



BILL MOYERS' WORLD OF IDEAS

August Wilson

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in your time and mine, today?"

AUGUST WILSON: I don't look at our society today too much. My focus is still in the past, and part of the reason is because what I do—the wellspring of art, or what I do—I get from the blues. So I listen to the music of a particular period that I'm working on, and I think inside the music is clues to what is happening with the people. And I don't know that much about contemporary music. So if I were ever going to write a play, say, set in 1980, I would have to go and listen to the music.

MOYERS: Why were blues so important? Is it Ma Rainey who says that you sing the blues not to feel better, but to understand life?

WILSON: The blues are important primarily because they contain the cultural expression and the cultural response to blacks in America and to the situation that they find themselves in. And contained in the blues is a philosophical system at work. And as part of the oral tradition, this is a way of passing along information. And in order to—if you're going to tell someone a story, if you want to keep information alive, you have to make it memorable so that the person hearing it will go tell someone else. That's how it stays alive. So blues was a way of doing that. And the music then provided you with emotional reference for the information. And it was sanctioned by the community, in the sense that if someone else sang the song, or other people sing the song, I mean, they kept it alive because they sanctioned the information that was contained in it.

MOYERS: You remember the first time you heard the blues?

WILSON: I do, very specifically I remember Bessie Smith. I used to collect 78 records that I would buy from the St. Vincent de Paul store, at five cents apiece, and I did this indiscriminately, I would just take whatever was there, take records. And I listened to Patii Page and Walter Huston, "September Song." And one day in my sack of records there was a yellow-labeled record that had a typewritten label, which was kind of odd. And I put it on, and it was "Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll Like Mine." It was by Bessie Smith, of course, and I listened to it, and I had one of those old 78's where you had to keep putting the needle in, and I recall I listened to the record 22 straight times. I had never in my life—

MOYERS: Twenty-two?

WILSON:—Twenty-two. And just over and, you know, I had never heard anything like it. And I was—I was literally stunned by its beauty. It was very much different than Patii Page singing, whatever she was singing. And it spoke—there was an immediate emotional response.

MOYERS: What did it say?

WILSON: Well, it was someone speaking directly to me.

MOYERS: About?

WILSON: About the fact that this is mine, and this is something that I can connect with, that I instantly, emotionally understood. That all the rest of the music I was listening to did not concern me, was not a part of me. But this spoke to something in myself, and it said, "This is yours."

MOYERS: You said earlier that music is a way of processing information. What was the information the blues brought to a kid named August Wilson?

WILSON: One, that there could be—that there was a nobility to the lives of blacks in America, which I didn't always see. I was at the time living in a rooming house in Pittsburgh, and after I discovered the blues, I began to look at the people in the house a little differently than I had before. I began to see a value in their life that I simply hadn't seen before. I discovered a beauty and a nobility to, in essence, what was a struggle simply to stay alive, a struggle to survive. The mere fact that they were still able to make this music, it was a salute to, it was a testament to the resiliency of their spirit.

MOYERS: You know, as you talk I think of these black teenagers in the ghetto, Newark in particular, where I spent a lot of time filming a documentary for CBS, and I think of those moments in *Joe Turner*, your play, when the characters are absolutely struck dumb because, as you wrote, "they ain't got words to tell." And I think of those kids in Newark. They don't have words to tell their story. The blues don't speak to them. It's

mainly rap. Do you think August Wilson could write a play about those kids?

WILSON: Sure. I mean, we come out of the same tradition. We come out of the same culture. I haven't actually stopped to look at what is happening with them in their particular life, but yes, there's no question, because it's me also.

MOYERS: You were a dropout, like a lot of these kids in the ghetto today. Who reached you? Who brought the poet to life in you?

WILSON: I think it was my mother. I mean, she's the one who taught me how to read. And also reading was very important to her because she stressed the idea that if you can read, you can do anything.

MOYERS: But if you could read, why did you leave high school?

WILSON: I was bored. I was confused. I was disappointed in myself. And I didn't do any work after school until my history teacher assigned us to write a paper on a historical personage. I chose Napoleon.

MOYERS: Why Napoleon?

WILSON: I had always been fascinated with Napoleon because he was a self-made emperor. Victor Hugo said, Napoleon's will to power, and it was the title of my paper. And I submitted it to my teacher, and he didn't think I had written it. And he wanted me to explain it to him. You know, I had my bibliography and my footnotes, and I felt that's all the explanation I should give. Well, the upshot of that was he gave me a failing grade on the paper. He had written an A-plus on it, or an "E," and he said, "I'm going to give you one of these two grades. And when I refused to prove to him that I had written the paper, other than to say I had written it, he circled the "E" and handed it back to me, and I tore the paper up and threw it in his wastebasket and walked out of the school. I was fifteen-years-old. And I did not go back. However, the next morning I got up and I went and played basketball, right underneath the principal's window. And as I look back on it, of course I wanted him to come out and say, "Why aren't you in school?" so I could tell him, tell someone. And he never came out.

MOYERS: Do you ever go back to—what do they call it—"The Hill," that was your area, "The Hill," in Pittsburgh?

WILSON: Oh, sure. Oh, sure. Yes.

MOYERS: What's happened to it?

WILSON: The same thing that has happened to most black communities; most of it is no longer there, the buildings. What used to be at one time a very thriving community, albeit a depressed community, but still there were stores and shops all along the avenue; they are not there anymore. When I left my mother's house I went out into the world, into that community, to learn what it meant to be a man, and I saw a family there. So I go back as often as I can. I go and I stand on the corner and say, "Yeah, this is me."

MOYERS: Have any of those people seen any of your plays?

WILSON: They have, yes.

MOYERS: Do they talk to you about them?

WILSON: They do. They are—some of the guys on the avenue, the people that you see just hanging out on the street. They don't really know what, probably, all they know is you did something. And they'll walk up and they'll say, "Hey, how you doing, man. I'm proud of—we proud of you." It was the fact that someone from that community did something, whatever.

MOYERS: You once wrote, one of your characters said, that "Everyone has to find his own song."

WILSON: Yes.

MOYERS: How do these people find their song.

WILSON: Well, I think one, they have it.

MOYERS: They have it?

WILSON: They just have to realize that, and then they have to learn how to sing it. In that particular case, in *Joe Turner*, the song was the African identity. It was connecting yourself to that and understanding that this is who you are, you know.

MOYERS: As an African? You mean, these people in Pittsburgh must find the African that's in them, or in their past, before they really know who they are?

WILSON: Oh, of course. We are Africans who have been in America since the 17th century. We are Americans, but we are— first of all we are Africans. There is no way that you can dispute the fact that we're African people, and we have a culture that is separate and distinct from mainstream white America's culture.

MOYERS: But friends of mine who go back to Africa say that they find themselves thinking and being treated as if they were American tourists.

WILSON: Yes, no question.

MOYERS: They're Americans.

WILSON: Sure. Sure. Absolutely, and if you take these people I'm talking about, and you take them back over to Africa, they would walk around trying to figure out what the hell's going on. There's no way that they can relate to that, you see, but the sensibilities are African. They are Africans who have been removed from Africa.

MOYERS: The Jews, in their Passover celebration, always end by saying "Next year in Jerusalem." They have a fixed place. But, what does it mean, "next year in Africa?"

WILSON: Part of what our problem as blacks in America is that we don't claim that. Partly, you see, because of the linguistic environment in which we live. I was in Tucson, at a writers conference, and I challenged my host to pull out his dictionary and look up the words "white" and "black." And he looked up the word white, and he came up with things like white, unmarked by malignant influence, of desirable condition, a sterling man, a bright, fair and honest. Then you look up the word black, and you get a villain, marked by malignant influence, unqualified, violator of laws, etc. And these are actual definitions in a Webster's dictionary. So this is a part of the linguistic environment, so that when white America looks at a black, they see the opposite of everything that they are.

MOYERS: Some whites are saying today that for blacks in the ghetto to emerge into the mainstream of American life, they really have to become mainstream Americans, they've got to become part of the white culture, that you can't exist— you can't thrive in a mainstream culture unless you become like the mainstream culture.

WILSON: Well, they hold up the examples of the Irish, or the Germans; these are all Europeans who share the same sensibilities as the mainstream, so it's very easy for them to melt. But we cannot change our names and hide behind the label of being an American, because we're a very visible minority. You can look at us, you can see us coming a block away. So there's no way that we can melt into the pot. Other races, for instance, the Orientals, they're allowed their cultural differences. You look at an Oriental, and they may do things very differently — and they do, they participate in the world differently than Europeans do.

MOYERS: Chinatown in San Francisco is a tourist attraction. Harlem is not.

WILSON: Harlem is not. Yes. So, it's because we allow the Chinese to have their culture differences. Not only do we allow it, we salute them for it. You see, but blacks are not allowed— blacks are expected to become like whites, without really understanding that in order to do that that we have to turn our head around almost 360 degrees. You see, because our world views are so drastically different to begin with.

MOYERS: But if blacks keep looking for the African in them, if they keep returning spiritually or emotionally to their roots, can they ever come to terms with this dichotomy, with living in these two worlds? Are they always going to be held by the past in a way that is potentially destructive?

WILSON: Oh, I don't see it as potentially destructive at all. In other words, to say that I am an African, that I can participate in a society as an African, I don't have to become— I don't have to adopt European values, European esthetics, European ways of doing things in order to live in the world.

MOYERS: What's your opinion, then, of *The Cosby Show*?

WILSON: It does not reflect black America to my mind.

MOYERS: In what sense?

WILSON: Most of black America is in housing projects, without jobs, living on welfare. And this is not the case in *The Cosby Show*, because all the values in that household are strictly what I would call white American values. I would be hard pressed to even—

you could search the entire United States and I think you'd be hard pressed to find that family, despite the fact that there are some blacks who have, quote, made it; who have money and who own their own houses, for instance. Who are not on welfare, who are educated and who have responsible jobs. They actually make a very small portion of black America. Most of black America is crowded into housing projects, looking for jobs.

MOYERS: Well, I understand that. But again, back to the Jewish Passover, where the Jews pray "Next year in Jerusalem." Since Africans don't have a Jerusalem, don't they have to say, "Next year in the American dream?" "I have a dream that I can make it in this country." Isn't that the Jerusalem for black Americans?

WILSON: Well, maybe, maybe. But you see, there's another part of Passover, I was invited to one one time, a friend of mine invited me, and I was struck by the very first words. It starts off, "We were slaves in the land of Egypt," you see. Now, that's the first thing. And then "Next year in Jerusalem" comes at the end. But they were constantly reminding themselves of what their historical situation has been, see, and I think, for instance, I find it criminal in fact that we, after hundreds of years in bondage, do not celebrate our Emancipation Proclamation; that we do not have a thing like the Passover where we sit down and we remind ourselves that we are African people, that we were slaves. Because we try to run away, we try to hide that part of our past. We don't have that. If we did something like that, it would say, "this is who we are." We would recognize the fact that we are Africans, we would recognize the fact that we were slaves, and we would recognize that since we have a common past, that we have a common future also.

MOYERS: You remind me, as you talk, of the fact that both Jews and blacks have been through such great suffering, and yet, as they went into the ovens or onto the slave ships, they kept singing the song of the Lord. And when I think of that, of the faith of both peoples, I think of Levee, in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, remember? He hears that a white mob has forced a black preacher to humiliate himself?

WILSON: Yes.

MOYERS: And he cries out, "Where the hell was God when all this was going on?"

WILSON: Mm-hmm.

MOYERS: What's August Wilson's answer to that question?

WILSON: Well, it was— it was the wrong God that he was expecting to come and help him, I think, as he later points out. He answers the question himself, he said, "This is the white man's God." The fact that Africans, when they came to America, their religion was stripped from them, everything; their language, culture, ideas. And when you look in the mirror, you should see your God. If you don't, you have somebody else's God. So in fact, what we do is, we worship an image of God which is white, right? Which is the image of the very same people — we're talking about image now — the very same people who have oppressed you, who have put you on the slave ships, who have beaten you and who have forced you to work, etc. The image was a white man.

MOYERS: So the God of the slaveholder can't be the God of the slaves.

WILSON: There's no question, no, it's two different things.

MOYERS: A paradox for August Wilson, at least for me — if I can be personal for a minute — is you had a white father.

WILSON: I did, yes.

MOYERS: And yet you chose the black route, the black culture.

WILSON: Because the cultural environment of my life was black. As I grew up, I learned black culture at my mother's knee, so to speak.

MOYERS: You didn't make a conscious choice? I'm going to choose black—

WILSON: No. That's who I always have been. The cultural environment of my life has always been— the forces that have shaped me, the nurturing, the learning, have all be black ideas about the world.

MOYERS: Do I hear you arguing for separate but equal cultures? You see, when I went to *Fences*, I wept. I wasn't an outsider, even though it was about the black experience

in America. I wept at the relationship between the father and the son, at the mother who was so loyal to a disloyal husband, at the importance of tradition, the role of the community. I wept. I was not an outsider there. I felt a part of that experience you were writing about. But you were writing about black America.

WILSON: I try to explore in terms of the life I know best those things which are common to all culture, so while the specifics in the play are black, the commonalities of culture are larger. There are universal realities in the play. So you're able—I think you were able to make connections with the father's—because the specifics are black, but you have father-son conflict, you have husband-wife, you have whatever.

MOYERS: So, you're not unsympathetic to those blacks who look at the Huxtables on *The Cosby Show* and see there something that they want, something to achieve. But you're saying that's not the whole story.

WILSON: That's not the whole story. And of course, everyone—I mean, you can go into Newark, the ghetto in Newark, and you ask the people what they want; they want decent homes, they would like to be the Huxtables. This is what they want. But there are no avenues for them to do that. In order to do that, one, you have to deny white America. The social contract that white America has given blacks is if you want to participate in society, you have to deny who you are. You cannot participate in the society as Africans. You can't come and bring that African stuff.

MOYERS: But the dominant commercial ethos in America is so strong that it seems to me—and there are so many more people who watch television than attend the plays—that it seems to me the Huxtables are winning the battle for the black imagination, and that the August Wilsons and the Troy Maxsons and the Ma Rainey's are losing.

WILSON: Yes, but you see, I think even blacks who sit up there and look at *The Cosby Show*, while they may want to participate and share some of the wealth, say, of the Cosby's; they understand that's foreign to them. That is not the way they live their lives. That is not the way they socialize. They recognize that immediately as that's the way white people do that. But they would like to have that and still be who they are, and still socialize and do the things that they do. They would probably go out and buy a big Cadillac, because their sense of style is different. And it might be a yellow one or a pink one. And it's simply aesthetics. Basically, we do everything differently. But we still would like to have, you know, whatever rewards the society has to offer to someone who is willing to work and who has the talent to, basically, to sell.

MOYERS: You once said, Mr. Wilson, that the most valuable blacks were those in prison, who had the "warrior spirit," as you called it, in the African sense, men who went out and got for their women and children what they needed when all of their avenues were closed to them. Who do you think has the warrior spirit in America today? Who's fighting the battle?

WILSON: I think those same people, for the most part. I think ever since we've been—since the first African set foot on the continent, there has been a resistance, and I think that this spirit is best exemplified in those—not necessarily all of them are in the penitentiary—but the ones, because of the spirit, who find themselves on the opposite side of the society that has constantly tried to crush that spirit.

MOYERS: I was going to suggest maybe the middle class, the black middle class, possesses that warrior spirit. Today, in the sense that they're struggling in a white man's world to make it, to provide for their children, to keep that house, pay that mortgage, send those kids to school, to live the life of responsibility. That there's a struggle going on there in the black middle class.

WILSON: The real struggle has been since Africans first set foot on the continent, an affirmation of the value of one's self. And I think if, in order to participate in American society, in order to accomplish some of the things which the black middle class has accomplished, if you have had to give up that self in order to accomplish that, then you are not making an affirmation of the value of the African being. You are saying that in order to do that I must become someone else, I must become like someone else. The example I always use is I was in the bus station in St. Paul, and I saw six Japanese-Americans who were sitting down, having breakfast. And I simply sat there and

observed them. And they chattered among themselves very politely, and they ate their breakfast. They got up and they paid the bill and they walked out. And I sat there, and I said, what would have been the difference if six black guys had come in here and sit down? What is the cultural difference? And the first thing I discovered is that none of the Japanese guys played the jukebox.

So the first thing when six black guys walk in there, somebody's going to go over to the jukebox, they'll go and put a quarter in the jukebox. Somebody's going to come up and say, "Hey, Rodney man, play this." And he's going to say, "No, man, plan your own record." You know, "Hey, I ain't playin' with you. Don't play my record, man. Put your own quarter in there." And the second thing I noticed, no one said anything to the waitress. Now, six black guys, "Hey, mama, what's happening, what's your phone number?" "Naw, don't talk to him, he can't read, but give me your phone number." The guy's going to get up to play another record, somebody's going to steal a piece of bacon off his plate, he's going to come back and say, "Man, who been messin' with my food? I ain't playin' with you all, don't be messin' with my food." When the time comes to pay the bill, it's going to be "Hey, Joe, loan me a dollar, man." Right? So if you were a white person sitting observing that, you would say they don't know how to act, they're loud, they don't like one another, the guy wouldn't let him play the record, the guy stole food off his plate. But if you go to them six guys and say, "What's the situation here?" you'll find out they're the greatest of friends and they're just having breakfast the same way the Japanese guys had breakfast, but they do it a little differently. This is just who they are in the world. They cannot not do it like that, because that's who they are.

MOYERS: So you've answered my question. I was going to ask you, don't you grow weary of thinking black, writing black, being asked questions about blackness?

WILSON: Well, how could one grow weary of that? I mean, you never transcend who you are.

MOYERS: [voice-over] From the Playwrights Center in Minneapolis, this has been a conversation with August Wilson. I'm Bill Moyers.