

# He taught the backup band to play

Young Dwight Andrews, who is a Cass Tech graduate, a Protestant minister and a jazz saxophonist, last month got his first Broadway break as musical director of a hit show where his job was a little bit different.

Most musical directors show the musicians what to play and when. Andrews had to show them *how*.

The unusually versatile Andrews, 33, was given four actors cast to play the backup band for old-time blues singer Ma Rainey — and none of them could play a lick on his appointed instrument.



**Lawrence DeVine**  
theater

The show is the New York season's first major critical hit, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," a work discovered and nurtured by another former Detroit, Yale Repertory Theatre artistic director Lloyd Richards, in New Haven, Conn. It was Richards who poked around campus and found that the horn-playing young preacher at the Black Church at Yale also knew the gospel according to Miles Davis and John Coltrane. Andrews, Richards found, was the man to segue from God's trombones to the jazz-band music of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom."

"LOYD HAD THESE four actors and he decided they really had to play their instruments on stage," said Andrews. "He thought it would be a bold move, but that it was absolutely essential to the play to believe these guys are musicians if you're going to believe their dialogue."

With that directive, Andrews said he went to the musical archives to research what an original band for famed 1920s blue singer Ma Rainey would have sounded like, with its then-unusual makeup of trumpet, trombone, bass and piano. For a trained musician like the 1974 master's graduate of the University of Michigan, that was the easy part.



Cass Tech grad Dwight Andrews (center) is the musical director for the Broadway hit "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." Former Detroiters Lloyd Richards (left) is the director of the play, and August Wilson is the author.

"Then I had to teach these guys how to play the instruments," said Andrews, who had been introduced to the eruptive new star Charles Dutton (trumpet), and oldtimers Joe Seneca (trombone), Leonard Jackson (bass) and Robert Judd (piano). "Lloyd thought it was a scream. I was a nervous wreck."

**MANY ANOTHER Broadway newcomer** must have had an easier time, but Andrews made it work. On opening night at the Cort Theatre, the four-piece ensemble performed flawlessly in the story of what happens among the musicians at a 1927 recording session for the race records division of a white-owned label. The play, by a Richards discovery named August Wilson, received widespread critical raves, including one comparison to the precedent setting "Raisin in the Sun," which Richards staged 25 years ago.

"Opening night was fantastic," said Andrews, "because everyone felt that we were really doing something historically important. By the time we got ready for opening night, we knew we had a strong play and all we had to do was deliver it. Maybe it is not as important historically as 'Raisin,' who knows, only time will tell, but we knew we'd make history by putting that kind of play on Broadway, a black drama that speaks more than just to blacks. It has that same kind of sensibility that 'Raisin' had."

Then, Andrews added the offbeat kind of remark that reminds one that he also wears that other hat as a ordained graduate of Yale's divinity school. "It's also fun for me getting to know a lot of my peers, we had all kind of stars at the opening, like Sigourney Weaver. Just a month before I had done the wedding for Sigourney and her husband, Jim Simpson, out on Long Island."

**ANDREWS CAME** to Broadway via Yale, to Yale via U-M, to U-M via Cass Tech. Probably safe to say, Dwight Andrews is the only musical director of a hit Broadway show who credits Detroit city councilman-pastor Nicholas Hood Jr. as his spiritual and artistic mentor. Hood, who was pastor of the Andrews family's Plymouth Congregational Church, "showed me his example at a time when I was 13, 14, when I hadn't thought of being anything else but a horn player. I wanted to be a musician, period. Then I became very close to the church, fascinated with the way He dealt with people. I am still working this out, how to combine church and music, but I had a great start because Detroit musically and culturally was a great place to grow up."

Early on, Andrews studied at Cass with band director Harold Arnoldi, later with former Detroit Symphony clarinetist Vince Melidon, and in Anderson White's Detroit Community Orchestra. That showed him the classics. Downtown, he got to sit in with jazzmen Marcus Belgrave and Kenny Cox.

**THE PREACHING SIDE** of his career so far does not conflict with the theater side, said Andrews. "I found

myself between these two poles, the secular and the sacred, and found the conflict not to be there. If people feel that they know you, Dwight the minister, then they understand that other part that is Dwight the musician. Many of the churches themselves are changing, though, becoming more open. At my Yale church, I've used piano, bass and saxophone, used vocal soloists with rhythm sections, I've done music from Duke Ellington's sacred concerts."

Andrews, single, is the son of James and Lovetta Andrews, both civil servants who now are retired in Detroit. Andrews is currently working on his PhD in music at Yale — with his dissertation on "An Analytical Model of Pitch and Rhythm in the Early Music of Igor Stravinsky." "I expect to get it between now and December of '85," he said, "unless Lloyd comes up with some new Broadway show in the meantime."