

THE RECORDINGS OF GLADYS BENTLEY

An Annotated Tentative Name-Discography

BENTLEY, Gladys vocals, piano, entertainer

Born: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, August 12, 1907

Died: Los Angeles, California, January 18, 1960

Born in Philadelphia, she moved to New York City at the age of 16 and began her career as a performer at Harry Hansberry's Clam House on 133rd Street, one of the city's most notorious gay speakeasies. In the early 1930s, she headlined at Harlem's Ubangi Club, where she was backed up by a chorus line of drag queens. She dressed in men's clothes (including a signature tuxedo and top hat), played piano, and sang her own raunchy lyrics to popular tunes of the day in a deep, growling voice while flirting with women in the audience. Bentley was openly lesbian early in her career, but during the McCarthy Era in the 1950s, she started wearing dresses and married (within five months of meeting) Charles Roberts, age 28, a cook, in a civil ceremony in Santa Barbara, California, in 1952. Roberts later denied that they had ever married. Bentley also studied to be a minister, claiming to have been "cured" by taking female hormones. In an effort to describe her supposed "cure" for homosexuality she wrote an essay, "I Am a Woman Again," for Ebony magazine in which she stated she had undergone an operation, which "helped change her life again." She died of pneumonia in 1960, aged 52. (Smithsonian Institution, Spotlight)

This personnelo-discography is based on RUST, JAZZ AND RAGTIME RECORDS 1897 - 1942.

Personnels are taken from this source, but modified in the light of earlier or subsequent research or on the strength of my own listening, discussed with our listening group or other interested collectors.

- Documented, most certain and aurally absolutely obvious identifications are listed thus: Gladys Bentley
- Probable, generally agreed, but not documented identifications are listed in italics, thus: *Gladys Bentley*
- Not attributable identifications – although the musician in question might be an otherwise well-known person – are listed thus: unknown
- If a possible identification for an otherwise unknown musician is suggested by the author without the possibility to prove the factual evidence, it is listed thus: (*Gladys Bentley*)

When feeling certain without a musician's documented presence, I have not refrained from altering Rust's statements without using italics. In any case, my statements are open to discussion and I would appreciate any contribution - pro or contra!

As always in my discographies on this website I have written recording sessions with their headings, dates, titles and names of musicians in italics, whenever I am convinced that the eponymous musician of this discography is not part of the accompanying group of this session!

Documented names of musicians if known – in recording ledgers or on record labels – are listed in bold letters.

This discography still is - and will certainly be - a work in progress for a long time, if not eternally. Yet, on the way to a definite discography of all jazz recordings before 1942 - which certainly will never be possible - it is intended to fill some gaps that have not been treated before.

John Wilby, CD-booklet to Document Records DOCD-5349: "**Gladys Bentley was a less sophisticated entertainer who used her physical characteristics to amuse her audience, and employed a "shout" style in her music.**"

001 GLADYS BENTLEY

Gladys Bentley – voc, pno

401058-B Ground Hog Blues

401059-B Worried Blues

New York,

Aug. 08, 1928

OK 8610,

Document DOCD-5349

OK 8610,

Document DOCD-5349

In 'Ground Hog Blues' Miss Bentley starts her performance with a four-bar piano introduction and a succeeding four-bar vamp with scat-vocal to switch over to a 16-bar 'verse', followed by three 8-bars blues-choruses, followed again by a 4-bar vocal half-chorus, plus a 4-bar piano extro, again succeeded by a 4-bar vocal coda. She sings surprisingly bluesy and with a rough and deep voice.

'Worried Blues' has a 6-bars piano introduction and then seven 12-bars blues choruses in which she answers her afore sung text line with a scat-vocal line. And this all with her harsh and deep voice.

She very probably is accompanied by her own piano playing, although listed in later Rusts as by J.C. Johnson. It is played in a rather simple style – quite unlike J.C. Johnson's - in rhythmical accordance with her singing, showing a call-response scheme without overlapping. Her pianistic performance does not reach Johnson's technically advanced piano-style. But it swings! This certainly is not J.C. Johnson!

Notes:

- BGR*2,*3,*4: unknown, pno.
- Rust*3: unknown -p
- Rust*4,*6: ?J.C. Johnson, p.

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| 002 GLADYS BENTLEY Gladys Bentley – voc, pno; Eddie Lang - gtr 401092-A How Long, How Long Blues 401093-B Moanful Wailin' Blues | New York, OK 8612, OK 8612, | Aug. 31, 1928 Document DOCD-5349 Document DOCD-5349 |
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Gladys Bentley was a singer/pianist and male impersonator – as can be recognized by her strong voice – in Harlem in the late 1920s. Miss Bentley very probably is accompanied by her own piano playing, here again (see session 001 above), although listed in later Rusts as by ?J.C. Johnson. This certainly is not J.C. Johnson! Piano playing is rather rudimental, and far from Johnson's abilities. But the OKeh people attached Eddie Lang – star guitarist of the white jazz community of the time – to Gladys Bentley, where he seems to be a bit lost for my taste. On Bentley's subsequent session – without a piano accompanist – Eddie Lang is feeling much more at ease. Here, she again uses a eight-bars blues structure, Leroy Carr's very famous 'How Long How Long Blues' that Carr had recorded for the first time just two months earlier in Indianapolis. And Miss Bentley already features it in her repertoire. Obviously, she is quite progressive and forward-looking. Eddie Lang opens the tune with one eight-bars chorus, Gladys then follows with six vocal choruses cum guitar and piano. 'Moanful Wailin' Blues' then has the regular 12-bar blues structure again. And Miss Bentley is her own singing partner when answering her lines in scat manner.

Notes:

- BGR*2,*3,*4: unknown, pno; Eddie Lang, gtr
- Rust*3: unknown p; Eddie Lang -g
- Rust*4,*6: ?J.C. Johnson, p; Eddie Lang, g.

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| 003 GLADYS BENTLEY Gladys Bentley – voc, pno 401284 Wild Geese Blues 401285 How Much Can I Stand? | New York, OK unissued OK unissued | Nov. 02, 1928 not on LP/CD not on LP/CD |
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As no tests of these sides have been found and issued, nothing may be said about the recorded music.

Notes:

- BGR*2: not listed
- BGR*3,*4: own pno.
- Rust*3,*4: not listed
- Rust*6: own p.

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|---|---------------------------------------|--|
| 004 GLADYS BENTLEY Gladys Bentley – voc; Eddie Lang - gtr 401284-C Wild Geese Blues 401285-C How Much Can I Stand? | New York, OK 8643, OK 8643, | Nov.15, 1928 Document DOCD-5349 Document DOCD-5349 |
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This is the re-make of the before listed but unissued session. I assume that the OKeh officials were not satisfied – or pleased – with Miss Bentley's performance at the fore-going session, her exhibit as a male-impersonator being "too much" for the traditional thinking and feeling of many elder people in her days. Or her pianistic endeavors were not sufficient in the ears of the OKeh people? We do not know. 'Wild Geese Blues' has very beautiful chordal accompaniment now by Eddie Lang although real "blues pickin'" is not his business. Yet, I like his rather academical guitar playing against Bentley's rough singing. 'How Much Can I Stand?' is a contemporary pop-song, containing her singing answered by her scat-vocal. And the vocal tag at the end sounds like a muted trumpet.

Notes:

- BGR*2,*3,*4: Eddie Lang (gtr)
- Rust*3,*4,*6: Eddie Lang -gtr

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|---|---------------------------------------|---|
| 005 GLADYS BENTLEY Gladys Bentley – voc, pno 401748-B Big Gorilla Man 401749-B Red Beans And Rice | New York, OK 8707, OK 8707, | Mar. 26, 1929 Document DOCD-5349 Document DOCD-5349 |
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The piano-accompaniment very probably is her own, not J.C. Johnson's nor James P. Johnson's! Rather simple style, we hear rhythmical accompaniment in accordance with her singing, call-response scheme without overlapping. There is no technically advanced piano-style as J.C. Johnson. But her piano playing grows in style and technique and fits perfectly to her vocal performance.

And what is it all about all the time? It's the same problem all the time.

'Red Beans And Rice' was part of Columbia's magnificent LP-set 'The Sound of Harlem', and thus accompanies me for a large part of my life, now.

Notes:

- BGR*2,*3,*4: unknown, pno.
- Rust*3: prob James P. Johnson -p
- Rust*4,*6: ?J.C. Johnson, p.
- Booklet to 'The Sound of Harlem, Columbia C3L 33: "One of the most popular of Harlem's singers of naughty songs was the late Gladys Bentley, who worked in men's attire – usually a dress suit with tails, a top hat and cane. She was a regular at The Clam House (where her most popular number was 'My Subway Man'), Connie's Inn and the Theatrical Grill. Here Miss Bentley, who usually accompanied herself at the piano, plays and sings clarinetist Bob Fuller's 'Red Beans And Rice'. It is a mild ditty for her, in honor of the famous New Orleans delicacy (Armstrong's favorite dish)."

006 **WASHBOARD SERENADERS**

New York,

Mar. 24, 1930

Harold Randolph – kazoo;

Clarence Profit – pno; Teddy Bunn – gtr; Bruce Johnson – wbd;

Bruce Johnson – voc (1,2); Gladys Bentley – voc (2)

59548-1

Kazoo Moan

Vic V-3812, Collector's Classics COCD 30

59549-1

Washboards Get Together

Vic V-3812, Collector's Classics COCD 30

Composer credits: 59548 (Washboard Serenaders); 59549 (Washboard Serenaders)

Miss Bentley sings one 32-bars AABA chorus only in scat manner - as familiar from the above recording sessions - in 'Washboards Get Together'.

'Kazoo Moan' clearly is a 'Snag It' off-shoot and contains elements of Ellington's 'Black And Tan Fantasy' at the tune's end, but has no Gladys Bentley participation at all.

Notes:

- *Ch. Delaunay, New Hot Discography, 1948: Harold Randolph (kazoo & scat singing); Clarence Profit (p); Teddy Bunn (g); Bruce Johnson (wb, vo); Gladys Bentley (vo)*

- *Rust*2: Harold Randolph (kazoo); Clarence Profit (pno); Teddy Bunn (gtr); Bruce Johnson (wbd, vcl)*

- *Rust*3,*4,*6: Harold Randolph -kazoo; Clarence Profit -p; Teddy Bunn -g; Bruce Johnson -wb-v; Gladys Bentley -v*

007 **GLADYS BENTLEY**

Los Angeles,

c. 1940

Gladys Bentley – voc;

unknown - acc

unknown title

Bronze BR1

not on LP/CD

unknown title

Bronze BR2

not on LP/CD

unknown title

Bronze BR3

not on LP/CD

unknown title

Bronze BR4

not on LP/CD

Unfortunately, nothing seems to be known about these recordings as listed in BGR*4.

Notes:

- *BGR*2,*3: not listed*

- *BGR*4: unknown acc.*

- *Rust*3,*4: not listed*

- *Rust*6: unknown acc*

008 **GLADYS BENTLEY QUINTETTE**

Los Angeles, California,

1945

Gladys Bentley – voc, ldr;

William Woodman – ten;

Sylvester Scott – pno; Byron Johnson – gtr; Bill Hadnot – sbs; Robert Rose – dms

Boogie 'n My Woogie

Excelsior 164

on LP/CD ?

Thrill Me Till I Get My Fill

Excelsior 164

on LP/CD ?

Red Beans And Rice Blues

Excelsior 165

on LP/CD ?

Find Out What He Likes

Excelsior 165

on LP/CD ?

Big Gorilla Blues

Excelsior 166

on LP/CD ?

Lay It On The Line For Father

Excelsior 166

on LP/CD ?

Boogie Woogie Cue

Excelsior 168

on LP/CD ?

Give It Up

Excelsior 168

on LP/CD ?

Notoriety Papa

Excelsior 169

on LP/CD ?

It Went To The Girl Next Door

Excelsior 169

on LP/CD ?

009 **GLADYS BENTLEY**

details unknown

Br 105

Lock And Key

Top Hat 3

on LP/CD ?

Br 106

Abie On The Reservation

Top Hat 4

on LP/CD ?

010 **GLADYS BENTLEY**

1951/1952

details unknown (mentioned in G. Bentley's 'Ebony' article in August 1952)

