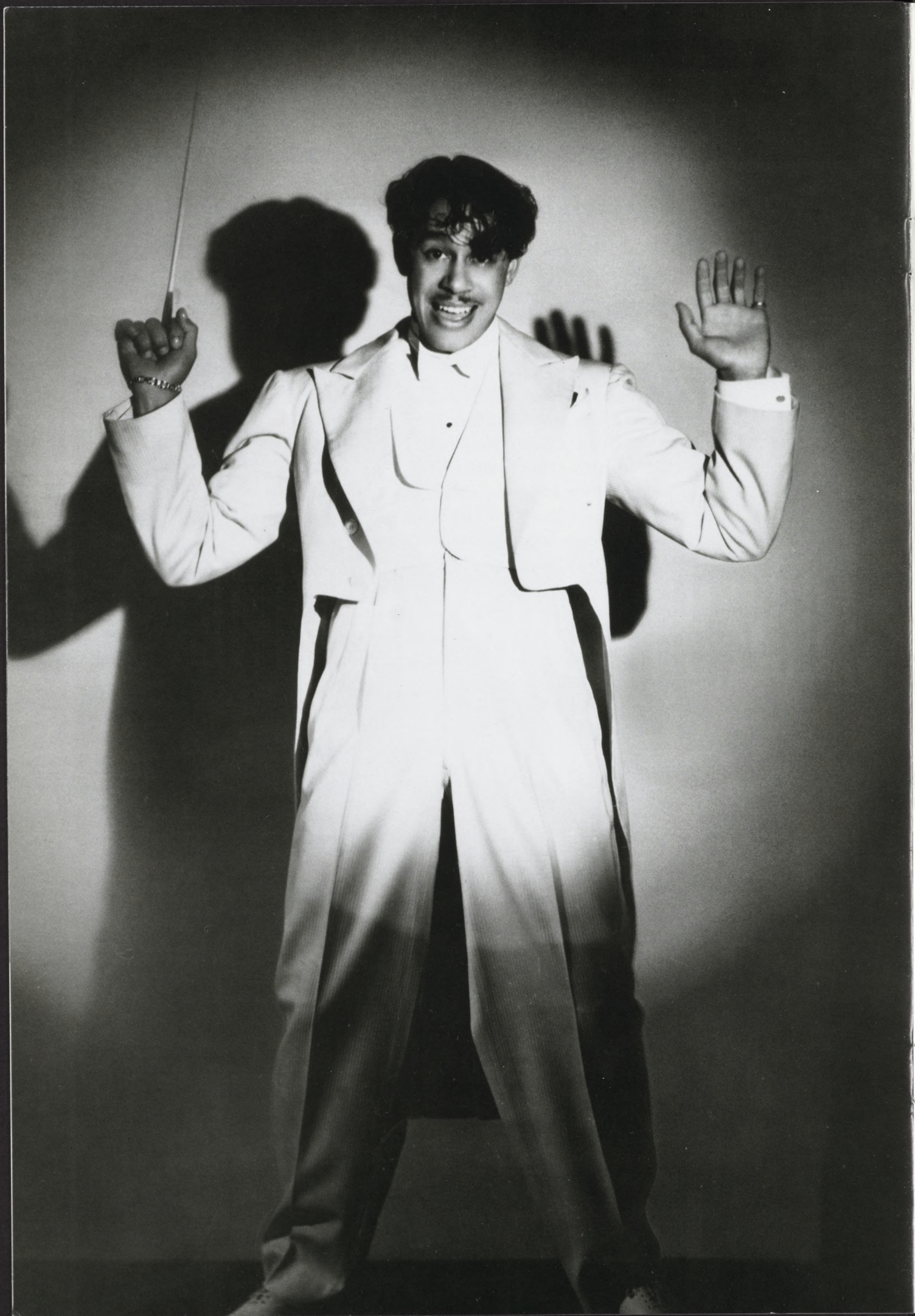
While most of her colleagues partied their earnings away, Rainey had her future in mind. She retired in 1935, at a time when talking pictures had killed vaudeville, the blues boom had long since given way to the real blues of the Great Depression, and former singers of the classic blues chirped cheerful songs to diminished audiences for meager fees. Settling down in Columbus, Georgia, Rainey invested in the very business that had contributed to her early retirement: She purchased and spent the rest of her life operating two theaters. Ma Rainey died in 1939.

– CHRIS ALBERTSON

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

- "BOOZE AND BLUES"
- "FAREWELL DADDY BLUES"
- "LUCKY ROCK BLUES"
- "SHAVE 'EM DRY BLUES"
- Paramount; 1924
- "CHAIN GANG BLUES"
- "DON'T FISH IN MY SEA"
- "STACK O' LEE BLUES"
- "WRINGING AND TWISTING BLUES"
- "YONDER COME THE BLUES"
- Paramount; 1926
- "BLUES OH BLUES"
- "DEAD DRUNK BLUES"
- "GEORGIA CAKE WALK"
- "MA RAINY'S BLACK BOTTOM"
- "MOONSHINE BLUES"
- "NEW BOWEAVIL BLUES"
- "OH PAPA BLUES"
- Paramount; 1927
- "BLACK EYE BLUES"
- "BLAME IT ON THE BLUES"
- "DADDY, GOODBYE BLUES"
- "DEEP MOANIN' BLUES"
- "SCREECH OWL BLUES"
- "SLEEP TALKING BLUES"
- "SWEET ROUGH MAN"
- "TOUGH LUCK BLUES"
- Paramount; 1928





FROM RAGTIME TO BIG TIME

Songs just run through my head. . . ." So said the legendary singer and guitarist Sister Rosetta Tharpe at the beginning of her career. Thanks to Tharpe and thousands of other artists like her, songs have been running through our heads for the past seventy years – songs of warmth, passion and humanity, the special creations of African Americans. Call it blues, jazz, gospel, pop or rock. Call it theater, Cajun or folk. There is no aspect of American music that has gone untouched by the inventive genius of black Americans.

Rosetta Tharpe herself was the summation of twenty years of unparalleled experimentation and growth in black music when her swinging spirituals dropped Manhattan sophisticates in their tracks at the Cotton Club in 1939. Little more than two decades earlier, the only black music widely circulated was performed by whites onstage and on records. Yet when the door opened a crack, black artists were inside to stay.

Black music in the United States developed along several lines, which came together from time to time with scintillating results. By the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, the most common manifestations of black music were ragtime and its offspring, jazz, jubilee, a mixture of Bible song-stories, plantation hymns and African American folk music, and vaudeville. Rags and jubilees were available on record before the First World War, and all forms of the music were featured in the theaters of the vaudeville circuit, but seldom by black artists.

In 1913, James Europe became the first black bandleader signed to a recording contract, partly because he was the music director for the immensely popular dance team of Vernon and Irene Castle. During the war, Europe assembled an all-black regimental brass band – Bill "Bojangles" Robinson was the drum major – that became the toast of Paris, giving the French their first taste of jazz. In 1919, Europe was murdered by a deranged musician in Boston, thus setting another, though unfortunate, precedent – that of the star performer cut down at the height of his career. Europe's success did not go unnoticed or uncopied, however. Eubie Blake, Tim Brym, W.C. Handy and Noble Sissle were among those who formed bands that played in a similar vein. Some of these early groups provided a fertile ground for the nurture of future stars, including Sidney Bechet with Will Marion Cook and Duke Ellington with Wilbur Sweatman.

While these black bands were playing their curious mixture of ragtime, marches and syncopated pop, two other strains of African American music were developing and gaining wide acceptance, if not yet among white listeners. Jubilee, practically invented as an art form by the Fisk University Singers (whose fund-raising tours had begun in 1871), suddenly sparked a craze on black college campuses. No black institution of higher learning, regardless of size, was without a quartet or octet, all of them

singing the same songs: "Massa's in the Cold, Cold Ground," "Live Humble," "Dry Bones," "Blue-Tail Fly." Noble Sissle and Paul Robeson were among those who gained their first professional experience singing with jubilee groups.

Far removed from the collegian's jubilee was workingman's blues. From its origins among work gangs and sharecroppers, blues had moved into minstrel shows and vaudeville, and Gertrude "Ma" Rainey was one of its earliest practitioners. Ma and her husband, William "Pa" Rainey, were playing blues for rural and urban audiences at least as far back as the early Teens, and Ma's protégée Bessie Smith would, of course, become the Empress of the Blues in the Twenties. Yet for years, Ma Rainey's blues could only be heard in person. Record companies were indifferent to black artists, even the many fine singers from the legitimate stage.

In 1920, that door swung open at last. The veteran dancer and singer Mamie Smith recorded "You Can't Keep a Good Man Down" for Okeh Records – a song originally intended for Sophie Tucker. Although the label made no special mention of the fact that Smith was black, the African American community knew all about it and bought the record in astounding numbers. Okeh brought Smith back into the studio, and the first blues, "Crazy Blues," was recorded and heavily promoted in the black press. Within two years its runaway success had brought dozens of similar performers to records.

In May 1921 a brave and remarkable experiment was launched by Harry Pace and W.C. Handy – an all-black record company, run by blacks, featuring black artists exclusively. The label was named Black Swan in honor of Elizabeth Taylor



Bennie Moten and his band in 1931: Moten, top left, beside his baton-waving brother, Buster, and Jimmy Rushing. Count Basie stands below, second from left.

Greenfield, the Mississippi-born singer whose voice – her range reached from baritone to soprano – had earned her the sobriquet the Black Swan and had made her a star on two continents until her death in 1876. Pace explained the purpose of the label when he declared: "There are 12,000,000 colored people in the U.S. and in that number there is hid a wonderful amount of musical ability. We propose to spare no expense in the search for and developing of the best singers and musicians among the 12,000,000."

With Fletcher Henderson as A&R man, Black Swan hoped to record the full range of black music, not only blues and jazz. Ethel Waters and Alberta Hunter, however, turned out to be the big sellers for the label, and some white artists were later added to the roster. Despite their good intentions, including a red-label series of black opera singers, Pace and Handy sold Black Swan to Paramount Records in 1924. Other black-operated companies – Kid Ory's Sunshine Records, founded in 1922, and J. Mayo Williams's Black Pati in 1927 – were even less successful. Williams, an A&R pioneer for Paramount, had been responsible for the revival of Ma Rainey and her development into one of the most popular blues singers of the mid-Twenties. He later performed similar duties for Vocalion and Decca.

At first all the top blues artists were female "concert" singers, but as recordings by black artists began selling in significant numbers, record companies went into the field to find artists to fill the demand. In 1924, Paramount cut a session with Papa Charlie Jackson, a banjo-playing vaudevillian. He was shortly followed onto record by Blind Lemon Jefferson, and the market for male country blues was discovered. J. Mayo Williams revealed another aspect of the blues when he recorded the singer and pianist Leroy Carr for Vocalion in 1928. The influence of Carr's urban blues would continue to be felt long after his death in 1935.

Singing groups were breaking into the secular market as well.

Black pioneers such as the Norfolk Jubilee Quartet gained a commercial toehold simply by recording pop and blues under different names, including the who's-kidding-who Norfolk Jazz Quartet. When the all-black musical *Shuffle Along* opened on Broadway in May 1921 for a run of more than 500 performances, the hit song of the show was "I'm Just Wild About Harry," written by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, and one of the key attractions was the singing of the Four Harmony Kings. Ivan Browning, the lead vocalist of the quartet, also played the romantic lead and was featured in a duet with one of the female stars, Lottie Gee, singing another hit song, "Love Will Find a Way."

If blues as a musical term was used, abused and confused, jazz fared no better, but in the Twenties a clearer picture of the idiom began to emerge. Prized by the young for making the Twenties roar, jazz was a symbol of the generation gap, and the symbol of the age was Louis Armstrong, whose 1925-26 recordings with his Hot Five made him a national figure. In 1929, Armstrong sang "Ain't Misbehavin'" in Fats Waller and Andy Razaf's Broadway musical *Hot Chocolates*, proving himself to be as innovative a vocalist as he was a trumpeter.

Though hot jazz was the bane of the elder generation, white audiences soon became accustomed to syncopation, and milder, sweeter forms of the music were gradually accepted. Leading the way in making jazz both respected and "respectable" was Fletcher Henderson. College educated and urbane, Henderson led a sweet band that played for whites only at the Roseland Ballroom in New York City. When his audiences began demanding hotter music, Henderson brought in Louis Armstrong to teach his musicians how to swing. It was Henderson's arranger, Don Redman, who worked out the big-band charts that set the pattern for the coming Swing Era.

In 1927 that most famous of all bands influenced by Henderson,

the Duke Ellington Orchestra, recorded "Black and Tan Fantasy" and showed to the still unper-suaded that jazz and *sophistication* were not con-tradictory terms. The following year a quartet of brothers from Piqua, Ohio, began performing vocal impressions of Henderson and Ellington songs, skillfully adapting jazz and pop to a vocal style of their own invention. Shortly after they began their radio broadcasts on CBS, an Octo-ber 1931 *Variety* reported: "Boys have an errat-ic style of harmony all their own. They squeeze various harmonic phrases out of their numbers and are especially at home with the hot stuff. In-strumental imitations, during the hot numbers, sound as though a real clarinet and tuba are played." What the Mills Brothers created would burst into a major movement in the Fifties.

While Ellington and the Mills Brothers were making a new kind of music, other inventions were spreading the news to unprecedented num-bers of listeners. Radio had joined the phono-graph as a major entertainment medium in the Twenties, and black music was heavily fea-tured on the early airwaves. In 1929 a quartet of sing-ers called the Southernaires began a ten-year stint on NBC. For their fans in the still largely rural United States, the Southernaires mixed plantation hymns with homespun homilies. The advent of talking pictures in 1928 also offered opportunities to black artists. The Mills Brothers starred in several short subjects, as did tradition-al groups such as the Kentucky Jubilee Singers and the Southern Revelers. The Mills Brothers were also heard in a few of Max Fleischer's "fol-low the bouncing ball" sing-alongs.

Many other vocal groups soon filled the dial with fifteen-minute spots every day of the week, but the Mills Brothers quickly achieved superstar status. Under the skillful guidance of Tommy



In the Thirties the Mills Brothers were superstars; Brunswick paid them a fee of \$500 for every record.

Rockwell, the Mills Brothers arrived in New York City in late 1931 and were signed by the CBS Network. Although initially paid \$300 a week, they soon began to earn \$1750 a week. At the same time their fee for performances in the-aters was \$3000 a week – this during the early years of the Great Depression. Their Brunswick recording contract called for a flat payment of \$500 per record.

The success of the Mills Brothers on CBS goaded its rival NBC into attempting what may have been one of the first hypes. The Three Keys were dragged from Chester, Pennsylvania, to Manhattan and presented to the world as the "answer" to the Mills Brothers. A "Special Extra" press release was sent to 2000 newspapers by

TWENTY YEARS OF BLACK MUSIC

- "CRAZY BLUES"
Mamie Smith, Okeh; 1920
- "HOW LONG, SWEET DADDY,
HOW LONG"
Alberta Hunter, Black Swan; 1921
- "THAT DA DA STRAIN"
Ethel Waters, Black Swan; 1922
- "DIPPERMOUTH BLUES"
King Oliver, Gennett; 1923
- "HATEFUL BLUES"
Bessie Smith, Columbia; 1924
- "SOUTH"
Bennie Moten, Okeh; 1925
- "EAST ST. LOUIS TOODLE-OO"
Duke Ellington, Vocalion; 1926
- "MATCHBOX BLUES"
Blind Lemon Jefferson,
Paramount; 1927



King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band of 1924 featured the young cornetist Louis Armstrong, second from right.



Mamie Smith's Jazz Hounds with Willie "the Lion" Smith at the piano in 1920: Smith made the first blues recording, "Crazy Blues," the same year for Okeh.

NBC in August 1932, touting the new trio and their network program. Even hard-shell Southern newspapers printed the story and, for the first time, a photograph of black artists.

Three more promotional releases followed. Nonetheless, the Three Keys – George "Bon Bon" Tunnell, guitarist John "Slim" Furness and pianist Bob Pease – were unsuccessful, especially among blacks. In addition, their "hot jive" was not nearly as appealing to whites as the smooth harmonies of the Mills Brothers. More damaging, the Three Keys did not have a gimmick: One reviewer complained that "there is little to distinguish the trio from the average small-town combination that frequents the studios of many cities." Although the Three Keys failed as Mills Brothers competitors, they were the first small group to perform vocal jazz numbers and were followed by the Ink Spots, who did this kind of music when their career was still young.

By 1933 there was a wide variety of black entertainment on radio, including broadcasts of the big-band music of Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, Charles Gaines, Earl Hines and Claude Hopkins, old-time preaching and singing by the Dixie Spiritual Singers, Elder Lightfoot Micheaux and the Eveready Jubilee Singers, and vocal harmony by the Four Sharps and Three Sharps and a Flat, as well as the Mills Brothers and the Three Keys. Listeners could also dial into *The Negro Business Hour* with Joe Bostic. Calloway and Ellington were each grossing \$5000 a week on radio, while the Louis Armstrong band earned \$2500 a week working the nightclubs.

Swing soon swept across the country, and black artists played pivotal roles in the rise of the new sound. Fletcher Henderson sold arrangements to Benny Goodman in 1934 when he organized his band, Henderson joined Goodman five years later as a full-time

staff arranger. Don Redman went from Henderson's band to McKinney's Cotton Pickers and then on to Count Basie's and Jimmy Dorsey's bands. Besides the Basie and Ellington orchestras, the most influential and best known black bands were led by Jimmie Lunceford and Chick Webb, who not only hired but adopted Ella Fitzgerald before his death in 1939. In a class by himself was the irrepressible Calloway, who for a time featured the Palmer Brothers, widely acknowledged as the inventors of modern vocal harmony.

On the edge of the swing spotlight, at least insofar as most of the public was concerned, were such important bands as those of Lucky Millinder and Earl Hines. Millinder's ranks at one time or another included Red Allen, Buster Bailey, Bill Doggett, Wynonie Harris, Bullmoose Jackson, Billy Kyle and Dizzy Gillespie, Hines could boast of Billy Eckstine, Budd Johnson and Omer Simeon. In the hinterlands west of the Hudson River were Eddie Barefield, Charlie Echols, Les Hite, Lloyd Hunter, Harlan Leonard, Floyd Ray, Jay McShann (whose roster would soon number the teenaged Charlie Parker) and the great Bennie Moten. Before his death in the early Thirties, Moten's band had harbored Count Basie, Eddie Durham, Hot Lips Page and Ben Webster.

While swing dominated the airwaves and jukeboxes in the mid-Thirties, one of the brightest lights of prewar blues, Robert Johnson, flashed across the skies of the Mississippi Delta. His tortured vocals and demonic slide guitar made every one of his handful of recordings a precious gem. His sales, limited by the Depression, may have been small – no more than a few hundred shellac 78s – but his influence on his contemporaries, including the young Muddy Waters, and succeeding generations is incalculable. Johnson's violent death at the age of twenty-six only added to his aura.

In the last days before the Second World War an indispensable element of rhythm & blues and rock & roll – the driving piano style known as boogie-woogie – enjoyed a revival. More than ten years earlier the style and the dance steps that went with it had been laid down by Clarence "Pinetop" Smith. Some early rags and blues had used the same device – the "walking" bass – but Smith called the music he played boogie-woogie and produced the seminal recording of the genre in 1928, "Pinetop's Boogie Woogie." Smith, however, did not live to profit from the boogie-woogie explosion of the late Thirties – he was accidentally shot to death in 1929. Tommy Dorsey enjoyed a huge hit with his version of "Pinetop's Boogie Woogie," and the pianists Albert Ammons, Pete Johnson, Meade Lux Lewis, Cripple Clarence Lofton and Jimmy Yancey each had his brief fling with fame before boogie-woogie subsided.

The postwar sound was also presaged by the success of the Ink Spots, who first rose to prominence in 1939. The Ink Spots were no overnight sensation – they dated to 1928 – but the lucky juxtaposition of Bill Kenny's lovely high tenor with the wry "talking bass" of Hoppy Jones made "If I Didn't Care" a big pop hit. The Ink Spots quickly surpassed the Mills Brothers in popularity and were the forerunners of the R&B vocal groups of the early Fifties.

Another architect of R&B, Louis Jordan, got his start as a member of the Rabbit Foot Minstrels (the original home of Ma and Pa Rainey and Bessie Smith) before joining the big bands. After working with Charlie Gaines, Leroy Smith and Chick Webb, Jordan formed his own group, the Tympany Five. An instant success on records and celluloid, Jordan's small combo set the pattern for rhythm & blues and rock & roll.

Small combos that owed more to the Three Keys' blend of hot jazz and vocal harmony than to the Mills Brothers' barbershop harmonies sprang up in the late Thirties as a response to the fad among black teenagers for the jitterbug. Chicago's Cats and the Fiddle, led by Austin Powell – which included for a time Tiny Grimes – were an all-string quintet whose hits included "Killin' Jive," "Public Jitterbug #1" and the ballad "I Miss You So," which became a pop standard. Less well remembered today are the Four Clefs of Springfield, Illinois, who recorded prolifically for Bluebird. The Four Clefs split their work evenly between pop ballads and jump blues that borrowed heavily from Western swing. In fact, one of their recordings, "I Guess I'll Be on My Way," was declared a "hill-billy hit" by *Billboard*.

An even smaller group, the King Cole Trio,

came to share Louis Jordan's domination of the pop-music charts. After leading a band in Chicago and playing solo piano in California, Nat Cole formed his trio in 1939 with Oscar Moore on guitar and Wesley Prince on bass. Cole achieved his greatest success years later as a solo vocalist, but the King Cole Trio was closely watched and imitated, then and later, by dozens of similar groups.

Cole's guitarist, Oscar Moore, was influenced by yet another key figure in the development of prewar black music. Charlie Christian was only twenty years old when he was discovered by John Hammond and won a spot with Benny Goodman. The first musician to take full advantage of the Gibson ES150 arch-top electric guitar, Christian was a master of improvisation, and Goodman gave him frequent solo spots on records and radio. Before his death of tuberculosis in 1942, Christian had helped to lay the foundations of modern jazz.

With the success of Mahalia Jackson's first recording in 1937, "God's Gonna Separate the Wheat From the Tares," the influence of gospel began to be felt in secular music, and the evangelical fervor of Sister Rosetta Tharpe, soon to appear at the Cotton Club, was wedded to the big-band drive of Lucky Millinder's Orchestra. At the threshold of the Forties, the sounds of



Ella Fitzgerald, erstwhile Chick Webb vocalist, soon after World War II

black America were knocking at the door of popular music. All the ingredients were in the stew, and the pot was ready to boil. Gospel, jazz, country and urban blues, small-combo hot jive and vocal harmony – all combined to form postwar rhythm & blues. The addition of country music to the recipe in the early Fifties changed the musical tastes of the world – and they called it rock & roll. – PETER GRENDYSA

"KING PORTER STOMP"
Fletcher Henderson, Columbia; 1928

"BASIN STREET BLUES"
Louis Armstrong, OKeh; 1929

"TRICKS AIN'T WALKING NO MORE"
Lucille Bogan, Brunswick; 1930

"TIGER RAG"
The Mills Brothers, Brunswick; 1931

"THE REEFER MAN"
Cab Calloway, Brunswick; 1932

"SOPHISTICATED LADY"
Duke Ellington, Brunswick; 1933

"JAZZOCRACY"
Jimmie Lunceford, Victor; 1934

"IN THE EVENING WHEN THE SUN GOES DOWN"
Leroy Carr, Bluebird; 1935

"TERRAPLANE BLUES"
Robert Johnson, Vocalion; 1936

"ONE O'CLOCK JUMP"
Count Basie, Decca; 1937

"A-TISKET, A-TASKET"
Ella Fitzgerald, Decca; 1938

"IF I DIDN'T CARE"
The Ink Spots, Decca; 1939

