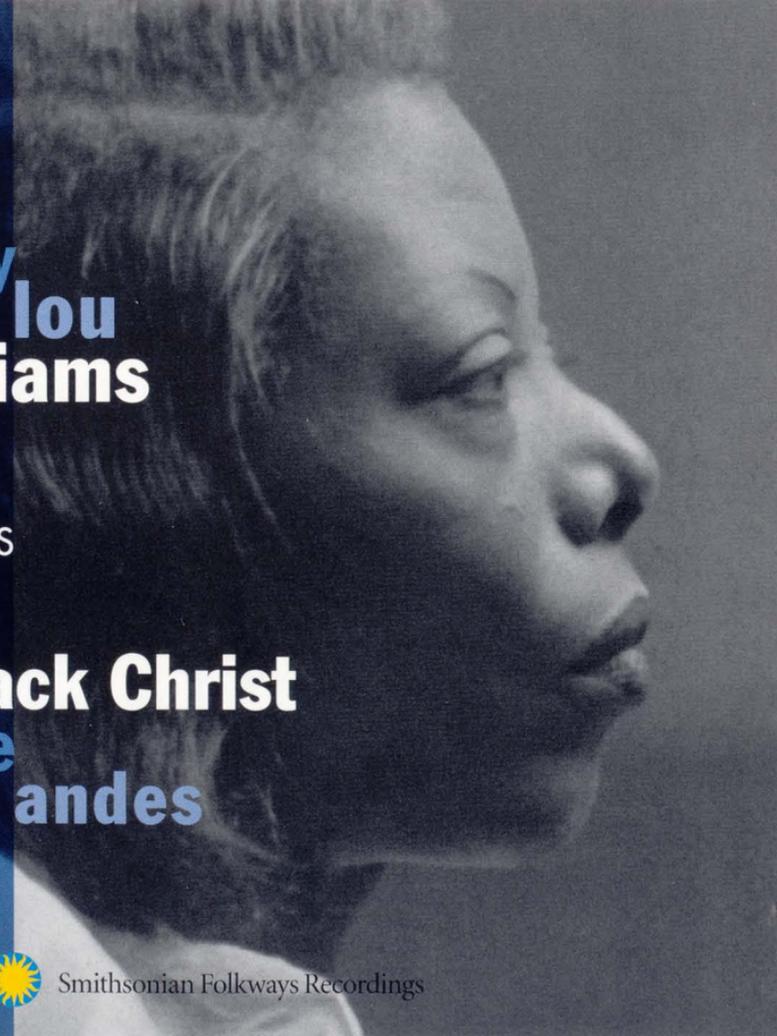




mary  
lou  
williams

PRESENTS

black Christ  
of the  
andes



Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

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Smithsonian Folkways Recordings



**mary lou williams**

PRESENTS

**black Christ  
of the andes**

SFW CD 40816

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1. **ST. MARTIN DE PORRES** 6:32  
(Music by M. L. Williams, lyrics by Rev. A. S. Woods, S.J./Cecilia Music Pub. Co., ASCAP)
2. **IT AIN'T NECESSARILY SO** 4:41  
(George and Ira Gershwin/George Gershwin Music c/o WB Music Corp., ASCAP)
3. **THE DEVIL** 4:00  
(Music by M. L. Williams, lyrics by Ada Moore/Cecilia Music Pub. Co., ASCAP)
4. **MISS D. D.** 2:28  
(M. L. Williams/Cecilia Music Pub. Co., ASCAP)
5. **ANIMA CHRISTI** 2:40  
(M. L. Williams/Cecilia Music Pub. Co., ASCAP)
6. **A GRAND NIGHT FOR SWINGING** 2:48  
(Billy Taylor/Duane Music Inc., ASCAP)
7. **MY BLUE HEAVEN** 3:06  
(George Whiting and Walter Donaldson/George Whiting Pub. Co., Donaldson Pub. Co., ASCAP)
8. **DIRGE BLUES** 3:21  
(M. L. Williams/Cecilia Music Pub. Co., ASCAP)
9. **A FUNGUS A MUNGUS** 2:57  
(M. L. Williams/Cecilia Music Pub. Co., ASCAP)
10. **KOOLBONGA** \* 3:21  
(M. L. Williams/Cecilia Music Pub. Co., ASCAP)
11. **FORTY-FIVE DEGREE ANGLE** \* 2:50  
(Denzil Best)
12. **NICOLE** \* 3:37  
(M. L. Williams/Cecilia Music Pub. Co., ASCAP)
13. **CHUNKA LUNKA** \* 3:07  
(M. L. Williams/Cecilia Music Pub. Co., ASCAP)
14. **PRAISE THE LORD** 5:55  
(M. L. Williams/Cecilia Music Pub. Co., ASCAP)

\* previously unreleased

## FOREWARD

Eddie Meadows

Many excellent musicians have made contributions to jazz, but most jazz research focuses on males, while female jazz artists who were not vocalists are rarely mentioned. Mary Lou Williams, Lil Hardin Armstrong, Clora Bryant, Melba Liston, and Vi Redd are among the innovative female jazz instrumentalists who have been recognized by jazz scholars. Williams is especially important, not because of her gender, but because of her work as an arranger, composer, pianist, and bandleader from the swing era to the avant-garde stylings of the 1960s. Many observers regard her as one of the most creative artists in jazz history. Billy Taylor says she is "brilliant," Duke Ellington says she is "beyond category." And Gunther Schuller, comparing her with male artists, uses the label "very special arranger-composer." Williams demonstrated that the views that many male musicians had about female musicians were only stereotypes, for her creative genius surpassed that of many of her peers.

After a 1954 performance in Paris, Mary Lou Williams walked away from the jazz world to seek deeper meanings to her life. She meditated and prayed daily in her

Harlem apartment and at a Roman Catholic Church nearby. From 1957 to her death, her most profound challenge was to balance her religious beliefs and her work in jazz. This disc features her first work of spiritual jazz, "Saint Martin de Porres," a six-and-a-half-minute piece composed for a mixed-voiced choir in lush harmonies. The music reflects her deep spiritual beliefs, which fueled her desire to marry jazz and religion. Deeply touched by the dark-skinned saint's devotion, humility, and religious conviction, she wanted to inform the world of the contributions and achievements that he had made to Christianity. By fusing spiritual content with jazz in this and other works heard in this recording, she aimed to heal troubled souls, especially those of African Americans.

## JAZZ FOR THE SOUL

Fr. Peter F. O'Brien, S. J.

*MARY LOU WILLIAMS is perpetually contemporary. Her writing and performing have always been a little ahead.... Her music maintains a quality that is timeless. She is like soul on soul.*

—Duke Ellington

*I figure now that when I play, it can be counted as a prayer.*

—Mary Lou Williams

*The music poured from the piano.*

—Fr. Peter F. O'Brien, S.J.

I first met Mary Lou Williams in the pages of *Time* magazine. In the February 21, 1964, issue, under "Music," articles appeared on two women. The first, "Opera," was devoted to Sarah Caldwell, the producer and director of the Boston Opera Group. The heading above her story labeled her "The Persistent One."

The second article, "Jazz," portrayed Mary Lou Williams, the pianist and composer, who had only recently returned to full-time playing after a long period of contemplative withdrawal from public performance. In the first of two photographs, she looks pleasantly

at the camera, a slight smile on her face, as she sits playing the piano inside the large oval bar at the Hickory House in New York. In the second, she is kneeling in prayer at the communion rail of the Church of St. Francis Xavier on West 16th Street in the same city. The heading called Williams "The Prayerful One."

The article detailed how, some ten years before, Williams had begun sensing evil all around her and "one blue night in Paris 'the badness' overwhelmed her; she got up from the piano and quit jazz cold. She drew up lists of names of people to pray for, urgent cases marked in red, and before long she [was enveloped by] an endless coil of sadness. For years there was nothing for her to do but pray."

The next paragraph stunned me: "She joined the Roman Catholic Church."

The article went on to report that "last week... a bit reluctant... still mightily prayerful, Mary was at the piano at the Hickory House." She was to remain there for eighteen months—a solid run.

I learned, as I read on, that her intense life of prayer was having practical results. She had formed the Bel Canto Foundation to help musicians who were either hobbled by drugs and alcohol, or impeded by detrimental states of mind or emotion, to "get back

to their music." She actually helped all sorts of people, but her main concern was for musicians, especially creative ones, and their music.

The end of the article reported that Mary Lou Williams "has written a jazz hymn to St. Martin De Porres, a mulatto saint of the 17th century."

In 1964, I too was on a search—a quest. My religious feeling had led me to the Society of Jesus, and I was a student at Loyola Seminary in Shrub Oak, New York. I had been a Jesuit for six years, yet things within myself were decidedly incomplete.

I decided to write Mary Lou Williams in care of the Hickory House and asked if I might come and see her. I had no money and worried that the management wouldn't let me in the door. I also asked, again since I had no money, if she would give me a copy of her new record about St. Martin de Porres for free. I went down to New York. I was twenty-three years old, looked eighteen, and was wearing my black suit and clerical Roman collar.

I was about to encounter a most enduring and abiding soul-mate.

The music poured from the piano. On a large platform inside the oval mahogany bar at New York's Hickory House, the last

surviving establishment offering jazz on West 52nd Street, "Swing Street," an authoritative African-American woman in early middle age sat at the piano, eyes mostly closed, her face registering every nuance in the music she was creating, back straight, her hands lying flat as they moved on the keys. She was wearing a royal blue chiffon gown of cocktail length, softly gathered at the shoulders. Her arms were bare. She had a beautiful throat and neck, good collarbones, and a dark brown face rising up from a strong chin to high cheekbones. Her mouth was well shaped and soft, and at times broke into a brief radiant smile when she achieved a particular musical passage. The smile never interfered with the concentration. There was nothing theatrical about her. You simply knew that you were in the presence of someone of the highest magnitude. Her name was Mary Lou Williams.

The emotional experience of the music and the woman herself was so strong that my life at once took on a permanent new direction. There was no confusion or doubt in me, and although I could not possibly have known the full consequences of that night's depth of feeling, I had found my purpose. I was finally at home.

At the end of her set, she descended from the platform and exited as the bartender

raised the flap to let her through. Her two accompanists repaired to a booth along the back wall of the room, and she sat at a small square table set at an angle slightly back from the traffic around the bar.

I slid off the bar stool and walked nervously toward her and told her my name. She asked me, "Are you a priest?" I told her, "No, I'm a Jesuit seminarian and I will be a priest." She was subdued—almost mute. I had been especially moved by one piece she played and asked her what her third-to-last number was. She replied, "Oh, that was just a blues."

When I asked about her record, she gave me a large square manila envelope. I removed the contents. It contained her LP, which had a pen and ink drawing of praying hands on a pink background and large black letters proclaiming *MARY LOU WILLIAMS presents*. A second, much smaller recording, showing a chiaroscuro black-and-white photograph of Mary Lou Williams was called *Music for the Soul* and contained selections from the LP.

I was too shy to ask her to sign the records, but I did ask her how I might reach her. She gave me a tiny card. On one side was her name, address, and telephone number; on the other, the address of the Bel Canto Thrift Shop. Though Loyola Seminary

was north of New York City, we had a tie-line, making all calls to Harlem local. From then on, I was on the phone to her everyday.

Mary Lou Williams lived and played through all the eras in the history of jazz: the spirituals, ragtime, the blues, Kansas City swing, boogie-woogie, bop or modern, and musics beyond—playing the new music of each era, a claim that is difficult to dispute. As pianist, composer, and arranger, she was considered the most important woman jazz musician. By the end of her career, her playing and composing had brought her into the front rank of all jazz musicians. She had perfect pitch, was entirely self-taught (her mother had never allowed a teacher to interfere with her), and often as a child spent twelve hours at a stretch at the piano.

She was born in Atlanta, Georgia, on May 8, 1910. Her mother was Virginia Riser; her father was Joseph Scruggs. As part of the great black migration, Virginia traveled north, somewhere between 1914 and 1916, to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Family lore has it that Mary Lou made the journey in the horn of an RCA Victor Victrola. Virginia played on an old-fashioned pump organ, often holding Mary Lou on her lap to keep her out of mischief. One day while her mother was pump-

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ing up the organ, little Mary Lou's fingers beat hers to the keyboard and picked out a melody. Mary Lou was three. Later on, in her lectures and demonstrations, she would point out the value of learning through observation: "I watch," she would tell her students.

By the age of six, Mary Lou was professional enough to be known throughout Pittsburgh as "The Little Piano Girl," and was playing parties for white-society people, such as the Olivers and the Mellons. As a youngster, she sat in with the Pittsburgh Union Musicians' Band, and she played with Earl Hines's musicians and McKinney's Cotton Pickers when those bands were in town.

Early in 1924, a black vaudeville show, *Buzz n' Harris's Hits and Bits*, came to town. Its piano player went missing. In the search for a replacement, Harris was led out to East Liberty, the black suburb of Pittsburgh, where he found Mary Lou playing hopscotch. She played the show that night, and traveled with the show that summer, mostly in the Midwest and South, on the Theater Owners' Booking Association (TOBA) circuit, which consisted of rundown vaudeville houses owned by whites but catering to blacks. The performers were black. In semi-proper circumstances, the TOBA was referred to as Tough on Black Acts. When things got down and dirty, it was called Tough on Black Asses.

The pit band was led by John Williams, who played alto and baritone sax. Mary Lou (then surnamed Burley (after a stepfather)) remained with *Hits and Bits* for a good while. She married Williams in Memphis in 1926, traveled on the B. F. Keith Circuit with Seymour and Jeanette in big-time vaudeville, where the theaters were large and glamorous and the acts were white. The only other black act Mary Lou recalled on the circuit was Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. She recorded with John Williams's Syncopators in 1926 and 1927 in Chicago. She stayed behind in Memphis to continue leading the band while Williams went to Tulsa, Oklahoma, to play with Andy Kirk and His Clouds of Joy. After a short period, she rejoined him. Replacing a missing pianist, she recorded with the Clouds of Joy in 1929 and 1930, though she was not yet an official member of the band. She composed her first arrangements ("Messa Stomp" and "Mary's Idea") for these recording sessions, and was heard to full advantage as a strong, two-fisted, swinging, stride pianist with the band. She made the first recording under her own name in 1930: "Nite Life," a brilliant exposition of stride piano on side A and "Drag 'Em," a blues, on side B. Thus, from the first recording under her own name, she established that she would approach music in diverse ways.

Mary Lou Williams remained with Andy Kirk and His Clouds of Joy from 1929 to 1942—the bulk of the swing era in jazz. Not only did she play piano, appearing on more than 180 recordings with Kirk's orchestra, she also composed and arranged the music for many of those sides. Her compositions of the period include "Walkin' and Swingin'," "Froggy Bottom," "Little Joe from Chicago," "What's Your Story, Morning Glory," "Step-pin' Pretty," and the beautiful "Big Jim Blues." In 1937, she wrote the boogie-woogie-based "Roll 'Em" for Benny Goodman's big band which became something of a hit. Decca also recorded Williams separately as a pianist with rhythm accompaniment in 1936 and 1938. The title of one release, "Swinging for Joy," is just right.

In 1942, Mary Lou Williams left Andy Kirk and His Clouds of Joy and returned to Pittsburgh to stay at her sister's house. She then formed a septet that included the trumpeter Harold Baker and a youthful Pittsburgh native, the drummer Art Blakey. By 1943, she was in New York, where she earned a following as a highly skilled solo pianist who composed for various small combinations of musicians, and occasionally for big bands. In 1944, Duke Ellington played her arrangement of Irving Berlin's "Blue Skies" in concert at Carnegie Hall. It later became known as

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"Trumpets No End."

In 1944, Mary Lou Williams found a champion in Moses Asch, owner and producer of Asch Records. Between 1944 and 1947, she recorded more than fifty sides for his various labels, including Disc and Folkways. In 1944 alone, she recorded six separate times. All the arrangements were her own, as were most of the compositions. The groups included, as sidemen, Coleman Hawkins, Don Byas, Vic Dickenson, Bill Coleman, Edmond Hall, Frank Newton, and Josh White. In 1946, she recorded a translucent solo piano album, and in 1947, Folkways issued her first bop recordings with Kenny Dorham. In 1945, meanwhile, she had composed *The Zodiac Suite*, writing harmonically advanced music not formerly associated with jazz. She recorded the suite for Asch Records with piano, bass, and drums. She soon scored it for small chamber orchestra and jazz instruments, and premiered it at Town Hall on December 31, 1945. The following June, she scored three sections of the suite for seventy pieces and played these with the New York Pops Orchestra at Carnegie Hall.

Mary Lou Williams was one of the major stride and swing performers who successfully made the transition to bop. For Benny Goodman in 1947, she composed two bop-influenced pieces: "Lonely Moments" and

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"Whistle Blues." For Dizzy Gillespie's big band in 1949, she composed the bop fairy tale "In the Land of Oo Bla Dee."

In 1952, she left for Europe for the first time. A nine-day engagement stretched out to two years. She played in England and at length in France, at the Boeuf sur le Toit and a club named for her, Chez Mary Lou. She recorded for six different companies and toured the continent.

Then one night in Paris in 1954, she walked away from two different jobs (an earlier one at a theater and a later one in a club), even leaving her money behind. She withdrew into the country. Earlier in England, she had been at a party where an American G.I. had noticed that she seemed disturbed. He told her to read the ninety-first psalm. She remembered things in a different way. She thought he had said, "Read the Psalms," so she read all of them. A significant new period in her life had begun. She returned to New York in late 1954. In early 1955, she recorded an album for Jazztone, and then went into a long period of seclusion and prayer.

Williams sought to pray in various churches. At one point, she was a member of Adam Clayton Powell's Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. At another, she put a spinet piano on a street corner in Harlem and

joined forces with tap dancer Baby Laurence. As she played piano and Laurence danced, they both preached to the passing crowd, attempting to save souls. She finally found Our Lady of Lourdes, a Roman Catholic church near her apartment in Harlem, which remained open at all hours. She went there to meditate and pray, preferring the chapel in the lower church.

Williams brought her spiritual search to Barry Ulanov. In the early 1940s, he had written the first full-length study of Duke Ellington, and was a former editor of *Metronome*, a superior magazine devoted to jazz. More to the point, Ulanov was a recent convert to Roman Catholicism and a professor of theology at Barnard College. He belonged to the Saint Thomas More Society, a group of liberal Catholic intellectuals, who met for talk and discussion. Its moderator was a Jesuit, Fr. Anthony S. Woods, who in addition to being a parish priest and spiritual director, was closely associated with the arts: he shepherded The Village Light Opera Company, the Xavier Players (composed of out-of-work professional actors and directors), and the Xavier Symphony. Ulanov brought him and Williams together.

After almost two years of spiritual conversation with Woods, Williams was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church on May 9,

1957—one day after her forty-seventh birthday.

The following six years included shorter or longer public engagements for Williams, including one in July 1957 as guest with Dizzy Gillespie and his big band at the Newport Jazz Festival. With the band, Williams played three sections of her *Zodiac Suite*. The concert was recorded by Norman Granz for Verve Records.

Other sporadic engagements included a concert at West Point, a stint at Toronto's Towne Tavern, and work in New York at The Prelude in Harlem and The Embers. She opened The Tudor Room at San Francisco's Palace Hotel, and remained there for many months in 1962. But though she played beautifully, people reported her high sensitivity to her surroundings when she worked. The remainder of 1962 and most of 1963 she spent, in retreat and doing charitable works.

She was also quietly composing and preparing to record.

Williams's own musical development is illustrated in a poster drawn to her specifications and ideas by the artist David Stone Martin. It is in the form of a tree, and she called the work *The History of Jazz*. It boldly shows her deeply held conviction about the origin of the music.

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Down into the earth of human experience (African-American human experience), which Williams called SUFFERING, the strong roots descend. From these roots, the tree grows,—thick and straight. Up the middle of the trunk, in ascending order, the eras in the development of jazz are named: spirituals, through ragtime to Kansas City, then bop. The blues are not just another stage, or step, in the evolution of the music, but run up both sides of the tree, originating in the roots. They ascend on the right into the leafy branches, but are severely stopped on the left, where chopped-off branches are seen. On these dead sticks appear such words as *cults and black magic, mere exercises, and classical books*. On the leaves of the tree are the names of the vital musicians in whose music the blues flourish.

The importance of the blues cannot be overemphasized in Williams's music. She would often say: "What I'm trying to do is bring back good jazz to you with the healing in it and spiritual feeling" and "The blues was really important—this is your healing and love in the music." In her teaching and talking about jazz, she never tired of pointing toward "this feeling." She'd say, "It's all spiritual music and healing to the soul." Part of this was in defiance of those who would call jazz "the devil's music," and part was in



REWARDS THAT GOOD MUSIC ALWAYS BRINGS TO A TIRED, DISTURBED SOUL AND ALL "WHO DIG THE SOUNDS."

Perhaps a comment on "suffering" is in order. There was nothing self-indulgent or masochistic about Williams. She experienced much human pain and sorrow in her life, but I never heard her react with anything like self-pity. There is simply this depth of connection with three and a half centuries of black life in America, and the experiences of her own life, which she calls "suffering." There is no glorification of slavery here, but an accounting of misery, which, because she is a musician, she relates to the courageous creation of the spirituals, which she also calls songs of joy, and of jazz, which she calls an outcry of sincere joy. The music is not separate from the seriously lived life, nor in its long history, from the seriously lived collective life of black Americans. And it is triumphant.

It is also useful to realize that by 1963 the civil-rights movement had been intensifying for almost a decade. In May of 1954, the Supreme Court in *Brown vs. Board of Education* ended the legal basis for segregation in the nation's public schools. In 1955, the young black teenager Emmett Till, while visiting Mississippi from Chicago, was murdered, for allegedly whistling at a white woman. In

December of that year, Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama. In 1957, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference formed, and Arkansas Governor Orville Faubus (ferociously satirized by bassist Charles Mingus in "Fable of Faubus") locked up the schools in Little Rock, rather than let in four black children. I vividly remember the four black students demanding service at a Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960. The country exploded in sit-ins, demonstrations, and freedom rides, as busses of blacks, often with some whites, headed south to fight, in a nonviolent way, for liberty and equal civil rights for all. It was a brave and impelling time.

African-American jazz musicians aided advances in the struggle for civil rights by composing and playing music with hard-edged political bite. As early as 1958, Sonny Rollins, the tenor saxophonist, recorded his *Freedom Suite*, accompanied only by bass and drums. The drummer was Max Roach. On August 31, 1960, Roach recorded his shattering *We Insist! Freedom Now Suite*. A week later, he recorded *Trip-tych*, with segments tellingly named: "Prayer," "Protest," and "Peace." On May 27, 1961, Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, including the trumpeter Lee Morgan and the

saxophonist Wayne Shorter, referred to the movement in a piece called *The Freedom Rider*. And Williams, in placing the words "Black" and "Christ" together in the one electrifying phrase "Black Christ," unified her own religious belief with the political struggle of the period. This album is the statement of her intertwined beliefs about faith in God, faith in black people, faith in America, and faith in jazz. It was her civil-rights statement in 1963.

Williams began composing *Black Christ* in mid 1962, and worked all through 1963 to arrange and assemble the fourteen pieces we have here. We must remember that two large events occurred that year. On August 28, more than 300,000 people gathered in Washington, D.C., and marched peacefully to the Lincoln Memorial, where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his I Have a Dream speech and gave moving expression to the transcendent hope of the civil-rights movement. About three months later, on November 22, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated, cut down by bullets, in Dallas, Texas. The tragedy brought the country together in grief.

The LP recording of *Black Christ* won two major awards in Europe: the *Prix Mondiale du Disque du Jazz* from the Hot Club of France, and the *Grand Prix* from the Académie du Disque Française.

Williams lived to create for another eighteen years beyond the presentation of "St. Martin de Porres." To the program of a concert held at Carnegie Hall in 1967 entitled *Praise the Lord in Many Voices*, she contributed three stunning pieces: "Thank You, Jesus," a brilliant version of the Lord's Prayer; "Pater Noster" for solo voice, mixed chorus and instruments; and a thunderous new arrangement of "Praise the Lord." In early 1967 she wrote her first extended sacred composition, *Mass I*.

In 1968, the Church of St. Thomas the Apostle in Harlem asked Williams to write some liturgical music. She responded with *Mass for Lenten Season*. After the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., she composed two motets working from King's words: "I Have a Dream" and "Tell Them Not to Talk Too Long."

During 1968 and 1969, Williams returned to Europe several times: to perform in concert in England; to open a club in Denmark, where she remained for more than six months; and to live and tour in Italy for a period of time. In 1969, she visited Rome for a planned performance of the Lenten mass, but she never realized her dream to play for the pope. News of the jazz mass had reached quarters that found the idea displeasing. The music was heard, not at mass,

but in a concert in the church after mass—not the same thing. The cancellation and switch made news around the world. During the same visit, Msgr. Joseph Gremillion, who headed the Institute for Justice and Peace at the Vatican, handed to Williams the texts proper to the Votive Mass for Peace. These texts and carefully expanded texts for the common parts of the mass formed the literary basis for Williams's third and best-known mass, *Music for Peace*. The work was later renamed *Mary Lou's Mass* (soon to be released by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings) by the great choreographer Alvin Ailey, who used the music for a series of dances of praise.

Williams's involvement in her career became constant and intense. Extended engagements in clubs and concerts at universities and jazz festivals were often mingled with preparation of choirs for performances of *Mary Lou's Mass*.

Between 1971 and 1978, Williams recorded eight complete albums, including *Zoning*, another masterpiece for Mary Records (reissued as Smithsonian Folkways 40811), and contributed to three others. In 1977 and 1978, she appeared at Carnegie Hall, first in duets with the avant-garde pianist Cecil Taylor, and second with the swing-era musician Benny Goodman, again giving some idea of her scope and versatility.

Both concerts were recorded.

In the fall of that year, Williams entered the final period of her life and career, when she accepted the position of artist-in-residence at Duke University, in Durham, North Carolina. It was a deeply fulfilling period for her. She loved the students, and they loved her. She received the Trinity Award, given directly by the vote of the students.

Williams battled bladder cancer for the last two years of her life. She never complained, and continued her intense schedule through the fall of 1980. In the final three months of her life, she was bedridden, but continued to compose. Her last work remains incomplete—a composition for 55 winds, three pianos, and a tambourine called *The History of Jazz*, a history she largely lived and helped create.

Mary Lou Williams died on May 28, 1981, in Durham. At her funeral, in New York, at the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola (where she had been baptized), the musical world gathered. Dizzy Gillespie played, and Benny Goodman and Andy Kirk attended. Excerpts from *Mary Lou's Mass* were sung. Her body was taken to Pittsburgh, where another mass was celebrated, with family and friends attending, in the Jesuit church of Saint Peter and Paul. She is buried in Calvary Cemetery in Pittsburgh.



Mary Lou Williams resting against the piano in her Harlem apartment in 1958. The framed image on the piano is Saint Cecilia, patron of musicians.

## THE TRACKS

### 1. ST. MARTIN DE PORRES

Mary Lou Williams, piano; The Ray Charles Singers conducted by Howard Roberts, chorus

Martin de Porres was born in Lima, Peru, on November 9, 1579, the son of John, a Spanish grandee, and Anna, a freed Panamanian, who was of African descent, and possibly of Indian blood. His parents were not married. Martin was born with the dark skin and features of his mother, who, when he was twelve, apprenticed him to a barber-surgeon. He learned to cut hair, conduct blood-letting, dress wounds, and prepare medicines. In 1594, at the age of fifteen, he presented himself to the friars of the Dominican order at Rosary Convent. He asked that he be taken in as a lay helper.

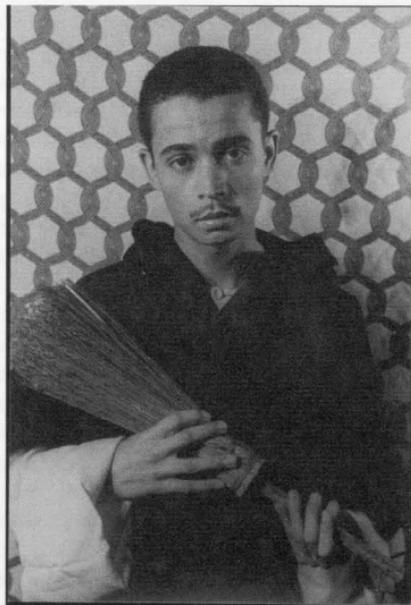
He spent his nights in prayer and acts of penance. He devoted his days to nursing the sick and caring for the poor. He ministered to African slaves who had been brought to Lima. His efforts were so constant and widespread that he was thought to have the gift of bi-location.

He had a special love of animals, extending even to the mice in the kitchen where he worked: "they are here only because they are hungry."

Martin de Porres died on November 3, 1639, just days short of his sixtieth birthday. He was soon widely venerated. Pope John XXIII canonized him in Rome on May 6, 1962, two days before Mary Lou Williams's fifty-second birthday. His yearly feast day is celebrated in the Roman Catholic Church on November 3. He is the patron of interracial justice and of social workers.

During May 1962 Williams began writing a hymn in praise of St. Martin de Porres. She completed the music in June, and began looking for someone to write a lyric. She approached her confessor, Father Woods, who was at first reluctant, saying he knew nothing of writing lyrics. She "tapped out the beats and hummed the melody, and one of the most beautiful lyrics quickly came forth."

- A St. Martin de Porres  
His shepherd staff a dusty broom  
St. Martin de Porres  
The poor man made a shrine of his tomb
- A' St. Martin de Porres  
He gentled creatures tame and wild  
St. Martin de Porres  
He sheltered each unsheltered child
- B This man of love  
Born of the flesh yet of God



*Edward Atkinson as Saint Martin de Porres, June 25, 1942.*

This humble man  
Healed the sick  
Raised the dead  
His hand is quick

A To feed beggars  
And sinners  
The starving homeless  
And the stray  
Oh, Black Christ of the Andes  
Come feed and cure us now we pray

C Oh God help us  
Spare Oh Lord  
Spare thy people  
Lest you be angered with me forever  
Lest you be angered with me forever

The lyric, at first, is a prayer to St. Martin de Porres. It is an invocation: "St. Martin de Porres[,]... come feed and cure us now[,] we pray." In between, the saint's virtues are portrayed: he is a shepherd, exercising pastoral care, but he works with a broom, and gives shelter to homeless people and strays, cures the sick, and feeds the hungry—even sinners.

Perhaps because so much sweetness and goodness in St. Martin causes the supplicant to consider the gravity of his own sins, the lyric then turns directly toward God ("Oh God help us"), and in mounting repentance

we ask to be spared from God's everlasting anger. The lyric takes another turn to particularity (individual guilt) when it moves from "Spare thy people" (us) to "Lest you be angered with me," a line that is emphatically repeated

Then, as if this is too much to bear, the piano enters with a long descending glissando and breaks into a playful habanera at a brighter tempo employing the basic melody, with slight blues ornamentation, as the chorus joyfully skips along, singing open, bouncing, scatlike vocals.

Of "St. Martin de Porres," one attentive listener recently said that the music "draws you in"—as indeed it does. The melody line, though deliberately simple to aid the prayerful intent, is sophisticated, drawn not only from the usual thirds, fifths, sevenths, and minor thirds, of popular music, to ninths, elevenths, and thirteenth. Altered (or flatted) fifths and raised ninths, among the basic "sounds" of bop, are also heard. These harmonies, closely placed, are so carefully constructed, that when sung, as truly and beautifully as they are here, they radiate serenity. They are also devilishly hard to sing.

The chords were composed to move smoothly. Here I quote Dr. Gayle M. Murchison, musicologist and assistant professor of music at Tulane University: "In addition to the

complexity of the tonal materials, the progressions are constructed in such a way that they 'slide' from one chord to another by way of *parallel motion* [emphasis added] Thus, for example, several voices form a new harmony within the resulting tonal context. Williams exploits this style of choral writing in order to create harmonic progressions that have a . . . gliding effect."

The composition is almost completely a cappella: the singers therefore have no instrumental help reaching their tones. Singing would not be so difficult if the notes were in conventional or easy-to-hear relationships, but they are not. How the chords are voiced, and how the voice-leading moves, is so subtly complex, that the singers must be able to look at the note printed on the page and then produce the required sound.

It is therefore interesting to note that the premiere of the work took place after mass, on November 3, 1962, the first celebration of the feast of the newly canonized St. Martin de Porres, and that it was sung by a soloist, Ethel Fields, with Williams at the piano. Eight days later, on the evening of November 11, the work was fully realized at Philharmonic Hall (Lincoln Center), in New York City, in a concert starring Williams and Dizzy Gillespie. Williams appeared during the first half of the concert playing piano

solo, with her bassist and her trio. Then the lights went down to a soft blue, and Brother Mario Hancock, Williams's good friend, who was in the audience that night, reported "a beautiful sound came up"—the sounds of "Martin de Porres." Gillespie and his quintet took the stage after intermission. They were the first African Americans to appear at Lincoln Center.

For the most part, Williams structured "Martin de Porres" within the 32-measure format of the standard popular song, also known as the AA'BA' form.

As the symbols indicate, the A and A' sections are not exact musical duplicates. Besides subtle variations in harmony and timbre, the melody line actually forms one long arc of sixteen measures. Its first six measures are linked to a repetition of the same melody in the A' section by a gracefully written descending phrase in measure seven, where, on its final note, the music moves toward a modal inflection and then in measure eight, to a note that lifts, and (in the manner of a Gregorian chant) remains unresolved. This process creates a tender openness and seamlessly connects two sections. In the final two measures of the A' section, in contrast, the phrase descends and resolves.

The music in the B section soars and forms another long arc extending across sixteen full

measures (beyond the usual eight reserved for the bridge). The voices, in addition, divide in various combinations, as they have from the beginning of the piece, but now more dramatically, between pairs or groups conveying the words of the text and those commenting on it, or reacting or responding to it, through specified vocables. This call-and-response interplay is a deep characteristic of African and African-American musics.

The lyrics for section C were not written by Father Woods, but come from the Psalms as adapted by Williams herself. Musically the C section forms an interlude, related to the whole, but not part of the basic AA'BA' structure. It is ten measures long, and stands starkly alone, in deep contrast to the overall gentleness of the music. The sopranos and altos utter high cries for help, while only the basses, in deep low tones and in unison, sing all four words: "Oh[,] God[,] help us." All the voices then reenter, asking to be spared. Dr. Murchison explains: "Williams here writes for dramatic effect. Fittingly [she] increases the rhythmic drive and intensifies the dissonance and chromaticism. The harmonic modulation illustrates the emotional turmoil of the lyrics."

The bridge (or B section) returns to a lighter, more airy way in waltz time, its chords less dense and more open. It moves upward and dances. The final A section is

sung simply, without choral response, until the coda, which reaches joyfully for the sky. The sopranos hit the highest note in the score, anchored by two low notes sung in sequence by the basses.

Hughes Panassie, writing in the January 1965 edition of the *Bulletin of the Hot Club of France*, called this piece a chef-d'oeuvre and its chords ravishing. He went on: "One might find this piece far removed from jazz; however, I believe that only a jazz musician could have written such a piece. Whatever it is, it is music of a great and exceptional beauty. Make no mistake. This is jazz of a very high order."

## 2. IT AIN'T NECESSARILY SO

Mary Lou Williams, piano; Theodore Cromwell, bass; George Chamble, drums

The Gershwins, George and Ira, composed this song as part of their opera *Porgy and Bess*, and placed it in the mouth of the jive character Sportin' Life. In the opera, the song is a comic showpiece, written in 3/4 time, a finger-snapping waltz. The lyrics are full of wisecracks that lead to whoops of collective glee from the crowd onstage. Williams retains the waltz, but extends it to the long meter, playing her version in 6/8 time, and transforms the music into a shimmering bal-

lad. This performance is a model of perfect construction. It is built on a limpid bass figure. Williams plays with clarity and economy. Her touch creates single-note right-hand lines of melody full of brightness, while the chords from her left hand move with shaded balance. Though she gives the impression of not straying far from the melody, she improvises thoughtfully and unobtrusively. In 1976, for the nation's bicentennial, *Life* magazine published a special issue celebrating 200 exceptional American women. The caption accompanying the photograph of Williams described her music as "cool as the smoke off dry ice"—an apposite description here. This is a lovely performance, a tribute from one great American artist to another.

## 3. THE DEVIL

Mary Lou Williams, piano; The Ray Charles Singers conducted by Howard Roberts, chorus

Williams composed the music for "The Devil," a straightforward 32-bar AABA song, in 1952. Ada Moore, the vocalist and intellectual, provided the words.

The lyric is wry and clever. It is also full of long open vowels, making it easy to sing. The sounds of the words themselves are seductive.

In 1962, returning to this song, Williams

scored the piece much in the same way she had composed "Martin de Porres," but in a much lighter vein. The melody is at first straightforward and pitched toward the lowest voices. In the B section, the lyric turns to questioning the sinner, and the music becomes reassuring and continues softly until the stanza ends. Then Williams returns to the bridge on solo piano, where the playing is particularly beautiful. The final section is scored more emphatically. It marches heavily toward the conclusion, which is wittily offset by ethereal, floating, wordless phrases from the women in the chorus.

## 4. MISS D. D.

Mary Lou Williams, piano; Theodore Cromwell, bass; George Chamble, drums

A portrait of the tall, ice-blond heiress and socialite Doris Duke, this piece of music is both a blues and a romp. When Miss Duke entered and crossed a room, she knew how to move. So does this composition, built on a bass figure, exactly four beats long, which repeats throughout, and undulates. I would like to see this rolling tune become the basis of a score for one of those let's-travel-across-the-country-together buddy movies—especially if the buddies were women à la *Thelma and Louise*.

## 5. ANIMA CHRISTI

Mary Lou Williams, piano; Larry Gales, bass; Grant Green, guitar; Percy Brice, drums; Budd Johnson, bass clarinet; Jimmy Mitchell, solo vocals; The George Gordon Singers, chorus

Williams skillfully combined most of the elements of a fourteenth-century prayer known as the "Anima Christi" ("Soul of Christ") with bits from the ordinary of the mass, phrases from various psalms, and lines she herself composed, and placed them into loosely rhymed stanzas to construct a newly formed prayer of praise and penitence.

Williams's approach in composing the music for this prayer is no less skillful. She combines numerous elements of black music and unites them into a pleasing whole. "Anima Christi" is also a long-meter waltz written in 6/8 time, but it is clearly a jazz waltz with interior syncopation. The overall direction at the head of the composition calls for swung 16th notes in a quasi-jazz waltz. By measure five, however, the pianist is directed to play a jazz waltz, and when we reach the entrance of the vocal soloist at measure eight, the call is for a "funky" gospel solo. By the time this piece gets rolling, both Williams on piano and Grant Green on guitar respond with phrases that are strictly out of the blues, but the blues the way a jazz artist would play them. This composition is a

miniature compendium of everything outlined on *The Jazz Tree*. The harmonies, in addition to everything else, are straight out of modern jazz. Just listen to the chords on the cries for help. Of particular note here too are the bass clarinet-playing of Budd Johnson and the soulful singing of Jimmy Mitchell.

## 6. A GRAND NIGHT FOR SWINGING

Mary Lou Williams, piano; Percy Heath, bass; Tim Kennedy, drums

This tune, cleverly titled against the widely known "(It's a) Grand Night for Singing," one of Richard Rodgers's glorious waltzes, moves in the Afro-Cuban manner against the driving beat of jazz. It was composed by Billy Taylor. Williams used it as her closing theme, playing numerous choruses as she improvised through its rocking 32 bars. Here, she is greatly aided by the propulsive swinging of the bassist Percy Heath.

## 7. MY BLUE HEAVEN

Mary Lou Williams, piano; Percy Heath, bass; Tim Kennedy, drums

In approaching this cute little tune, Williams would often play a long, and quite funky, introduction. When the familiar melody finally arrived, the audience would respond

with amused laughter. Here, this comic "vaudeville turn" of a song becomes quite sophisticated as it bounces along. Percy Heath once again provides a supple bass, while Tim Kennedy's drums are crisp. Williams's lightness of touch and subtle timing contribute to the forward motion. In her live performances, she often improvised through many choruses of this ditty.

## 8. DIRGE BLUES

Mary Lou Williams, piano; Percy Heath, bass; Tim Kennedy, drums

This is a solemn funeral march, spare and almost classical in tone, but drenched in the blues and written within the 12-bar structure of that form. The tempo is slow. The descending chords are shaped in quarter-triplets (three accents evenly spaced over one beat)—another characteristic of blues ornamentation. Here the effect is as insistent as the striking of a muffled drum. Late in life Williams wrote: "At one time in my career, I felt that the blues... was a style of music that I should be ashamed of. But then I made the discovery that all of the eras in the history of jazz were modern, especially in the matter of phrasing, and that all the music, even up to Coltrane and beyond, was based on the blues and the blues feeling. You can play all

of it—way-out chords... everything, and put this feeling and approach of the blues in it" (liner notes to *My Momma Pinned a Rose on Me*, 1978). In this dirge, Williams does with the blues what Beethoven accomplished in the *marcia funebre sulla morte d'un eroe* in his piano sonata no. 12 in A-flat, op. 26.

## 9. A FUNGUS A MUNGUS

Mary Lou Williams, piano

The first eleven notes of this composition from a bitonal melody. The sequence is formed as the chords move from B-flat diminished to B major to D-flat minor to A major against the fundamental chord of F diminished, which persists throughout. When pianist Geri Allen first heard these notes, she exclaimed: "What a beautiful melody!" The motif is then freely, though coherently, developed. Williams's concern that feeling in jazz was under attack in the early sixties from musicians injecting mere exercises or otherwise purposeless notes (the fungus) into music, is perhaps heard here in the center of the piece, when she plays a series of hard-struck loud chords followed by notes that seem to be babble, rather than partake of "conversation." This performance is nonetheless an example of well-shaped free jazz, and the delicate melody survives in the end.

## 10. KOOLBONGA

Mary Lou Williams, piano; Percy Heath, bass;  
Tim Kennedy, drums

Williams composed "Koolbonga" in 1953. It is a 12-bar blues, composed over a montuno pattern, the left-hand, or bass, phrase repeating throughout. Once the melody has been played, Williams turns to the straight-ahead 4/4 beat of American jazz and improvises by swinging the blues. She then returns to the Latin rhythm to close. Billy Taylor has also recorded this composition, in an arrangement involving four kinds of flutes.

## 11. FORTY-FIVE DEGREE ANGLE

Mary Lou Williams, piano; Percy Heath, bass;  
Tim Kennedy, drums

The bop drummer Denzil Best put this composition together, giving it an intricate melody, usually taken at lightning speed. Williams recorded it that way in 1965 for RCA Victor during a live performance at the second Pittsburgh Jazz Festival. Here, she rearranges the work into a quiet chamber offering by using the chordal structure instead of the multinote angular melody line, and reversing things: where notes go up in the original tune, she has them descend; where they angle one way, she now directs them in another. The result is spread over two lightly

swinging slowly paced choruses. The first presents Williams on piano with discreet bass accompaniment and then, with characteristic generosity, she turns the second chorus over to an explication by the bass. Things end as quietly as they began.

## 12. NICOLE

Mary Lou Williams, piano; Percy Heath, bass; Tim Kennedy, drums

Williams composed "Nicole" in France in 1954. It is a portrait of her friend Nicole Barclay. Again, this is a blues, a most beautiful one. It moves in a circular way, à la ronde. It is a most pertinent example for hearing the "conversation" in the music, as it moves effortlessly through seven fluid choruses. This distilled approach to the blues would reach its apotheosis in Williams's 1974 recording of "Rosa Mae," available on *Zoning* (Smithsonian Folkways CD 40811).

## 13. CHUNKA LUNKA

Mary Lou Williams, piano; Percy Heath, bass;  
Tim Kennedy, drums

This piece belongs to the subdivision of the blues called boogie-woogie, which in this case is light and sophisticated. There were seven takes made of this tune on this session, not so much because the music is hard, but

because the really difficult thing is to get the "groove" going right. The last three takes were unbroken. The rhythm from the bass and drums never stopped. This is the final take, where you hear Williams clapping out the beat at the beginning. At the very end, we hear her say "Let's hear that one." She must have found it satisfactory for there is no take #8. In 1968, she fashioned an arrangement of this composition and recorded it with the Danish Radio Jazz Big Band. It opens with multiple choruses for her own piano, contains some growling upward surges for the horns led by flute, offers some space for the saxophone of the great Ben Webster, and closes with gigantic modern harmonies for the full band against the boogie bass.

## 14. PRAISE THE LORD

Mary Lou Williams, piano; Larry Gales, bass; Grant Green, guitar; Percy Brice, drums; Budd Johnson, tenor saxophone; Jimmy Mitchell, solo vocalist; The George Gordon Singers, chorus

The invocation of the Holy Ghost is from a medieval prayer by Stephen Langton. The remainder of this stirring, yet gentle hymn takes its words from psalms 148 and 150. The composition is by Williams, as is the arrangement for the voices, but Melba Liston, the trombonist and arranger, put the wheels under this rolling congregational anthem. Though much in the same spirit as "Anima Christi," it benefits from the fervor of Budd Johnson, now on tenor saxophone, as the rhythm section funkily vamps on.

*Photo next page: Mary Lou Williams with arranger-trombonist Melba Liston during a recording session for Roulette Records.*



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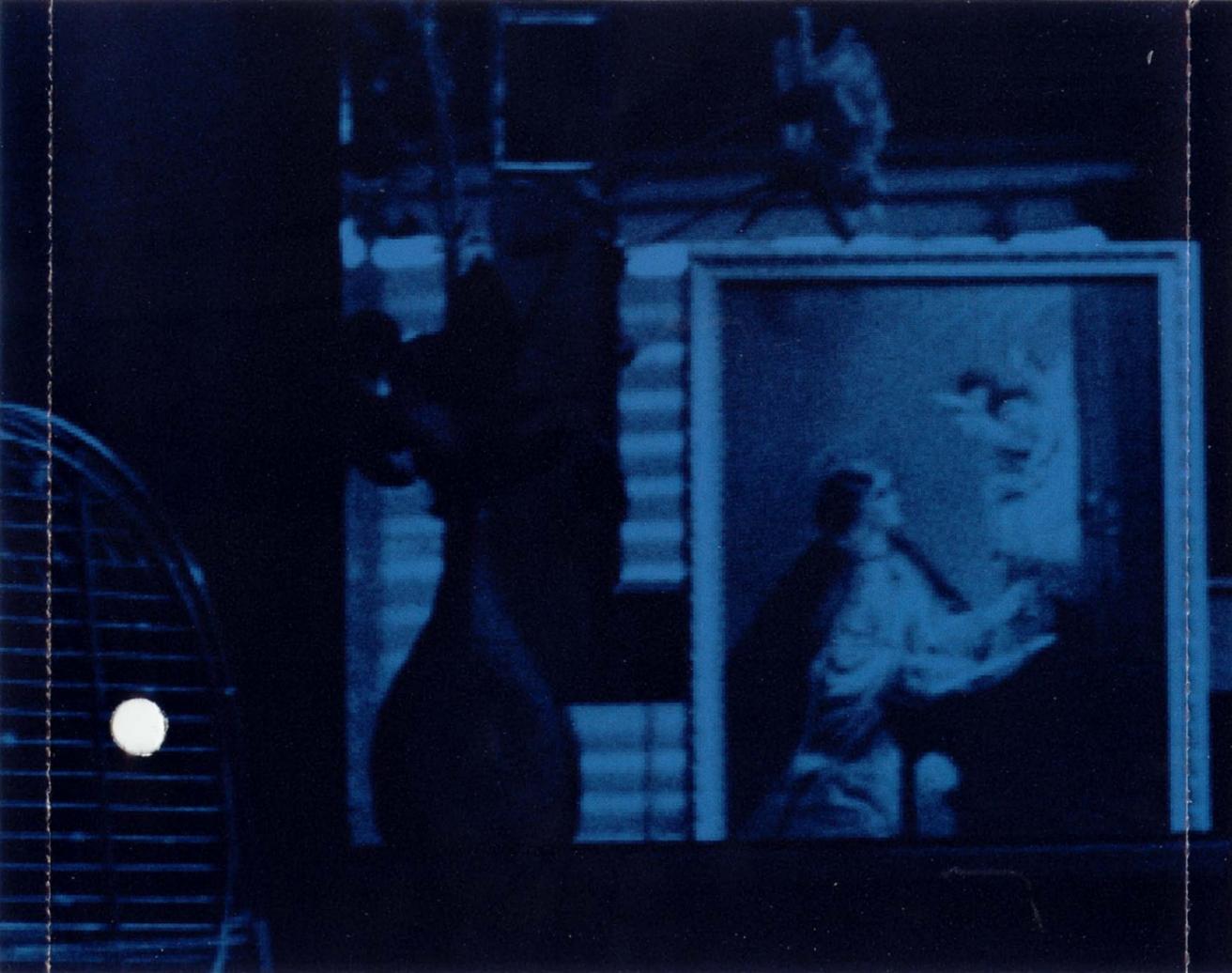
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## mary lou williams

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black Christ  
of the andes

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12. NICOLE \* 3:37
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14. PRAISE THE LORD 5:55

\* previously unreleased

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