

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County

Gladys Alberta Bentley

(August 12, 1907 – January 18, 1960)

“Harlem Renaissance Blues Singer and Performer”



Gladys Alberta Bentley AKA Barbara "Bobbie" Minton was born on August 12, 1907 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to George L. Bentley from the U.S. and Mary (Mote) Bentley from Trinidad. Gladys' mother was reported to be disappointed that she gave birth to a girl and rejected Gladys after her birth. The family struggled financially and Gladys was often teased for preferring to wear her brother's hand-me-down clothes instead of dresses. She was also taunted for being a tomboy, having a deeper voice, and, for being considered overweight. Gladys' boyish behavior concerned her parents and they took her to various doctors so she could be "fixed." Their inability to accept Gladys' dress and mannerisms caused great disruption in the family. Gladys left home at the age of 16, moving to Harlem. In New York, she found acceptance, and a vibrant artistic and intellectual community.

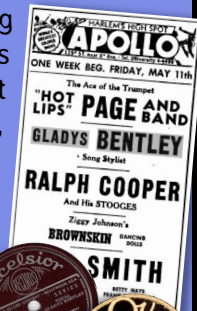
Gladys had a voice for signing the Blues, a talent for playing the piano and a confident stage presence. Her masculine appearance helped her secure a job at Harry Hansberry's Clam House on 133rd Street, one of the city's most notorious gay speakeasies. Although the ad called for a male pianist, Gladys auditioned wearing tuxedo and top hat. She was an instant hit. Her salary started at \$35 per week plus tips and went to up \$125 per week, (almost \$2,500.00 today). The club was eventually renamed Barbara's Exclusive Club, after her stage name at the time, Barbara "Bobbie" Minton. Her success provided her a Park Avenue apartment with servants and other trappings of wealth.

Gladys didn't hide her sexuality and openly flirted with the women in the audience. Her deep voice and risqué performances appealed to straight, gay, black, and white audiences. She sang ribald songs - taking popular songs of the day and changing the lyrics to shock the audience. She performed in speakeasies and night clubs in Jungle Alley, the center of Harlem's sporting life. Okeh Race Records released eight singles of her music between 1928 and 1929. She also had her own weekly radio program. By 1933, Gladys headlined in popular nightclubs and theatres such as The Cotton Club and The Apollo, wearing her signature tuxedo with matching top hat and walking cane. From 1934-1937, she created her own musical revue with a chorus of eight male dancers in drag, at the well-known Ubangi Club.

Gladys lived with numerous female partners and even claimed marriage to one, but after the repeal of Prohibition, her popularity and public tolerance of openly gay persons waned. The decade of the Great Depression severely impacted Harlem nightlife and performers were forced to find other means of income.

In 1937, Gladys moved to Los Angeles to live with her mother. Her success picked up again during World War II with the expansion of gay bars on the West Coast. She also recorded more records in the Excelsior label in 1945. The conservative views of the 1950's had a significant impact on Gladys' career. Her androgenous appearance, once celebrated, now limited her ability to work. In 1952, she appeared in the August issue of Ebony Magazine wearing a dress and claiming she was a "woman again." She posed for photos, cooking dinner and cleaning house. That same year, 45 year old Gladys married Charles Roberts, a 28 year old cook. She also became involved in the church and became an ordained minister. She and Charles later divorced. In 1958, Gladys appeared on the game show "You Bet Your Life," playing piano and singing. She performed regularly at the Rose Room in Hollywood.

On January 18, 1960, Gladys Alberta Bentley, died in her Los Angeles home after a short bout with Pneumonia. She was 52 years old. She remains a pioneer in pushing the boundaries of gender, sexuality, class, and race.



Relating between shows with long-time friend Willie Bryant, now Harlem's "sauce." Gladys Bentley displays mannish street garb which became associated with her during '30's.