

# Mary Lou Williams

Musician  
1910-1981

by David Conrads

In a remarkably productive career that spanned a half century, Mary Lou Williams established herself as a pianist, composer, and arranger, an unprecedented feat that has remained an inspiration to women in jazz. While she is widely regarded as one of the greatest female jazz musicians ever, her long list of accomplishments is impressive by any measure. She worked in Kansas City from 1929 to 1942, during the heyday of the city's jazz scene. Long after achieving international recognition, she continued to credit Kansas City as her musical birthplace.

Mary Elfrieda Scruggs was born in Atlanta in 1910 and grew up in Pittsburgh. A child prodigy, she taught herself to play the piano by ear. She was playing in public by the age of six and was a professional musician by her early teens. In 1927, she married saxophonist John Williams. The couple lived briefly in Memphis then moved to Oklahoma City, where John Williams joined Andy Kirk's Twelve Clouds of Joy. In 1928, the Clouds moved to Kansas City.

By 1930, Williams had become a regular member of Kirk's band. At a time when there were very few women instrumentalists in jazz, she was soon recognized as Kirk's top soloist, and the band's success in the 1930s was due in large part to Williams' distinctive arrangements, compositions, and solo performances. She was responsible for some of the band's biggest hits, including "Froggy Bottom," "Walkin' and Swingin'," and "Lotta Sax Appeal." In addition to her work with the Clouds, Williams provided arrangements for many of the top bandleaders of the swing era.

Williams left Kirk's band and Kansas City in 1942. She formed her own small group with her second husband, trumpeter Harold Baker, and then joined Duke Ellington's band for a short time. She worked freelance thereafter, mainly in New York and Europe. She retired from music in 1954, but resumed her career in 1957 and remained active into the 1970s.

Williams returned to Kansas City in 1980 to receive an honorary



degree from Rockhurst College. A section of 10th Street, between The Paseo and Woodland Avenue, was renamed Mary Lou Williams Lane, in her honor.

### **Sources**

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