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American Commemoratives Stamp Series: Jazz Singers/Blues Singers

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AMERICAN COMMEMORATIVES

JAZZ SINGERS/ BLUES SINGERS



During the first half of the 20th century, these eight singers forged two distinctively American music styles—jazz and blues—and paved the way for later musicians. They are presented here as part of the Legends of American Music Series.

Known as the "Mother of the Blues," Ma Rainey was one of the earliest blues singers to record and was famous for her deep and heavy voice. She also "discovered" Bessie Smith and encouraged her in her vocal career. Smith, one of the most famous of all blues singers, began touring with a minstrel show at age 11 and made her first recording in 1923. Throughout the 1920s, she was hugely popular with hits such as "Jail House Blues."

Billie Holiday, "Howlin' Wolf," and others continued to establish jazz as a legitimate music form in the 1930s, especially after the invention of the modern jukebox in 1935.

Holiday's fame soared even higher as she began composing her own numbers, including "Don't Explain" and "God Bless the Child." Born Chester Burnett, "Howlin' Wolf's" powerful voice and use of the electric guitar made him the great star of the Chicago clubs as he played a style known as delta blues.



The vibrato in Mildred Bailey's high-pitched voice displayed her easy sense of jazz phrasing and made her one of the first steady female jazz band singers. Bailey reached the peak of her career in the late 1930s when she and her husband, Red Norvo, began touring as "Mr. and Mrs. Swing."

Although his parents never approved of his career, Jimmy Rushing has been called the all-time greatest male blues singer. Stretching the musical limits of the blues, Rushing recorded "He Ain't Got Rhythm," "Blue Devil Blues," and dozens of other hits in the 1940s and 1950s.

Born McKinley Morganfield, "Muddy Waters" broke with the country blues style to create a style known as "urban blues." In 1958, Waters' popularity widened when he toured England. His style inspired a generation of young musicians—both British and American—who later developed rock 'n' roll, soul, and pop music.

Waters was strongly influenced by Robert Johnson, whose falsetto singing and masterful slide guitar made an impact on both his contemporaries and later musicians. Johnson's original songs, such as "Me and the Devil Blues," and "Love and Vain" are considered some of his most compelling numbers.

All of the musicians featured on these commemorative stamps have in some way influenced both the music world and each other. Their rich voices can still move and inspire us, thanks to the recordings they've left behind.

The Jazz and Blues Singers commemorative stamps were designed by Howard Koslow and Julian Allen of New York, New York, and were issued on September 17, 1994 at the Mississippi Delta Blues Festival in Greenville.

