



Following in the footsteps of jazz great Mary Lou Williams, pianist recreates her 'Music for Peace' Mass



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Pittsburgh musicians are proud to claim jazz legend Mary Lou Williams, the “first lady of the piano,” as one of their own.

Williams, a child prodigy, was born in Atlanta and grew up in East Liberty in the 1910s and ‘20s. She began performing professionally as a teenager, encountering the likes of Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, and went on to mentor such future legends as Thelonious Monk and Dizzie Gillespie.

Through Williams’ legacy, the city has adopted another pianist-composer, [Deanna Witkowski](#), who on Sunday is featured in a “[Mary Lou’s Mass](#)” at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Shadyside. Witkowski will also introduce Williams’ liturgical music on Saturday night at 7 p.m. at St. Benedict the Moor Church in the Hill District in a lecture-performance intended to set the stage for Sunday’s mass.

Like Williams, Witkowski converted to Catholicism later in life.

“I converted in 2009 mostly due to the influence of New York Jesuit priests at the same exact parishes where Mary Lou had her own spiritual advisors,” Witkowski said. “I’ve realized I literally walked in her footsteps.”

Now the leading scholar and performer of Williams’ work, Witkowski is pursuing a doctorate at the University of Pittsburgh in jazz studies. Earlier this year she published “Mary Lou Williams: Music for the Soul,” which had its release in September at the Downtown jazz club Con Alma. She’s also releasing a record of her own music alongside Williams titled “Force of Nature” in the coming months.

“Deanna came here to study a couple years ago now and she was *engulfed* by the cats here from Roger Humphries on down,” said Marty Ashby, guitarist and executive producer of Manchester Craftsmen's Guild’s MCG Jazz. Ashby was married in Sacred Heart 29 years ago.

“She’s got an unbelievably in-depth knowledge of Mary Lou Williams, and she can really *play*,” he said.

Williams, who died in 1981, continued developing her musical career after her conversion, but her focus shifted more toward liturgical music. She wrote three masses in total, the third of which is the “Mass for Peace,” a papal commission from a priest who approached her in Rome during Vatican II in the 1960s.

Sunday’s concert, which is not ticketed, includes singers from The Mendelssohn Choir of Pittsburgh as well as East Liberty Presbyterian Church and the Heritage Gospel Chorale. The program will last about an hour and will include a couple of Witkowski’s original works. It’s a concert performance, so no scripture reading or communion.

“Often, Mary Lou’s story is told in ‘before and after’ terms regarding her conversion, but I don’t like talking about it that way,” Witkowski said. “She really wanted to have her sacred music performed as often as possible, in the context of an actual service where possible.”

“Mary Lou’s Mass” takes place at Sacred Heart at 7 p.m. Sunday.

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