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Suits Me: The Double Life Of Billy Tipton



Synopsis

The jazz pianist Billy Tipton was born in Oklahoma City as Dorothy Tipton, but almost nobody knew the truth until the day he died, in Spokane in 1989. Over a fifty-year performing career, Billy Tipton fooled nearly everyone, including Duke Ellington and Norma Teagarden, five successive "wives" with whom Billy lived as a man, and three children who he "fathered." As Billy Tipton herself said, "Some people might think I'm a freak or a hermaphrodite. I'm not. I'm a normal person. This has been my choice." This jazz-era biography evokes the rich popular-music history of the Great Depression and reads like a detective story.

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Customer Reviews

When Billy Tipton died in 1989, the world rushed in and gave him, briefly, the larger fame he had once nibbled at as a jazz musician and entertainer. But in June of 1958, after 20 years of chasing the brass ring, when the door to the big time world of popular music opened and beckoned Billy in, he backed away from the spotlight, settling for playing the hotel ballrooms and clubs of greater Spokane, Washington. In *Suits Me*, Stanford University English professor Diane Wood Middlebrook explores both the geography of jazz and swing in the heartland of America, and the geography of gender in the middle of the 20th century. Because underneath his dapper suits and corny comedy routines, Mr. Billy Tipton concealed the body of a woman, and when he died, his sex revealed by paramedics and the coroner's report, he left hundreds of people who knew him, and millions more who heard the news, astounded by his "deception..." Professor Middlebrook's research has been

thorough, and she has spoken with most of Tipton's living relatives, former wives, business partners and many other musicians of the era. What she reveals to her readers is a fully textured portrait of an era and a man who worked hard and earned every privilege he received. She lets us almost hear the music, taste the dust from the roads Billy and his bandmates and partners traveled. She lets the people who knew him comment on whether they thought he was a man or a woman. She lays out the mystery of how others perceived and ignored or challenged Billy's gender presentation, and the lengths to which Billy went to protect his secret, which sometimes wasn't all that hidden.

Submitted for your consideration: the curious tale of one Dorothy Tipton, AKA Billy Tipton--jazz pianist, husband, father, showman, raconteur, and male impersonator par excellence. On the surface, this story does seem like fodder for Rod Serling. Billy Tipton was a riddle wrapped in an enigma, but his story is nonetheless quintessentially American. Nobody excels at reinvention quite as well as Americans. Reinventing oneself is part of the American dream, and as author Diane Middlebrook explains, Dorothy Tipton adopted male clothing and became Billy Tipton in order to pursue her dream of becoming a jazz artist. The chances of female instrumentalists for joining or fronting jazz bands were slim and none in 1935. But Billy/Dorothy was very versatile, likeable, and energetic and she parlayed her talents as a musician, arranger and showman into a respectable career, as the leader of small jazz combos in the Western U.S. Paradoxically, her fear of being exposed as a male impersonator, or "cross-dresser" in the parlance of the time, kept her mired in the semi-successful life of a musician who played "the circuit." I think this book succeeds best as a portrait of Americana. Middlebrook does a fine job of capturing the flavor of Oklahoma, Kansas City, Spokane and the places in between that Billy traversed as a musician. She also delineates very well the fresh-scrubbed, impish, oddly sympathetic figure of Billy herself. Where she stumbles a bit is in her tendency to overanalyze, and to sometimes adopt the tone of Billy's risque and cheap humor within her own writing--she sometimes goes for the too easy and the too obvious turn of phrase.

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