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Soul On Soul: The Life And Music Of Mary Lou Williams



Synopsis

Pianist, composer, and arranger, Mary Lou Williams (1910-1981), was one of the most significant and influential artists in the history of jazz. A versatile musical genius who experimented with and mastered most of the emerging styles in jazz's evolution, Williams wrote and arranged for such greats as Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman, and she was friend, mentor, and teacher to the likes of Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, and Dizzy Gillespie. Yet throughout her prolific career of nearly six decades, she battled as an African American woman to achieve recognition, equality, and acceptance in the male-dominated world of jazz. Now Williams's artistic brilliance and lasting legacy are affirmed in this definitive volume, which masterfully interweaves biographical details with incisive commentary on her music, performances, and recordings. Setting Williams's intriguing story against the racial, social, cultural, and musical currents of her times, Tammy L. Kernodle draws on extensive interviews and meticulous research to chronicle the tragedies and triumphs of Williams's stormy life. Included are her struggles with racism, sexism, and age discrimination, and such personal misfortunes as recurrent bouts of poverty, turbulent marriages and love affairs, extreme loneliness, and a string of bad business decisions. Born to an impoverished, unmarried mother in Georgia, and raised in Pittsburgh, the self-taught Williams started performing publicly when she was six-years-old. By the age of twelve, the "little piano girl" was touring on the black vaudeville circuit. Kernodle follows Williams's harsh life on the road, her rise to fame in the 1930s as an arranger and performer for Andy Kirk's Kansas City swing band Twelve Clouds of Joy, her role as matriarch of the bebop movement, her solo career, her blossoming spirituality, and conversion to Roman Catholicism. In her later years, Williams wrote sacred jazz pieces that brought emotional healing to listeners, and worked tirelessly to help and rehabilitate addicted, down-and-out musicians. She was also strongly committed to advancing jazz composition and to educating others about the cultural roots of jazz. This striking portrait untangles the paradoxes of an exceptionally gifted pianist who defied the odds and endured hardships to create innovative music that inspired musicians and fans alike. It celebrates her persistent yet loving spirit, extraordinary talent, and enduring body of work.

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Love It!!!

A must read for jazz aficionados. Marylou Williams is the Mother of Bebop!

Father Peter O'Brien's uninspiring blurb on the back cover foreshadows the disappointment inside. The music manager/priest states the obvious: "Her(Kernodle's)book advances three pertinent realities: Mary Lou Williams was black; she was a Black Woman; she was a creative artist in African American music." Gee, thanks for that information, Father.Mary Lou Williams life story is as complex and eventful as her compositions. As the only figure to explore all the eras of jazz, her musical contributions alone can fill a book, not to mention her rich personal story. Unfortunately Kernodle exchanges a thorough portrait of the artist for what is essentially an abridged version of Linda Dahl's

excellent book. To be fair to Kernodle, Dahl's narrative did get bogged down at times and Kernodle corrected that problem with a better flow, but the exchange is not worth it. The life and music of MLW simply demands a lengthier and more detailed treatment. Kernodle does offer some excellent interpretations of Mary's music but not nearly enough. One of Mary's most sophisticated and accessible albums, *Free Spirits*, is glazed over with a couple of quotes from old critics and nothing from Kernodle. Another missed opportunity is not even quoting the Duke Ellington text from which she took the title "Soul on Soul." I was also disappointed that this author seemed to use Mary as a vehicle for a typical and predictable African American/Womens Studies style narrative. Discussions of gender, race relations, Jim Crow, segregation etc. are natural and indeed indispensable in any treatment of MLW but gender/race becomes a second theme in Kernodle's book, which is space that could otherwise have gone to further exploration of the individual. Fortunately, Kernodle does acknowledge that Mary refused to be labeled or pigeonholed by her race or gender and did not engage in the "victim" mentality. I will keep this book and enjoy using it as another listening guide to Mary's recordings, which I can never get enough of.

Fans of soul music in general and the efforts of pianist/composer Mary Lou Williams in particular will not want to miss *Soul On Soul*, an in-depth biography of the jazz musician's life and achievements. Williams pioneered some of the most beloved styles in jazz music, writing for Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman and almost all the 'jazz greats' of her time: *Soul On Soul* blends biographical insights with background on performances, recordings, and the evolution of jazz music.

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