

MIQDASH BETHEL COVENANT ASSEMBLY

Pearl River, Louisiana · miqdashbethel@gmail.com

WITNESSES TO THE WOUND

A Covenant Investigation into the Exploitation of the Zamar Carriers

100 Years of the Music Business on Trial

Report No. 2 of an Ongoing Series

MA RAINEY

1886 – 1939

The Mother of the Blues

*35 years performing — over 100 recordings — the form she built fed the entire industry —
dropped by Paramount at the height of her catalog — died with theaters, not royalties — buried
with almost no notice*

March 2026 · Kepha Arcemont, Elder and Founder

SECTION ONE — THE GIFT: WHO YAHWEH MADE HER

Biography: The Making of a Covenant Musician

Gertrude Pridgett was born on April 26, 1886, in Columbus, Georgia — the daughter of Thomas and Ella Pridgett, both of whom were minstrel performers. She was born into the performance tradition. It was not an escape she found — it was the air she breathed from birth. The Encyclopedia Britannica confirms her first public performance at approximately age 14, singing and dancing in a local talent show called *A Bunch of Blackberries* at the Springer Opera House in Columbus. She was already where she was always going to be: on a stage, in front of people, carrying a sound.

By 1902, she heard a blues song for the first time — sung by a young girl in a small Missouri town where her troupe was performing. The song was about a man who had left. It was simple, direct, and devastatingly true. Ma Rainey learned it by heart, added it to her encore, and **began carrying the blues into every venue she entered**. She did not invent the form — she was honest enough to say so. But she was the first woman known to incorporate authentic blues into vaudeville, minstrel, and tent shows, taking a music that had developed in the fields and the quarters of the Deep South and placing it on a stage where it could reach thousands.

In 1904 she married William *Pa* Rainey, a comedy singer and performer, taking the name she would carry to history. They toured together with the Rabbit Foot Minstrels and eventually billed themselves as *Rainey and Rainey, Assassimators of the Blues*. The name was bravado and accuracy simultaneously. They went into every room and destroyed it. The tent came down, the sawdust floor was packed, the kerosene footlights flickered, and Ma Rainey sang — and the people in those tents, sharecroppers and laborers and domestic workers and railroad men, felt themselves seen and heard in a way that no other sound had ever achieved.

This is the zamar tradition in its most essential form: the covenant musician standing before the community, carrying their pain back to them with craft and love, creating the spiritual space that Dawid's kinnor created for Shaul. The blues is not secular music dressed up as sacred. The blues *is* sacred music — the sound of a people whose suffering ****Yahweh**** has heard, given back to them in a form they can bear.

◆ *I grew up in New Orleans, in the same river of sound that produced Ma Rainey. The blues she carried into those tents in Georgia and Alabama in 1910 and 1915 is the same frequency I play through vintage Gibson Les Pauls in Louisiana and Texas in 2026. When I play the blues, I am not playing entertainment. I am playing testimony. That is what she was doing. That is what it has always been.*

Born	April 26, 1886 — Columbus, Georgia
Parents	Thomas and Ella Pridgett — minstrel performers
Career Start	Age 14, Springer Opera House, Columbus — 1900

Marriage	William 'Pa' Rainey, 1904 — toured together until separation c. 1916
Touring Career	35+ years — Rabbit Foot Minstrels, Tolliver's Circus, TOBA circuit, her own Georgia Smart Sets
Recording Career	1923–1928 — Paramount Records — approximately 92–100 sides recorded
Key Collaborators	Louis Armstrong (1924), Thomas Dorsey, Tampa Red, Fletcher Henderson, Coleman Hawkins
Retirement	1935 — Columbus, Georgia — owned and managed Lyric Theater and Airdome
Death	December 22, 1939 — heart failure — Rome, Georgia — age 53
Recognition	Blues Hall of Fame 1983. Rock and Roll Hall of Fame 1990. Grammy Lifetime Achievement 2023.

The gift documented: Over 35 years of continuous performance before Ma Rainey ever entered a recording studio. By the time Paramount signed her in 1923 she was 37 years old, with more stage experience than any executive she would ever work with. She had performed before tens of thousands of people across the American South and Midwest. She had developed a sound — the deep, gravelly, moaning contralto, the instinctive connection with an audience's emotional life, the gold teeth catching the spotlight — that was wholly original and wholly hers. She had also shaped the early career of a young singer named Bessie Smith, who would go on to become the Empress of the Blues. **The form that would generate hundreds of millions of dollars for the recording industry was built, refined, and delivered to that industry by Ma Rainey.** She handed them a foundation. They built an empire on it. She got one cent per sale.

SECTION TWO — THE WOUND: WHAT WAS DONE TO HER

The Exploitation — Layer by Layer

Layer One: Paramount Records and the Race Records System

Paramount Records was not a music company that loved music. It was a subsidiary of the Wisconsin Chair Company — a furniture manufacturer that entered the phonograph cabinet business and discovered, almost by accident, that it needed product to sell through its cabinets. The University of Wisconsin's historical record on Paramount confirms: *"In the early 1920s, Paramount was accumulating debt while producing no profit."* The company entered the *race records* market not from cultural interest but from commercial desperation. Black music was a profit opportunity. The artists who made it were the raw material.

Paramount hired J. Mayo Williams as its first Black A&R representative — the talent scout who would find and sign the artists. Williams's own documented words, preserved by music historian William Howland Kenney in *Recorded Music in American Life*, define the system with brutal clarity: **Williams later boasted to a prospective biographer that nine out of ten Paramount artists received no royalties, regardless of sales.** He did not present this as a confession. He presented it as a boast. This was how the game was played.

The standard Paramount recording contract — written by Paramount, not Williams — provided for a **one-cent royalty per net record sale**. The word *net* was undefined. *Net* after what deductions? After what costs? After what creative accounting? The contract left this entirely to Paramount's discretion. Williams's "*creative bookkeeping*," as Kenney documented it, **ensured that the vast majority of artists saw no sales royalties at all.** The one-cent contract was already exploitative. The bookkeeping made even that one cent theoretical.

◆ *The one-cent royalty. Again. Joplin got one cent per copy in 1899. Ma Rainey got one cent per net sale in 1923. Same number. Different decade. Same system. The rate did not go up because the system was not designed to go up. It was designed to give the artist just enough to keep them recording while the infrastructure captured everything else. I have played for percentages of door money that worked the same way. You get 60% of whatever the promoter says came in. And the promoter is the one counting.*

Layer Two: The Inferior Recording Equipment

Paramount's exploitation of Ma Rainey extended beyond the contract into the physical recording technology. While other labels were advancing to microphone recording and metal master discs by the mid-1920s, Paramount kept Rainey recording into an old-fashioned horn and cutting onto wax cylinders. The historical record at One Mic History confirms: she was "*singing into an old-fashioned horn and recording on a wax cylinder long after everyone else was using microphones and metal master discs, making her records sound noticeably inferior to those of her peers.*"

This is a critical point of covenant analysis. The inferior sound quality was not an accident of poverty. Paramount was simultaneously finding money for advertising campaigns, for pressing facilities, and for distribution networks. **The decision not to invest in proper recording equipment for their top Black artist was a business decision** that served the label's interests: it kept production costs low, kept the artist's recordings sounding rougher than competitors, and ultimately contributed to the decline of her commercial viability — which Paramount then used as justification for dropping her contract. The system created the conditions that justified discarding her.

Layer Three: Seven Musicians Left Unpaid — 1928

The year 1928 was documented as Ma Rainey's peak year of commercial success. Twenty titles recorded for Paramount. A lengthy tour of the Midwest and the South. The release of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, a wildly popular song. Her audience was larger than it had ever been.

And yet: **during the spring tour of 1928, seven members of her own show left because they had not been paid.** Ma Rainey — the Mother of the Blues, at the height of her fame, generating income for Paramount and for every venue she played — was forced to disband her company mid-tour and join someone else's troupe just to keep working. The same year her name was on hit records and packed houses, she could not pay her own musicians.

This is the ***ashaq*** — the oppression of the hired worker — completing its cycle. Paramount extracted value from Rainey's recordings. Tour promoters extracted value from her performances. And at the end of the extraction chain stood the musicians in her band, who were owed wages and could not collect them, because the woman who owed them had herself been systematically underpaid by everyone above her in the chain. **The exploitation cascades downward.** The one at the bottom is always the one with the least power and no legal recourse.

Layer Four: Dropped at the Height of Her Catalog

In 1928, Paramount chose not to renew Ma Rainey's contract. The official justification was that her style — the deep Southern country blues she had pioneered and perfected — was being eclipsed by a more sophisticated urban sound. Musical tastes were changing. The Depression was coming. The TOBA circuit was declining. Every one of these things was partially true. But the covenant analysis must go further: **Paramount dropped Ma Rainey after five years of extracting approximately 100 recordings from her** — recordings that the label owned in perpetuity, that it had paid for at one cent per net sale, and that it continued to profit from after the contract ended. Her voice — the sound she had spent 35 years developing, the sound that had been the bedrock of Paramount's race records commercial success — now belonged entirely to the company.

She walked away with nothing that the label owned. She retained her voice, her performance ability, and her reputation. **The catalog was Paramount's.** When her recordings were reissued decades later — in the 1960s by Milestone and Biograph, contributing to the blues revival that would reshape American popular music — no royalties flowed to Ma Rainey's estate. She had been dead for decades. The label had collected. The artist had been discarded.

Layer Five: Death with Almost No Notice

Ma Rainey retired to Columbus, Georgia in 1935 after the deaths of her mother and sister. She managed two theaters — the Lyric Theater and the Airdome — and joined Friendship Baptist Church, giving her voice to the choir and to hymns and spirituals. A friend from those years recalled her coming onto her porch and singing — not the blues, but anthems and spirituals. She gave money, food, and clothing to the needy. She was a woman of covenant character — generous, grounded, and faithful to the community that had always been hers.

She died on December 22, 1939, of heart failure. She was 53 years old. Her death was, as multiple historical sources confirm, **"little noticed at the time."** The woman who had performed before tens of thousands, whose voice had shaped the entire blues tradition, whose recordings had made Paramount profitable when the company was drowning in

debt — died and the world barely registered it. She was buried in Columbus. It took decades before the city restored her home and nominated it for the National Register. Contrast this with what happened to her catalog. The same recordings that Paramount had extracted from her at one cent per net sale — recorded on inferior equipment in a company that boasted nine in ten of its artists never saw a royalty — became the foundation of the American blues canon. **See See *Rider Blues*** (1924, with Louis Armstrong) was added to the Library of Congress National Recording Registry in 2004. Her recordings were cited by Langston Hughes. Sterling Brown wrote poetry in her honor. Angela Y. Davis devoted a full academic work to her legacy. The world eventually understood what she was. **She was not alive to receive any of it, and her estate received no royalties from any of it.**

SECTION THREE — THE HONEST RECORD: WHAT THE EVIDENCE ALSO SHOWS

Nuance Required by the Covenant Research Standard

The covenant research standard of Miqdash Bethel requires complete honesty, not selective prosecution. Several facts must be stated that complicate the simple narrative of pure victimization:

First: Ma Rainey was not a naive young artist entering the music industry without experience or leverage. She was 37 years old when she signed with Paramount — a seasoned performer with over two decades of professional experience in an industry known for its shady practices. One careful historical analyst notes: *"She was a smart woman who had been in the entertainment business a lot longer than any of the Paramount executives she dealt with, and she knew what went on behind the scenes."* She was not unaware. She was operating within the limited options available to a Black woman in 1923 America.

Second: Paramount, despite its exploitative contract structure, did invest in aggressive marketing of Ma Rainey's first release — running campaigns under the headline *"Discovered at Last!"* and calling her the Mother of the Blues, the Songbird of the South, the Paramount Wildcat. The marketing expanded her audience beyond the Southern tent circuit to Northern cities. The exposure was real, even if the compensation was not proportional.

Third: Ma Rainey did not die in destitution in the way that Joplin did. She owned theaters. She had property. She had built something — not through her recording income, but through 35 years of touring and performing and accumulating the kind of practical wealth that could not be contracted away. **This is significant:** she was a businesswoman as well as an artist, and her survival was due to that fact, not to the music industry's generosity.

The covenant indictment therefore is not that Ma Rainey was destroyed — she was not. It is that **she was systematically prevented from receiving the full covenant measure of what her gift created.** The industry built on her foundation. She was compensated at the fraction the system was designed to pay. The rest went to the infrastructure. This is *ashaq* — oppression that does not require destruction to be a covenant violation. It requires only that the laborer is denied her full share.

SECTION FOUR — THE THREE WITNESSES (DEVARIM 19:15)

Corroboration of the Record

WITNESS One: *William Howland Kenney, Recorded Music in American Life (academic monograph) — documents J. Mayo Williams's own boast that nine out of ten Paramount artists received no royalties regardless of sales. Documents Williams's 'creative bookkeeping' that ensured the vast majority of artists saw no sales royalties. Documents Williams's commission structure that incentivized royalty extraction from artists. This is primary source documentation from the A&R representative himself.*

WITNESS Two: *Britannica Encyclopedia (britannica.com) — peer-reviewed reference confirming: Rainey recorded approximately 92 songs for Paramount between 1923 and 1928; these recordings became 'the only permanent record of one of the most influential popular musical artists of her time'; Rainey continued to sing into the 1930s; her music slipped into obscurity for decades before being reissued. Confirms the gap between her cultural legacy and her material compensation.*

WITNESS Three: *New Georgia Encyclopedia (georgiaencyclopedia.org), Georgia State University — academic publication confirming: Rainey's 35 years of touring and recording; her role in establishing classic blues as a staple of American musical life; the inferior technical quality of Paramount's recordings; her retirement to Columbus in 1935; her death in 1939 with recognition coming only posthumously through Hall of Fame inductions in 1983, 1990, 1992, and 1993.*

Additional corroboration: BlackPast.org (University of Washington contributor), National Women's History Museum (womenshistory.org), Library of Congress Headlines and Heroes blog, One Mic History (onemichistory.com), and Chicago Magazine's documented investigation into J. Mayo Williams's methods.

SECTION FIVE — THE COVENANT ANALYSIS: WHAT THE TORAH SAYS

The Torah Charges — Applied to Ma Rainey

Charge One: Withholding Wages from the Hired Worker — Vayikra 19:13

"You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning."
— Vayikra (Leviticus) 19:13

J. Mayo Williams admitted — on the record, to a prospective biographer, as a boast rather than a confession — that nine out of ten Paramount artists received no royalties regardless of sales. **This is the hired worker's wages held past morning.** It is not alleged. It is documented in the A&R representative's own words. The Hebrew **lo ta'ashoq** (לֹא תִאְשֹׁק) — do not oppress, do not defraud — is violated by a system in

which the artist's compensation is entirely dependent on accounting controlled by the label, with no independent verification, no legal recourse in a Jim Crow court system, and no ASCAP membership that would allow royalty enforcement.

Charge Two: The Seven Unpaid Musicians — Devarim 24:14–15

"You shall not oppress a hired worker who is poor and needy... You shall give him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets... lest he cry against you to Yahweh, and you be guilty of sin."

— Devarim (Deuteronomy) 24:14-15

Seven musicians in Ma Rainey's own band were not paid during the spring 1928 tour — the year of her greatest commercial success. They were hired workers. They were poor. They were needy. They were owed wages. They were not paid. This is ***ashaq*** cascading down the extraction chain: Paramount underpays Rainey, Rainey cannot pay her musicians, her musicians cry out. **Yahweh hears the cry of the unpaid worker.** The Torah says so explicitly: *"lest he cry against you to Yahweh, and you be guilty of sin."* The sin is entered into the covenant record the moment the worker is sent away without wages.

Charge Three: Muzzling the Ox — Devarim 25:4

"You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain."

— Devarim (Deuteronomy) 25:4

Ma Rainey spent 35 years building the form, the audience, the tradition that made the blues commercially viable. She delivered that form, fully developed and audience-tested, to Paramount Records in 1923. The label recorded 100 sides from her voice, paid her a fraction of what those sides generated, and then dropped her contract when they judged her style commercially inconvenient. **The ox that built the harvest was given a handful of grain and sent back to the field.** The covenant principle is not satisfied by the one-cent royalty. The covenant principle requires proportional sharing in the fruit of the labor the ox provides. No proportional sharing occurred. The label kept the catalog. The artist kept her voice.

Charge Four: The Unpublished Song Ownership — Vayikra 25:17

"You shall not wrong one another, but you shall fear your Elohim, for I am Yahweh your Elohim."

— Vayikra (Leviticus) 25:17

The broader Hebrew word here is ***lo tonu*** (לֹא תוֹנוּ) — from the root ***yanah*** (יָנָה), which BDB defines as: *to oppress, to suppress, to treat with violence and wrong.* The Talmudic expansion of this verse covers ***ona'at devarim*** — wronging with words, with terms, with contract language deliberately designed to obscure the true value of what is being exchanged. A one-cent royalty on undefined *net* sales, with bookkeeping controlled by the label, is ***ona'at devarim*** — a contract whose language is designed to obscure the wrongness of the exchange. The Torah prohibits it. The command is grounded not in

human law but in fear of **Yahweh**: "for I am Yahweh your Elohim." The covenant does not need a Jim Crow court to enforce it.

SECTION SIX — THE LIVING WITNESS: KEPHA ARCEMONT, 2026

A Blues Guitarist Reads the Record

Ma Rainey performed for 35 years before she made a single recording. I want every working musician reading this document to sit with that number. Thirty-five years of tent shows, minstrel circuits, TOBA venues, and sawdust-floor crowds before a microphone — however primitive — captured her voice. She was not discovered. She was already fully formed. The recording industry did not create Ma Rainey. It extracted her.

◆ *Peace of Blues was founded in 2014 in Abilene, Texas. By the time I walked into a recording studio, I had been playing guitar for decades. I knew what I had. And I also knew what the music business was. I had watched it my whole life. I had seen gifted musicians play for door money and percentage deals and promises that never materialized. The system Ma Rainey walked into in 1923 is structurally identical to what a working musician navigates in 2026. The names change. The mechanisms evolve. The extraction is the same.*

What strikes me most about Ma Rainey is not her victimhood — she was not primarily a victim. She was a force. She came out on that stage dressed down, gold teeth gleaming, ostrich plume in hand, and she **possessed** the room. Thomas Dorsey, who played piano behind her, described it: "When she started singing, the gold in her teeth would sparkle. She was in the spotlight. She possessed listeners; they swayed, they rocked, they moaned and groaned, as they felt the blues with her." That is the covenant musician at work. That is the zamar functioning as Yahweh designed it: the sound opens the space in the human spirit, the room breathes differently, and something that was compressed and buried rises.

The deeper covenant question Ma Rainey's story raises is this: what happens to the zamar tradition when the institutions that should sustain it are instead designed to extract from it? The Levitical musicians had the tithe. They had housing. They had covenantally assigned provision. They did not have to choose between their art and their survival. Ma Rainey had to make that choice every year of her career. She had to decide whether the terms Paramount offered were acceptable, knowing that if she refused, someone else would take her place and she would return to the tent shows. **Desperation is the enemy of fair negotiation.** The system was designed around the artist's desperation.

◆ *When I think about the seven musicians in her band who were not paid in 1928 — the year she was most famous — I think about every musician I have ever played with who drove hours to a gig and got paid less than the gas cost. The wound does not stay at the top of the food chain. It cascades down to the*

people who have the least power and the most need. Yahweh sees every one of them. The covenant record includes every unpaid musician from every tour, not just the names history remembers.

SECTION SEVEN — THE COVENANT VERDICT: THE JUDGMENT OF YAHWEH

Yahweh's Record on Ma Rainey

The covenant verdict of this report must be stated with the same precision as the charges. Ma Rainey was not destroyed. She survived. She owned property. She managed theaters. She gave to the needy in her community. She died in her own home, surrounded by her people, in the city that made her. This must be honored.

And yet: **the full covenant measure of what her gift created was systematically withheld from her by every institution that profited from it.** Paramount Records built its commercial identity on her voice and paid her at rates its own A&R representative admitted were designed to avoid paying anything at all. The tour circuit extracted her performance value and left her unable to pay her own musicians at the height of her fame. Her recordings — owned by the label — continued generating cultural and commercial value decades after she died, producing no compensation for her estate.

YAHWEH'S COVENANT VERDICT ON THE TREATMENT OF MA RAINEY: The Mother of the Blues was a zamar carrier of the first order — 35 years of covenant service before the recording industry found her, 100 recordings delivered into a system designed to pay a fraction of their value, seven musicians left unpaid at the height of her fame, a catalog surrendered to a company that boasted it paid royalties to almost none of its artists. Every one of these acts stands in violation of Vayikra 19:13, Devarim 24:14-15, Devarim 25:4, and Vayikra 25:17. The judgment of Yahweh on systems that extract from the gifted does not wait for the court of history to confirm it. The record is already open. It has always been open.

The Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award was given to Ma Rainey in 2023 — 84 years after her death. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inducted her in 1990 — 51 years after her death. Her home in Columbus was restored and nominated for the National Register in 1992. The world eventually confirmed what the covenant already knew.

Yahweh does not need the Grammy Recording Academy's affirmation to know the value of what He placed in Gertrude Pridgett Rainey. He knew it in 1902 when she heard a sad song about a man leaving and decided to carry it wherever she went. He knew it in every tent, every TOBA theater, every recording session in a Chicago studio where she sang into a horn instead of a microphone because the company that owned her contract had decided she wasn't worth the upgrade. **The covenant record of Ma**

Rainey is complete. The indictment of the system that extracted from her is entered. It stands.

"For He who avenges blood is mindful of them; He does not forget the cry of the afflicted."

— Tehillim (Psalms) 9:12

SERIES NOTES

Next in series: Report No. 3 — Bessie Smith: Empress of the Blues (1894–1937). The woman Ma Rainey helped shape — who made Columbia Records millions, could not read, received no royalties, and died in a Mississippi car accident under circumstances that have never been fully resolved.

Research standard: All charges in this series require a minimum of two to three independent authoritative sources per Devarim 19:15. No charge is entered on the basis of a single witness, rumor, or partisan source.

Selah.

*Miqdash Bethel Covenant Assembly · Pearl River, Louisiana · March 2026
miqdashbethel@gmail.com · Doctrinal Authority: The Tanakh Alone*