

S1E1 Bessie Smith FINAL

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SPEAKERS

Rebecca Marquardt, Desi Waters, Music

- R** Rebecca Marquardt 00:00
"Whatever it's called. It's not gay. I don't want to know." Hello, I'm Rebecca Marquardt, and this is the first ever episode of gay or nay alleged queers of history. I know, another podcast! Thank God for quarantine. This podcast shines a light on queer history before Stonewall by sharing queer stories about historic figures and asking our guests if they were alive today, would they be queer? I'm thrilled to welcome my first guest, who was also one of my first friends when I moved to New York City. Her name is Desi Waters, and she is a fabulously talented actor, singer, writer and director,
- D** Desi Waters 00:42
And queer!
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 00:44
yes, and queer! But more importantly, she's one of like the kindest and funniest people I've ever met. We we met doing a musical on the Lower East Side called speakeasy which fittingly was set in the queer subculture of New York City during Prohibition prohibition that was a weird way to say it prohibition. Probably too young or already off track. It was one of the first things that opened my eyes to the abundance of queer history I did not know existed and it introduced me to one of my favorite people. Please welcome to the podcast Desi Waters! If we had a live audience, maybe I'm crazy, but it's just me clapping

into a microphone.

D Desi Waters 01:29
Yeah.

R Rebecca Marquardt 01:31
Desi our conversations usually start in a very normal place and then they immediately tangent off into oblivion.

D Desi Waters 01:37
Yes. Buckle your seat belts people.

R Rebecca Marquardt 01:40
Yeah, I, I'm gonna do my best to keep us focused so we can get through this podcast together and there's no guarantees, but I think we're gonna be alright, we can do this. We can do it. I believe in us. Okay, so to begin with, I checked out your website so I can make a proper professional introduction. Oh, I'm so fancy. So I knew that you were in a production of Mary Poppins. Yes. I also, I also knew that you had been on the blacklist several times. I believe six. Yes. Okay. And you were the court clerk?

D Desi Waters 02:10
Court clerk? Yes. Court clerk.

R Rebecca Marquardt 02:12
I was like "The internet said court clerk!"

D Desi Waters 02:14
Yes. The clerk a clerk?

R Rebecca Marquardt 02:17
What I didn't know which you started to sample for us. When we were doing a mic check

your special skills it says villain laughs

D Desi Waters 02:24
Villain Laugh

R Rebecca Marquardt 02:28
That's amazing. I love it. You're right. You're invited to drop that in this podcast wherever it feels appropriate. How's your quarantine been?

D Desi Waters 02:39
I am quarantined with a 22 month old, so...

R Rebecca Marquardt 02:44
Yours specifically?

D Desi Waters 02:46
It is, it's my wife and I, we have a girl, a little girl.

R Rebecca Marquardt 02:50
Okay, great. Yeah, like did you just like find somebody else's...

D Desi Waters 02:53
Kid was out there by themselves. And I was like, Come quarantine with us kid. You're not going to make it out here with the werewolves.

R Rebecca Marquardt 02:59
You know? I feel like you would do that though. If you just saw a 22 month old, you'd be like you're coming home with me. Yeah, come on home.

D Desi Waters 03:05

Jebadiah. That would be the kid's name. But this is not to say, again, we're already...

R Rebecca Marquardt 03:12
I know. It's fine. It's fine.

D Desi Waters 03:14
Well, I didn't like people are like, I'm so bored. I'm not doing anything. I'm just sitting here drinking and napping. And I'm like, Really? Really.

R Rebecca Marquardt 03:22
Really hard.

D Desi Waters 03:24
We're up at like, 630 and then she goes to bed at 830 and then we have our lives afterwards.

R Rebecca Marquardt 03:31
Oh, and then you get to be on your friends podcast. It's a dream come true. Yeah, I picked up

D Desi Waters 03:37
Yeah, on whatever day this is.

R Rebecca Marquardt 03:41
Friday, Friday night, Friday night hanging out with your friends. That's what it should be.

D Desi Waters 03:44
All right. Cool.

R Rebecca Marquardt 03:45

Um, Have you picked up any new like hobbies or skills or routines that like outside of quarantine you never would have expected?



Desi Waters 03:52

You know, I am much more organized, I think, during quarantine.



Rebecca Marquardt 03:59

Well that, like, just because you're in your home more, so you're like, I can't I need to fix this?



Desi Waters 04:05

You know, because we're in the house more. And we're starting to play with duplos and we have cars and bowls. And so tripping over them. I started making rules like no eating in the living room because I'm still picking out Cheerios from under the couch. So but like I did, like I did a thing like I made bath soap. Purple bath soap, and I made playdough like, I didn't think I'd be that mom. But



Rebecca Marquardt 04:35

Nice. Yeah. Yeah. Just makes you appreciate daycare workers infinitely more, right?



Desi Waters 04:42

So I, I tried doing homeschool the first day and we didn't get past calendar time, which is the first five minutes and you discuss the calendar. And we were just like, how do we are like how did your teacher get 20 of you to sit down? Yeah, and like with the one she was Like No,



Rebecca Marquardt 05:01

I think in this time period like I don't even find much use for a calendar so what is a 22 month old native calendar for really like, 'Ope! We're making more playdough today.'



Desi Waters 05:11

Yeah, I even had I even had, like, uniforms.

R Rebecca Marquardt 05:14
Oh my gosh

D Desi Waters 05:15
Yeah, we had uniforms It was great.

R Rebecca Marquardt 05:17
Did you have matching uniforms with her?

D Desi Waters 05:19
I was gonna do a nice picture of me and my robes because it was Hogwarts Jackson Heights.

R Rebecca Marquardt 05:24
Ah, that's fun.

D Desi Waters 05:25
She's Ravenclaw right now, but we'll let the sorting hat decide. Because that's what you do. But then after calendar time, and there may have been crying and then a lot of sitting there going, what do we do now? So then I went online and I figured out some stuff. Yes.

R Rebecca Marquardt 05:44
That's exciting.

D Desi Waters 05:45
But now we're good.

R Rebecca Marquardt 05:46
We're good. Have you... I mentioned I was gonna ask if there was like any queer media you had consumed recently and you're like, I'm going to watch something this week. Did you get around to it?

- D** Desi Waters 05:57
I did see the portrait of a lady on fire. I did see that.
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 06:01
What were your feelings? Cuz you just said that with no emotion whatsoever and I didn't know that was possible.
- D** Desi Waters 06:06
You know what it was?
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 06:07
'That's how I felt about it. I love it! Ahh!'
- D** Desi Waters 06:13
Because it was my wife, and at the beginning of the movie, it says there's mature content and says 'for mature audiences'. And I realized that my wife is not mature audiences. She's...
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 06:27
I thought you were gonna say you, knowing you and knowing your wife, I'm like, No, you're definitely the one will be like, 'ah haha'
- D** Desi Waters 06:33
Exactly. But every time a woman entered, she's like, are they gonna have sex? I'm like, No, that's the maid. Okay. Are they gonna have sex? No, that's just that's a boat captain. Okay. Are they gonna have sex? That is a that is a bag of flour. They're not gonna have sex. The entire film.
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 06:48
You never know. Well, by the end of our conversation today, your definition of sex is gonna be a lot more broad, I think. That was a killer transition, man. Are you ready? Thank you. points for me. Are you ready to have this conversation today? 'This conversation', that was

weird. This little chitty chatty? Okay. So here's how this works. So I'm going to teach you today about Bessie Smith, Empress of Blues.

D Desi Waters 07:20
Yeah.

R Rebecca Marquardt 07:21
And by the end of the episode, I need you to decide where you think in 2020 if she was alive now where she would fall on both the gender identity spectrum as well as the sexual orientation spectrum. Are you ready?

D Desi Waters 07:34
Yes.

R Rebecca Marquardt 07:35
Yeah, okay great. I am not. I have a few disclaimers that I need to share first. These are not legal disclaimers. These are just like things. This is like part of the conversation it's going to be you'll get it.

M Music 07:47
Time for disclaimers tune

R Rebecca Marquardt 07:49
Disclaimer number one, I want to give a give a little like trigger warning/caution warning about some of the language that will come up today. That in today's terms it might be considered offensive, but the meaning of words change over time. So in the early 1900s, the word gay meant like, oh, we're having a gay old time. It didn't mean homosexual. In the early 1900s, their closest words for gay man and gay woman were faggot and bull dyker. Right. But fagot... I know that was dramatic pause so I could call Oh, but the words faggot and bull dyker did not mean 'man who sleeps with men' and 'woman who sleeps with women', it meant a faggot, was specifically a very effeminate man who seduced other men. If you were a butch, masculine man and you had sex with men, you are considered a 'normal' because you presented to the world as your gender identity. The same with queer women. If you presented as very butch and masculine or you wore men's

clothing and you slept with women, you were a bull dyker. But if you were a middle class lady who shared the same bed with another woman for 40 years, you were just in a romantic friendship that people are like, 'it's so sweet that they love each other so dearly.' So that's our first disclaimer. Related disclaimer, we're going to be referring to Bessie Smith with she/her pronouns, because during her lifetime Those were the pronouns associated with her. We're going with history for this one, but we'll we'll kind of look at that at the end of the episode and decide if we think that that's a fair assessment. Disclaimer number three, I am a gay white cis woman. Desi, how would you describe yourself?

D Desi Waters 09:25
Gay. Lesbian Black-ican. Cis, right? Yeah, yes. I'm a she her?

R Rebecca Marquardt 09:38
She/her? *laughter*

D Desi Waters 09:38
I'm a 90's lesbian, black 90's Lesbian.

R Rebecca Marquardt 09:43
It's perfect. Perfect. She/her. I like it with a question mark at the end.

D Desi Waters 09:48
Sheer?

R Rebecca Marquardt 09:49
Um, okay. So I'm bringing those up, just simply to say, um, and I think you probably are in the same boat as me that like I try to make an effort to educate myself and try to understand what the world is like for people who don't fit my exact description, but we're always working on some kind of learning curve. So like we're gonna say things at some point in life that are problematic or ignorant. So my hope is that if you hear anything that I say that you'll be like, "Maybe don't say that", and then you can educate me and I'll be better for it. And for any listeners at home who hear something and you're like, "I do not think this means what do you think it means", (There's always room for Princess Bride

reference.) Hopefully you will also reach out to us, gayornaypodcast@gmail.com, and be like, "Hey, here's what you need to know." And I'll be like, "great, maybe that'll be part of the podcast for future episodes."

D Desi Waters 10:35
Or you could just post it and make a big brouhaha.

R Rebecca Marquardt 10:38
Yeah, slam me on the internet. "What an idiot."

D Desi Waters 10:42
Yeah.

R Rebecca Marquardt 10:44
Wait, if I say something truly terrible, and you're like, "you knew what you were saying", you should do that. That's fine. public shaming works sometimes.

D Desi Waters 10:51
Yeah.

R Rebecca Marquardt 10:52
My intentions are pure, I assure you.

D Desi Waters 10:54
Oh, God.

R Rebecca Marquardt 10:58
Oh, this is a train wreck. We're having fun. Alright, so, our final disclaimer is sort of the beginning of our actual conversation and where we get to the meat of Bessie Smith. That felt like a weird thing to say, but I stand with it. Let's get to the meat of her.

D Desi Waters 11:16
Get to her meat, girl, get to her meat.

R Rebecca Marquardt 11:19
All right, so this disclaimer is about the sources that we being me and my producer slash research buddy slash cousin, Emily.

D Desi Waters 11:31
Is that a union gig? Cousin?

R Rebecca Marquardt 11:33
Yeah, yeah, she's, uh, all her dues have been paid fully. Yes, she's in good standing. So our main sources, there are a few different sources that we used to collect information. But they're all sort of secondhand. So Bessie died over 80 years ago, and she did not write an autobiography. So we can't hear from her what her story is, which would have been the best source. So, one of the sources that we use a man named Chris Albertson. According to Wikipedia, he was a jazz journalist, writer and record producer. As far as I can tell, he was a straight white cis man. And he wrote the what I think is just widely accepted as the biography on Bessie Smith. A bulk of his research came from interviewing people who knew her personally including Ruby Walker, who we do know for sure, was Bessie's niece by marriage, and she traveled with Bessie in the 1920s, which is the time period we'll kind of focus on, so, that's source one. Another source there's the biopic movie Bessie directed by Dee Rees, starring Queen Latifah. Biopics are not documentaries. So they're not really like great resources for historical accuracy. I think most directors are like, "I want to tell a compelling and interesting story that has some facts in it."

D Desi Waters 12:55
Thats a biopic, yeah.

R Rebecca Marquardt 12:57
You know, as a filmmaker, I'm like, "Yeah, I think She did a great job. I thought it was a great story." I also I could see, having read a lot of the Chris Albertson biography and then seeing the movie, they pulled that directly from the book. And then there were other things were like, "Ah, this character is sort of amalgamation of these five other people just

crammed into one tidy character." What's interesting, it gets a little scandalous because the movie came out and Chris Albertson went to his blog to basically just dump all over the movie. Like he was like, "This was so inaccurate it was full of trash. They obviously did not read my book", even though I was like, but like this, this, this, this, this and this. Those all came straight out of your book, what are you heard about? And he said that Dee Rees and her lesbian agenda, just wanted to paint Bessie out to be gay. But what's..... so we'll come back to that. So there's,

D Desi Waters 13:52
We can't just start there.

R Rebecca Marquardt 13:54
Yeah, no, that would be crazy. So so there's that blog post where he was like this movie is trash. And then underneath that blog post, somebody commented on that blog post and said, "Hey, I am Bessie Smith's cousin, you,..." like a lot of people commented and said, "Oh, your other stuff makes it very clear that you're racist and anti semitic." And I was like, Oh, that's interesting. But he wrote the biography of a black woman, like, that's not promising, like how did that taint his telling of her story? But then this woman who commented she claimed to be Bessie's cousin. And she said, "all your information came from Ruby Walker. Well, Ruby Walker was a rival of Bessie Smith, and she just wanted to profit off of Bessie and she made up the wildest stories to get you to keep paying her money."

D Desi Waters 14:41
Oooh.

R Rebecca Marquardt 14:42
So yeah, exactly. So there's all these sources and they're all just kind of dumping all over each other. So you know, it's like everything that we we read and came across, we took with a little bit of a grain of salt and it was like, Oh, we found the same information, the seven different places. So this feels like a pretty solid. So those are just things to keep in mind as we go through Bessie's story today.

D Desi Waters 15:07
We could call this podcast 'Disclaimers'.

R Rebecca Marquardt 15:10
Disclaimers. Yeah, it's only like 30 minutes of disclaimers, it's fine. I didn't tell you this podcast is like 10 hours long. We're gonna be here all night.

D Desi Waters 15:19
Great.

R Rebecca Marquardt 15:20
It's a wee small percentage of the whole episode. Ah, all right. Bessie Smith, Elizabeth Smith, Bessie for short, was born in 1894 in Chattanooga, Tennessee. A little context about what was going on in the world that it is less than 30 years after slavery was outlawed, it's only 15 years after the first commercially viable lightbulb became available, and most homes did not have indoor plumbing cars, telephones or radios. The Panic of 1893 happened the year before she was born. It led to an economic depression that caused 15,000 companies, 500 banks, and a lot of farms to go out of business And that is just history. It's definitely not current events.

D Desi Waters 16:06
Nope.

R Rebecca Marquardt 16:07
It's all just a little bit of history repeating. What do you got over there?

D Desi Waters 16:12
Sorry, I think it's, sorry. It's just interesting. I've been doing a lot of play reading and looking at how many people were just like, yep. And then he produces the play 1922 and I'm like, when was the Spanish flu? Right then. Okay.

R Rebecca Marquardt 16:28
So, Bessie's specific childhood, so her dad died when she was so young she never remembered him. Her mom died by the time she was nine. According to one place that said her two older brothers died and other place that her one older brother died. Either way, her oldest sister, Viola, was left in charge of the family. Viola was extremely abusive

and violent. She frequently locked Bessie in the outhouse overnight, which later would lead Bessie to joke that she was raised and 'real shithouse' but um, so, I know, it's like that's making comedy out of bullshit. Or human shit, I guess in this case. All right. Bessie was educated through the eighth grade, which was not uncommon at the time. Oh, I missed the last fact about just generally what was going on in the world in 1894. There she was born life expectancy for white people was 48. for black people, it was 33. Yeah. So Bessie, back to education, Bessie was educated through about eighth grade. And then she started busking in front of saloons with her brother Andrew, and a close family friend said that he didn't remember her being a very good singer, but she could shake a coin loose from a pocket because she was a great entertainer. She knew how to just like suck it out. Ew, suck it out. No. She was a great entertainer and she knew how to talk people out of money. That's better. That's better.



Desi Waters 17:03

That's kinky. I like it. Keep that.



Rebecca Marquardt 17:56

At the time, women didn't really have promising lives ahead of them when it came to career, anything and especially to be a woman of color at the time. It was like take this terrible job that doesn't pay very well until you marry a man who doesn't treat you very well. And that's your life. Or you could try to get into entertainment. You tried to get into the vaudeville circuit and that kind of thing, because at least that promised something. Her brother Clarence, he was a musician. And he auditioned and got hired for a touring show. But he was afraid that because Bessie was starting to get into performing that she would try to tag along with him. And he was also afraid that Viola would beat him because she didn't want him to leave. So he literally just Irish exited the whole family. He didn't say anything he just left.



Desi Waters 18:40

Sorry Irish people.



Rebecca Marquardt 18:43

I don't know how you guys got the reputation for that, but I'm not gonna lie. I love the Irish exit. It's so much work to say goodbye to people. I gotta make the rounds to this whole room. So Clarence thought Bessie was too young to come with on tour. That was his main hesitation about bringing her when she was 16 at the time Personally, I disagree. I think it's

bogus to say that she was too young because at that time the age of consent was 10. So she could have been married for six years, but she wasn't old enough to go on tour and perform and get out of her abusive sister's home. That's ridiculous.

D Desi Waters 19:13
Wow. Wow.

R Rebecca Marquardt 19:14
Yeah. Two years later, the show was back in town, Clarence got her an audition and she joined a touring show as a dancer and then eventually moved to the chorus. She met Ma Rainey and other alleged bisexual putting quotation marks, Ma Rainey likely mentored her and offered some guidance. She played like a mother figure to a lot of the women that were involved in her shows. Eventually, Betsy started to tour on her own and started to build up a loyal following by 1923. She was such a popular performer live that she was finally able to get in with Columbia Records. She had met with other record producers and they tried to record her. It was actually a black recording label and they were like we want to feature black artists and in the movie, it's such a great scene because she walks into the room. And they... have you seen the movie?

D Desi Waters 20:06
I've seen it.

R Rebecca Marquardt 20:07
Oh, yeah, they're just like, and she's like talk about white passing. Like, I mean, they like...

D Desi Waters 20:13
That was great.

R Rebecca Marquardt 20:14
Oh, yeah. Oh my god so good. But but they basically were like your sound is too rough. We need a softer sound that will appeal to the people who can afford to buy the records. They were basically like, Hey, can you just coddle this white audience?

D Desi Waters 20:28
Sound white? Yeah, sound a little whiter.

R Rebecca Marquardt 20:30
Yeah, I forget his name. But a man at Columbia Records was like, No, I want your sound and he hired the best musicians to accompany her. In just in 1923. She released 28 singles, which is insane. She also became the highest paid touring performer at the time. Flying through her career as the Great Depression hit. It brought her recording career to a halt because people just couldn't spend money on records anymore. She kept performing live, but it didn't pay so well, things weren't particularly stellar. She did a Broadway show. Did you know that, Desi?

D Desi Waters 21:07
I did not.

R Rebecca Marquardt 21:07
It was called 'Pansy'. And the only thing that I can find out about it online is that it opened on May 14, 1929. And it closed on May 16, 1929. It had three performances and was considered a massive flop,

D Desi Waters 21:26
Poor Pansy.

R Rebecca Marquardt 21:27
I like the idea of trying to revive just like miserably failed musicals but trying to find a way to make them not miserable failures. Like how do you how do you change it? Can you keep the music and change the book? Do you change the lyrics? Like what what element needs to swap out? Or do you just keep the name and change literally everything? And say you did it? "We did it! Pansy is a success!"

D Desi Waters 21:50
Wow. Bessie Smith played herself.

- R** Rebecca Marquardt 21:52
In Pansy?
- D** Desi Waters 21:53
Yeah.
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 21:54
Oh, nice. Would you like to join our research team? I will admit I didn't go super deep on trying to find out more about Pansy. I mostly just liked that it lasted three days. And I was like what?
- D** Desi Waters 22:07
I'm on Black Google, we get a different type of... we get different information.
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 22:13
You get the real information.
- D** Desi Waters 22:16
But we don't get health insurance. So it's...
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 22:19
Oh, well, you know, the truth ain't free.
- D** Desi Waters 22:26
Nope. Get everybody back in the car. Nope. Get back on the...
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 22:31
Tournament buzzer round. Okay, yeah, by the end of her life, by 1936, she was like working in a, a, not a saloon. What? What are other words, similar to saloon? Emily, see if you can find out what she was doing in 1936. I think it's on her Wikipedia page. Well, Emily looks that up for us. We'll get back to that before we before we close.

D Desi Waters 22:57
Thank you, Emily.

R Rebecca Marquardt 22:59
Yes. So we're gonna dive into her relationships because that's what you really need to decide gay or nay, right?

D Desi Waters 23:04
Yeah.

R Rebecca Marquardt 23:05
But I wanted to talk about how she died because there's like a crazy story. So she was riding passenger in a car with her then lover Richard, and she had her arm out the window, which will be important later. Richard pulled up on a truck that was going slow so he wanted to pass it but he mis-guessed the speed on the truck, and he sideswiped it on Bessie's side. So they pull off on the side of the road and a doctor just happens to come up to the accident, like right after it happens. And so he gets out, another car pulls up, and this doctor turns to the guy who pulls up and he's like, go to the nearest house and call an ambulance right away. And then they get Bessie out of the car. They get her to the side of the road, Richard is totally fine. They get her to the side of the road while they are there waiting for an ambulance. Another car comes up, slams into the doctor's car, which then slams into Bessie's car, which then almost runs over Bessie.

D Desi Waters 24:00
Wow.

R Rebecca Marquardt 24:01
Which is crazy. So Edward Albee wrote a play called 'The Death of Bessie Smith', based on what was at the time a widely held belief that the only reason Bessie died is because she was taken to a whites only hospital and they refused to treat her. But that theory is actually been discredited. There's a whole play based on it, but it was discredited because the doctor who was at the scene even went on record and said, there's no way that that could have happened because hospitals and ambulances were still segregated, which meant when he sent somebody to call an ambulance, that person called for an

ambulance for black people that would only go to hospitals for black people.

D Desi Waters 24:40
Yeah.

R Rebecca Marquardt 24:41
A second ambulance came and picked up the second driver who had crashed into the doctor's car and took that person to a white person hospital.

D Desi Waters 24:49
Yeah.

R Rebecca Marquardt 24:50
But when Bessie, when they hit the side of the truck, it crushed Bessie. When she got to the hospital, they had to amputate her right arm.

D Desi Waters 24:57
Right.

R Rebecca Marquardt 24:57
But then she ended up dying later of just other impact related injuries. A speakeasy! How could I forget that Betsy was working at a speakeasy by the end of her life?

D Desi Waters 25:07
We both... we lose points. Both of us lose points.

R Rebecca Marquardt 25:10
Remember that show we did that was about kind of like a saloon but not a saloon? It was like a thing similar but I can't remember the word. A speakeasy.

D Desi Waters 25:18
Yeah.

R Rebecca Marquardt 25:18
Yes. It was called Art's Cafe. With all of the fame and fortune that she had had in her life, that was the last job that she held, was working in a speakeasy. And it didn't say how, it didn't say like, "Oh, she was a performer making \$8 million a week." That's unlikely. So Bessie dies at this hospital in Georgia. She's buried in an unmarked grave in Pennsylvania. Her grave remained unmarked until 1970.

D Desi Waters 25:41
Wow.

R Rebecca Marquardt 25:42
In the 40s,

D Desi Waters 25:45
Paid for by Janis Joplin!

R Rebecca Marquardt 25:47
I'm getting there!

D Desi Waters 25:48
Sorry.

R Rebecca Marquardt 25:50
I know, it's cool, but here's, okay. So first, it's like a terrible thing. And then it's an awesome thing. So in the 40s, and the 50s, there were two different Bessie Smith Memorial concerts held to raise money to buy a headstone for her grave site. Jack Gee, her former husband, just pocketed the money and ran. So that was bogus. But then in 1970, the NAACP partner NAACP, I Wow, I said that I was like, "That didn't sound right at all."

- D** Desi Waters 26:18
You're like "I did it! No, I didn't."
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 26:21
They partnered with Janis Joplin to get her a headstone and it reads, "The greatest blues singer in the world will never stop singing."
- D** Desi Waters 26:30
Aw.
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 26:31
Which is pretty freakin cool.
- D** Desi Waters 26:33
Where's her family, where all these cousins and nieces who...?
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 26:37
Yeah, so they were.... her entire family... So I think there were seven children, seven or eight children. She eventually moved all of them up to Philadelphia with her, including her older sister, Viola, who would later go on to raise her child, despite the fact that she beat Bessie constantly as a kid. You know, families are complicated.
- D** Desi Waters 26:59
Different times, too. Different times.
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 27:01
Yeah, definitely. So we're gonna talk about relationships in her life. But before that, we're gonna take a quick break. Rebecca here! I just wanted to give a quick hello and welcome to this brand new baby podcast. I was telling my cousin Emily about the queer history books I was reading and how annoyed I was that so many historical figures have basically been labeled straight because queer labels didn't exist during their lifetimes. I told her I was considering starting a web series that tried to redefine some of these folks using the

terminology available in 2020. And she said, "That would make a great podcast!" After a couple months and a lot of learning, Gay or Nay has officially launched. I hope you'll stick around to see how we grow and develop. If you'd like to support us, we have a Patreon, where just \$1 a month we'll get you access to recordings of the planning sessions Emily and I do to swap research and structure the episodes, sessions I've lovingly come to call braindumps. If you can't spare the cash, but you'd still like to support us, your likes, comments, reviews and follows we'll help other folks find us. We're at @gayornaypodcast on all social media. Thank you for listening, I hope together we can do our part to queer history up a bit. And we're back. That's how you end a break on a podcast, right? We're going to talk about Bessie Smith's relationships. We're gonna start with the biggest one, which is her main husband, Jack Gee. There are other husbands. This is the one that people actually know anything at all about. He introduced himself to her after seeing her perform. He was not in the arts. He was not a performer. He just was like, "I like you. And I think that we should go on a date." So he brought his A game on that first date. He really wanted to show off, he got himself shot. He chased after an armed gunman, got shot and the process, ended up in the hospital, and Bessie visited him every day and then moved in with him shortly after that, which I'm going to give this speedy relationship move some lesbian points even if it was with a man.



Desi Waters 29:02

That's amazing.



Rebecca Marquardt 29:04

Jack Gee, or as she often called him JG, because it's shorter than Jack Gee



Desi Waters 29:10

And much easier to say.



Rebecca Marquardt 29:11

Yeah, for sure. And I think Jack Gee's name was actually like John G or something but he went by Jack G, and then she called him JG. It's, I don't know...



Desi Waters 29:20

It's because black people like nicknames. Just what we do.

R Rebecca Marquardt 29:24
I don't fully understand how you get Bessie from Elizabeth. Is it like you just change the 'zuh' to a 'suh' maybe? Bethie.

D Desi Waters 29:33
Bethie.

R Rebecca Marquardt 29:41
Okay, that was fun. All right, so Jack Gee and Bessie, they both cheated on each other constantly. They both beat the shit out of each other, constantly. Violent reactions were not unusual for Bessie. There was a story of a time that she was in a bar saloon whatever, speakeasy dare I say, one of her chorus girls was getting harassed by a man who you know, a little like, "Come on baby, you know you want to get out of here with me" and she's like, "No I don't." And so Bessie goes over there and just... I know, I'm very dramatic. Bessie goes over there and just clocked this guy, like he falls down, he is completely stunned. He leaves there just totally ashamed, everybody in the bar is laughing at him, speakeasy, the pub, or whatever, she leaves at the end of the night with her chorus girls and that man is waiting for her, stabs her in the stomach and runs. She chased him for three blocks before she finally stopped chasing him to go to a hospital. It is, it is rumored that a bunch of her fans got together, tracked the man down and literally beat him to death.

D Desi Waters 30:52
Wow.

R Rebecca Marquardt 30:52
Yeah! Times have changed... some... sort of...

D Desi Waters 30:56
Well, now we get on Twitter and we just assassinate their personalities.

R Rebecca Marquardt 31:01
Ooh, I like that.

D Desi Waters 31:03
Thank you.

R Rebecca Marquardt 31:04
That was good. That was good. All right back to... back to Jack. JG did not drink or party so Bessie would stay clean whenever she was around him. And then she would binge whenever he wasn't around. He was prone to going on camping trips.

D Desi Waters 31:20
Right...

R Rebecca Marquardt 31:21
Yeah, he would never bring home any game, he would just go camping. And then he would come home. So whenever he wasn't around Bessie just kind of let loose and do whatever she wanted. And then when he was around, she was always kind of on pins and needles like waiting to get caught, waiting to get into a fight, waiting for all of the bad. When their relationship first started to get bad, Bessie adopted a son. To be clear, Bessie adopted a son. She didn't tell Jack Gee, she just brought this boy home. A six year old boy.

D Desi Waters 31:51
Oh, that was real! That was true.

R Rebecca Marquardt 31:52
That, that was true. In the movie, he says that he's from an orphanage. And Jack Gee is like "Oh, you're from an orphanage?" and he's like, "Well, that's what she told me to tell you." He was actually the son of one of her chorus girls' nieces.

D Desi Waters 32:08
Okay,

R Rebecca Marquardt 32:08
And she had too many kids. She couldn't take care of them. Bessie had met this kid and

just loved him and told the mother like if you ever can't handle him, you let me know. And I'll just take him. So she brings his kid home. She did actually named him Jack Gee, Jr., and then her older sister, Viola, the abusive one was the primary caretaker for him because Bessie was constantly on the road and touring and recording, and also drunk a lot of the time.

D Desi Waters 32:33
So, yeah.

R Rebecca Marquardt 32:34
Later in life, when JG Jr. tried to claim royalties from Bessie Smith's old albums, he found out in the process of trying to get those royalties that he had never been legally adopted. So he didn't get any of the royalties.

D Desi Waters 32:49
That happened a lot. Yeah.

R Rebecca Marquardt 32:51
He spent his life working as a bartender and a security guard.

D Desi Waters 32:55
Oh, Jack Gee Jr.

R Rebecca Marquardt 32:57
Yeah. Not that there's anything wrong with either of those things.

D Desi Waters 33:00
No.

R Rebecca Marquardt 33:00
You'd think if your mother was like the highest grossing blues touring artist ever like, yeah.

Anyway, so affairs... Jack Gee at one point caught Bessie in bed with one of her chorus girls.

D Desi Waters 33:16
Really?

R Rebecca Marquardt 33:17
Yeah and said "I'm gonna beat you after your show." Usually, Bessie was very discreet whenever Jack Gee was around, but she never knew when he was gonna show up and he just happened to drop in at the wrong time. So he gave her a warning. He was like, "I'm gonna let you do your show and then I'm gonna beat you up." So she grabs Ruby, her closest friend/niece, who we will talk about more momentarily and a couple chorus girls and they just took off. They hopped on a train and went to Detroit. We're gonna come back to Detroit later because things got wild. After two weeks there Jack Gee found them again, and they got on another train and ran to Cincinnati for a couple of weeks. Bessie though, of course not the only cheater in the relationship, Jack Gee actually carried on a bunch of affairs. Bessie caught him with Gertrude Saunders, one of her chorus girls. Bessie beat Gertrude, like so badly. She threw her off of the train Jack Gee was like coming up or something like he saw Gertrude and went to go check on her. Betsy pulls out a gun and starts shooting at Jack Gee. According to Ruby, like she didn't try to hit him. She was like, "if she wanted to kill him, she killed him. She just wanted to scare him away." But she unloaded like an entire whatever it's called of bullets. These are words I don't know. It's not gay I don't want to know!

D Desi Waters 34:34
Don't tell me.

R Rebecca Marquardt 34:36
A magazine?

D Desi Waters 34:37
A magazine.

- R** Rebecca Marquardt 34:37
I think that sounds right.
- D** Desi Waters 34:38
That sounds good, we'll say it.
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 34:39
Okay, I've maybe fired a gun. I'm from Texas. I've fired a gun. I just don't know anything about them.
- D** Desi Waters 34:44
Right.
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 34:45
Isn't it... A clip! Ah, Emily for the win. I like having this silent third party that just chats us the answers to questions.
- D** Desi Waters 34:54
Yes.
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 34:55
All right. So anyway,
- D** Desi Waters 34:56
You know, I'll never complain about my friends being extra again.
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 35:02
No, compared to Jack and Bessie, everybody, you know, is just humdrum.
- D** Desi Waters 35:08

Yeah, they're all boring.

R Rebecca Marquardt 35:09

Jack Gee actually eventually used Bessie's money to produce an entire tour starring Gertrude Saunders like he basically left Bessie to go be with Gertrude, but he took all the money with him. Bessie never handled the money in any of her tours, it was always her brother Clarence and her husband Jack. By the end of their relationship, by the time they had split, there was a story from Louis Armstrong, where he was in the recording studio with Bessie Smith and he pulls out a \$100 bill and he says "Bessie, can you break this hundred dollar bill?", she lifts up her skirt, and reveals that she is wearing an apron under her skirt and it is full of cash. She was basically just ready to run at the drop of like, she was like she never knew when he was gonna show up and she was gonna have to run for her life. So that was their marriage.

D Desi Waters 35:58

Wow.

R Rebecca Marquardt 35:58

Yeah. Times have changed. You know, I'm not saying things are perfect now but they're definitely better.

D Desi Waters 36:06

A little, a little better. Yeah.

R Rebecca Marquardt 36:08

Yeah. Alright, so other relationships that Bessie had, just to give you a wider because you know, we need a wider sample to be able to make a proper assessment here. She married a man named Earl Love. All we know is that she married him very young. He was rich, and then he died right after they got married.

D Desi Waters 36:23

Oh, wait, what happened to Jack Gee, he just left, or?

R Rebecca Marquardt 36:26
No, no, this was before.

D Desi Waters 36:28
Okay, thank you.

R Rebecca Marquardt 36:29
So this honestly like this could have been like a teenage marriage. She could have been an 11 year old marriage hell, we really don't know. Allegedly, she had a fling with a man on her first tour. But she also had like, met Jack Gee by about that time, so it's open for debate. Later in life, there was also Richard the man that she settled down with who was driving the car when she died, at least the way that the movie paints out the character of Richard it seems like that was a much healthier relationship and it did seem like from what I've read that she kind of like calmed down a little bit and got a little bit of that. out of her system. Female lovers, so she toured with Ma Rainey, there's no, no evidence to suggest that anything happened between them, but there are a lot of queer stories associated with Ma Rainey, perhaps we will, we will discuss her one day. Lillian, Lillian is a chorus girl of hers. We see this trend with chorus girls, she didn't, the chorus girls did not get paid well, they basically did it in the hopes that they could learn from Bessie and then try to make their own thing happen. So they didn't get paid well and they were essentially expected to just do anything that she wanted and realistically probably anything that Jack Gee wanted them to do. So Lillian, the chorus girl, she and Bessie like fell pretty hard for each other, at one point they had a little bit of a spat because Bessie wanted to kiss Lillian in front of the other girls and Lillian was like, oh, that's, you can't do that. And Betsy was like "Honey, I can have any one of these chorus girls, so if you're not gonna let me do this, then I'm moving on." Lillian goes back her room in the Oh God, what's it called? Not a... a boarding house. Lillian goes back to her room and her... Sometimes words are hard. Lily goes back to her room in her boarding house, turns up the gas, nails the windows shut so that people can't come in and open the window, and tries to kill herself. They figured it out. They broke the windows, they saved her. They call a truce, they decided that they were back on good terms again, but Bessie put Lillian on a train and sent her back home so that she would not tour with her anymore for her own health. Marie was the chorus girl that Jack Gee had caught her with. And then after that time that he caught her and he was like, I'm gonna beat you after this show. She was like, "No, you won't", and they hopped on a train went to Detroit. Detroit is where we talk about buffet flats, and Ruby Walker's interview with Chris Albertson, yeah. So, Desi, I'm going to pause the recording and I'm going to play just a little sample of this interview for you and then I'm gonna have, we're gonna come back and I'm gonna have you just react to to what you heard. So we're

pausing now.

D Desi Waters 39:12
That's great. No, it wasn't fish day.

R Rebecca Marquardt 39:19
All right, so for listeners at home I'm gonna put a link in the podcast description so if you want to hear this and you should click on the link, it's on iTunes, Spotify, all the places. Desi, please explain to the people give them a taste, so they can...

D Desi Waters 39:32
Well now, this is a classic. This is your auntie or your grandma at the picnic, and she's just spilling the tea on things that you don't want to know about, necessarily about her past. Lord child! But she, she just told me girl, she said that in the buffet flats you could go and watch people you know, with a man and a man or a woman and a woman, and if you wanted to they would do something to you. But she tried and he told her that it wasn't fish day! So that's what that is, that's what that's about.

R Rebecca Marquardt 40:12
I love it when she's when she's describing what this one man is doing to this other man that she says like, "Oh, and by the time he got to the front of him, I tell you, he was yeepin', and I felt like yeepin' with him."

D Desi Waters 40:28
I want to meet somebody makes me yeeep.

R Rebecca Marquardt 40:31
Yeah. Okay, so we're getting into some of the scandalous stuff. So a buffet flat party was it was not cheap to get into, first of all, but that also made it pretty safe and usually not something that got busted out by the cops because it was in a nice neighborhood and it from the outside, you couldn't really tell what's going on as long as they kept the noise down enough. You could go all night, so people would pay good money to go in there and it would just be in different rooms. There will be different sex acts going on and if you want

to do could join in. And if you didn't, you just drank and partied and had a grand old time. She talks in a different interview about there was a woman at the parties who would put a coke bottle in her pussy. She'd also light a cigarette and she could puff it with her pussy. And Ruby goes on to say, "an educated pussy, you know?" Because she knew how to do tricks.

D Desi Waters 41:21
Oh, yeah, that makes sense. Yeah.

R Rebecca Marquardt 41:24
Yeah.

D Desi Waters 41:25
Where are these people now? Oh, where would you where would you go for buffet flat entertainment?

R Rebecca Marquardt 41:31
Yeah, what, jail?

D Desi Waters 41:33
Prisión?

R Rebecca Marquardt 41:35
Oh, yes, the French one. Emily asked, How did she learn how to do all these pussy tricks without YouTube? That would get pulled off of YouTube, okay? Anyway. So it's important to know, like the culture in the early 1900s. Like, especially intellectuals were like trying to buck all of the old Victorian norms. So like it used to be that if you were you know, your parents would invite a gentleman caller over to have one dinner. And they'd be like, Yes, he's satisfactory for you to marry, and now you're married. But in the 1900s, we see people going on dates, we see them being like, "No, I'm doing my own thing." They wanted to experience all of these things that would be considered outlandish to their parents and their grandparents. You know, they were the original Okay, boomers, but with boning a lot of the time.

D Desi Waters 42:23
Wow. Wow.

R Rebecca Marquardt 42:24
Yeah.

D Desi Waters 42:25
And I think also there was that another thing that spiked it was World War One where people were like, "Hold up, we've been behaving really well. And now we still gonna die? No, oh, God, I don't"

R Rebecca Marquardt 42:37
Yeah, I think that helped. Plus, like then you had people going off to war where it was like, Oh, it's just all men. And now it's all women left behind.

D Desi Waters 42:45
Yeah.

R Rebecca Marquardt 42:46
And what's interesting, and this is actually true across basically all time, all of the laws that you find, maybe not all but all the laws that I have read about homosexual activity, saying that it's illegal. It specifically says because To men, yes, pretty much nowhere like Hannah Gadsby talks about that in 'Nanette'. And then I looked at the Texas laws and it was the same thing because like law makers were all men and they were like, well, what were two women even do together? There's no penis, so it's not really sex. So that's cute if they want to be together. In the early 19 hundred's men didn't care if their wives had sex with other women. I mean, not all men. But yeah, a lot of men didn't care if their wives had sex with women. They were like, no, this is just part of the party culture. We go out and we get hammered, while booze is illegal. And then our wives hook up with these other women and it's fine. We don't care

D Desi Waters 43:32
And there's no competition either. Yeah, that's their fear, the competition. Yep.

R Rebecca Marquardt 43:37
#NotAllMen -Emily Another time Oh, another story that Ruby tells in a boarding house. So this landlady for Bessie, Ruby, and three of the chorus girls calls over this gay man to service the women. So this man comes in and then the landlord comes up and she brings booze and then she's like, "Ooh, don't mind if I do," and she shuts herself into the room with them, so now it's six women and one gay man, and the gay man goes around he services every single one of them, as Ruby put it, he went through the whole crowd of women. And then he said, "Okay, I'm gonna call my husband now." Then the husband shows up, and the women watch him mess around with his husband. And the women were all super impressed at just like how they were going at it to the point that like, Ruby turned to Bessie and made a joke of like, oh, there's no hope for women like we're, we're out of luck now.

D Desi Waters 44:33
Wow.

R Rebecca Marquardt 44:34
Good times.

D Desi Waters 44:36
Where do you go from there? Where do you go from there?

R Rebecca Marquardt 44:38
I know, I think I think you literally end with a bath. I think we're literally ending with a bang here. That is the perfect way to conclude it. So Desi, so I want you to start thinking through where you feel best you would have fallen on gender identity spectrum and sexual orientation spectrum. We're gonna take one more quick break and then we will come back and find out your answer. Cool cool cool cool cool cool. I'm gonna keep that in. Rebecca here for one last sidebar. I don't think we'll normally have this many but this one's important. I wanted to call out a pretty massive oversight in this episode in the early 1920s, at the height of Bessie's career, the Black communities in Tulsa, Oklahoma and Rosewood, Florida were burned to the ground by white people. Despite hours of researching a black woman who was touring all over the South at that exact time., I didn't read a word about either massacre until after George Floyd was murdered, which was after we've recorded this episode. I could laugh it off and say "Desi was right, there is a

black Google!" But that would be a jokey way of avoiding the fact that American school systems teach a white centric version of history. This is a queer history podcast. So queerness will always be the focus, but to talk about about a black woman from the south in the 1920s, and not even acknowledge these two massacres that would have had a massive influence on her life is at best problematic. My goal might be to help undo the straight narrative that's been forced on history. But when you're talking about a black woman, it's just hypocritical to not call out the forced white narrative. Anyway, Black Lives Matter. I will continue to do the work to be as anti-racist as I can be. And I hope you'll do the same. And we're back and Desi just pointed out to me is that because we're recording this and then editing it, we don't have to actually take a break. We can just say, and we'll be right back, and now we're back. But instead, we took a break and we were waiting for someone to tell us it was time to go again. Alright, Desi. Do you feel comfortable being able to say, say how you're feeling about the gay or nay thing yet?

D Desi Waters 46:56
I do. I've always felt comfortable.

R Rebecca Marquardt 46:58
Okay, talk me through it. Talk through your thoughts, anything.

D Desi Waters 47:02
I think in today's culture if we said that she was a jazz singer, which is interesting, I think she might be bisexual, but would still be kind of closeted, and still kind of continuing the marriage to a man, but having the different girlfriends, just because the acceptance hasn't really gone that far. Like it hasn't really grown that much in that particular culture. Yeah, yeah.

R Rebecca Marquardt 47:28
Do you think like bisexual like equally attracted to men or women under like an ideal situation? She could either marry a man or a woman or do you think she's like, a little bit more gay but still likes men and it's just easier to marry men?

D Desi Waters 47:43
A little more lesbian, but it's, but it's hard to tell a little easier to marry a man but it's also because at that time, that's what you did.

R Rebecca Marquardt 47:50
Yeah.

D Desi Waters 47:51
Like it's just what you did. So we're going with bisexual, we'll go with bi so that's what she would present as bisexual.

R Rebecca Marquardt 48:00
Okay.

D Desi Waters 48:00
Cuz she didn't do any of the cross dressing either really.

R Rebecca Marquardt 48:04
No, I never I never found any instance of her straight up performing as a man or even dressing like a man. Yeah. So are we then are we saying cis woman?

D Desi Waters 48:15
Cis woman.

R Rebecca Marquardt 48:16
Cis bisexual woman. Yeah. All right. So that is your final answer

D Desi Waters 48:20
That's my final answer.

R Rebecca Marquardt 48:21
All right. So is there anything else that you want to say before we find out if you're right or wrong?

- D** Desi Waters 48:27
What was interesting for me was watching any documentary on Bessie Smith a little bit, you could find a lot of it covered race. So it's also sometimes difficult to kind of figure out like where they are on that spectrum. And clearly, like what comes first is oh, you're black first. We'll deal with the other stuff later. We get around to it.
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 48:46
Tell me more?
- D** Desi Waters 48:48
Well, no, because you have a lot of, you know, because a lot of decisions were made by segregation and antebellum laws and Jim Crow laws. So a lot of those choices that you have now, there was less choices for a black female especially.
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 49:05
Yeah, like, well, that's women in general. Like couldn't, we didn't have the option to be with a woman until I mean arguably the 70s we just couldn't make enough money. Yeah, like it financially was not an option to not have a man supporting.
- D** Desi Waters 49:20
and even now it's still like oh, okay, yeah, yeah, we can pull it off.
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 49:26
Yep. Where can people follow you?
- D** Desi Waters 49:29
You know what if you go to Desiwaters.com all my stuff is there. I'm working on a Facebook Live for quarantine right now. But it will be...
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 49:38
What's what's gonna be...?

- D** Desi Waters 49:39
as good as it can be expected? And it's just three of us sitting and talking.
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 49:44
Oh, wait, have you done this already on it? I think I watched part of that.
- D** Desi Waters 49:47
Yeah, we've done it. Yeah, we did it. We've done it once before.
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 49:50
That's gonna be delightful. Great.
- D** Desi Waters 49:52
Yes.
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 49:52
If you want to follow our podcasts, we are @gayornaypodcast on all of the social medias. I am Rebecca Marquardt. I'm @Rebeccaloops on social media.
- D** Desi Waters 50:01
Wiki wiki!
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 50:03
Emily Do you want to promote yourself?
- D** Desi Waters 50:06
No. She said no.
- R** Rebecca Marquardt 50:07
I am boring on sock meds. Chat is fun in podcasts. All right. Elizabeth 'Bessie' Smith,

'Bethie', a cis bisexual woman, let's find out if you are correct! Drumroll please. You lose because you're not allowed to label other people. Oh but thank you for playing anyway. This has been hosted by me Rebecca Marquardt, Emily Anderson is our podcast loving producer, music is by Joanna Burns and today's guest, our first guest ever was Desi Waters. Find her at desiwaters.com, follow us on social media @gayornaypodcast and be sure to rate review, subscribe and check out our Patreon. Until next time, thanks for listening.