

Negroes of New York

Wilbur Young

Sketches of Colorful Harlem Characters

Gladys Bentley

Huge voluptuous chocolate colored Gladys Bentley whose age roams in the neighborhood of thirty and forty is a product of old Harlem. She came to town in the early twenties during the age of rent parties, home brew and cooked gin and in no small way added to the riot of glamour that held sway.

Gladys made a living for herself as a transient piano player and entertainer for in spite of her hamlike mitts, they were extremely nimble in manipulating the ivories and unlike many of her contemporaries, she did not specialize in the blues but leaned towards ad libbing lyrics of popular tunes. So adept was she at this art that she could take the most tender ballad and convert it into a new low with her filthy lyrics. In fact, some of these lyrics would be so rank that the house lady would look on in despair while Gladys, not content with merely singing them herself but would encourage the paying guests to join in on the chorus which they did willingly. At this stage, it was just a matter of time before the house got raided.

So successful was Miss Bentley in her peculiar art that she was offered a neat sum to entertain in many of the local "jernts" However, she didn't become famous until she became the feature attraction at the Ubangi Club on Seventh Avenue and 131st Street, formerly the old Connies Inn. Here, she headed a revue which included the famous "Male" chorus, a group of pansies. Gladys toned her songs down somewhat so they were now called risqué. She always worked in flashy men's

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attire which made her look like an overstuffed beer barrel. Her very short hair was plastered down on her rather small head making her look more a man than a woman.

As Gladys grew in popularity, rumors had it that she was queer and even sported a girl friend. To add to these whispers, she could be seen any day marching down Seventh Avenue attired in men's clothes and she seemed to thrive on the fact that her odd habits was the subject of much tongue wagging.

At present, Gladys Bentley is featured in a night club in Philadelphia where she has been for several years and is still popular as ever. One thing certain however is when things get slow out of town, she will be back in New York city.