
EMORY COMPOSER RECREATES AFRO-AMERICAN LIFE WITH PLAYWRIGHT AUGUST WILSON

Authentic African-American music from before 1940 is all but lost to today's listening public, according to Emory University's Dwight Andrews, a specialist in music theory and ethnomusicology. Andrews, who is helping to rediscover Afro-American blues through historical recordings and street singing, composes and arranges musical sequences and scenes for plays by Pulitzer Prize-winner August Wilson. Their work together since 1984 has resulted in four plays which cover four decades of 20th century African-American experience. The plays have had highly successful runs on Broadway and at major theaters throughout the nation. Wilson and Andrews are now planning their fifth collaboration, a full-fledged musical which will be developed and workshopped at Emory in the spring of 1990.

The new musical will be set in the 1940s, a decade not explored in the previous plays: "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," set in 1911, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," set in 1927, "Piano Lessons," set in the 1930s, and Pulitzer Prize-winner "Fences," set in the 1950s. Says Andrews, "The plays, which explore such issues as racism, economic exploitation, pride and self-identity, also demonstrate how Afro-American life has changed over the decades. Or, more significantly, how it has not changed."

An arranger, composer, music director and jazz artist, Andrews designs and structures musical sequences for the plays after conducting a comprehensive study of music from the period. "My responsibility is to make the musical moments an extension of the play, a natural progression of the drama," he explains. "It means creating and arranging music which literally would have been heard at that place and time. The music weaves through the story, and conjures up not just a melody, but a whole sensibility about the characters' lives." He adds, "Wilson's characters are just regular people. But they have wonderful, curious stories to tell." (Contact: Cynthia Taylor, 404/727-6216)