

Moving With the Spirit: The Sacred Jazz of Mary Lou Williams
By Deanna Witkowski

May 8, 2010 will mark the centennial of the birth of the brilliant jazz pianist/composer Mary Lou Williams (1910-1981). In the 1960s, Williams, who often stated that she wanted to be a force for emotional healing through her music, began focusing on liturgical music composition. Her service music inspired Duke Ellington to write his own *Sacred Concerts*, yet differed from Ellington's work in that her pieces were conceived for use in actual church services, rather than solely in concert settings. From 1963 until 1970 she composed a number of hymns and three Mass settings that garnered attention within the American Catholic church as well as from the Vatican. In 1975, jazz was played for the first time in New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral, when Williams performed *Mary Lou's Mass* with her trio and a 60-voice youth choir.

As I sit in my Manhattan apartment, I am surrounded by the spirit of Mary Lou Williams: her photo on the record cover of her solo recital from the Montreux Jazz Festival in 1978 looks out from above my computer; recordings dating back to 1938 sit on a CD shelf containing only music from Williams (and thankfully, they don't just sit there!); and my own sheet music scores are all over the living room futon as I finish putting together a songbook to accompany my recent sacred jazz recording, *From This Place*.

Even more important than these physical items is the recognition in my own spirit of an affinity, a sense that I am continuing in Williams' legacy of bringing together jazz and liturgy, whether I am literally playing her compositions with my trio or playing my own pieces in a local or far-away church. Why does Mary Lou Williams matter, and how has she given so much inspiration to me—similar, perhaps, to the inspiration that many Catholics derive in looking to the communion of saints?

Rather than give a complete chronological overview of Williams' work (which has been done with great aplomb elsewhere—see “resources” listing at end of article), this article will focus on Williams' conversion to Catholicism, her liturgical music and how my own personal journey has been influenced by this bold woman's inspiring path.

The Beginnings of a Conversion

In the early 1950s, after a career that had included being principal arranger, composer, and pianist for bassist Andy Kirk's *Twelve Clouds of Joy* in the late 1920s and 30s, doing big band arranging for Benny Goodman, Earl Hines, Duke Ellington, orchestral arranging of her original pieces (such as the Town Hall performance of her *Zodiac Suite*), and playing extended trio engagements at respected New York venues such as the Village Vanguard, the Downbeat Club, and Café Society, Mary Lou Williams set sail for a nine-day performance tour in England in 1952. Her nine-day tour turned into a two year European sojourn.

It was in Paris that Williams' conversion to Christianity had its start. While Williams had had many successes in her career, she also had many disappointments, both in business affairs and in her desire to take care of those less fortunate than herself (often members of her extended family). Her brilliance as a forward-thinking composer and performer was not matched by the intermittent opportunities she was afforded to record as a leader. Her family in Pittsburgh had the impression that

Williams was a wealthy woman (who indeed often sent money home to aid her relatives)—yet Williams had struggled all her life to survive financially as a jazz musician. During her sojourn in Paris, she began to feel a growing depression, a sense that music did not hold any meaning.

It was during this trip that one of Williams' patrons, an American expatriate and practicing Catholic named Colonel Edward L. Brennan, introduced Mary to a church with a garden. It was of this place that Williams later remarked that she "found God in a little garden in Paris." She also had a vision there of the Virgin Mary (and was to have many visions in the next several years during the course of her conversion). Around this same time, Williams began to seek solace in prayer and in reading the Psalms. She also became more reclusive as she questioned her life as a musician and attempted to find a way to become close to God.

Returning to the States in late 1954, Williams began withdrawing from the performing world in earnest. She did several radio and television appearances, and also made the important history of jazz recording, *A Keyboard History*, but turned down many offers to perform in nightclubs, feeling that their environments were sinful. She continued her inward religious search, briefly attending the Abyssinian Baptist Church before embarking on an austere diet of prayer and service that began at Our Lady of Lourdes, a Catholic church in her Harlem neighborhood. Williams reportedly made lists of up to 900 names of people she would pray for every day: she would spend hours in the church in prayer, then return home to attend to family members (who had moved in with her from Pittsburgh), some of whom had addictions to drugs. Even though she needed money, she continued to turn down performance offers.

It was in 1956-57 that Williams met two priests who proved very influential in her spiritual formation and in her return to performing in public. Fr. John Crowley met Williams' close friends Dizzy and Lorraine Gillespie while working as a missionary in Paraguay. Crowley, a jazz lover, met Williams when he returned to the East Coast. He urged her to stop taking in musicians and family with addiction issues. He also suggested that she offer her music as prayer for others, nudging her towards her eventual decision to re-enter the jazz scene as an active performer.

A Jesuit priest, Fr. Anthony Woods, was introduced to Williams by Barry Ulanov, the great jazz writer who had himself converted to Catholicism from Judaism. Woods, who was based at the large St. Ignatius Loyola Church on Park Avenue (and later at St. Francis Xavier in the West Village), gave catechism classes that both Williams and Lorraine Gillespie attended. Woods helped Williams with her desire to pray for hundreds of people each day by teaching her how to pray for others without having to separately list each name. He also encouraged her to return to her music. In 1957, both Williams and Gillespie were baptized and confirmed in the Catholic faith.

A Marriage of Jazz and Faith

Williams' conversion began a ten-year period of bringing together jazz and liturgy, from 1962 to 1972. Williams had composed one sacred work in 1948, "Elijah and the Juniper Tree," for a sixty-voice choir in Pittsburgh (the piece was only performed once until 1996, when it received its second performance at the LYNX Jazz Festival in Florida). In 1962, coinciding with the Second Vatican Council, Williams composed

“Hymn for St. Martin de Porres” for the Dominican lay brother who was the first person of color to be canonized in the Catholic church. The piece was issued on Williams’ own record label, Mary Records, in 1964 on *Black Christ of the Andes*.

In 1964, Williams convinced the Pittsburgh bishop, John J. Wright, to help sponsor the first Pittsburgh Jazz Festival. At that festival, which included Art Blakey, Thelonious Monk, Ben Webster, and others, Melba Liston arranged much of Williams’ original material for a 25-piece band (including “St. Martin de Porres” and “Praise the Lord”).

Pittsburgh was also where Williams composed the first of her three Masses. In 1967, she was hired by Bishop Wright to teach music at Seton High School, a Catholic girls’ school in the city. Williams began writing her first Mass (simply entitled *Mass*) during her teaching: according to Williams, she would write eight bars and then teach the new material to the students. In July of the same year, her complete Mass was performed in Pittsburgh’s St. Paul’s Cathedral with a small choir of thirteen voices and piano.

In 1968, Williams was commissioned by the New York Catholic Diocese to compose a Mass for Lent. *Mass for Lenten Season* was performed for six Sundays at the Church of St. Thomas the Apostle in New York in 1968. The instrumentation included saxophone, flute, guitar, piano, bass and drums (or bongos). Both Masses have never been recorded in their entirety.

That April, following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Williams composed two tribute pieces for the civil rights leader. “If You’re Around When I Meet My Day” and “I Have a Dream” were both performed by a children’s choir on Palm Sunday of 1968.

Later that year, Williams returned to Europe. She had been scheduled to perform *Mass for the Lenten Season* in February 1969 at a Mass in Rome in honor of Dr. King. However, a sudden injunction from the vicar general prohibited Williams from performing the work as part of an actual Mass: she was only able to perform the work in concert. The reasoning given was that jazz Masses could only be used in actual services if they did not include a drummer (*Mass for the Lenten Season* included bongos). She began traveling in Italy, writing new arrangements of the *Mass* for seminary students (and leaving out percussion) and presenting the piece around the country.

In March 1969, Monsignor Joseph Gremillion, secretary of the Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace, commissioned Williams to write a Mass that he suggested be called *Mass for Peace*. This papal commission was something that Williams had wanted for years: her return to Europe the previous year had been spent in trying to find ways to receive a commission from the Vatican.

This third Mass, which combined jazz-rock and gospel, is the best known of the three Masses. Williams self-released the work on her own label, Mary Records, and premiered *Music for Peace* in concert at Columbia University’s St. Paul’s Chapel in April 1970. Williams presented the piece in churches and schools for several years before it was performed as part of an actual service at New York’s Saint Patrick’s

Cathedral in 1975. Williams also expanded the Mass for Alvin Ailey, who choreographed and performed the piece, now known as *Mary Lou's Mass*.

From 1977-81, Williams was artist-in-residence at Duke University, where her history of jazz classes had long waiting lists—Williams' love of educating young people made her an extremely popular teacher. She formed The Mary Lou Williams Foundation in the final year of her life before her death on May 28, 1981.

Traveling with Mary Lou: Personal Notes

My own journey with Mary Lou Williams began one decade ago.

In 2000, Dr. Billy Taylor asked me to lead my group at the Mary Lou Williams Festival at the Kennedy Center. I was excited but also felt a huge responsibility to learn about Williams—at that time, I did not yet know any of Williams' work. I had heard her name, and knew that she had been a pioneering jazz musician who had mentored Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, and Thelonious Monk—but I still had not listened to much of her music.

Fortunately, I found ample resources to begin my research: trumpeter Dave Douglas had recently released the recording, *Soul on Soul*, a tribute to Williams; author Linda Dahl had recently released her Williams biography, *Morning Glory*; and I visited the wonderful Mary Lou Williams Collection at the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University.

The revelation about Williams' sacred output was specifically of interest to me, as I had moved from Chicago to New York in 1997 with a full-time position as music director at All Angels' Church, an Episcopal parish on the Upper West Side. While at All Angels', I composed the beginnings of two Mass settings, psalm settings, and new music for old hymn text. After leaving All Angels' in 2000 (right around the time of my Kennedy Center performance), I realized that I had a book of music that might have a life outside of one congregation. Like Williams, I began making contacts with churches when I would travel, and started presenting my sacred music in the context of worship services, something I do to this day. Like Williams, I feel passionately that jazz has much to offer the church: its life, richness, and ability to move hearts is sorely needed as part of the musical palette offered in worship music today. Like Williams, I converted to Catholicism, and was received into the church in 2009. While my decision to convert was not because of Williams, Williams' courage to follow her heart- in both music and in faith- provided a constant encouragement, comfort, and sometimes a kick in the pants to move forward. Going back and rereading portions of *Morning Glory*, I resonate even more deeply with Williams' struggles as a bandleader/composer. At times, I have felt discouragement, confusion, and loneliness as I have wrestled with where God is leading. I have wondered why my path does not seem to be conventional. But then I look at the photo of Williams above my computer, and I am reminded that I am not alone. This amazing, strong, musical, sensitive, bold, passionate woman has laid down the groundwork for me. How can I deny the call which demands me to be the same?

Selected resources (online, in print, and on CD):

Online:

The **Mary Lou Williams Collection at the Institute of Jazz Studies** at Rutgers University has an online exhibit dedicated to Williams: <http://newarkwww.rutgers.edu/ijs/mlw/intro1.html>

Fr. Peter O'Brien, Williams' former manager, is the executive director of **The Mary Lou Williams Foundation**: <http://www.marylouwilliamsfoundation.org/>

My own website has clips from two different presentations of *Moving With the Spirit: The Sacred Jazz of Mary Lou Williams*- one with my trio and historian, Dr. Tammy Kernodle, at the Kennedy Center; and one with my duo (and myself as the speaker) at International Art Movement's Space 38/39 in New York: <http://deannajazz.com/videos.shtml>

In print:

Friend and colleague, Dr. Tammy Kernodle, has written the biography *Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams*, which gives ample attention to Williams' spiritual conversion and liturgical music: <http://www.amazon.com/Soul-Life-Music-Mary-Williams/dp/1555536069>

The afore-mentioned *Morning Glory* by Linda Dahl is another biography of Williams that has been important in my own research: http://www.amazon.com/Morning-Glory-Biography-Mary-Williams/dp/0520228723/ref=pd_sim_b_1

On CD:

Both *Mary Lou's Mass* and *Mary Lou Williams Presents Black Christ of the Andes* have been reissued in the last several years by Smithsonian Folkways, and are available on iTunes as well as at Amazon.

While it is not my intent to cover Williams' substantial and amazingly versatile non-liturgical recordings in this limited space, two other recordings that are personal favorites are *Live at the Cookery* and *Zodiac Suite*. *Nite Life* includes a half-hour spoken commentary by Williams.

Here are Amazon links for all five of these recordings:

http://www.amazon.com/Mary-Lous-Mass-Lou-Williams/dp/B0007727TS/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=music&qid=1265401721&sr=1-1

<http://www.amazon.com/Black-Christ-Andes-Mary-Williams/dp/B0001L3LGS>

http://www.amazon.com/Live-Cookery-Mary-Lou-Williams/dp/B000003H8W/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=music&qid=1265401781&sr=1-1

http://www.amazon.com/Zodiac-Suite-Mary-Lou-Williams/dp/B000001DM3/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=music&qid=1265401809&sr=1-1

http://www.amazon.com/NiteLife-Mary-Lou-Williams/dp/B000009NZG/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=music&qid=1265401837&sr=1-1