

## The Audience

### The Milwaukee Repertory Theater Department of Education

Jenny Kostreva  
Education Director  
[jkostreva@milwaukeeep.com](mailto:jkostreva@milwaukeeep.com)  
(414) 290-5370

Andy North  
Education Coordinator  
[anorth@milwaukeeep.com](mailto:anorth@milwaukeeep.com)  
(414) 290-5393

*You can sit there and have a universal experience, of fear, of anger, of tears, of love, and I discovered that it's the audience, really, that is doing the acting.* **Marlon Brando**

Theater is a collaborative art form. The success of a production relies upon every member of the ensemble performing their role expertly, from the cast and crew to the administrative staff to the audience themselves. Come prepared to make your contribution as a member of the audience. You have an active role to play, and the performers are relying on you to be respectful and attentive. Months of preparation, weeks of rehearsal and hours upon hours of effort have gone towards providing the best possible performance for you. Your participation is what makes this process worthwhile.

## Visiting The Rep ...

Milwaukee Repertory Theater is housed in the Milwaukee Center at the corner of Wells and Water Streets, downtown. Our building was formerly the home of the Electric Railway & Light Company. This name is still carved on the wall outside.

You'll enter on the Wells Street side into a large, open space. Our box office will be visible on your left as you come through the front doors. The large space is the main hub for the businesses that share this building: a bank, an office tower, the Pabst Theater and the Intercontinental Hotel. If you walk into the center of this area, you'll see an escalator to your left. You will take this escalator to the second floor, then take another left to enter the Stackner Cabaret.

**For information on our education programs and our productions, visit our website at [www.milwaukeeep.com](http://www.milwaukeeep.com)**

Programs in the Education Department  
receive generous funding from:

Target Stores  
Richard and Ethel Herzfeld Foundation  
Rockwell Automation  
Harley Davidson  
The Einhorn Family Foundation  
MPS Partnership for the Arts



## Inside this guide

Synopsis /  
About the Author 2

The Blues 3

Famous Blues  
Musicians 4

Paramount  
Records 6

Discussion  
Questions  
and Activities 7

The Audience /  
Visiting the Rep 8

## Grafton City Blues

A study guide for students and educators

This study guide was researched and designed by the Education Department at Milwaukee Repertory Theater, and is intended to prepare you for your visit. It contains information that will deepen your understanding of, and appreciation for, the production. We've also included questions and activities for you to explore before and after our performance of

### GRAFTON CITY BLUES

If you would like to schedule a classroom workshop, or if we can help in any other way, please contact:

**Jenny Kostreva** at (414) 290-5370 or  
[jkostreva@milwaukeeep.com](mailto:jkostreva@milwaukeeep.com)  
**Andy North** at (414) 290-5393 or  
[anorth@milwaukeeep.com](mailto:anorth@milwaukeeep.com)

**Study Guide written by**  
Andy North, *Education Coordinator*  
**with contributions from** Christina DeCheck

Editing by Kristin Crouch, *Literary Director*  
Jenny Kostreva, *Education Director*

# Synopsis

*Grafton City Blues* tells the story of Blue, a bandleader who comes from a long line of musicians. Blue has inherited a house full of blues memorabilia from his long-lost father, and at the top of the show he brings his bandmates Harp, Queen and Professor into the basement to dig through the equipment for anything useful. He tells everyone to “take a peek” before they head off to rehearse for a wedding gig the following day.

Queen, the group’s female vocalist, is upset that the band has to support itself by playing at weddings and bar mitzvahs. Blue points out that this is the only way they will get paid to play music.

Blue finds a trunk labeled “Grafton City Blues,” containing records, clothing and other memorabilia detailing the history of Paramount Records. The label was owned by the Wisconsin Chair Company in Grafton,

and recorded albums for many of the musicians that Blue’s bandmates admire. As the group unpacks the trunk, they recount the history of Paramount Records and the artists who recorded there. The action continually shifts between the past and the present, with band members adopting the personae of past blues musicians to tell their stories and perform their songs.

At the end of the evening, Queen remarks, “I feel better. The blues can’t help but make you feel better.” She agrees that the band needs the wedding gig, and says that she will sing whatever Blue wants. Blue decides not to sell the mementos he has inherited, since they are important to both his family’s history and the history of the blues. He cues the others to join him in “Let the Good Times Roll,” and the band plays as the lights come down.

## About the Author



Playwright Kevin Ramsey, a New Orleans native, says he is “committed to the historical examination and retelling of the African-

American musical experience and its artistic contribution to American and world culture.” *Grafton City Blues* is Ramsey’s fourth musical to originate at the Milwaukee Rep, following *If These Shoes Could Talk (A Tap Dance Tale)*, *From My Hometown*, and *Sam Cooke: Forever Mr. Soul*.

Ramsey is the founder of Urban Musical Tours (UMT), an organization devoted to performing professional theatrical

events for multi-ethnic urban communities. As a writer, director, choreographer and producer, he has been involved in over 100 productions in the past 25 years.

Ramsey first heard about Paramount Records while discussing Wisconsin’s history with the staff of the Milwaukee Mayor’s office. “I was amazed,” he said. “It was a revelation to find out that Grafton had been a cradle for blues, gospel, folk and many other musical genres.”

Despite the massive amount of research involved in writing *Grafton City Blues*, Ramsay never actually visited the township until the summer of 2007. There he met Angela Mack, a local teacher and blues historian, who remarked, “I see Kevin as picking up where August Wilson left off.”

## Discussion questions and activities

- On the first page of the script, playwright Kevin Ramsey has printed a copy of “The Weary Blues,” a poem by Langston Hughes. The full text of this poem is available on the website [poets.org](http://poets.org). Read this poem aloud to a partner or in a group. Why do you think Ramsey included this poem in the script? What comparisons can you draw between the stories of “The Weary Blues” and *Grafton City Blues*?
- Write the lyrics to your own blues song in AAB format (one line sung twice, followed by a concluding line). It can be as long or as short as you like, and concern whatever subject you choose. Be sure to give your song an appropriate title.
- Write a short biography (similar to those on pages 4 & 5) for one of the following Paramount recording artists:

Alice Moore  
Marshall Owens  
Cow Cow Davenport  
Rubin Lacey  
William Huff  
Jimmy Blythe  
The Reverend James Morris Webb  
Bud Shiffman  
Henry Brown  
Tommy Johnson  
Henry Townsend  
Sig Heller  
Edmonia Henderson  
Blind Blake

Information on these artists can be found at [ParamountsHome.org](http://ParamountsHome.org) or the sources below.

## Sources and Suggested Reading

*Paramount’s Rise and Fall: A History of the Wisconsin Chair Company and its Recording Activities* by Alex van der Tuuk. Colorado: Mainspring Press, 2003

*Consumed by Fire* by Kevin J. Wester. Wisconsin: K.J. Wester, 1997

*Blues: the Basics* by Dick Weissman. New York: Routledge, 2005

*The Blues: from Robert Johnson to Robert Cray* by Tony Russell. New York: Schirmer Books, 1997

*Blues for Dummies* by Lonnie Brooks, Cub Koda and Wayne Baker Brooks. California: IDG Books, 1998

# Paramount Records

The precursor to all modern sound recording equipment was the phonograph, a device for storing sound as a set of grooves cut into a cylinder (or, later, onto a disc). Phonographs had their heyday in the 1910s, before the age of radio. Between 1914 and 1917, over 150 new companies were formed to sell phonographs or related merchandise. In Grafton, Wisconsin, a phonograph cabinet manufacturer called the Wisconsin Chair Company attempted to get ahead of the competition by opening their own record-producing facility, called the New York Recording Laboratories.

Originally, the NYRL existed as a marketing ploy - customers who bought a phonograph cabinet from the WCC would receive five or ten free discs from Paramount, the company's own record label. It wasn't long, however, before those who ran the recording studio noticed the potential market among the local Ozaukee County immigrants. The region was populated by Ger-

mans, Poles and Swedes, all of whom were eager to hear traditional music from their homelands. Lacking the resources to compete for talent with larger labels like Columbia and Victor, Paramount shifted its focus to exploit these niche markets.

In 1922, Paramount launched a new record series targeted specifically at black Americans, which they called their "race" line. For the next six years the Paramount label was the foremost producer of black jazz and blues records, launching the careers of Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong and Alberta Hunter, among others.

Despite the success of these artists, the New York Recording Laboratories refused to invest money in new recording equipment and techniques. After all, they were selling plenty of records with their existing equipment; there was little to be gained commercially by upgrading their manufacturing proc-

ess. As a result, Paramount developed a reputation for producing low-quality recordings that "sounded like they had been recorded on your front porch," as one biographer put it. The equipment used was so poor that an original Paramount recording sounded worse than a reproduction of an album from Columbia, Victor or Edison. For this and other reasons, Paramount's early success was unsustainable.

By 1928, the entire phonograph industry was in trouble. Radios were becoming more and more popular as sound quality improved. The release of *The Jazz Singer* in 1927 heralded the arrival of the "talkies," motion pictures with synchronized sound. The rise in popularity of motion pictures triggered a further decline in phonograph sales, as it was much cheaper to purchase a cinema ticket than a blues recording. Sales of blues and jazz records were diminishing across the board, as the public's taste shifted to upbeat big band tunes. When the stock market crashed in 1929, it was the last in a long line of misfortunes leading to the demise of Paramount.

Although the New York Recording Laboratory continued to cut records through the first years of the Great Depression, sales of those records had dropped dramatically. Recording ceased altogether in 1932, and the NYRL disbanded in December of the following year. Most of the company's metal masters (original recordings of each song) were sold as scrap metal, making Paramount releases exceptionally rare and valuable to modern collectors. The Wisconsin Chair Company remained afloat for twenty more years thanks to Roosevelt's New Deal, but the NYRL never returned.

Nowadays, the remnants of the WCC are mostly underwater. In 2001, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources ordered the dam in Grafton to be destroyed, concealing the ruins of the Wisconsin Chair Company and its recording studio beneath the surface of the Milwaukee River.



# The Blues

Blues music was born on the Mississippi Delta after the Civil War. It has its roots in the work songs and spirituals of plantation slaves, combining the free-form lyrical patterns of the former with the expressive vocalization of the latter. Unlike its predecessors, however, blues music is intensely personal. Where work songs and spirituals were born from a yearning for solidarity, the blues fulfilled the need for self-expression. Freed slaves were being integrated into a society that placed high value on individuality, thanks to the influence of self-determinists like Horatio Alger, who taught that each person is in control of his or her own destiny. As a result, blues songs reflect the individual's ability to overcome hard luck and adversity.

The original lyrical form of a blues verse consisted of a single line repeated four times, recalling the call-and-response roots of the genre. This later evolved into the AAB form commonly used today, consisting of an introductory line, which is repeated once, and a concluding line. Blues musicians make use of the **blue scale**, where notes are sung or played or at a lower or flatter pitch than those of the major scale, producing an expressive, melancholy sound.

The use of the word "blue" to describe low spirits dates back as far as the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The phrase "the blues" is a shortening of "the blue devils," demons who were popularly thought to cause depression. The musical style was officially named in 1912, with the publication of Hart Wand's "Dallas Blues", though the term had been unofficially used by blues musicians for years prior.

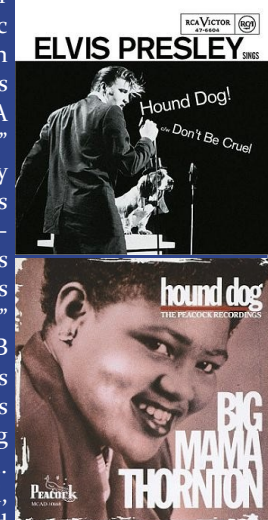
The success of "Dallas Blues," along with the simultaneously released "Memphis Blues" and "Baby Seals' Blues," brought blues



music to a mainstream audience. In 1920, Mamie Smith's recordings of "Crazy Blues" and "It's Right Here For You" sold 75,000 copies within their first month of release and opened the doors for other blues artists. Companies were eager to exploit the new "race record" market, so called because the album's were purchased almost exclusively by black consumers. Artists such as Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey and Blind Lemon Jefferson made

names for themselves during the 1920s boom. As record sales slumped during the Great Depression, the blues migrated north to cities like Detroit and Chicago. The urban blues were born, combining aspects of many regional styles into a more sophisticated, polished sound.

From the 1940s onward, urban blues influenced the development of many new musical styles through its use of the 12-bar (AAB) style and the use of the blues scale. For example, the ladder of thirds is a melodic structure common in rock and roll songs like The Beatles' "A Hard Day's Night" and The Who's "My Generation," that was built on the framework of the blues scale. Elvis Presley's famous "Hound Dog" follows a strict AAB structure, since it was originally recorded as a blues single by Big Mama Thornton. Jazz, rock and roll, rockabilly, folk and country all share varying degrees of blues influence.



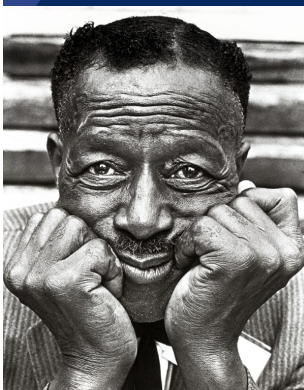


# Famous Blues Musicians



## Skip James (1902-1969)

Neremiah Curtis "Skip" James left home at the age of fourteen to search for his father, who had abandoned the family ten years before. He spent most of his teenage years as a drifter, supporting himself through a combination of backbreaking labor and crime. Skip wrote his first song, "Illinois Blues," about his frustration at the direction his life had taken. The song caught the attention of Henry Stuckey, a talented local guitarist who became a mentor to Skip. Together, the two musicians pioneered the "Benton School of Blues," a sophisticated style of blues guitar which relied heavily on the use of minor chords.



## Son House (1902-1988)

Eddie James "Son" House became a Baptist preacher at the age of 15. Five years later he was expelled from the Church due to an affair with a woman ten years his senior. Fascinated by the blues and seeking to reinvent himself, Son taught himself to play the guitar, and used the story of his rise and fall within the Church as the subject of his first song "Preachin' the Blues." Son is famous for his passionate, spellbinding style of performance, and has been described as "the very incarnation of the blues." The handful of songs he recorded with Paramount Records in 1930 are considered masterpieces of the genre, and influenced later performers like Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters.



## Blind Lemon Jefferson (1893-1929)

Lemon Henry Jefferson was blind either at birth or shortly thereafter. His unpredictable, improvisational style made him extremely popular and nearly inimitable. Lemon began his career as a gospel singer under the name "Deacon L.J. Bates," but his blues recordings, under his real name, proved far more popular. He recorded over 100 songs (on 43 records) for the Paramount label, making him one of the company's most valuable assets. Lemon is credited with inventing the Texas blues, a "swinging" blues style heavily dependent on guitar licks and riffs.

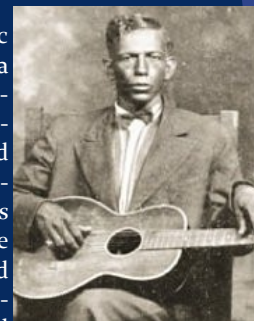
## Ma Rainey (1886-1939)

Gertrude Pridgett was born into a family of performers and appeared onstage for the first time at the age of fourteen. At sixteen, she married vaudevillian Pa Rainey and, naturally, became "Ma" Rainey. The two toured the country with several different vaudeville troupes, performing a song-and-dance double act and gaining great fame throughout the south. In 1923 Ma signed a contract with Paramount Records and recorded over 100 songs with the label over the next five years, including the famous "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." She was forced to retire from performing in the Great Depression and spent her later years as a theater manager. Ma Rainey was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1990.



## Charlie Patton (1891-1934)

Charlie Patton was the originator of the Delta Blues, a rhythmic style favored by the bluesmen who wandered the Mississippi Delta at the turn of the century. Patton was one of the earliest blues musicians, and his habits of excessive drinking, smoking, and womanizing became the model for the blues lifestyle. He also pioneered methods of showmanship that would later be adopted by rock musicians, leaping around the stage and playing his guitar behind his back, over his head or between his knees. Nowadays Patton is more famous for his influence on later musicians like Howlin' Wolf and Robert Johnson than for his own recordings, which are nearly incomprehensible due to poor recording equipment and the natural harshness of Patton's voice.



## Bessie Smith (189?-1937)

Bessie Smith began her career with the Rabbit Foot Minstrels, a touring vaudeville troupe. Though Smith had a powerful voice, the company already employed Ma Rainey and had no need for another songstress, so Smith was hired as a dancer. Rainey mentored the young performer for three years, after which Bessie left the troupe to begin her solo career. Her first album, a double recording of "Gulf Coast Blues" and "Down Hearted Blues," sold more than 750,000 copies, making her the second highest-selling blues musician of 1923. Bessie recorded over 150 songs over the next ten years, and her success as a recording artist and a singer on the vaudeville circuit made her the most highly-paid black performer of the 1920s.

