



# **Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams**

*Tammy Kernodle*

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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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