

# Commentary

## Sexual Oppression is the Crime

by Dot

When Billy Tipton first dressed as a man to be taken more seriously as a jazz artist she probably had no idea it would guide the rest of her life to a prison of secrecy. It worked. She was respected and admired as a jazzman extraordinaire and a gifted pianist and saxophonist. As a man she enjoyed a musical career rich in opportunities.

She died last month at the age of 69 of bleeding ulcers. She was living in a mobile home in Spokane, Washington where she had settled down. Bursitis and arthritis had ended her musical career in 1979 and her income as a booking agent was meager.

She had three adopted sons who still think he was the greatest Dad they could have had and who don't quite understand why she never told them the truth. Some of her male colleagues don't understand why she thought she had had to pose as a man to make it in the music world of the 30's and 40's, where they say maybe there weren't a lot of women, "but there were plenty and they were highly respected."

As a woman I understand what her

colleagues didn't. I can imagine Billy Tipton, a scared young musician, unsure of her musical talent, aware of the barrier of her gender and with no inside connections to smooth her way. I can imagine her trying a stunt like posing as a man if it would give her an opportunity to do what she wanted most, to play her music.

As a gay person I can understand what her children didn't. I know why she hid for 40 years, not revealing her identity, especially to those closest to her, because their rejection could hurt her the worst. Billy Tipton may not have been gay, but she was different; she was hiding from a world that would not let her be herself, terrified of the loathing and anger that people feel toward people who are different. The price she paid of living on the fringe of life and denying herself is the same price we pay as gay people in a homophobic world.

Along the way she wanted to have family in her life, so she cultivated a relationship and adopted children and by all reports spent 20 years as a devoted father. I can imagine some people thinking that carrying her charade this far was bizarre or

sordid, but I can imagine that she was trying to add some of the fullness and happiness to her life that other people take for granted.

I read the tragic story of Billy Tipton and imagined how different her life could have been if she had developed her musical talent and love in a time and place where gender does not predetermine success. I know that that time and place is not here and now. We have made our small steps to combat sexism since Billy Tipton's time, but every child that grows up in this society still feels the pressures for conformity of gender roles, sexual identity, economic status, ethnic identity, political ideology, and religious beliefs that contributed to Billy's choice to hide and that drive the majority of gays and lesbians deep into their closets publicly if not privately.

We are all losers in this story, not just Billy. What could she have been with that burden lifted from her shoulders, free to joyfully express all of her creative self? What has the world missed because of the suppression of her musical voice and the suppression of the spirits of the millions of

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