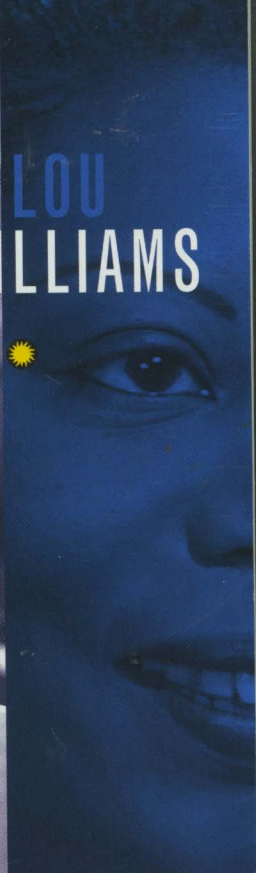




MARY LOU  
WILLIAMS  
ZODIAC  
SUITE

SMITHSONIAN/FOLKWAYS



# MARY LOU WILLIAMS

## ZODIAC SUITE

Previously released in 1945 as Asch 620 and 621  
and in 1975 as Folkways 32844

Original sessions produced by Moses Asch

Reissue compiled and produced by Matt Walters  
Associate producer: Father Peter F. O'Brien, The  
Mary Lou Williams Foundation, Inc.

Newly annotated by Dan Morgenstern and Mary  
Lou Williams

Cover photo courtesy of the Michael Ochs Archive

Smithsonian/Folkways proudly celebrates  
the 50th anniversary of the original Asch  
Records release of Mary Lou Williams'  
master work *Zodiac Suite*. This reissue  
includes 6 unreleased performances mas-  
tered from the original acetates.

"Mary Lou Williams is perpetually contem-  
porary...her music retains—and maintains—  
a standard of quality that is timeless. She is  
like soul on soul." —Duke Ellington

1. ARIES \* 1:48
2. TAURUS 2:33
3. GEMINI \* 2:08
4. CANCER \* 2:31
5. LEO 1:43
6. VIRGO \* 2:26
7. LIBRA 2:09
8. SCORPIO \* 3:01
9. SAGITTARIUS 1:50
10. CAPRICORN 2:38
11. AQUARIUS \* 3:38
12. PISCES 2:31
13. ARIES 2:17
14. CANCER 2:36
15. VIRGO 2:44
16. SCORPIO 3:10
17. AQUARIUS 2:40

\*previously unreleased



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All tracks copyrighted by Cecilia Music, Inc.  
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## INTRODUCTION

by Dan Morgenstern

When she composed the *Zodiac Suite*, her first extended work, in 1945, Mary Lou Williams was 35 years old, but had already been a full-fledged professional for more than 20 of those years. Actually, she had been earning money as a performer since the age of six, when she was known as "the little piano girl" and was in demand for informal recitals, school dances, picnics, and other community events. She was a natural.

It would be demeaning, and politically incorrect, to call Mary Lou Williams "the greatest female jazz musician," though she was frequently described that way during her lifetime—1910 to 1981. In fact she was a great and unique figure in jazz history, a pianist, arranger and composer who never ceased to be up-to-date throughout her long career. Duke Ellington, who had a way with words as well as with notes, put it best: "Mary Lou Williams is perpetually contemporary.

Her writing and performing are and have always been just a little ahead throughout her career...her music retains—and maintains—a standard of quality that is timeless. She is like soul on soul."

It was always impossible to categorize her music, to classify and pigeon-hole her in the fashion dear to musicologists. And she took pride in that: "No one can put a style on me," she told Whitney Balliett. "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." Yet her music, through six decades, was consistently and recognizably her own, infused with a distinctive and delightful personality. And it was always, as she herself proudly maintained, in the jazz tradition.

Mary, as her friends called her (and since I was fortunate to count myself among these, I'll use that familiar form from here on in), had almost no formal musical training. Her mother, whom she

startled when, at age three, she picked out a melody while sitting on her mama's lap at the harmonium, played keyboards but wasn't able to instruct her daughter. Musicians would come to the house (by then, she had moved with her mother and siblings from her native Atlanta to Pittsburgh) and show her things, and she would learn from watching them play. She also taught herself fingerings and tunes by slowing down rolls on the player piano—just as young Duke Ellington had done.

Her earliest influences—aside from unknown if talented local players—were Jelly Roll Morton, whose tunes she loved (and who gruffly told her she wasn't playing his *The Pearls* right when she performed for him at 13 or so, but then deigned to show her how it should be done) and fellow Pittsburgher Earl Hines, seven years her senior and very encouraging. She was gifted with perfect pitch and an equally perfect ear and able to memorize instantly what she heard. Another early influence, Fats Waller, was working on the score to a musical when she was

introduced to him by a musician friend, who bet the already formidably proportioned pianist-composer that the then 17-year old (and younger-looking) would be able to play back for him anything he chose to perform. He snorted, but when Mary reproduced with uncanny accuracy the brand-new, unpublished tunes Fats had played, she recalled that "he picked me up and threw me in the air. I didn't weigh more than eighty or ninety pounds."

Not so well known (as a pianist, if famous as half of the comedy-and-dance team of Buck and Bubbles) was Ford Lee "Buck" Washington, who came through and was delighted to meet "the little piano girl" and showed her some stuff. This included a very special run down the entire keyboard, which Mary adopted and which in turn was appropriated by another great influence and lifelong friend, Art Tatum, whom Mary first encountered in the late 1920s in Cleveland.

By then she was "on the road," playing in the small group led by her first husband-to-be, reedman John

Williams. They'd met when Mary was recruited as a panic replacement for the pianist with the touring show led by comedian Buzzin' Harris, who'd suddenly disappeared during a Pittsburgh stand. Since it was summer, and school was out, her mother and stepfather reluctantly gave the 15-year-old permission to tour with the show. This was on the notorious T.O.B.A. circuit (the initials stood for "Theater Owners' Booking Association" but performers reinterpreted them as "Tough On Black Asses"), which specialized in black theaters, many if not most of which offered very few amenities backstage and less than generous compensation. But in spite of the hardships, young Mary took to the performing life immediately, and though she returned to high school at summer's end, it wasn't for long.

John Williams, who led the band for Buzzin' Harris, had been most impressed with Mary's keyboard skills, and persuaded her to rejoin the show. When it folded, Williams quickly found another berth for his band with the dance team of Jeanette and Seymour,

at that time the only African-American act that toured on the prestigious Keith vaudeville circuit. When Seymour died of a heart attack in November 1926, Jeanette briefly carried on; then Mary (now married to John Williams) moved to Memphis, her husband's home town, and played in his band at a local ballroom. When John decided to join trumpeter T. Holder's band, Mary became leader of the Williams Synco-Jazzers.

By then, the band had already made its recording debut, for Paramount and Gennett in Chicago in February, March and May of 1927. Though only four of the 12 sides cut were ever issued, they give us our first glimpse of Mary's piano skills. John Williams' replacement in what now was Mary's band was none other than Jimmie Lunceford, famous band leader to be but then a journeyman saxophonist. When the Holder band picked Oklahoma City as its home base, Williams sent for his wife to join him there. The band was by all accounts an excellent one, but there was as yet no

role for Mary in it, and for a while she made some extra money driving a hearse. (She'd been driving since she was 12, and her skills were legendary.) She also sewed and manicured for the musicians. Mary never had children, but throughout her life she mothered musicians, whom she referred to as her "boys," and they, in turn, loved and respected her and acted as her protectors when life on the road got a bit rough—as it often did. On occasion, when the Holder band found itself confronted with an unenthusiastic audience, Mary would be called upon to perform one of her piano specialties—at this time, she excelled in boogie woogie—and this would invariably get a big response. We wouldn't dare to put it that way, but Mary herself in later years proudly related that "people were surprised to hear a little 90-pound girl play the piano like a man."

Now things began to move in Mary's musical favor. Mary had gone back for a visit to Pittsburgh, but after T. Holder had been deposed by his bandsmen (apparently for shortchanging them on

gigs) and the band, now led by bassist Andy Kirk, had relocated to Kansas City, Mary rejoined them there. Kansas City was then a veritable hotbed of jazz—nightlife thrived under the corrupt political leadership of boss Tom Pendergast—and Mary soon found herself in constant demand at the now legendary jam sessions that were a fixture of the city's musical landscape.

Andy Kirk, a well-schooled musician, quickly noted that Mary had a gift for inventing original piano pieces. One of her first was Froggy Bottom, a blues. He encouraged her to try her hand at arranging, and helped her improve her musical reading and writing skills. She still wasn't playing regularly with the band. In late 1929, Brunswick Records made a field trip to Kansas City, recording local talent in a makeshift studio at a hotel. The talent scouts, Jack Kapp (later founder of Decca Records) and Dick Voynow (a pianist and former leader of the Wolverines of Bix Beiderbecke fame), quickly spotted the Kirk band. Of the eight sides cut (two of them issued as



by "John Williams and his Memphis Stompers" on Vocalion, the others as by "Andy Kirk and his Twelve Clouds of Joy" on Brunswick), three were Mary Lou Williams compositions and arrangements (Lotta Sax Appeal, Mess-A-Stomp, Froggy Bottom), and she was in the piano chair for all of them. And Kapp was so impressed that he recorded Mary in her first solo role (Night Life and Drag 'Em) in Chicago in April of 1930.

Yet it was not until 16 months later—in March of 1931—that Mary joined the Kirk band as its regular pianist, though she already was its musical brain. Unfortunately—aside from a Victor session with Blanche Calloway (Cab's singing sister) fronting the band in 1931—the Clouds of Joy would not record again for a full five years, until Kapp enlisted them for his Decca label.

The band had been doing pretty well, mostly touring the mid- and southwest, but its fortunes took an upward turn after it came up with a big hit, waxed just one month after its first

Decca date. This was a new song, Until the Real Thing Comes Along, featuring the band's vocalist, Pha Terrell, who had one of those high tenor voices beloved by African-American (and white) audiences (vide Jimmie Lunceford's Dan Grissom, Claude Hopkins' Orlando Roberson, and Ellington's Herb Jeffries) and despised by the budding breed of jazz critics. The record made the Kirk band, and facilitated the recording of many Mary Lou Williams instrumentals—as well as lots of Terrell vocals, of course. Among the 109 issued Kirk sides made until Mary left the band in May 1942, there are such gems as Steppin' Pretty (one of Mary's—and my—favorites), Walkin' and Swingin', Mary's Idea, In the Groove, Twinklin', Scratchin' in the Gravel, and so many more, including a well-earned tribute, The Lady Who Swings the Band.

Under Mary's musical direction, the Kirk band, which emerged on records from Kansas City just before Count Basie, had a softer, gentler touch than the Basie crew, but was just as deeply

rooted in the blues, which was always a key element in Mary's music. "The blues," she said late in life, "is really the healing force in all forms of jazz—no matter how far out. You can play all of it—way out chords, fast technique and everything, and put this feeling and approach of the blues in it." She herself and tenorman Dick Wilson (1911-41) were the band's stand-out soloists, but the underrated clarinetist John Harrington and the fine trombonist Ted Donnelly could also be counted on, and trumpeter Harry Lawson, a master of blues, was a special favorite of Mary's.

Her brilliant arranging for Kirk didn't go unnoticed, and Mary did plenty of freelance work for other leaders, Benny Goodman, with whom she had a special personal relationship, got one of her all-time best, Roll 'Em, and the excellent Camel Hop. For Lunceford, she penned What's Your Story Morning Glory (which, as she eventually managed to prove legally, became the basis for the hit song Black Coffee), and for Ellington, she did a

rousing version of Blue Skies that became known as Trumpets No End. and she also wrote for Louis Armstrong, Earl Hines, Glen Gray, and Tommy Dorsey. But her work for the Kirk crew—as close-knit as an extended family, musically and personally—has a very special flavor. It ranks with the very best of the Swing Era, and musicians listened avidly—among them Thelonious Monk, whom Mary had first met in the early '30s in Kansas City, when the pianist came through with a touring evangelist's tent show. They struck up a lasting friendship. Monk certainly paid attention to Mary's output with the Kirk band—especially the last eight bars of Walkin' and Swingin', which would be instantly recognizable to all who know Monk's famous Rhythm-a-ning—as Ira Gitler has pointed out.

By the time Mary left Kirk in May of 1942, she had divorced John Williams and married trumpeter Harold "Shorty" Baker, then also with Kirk. It was when Baker was hired by Duke Ellington that Mary decided to go with him rather

than to stay on with Kirk, but after some dozen years, she was ready for a change of musical scene. For a while, Ellington had her travel with the band as a member of his arranging staff. But the marriage didn't last, and Mary decided to settle in New York, where she was quickly hired by the astute Barney Josephson, owner of Cafe Society, the Greenwich Village night club that featured outstanding jazz, blues and comedy and—unique for its day—catered to integrated audiences.

## THE ORIGINS OF THE ZODIAC SUITE

Mary thrived in an environment that included Billie Holiday, Josh White, trumpeter Frankie Newton, dancer Pearl Primus, and comedienne Imogene Coca, all of whom became special friends. When Josephson branched out and opened his Cafe Society Uptown on the fashionable East Side of Manhattan, Mary alternated between the two venues. It was here that the Zodiac Suite was born.

"I read a book about astrology," Mary told me in 1975, when the suite was about to be reissued on LP, "and though I didn't know too much about it, I decided to do the suite as based on musicians I knew born under the various signs." Thus it wasn't a deep or abiding interest in the pseudo-science of the stars that attracted Mary; rather, she found the signs and their presumed characteristics a handy way to sketch musical portraits of specific persons and general psychological states and attitudes.

At that time, Mary had her own weekly radio program on station

WNEW ("Barney got it for me," she said) and decided to introduce one of the signs each Sunday on the program. She wrote the first three ahead of radio time, but then, as she told John S. Wilson, "I was just without ideas. I couldn't write any more; my inspiration had left me. So what I did to finish (the suite)... I composed while I was playing. I'm at my best composing that way." And she elucidated further: "I don't consider myself a composer-arranger. That's part of it. But the basic thing is the piano, because I can do so many things on the piano—switching and changing, and doing things... my arranging and composing comes while I'm playing piano. All the things I recorded with Andy Kirk (and didn't get paid for; I lost them all because I didn't have them copyrighted) I just sat down and played, and my composing and arranging flows from playing." Put succinctly, she was a quintessential jazz composer, with a very elusive borderline between composing and improvising.

There's nothing episodic about the suite, however. It's a cohesive piece of

music, and each movement is intrinsically related to the aspects of the sign it describes. Words and concepts like "impromptu" and "spontaneous" are not ordinarily ascribed to the kind of work Mary Lou Williams created with the Zodiac Suite. But then she was no ordinary musician. And of course by the time she recorded the piece she had been able to do some polishing.

Mary had been recording for Moe Asch for more than a year when she did the suite. Recording for Asch, she told John S. Wilson, "was different (from recording for others) because Moe had more love and more respect for jazz artists. Often he would take us for dinner—the nicest dinners, steak dinners, the nicest places—and it was his idea that an artist should be heard if they're talented. He'd turn the tape on and go away, let you record anything you wanted to, and it always worked out great...He'd just tell you to go ahead and record what you wanted to record...He did all kinds of things trying to get the artists heard. That was his main thing."

(Mary also tells about how Asch asked her to get Art Tatum and Erroll Garner to record for him, and that she told him Tatum would be quite expensive, quoting a figure of \$1500. In the event, once she got the two together, Tatum only charged half that sum. "I said, 'Why—he was willing to pay you more money,' and Tatum said, 'As great as that man is, I'd record for him for nothing.' That's how great Moe is.")

To record the suite, Mary enlisted the help of two Cafe Society colleagues, bassist Al Lucas and drummer Jack "The Bear" Parker, both of whom were then members of Eddie Heywood's popular little band. Lucas (1916-1983) was born in Ontario, Canada, started on piano, took up bass and tuba at 12 and came to New York at 16. After a long stint with the Sunset Royals (a big band), he worked with Coleman Hawkins, Hot Lips Page and Heywood, then briefly with Ellington. Erroll Garner, Teddy Wilson and Mary were some of the pianists he frequently worked with in trio formats; in contrast, he kept time for tenor booters Illinois Jacquet and Sam

"The Man" Taylor, touring Japan with the latter. Lots of New York studio work kept Lucas busy from the '60s on, but he could always be found on live jazz dates. Jack Parker's life is not well documented; he apparently left music by the '60s. He made his recording debut with singer Bon Bon Tunell in 1941, often worked (and recorded) with Hot Lips Page, and also made records with Don Byas, Cliff Jackson, Pete Johnson and Heywood.

"Al Lucas has terrific ears," Mary said. "He got a job with Duke Ellington after he played him the record of Aries. And Jack the Bear is a terrific drummer who could catch all the moves and moods without rehearsal. We set up a system of signals—I'd shake my head for them to stop and nod for them to come in—but that was all."

The Zodiac Suite was originally issued in 1945 on two 78 RPM albums, each album containing six selections on three 10-inch discs. Moe Asch was certainly a dedicated man, but his pressings were pretty awful. In 1945, it was very hard for small record companies

to obtain decent shellac, the key ingredient in the compound from which 78s were pressed (pressing was a problem, too). So the originally issued discs were quite noisy, and when Asch, produced by Mary's devoted manager, Fr. Peter O'Brien, decided to reissue the suite on LP, the transfers, apparently made from the discs—probably the session acetates could not be found—were hardly state-of-the-art.

The new transfers are far superior—but that's only part of the story. Now that the Asch archives are in the good hands of Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings, a project such as this can be given proper care and attention. Thus, when producer Matt Walters found numerous unissued takes from the Zodiac session on acetates, he carefully compared them to what had been originally issued. He decided, quite rightly, that some alternate versions were actually superior to the issued ones—and not only in sound, but musically as well. "Quite simply," said Walters, "the best source available musically made the final sequence at the head of the

program." Of these 12 selections, no less than six are previously unissued alternate versions. "The five selections in the second group are included," Walters continued, "because they had musical virtue and were distinct enough to merit inclusion. I felt it was best to separate them so the listener could have an uninterrupted musical experience with the twelve best takes, and then hear some alternates which follow in the same order as the original selections in the suite." (Of course, through the convenience offered by CD playback, a listener can also compare two versions of a movement back-to-back.)

In the following observations on the selections, comments in quotes are by Mary Lou Williams and were made in 1975, when the LP reissue was being prepared. Thus they always referred to the issued takes. And of course the dedications are hers as well.



## THE ZODIAC SUITE

By Dan Morgenstern

1. **Aries\*** is for Ben Webster (an old friend from Kansas City days and a great connoisseur of piano players; he could play some pretty good stride himself) and Billie Holiday, "for pioneers, people who create sounds and things you've never heard before. I'd do it much faster now." Interestingly, the alternate that begins our program is slower than the issued take, yet is a firmer and more effective performance, opening with a brilliant run up the keyboard. There's much interplay with bassist Lucas (this is a duo track) and both versions evoke the Jimmy Blanton-Duke Ellington collaborations. The slow middle section is more thoughtful (and longer) on the issued take (track 13), the dynamics more effective on this alternate.

2. **Taurus**, presented in a single, issued take, is dedicated to Duke, Ellis Larkins, and Mary herself. "Taurians are stubborn, they procrastinate, but they also know in what direction

they're going. Dig the rhythm section. These guys didn't know what I was going to play and they're following. That's real jazz. I'd arrange this today with a lot going on." There's a lot going on here, including whole tone scales before it goes into tempo and the blues. (Tempo changes, and alternation between sections in and out of tempo, are characteristic of the entire suite.) This was the first movement Mary wrote—she recorded it as "Taurus Mood" for World Transcriptions more than a year earlier—with the same sidemen.

3. **Gemini\***, the alternate presented here, is dedicated to Benny Goodman, Harold Baker, and Miles Davis ("Though I didn't know his sign then"), and the twins theme is represented by bass moving in one direction, piano in the other, and a playful theme contrasted with a boogie woogie segment. Mary had Shorty Baker in mind: "He'd get real barrelhouse (with a bit too much to drink), and then gentle and playful again."

4. **Cancer\*** is for Lem Davis, a fine, underrated alto saxist then with Eddie Heywood's band and one of the few musicians born under this sign Mary then knew. Again, the first heard alternate take is with bass only, the issued one (track 15) with drums added. The alternate is the more successful, if only because the rubato opening is harmonically more inventive. The main strain is a rather melancholy minor one. On the issued take, Parker, on brush, comes in after Lucas' solo passage.

5. **Leo**, heard as originally issued, opens with a drum roll and a piano fanfare. This is for Vic Dickenson, the great trombonist and a Mary Lou Williams favorite (he recorded with her for Asch on several occasions), who was then also in Eddie Heywood's Cafe Society band. "Proud but hip and very strong, Leos really know what they're doing. Vic plays those beautiful ballads; he can take an audience and hold them." The fanfare should be scored for three horns. It, and the drum roll, reappear before the intriguing ending.

6. **Virgo\*** (we hear the alternate first) is a boppish blues, with bassist Lucas the only partner; there's special interplay between these two here. Also very special is the glissando that opens the second eight in the swinging, improvised piano segment that follows the bass solo. This gliss was appropriated by Nat King Cole, whose touch in any case resembled Mary's. Interestingly they both began with Earl Hines as a strong piano model. Tatum also copped this Mary special—it may be the one she said she got from Buck Washington! It does not appear on the issued take (track 16), which is slightly more structured but not as buoyantly swinging. Virgo's dedicatee was Leonard Feather, "who loves blues."

7. **Libra** is "for very beautiful friends, for Dizzy, Art Tatum, Bud Powell, Monk. Libras become great friends. They're very charitable people. I like this!" This is the issued take, with a very pretty opening and attractive, impressionistic harmonic movement. A piano solo, it reminds this listener of some of Bix Beiderbecke's piano stuff—in mood and harmony.

8. **Scorpio\*** is heard first in the alternate version. It's a trio performance with a Tatumesque feel in the opening passages. An ostinato figure dominates and there are echoes of the blues and some pretty thirds. Lucas on bass and Parker on drums, cued in and out, again perform remarkably. Mary dedicated this to "my friends the sexpots, Imogene Coca, Ethel Waters, Katherine Dunham (who used this in a ballet). And Al Lucas, who has telepathy on this. I never had an argument with a Scorpio." The issued take (track 17), slightly slower, is also fine.

9. **Sagittarius** (issued), a piano solo, is "for Eddie Heywood, and for Bob Cranshaw, though I didn't know him then." Opening brightly, it soon turns more reflective, and I hear more than a faint echo of Beiderbecke's "In A Mist" and one of the Gershwin piano preludes.

10. **Capricorn** (issued) was one of Mary's own favorites. It's dedicated to Frankie Newton, the gifted, troubled, highly intelligent trumpeter who also was among the Cafe Society incumbents, and who recorded with Mary for Moe Asch. "Capricorns are very good people, very deep people, very sad people... This has a mood to it, and I knew the people." It certainly has a mood. It's in the minor hue beloved by Newton and captures some of this special melancholy. It almost has the formality of a classical piece, as well as great warmth.

11. **Aquarius\*** is dedicated to President Franklin D. Roosevelt (how many of the more recent presidents have had compositions dedicated to them?) and to Josh White, the singer-guitarist who was a fixture at Cafe Society and a close friend—and ex post facto, to Eartha Kitt. Also a solo performance, it seems remarkably structured for something created spontaneously. The alternate, heard first, was (at 3:38) too long for a 10-inch 78. It is so different

from the faster (and 58 seconds shorter) issued take (track 17) that they could be two discreet pieces. Mary had remarkable imagination.

12. **Pisces** (issued), also a solo, is a jazz waltz—a genre Mary would visit again. It's a charming piece, dedicated to bassist Al Hall, pianist-composer-vocal coach-arranger Phil Moore, and Barney Josephson—all of Cafe Society. Hints of Chopin, maybe, but most of all, Mary Lou Williams, with that special keyboard touch—she makes those bell tones sing.

## CONCLUSION

The Zodiac Suite had a life well beyond the radio and records. Again through the offices of Barney Josephson, who had encouraged Mary to orchestrate the Zodiac Suite, it was presented in concert at Town Hall on Dec. 31, 1945. A chamber orchestra consisting of a small string section, trumpet, trombone, French horn, flute, clarinet, bassoon, bass and drums—and of course, piano—was conducted by Milt Orent, who'd also assisted Mary with the orchestrations, and Ben Webster and soprano Hope Foye appeared as guest artists.

The concert, which concluded with a jam session involving other guests, was recorded on acetate discs, but for many years these were considered lost. Recently they were discovered in a private collection and issued on CD (see discography). There was still more to come for the suite: in June 1946, three movements were performed at Carnegie Hall by the 70-member Carnegie "Pop" Orchestra, conducted by Herman Neuman. (This was apparently a N.Y. Philharmonic summer spinoff, similar to the

Boston Pops; the concert took place on June 6.)

Once again, Milt Orent assisted with the orchestration, but he was called away before the third movement had been completed, and Mary, though in a panic, finished the job herself—including a segment for violins that she based on a Charlie Parker blues lick, and which the “longhairs” managed to swing.

Mary thought highly of Orent, a bassist then on NBC’s arranging staff. “The reason I was so ahead in modern harmony,” she recalled years later, “was that I absorbed from (Milt). He knew so much about chords and things ...he was about 30 years ahead in sound...he was so far out, they finally fired him.” Mary and Orent collaborated on a 1947 big-band date for Moe Asch that produced two interesting scores (later also recorded by Benny Goodman), *Lonely Moments* and *Whistler’s Blues*.

And once again, a decade later, the *Zodiac Suite* played an important role in Mary’s life. In 1954, she suddenly

walked out on her job in a Paris nightclub, came home to New York and retired from performing. She converted to Roman Catholicism and founded a charitable organization, the *Bel Canto Foundation*, dedicated to helping troubled musicians; it was financed by a thrift shop operated by Mary, who solicited items from such famous friends as Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington (the *Institute of Jazz Studies* has a box of ties donated by Satchmo in its Mary Lou Williams archive).

In 1957, Lorraine and Dizzy Gillespie, assisted by Mary’s spiritual adviser, persuaded her to come out of musical seclusion. Reluctant at first, she agreed, and her coming-out party took place at the Newport Jazz Festival. With the Gillespie big band, she performed three movements from the *Zodiac Suite* (Virgo, Libra, and Aries; the concert was recorded for Norman Granz’s Verve label). Warmly received, Mary quickly resumed her performing activities, mostly in the trio format. In 1962, she wrote her second major work, *Saint Martin de Porres*, per-

formed at Philharmonic Hall in New York. She followed this with three masses, one of which became known as *Mary Lou’s Mass* when Alvin Ailey choreographed a work with that title to what had originally been called *Music For Peace*. To her great pleasure, it was performed in St. Patrick’s Cathedral in 1975—the first (but not last) time jazz was heard there.

Mary spent her final years at Duke University in Durham, N.C., where she’d first come as artist in residence in 1977. She taught jazz history and conducted a chorus and jazz orchestra. Teaching came naturally to Mary—she’d been doing it all her life: on the Kirk band bus, at her apartment in Harlem which became a salon for musicians in the early days of modern jazz, and on thousands of bandstands, inspiring both fellow players and listeners with her ever-fresh ideas. As Duke Ellington said, she was “soul on soul.” The *Zodiac Suite* was one of the highlights in a remarkable life in American music.

## WHY I WROTE THE ZODIAC SUITE

by Mary Lou Williams

It seems that man has always utilized the stars and heavenly bodies to guide him and his destinies in making new inroads in the world in which we live; so I adopted the Signs of the Zodiac themes for writing my latest compositions, released under the ASCH record label.

I have always thought of astrology and the study of the stars as understanding one of the influences that molds man’s destiny, and I have given the Signs the musical interpretation which I feel they warranted.

To carry through my ideas about the Signs of the Zodiac and to give musical expression to the quotation “Stars guide man’s life and fortunes,” I based each sign on people I know in the creative world.

So far as I have been able to determine, the only other composer who has utilized astrological concepts in writing music was the English musician, Robert Forsythe. However, his selections cover only a few of the signs.

For instance, in writing **Aries** (The Sign of the Ram) I utilized the two people whom I felt best typified the moods and personalities governed by the sign. Both Billie Holiday, the songstress, and Ben Webster, the saxaphonist, come under this sign. Changeable, moody, and impulsive, they seemed to me the examples I should choose for my composition.

In writing the music for those born under the sign of the bull, **Taurus**, I wrote an interpretation for those who are creative and are said to be lovers of the arts. Music and art usually dominate the lives of these individuals. And what better examples could I select than Duke Ellington, Joe Louis and Bing Crosby? I have also tried to portray the stubborn quality of individuals born under Taurus, and my music for the Sign of the Bull begins and ends with the same theme to indicate the personality that "only changes when it is forced to do so."

**Gemini**, The Twin Sign, is dedicated to two men I have known and admired for many years. Both of them are well known for their versatility in many pursuits. Benny Goodman, a famous musi-

cian and clarinetist, is as well known for his work with symphonic concert orchestras as he is for his own swing band, Paul Robeson is a man who has become universally known as a great singer, actor and world citizen. Each of these outstanding people are at home doing "two things at one time", and to me seemed like wonderful examples of the "dual personality" Gemini represents. And so in my music, I have used two themes, in discord equally balanced to set the pattern of those born under the Sign of the Twin.

**Cancer** is the composition I have dedicated to those who like order, peace and tranquillity. The general traits of those born under the sign of the Crab are well accented in my selection which was modeled after the lovely actress, Lena Horne, whom I have known for a long time.

**Leo**, the lion, the sign for kings and those "born to rule," is written with the pomp and circumstance it deserves. I have given the opening chords a trumpet like effect to set the stage for this piece. If you examine history, you will find many leaders born under the sign of Leo.

It is said that ALL **Virgo**-born are favored for adventure, initiative and a go-getter spirit, so I have chosen Phil Moore, the pianist and band leader, as an appropriate subject for musical portrayal of those born under Virgo. Flowing rhythms and running chords suggest these people who seem to be more intellectual than emotional personalities.

**Libra**, the sign for those who love beauty and art, was written in a harmonious and melodic mood. It was meant to identify one of the great American musicians of our time, Art Tatum.

**Scorpio** is the sign of those who are creative, intense and passionate. Imogene Coca, the popular comedienne, is one of the artists born under this sign whom I have known; Al Lucas-Bassist is another. The music for Scorpio people is set in a strong and forceful pattern to indicate some of the moods which they themselves follow.

**Sagittarius**, the Sign of the Archer, governs those who are usually successful, noble and magnanimous: "The young man who sees visions and the old man who dreams dreams" are Sagittar-

ius. Alan Comfrey, radio music commentator was born under this Sign. John Hammond, the musician impresario who has done so much for American musicians and music, is influenced by this sign. I set this piece in a triumphant and varied mood for those headed for "success and glory," and made the bars of the music full and resounding as possible to achieve the kind of effect I wanted for the portrayal of Sagittarius individuals.

**Capricorn** people are generally considered persistent, moody, and hard working. My Capricorn is written with a dirge-like, half hammer beat, and it builds slowly to suggest a deliberate and head-strong personality. Pearl Primus, the dancer, and Frankie Newton, the trumpeter, are wonderful examples of the perfectionist-body type of individual I have in mind in this music.

**Aquarius**, the sign of the water-bearer, is a light, happy and jovial composition. It is written for such outgoing people and humanitarians as are suggested by the personality of the late Franklin D. Roosevelt.

**Pisces**, the Sign of the Fish and the last of the Signs of the Zodiac, I composed while broadcasting one Sunday afternoon. There is a theme but no set pattern written for this composition because I think of Pisces people as freedom-loving and imaginative. Of course, those influenced by this Sign are thought to be arrogant and "high minded" too—and as the music unfolds I have injected those notes which I thought best captured the spirit of these people.

The personalities of those influenced by the stars have been interpreted freely, so that I could achieve the scope and effect I wanted in each case. I know that man has thought of the stars mystically since the beginning of time; giving musical expression to the Signs has been a very satisfying experience for me.

As a composer and musician, I have worked all my life to write and develop serious music that is both original and creative. The Zodiac Suite is the beginning of a real fulfillment of one of my ambitions.

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## C R E D I T S

Original Asch Records *Signs of the Zodiac* album released 1945

Recorded at Asch Records Studio, New York, Spring, 1945

Recording engineer: Moses Asch  
Original sessions produced by Moses Asch  
Reissue compiled and produced by Matt Walters

Associate producer: Father Peter F. O'Brien  
Newly annotated by Dan Morgenstern and Mary Lou Williams

Production supervised by Anthony Seeger and Matt Walters

Editorial assistance by Anne Elise Thomas  
Transferred to digital from the original acetates and analog production masters by Malcolm Addey

Mastered by Joe Gastwirt, Ocean View Digital, Los Angeles, CA

Design: Visual Dialogue

Cover photo courtesy of the Michael Ochs Archive, Venice, CA. Photo by James Kriegsman, circa 1946

Interior photo courtesy of the Mary Lou Williams Foundation, Inc. circa 1940

Special thanks to Father Peter F. O'Brien, The Mary Lou Williams Foundation, Inc.

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