Mary Lou Williams

Don Byas  Bill Coleman  Coleman Hawkins  Kenny Dorham  Vic Dickenson  Frankie Newton  Edmund Hall

The Asch Recordings, 1944-47
Compiled and Edited by Peter O'Brien, S.J.
Mary Lou Williams

is the most important female instrumentalist in Jazz. Her musical stature, however, can no longer be measured in such limiting terms. She has long since outgrown any reference to gender and belongs quite simply among the greatest names in Jazz. Some of them appear on her album: Coleman Hawkins, Don Byas, Kenny Dorham; vocal accompaniment with Josh White; Big Band; and the famous trio recordings with Al Hall on bass and Bill Coleman on trumpet.

Mary Lou Williams-the Asch Recordings 1944-47 brings together 35 sides (over 100 minutes of music) recorded by Mary Lou Williams in various settings: solo piano; small-group sessions with Coleman Hawkins, Don Byas, Frankie Newton, Vic Dickenson, Kenny Dorham; vocal accompaniment with Josh White; Big Band; and the famous trio recordings with Al Hall on bass and Bill Coleman on trumpet. Twenty-eight of these sides were previously released on 78 rpm only—one side has never been released in the United States. More importantly, brought together this way for the first time, they offer a kind of portrait of change and development. They were recorded during the explosively creative years for Jazz that brought about the change from Swing to Bop or Modern. These were vivid years for Jazz and they were important years for Mary Lou Williams. In these records Miss Williams may, at one moment, be looking back toward the music of the previous decade and era (though always with nuance and absolute authority) and ahead toward more modern sounds with unusual and deft twists of melody and phrasing and chords until the final recordings of the set when she has clearly developed into a modern pianist of exceptional taste.

The tapes for these LPS were made entirely from original 78 rpm Asch and Disc recordings. The original 78s were largely from the collection of Mary Lou Williams. Other 78s were graciously loaned by The Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University (through the kindness of Dan Morgenstern) and by collector Kenneth G. Noble, M.D.—Our thanks.

This set of LPS Mary Lou Williams—the Asch Recordings 1944-47 together with The Zodiac Suite (Folkways 32844), Mary Lou Williams—Footnotes to Jazz Vol. 2 (Folkways 2292), and Piano Jazz Greats (Folkways 2852) make available on LP all the recordings Mary Lou Williams made for Asch-Disc during a highly creative and transitional period for Jazz and for Mary Lou Williams: the mid 1940s.

Mary Lou Williams may also be heard on the following recordings:

Mary Lou Williams (Black Christ of the Andes/St. Martin de Porres) winner Grand Prix du Disque Francais (Folkways 32843)

Mary Lou's Mass (Mary Records—M102) with small orchestra and chorus—scored for the Albin Alley American Dance Theatre—performed at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City.

Zoning (Mary Records—M103) Mary Lou Williams today—her most recent piano recording.


MARY LOU WILLIAMS

She learned the Spirituals and Ragtime from her mother. The Blues were an early and profound part of Miss Williams' music and remain an essential and central element in everything that she plays—no matter how far out—to this day. Miss Williams calls the feeling of the Blues, a soulful feeling, characteristic of all good Jazz no matter how far out. Duke Ellington again said it exactly: "She is like soul on soul," Mary Lou Williams played the music of the small Jazzbands—music played with an insistent beat—as a member of John Williams' Syncopators. The period was the mid and later twenties. John was her first husband and the combo toured widely with a vaudeville show Buzz n' Harris and then with the team of Seymour and Jeanette on the Tivoli and Keith Orpheum Circuits. Scattered recordings of this early group exist under either John Williams' Syncopators or Jeanette James' Synco-Jazzers.

During the thirties Miss Williams achieved wide fame as pianist-composer-arranger for Andy Kirk's Clouds of Joy. The scene was Kansas City—the Swing Era—and Miss Williams' strong playing—especially in the left hand—together with her many original compositions and unusual arrangements did much to spread the style known as Kansas City Swing: the strong blues based and joyful music most widely known through Count Basie, Jam sessions during the era also tended to increase the musicians' solo inventiveness. During the same period Miss Williams wrote for the Big Band: she replaced Louis Armstrong; the Dorseyes, Benny Goodman (Roll Em and Camel Hop), Jimmie Lunceford (What's Your Story Morning Glory)—during the twenties Mary Lou had a small band in Memphis, Tennessee—she was the leader of this combo when she was all of seventeen—one of the sidemen was Jimmie Lunceford—and Glen Gray and the Casa Lomas among others. For Kirk she wrote Little Joe from Chicago (the first Big Band boogie-woogie thus arranged), Cloudy, Walkin' and Swingin' (much loved by musicians for the unusual voicing in the arrangement and bought and played by all the Bands of the period), Steppin' Pretty, Scratchin' in the Gravel, Beatrat Shuffle, Mesa Stomp, and many more, Miss Williams has written more than three hundred and fifty compositions to date. During the thirties she recorded extensively with Kirk for Decca. At times during the period she also made trio or small group recordings with units from the Band. One set of four sides deserves special mention: they were recorded for Varsity and the group was called: Six Men and a Girl. The group included Harold Baker on trumpet (Mary Lou's second and to date last husband) who later joined the Ellington Band, and the brilliant tenorist with the Kirk Band: Dick Wilson. Hopefully these sides will soon find their way on to LP. They have never been reissued. Miss Williams remained with the Kirk Band until 1941.

In '41 Mary Lou Williams traveled with and wrote for the Duke Ellington Band for about six months producing some fifteen to twenty arrangements. The most durable of these was a brilliant version of Blue Skies (melody completely hidden) called Trumpet No End, which was a showcase for the fabulous Ellington trumpet section which by that time included Al Hibbler. The arrangement was recorded in 1946 by the Ellington Band, Mary Lou also traveled awhile as a leader of a small group that included Baker, Orlando Wright (Musa Kaleem) who is heard on Side D of this collection on-two tunes: Lonely Moments and Whistle Blues, and an 18 year old drummer from Mary Lou's home town of Pittsburgh, Pa. named Art Blakey. Regrettably this group was never recorded. Any airchecks etc. out there? Please wire collect!

In the early forties Miss Williams began a long and happy engagement at Cafe Society Downtown in New York City. She had moved to N.Y., permanently in 1941. She played off and on at Cafe Society (mostly on) for a good five years beginning in 1943 from which I am able to gather. Those years from 1941 through 1948 were a period of intense creativity in Jazz, and the place of creation was New York City. Mary Lou arrived on the stage at the right time. Varied influences were brought to bear on the music of Mary Lou Williams during those years. One was her already mentioned more or less constant "egg" at Cafe Society. Cafe Society encouraged a look back over the shoulder toward what was best in the music of Kansas City and the Swing Era in general, that was no loss. By the forties Swing was mature and many of the most brilliant players from the era found employment at Cafe Society: Teddy Wilson, Eddie Heywood, Billie Holiday, and then with the team of Seymour and Jeanette on the Tivoli and Keith Orpheum Circuits. Some of them appear on this record: Vic Dickenson, Edmund Hall, and Frankie Newton who led the house band there for awhile. Then there's Josh White who, in another category, was one of Cafe Society's biggest stars.
The second influence was a group of musicians together with three locations. The musicians and two of the locations are widely known—even famous, and many of the musicians might be referred to as "the original boppers." Among them figured Dizzy Gillespie, Kenny Clarke, Oscar Pettiford, Miles Davis, Tadd Dameron, J.J. Johnson, Kenny Dorham, Charlie Parker, and most especially t.s.-v.s. Mary Lou Williams, Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk who were in her company almost daily. All these musicians were intensely and creatively busy in bringing to birth a new form of Jazz that would later be labelled Bop or Modern. The two widely known locations were Minton's Playhouse in upper Manhattan (the house that built Bop) and New York's 52nd Street. The third not so widely publicized meeting place was Mary Lou Williams' apartment.

Before, in between, and after work at Cafe Society Downtown, Mary Lou Williams was to be found at Minton's, Here Dizzy, Monk, and Charlie Parker were at work late at night playing and creating new sounds in music, Mary Lou Williams was an early appreciator of their work and an encourager of the new music—so much so that she was at times 'put down' by musicians of the previous era. She was also often found in the clubs along 52nd Street listening—sitting in—after her regular performances at Cafe Society. In the middle late forties Miss Williams left Cafe Society in favor of the clubs along 'the Street' where the new music was beginning to have a hearing and where her playing began to advance rapidly along modern lines. Of course she herself had always been 'modern'. In Kansas City during the thirties after regular Jam Sessions musicians would often gather around the piano, Mary Lou to play "Zombie" for them. The 'ouute' chords Mary Lou played on such occasions were new and 'out' harmonies—based off 'sounds' in Mary Lou's words—chords she says were 'modern' even 'avant-garde' as these terms are used concerning Jazz today. They were merely, even at that time, the product of an experimental and advancing music scene. The music and the desire amongst the musicians to produce something new and new is strikingly in evidence throughout her recorded career. Similar and constant evidence of a highly individual and original musical mind can be found everywhere on these thirty sides. For instance:

The entire opening set of five tunes, The Arrangement of Lullaby of the Leaves is by Edgar Sampson who wrote Stompin' at the Savoy. The five four arrangements were made by MLW. The relaxed tempos that give full value to tone and soulful feeling are unusual, Roll Em and Little Joe are reworkings of two of her earlier compositions. Roll Em was a hit for Benny Goodman in 1937 and formed part of the 1938 Carnegie Hall Concert. Both are taken at slower, laid back tempos. The harmonies and voicings are mellow and creamy. This is the boogie-woogie with a jazz difference and the conception is not commercial though these sides were recorded during the boogie-woogie craze of the forties, Miss Williams was never a boogie-woogie pianist but having been trained to play all styles and because of her own flexibility, she played it too. I like Frankie Newton's beautifully constructed and thoughtful solo passages and his delineation of the melody line on the introduction of Satchel. He sounds like Benny Goodman. The melody line, Little Joe: soulful tone—beautiful feeling—the sort of music that makes me wish I'd known the man. Yesterday's Kisses has an odd and inventive melody line, Mary Lou does not remember the tune or recording it. It was released in Europe on Baronet by Timme Rosenkrantz and has never before been released in the US. The personnel listed on the original 78rpm recording label listed all six members of the group, but only piano, bass, and clarinet. It must be Edmund Hall on Clarinet though it sounds like Benny Goodman. The piano sounds like no one but Mary Lou, Musicologists step forward and clear up this mystery please! Satchel Mouth Baby became a hit in the late forties for Billy Williams under the title Pretty Eyed Baby and in Italy, Piccolo Baby. Throughout the set Mary Lou's presence is felt guiding, pushing, shaping, leading, and blending the music. The tempos are slow and relaxed but the music swings. This has always been one of Miss Williams' outstanding characteristics: her ability to swing at any tempo, The music coheres—it holds together—it doesn't drag. The set also shows the beauty of Vic Dickenson's very high and archaic trombone.

The three piano solos on Side A are mostly a look back—probably the sort of music expected at Cafe Society. They are, however, all music, Notice the perfect time—the constant invention and surprise—again swinging or just the right amount of tension at slow tempos. Notice the intricacy of the rhythm and voicings in Mary Lou's Boogie (it's original and different—a pretty boogie), St. Louis Blues reminds me of certain passages in Nightlife, Mary Lou's first recorded piano solo in 1929.

Mary Lou likes Gjon Mill Jam Session named for the great Life Magazine photographer who made a motion picture in the forties also titled Gjon Mill's Jam Session in which Lester Young figured promin
Cavanaugh. She evolution on nothing else. I have heard Miss Williams outdo herself several times on Stardust Part II and beautiful soulful piano throughout, this I think is the earliest recording of the Coleman Hawkins line on Lady Be Good. In 1944 it is referred to as the only impromptu recording of the session that included Soledad of My Soul and That and possibly Carcinoma. Fats Navarro called it Fats Blows and Monk called it Riffside. Hawkins and Mary Lou both take fine solos here, Mary Lou's solo on Songin' My Soul is especially interesting. It fits the context of Hawkins' playing so well. Another example of her ability to listen to the music of her companions. This is true and true of Mary Lou's composng and arranging on these sides and her approach to the piano in playing them presage what is to come.

Side C absolutely knocks me out. Carcinoma is the high point on all four sides for me. The relaxed tempo and the beautiful melody is matched by the trio of three players. In introducing the records on Side A of this collection, Charles Edward Smith wrote in the original notes accompanying the 78s: "Ensemble piano talent is rare in jazz and Mary Lou Williams has it to an unusual degree. Here acceptance of other musicians is not—here are thirty two bars and I'll be back later—but a really collaborative effort," his words seem even more true of these sides with Bill Coleman and Al Hall. The music is a real blend—the arrangements don't abruptly leave off and begin—the three players play their parts and one whole results. Mary Lou is modest in what she takes for herself. No show business here—only the requirements of the music, Carcinoma was recorded during the Hawkins' date I think—it was released in an album with that material at any rate. The other six sides were released together in an Album, the date was supposed to be for solo piano. The producer uncharacteristically responded with displeasure when Mary Lou arrived with Coleman and Hall at the studio. They had been working together for a month to prepare for the date and the lady came armed with arrangements and odd and unusual harmonies and the feeling. The subtleties in these musical areas in Mary Lou's compositions and arranging on these sides and her approach to the piano in playing them presage what is to come.

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The next two sides are by a band put together by Milton Orent—the bassist. He and Mary Lou were close friends during the mid and late forties. Among other things, he was a staff arranger with ABC. He lost his job there once because his musical ideas and harmonies proved so advanced for the period. Among other things, he was a staff arranger with ABC. He lost his job there once because his musical ideas and harmonies proved so advanced for the period. The producer uncharacteristically responded with displeasure when Mary Lou arrived with Coleman and Hall at the studio. They had been working together for a month to prepare for the date and the lady came armed with arrangements and odd and unusual harmonies and the feeling. The subtleties in these musical areas in Mary Lou's compositions and arranging on these sides and her approach to the piano in playing them presage what is to come.

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P.S. Miss Williams' career did not stop with the last of these recordings. Many journeys, geographical, spiritual, and musical took her into many corners in the thirty years since. Her religious conversion became musically important in her extended compositions for sacred purposes especially: Hymn in Honor of Saint Martin de Porres and her three Masses including Mary Lou's Mass which was choreographed by Alvin Ailey and which was the first Jazz composition performed in Saint Patrick's Cathedral in NYC (1975). Many honors have come Miss Williams' way—the naming of Mary Lou Williams Lane in Kansas City—two Guggenheim Fellowships—a half dozen Honorary Degrees. More importantly she has continued to compose and play and invent musically. She is currently beginning a new period in her life—that of Full Professor teaching fulltime at Duke University in Durham, N.C. She is also currently at work on her autobiography: Zoning the History of Jazz.

Record I - Side A

March 12, 1944: MARY LOU WILLIAMS, piano; Frankie Newton, trumpet; Edmund Hall, clarinet; Vic Dickenson, trombone; Al Lucas, bass; Jack Parker, drums

Lullaby of the Leaves (651 - 1004A / Asch 450-1) Bernice Petekere (Bourne Company - ASCAP) time: 3:43

Roll Em (653 - 1003A / Asch 450-2) Mary Lou Williams (Robbins Music Corp. - ASCAP) time: 2:49

MARY LOU WILLIAMS, piano; Edmund Hall, clarinet; Al Lucas, bass

Yesterday's Kisses (2A / Baronet TR-3-B) Mary Lou Williams (Cecilia Music Publishers, Inc. - ASCAP) time: 2:45

Personnel as on Lullaby of the Leaves

Satchel Mouth Baby (656 / Asch 502-A) Mary Lou Williams (MCA Inc. - ASCAP) time: 2:52

Little Joe From Chicago (652 - 1002A / Asch 450-2) Mary Lou Williams-Henry Wells (Cecilia Music Publishers, Inc. - ASCAP) time: 2:52

April 19, 1944: MARY LOU WILLIAMS, solo piano

Drag Em (661 - 1002B / Asch 450-3) Mary Lou Williams (Cecilia Music Publishers, Inc. - ASCAP) time: 3:48

Mary's Boogie (660 - 1003B / Asch 450-1) Mary Lou Williams (Cecilia Music Publishers, Inc. - ASCAP) time: 2:35

St. Louis Blues (662 - 1004B / Asch 450-1) W. C. Handy (Handy Bros. Music Co., Inc. -ASCAP) time: 3:13

Date Unknown - ??: MARY LOU WILLIAMS, piano; Nora Lee King, vocal

Blues - Until My Baby Comes Back Home (MA1228 - Asch 550-2A) time: 2:50

Record I - Side B

June 5, 1944: MARY LOU WILLIAMS, piano; Don Byas, tenor saxophone; Dick Vance, trumpet; Vic Dickenson, trombone; Claude Greene, clarinet; Al Lucas, bass; Jack Parker, drums

Gjon Mill Jam Session (1236-1006A / Asch 552-2) Mary Lou Williams (Cecilia Music Publishers, Inc. - ASCAP) time: 3:15

Man o Mine (1234 - 1006B / Asch 552-2) Mary Lou Williams-s-Don Byas (Cecilia Music Publishers, Inc. - ASCAP) time: 4:10

Stardust Part I (1239-1005A / Asch 552-1) Hoagy Carmichael (Mills Music, Inc. - ASCAP) time: 3:25

Stardust Part II (1235-1005B / Asch 552-1) Hoagy Carmichael (Mills Music, Inc. - ASCAP) time: 3:51

December 15, 1944: MARY LOU WILLIAMS, piano; Coleman Hawkins, tenor-saxophone; Bill Coleman, trumpet; Eddie Robinson, bass; Denzil Best, drums

Lady Be Good (MA 1302-1 - 1007B / Asch 552-3) George & Ira Gershwin ( Warner Bros. Inc., - ASCAP) time: 3:47

add: Joe Evans, alto saxophone; Claude Greene, clarinet

Song in My Soul (MA 1300 - 1008A) Mary Lou Williams, - (Cecilia Music Publishers, Inc.) time: 3:03

This & That (MA 1301 - 1008B) Claude Greene - time: 2:40

Record II - Side C

Date Unknown (1944): MARY LOU WILLIAMS, piano; Bill Coleman, trumpet; Al Hall, bass

Carcinoma (MA 1259 - 1007A / Asch 552-3) Mary Lou Williams (Cecilia Music Publishers, Inc. - ASCAP) time: 3:39

August 10, 1944: Personnel as on Carcinoma

Russian Lullaby (MA 710 / Asch 351-1A) Irving Berlin (Irving Berlin Music Company - ASCAP) time: 2:51

Blue Skies (MA 711 / Asch 351-1B) Irving Berlin (Irving Berlin Music Company - ASCAP) time: 2:40

Persian Rug (MA 712 / Asch 351-2A) Neil Moret (Robbins Music Corp. - ASCAP) time: 2:39


You Know Baby (MA 714 / Asch 351-3A) Mary Lou Williams-Frank Lewis (Cecilia Music Publishers, Inc. - ASCAP) time: 2:40

I Found a New Baby (MA 715 / Asch 351-3A) Jack Palmer-Spencer Williams (MCA Inc. -ASCAP) time: 2:58

December 11, 1944: MARY LOU WILLIAMS, piano; Josh White, vocal; Bill Coleman, trumpet; Jimmy Butts, bass; Eddie Dougerty, drums

The Minute Man (MA 780 / Asch 2001 A) M. Ashwood-F. Johnson-C. Hopkins-M. L. Williams / time: 2:05

Froggy Bottom (MA 784 / Asch 2001 B) Mary Lou Williams (Cecilia Music Publishers, Inc. - ASCAP) time: 2:54

Record II - Side D

February 16, 1946: MARY LOU WILLIAMS, solo piano

How High the Moon (MA 235 / Disc 612 - 5025A) Morgan Lewis (Chappell & Co. Inc.0 time: 2:12


Blue Skies (MA 238 / Disc 612 - 5026A) Irving Berlin (IRving Berlin Music Co. - ASCAP) time: 2:12

The Man I Love (MA 236 / Disc 612 - 5026B) George Gershwin (New World Music Corp. -ASCAP) time: 2:22

These Foolish Things Remind Me Of You (MA 239 / Disc 612 - 5027A) Jack Strachey (Bourne Co. -ASCAP) time: 2:22


Date Unknown (1947): Milton Orent-Frank Roth Orchestra (supervised by MARY LOU WILLIAMS—arrangements Mary Lou Williams/Milton Orent): Irving Kustin, Leon Schwartz, Edward Sadowski, trumpets; Martin Glaser, Allan Feldman, Maurice Lopez, reeds; Orlando Wright (Musa Kaleem), tenor sax.; Frank Roth, piano; Milton Orent, bass; Jack 'the Bear' Parker, drums—there is some question about the pianist on Whistle Blues: Frank Roth or Mary Lou Williams.

Lonely Moments (656 / Disc 6067A) Mary Lou Williams (Cecilia Music Publishers, Inc. - ASCAP) time: 2:55

Whistle Blues (658 / Disc 6067B) Mary Lou Williams (Harman Music Inc. -ASCAP) time: 2:56

Date Unknown (1947): MARY LOU WILLIAMS, piano; Kenny Dorham, trumpet; John H. Smith, Jr., guitar; Grachan Moncur, bass

Kool (833 / Disc 5033B) Mary Lou Williams (Cecilia Music Publishers, Inc. - ASCAP) time: 2:43

Mary Lou (832 / Disc 5033A) Lyman-Wagner-Robinson (Venus Music Corp.- Mills Music Inc. -ASCAP) time: 2:16

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