



# FRED MOTEN

**ANALYZE, SYNTHESIZE, SYNCOPATE, DISPLACE**  
BY JOHN PIETARO

Just in time to stare down the ignorant and malignant, there comes Fred Moten, Ph.D., the celebrated NYU professor of critical race theory, performance and poetics. What better way to gnarl right-wing ulcers and fuel radical fight-back? Add “jazz historian” into the mix and pepper it with a Truman Capote Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship and a MacArthur Fellowship for “Black aesthetics, cultural production, and social life.” Moten also pridefully sits on the board of City University of New York’s Center for Gay and Lesbian Studies. It’s uncanny to consider that his celebrated 2003 book *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, is still incredibly timely, and is now old enough to buy cigarettes and vote.

Born in Las Vegas in 1962, Moten is the son of a schoolteacher and a laborer. He came of age in the ’70s, and deeply inspired by the Black Arts Movement, he entered Harvard University in 1980. In numerous statements since, Moten has cited fellow student Stefano Harney as a key life influence, with the result that the two have collaborated on projects through decades. But it’s the example of the late Amiri Baraka (1934-2014) and his Black radical aesthetic that’s stood as the primary inspiration throughout Moten’s work. “Baraka was at the convergence of all these things... music, experimental literature, radical Black politics, philosophy and literary theory,” Moten told the *Brooklyn Rail* in 2018. The statement speaks volumes. In the March 26 issue of *The Nation*, in an article entitled “In Fred Moten’s Music, Theory Is Put Into Practice,” many more observations are revealed about James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Richard Wright and many others. More so, the profile aligns Moten with other

poets currently engaging with improvising musicians, listing Eileen Myles and drummer Ryan Sawyer among them. Moten cites poetic word as a counterpart to music, not leading but ultimately as a meld—a concept that reconfigures the idea of Beat poetry.

Moten has himself endeavored in spoken word performance; in the tradition of Baraka’s Blue Ark ensemble, his expansive jazz visions have been twice captured in a trio with bassist Brandon López and drummer Gerald Cleaver. Last year they released *the blacksmiths, the flowers* (Reading Group Records), which followed *Moten/López/Cleaver* (Relative Pitch). The latter album’s opening track, “The Abolition of Art, the Abolition of Freedom, the Abolition of You and Me”, is nothing if not hypnotic. Within a jarring text Moten describes as “a love song, so it’s got to be truthful,” he provocatively emotes within López’ tight off-the-bridge pulsations and Cleaver’s whispering cymbal and tom-tom prisms: “Freedom is too close to slavery for us to be easy with that jailed imagining. We’ve been held too close by that too long in all that air they steal in our eyes while we swarm in common auction.” When asked about his growing body of work with Moten, López says, “To say that Fred’s ability to analyze, synthesize, syncopate and displace information is inspiring remains an understatement. If there is such a thing, he’s a master improviser...one with the ability, flexibility and deep awareness of the collective that creates the profound shit! I’m honored to know him and deeply inspired by our work together.”

In April, Moten released a riveting duo album with López, *Revision* (TAO Forms), the impact of which has not yet reached far enough and should rapidly earn the notice deserved. The bassist, eating the sound source with smoldering, caustic bowing and driven pizzicato, fires the partnership with Moten’s unbridled poetics of “#9”: “Well, you know, huh, I think in little involuntary trios which lets me further note, boogie, that I ain’t got no job....but I know how I’m gonna live: spread out in angry joy...” The poet also engaged with Joëlle Léandre, the master septuagenarian French bassist, on *Lifetime Rebel* (RogueArt), a multi-disc set released last year that celebrates Léandre’s Lifetime of Achievement

Award given at the 2023 Vision Festival. It documents the bassist and poet’s first-time collaboration, one of four featured projects and sets, which the bassist presented that evening. Of their time together, Léandre enthusiastically comments: “Playing with him was a simple and direct meeting. I love his voice and text, and as all poets are, he is a musician; he plays, he sings sometimes, and he listens to the music around him. All his text become sounds, even if totally political, hard, rude, funny too, but with his conscience of what’s happening in this world, this terrible world.”

Over many years, left-leaning creatives and theorists have idealized an intersectionality of oppressed nations—the peoples struggling against institutional repression—to which Moten has become a safe space for the many, including LGBTQ+ artists. In 2020, his work with Renee Gladman, the writer, publisher and visual artist of “Black/Queer” culture, has endowed (in Moten’s words) “a queering of the line and a muddying of the waters.” This shake-up of the seemingly comfortable art world has been an ongoing quest for Moten, who sees his role within it as fully unexpected, as have earlier generations of revolutionary creators. Perhaps Moten, now in his early 60s, has founded this rare aspect of academia for the utter radicals among us—a formality that is anti-formality if not the necessary reconstruction of academia itself. But then, that seems to have been the point all along.

For more info visit [fredmoten.site.wesleyan.edu](http://fredmoten.site.wesleyan.edu)

## Recommended Listening:

- Various—*Harry’s House, Vol. II-III* (Fast Speaking Music, 2008-11)
- Fred Moten, Brandon López, Gerald Cleaver—*Moten/López/Cleaver* (Relative Pitch, 2020)
- Fred Moten, Brandon López, Gerald Cleaver—*the blacksmiths, the flowers* (Reading Group, 2023)
- Joëlle Léandre—*Lifetime Rebel* (RogueArt, 2023)
- Asher Gamedze & The Black Lung—*Constitution* (International Anthem, 2023)
- Fred Moten/Brandon López—*Revision* (TAO Forms, 2024)

## LEST WE FORGET



# BILLY TIPTON

**TO PLAY & LIVE HIS AUTHENTIC SELF**  
BY MARILYN LESTER

Transgender experience is boldly as old as humanity. Motives have differed along the timeline, but for many, like pianist Billy Tipton, born female but living as a male, the transgender life was motivated by practical concerns. Billy wanted access to a man’s world he’d never crack open as a female. And he artfully passed. Tipton’s gender at birth was only discovered at his death in 1989 when paramedics in Spokane, WA, responding to a medical emergency, uncovered the inevitable. By all accounts, no one had seen Tipton naked in at least 40 years. The surprise reveal made national news.

But his story also resonated for what it represented. In late ’80s Seattle, saxophonists Amy Denio, Sue Orfield, Jessica Lurie and Tina Richerson had formed a saxophone quartet with drummer Robert Kainar. Tipton’s near-simultaneous death inspired the group to name itself the Billy Tipton Memorial Saxophone Quartet (later known as the Tiptons Sax Quartet

and, then, simply The Tiptons). Says, Denio, “Billy demonstrated that gender stereotypes are useless. He was playing in the era when *DownBeat* was publishing articles claiming that women were ‘too hysterical’ to play jazz.” Austrian Kainar first heard of Tipton through the group. He notes that if there were other instances of this kind of determination in the jazz world they’re too little known. “Jazz is not just music,” he declares. “It is a way of life.”

The question is: how did Tipton pull off this feat? The answers are several. He was a private person skilled at covering his tracks. Mainly, he invented the story that a major auto crash had damaged his genitals and required lifelong binding of his ribs. He always locked the bathroom door, where he dressed, and he religiously avoided doctors. Most amazingly, he was the husband of five women, beginning in 1934. Indeed there were sexual relations and according to the late Diane Middlebrook, author of *Suits Me: The Double Life of Billy Tipton*, he chose people who were largely self-involved and might not notice much beyond themselves. Middlebrook also has said in interviews that Tipton was an incredibly gifted, focused actor and mimic, successful in a role played for most of his life.

Tipton (Dec. 29, 1914–Jan. 21, 1989) was born as Dorothy Lucille Tipton in Oklahoma City, but raised from age four by an aunt in Kansas City, MO, after her parents divorced. Musically talented, Dorothy studied piano and organ and became attracted to the saxophone

when the jazz bug bit. But an indignity stuck when Tipton was barred from playing in the high school’s all-male band. At age 19 Dorothy began dressing as a man to get work as a jazz musician. Opportunity presented itself via radio where musicians were primarily heard and like Tipton’s piano hero, Teddy Wilson, spared any prejudice. Tipton no doubt heard Wilson on the “Camel Caravan”, broadcast over CBS radio, studying and emulating his style.

In 1936, dressing as a man only when necessary, Tipton led his own band on KFXR radio, and in 1938, joined Louvenie’s Western Swingbillies on KTOK radio and on their live gigs. By 1940, Billy Lee Tipton was fully born. Through the ’40s, he toured with Scott Cameron’s and Ross Carlyle’s bands, and performed with George Meyer. By 1951, the pianist wound up in Longview, WA, playing solo before starting the Billy Tipton Trio with bassist Kenny Richards (later Ron Kilde) and drummer Dick O’Neil. Tipton took the trio further. In 1956 at King’s Supper Club in Santa Barbara, CA, a Tops Records talent scout heard the group, which led to two 1957 albums: *Sweet Georgia Brown* and *Billy Tipton Plays Hi-Fi on Piano*. An invitation in 1958 to become the house band at the Holiday Hotel casino in Reno, NV, was followed by an offer of more albums by Tops. But Tipton declined, instead making the move to Spokane where the trio became the house band at downtown

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