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New Biography of Jazz Great Mary Lou Williams Explores Her Musical Genius and Spiritual Legacy

Though jazz composer and pianist Mary Lou Williams, who died in 1981, is not as well-known today as contemporaries such as Thelonious Monk, Bud Powell, and Dizzy Gillespie, her musical and spiritual legacy is lately the focus of renewed, and well-deserved, appreciation. This year has already seen the release of two new interpretations of her signature work, *Zodiac Suite*. Now, a new biography of Williams explores the spiritual journey that led her to convert to Catholicism, and to spend the rest of her life sharing her gospel message that “jazz is love.” In ***Mary Lou Williams: Music for the Soul*** (Liturgical Press, \$16.95 paper, August 15, 2021), Williams scholar Deanna Witkowski, offers a poignant portrait of the pioneering jazz pianist-composer. It’s the latest addition to the *People of God* series from Liturgical Press.

Witkowski is herself a jazz composer, pianist, and interpreter of Williams’s work, whose forthcoming album, *Force of Nature* (MCG Jazz, October) features all Williams compositions. She presents the full Mary Lou: “a forward-thinking, breathtakingly original pianist and composer,” who mentored some of the greatest musicians of the twentieth century—including Powell, Charlie Parker, and Art Blakey—and a deeply spiritual person who found solace in the Catholic faith and believed in the healing power of jazz.

“Mary Lou wanted jazz to be heard on the sidewalk, in church, nightclubs, community centers, and schools: in short, everywhere,” Witkowski writes. “She recognized that jazz had the power to transform lives and to heal individuals and communities.”

Williams’s life was not an easy one, beset by racism, sexism, the exhaustion and financial precariousness of a touring musician’s life, and a gambling addiction. “As an African American woman who believed in her music above all else, Williams faced many uphill battles that male musicians simply did not contend with,” Witkowski says “But she possessed courage, strength and a stubbornness that belied her shy demeanor.”

Williams converted to Catholicism at the age of 47, after a two-year sojourn in Europe, a time during which she enjoyed the acclaim of European jazz fans, but also experienced a spiritual crisis and a questioning of her vocation. She spent three years away from music, saying, “I didn’t really stop on my own. Something carried me away, I began praying and I never thought about playing anymore. I just thought about helping people....”

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Jesuit priests Anthony Woods and Peter O'Brien (who later became her manager), with whom she had formed a strong bond, encouraged Williams "to serve God and help people through her music." She returned to composing and playing, started the Bel Canto Foundation and opened two thrift shops to raise funds to benefit musicians.

Even before her conversion, Williams regularly gave food to those in need, and served as "a one-woman support system" to the troubled Bud Powell. Like her friend Dorothy Day, Williams chose voluntary poverty, devoting her time to helping the poor and sick. She visited sick musicians, cooking and doing laundry for them, and even began bringing musicians who struggled with heroin addiction in to her home.

A liturgical jazz pioneer, Williams composed three Mass settings, and devotional works such as "Black Christ of the Andes," honoring St. Martin de Porres. "Mary's faith in herself was being strengthened by a larger community of fellow believers in God and in jazz," Witkowski says.

In the final years of her life, Williams "had fully integrated her spirituality, music, and her teaching in her frequent performances of Mary Lou's Mass, and her history of jazz demonstrations," says Witkowski. "Her persistence in sharing the history of jazz stemmed from her conviction that jazz was 'healing to the soul' and needed to be experienced by as many people, in as many environments, as possible."

Witkowski was introduced to Mary Lou Williams's work twenty years ago. "In Mary Lou, I unexpectedly found a soul companion and lifelong mentor," she says. Like Williams, she is an adult convert to Catholicism, and shares the belief that jazz should be played everywhere. She is working with the Mary Lou Williams Foundation to create a new performance edition of "Mary Lou's Mass" that will be available to churches, colleges, and choruses across the country that want to share Mary's joy so abundantly on display in this monumental work.

DEANNA WITKOWSKI is an award-winning jazz pianist and composer who recently relocated to Mary Lou Williams's hometown of Pittsburgh after spending twenty-three years as a New Yorker. Her seven recordings include the forthcoming *Force of Nature* (MCG Jazz) featuring all Williams compositions, and *Makes the Heart to Sing: Jazz Hymns* (Tilapia Records), featuring 14 jazz arrangements of classic hymns alongside a companion sheet music book. As a frequent guest music leader, Witkowski has shared her original liturgical jazz in over one hundred churches throughout the United States. She has lectured and performed the music of Mary Lou Williams at venues including the Kennedy Center, Duke University, Fordham University, and with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. She is currently a PhD student in jazz studies at the University of Pittsburgh. Visit Witkowski online at deannajazz.com.

Mary Lou Williams: Music for the Soul

by Deanna Witkowski

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