



SMITHSONIAN/FOLKWAYS

# mary lou williams

Z O N I N G





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# mary lou williams ZONING

Previously released in 1974 as Mary Records M103  
Original sessions produced by Mary Lou Williams  
Reissue compiled and produced by Matt Walters  
Associate producer: Father Peter F. O'Brien, The  
Mary Lou Williams Foundation, Inc.  
Newly annotated by Bob Blumenthal

This Smithsonian/Folkways reissue of the  
legendary jazz composer, arranger, and  
pianist Mary Lou Williams' 1974 *Zoning*  
LP includes 2 unreleased performances.

1. SYL-O-GISM \* 3:27
2. OLINGA 4:04
3. MEDI II 2:07
4. GLORIA \* 4:38
5. INTERMISSION 2:22
6. ZONING FUNGUS II 6:51
7. HOLY GHOST 5:24
8. MEDI I 4:55
9. ROSA MAE 4:37
10. GHOST OF LOVE 4:37
11. PRAISE THE LORD 6:37
12. GLORIA 6:35
13. PLAY IT MOMMA 4:22

\*previously unreleased

AMERICA'S



HERITAGE

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All other tracks copyrighted by Cecilia Music, Inc.  
(ASCAP)

1. **SYL - O - G I S M \***  
(M.L. Williams, L. Gales) 3:27
2. **OLINGA**  
(D. Gillespie) 4:04
3. **M E D I I**  
(M. L. Williams) 2:07
4. **GLORIA \***  
(M. L. Williams, R. Ledogar) 4:38
5. **INTERMISSION**  
(M. L. Williams, M. Suggs) 2:22
6. **Z O N I N G F U N G U S I I**  
(M. L. Williams) 6:51
7. **H O L Y G H O S T**  
(L. Gales) 5:24
8. **M E D I I**  
(M. L. Williams) 4:55
9. **ROSA MAE**  
(M. L. Williams, L. Gales) 4:37
10. **G H O S T O F L O V E**  
(M. L. Williams) 4:37
11. **P R A I S E T H E L O R D**  
(M. L. Williams) 6:37
12. **GLORIA**  
(M. L. Williams, R. Ledogar) 6:35
13. **P L A Y I T M O M M A**  
(M. L. Williams) 4:22

\*previously unreleased  
"Olinga" copyrighted by DIZLO Music Corp.  
(ASCAP)

## INTRODUCTION

by Bob Blumenthal

Any performance by an artist as multifaceted as Mary Lou Williams should carry a caveat: This is not the whole story! Even in one of her definitive works, like the present album, only a portion of her creativity is on display. Jazz history still does not have a handle on Williams, whose playing, writing, bandleading, teaching, humanitarian efforts, longevity and ability to evolve stylistically would make her *sui generis* even if she was not also celebrated as the "first lady of jazz", the music's leading female instrumentalist. At least a portion of each of her many talents comes through on this recording—her most intriguing performance in a small-group setting.

Zoning's appearance in 1974 served as both a revelation and a reaffirmation of what had always made Williams so unique. She was still stretching the boundaries, with harmonic, rhythmic and formal notions that bordered on the avant-garde; yet her

ear for melody and her deep immersion in the blues idiom remained. Both the compositions and the instrumentation she chose allowed for a seamless fusion of her secular origins and more recent spiritual interests, while the pieces for two pianos precede her concert encounter with Cecil Taylor by three years. With hindsight, premonitions of this music can be heard in her earlier work, especially in the stark recurring bass line of "Fifth Dimension" (1946) and the Latin montuno pattern of "Kool Bongo" (1953). Still, *Zoning* was unprecedented and totally surprising, and remains a unique pinnacle in Williams' discography.

The bulk of the music was recorded on January 17, 1974, with the assistance of pianist Zita Carno, bassist Bob Cranshaw and drummer Mickey Roker. Williams makes the most of her supporting cast by presenting music for two-piano quartet, piano-bass duo and the standard piano trio. While the blues is pervasive and the moods interrelated, each piece is distinct, and distinctly eloquent.

Williams' preference for the cutting edge led her naturally to younger players and newer approaches, in the manner of such other era-spanners as Coleman Hawkins, Miles Davis and John Coltrane. In these performances, however, where the ensemble never exceeds a quartet, her most telling counterpart may be Duke Ellington, who wrote three concerts of sacred music in the 1960s at the same time Williams was composing three masses. Ellington had an orchestra at his disposal throughout his career, a luxury Williams lost when she left Andy Kirk's Clouds of Joy in 1942; but her recording career was lengthier (if much less voluminous) than Ellington's, and the final decade of her career allowed her to refine the blues impulses in her religious music in a manner that Ellington was never granted.

Stress on the spiritual nature of the present performances is not meant to suggest any disjunction between them and the Williams big band arrangements that helped define Kansas City jazz in the 1930s. Williams' emphasis

on swing, the blues and the classic styles of jazz piano counterbalanced her thirst for something new in music. In her final years, this balance gave way to a tension that found her emphasizing a history-of-jazz approach in live and recorded performances and bemoaning the lack of post-bebop innovation in the program notes to her famous *Embraced* concert with Cecil Taylor. On *Zoning*, we hear a far more harmonious agreement among the impulses that define all of Williams' music.

Thanks to direct testimony from the artist herself, we now know that Mary Lou Williams was born Mary Elfrieda Scruggs in Atlanta, Georgia on May 8, 1910; that she began playing piano at the age of two-and-a-half and was encouraged by various relatives; that she moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania between the age of four and six; and that her first decade of professional appearances found her working under the surnames of stepfathers Winn and Burley.

By her own admission Williams began as a novelty performer, both in

terms of her age (she was six at the time of her first paying job) and her technique, which included playing with elbows and feet as well as behind her back. She apparently absorbed all kinds of music quickly, however, and from age fourteen was touring the T.O.B.A. (Theater Owners' Booking Association) circuit as an accompanist to vaudeville acts. At fifteen, she joined the band of a saxophonist and future husband John Williams, with whom she made her recording debut in 1927. A year earlier, when she was in Memphis and still Mary Lou Burley, John Williams took an offer to join Terrence T. Holder in Oklahoma City and she took over the band. One of her sidemen was Jimmie Lunceford, then working his way back East to his own pivotal role in the swing era after studying in Denver with Wilberforce Whiteman, father of Paul Whiteman. Curiously, Wilberforce Whiteman had another Black student at the time, Andy Kirk, who would lead the renamed Holder Dark Clouds of Joy as the 12 Clouds of Joy from 1929 until 1948.

Kirk (1898-1993), a native of Newport, Kentucky, also shared Lunceford's knack for organization that ultimately allowed both men to give up playing and concentrate on fronting their orchestras. A lengthy engagement at the Pla-More Ballroom brought the Kirk band to Kansas City in 1929, where it made its first recordings for Brunswick. At the time, Williams was doing various odd jobs for the band and other non-musical employers while also writing music; yet due to the absence of pianist Marion Jackson at a rehearsal, Brunswick producer Jack Kapp was able to hear Williams play and insisted upon her participation in Kirk's studio debut. Williams made such a strong impression that, when the band journeyed to Chicago for more recording in 1930, she cut two unaccompanied solo performances. She became a regular performing member of Kirk's band in 1931, and quickly assumed the mantle of star soloist as well as principle arranger.

Early recordings reveal that Williams was a writer and a player with a vast

command of both the young jazz idiom's techniques and her new hometown's blues elegance. Like Count Basie, another transplanted Easterner, she had mastered the stride idiom that James P. Johnson and Fats Waller had popularized in New York while ultimately adding a distinctive Midwestern economy of style. She also appreciated the more linear right-hand inventions and left-hand impulsiveness of fellow Pittsburgher Earl Hines, plus the more complex harmonies that made Ellington's music so intriguing. Her playing already conveyed the equilibrium and dynamics found in her orchestral scores, which expertly balanced the weight of each section and favored voicings (including a single trumpet against saxes and clarinets in a lead role) that would become trademarks when the Kirk band began recording regularly for Decca in 1936.

Although Kirk had surprising success touring the East Coast in the first years of the Depression, he spent much of the early '30s in Kansas City, where Williams became an essential member

of the legendary scene. She was a mainstay at after-hours jam sessions, comping during the famous tenor battle that took place when local Ben Webster and the locally based Lester Young challenged Coleman Hawkins while the Fletcher Henderson band was in town. In less competitive circumstances she met numerous other greats and soon-to-be-greats, including a teenaged Thelonious Monk when he passed through town with a medicine show. Her skills are well displayed on the 108 titles she recorded with Kirk's orchestra and the 14 small-group titles she cut during the same period, a body of work which includes several definitive examples of Kansas City style.

While writing duties for Kirk involved retooling staples from the books of competitors (primarily Bennie Moten) and occasional novelties, Williams also penned such hard-swinging classics as "Walkin' and Swingin'," "Lotta Sax Appeal," "Twinklin'" (like "Close to Five," a feature for her piano), "Mary's Idea," "Big Jim Blues" (together with "Floyd's Guitar Blues," an early show-

case for electric guitarist Floyd Smith) and "Scratchin the Gravel." The band had an exceptionally tight rhythm section, spurred by the drums of Ben Thigpen (father of Oscar Peterson drummer Ed Thigpen) and a major soloist in tenor saxophonist Dick Wilson. It also was more compact than most of its competitors, with only four or five reeds and three saxophones, and Williams made the most of this relatively limited palette. While the enormous success of "Until the Real Thing Comes Along," a torch ballad sung by high-pitched male vocalist Pha Terrell, often overwhelmed Kirk's jazz profile, his band was a major regional and national force, thanks in large measure to Williams' contribution.

The trio, quartet and septet sessions Williams recorded at the time, as well as occasional supporting appearances like her 1939 session backing singer Mildred Bailey, reveal an even more complete stylist. She could evoke Willie "The Lion" Smith in lilting melodies like "Swingin' for Joy," or delicately recast Jelly Roll Morton's "The Pearls," then

turn around and finesse a boogie blues like "Overhand." Like Benny Carter, Teddy Wilson and Basie, she streamlined Jazz's more emphatic rhythmic qualities while anticipating the more fluid music to come.

Other bandleaders began soliciting compositions and arrangements from Williams before she left Kirk in 1942. Ultimately, she would contribute to the books of Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, Bob Crosby, Tommy Dorsey, Duke Ellington, Glen Gray, Dizzy Gillespie, Benny Goodman, Earl Hines and Jimmie Lunceford. She left Kirk with her new husband, trumpeter Harold "Shorty" Baker, and became a staff arranger for Ellington in 1943 when Baker joined the Ellington band. Her relocation to New York put her in the midst of another critical after-hours scene, and her apartment became a gathering place for young visionaries including Gillespie, Monk, Bud Powell and Kenny Dorham. Specific contributions are often difficult to document, although the Monk/Williams affinity is suggested by the reappearance of a

shout chorus from "Walkin' and Swingin'" as "Rhythm-a-ning" and the mutual fondness for the chord changes of "Just You, Just Me" and what would become Monk's "Well, You Needn't." All of the young modernists testified to the importance of Williams as a mentor and enthusiastic supporter of their music.

Williams never organized her own big band in the '40s, preferring smaller units for her appearances at Cafe Society Uptown and Downtown (where she worked extensively between 1944 and '48) and in her recordings for Asch, Continental and RCA. (On the latter two labels, at the initiative of producer Leonard Feather, she was heard leading all-female quintets and trios.) In these performances, which include an early jazz waltz, strains of the newer bop style enhanced a conception that remained solidly centered in the blues. But Williams was also incorporating the harmonic colors of the modern European composers, which she applied on her ambitious "Zodiac Suite" (SF 40810). This extended work in twelve movements was originally recorded in solo and trio

format for Asch in 1945, then orchestrated by Milt Orent. She presented the entire suite at her December 31, 1945 Town Hall concert, with Orent conducting a scaled-down orchestra including Mary Lou Williams and guest soloist Ben Webster featured in the "Cancer" movement. Three of the movements were later performed by the Carnegie "Pop" Orchestra at Carnegie Hall in June 1946.

By the beginning of the 1950s, Williams had grown disillusioned with the music business, particularly in the United States. She left for Europe and recorded in London (1953) and Paris (1954); but soon had retired from the music and withdrawn to the French countryside. She converted to Catholicism and dedicated herself to the needs of her fellow musicians. In 1957 she appeared at the Newport Jazz Festival, where she soloed with her good friend Dizzy Gillespie's big band, playing three movements from the "Zodiac Suite." Now, however, her apartment became the center of her ministry, with cots and a soup kitchen for the broke,

the homeless and the strung out among New York's music community. She also opened a thrift shop, and established the Bel Canto Foundation to help underwrite her efforts.

These were the priorities that marked the next 15 years of her life. She would perform on occasion, including a 1965 piano workshop at the Pittsburgh Jazz Festival and a 1971 session with Gillespie and Bobby Hackett that were captured on memorable recordings. Still the primary focus was religious, in both her music and her everyday life. Once again, she claimed a historic first when her hymn for St. Martin de Porres was presented in church in 1962, and her three subsequent Masses were warmly received and widely performed. Mary Records was formed by Williams in 1963 to release the pianist's own music. *Zoning*, the third album in the label's catalogue, was the most extensive example of what might be called Williams the straight jazz performer in 20 years.

The sessions that produced *Zoning* signalled a return to the secular for

Williams, who had already been performing (primarily in duo) at The Cookery in New York. She began recording again for various labels, often presenting a history of jazz through stylistic variations on the blues. Her club and concert schedule increased, even as she grew more deeply involved in education at Duke University and in various campus residencies. When she succumbed to cancer in May of 1981, she was a revered figure once again, although her reputation has suffered as compact discs replaced vinyl and too much of her music went out of print. The appearance of this essential recital, together with *Zodiac Suite* (Smithsonian/Folkways 40810) and an excellent 1993 survey of her work with Andy Kirk (*Mary's Idea*, Decca Jazz GRD-622), should inspire a proper accounting for this giant of 20th century American music.

## ABOUT THE TRACKS

by Bob Blumenthal

1. **Syl-O-Gism** 3:27 "Syl-O-Gism," the first of five trio tracks recorded at the January session, is released here for the first time. It is a soulful 16-bar pattern with an eight-bar main phrase (stated by the piano in two-hand unison over Cranshaw's bass figure) and an eight-bar release. The atmosphere grows even funkier in the blowing choruses, with all members of the trio moving between the sections like a well-oiled machine and Williams using her left hand to propulsive effect in several spots. Who wrote this short, sweet gem? And are any of the contemporary pianists who spend their time searching out obscure hard bop tunes hip enough to pick up on it?

2. **Olinga** 4:04 Dizzy Gillespie's "Olinga" is a very different 16-bar form, with its dramatic fanfare followed by what might be called an unresolved blues chorus. The recurrence of the fanfare, Roker's use of mallets and the occasional flourishes in Williams' improvisation

suggests the Ahmad Jamal trio. (What a multi-generational run of pianists Pittsburgh produced—Earl Hines, Williams, Erroll Garner and Jamal, to name only the most influential!) The track is nearly stolen by the impeccable, underrated Roker, who recorded another memorable version of the tune with the composer nearly two years later.

3. **Medi II** 2:07 "Medi II" is a very modern up-tempo blues in 8/8 that goes into 12/8 during the resolution of the chorus. Williams brought it to a Buddy Tate record session that included Roy Eldridge and Illinois Jacquet a year earlier, and it must have inspired a few raised eyebrows among those veterans. Here it simply races flat-out, with a brief free chordal section before the conclusion.

4. **Gloria** 4:38 The Williams/Cranshaw/Roker version of "Gloria" is the second previously unused trio performance, recorded January 17, 1974; it is slower than the master take and two minutes shorter, which places greater emphasis on the compositional structure before launching into the

concluding vamp section. "Gloria" was originally heard in "Mary Lou's Mass," where it had lyrics, although this version especially makes clear that the composer found no need to simplify her forms to accommodate a text.

5. **Intermission** 2:22 This track includes Zita Carno on a second piano. While Carno is classically trained, she was well attuned to jazz (and is best known among jazz fans for her notes to John Coltrane's *Giant Steps*) and lent a more unified spirit to these tracks than Williams' subsequent performances with Taylor. This empathy quickly becomes obvious on "Intermission," the first piece recorded, where Carno tracks the harmonic extensions in Williams' brief improvisation with gentle supporting chords. The composition, which Williams wrote with bassist Milton Suggs, is in 11/4, with Cranshaw establishing the basic 5+6 pattern before the pianos state the curlicue theme. Roker's subtle percussive commentary during the melody statement is also invaluable.

6. **Zoning Fungus II** 6:51 "Zoning Fungus II," a variation on the earlier composition "A Fungus Amungus," reveals an even more exceptional affinity between the pianists. The piece begins as an unaccompanied duet for the keyboards, and suggests a duel as ideas are offered up by one player, then bruised about by the other. Phrases echo and merge more affirmatively after the rhythm section establishes an underlying 7/4 pattern—even if much of this is written, the execution conveys the spontaneity of improvisation. Each pianist solos, with Carno acquitting herself well in such heady company, as Roker again keeps the groove loose while Cranshaw holds the vamp.

7. **Holy Ghost** 5:24 Cranshaw is given more leeway in the first of the two duo pieces. "Holy Ghost" is an absolutely beautiful ballad by bassist Larry Gales, and a prime example of why Cranshaw's note choices, taste and sound are so widely respected. He is playing an electric bass, due to an injury that has made it difficult for him to perform

on his original upright instrument, yet there is nothing "unnatural" about his presence here. Williams was especially fond of the bassist—each movement of her "Zodiac Suite" was dedicated to musicians born under the title sign, and Cranshaw was one of only two dedicatees added after the fact (Miles Davis was the other). Her own work here displays the same sensitivity, with a glowing touch and an almost self-effacing application of techniques such as tremolo and glissando that might otherwise overwhelm the meditative mood.

8. **Medi I** 4:55 The other duo, "Medi I," is a medium-slow blues where the bass line serves as the melody. Williams and Cranshaw state the theme in unison, then the pianist improvises. Some of her most basic playing is contained on this track, although she manages to jostle expectations by setting her more traditional phrases against drifting harmonies or buoyant block chords. Like so much of the music on this session, the means seem simple, yet the results are profound.

9. **Rosa Mae** 4:37 "Rosa Mae" is a medium-slow, ultra-funky blues where the beat is broken in the second and third strains of the theme choruses (but only in the third strains of the blowing choruses). The trio gets deep in the pocket here, with a perfect blend of restraint and intensity. A groove this visceral is probably what gave the blues the reputation of being the devil's music.

10. **Ghost of Love** 4:37 The piano solo "Ghost of Love" is an ideal bridge between the two distinct trios Williams employed on these sessions. A ballad with great changes, it has an introspective cast that brings elements out of Williams that get less emphasis on the bluesier compositions. Without accompanists present, she is able to pause and reflect, then push ahead in the form, creating an unforced momentum to her two choruses.

11. **Praise the Lord** 6:37 "Praise the Lord," which also comes from "Mary Lou's Mass," was the first piece recorded by the trio of Williams, bass violinist Milton Suggs and conga drummer Tony

Waters. While mainly an up-tempo improvisation on a bass pedal point, it does allow for the composer to state the melody in an early unison passage. She is extremely playful and rambunctious here, and seems to feed off the adjustments Suggs makes to the underlying vamp. As a measure of contrast for this, the album's simplest form, bass and congas frame the performance with conversational exchanges.

12. **Gloria** 6:35 Suggs and Waters also appear on the fleeter master take of "Gloria" (recorded March 18, 1974), which has a lilt quite distinct from the alternate. Conga drums work particularly well on the long vamp improvisation, which suggests one of Williams' favorite proteges, Bud Powell, and his classic "Un Poco Loco." The numerous shifts in texture and dynamics that Williams employs suggest that she could have successfully realized this vocal work in an orchestral setting.

13. **Play It Momma** 4:22 "Play It Momma" is a simple eight-bar blues pattern that changes keys to create a release—a

cross, if you will, between "Listen Here" and "So What." Once again, the pianist harkens back to her early days with hints of stride and barrelhouse, then drops in a newer idea lest the atmosphere grow too nostalgic.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bob Blumenthal's writing on jazz and other topics currently appears in *The Boston Globe*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Chicago Tribune* and *CD Review*. He has also been a contributor to *The Boston Phoenix*, *Rolling Stone*, *Down Beat* and *The Village Voice* among other publications; WGBH and Monitor Radio among broadcast media; and has authored numerous liner and program notes for jazz albums and live performances. He was a contributing editor of *The Rolling Stone Record Review Guide* and *The Rolling Stone Jazz Record Review Guide*, and a contributor to the anthology *Bluesland* and the upcoming *Gramophone Good CD Jazz Guide*. He has also produced several anthologies of Stan Getz's music. He was a fellow at the First Smithsonian Seminar in Jazz Criticism, one of six individuals asked to select the White House Record Library by the Recording Industry Association of America, and has served as an advisory panel member for the National Jazz Service Orga-

nization, the New England Foundation for the Arts and WGBH-FM and a consultant to the Harkness Fellowship.

MARY LOU WILLIAMS  
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MARY LOU WILLIAMS  
DISCOGRAPHY

*Mary Lou Williams, 1927-1940*: Classics 630 (CD)\*

*The Best of Mary Lou Williams* (1977-78 recordings): Pablo 2405-2412 (cassette)

*Live at the Cookery* (1975 recordings): Chiaroscuro 146 (CD)

*Mary Lou Williams in London* (1953 recordings): GNP Crescendo GNPS-9029 (LP)

*Mary Lou Williams and Don Byas* (1953 recordings): GNP Crescendo GNP-9030 (LP & cassette)

*Roll 'Em* (1944 recordings): Audiophile AP-8 (LP)

*Andy Kirk and Mary Lou Williams, "Mary's Idea"*: Decca Jazz GRD-622 (CD)

*Andy Kirk and his Twelve Clouds of Joy, 1929-31*: Classics 655 (CD)\*

*Andy Kirk and his Clouds of Joy, 1936-1937*: Classics 573 (CD)\*

*Andy Kirk and his Clouds of Joy, 1937-1938*: Classics 581 (CD)\*

*Andy Kirk and his Clouds of Joy, 1938*: Classics 598 (CD)\*

*Andy Kirk and his Clouds of Joy, 1939-1940*: Classics 640 (CD)\*

*Andy Kirk and his Clouds of Joy, 1940-1942*: Classics 681 (CD)\*

*Buddy Tate and his Buddies* (1973 recordings): Chiaroscuro 123 (CD)

*Marian McPartland's Piano Jazz with Guest Mary Lou Williams: Jazz Alliance/Concord Jazz 12019*

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## C R E D I T S

Recorded at A & R Studios, New York, January, February, March, 1974

Recording Engineer: Richard Blakin

Original sessions produced by Mary Lou Williams

Reissue compiled and produced by Matt Walters

Associate producer: Father Peter F. O'Brien

Annotated by Bob Blumenthal

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## About Smithsonian/Folkways

Folkways Records was founded by Moses Asch and Marian Distler in 1948 to document music, spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world. In the ensuing decades, New York City-based Folkways became one of the largest independent record labels in the world, reaching a total of nearly 2,200 albums that were always kept in print.

The Smithsonian Institution acquired Folkways from the Asch estate in 1987 to ensure that the sounds and genius of the artists would be preserved for future generations. All Folkways recordings are now available on high-quality audio cassettes, each packed in a special box along with the original lp liner notes.

Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings was formed to continue the Folkways tradition of releasing significant recordings with high-quality documentation. It produces new titles, reissues of historic recordings from Folkways and other record labels, and in collaboration with other companies also produces instructional videotapes, recordings to accompany published books, and a variety of other educational projects.

The Smithsonian/Folkways, Folkways, Cook, and Paredon record labels are administered by the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies. They are one of the means through which the Center supports the work of traditional artists and expresses its commitment to cultural diversity, education, and increased understanding.

You can find Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings at your local record store. Smithsonian/Folkways, Folkways, Cook, and Paredon recordings are all available through:

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For a free catalogue, write:

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Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings  
955 L'Enfant Plaza, Suite 2600  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, DC 20560  
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fax (202) 287-3699



# Smithsonian Folkways

Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings  
Center for Folklife Programs and Cultural Studies  
955 L'Enfant Plaza, Suite 2600  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington DC 20560

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