

Claude Williams

Musician

1908-2004

by John Arthur Horner

Claude “Fiddler” Williams didn’t play the instrument for which he became best known until after he had already mastered the guitar, mandolin, banjo, cello, and bass.

Born in Muskogee, Oklahoma, on February 22, 1908, Williams began his musical career 10 years later. In his teens, he heard the great jazz violinist Joe Venuti play and told his mother he wanted to play the violin. By the end of the next day he had received his first violin, and was playing his first song.

In 1925, Williams married his first wife, Mabel. They had one son, Mark, and remained together until her death some 60 years later. After her death he married Blanche Fouse in 1989.

Williams played with the string band of his brother-in-law, Ben Johnson, averaging \$6.00 a night in tips. He moved to Kansas City in 1928 and later said that jazz musicians who made it big “had to earn their Kansas City stamp.” Williams joined the Twelve Clouds of Joy and played guitar and violin with them on his first recording. In the jam sessions and battles of the bands of the 18th and Vine district, Fiddler listened to great horn players like Lester Young and Buddy Tate. He worked with jazz greats like Terrence Holder, Andy Kirk, and Mary Lou Williams. In 1930 the Twelve Clouds of Joy played in New York’s Roseland Ballroom and Harlem’s Savoy.

He played with many bands before leaving Kansas City for Chicago. There he played for Eddie Cole’s band, including Eddie’s brother, Nat “King” Cole. In 1936 another Kansas City jazz great, Count Basie recruited Williams for Basie’s first big band. During Williams’ time with the Count Basie Orchestra, the readers of *Downbeat* magazine in a national poll voted him “Best Guitarist of the Year.”

Williams moved back to Kansas City in 1953 to lead the first of his own groups. Although he worked in western cities, and toured, Kansas City was his base. He appeared at the Monterey Jazz Festival and the Smithsonian Festival of American Folk Life, toured



often in Europe, and appeared in the Broadway review *Black and Blue*.

Williams was inducted into the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame and was named a Kansas City Jazz Master. He was given a National Heritage Fellowship Award, the Charlie Christian Jazz Award, the Coleman Hawkins Award, the Kansas City Jazz Ambassadors Excellence Award, and the Lynn Riggs Award. In 1992 he performed at the party for President Clinton's inauguration, and in 1998 he received recognition from the National Endowment for the Arts.

During his last years Williams continued to perform and tour. In May 2001 he headlined at the Folly Theater with 14-year-old pianist Eldar Djangirov, nearly 80 years his junior. Each summer he taught at Mark O'Connor's Fiddler Camp in Tennessee.

Claude Williams died April 25, 2004.

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