



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

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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us. Getting asked to join the band was life changing for me and really opened up my entire career.

TNYCJR: Even though the ensemble refers to itself as “genre agnostic” it definitely has a kind of chamber music vibe. How do improvisation dynamics operate within the ensemble?

ROWLANDS: The majority of the music we perform is through-composed, but within that we may have certain songs with sections that have improvisational elements that can happen in different ways. As an ensemble we love the idea of group or communal improvisation. One example is a piece called “Robert Henry”, written by Andy Clausen, dedicated to his nephew who at the time of the composition was two years old. In the middle of the song, there’s a section where Riley and Addison [Maye-Saxon, trombone] both improvise in a communal and textural way. The instructions given to them are to embody what might be going on in the mind of a two-year-old, which can vary quite wildly night to night. There’s another piece that will be on our upcoming album *Paradise* called “The 5:10 to Ronkonkoma”, which has a similar group improvised section in the middle that we describe as a simmering soup that starts to bubble over throughout. There are other songs that have a more traditional, single featured soloist in it, like one we’ve recently been playing called “Cupid” by the late, great trumpeter Ron Miles. Riley, the other trumpet player is featured on this one.

We actually have a record of all completely improvised music, *Bricolage*, that we recorded in 2019, during a residency in New Hampshire with pianist Conrad Tao. He was there with us, writing a piece of music for us, which turned out to be a concerto for The Westerlies and full orchestra. Part of his process for getting to know our sound was to improvise with us every single day for at least an hour. So we decided to put up mics everywhere to archive it. Flash forward to 2020 in the middle of the pandemic. We were going back into the archive and rediscovered these very long recordings of improvised music and found some really incredible golden moments that we decided to edit down to our favorite moments and put into an album.

TNYCJR: You’re known to be a strong advocate for equity in the music business, especially in regard to the LGBTQ+ community. How has your personal and professional life prepared you for such a role?

ROWLANDS: In a way, I was kind of thrust into the position of being an advocate and an elder, if you will, for people to look up to. So it’s not something that I necessarily sought out to do but something that has happened purely out of necessity, yet something that I’m happy to do. I first came out as a trans woman in 2018, actually simultaneously with my joining The Westerlies. When they asked me to join, all of my bandmates were so wonderful with navigating this time with me. I never had any idea how I was going to come out—the idea terrified me. When I joined The Westerlies I knew that it was important for me to come out before they made the announcement, so we made a plan for me to come out on social media the day before they announced me as the newest member. It was a wild 48 hours.

The jazz scene historically has not been a very welcoming place for queer people. I had convinced myself that if I came out as queer, especially if I came out as trans, then I would have no shot at being a professional musician, especially a professional jazz musician in NYC. Because of that, it was so terrifying to even think about. At the time, I didn’t know a single other trans musician in the professional world, at least in New York City, performing at this level, so there was no roadmap or anybody to talk to about how to go about

it, but I knew that I needed to do it. The idea that I could potentially be, I guess, a role model for younger trans musicians really helped me get through it. And, yeah, it’s been really incredible over the past seven years now. I’m getting messages on Facebook, on Instagram, getting emails from younger musicians telling me, “hey, thank you so much for doing what you’re doing, you gave me the courage to come out too.” It’s extremely rewarding to receive these messages and know that I made a difference with these younger people.

TNYCJR: Are things getting a little better in that direction within the jazz community?

ROWLANDS: Yes and no. I think there’s a lot of folks on the more progressive side who are much more open to it than people used to be and making an effort to learn more about us, but at the same time we have places like JALC hiring the famously transphobic Dave Chapelle to host their Gala just recently, which is so troublesome when we’re dealing with so much intense anti-trans rhetoric and pushback against us by the federal government. It’s honestly a very scary time to be trans, especially openly trans like myself. I mostly rely on my queer and trans communities to feel heard and be seen and feel safe these days.

TNYCJR: Meanwhile, you’re not just busy with The Westerlies, you’re on Broadway now.

ROWLANDS: Yes! I’m playing the second trumpet book in the show *Gypsy*, starring Audra McDonald. We’ve been going since November. It’s my first time doing anything on Broadway, and it has been such a fun and exciting experience. This music is incredible and has a hell of a lot of trumpet in it. There’s a famous trumpet solo in the overture, which happens to be in my book. It’s such an honor to get to play it every show. We recorded a cast album a few months ago, which was recently released. You can hear my solo towards the end of the overture.

For more info visit maestramusic.org/profile/chloe-rowlands, instagram.com/_chloerowlands_/?hl=en and westerliesmusic.com. Rowlands is at Public Records Jun. 11 (with The Westerlies). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- The Westerlies – *Wherein Lies The Good* (Westerlies, 2018)
- The Westerlies & Conrad Tao – *Bricolage* (Westerlies, 2019)
- The Westerlies – *Songbook Vol. 2* (Westerlies, 2020)
- The Westerlies – *Songbook Vol. 1* (Westerlies, 2021)
- The Westerlies – *Move* (Westerlies, 2021)
- The Westerlies – *Paradise* (Westerlies, 2024)

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nightclub Allen’s Tin Pan Alley. To make a living wage he joined the Dave Sobol Theatrical Agency, booking the musicians. With a fifth wife, Kitty, and three adopted sons, they became pillars of the community.

We may never know why, when Tipton was finally offered the opportunity of musical success, he retreated to Spokane. But the legacy left is now larger: in 2020, *No Ordinary Man: The Billy Tipton Documentary* (a film by Aisling Chin-Yee and Chase Joynt) was released. IndieWire called it “a riveting dive into the past that heralds the future of trans cinema...arrives at something transcendent.” According to Orfield, “The world writ large branded him ‘woman,’ but that’s not who he was. He wanted to play music. He wanted to live as his authentic self, and he did.” Denio adds she’s spoken to many people who knew Billy. “They are all unanimous,” she says, “Billy’s decision...did not interfere with their sense of (his) generosity or

creativity. Everyone...shares the same love and respect for him.”

For more info visit queermusicheritage.com/feb2003bt.html and legacyprojectchicago.org/person/billy-tipton

Recommended Listening:

- Billy Tipton – *Billy Tipton Plays Hi-Fi on Piano* (Tops, 1956)
- Billy Tipton – *Sweet Georgia Brown* (Tops, 1956)

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along the ubiquitous Berlin experimenter **Christian Lillinger** and the lesser-known Lithuanian sticksman **Arkady Gotesman**. Their involved patterns seeped away into near-silence, as Osgood whipped a dried sprig-twig, crashed his high, high cymbal, then sung a wine glass, joined by Lillinger to rattle around the brick walls and the onstage lighting construction. As listeners immersed for meditation, Osgood announced guest alto saxophonist **Maria Faust**, an Estonian native who has been on the Danish scene for a couple of decades. She reflatd the percussionists with a lung-strong issuance of ceaseless linear soloing. The drummer-percussionists returned to their scatter-and-flail tendencies, Gotesman adding colors with bongos, as well as invoking a big bass drum. Faust had played on the previous evening, with **The Economics**, a sort of seated marching band who have been providing the live soundtrack for a long-running play in Tallinn, with a pair of narrators capturing the text to the side of the stage. The tunes lie down at the Carla Bley or Willem Breuker end of the alleyway, strong on subverted tradition. The group included trumpet, trombone, tuba and drums (a big bass side-beast), in a feast of lowdown lollop and funereal crawling. Faust soloed almost throughout, buoyed by the other horns, as a gallop would rise out of a placid plain and get punctuated rousingly, adding a wildness that the songs also needed more towards the set’s beginning.

Two nights later, pianist-composer **Mathei Florea** brought his New Grounds (including a string quartet) to the Fotografiska gallery (there’s one in NYC), with specially-imported NYC-based, Israeli guitarist **Gilad Hekselman**. This band recently won an Estonian Jazz Award, presented just a few hours earlier at the Von Krah! venue next door. Trumpeter Dmytro Bondarev shone most during this set, with a series of impressive, peppery solos. Straight after, in Von Krah!, the Snarky Puppy quietcore of **Bill Laurance** and **Michael League** continued their extensive European tour, positioning themselves deliberately at the opposite pole of their core combo existence. The two have honed an extremely sensitive interaction of melodic grace which floats around the Middle East (mostly at the behest of League’s oud), with Laurance sounding very different compared to his other complementary solo dates. Snarky Puppy has been producing a variegated tangle of off-shoots as a form of so-called ‘rest’ in between their own tours. Laurance and League evoke a delicacy of tender sound, with the latter furthering the scope whenever he picks up his loose-string-action fretless acoustic bass guitar. With a slinking, gently funkng progress, the twosome beamed smiles of ecstasy towards each other.

Around midnight, Hekselman and the Snarky Puppy musicians rolled up at the jam session, around the corner at Terminal Records & Bar, joining a hardcore of local players governed by the expatriate US trumpeter Jason Hunter. The Tallinn bunch were deeply into a no-wave funk hypnotism along the lines of Defunkt and James Chance, but relaxed the leash when Hekselman and the Snarky Puppy duo took to the stage, providing the attentive audience the climax to what was an otherwise typical jam session. In a microcosm, these are the daily extremes of the Jazzkaar experience.

For more info visit jazzkaar.ee/en/