
Navigating Gender: Billy Tipton and the Jazz Culture of Masculinity

Abstract

In this paper, I examine the life of Billy Tipton, a jazz musician who lived most of his life in Spokane, Washington, as a prominent entertainer and pianist. He is significant because he was a transgender performer who never underwent gender reassignment surgery and passed successfully throughout his adult life, with his assigned gender only being revealed upon his death. He lives largely in the public eye as an inspirational early trans performer, with perhaps the most notable tributes being the opera "Billy" based on his life and staged in Olympia, Washington (performed only three times), a jazz musical, "The Slow Drag," which was performed Off Broadway and the Billy Tipton Memorial Saxophone Quartet, a feminist all-woman saxophone quartet based in Seattle.

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Comments

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Billy Tipton and the Jazz Culture of Masculinity**

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In this paper, I examine the life of Billy Tipton, a jazz musician who lived most of his life in Spokane, Washington, as a prominent entertainer and pianist. He is significant because he was a transgender performer who never underwent gender reassignment surgery and passed successfully throughout his adult life, with his assigned gender only being revealed upon his death. He lives largely in the public eye as an inspirational early trans performer, with perhaps the most notable tributes being the opera “Billy” based on his life and staged in Olympia, Washington (performed only three times), a jazz musical, “The Slow Drag,” which was performed Off Broadway and the Billy Tipton Memorial Saxophone Quartet, a feminist all-woman saxophone quartet based in Seattle.

Tipton originally presented as male only onstage, by 1940, when he was 26, accounts show Billy as presenting as male full-time. At this point, the only people aware of his assigned gender were two cousins with whom he remained in contact throughout his life: he successfully passed in his everyday interactions. Biographer Diane Middlebrook suggests he initially presented as male onstage—for the first time at the age of twenty—in order to combat the sexism faced by female musicians in the industry: the swing era was overwhelmingly male, and especially in the Midwest, where Billy’s career began, it is likely that women would have trouble getting hired to play in jazz clubs, whose clientele were considered rough and seedy, and where musicians were overwhelmingly male. Although some women—including Norma Teagarden, a fellow jazz musician in Oklahoma City and a source of inspiration in Tipton’s piano performance—were successful, when starting out, Tipton was able to gain entry into the jazz world by dressing in men’s clothes onstage, avoiding speculation and judgment about gender by dressing to blend in on the bandstand. This evolved into full-time

presentation as male when he moved away from Oklahoma City and distanced himself from his past. I suggest that this was motivated by a variety of factors: he discovered the benefit to his career through passing as male and fitting in as “one of the boys” as opposed to a female outlier; he had discovered a community in which his choices were respected with tolerance and a lack of questioning; and third, and most important; that he had, onstage, stepped outside the traditional boundaries of gender and discovered a newer, more comfortable place to inhabit. Jack Halberstam, in his essay “Telling Tales: Brandon Teena, Billy Tipton, and Transgender Biography” points out Middlebrook’s insistence on looking at Tipton’s gender portrayal as an act, noting that “Diane Middlebrook comes dangerously close to claiming that Tipton’s life as a man was simply the result of his overwhelming ambition to perform as a musician. This rubric then forces Middlebrook to view his relationships with women as elaborate deceptions; she depicts Tipton accordingly and variously as a “magician” (147) weaving a “tangled web of deceit” (176), as lacking “self-esteem” (222) as someone who preyed upon innocent and naive women...Eccentric, double, duplicitous, deceptive, odd, self-hating: all of these judgements swirl around the passing woman, the cross-dresser, the non-operative transsexual, the self-defined transgender person, as if other lives-gender normative lives-were not odd, not duplicitous, not doubled and contradictory at every turn” (Halberstam 71).

Middlebrook, in her biography, makes several controversial or flatly offensive choices, and the two that stand out are in the book’s cover and in the use of pronouns throughout. The cover features a dual image of two photos of Tipton—half presenting as male, half as female, and the title of the book is “Suits Me: The Double Life of Billy

Tipton”. In her word choice and in her display of the two images, Middlebrook introduces her biases immediately to the reader: to her, she makes it clear, Tipton did not lead the life that felt true to him, he led a “doubled” one, which again implies the duplicity or deception that Halberstam notes. The New York Times, in the review of the book, noted that “For [Dr.] Middlebrook, Tipton was a case study in the essentially fluid boundaries of human sexuality. The subject provided an opportunity to explore the question of how much of what is called male and female is the result of biology, and how much is the result of a performance, acted according to cultural norms. “She was a great performer,” Ms. Middlebrook said in a recent interview. “I don't think she thought she was born in the wrong body. That's a contemporary narrative. She's not a lesbian, because the women she was with didn't know she was female. She occupied an undefinable space. She was someone who worked creatively in the gap between biology and gender””(Middlebrook, Brubach). Middlebrook goes on to use she/her pronouns throughout the book, opening with the disclaimer that “Billy Tipton’s success in passing as a man creates a problem for anyone writing about this person’s life: should Billy be called “he” or “she”? My account uses both pronouns...I use the female pronouns “she” and “her” when I attribute motives and skills to Billy as the producer of the illusion of masculinity, both onstage and off” (Middlebrook xix). This, again, is a problematic statement in the way that it aligns Billy with femininity and his choice to present as male is treated as an artifice rather than as a self-defined identity.

The jazz community in the Midwest during the majority of Billy’s career in the thirties and forties was, demographically, racially mixed but overall whiter than in most of America, especially the east coast and was largely male, but it was a community

tolerant of perceived sexual and gender-related eccentricities. In terms of gender correlation with instruments, it is notable that Billy played both the piano, typically considered a woman's instrument, and the saxophone, which was more masculine. Of Billy's gender performativity onstage—and of his living with another woman when he was still presenting as female offstage—a musician commented, “Back then there were not nearly the number of mean people we have today. This country is on a binge of ignorance and revels in it...the attitude then, with us and with everyone you talked to, probably would have been ‘What the hell difference does it make? He was a nice person, played well—what the hell difference does it make?’” (Middlebrook 117). I suggest that, although the public stage of jazz meant that Billy was forced into moving from the Midwest to the west coast to successfully complete the transition of gender in his personal and professional life, jazz as a culture was anti-mainstream and thus more accepting and willing not to interrogate the identity of the piano player onstage, as long as, as one of his former bandmates said, he was playing well. While Middlebrook, in her biography, looks at Billy's choice to pass as a deceptive one based on careerism, I suggest that jazz and gender intersected in his life in a unique way: jazz led him to gender exploration and discovery, and his success at one both relied on and led to his success in the other. In part this matters because of the public nature of the stage: one can assume that a persona was being inhabited onstage—Tipton's own habit of slapstick routines and acts of leadership on the bandstand strongly correlate with the assumption of a performance persona that was different than that of his private life. The act of being transgender and occupying a career in which the body is made public and the job is done in view of an audience and with an audience in mind suggests, to Middlebrook and to

others who view Tipton's gender as an act and not a reality, a divorce between the public and private; I suggest, as Halberstam posits, that Tipton's decision to change his social security card and official documents, to marry and adopt children, and to keep his assigned gender private from almost everyone in his life, suggests that the masculine was not an act for him, and although jazz led him to gender discovery, the discovery and exploration of the masculine affected his life offstage as much as on. Here the biographer becomes crucial as biases are revealed, and Halberstam notes that: "she identifies with and is in sympathy with Billy's wives rather than Billy; it tells us that her particular perspective may allow her unique insight into the lives of those women who chose to ignore and accept Billy's anatomy while loving and honoring his chosen gender... What would the biography look like if the biographer identified with Billy? Should such an identification be a pre-condition for writing such a biography? Why is the life of Tipton the life on show when the lives of his wives share in the eccentricity that so fascinates Middlebrook? Those wives also lived double lives and also made choices, shrewd choices; how is it that the scandal of the transgender body drains attention away from the extraordinary qualities of other conflicted lives?" (70-71). This is something that is also noteworthy in Jackie Kay's novel *Trumpet*, loosely based on Billy's life story; in *Trumpet*, the biographer is a character alongside the family and deceased transgender subject, and she faces resistance from his wife, who says "I am the only one who can remember him the way he wanted to be remembered," and thus rejects the premise that the gender assignment of the dead body can be dissected in the public eye, rewritten by the public, the media, and the biographer to prove the living body a fiction.

Here, too, empathy and biography intersect: both Halberstam and Kay focus on the sympathy of the biographer in the tracking of a life. Billy Tipton is a compelling figure in the public eye because of the tempestuous posthumous “reveal” of gender and the divides among family—his adopted son willing to exploit his father, his wife willing to stay silent, community members divided on whether to speak or respect his presentation without invading it. Billy’s own desire for privacy in part caused his death—he refused to see a doctor and died of an untreated peptic ulcer—and this willingness to refuse medical attention in an era of increased diagnoses and medicalization of the transgender narrative suggests that the body was not his focus, rather, that it was a conduit for finding a comfortable gender presentation. The recognition of Billy as a male jazz musician is one that is necessary in upholding his own self-perception and his gender presentation, and it is a crucial choice for his biographers and those who study his life.

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