

Case Study: How did Gladys Bentley use fashion and performance style to challenge social, political, and cultural norms of the 1920s-30s?

I. Historical Background and Context

Gladys Bentley (1907–1960) was an American blues singer, performer, pianist, and entertainer during the Harlem Renaissance. Her career skyrocketed when she appeared at Harry Hansberry's Clam House, a well-known gay speakeasy in New York City in the 1920s.

Gladys Bentley joined New York's Harlem Renaissance jazz scene at age 16 and became an instant sensation, performing piano and vocals at the most popular clubs, wearing men's clothing (including a signature tuxedo jacket and top hat), and openly flirting with women in the audience. Bentley performed at venues like the Clam House and later headlined in the early 1930s at Harlem's Ubangi Club, where she was backed up by a chorus line of drag queens. She sang popular tunes of the day, adding her own raunchy lyrics, in a deep, powerful voice that challenged both musical and gender conventions.

In his autobiography, Harlem Renaissance writer and social activist Langston Hughes described watching Bentley's performances. "But for two or three amazing years, Miss Bentley sat, and played a big piano all night long, literally all night, without stopping--singing songs like "The St. James Infirmary," from ten in the evening until dawn, with scarcely a break between the notes, sliding from one song to another, with a powerful and continuous underbeat of jungle rhythm. Miss Bentley was an amazing exhibition of musical energy--a large, dark, masculine lady, whose feet pounded the floor while her fingers pounded the keyboard--a perfect piece of African sculpture, animated by her own rhythm."¹

Bentley's performances took place during the height of the Harlem Renaissance (1918-1937), a period of extraordinary cultural development for African Americans in literature, music, and art. However, this creative freedom existed alongside significant legal and social restrictions. Cross-dressing laws, often called "masquerade laws," continued to criminalize gender non-conformity throughout the United States. These laws typically required individuals to wear at least three items of clothing "appropriate" to their assigned gender—a regulation known as the "three-item rule."

The economic and social vulnerabilities faced by performers like Bentley were compounded by intersecting forms of discrimination. As a Black, lesbian, working-class woman who openly defied gender norms, she faced potential

¹ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 225-226.

legal prosecution, as police raids on gay establishments were common, and performers risked arrest, fines, and imprisonment.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Bentley's bold performances included not only cross-dressing but also openly sexual lyrics and flirtations with women audience members. Her defiance of social norms extended beyond performance into her personal life. She reportedly married a woman in a civil ceremony in New Jersey, though the legal status of the union was not recognized.

In 1937, Bentley moved to California, where she faced obstacles when trying to perform in men's clothing due to the state's anti-cross-dressing laws. In 1940, for example, Joaquin's El Rancho, a bar in Los Angeles, was required to obtain a special police permit to allow Bentley to perform in trousers instead of skirts. Sometimes, Bentley was banned altogether from performing as a result of her clothing preferences.

Beginning in the late 1940s, alongside the better-known Red Scare that hunted for communists, the Lavender Scare focused on removing gay and lesbian workers from government jobs. The impact of the scare was felt far beyond the federal government. The Lavender Scare pushed LGBTQ communities further underground and reinforced discrimination in employment, housing, and public life. The FBI, under J. Edgar Hoover's leadership, maintained surveillance files on many prominent entertainers, particularly those whose lifestyles challenged conventional ideas about "moral behavior." The Bureau's documented interest in monitoring "subversive" individuals extended to entertainers who challenged gender norms. Even Gladys Bentley eventually modified her appearance to conform more closely to society's gender norms.

Bentley passed away in 1960 from the flu.