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## “PASSING” WOMEN, PERFORMING MEN

On February 2, 1989, *The New York Times* reported the death of Billy Tipton, a saxophone and piano player living in Spokane, Washington. After performing with the Jack Teagarden, Russ Carlyle, and Scott Cameron bands, he formed The Billy Tipton Trio in the 1950s. Married, with three adopted sons, Tipton’s death at seventy-four revealed the secret of his life—he was a woman. Known to his wife but unknown to his children, Tipton appeared as a man in nightclubs throughout the West to improve her chances of success as a jazz musician. On November 28 of the same year, the tabloid *The Weekly World News* reported that Salvador Sanchez, “billed as the world’s toughest bullfighter and hailed by millions of adoring fans as the bravest man alive,” was gored by an angry bull in Pamplona, Spain. The doctor discovered that he, too, was a woman. Like Tipton, Sanchez was married and had two adopted daughters, but unlike Tipton, only his best male friend knew that the former choirgirl had changed her name “to conquer the world as a man.”

While assumed class differences of the two newspaper readerships are revealed in the sexual knowledge of the wife—it’s one thing if “millions” don’t know, but quite another that *she* didn’t know—gender differences are revealed as a constant. It’s not sufficient to be as good as a man; certain professions still require being a man. What musicians and bullfighters have in common is their visibility, their status as performers, their dependence on spectators. While knowledge of their “true” sex remains a well-kept secret, their performances on stage and in the ring have been viewed and accepted by a mass audience. By acquiescing to the inevitability of sexual difference in “passing” as the opposite sex, these performers at the same time suggest that gender might be no more than just that, a performative act.

“Passing” functions as one of several terms used to designate the