

Mary Lou Williams: Setting New Standards In the World of Jazz



When I'm playing, it seems as though someone else takes over. What I play comes from God, and I write it for the benefit of other people.

-Mary Lou Williams

A few weeks ago, I was directed to a video on Facebook by a friend. This video entitled [Roll 'Em](#) was not at all anything I was prepared for. Not only is this a fantastic tune, but I discovered someone quite significant I was not previously aware of.

Mary Lou Williams, born Mary Elfrieda Scruggs in 1910 in Atlanta Georgia, was a child prodigy on the piano and in music in general. With the help of her perfect pitch and the guidance of her mother, she became irreplaceable to the Jazz music scene.

She started out as the pianist in a band called *Clouds of Joy* in the 1930's. Not only the pianist, she also wrote and arranged most of the music the band played. Her music became so successful that her work was requested by big band leaders of the time such as Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington, and Tommy Dorsey. In 1942 she left the band *Clouds of Joy* for New York City. She set up shop

in a Harlem apartment where she became a swirl of activity for other Jazz musicians in the area. She was a weekly appearance on a radio show and performer at a Greenwich Village night club and she even started taking on students such as Thelonious Monk and Dizzy Gillespie.



She traveled to Europe for a couple years in 1952-1954, but she decided it wasn't her scene and returned to the USA. Soon after her return, she went on a religious hiatus because she felt that her faith and her Jazz community could no longer be mixed. After finding solace, she returned to the music scene at a performance with Dizzy Gillespie at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1957.

She went on to form her own label *Mary Records*, the first to be started by a woman, and her own music publishing company, the *Cecelia Music Publishing Company*. She continued to perform at high class venues and landed a teaching position at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and at Duke university.

Because of her strong religious faith after 1957, she went on to write multiple masses, one of the most famous being *Mary Lou's Mass*, also known as *Music for Peace*. It was the first jazz piece to be performed at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City.

She died in 1981 of cancer. She left behind the Mary Lou Williams Foundation: a foundation that helps children and young adults learn about and explore the world of jazz music. She is known as one of the first women to have a successful music career in jazz.

No one can put a style on me.
I've learned from many
people. I change all the time.
I experiment to keep up with
what is going on, to hear
what everybody else is doing.
I even keep a little ahead of
them, like a mirror that shows
what will happen next.

-Mary Lou Williams

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