

We Have No More Creators: Mary Lou Williams Performs the Jazz Canon

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We have no more creators. Jazz is a thing that feeds love, and it's healing to the soul, and this other music puts you in a block.¹

Jazz pianist Mary Lou Williams “played all the eras.”² Beginning with her days in Andy Kirk’s Kansas City-style swing ensembles through her time composing large-scale religious pieces, Williams proved herself a remarkably adaptable practitioner of many jazz styles. While her life and music are well known to musicians and scholars alike, not many are aware that she was also an engaging educator. In a series of events between 1976 and her death in 1981, Williams performed lecture-recitals that presented a chronological history of a wide array of jazz styles, introducing each and playing examples. Offered as one-time recitals at universities like Rockhurst University and the University of Michigan—as well as semester-long courses at Duke University, where she held an artist-in-residence position—Williams’s educational events communicated her (sometimes contentious) musical values to these youthful audiences. These educational events show Williams during a contemplative and spiritual portion of her life and provide a unique look at an iconic performer functioning as a jazz historian and philosopher. Examining Williams’s educational performances of jazz style illuminates and interrogates the jazz canon, revealing ways that she used educational events to legitimize her own place within that canon. Crucially, Williams negotiated her position through her own marginalized identities as a Black spiritual woman in an overwhelmingly male musical community that she considered increasingly corrupted. Examining Williams’s educational efforts reveals an “other story” that is often hidden.

¹ Mary Lou Williams, *A Grand Night for Swinging*, Highnote 7180, 2008, compact disc.

² This versatility can be heard on her performed history of the genre on Mary Lou Williams, *The History of Jazz* (Smithsonian Folkways FW02860, 1978).

Jazz historiography and performance have inspired some of the most compelling scholarship within the field of jazz studies. Broaching topics including periodization and canonization, scholars such as Scott DeVaux have questioned the validity of accepted historiography in numerous articles, while Ingrid Monson and Paul Berliner have led the study of collaborative and individual practices in jazz performance.³ Although both historiography and performance have inspired convincing scholarship, the convergence between the two areas has motivated fewer researchers. Musicians themselves, though, have also found jazz historiography a fertile area for exploration, using additional methods of expressing their ideas beyond the written word: their own performances.⁴ These events reveal fundamental ways that performers' experiences of jazz history departed from those of scholars, how those experiences shaped jazz historiography and jazz performing styles, and how performers communicated musical value to both musically sophisticated audiences as well as students. As Monica Hairston O'Connell and Sherrie Tucker note, studying performers' experience of their own histories as well as their collective histories "helps us to tune into fuller understandings of multiple dimensions of jazz practice, jazz historiography, and the jazz archive."⁵

In this article, I explore Mary Lou Williams's educational presentations musically depicting jazz history. Williams's lecture-recitals and classroom presentations provide opportunities to examine periodization, stylistic designations, and improvisatory practice. They also reveal the importance of the performer's personal history and belief system. I utilize a variety of sources for this work: commercial recordings; secondary scholarship on Williams; and archival materials from the Institute of Jazz Studies (Rutgers University) and Duke University which include sketches, letters, oral histories, written drafts of the narrative contained on her commercial recording "The History of Jazz," and recordings from her classroom lectures at Duke. Listening to Williams's lecture-

³ Scott DeVaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography," *Black American Literature Forum* 25, 1991: 525–60; Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁴ As Eric Porter details, jazz musicians often used their performances in the service of criticism and social activism, both aspects of the self-conscious public intellectualism of Williams I describe here; Porter includes Williams in his group of activists, noting that she advocated applying to jazz "a rudimentary kind of goal orientation and open-mindedness as a means of succeeding in society" (76). Eric Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).

⁵ Monica Hairston O'Connell and Sherrie Tucker, "Not One to Toot Her Own Horn (?): Melba Liston's Oral Histories and Classroom Presentations," *Black Music Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (2014): 122.

recitals and how she constructed them over the course of several iterations offers us a broadened perspective of the jazz canon and the ways that performers perceive their own contributions to the canon. I also suggest that Williams's conversion to Catholicism affected how she taught post-bebop styles and the language that she used to discuss them. I trace the themes of her spirituality in her teachings, including her ideas on jazz's purpose, the "feelings" of jazz styles, and her dislike of certain styles she considered antithetical to jazz. I argue that her lecture-recitals can be interpreted as an attempt to legitimize her place in the jazz canon by reformulating popular discourse surrounding jazz history. I begin with the historical precedents of her lecture-recitals, trace the impact of her identity as a spiritual Black woman, and detail her lecture-recitals and classroom presentations, focusing on how she maps her life story onto the history of jazz as well as her controversial views on modern jazz.

PERFORMING JAZZ HISTORY

Mary Lou Williams (1910–81) was employed in jazz bands at a time when women instrumentalists rarely performed with men.⁶ Williams had success in a number of endeavors: performing and arranging for Andy Kirk and the Twelve Clouds of Joy; arranging and composing for Benny Goodman; and forming her own bebop combos, which she performed with until her death. The myriad of recordings Mary Lou Williams left from her long career include commercial and archival recordings of several lecture-recitals and college classes she gave in her last decade.⁷ Each lecture-recital recording features a chronological history of jazz, combining performances by Williams on the piano with commentary on the styles and pieces played. Although Williams gave most of her live lecture-recitals in the 1970s, these events nonetheless reflect her lifelong personal interest in jazz historiography, an interest that was, at this point in her life, influenced by her faith. Additionally, a small selection of lecture recordings from

⁶ Women were most likely to be pianists (as Williams was) in jazz bands; in addition, Williams's arranging duties may have also been coded as acceptably feminine. See Lisa Barg, "Taking Care of Music: Gender, Arranging, and Collaboration in the Weston-Liston Partnership," *Black Music Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (2014): 97–119.

⁷ Atypical for Black woman born at the beginning of the twentieth century, Williams's career, including her chronological performances of jazz history, is well documented in her personal effects. This unusual level of documentation, and the archives it inspired, is partly responsible for the broad scholarly engagement with Williams's life and career. As Saidiya Hartman details, many Black women from the early 20th century must be excavated from archival records: archives must be "pressed at the limits" and archival documents such as arrest records and rent collectors' journals "broke[n] open" to reveal such subaltern narratives. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2019), xiv.

her semester-long Duke University courses exist, which further illuminate intersections between her faith and her teaching of jazz history.

Williams's version of jazz history, presented in the form of these lecture-recitals, was standard from performance to performance. Williams verbally introduced different jazz styles before playing corresponding examples. Similar to other early jazz historiographers (such as Marshall Stearns and Frank Tirro), she attempted to create a unified historical narrative of jazz's diverse styles, beginning with spirituals and moving semi-chronologically through ragtime, the blues, Kansas City swing, Boogie-woogie, and bebop, sometimes including avant-garde at the end. In at least one lecture-recital her manager Rev. Peter O'Brien gave the lecture portion of the event, as Williams grew increasingly ill in the last years of her life. However, on every recording, Williams plays all of the examples.⁸ Even on the later recordings, where she speaks little, she can't resist adding a few words that she thinks Rev. O'Brien has left out, to the delight of her audience.

Through her educational practices, Williams participated in a longstanding tradition of performers presenting chronological jazz lecture-recitals. As early as Paul Whiteman in 1924, when jazz recordings had existed only for seven years, musicians and scholars began to organize performances of jazz pieces in a chronological fashion.⁹ These events generally included several pieces arranged and performed by the organizing group's members. Although these early works did not always include a spoken lecture component like Williams's, they were similarly presented as educational events. I will refer to these events as "performed histories": concerts that, in whole or in part, were intended to portray a chronological progression through jazz. Performed histories are important but often overlooked events that depart from the normal history-constructing process in which an author ostensibly studies, recounts, and synthesizes musical events. Performed histories reduce the scholarly distance between historical events and their players, making the performers part of the history as they recount it. They make the motives of the historiographer (the performer, in these

⁸ In the latest recording, from 1980 at Rockhurst University, the recording device was left to run after the lecture-recital had concluded, and voices are heard encouraging a tired Williams to find a cool place to sit down and rest.

⁹ I detail Paul Whiteman and Benny Goodman's educational performances in "Concertized Jazz: The Divergent Motives of Whiteman (1924) and Goodman (1938)," in *Beyond the Bandstand: Paul Whiteman in American Musical Culture*, ed. Anthony Sheppard (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2024). These two events, while some of the earliest, were only examples of a larger trend; John Hammond produced two semi-chronological concerts in 1938 and 1939 called "From Spirituals to Swing," and pianist Art Hodes presented lecture-recitals beginning in the 1940s.

cases) obvious, and they often explicitly question or reinforce the idea of jazz as a progressive art.

Performed histories allow performers to assert their own positions within jazz narratives without relying on critics to position them. The desire for musicians to distance themselves from critics is also prevalent in jazz autobiography, the turn to which reflected what Daniel Stein refers to as “musicians’ desire to correct what has been written about the music by journalists and critics, who are often regarded as colonizing outsiders.”¹⁰ While purveyors of performed histories seldom reference critics specifically, they do approach areas frequently tread by critics and scholars, including authority/authenticity, stylistic designations, and the very term “jazz.” Like autobiographies, performed histories “provide discursive space for reassessment and reconfiguration.”¹¹ The performed history further fixes what Harlos calls “an overarching sentiment that a good deal written about the music does not necessarily correspond with the sensibility or even lived experiences of the musicians themselves.”¹² Monson also notes that there exists “a long-standing grievance in the jazz community: previous writers had not taken the perspectives and interpretations of jazz musicians seriously enough in their work.”¹³ The performed history grants jazz musicians control over both private and public narratives, rectifying the perceived notion that critics and scholars have misrepresented the performer and their music.

A RELIGIOUS WOMAN

For Williams, one of these neglected “perspectives and interpretations” was religious belief and how it impacted jazz history. Williams converted to Catholicism following a hiatus that began after an onstage mental health crisis in 1954, when she left the stage in the middle of a performance. She writes, “it seemed that night that it all came to a head, I couldn’t take it any longer. So, I just left—the piano—the money—all of it.”¹⁴ In addition to needing mental and physical rest, Williams had been growing increasingly disturbed about the number of musicians whose lives had been ruined by drugs and alcohol. During a three year hiatus from performance, she found solace in the ideas of the Jesuits—an order of Catholic priests and brothers—and devoted herself to the

¹⁰ Daniel Stein, “The Performance of Jazz Autobiography,” *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture* 37, no. 2 (2004): 178.

¹¹ Stein, “The Performance of Jazz Autobiography,” 179.

¹² Christopher Harlos, “Jazz Autobiography: Theory, Practice, Politics,” in *Representing Jazz*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Duke University Press, 1995), 137.

¹³ Monson, *Saying Something*, 5.

¹⁴ John S. Wilson, “Mary Lou Williams,” *International Musician* (January 1937): 8.

mission-based charitable acts that the Jesuits believe integral to faithful practice.¹⁵ These included forming a prayer group, where she invited musicians, and founding an organization called Bel Canto that cared for jazz musicians suffering from addiction. However, after experiencing financial strain and speaking to spiritual advisors, she returned to performance in 1957.¹⁶

Williams's faith is well documented and forms a thread running throughout the second half of her life. Directly following her return to performing, Williams's newfound faith was a primary inspiration for her compositions. Her "Black Christ of the Andes (a Hymn to St. Martin De Porres)" was her earliest entry into sacred jazz; Gayle Murchison posits that this piece, composed in honor of the newly canonized patron saint of interracial harmony and social justice, was also Williams's contribution to civil rights.¹⁷ This was followed by the *a capella* "The Devil," an arrangement of Ada Moore's "The Devil Is a Woman," a moralistic but colorful work that acknowledges the ubiquity of devilishness in human society ("the Devil looks a lot like you and I"). Williams also composed several masses: *Mass* (also known as *Pittsburgh Mass*), *Mass for Lenten Season*, *A Mass for Peace*, and a rescoring of *A Mass for Peace* called *Mary Lou's Mass*.¹⁸ These religious works were notable in the way that they combined sacred forms with jazz and jazz-influenced musical styles. While Williams was not the first to compose sacred jazz, as Tammy Kernodle notes, she successfully incorporated jazz into the Catholic liturgy, a notoriously traditionalist structure.¹⁹ As Kernodle has detailed, her ability to incorporate jazz into the liturgy was enabled by the series of meetings known as the Second Vatican Council, which expanded the range of musical styles allowed for liturgical uses. Williams's liturgical music was so successful, she received a commission from the Vatican in 1970. While Murchison's and Kernodle's works detail Williams's religious music well, her religion is rarely tied tangibly to her non-religious works. An understanding of Williams's performances, particularly those after 1954, incorporates her spirituality throughout.

¹⁵ While Catholics generally prioritize charitable acts, the Jesuits' active missions distinguish them from more contemplative orders like the Benedicts.

¹⁶ Father Anthony Woods' advice to Williams: "You belong at the piano and writing music. It's *my* business to help people through the Church and your business to help people through music." Liner notes to Williams, *The History of Jazz*.

¹⁷ Gayle Murchison, "Mary Lou Williams's Hymn 'Black Christ of the Andes (St. Martin de Porres):' Vatican II, Civil Rights, and Jazz as Sacred Music," *The Musical Quarterly* 86, no. 4 (2002): 591–629. St. Martin de Porres died in 1639 but was only canonized in 1962.

¹⁸ *Mary Lou's Mass* also incorporated a small part of *Pittsburgh Mass*.

¹⁹ Tammy Lynn Kernodle, "This Is My Story, This Is My Song: The Historiography of Vatican II, Black Catholic Identity, Jazz, and the Religious Compositions of Mary Lou Williams," *US Catholic Historian* 19, no. 2 (2001): 83–94.

Another aspect of Williams's work that must inform study of her lecture-recitals is gender. Scholars of gender studies have worked to reveal the extent to which women like Williams are eliminated from the primary jazz narratives and the ways that they have recovered historical power. With the exception of Mary Lou Williams and Melba Liston, early propagators of jazz education are primarily men.²⁰ Furthermore, many histories focus on instrumental jazz instead of vocal jazz, which further separates women from the canon. Although pre-bebop jazz was as often vocal as it was instrumental, vocalists were viewed as "a necessary evil," as Benny Goodman referred to them.²¹ It is no surprise that Goodman's instrumentalists were all men and his vocal soloists all women. Some even asked if women were capable of swinging at all.²²

For female instrumentalists, their ability to enter a jazz narrative was restricted not only by their inferior social status, but also by the commonly leveled claim that their music was derivative instead of innovative. Williams's ability to adapt to changing styles was integral to her long career but caused critics to dismiss her along these very lines. She was able to play many of the popular jazz styles throughout her long career, from the 1920s to the 1970s, excelling at many—she demonstrated a mastery of the technical demands of bebop, for example, a transition that many musicians active during the 1920s and 1930s found challenging. But when jazz became perceived as a progressive art, her ability to absorb styles allowed some to dismiss her impact. Gunther Schuller, for example, argues for her acceptance into the jazz canon only as "a first-rate assimilator" instead of as an "originator," the perceived true role of the canonized.²³ He goes on to call her "a synthesizing, synopsisizing stylist, and what one can only describe as an 'advanced conservative,' contradictory as that may sound."²⁴ Whitney Balliett begins his publication of an interview with her: "The triumph of Mary Lou Williams' style is that she has no style."²⁵ Her contemporaries noted that she used her imitative abilities to play in a masculine

²⁰ Trombonist Liston was also an active educator: see O'Connell and Tucker, "Not One to Toot Her Own Horn."

²¹ Jeffrey Magee, *The Uncrowned King of Swing: Fletcher Henderson and Big Band Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 201.

²² As Tucker notes, this question was posed more often by the white press than the Black press: "Interestingly, although, like the white press, the black press emphasized beauty, sex appeal, youth, and marital status, when reporting on all-girl bands, it did not routinely obsess over such questions as, 'Can girls swing?' as did the white-owned music trades." Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: "All Girl" Bands of the 1940s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 106.

²³ Gunther Schuller, *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz, 1930-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 352.

²⁴ Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 360.

²⁵ Whitney Balliett, "Out Here Again," *The New Yorker*, May 2, 1964, 52.

manner. Her husband, John Williams, described her youthful style: “She played note for note anything that she heard, Earl Hines, Jelly Roll Morton, and heavy like a man.”²⁶ Historically, women as a whole have been dismissed as non-creative; or, as Ezra Pound names woman: “the conservator, the inheritor of past gestures...not inventive, always the best disciple of any inventor.”²⁷ Like others of her gender, Williams, a stylistic chameleon, was subjected to the harshest criticisms from critics who prized more overt, gendered forms of innovation. However, Williams’s ability to mimic her contemporaries was a key to her success in her educational endeavors as well as her performance career.²⁸

Williams, for her part, does not deny that she utilized mimicry. However, unlike her detractors, she recognizes imitation as an intrinsic step in the creative process, placing imitation among her talents: “I can play the old-fashioned spiritual and I can ‘bop’ on top of it.”²⁹ Her lecture-recitals placed her mimicking abilities on full display, and are evidence of how she used mimicry to be successful, in a way often overlooked by her detractors. When directly confronted with the accusation that she “hasn’t a definite style,” she responded with, “I consider that a compliment.”³⁰ Unlike trumpeter Clora Bryant, who stated, “Mary Lou Williams...didn’t bring anything new,” Williams interpreted her stylistic assimilation as part of her search for newness: “I’m always experimenting, always changing, always finding new things.”³¹ Furthermore, she criticized musicians who “become so stylized that they can’t break out of the prison of their styles,” intimating that innovation comes from more than uniqueness.³² Scholars have agreed. Kernodle notes that Williams never “perfected a particular style and maintained it” but connects this with her “constant need to innovate and experiment,” which was crucial for her career.³³

²⁶ Linda Dahl, *Morning Glory: A Biography of Mary Lou Williams* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 44.

²⁷ Ezra Pound, Postscript to Remy de Gourmont, *The Natural Philosophy of Love* (New York: Boni and Liveright), 217.

²⁸ Sarah Caissie Provost, “Bringing Something New: Female Jazz Instrumentalists’ Use of Imitation and Masculinity,” *Jazz Perspectives* 10, no. 2–3 (2017): 141–57.

²⁹ D. Antoinette Handy and Mary Lou Williams, “First Lady of the Jazz Keyboard,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 8, no. 2 (Autumn 1980): 202.

³⁰ Mary Lou Williams, *Mary Lou Williams: A Keyboard History*, Jazztone J-1206, 1955, LP.

³¹ Wayne Enstice and Janis Stockhouse, *Jazzwomen: Conversations with Twenty-One Musicians* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 39; Mary Lou Williams, “Interview with Mary Lou Williams,” interview by Marian McPartland, Marian McPartland’s Piano Jazz, NPR, 1978, <https://www.npr.org/2010/05/06/126537497/mary-lou-williams-on-piano-jazz>.

³² Mary Lou Williams, *Mary Lou Williams*.

³³ Tammy L. Kernodle, *Soul On Soul: The Life of Mary Lou Williams* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 3. Other scholars have used similar language in their analyses of

Her lecture-recitals, then, can be interpreted as an attempt to legitimize her place in the jazz canon by reformulating popular discourse surrounding jazz history. Additionally, in reproducing jazz history aurally, all performers must utilize the feminized art of mimicry and innovate within a primarily pre-determined framework.

Mary Lou Williams, then, presenting her lecture-recitals and university classes in the 1970s, was driven to relay jazz history for different purposes than the early proponents of performed histories like Paul Whiteman and Benny Goodman. The earliest jazz historiographers were white men who were involved in the music industry but were not themselves musicians. These men, who included critics Marshall Stearns and Nat Hentoff, among others, published mainly in the popular press.³⁴ As critics writing for such organizations as *Downbeat* and *Life*, their primary purpose was to help the public decide which records to purchase.³⁵ Thus, the early historiography that grew out of the popular press was concerned with creating a jazz canon that could be purchased by any consumer. Jazz's improvised nature encourages us to consume the music in live format, but the lure of recorded sound and the machinations of the music industry dictated that jazz develop a canon of recordings. As a consequence, music that one could not buy was neglected, particularly in jazz's earlier, more commercially driven days.³⁶ And jazz created by women, many of whom enjoyed rich performing schedules but were seldom recorded, was a particular area of neglect. Sherrie Tucker calls these neglected lines of influence "other stories."³⁷ In jazz, these "other stories" are from expectedly marginalized groups—women, non-cisgendered, non-heterosexual, and minority ethnic groups. Thus, Mary Lou Williams and some of her marginalized contemporaries rejected the entire notion of canonical recordings, choosing instead to focus on style and

Williams's career; Daphne Brooks refers to her as "genius" (90) and her swing "innovative" (91). *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2021).

³⁴ See Mario Dunkel, "Marshall Winslow Stearns and the Politics of Jazz Historiography," *American Music* 30, no. 4 (2012): 468–504.

³⁵ Raeburn traces the development of the origin story through the activities of record collectors instead of singularly through historians. Bruce Boyd Raeburn, *New Orleans Style and the Writing of American Jazz History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

³⁶ In detailing the spaces of live jazz performance, Kimberly Hannon Teal notes several relevant issues, including jazz's changing economic viability from commercially successful in its early decades to a nonprofit-supported "social good" which relies heavily on its own heritage to justify its contributions to culture. *Jazz Places: How Performance Spaces Shape Jazz History* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021), 3–5.

³⁷ Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift*, 3.

periodization, asserting an “other story” that embraces both recorded and unrecorded musicians.

Williams used her performed histories to spread her “other story.” Because many of these performances were left undocumented except for generic marketing materials, it’s unclear which performances were performed histories (in whole or in part) and which were traditional concerts. However, recordings that feature her performed histories include events at the University of Wisconsin at Madison (March 10, 1976), the University of Michigan (September 21, 1978), and Rockhurst University in Kansas City, MO (probably May 11, 1980). Williams also produced a commercially available recording called *The History of Jazz* for Smithsonian Folkways (1978).³⁸ At the same time as she was presenting lecture-recitals at colleges, she earned an artist-in-residence position at Duke University, which afforded her stability she hadn’t known as a freelance musician. Here, she taught courses titled “Introduction to Jazz,” “Jazz Improvisation,” and directed a jazz ensemble. Shortly before her death in 1981, Williams received a National Endowment for the Arts grant to write a *Wind Symphony*, which would chronicle the history of jazz.³⁹

JAZZ HISTORY AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Williams performed histories educated audiences while positioning herself as an integral player in jazz. Williams’s method of legitimizing her place in the canon prioritizes her personal story over a generic narrative. She weaved her personal details in with her views on jazz history, which made her more endearing to the audience. Her charming personal presentation went beyond a few clever words delivered at opportune moments. Williams’s lecture-recitals were as much a history of her musical career as they were a history of jazz styles. Long before she began performing live lecture-recitals, in March 1955, she recorded an album for the label Jazztone called *Mary Lou Williams: A Keyboard History*. This album is a prototype for her lecture recitals, including six songs:

1. “Fandangle”
2. “Mama, Pin a Rose on Me”

³⁸ Other commercially available recordings include the first half of her *Embraced* concert with Cecil Taylor and a recital. Mary Lou Williams and Cecil Taylor, *Embraced* (Pablo Records 2620-108, 1977, LP); Mary Lou Williams, *Solo recital, Montreux Jazz Festival 1978* (Pablo Live, 2308-218, 1978, LP).

³⁹ Williams was unable to complete the piece before her passing. Anthony M. Kelley at Duke University recently reconstructed the *Wind Symphony*, titled “History...” The piece premiered on April 13, 2024. <https://music.duke.edu/events/duke-wind-symphony-history>

3. "Roll 'Em"
4. "Sweet Sue"
5. "Lullaby of the Leaves"
6. "Taurus"

These songs coincide with the styles Williams would later include in her lecture-recitals. The liner notes reveal which styles are included: "With her, we take a retrospective musical journey back to the days when she played ragtime and blues that her mother taught her. We then go to Kansas City, to the boogie woogie and swing phases of her career, and travel right on through to Carnegie Hall, where her well-known *Zodiac Suite* was first performed."⁴⁰ This album was recorded in 1955 and included a bop tune as the most modern style ("Lullaby of the Leaves"). Many of her later lecture-recitals closed instead with "A Fungus Amungus," her parody of avant-garde jazz; Williams would sometimes describe this song as a parody of Cecil Taylor, whose 1966 album *Unit Structures* embodied the "sickness" that she would rave against. Instead, on *A Keyboard History*, she includes "Taurus" from her own *Zodiac Suite* (1945). Williams was not particularly interested in astrology; instead, *Zodiac Suite* consists of musical portraits of other musicians, with "Taurus" representing pianists Duke Ellington, Ellis Larkin, and herself. *Zodiac Suite* itself was inspired by Ellington's own extended work *Black Brown and Beige* and fulfilled Williams's ambitions to bring together disparate idioms in jazz and classical.⁴¹ It is not the only song of personal significance on the album, however. She learned "Fandangle," her ragtime example, as a child from her mother, and "Mama, Pin a Rose on Me" from her stepfather, Fletcher Burley.⁴² Neither of these songs was recorded by others. Another self-composed piece, "Roll 'Em," was a hit for Benny Goodman's band in 1937. "Sweet Sue" (more commonly known as "Sweet Sue, Just You") and "Lullaby of the Leaves" are the only two in this short history with no obvious personal significance.

Williams's performed histories often act as complete musical autobiographies, tracing important musical events throughout her life. Musical autobiographies suffer similarly to literary jazz autobiographies, "dismissed as the literarily

⁴⁰ Paul Shapler, liner notes for Mary Lou Williams, *A Keyboard History*.

⁴¹ Kernodle (2004) writes that "Mary had no deep interest in astrology" (109), and while Farah Jasmine Griffin writes that "Williams had a long-standing interest in the zodiac," she seems to equate the zodiac with Williams's search for spirituality. *Harlem Nocturne: Women Artists and Progressive Politics During World War II* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2013), 164. See also Griffin, *Harlem Nocturne*, 162-163.

⁴² Kernodle, *Soul on Soul*, 176. "Mama, Pin a Rose on Me" is listed on other albums variously as "My Mama Pinned a Rose on Me" and "Momma Pinned a Rose on Me," and bears no resemblance to the 1905 popular song "Mother, Mother, Mother Pin a Rose on Me."

insignificant” (or musically insignificant) because of the aura of self-promotion surrounding these endeavors.⁴³ To be sure, all autobiographies, musical and literary, have shortcomings—what Stein calls the “basic ‘untruth’” of autobiographical narrative⁴⁴—and performed histories can be as much myth as truth in how they can also superimpose the historical on the personal. However, Stein rightly compares literary jazz autobiographies to the process of improvisation: “These images render the autobiographical self unstable and shifting, improvised and performed, as musical improvisation is translated into autobiographical narration through the invention of a self that cannot be pinned down and that is conjured as an element of an overall self-mythology.”⁴⁵ “Untruths” and “self-mythology” are familiar to jazz narratives, manifesting in autobiography (Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog*) and biography (Brunn, *The Story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band*).⁴⁶ Black performers in particular have been accused of presenting themselves in untrue circumstances, which is reflected in their autobiographies and has implications for the stories they tell about jazz. Some musicians used myths about themselves to further their careers; consider Valaida Snow, who spread myths about her work with Louis Armstrong and her time in a Nazi concentration camp.⁴⁷ Stein points out the ways musicians utilize personal and cultural myths to their advantage: “the musicians utilize the creative and liberating potential inherent in the writing of their life stories; thus, they frequently seize the opportunity to re-mythologize themselves.”⁴⁸

Williams’s performed histories present an autobiographical narrative, but they also map her own history onto that of the entirety of jazz. Performed histories such as Williams’s re-translate the autobiographical self (the musician’s public image) into musical terms. The performer negotiates between two positions: the simultaneous invented and realistic autobiographical self and the position of the studious historian. The performed history seeks to locate the performer as a singular representative of a larger historical construct. By overlaying the personal with the general, musicians performing histories re-mythologize by inserting themselves into the jazz narrative, taking full advantage of the “creative and liberating potential.”

⁴³ Stein, “The Performance of Jazz Autobiography,” 173.

⁴⁴ Stein, “The Performance of Jazz Autobiography,” 174.

⁴⁵ Stein, “The Performance of Jazz Autobiography,” 174.

⁴⁶ Charles Mingus, *Beneath the Underdog* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 1998); Harry O. Brunn, *The Story of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970).

⁴⁷ Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

⁴⁸ Stein, “The Performance of Jazz Autobiography,” 177.

The autobiographical-historical conflation that is evident in *A Keyboard History* continues with her lecture-recitals. Williams presented a modified view of jazz from the performer's perspective at a moment when students were beginning to experience jazz in the institution. In Williams's version, masterworks by others are discarded in favor of the personal. As in *A Keyboard History*, she always includes a little-known example of ragtime in her lecture-recitals, usually "Who Stole the Lock Off the Henhouse Door?" which, like "Fandangle," she learned from her mother. In the 1970s she added the spiritual to the beginning of her performed jazz history; the example she uses is "Lord Have Mercy," an instrumental version of "Anima Christi" from *Black Christ of the Andes*. By performing personal pieces that were rarely performed by others, Williams connects herself concretely with the larger history of jazz. Dismissed by critics and younger musicians, labeled an imitator instead of a creator, Williams uses the lecture-recital as a method of legitimizing her musical contributions.

HEALING AND FEELING: DEFINING JAZZ AND ITS STYLES

Williams's widespread acceptance by musicians and fans also allowed her to position herself as the matriarch of the jazz world, a position enabled by her Catholic faith. Post-1954, Williams cultivated a caretaking role, presenting jazz as a historical movement dedicated to love and kindness—a movement emblemized by her charity work targeted at jazz musicians. She displayed this in visual form through her jazz family tree (Figure 1), a drawing sketched by Williams and realized by her former lover and lifelong friend, jazz album artist David Stone Martin. Containing a stamp from Jazzmobile, a New York City organization founded in 1964 to "promote, propagate, and preserve America's classical music, jazz," the drawing was handed out on at least one occasion, to an audience comprised of Richmond public school children and probably also distributed at other events.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ "About," Jazzmobile, accessed December 13, 2024, <https://www.jazzmobile.org/#> and Handy and Williams, "First Lady of the Jazz Keyboard," 202. In addition to her university performances, Williams also spoke at primary and secondary schools. There are a number of references to these in her archival materials, but to my knowledge, no recordings exist.

The makeup of the Jazz Tree mirrors her lecture-recitals, particularly along the trunk and roots. At the bottom of the tree, over the roots, is written the word "SUFFERING." In ascending order, above "suffering" are listed "roots," "spirituals," "ragtime," "Kansas City swing," and "bop," corresponding directly with the stylistic categories espoused in her lecture-recitals. "Blues" also plays a prominent role on the tree, which features the word in small letters running up both sides of the trunk. Above the trunk, the tree blooms in grand style, with each leaf containing the name of at least one jazz musician. Notable is the lack of any post-bop styles on the trunk; Williams discards the terminology that many jazz historiographers had developed to describe these styles, but canonizes musicians who played them by including them on the tree's leaves.

The two most prominent words on the tree are "suffering" and "blues." By prioritizing "suffering," she posits its importance in jazz's genesis and its continuous existence as a stream flowing through all legitimate (in her opinion) musicians. She portrays all of jazz as overcoming the adversity of slavery while preserving the memory of the enslaved.⁵⁰ Similarly, she portrays the blues as a stream affecting all styles of jazz. In addition to the blues, other "jazz roots" like ragtime play a disproportionately large role in her educational philosophy. Three of her six styles are commonly considered contributors to jazz's conception: spirituals, ragtime and the blues (four out of seven if both forms of blues, "old" and "new," are counted separately). The blues, though often included as one of jazz's roots,⁵¹ lie at the heart of Williams's historiography, and her discussions of the blues de-prioritize any insular characteristics of the style. Instead of relegating the blues to its own category that interacts superficially with other jazz styles, Williams characterized the blues as a stream that continually feeds into jazz even as styles changed.

Her lecture-recitals evidence her focus on the blues. She always included at least two, if not three, examples of the blues, emphasizing its importance through repetition. Her two examples included an "old blues" (or an "old fashioned blues") and a "new blues," but she doesn't always draw a defining line between blues and other styles, using "new blues," "bebop," and sometimes "modern" interchangeably. Her choices for "new blues" might include examples

⁵⁰ For an alternate viewpoint on suffering's role in jazz musicians' creativity, see Harry Reasoner's ill-prepared interview of Miles Davis for *60 Minutes* in 1989. During a line of questioning about the differences between Black and white musicians, Reasoner asks Davis if "Black musicians hurt more." Davis's response: "no, it's not that cliché." Later, Davis continued to dismiss Reasoner's prompts about the connection between jazz and slavery, saying, "I've never suffered and don't intend to suffer."

⁵¹ For an example, see Donald D. Megill and Richard S. Demory, *Introduction to Jazz History* (London: Pearson, 1996).

of “slow modern blues” (“Baby Man,” by John Stubblefield at the University of Michigan, 1978) or bebop tunes (“New Blues” on the *History of Jazz* recording). To further prove that blues was integral to jazz and not preliminary, she prefaces her blues/bebop by erasing any demarcation between the two styles: “the bop era blues chords added a great richness and more technique.”⁵²

Williams identifies jazz as a fundamentally Black American art through these lecture-recitals. This causes her to depart, sometimes significantly, from other descriptions of jazz’s periods, even if she utilizes similar style names. For example, she argues that Scott Joplin, known to most as “the father of ragtime,” played music that was not authentically American—thus not jazz-adjacent, but rather “European.” Williams categorically excludes Joplin from ragtime, not only for this reason, but also through her chronology of jazz history—she cites ragtime’s genesis at “more or less the style around the time of World War I” (Joplin died in 1917 after publishing rags for more than 15 years).⁵³ The exact stylistic difference between Joplin’s music and Williams’s interpretation of ragtime is not immediately apparent in her performed examples. Her performance of “Who Stole the Lock Off the Henhouse Door” features many of the same musical elements found in Joplin’s classic rags, including a bouncing “oom-pah” left hand and a highly syncopated right; however, Williams’s right hand owes a larger debt to Harlem stride, a piano style at which she excelled. Furthermore, Williams’s left hand is steadier than many of Joplin’s left-hand lines, supporting Williams’s assertion that “ragging the piano came out of the beat of the spiritual” and weakening associations with “European” elements.⁵⁴ Additionally, Williams’s steadiness may have allowed her an improvisational framework that she believed Joplin’s published pieces lacked.⁵⁵

Her belief that jazz was uniquely Black American did not mean that Williams subscribed to the conventional jazz narrative found in the work of Marshall Sterns and other jazz historiographers of the time. In fact, she was surprisingly careful to point out that her concept of jazz also had “nothing to do with New

⁵² Williams, *The History of Jazz*.

⁵³ Williams, “Interview with Mary Lou Williams,” *Jazz Women USA*.

⁵⁴ Williams, concert at Rockhurst University, May 1980, unmarked box, Mary Lou Williams Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University.

⁵⁵ Although Joplin’s piano rolls do depart from the published score, the fidelity of these rolls remains in question; see Rudi Blesh, introduction to *The Collected Works of Scott Joplin* (New York: New York Public Library, 1971), xxxix. Furthermore, improvised ragtime playing may have been widespread. See Edward A. Berlin, “Ragtime and Improvised Piano: Another View,” *Journal of Jazz Studies* 4, no. 2 (1977): 4.

Orleans or Africa.”⁵⁶ Rev. Peter O’Brien reproduces but refines Williams’s opinion at the Rockhurst University lecture-recital, stating, “It’s only one style of music which came out of New Orleans.”⁵⁷ O’Brien goes on to say that jazz more accurately came out of the American South as a whole. Williams’s subordination of Africanism may be attributed to her narrow conception of “African” music. She attributes jazz’s African legacy to the drums, further asserting that the connection is unsuitable because “what’s played on the drums here is not what they play in Africa.”⁵⁸ In her recorded lecture-recitals and interviews, she neglects other commonly cited African jazz elements, such as call and response and community engagement. And while she doesn’t cite polyrhythm specifically as an African or American element, she insinuates that it is absent from jazz in the United States. In fact, Williams objects to more than just African origins. She negates Latin influences and denies any combination of cultures as part of jazz’s beginnings: “Because it came out of suffering of the first early Black slaves and it’s all American. It has nothing to do with Africa or Latin American music.”⁵⁹ Her denial of multiple sources of origin is evidence of her quest to preserve the US identity of jazz, and, by extension, her own identity. In order for her to contribute to the canon, she must relocate jazz and its origins to align with her own.

Williams’s jazz history lacks several prominent stylistic categories, further revealing the ways that she negotiates her own place the canon. While her well-publicized dislike of post-bop jazz explains the lack of cool, modal, hard bop, and avant-garde styles such as free and fusion, it does not account for the absence of Dixieland jazz and swing. While Kansas City swing plays a prominent role in her lecture-recitals—she calls it “the greatest era of them all”—she consistently refers to “Kansas City swing” instead of the general “swing.” She also discards the term Dixieland, perhaps because of its close association with New Orleans. Where, then, would many of the most famous jazz musicians from the 1920s and the 1930s fit into Williams’s history? Could it be possible that Williams didn’t consider the New York musician Duke Ellington jazz? Was Louis Armstrong jazz, in spite of conforming poorly to the categories “ragtime” or “Kansas City Swing”? Williams answers these questions by giving several Harlem musicians, including Duke Ellington (and seventeen others who played with Ellington), Chick Webb, and Benny Carter, leaves on the Jazz Family

⁵⁶ Williams, concert at University of Michigan, restored recording for NPR broadcast, May 6, 2012 (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126553362>).

⁵⁷ Williams, concert at Rockhurst University.

⁵⁸ Handy and Williams, “First Lady of the Jazz Keyboard,” 201-202.

⁵⁹ Williams, *A Grand Night for Swinging*.

Tree. “Ragtime,” too, seems to include musicians traditionally categorized as Dixieland, with such artists as Kid Ory, Sidney Bechet, and King Oliver. Ragtime, in Williams’s view, served as a location-nonspecific term that covered Dixieland and New Orleans jazz musicians. By emphasizing Kansas City—her own origins—and de-emphasizing New Orleans, she again maps jazz history onto her own history.⁶⁰

Williams utilizes traditional periodizations, yet she reforms these categories and deemphasizes rigid stylistic features. If she rejects traditional categorization techniques, what use is periodization to her at all? Tucker notes that periodization itself is a commercial venture, which she encourages us to “[approach] as advertisements that must be analyzed and problematized.”⁶¹ However, performed histories reveal ways that musicians themselves—not music business executives—utilized periodization for their own purposes. Periodization for musicians like Mary Lou Williams provided a socio-cultural category for understanding their own music and experiences in a way that transcended the music industry. This understanding was sometimes reached retrospectively, positioning the musician in terms of what her music was *not* (avant-garde, modern, swing, or any number of other categories that musicians wished to separate themselves from). Sometimes periodization was utilized during the period itself, which served in part commercially and in part to endear the musicians to the colleagues they wished to associate themselves with.

Traditional period labels such as “spiritual,” “blues,” and “bebop” give Williams entry points into jazz historiography while allowing her to detail her overarching philosophies. Although the lecture-recitals and the styles on the Jazz Tree conform to a linear narrative, they also purport to teach the audience about the feeling and strains of jazz. In this way, again, Williams challenges a prevailing jazz historiography organized around specific harmonic approaches, stylistic innovations, or melodic patterns. For example, Williams presents the spiritual not as a genre but as a “feeling,” which she calls “the permanent characteristic of good jazz.”⁶² She then connects the spiritual (commonly accepted as a “root”) with jazz, allowing her to assert, “jazz was created out of

⁶⁰ Additionally, Williams may have rejected “Dixieland” and “swing” as revivalist and commercial terms respectively, which would also poorly align with her concept of jazz as an African-American art form.

⁶¹ Tucker, *Swing Shift*, 17. For a broader discussion of the forces that shape 20th century musical genres, see David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2016).

⁶² Tucker, *Swing Shift*, 17.

spirituals,” without referring to any specific characteristics.⁶³ Additionally, her focus on the spiritual “feeling” and her performance of a Catholic-coded piece allows her to construct a jazz history that aligns with her faith. Like the spiritual “feeling,” the blues, too, transforms into a “blues feeling,” instead of a genre with its own practitioners, chords, and timbres. These “feelings,” instead of emphasizing an evolutionary process in which musical elements connect styles only through the previous or following iterations, allow for a coherent narrative that provides a definition for the term “jazz.” Furthermore, her avoidance of technical terminology permits her to speak to a general audience. Instead of discussions of Charles Mingus’s metric modulations, Ornette Coleman’s amorphous “harmolodic theory,” and the typical bebop musician’s thirteenth chords and leading tones that might be too complex for a general audience, Williams speaks directly to every person’s instinctive musicality. Jazz, posits Williams, should be “healing to the soul,” and the medicines are the spiritual and blues feelings. By positing a “healing” framework for jazz, Williams distances her music from other musicians’ works that she did not consider healing.

If, according to Williams, the spiritual and the blues could indicate the spirit of good jazz, other styles and musical techniques could poison jazz as well as its listeners. Williams’s religious and musical beliefs caused her to take issue with newer forms of jazz and other types of music she viewed as contaminating jazz. On the left side of the Jazz Tree’s canopy, Williams includes several leafless branches with blunt ends. These branches illustrate jazz’s dead ends, and include the labels “commercial rock,” “avant garde,” “black magic,” “cult music,” “exercises,” and “classical books.” While the cryptic “black magic” and “cult music” may refer to Williams’s deep Catholic faith, the other dead ends may raise eyebrows, particularly with regard to the many avant-garde musicians who contributed landmark performances during the Civil Rights Era. Those who knew Williams well, though, would have been more surprised to see her pass up an opportunity to denigrate the avant-garde.

Williams rationalizes her dislike of avant-garde musicians by distancing them from the jazz canon. Closely tied with “suffering,” her main criteria for inclusion in the canon is the blues, emphasized by the repetition of the word “blues” on the tree and supported by statements in her lecture-recitals. Her focus on the blues allows her to include musicians that would normally be excluded on the basis of their avant-garde music. One may assume, for example, that Williams’s

⁶³ Mary Lou Williams, “Interview with Mary Lou Williams,” interview by Will Moyle, “Essence of Jazz” WXXI radio broadcast, 1977.

concept of the jazz canon would categorically exclude John Coltrane because of his late experiments in free and avant-garde jazz, exemplified by his 1966 album *Meditations*. However, she had great respect for Coltrane, at one point saying “everyone’s trying to play like Coltrane, but they didn’t know that Coltrane was a great giant, he could play everything.”⁶⁴ Williams thought that Coltrane was admirable because he was able to play in all styles, including the ones Williams considered legitimate. In her 1978 University of Michigan lecture-recital, she again tries to reconcile Coltrane with her personal philosophy, saying, “Without the blues in the music—even in the modern era—if that’s missing, it’s cold. Even Coltrane had that in his music. The blues.” However, she didn’t condone all of Coltrane’s activities, although she didn’t always admit this sentiment to the public. In a letter to her friend and confidante, Brother Mario, she wrote, “The musicians of today are playing the upsetment of the world. These young cats had gotten ahold of Coltrane before he died. You’ll faint when you hear what they are playing. And most of it is evil to listen to. Real jazz soothes the soul, makes one happy.”⁶⁵

Jazz fellowship was of concern to Williams, and she believed that free jazz and rock lacked fellowship. In a conversation with one of her students at Duke, she says, “the free cats...they’ll come up on the stand and everybody goes for himself.”⁶⁶ Real jazz, for Williams, was a form of musical love: “I almost hated a guy, and when he got up on the stand, I loved him.... while you’re playing, it’s love and togetherness.”⁶⁷ To her, free jazz represented selfishness.

WILLIAMS’S EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHIES

Two other dead branches on the Jazz Tree provide insight into how Williams perceived jazz’s devolution: “exercises” and “classical books.” Williams was most active as a lecturer during the 1970s, a period of intense growth for jazz education. Along with institutional jazz education came teaching pedagogies that advocated for the study of scales and patterns to use as building blocks for improvisatory creation. Williams finds this method objectionable:

Improv cannot be easily explained. The moment a soloist’s hand touches his instrument, ideas start to flow from the mind, through the heart and

⁶⁴ Williams, “Interview with Mary Lou Williams,” interview with Will Moyle.

⁶⁵ Kernodle, *Soul on Soul*, 247.

⁶⁶ Mary Lou Williams Lecture, 1977-10-11, Department of Music audiovisual recordings, 1951-1996 and undated, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

⁶⁷ Mary Lou Williams Lecture, 1977-10-11.

out the fingertips. Or at least it is the way it should be. Therefore, if the mind stops, there are no ideas, just mechanical patterns. If the heart doesn't fulfill its role, there will be very little feeling or none at all.⁶⁸

She called these musicians who don't connect the heart with the fingers "real robots."⁶⁹ The cultural hegemony of "classical music," which standardizes training techniques that dictate the pathway to musical expression, is detrimental to the "spiritual feeling" that Williams is careful to prioritize.⁷⁰

Her appointment to a faculty post at Duke University in 1977 may seem inconsistent with her core belief of non-standardized education. The jazz historian Frank Tirro helped to arrange this appointment, one of the first faculty positions given to an African American female jazz musician. Ironically, that same year, she gave an interview in which she said, "jazz cannot be taught out of schools and books."⁷¹ She went on to detail the experience of her mother, whose ear she said was destroyed by piano lessons, dooming her to a life of only reading music instead of creating and improvising. Consequently, her mother forbade her daughter from taking formalized piano lessons. "If you touch anyone like myself," Williams said, "you'll destroy it."⁷² The seeming contradiction between her feelings on institutionalized education and her position as an institutional educator is somewhat resolved by her choice of teaching methods. A consummate performer, she taught almost entirely from behind the piano, compelling her students to sing and experience jazz as viscerally as possible. Often she would complete discussion of just one or two songs per class session. She valued learning by participating over all other forms of education. She often advised young musicians to "get away from some of the teaching," espousing a different type of practicing.⁷³ When asked if she practiced at all, she responded, "yes, with my mind. My mind moves my fingers."⁷⁴ Rustin attributes her focus on the mind as a rejection of the male body: "We note throughout her lack of discussion of the male body as relevant to performance or the music. Rather, her attention is focused on the mental work of music, with emphasis placed on 'masculine' characteristics such as discipline, strength, experimentation, and

⁶⁸ Williams, *The History of Jazz*.

⁶⁹ Williams, handwritten note, Series 3 box 2, Mary Lou Williams Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University.

⁷⁰ By her death in 1981, Williams had just begun to experience the rebirth of bebop in the form of "bebop revival" or neoclassicism. One wonders if she would have found Wynton Marsalis, who is clearly versed in blues and bop chords, a "real robot."

⁷¹ Williams, "Interview with Mary Lou Williams," Interview by Will Moyle.

⁷² Williams, "Interview with Mary Lou Williams," Interview by Will Moyle.

⁷³ Handy and Williams, "First Lady of the Jazz Keyboard," 197.

⁷⁴ Handy and Williams, "First Lady of the Jazz Keyboard," 203

endurance.”⁷⁵ Williams further advocated practicing without playing by telling her students to listen: “If you sit down and listen; study it; pick it out, you’ll come out just about the way I did.”⁷⁶ She extended this type of advice in her private lessons, saying, “sometimes my students ask me what the chord is. I tell them, ‘when you find it, I’ll tell you.’”⁷⁷

On the other side of the coin, she considered leaving the young musician to operate without direction to be dangerous. The final dead branch, “commercial rock,” speaks to both jazz-rock fusion (immensely popular at the time of Williams’s lecture-recitals) as well as popular music. Jazz-rock, which is often based on the repetitive patterns of funk, was devoid of the blues and therefore inferior. Even worse, rock music took talented children away from jazz. In an interview with Will Moyle, she laments the talented musicians that left jazz for rock, saying, “If a kid two or three years old is born playing jazz, he hears this awful rock on TV, and it’s destroyed. Nothing happens with him after that; he goes right into that [rock].”⁷⁸ In the 1960s and 1970s, young Black people were viewing jazz less and less as an expression of their African American values and turning toward more popular styles. Although these youth weren’t necessarily turning to rock—which, following Chuck Berry and Little Richard’s promising beginnings, alienated Black consumers and musicians through the business model of album-oriented rock radio—they were looking towards popular styles of funk, soul, and R&B as expressive vehicles.⁷⁹

Williams further espouses her controversial views on the dangers of straying too far from the healing powers of jazz in her draft sketches of the Jazz Tree. She experimented with several different versions of the Jazz Tree before settling

⁷⁵ Rustin, “Mary Lou Williams Plays Like a Man,” 459.

⁷⁶ Handy and Williams, “First Lady of the Jazz Keyboard,” 208.

⁷⁷ Handy and Williams, “First Lady of the Jazz Keyboard,” 197.

⁷⁸ Williams, “Interview with Mary Lou Williams,” Interview by Will Moyle.

⁷⁹ Williams found these youthful musical preferences in the Duke student body upon her arrival. Her classes were at first filled almost entirely with white students, while the small number of Black students on campus avoided not only her, but anything having to do with jazz. Williams had found herself encountering a new generation of Black students who had largely rejected jazz as a music of their race, associating it more with Uncle Tom entertainer stereotypes such as Cab Calloway and Louis Armstrong. The age demographic was new, but the underlying concept was old for Williams. The manner in which Williams spoke at Duke about jazz and its connections to the soul and spirit won over the students. As she became an established presence on campus, Black students started attending her courses, including the Black radicals that she got to know in the dining hall (Dahl, *Morning Glory*, 342). Similar to how she brought Black culture to the liturgy, Williams also brought Black culture to Duke’s music program.

on the one pictured above. In these sketches, she vacillates between a tree that represented musicians affirmatively and one that represented them derogatorily.

In one sketch, Williams delineates the same categories of jazz as in the final version—spirituals, ragtime, Kansas City (KC) swing, and bop—but above bop, she writes, “creation stopped.” Instead of bursting into leafy life with admired musicians, the tree’s branches end bluntly with musicians Williams disapproved of: Keith Jarrett, [Dave] Brubeck, Stan Kenton, and Ahmad Jamal. Along with their unenviable positions above the harsh phrase, “creation stopped,” Williams made her feelings on some of these musicians clear in conversation, too. For example, about Dave Brubeck, Williams said: “Never in the history of jazz has the phrasing been like it is in bop. Musicians like Dave Brubeck come up with different styles which may be interesting. But they are not bop.”⁸⁰ Bop, as her last jazz category, forms the basis for evaluating younger musicians, and Brubeck doesn’t qualify as worthy.

Other Jazz Tree sketches are arranged with less obvious bias. Another sheet of source material for the Jazz Tree includes a sentence that describes the problem Williams had with Jamal: “suffering of the growth created such artists who were ashamed of slaves... Miles Davis, McCoy Tyner, Ahmad Jamal, Billy Taylor. [*sic*]⁸¹ Next to that, she raises the question of Benny Goodman again, including him in a cryptic list:

1. Benny Goodman
2. Paul Whiteman
3. Billy Taylor
4. Jelly Roll [Morton]
5. Bill Evans
6. McCoy Tyner
7. Ahmad Jamal
- [8, 9, and 10 are listed but are blank]

A sentence on the side of the paper seems to illuminate her problem with these musicians: “Time to give credit and honor to slaves.” While Williams doesn’t make the connection explicit, the musicians on her list are unified in that each one approached jazz in a way that didn’t fit with Williams’s spirituals-, blues- and bop-organized history. Paul Whiteman, discussed previously, notoriously

⁸⁰ Mary Lou Williams, “In Her Own Words,” *Melody Maker* (May 22, 1954), Reproduced in Max Jones, *Jazz Talking: Profiles, Interviews, and Other Riffs on Jazz Musicians* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2000).

⁸¹ This text-only sketch is not included here.

downplayed jazz's African American roots.⁸² Jelly Roll claimed to have invented jazz, consequently denying slave roots.⁸³ Billy Taylor, founder of the aforementioned Jazzmobile, called jazz "America's classical music"; Williams disdained connections between jazz and classical. And Goodman, although many labeled him a pioneer for musical integration, usurped the title "King of Swing" from those Black musicians whom Williams would have crowned.

For Williams, these musicians, in addition to the late Coltrane and Cecil Taylor, suffered from a loss of real feeling. She explains that this feeling is connected to the blues, saying, "some musicians that are artistic, has some of the blues strain left in their music."⁸⁴ This "blues strain" was obfuscated by what she considered empty displays of talent. These musicians were concerned only with "how fast they can play," neglecting the true spirit of jazz.⁸⁵ Furthermore, she considered their playing style to be mindless, noting that in her time, "The only time we'd do all that running-up-and-down-the-keyboard stuff was when we were lost and had stopped thinking."⁸⁶ The connection between the mind, the spirit, and the music forms the basis for her aesthetic criteria.

The example of avant-garde jazz she plays in her lecture-recitals, "A Fungus Amungus," is a visceral display of the coldness that Williams asserts has been lost. She introduces it by saying, "[there is] much kissing and hugging but very little charity and love."⁸⁷ She simultaneously refers to the superficiality of the musicians themselves as well as the superficiality of the music: they both appear jazz-like but lack substance. Williams uses this piece, more of a parody of avant-garde jazz than an example of it, to emphasize the difference between blues-based jazz forms and the type of free jazz that was popular in the 1960s. The piece, her own composition, features many of the elements that alienated jazz

⁸² In a set of notes outlining her *History of Jazz* lecture, she says about Whiteman (referring to him by his moniker), "And to think that some of our great white musicians have won the polls as King of Jazz. Wow! What a joke!" Williams, handwritten note, Series 3 box 2, Mary Lou Williams Collection, Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University.

⁸³ See Howard Reich and Williams M. Gaines, *Jelly's Blues: The Life, Music, and Redemption of Jelly Roll Morton* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2003) for investigation of this claim.

⁸⁴ Williams, *The History of Jazz*.

⁸⁵ Handy and Williams, "First Lady of the Jazz Keyboard," 211.

⁸⁶ In the full quote, Williams explains why she doesn't discuss pianists after Bud Powell: "Since Bud's time, pianists seem only to be concerned with how fast they can play—how much technique they have. But jazz is more than that." Handy and Williams, "First Lady of the Jazz Keyboard," 211.

⁸⁷ Williams, *The History of Jazz*. According to Lorraine Gillespie, the title of this piece comes from a preacher who exclaimed during a service, "There's a fungus among us." Pochonet, Gérard. 1964. Liner notes for *Mary Lou Williams Presents Black Christ of the Andes*, Folkway Records FJ 2843.

fans but fascinated jazz musicians in the 1960s: tone clusters, unpredictable phrasing, and a lack of a steady beat, resulting in seeming chaos.⁸⁸ Her rendition of “A Fungus Amungus” varied greatly from performance to performance—the song has no identifiable melody or harmonic scheme beyond striking dissonance—but was conspicuous in its differences from the other blues-based pieces on the programs.

WILLIAMS’S VOICE

Although I have detailed many instances where Williams voices her philosophies, Williams actually speaks little during her lecture-recitals and even less during her classroom lectures. Instead, she uses music to communicate ideas and values. Even in her Duke classroom Peter O’Brien lectured and handled the course’s assignments. What are we to make of a history teacher who rarely speaks? According to O’Connell and Tucker, to truly hear women’s experience in jazz we must develop new ways of listening that incorporate orality in addition to speech: the practice of listening to a person’s words, their speech style, and their pauses and absent words.⁸⁹

While Williams utilizes the spoken word, she more often uses recordings and performance to speak for her. Williams does not lecture. We can understand this silence as a coping mechanism for dealing with the trauma of experiencing what O’Connell and Tucker call “jazz women’s experience of jazz sociality.”⁹⁰ In her introductory remarks to a 1977 performance with the Duke jazz ensemble, Williams hints at this experience, saying, “I don’t want to talk too much, because I never did [talk] much, all I did was think music, sweet music, and when I would try to talk the guys in the band would say ‘shut up’ and I kept my mouth closed for 30 years and Father Peter O’Brien opened it for me.”⁹¹ Her silence may have been a survival technique as a woman playing and traveling with all-male bands; both Williams as well as Melba Liston detail the ways that being a

⁸⁸ In a warning to her listeners before performing “A Fungus Amungus,” she says, “They’ve taken all of the feeling out of the music... don’t become frightened because you’re gonna hear a lot of noise.” (concert at Rockhurst University, 1980)

⁸⁹ O’Connell and Tucker, for example, adopt an idea from Frank Farmer and Margaret Strain: “paying attention to what is not said might help scholars develop a repertoire of discernments to inform the use and interpretation of oral histories.” O’Connell and Tucker, “Not One to Toot Her Own Horn,” 124.

⁹⁰ O’Connell and Tucker, “Not One to Toot Her Own Horn,” 126.

⁹¹ Duke Jazz Band concert with Mary Lou Williams and Frank Tirro, 1978-12-01, Department of Music audiovisual recordings, 1951-1996 and undated, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

woman jazz performer was dangerous socially, physically, and sexually.⁹² Her religious conversion allowed her to realize the importance of communicating her own narrative, a development enabled by her institutional connections and working (and spiritual) relationship with O'Brien. However, she never became fully comfortable, and therefore let the music, and O'Brien, speak for her in her classes.⁹³

Williams speaks through both her own music as well as the music of others, which she uses extensively in her class sessions. Her students, despite being nonmusicians, were expected to listen and vocally reproduce what they were hearing immediately. Occasionally, Williams or O'Brien pause to define a term that they clearly hadn't planned on defining: arranging, in one example, or chord changes in another. Still, Williams placed a lot of faith in her musically green students. In one example, she teaches several versions of "I'm In the Mood For Love." First, she plays a version by Charlie Parker, followed by another by James Moody. Finally, she plays King Pleasure's "Moody's Mood for Love," a vocalese version of Moody's solo from the saxophonist's recording of the tune. She also plays the original melody several times on the piano. The class is given no pedagogical reason for learning these songs until halfway through the second class session—a full hour and a half after they began the exercise. At this point Williams tells them, "you're improvising," a surprising statement since few people would consider what they were doing—singing someone else's music note for note—improvisation. The exercise is difficult, and the students struggle with King Pleasure's rapid vocal line. Despite its difficulty, the students are experiencing jazz's "good feelings" rather than hearing an academic viewpoint. This teaching strategy mirrors the informal educational system that produced Williams herself.

CONCLUSION

Williams's educational activities at Duke and in her college lecture-recitals can be understood as sites for her own type of jazz proselytization. She consciously connects certain types of music with darkness and devilishness and passes these ideals on to college-aged adults. She advocates for her students to experience certain forms of jazz as a healing, connective force. These spiritual ideas are

⁹² For more information, see my chapter, "Accessing Jazz's Gendered Places and Spaces," in *The Routledge Companion to Jazz and Gender*, eds. James Reddan, Monika Herzig, and Michael Kahr (New York: Routledge, 2022).

⁹³ Dahl notes that Williams's and O'Brien's relationship during the Duke years was strained; thus, her reluctance to speak may further be interpreted as a coping mechanism to avoid conflict with a man who held spiritual power over her. *Morning Glory*, 348.

reinforced through her participatory teaching philosophy, which prioritizes performance as the primary means for understanding jazz.

Her belief in jazz's healing powers, its "feelings," and the music's "true spirit" all speak to Williams's intense personal connection with jazz and its history. Such personal experiences can be hidden in traditional jazz historiography. Performed histories, created by the musicians like Williams who "played all the eras," demonstrate jazz's stylistic transformation from the inside. Moreover, performances like those of Williams distance jazz history from the canonization wars. Whereas jazz historiographers often draw a small, sanctioned list of recorded masterworks from a massive body of music, Williams's history deemphasizes the recorded work, highlighting the malleable beauty of jazz compositions. Williams gives her students and audiences reasons to reconnect with jazz or experience it for the first time. If canonization creates a musical museum, performed histories like Williams's display real-time contestation of the established canon. With Mary Lou Williams, we can peek out of that museum's doors to see the complex, controversial, and potentially healing world of jazz beyond.

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