



# LINDA FREDRIKSSON

FINNISH GENRE-BENDER

BY WIF STENGER

With stunts like playing 24 gigs in 24 hours and trading instruments mid-song without missing a beat, “punk jazz” trio Mopo put Finnish saxophonist Linda Fredriksson on the map—at least among fans of scruffy European improv—around 2012. That year, the band released its debut after three years of raucous gigging at rock clubs and festivals. The saxophonist also appeared on another debut, a Blue Note Finland release by the Afrobeat/funk band Northern Governors. A year later, Fredriksson was blasting their baritone with the Ricky-Tick Big Band, backing several rappers. After a decade with Mopo, including gigs in Asia, North Africa, Turkey and Mexico, Fredriksson released a solo debut, the intimate, experimental *Juniper* (We Jazz). It earned rave reviews and many awards, which at times got to be a bit much for the saxophonist, who says that “publicity feels awkward for me. I want to keep the focus on the music.”

It has since become clear that there wouldn't be any pigeonholing for Frederiksson simply being a jazz saxophonist. With various horns and bass clarinet, guitar, keyboards and some humming vocals, they painted tender, atmospheric pieces from a palette of folk, ambient, electronics and even indie rock. Two other notable bands, in which the musician's playing and contributions can be appreciated, have released a pair of albums each: *Superposition*, a taut acoustic jazz(ish) quartet, and *Kiri Ra!*, a dreamy improv trio that touches on spiritual jazz, ambient and cinematic scores. “I have a big interest in trying to make the music in a fun, open space where I get to be who I am without any labels or boxes,” says Frederiksson from their home in Helsinki. A “big interest” goes back at least to age nine, when they picked the saxophone at Helsinki's Pop & Jazz Conservatory because “other

kids in the class were starting to play clarinet and I didn't want to do the same thing as everybody else. I wanted something that was my own.”

Fredriksson was encouraged in that by saxophone teacher Antti Snellman. “In my first lesson, he showed me how to play an A, and then said, ‘now you can start immediately; let's improvise something with this note.’ So from the very beginning, there was a sense that you can invent. It's not just about reading notes; it's more about listening and creating your own stuff. When I had students of my own, I encouraged them to improvise from the first lesson, too.” Fredriksson hasn't taught formally for more than a decade, despite holding a Master's degree in musical education from the Sibelius Academy. Alongside that pedagogy major, there have been many classes in the adjacent jazz department as well as during an exchange year in Amsterdam. This approach suited Fredriksson: “It was a perfect way to get the knowledge and find my own voice without all the pressures and comparing myself so much to others.”

At the Academy, there were studies with several established Helsinki saxophonists, as well as Finnish-American guitarist Raoul Björkenheim, who guested on a Mopo 7". Fredriksson's latest release is the second collection from *Kiri Ra!* (*nen*, We Jazz), improvised over nearly a decade, mostly in pianist Matti Bye's hometown of Stockholm and at the Finnish archipelago home of multi-instrumentalist and vocalist Lau Nau. “In *Kiri Ra!*, all the structures or rules of the other projects I've played in somehow vanish. We meet a few times a year. It's like a music camp bubble slash therapy group, just hanging out, drinking coffee and not talking about music, but then somebody ends up behind some instruments and we record. It feels so different: liberating, safe and cozy.” Fredriksson adds that when the tracks were selected for the release, the members couldn't remember exactly who played what instruments. “It was more or less about what instrument happened to be next to you on the couch,” says Fredriksson, who contributed wooden flutes and an oud-like mandolin, bringing to mind Shabaka and Anouar Brahem.

Still, Fredriksson loves to return to the baritone, the instrument that has earned them several *DownBeat*

Rising Star honors. “Of the horns that I play, it feels closest to me. I've always felt free with it. Especially when I was younger, with the baritone it was easier to remember that I'm allowed to do whatever I want, rather than what I imagine someone expects from me.” The particular love for the unwieldy instrument rests in its versatility and richness, with different sounds and textures: “I'm able to express such a wide range of things with it. It has all the softness in the world, while also holding the rough, hard sides of life.” On the new *Kiri Ra!* album, Fredriksson plays alto on the album's jazziest track, “omwhere”, with the spirit of the Coltranes hovering above. “I've listened to a lot of Alice and John Coltrane, along with Wayne Shorter, so that's the feeling in my head sometimes. Before them, the first two big names I really enjoyed were Jan Garbarek and Maceo Parker. I've always listened to a lot of funky rhythmic stuff.” Having also recorded with hip hop, ska and Brazilian-style groups, now there's a busy concert summer ahead in Finland with four different bands, which suits Fredriksson, whose preference is to travel by train anyways.

They recently had to turn down an invitation to NYC's Winter JazzFest (which would have been the saxophonist's first-time playing NYC) due to the expense and red tape. “That sounds like the kind of festival that I love, where it's easy to hang out and improvise with other musicians. I wish there were more like that.” Fredriksson's latest recording projects are the third *Superposition* album and a second solo release: “I'm between two worlds, older stuff related to the first album and something new that's starting to rise, but I don't know what it is yet...”

For more info visit [lindafredrikssonmusic.com](http://lindafredrikssonmusic.com)

#### Recommended Listening:

- Mopo—*Jee!* (Texicalli, 2011)
- Mopo—*Mopocalypse* (We Jazz, 2017)
- Superposition—*Superposition* (We Jazz, 2019)
- Linda Fredriksson—*Juniper* (We Jazz, 2019-21)
- Kerkko Koskinen, Linda Fredriksson, UMO Helsinki Jazz Orchestra—*Agatha 2* (We Jazz, 2022)
- Kiri Ra! (Lau Nau, Linda Fredriksson, Matti Bye)—*nen* (We Jazz, 2018-2025)

## LEST WE FORGET



# BESSIE SMITH

ACROSS BARRIERS OF RACE, GENDER, CLASS & IDENTITY

BY MARILYN LESTER

Known as “Empress of the Blues,” Bessie Smith (1894-1937) is arguably one of the best known and enduring blues singers of all time. She was among the highest-paid Black performers at the height of her career, and one whose legacy, unlike other female greats of the past in jazz and blues, has never been relegated to obscurity. Smith has remained influential, an inspiration to her collaborators (Louis Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins, Fletcher Henderson, James P. Johnson, et al.), as well as to vocalists who followed her, including Billie Holiday, Mahalia Jackson, Dinah Washington, Aretha Franklin and today's queen of R&B and the blues, Bettye LaVette, who notes simply and deeply, “When I see Bessie Smith [in my mind], I cry. She is literally the bridge upon which I came across.” Books and plays about Smith have been written and movies made. Her music still sells and, most significantly, her songs are

still sung: “Downhearted Blues”, “Backwater Blues”, “Cold in Hand Blues” and many others.

Smith was born in 1894 in Chattanooga, TN. Her father, a Baptist minister, died soon after her birth, followed by her mother in 1906, leaving her in the care of an aunt. It was around this time Smith began performing as a street singer, accompanied by a guitarist younger brother. In 1912 she joined the Moses Stokes minstrel show, and soon thereafter the Rabbit Foot Minstrels, where she was discovered and mentored by “Mother of the Blues,” Ma Rainey. After ten years of minstrelsy, Smith settled down in Philadelphia, and in 1923 met and married Jack Gee, signed a contract with Columbia Records and recorded “Downhearted Blues”, which sold an estimated 800,000 copies, immediately catapulting her to fame. Saxophonist Carol Sudhalter, who hosts the monthly Flushing Town Hall Jazz Jam, and who will be fêting Smith this month, observes, “What comes through [on recordings] is the power in her delivery, the determined feeling—the tenderness, sadness, grief. She makes the lyrics come alive.” But Smith's popularity and success began to decline in the early '30s, largely due to the financial ravages of the Great Depression and the cultural shift to swing music.

The singer's private life behind the outer success was decidedly notorious. She was, by nature, a free-wheeler who greatly prized personal freedom. Bisexual,

her relationships with women were conducted in a protected queer subculture; Smith's female partners included her longtime friend Ruby Walker, as well as various chorus girls and dancers. Scholars and gender theorists cite her lyrics—and those of her mentor Ma Rainey—as evidence of queer leanings. But be they male or female, Smith's many sexual encounters and relationships were generally, dramatically tumultuous. “Smith was a voice of truth-telling, a movement of radical selfhood, and the embodiment of a people, a culture and an era,” observes vocalist Brianna Thomas. “The Empress of the Blues refused to be confined by society's expectations and ‘isms,’ defying every limitation built around her. She spoke truths that cut through human complexity with the precision of simplicity, bridging understanding across barriers of race, gender, class and identity...With unapologetic authenticity, she was exactly who she believed herself to be. That is why we are still listening to Bessie Smith today.”

After Gee (from whom she separated in 1931), Smith entered a long-term common-law relationship with Richard Morgan, who was involved in Smith's death in 1937: early on September 26, Morgan and Smith were driving on US Route 61 near Clarksdale, MS. Morgan,

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**NYCJR:** Can you tell me more about *The Lost Women of Song*, the live show that you developed over the years?

**PELLED:** It started at a time in my life when I got obsessed with these women who wrote or made music that was way ahead of their time. Some of them made one record and then disappeared. Some never even recorded, and demos of their songs were found years after they passed and released posthumously. I learned their songs, arranged them and performed the project monthly at Brooklyn's Barbès in Park Slope. At the shows I would also tell their stories, or whatever I could find about them. Some of them are very mysterious, and it was hard to find information.

These women are a huge influence on me, and I want to honor them when I play. They are also a little depressing. The music is so good, but heavy, and at some point I got tired of telling these stories. Maybe I was scared I was becoming a lost woman myself. But they still find their way into my records. "Rosa Mae" by Mary Lou Williams made it onto this blues record, and it's one of my favorite tracks, even though she's not really a "lost woman." *Love of the Tiger* had one song from this project, the only cover on the record, "Smooth Talking Con Man" by Mistress Mary. Following *I Wish You Would*, I'm releasing a more Americana, singer-songwriter-leaning record with the same band. There's a song on it that I learned from Tia Blake, "I Wish I Was a Single Girl Again". She recorded one album at 19 while living in Paris, and later stopped making music and became a writer.

**NYCJR:** There's something so simultaneous about the way you work. You're clearly someone who lives in the moment, and yet you're also drawing from these really moving artistic bodies of the past. How do you hold both of those things at once?

**PELLED:** I think it's related to my past in some intuitive way. When I wrote the song "Love of the Tiger", I thought about my Thai grandmother, who I barely knew. She passed away when I was two years old. She was born in Bangkok, raised there, married my Iraqi grandfather, and they later lived in Switzerland, where my mom grew up. At the time, I was thinking about what kind of songs I wanted to write, exploring different parts of myself. I was also listening to psychedelic Thai music from the '60s, and that led me to writing kind of a Thai love song I imagined my grandmother would sing. There's something about the women in my life that haunts me. I keep looking for more. In the song, it feels like I'm channeling my family's emotions...my grandmother, my mom. I got this role in my family. They're lovely, but not very expressive emotionally, it's just not the way they learned to be in the world. I feel like I had to learn that on my own. And because of that, I'm kind of carrying it for them.

**NYCJR:** That's something that could be so heavy as a child, to feel like you are the translator of emotions, but also, I feel confident in saying that's probably part of what has made you such an extraordinarily evocative singer and musician.

**PELLED:** Totally, I think that's what makes me want to sing. When I sing, I don't mind it at all. I feel like if it connects with people and makes them feel something, that's the best thing that can happen. Dealing with these emotions and passing them around the room, and everyone just thinks about themselves in a good way, you know? Someone who wants to sing needs to be down for the ride of exploring these emotions. It's not for everyone. If you're a singer, that's what you have to work with. If you want to go on stage, you want to bring all this stuff, you know? That's why I tend to find myself with crazy girlfriends, and now

a totally unhinged wife. I take the drama, and I sing with it. It's okay, they know they're wild.

**NYCJR:** Probably, they love every minute of it. We need a place to put those emotions. I wonder if you've ever had an experience, maybe it's every experience, where you're at the front of a room delivering a song, and you can feel everyone giving emotional energy back? What is that like for you as the absorber of all of the emotions?

**PELLED:** That's the best thing that can happen. When you feel that coming back from the room, that's when you know it's working! That's my job, to make people feel something, to wake them up in that way.

For more info visit [didamusic.com](http://didamusic.com). *Pelled* is at *Ornithology* Jun. 4 and *Joe's Pub* Jun. 17. See *Calendar*.

**Recommended Listening:**

- Dida Pelled—*Plays and Sings* (Red, 2010)
- Dida Pelled—*Modern Love Songs* (s/r, 2013)
- Dida Pelled—*A Missing Shade of Blue* (Red, 2014)
- Dida Pelled—*Love of the Tiger* (Husky Pants, 2020)
- Dida Pelled—*I Wish You Would* (La Reserve, 2024)

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at the wheel, struck a slow-moving truck, causing the car to roll over, leaving Smith with catastrophic injuries, including a nearly severed arm. Dr. Hugh Smith, a surgeon from Memphis, coming upon the accident, stopped to give assistance. Eventually, two ambulances arrived—one from the local white hospital and one from the Black G. T. Thomas Hospital where Smith was taken, dying later that morning without regaining consciousness.

Shortly after Smith's death, music critic John Hammond wrote in *DownBeat* that she had been refused admission to a "whites-only" hospital and subsequently bled to death due to racial discrimination. It was an albeit believable narrative that stuck for decades, despite evidence to the contrary. Regardless of that now firmly rectified fiction, Smith's legacy is brighter than ever. Jazz royalty, vocalist Catherine Russell—the daughter of Carline Ray (the pioneering bassist-guitarist and member of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm) and Luis Russell (the legendary pianist-bandleader and longtime Louis Armstrong music director)—sums it up eloquently: "Of all the Blues women of the 1920s, Bessie Smith is my favorite. I believe every word she sang because her intention was always clear. Every story she told came straight from her heart. There was no separation between her strong, beautiful voice and the story she was telling. There was pain inside her joy and joy inside her pain. Her voice and spirit sound as fresh today as I'm sure they always did. Bessie is still teaching us how to sing the blues one hundred years later."

For more info visit [nmaahc.si.edu/lgbtq/bessie-smith](http://nmaahc.si.edu/lgbtq/bessie-smith). A *Bessie Smith* tribute is at *Flushing Town Hall* Jun. 10. See *Calendar*.

**Recommended Listening:**

- Bessie Smith—*The Complete Recordings, Vol. 1* (Columbia-Legacy, 1923-33)
- Bessie Smith (with Louis Armstrong)—*The Bessie Smith Story, Vol. 1* (Columbia, 1923/25)
- Bessie Smith—*The Complete Recordings, Vol. 2* (Columbia-Legacy, 1924-25)
- Bessie Smith—*The Complete Recordings, Vol. 3* (Columbia-Legacy, 1925-28)
- Bessie Smith—*The Complete Recordings, Vol. 4* (Columbia-Legacy, 1928-31)
- Bessie Smith—*The Complete Recordings, Vol. 5* (Columbia-Legacy, 1931-33)

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