

A black and white photograph of Gladys Bentley. She is wearing a white tuxedo jacket over a white shirt with a bow tie, and a white top hat. She is holding a cane in her right hand and looking towards the camera with a slight smile. She is standing next to a piano, which is partially visible on the right side of the frame. The background is dark and out of focus.

GLADYS BENTLEY CASE STUDY

THE PAST IS ALWAYS PRESENT
HISTORY UNERASED, INC.

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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.

II. Digital Primary and Secondary Sources

[Library of Congress Primary Source Analysis Tool](#)

1. [A Night-Club Map of Harlem, 1932](#). Library of Congress.
2. [The Washington Times \(Washington \[D.C.\]\), December 12, 1934](#). Library of Congress. (Hover over the top of the third column and use the zoom tool to scroll down and read the full article.)
3. [Bentley, Gladys. "I Am a Woman Again." *Ebony*, August 1952, 93-98.](#)
4. [Barker, Edwin L., and Albert Barker. *American Holiday*, 1934](#). Library of Congress. (Scroll to Image 4 for an advertisement for the Ubangi Club)
5. [American Federation of Musicians. Letter dated January 1, 1949 pertaining to a claim filed against Bentley by a club owner](#). Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.
6. [Photograph of Gladys Bentley by an unidentified photographer, 1927-45. White Top Hat and Tails](#). Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.
7. [Photograph of Gladys Bentley by an unidentified photographer, 1927-45. Headshot](#) Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.
8. [Photograph of Gladys Bentley, 1936-1941](#). The New York Public Library Digital Collections. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library.
9. ["Gladys Bentley Marries California Cook," *Jet Magazine*, September 18, 1952](#). Digital Transgender Archive.
10. ["Okeh Race Record Advertisement." *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 27, 1928](#). Digital Transgender Archive.
11. ["New York Police's War on Cafes Ends." *The Chicago Defender*, April 7, 1934](#). Digital Transgender Archive.
12. ["Here's What Happens at Harlem's Famous Ubangi Club." *The Afro-American*, February 8, 1936](#). Digital Transgender Archive.
13. ["Harlem Not So Hot." *Niaqara Falls Gazette*, July 23, 1930](#). Digital Transgender Archive.

Secondary Sources

1. [UnErasing LGBTQ History and Identities: A Podcast, Season 7 Episode 1: From Blues to Rock: The Black, Queer Women Who Shaped America's Soundtrack](#).
2. ["Meet Gladys Bentley."](#) May 5, 2022. History UnErased on Vimeo.

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

IV. Discussion and Analysis Questions

1. What were the possible motivations for Bentley to perform in masculine dress and openly challenge gender norms?
2. How did Bentley's performances test the boundaries of artistic and personal expression protected under democratic ideals?
3. How did Bentley navigate multiple identities - as a Black person, a woman, and someone who didn't conform to traditional gender expectations?
4. Compare the "masquerade laws" of the 1840s-1880s with contemporary legislation targeting drag performances. How is gender expression being regulated today?
5. How did Bentley's visibility and success contribute to gradual institutional transformation?
6. How did changing social attitudes in the 1940s-50s force Bentley to alter her public persona?
7. In what ways did Bentley and other performers of the Harlem Renaissance create spaces where marginalized people could gather, express themselves, and build solidarity?
8. Why was Harlem in the 1920s more accepting of non-conforming gender expression than other places and times?
9. What role did speakeasies and underground venues play in creating spaces for people like Bentley?

10. How did Bentley's performances bring together diverse communities?
11. How did FBI surveillance of entertainers like Bentley reflect broader patterns of government monitoring of marginalized communities?
12. What were the possible considerations and risks that venue owners, fellow performers, and audience members took by supporting Bentley's career?
13. What can Bentley's example teach us about civic courage in challenging times? How do contemporary artists and entertainers use their platforms for social change?

VI. Case Study Question: How did Gladys Bentley use fashion and performance style to challenge social, political, and cultural norms of the 1920s-1930s?

Support your answer using your knowledge of:

- 1920s-1940s American history and the Harlem Renaissance
- Cross-dressing laws and the "three-item rule"
- FBI surveillance practices and their impact on marginalized communities
- The intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and class in early 20th-century America

Requirements:

- Incorporate your responses to the analysis questions
- Cite primary sources where available
- Connect historical patterns to contemporary issues where appropriate
- Consider both the limitations and significance of Bentley's individual actions within broader social movements
- Examine how different communities (Black, LGBTQ, working-class, artistic) might have viewed Bentley's contributions differently