

## “Gay Paree”:

### The Public Lives of Gordon Heath and Lee Payant, 1949-1976

#### Context

This collection of documents from the Gordon Heath Papers helps students and teachers to explore:

- Americans Abroad: Consumer Culture and Tourism in the 1950s
- American Gay Men in the 1950s
- African American Expatriates in the 1950s

#### Introduction and Background Information for Students

The lesson plan below uses this collection of documents from Heath's papers in terms of Heath and Payant's public persona as performers, and whether being gay men was a part of that persona. This collection, however, also includes rich information about American tourists in Europe in the 1950s and 1960s. Selections from this document collection could also serve as the basis for a discussion about African American expatriates in Paris after World War II, and would complement the study of the New Negro movement, and the experience of African Americans who fought in Europe during World War I.

#### Discussion

Before providing students with any information on Heath and Payant's biographies, begin discussion by asking students to review the article, “An American in Paris.” Ask them to consider what the author meant by the subtitle, “big, gay American crowd” and support their answer with evidence from the text of the article. Briefly open the floor to discussion, and prompt students to consider how usage of the adjective “gay” has changed over time. Consider projecting or distributing the following entry from the *Dictionary of Critical Theory* for the adjective, “gay”:

“Originally an adjective to describe a light-hearted, frivolous, or joyful attitude, it was used in the early part of the 20th century to refer to someone with an open-minded or unconventional approach to sexual propriety. And until the 1950s, this was its most widely recognized meaning; but in the middle part of the century it also began to be used as a synonym for homosexuality in general. This latter meaning emerged as the dominant meaning of the word in the 1970s.”<sup>1</sup>

Note that the magazine article was published in 1951, when the meaning of “gay” was probably ambiguous and perhaps suggestive. Prompt students to brainstorm additional sources that might help to clarify the meaning of “gay” in this context, or provide insight into how sexuality and homosexuality was addressed or acknowledged in the public sphere in the 1950s.

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1 "gay" *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*. by Ian Buchanan. Oxford University Press 2010. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. University of Massachusetts – Amherst. 9 September 2011 <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t306.e280>>

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#### Discussion (continued)

Then transition to a brief presentation of background information on Heath, Payant, and their Parisian night club, l'Abbaye. Make it clear that although we, as readers of Heath's papers, know that Heath and Payant were business and life partners whose relationship spanned nearly thirty years, this selection of documents leaves open the question of how the tourists, students, and expatriates who visited l'Abbaye understood the men's relationship.

Provide students with additional documents from the collection. Ask them to develop a hypothesis about whether being gay men was a part of Heath and Payant's public persona as performers and nightclub owners, and support the hypothesis with evidence from the sources.

#### Assignments and Additional Questions for Discussion

- One of the most curious and touching letters in this collection is the 1956 letter from a Texan housewife who writes to Heath and Payant to request souvenirs from l'Abbaye for her daughter's scrap book. Write a paragraph reflecting on what this letter suggests about how Americans viewed Paris and “Parisian” culture, or imagining how the writer's daughter Peggy might have viewed the l'Abbaye entry in her scrap book.
- Art Buchwald's booklet for the *New York Herald Tribune* and the 1951 article, “An American in Paris” suggest a tension between American expatriates who knew the “real Paris,” and American tourists who visited the city. Who were the readers of these publications? Were they tourists or Paris residents? How might each group of readers respond to these publications?
- Choose a photograph from the document collection and write a brief response to the image on the themes American tourists in Paris; Heath and Payant's public persona; or African American expatriates in the 1950s. What information does the photograph provide, that is left out of other written sources? What questions does the photograph leave unanswered?