



KANSAS LEGEND BIOGRAPHY

Mary Lou Williams (1910-1981)

Mary Elfrieda Scruggs was born in Atlanta, Ga., and raised in Pittsburgh, Penn. As a baby, she was exposed to music, listening to her mother practicing an old-fashioned pump organ. At age six, Mary began playing the piano, specifically Irish songs for her uncle and classics for her grandfather. Her stepfather would sneak her into clubs and collect money from people to hear her play.



Mary Lou took her stepfather's name and performed as Mary Lou Burley. At age 15, she began performing on the road with vaudeville act Seymour & Jeanette in a purely pop style. In Kansas City, Mary Lou quit the vaudeville circuit and joined John Williams' dance band. John Williams' Jazz Syncopators made their first recordings during the 1920s, but the group disbanded after a short time. Mary Lou and John married, and together they joined Andy Kirk's Twelve Clouds of Joy where Mary Lou quickly became the band's arranger.

During the 1930s, Williams created unusual arrangements for her original compositions and helped propel Count Basie's Kansas City Swing into glory. Williams created swing-band for other notable musicians of the time, including Benny Goodman. By 1941, the Williams' marriage had dissolved and Mary Lou began traveling with the Duke Ellington Band. Over the course of six months, she produced more than 15 arrangements for the group, including hits like "Trumpet No End." At the end of the year, Williams left Kansas City for a fresh start and a new engagement in New York City.



In 1942, Williams formed her own small group in New York and married her second husband, Shorty Baker, a trumpeter. She and many of the most notable swing musicians of the time played at the Café Society, and led the way in jazz's most creative era. All of the creativity evolved into bop music, and Williams spent time with the likes of Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Charlie Parker and others at Minton's Playhouse and New York's 52nd Street.

In 1945, Williams recorded her first extended work, "The Zodiac Suite." The New York Philharmonic performed three movements from this work at Carnegie Hall. She also had her own weekly radio show, "The Mary Lou Williams Piano Workshop." In the early 1950s, Williams spent two years performing and composing in Europe before returning to the states and devoting her time to religious activities and charity work.



Williams came out of retirement to record a spiritual album in 1963, "Black Christ of the Andes" and recorded "Mary Lou's Mass" in the 1970s. She was always ahead of her time in terms of using fresh and innovative approaches in her compositions. Williams found a way to blend jazz with rhythm and blues, gospel and spiritual elements in her music.

Mary Lou served as a revolutionary in the music world for more than 50 years. As a composer, arranger and bandleader, she earned respect from her male colleagues and changed the future of music with her contributions to Kansas City swing and bebop.

