

History is Gay Podcast  
Episode 4: Bulldaggers and Lady Lovers

**Introduction**

**Leigh:** Hello, and welcome to *History is Gay*! A podcast that examines the underappreciated and overlooked queer ladies, gents, and gentle-enbies that have always been there in the unexplored corners of history. Because history has never been as straight as you think.

♪ Intro Music ♪

**Leigh:** Hey, folks! I'm Leigh.

**Gretchen:** And I'm Gretchen.

**Leigh:** And we're recording in person together today!

**Gretchen:** We're in the same space!

**Leigh:** It's super cool. I don't know if y'all knew this, but we record over Skype far, far away from each other.

**Gretchen:** Literally two time zones away from each other.

**Leigh:** Yeah. So, now we're sitting in the same room. So, we apologize for any weird soundy things because we don't know what we're doing. But-

**Gretchen:** Yeah, this is a new experience.

**Leigh:** I'm excited. I don't know if you're excited about this, but I'm excited.

**Gretchen:** I'm excited. We might laugh a little bit more in person [both hosts laugh].

**Leigh:** We realize that recording together in the same room might be a little bit of a disaster. We also have a friend here who is sitting in the corner drinking wine and trying not to laugh. That may or may not be super successful. [laughter]

Yeah, uh... what are we talking about?

**Gretchen:** Today we're going to be talking about bulldaggers and lady lovers. So the lesbian and bisexual blues legends of the Harlem Renaissance.

**Leigh:** Yes! Oh boy!

**Gretchen:** Oh man! Oh boy, these ladies.

**Leigh:** I first started booking into these when we were starting to look for music for the podcast, and I discovered Lucille Bogan. And I was like, what is happening right now?! [laughter] This is the gayest shit I've ever encountered. It's so much fun. Oh my god.

**Gretchen:** This is gonna be great.

## **The Harlem Renaissance, Cultural Context, and the Language We Used**

**Leigh:** This is gonna be a lot of fun. So we're diving back into the format that we first had from our first episode where we're gonna be talking about a specific group of people and we're gonna tell you how gay they are. Which is really cool.

**Gretchen:** Oh man. So, before we dive in, we do have a couple of announcements about content warnings. The first thing that we need to mention is that we will be using some language that is often considered slurs. The words 'faggot' and 'dyke' will be used. They- we're not going to be using them as slurs, they were just terminology that was used at the time. This was terms people would use to refer to themselves in the queer community. So those terms will come up though, and we just want you all to be aware that those terms will come up.

**Leigh:** Yeah. There will also be some mention of domestic violence. A lot of these women dealt with it in their lives and it actually became a huge element of the content of their music. [agreeing noises] So that will be a theme sort of throughout, but we're gonna be pretty abbreviated about it,

not very explicit. Because we have some more fun and awesome gay things to get into with their lives.

**Gretchen:** Right. Yeah. So, other than that I don't think we have any other new announcements do we?

**Leigh:** No. No, unless you are a person who is going to TGI Femslash, which is a really, really awesome femslash queer lady convention sort of thing that we're going down to later in the week that we're recording this. Which we will be coming back when we release it. But, yeah. [quietly] Any of you who are listeners who are going to that, we would be excited to see you.

**Gretchen:** Yeah, and we've got some merch that we're gonna take with us to TGI Femslash. So, that maybe hopefully be something that we're offering to our general listeners soon, but right now we're just limited because we're new at this thing so- [laughs]

**Leigh:** Yeah, yeah, if we have anything leftover, we'll be sure to let anybody- everybody know about it. But with that, let's get into our, our main topic. Let's talk about the lesbian and bisexual blues legends in the Harlem Renaissance.

**Gretchen:** Yeah! Leigh, you want to start us off?

**Leigh:** Yeah! Yeah! So, for those of you who don't know anything about the Harlem Renaissance, this is a period of time between 1920 and 1930 in the neighborhood of Harlem, New York. So for many Black Americans in the U.S. at this time, the desire for respectability meant adapting to and adopting to values of white Christian Edwardinism. Not so- in the blues community and in Harlem. So, the time between- the beginning of the 1920's and 1930 in Harlem, New York was filled with an explosion of art, music, poetry, and entertainment among the primarily Black neighborhood, known as the Harlem Renaissance.

What a lot of people don't know, however, is that the Harlem Renaissance also gave way to a prominent Black, gay subculture outside of the dominant white mainstream culture. Full of speakeasies and private parties, booze and

schmooze, and an open secret quality prevalent in the jazz and blues music everywhere at the time.

**Gretchen:** Yeah, and this came out of this– there was a mass migration of Black people from the post-slavery South to cities in the North and West, which was known as the Great Migration. They moved to places like Chicago, Detroit, Buffalo had significant Black communities– same with Milwaukee. But New York City, the Harlem neighborhood had the biggest influx of Black residents and became the epicenter for Black art and culture.

It was an introduction of what was called the New Negro Movement, and Harlem really was the capital of that new movement. And there were – many prominent participants in the Harlem Renaissance were reportedly gay, lesbian, or bisexual, according to one of our sources. The book called *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance*.

**Leigh:** Yeah, some of the– the people that we know of as some of the most prominent luminaries in the Harlem Renaissance, folks like poet Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, were queer or, if not queer, queer adjacent and ran in the same circles as a lot of these people. So it was completely and totally enmeshed in this culture.

**Gretchen:** Right, you have someone like Frankie "Half-Pint" Jaxon who sang a lot of songs as a female impersonator and would even sing songs about male lovers as a female impersonator. So you have, yeah, that kind of not– they're either queer themselves or queer adjacent. They're queer somehow, either in their presentation, in the- in the way that they performed or in their, you know, actual relationships with people of the same gender.

**Leigh:** Yeah. Also in this period you get the advent of female blues singers which are the people we're going to be primarily talking about today and what was really significant about these women was that they were specifically defying post-Victorian cultural expectations. These women were flouting and doing away with the model of womanhood that was mainstream culture. Right. They were not subservient to men–

**Gretchen:** Nope! [laughs]

**Leigh:** In [emphasizes] any fashion. They dressed flashy and flamboyantly. They would be dressed head to tail–

**Gretchen:** in tuxedos.

**Leigh:** In tuxedos, or gaudy gowns with a lot of– jewelry. And it was this really amazing explosion of culture from these women that came from working class Black backgrounds. And they were trailblazers. A lot of the flapper movement actually took cues from these communities.

**Gretchen:** Right, I was really intrigued by that because I don't remember learning that specifically in school. That, like, the flapper movement in the fashion, in the way the women behaved in that movement took its cues directly from the Harlem Renaissance and these female blues singers, so I thought that was awesome.

You also have them diverging from the upright ambitious lifestyle promoted by the Black leadership at the time like W.E.B. Du Bois, who was working towards assimilation and establishing Black colleges. So you have this movement within the Black community towards wanting to establish a kind of respectability within the dominant white culture and really counter to that were these blues singers who were basically doing the opposite of all of that.

**Leigh:** Mhmm, yeah. Also, at this time, you have to understand too, like, especially in the South, a lot of these women started their careers before they got into Chicago or New York and really going into these touring circuits– they started out in a lot of abject poverty in the South, and came from sharecropping families. And so at this time, some of our sources would talk about how the two main avenues for Black women, or Black folk in general, was to work either as sharecroppers, go into domestic labor, or go into entertainment. Entertainment and going to the stage was generally thought of as the only way out of crushing poverty.

**Gretchen:** Right. Right. Now, as we mentioned at the beginning, there's some language that you need to be aware of at this time. This is actually the origin of the term 'bulldagger', which was the term for butch lesbians. Which could be shortened to 'BD Women', BD being short for 'bulldagger.' At a

Harlem party, a vice investigator attended and asked one of the women if she were "normal". She responded:

*Everybody's here is either a bulldagger or a faggot, and I am here.*

So, like we said, the use of bulldagger, faggot. But what's interesting is bulldagger, or bulldyke, which is another version of the [agreeing noises] same term, were actually reserved for people of color. At the time, people who were queer, who were white, would've been referred to as lesbians and homosexuals. So dyke and faggot at the time were specifically used for non-white people in this context.

**Leigh:** Yeah, you also see a lot of references to being "*in the life*", which I thought was really cool and I wanna use that now.

**Gretchen:** [drawn out] Yeah...

**Leigh:** Yeah. And if you don't know the origin of, I mean, we talk about how dyke was specifically used among POC at the time, but- the specific term dyke, or bulldyker, has been seen as- one of its first uses in a novelist from this time period, Claude McKay, he has a whole bunch of novels. And in one of them, he refers to someone else as a bulldyker and there's suggestions that it might be related to the slang usage of dike, d-i-k-e, AKA a ditch, used as slang term for vulva, and bull being used as like a masculine or aggressive sense.

So I think it's really interesting. There's constantly a conversation of like, "Oh no! We can't use this word because of slurs!", but everything was either a slur or became something that we attributed to ourselves

**Gretchen:** Right.

**Leigh:** After it being used derogatorily against us. So, it's an ever evolving thing.

**Gretchen:** Yeah, because at the time when women referred to themselves as a bulldagger or a bulldyke, it wasn't derogatory then. That was just the term they used to describe themselves at the time. Speaking of bulldykes-

## **Bio Time! Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, Gladys Bentley, Ethel Waters (& Ethel Williams), Alberta Hunter, & Lucille Bogan**

**Leigh:** Oh boy. Oh man.

**Gretchen:** These ladies are so amazing.

**Leigh:** Yeah! I'm excited about this. And it's funny too because there's a really great documentary. It's like a thirty minute documentary and it's actually available online right now, we're gonna put a link to it, but it's called [\*T'Aint Nobody's Bizness\*](#)–

**Gretchen:** Can I just say how much I enjoy that there's a pun in that title?

**Leigh:** Oh, taint.

**Gretchen:** T'aint, t'aint nobody's business! [Both hosts laugh] I know it's not supposed to be, but I am a child. So when I read that, I was like, "Ha ha that's got the word taint."

**Leigh:** But there's this really fantastic documentary that is actually available for free online on Vimeo right now, at least for the month of February for Black History Month that goes into all of these queer divas, which is really cool. And they separate them out in kinda two sections by like "bisexuals and the bulldaggers", and you'll kinda see as we go through these the different approaches these women went into their relationships with women in different ways.

But, the first person we're going to start off with is Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, who I love. So, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey was born in 1886, and she died in 1939. She was one of the big three, "Big Three Classic Women Blues Artists", including her, Bessie Smith, and Lucille Bogan. She is called the Mother of the Blues and she is one of the earliest Black American recording artists. She made over 92 records in her five year recording career. She– was performing for so much longer, but she had a five year recording career, and she made almost 100 records which was [emphasizes] insane!

**Gretchen:** Right.

**Leigh:** And Sandra Lieb, who wrote one of the most comprehensive biographies on her life mentions that,

*In her most striking records, Ma Rainey deals with prostitution, homosexuality, lesbianism, and sadomasochism.*

And you'll see this is a large theme around a lot of these women who were part of kinda the "dirty blues circuit". We don't have a lot of time to get into all the intricacies of the blues and what it meant for Black feminism and all of that, which is so fascinating and I really, really hope you go out and read these books. You should be able to find them in your library, I found a couple ones in my library and it was really hard to not just dump all of that in our outline [laughter] because I was just like, "No! I wanna talk about this, it's so cool!"

Angela Davis has a really cool book on it, too. So she was born Gertrude Pridgett on April 26, 1886 in Columbus, Georgia. She was the second of five children, and her parents were both minstrel troupe singers. There's actually a lot about her life that has been relegated to legend, and a lot of historians have had kind of a difficult time narrowing down what's fact and what's fiction [snorting laughter] in regards to tales of her life.

**Gretchen:** Oh my God.

**Leigh:** Yeah, there's a lot of people who were like, "Oh yeah! I knew Ma Rainey and this happened and blah blah blah," and other people are like, "What are you talking about?"

There's actually speculation that there were two Ma Rainey's.

**Gretchen:** [drawn out] What?

**Leigh:** Yeah, yeah, cause there was like, "Oh no! Ma Rainey never went to New York!" and then there was this other one which... read the book. We don't have time to get into it but, it's just so great.

She's described as a "short, heavy, dark-skinned woman with luminous eyes, wild wiry hair, and a large mouth filled with gold teeth." She was generally outgoing, sweet-tempered, warm, clean spoken, and temperate, which is a contrast to her fiery tempered protege, Bessie Smith, who we will talk about.

**Gretchen:** Oh, man– Bessie– Bessie Smith.

**Leigh:** She started performing in 1900 at the age of 14 in tent shows and traveling minstrel acts. And if you don't know about the tradition of minstrelsy, it was an art form in the early 1900's, 19-teens, that started out with white folk using black face– and doing grossly racist comedy acts and singing and it sort of eventually started moving more towards actually having Black performers. But, it was still a lot of exaggerated comedy and music and what the blues evolved out of this type of vaudevillian style.  
[agreeing noises]

There are actually tales that Ma Rainey says that she coined the term 'the blues', but I learned that this is actually a myth. However, she is one of the first people to publicly perform in this style. She's the earliest link between– before her it was just kind of like solitary dudes wandering the streets in the South and like, singing random songs, and she was the first person to like, perform these. She cemented it as like, the classic blues. All of the classic blues women singers followed in her footsteps, even if they weren't directly taught or influenced by her.

**Gretchen:** So, so if she's the mother of the blues... does that mean the blues are gay?

**Leigh:** [Confidently] Yes. [Both hosts laugh] Well, you're gonna find this out. [Shouts] The blues were really gay!

**Gretchen:** The blues are gay.

**Leigh:** I mean, male, female, anyone– the blues were gay! She even recorded with Louis Armstrong, too. Bessie Smith did as well, too, as well. She married William "Pa" Rainey in 1904 at the age of 18, and they became a song and dance team and they traveled together billed as *Rainey and Rainey, Assassins of the Blues*, [laughter] which is so cool!

**Gretchen:** Oh my god! That is amazing!

**Leigh:** Yeah. She– one of her most famous shows was the *Rabbit Foot Minstrels'* troupe. They had like, comedy and circus acts, and they did this whole cool thing with her coming out of a victrola. It would like, open up– it was really neat. But they traveled throughout the South, and she was one of the most renowned performers that traveled with them. She continued performing through the 19-teens, and then she joined with the *Moses Stokes Traveling Show*, where she met and began to work with a new, young, up and comer out of Tennessee, Bessie Smith, who we will get into very soon.

Speaking of legends about of her life, there are actually rumors and stories that she kidnapped Bessie.

**Gretchen:** What?

**Leigh:** Yeah, that she kidnapped Bessie, and took her along with the show, and taught her the blues, and it's like, all legend– but it makes for a really good story. Bessie's sister-in-law, Maude Smith, actually like denies the story and says they would get together and laugh about the kidnapping rumors?

**Gretchen:** Oh my gosh.

**Leigh:** There's like a whole great story in one of the books that you can read, but they talk– they get together over lunch and they talk about how funny it was, and she says that Ma was really more like a mother to Bessie. And that even though Bessie would later kind of deny it, that they were shown to be really close friends and colleagues, but Bessie likes to save face. [laughter]

Up until this point, she had mostly been moving around the South, traveling a lot, and becoming kind of like a Southern minstrel star. And then in 1923, she picked up a contract with Paramount Record Company and became a national recording artist. She went to Chicago– so most of these other women you'll find did a lot of their recording in New York, in Harlem, but she did most of her work out of Chicago. And she recorded her first songs–

where she was given the moniker 'The Mother of the Blues'— at 37 years old.

She's not the first person to ever record the blues. That happened about three years earlier with Mamie Smith. She was the first Black woman to record on the Okeh label. But like blues mania had started to sweep the nation with that. And then the next year she joins up with a pianist named Thomas Dorsey and starts *The Wildcats Jazz Band*, and she continues touring with them through the 20's until the end of the decade when, as you'll see with Bessie Smith too, like the rise of radio and changing audience tastes and response to vaudeville and minstrelsy, all of these kind of things— started to lead to the decline of vaudeville and the blues and kind of move into a swing era. And, like, the thing that finally did like the last nail in the coffin was the Great Depression in 1929. But her recording contract was terminated in 1928, and a former Paramount executive explained to her that,

*"Her down-home material had gone out of fashion."*

So to kind of close out Ma's bio here, she retired in 1935, after the death of her sister Melissa, and returned to Columbus, Georgia to live in the home that she built for her family. She was taking care of her family to the very end. Later that year, her mother died as well. She ended up purchasing and managing two different theaters in Rome, Georgia, and she turned to religion later in life. She died in December 1939 at the age of 53 from a heart disease and her— [yells] this pisses me off so much! Her death certificate lists her usual occupation as "housekeeping." Like, the mother of the blues, the person who created an entire musical genre and paved the way for music as we know it today had on her headstone that her occupation was 'housekeeping'. Because—

**Gretchen:** [sarcasm] Gee. Gee. Wonder why?

**Leigh:** Racism!

**Gretchen:** Right? Ugh. Probably some sexism in there, too.

**Leigh:** Yeah. Racism, sexism,

**Gretchen:** All the -sms.

**Leigh:** All the great stuff. But, that's a brief bio of Ma, get more into her.

**Gretchen:** Right, so Bessie Smith came up a couple of times when you were talking about Ma Rainey, and she was born in 1894 and lived to 1937. She's a, like we said, a protege of Ma Rainey, called 'The Empress of the Blues'. [agreeing noises] So, stepping up in life.

**Leigh:** Well because, she was like, Ma was like, the first, but Bessie Smith was like, gold standard.

**Gretchen:** Yep.

**Leigh:** She knocked it out of the park, She was like the highest paid recording artist of her time.

**Gretchen:** Yep, she was also like the queen bee in this circle [laughter] of like, bisexual and lesbian African American blues singers. She had over 160 recordings. I mean, she really is empress. All hail.

Born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, the daughter of a Baptist preacher, and one of seven children. She started street performing at the age of nine, and auditioned for *The Moses Stokes Traveling Show* at age 18 in 1912. That's where she met Ma Rainey, who took Smith under her wing to introduce her to the world of professional signing. She met her first husband, Earl Love, in 1920, who died a year later. And then, she married Jack Gee in 1922. And their relationship lasted six years, and they adopted a son together.

And many themes in Smith's music deal with the physical violence between the two of them and abusive men in general. Smith's excessive drinking, temper, and affairs with women drove Jack crazy, and he would beat and threaten to kill her frequently. Many times on her tours, Jack would make a surprise appearance and break up wild parties, and her chorus girls and boys were terrified of him.

**Leigh:** Yeah, I thought it was really interesting like Angela Davis in her book specifically noted that the performances of classic blues women, especially Bessie Smith, were one of

*"the few cultural spaces in which the tradition of public discourse on male violence had been established."*

**Gretchen:** Hm. One of the few places where they could talk about their life story honestly and openly was in their music.

Her first recording, or her first major recording, *Downhearted Blues* actually sold 780,000 copies in less than 6 months. When we said gold standard, this is gold standard. This was astonishing for a woman of color in 1924. Each of the other songs that she recorded at the time sold over 20,000 copies and people would stand in line for hours just to get a chance to listen to her sing.

However, Frank Walker, who's studio she recorded with, was an asshole, [agreeing noises] and he struck out the royalties clause in her contract. So she only ever received a fraction of the money that she could've earned in her lifetime.

**Leigh:** Yeah.

**Gretchen:** Yay racism and sexism. Oh man, that's another just, running theme in the lives of these women. Is you look at their lives and you see the ways that they were just shut down or [agreeing noises] underappreciated or not given what they deserved. You look at the amount of money that they were making in a week and it's ridiculous to think that was- someone of this talent and caliber was making so little.

**Leigh:** Yeah. They only made like, a certain amount of money per usable side of the record, too, which is really interesting, so... it's crazy.

**Gretchen:** Yeah. Much of Bessie Smith's music centers around traveling themes, and she and her company traveled in a train car that she purchased so as to avoid segregation issues with hotels, which is smart. She would cook for her company on the train and had a wild life on the road hanging

out in bars, and buffet flats, which, we will get to– buffett flats later. They are very exciting.

Bessie actually also had a wild temper and would hurl violent threats and sometimes carry them out. So, fun fact–

**Leigh:** [laughter] Do you wanna talk about this, or do you want me to talk about this?

**Gretchen:** You talk about this.

**Leigh:** Okay, I could talk about this.

**Gretchen:** But we have to preface this by, if y'all remember our first episode where we talked about how we wanted to ship Lizzie Borden with Anne Bonnie...

**Leigh:** Oh, yeah.

**Gretchen:** We may have to make this a poly threesome.

**Leigh:** This is definitely becoming a poly threesome. I want Bessie–

**Gretchen:** Bessie Smith needs in on this.

**Leigh:** And this is definitely like a case of anachronism right? Lizzie and Anne? Not too far apart removed. Let's just launch them into the 1920's because I want them to hang out and wreak havoc with Bessie.

**Gretchen:** These three women would [laughter] fuck shit up!

**Leigh:** Fuck shit up. Speaking of fuck shit up, in 1927, basically, Bessie is getting ready to perform, right? She's performing in this tent show and fucking KKK members, stupid ass klansmen, come up and came to interrupt her show by trying to remove the stakes in her tent and collapse the tent on her and her performing band.

**Gretchen:** Seems like a bad idea.

**Leigh:** Bad idea so– for anybody, but like...

**Gretchen:** They didn't know what they were getting into.

**Leigh:** They didn't know what they were getting into. She leaves the tent and,

*"...ran towards the intruders, placed one hand on her hip, and shook a clenched fist at the klansmen.*

*'What the fuck do you think you're doing?,' she shouted above the sound of the band. 'I'll get the whole damn tent out here if I have to. You just pick up them sheets and run!'"*

[laughter] So the klansmen apparently just stood there dumbfounded and gawked, and she just kept hurling obscenities at them until they finally disappeared into the night, and then she just went back to performing– like nothing had happened. [laughter] Like the KKK walk up on you and you're like, "Get the fuck outta here! What are you doing?" Iconic. She's my hero.

**Gretchen:** Oh, man. Right? She is.

**Leigh:** God, bring back Bessie Smith for 2018 Nazis, please. Assholes.

**Gretchen:** Unfortunately, as with Ma Rainey, times got harder in the 30's and the blues started going out of fashion. But, she started touring the South again with her own show. She died in September 1937 in a car crash with her boyfriend at the time, whose name was Richard Morgan, while they were in Mississippi. Jack Gee, [murmurs] asshole... sorry I just have to keep saying that because he is, became rich off her royalties and that motherfucker didn't even buy her a headstone. She lay in an unmarked grave for 33 years while relatives squabbled over money and argued over who should pay.

She actually didn't get her own headstone until 1970 when Janis Joplin, a huge fan of Bessie's, and Juanita Green, who used to clean her house and became president of the Philadelphia NAACP finally got her a headstone.

**Leigh:** Yeah. Yeah, it started out with– there was a woman who was a neighbor and noticed that like, you know, there was just no headstone. So she actually put out– I think it was like she put out a column in the local newspaper asking if anybody would be interested in– like calling for donations or calling for purchases and it got big. It got nationwide and Janis Joplin and Juanita Green actually got hold of it and heard about it and then purchased– and set up a headstone for her.

But like, man, fuck this shit! Like, the mother of the blues has her headstone say 'housekeeper' and the empress of the blues lays in an unmarked grave for 33 years.

**Gretchen:** Goddamnit.

**Leigh:** I hate everything! Except for these women, I love them.

**Gretchen:** Yeah We hate all of the asshole men in their lives, but these women are amazing.

Okay, okay, now Leigh's gonna talk about my favorite–

**Leigh:** Oh boy. Gladys!

**Gretchen:** Gladys Bentley.

**Leigh:** Gladys Bentley everyone.

**Gretchen:** [whispers] I want her to be my girlfriend.

**Leigh:** So you remember how excited we got about Pierre the Pansy Pirate? I love Gladys– [whispers] I love Gladys Bentley so much, like ugh!

Okay, so she was born in 1907, lived to 1960. She was born to George Bentley and Mary Mote in Philadelphia. She was the oldest of four children in a poor family, and apparently her mother always wanted her to have been born a boy and her mother refused to touch or nurse her for six months after she was born– which is terrifyingly tragic.

**Gretchen:** Yeah, her grandmother like, took care of her while she was an infant because her mom didn't want anything to do with her because she wanted so much for her to be born a boy.

**Leigh:** [sarcasm] Yeah, that doesn't create lasting damage. Fuck that. So she moved to New York City by herself at 16, and when she heard The Clam House was looking for a male pianist, she put on a tux and soon became an in-demand singer.

She was a butch, short-haired pianist, and an alto singer who sported a white tuxedo, and top hat, and tails. Hashtag iconic.

**Gretchen:** See why I wanted her to be my girlfriend? Also, Clam House.

**Leigh:** Yeah. The Clam House. We'll get into the Clam House too, later. She was known for improvising suggestive, risqué lyrics to popular songs, and there's a quote that says,

*"If ever there was a gal who could take a popular ditty and put her own naughty version to it", observed one journalist, "La Bentley could do it."*

She headlined at the Ubangi Club where she was backed by a chorus line of drag queens, and she performed regularly at the Cotton Club, Connie's Inn, and especially, as we mentioned before, Harry Hansberry's Clam House, which was a very popular kind of underground club that specifically catered to gay clientele and had gay folks performing.

**Gretchen:** Hence the name [emphasizes together] Clam House. [laughter]

**Leigh:** Clam House. Which is funny, there was a funny Tumblr post that Gretchen reblogged a while ago that had like runes on clams or something-

**Gretchen:** Yeah, there were like all these runes- like there's these clams that occur naturally that have these- and they look like they have runes on them and somewhere along the line someone was like, "Clams are gay" and Leigh was like, "No, no Gretchen. [together] Clams have always been gay!"

**Leigh:** Yeah. Gretchen was like, "Clams are gay culture now!" and I'm like "Gretchen! Clams have always been gay culture, have you never heard of clam bake?" [laughter]

**Gretchen:** No wonder I liked clam chowder so much as a child.

**Leigh:** [Laughs] Is that your root? Is that your delicious savory root?

**Gretchen:** Sure.

**Leigh:** Yeah, let's just call it that right now. [laughter] So yeah, there's a great quote from Robert Philipson, who was— is the um, I say was like he's not you know, like literally—

**Gretchen:** He's probably like blocks away from us right now.

**Leigh:** He lives in the Bay Area apparently. So he's the director of that *T'Aint Nobody's Bizness*, but there's a quote,

*"The Clam house was famous because it had Bentley, reveling in her image as a bulldagger. Because of her, it became a place where Black lesbians and gay men would go to hang out. White sightseers from downtown would check out her show as well. "*

She was known as 'The Brown Bomber of Sophisticated Songs', which is my favorite title, and she was a powerful performer.

*"When Gladys sings "St. James Infirmary", it makes you weep your heart out,"*

one fan wrote of her. Langston Hughes was actually a large fan of hers. He called her,

*"An amazing exhibition of musical energy,"*

and fiction writers of the era actually based characters on her.

**Gretchen:** She was known for having this low, gravelly, like, alto and I just—everything about that makes me happy. I love that... that sound.

**Leigh:** We're gonna play some clips for you all.

**Gretchen:** Hopefully we'll have some clips for you guys.

**Leigh:** In 1940, she ended up moving to California and she headlined at Mona's 440 Club in San Francisco, where their motto was, "Where Girls Will Be Boys." Which is actually considered one of the first explicit lesbian bars in America and she performed there with other performers of color. In L.A., when she was performing down there, she was actually required to get a permit to perform in her iconic tux.

**Gretchen:** Because there was a lot of backlash at the time of women dressing— with like, gender presentation and so. It really was a backlash against the very openly flamboyant gay subcultures in Harlem. They were like, "Oh, well you have to— you're a woman. You have to wear a dress." And so she had to get a permit to perform in her tux, which...[yells] who would keep Gladys Bentley out of her tux?!

**Leigh:** Well even female impersonators of the time, and even later— I was listening to another really really fantastic queer history podcast, which if you don't listen to it you should, *Making Gay History*, where there was someone who was talking about how they — when they were in drag or trans women on the street, they had to wear like men's clothing underneath because if the cops pulled up on you, you has to basically flash that and be like, "Hey, I still have, you know this gender presentation that's acceptable underneath these clothes," which is [sing-song] bullshit.

**Gretchen:** Bullshit!

**Leigh:** She got in trouble later on in the 1950s, she ran afoul of the House Un-American Activities Committee, our good friend HUAC. But, interestingly enough, not for any sort of political shenanigans, like you would expect in the McCarthy age, but because of her lesbianism and interracial affairs. Boo! And so due to that atmosphere, she apparently, in an *Ebony* article, claimed that she converted to heterosexuality through female hormone supplements

and she said this as a way to save her career. But later on, she pretty much renounced that.

She claimed to have two husbands, but one actually denied the marriage took place. Hello, beards. And apparently she was a devout Christian, and she studied for Ministry but she unfortunately died before she could be ordained.

**Gretchen:** Right. It was interesting to notice that with Ma Rainey too, where you have this later in life they kind of found religion. And at least in Gladys Bentley's case she used it for a kinda cover for, "No wait guys...I'm not... I'm actually straight now."

**Leigh:** Yeah, Ma was actually— Ma Rainey was religious her whole life. But like, after her mother's death and her sister's death, she kinda went back home. And her brother, I believe, was a large part of the church. He was like a preacher or, I can't remember exactly what it was. And so she specifically kind of joined that congregation later in her life.

**Gretchen:** Right. So, next up we have Ethel Waters and Ethel Williams. Ethel Waters was born in 1896 in Chester, Pennsylvania to Louise Anderson. After her mother was raped by a gentlemen named John Waters. She was also raised in poverty, running theme here, by her grandmother, and never lived in the same place for longer than a year and half.

Ethel Waters married her first husband at 13 years old, but he was abusive so she left him and worked as a scrub woman and a maid in her later teens. She broke into vaudeville under the name 'Sweet Mama Stringbean', and began to appear on stage shows and eventually in films like *On with the Show!*, *Cabin in the Sky*, *The Sound and the Fury*.

She also, later in her life, starred on a TV series called *Buelah*. And she ended up in Atlanta working at the same club as Bessie Smith, where at Smith's urging, she sang ballads and popular songs so as not to compete with Smith singing the blues.

**Leigh:** Oh yeah. Bessie Smith was like, [emphasizes ], really competitive. Like, she never publicly acknowledged herself as being influenced by Ma

Rainey. She said she was influenced by Cora Fisher, I think? But, that kinda happened with some other women. She was like, "Don't steal my spotlight!"

**Gretchen:** Yeah, yep. [imitating Bessie Smith] You can't sing the blues, I'm singing the blues. You gotta sing some other music.

**Leigh:** [imitating Bessie Smith] This is my shit.

**Gretchen:** So Ethel Waters moved to Harlem in 1919 and is known for being a blues singer who sang in what's called the vaudeville style, and popularized songs like, *Dinah*, *Stormy Weather*, *Heat Wave*. *Heat Wave* I think is actually one of the titles of her biographies.

Like Bentley though, she was known for raunchy blues songs like, *My Handyman*, with the lines, [sings]

*He shakes my ashes,  
greases my griddle.  
Churns my butter,  
Strokes my fiddle.  
My man is such a handyman.*

She actually did act quite a bit and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress in 1949 for the film *Pinky*. She was also the first Black woman to be nominated for an Emmy for her role on the TV show *Route 66*. And, my favorite tidbit about her life, is that she toured with Billy Graham— on his crusades, which is delightful and fascinating given her as a person. She eventually died in 1977.

And we have Ethel Williams in here, you'll find out later why Ethel Williams is here, but she lived from 1891 to 1961, and she was a dancer in the same company as Ethel Waters.

**Leigh:** Yep. And then our last folks that we wanted to get into here, just like a very abbreviated things. Those are kind of like our big, big four, and then we have Alberta Hunter who was born in 1895 and died in 1984. She was... lived a long time!

**Gretchen:** She lived a long time!

**Leigh:** She sang with Louis Armstrong at the beginning of her blues career and even sang for President Jimmy Carter in the White House towards the end of her career. In 1919, she started a long-term relationship with Lottie Tyler, who was the niece of entertainer Bert Williams. And she was known for playing musical bids with Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, and Ethel Waters.

And she, over the course of her life, was very, very kinda closed down with her woman-loving-woman status. She concealed and kinda refused to speak about her lesbianism even though she lived with a woman for 20 years. She ended up getting a nursing degree and working at a hospital for 20 years. That's kinda what we have on Alberta Hunter. She could probably be a whole other episode later on. There's some really great stuff on her out there.

**Gretchen:** Right? Same with like, Billie Holiday, there's a whole circle of ladies even outside the blues singers from this time period [agreeing noises] that intersect with each other. And we'll end with Lucille Bogan, also known as Bessie Jackson. She lived from 1897 to 1948. She was born Lucille Anderson in Amory, Mississippi, and raised in Birmingham, Alabama. She married Nazareth Bogan in 1914 and had a son, Nazareth Jr., a year later. Eventually divorced Bogan and married a man 22 years younger than herself, James Spencer.

**Leigh:** Alright, there you go.

**Gretchen:** She recorded vaudeville songs in the early 20s, and recorded the first song by a Black blues singer outside of Chicago and New York in 1923 with the song *Pawn Shop Blues*, which she recorded in Atlanta. And had her first big success in 1927 with the song *Sweet Petunia*.

She is also known for her sexually explicit dirty blues songs about sex and drinking. Songs like *Sloppy Drunk Blues*, and *Shave 'Em Dry*, which we'll get to.

**Leigh:** Yeah, and all of those songs too, like, you know, if she was the first person to like start performing those then they kind of ended up in the

whole blues circuit of all of these women. They all have variations of these songs.

**Gretchen:** As we noticed with Ma Rainey, you have a theme of prostitution and sexwork featured prominently in many of her songs, like the song *Groceries on the Shelf*, also called *Piggly Wiggly*, which is named after the supermarket chain. For those of you who don't know, that's a chain of supermarkets in the United States called Piggly Wiggly.

Lines like,

*My name is Piggly Wiggly  
And I swear you can help yourself  
And you got to have your green back honey  
Don't take nothing else*

She returned to New York in 1933 and started recording under the pseudonym Bessie Jackson, and recorded the song *B.D. Woman's Blues* in 1935.

### **What Do You Mean They're Not Straight?**

**Leigh:** Which leads us to our next little section which is, why are all these women in here? Why did we just give you biographies of all these acclaimed blues singers? Hmm, why do we think they're gay, Gretchen?

### **Evidence From Historical Cultural Context: Queer Subculture & Performance in Harlem Nightlife**

**Gretchen:** Well one of the reasons is that, in general, the sexual and social morays in Harlem were a lot more fluid and there was more tolerance for homosexuality, as we talked about earlier in the episode.

As Steve Watson mentions in his article on the Harlem Renaissance,

*Harlem churches were strictly anti-gay, but the community, especially the nightlife community, provided a model of tolerance.*

Richard Bruce Nugent recalled,

*"You don't get up on the rooftop and shout "I fucked my wife last night", so why would you get up on the roof and say I love prick? You didn't, you just did what you wanted to. Nobody was in the closet. There wasn't any closet."*

A common pick up line of the time was, "I'm a one way man, now. Which way would you like?", or, in a period where syphilis ran rampant, sex between men was rationalized by, "Better a little shit than a canker."

**Leigh:** Yeah. There ya go.

**Gretchen:** Wee!

**Leigh:** Whoo! And like Gretchen said, specifically Harlem nightlife was where you would see a lot of queer activity and community, and was actually one of the first kind of places that you would see a large swath of people coming together as community around this sexual minority status.

There's a quote that we have here that says,

*"What was occurring was occurring clandestinely, or within urban settings that were more or less secret and difficult to penetrate."*

**Gretchen:** [Stifles laughter]

**Leigh:** Yeah, I know. [Both laugh]

**Gretchen:** Sorry, I'm a child.

**Leigh:** Like we said, disaster. But yeah, it was very much under the cover of night because it could be prosecuted by same-sex activity. There were some open demonstrations. In this time period you get a lot of talk about there was this thing called the 'Pansy Craze', and there were elaborate Harlem

drag balls that were attended by sight-seers and celebrities. There were drag performers and cabarets as well. But, the main queer activities and community could be found at private parties and at underground speakeasies where there were elements of privacy and safety.

A woman who came around to all of these kind of parties at the time, and a lot of these quotes come from Chris Alberston's Bessie Smith book, but this woman, Mabel Hampton, remembers,

*"We used to go to parties every other night. The girls had all the parties."*

And she says— she even, there was a culture of just kind of joining along. She said,

*"Seeing the rest of them do it, what the hell! I'll do it too. It was fascinating!"*

**Gretchen:** Why not try?

**Leigh:** Why not try a little lesbianism?

**Gretchen:** Right? Right? That sounds like a— [laughs]

**Leigh:** She ended up actually hosting a shit ton of her own parties, too. [laughter] There were costume balls that attracted thousands of attendees, many of them men in drag. And the gay clubs and speakeasies were really important, too, and this is kind of where you see an invasion of white queers into black spaces. Because these kinds of clubs were already kind of considered to be "low" and couldn't be found in the higher-class white neighborhoods. And so thus, white gays and lesbians would travel to places like Harlem where those kind of clubs could exist more freely, due to the already present stigma against people of color.

Eric Garber, who wrote a really wonderful article that we'll link, notes that,

*"This identification and feeling of kinship undoubtedly shared by other white lesbians and gay men may have been the first beginnings of a homosexual minority cautiousness."*

The first kind of time where you have like, you know, there was a level of exploitation to it, but there was also a level of 'we're also in this minority' consciousness.

**Gretchen:** Yeah. It all sort of, like, transcends the racial divide. There's something about our sexual attraction or something about the way that we live our lives that kind of transcends the racial divide and we can have a community around that. That even, you know, goes beyond, like, the segregation of neighborhoods and things like that.

**Leigh:** Yeah. It's pretty nuanced, too. Cause there's a lot of discussion about how there was some— a lot of exoticization going on, and— there's some really great stuff in the books that we'll link too if you want to read more about specifically that.

**Gretchen:** A'Lelia Walker, who was the daughter of Madam C.J. Walker, was dubbed 'The Mahogany Millionaire'.

**Leigh:** [Whispers] I love her.

**Gretchen:** She hosted a salon and threw lavish parties at her home with her female lovers. Celebrities such as, I mean you'd get people like Cary Grant, Cole Porter, and even Bessie Smith were known to attend.

**Leigh:** Tallulah Bankhead, too.

**Gretchen:** Ooh!

**Leigh:** Yeah add that. Tallulah Bankhead was one that I wrote about. Just fantastic!

**Gretchen:** Mabel Hampton, once again, remembers,

*"The bulldykers used to come and bring their women with them."*

You know, which brings us to...

## **Word(s) of the Week: Rent Party & Buffet Flat**

**Leigh:** Our word of the week!

**Gretchen:** [sings] Word of the week!

**Leigh:** Which, again, we're gonna do two. Cause, they're related. So this week's words of the week are 'rent party' and as you heard us mention before, 'buffet flat'.

So, a 'rent party' is a party where guests paid admission to help the house out with their monthly bills. Folks were facing high rent charges from white landowners and there were some, you know, really fucked up rent practices going on. People couldn't afford their rent. Big surprise. [sing-songs] Not anything new!

But, so these were kind of parties that were open to the public and they could last all night long. People would come in, they would pay money, and frequently each room would sport a different pleasure one could indulge in. They were some of the few racially mixed venues of their time, and they got really wild. *Harlem Newspaper* reports one that actually went wrong where one woman cut the throat of another woman because they were both rivals for the affections of a third woman. Um... we're sure Bessie Smith wasn't involved in that!? [Laughs]

**Gretchen:** Right?

**Leigh:** Dang!

**Gretchen:** Seems like something she would do. Cut a bitch.

**Leigh:** Yeah. The second one is 'buffet flat'. These are all kind of related. They're both wild parties that people would pay admission into. But, 'buffet flats' seemed to be the big, big one. So they were after-hours entertainment in someone's flat where gin was poured from milk pitchers, even bathtubs full of gin, and sometimes there were gambling and sex-work on tap as well.

Bessie Smith and her niece, Ruby Walker, who we'll talk a little bit more about their kind of relationship, but they visited one together in Detroit where... I dropped this quote on Gretchen while we were working on our outline together and it's great-

**Gretchen:** I may have screamed.

**Leigh:**

*"They had a faggot there that was so great that people used to come there just to watch him make love to another man. He was that great. He'd give a tongue bath and everything. By the time he got to the front of that guy, he was shaking like a leaf. People used to pay good just to go in there and see him do his act. That same house had a woman that used to take a cigarette, light it, and puff it with her pussy. A real educated pussy."*

**Gretchen:** At another, a young, Black entertainer named Joey played the piano and sang, then did a strip tease and extinguished a lighted candle by sitting on it until it completely disappeared.

**Leigh:** How many times am I gonna say the word pussy on this podcast? My mom listens to this. Hi, mom. [Both laugh] Hello.

But yeah, so, 'buffet flat' and 'rent party'. These were the kind of places where you could see people coming to engage in their various proclivities. But, the greatest concentration of queer expression could actually be found specifically in blues music.

**Gretchen:** Right, and that was because the blues world was the perfect realm for people who were thought of as sexually deviants to inhabit, as it thrived far outside the scope of the dominant white American culture in the early 20th century. The social and sexual attitudes of Harlem's new immigrants were best reflected in the blues, and homosexuality was clearly a part of this world.

Blues music- at the time, blues music was so far under the radar of mainstream America that female blues singers could get away with

occasionally expressing unconventional desires. And so, this was a place where they could be open and honest about it because most people were ignoring it. People within their community was aware of it, but like, mainstream American culture was not paying a whole lot of attention to it. They could kinda get away with saying whatever they wanted to say.

**Leigh:** Well especially too, because part of the conceit of the blues music is being somewhat story based. These singers would take on sort of characters or playing a part in these songs. And so, that gave them a semblance of safety and presumed deniability. Right? Is she singing about herself or the character? It allows you to kind of like, 'Well... just singing this blues song. This is not about me loving women, it's about this lady that I'm singing from the perspective of.'

Kind of like we were talking about last episode with the whole, "We don't know in some of these poems if somebody is a man writing this poem and doing it from a female perspective. I don't know!"

**Gretchen:** Right. Right. There was kind of a plausible deniability that if they really- if push came to shove they could say, [fake denying voice] "I'm just singing about somebody else who feels this way. Not me! Nope! I'm just a queer- I'm a lesbian...supporter."

**Leigh:** As a lesbian... [Both say in unison in fake denying voice] supporter. We have to have at least one fandom reference in every podcast don't we?

**Gretchen:** [Laughs] Right.

## **Evidence From Their Personal Lives & Music**

**Leigh:** So let's- That was kind of our social context of what was going on in terms of the queer world. Do you want to talk a little about, specifically Ma?

**Gretchen:** Yeah. Ma Rainey. Okay, so in 1925 she was arrested at an orgy. That she was having. With multiple women in her chorus.

**Leigh:** Whoo!

**Gretchen:** Here's a direct quote,

*"She and a group of young ladies had been drinking, and were making so much noise that a neighbor summoned the police. Unfortunately, for Ma and her girls, the law arrived just as the party got intimate. There was pandemonium as everyone madly scrambled for clothes and ran out the back door. Ma, clutching someone else's dress, was the last to exit. But, a nasty fall down a staircase foiled her escape."*

So, she was thrown in jail and Bessie Smith had to bail her out the next morning. So- Big gay orgy.

**Leigh:** And then later on in her career, she started kind of including some more queer content in her music, kind of reflecting on and responding to these rumors of lesbianism after this big arrest in 1925. So, do you want to talk a little bit about *Prove it On Me Blues*?

**Gretchen:** *Prove It on Me Blues*, quote,

*"A powerful statement of lesbian defiance and self worth in response to the rumors after her arrest."*

Here are some choice lines,

*Went out last night with a crowd of my friends,  
They must have been women,  
because I don't like no man.  
It's true I wear a collar and tie,  
Talk to the gals just like any old man.*

*Don't you say I do it,  
Ain't' nobody caught me.  
You sure got to prove it on me.*

She's daring the world to find evidence and admitting [drawn out together] just enough but never coming- never actually saying it but also kind of yes she's saying it.

The advertisement for the release of the song showed the woman– the blues woman sporting a man's hat, jacket, and tie, and while a policeman looked on, obviously attempting to seduce two women on the street corner.

**Leigh:** Yeah, we're gonna put that up on the website. It's pretty great.

**Gretchen:** It's great.

**Leigh:** She also had a couple of other songs that, if not dealing directly with like lesbianism, specifically talked about the prevalence of homosexuality in the community.

There's this one song called *Sissy Blues* where she talks about her man being stolen by a 'sissy'. A 'sissy' named Kate, apparently.

She says,

*I dreamed last night I was far from harm,  
Woke up and found my man in a sissy's arms.*

And talks about how much better at loving her man this 'sissy' named Kate is– and that 'sissy' had a fantastic 'jelly roll', and a whole bunch of other stuff.

**Gretchen:** What's a 'jelly roll'?

**Leigh:** Oh boy. [laughter] We don't have time to get into that, but there were a lot of euphemisms in all of these songs. But, Philipson, again, the documentarian, says that he,

*"...doesn't want to overplay the significance of the three songs that Ma Rainey wrote and recorded that had some references to the queer world."*

These were like a handful out of hundreds and hundreds of blues songs that were being recorded, and the fact that there were any was pretty remarkable, which I thought was really important to note.

**Gretchen:** Now, Bessie. Bessie Smith, who was known for her,

*"Violent temper, a taste for alcohol, and a prodigious appetite for women."*

Can you see why we want her to get together with Anne Bonny?

**Leigh:** What was the quote from Anne Bonny? That was like-

**Gretchen:** Boisterous-

**Leigh:** like a boisterous and violent temper or whatever? Gosh.

**Gretchen:** They were made for each other.

**Leigh:** She had a long and passionate affair with Lillian Simpson, who was a chorus girl of hers in 1926. They shared a berth on the show's train, and when Simpson- one evening when Simpson got- Gretchen is like, shaking her head. She's so excited about this!

**Gretchen:** I love this, it's my favorite!

**Leigh:** When Simpson got upset that Smith had kissed her in public, Smith replied,

*"The hell with you, bitch! I got 12 women on this show, and I can have one every night if I want it!"*

**Gretchen:** Isn't she great?

**Leigh:** Oh my God. That actually sent Lillian into like a crazy depressive spiral and she actually had a suicide attempt, and Bessie burst in- like kicked down the door and rescued her from herself. From that moment on Lillian never said a word about, like, being embarrassed by anything.

**Gretchen:** Oh my gosh. Wow.

**Leigh:** Bessie also had like a really complex relationship with her husband Jack's niece, Ruby Walker, who was one of her most crucial and kind of most complex relationships in her life. At the same time was like mentor, friend, but also confidant. Ruby basically acted as the keep of her lesbian secrets and traveled with her from 23 until 29, not ages but 1923, 1929, when Jack and Bessie broke up, and they would often run away from Jack together.

Lillian was actually a friend of Ruby's and Lillian even told Ruby she,

*"Didn't know what she was missing, and that she 'try it' with Boula Lee, who was with another chorus girl."*

Bessie was like, "Uh uh, no!", and she warned Ruby that she would send her home if she fooled around with any of the other girls.

**Gretchen:** Possessive much?

**Leigh:** A little bit. A little bit, but it's like, they were probably not having sex but she didn't want Ruby to have [together] sex with anybody else.

Yeah. She would often buy— I thought this was really cool. She would often buy red gifts for like the significant women in her life— which was actually a callback to Jack buying her a red dress on one of their first dates. So, you see a lot of stories of like, women in like, red pajamas and red dresses, and stuff like that she had bought them.

**Gretchen:** I don't— You guys can't see us right now but we both happen to be wearing articles of clothing that have red on them.

**Leigh:** Oh shit! Oh yeah, that's good. [laughter]

**Gretchen:** We didn't plan that, we just are.

**Leigh:** She, you know, like we said before, she was a frequent attendee at 'rent parties' and 'buffet flats'. Ruby Walker— so a lot of the stuff that we actually know about Bessie and her queer proclivities actually come from the Chris Albertson book where he had interviewed Ruby Walker. So all of this is

from her niece who was there with all of- everybody together. So she says, on that same 'buffet flat' in Detroit that we talked about earlier,

*"It was nothing but faggots and bulldykers. A real open house. Everything went on in that house, tongue baths, you name it. They called them 'buffet flats' because buffet means everything. Everything that was in the life. Bessie was well known in that place."*

**Gretchen:** Well known...[suggestively] biblically. One night, Bessie and Ruby went to a party. Bessie, with five girls in her posse, and they all ended up in Bessie's room. Ruby passed out early in the night and woke up later to Jack surprising everyone and hell breaking loose after he caught Bessie in bed with a girl named Marie, and threatened to kill her. Yeah, so Bessie got all of them together, their things, and ran out to the train depot together, no one taking the time to dress. And, if you want the full story of that you can read Albertson's book.

**Leigh:** Yeah, Ruby actually talks about how that's how she lost her good fur coat. She's like, [Imitates Ruby's voice] "That's how I lost my only good fur coat! Bessie took us out of...took us out of", I can't remember where it was, maybe it was Detroit? I don't know, but she was like, "We left Detroit... she took us out of Detroit almost naked!" like nobody had time, they just went whoosh, whoosh, whoosh! It was crazy.

She also had some great references in her lyrics. So, lyrics to *The Boy in the Boat*,

*When you see two women walking hand in hand,  
Just look 'em over and try to understand.  
They'll go those parties,- have the lights down low,  
Only those parties, where women can go.*

**Gretchen:** Then there's the song, *Empty Bed Blues*,

*I want a deep sea diving woman that got a stroke that can't go wrong,  
Yeah, touch that bottom gal, hold it all night long.*

**Leigh:** Yeah, she would frequently perform that one. It was usually like, addressed to a male love interest, but on more than one occasion she apparently changed the lyrics to that. [agreeing noises] Which is great.

Then there's the lyrics of *Foolish Man Blues*,

*There's two things got me puzzled,  
There's two things I can't stand.  
A mannish acting woman, and a skippin', twistin', woman actin' man.*

There we go.

**Gretchen:** Right? So Ma and Bessie?

**Leigh:** There's a-

**Gretchen:** I think there are rumors. There are rumors that they were involved.

**Leigh:** Yeah. There was speculation that they were romantically involved. One of Ma Rainey's guitarists for her Jackson, Mississippi tent show, Sam Chapman, is quoted as saying,

*"I believe she was courtin' Bessie the way they'd talk. I believe there was something going on wrong. Bessie said, 'Me and Ma Rainey had plenty of big times together'... If Bessie'd be around, she'd get to talking to another man, she (Ma) would run up. She didn't want no man to talk with her."*

So, [agreeing noises] I don't know. That's like, all you can find kind of about them. If anything, Bessie must have in looked up some way to Ma. Who knows if they had something more going on, but enough people were talking about it.

**Gretchen:** And that brings us back to Gladys. Gladys Bentley. [Sighs] Her querness was present as a child. She was mocked for her non-traditional presentation in the way that she dressed, even when she was younger. Her parents actually took her to the doctor to try and cure her of a crush she had

on a female teacher. [blows raspberry] She is– We consider her the 'Queen of Classy Butch', and proudly wore the label of bulldagger. I mean, it was part of her performance, the tux and tophat, [agreeing noises] and the–

**Leigh:** Flirting shamelessly with the women in the audience! Can you imagine that in the 20's?

**Gretchen:** Yeah! Oh my gosh. [Leigh sighs] She actually even had a, I mean, not legal, but she actually had a marriage ceremony with one of her female lovers.

**Leigh:** Love it.

**Gretchen:** And Bentley actually said to *Ebony* magazine in the interview we mentioned earlier,

*"From the time I can remember anything, I never wanted a man to touch me. Soon I began to feel more comfortable in boy's clothes than in dresses."*

And we mentioned earlier that she had kind of said that she was, you know, 'cured' and had become a heterosexual because of her female hormone treatments. But, but however, in 1957, she was interviewed and the interviewer asked her about a photo that she had on her dresser of a man and a woman, and she pointed to the male and said,

*"That's my husband."*

And then pointed to the other one and said,

[together] *"That's my wife."*

**Leigh:** So good. Just like, nonchalantly, "That's my husband and that's my wife." Goals.

**Gretchen:** Yes.

**Leigh:** God. All of these people just seem to have been so deliciously poly. That we've talked about on this podcast so far. That's great.

**Gretchen:** Oh my goodness. Oh, and that brings us back to the Ethels!

**Leigh:** Oh the Ethels!

**Gretchen:** We didn't tell you much about Ethel Williams— before there actually really isn't a whole lot known about Ethel Williams other than her relationship with Ethel Waters.

**Leigh:** She had red hair, apparently. That's what I found.

**Gretchen:** Oh okay! I didn't even find that. So, Ethel Waters was involved with the blues singer Alberta Hunter— that we mentioned earlier, and is rumored to have had an affair with the British novelist of lesbian stories, Radclyffe Hall, whom Waters actually mentions in one of her autobiographies.

Waters and Williams had a fairly public affair with each other, complete with flirting from stage, lover's spats, they actually earned the nickname 'The Two Ethels', [agreeing noises] and they even moved in together and lived together as lovers. Which was considered disreputable and probably pretty unprecedented at the time, for them to be openly living with each other.

Waters, also kind of like Alberta Hunter, managed to keep that fact out of all the biographies written about her for the 20th century. [agreeing noises] It's actually— the biography that was written in 2004— it's either 2004 or 2007, that was the first biography to actually mention that they lived together and were lovers.

**Leigh:** Yeah, she kept things locked down. It was also part of the fact that like she really kinda ended up in high society, a sophisticate kind of spaces, and she's one of the women in this kind of circle of women that moved further into the swing and established the jazz age, too. She started having a lot more interaction with like White culture and 'higher society culture'.

**Gretchen:** Right. Right. She was the one who was nominated and won awards for like her film and her television acting. So, she was moving more into kind of the elite Hollywood circles than some of the other women were.

**Leigh:** Yeah, can't be a queermo in one of those.

[Both hosts groan in disgust]

**Gretchen:** Except...[together] except maybe. Hmm. We might talk about that soon.

**Leigh:** Hmm. Maybe. Last, we have our friend Lucille Bogan. So she's been a little bit harder to track down information on even though she was like the first person we discovered. But, we really wanted to have you listen to or hear some lyrics from *B. D. Woman's Blues*, so here's some lyrics for that:

*Comin' a time, B.D. women ain't gonna need no men  
They got a head like a sweet angel and they walk just like a natural man*

And,

*They can lay their jive just like a natural man*

So there's discussion about whether she could just be writing about B.D. Women, rather than being one herself. Kind of that conceit of the blues nature that we were talking about earlier. But, god damn— are her lyrics raunchy.

**Gretchen:** Oh man!

**Leigh:** Like a lot of them. [laughs]

**Gretchen:** So, we looked up *Shave 'Em Dry*, and this isn't the full song— we can post the full song in our show notes, but uh... here's some nice choice lyrics from Lucille Bogan,

*I got nipples on my titties, big as the end of my thumb  
I got something between my legs'll make a dead man cum  
...baby, won't you shave 'em dry?  
...Want you to grind me, baby, grind me until I cry  
...I fucked all night, and all the night before, baby  
And I feel just like I wanna, fuck some more  
Oh... grind me, honey, and shave me dry*

**Leigh:** Sorry, mom.

**Gretchen:** Yay! Whoo! Oh and it gets– the whole song is like that.

**Leigh:** Whoo! So, yeah. One kind of last thing we wanted to talk about with all of these women is that there's was a very specific distinction in a lot of things we were reading about– distinction between the women who took female lovers and then the kind of out, butch, lesbians or B.D. Women, or bulldaggers. The difference between like, Gladys Bentley was really kind of the only one who was really out and about in her identity.

**Gretchen:** Yep.

**Leigh:** A lot of these other women were either what we would kind of consider nowadays bisexual or were in marriages to kind of cover things up, but Gladys Bentley was really the one who was like, "Eh, fuck it! This is great."

There's a great quote from Josephine Baker's friend, Maude Russell, who– Josephine Baker is a little out of this kind of time period, she was more in the Swing Age, in the Swing Era– but she had numerous, numerous affairs with lots of other women, including Frida Kahlo, but this woman, Maude Russell actually says a really interesting quote– where she says,

*"We had girl friendships, the famous lady lovers. But, lesbians weren't well accepted in show business. They were called buldykers. I guess we were bisexual is what you would call it today."*

[agreeing noises] I thought that was really cool. Yeah. That brings us kind of to our wrapping up here after our good a hour of good gay content, so–

## Pop-Culture Tie-In: Bessie (2015)

**Gretchen:** Yeah. Do we have any pop culture tie-ins this time? We didn't have any last time.

**Leigh:** Yeah, yeah, it's because we keep running out of time.

**Gretchen:** We have so many other things to say.

**Leigh:** We write 30 page outlines.

**Gretchen:** You got a couple of Ravenclaws here, we've got copious notes.

**Leigh:** Oh, yeah. A fun thing we'll put a link on the website to is, there's a really great HBO film from 2015 called *Bessie*, and it was based on Bessie's biography by Chris Albertson, which we referenced a lot of times. But, I think this is super cool and we should do a movie watch of it because Queen Latifah plays Bessie Smith and Mo'Nique plays Ma Rainey. [hard agreeing noises] So we're gonna watch that.

**Gretchen:** Yes! That sounds amazing! God damn.

## Takeaways

**Leigh:** But, kind of main takeaways, conclusions, final thoughts as we wrap up here. I think it's just- this really amazing emphasis of these women being trailblazers in creating a kind of new Black feminism, and the fact that I didn't know that there was any sort of queer subculture

**Gretchen:** Right!

**Leigh:** In the Harlem Renaissance, and specifically in like just Black queer communities. That whole bullshit statement about how there's this like more prevalence of homophobia in African American communities, which is- and you know, I cannot speak to that community but clearly that wasn't the case in this blues community which was kind of everywhere which is amazing.

**Gretchen:** Right, right, what's really cool about that is kinda like last week when we were talking about how because of the way the government has cracked down in China, that they have kind of lost their connection. A lot of like modern gay people in China have lost their connection to this tradition of homosexuality. And here we have something similar where I think because so often people talk about how homophobia is so much more prevalent among Black communities that people have lost this iconic movement of, you know, of queer people in the Harlem Renaissance.

And just what— It's just another tragic loss like both for our community specifically, but I just think for history in general. I think this is one of the— feels like in the United States one of the first places where it was really just— people— like that one quote about there were no closets. People just did what you wanted to do. You didn't shout it from the rooftops, but at least—

**Leigh:** At least in this insular community.

**Gretchen:** In this insular community, people were just allowed to kind of exist for who they were, and it's just so beautiful to like see another story like that. Where there's no stigma from within the community. There's no sense of fear. But you don't read these and get the sense that these are people that are terrified of their experience or who they were. You read Gladys Bentley, or like, [laughter] Bessie Smith and she's like, shouting down klansmen.

**Leigh:** Oh God, hero. Yes.

**Gretchen:** Right? Just how fearless these like, women were, I think especially, as queer women of color, the fearlessness of these women is just super like beautiful and inspiring, yeah, and awesome.

### **How Gay Were They?**

**Leigh:** So Gretchen, how gay were they?

**Gretchen:** We're gonna need to invent a new goddamn scale for the levels of gay of these women! [laughter]

**Leigh:** We didn't– Look guys, I'm gonna be real with you. We didn't even put numbers anyway. We didn't even rank them out individually.

**Gretchen:** No.

**Leigh:** I just wrote in all caps on our outline. My notes literally just say, [yells]“All of them are off the charts. Good fucking Lord how did I not know about this?”

**Gretchen:** Right? Because there's [struggling to speak through laughter] just– like it's– arrested at a gay orgy? Like?

**Leigh:** Goals.

**Gretchen:** Right! Seriously. Hashtag goals.

**Leigh:** And I guess, with that, hashtag goals. That's it.

**Gretchen:** That's today's episode.

### **Closing & Where To Find Us Online**

**Leigh:** You can find us online individually. Gretchen, where can our lovely listeners– of which there are people in 44 countries, what the hell y'all? That's insane. That's so cool!

**Gretchen:** What?! You guys are amazing!

**Leigh:** So Gretchen, where can lovely folks find you on the– locate you upon the internets?

**Gretchen:** Well, when I'm not gushing about gloriously gay women, I am writing nerdy media analysis and fangirling over *Star Wars*, right now my life is *Star Wars*, [laughter] and other shows like *Steven Universe*, *Wynonna Earp*, and working on a queer science-fiction novel. But yeah, you can find me at [TheFandomentals.com](http://TheFandomentals.com), or my personal website, [GNellis.com](http://GNellis.com), or you can find me on Tumblr and Twitter as @gnelliswriter, all one word. What about you, Leigh?

**Leigh:** So, when I'm not nerding out about old timey queer folks, I'm usually talking about comics and queer TV over at @aparadoxinflux on Twitter, and I guess now wandering the streets trying to find a 'rent party', damn.

**Gretchen:** Maybe we should host one?

**Leigh:** Oh, boy. Look, I need my security deposit back, okay?

[Both laugh]

**Gretchen:** True. This is the Bay Area, it's expensive, man.

*History is Gay!* podcast can be found on Tumblr at [historyisgaypodcast](http://historyisgaypodcast), Twitter at [HistoryisGayPod](https://twitter.com/HistoryisGayPod), and you can always drop us a line with questions, suggestions, or just to say hi at [HistoryisGaypodcast@gmail.com](mailto:HistoryisGaypodcast@gmail.com).

We've already gotten several lovely wonderful emails from you guys.

**Leigh:** Yeah, keep 'em coming!

**Gretchen:** We're awesome. Oh! We also had fanart!

**Leigh:** Yes! Oh my God. Okay-

**Gretchen:** One of our listeners listened to our first podcast about pirates and said they were inspired to draw photos of our queer foursome.

**Leigh:** Yeah, yeah. Go to our Tumblr, we reblogged it. You can check out their Tumblr. I believe it's enderkitty? We reblogged it, but they're super cool and we love it! And we were so touched that our podcast inspired you to art. Keep doing it!

**Gretchen:** Draw fanart!

**Leigh:** Also, if anyone wants to draw any shippy fanart of all of these women being destructive and gay together, hit me up!

**Gretchen:** Yeah. Neither one of us draws, so if someone else can fill that void, that'd be great.

**Leigh:** Yeah, if you're enjoying the show, remember to rate, review, and subscribe. Wherever you get your podcasts. It helps more people find the show and we can expand this awesome community where people are making fanart, which is so cool.

**Gretchen:** Ah, I know! Oh my gosh, you guys are great. So that's it for *History is Gay!* Until next time—

**Leigh:** Stay queer...

**Gretchen:** ...and stay curious.

♪ Outro Music ♪