“B.D. Women Ain’t Need No Men”

The Harlem Renaissance as a Stage for Black Queer Female Expression

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A cultural movement composed of live sex shows and grandiose performances where the women wore tuxes and the men wore rouge, the exploratory nature of the Harlem Renaissance gave Black queer women the space to express their true selves. They were able to portray themselves on stage and in public how they desired and go beyond common stereotypes of African American women, from the mammy to the hypersexual "loose" woman. Black queer women were able to embrace their queerness, and going against gender norms and heteronormative expectations was not only accepted but often an enticing part of the personas and performances which sparked their fame.

The Harlem Renaissance was an artistic, social, and cultural movement primarily led by same-sex desiring Black Americans who challenged prevailing notions of race, gender, and sexuality. Beginning around 1918 and ending around 1935, the movement was centered in Harlem and spread throughout urban centers in the Northeast and Midwest. The hostile racial climate in the South led to the Great Migration of Black Americans to the North and the formation of Black neighborhoods like Harlem. The early 20th century saw a dramatic rise in violence in the United States and in 1915 the American terrorist organization the Ku Klux Klan experienced a resurgence. African Americans also sought to move North for new opportunities available after World War I. Over six million African Americans moved from the South to the North from 1910-1970.[1] By the 1920s Harlem became, "home to soaring cathedrals, thriving businesses, a wide array of social clubs…dozens of elegant nightclubs and hundreds of basement jazz clubs and speakeasies, and to the poets, artists, and novelists whose work produced the Harlem Renaissance."[2]

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[1] Radesky, Caroline. "Harlem Renaissance." Global Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) History: G-O, 2019.

[2] Wilson, James F. Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies : Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance. University of Michigan Press, 2010, pg. 246.

With this large movement of African Americans searching for new lives, Harlem became the symbolic and practical center of vast social experiment in America, due in part to its previous reputation as a vice district. Harlem was filled with tenements, bars, clubs, dance halls, and brothels. This combined with existing stereotypes of Black Americans being inherently oversexed and sexually degenerate, which lead to less policing and vice squads. Harlem was also a largely white-controlled vice industry in a poor Black neighborhood, which meant authorities often looked the other way, and focused attention on communities whose morality they were more invested in. During this period Greenwich Village was the most famous gay enclave, but Harlem had a reputation of being more inclusive and livelier. While Black homosexuals were denied access to segregated restaurants and speakeasies white homosexuals patronized, Black and white queers could attend performances, venues, and parties in Harlem causing a greater variety of persons from all backgrounds.

Queer Harlemites socialized at cafes, dance halls, corner cabaret saloons, basement speakeasies, and tenement parties thrown to raise money for the rent. Buffet flats were tenement apartments which renters made available to paying guests, and often were the locale of parties, speakeasies, and live sex shows. Bessie Smith was a famous blues singer, and her niece Ruby Smith tells the story of a buffet flat party she attended with Smith:

"A buffet flat nothing but faggots and bulldaggers...open house.... Buffet means everything goes on there.... They had a faggot there was so great that people used to come to watch him make love to another man.... He'd give him a tongue bath and by the time he got to the front of that guy he was shakin' like a leaf.... I wanted to get in with that cat but he said it wasn't fish day, so I was out..."[3]

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[3] Johnson, Maria V. "'Jelly Jelly Jellyroll': Lesbian Sexuality and Identity in Women's Blues." Women & music (Washington, D.C.) 7 (2003): 31–52

Officially, Harlem nightclubs and theaters were held accountable under state censorship laws, but this rarely impacted performances. Some of the best-known Harlem acts flaunted qualities not allowed on Broadway. Harlem performances blurred preconceived notions of gender, one example being the renowned Black drag artist Walter Winston, who performed at the Ubangi Club with the persona of Sepia Gloria Swanson. The Ubangi Club was also where Gladys Bentley would sing dressed in male attire playing the piano with a chorus of rouged "pansies". Walter Winston is credited with beginning a vogue for male impersonators of Broadway & Hollywood starlets. Winston was rarely observed in male attire and lived life like a glamorous movie star going by Gloria and using she/her pronouns. Though she was renowned in Harlem, not everyone who attended Gloria's performances enjoyed it. Augustus Austin, writer for the *New York Age*, wrote:

"When 'Gloria Swanson' made 'her' appearance my spirits dropped; when "she" sang "I'm a Big Fat Mama With Meat Shaking on My Bones," I became disgusted; but when "she" showed "her laundry" I had a sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach akin to the feeling one has on his first ocean trip."[4]

Drag and drag balls were central to Harlem nightlife. The Hamilton Lodge Ball was the biggest annual event in Harlem, with an estimated 800 guests in 1925 and around 1,500 in 1926. It was organized by the Hamilton Lodge No. 710 of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows who officially called it Masquerade and Civic Ball, but by the late 1920s it was commonly known as the Faggots Ball. In 1926 a newspaper report noted that "fairies" made up about half of all those present. In 1936 the crowd was summarized as, "effeminate men, sissies, wolves, ferries,

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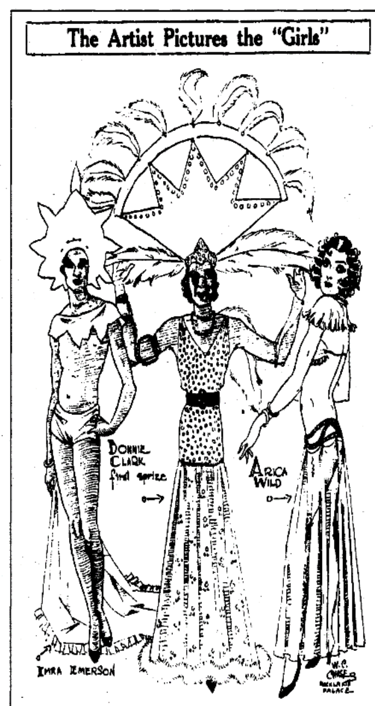
[4] Chauncey, George. "Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890 1940." Gay New York: gender, urban culture, and the makings of the gay male world, 1890-1940. Basic Books, December 31, 1993. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.00516.

faggots, the third sex, ladies of the night, and male prostitutes…for a grand jamboree of dancing, love making, display, rivalry, drinking and advertisement."[5] Gay men as dancers and drag queens were the focal point of attention but lesbian male impersonators and straight masqueraders also attended. Queer women would don their suits and strut with walking sticks and cigars. The ball was attended by white performers and spectators but most of those in attendance were Black. African-American newspapers covered this ball and others extensively, which illustrates that there was likely a high level of tolerance for drag and performative gender transgression in Harlem. In a *Chicago Defender* article published in 1935 journalist Ted Yates describes the Harlem satellites seen at the Hamilton Lodge Ball and goes on to declare, "there were 4,400 present, I think-but, as Gus Simons would have you believe, '4,399 were queer'. I never!"[6]



[5] Chauncey
[6] Yates, T. (1935, Mar 02). New york after dark. *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)* Retrieved from https://flagship.luc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/new-york-after-dark/docview/492410005/se-2?accountid=12163

Locales like the Clam House were also an essential part of Harlem night life. The Clam House was the hub of the world of blues women, a tangible form of community for queer female performers. Angela Davis argues that the blues genre and songs by female performers like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, "begin to articulate a consciousness that takes into account social exploitation, racism, and male dominance as seen through the lenses of the complex emotional responses of black female subjects."[7] African Americans brought the musical stylings of the blues with them from the South to Harlem during the Great Migration. The blues are a secular genre with origins in folk music and characterized by lyrics which discuss the harsh challenges of real life. In the 1920s the blues became the first truly public avenue for Black female self-expression. Black women were able to discuss their battles with racism, sexism, abuse and openly discuss their sexuality. The blues humanized Black women as a tool for female empowerment and for honest discussions of their nuanced life experiences. They were candid about both mistreatment they experienced in relationships and their desire for physical pleasure. Black women were able to go against the one-dimensional stereotypes of "mammy" or "loose" woman and cultivate complex images combining maternal compassion and sexual desirability. One example is the famous singer Gertrude Rainey, known as Ma Rainey, with "Ma" symbolizing both a mother figure and lover. Blues women could transform themselves from being viewed as sexual objects to sexual subjects and command sexual respect. Additionally, they were able to be extravagant and outrageous in both their demeanor while performing and their dress. Some women like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith wore dazzling sequined gowns and rhinestones while others like Gladys Bentley sported handsome suits and ties. Still, these women

[7] Wilson, 165
"The Artist Pictures The 'Girls'" Chauncey, 262

often came from and spoke to the working-class experience and were shunned by Black churchgoing middle class.

Gertrude "Ma" Rainey is known as the Mother of the Blues and is one of the most famous female blues singers of the Harlem Renaissance. She lived from 1886-1939, was born in the Deep South in poverty, and was married to musician Pa Rainey. In 1923 Paramount Records picked her up and she became one of the first artists to record the blues, eventually recording more than 100 songs.[8] Although Rainey was married, she pursued relationships with women. In 1925 Rainey was holding a party when police were called due to a noise complaint, and she was arrested as the police arrived to a group of women having sex. The next morning she was bailed out by fellow artist Bessie Smith.[9] "Prove It On Me Blues" was her most provocative queer song and details a night out on the town with women, explained by Rainey as, "they must have been women, cause I don't like no men."[10] In the Paramount Poster for the song a masculine-looking Rainey, who states in the song that she can "talk to the gals just like any old man"[11], is flirting with two feminine women while a police officer watches from afar.[12] This illustrates how Rainey's sexuality was a selling point for Paramount Records.

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[8] Radesky
[9] Radesky
[10] Rainey, Gertrude "Ma.".“Prove It On Me." Youtube, 7 November 2010. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRyaUcVfhak
[11] Rainey
[12] CAAM Web Staff. "On April 26, 1886, Ma Rainey, the Mother of the Blues, Was Born."*CAAM*, 26 Apr. 2020, https://caamuseum.org/learn/600state/black-history/blackhistory-on-april-26-1886-ma-rainey-the-mother-of-the-blues-was-born.

Another famous blues woman, Bessie Smith, was born into poverty in Tennessee and died in 1937.[13] She was picked up by Columbia Records while living in Philadelphia with her husband and became the highest-paid female performer of the time. She performed throughout the North and South, often for predominantly Black audiences and working-class Harlemites, and refused to perform at whites-only venues. She had relationships with women during her travels, which her husband did not approve of, and eventually led to their separation. Bessie Smith was known to attend parties at buffet flats with women from her show which were catered to queer people.

One of these parties is referenced in Smith's song, "Jailhouse Blues" where she states, "lord, this house is gonna get raided, yes sir!". The song becomes explicitly queer when her lyrics call for another woman to share her bed in jail, "thirty days in jail with my back turned to the wall…look here Mr. Jail Keeper, put another gal in my stall."[14]

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[13] Radesky
[14] Johnson

Another explicitly queer blues musician was Lucille Bogan. Bogan moved to New York in the early 1920s and eventually recorded blues music for Paramount Records. She wrote songs about her experiences as a sex worker, her alcoholism, her encounters with violent men, and her relationships with women. Her song "B.D. Woman's Blues" refers to the terms "bulldagger or "bulldyke" which could be used as self-descriptors or pejoratively. "Bulldagger" was used to describe primarily Black masculine lesbians who dated glamorous women and had an air of chivalry. The same-sex desiring aspect of the song is clear when Bogan asserts that, "coming a time, B.D. women ain't gonna need no men."[15] In her song B.D. women can support themselves and walk, "like a natural man"; however, they have a "head like a sweet angel" and do not hurt women.[16] The argument can be made that Bogan is singing that these women are not imitating "natural men", they are superior to them.

One woman who fulfilled the stereotype of a "bulldagger" and strengthened the alliance between lesbianism and masculinity was Gladys Bentley. Bentley was born in 1907 to a working-class couple in Philadelphia, who she claimed had wanted her to be a boy, and she would wear her younger brothers' suits to school. Bentley stated that she left her home in 1923 when she was only sixteen to go to New York. She played piano in Harlem's rent party circuit and quickly established herself as a highly proficient pianist and was able to secure a modest living. She signed with an agent in 1928 and began to sell blues records.[17] While her music was undeniably heterosexual, her public persona pushed gender norms and was explicitly queer. She was famous for her trademark white tuxedo and performing with a top hat, flirting with the women in the audience. Gossip columnist Archie Seale reported that, "the buxom Gladys

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[15] Bogan, Lucille. "B.D. Woman's Blues. *YouTube*, 9 November 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_nmrWB1ovQ0
[16] Bogan
[17] Wilson

Bentley entering the Alhambra [Theatre] late Saturday afternoon while three chicks stood amazed."[18] She only wore men's clothing in public and married a white woman in a highly publicized New Jersey civil ceremony. Her outfits consisted of, "immaculate white full dress shirts with stiff collars, small bow ties and skirts, oxfords, short Elton jackets, and hair cut straight back."[19] Bentley was the epitome of masculine swagger on and off stage with her deep voice and high-class appearance.

Bentley's music embodied the struggles and obstacles African American women continually encountered. She recorded a number of songs depicting a woman who was wronged by a man: "Worried Blues", "Moanful Wailin' Blues", "How Much Can I Stand". She concurrently held the persona of a blues singer who is a down on her luck woman treated badly by men while also having a persona of a tuxedo wearing self-assured and sexually empowered woman. Her music was transgressive culturally as she was known for taking popular songs and making them salacious. One critic described her act as, "one of the rankest revues this

[18] Wilson, 181
[19] Wilson, 175

commentator has witnessed in many a moon"[20] and she was known from being able to switch from raunch one moment to the model of refinement the next.

By 1929 Gladys Bentley had become a mainstay at Harlem cabarets and speakeasies like the Mad House and Harry Hansberry's Clam House in Jungle Alley. Bentley also developed a gay following at the mob-owned Ubangi Club. The *New York Times* column "Night Club Notes" stated in 1936 that, "The Ubangi still draws a mixed crowd, is noisy and intimate and gay- altogether Harlem, in short."[21] She would often head a revue at the Ubangi Club wearing her men's attire and had a "pansy" chorus line composed entirely of female impersonators. In March of 1936 the *New York Times* describes her as, "not only a fixture at Harlem's Ubangi Club but a fixture in the community."[22] At the height of her popularity Bentley rented a $300 a month apartment on Park Avenue, had servants, a big car, and could support her wife in style. In the early 1940s she faced legal challenges over her right to perform in male attire and received a special police permit to wear pants instead of a skirt. In the later half of her life Bentley repudiated her lesbian past in an essay in *Ebony* "I Am". She embraced Christianity and publicized her marriage to a man. Gladys Bentley died in 1960 at the age of fifty-two.

Bentley's later in life switch to femininity and heterosexuality may reflect the trend that in the late 1930s and onward with queerness no longer being seen as interesting, novel, or funny, but criminal and dangerous. The Hamilton Lodge drag balls, a Harlem tradition since the 1870s, ended abruptly in 1939 after a wave of panic over sex crimes seized the nation.[23] Still, being as explicitly and publicly queer as Gladys Bentley was not accepted by all in Harlem during the

[20] Wilson, 156
Picture of Gladys Bentley: Yaeger, Patricia. "Editor's Note: Bulldagger Sings the Blues." *PMLA* 124, no. 3 (2009): 721–26. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25614318.
[21] Wilson, 178
[22] Wilson, 156
[23] Wilson

Harlem Renaissance. Middle class and churchgoing African Americans viewed lesbians and gays of Harlem as part of the "lowlife" that was bringing disrepute to the neighborhood and African Americans as a community. They organized homes to protect and police young, single, migrant women, called on police to close brothels and buffet flats, and denounced dance halls and cabarets as a threat to the advancement of African Americans. Black newspapers would print instructions for how new migrants during the Great Migration should act so no disreputable behavior would occur disgracing the whole community. An effort to fight against stereotypes was a large reason why Black middle-class women found it crucial to attack and distinguish themselves from images of Black female sensuality. Racist ideology was used to stigmatize all Black women as morally debased.

Adam Clayton Powell was the pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church from 1908-1937 and was very concerned with the visibility and tolerance of gay Harlemites. Powell was an early leader of the Urban League and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People[24]. In a 1929 *New York Age* article "Dr. A.C. Powell Scores Pulpit Evils" Powell claimed that "sexual perversion" or homosexuality, "has grown into one of the most horrible, debasing, alarming and damning vices of present day civilization, and is…prevalent to an unbelievable degree."[25] Powell also claimed that homosexuality threatened the Black family, "causing men to leave their wives for other men, wives to leave their husbands for other women, and girls to mate with girls instead of marrying."[26] These sentiments towards queer people were felt by many other members of the Harlem community. Gossip columns, like the Amsterdam News, would publish the names, addresses, ages, and occupations of men arrested for female impersonation or

[24] Chauncey, 254
[25] Chauncey, 255
[26] Chauncey, 255

homosexual solicitation. This would often lead to the ruin or end of people's professional lives and greatly impacted their social lives. W.E.B Du Bois fired the managing editor of *The Crisis* when he learned that he had been arrested for homosexual solicitation in a public washroom. Whatever Du Bois' personal reaction it is evident that he felt that firing the editor was necessary in order to maintain the integrity of the newspaper.

Not all ideals of racial uplift, the goal of advancing African Americans socially and economically, involved conforming to the heteronormative ideals of larger white American society. Homosexual writer and Howard professor Alain Locke wrote extensively on the ideology of "New Negro" which was developed in Harlem. Locke was born in 1885 and died in 1954[27] and mentored and financed many queer writers of the Harlem Renaissance. The "New Negro" ideology rejected accommodationist approaches to racial justice and instead advocated for racial pride and social disobedience. It called for challenging white notions of cultural supremacy, exploring Black experiences, and celebrating Black culture.

Ideologies like "New Negro" reflect how the Harlem Renaissance was an exploratory time for African Americans to develop pride in their identities. Queer Black women were able to explore these identities through performances at clubs like the Clam House and large events like the Hamilton Lodge Ball. Women like Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, Lucille Bogan, and Gladys Bentley all defied heteronormativity through their performance styles and the queer content in their songs. Additionally, their lifestyles, from attending gay parties to romantic relationships with women, went against not only heteronormative norms but virtuosic norms of the time. Through embracing their queerness, their sexuality, and bravely crooning about their

[27] Radesky

struggles blues women fought against stereotypes of Black women and aided in creating a popular culture where Black women's personhood was acknowledged.

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