

UnErasing LGBTQ History and Identities Podcast

Season 7 Ep 1: From Blues to Rock: The Black, Queer Women Who Shaped America's Soundtrack

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Deb Fowler: Hello, and welcome to UnErasing LGBTQ History and Identities: A Podcast. I'm Deb Fowler, co-founder of History UnErased. In this episode, we're turning up the volume on the trailblazing queer women who helped shape American music.

Before there was k.d. lang, Janelle Monáe, or Brandi Carlile, there were queer women — bold, brilliant, and unapologetic — whose voices redefined music genres and challenged social norms. Our host, Kathleen Barker, will take you on a deep dive into the lives of Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Gladys Bentley, and "Sister" Rosetta Tharpe, three pioneers whose music and lives defied social norms of their day. Take it away, Kathleen!

Kathleen Barker: When we think about the Harlem Renaissance, the period that philosopher and educator Alain Locke called the "spiritual coming of age" for African Americans, names like Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Duke Ellington probably come to mind. But there were other notorious figures, just as dazzling and defiant, who helped shape the music of the era. When we talk about the blues, we have to begin with two women whose music was revolutionary: Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. These artists were pioneers in their field, writing and performing music that reflected their experiences as queer, independent, Black women.

Let's begin with the "Mother of the Blues" herself, Ma Rainey. Born Gertrude Malissa Nix Pridgett in Columbus, Georgia, on April 26, 1886, her parents were minstrel performers. Rainey's own career began on the performance circuit, which is also where she met her future husband: comedian, singer, and dancer Will "Pa" Rainey. The two married in 1904, and formed their own traveling act, "Ma and Pa Rainey." The couple separated after about a dozen years of marriage, and Rainey then created her own show: "Madame Gertrude Ma Rainey and Her Georgia Smart Set."

Rainey packed venues across the South and Midwest, drawing big, often mixed-race crowds, although they were still segregated. Her shows were a full production: the band would warm up the crowd with jazz, then came the chorus girls, some comedy acts, and finally Rainey herself. She'd make her grand entrance and bring the house down with songs like "I Ain't Got Nobody," "A Good Man is Hard to Find," and her signature encore, "See See Rider Blues." Rainey had an unforgettable stage presence. She sang with a strong, moaning style that made you feel every word. And she looked the part too, sporting gold teeth, flashy outfits, and lots of jewelry. She commanded the stage, and surrounded herself with both male and female performers—and lovers. She knew how to light up a stage, but more than that, she knew how to connect with her audience.

Rainey signed a recording contract with Paramount Records in 1923, making her one of the earliest recorded blues musicians. Rainey's musical style helped bridge the world of vaudeville with the raw, heartfelt sounds of Southern blues. Of course, the blues themselves are deeply rooted in the call-and-response traditions of West Africa, songs and stories passed down through generations. Between 1923 and 1928, Rainey recorded almost 100 records. Her 1924 recording of "See See Rider Blues," which recounts the story of an unfaithful lover, was added to the Library of Congress's National Recording Registry in 2004.

Rainey tapped into the cultural zeitgeist with songs like "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." If you've ever heard of the Charleston, you might be surprised to know there was another dance craze that took the 1920s by storm: the

Black Bottom. The dance has its roots in African American dance traditions, beginning in communities in the South, before making its way up to Harlem. By the mid-1920s, you could find people in all sorts of venues, from jazz clubs and dance halls to Broadway, dancing the Black Bottom. Imagine shimmying hips and shoulders, syncopated rhythms, bent knees, crouched torsos, and you'll have an idea of what the Black Bottom was all about. Unlike traditional couple dances that required partners to move in sync, the Black Bottom gave people the opportunity to dance solo or with a partner. Everyone could add their own flair, their own moves, without worrying about matching steps.

Here's an advertisement for "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," published in the Washington Tribune on February 17, 1928:

***Jocardo Ralston:** Here is a whale of a number by good old "Ma" Rainey and her famous Georgia Band. This record is so good, it just had to have Ma's name in the title, so it's called "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." When you hear it, you'll understand why it couldn't be called anything else—you can close your eyes and just see "Ma" black-bottoming around as those mean trombones and clarinets moan and chirp. Be sure to ask your [record] dealer for Paramount No. 12530.*

Another famous record of Ma Rainey's is "Prove It On Me Blues," recorded in 1928, and often cited by music historians as one of the earliest examples of overtly queer expression in American music history. The song features Ma Rainey narrating gossip about her relationships with women, all while humorously denying it.

Famous lyrics include:

"They say I do it, ain't nobody caught me / Sure got to prove it on me."

She references dressing in men's clothing and spending time with women in public spaces:

*"Went out last night with a crowd of my friends,
Must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men."*

Rainey was open about her relationships with women in private and, through this song, hinted at them publicly. This was rare and risky in an era when same-sex relationships were criminalized and heavily stigmatized. But Rainey successfully uses playful denials and humor to challenge the norms around gender and sexuality, deflecting judgment while affirming her autonomy. The song is a classic example of the classic blues tradition, where performers often included personal narratives, coded language, and double entendres to discuss taboo subjects like sexuality, poverty, and social injustice. Rainey's blending of personal storytelling, social commentary, and subversive content helped shape the blues as a genre not just of sadness, but of resilience and identity.

Rainey's unapologetic embrace of her sexuality made her an early icon in queer history, especially within the Black community. She pushed boundaries, both musically and socially, making space for complex identities that didn't fit the mold.

And then, there's Bessie Smith, often called the Empress of the Blues. Born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1894, Bessie started her career performing with Ma Rainey's traveling show. Rainey mentored her, and you could hear that same emotional depth and vocal power in Bessie's performances.

But Bessie Smith wasn't just a student—she became a star in her own right. Her 1920s recordings were wildly popular, making her one of the highest-paid Black performers of her time. Songs like “Downhearted Blues” and “Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out” still resonate today for their honesty and vulnerability.

Bessie's personal life was just as bold as her voice. She was known for her hard-living, hard-loving ways, and she, too, had relationships with both men and women. There are accounts of her affairs with women, and her bisexuality was an open secret in entertainment circles.

Together, Rainey and Smith not only defined the classic blues era, but they also embodied the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance, even if their core audiences were often in the South and Midwest. Their music traveled, inspiring the artists, poets, and thinkers of Harlem's cultural revolution. The blues they sang—rooted in Black experience, pain, resilience, and joy—laid the groundwork for jazz, rock, and soul.

Another incredible musician active during the Harlem Renaissance was Gladys Bentley. Bentley wasn't just a blues singer and pianist. She was a queer trailblazer and musical innovator whose performances drew huge black and white audiences to Harlem in the 1920s. Musically, Bentley was part of the classic blues tradition forged by Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, but her performance style fused music, comedy, and cabaret.

Gladys Bentley was born in 1907 in Philadelphia to a strict, working-class family. From a young age, she rejected the expectations placed on girls. She preferred boys' clothes, and had crushes on her female teachers. She ran away from home as a teenager and landed in Harlem just as the Renaissance was blooming.

There, she reinvented herself. She stepped onto the stage dressed in a white tuxedo and top hat, a cigarette dangling from her lips. She was bold, unapologetic, and magnetic. In the dance halls, clubs, and speakeasies of Prohibition-era Harlem, Bentley played piano and belted bawdy blues songs filled with innuendo, and sometimes, explicit references to same-sex desire. She became the star of places like the Clam House and the Ubangi Club, some of the hottest nightspots in town, where Black, white, straight, and queer audiences all mingled.

Bentley didn't just perform, she owned the stage. She'd flirt openly with women in the audience and improvise lyrics on the spot, often playfully calling out patrons by name. Her deep, growling voice and expert piano playing made her a standout in the crowded jazz and blues scenes. Writer Langston Hughes called Bentley “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.”

Writing in the *Atlanta Daily World* on February 18, 1938, Society columnist Eulus L. Nance recalled Bentley's memorable performances:

JR: “Gladys had a way of swinging those “sex-quisite” songs while she beat out a tattoo with one foot which she patted rhythmically. She would pass from table to table, giving each party its desired request. At the end of these

sparkling “gems”, it was the rule rather than the exception to see Gladys “truck” off the floor waving dollar bills lavished on her at the various tables high above her head with her top-hat tilted in one hand and the sexy words still issuing from her mouth. It has been truthfully said of Gladys that she knows a thousand spicy songs. One thing is certain, she never runs out of them and she doesn’t have to refer to manuscript.”

Unfortunately, as the Harlem Renaissance faded and the 1930s gave way to the conservatism of the 1940s and 1950s, the vibrant queer nightlife scene was pushed back underground. Then came the Red Scare and the parallel Lavender Scare, a time when not only communists but also members of the LGBTQ community were labeled threats to national security.

Like many others, Bentley faced pressure to conform. In the 1950s, she published an essay in *Ebony* magazine claiming that she had been “cured” of her homosexuality through hormone treatments and had married a man. According to Bentley, she had “become a woman again.” Some historians believe this was a survival tactic—an attempt to protect her career and avoid persecution in a climate where queerness could destroy livelihoods.

Bentley’s later years were quieter, but her legacy lives on. She challenged ideas of gender, sexuality, and race, and helped write the soundtrack to the Harlem Renaissance. She made the piano a site of both musical brilliance and personal rebellion, while carving out space for queer expression in public life. Although Gladys was more conservative in her later years, other artists were carving out spaces for queer women musicians.

When we talk about the origins of rock and roll, names like Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry are usually bandied about. But before either of them picked up a guitar, Sister Rosetta Tharpe was already turning gospel into something electric—literally. She was a musical trailblazer whose groundbreaking sound laid the foundation for rock and roll. And while her contributions to music are finally getting long-overdue recognition, there’s another part of her story that deserves the spotlight: her place in queer history.

Born in Arkansas in 1915, Sister Rosetta Tharpe was raised in the Church of God in Christ. Her mother was a traveling evangelist, and Rosetta began performing in churches at a young age. She played the guitar with incredible skill—something that wasn’t common for women at the time, especially in religious spaces. But it wasn’t just her talent that set her apart. She blended the spiritual power of gospel with the rhythmic pulse of swing, blues, and eventually, early rock. Her stage presence was magnetic: full of joy, swagger, and a deep spiritual connection to her music.

By the 1940s, Tharpe was a national sensation. She played to packed clubs and arenas, and even performed at New York venues the Cotton Club and Carnegie Hall. Her 1944 hit “Strange Things Happening Every Day” is often cited by historians as one of the first rock and roll records. Little Richard called her his greatest influence, and artists like Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley, and Aretha Franklin all owed her a musical debt.

While she was often marketed as a church-going gospel singer, her personal life told a more complex story. Tharpe had relationships with both men and women, including a rumored long-term relationship with her musical collaborator Marie Knight. In an era when being openly queer could destroy a career—or worse—Tharpe lived boldly and unapologetically. She didn’t label herself publicly, but those in her circle knew the truth. Her queerness was an open secret in the music industry.

She also defied expectations about what a woman—and especially a Black woman—could do onstage. Dressed in church clothes and wielding a guitar like a rock star, she disrupted norms and claimed space in a male-dominated industry. That defiance of gender and genre makes her not only a musical pioneer but also a cultural icon for queer women today.

In 2018, she was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as an “early influence”—a title that barely scratches the surface of her impact.

Sister Rosetta Tharpe didn’t just help invent rock and roll—she did it while breaking the rules about gender, sexuality, and race. She paved the way for generations of queer women in music, even if the world wasn’t ready to celebrate her while she was alive. Today, we remember her as she truly was: a queer Black woman who changed music forever.

Music isn’t just about melody and rhythm—it’s about resistance, reinvention, and radical self-expression. Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Gladys Bentley, and Sister Rosetta Tharpe weren’t just extraordinary musicians; they were queer Black women who claimed space in industries and societies that tried to silence them. Each woman challenged the norms of her time, whether by singing openly about same-sex desire, performing in men’s suits and tuxedos, or shredding gospel chords on an electric guitar. Their stories remind us that queer history is not a footnote. It’s central to the story of American culture. So the next time you hear a blues track, a rock anthem, or a gospel-infused guitar riff, listen closely. You might just hear Ma, Gladys, or Rosetta in the echoes. Because queer women didn’t just contribute to music history—they helped build it from the ground up.

DF: Kathleen Barker is History UnErased’s program director and is a library and information specialist and public historian with 20 years of experience as a museum and library educator. This podcast is funded by the New York City Council. It was developed by History UnErased and produced and edited by Dinah Mack, our youth equity program director and podcaster. A special thanks to Jocardo Rolston for lending his voice to this episode. Our theme music is “1986” by BrothaD via Tribe of Noise.

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I’m Deb Fowler. Thanks for listening. Visit UnErased.org to learn how we are putting LGBTQ history in its rightful place - the classroom.

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