

“Night Life”—Mary Lou Williams (1930)

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Essay by Linda Dahl (guess essay)*



Mary Lou Williams

How does a 20 year-old female African-American pianist's casual three-minute solo debut become one of the most notable recordings of the 20th century? The pianist, Mary Lou Williams, could not yet read or write music. Her training had all been by ear, collected in rough dancehalls, gambling dens and traveling tent shows in the early part of the century. Yet this was a fecund atmosphere for a young musician: she was surrounded by great teachers such as Earl Hines, Jelly Roll Morton, Art Tatum and the remarkable women pianists Lovie Austin and Lil Hardin Armstrong. Mary Lou had a whip-smart ear, superb sense of time and drama--and great determination. Notably, she continued to evolve through the eras of jazz to follow: swing, bebop and free jazz. Mary Lou at 20 was on the verge of becoming not only a renowned performer, but a composer and arranger as well, a peer of Ellington and a mentor to Monk. She would never stop challenging herself. Even when she lay mortally ill in 1981, she kept working on a new piece, her *Wind Symphony*.

But in 1930, what made her such a stand-out? Already married to a member of The Twelve Clouds of Joy, one of the fine new swing bands, she itched to play and arrange for the band, but they already had a pianist. Andy Kirk, the leader, nicknamed her “The Pest,” yet he knew Mary Lou's worth. And when the band's pianist was periodically indisposed because of drink, Mary Lou's stomping, lyrical playing delighted crowds, while her already-intricate arrangements, dictated to Kirk, earned musicians' respect. Based then in Kansas City, the hot new musical hub, she sat in at late night sessions with the likes of Coleman Hawkins, Ben Webster and Count Basie. During late 1929, producer Jack Kapp of Decca Records in Chicago got wind of the Twelve Clouds of Joy and sent a scout to Kansas City to record their audition. When the male pianist failed to show up again, Mary Lou took the piano chair, and her future was set in motion. Imagine a cold, late winter day in Chicago in 1930, a city stuffed with hot music. The Great Depression is looming but hasn't yet devastated the land. The niche market for music by African-American musicians is growing, and Decca has decided to bring the Clouds, minus Mary Lou, up from Kansas City by train to make a recording. But when they get there, Kapp (to his ever-lasting credit) says, “Where's the girl? Send for the girl!” A telegram goes out: Mary Lou is to catch the next train.

Now imagine a very different scene: dark, brutal, the underside of this shiny bright, exciting new music, where Mary Lou is just another young woman, vulnerable prey. Proud and discreet, she never publicly revealed the string of abuse she endured but privately she kept diaries. When I became her biographer decades later, I was to find them stored in the basement of a crumbling old mansion on Long Island. And she wrote about two separate violent assaults right before her

arrival in Chicago. The first assault occurred in Kansas City at a party the night before she got the precious telegram; the second happened the next night when she was attacked by a porter on the train to Chicago. These assaults left her in such pain, she wrote, that she had to sit on one hip; a doctor later told her that she had suffered permanent damage to the uterus.

“I wasn’t fit for anything when I arrived in Chicago that morning,” she wrote, “but I went straight to the studio to record.” There, the producer was pacing, impatient to get started but the band wasn’t ready yet. So he asked Mary Lou to play a couple of solo numbers while they waited. She had been improvising since she was a girl--the “Little Piano Girl of East Liberty” in Pittsburgh. And she’d been out on the road since 12. But this, of course, was different, this was a dream come true: making a recording alongside greats like Louis Armstrong, Fletcher Henderson, Ellington! Exhausted, traumatized, aching, Mary Lou did what she would always do, slipping into the music body and soul. As she writes, “Out of my training and the way I was feeling the beat came two originals, ‘Nite Life’ and ‘Drag ‘Em.’” She let the three-minute solos rip.

It is an accepted heavy irony that African-American music and musicians were barely noticed by most critics in their own land then, whereas they were treated attentively in Europe. The French critic Hugues Panassie, in his seminal *Guide to Swing Music*, gave high praise to Mary Lou’s solo debut. While her style, he said, was “derivative of James P. Johnson and Fats Waller, she is much more fantastic and ardent. On ‘Nite Life,’ she has made one of the most beautiful hot piano solos we have.” He added that you’d never guess it was a woman playing, the handicapping that has so often held back female musicians. Well, Mary Lou wasn’t ever having any of that.

Andy Kirk knew her worth, too, for all his foot-dragging about letting her in the band. “She had a set of ears you wouldn’t believe. I used to say that if you dropped a dishpan on the floor, she’d tell you what key it was ringing in.” Still, it took him a year after “Nite Life” was recorded before he finally made Mary Lou Williams a full-fledged member of the Twelve Clouds of Joy.

And what did Mary Lou receive from Decca for “Nite Life,” aside from insider attention? “Peanuts,” her then-husband John Williams scoffed. “We guys in the band got four or five dollars, Mary got maybe ten.” As for royalties? Not a dime. With, she wrote, holes in her shoes, no winter coat, curtains refashioned into a dress for performances and poor-boy sandwiches to sustain her, Mary Lou soldiered on--to greatness.

Linda Dahl is the author of the award-winning biography of “Mary Lou Williams, Morning Glory.” Her latest books are the novel “Cleans Up Nicely” (2013) and “Loving Our Addicted Daughters Back to Life” (2015).

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.