

III. "The Masculine Songbird" Primary Source Improv Activity

Historical Context

In the 1920s and 1930s, newspapers and magazines frequently covered Gladys Bentley's performances at venues like the Clam House in Harlem. A typical review from *Variety* in 1928 described her as "a large colored woman in men's evening clothes" who sang "risqué songs" and noted her "masculine appearance." Black publications like the *Amsterdam News* often portrayed her more respectfully as a talented artist, while the white mainstream press emphasized her gender presentation as a sensational novelty. During the early 1930s, Gladys Bentley headlined at Harlem's Ubangi Club, where her performances drew audiences from across racial and class lines. Contemporary accounts describe her commanding presence on stage, her interactions with audience members, and the charged atmosphere of her shows. These performances took place in venues that operated in legal gray areas—speakeasies that served alcohol during Prohibition while also providing spaces for gender and sexual expression that challenged mainstream norms.

Primary Source Focus: Compare coverage of Gladys Bentley in a variety of newspapers and media.

"The Masculine Songbird" Primary Source Improv Objective: Examine how different publications portrayed the same entertainer and analyze racial and gender bias in entertainment journalism.

Analysis Questions:

- What language do contemporary sources use to describe Bentley's performances and appearance?
- How do different publications frame her story?
- What aspects of her artistry does each publication emphasize or ignore?
- How might this coverage have influenced public perception of both Bentley specifically and gender non-conforming performers generally?

Scenario A: The Club Owner's Dilemma *The business office of the Ubangi Club, 1932*

- Balancing artistic freedom with legal and financial risks
- Negotiating with police, local officials, and community leaders
- Marketing decisions about how to promote controversial acts
- Managing relationships with performers, patrons, and authorities

Scenario B: Opening Night Reactions *Outside the Clam House, Saturday night, 1928*

- Mixed crowd of Harlem locals, white downtown tourists, and entertainment industry figures
- Different groups are discussing what they just witnessed inside
- Conversations about artistic expression, social boundaries, and changing times
- Reactions ranging from admiration to shock to protective support
- Discussion of how the press coverage might affect Bentley's career and the venue's reputation