WORDS ON PLAYS

Seven Guitars

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
American Conservatory Theater

presents

Words on Plays

an educational guide to

August Wilson's

SEVEN GUITARS

Directed by Lloyd Richards

Prepared by

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# SEVEN GUITARS

Words on Plays

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A Note from the Playwright

Despite my interest in history, I have always been more concerned with culture, and while my plays have an overall historical feel, their settings are fictions, and they are peopled with invented characters whose personal histories fit within the historical context in which they live. I have tried to extract some measure of truth from their lives as they struggle to remain whole in the face of so many things that threaten to pull them asunder. I am not a historian. I happen to think that the content of my mother’s life—her myths, her superstitions, her prayers, the contents of her pantry, the smell of her kitchen, the song that escaped from her sometimes parched lips, her thoughtful repose and pregnant laughter—are all worthy of art.

Hence, Seven Guitars.

The Characters of *Seven Guitars*

**Floyd Barton**
An aspiring blues musician with one hit record, "That's All Right." Floyd has just been released from a six-month jail term. His dream is to go to Chicago with his old love Vera and become a blues star.

**Vera**
Vera is a warm, sensible woman who still cares about Floyd, but was hurt too badly by him to trust him. She has a strong sense of her own worth and has her own creative talents.

**Louise**
Vera's neighbor, smart and sharp-tongued, Louise doesn't expect much out of life but good friends, card games, and a bit of fun now and then. She is friendly to Floyd, but doesn't think he is good enough for Vera.

**Hedley**
Louise's tenant, Hedley, is a sick man, both in body and spirit. In the late stages of tuberculosis, he has also lost his grip on reality. He makes his living by killing chickens to make sandwiches, and his mind is always churning over the plight of the African-American man. He clings to the idea that the ghost of jazzman Buddy Bolden will come to him and give him money to buy a plantation.

**Canewell**
A man from the country with traditional values, Canewell has still been able to learn plenty of city smarts. He plays the harmonica in Floyd's blues combo.

**Red Carter**
Slick and citified, but with country roots, Red is a ladies' man. He plays drums for Floyd's combo.

**Ruby**
An uncommonly good-looking woman, to the men in the play Ruby is sex. She flees to her Aunt Louise to escape a murderous, jealous boyfriend, only to encounter the same kind of reactions among the men of the Hill. She can be thoughtless in her self-centeredness, but she also has a generous heart.
Synopsis of *Seven Guitars*

It is 1948 in the Hill District of Pittsburgh. Six friends are gathered in Vera Dotson’s backyard after the funeral of Floyd "Schoolboy" Barton, whose sudden death has cut short a promising blues career. As they recount the mysteries of Floyd’s death—the premonition he had a week before he died, and the angels that seemed to appear at his funeral to bear him away—the sound of the phonograph drifts in, playing Floyd’s one hit song, "That’s All Right."

Time leaps back a few days, and Floyd, just out of jail, stands in Vera’s yard trying to persuade her to come to Chicago with him. Vera and Floyd’s past relationship ended badly once (when he ran off with another woman), but he is still in love with Vera. Vera’s friend and neighbor, Louise, thinks Floyd is up to no good and warns Vera off, but he claims to have a solid offer from a record company in Chicago to record more songs. Floyd’s friend and blues partner, the harmonica player Canewell, stops by, and Floyd tells him his plans to add Red Carter, an expert drummer, to their band. Floyd also hopes to buy a better guitar for their upcoming Mother’s Day performance at a local night spot, the Blue Goose, and wants to buy a headstone for his mother’s grave. Red Carter shows up, and together with the tubercular Hedley (Louise’s off-beat tenant, who makes his living slaughtering chickens in the yard while spouting prophetic pronouncements on the treachery of whites and the black man’s coming triumph) the men discuss the common themes of their lives: God, women, work, music, and violence.

After a good meal cooked by Louise and Vera, the group gathers around the radio to listen to a Joe Louis fight. They are just settling in to celebrate Louis’s victory and play cards when Louise’s sexy young niece, Ruby, arrives. Ruby’s troubled life down home has led her to seek shelter with her aunt. The men are distracted, each trying to impress her. As the tension builds, the rooster next door begins crowing, much to everyone’s annoyance. Hedley executes the rooster, which he sees as a symbol of the black man in America.

Ruby, fascinated by Hedley’s strange behavior, draws him into conversation. He explains his vision of the future of black America and his dreams of fathering a black leader—another Marcus Garvey or Joe Louis. Floyd appears, anxiously searching for his manager, who was to finance the trip to Chicago and the band’s upcoming gig at the Blue Goose. When he discovers that his manager has been arrested for fraud, Floyd disappears for a while. He next appears loaded with money, which he claims is the deposit he had intended to use for his mother’s tombstone. Floyd asks Vera to marry him, and they plan to go to Chicago together. Everyone gets dressed up and goes to see the show at the Blue Goose. When they return late that night, Floyd has a final disastrous encounter with a drunk and raving Hedley.
The Setting of *Seven Guitars*

The history of the people of Pittsburgh’s Hill District is much like the history of African Americans in other major northern cities.

One of the major manufacturing centers of the United States, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania has been at the center of the nation’s steel industry for many decades and remains to this day a leader in steel production. As industry boomed at the end of the last century, thousands of European immigrants poured into Pittsburgh. By 1910, the city was the nation’s eighth largest.

Although there were African Americans living in Pittsburgh at the turn of this century (August Wilson’s *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* chronicles this early period), the great northbound migration of southern blacks started around 1916 when the First World War stimulated industry, creating many jobs for impoverished sharecroppers from the South. A second wave followed in the early 1940s during the Second World War (when Canewell and Red Carter must have moved to Pittsburgh), as men arrived in droves to work in the steel mills—usually for ten hours a day at temperatures greater than one hundred degrees. Wilson’s home, the predominantly African-American Hill District, is now a ghetto of boarded-up brick buildings marred by drugs and gang violence. The picture he paints in *Seven Guitars*, however, shows that the area offered a thriving cultural life to African Americans in the late 1940s. In the 1960s, Pittsburgh’s “Freedom Corner” became the site of many important civil rights marches.
Who's Who and What's What in Seven Guitars

Buddy Bolden
Charles "Buddy" Bolden, who Hedley believes will appear to him and give him money, is considered "the First Man of Jazz." He died in a mental hospital, twenty-five years after a successful career as a horn player ended in mental illness. He was born in New Orleans in 1877, a legend in his own time and a figure of myth after his death. He is considered a jazz pioneer, the first "king" of the cornet in New Orleans. Contemporaries said that he played cornet with exceptional power and was the sweetest, loudest, and deepest of the early horn players. None of his music was recorded, but those who heard him called him a jazz innovator, a creative improvisor, and a great bluesman.

Folk Medicine
A combination of magic and useful herbs, applied according to a blend of African, Haitian, and European traditions, African-American folk medicine traveled with people like Hedley and Canewell from the rural South to northern cities. "People couldn't afford doctors . . . [so] they worked their own remedy and their own remedy come out good," said a southern woman in the 1960s. A folk healer or "conjure doctor" had several jobs: there were the usual cases of natural illness, and then there were problems caused by spells and curses. A mixture of Christian prayer and voodoo magic made up the treatment for the latter, as in this spell recommended by Seven Sisters, an Alabama conjure woman, to "keep your wife from flirting around": "take a persimmon sprout about six inches long and bury it under the doorstep while her flirting spell is on." Knowledge of medicinal herbs was combined with faith and superstition to heal sick African Americans, who distrusted modern standardized medicine even when they had access to it (which was not very often).

Marcus Garvey
One of Hedley's heroes, Marcus Garvey was born in Jamaica in 1887, the youngest of eleven children. In 1914, Garvey established the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Its goals included the promotion of black solidarity, with a special concern for the welfare of African Americans. He believed that African Americans must become economically strong to gain respect, and he founded several businesses to prove his point. One of his chief goals was to establish a black-governed nation in Africa. "Up you mighty race, you can accomplish what you will!" Garvey cried. He was said to be "a proud black man, honored to be a black man, who would be nothing else in God's creation but a black man." But after 1920 his popularity decreased, as he was criticized for his extreme separatism. His followers were not allowed to settle in the African state of Liberia. Garvey himself was convicted of mail fraud and imprisoned from 1925–27. He said of himself, "I am only the forerunner of an awakened Africa that shall never go back to sleep." Garvey died in 1940. In 1964 he was named Jamaica's first national hero.
Golden Seal
Also called orangered, an herb with a thick yellow rootstock and hairy stem with a single
greenish-white flower, still used today for medicinal purposes.

Joe Louis
The characters in Seven Guitars listen with delight as Joe Louis knocks out another white
opponent. Louis was the longest-reigning heavyweight boxing champion in history,
holding his title for almost twelve years. Known as the "Brown Bomber," he was
worshipped by African-American and white fans alike. He was born in 1914 in Lexington,
Alabama. He won the championship title in 1937 in Chicago and successfully defended
his title twenty-five times, scoring twenty-one knockouts. After he fought in the Second
World War, his image became a rallying symbol for military recruiters. Louis died in
1981.

Toussaint-Louverture
Another of Hedley’s heroes, Toussaint-Louverture (1743?-1803) was born a slave but rose
to become a liberator and leader of Haiti. During the war for control of Haiti in the
1790s, he fought first with the Spanish, but then transferred his allegiance to the French,
who had freed their slaves. When the French were victorious, he became lieutenant
governor and then governor of St-Domingue (Santo Domingo). His ultimate goal was
independence for Haiti. Though Toussaint himself died in a French prison, his goal was
eventually achieved when the French were driven out of Haiti in 1803.

Tuberculosis
Hedley has tuberculosis (or "TB"), an infectious disease that begins in the lungs. In most
cases, the immune system battles the infection and healing occurs, leaving a scar on the
lungs. In about five percent of cases, however, the infection spreads and becomes deadly.
The main symptoms of tuberculosis are coughing up blood, chest pain, difficulty
breathing, weight loss, and high fever. Today there are many drugs to treat TB, but in
Hedley’s day only a trip to a sanitarium where he could rest and receive constant care
could offer hope of a cure.

Muddy Waters
"I just felt blue, and the song fell into my mind and came to me and I started singing," is how Floyd Barton’s hero, the legendary bluesman Muddy Waters, described his
songwriting method in 1941.

Muddy Waters was born McKinley Morganfield in Rolling Fork, Mississippi in
1915. He was one of twelve children whose mother died when Muddy was three. Raised
on a plantation by his grandmother, he went to work at the age of nine. He learned to
play the harmonica in childhood, and taught himself the guitar in his teens. He bought his
first guitar for $2.50 and practiced at least two hours every day, learning to play by ear
from records. He worked on the plantation for seventeen years, driving a tractor by day
and playing guitar at night with a four-person string band. In 1941, music researcher Alan
Lomax recorded Muddy’s blues for the Library of Congress. In 1943, Muddy moved to
Chicago, launching a hit career that lasted until his death in 1983. In Chicago, Muddy developed a bigger sound for the blues, bringing in piano and drums, turning the blues into what is now called "rhythm and blues."

**Whist**
An English card game, similar to bridge.
The Year of Seven Guitars: A Chronology of 1948

January 7: President Harry S. Truman, in his annual state of the union address, calls for an immediate tax cut of $40 per person and lists five goals for the next decade: to secure essential human rights for U.S. citizens, to increase the national standard of living, to conserve the natural resources of the United States, to develop the country's human resources, and to achieve world peace based on principles of justice, freedom, and the equality of nations.

January 12: Ada Sipuel becomes the first black law graduate at the University of Oklahoma after a U.S. Supreme Court ruling that black students hold the right to have "an opportunity to commence in the study of law at state institutions at the same time as [other students]."

February 2: Truman presents a civil rights package to Congress that includes measures to end employment discrimination and segregation in schools; these proposals will cause Truman to lose white voters' support in many parts of the Deep South in the November presidential election.

March: Lloyd Richards leaves Detroit, Michigan for New York City.

March 8: The U.S. Supreme Court declares religious education in public schools a violation of the First Amendment (separating church and state) and rules that state funding cannot be used for religious schools.

March 31: Labor leader A. Philip Randolph, one of the nation's leading black spokesmen, urges black youths to refuse military induction unless racism is prohibited in the armed forces and creates the League for Non-Violent Civil Disobedience Against Military Segregation.

April 2: The U.S. Economic Assistance Cooperation Administration provides more than $500,000 in aid to Western Europe under the Marshall Plan.


May 1: Senator Glen Taylor of Idaho is arrested in Birmingham, Alabama for attempting to enter a meeting through the "Negro" entrance.

May 3: In Shelley v. Kramer, the U.S. Supreme Court rules that federal and state courts cannot enforce restrictive housing covenants which bar persons from owning or occupying property because of race.

May 14: Israel declares itself an independent nation.

May 27: Attorney General Tom C. Clark rules that no member of the Communist Party may hold a federal job.

June 25: Joe Louis defeats "Jersey Joe" Walcott with an eleventh-round punch, successfully defending his heavyweight title, which he has held since 1937. (Louis retires soon after.)

July 17: Southern democrats form the States' Rights or "Dixiecrat" party and nominate Governor Strom Thurmond of South Carolina for president; former Alabama Governor Frank Dixon states in the keynote speech at the Dixiecrat convention that "the Truman civil rights (plan) wants to reduce us to the status of a mongrel, inferior race, mixed in blood, our Anglo-Saxon heritage a mockery."
July 26: An executive order barring segregation in the armed forces and calling for an end to racial discrimination in federal employment meets resistance in Congress.

August 16: Babe Ruth dies.

September 13: Howard University political scientist Ralph Bunche is confirmed by the United Nations Security Council as mediator for Palestine; two years later Bunche will become the first African American to receive a Nobel Peace Prize for his work.

October 1: The Supreme Court of California rules that the state’s law prohibiting interracial marriages is unconstitutional.

October 24: In a speech outlining Russian-American relations, financier and presidential advisor Bernard Baruch states: "Although the war is over, we are in the midst of a cold war that is getting warmer."

November 2: Republican Margaret Chase of Maine becomes the first woman to be elected a U.S. senator.

November 3: In a surprise victory for the incumbent, Harry Truman defeats Governor Thomas E. Dewey of New York in the race for president. The Chicago Tribune prints the famous erroneous headline "Dewey defeats Truman" hours before tallying the votes is completed.

December 16: The Declaration of Human Rights is adopted by the United Nations general assembly.
America in 1948

★ The per capita disposable personal income in the United States is $1,410.
★ The most popular radio programs include "Walter Winchell’s Journal," "Arthur Godfrey Time," and "The Phil Harris–Alice Faye Show."
★ Andrew Wyeth paints Christina’s World.
★ The number of men in military service is 1,445,000, as compared to 6,358,200 in 1943.
★ The Selective Service Act provides for continued military draft (through 1973).
★ The Cleveland Indians (American League) beat the Boston Braves (National League) to win the World Series, 4–2.
★ Tennessee Williams’s A Streetcar Named Desire wins the Pulitzer Prize for drama.
★ James A. Michener’s novel Tales of the South Pacific wins the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Best-selling novels include The Naked and the Dead, by Norman Mailer, and Raintree County, by Ross Lockridge, Jr. Other notable books published include Other Voices, Other Rooms, by Truman Capote; The Plague, by Albert Camus; Cry, the Beloved Country, by Alan Paton; and How to Stop Worrying and Start Living, by Dale Carnegie.
★ A Buick Roadmaster costs $2,900; a DeSoto convertible costs $2,500.
★ WDIA, in Memphis, becomes the first U.S. radio station to adopt all-black programming.
★ Malcolm Little, who later changes his name to Malcolm X, serves the second of a six-year prison term for burglary.
★ Laurence Olivier’s film of Shakespeare’s Hamlet wins the Academy Awards for best picture and best actor (Olivier).
★ The long-playing record (LP) record is invented by Peter Goldmark and introduced by Columbia Records.
★ Leonard Chess of Aristocrat Records in Chicago reluctantly releases Muddy Waters’s first hit, "I Can’t Be Satisfied / I Feel Like Going Home." The initial pressing sells out that same day.

These chronologies were adapted and reprinted from the Huntington Theatre Company’s program for Seven Guitars, compiled by Jayme Koszyn and Peter Altman.
The Blues

by Michaela Goldhaber

"It takes a man that’s had the blues to sing the blues," many musicians would say. The blues grew up in the Mississippi Delta, out in the cotton fields, along the railroads, on the mule trails, and in the levee camps. The bitter poetry and powerful music of the blues were often necessary to give African Americans the necessary "pep to work" sun-up-to-sun-down jobs.

Black "mule skinners" used songs to keep moving for long, hard hours with heavy loads, and the mules would holler along as they were worked to death building levees to keep the Mississippi River from flooding. "Roustabouts" loading and unloading cargo along the Mississippi would sing to keep their muscles going, load after back-breaking load. And the blues have always been dance music. When the work was done, people would gather together in a ramshackle club or a tool shed, dancing and grinding to the sweet sad sounds of the blues.

What are the blues about? Mostly human relationships. Women who done men wrong, men who done women wrong, an appeal for love and warmth in a cold, hard world. Many blues singers say they simply think about a bad experience with a loved one, and out comes a song. "The blues is about a woman," said the legendary bluesman Sam Chatmon. "If your wife or someone misuses you, you make up a song to sing. Instead of tellin’ her in words, you’ll sing that song." Another blues great, Memphis Slim, said, "Blues is a kind of revenge. . . . We all have had a hard time in life, and things we couldn’t say or do, so we sing it."

The sound and inspiration of the blues are similar to those of gospel, the music of the African-American church. Though a churchgoer might call a blues musician a "guitar-picking child of the devil," blues music had its roots in church music. The blues were considered sinful because of the intimate physical dancing that usually accompanied them, as well as the sexual imagery of their lyrics, as in this Chatmon song:

Says I told you to your face  
I had another good girl to shake it in your place.  
Babe, it’s your last time  
Shaking it in the bed with me.

Where gospel offers the problems of the world up to God for a solution, blues songs are laments, moaning the troubles of this world without hope of solution.

Any good blues musician is constantly changing his songs, so no two performances are alike. The blues are intimate music, a conversation between the bluesman and his guitar. Great blues musicians like Muddy Waters also admit their debts to earlier songsters. There are only so many tunes and themes shared among a handful of singers, and blues scholars enjoy following the lines of tradition, as clear to them as family trees, along which each blues song or style of playing was passed.

Despite the rough life of the blues musician on the road, and the music's sinful
associations, there were also great women who ventured into the blues. Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Memphis Minnie: these powerful blueswomen gave as good as they got, demanding a place to tell their stories and wail their sorrows.

Beginning in 1914 a great exodus of African Americans began as people moved from the rural South to the big cities of the North, especially Chicago. Sharecropping in the South was still only a step above slavery, and in the big cities there were jobs that paid more in a week than a farmer could expect in a year. This song seems to capture the frustration of the time:

I ain' gon raise no mo' cotton,
I declare I ain' gon try to raise no mo' corn.
Gal, if a mule started to runnin' away with the world,
Oh, lawd, I'm gon let him go ahead on.

Blues musicians could actually earn money for playing music at dance halls and bars and could even record their own songs. August Wilson's play Ma Rainey's Black Bottom tells the story of such an early recording session, and how the white record producers were ready to swindle the African-American performers, cheating them of royalties and paying them next to nothing. Even a successful musician still needed to hold down a day job to support himself.

The sound of the blues changed when it moved to the city. Country musicians played by ear, with a free and improvisational style. City blues, in contrast, had to be written down for recording sessions, and therefore became more formal. Also, the noise and crowds of city clubs made amplification necessary. Muddy Waters was a pioneer in exploiting the challenges of city playing, using electric guitars and adding instruments to create a new, bigger sound for the blues.

The blues express the harshness of life, including its violence, as shown in this song by Waters:

I'll take my .32-20 and lay you in your grave,
And the day of resurrection you gonna rise again...
Everybody keeps on hollerin' about old Dangerous Doom.
When I, oohhh, get my .32-20, I'm gonna be dangerous, too.

Like rap today, the blues were frank about the dangers of life for African-American people, and the anger they felt. As Alan Lomax writes in The Land Where the Blues Began:

The world of the blues was no child's garden of verses. It was frontier, it was ghetto; it was also shaped by old African traditions, that had trained boys in Africa to be the armed defenders of their village and their nation and now prepared American black youngsters to fight for their neighborhoods and to survive in the harsh worlds of slavery ... and, often, prison.
Getting the Blues

by Elizabeth Brodersen

In terms of influence on my work, I have what I call my four Bs: Romare Bearden [the painter]; Imamu Amiri Baraka, the writer; Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentine short-story writer; and the biggest B of all: the blues.

August Wilson

In 1948, when Floyd Barton dreams of making it to Chicago, the blues scene in the Windy City was in full swing. The legendary guitarist Muddy Waters—Barton’s inspiration—was king, and the South Side was jumping to the tunes of musicians who arrived daily among the flood of immigrants from the South. Blues greats Tampa Red, Bill Broonzy, Lonnie Johnson, Memphis Slim, St. Louis Jimmy Odum, Big Maceo, Lil Green, Memphis Minnie, and Washboard Sam—among many others—had been building a vital blues tradition in Chicago for more than twenty years, and generally welcomed talented newcomers, like Floyd, to their turf.

Commonly believed to have grown out of the field "hollers" and work songs of slaves, the blues first developed a recognizable, characteristic form in the 1890s. Singer Ma Rainey reportedly incorporated blues music into her act after hearing it for the first time in Missouri in 1902. Initially identified with the country sounds of the Deep South, particularly the Mississippi Delta, the blues evolved with the people as they made their way north during the first half of this century.

Traveling North

For Wilson, who credits Bessie Smith with awakening him to the musical speech of the people he grew up with, the story of the blues is in many ways the story of African-American people in this country. The specifically urban blues of Muddy Waters and his colleagues were largely the product of a mass exodus of African Americans from the rural South to the industrialized urban North between the First and Second World Wars. Francis Davis reports in his History of the Blues that an estimated 6.5 million blacks migrated northward between 1910 and 1970. At the turn of the century, almost ninety percent of this country’s African-American population lived in the South, most in country towns and villages; as late as 1940, more than three-fourths still lived there. The first great wave, which began in 1917, was followed during the Second World War by the northward migration of a half million African Americans (almost as many as had migrated during the previous forty years). And half of those went to Chicago.

Chicago was seen as the Promised Land by many southern African Americans who, like Floyd and his friends, dreamed of a better life. The introduction of the row tractor, mechanical cotton picker, and chemical defoliants essentially eradicated employment opportunities in the South. Especially in isolated rural areas, infant mortality
was extremely high, tuberculosis and venereal disease were rampant, medical care was almost nonexistent, and murder was common. As Davis observes, "The unwritten law in the backwoods gambling dens in which the blues were performed was that you could kill anybody you pleased and the authorities would look the other way, so long as your victim was a fellow Negro and not a good worker."

Yet most found that life in the North was not much easier. Competition for jobs was fierce, which contributed to increased racial tension, and—with several hundred hopefuls arriving at Illinois Central Station (nicknamed "the Ellis Island of the black migration") each week—housing was scarce. Violence was still ever present. All these themes made it into the music of the time.

**Muddy Waters**

The thirties and forties are viewed by many as the most productive period for the blues. While the earliest definitively urban blues in Chicago were produced by Georgia Tom and Tampa Red, it was Waters who gave the electric blues, for which the city is famous, their form. As Floyd says: "I heard this music and walked in there and somebody told me that was Muddy Waters. I took off my hat. I had never heard nothing like that before."

Born McKinley Morganfield, Waters was raised in a sharecropper’s cabin in Rolling Fork, Mississippi. In 1943, at the age of twenty-eight, he boarded a train in Clarksdale and headed north. He carried only his guitar, which he had mail-ordered from Sears, Roebuck for $11, and a suitcase with one change of clothes. Lucky enough to immediately land a day job on the loading dock of a paper factory, he was soon clearing about $30 a week playing as a sideman with Chicago bluesmen Memphis Slim, Sunnyland Slim, Sonny Boy Williamson, and others.

Waters soon took up the electric guitar and harmonica, the instrumental fundamentals of postwar Chicago blues, to be heard over the noise of crowded city bars. Called "deep blues," Waters’s music incorporated the country sounds of his Delta home into the electrified urban music of his Chicago forebears, expressing the alienation and anxiety felt by many transplanted southern blacks. Waters’s champions included Big Bill Broonzy, another Mississippi emigré who until Waters’s arrival had contended with Tampa Red for the blues crown of Chicago, and Sunnyland Slim, who introduced Waters to record company representatives.

In 1948, Aristocrat, a new Chicago-based label founded by the Chess brothers, recorded Waters performing "I Can’t Be Satisfied." The record sold out by nightfall on the day it was released; rationing by record-store owners prevented even Waters himself from buying more than one copy (he sent his wife back for a second). According to Mike Rowe (writing in *Chicago Blues*), Waters was taken aback by his sudden success:

*He would be out driving his truck, still delivering Venetian blinds, and experience the eerie sensation of hearing his voice booming out from the open windows of a hundred tenements as the record was played and played again. He confessed: "I used to wonder if I had died!"*
By the beginning of the 1950s, there were more than fifty blues clubs in Chicago. Waters, though challenged by rival contemporaries Howlin’ Wolf and Sonny Boy Williamson, continued to rule the scene throughout the decade. His band became the proving ground for legions of bluesmen, whom he fostered in his turn, as he was mentored by Broonzy. As Wilson posits, who knows what might have happened if Floyd had indeed made it to Muddy’s side?

* * *

**Country Blues**
by Muddy Waters

Well, it’s gettin’ late on the evenin’,
I feel like, feel like blowin’ my horn.
I woke up this mornin’, find my,
My little easy, my little easy gone.

Minutes seem like hours and
Hours now, oh it seems like days.
Seems like my little woman
Better stop her low-down ways.

I b’lieve I’ll go back to Memphis, boys,
Gonna have some of this here hambone boiled.
I done laid round Clarksdale and
I’m ’bout to let my old, my little old hambone spoil.

Yes, I’m goin’ back to St. Louis,
I’m gonna have my little churnin’ done.
I can’t find no country woman can make my low-down,
My little old butter come.

Well now, bye-bye, babe, I ain’t got me
No more to say.
Just like I been tellin’ you, gal,
You gonna have to need my help some day.
Voices from the Hill: The August Wilson Story

by Tim Fisher

August Wilson's *Seven Guitars* is the seventh installment of what is perhaps the most ambitious theatrical project undertaken by a major contemporary playwright: a decade-by-decade chronicling of the African-American experience as it has unfolded in the twentieth century. Along the way Wilson has won nearly every award possible for dramatic work, including two Pulitzer Prizes, the first in 1985 for *Fences*, a play set in 1950s Pittsburgh at the dawning of the civil rights movement, and the second in 1987 for the 1930s-era *The Piano Lesson*, which was filmed for CBS's Hallmark Hall of Fame earlier this year. Artistic creations of the playwright’s mind, Wilson’s plays are not documentaries. The focus for all of them is the Pittsburgh neighborhood where he grew up, a place called "the Hill"—once known as "little Harlem"—which like any American locale has adjusted with or against the times, giving the playwright a fixed perspective from which to measure the long-term changes in African-American culture. It is the voices from the Hill Wilson heard as a young boy that later became the characters and stories of his plays. "The whole world came into being in Pittsburgh," he says. "I came into manhood there."

Wilson was born in 1945 to a white German father who was a baker and a black mother who worked as a janitor. Determined to become a poet, Wilson purchased a typewriter at the age of twenty. "When I bought the typewriter, that meant I was not going to be a bus driver and I was not going to be a lawyer," he says. "I was going to write." He had dropped out of school in the tenth grade and subsequently been ordered by his mother, a woman who raised six children by herself, to move out and find a job. In downtown Pittsburgh he made ends meet as a dishwasher and elevator operator, still trying to write and pursue his own education. "When things were tight, I'd bring my typewriter [to the pawnshop] and get ten dollars for it," he recalls. "It cost me $11.50 to get it back, and I had to claim it within four months. And every time I returned, the pawnbroker seemed just a little too eager to buy it from me for $25. I refused. But you can't imagine how many times I had to drop that thing off and pick it up again."

*Wilson Hears the Blues*

It was about this time that Wilson, who had already collected some two thousand 78-rpm records at a nickel a piece, discovered Bessie Smith and the blues. The blues are the first and "biggest B" of the "four Bs" he says have most influenced his work—the artist Romare Bearden, who especially inspired *The Piano Lesson*, and writers Imamu Amiri Baraka and Jorge Luis Borges. "One day there was this typewritten yellow label and it said, 'Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll Like Mine—Bessie Smith.' I'd never heard of Bessie Smith. I listened to it twenty-two straight times and I became aware that this stuff was my own.... The music became the wellspring of my work. I took that stuff and ran with it."
Seven Guitars, in particular, is a product of Wilson’s love for the blues and his appreciation of it as black America’s own form of oral history. Spontaneous, collective, and fluid, blues music is a projection of the community through an individual, whose tale becomes a metaphor for the group experience. So essential to black culture are the blues, says Wilson, that he likens them to an artifact which could be used, thousands of years in the future, to reconstruct the history of the people. "I think that the blues are the best literature black Americans have," Wilson says. "It does everything literature is supposed to do; it is the response of black Americans to the world. All the ideas of rhythm and symmetry, of pleasure and pain are there, so if you had only the music and had nothing else you would be able to tell a great deal about these people."

In downtown Pittsburgh Wilson roomed with struggling artists, political activists, and down-and-outs (one man claimed to specialize in counterfeit money), all of whom he began to see—and hear—in a new way following his epiphany with the blues. "I began to look at the people in the house differently than I had before," he says, "because somehow there was something about them, that came through in Bessie Smith, that I hadn’t known before." While continuing to scrape by with odd jobs, Wilson became involved in many of the political movements of the late 1960s that were dedicated to elevating the level of black consciousness and making headway with civil rights legislation. With his playwright friend Rob Penny, Wilson cofounded Black Horizons, a community theater where he did some directing. He also tried writing a play, but met with frustration. "I could not make those characters talk," he says. "So I said, 'Hey Rob, how do you make your characters talk?' And he said, 'Oh, you don't, you just listen to them.' Just like that. I can't say I considered that a great pearl of wisdom. But years later, that was what I started doing."

In 1977, another friend, Claude Purdy, heard Wilson recite a poem about a character named Black Bart. Purdy suggested that Wilson turn the material into a play, and reluctantly, after some prodding, Wilson wrote a draft in about a week, only to find that in the meantime Purdy had left for St. Paul. Two days later, however, Purdy sent a ticket to Wilson; he traveled there, rewrote the play, got a job cooking for a social service agency, married, and remained for the next several years. "I made $88 a week," he says of that time. "But it freed me up. I wrote Ma Rainey's Black Bottom [Wilson's first major play, which premiered on Broadway in 1984] while working there. I had all these ideas. It was cool."

What "freed up" Wilson was the experience of hearing the voices of the Hill thrown into relief against the speech of the largely white, working-class area where he lived in St. Paul. A visit back to the Hill gave him the idea for writing a play about the neighborhood’s slightly illegal, independent taxi companies, called "jitneys." As he wrote the play of the same name, Wilson says he was "creating characters who were talking black language for the first time." Prior to that, he says, "I didn’t always value the ways black people talked. I thought in order to make art out of it, you had to change it." With Jitney, he had come to understand Rob Penny’s advice.
The Wilson–Richards Connection

It was from St. Paul in the 1980s that Wilson began sending his work to the Eugene O'Neill Playwrights' Conference. Of the first several plays he sent, all were rejected, including Jitney. He was devastated. "I said, I got to write a better play. I was already writing the best I could." Finally, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom caught the eye of the conference's artistic director, Lloyd Richards. Receiving the telegram that invited him to the conference as a participant was one of the happiest moments of Wilson's life. "Since then, I can't tell you how many openings, and this award, and that award, but nothing has felt like that first telegram that said I was going to the O'Neill."

At their first meeting to discuss the play, Wilson recalls that Richards told him, "You've got a lot of work to do," and Wilson replied, "I ain't ever been scared of hard work." Richards wanted to do the play at Yale Repertory Theatre, where he was also artistic director, so Wilson asked him to direct it. "The first day of rehearsal," Wilson remembers, "the actors read the script, and they had some questions. Before I could get it together, Lloyd started answering the questions. And he knew the answers. I found out that he knew the characters like I did." Ma Rainey premiered at Yale Rep in 1984. From there, Wilson and his playwriting took off: Fences followed in 1985, Joe Turner's Come and Gone in 1986, The Piano Lesson in 1987, Two Trains Running in 1990, and now, Seven Guitars. All of Wilson's major plays, with the exception of Seven Guitars, premiered at Yale, and most have had productions at A.C.T.

In addition to fostering Wilson—he went on to direct all of his major plays—Lloyd Richards has been, in a sense, caretaker of the African-American theater tradition ever since directing the original production of Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun in 1959. In 1978 he became the artistic director of Yale Rep, and a year later he became dean of the Yale School of Drama. His retirement in 1991 was honored with the establishment of the Lloyd Richards Distinguished Professor of Theatre Chair, the first permanently endowed chair at Yale University recognizing the achievements of an African American. Fences, the most critically and financially successful of Wilson's plays, earned Richards a Tony Award for best director.

Ma Rainey piqued Richard's interest, he says, because its characters used a quality of speech that was specific to black culture at a specific period of time. "You heard unique points of view," Richards says, "and you heard a combination of people—the articulate who had a large vocabulary and the articulate who had a small vocabulary. I say the articulate in each case because in the quest to express a complicated idea with a small vocabulary, one needs to use that in a very selective and special way. He or she ends up speaking very much in metaphor and the poetry of the streets... I've been living in Pittsburgh for the past twelve years through these plays," he concludes.

A Representative of Another Time

We will no doubt continue to hear voices through Wilson, with music as a primary source. "I know I'm a representative of another time," Wilson says, musing on his future plays that will be set in the later years of this century, "but I think I can begin to
understand this different generation by listening to the music. That's the key." When comparing the African-American past with its present, Wilson notes similarities and differences and changes, but always black self-worth emerges as central theme. The characters in Seven Guitars, he says, are "each defining themselves in their own way—Floyd in relation to his music, Hedley in relation to Marcus Garvey and Buddy Bolden and his beliefs. They're all trying to find their values. See, once the store of value that was placed on the body was removed by the Emancipation Proclamation, you had to find your own value." Tensions within the black community, he says, have changed in name only. "I think the old divisions of the rural South, the old conflict of urban-rural that once existed in the black community, have largely been replaced by a class conflict, a growing middle class."

Wilson also wonders how the lure of an almost mythological North has changed black culture. "The northern cities were not prepared for the massive migrations of people, so blacks ended up there without jobs, and sixty years later that's still the case. A perfect example is Oakland, where blacks came out to work during the war in the shipbuilding trade. I think African Americans need to seriously look at what it has cost us to uproot our culture, which is an agrarian-based, southern rural slave culture, and transplant it in the industrial North." And as far as the blues are concerned, in Wilson's opinion, damage was done when they exploded from a rural folk music into a million-dollar mainstream industry. While people such as Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and Bessie Smith have become legends, there were others who did not achieve the status of stars, and many more who were ruined by the attempt to make it big.

There is a good reason Wilson does not write essays on these subjects. First and foremost, he is an artist, a playwright. "I write for an audience of one, which is the self," he says, referring to the early process of writing a new play. "When you sit down to write, you sit in the same chair that Tennessee Williams sat in or Eugene O'Neill or William Shakespeare. You're confronted with the same problems—how to get a character on stage, how to get him off, how to build a scene."

While sitting in that chair, Wilson continues to follow Rob Penny's advice, as well as his own instincts. When he first began to write Seven Guitars, for example, Wilson originally intended to write an all-male play. "Originally I was going to have seven guys with guitars on the stage and they formed a little orchestra on the street corners. It was about their world of bluesmen, and how their world clashed with the white world who saw them as vagrants and as drunkards, and the black community who saw them as carriers of this tradition, these functional oral historians in this world... Then [Vera] walked on stage, and everything changed... She wanted her own story in there."

By the time Vera finished telling Wilson her story, three of the play's original characters had become women. "There's seven characters. Each one of the characters is a guitar," explains Wilson. "I guess I wrote the music and the characters have to play the guitar."

Following its run at A.C.T., Seven Guitars will play in Los Angeles before opening on Broadway next March. Meanwhile, when not in rehearsal, Wilson will be at his desk, fashioning another play, listening to a new set of voices. "My goal, always, is
to get back to my typewriter," he says. "No matter what I'm doing or where I am. Because for me, that is the real joy."

Material for this article was drawn from an interview with August Wilson and excerpts from other interviews published in The New York Times, Ebony, The Chicago Sun-Times, The Boston Globe, Onstage, and Vanity Fair.
An Interview with August Wilson

Tom Cremer, the dramaturg of the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, which staged the first production of Seven Guitars, talked to August Wilson about his newest play:

Tom Cremer:

I want to start off with the blues, which has had a big influence on your writing, and which is a big part of Seven Guitars. Somebody once said that much of Muddy Waters’ music was the story of a man from the country stuck in the big city. I’m wondering if that’s the story too of Floyd Barton, the bluesman in your play.

August Wilson:

Well, I think it may be the story of everyone in the play. Of course, the blues came out of the rural areas of the country and particularly blossomed in Chicago during the ’30s and ’40s. Most of these men were from Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, and Arkansas. They were not from Chicago. So, the story of the man from the country being stuck in the big city may be an internal conflict. There is an internal conflict in the play between Floyd and Canewell. Canewell still clings to the rural values, still talks about wanting to have a garden and what he’s going to plant, and Floyd is talking about a Buick and a telephone, an icebox and a refrigerator, city things. Canewell still wants an old subsistence kind of lifestyle. It’s perfectly satisfying for him to have three rooms and a little garden. So there’s this conflict between them, and I think that’s why Canewell isn’t ambitious and doesn’t want to go to Chicago. That may be true of Floyd also.

TC: How about some of the other characters? Ruby is from down South; she’s come up North, but her attitude is not that of a country girl.

AW: She’s country and doesn’t want to be country. Ruby is the kind of person who came up North, and two months later forgot all about the South; everybody who came up from the South was country to her. It didn’t take her but two months to look around and adapt and adjust. There are also people who came up and two years later they were still trying to figure out what the hell’s going on in the city; they’re inordinately discontented, wanting to go back home. There were a lot of people who talked about going back, but Ruby’s not one of them. She’s going to have it down in two months time.
TC: I remember at the O'Neill Conference last summer, during rehearsal one day you were talking about the differences between the city and the country. Does that still apply to people today? Is that tension still at work?

AW: I think that particular tension has been replaced by some other tensions within the black community. The best example is in terms of class. The blacks who made rapid adjustments to the cities were the ones who took advantage of opportunities that were presented by white America. They went to colleges and became educated and moved into what you call the black middle class. So I think there's a conflict between them and their country cousins, or what are referred to as the black underclass. So I think the conflict of the rural South has been replaced by a class struggle or a class conflict within the black community.

TC: Within the city.

AW: Yes, within the city. There's very little distinction made anymore between the country and the city.

TC: At the O'Neill you also talked of the need for people, especially black Americans, to place value on themselves. To find value in self determination. In the play, again is it Floyd you're thinking about or is it all your characters?

AW: I think it's all of them. They're trying to find a way of relating to society. They're each defining themselves in their own way—Floyd in relation to his music, Hedley in relation to Marcus Garvey and Buddy Bolden and his beliefs. They're all trying to find their values. See, once the store of value that was placed on the body was removed by the emancipation proclamation, you had to find your own value. The value had always been the value of the labor. When you are then free to sell your labor to the highest bidder, you quickly find out that the value is $4.30 an hour or whatever the minimum wage is. What I'm trying to say is, in order to assert a value you have to find your own value.

TC: In this play, more than your others, there's a lot of violence in the lives of the characters. Ruby's come up North because "somebody done killed some other body." Canewell has his knife, Floyd and Red Carter have their guns, Miss Tillery's son next door is killed.

AW: And the rooster is killed also.

TC: Yes, the rooster, of course. What's going on in this world?

AW: Well, I think the '40s are echoing the '90s. It was a violent time. The violence is integrated almost seamlessly in their lives. It's just life going on. Men in the
world have weapons. I always look at this backyard as an arena, an arena with blood and guts and men with knives and steel and guitar strings. And women—Ruby representing all of that. And of course one of the main characters in the play is murdered.

TC: Floyd says if one man has a gun then everyone’s got to have one.

AW: I think the United States demonstrates that most aptly. Think of nuclear weapons. The Germans were working on a bomb and then we worked on one, because if they had one then we had to have one, and then we tried to outdo Russia tit for tat. You have twenty-seven thousand, well we have twenty-eight thousand. I think that’s a purely American statement.

TC: You’ve often said that you wanted your audience to understand that your characters were African, that they came out of an African culture, not a European culture. And in all your plays someone or something reminds us of Africa, the presence of Africa. How do you see the African presence in Seven Guitars?

AW: I think it’s in the social intercourse of the people, which is very different than the social intercourse of white people in the ’40s, just in terms of the way the people relate to one another. Their social manners speak to a very African orientation. Specifically, the character of Hedley may carry inside him the largest African response to the world with his concept of the messiah, with the understanding that there’s a necessity for a messiah. In that sense he may be the one who carries the political awareness that blacks are not free and are oppressed. The other characters like Floyd are trying to get some modicum of food, shelter, and clothing, and something beyond that like a Buick or whatever. In that sense, Hedley may be the most African of the characters.

TC: Hedley is fascinating in his prophecies. He’s like an Old Testament prophet. He also seems to be one of the most damaged characters. He’s physically sick. He reminds me of Hambone in Two Trains Running. Both are struggling with injustice and the struggle seems to have hurt them somehow.

AW: Yes, that’s correct. I call them spectacle characters. I’m not sure why I do that. I always have to have one in every play.

TC: Where do your characters come from? Other playwrights write very personally and one could find the biographies of their friends in their plays. Are there people back in the Hill District of Pittsburgh who are models for your characters?
AW: No, there are not. None of my characters are modeled after anyone. They’re all made up out of myself. They’re all invented characters. There’s no Hedley that I know, there’s no Hambone. They’re all part of myself. As I write the play they all sort of walk on stage and announce who they are. I try to keep a balanced palette, if you will, and I want to have some representation. For instance, I wanted someone to carry a political idea in Seven Guitars, and Hedley came closest to that out of all the characters in the play. I said, okay, I got that in him. He’s a follower of Marcus Garvey. When I was a young man of twenty-five, surprisingly there were quite a few followers of Garvey still around. Then you begin to orchestrate those ideas and integrate him into the play and it becomes a part of it, and the next thing you know he’s doing things that only he would do. That becomes a test, because if you have a character saying or doing something that another character could say or do then you’re not writing your characters properly.

TC: You’re just writing ideas.

AW: You’re just writing ideas. But once they become their own selves you can say yes, that’s what Canewell would have done, and no one else could have done it. I think you’re home free from there. At least you got a good start.

TC: When you’re writing, do you have an audience in mind? Is there a specific audience or an ideal audience?

AW: No. I write for an audience of one, which is the self.

TC: Your own self.

AW: My own self. I have to satisfy me before I can satisfy anyone else. My own particular requirements as an artist, what it is I’m trying to accomplish, I have to answer to that. However, in the craft of playwriting, you have to write with an audience in mind in the sense that the play is going on to be viewed by an audience. So you don’t write for a particular audience, but you are audience aware. You are telling the story to someone and that’s important because it will often dictate, in the craft, what you are trying to accomplish.

TC: Speaking of craft, in Seven Guitars you are trying something new. You’re writing a mystery play with a different structure.

AW: This play has become all kinds of different things from the beginning. I’m torn between wanting it to become more of a mystery and less of a mystery. I think it’s unimportant to know who it is that killed Floyd, as opposed to knowing the why of it. There’s a real tragedy in the why of it. It’s less tragic if he’s killed over a woman. But he’s killed over an idea. Every time Floyd plays with Hedley he’s coming closer and closer. He’s helping to seal his death but he doesn’t realize it.
TC: He's preparing the way.

AW: Yeah, unknowingly. Maybe I should give more clues. For instance, I don't think at the beginning you know that Floyd's throat was cut. I wanted the murderer to possibly be all of them. I didn't want any of the characters to be murderers per se.

TC: My last question is, why Seven Guitars?

AW: Ah ha. There's seven characters. Each one of the characters is a guitar. I guess I wrote the music and the characters have to play the guitar. Originally I was going to have seven guys with guitars on the stage and they formed a little orchestra on the street corners. It was about the world of bluesmen, and how their world clashed with the white world who saw them as vagrants and as drunkards, and the black community who saw them as carriers of this tradition, these functional oral historians in this world. I was looking at two different ways of looking at blues singers, so I had seven guys with seven guitars, then this woman walked on stage and everything changed.

TC: Who showed up first, Ruby or Vera?

AW: It was Vera. It was definitely Vera. She wanted her own story in there. Then I started fiddling with that, but I kept the title of Seven Guitars. I think that will play. I hope it will.

TC: I think so. Thank you.

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A Journey through the Twentieth Century with August Wilson

Seven Guitars is the seventh work in a decade-by-decade series of plays by August Wilson chronicling the twentieth-century African-American experience. Here is a brief overview of his dramatic journey to date:

Joe Turner's Come and Gone (1986) is set in a Pittsburgh boardinghouse in 1911, as the first wave of the great black migration from the rural South to the urban North begins. After years of forced labor on a southern farm, a man searches for his wife and daughter.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (1984) is set in the 1920s in a Chicago recording studio, where a group of musicians, including the famous blues singer of the play's title, confronts racism and violence in the music industry and in society.

The Piano Lesson (1987) is set in Pittsburgh in 1936. Boy Willie, a former sharecropper, journeys north to persuade his sister to sell their joint inheritance, an intricately carved piano, so he can buy Mississippi farmland with the proceeds.

Seven Guitars (1994) is set in 1948 in Pittsburgh, where a group of blues musicians and their women dream of fame and a better life in Chicago and struggle to survive in a world of violence and poverty.

Fences (1985) is set in inner-city Pittsburgh in the 1950s. The play concerns a former star baseball player, now an ordinary laborer, whose views on life clash with those of his rebellious son, mirroring the increasing tension of the years just before the civil rights movement takes off.

Two Trains Running (1990) is set in a luncheonette in Pittsburgh in the 1960s, just one month after the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Jitney (1982), the first play in the cycle to be written, is set in the 1970s. It takes place at a taxi stand, where independent drivers fight for economic survival.
A Brief History of African-American Theater

by Michaela Goldhaber

When August Wilson decided to make the move from writing poetry to writing plays, he joined a long and rich tradition of African-American theater. James V. Hatch, in his introduction to The Roots of African-American Drama, characterized African-American theater as "the attempt of black playwrights to present honest black images on an American stage that for two centuries presented dishonest ones, written by white playwrights."

The earliest public theatrical performances by African Americans were minstrel shows presented by slaves in the 1820s. These were song-and-dance revues, full of satirical skits that struck in subtle ways at the cruelty of white slave owners. But this unique art form was taken over by white showmen who rose to success by imitating minstrels, performing in "black-face" make-up.

In 1858, William Wells Brown, a former slave and an abolitionist, wrote An Escape: or a Leap to Freedom, the first play to be published by an African American. African-American drama traveled to Broadway in the form of musical revues just before the turn of the century. It was not until W.E.B. Du Bois issued a call to the African-American community in the 1920s for plays about, by, and for African-Americans, however, that serious black drama reached the Broadway stage.

In 1923, The Chip Woman's Fortune, by Willis Richardson, "a folk piece of family life" (Hatch), was the first. Richardson wanted to show "the soul of a people," and he paved the way for plays that portrayed the everyday lives of African Americans. In 1955, Trouble in Mind, by Alice Childress, became the first play by an African-American woman to be produced off-Broadway. Then in 1959, theater history was rocked by the Broadway opening of Lorraine Hansberry's smash hit, the African-American family drama, A Raisin in the Sun. Raisin was directed by Lloyd Richards, who went on to become Wilson's collaborator.

During the 1960s, African-American playwrights, inspired by Hansberry, became more politically militant and began to demand social change. Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) reissued Du Bois's appeal for plays by and for the African-American community as part of the Black Art Movement. His call was answered by such playwrights as James Baldwin, Adrienne Kennedy, Ed Bullins, and Charles Gordone, who was the first African-American to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama, with No Place to Be Somebody. African-American plays became commercially and critically successful; among the early successes were Joseph Walker's Tony Award-winning The River Niger in 1973, Ntozake Shange's For colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf in 1976, and Charles Fuller's A Soldier's Play, which won the 1981 Pulitzer and was made into a feature film. In the early 1980s, Wilson began his decade-by-decade chronicle of African Americans in the twentieth century, for which he has won two Pulitzer Prizes. Today, Wilson and such playwrights as George C. Wolfe, Anna Deveare Smith, and many others continue to explore and overthrow stereotypes and prejudices, creating a unique contribution to American theater history.
Coast-to-Coast Collaboration:
A.C.T. Plays August Wilson’s Seven Guitars

by Elizabeth Brodersen

This season A.C.T. continues its unique collaboration with one of this country’s most compelling contemporary playwrights: August Wilson. The newest installment in Wilson’s six-play exploration of the twentieth-century African-American experience, Seven Guitars, makes its way to the Marines Memorial Theatre in November, on its way from the Huntington Theatre Company in Boston to the Ahmanson Theater in Los Angeles. The production’s ultimate destination: Broadway, in March 1996.

In Seven Guitars, Wilson brings us a mystical, musical portrait of postwar life in Pittsburgh’s Hill District. Four men and three women (the "guitars" of the play’s title) weave a lyrical tapestry of dialogue and song as they fight for their dreams amid the poverty and violence of daily life in the urban North. The story centers around a fateful week in the life of one hard-playing, hard-living jazz musician, Floyd Barton, whose career is just about to take off. It is 1948, and the Chicago blues scene is making a comeback. Muddy Waters, the king of Chicago blues, has just launched his career, and Floyd is itching to follow him.

Like most of his work, Seven Guitars is partly the product of Wilson’s close collaboration with director Lloyd Richards, former artistic director of Yale Repertory Theatre and the National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O’Neill Theater Center. In 1982, Richards agreed to direct Wilson’s first major play, Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, and has since taken most of Wilson’s plays from first production to Broadway. He also directs the current coproduction at A.C.T.

The Wave of the Future

Seven Guitars’s hosts at each stop along the play’s coast-to-coast journey—including Sageworks, the commercial sponsor in New York—all share in the costs and benefits of developing the production.

The broadly based collaboration which brings Seven Guitars to the A.C.T. mainstage, although unusual for A.C.T., is by no means unprecedented. The term "production sharing" entered the American theatrical vocabulary in the mid 1980s as playwrights and regional theaters struggled with the financial challenges of producing "noncommercial" theater. Previous A.C.T. productions of Wilson’s plays have taken similar routes: the 1987 production of Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom was coproduced by A.C.T. and the Los Angeles Theater Center (LATC), and the 1988–89 season’s Joe Turner’s Come and Gone was coproduced by A.C.T., LATC, and San Francisco’s Lorraine Hansberry Theatre. The Piano Lesson, originally coproduced by a long list of commercial and nonprofit regional theaters, began its national tour (the first for a Wilson play) at Theatre on the Square under the auspices of A.C.T., Yale Rep, and several individual producers in 1991.
A.C.T. Producing Director James Haire believes that coproductions are a wave of the future for American theater. "Coproductions work on two levels," he explains. "They help plays-in-progress tremendously, by allowing them to evolve over a much longer period of time than the three or four weeks of rehearsal typically allotted a new production. Also, sharing costs among several organizations makes producing complicated plays much more affordable for nonprofit theaters, which continue to face tremendous economic difficulty in this country, as well as less risky for commercial producers. Playwrights need not feel constrained to write two-character, one-set plays to see their work produced."

Set against the cost savings of coproductions, however, is the potential loss of artistic control. The sets, costumes, and lighting for *Seven Guitars*, for example, which opened at the Huntington in September, were designed by artists following Wilson and Richards’s artistic vision and constructed in Boston. Wilson and Richards also control the selection of the principal cast.

Haire does not consider this a problem. "We’ve worked with August and Lloyd before, and there’s no question about trusting their artistic integrity," he says. "I’ve been working with all the parties on budgetary issues from the very beginning, while Carey [Perloff] has been intimately involved in casting and script development." Wilson and Richards will be in residence at A.C.T., with the designers and cast, for almost three weeks of rehearsals and preview performances before the San Francisco opening, working on rewrites and continuing to shape the production. Two of the principal actors, Rosalyn Coleman and Viola Davis have already appeared in A.C.T. productions, and the understudies for the San Francisco performances are cast by A.C.T.

As for the logistical challenges of coproduction, A.C.T. was fortunate that the 1995–96 season’s second fall slot coincided exactly with *Seven Guitars*’s schedule. Haire worked closely with the production’s designers to ensure that the set would be transferable from stage to stage: it had to be rebuilt to fit into the smaller Marines Memorial Theatre, and further modifications will be necessary to accommodate the much larger Ahmanson stage.

The Spirit of Collaboration

*Seven Guitars* also allows A.C.T. to broaden its community theater education efforts, while honoring the profound spirit of collaboration that has helped Wilson to become the chief chronicler of twentieth-century African-American cultural history, as well as one of the century’s most popular playwrights. On November 13, Wilson and Richards will discuss *Seven Guitars* and the evolution of their lives’ work as part of A.C.T. Perspectives, the free A.C.T. symposium series which has grown in popularity over the last two seasons. This symposium is cosponsored by the Lorraine Hansberry Theatre, whose subscribers have been offered special ticket discounts and other benefits as key elements of the collaboration. It is Hansberry’s ground-breaking play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, which is credited with igniting the African-American theater movement of the 1960s,
which in turn inspired and nurtured Wilson’s early work; Richards directed the original production of Raisin in 1959.

"I would like to see A.C.T. become more involved in similar collaborative projects," says Haire, "particularly with large-scale musicals that might otherwise require resources greater than any one theater could provide. And with the Geary Theater’s updated, versatile stagecraft, we will be even more flexible in what A.C.T. can produce here in the future."
Study Questions and Exercises

The following questions were prepared for participants in the A.C.T. ArtReach program:

1. Select or compose a piece of music that expresses the personality and life of each of the characters in *Seven Guitars*. Explain why you chose that particular piece of music and how it reflects each character’s essence.

2. Construct a collage out of magazine clippings that illustrates the story of one of the characters in *Seven Guitars*. Then make a collage that tells the story of your own life, and compare them with each other.

3. Listen to the lyrics of a blues song. What do these lyrics say about the life of the person who wrote them? Write your own blues song and include elements from your own life.

4. Names and nicknames have a special significance in *Seven Guitars*. What does your name or nickname mean? Where did it come from? If you don’t have a nickname, make one up for yourself. Write a brief description of the origin and meaning of your name or nickname.

5. Each character in *Seven Guitars* dreams about making a better life for him- or herself. Identify each character’s dream and how that dream affects the action of the play. What happens to each dream? What about each character’s personality and circumstances makes it more or less likely that he or she will achieve that dream?

   What is your dream in life? How does it affect the actions you take each day? What can you do to make it come true? What are the obstacles you face? Compare your dreams and aspirations to those of a particular character in the play.

6. Use magazine clippings, postcards, or other visual images to construct a photo album page from a specific period in each character’s life. For example: cut out pictures and words that might illustrate Floyd’s first trip to Chicago, or Ruby’s journey to Pittsburgh.

7. Describe the superstitions found in *Seven Guitars*. List some of the things that you are superstitious about and explain how they affect your life.

8. Many of the characters of *Seven Guitars* have moved to Pittsburgh from different parts of the country or want to leave Pittsburgh for other places. Write an essay or draw a picture describing your own geographical roots. What part of the
country is your family from? Has your family moved around a lot? Where? If you had a choice, where would you move to?

9. African-American storytelling is descended from the oral traditions of African culture, in which the history of a tribe or family is handed down in the form of stories told by one generation to the next. Can you think of any stories from your family that have been passed down from generation to generation? Is there a story from your own life that you would like to see passed down to your grandchildren? Tell one of these stories to your class.

10. The characters of Seven Guitars engage in many activities that give joy and meaning to their daily lives, like playing cards, listening to a fight together, singing, or going to a Mother’s Day dance. What other activities in the play might be considered rituals? Do you and your family and/or friends have similar rituals? Compare and contrast them to the rituals found in Seven Guitars.

11. Imagine the characters of Seven Guitars at a reunion five years after Floyd’s funeral. What would they say to each other? How would they act? What might have happened to each of them in those five years?

12. Research your ancestry. What were your ancestors’ lives like? What do you think they would say to you if they were alive today? Draw a picture of them and/or write a brief description of how they lived.

13. Bring an object from home that has sentimental value and tell a story about it. The story can be either completely true or completely false; in either case, make your listeners believe your story. Have them guess whether the story is true or false.

14. Identify a line of dialogue or a monologue from each of the characters in Seven Guitars that best indicates his or her world view. If you could write a monologue that sums up your world view, what would it be?

15. What does the title of the play mean? Pick an alternate title.

16. Using watercolors or another medium, paint an abstract picture that captures the essence of your favorite scene in the play.

17. Figures such as Marcus Garvey, Joe Louis, and Buddy Bolden are heros to many of the characters in Seven Guitars. Why are they important? What makes them heros? Who are your heros?

18. Although all of the action we see in Seven Guitars takes place in Vera’s backyard, many of the most important events of the play take place somewhere else. We learn about these events from the dialogue of the characters who describe them.
What are these events? How do they affect the actions of the characters that we do see? Write a scene that describes one of these events, and act it out with friends. If you could take the characters out of the setting of the play, where would you have them go?

19. Pick a character from *Seven Guitars* and write that character’s journal entry for the day after Floyd’s funeral. How does this character feel? What are this character’s goals?

20. Tall tales and African-American folklore are essential components of *Seven Guitars*. Make up your own tall tale or research African-American folklore and present a story to the class.

21. Discuss the issue of violence in *Seven Guitars* as reflected in the lyrics of blues songs from the time period. How does that violence compare with violence found in contemporary society and music?

22. Write an alternate ending for *Seven Guitars*. Does Floyd make it back to Chicago? What happens to him there? To Vera? To Hedley? How does Ruby’s baby grow up?

23. Consider the use of symbolism in *Seven Guitars*. What is the significance of the rooster? What do the angels at Floyd’s funeral mean? What other symbols can you identify that are used in art forms like sculpture, painting, song, and dance? Are the symbols used in *Seven Guitars* similar or different?

24. Hedley says in *Seven Guitars*: "I always wanted to be a big man. ... Maybe Hedley never going to be big like that. But for himself inside. That place where you live your own special life. I would be happy to be big there." Discuss this statement. What does Hedley mean when he talks about living his "own special life"? Do you have a "special life" of your own?


Films

