



Gladys Bentley.

Bentley, Gladys (1907-1960)

by Gillian Rodger

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African-American Blues singer Gladys Bentley openly flaunted her lesbianism in the 1920s and 1930s, but recanted in the 1950s in an attempt to salvage her career.

Bentley was born on August 12, 1907, the oldest of George L. Bentley and Mary C. Mote's four children. By Bentley's own account, her childhood in Philadelphia was not a happy one. She was a "problem child," feeling at odds with her peers who taunted her for being overweight and a tomboy.

In an interview in *Ebony* magazine late in her life, Bentley remembered having crushes on women in her early childhood; these infatuations apparently alarmed her parents, who may have sought medical help for their daughter.

At the age of 16, Bentley left her parents' home and ran away to New York City. At first she made a meager living in Harlem as a pianist and singer, playing primarily for rent parties. She specialized in improvising indecent lyrics to the tunes of popular melodies of the day; one of her songs combined "Sweet Georgia Brown" and "Alice Blue Gown" into a bawdy ode to anal intercourse.

Bentley eventually secured herself a position as pianist at speakeasies such as the Mad House on 133rd Street, where she was paid \$35 a week. When Bentley began to attract a white downtown audience, including writer Carl Van Vechten, her salary was raised to \$100 a week.

As Eric Garber notes, Bentley's name came to be synonymous with "Hot Harlem" of the 1920s. The singer appeared at the Cotton Club and headlined at The Clam House for several years, where she performed in a white tuxedo and top hat. She cultivated her image as a "bull dagger," openly flaunting her lesbianism not only in performance but also in public. In a much publicized ceremony, she even married her white lesbian lover.

In 1928, at the height of her fame, Bentley made a number of recordings for Okeh records. She issued other records in the 1940s and 1950s. While she never became a popular recording artist, her records, which do not make an issue of her sexual orientation or include her filthy lyrics, do reveal her as a strong, independent woman.

"How Much Can I Stand," featured on Rosetta Records' recent compilation of early blues recordings, *Mean Mothers: Independent Women's Blues, Vol. 1* (1992), perfectly captures Bentley's gravelly alto. Accompanied by the white guitarist Eddie Lang, Bentley sings a slow blues, answering the guitar with vocal imitations of trumpet frills that are reminiscent of Louis Armstrong.

During the 1920s and later, Bentley was frequently the subject of gossip columns. She also made an indelible impression on a number of writers and memoirists. In 1945 Langston Hughes, in his autobiography *The Big Sea*, remembered her as "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."

She was probably the model for Sybil, the lesbian piano player in Blair Niles' gay novel *Strange Brother* (1931). Garber notes that she also makes "unnamed but unmistakable" appearances in Carl Van Vechten's *Parties* (1930) and Clement Wood's *Deep River* (1934).

The stock market crash of 1929 dealt a severe blow to Harlem's night life, but Bentley managed to prolong her career into the 1930s. In this decade Bentley was featured at the Ubangi Club on 133rd Street, a gay club with a chorus of female impersonators.

In 1937, Bentley abandoned Harlem for Los Angeles where, with some difficulty, she managed to secure club dates, but where she was harassed by police for her crossdressing. During World War II, Bentley increasingly relied on night spots catering to a homosexual clientele for her bookings.

In the 1950s, Bentley's trademark lesbian act became a liability as McCarthyism swept the United States. In an effort to save her career, and maintain her livelihood, Bentley cleaned up her act and began to perform in dresses.

During this period she wrote the autobiographical piece "I am a Woman Again," which was published in *Ebony* in 1952. In this article Bentley repudiated her former life, claiming to have "lived in a personal hell" of unhappiness and loneliness until she found the love of a good man and sought medical treatment to cure her of what she described as deviation.

Eric Garber notes that "[n]umerous elements of this autobiographical account ring false." These include the medical treatment she claims she sought, her alleged marriage, which was later denied by the supposed husband, and details of her childhood--for example, she claimed that her mother had longed for a son throughout her pregnancy. Garber views this article as a last-ditch attempt to salvage her career at a time when her livelihood was threatened.

Bentley's strategy seems to have worked, but she never regained her popularity of the 1920s and 1930s. She was briefly married to a man in 1952, and at the end of her life sought solace in the church, becoming a devoted member of the Temple of Love in Christ, Inc. Bentley died on January 18, 1960, of influenza.

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Gillian Rodger, Assistant Professor of Musicology at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, completed her Ph.D. from the University of Pittsburgh with a dissertation entitled "Male Impersonation on the North American

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