

Sidedoor Season 3, Episode 15: Singing the Gender-Bending Blues

Haleema Shah: A quick note, this episode contains mature themes that may not be suitable for all listeners.

[INTRO SONG]

Haleema Shah: This is Sidedoor. A podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Haleema Shah.

[Music of Gladys Bentley]

Haleema Shah: That deep voice accompanied by a trumpet-like scat is the sound of Gladys Bentley. She was a mainstay of nightclubs in early 20th Century Harlem, and her performances featured songs with pretty typical blues themes.

Dwandalyn Reece: Gladys Bentley was a singer, performer, and entertainer who defied traditional gender roles in not acting in expected ways.

Haleema Shah: This is Dwandalyn Reece, she's curator of music and performing arts at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. One section of the museum explores the blues in the 1920s and 30s. And Gladys Bentley is part of that story, even though her name doesn't have the same recognition as some of her peers. But that's changing. Today, Bentley is getting a second look from a new generation of listeners. And it's because she's being revisited as a kind of trailblazer.

Dwandalyn Reece: She pushed gender conventions for black women.

Haleema Shah: Gladys Bentley was a proud gender-bender at a time when states had laws against crossdressing. Her signature look was a white tux, top hat, and slicked back hair. She sang raunchy songs. And she was an out lesbian, long before the sexual revolution and the gay rights movement.

Dwandalyn Reece: I can imagine the discomfort that some people might have felt with that. Like how dirty can a woman be onstage? But she pushed the boundary of public taste, in a way that it would much have been more suitable for a man to do.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: As an African American woman in the 20s and 30s, especially before the Civil Rights era, Bentley would have been acutely aware of the risks she was taking. But she still followed her own beat and both thrilled and scandalized audiences with songs like the one you're hearing: "Gladys Isn't Gratis Anymore."

Haleema Shah: This time on Sidedoor, we'll meet Gladys Bentley: a woman ahead of her time, who navigated America's quickly changing values. She played with society's expectations in a way that helped her survive and thrive in the public eye for decades.

[BREAK]

Jim Wilson: Gladys's Harlem was a very exciting place. Some of the best musicians in the history of American music were playing there.

Haleema Shah: This is Jim Wilson. He's a professor of English and Theatre at City University of New York, and has written about queer performers during the Harlem Renaissance. Wilson said that Gladys Bentley arrived in Harlem around 1925, an artistic hub that became home to luminaries like Langston Hughes, and sexually-fluid African American singers like Ethel Waters and Bessie Smith. One historian said Harlem was quote "surely as gay as it was Black."

Jim Wilson: It was also a place for people to let loose of their bourgeois attitudes. So this is following the very uptight Victorian era. And Harlem was a place that people could actually experiment sexually and socially.

Haleema Shah: Harlem drew crowds of all sorts, including white audiences. During the Prohibition Era, speakeasies and underground parties gave people covert access to alcohol. And they also became a sort of protective cocoon for queer performers like Bentley.

Jim Wilson: Whites felt they could do things there that they couldn't do other places in New York, such as midtown in the Times Square area. Those would have been very carefully policed so that performances, like Gladys Bentley's would not have been tolerated.

Haleema Shah: The Harlem Renaissance also overlapped with the Great Depression. Amid this creative explosion, people still struggled.

Jim Wilson: The people who lived in Harlem, the African Americans who worked very long hours for not much pay had a very different experience. So Langston Hughes famously wrote that if there was a Harlem Renaissance, the people who lived in Harlem were not aware of that. They were going to bed before the nightclubs even got started.

Haleema Shah: Even if the Harlem Renaissance didn't impact everyone's lives, Dwandalyn Reece says it had a lasting impact on American culture.

Dwandalyn Reece: The Harlem Renaissance is really a critical point in the history and evolution of, of African Americans in the 20th century. It was a movement forward for African American culture. And then the creativity that came out of that period, it's really shaped music, theater, dance, literature, in a way that really has shaped who we are today.

Haleema Shah: It was in this world that Bentley began to build her career. Before she started playing nightclubs, she played in more private and modest settings.

Jim Wilson: From what I do know she started performing in what were called rent parties.

Haleema Shah: Rent parties are exactly what they sound like: people in Harlem covered rent by charging admission for private parties with alcohol and live performers.

Jim Wilson: Rent parties were a place for musicians to try out material.

Haleema Shah: Bentley recorded classic blues songs in her early days, but also used the parties to curate her signature sound.

Jim Wilson: She quickly made a name for herself as somebody who sang ribald songs. She would take popular songs of the day and just put the filthiest lyrics possible. She took two

songs: Sweet Alice Blue Gown and Georgia Brown, and combined them and it became a song about a—

Haleema Shah: OK Jim, this is a family show. Let's just say it was some pretty sexually explicit stuff. Those raunchy lyrics weren't the only thing that made Bentley stand out. She had a dapper style like a Harlem Renaissance man.

Jim Wilson: We know that she mainly wore men's clothing. She said in her autobiographical piece that as a child she felt much more comfortable wearing boys clothes than she did girls clothes. And as she grew older, she tended to wear suits.

Haleema Shah: Not long after she arrived in Harlem, Bentley got her shot at becoming a nightclub performer. Here is what she wrote in one article, read by a voice actor:

[Gladys's writings read by a voice actor:]

I met a friend who told me that the Mad House on 133rd Street needed a pianist right away. Their pianist had gone to Europe with Blackbirds.

"But they want a boy," my friend said.

"There's no better time for them to start using a girl," I replied.

At the Mad House, the boss was reluctant to give me a chance. I finally convinced him. My hands fairly flew over the keys. When I had finished my first number, the burst of applause was terrific.

Haleema Shah: The crowd loved her music and her style.

[Gladys's writings read by a voice actor:]

For the customers of the club, one of the unique things about my act was the way I dressed. I wore immaculate full white dress shirts with stiff collars, small bow ties and shirts, oxfords, short Eton jackets and hair cut straight back.

Haleema Shah: As the crowds grew bigger, so did the venues. By 1929, Bentley went from underground success to Harlem-famous. She performed at the Clam House, an iconic gay speakeasy, and later, the Lafayette Theatre, one of Harlem's most famous venues.

Haleema Shah: As her star rose, Bentley became a darling of the Harlem arts community: Langston Hughes praised her as performer, saying she was quote “an amazing exhibition of musical energy—a large, dark, masculine lady, whose feet pounded the floor while her fingers pounded the keyboard.”

Haleema Shah: Venues advertised Bentley as “a male impersonator,” and she became known for flirting with women in the audience as she performed. A newspaper called The Afro American said this of her act:

[Newspaper clippings:] “Miss Bentley (whom many mistake for a man) delivers her prize number ‘Nothing Now Perplexes Like the Sexes, Because When You See Them Switch, You Can’t Tell Which is Which.’”

Haleema Shah: The media was shocked by her, but couldn’t look away. She would have done well on Twitter.

Jim Wilson: They would write about the fact that she was a scandalous lesbian. Gladys Bentley had told the gossip columnist that she had just gotten married and the gossip columnist asked, ‘well, who’s the man?’ And she scoffed and said, ‘Man? It’s a woman.’

Haleema Shah: Up until recently, same-sex marriage was unheard of for a lot of people. But in the 1930s, that was the story Bentley put out there for her fans and critics. It didn’t really matter whether it was true or not. It was the identity Bentley was sharing with the public.

Jim Wilson: She had claimed that she had married a white woman in a New Jersey civil ceremony. I have not been able to find any evidence of that union or of that civil ceremony. One of the frustrating and actually joyous things about Gladys Bentley was she was constantly inventing herself. So oftentimes when she mentioned something about her personal life, you had to take it with a grain of salt and not necessarily take it for truth.

Haleema Shah: Bentley was a known exaggerator. But here’s what we know for sure: some people were truly offended by her performances; but her audience kept growing, and her bank account did too. In Ebony magazine, Bentley said she performed in Manhattan clubs at the peak of her fame.

[Gladys’s writings:] The elaborate mid-Manhattan club where I appeared had a 75-foot silver and onyx bar and mirrors everywhere. I was an immediate success. Soon I was living on Park Avenue in a 300-dollar-a-month apartment. I had servants and a beautiful car.

Haleema Shah: By the way, a 300-dollar-a month apartment would cost over 5,000 dollars today. In 1934, when Bentley had taken her act to King's Terrace a venue in midtown Manhattan, she wasn't performing solo. She was supported by a chorus of eight men who were quote "liberally painted" and described as having effeminate voices and gestures. One observer even wrote this about her performance:

[Newspaper clippings:] "The chief and filthiest offering of the evening, however, is a personal tour of the tables by Miss Bentley. At each table she stopped to sing one or more verses of a seemingly endless song in which every word known to vulgar profanity is used."

Haleema Shah: After one such performance the police padlocked King's Terrace, presumably because of a quote "masculine garbed, smut-singing entertainer." Although she kept playing other venues in both Harlem and Manhattan, the mid 1930s marked a shift for Bentley's act.

Jim Wilson: It was a much more toned down act from what I understand.

Haleema Shah: People's tastes began to change around this time, too.

Jim Wilson: By the mid to late 1930s the Harlem Vogue has really started to diminish. Bentley's act also had...I think there was a whiff of "been there, done that," and people weren't as titillated by her act as much as they had been.

Haleema Shah: So in an industry that demands that performers adapt or perish, Bentley adapted. Coming up, as America got more conservative, we'll find out how Bentley shocked people yet again, but not how you'd expect.

[BREAK]

Haleema Shah: We're back, and we're looking at the life of performer Gladys Bentley. She made a name for herself during the Harlem Renaissance, but didn't get mainstream famous the way people like Langston Hughes or Josephine Baker did.

Haleema Shah: This is, in part, because Bentley's provocative performances kept her out of the mainstream press of her day, but now, she is having a bit of a moment. Bentley was a large African American woman who dressed in men's clothing, loved women, and performed songs

that would make most people blush. Like, actually, there are some Bentley lyrics that I couldn't read out loud in our story meetings. We just passed the book around and everyone kinda said "Oh, I see."

Haleema Shah: Anyway, as her story resurfaces, it's also inspiring a very specific community of performers: drag kings.

Haleema Shah: Kendra Kuliga built a community for drag kings in Washington, D.C. I swung by her apartment. She doesn't do drag as much as she once did, but from time to time, she still steps on stage and becomes: drag king Ken Vegas.

Kendra Kuliga: In the most basic terms, drag kinging is a female-born person putting on traditional masculine male attire.

Haleema Shah: Drag kings perform traditionally masculine roles on stage. I knew that in order to become Ken Vegas (who has a very 80s vibe) there would have to be a closet somewhere in Kendra's apartment filled with costumes.

Haleema Shah: But I wasn't prepared for this...

Haleema Shah: This looks like being in a costume shop, I have to say. Oh my goodness! Okay. I see boxes and boxes that are labeled...

Kendra Kuliga: And hats! Those are some top hats. Oh, that's the leather cat right there.

Haleema Shah: If I sound like a kid in a candy shop, it's because the costume collection is extensive. There are trench coats, leather pants, and...

Haleema Shah: Oh, is that a police baton?

[08:39] Yeah. I got this police shirt made. I put the patches on, and the "daddy" badge, and you know it says security officer. So basically I dressed it up to be a New York police cop.

Haleema Shah: Kendra's performances are less frequent now, because she has shifted her energy to the Drag History Project; an online resource documenting women who wore

masculine attire throughout history. One of them is Gladys Bentley who Kendra calls a “male impersonator” because that’s the term people used for Bentley in her day.

Kendra Kuliga: First of all, it's very important if you're going to be a drag performer to know your history. We are not the first to do drag or male impersonation. As far as Gladys Bentley's character is concerned, I mean, she was a queer artist of color in the Harlem Renaissance who definitely made an impact, and made a name for herself.

Haleema Shah: For Kuliga, Bentley’s legacy as a performer is one that’s pretty relatable.

Kendra Kuliga: When I was reading her obituary, I was like, yeah, that reminded me of myself back in the day when I would, when I was kind of in my heyday of drag.

Haleema Shah: Especially Bentley’s flirtatious performances in which she would interact with women in the audience.

Kendra Kuliga: I felt kind of, like, a parallel. Just that testing what is attractive, you know, that sexual interaction between audience member and performance. I was just like, yeah, Gladys was doing it back in the day. I mean, she was wooing the ladies and I'm sure it made a lot of guys very uncomfortable. Just that unabashed sexual confidence and ability to connect to our audience.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: By the late 1930s, Gladys Bentley’s career had passed its peak. Harlem Renaissance historian Jim Wilson says that around this time, Bentley moved to California. There, she performed in upscale supper clubs and bars. But after that move, we lose track of Bentley for a bit. We know that she was still recording and performing songs in the 1940, but she had less press coverage.

Haleema Shah: Then in the 1950s, Gladys made a comeback. But it was tricky. At the time, America was eager to emerge from the shadow of World War II and embrace a white picket fence fantasy with traditional gender roles. Entertainers became targets of suspicion as politicians like Joseph McCarthy argued that communism and homosexuality were threats to the country. Long gone was the permissive speakeasy culture of the Roaring 20s. In this “Leave it to Beaver” era, Bentley’s act didn’t hold the same appeal.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: And this major cultural shift is why this part of her story is a bit mysterious. There are a lot of details that are hard to square with her time in New York. Here's Jim Wilson again.

Jim Wilson: When she goes out west, she finds religion as many of the people like her, like Ethel Waters for instance, also found religion later.

Haleema Shah: She even planned to become ordained as a minister.

But the part of Bentley's life story that's really challenging to understand is this: In 1952, she wrote her life story for Ebony magazine. The article is called: "I Am a Woman Again." Here's how it started, read by a voice actor.

[Gladys's writing:] For many years, I lived in a personal hell. Like a great number of lost souls, I inhabited that half-shadow no man's land which exists between the boundaries of the two sexes.

Haleema Shah: Bentley wrote that she underwent some type of medical treatment intended to awaken her quote "womanliness". This article also says that she finally found love with a man. Her story was accompanied by photos that showed carefully curated images of 1950s femininity.

Jim Wilson: A couple of the photos show her preparing meals, making the bed for her husband, wearing a dress, wearing flowers in her hair. There's a picture, I believe with her, with an adoring man looking at her.

Haleema Shah: She wears a matronly white house dress and performs the role of homemaker in the photos. But Bentley still writes unapologetically about her past as a gender-bending and provocative entertainer.

[Gladys's writing:] I have been featured as the star in the swankiest supper clubs in the nation. I have earned the distinction of being the first, and in some cases, the only performer of my race to crash the star dressing rooms of the most plush glitter spots.

Haleema Shah: This part of Bentley's story is hard to parse because maybe she was trying to reinvent herself in a way that was conveniently more palatable in 1950s America. But it's also possible that the article was a deft use of the press, for marketing.

Haleema Shah: We can't know what was in Bentley's head -- and heart -- at the time, because she's not here to tell us. But for drag kings like Kendra Kuliga, the article doesn't take away from Bentley's legacy as a charismatic and risqué performer who wore masculine clothing...

Kendra Kuliga: I mean, we're gender fluid, right? I mean, just because she liked women and wooed women doesn't necessarily mean she couldn't be with a guy or embrace that lifestyle, especially if it was life threatening. And I'm not necessarily saying everybody has to closet themselves, but I can understand why people do in order to survive.

Haleema Shah: In 1958, after Bentley's supposed transformation, she appeared on Groucho Marx's game show "You Bet Your Life." It's the only video we have of her. On the show, Bentley wears a modest floor length gown, pearls, and flowers in her hair. It's a departure from the sharp tuxedos of her youth, but Bentley still owns the stage.

Groucho Marx: You're the Gladys Bentley.

Gladys Bentley: Yeah, that's right.

Groucho Marx: Could you sing something for us now?

Gladys Bentley: If you have a small piano, I could do 'Them Their Eyes'

Groucho Marx: Suppose we have a large piano, then what would you do?

Gladys Bentley: Well I could do other things...maybe somebody else's eyes

Haleema Shah: Bentley's look may have changed... but her voice and fiery energy on the piano stayed the same.

Haleema Shah: Two years after that performance, Gladys Bentley died of pneumonia. She was 52.

After spending her life on the fringes...she is now celebrated inside the National Museum of African American History and Culture. There, people like Dwandalyn Reece preserve the story of a performer who lived the art -- and challenge -- of being true to yourself.

Haleema Shah: Dwandalyn Reece: I think she wanted to be seen for who she was, you know, at heart, no matter what her self-identity. While she was a performer and she wanted to do what she did best, and what was true to her own spirit. You know, did she see herself as one gender or the other? Or just a woman who is comfortable in her own skin?

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

Haleema Shah: We'd like to give a special thanks to the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture for helping us tell Gladys Bentley's story. And, we also want to thank our voice actors for this episode -- D.C.-based drag king, Pretty Rik E, for performing as Gladys Bentley...Jenine Jones for performing as a reporter for The Afro American...and Lizzie Peabody for being an outraged member of Bentley's audience.

Haleema Shah: This week's story was part of the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative and the Smithsonian Year of Music. If you want to learn more about either of these fascinating efforts, check out the...you guessed it...Sidedoor newsletter.

Haleema Shah: You can subscribe at [si DOT edu SLASH sidedoor](mailto:si.DOT.edu.SLASH.sidedoor). Every other week, I'll show up in your inbox with bonus content, news, and updates. In this week's newsletter, you'll find photos of Gladys Bentley and links to her music.

Haleema Shah: Sidedoor is made possible by funding from the Secretary of the Smithsonian, as well as the Smithsonian National Board. And thanks to listeners like YOU – your generous support helps make all the amazing work you hear about at the Smithsonian possible.

Haleema Shah: Our podcast team is Justin O'Neill, Jason Orfanon, Lizzie Peabody, Jess Sadeq, Greg Fisk, and Lara Koch. Extra support comes from John Barth, Genevieve Sponsler, and Claire Tighe ("TIE"). Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and other episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder. If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship at [prx dot org](mailto:prx.dot.org).

Haleema Shah: I'm your host Haleema Shah. Thanks for listening.

