

**At the Intersection of Jazz and Catholicism:  
The Sacred Music of Mary Lou Williams**

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In the 1960s, African American jazz pianist and composer Mary Lou Williams (1910-81) used what was then known as the Negro spiritual, blues, swing, bebop, and even ragtime as inspiration for her settings of the sacred liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church. She deliberately chose jazz, which she called “the only true American artform,” drawing from all the eras of jazz. In doing so, she documented the important achievements in black music history in a way that few have achieved within the confines of single multi-movement works. In this she should be compared to Ellington perhaps, whose multiple movement extended works, like *Black, Brown and Beige* (1943) had presented the diversity, depth, and variety of the African American experience. In the 1930s Williams was a traditionalist whose musical life centered around the composition and performance of swing dance music for the popular jazz market, presented in a style that was deeply rooted in the blues. In the 1940s, however, she became a modernist experimenter as a mentor to the main figures in bebop, like Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, and Bud Powell. In the 1960s, as a newly converted Catholic, she began to write liturgical music influenced by changes in Catholic practice brought on by the reforms of Vatican II, especially the shift away from the Latin Mass, to the vernacular Mass. In this project I explore how and why Williams crafted the vernacular Mass as a juxtaposition between the practice of redemptive suffering and the neo-bop framework in her sacred works. I argue that she used the musical side, the neo-bop framework, to memorialize and bear witness to the long history of physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering of African Americans. Thus, by using the suffering of a people

as a metaphor for the suffering of Christ, Williams was able to bring the history of black Americans forward during a time of civil rights activism. This project looks through the lens of Williams' Catholicism and her notion of the "spiritual feeling in the blues that arises out of suffering" to explore her late religious works, especially *Mass* (1967).

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## 1.0 Introduction

In 1954, Mary Lou Williams abruptly left the jazz scene, devoting herself to religious activities, Catholicism, and the composition of sacred music. She had become a major figure in the New York jazz scene by the 1950s, but a bad jazz economy had taken its toll on many musicians, including Williams, who was becoming increasingly disillusioned with her career, and with what she felt was a drug-infested, corrupt, and sinful environment in which professional jazz musicians were forced to work. As she dealt with an increasing despondency, she booked a short European tour that began in London in early 1952, that turned into a two year sojourn for Williams, who after the two-week tour, was not eager to return to the States. As her booking schedule brought her to Paris, her state of mind worsened, and she walked off the stage during an appearance at *Le Boeuf sur le Toit* in 1954, vowing never to play again. She spent most of the next eight years in virtual seclusion in Harlem, away from music, praying, often walking the streets looking for drug addicted musicians in need of care.

Largely self-taught, Williams had struggled with many career obstacles, including racism, sexism and the cutthroat atmosphere in the business of jazz, to become one of its most established jazz artists. As a teenager in 1929, her first big break came in Kansas City through her husband, John Williams, a tenor sax player with the Clouds of Joy, a regional African-American swing dance band led by saxophonist Andy Kirk. As Kirk's pianist, arranger and composer, her contributions were instrumental in bringing success to the band during the 1930s. During her residency with the Kirk band during the period (1929-1942), Williams arranged, composed and played for more than twenty recordings, mostly with the Clouds of Joy, but also



under her own name as well, despite gender norms that didn't recognize women as legitimate jazz musicians. Her output of original popular songs and dance music from that period epitomizes the achievements of African-American music in the swing era, and includes signature pieces like "Froggy Bottom," "Mary's Idea," "Drag 'Em Blues," and "The Lady Who Swings the Band."<sup>1</sup>

By 1942, after twelve years of touring with the Clouds of Joy, Williams had become, according to her biographer Tammy Kernodle, "more exhausted than wealthy, and disillusioned about the diminishing level of creativity in jazz."<sup>2</sup> She was increasingly disillusioned as well, following the end of her marriage to John Williams in 1938, and by the personality clashes and financial problems that had consumed her professional association with Kirk and the Clouds of Joy. As they arrived in Washington D.C. for an appearance, she decided to quit the band and headed back home to Pittsburgh. Williams later said that fame had broken the Kirk band. Jealousies and arguments over money had split the band into cliques, and an artistic chill on creativity had taken root because audiences demanded to hear the band's hits exactly as they had recorded them.<sup>3</sup>

Although raised a Protestant, it was soon after her return to Harlem, around (1955-56), that Williams embraced Catholicism, making her conversion and confirmation in 1957. Spiritual advisors and future collaborators like the Jesuit priests, Father Anthony Woods, S.J., Father John

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<sup>1</sup> From "Kansas City and the Clouds of Joy," *Mary Lou Williams, Soul on Soul*, Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University, <http://newarkwww.rutgers.edu/ijs/mlw/intro2.html>, (Accessed January 14, 2015)

<sup>2</sup> Tammy Kernodle, 82.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 80.

Crowley, S.J., and a Franciscan Friar of the Atonement, Brother Mario Hancock, S.A. (1937-2005), eventually persuaded the distraught Williams that she could both return to jazz, and continue to be a Catholic, by “offering” her music as prayer. At this time, Williams began to compose and perform Catholic liturgical music in a modern jazz style, which as she said, came “from my mind, through my heart to my fingertips.”<sup>4</sup>

The first published work in this religious jazz style was the 1962 extended modern jazz spiritual “St. Martin de Porres: Black Christ of the Andes,” dedicated to one of Williams’ most important religious role models – Martin de Porres, the newly canonized black saint. This was followed soon after by *Mass* (1967), which would establish the model used in her subsequent sacred Masses, *Mass for Lenten Season* (1968), *Mass for Peace* (1969), commissioned by the Pontifical Commission on Justice in Rome, and a modern dance work commissioned by choreographer Alvin Ailey (1931-89), *Mary Lou’s Mass* (1971).<sup>5</sup>

As this project explores, the liturgical music of Williams memorializes the suffering of African American slaves through what Williams argued was the affective core of jazz, “the spiritual feeling in the blues (which arises from suffering).”<sup>6</sup> She claimed that jazz, because of its engagement with suffering, was healing, and worked to heal others through it.

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<sup>4</sup> John S. Wilson, “Jazz: From Mind to Heart to Fingertips to Piano,” *New York Times*, (February 6, 1964), 34.

<sup>5</sup> There is also a work she composed much earlier, in 1948: the unpublished extended-form jazz spiritual, “Elijah and the Juniper Tree.” This was her second effort at extended form following *Zodiac Suite* (1945).

<sup>6</sup> Mary Lou Williams, untitled essay, Personal Papers, *Mary Lou Williams Collection*, Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University, Newark, NJ.

Duke Ellington (1899-1974) praised Mary Lou Williams in his autobiography, *Music Is My Mistress*, writing that she was “Beyond category — a pianist who sums up in herself the full essence of jazz and expresses it with skill and perception that few other jazz musicians have even approached.”<sup>7</sup> Another Ellington quote, also taken from his autobiography, is perhaps more well-known, but no less eloquent than the former:

Mary Lou Williams is perpetually contemporary. Her writing and performing have always been a little ahead throughout her career. Her music retains, and maintains, a standard of quality that is timeless. She is like soul on soul.<sup>8</sup>

Williams had an affinity with some of the innovations of Ellington, for example, his use of extended form. Both composers have also shown through their works, a serious effort to memorialize the African American experience.

Williams was interested in extended form as early as the mid-forties, during which she recorded a twelve movement composition, *Zodiac Suite* (1946), for piano, bass, and drums. In his book *Ellington Uptown*, John Howland observed that Ellington’s interest in symphonic jazz was inspired by the 1920s extended form experiments in symphonic jazz of Paul Whiteman in the 1920s. The symphonic jazz genre had been generally regarded as a low-class “middle-brow” form of entertainment under the achievements of Whiteman. Symphonic jazz, however, by the 1930s and ’40s gained legitimacy and “authenticity” once black musicians and composers like Ellington were able to premiere their works in New York’s most prestigious symphonic venues, like Carnegie Hall, and Town Hall.

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<sup>7</sup> Duke Ellington, *Music Is My Mistress*, (New York: DaCapo Press, 1976), 169.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

It was as a result of the success of Ellington's symphonic jazz influenced *Black, Brown, and Beige* in 1943 at Carnegie Hall, that he was elevated to a position, in Howland's words, of "high-culture prestige, status, and artistic entitlement that was tied to the classical music tradition."<sup>9</sup> The symphonic jazz style, formerly dominated by Whiteman, suddenly became associated with Ellington and African American jazz, whether it was improvised or composed. Whiteman's repertoire began to be regarded as the non-jazz side of the symphonic jazz style.<sup>10</sup>

Mary Lou Williams had been regarded as one of jazz's most talented artists during the 1930s and '40s. Her first steady professional work was with Andy Kirk (1898-1992) and his dance band, the Clouds of Joy, beginning in 1929. They were a regional mid-western swing dance ensemble whose success would be largely attributable to the musical talent of Williams, honed for twelve years as a member of the band.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> John Howland, *Ellington Uptown: Duke Ellington, James P. Johnson, and the Birth of Concert Jazz*, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2009), 146.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> With the Clouds of Joy, Williams began composing, but since she didn't know how to notate music, she would dictate her ideas to Andy Kirk, who could write them down., but who also took advantage of the situation by claiming authorship of Williams' material. This process of dictation did not lead to Williams receiving proper composer credits, and consequently, she never earned royalties for most of the material she composed while with Kirk and the Clouds of Joy. Surely the economic implications of losing the composition royalties, as well as the author credits were issues involved in Williams' departure from the Kirk band in 1941. There was a silver lining, though, in that Kirk taught Williams the rudiments of music theory and reading, which started her on the road of being able to arrange and compose on her own. (See Nicole T. Rustin, "Mary Lou Williams Plays Like a Man!:

As she set out on a solo career in New York in 1941, after leaving the Kirk band, she secured a highly successful multi-year solo engagement at Café Society, in Greenwich Village. According to Farah Griffin, Café Society opened in 1938 and was the first racially integrated nightclub in New York City. Beginning in 1945, Williams appeared regularly as a specialty pianist for her skill as a boogie-woogie player, a style she had perfected during her Pittsburgh childhood when she was known as “the piano girl from East Liberty.”

The owner of Café Society, Barney Josephson (1902-88), ran two separate nightclubs under the name Café Society. Williams played at the Downtown club, which was on Sheridan Square, in Greenwich Village. Hazel Scott was featured at the Uptown club, on 58<sup>th</sup> St. between Lexington and Park Avenue, which attracted a more affluent star-studded audience than the Downtown venue.<sup>12</sup> Generally, both Café Society venues attracted liberal and leftist socialites, intellectuals, artists, and political activists who were well-known for their involvement with the Popular Front.

Williams and Hazel Scott developed a friendship as pianists employed at Café Society beginning in 1943. The club and its owner, Josephson, were also known for their association with the Popular Front, a communist inspired group that had widespread appeal in New York City from the 1930s to the 1950s.<sup>13</sup> New York was a place where American Communists, both card carrying party members and sympathizers alike, could live and work among other Communist co-workers and neighbors.<sup>14</sup> The most popular nightclub for leftists, at that time,

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Gender, Genius, and Difference in Black Music Discourse,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 105, (Summer, 2005): 445-462.

<sup>12</sup> Sam Roberts, “The Clubs That Broke Barriers,” *New York Times*, (August,14, 2009), 8.

<sup>13</sup> Griffin, *Harlem Nocturne*, 44-45.

was Café Society, which was a showcase for unknown black performers. These artists included jazz singers like Billie Holiday and Lena Horne, jazz pianists Williams, Hazel Scott, and Teddy Wilson, as well as artists from other disciplines like dance, featuring Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus, and from comedy and acting, artists like Imogene Coca and Zero Mostel.<sup>15</sup>

Hazel Scott was a black woman with a lighter complexion than the dark-skinned Williams, and had a very gender specific show-business approach as a pianist. In *Harlem Nocturne*, Griffin states that Scott was known for “her glamour, her sexy presentation, her low-cut gowns, and her “swinging the classics” style.”<sup>16</sup> In contrast, despite being attractive herself, Williams did not exploit her femininity with sex and glamour. She preferred to develop her jazz and composing abilities live, on the stage during performance. She had given up being a musical entertainer following her Pittsburgh childhood. Given the nickname “little piano girl from East Liberty,” she would do tricks, for example, playing the piano with the keyboard covered by a sheet. She now had a strictly professional and artistic approach to nightclub work. She just wanted to be a jazz musician and composer.<sup>17</sup>

Although some thought there was a professional rivalry between the two women, Griffin contends that the two were “devoted friends” and the rivalry had been fabricated, especially in

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<sup>14</sup> Maurice Isserman, “When New York City Was the Capital of American Communism,” *Red Century*, *New York Times*, (October 17, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Griffin , *Harlem Nocturne*, 44-45.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid..

<sup>17</sup> Kernodle, *Soul on Soul*, 96-97.

the press.<sup>18</sup> Café Society owner Josephson, who was involved in promoting his acts is likely to have encouraged rumors about a rivalry for the sake of publicity. As evidence of press rumors, a *Time* magazine piece from July 26, 1943, profiling Williams, seemed to imply a controversy concerning a rivalry between them, although it did not name Scott directly. The *Time* article described Williams in a way that seemed to pit her pianistic prowess against Scott's sexy reputation, saying that Williams, unlike Scott, was "no kitten on the keys." The article also brings to light the gender bias against women in jazz at the time, that would only validate a woman's ability as a jazz pianist by the standards of "male" jazz piano playing, while at the same time comparing Williams' piano playing to that of the great stride pianist, James P. Johnson:

If you shut your eyes you would bet she was a man. But last week's audiences at Manhattan's Downtown Café Society had their eyes open. They heard a sinewy young Negro woman play the solid, unpretentious, flesh-&-bone kind of jazz piano that is expected from such vigorous Negro masters as James P. Johnson. Serene, reticent, slow-eyed Williams was not selling a pretty face, or a décolletage, or tricky swinging of Bach or Chopin. She was playing blues, stomps and boogie-woogie in the native Afro-American way—an art in which, at 33, she is already a veteran.<sup>19</sup>

Kernodle has observed, that during the forties, similar articles were scrutinizing the role of women in jazz, and Williams was often invoked as a model for other women musicians. She writes that such invocations only made Williams more determined not to be influenced by the normative excesses of critical opinion, for example, which had tried to cloud her relationship with Hazel Scott. Williams simply viewed herself as a musician, "not as an activist for racial or gender causes in jazz."<sup>20</sup> That observation is quite central to understanding how Williams,

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<sup>18</sup> Griffin, *Harlem Nocturne*, 153.

<sup>19</sup> "No Kitten on the Keys," *Time*, Vol. 42, Issue 4, (July 26, 1943), 78.

<sup>20</sup> Kernodle, *Soul on Soul*, 95.

despite her personal disinterest in becoming a racial or gender activist, managed to overcome many of the obstacles in her life and career which were created by racial and gender norms.

By 1943, largely because of her appearances at Café Society, and despite the adverse gender norms which sought to marginalize the talents of female jazz musicians, Williams was already considered to be among the top jazz pianists in New York. Through Barney Josephson and his connections, she would become the host of a weekly radio show, the *Mary Lou Williams Piano Workshop*, on WNEW, New York, in 1945. Among the show's highlights were on-air segments where Williams would introduce her new works to her radio audience prior to playing them in public. Most notably, she introduced her *Zodiac Suite* on the program, featuring the introduction of one movement per weekly broadcast before premiering the suite with members of the New York Philharmonic at Philharmonic Hall, in 1946.<sup>21</sup>

Hazel Scott would marry Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. (1908-72), in 1945, and find career success in Hollywood. Her husband was the pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church, and a popular African American civil rights leader, activist, and member of the House of Representatives.<sup>22</sup> He was elected to the House in 1945, where he served until 1967, when he was expelled for the alleged misuse of public funds. Detractors like the *New York Times* claimed that Powell was a “demagogue, a Congressional rebel, a civil rights leader. . . a wheeler-dealer, a rabble-rouser, a grandstander, a fugitive. . . a playboy.”<sup>23</sup> But others, like Farah Griffin, have praised Powell as an avant-garde black leader who used his leadership qualities and charisma to fight for the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>22</sup> Griffin, *Harlem Nocturne*, 21-22.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas A. Johnson, “Man of Many Roles,” *New York Times*, (April 5, 1972), 1.



advancement of Williams' Harlem community. Griffin suggests that Powell embodied the militancy and confidence that characterized a new generation of black Americans and was the first black American to serve in Congress. As pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church, as a Harlem community leader, and New York City councilman, he confronted racist hiring and housing policies, proving himself to be both a fearless and ambitious black leader.<sup>24</sup>

Although he had enemies, it is worth noting that after his expulsion from Congress, Powell won re-election to the same seat in the House in 1969. That speaks to a level of support for him in his district, Harlem, that saw him as a heroic fighter who had unjustly been the target of conservatives and Republicans.

Hazel Scott became the first black woman to host her own television show, *The Hazel Scott Show*, in the summer of 1950, airing three nights a week on the DuMont television network.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, within a month, Scott was branded a Communist in the publication anti-communist *Red Channels*. This triggered a summons for her testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), where she refused to name names. As a result, her television show lost its sponsors and the show was quickly cancelled.<sup>26</sup> This was the era of McCarthyism and Communist paranoia during which widespread denunciations of many in the American creative community had led to the destruction of many prominent careers.

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<sup>24</sup> Griffin, *Harlem Nocturne*, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime-Time Network TV Shows*, 3rd Edition, (New York: Ballantine, 1964).

<sup>26</sup> Griffin, *Harlem Nocturne*, 153.

Scott and Williams were not members of the Communist party, but they were linked to the leftist community because of their frequent appearances at fundraising benefit concerts for the Popular Front, the NAACP, and other groups that were under surveillance by the federal government. Barney Josephson, who was a supporter and fundraiser for those groups, had insisted on the appearances of Williams and Scott at those benefits, as well as other musicians on his payroll, as a kind of condition of their employment at Café Society.<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately for Scott, her association with Café Society became indirectly responsible for the cancellation of her television show. In 1947, Josephson's brother Leon, who actually was a Communist, refused to testify before the HUAC. The following year, in 1948, the *New York Times* reported that "the cafe owner was pummeled by prominent columnists, customers left, and both clubs were sold."<sup>28</sup>

And so ended the era of Café Society, another victim of the anti-communist excesses of McCarthyism. Luckily for Williams, the leftist politics of Café Society, which had placed her at the center of anti-communist investigations, did not result in her being called to testify before the HUAC. Had she been called, regardless of her testimony, as had happened to Hazel Scott, her career and ability to work could have been severely damaged.

Although Williams' skill at boogie-woogie was responsible in great measure for her success at Café Society, her personal impulses in composition actually leaned towards modernism and longer extended pieces. The first of these efforts premiered on December 31, 1945 at Town Hall, with Williams leading her jazz trio and a chamber orchestra of mostly NBC

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>28</sup> Sam Roberts, "The Clubs That Broke Barriers," *New York Times*, (August 14, 2009), E8.

classical musicians, augmented by members of Edmund Hall's jazz band. The *New York Times* captured the moment in their review of the concert:

The chamber orchestra was aided by Mary Lou's own big band, which consisted of Ben Webster on tenor, Eddie Banfield on clarinet, the trombonist Henderson Chambers, the trumpeter Irving Randolph, the bassist Al Hall, and the drummer J.C. Heard. Much like Ellington's 1943 Carnegie Hall concert, the program combined the premiere of the *Zodiac Suite* with performances of some of Mary Lou's most popular compositions.<sup>29</sup>

The *Zodiac Suite* was originally scored for jazz piano trio only. It was recorded and released by Asch Records in 1945 featuring Williams on piano, Al Lucas on bass, and Jack Parker on drums. However, in preparation for concert hall performances of the work in 1945-46, Williams rescored the work for jazz piano trio and orchestra ensemble for the Carnegie Hall premiere in June 1946, which featured the addition of seventy musicians from the New York Philharmonic.<sup>30</sup>

Williams began flirting with extended form religious composition shortly thereafter, with her first modern jazz spiritual from 1948, "Elijah and the Juniper Tree," for chorus and piano. Based on a biblical story about the prophet Elijah, the piece would plant the seed that would later bloom into a late period of religious music, starting in 1962. That's when she premiered her second extended modern jazz spiritual "St. Martin de Porres: Black Christ of the Andes," for a cappella chorus and piano solo.

As the long process of learning how to use extended form was working itself through her music, she was enlisted to produce some outstanding arrangements for some rather well-known artists. One of these was Duke Ellington, for whom she wrote an acclaimed arrangement of

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<sup>29</sup> Tammy Lynn Kernodle, *Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams*, (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 123.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 123-128.

“Blue Skies” that was renamed “Trumpets No End.” She was also commissioned by Dizzy Gillespie for an original big band bebop composition that she memorably titled “In the Land of Oo-Bla-Dee.”<sup>31</sup>

As an important contributor to virtually all the major eras of jazz history, Williams had always been aware of the advancements in black music, so she had always kept up with the latest innovations in jazz. In the 1940s she expanded her compositional ability into bebop and extended form. She had been influenced by the boppers with whom she had collaborated, and by Ellington’s extended tone poem *Black, Beige, and Brown* in 1943. Ever since the symphonic jazz model was identified with Whiteman in the 1920s, the concept of extending jazz compositions that crossed jazz and classical elements was looked at as the most desired medium for jazz composers who aspired to the kind of legitimacy that Ellington had achieved in the classical world.

In its 1946 Town Hall premiere, however, she performed three of the movements, augmenting the trio with a chamber orchestra formed from the New York Philharmonic. *Zodiac Suite* represents an ultimate challenge for jazz composers, and a successful realization of an extended form crossover between the jazz club and symphony hall. While Williams stood on the shoulders of Ellington’s work, he in turn, was standing on the shoulders of Paul Whiteman and his concept of symphonic jazz. Williams was able to overcome the prevailing race and gender norms of the time to overcome the obstacles that had kept black performers and women from playing Carnegie Hall, but it became difficult for her, in the end, to firmly establish herself as a

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<sup>31</sup> Notes on Mary Lou Williams, *Smithsonian Folkways Recordings*, accessed December 9, 2019, <http://smithsonianfolkways.tumblr.com/post/579439872/listen-to-the-latemarylouwilliams-song>

jazz composer. Her gender, as well as the perception of her as a famous jazz performer were handicaps in that regard as well. Thus, Williams had difficulty carrying her public with her as she began her premiering her extended compositions. By the mid-1940s, her compositional abilities would be proven to be beyond reproach with *Zodiac Suite*, and only grew more formidable in works like “Black Christ of the Andes” and her Masses. As previously stated, this study seeks to bring those abilities to the attention of those who only think of Williams as an exceptional jazz pianist.

Since the late 1990s, as scholars have been re-discovering discovering the music and life of Williams, their work seems to move her further away, instead of closer to the status of “beyond category,” towards one objective “category” or another. Perhaps Ellington’s message still rings true, that a single category draws only on specific recognitions while ignoring other important qualities. In the scope of Williams scholarship, these objective categories include, for example, Williams as a Catholic composer;<sup>32</sup> as a black female jazz artist struggling with the racial and gendered norms of a male dominated jazz field;<sup>33</sup> as a boogie-woogie playing witness to the New York left-wing movement at Café Society in the 1940s;<sup>34</sup> as a black Catholic jazz

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<sup>32</sup> Gayle Murchison, “Mary Lou Williams's Hymn “Black Christ of the Andes” (St. Martin de Porres): Vatican II, Civil Rights, and Jazz as Sacred Music,” *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 86, No. 4, (Oxford University Press, Winter, 2002): 591-629.

<sup>33</sup> Carol Bash, *Mary Lou Williams: The Lady Who Swings the Band*, (New York: Paradox Films, 2014), DVD.

<sup>34</sup> Farah Jasmine Griffin, *Harlem Nocturne: Women Artists & Progressive Politics During World War II*, (New York: Basic Civitas, 2013).

composer who located the social activism of the Civil Rights movement at the center of her religious music;<sup>35</sup> and as a jazz composer of some exceptional and rather obscure big band pieces.<sup>36</sup>

But what about “subjective categories” in Williams’ music? Why aren’t the subjective, the emotional qualities of her music studied as well? I would suggest that among the principal effects of objectification of an artist or their work, is the obliteration of the subjective. In searching for the exterior qualities of jazz, like form or rhythm, for example, we might pass up opportunities to experience its subjectivity, which comes not out of its structural or technical details, but out of its connection to the emotional landscape of the African American experience.

The genius of Williams is easily understood by her versatility in many different areas of achievement, for example, as an exceptional musician, jazz pianist, arranger, and composer. But, the single categories obstruct the kind of larger view of Williams available to us in her major Catholic works, in which she linked the Passion and death of Christ with the historical suffering of African Americans under slavery, as the subjects of redemptive suffering within the sacrifice of the Mass. Thus, her liturgical jazz Masses bear witness to the suffering, joy and hope of the African American experience. Besides Ellington and Williams, there are not many black jazz artists who have endeavored to do this.

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<sup>35</sup> Ruth Feldstein, *How It Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement*, (Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>36</sup> *Mary Lou Williams: Selected Works for Big Band*, edited by Theodore E. Buehrer, (Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, Inc., 2013).

## 1.1 From the Secular to the Sacred

In 1954, Williams had distanced herself from jazz, leaving behind a life in music, or so she thought. By the early 1950s, she had become disillusioned with the post-war decline of the New York jazz scene, and was rapidly approaching a life crisis which would erupt in the middle of a European tour, when she walked away from her career, expecting never to play again. During a period of seclusion (1954-62), she seldom recorded and played only a handful of engagements, notably with Dizzy Gillespie at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1957. Then, against all expectations, she returned to the stage in 1962, resuming her career. To the shock of many, she was now more interested in the composition and performance of Catholic liturgical jazz works than in secular mainstream jazz performance.<sup>37</sup>

Williams composed her major Catholic works mostly during the period 1962 to 1971, with the exception of an unpublished early modern jazz spiritual, “Elijah and the Juniper Tree” which was completed in 1948, following *Zodiac Suite* (1946). The bulk of her major Catholic works consists of the modern jazz spiritual “Black Christ of the Andes” (1962), *Mass* (1967), *Mass for Lenten Season* (1968), *Music for Peace* (1969), and *Mary Lou’s Mass* (1971). *Mary Lou’s Mass* was an expansion of Williams’ third Mass, *Music for Peace*, but as her largest liturgical work, it should be considered as one of her major Catholic works for its breadth, and especially its additional content, which includes a piece set to the text of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I have a dream” speech. On the commercial side, *Mary Lou’s Mass* remains her most

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<sup>37</sup> Kernodle, *Soul on Soul*, 200.

recognized work in the both the secular and religious domains, and did the most, of all her works, to spread an awareness of her sacred music.

While acknowledging the origins of jazz’s “spirituality” in African and African American religious practices,<sup>38</sup> this project is based on the notion that the liturgical jazz works of Williams are inspired by traditional Catholic theology and rituals, but at the same time, equally inspired by the African American experience. In this work, I attempt to expand Williams’ legacy and relevance in jazz beyond jazz performance and the theatrical flash of memorable nicknames like “First Lady of the Keyboard” and “Little piano girl from East Liberty.”

Based on score analysis and Williams’ personal letters and essays, principally drawn from the archives of the *Mary Lou Williams Collection* at Rutgers University,<sup>39</sup> and the *Linda Dahl Mary Lou Williams Collection* at Duke University,<sup>40</sup> this study explores the importance of subjectivity in Williams’ liturgical works. By drawing on theories of black aesthetics and identity, including Huey Copeland’s work on black identify formation in visual art of the 1990s,<sup>41</sup> Fred Moten and Guthrie Ramsey’s studies on race and black identity in jazz performance,<sup>42</sup> and through studies of black female progressive activism in Farah Griffin and

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<sup>38</sup> Jason Bivins, *Spirits Rejoice! Jazz and American Religion*, (Oxford University Press, 2015), 66-67.

<sup>39</sup> *Mary Lou Williams Collection*, Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University.

<sup>40</sup> *Dahl Collection on Mary Lou Williams*, Duke University, Durham, NC.

<sup>41</sup> Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America*,. (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

<sup>42</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, (Regents of the University of Minnesota, 2003), and Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., *The Amazing Bud Powell: Black Genius, Jazz History, and the*



Ruth Feldstein,<sup>43</sup> this study considers how Williams may have advanced agendas of racial, social and cultural advancement and whether, as Feldstein puts it, it was “as a result of race, or in spite of it.”<sup>44</sup>

My research draws on jazz studies, religious studies, affect theory, African American studies, jazz theory, critical race theory, and gender studies. Within these disciplines scholars have often struggled to overcome the limitations of objectivization on music research, and in the study of jazz, particularly, they have often bypassed jazz’s subjective nature. By favoring the study of the most detailed theoretical and stylistic traits of jazz they have made valuable contributions to jazz scholarship, but in the process have often overlooked the more important “affective” qualities of jazz, particularly the expression of suffering that lies at the core of African American music. Using Catholicism as a lens, my project seeks to explore the subjective qualities of jazz which function as modalities for personal and social change. I also explore how the subjective qualities are transmitted in the music via Williams’ notion of the “spiritual feeling in the blues.”

The sacred music of Williams is embedded, as well, within the struggles for racial and social justice during the civil rights era of the 1960s, Williams was able to use jazz, race and gender to establish a modern black aesthetic within a Catholicism that had historically marginalized black Catholics like her. My project seeks to advance an appreciation of Williams

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*Challenge of Bebop*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press and Chicago, IL: Center for Black Music Research, 2013).

<sup>43</sup> Griffin, *Harlem Nocturne*, 2013, and Feldstein, *How It Feels to Be Free*, 2013

<sup>44</sup> Feldstein, 18-19.

as a black Catholic composer, jazz pianist and black music activist, by which I mean an artist who uses their music to effect social change. I consider how, supported by officials within the Church, she produced three complete jazz Masses, each one a testament to racial, social and ethical goals championed by both secular and religious activism.

I ask if through an emphasis on concept, composition, and performance, Williams “constructs race” by inserting African American musical forms and the racialized black body, constituting what Moten terms the “performative essence of blackness.”<sup>45</sup> Or was she navigating, in Feldstein’s words, a “tension between universalism and racial particularization” while pursuing religious musical expression? Through these types of inquiries, I seek to construct a deeper view of Williams that goes beyond her reputation as a jazz pianist, arranger and composer of popular music, looking into jazz itself, into its power as a transformative personal, social and cultural force.

## 1.2 Performing Race and Gender

Williams used the “performance” of race and gender during the 1960s to frame the struggle for justice and the fight for gender equality. Ironically though, as Griffin writes, Williams herself never cared to be classified as a female artist, and downplayed her struggles as a female jazz artist and composer. She thought of herself as a musician, not a female musician.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 16.

<sup>46</sup> Griffin, 196.

She was also a genius. Nicole Rustin has thought about the way black women are perceived in jazz, and how their “genius” has been historically dismissed by the sexist norm which had always claimed the status of genius for males only. Within the field of jazz piano, Williams’ exceptionalism as a jazz artist often broke down the norm of male genius as well, as this project tries to make clear. Rustin engages with the topic of Williams, the “exceptionalist,” in the following excerpt from “Mary Lou Williams Plays Like a Man!:

Mary Lou Williams responded regularly to questions about being the exceptional female. She would say, “People ask me how it is to be a woman musician. I don’t think about it so much, and I guess that is because I am first of all a musician.” She also noted that “there have never been any problems performing because I was a woman. You just have to be as good or better than the man is. And if you get carried away in your work you really don’t know if you are a woman or a man.”<sup>47</sup>

The broader questions raised by the example of Williams ask us to consider the exclusionary agenda of sexism in jazz by broadening our awareness of the historical accomplishments of women in jazz. Rustin provides a powerful reflection on the importance of women geniuses in jazz.

How do black women work in jazz? What work does black women’s music do aesthetically, culturally, racially, historically? Why is it important to have models of black female genius in black music discourse generally, and jazz specifically? There are few, if any, myths of black female genius. Unlike those of black male jazz musicians, discussions of black

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<sup>47</sup> Ruth Feldstein, *How It Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement*, (Oxford University Press, 2013), 447.

women in jazz, particularly singers, have tended to obscure both the myths and the realities of their genius.<sup>48</sup>

Williams' return to music in 1962 was driven by a small group of faithful supporters within the clergy who encouraged her to end her exile from jazz. Together with her desire, as an artist and a Catholic, to express her faith as well as her music, with their help, she seized the opportunity to do both simultaneously by offering her music as "prayer." But it was particularly in response to the adoption of the vernacular Mass during Vatican II, that Williams began to set English translations of Catholic liturgy to African American jazz. The move away from the Latin Mass was an important reform designed to increase the participation of Catholics in the faith, and it became the focus of Williams' late works. At the same time, it seems that she was eager to take advantage of this new phase of Catholic sacred music as a way to resurrect her career, which had been sidelined for the most part, since 1954.

For this, she had set up her own record label, Mary Records, to record, produce, and release her own music, starting with "Black Christ" in 1962. She also pursued the Church hierarchy in search of material, as well as spiritual support for her musical efforts, stressing her desire to use her liturgical music in service of the reforms and aspirations coming out of Vatican II, which had exposed the many "sins" of the Church, which it now sought to expunge. One of these, the historical marginalization of African Americans within the Church, provided an impetus to Williams' involvement in the advancement of the religious interests of African American Catholics.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 449.

Ruth Feldstein described Williams a black entertainer-composer “performing civil rights” who “reached” St. Patrick’s Cathedral via her liturgical jazz.”<sup>49</sup> Williams’ first two jazz Masses, *Mass* and *Mass for Lenten Season* seem to have laid the musical and spiritual foundations for the success of her third Mass, *Music for Peace*. *Music for Peace* was released by Williams on her label, Mary Records in 1970, but its success was not realized until the following year, when the music, with additional movements added, was turned into the commercially and artistically successful dance collaboration with choreographer Ailey, *Mary Lou’s Mass*. The collaboration would bring national and international recognition to Williams’ religious music. The music from *Mary Lou’s Mass*, minus the dancers, remains her most performed major work today. The obscurity of the first two Masses was in large part, it seems, caused by the lack of any recordings of the complete works.<sup>50</sup>

Ironically, Paul VI was personally against the use of jazz in the Mass, and had gone on to proclaim a ban on the use of jazz Masses in January, 1967. We know the ban was unsuccessful, since just six months after proclaiming it, Williams’ first jazz Mass was sung in Pittsburgh. It is because of the obscurity of this early work that I have chosen to explore it through music analysis in Chapter Five. Falling squarely at the intersection of jazz, Catholicism, and the African American experience, the major Catholic works of Williams are listed in Figure 1, a composition timeline. Notably, it shows a fourteen-year gap between “Elijah” and “Black

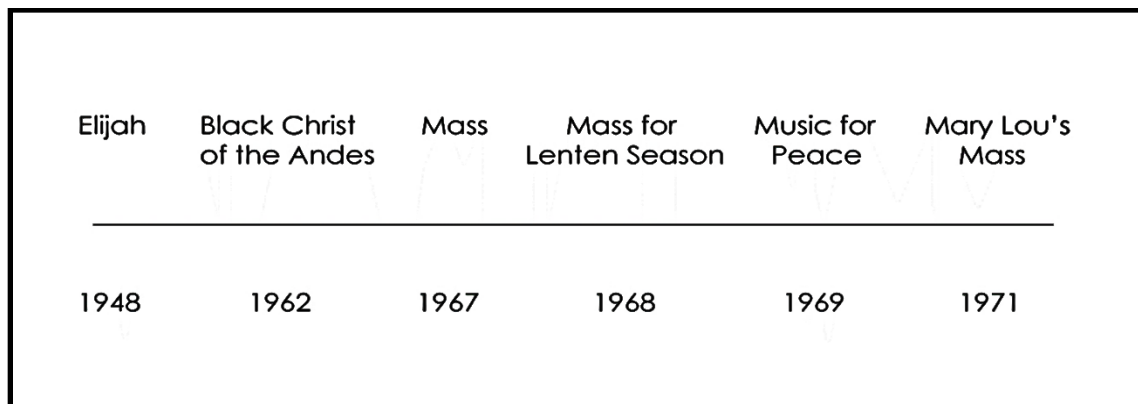
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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>50</sup> An ongoing project of the Mary Lou Williams Foundation has been the recording of some of the previously unrecorded liturgical works and Masses of Williams by the late pianist Geri Allen leading the Mary Lou Williams Collective.

Christ.” “Elijah,” as well as the *Zodiac Suite*, were composed while she was still active as a musician and composer in New York.<sup>51</sup> “Black Christ of the Andes” represents Williams’ return to performance and composition following her almost complete withdrawal from jazz performance during the period (1954-1962).

**Figure 1 Composition timeline for the major Catholic works of Mary Lou Williams**



In this project, I discuss the conditions and historical currents within America which led to the serious declines in the jazz industry, as well as in Catholicism during the 1950s and 1960s to lay the foundations from which the eventual collaborations between Williams and the Catholic Church were forged. From the period of her self-exile from jazz to her emergence as a Catholic composer, for example, I detail her mission to “save” jazz from economic and historical

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<sup>51</sup> Dan Morgenstern and Mary Lou Williams, liner notes, *Mary Lou Williams: Zodiac Suite*, (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings: Cecilia Music, Inc., 1995), 8. CD re-issue of *Signs of the Zodiac*, (Asch Records, 1945). Mary Lou Williams: “I read a book about astrology and though I didn’t know too much about it, I decided to do the suite based on musicians I knew born under the various signs.”

obscurity. Williams also engaged with religious, social and humanitarian currents which were affecting Catholicism during the fifties and sixties.

Williams' engagement with black suffering provided the basis of a mutual attraction and philosophical partnership with a Church whose philosophy centered on participation in the redemptive suffering of Christ. For this reason, Williams believed that Catholics were much more sympathetic to the African American experience because their religion was based on the contemplation and participation in suffering, and because of this, felt they had a deeper understanding of suffering under slavery, for example, than other Christian denominations.

As her religious works bore witness to the African American experience and the Passion, death and resurrection of Christ, the following text, taken from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, redefined suffering as a participation in the Passion, the modality by which these acts were to bring redemption:

Union with the passion of Christ. By the grace of this sacrament. . . the person receives the strength and the gift of uniting himself more closely to Christ's Passion: in a certain way he is consecrated to bear fruit by configuration to the Savior's redemptive Passion. Suffering, a consequence of original sin, acquires a new meaning; it becomes a participation in the saving work of Jesus.<sup>52</sup>

So, participation in the work of Jesus, through redemptive suffering, in which one assumes onto oneself Christ's suffering, death and resurrection, is very extensive for the lay person who undertakes it. For Williams, the creator, participation in redemptive suffering would have a musical side as well, and been represented in the composition of a new musical work. Indeed, all of her liturgical pieces represented her complete mental, physical, and spiritual

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<sup>52</sup> "The Effects of the Celebration of This Sacrament," Part 2, Chapter 2, Article 5, No. IV, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, accessed July 14, 2019, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_INDEX.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM)

involvement in both Catholicism and jazz. These involvements stand at the foundation of all her religious works.

Redemptive suffering was equally an important affective quality to the Civil Rights movement, especially to the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1960, he submitted an article for the journal *Christian Century* called “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence.” After reading the draft, the editor, Harold Fey, asked King if he would add some paragraphs about his personal experiences in the struggle as well.<sup>53</sup> He submitted four more paragraphs for the article, which unfortunately arrived too late for publishing, but they were important enough to publish separately, a few weeks later. Called “Suffering and Faith,” it dealt with the evolution of King’s thinking about his personal sacrifices and the nature of suffering, as the following excerpt reveals:

It is possible for one to be self-centered in his self-denial and self-righteous in his self-sacrifice. So, I am always reluctant to refer to my personal sacrifices. But I feel somewhat justified in mentioning them in this article because of the influence they have had in shaping my thinking. . . So in a real sense I have been battered by the storms of persecution.<sup>54</sup>

That persecution led to personal sacrifices that by 1960 included five arrests, multiple detentions, having his home bombed twice, near-daily death threats, and a near fatal stabbing.

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<sup>53</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “Suffering and Faith,” *Christian Century* 77 (April 27, 1960): 510, Footnote 2.

An editor’s note preceded the essay: “In his article for the series titled ‘How My Mind Has Changed,’ Martin Luther King, Jr., said nothing about his reaction to his personal perils (see the *Christian Century* for 13 April). Before publishing the article, we asked him to consider whether or not his experience with danger and suffering had affected his thinking, and if it had, to add comments along this line. His comments arrived after his article had gone to press, so we publish them herewith.” (see also Ballou to Fey, April 7, 1960).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.



He knew there would be more personal sacrifices to come, and King acknowledged his fear of continuing to confront more suffering, as the addendum further stated:

I must admit that at times I have felt that I could no longer bear such a heavy burden and have been tempted to retreat to a more quiet and serene life. But every time such a temptation appeared, something came to strengthen and sustain my determination.<sup>55</sup>

He then reveals that he saw a tremendous value in what he named “unmerited suffering,” in that it was an experience that could allow a transformation of suffering into a “creative force.”

Thus, he concluded that the endurance of suffering was redemptive and healing:

My personal trials have also taught me the value of unmerited suffering. As my sufferings mounted, I soon realized that there were two ways that I could respond to my situation: either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force. I decided to follow the latter course. . . I have attempted to see my personal ordeals as an opportunity to transform myself and heal the people involved in the tragic situation which now obtains. I have lived these last few years with the conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive.<sup>56</sup>

King’s observations on suffering as redemption are consistent with the views of Williams on suffering, which credited spiritual feeling and healing power to the affective qualities expressed in the blues. These produced a transformation of “unearned suffering,” as King stated it, into “redemptive suffering.” King called it a transformation of suffering into a “creative force.” Williams named the source of the transformation as “the spiritual feeling in the blues.” Perhaps in the case of Williams, we can view it as the transformation of suffering into musical creation. For example, she had written that jazz had the power to heal through the “deep spiritual feeling” that comes out of suffering. In other words, she and King agreed that suffering has meaning and value, especially for African Americans. Williams wrote often about jazz and its

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

meaning, as in this excerpt from an essay that she hoped would be part of an extensive future autobiography:

Jazz is our heritage. It is the only authentic art form created in America. It is our unique contribution to world culture. This music must be kept alive on Radio and TV because of the therapeutic or healing powers that it has for the spirit, or the soul. This music was born in suffering, the suffering of the American black people. It is from this suffering at its origin that gives jazz the deep spiritual feeling and power that is healing to the soul.<sup>57</sup>

Because her music was so connected to suffering in the first place, her sense of shared suffering with Catholics seems significant in explaining her attraction to Catholic liturgy as a medium for composition, especially the practice of redemptive suffering, which she found very attractive as a way to heal her injured spirit. The mutual preoccupation with suffering was, I contend, the basis of mutual attraction and philosophical partnership with spiritual mentors and officials in the Church that would produce the historic collaborations represented by Williams' vernacular Masses.

I argue, however, that despite the success of their extended collaborations, culminating in *Music for Peace*, which was the first jazz Mass by an African American woman ever commissioned by the Catholic Church, both the Church and Williams had initially been reluctant to "modernize" their responses to the contemporary needs of their respective constituencies. I explore how for the Church, this modernization included reforms like the adoption of Mass in the vernacular and facilitating the increased participation of women and minorities. For Williams, modernization included the addition of newer black vernacular musical expressions which would attract younger and larger audiences. She was slow to do this until she integrated newer musical

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<sup>57</sup> Williams, personal papers, *Mary Lou Williams Collection*.

styles alongside her main compositional interests - the spiritual, blues, and bebop. I consider how the confluence of these powerful changes and currents sought, through collaborations of Williams with the Church, to elevate both jazz and Catholicism. The issues of ethics, racial and religious identity were subsumed into Williams' liturgical jazz works, particularly the Masses. They represent a particular jazz language that carries Catholicism, race, and gender on its beat.

## 2.0 Jazz and Catholic Practice

Jazz and Catholicism became intimately intertwined in the 1960s as composers turned to jazz as a medium for setting religious texts, including masses. Early works by such African American composers as Eddie Bonnemere, for example, a jazz pianist who composed an early Catholic jazz Mass in 1958, and Father Clarence Rivers, S.J, a Jesuit priest who in 1964 integrated melodic ideas from spirituals into the Catholic liturgy, represent a unique and innovative group of clergy, musicians, and composers who pioneered the use of liturgical jazz during the late 1950s and 1960s. Mary Lou Williams was an important contributor to that group of composers. Supported by a handful of Catholic advisers and mentors, as well as high officials in the Catholic Church, she composed jazz settings of the Catholic liturgy that reflected the communal values, aspirations, and goals of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

The Council had been called by Pope John XXIII in October, 1962, to address the need for a “modernization,” an updating of Catholic practices and thought. The following summer, in June 1963, the death of John XXII brought the election of his successor, Pope Paul VI, who then presided over Vatican II for the duration of the council. For composers, a most welcome outcome of Vatican II was the shift away from the Latin Mass to the vernacular Mass. This quickly opened the door for jazz composers to enter the arena of Catholic music.

Guidelines for Catholic music began following the codification of Catholicism at the Council of Trent (1545-63). Up until the late twentieth century, Catholic sacred music was defined by Gregorian chant, choral polyphony, and the pipe organ. Twentieth century guidelines, included in documents like *Motu Proprio Tra Le Sollecitudini* of 1903 laid out musical policies

consistent with the ultra-conservative results from the First Vatican Council (1869-70).<sup>58</sup> It also asserted that Latin was the proper language for the “liturgical solemnities” in the Ordinary of the Mass. These consist of Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei.<sup>59</sup> The variable or common parts of the Mass, called the Proper, however, could be sung in the vernacular language. The sections of the Proper consist of Introit, Gradual, Alleluia, Sequence, Offertory, and Communion. These change from week to week according to the liturgical calendar and are parts of the Mass that are either spoken or sung by the congregation and/or the choir.<sup>60</sup>

Sixty years later, the Second Vatican Council would produce documents like *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963) and *Musicam Sacram* (1967), that encouraged the use of vernacular languages and music in the Mass, both in the Ordinary as well as the Proper.<sup>61</sup>

Within the history of Catholicism is an obscure American jazz and blues, African roots have long been thought to be the basis for African American music. By examining the African

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<sup>58</sup> Pope Pius X, *Motu Proprio Tra Le Sollecitudini*, On Sacred Music, Liturgical Texts, Section III, No. 7, (Rome: November 22, 1903).

<sup>59</sup> For more detailed information on the structure and meaning of the sections of the Ordinary, see Chapter 5.0 *Mass: Jazz, or Long and Drawn Out Like a Symphony?*, 105-106.

<sup>60</sup> “The Propers of the Mass: Chants between the Readings, The Gradual, Tract, Alleluia, and Sequence,” *The Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul*, accessed September 6, 2019, [https://www.stspeterandpaulbasilica.com/files/catechesis/BasilicaHandout\\_ChantsBetweenReadings.pdf](https://www.stspeterandpaulbasilica.com/files/catechesis/BasilicaHandout_ChantsBetweenReadings.pdf)

<sup>61</sup> Second Ecumenical Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, (Rome: Holy See, December 4, 1963); *Musicam Sacram*, Instruction on Music in the Liturgy, (Rome: Holy See, March 5, 1967).

roots of Catholicism it can explore how those roots were , however, are not well known nor have they often been explored. The assumption that Catholicism was a European religion seems to have taken hold as the Church directed its global power from Rome during the long rise of Catholicism. The sacred music of Mary Lou Williams offers a path towards reconciliation between African and European philosophies of music and religion that have heretofore been thought of as mutually exclusive systems, and seldom been considered as compatible or interdependent. We can begin by examining the African roots of Christianity.

The following description of early Christian Ethiopia by Cyprian Davis, a Benedictine monk, black historian and theologian, speaks to the importance of the historical contributions of Africans to Catholicism. While many Northern Europeans were still living in caves, Christianity was flourishing in the Ethiopian royal court at Axum, where it had been introduced by Syrian slaves in the early fourth century:

In the history of the church, Ethiopia occupies a special place. Here we have an African church that has its roots in the early church. Before the church was established in Ireland or Anglo-Saxon England or in any country of northern Europe, a Catholic church . . . blossomed in an African culture. Despite any doctrinal differences that arose later, the Ethiopian church is a reminder that Africa forms part of the rich heritage of Catholicism.<sup>62</sup>

In another section of his *History of Black Catholics in United States*, Davis lists some early popes and important saints of African descent, particularly St. Augustine, a major contributor to the development of Christian theology and thought. Notably among these religious figures is another saint with a deep significance for Mary Lou Williams. It is the Peruvian St. Martin de Porres (1579-1639), a seventeenth-century mulatto lay Dominican brother, who would

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<sup>62</sup> Davis, *History of Black Catholics*, 7-8.

become a religious and humanitarian role model to Williams in the early 1960s. It was to St. Martin, following his canonization in 1962, that she dedicated arguably her finest choral writing, and most well-known extended jazz hymn, “St. Martin de Porres: Black Christ of the Andes,” to his memory.

Some of the most important figures in Catholicism were of African descent. These include the election of three very early popes who are believed to have been Africans – St. Victor I (pontificate 186-197), St. Miltiades (311-14) and St. Gelasius I (492-96). In addition, there have been many canonized Catholic saints of African descent throughout the history of the Church that are still venerated as important contributors to the traditions of Catholicism. These would include, most importantly, the North African, St. Augustine (354-86), as well as the Sicilian, St. Benedict the Moor (1526-89), and the Peruvian, St. Martin de Porres (1579-1639).<sup>63</sup>

Catholic iconography and other visual expressions of doctrine and theology first appeared on the African continent, beginning in the fourth century. For example, the visual preoccupations of Christian architecture that have guided the design and construction of great cathedrals the world over for over a thousand years reflect the profound impact of African culture and art on Christianity. These following elaboration on the details of African influences on early Christian rites and practices are not well-known, but are touched upon in the following statement from Davis’ book.

Ethiopia became a Christian nation with its own tradition and culture. By the fifth century it had its own liturgy, derived from Coptic liturgy of Alexandria. The Ethiopian liturgy had its

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 8-13.

own unique characteristics in terms of liturgical texts, sacred rites like the dance, music (including the use of a drum that was unique to Ethiopia), and artwork and architecture, like the famous churches carved out of solid rock, at Lalibela. Ethiopia has made its own unique contribution to the Christian heritage with its own translation of the Scriptures, its own version of several patristic texts, and its own rich tradition of monasticism and asceticism.<sup>64</sup>

It is fortunate that Christianity would retain many of the liturgical rites and practices, along with doctrinal texts produced by Africans, like the writings of St. Augustine, for example, and the development of Christian artwork and architecture. Thankfully, these important contributions to Catholicism would survive even as the Church became a primarily European institution. Among other religious rites and musical practices for worship that did not survive the shift of Christian power to Europe, was the use of dance and percussion instruments. The prohibition of instruments like percussion is set within “Section VI. Organ and Instruments,” in the Motu Proprio *Tra Le Sollecitudini*, which states: “The use of the piano is forbidden in the churches, as well as all the light or loud instruments, such as the drum, the *chinesco*, the cymbals and the like.”<sup>65</sup>

While dance may once have been associated with European Catholic celebrations in the remote past, by the Renaissance, dancing was deemed incompatible with Catholic sacred rites. However, dance has long been a part of, and continues to be associated with religious celebrations in non-European Catholic regions where dance is an integral part of the culture. This

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Pope Pius X, *Tra Le Sollecitudini*, VII.



is especially true, for example, in former missionary lands of the African continent, Central and South America, the Middle East, and the Pacific Islands.<sup>66</sup>

The prohibition of so called “secular” instruments in Catholic rites, like percussion, as well as dance, speaks to an anti-body, anti-rhythm model of European Catholic values which lasted well into the twentieth century. The European anti-body attitude was fueled by Catholicism’s feminization of the body, the emotions, and rhythm, rendering these “supposed” female qualities as anti-Christian realms of sin.

Such aversion and condemnation of femininity, including rhythm, continued during the colonial period. In the Western Hemisphere, slave owners feared that encouraging the expression of African cultural, religious and artistic practices that might be brought over by the slaves would create a sense of community among them that could lead to escape or revolt. The solution, which in the end proved unenforceable, was a deliberate suppression of religious and artistic expressions which were very rhythmic and included drumming, singing, and dancing. The ban on rhythmic activities was more prevalent among the British Protestant slave owners in North America, than among the Catholic Spanish slave owners in the Caribbean and South America, where slaves were allowed more cultural and religious freedom for expression.

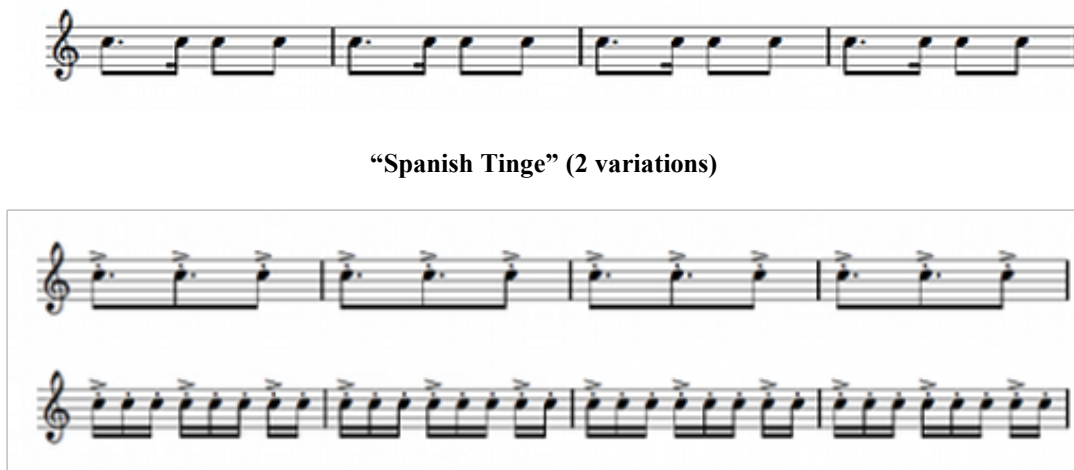
The development of black music in the Caribbean basin, especially, had a huge impact on the development of ragtime, blues and jazz around New Orleans. As a major port on the Gulf of Mexico, rhythmic and harmonic influences from the Spanish held Caribbean colonies were introduced to Southern musicians in North America, who incorporated them into the early blues

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<sup>66</sup> “Dance,” *Catholics & Culture*, accessed June 14, 2019, <https://www.catholicsandcultures.org/practices-values/dance>

and jazz they were developing. A good example of this was the use of a popular rhythmic device known as the “Spanish tinge” in ragtime piano works. The aria “Habanera” from Bizet’s opera *Carmen* (1842) would make the rhythm a worldwide sensation. Figure 2 shows the Habanera rhythm and the rhythmic derivations of it used in ragtime music, known as the “Spanish tinge.”<sup>67</sup>

**Figure 2 Habanera rhythm and comparion to the Spanish Tinge”<sup>68</sup>**



The “Tinge” was a derivation of the Habanera rhythm, which had been appropriated by black Cuban slaves to produce a syncopated rhythm that was characteristic of Cuba’s national dance, the *danzón*. It represents an early example of how ragtime, jazz, and blues can also claim a kinship with the rhythms of the Catholic Caribbean, all surely born from the suffering of black slaves.

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<sup>67</sup> See Chapter Five, 112-114, for a more detailed explanation of the “Tinge” and its usage in ragtime music.

<sup>68</sup> “The Habanera Rhythm,” Influential Cultures Concept and Examples of the Habanera Rhythm in Tango and Jazz, *African American and Latin American Styles of Music*, accessed June 13, 2019, <https://african-americanandlatinamericanstylesofmusic.weebly.com/habanera-rhythm.html>

## 2.1 The Decline of Jazz

By the mid-1940s, the modernist aesthetic of the bop movement had alienated many traditional musicians, fans and critics alike, seriously dividing both public and critical appreciation and economic support for jazz. In their historiographical collaboration, *Jazz*, Giddins and DeVeaux have proposed the negative reaction to bebop as a major contributing factor to the post-war decline of jazz, which had dominated popular music since the beginning of the twentieth century. Jazz critic Whitney Balliet also described conditions on the ground in the post-war New York jazz scene that seem especially useful in understanding the professional situation in which Mary Lou Williams found herself in her post-Kirk period:

Jazz itself had turned transparent. Then big bands had been replaced by esoteric small groups that played bebop or cool jazz. Dancing-and the musicians who played for it-had been obliterated by a thirty percent wartime cabaret tax. Fifty-Second Street, which had cradled jazz since the thirties, was being taken over by office buildings. Jazz musicians-particularly those weaned on swing-had not felt so put upon since the early days of the depression.<sup>69</sup>

As record companies scrambled to abandon bop for more commercial jazz, musicians like Mary Lou who had embraced bop, fell onto hard times as the jazz business became what one observer described as “a monster, directed by commercialism, not the creation of good music.”<sup>70</sup> The jazz “monster” would soon be made worse by the advent of electronic technologies like television and the electric guitar, which contributed to the success of rock and roll, rhythm and blues, and other modern genres which were displacing jazz from its former popularity. Williams

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<sup>69</sup> *Bid.*

<sup>70</sup> Kernodle, 175.

blamed young Black musicians for turning their backs on jazz and their African American roots, their own “sound” and musical heritage. Jazz and black vernacular came, as Mary Lou wrote, “out of pure suffering of a race of people. Not the suffering of one person, but of a race.”<sup>71</sup>

The post-war period also brought to an end one of the hallmarks of American jazz that had brought jazz to prominence in the 1920s and 1930s - dancing. Venues could no longer support the expense of big swing bands, so audiences lost venues in which they could dance. The war years had also seen a decline in the production of new records, partly because of wartime restrictions on the use of vinyl, and the fact that a great number of musicians were serving overseas in the armed forces. As opportunities for dancing faded, nightclubs and dance halls were forced to close, there was a general loss of work for musicians at home, which would affect those musicians returning from wartime service as well.

Economic constraints became the norm, and conditions became more favorable for singers, pianists, and small combos. The area of “singers and pianists,” particularly, was the only area of jazz performance that was open to women under the prevailing gender norms in jazz. In contrast, other jazz instrumental areas like drums, bass, brass, and woodwinds were not associated with women either.<sup>72</sup> The short commercial life of bop in the forties set the stage for the development of new genres that could be commercially exploited moving forward into the fifties and sixties. As jazz transitioned from bop into cool and third-stream styles in the late

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<sup>71</sup> Mary Lou Williams, Series 5, Box 11, Personal Papers, *Mary Lou Williams Collection*, Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University.

<sup>72</sup> Sally Placksin, *American Women in Jazz: 1900 to the Present – Their Words, Lives, and Music*, (Wideview Books, 1982), 45.

1940s and early 1950s, new styles in black music like rhythm and blues, and rock ‘n roll became more popular than jazz. Further weakening of jazz was due to the new sounds of electronic technologies, for example, which contributed more to the success of these new genres than they did for jazz. As jazz artists like Williams struggled to reclaim their former prominence in the musical mainstream, only those who were quick to embrace new electric technologies and musical expressions like rock and soul, seem to have been the most successful. Miles Davis (1926-91), for example, was able to integrate new technologies like electric keyboards and guitars into a new form of jazz as early as 1968 on his recording *Miles in the Sky*, which featured Ron Carter (1937- ) electric bass, Herbie Hancock (1940- ) electric piano, and George Benson (1943- ) electric guitar. Of course, the later successes of *In a Silent Way* (1969) and *Bitches Brew* (1970) would firmly establish Davis as a leading figure in the jazz fusion movement he helped to create.

By the end of the 1950s the free jazz movement was further eroding support for jazz. John Tynan, in *Downbeat*, captured the vehemence of criticism leveled against the avant-garde movement, labeling the music of John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy, particularly, as “anti-jazz.”<sup>73</sup> Williams, who had been an important contributor and participant in virtually all the previous movements in the history of jazz, particular in the development of bebop, was horrified by the avant-garde free jazz movement, which she felt had turned away from the blues. Ironically, both Williams and many musicians in the avant-garde, like Coltrane, whom she admired, were at the vanguard of the search for spirituality. In fact, in 1977 she shocked the jazz world by playing a

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<sup>73</sup> John Tynan, “Take 5,” *Downbeat*, (November 23, 1961), 104.

piano duet with one of the avant-garde's most celebrated pianists, Cecil Taylor, in what the *Washington Post* described as a meeting of the jazz mainstream with the avant-garde. Williams said working with Taylor was difficult, she explained, because he was tense and nervous, but she added that she had asked Taylor to perform with her because he was "creative and honest."<sup>74</sup>

Williams thought that the new genres of rock, soul, and other contemporary music were destroying the jazz tradition. She felt that the free jazz movement was obscuring jazz's connection to the roots of black music, and she worried that jazz's musical origins in the hardships of the African American experience and its importance as America's only musical art were being forgotten, and in danger of being lost. She alludes to the future of jazz in the following excerpt, lamenting the fate of bop and its creative revolution:

I am sure that everyone is waiting for a new era of modern "Jazz" to develop. After the Bop period our creativeness and progress stopped – and the newcomers of this music have lost the heritage that we suffered to create. Nobody has been able to create any new modern sounds. Those who are trying have lost what we all suffered for.<sup>75</sup>

The main point for Williams was that African American musicians, as the title of her essay indicated, had turned their backs on the legacy and heritage of suffering under slavery. This was the crucible in which the spiritual, and then jazz, had been forged. Without the suffering, the advancement of jazz was not possible. Williams hoped to revive the creative energy of the boppers, the last black generation to relive and recreate the heritage of slavery that had fostered

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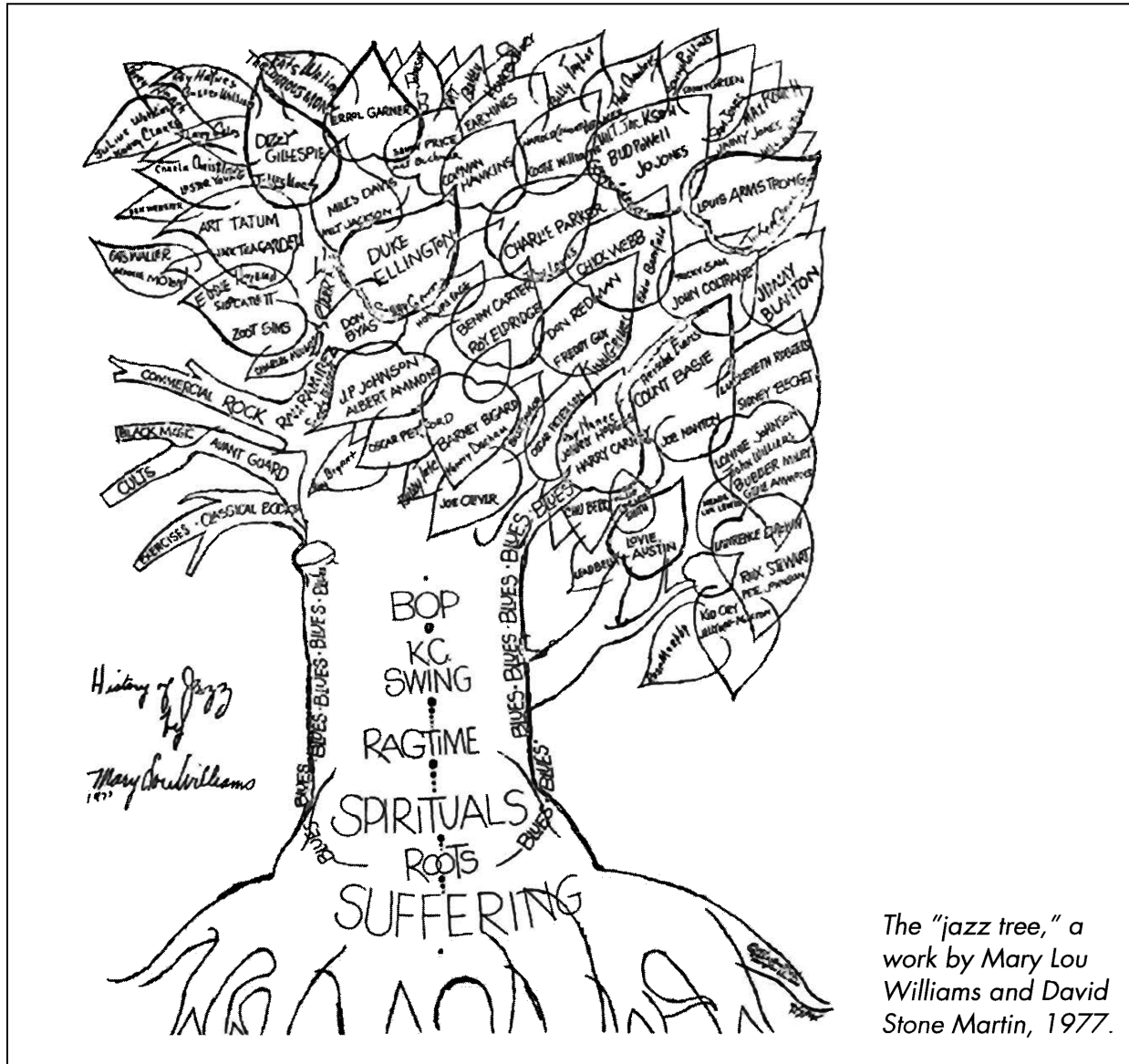
<sup>74</sup> Holly I. West, "Jazz Duo, with a Note of Tension," *Washington Post*, (April 18, 1977), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1977/04/18/jazz-duo-with-a-note-of-tension/cfc065fd-3f1a-49a9-b3e0-5d51f1c2eae4/>

<sup>75</sup> Mary Lou Williams, "Has the Black American Musician Lost His Creativeness and Heritage in Jazz," Box 5, Series 5, Personal Papers, *Mary Lou Williams Collection*.

all the important achievements of black music. Aside from music, she turned to art to begin to educate the young players about the history of jazz, hoping they would feel more connected to their jazz past.

The “Jazz Tree,” in Figure 3, is a graphic collaboration by Williams and artist David Stone Martin (1913-92), in which Martin produced an image of a tree that represented Williams’ views on the historical development of jazz. It shows a tree whose roots are in suffering, with blues coursing up through the trunk, out of which grow the leaves symbolizing the musical achievements of black music: especially the Negro spiritual, ragtime, Kansas City swing and bebop, which represented for her the most important achievements in African American music. “Healthy,” as well as “unhealthy” musical “growths” representing different jazz genres and jazz musicians, are indicated by the presence or absence of foliage, respectively. The letters in the word “suffering” are the largest, with “spiritual” being the next largest, gradually getting progressively smaller as you climb up the tree trunk through “ragtime,” “K.C. swing” and “bop.” This speaks to Williams’ belief in the importance of suffering and the spiritual to the foundations of jazz. Notably, on the lower left side, both “avant-garde” or free jazz, and “commercial rock” appear as bare tree limbs, alongside other bare branches like “black magic” and “cults.” The graphic was used as part of Williams’ “History of Jazz” performance-lecture series of educational appearances.

Figure 3 “Jazz Tree,” by Mary Lou Williams and David Stone Martin<sup>76</sup>



<sup>76</sup> Mary Lou Williams and David Stone Martin, “History of Jazz Tree,” 1977, Box 4, Item 2, Series 9, Posters/Artwork, *Mary Lou Williams Collection*.



Martin was, according to Dahl, briefly Williams' lover, circa 1944-45. Martin was white, reportedly "a night owl, a drinker, an iconoclast, a gifted artist with a conscience who instinctively related deeply to jazz and musicians."<sup>77</sup> When Williams asked Martin to produce an album cover for her 1945 78 RPM LP release, *Mary Lou Williams Trio*, on Asch Records, he stumbled into a new art medium: record cover art. He produced a portrait of Williams for *Mary Lou Williams Trio*, in what would be the first of over two hundred record covers for Asch, and hundreds of others for assorted labels owned by Norman Granz (1919-2001), including Verve, Clef, and Norgram.

It was as a result of the changing musical scene and Williams' views on the decline of interest in jazz, especially by young people, that she turned to composing sacred jazz works in order to help save jazz. She hoped she could reach young black musicians who had "turned their backs on their heritage." In defending her position on the music of the new "regime," she singled out rock, but especially the avant-garde movement, as existential threats to the survival of jazz:

The modern sounds of today are related to "soul – less Rock." One will find plenty of hate, bitterness, hysteria, black-magic, confusion, discontent, empty studies, musical exercises by various European composers, sound of the earth, no ears, not even relative pitch and Afro galore – and I'm crazy about the Afro styles in dress – but what has happened to our great American musical heritage? I try to teach youngsters to play all styles of music. But why should I teach them to destroy the greatest and truest art in the world – American Jazz? I was born in the U.S.A. This new mixture of Afro and everything else does only one thing – it destroys two arts –you have neither Afro nor Jazz. It seems that before changing to another country's musical heritage, I should try to persevere and fight here at home through my music of love and peace and bring this heritage forward.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Dahl, *Morning Glory*, 149.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

Williams thought of jazz as a totally American art form. She dismissed the popular notion that jazz had African roots, placing the origins, as she repeatedly wrote about, in the suffering of American slaves. An excerpt from another of Williams' writings regarding the subject of African versus black American music reveals her determination to save jazz by educating young musicians about it:

Jazz will never die. . . It was created through the suffering of the black Americans. When the chiefs sold them, they were brought to America losing the African contents of the music. Many have tried to trace it, but it cannot be traced to the roots of African or any other art in music. I played with eighteen African drummers and had to switch to their way of playing. This great art did not [fit] what they played. Now, why is it that this music is different – well the answer is: anything born out of suffering is spiritual and healing to the soul.<sup>79</sup>

Williams' conversion to Catholicism was certainly a major catalyst for Williams' late works. Other composers, like Duke Ellington, Dave Brubeck, and more recently Wynton Marsalis, would be inspired by her work to compose their own religious works. In Chapter Three, I explore Williams' journey towards Catholicism and how it changed her musical direction.

Concerned about the loss of the African-American musical heritage, Williams sought to “save” jazz by bringing attention to the major historical achievements of African-American musicians. In a 1977 *Contemporary Keyboard* interview documenting her “return” to jazz, Len Lyons reported on the nature of Williams' mission to “save” jazz, a mission which he dates to 1970, although apparently, as I have explained, it had begun in the post-war years following the decline of jazz and really took root with the release of “St. Martin de Porres” in 1963 and the

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<sup>79</sup> Williams, untitled note, *Mary Lou Williams Collection*.

composition of her three Masses during the period (1966-69). Lyons' interview considers Mary Lou's mission to "save" jazz and her return to jazz in this excerpt:

Since Mary Lou Williams, now in her mid-60s, came out of semi-retirement in 1970, her slogan has been, "Save jazz." Her goal is to cultivate a "new era" in jazz which will revive the values found in the earlier forms – spirituals, ragtime, Kansas City swing, and bebop. "I'm sad in my heart," she says, "because after Bud Powell and Charlie Parker, they cut off the growth of something beautiful." The villains are commercial music and the avant-garde. Between them, she feels, they are destroying the possibility of innovations which jazz needs to survive. "You don't have anyone playing real jazz today," she adds.<sup>80</sup>

## **2.2 The Decline of Catholicism**

The postwar era in the United States was a time of significant change in which many of the norms by which Americans had lived before the war, would be swept away or radically altered. For Catholicism, it was a time in which a serious undermining of the Church's authority was underway, caused, in part, by its unwillingness to engage with the racial, religious, social, economic and political needs of its membership. Among these neglected needs was the historical struggle of African American Catholics for acceptance into the mainstream of Catholicism. Church policies like those that opposed birth control and divorce, the ordination of women, for example, and the marginalization of minorities within the Church, for example, were seen as authoritarian controls on spiritual as well as secular values. Catholics began to question the authority of a Church that seemed to be out of step with the fast-changing postwar conditions of American culture.

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<sup>80</sup> Len Lyons, "Mary Lou Williams," *Contemporary Keyboard*, October 1977: 45.

Two major currents were at work in precipitating the decline of American Catholicism during the postwar period leading up to the 1960s. One was the assimilation of traditionally ethnic Catholic groups into American life. As anti-Catholic prejudice and discrimination declined, growing social and economic opportunities allowed more Catholics to enter the American mainstream, where they traded Catholic values and attitudes for those of the non-Catholic majority population. The other current affecting Catholicism in the 1950s had begun decades earlier with the Catholic Worker movement led by Dorothy Day and other dissatisfied Catholic intellectuals who thought that modern Catholics had evolved into “complacency” and “mediocrity” largely because of a Church that had become unaccountable and irrelevant to the needs of modern American Catholics. Maines and McCallion have observed that by the early sixties, the two major currents within Catholicism “coalesced” into one great liberal voice that would dominate the process for change during the Second Vatican Council.<sup>81</sup>

Fearing for the future of Catholicism, Pope Paul VI called for an updating of Catholicism in which the Church would, through the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council (1963-65), question its style of top-down authoritarianism, and consider empowering Catholics to enjoy a more fulfilling, inclusive and democratic participation in the Church. And that’s what they did. Not all Catholics were on board with the progressive agenda put forth by the Council, and the debate on the changes brought forth has survived to the present day. Statements out of the Council, like *Gaudium et Spes* (Joy and Hope), addressed the need to investigate shortcomings in

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<sup>81</sup> David R. Maines and Michael J. McCallion, *Transforming Catholicism: Liturgical Change in the Vatican II Church*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007), 9.

the Church's worldview and consider what its new role in the post-modern world should look like.<sup>82</sup>

Among the faults the Church recognized in its worldview was a lack of empathy for the autonomy and self-determination of the individual, and through statements like the following, was determined to win back the support of alienated Catholics. First, it sought to explain to the world how it saw its own presence in the world, and it sought to reevaluate its understanding of the post-war world and of the people who live their lives within it. Its focus was on "that world which is the theater of man's history, and the heir of his energies, his tragedies and his triumphs."<sup>83</sup> Finally, the Church was ready to embrace the secular alongside the sacred, as equal currents in the life of Catholics and of the Church, a concept that was traditionally unthinkable in Catholic theology. It was now acceptable to aspire to the best of the human and the scientific, as well as the divine.

This Sacred Synod, therefore, recalling the teaching of the first Vatican Council, declares that there are "two orders of knowledge" which are distinct, namely faith and reason; and that the Church does not forbid that "the human arts and disciplines use their own principles and their proper method, each in its own domain"; therefore "acknowledging this just liberty," this Sacred Synod affirms the legitimate autonomy of human culture and especially of the sciences.<sup>84</sup>

The development of liturgical jazz would show that the integration of African American Catholics into mainstream Catholicism could be accomplished through sound, in the form of the

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<sup>82</sup> Second Ecumenical Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, No. 4, (Rome: Holy See, December 7, 1965).

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

vernacular Mass. That achievement was pretty far removed from the original intentions of the Roman Catholic Church, whose tight control over all facets of Catholicism, even musical, prevented healthy musical and cultural development. In the 1500s, Catholic sacred music was dominated by Gregorian chant and polyphony. Chant was passed down to succeeding generations of singers in two ways. First, through the oral tradition, in which the singers were taught person to person, master to student. The development of notation for chant began in Europe in the ninth century, which was introduced in the Middle Ages, to traditionally considered to be a composer's best guess as to what they actually want to hear. Western liturgical music was a secret language shared by few.

### 2.3 Liturgical Jazz

Mary Lou Williams was not the first composer to introduce jazz into the Christian liturgical rite. It was Father Clarence Joseph Rivers, a black Cincinnati Roman Catholic priest, who initiated the first effort to integrate black American music into the Catholic Mass. In his *American Mass Program* (1963) he combined rhythmic and melodic elements of African American spirituals with the traditional monody of the Catholic Church, Gregorian chant.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Douglas Shadle, "Black Catholicism and Music in Durham, North Carolina: Praxis in a New Key," master's thesis, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2006).

Another notable early work is an Episcopal communion service based on Psalm 150,<sup>86</sup> *Music for the Liturgy* (1961), scored for voices and jazz quintet, written by the African American Episcopalian priest Rev. Standrod T. Carmichael.<sup>87</sup> Carmichael's *Music for the Liturgy* (1961) represents an obscure, yet authentic early liturgical jazz work. A reviewer cited the characteristic African American rhythmic elements in the work, as being rhythms that had been used in certain black churches for years, writing: "This was a jazz version of the Kyrie, Sanctus, Agnus Dei and the Gloria. It might have been a Mass, except for the order."<sup>88</sup>

Other African American composers were to contribute more obscure, but early jazz Masses, including one by the jazz pianist Edgar Summerlin, whose *Requiem for Mary Jo* (1958) was composed at the death of his young daughter. Later, less well-known works by African American composer, musician and educator David Baker include three Masses, each from different Christian denominations. These are *Episcopal Mass for the Feast Days of Absalom*

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<sup>86</sup> Williams drew text from the same Psalm 150 (as well as Psalm 148), to set her processional hymn "Praise the Lord," from *Mass* (1967).

<sup>87</sup> The Episcopal and Catholic liturgies share basically the same formal structure of the Mass, and both used Latin, as well as the vernacular in the post-Vatican II period. They share the use of the same texts from the Ordinary, i.e. Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Agnus Dei, and liturgical rites. Episcopalians, as they are known in the United States, do not, however, recognize the Pope in Rome as the supreme religious authority.

<sup>88</sup> Ed Costello, review of *Music for the Liturgy*, by Stanrod Carmichael, "Liturgical Jazz Proves Forceful," *Spokesman-Review*, (Spokane, WA: March 10, 1965).

Jones (2003),<sup>89</sup> *Catholic Mass for Peace* (1969 )<sup>90</sup> for SATB chorus and jazz ensemble, and *Lutheran Mass* (1967) for SATB chorus and jazz septet. Other religious works by Baker include *Psalms* 22 (1966), for SATB chorus, narrators, jazz ensemble, string ensemble and dancers, and three orchestrations of *Psalms* 23 (1968) for (1) SATB chorus and organ, (2) jazz septet, and (3) boys' choir and SATB chorus.<sup>91</sup> Jazz pianist and composer Eddie Bonnemere, a former student of Mary Lou Williams, wrote a Catholic jazz Mass featuring calypso, bossa nova, and Gospel elements, *Missa Hodierna* (1966), scored for mixed chorus and ten-piece jazz ensemble.<sup>92</sup>

Non-African American composers as well have contributed to the development of the liturgical jazz genre in the twentieth century. Among other early efforts at producing a jazz Mass was *An American Jazz Mass* (1959) for voices and instrumental quintet, by an undergraduate student and future Yale professor and jazz scholar, Frank Tirro, whose work, unlike the Masses of Fr. Rivers, Rev. Carmichael, Summerlin and others, leans on European classical elements and

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<sup>89</sup> Monika Herzig, Nathan Davis, J.B Byas, Willard Jenkins, Lissa May, Brent Wallarab, David Ward-Steinman, Quincy Jones, and John Edward Hasse, *David Baker: A Legacy in Music*, (Indiana University Press, 2011), 208.

<sup>90</sup> The name of this Mass, *Catholic Mass for Peace*, is almost identical to Williams' *Music for Peace*, which was written in the same year, 1969. Peace was a widespread topic in 1969, during the height of the Vietnam War.

<sup>91</sup> Andre Jerome Thomas, "A Study of the Selected Masses of Twentieth-Century Black Composers: Margaret Bonds, Robert Ray, George Walker, and David Baker," PhD diss., (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1983), 119-120.

<sup>92</sup> Duncan Perdita, "Music IN Review: "Missa Hodierna," *New York Amsterdam News*, (May 14, 1966), 22.



Gregorian chant, and not on black American vernacular.<sup>93</sup> Tirro's Mass was described in 1963 by reviewer James Reyes as an amateur attempt having little to do with a Mass, much less jazz:

. . . not merely amateurish (a small fault) but . . . also naive and unconvincing by any standards. . . The piece, in short, achieves no convincing harmonic style and has even less melodic interest. Lastly, the declamation of the text is without distinction, and except for a few syncopations, there is nothing of "American Jazz" in the setting of the text.<sup>94</sup>

A quite abstract concert Mass setting worth mentioning was written by Leonard Bernstein (1918-90), who although Jewish, found inspiration and dramatic opportunities in the form of the Catholic Mass. His *Mass* (1970), is a large-scale expressionist concert version of the Mass for voices and orchestra that has less to do with religion than it does with theatricality and social protest.<sup>95</sup> Non-Catholic jazz pianist Dave Brubeck (1920-2012) began his classical style large scale concert setting of the Catholic Mass, *To Hope: A Celebration* (1979), as a Protestant, but converted to Catholicism when the work was completed.<sup>96</sup> Additionally, composer Lalo Schifrin, an Argentinean Jew who achieved considerable success scoring films and television, produced a non-Mass liturgical work, *Jazz Suite on the Mass Texts* (1998).

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<sup>93</sup> Tirro would later head the Music Department at Duke University. In 1977, he offered Williams a teaching position there, which she accepted, working there until her death in 1981.

<sup>94</sup> James E. Reyes, review of Tirro, "An American Jazz Mass," *Notes*, Second Series, Vol. 20, No. 4, (Music Library Association, Autumn, 1963), 567-568.

<sup>95</sup> W. Anthony Sheppard, "Bitter Rituals for a Lost Nation: Partch's "Revelation in the Courthouse Park" and Bernstein's "Mass," *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 80, No. 3, (Oxford University Press, Autumn, 1996), 481-499.

<sup>96</sup> Michael Sherwin, "Jazz Goes Back to Church: Dave Brubeck's Religious Music," *America Magazine*, (August 4-11, 2003), 12-15.

A notable distinction between the Masses of Mary Lou Williams and those of many other composers who write in the liturgical jazz style, however, is that Williams' Masses were composed for liturgical use, to be sung during the celebration of the Mass, not as concert performance events. Following Williams' death in 1981, many concert performances of *Mary Lou's Mass*, especially, have not been sung as part of a Mass celebration. In the increasingly secular atmosphere of American society, the religious content of Williams' work has often been superseded by her fame as a jazz artist and composer. But she probably didn't mind that, as long as her sacred music was getting exposure.

Other women who have tried to get Williams' music out to the public include, most importantly, the late African American jazz pianist and composer Geri Allen (1957-2017), whose performances of Williams' sacred music brought the importance of Williams' music to international attention. Other contemporary Williams' interpreters include the white pianist and composer Deanna Witkowski (1975- ), a lesser known Williams interpreter who performs repertoire taken from Williams' religious works.

Among the most well-known non-Mass religious concert works by an African American are the three *Sacred Concerts* (1965, '68, '73) by Duke Ellington. Unlike Williams' Masses, written for the celebration of Mass, Ellington's religious music was written for the stage, although often performed in churches. Like Handel's *Messiah*, the *Sacred Concerts* are non-denominational works designed as concert events that set religious and original texts. Another such example is the Wynton Marsalis religious work for jazz septet and vocalists, *In This House, On This Morning* (1992) that offers an extended suite of impressions of the African American

church.<sup>97</sup> Marsalis, however, also has written a concert mass, *Abyssinian 200: A Celebration* (2008) a 19-part suite based on the liturgy found in many African American Baptist churches.<sup>98</sup> Other notable religious works by African American jazz composers include *Easter Suite* (1984) by Oscar Peterson, and Billy Taylor's *Make a Joyful Noise* (1981).<sup>99</sup>

Despite such varied and blossoming creative activity in the development of Catholic sacred jazz, unleashed by the Church itself as a result of its own Vatican II reforms, the newly elected Pope Paul VI would declare in 1967 that "jazz Masses violate the norms for sacred music." By "norms," of course, the Pope was referring to fifteenth century polyphony and Gregorian chant. Around the same time, Cardinal James Francis McIntyre (1886-1979) of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, pronounced jazz as "profane," while the spokesman for the Archdiocese of New York, John Michael Caprio, would state that the Catholic Church "permits many musical forms, provided they are not used for entertainment, are appropriate in style and text, are dignified and complement the prayer."<sup>100</sup> These varied responses by clergy to the new currents in Catholic music illustrate the fact that decisions about the appropriateness of various kinds of sacred music in the post-Vatican II Church were set by regional and local religious

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<sup>97</sup> Paul Verna, Marilyn A. Gillen, Peter Cronin, CD review; Wynton Marsalis, *In this House, On this Morning*, Wynton Marsalis Septet, *Billboard*, (Apr 16, 1994), 62.

<sup>98</sup> "Wynton Marsalis' jazz Mass debuts," *Associated Press*, (April 9, 2008), accessed May 30, 2019, <https://www.heraldnet.com/news/wynton-marsalis-jazz-mass-debuts/>

<sup>99</sup> Leslie Rubenstein, "Jazz for Church Services Makes Measured Progress," Arts and Entertainment, *New York Times*, (April, 19, 1987).

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

authorities according to their needs. If the Pope did not want jazz Masses sung in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, for example, that did not preclude jazz Masses from being sung in St. Patrick Cathedral in New York, or St. Paul Cathedral in Pittsburgh, where Williams' first jazz Mass was sung.

Such was the political, cultural and artistic milieu within which Mary Lou Williams and others found themselves as they were developing the "new" sound of the Catholic Church. As I argue in this project, a central element in Williams' sacred music was her bearing witness to the historical suffering of African Americans. It is reasonable to assume that this emphasis on bearing witness to suffering constituted the basis for Williams' attraction to Catholicism, which at the time of her conversion, in 1957, centered on participation in the redemptive suffering of Christ.

The preoccupation with suffering and redemption thrust both Williams and the Catholic Church into collaborations that were musical reflections of a new post-Vatican II vision of Catholicism. Despite the success of their collaborations, which culminated in the commissioning of the *Mass for Peace*, both the Church and Williams had initially been reluctant to "modernize" their responses to the contemporary needs of their respective constituencies. For the Catholic Church this included its response to a widespread backlash by Catholics to the continuation of centuries of authoritarianism and the Church's deliberate disengagement with modernity and the problems attendant to the fast-changing realities in the lives of practicing Catholics. For Williams, this included her failure to respond to the changing musical tastes of post-war Americans, who now preferred new forms of black music like rhythm and blues, rock, and soul, to jazz. By the mid-1960s, having adopted the use of the vernacular Mass, Williams' challenge

would be to develop a broader, younger audience for her religious works by incorporating some of these new black music forms into her preferred modern jazz style of composition.

The post-war decline in the popularity of jazz created a desire in Williams to save jazz. She saw that young musicians were attracted to the contemporary genres of the sixties, like pop, rock, soul. Perhaps because of her role as musical mentor to Dizzy Gillespie (1917-93), Bud Powell (1924-66), Thelonious Monk (1917-82) and other bebop during the bebop era, she was slow to embrace post-bop genres of African American music in her liturgical music during the 1960s. But as I show, Williams soon came to realize that the exclusion of new genres and technologies was turning away young people, limiting the appeal of the music. It was therefore counterproductive to her goal of saving jazz. Her first liturgical setting in 1967, *Mass*, used just piano, bass, and voices. Only a few years before that, the use of piano would not have been permitted. In that sense it is a non-traditional orchestration. It does not call for organ, the traditional accompaniment to sung Masses. But, in terms its jazz credentials, *Mass* reveals its tribute to a set of traditional black vernacular genres – the spiritual, swing, bop, ballad, and even ragtime. Interestingly, it is the work she discarded right away. The second *Mass* in the following year was scored for chorus and a small jazz ensemble of flute, sax, jazz guitar, keyboard, bass, drums. The appearance of the description “keyboard” in the score, instead of piano, suggests an electric keyboard could be used. Similarly, “jazz guitar” suggests an electric guitar was to be used. Williams also incorporated the use of contemporary gospel rock in the Kyrie, flanked by traditional swing, rubato ballads, and jazz waltzes in the other movements. By her third *Mass*, in 1969, however, her work reflected a new model of inclusiveness in which her personal preference for bebop, blues and the Negro spiritual, and traditional jazz instrumentation would be augmented by the addition of contemporary genres like gospel, rock, soul, and rhythm and

blues, along with orchestrations that included instruments like electric guitar, electric bass, and French horn.

### 3.0 Williams and Catholicism

Mary Lou Williams came to Catholicism relatively late in life. She was forty-seven when she converted to Catholicism in 1957, following a personal breakdown which put a virtual hold on her jazz career. By 1950, she had become disillusioned with the declining economic conditions in the New York jazz scene, so she agreed to headline the “Big Rhythm Show of 1952,” a two-week British concert package that began in London with the Cab Calloway orchestra and dancer Marie Bryant. She soon became unhappy because the show was more of a commercial variety show, not a serious presentation of jazz. Along with that, she was bothered that the British musician’s union was trying to micro-manage the production with rules and regulations. She even enlisted Max Jones from the British magazine *Melody Maker* to help her get around union rules so she could cancel appearances with British bandleader Ted Heath at the Palladium Theater in 1953.<sup>101</sup>

Williams decided not to return to New York after the tour. She managed to secure enough bookings to extend her stay in Europe for two years, performing mainly around London and Paris. But the disillusionment she had been experiencing would eventually overcome Williams in the spring of 1954. In Paris she walked off the stage during an appearance at the nightclub *Le Boeuf sur le Toit*, vowing to quit performing. She would make a contemporaneous diary entrance explaining her state of mind at the time: “I was still looking for peace of mind, and I was determined to give up music, nightlife and all else that was sinful in the eyes of God. After that, I

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<sup>101</sup> Whitney Balliett, “Out Here Again,” *New Yorker Magazine*, (May 2, 1964), 82.

wouldn't play anymore.”<sup>102</sup> In an interview with the *New Yorker Magazine* ten years later, she described what this difficult period was like. It also indicates that it was in Europe that she first became interested in prayer:

If I didn't have my prayers, they'd have to put me in a straitjacket. My life turned when I was in Europe. I played in England for eleven months and spent money as fast as I made it. But I was distracted and depressed. At a party . . . I met this G.I. He noticed something was wrong, and he said, “You should read the Ninety-First Psalm.” I went home and I read *all* the Psalms. They cooled me and made me feel protected. I just slept and ate and read the Psalms and prayed.<sup>103</sup>

It is especially interesting to note that this experience would bring her closer to the religious life she would pursue.

It was not until late 1954 that she returned to New York from France, spending the next eight years searching for spiritual peace and direction. She began to look for these in religion, first in the Baptist faith, then the Catholic, as she told critic and writer Whitney Balliet in 1964:

When I came back from Europe, I decided not to play anymore. I was raised Protestant, but I lost my religion when I was about twelve. I joined Adam Powell's church. I went there on Sunday, and during the week I sat in Our Lady of Lourdes, a Catholic church over on a Hundred and Forty-Second Street. I just sat there and meditated. Music had left my head, and I hardly remembered playing.<sup>104</sup>

When Williams left Abyssinian Baptist Church, probably in early 1956, she was still trying to ground herself in religion. Despite the failure of her Baptist experience she moved on. She would soon thereafter find a church that was more to her liking at West 142<sup>nd</sup> St. and Amsterdam

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<sup>102</sup> Mary Lou Williams, diary entry, c.1954, “Europe & Travels in the ‘50s,” *Mary Lou Williams: Soul on Soul*, Mary Lou Williams Foundation, accessed June 2, 2019, <http://newarkwww.rutgers.edu/ijs/mlw/europe.html>

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 85.



Avenue in Harlem. It was quiet and more amenable to her schedule, and it was conveniently located nearer to her Hamilton Terrace apartment, which was near 144<sup>th</sup> St. Our Lady of Lourdes was a Diocesan Catholic church where Williams prayed for extended periods for hundreds of persons whose names she kept on slips of paper in a small book.

From the mid-fifties to the early sixties, spiritual advisors John Crowley, Anthony Woods, and Mario Hancock, repeatedly advised Williams that she could both end her musical exile and practice her devotion to Catholicism, by returning to jazz by “offering” her music as prayer. By 1960, she came to support this view, and began to compose liturgical music, devoting the rest of her life to composing Catholic works. The first work in this liturgical jazz style was the 1962 extended modern jazz hymn dedicated to a newly canonized black saint, “St. Martin de Porres: Black Christ of the Andes.” Williams chose the saint’s feast day, November 3, as the date of the premiere of the work at the St. Francis Xavier Church, a Jesuit parish at 16th Street between 5th and 6th Avenue, on the lower West Side of New York. Father Anthony Woods, S.J., pastor of the church, was the author of the text for the piece.

Martin de Porres was canonized by Pope John XXIII on May 6, 1962, after having been blessed, or “beatified” in 1837 by Pope Gregory XVI. The following excerpt is taken from the homily of Pope John XXIII as he celebrated the canonization Mass for St. Martin de Porres in 1962. It summarizes the reasons for his elevation to sainthood and his value to the Church.

As we have already affirmed at the beginning of our homily, we deem it very opportune that this year in which the Council is to be celebrated, be listed among the saints Martin de Porres. For the path of holiness that he followed and the flashes of preclara virtue with

which his life shone, can be seen as the healthy fruits that we wish the Catholic Church and all men as a consequence of the Ecumenical Council.<sup>105</sup>

The opening sentence of the homily states: “We deem it very opportune that this year in which the Council is to be celebrated, be listed among the saints Martin de Porres,” which gives us a clear indication as to the possible motives of the Church for bestowing the sainthood. As the Second Vatican Council got under way, it seems fair to conclude that it was indeed an “opportune” time to add a black saint from the Western hemisphere. Doing so would set the tone for, at least an acknowledgement of the racism within the Church. It was the start of an effort on the part of the Catholic Church to balance the scales in which it had always excluded minority and female candidates for sainthood. Among the candidates to be canonized from the United States in the post-war era were two women, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton (canonized 1975), and St. Frances Xavier Cabrini (canonized 1946).

In 1964, just two years after the elevation of St. Martin, the Church went on to canonize twenty-two nineteenth-century Catholic African Bantu young male pages who were persecuted and martyred on the orders of Uganda’s King Mwanga, who wanted to expel Christianity from his country. The young men were pages at the royal court, where they were imprisoned for resisting the homosexual demands of the king, and later sadistically martyred, during 1885-1886.

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<sup>105</sup> Pope John XXIII, “The Holy Thirst,” Ritual of Canonization of Blessed Martin de Porres,” (Rome: Holy See, May 6, 1962), accessed on June 28, 2019,

[http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/homilies/1962/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_hom\\_19620506\\_martino-porres.pdf](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/homilies/1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_hom_19620506_martino-porres.pdf)

Despite the king's effort to stamp out Christianity in Uganda, the effort failed as the number of Catholics grew from 800 to 3,000 in the year after the martyrs' deaths.<sup>106</sup>

The *Los Angeles Times* reported that the black saints had been beatified by Pope Benedict XV in 1920 and were the first to be canonized under Pope Paul VI, and represented a new racial consciousness within Catholicism:

The ceremony here [St. Peter's Basilica] had strong overtones of emphasis on racial equality. The canonization rites accompanied by the native-beat music of a new African oratorio in the presence of colorfully robed African delegations in St. Peter's Basilica makes it possible for African Negro Catholics to have their children baptized in the names of people of their own blood and traditions.<sup>107</sup>

That they had African music in St. Peter's is interesting given the difficulties of Williams in being afforded the same privilege just a few years later. No doubt this was because the African music had been designated as an oratorio, a Western musical form the Church may have found to be more suited to the solemn occasion, compared to blues form or jazz, which Pope Paul VI would ban in 1967, calling it "profane" music.<sup>108</sup> Many in the conservative African American community undoubtedly agreed with the Pope's ban on the use of jazz in church. Many blacks

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<sup>106</sup> "St. Charles Lwanga and the Martyrs of Uganda," Magnificat: Bring the Word of God to Life, *Aleteia*, accessed August 28, 2019, <https://aleteia.org/daily-prayer/sunday-june-3/>

<sup>107</sup> "Pontiff Proclaims 22 Negro Martyrs Saints: Bantus First Africans to Be Canonized in Modern Times; Tom-Toms Carry News," *Los Angeles Times*, (October 19, 1964), 7.

<sup>108</sup> Robert C. Doty, "Jazz Mass Included In Ban by Vatican On 'Strange' Rites," *New York Times*, (January 5, 1967), 1.

had not supported the blues since its creation, and especially were against the use of blues repertoires in the service of religion.”<sup>109</sup>

The *New York Times* reported on the meeting at which the canonization had been approved, emphasizing that it was Pope Paul VI, who was in attendance, that gave the final approval. With the canonization of women and people of color, the Church was proclaiming its opposition to its historical racial and gender discrimination.<sup>110</sup> This was actually fortunate for Williams, whose race and gender, formerly obstacles to a meaningful relationship with the Church, could now put forth her religious works as the embodiment of the racial and gender issues identified and addressed by the Second Vatican Council.

### 3.1 The “Reverend”

As she investigated organized religion, Williams sought to involve herself in charitable work with drug-addicted musicians. As she prayed for others in Our Lady of Lourdes, Williams sought to atone for her “past sins.” Her sins included smoking, gambling, excessive spending, and especially, the “failure to sacrifice” for herself or others.<sup>111</sup> She became a kind of fanatic, fasting only on apples and water for days on end. In her own words, she admitted that she lived

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<sup>109</sup> Tracy Fessenden, *Religion Around Billie Holiday*, State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018, 26.

<sup>110</sup> Associated Press, “Vatican to Canonize 22 Negro Martyrs,” *New York Times*, (July 8, 1964), 1.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

and behaved “like a monk.”<sup>112</sup> She was so fanatical that Miles Davis took to referring to her as “the Reverend.”<sup>113</sup> Williams could often be found walking the streets of Harlem, looking for strung out musicians who were addicts. She would take them off the streets to her apartment, where she attended to their health as she tried to distract them away from drugs through musical activities. She would let them stay for as long she thought was necessary. Then they would leave, only to repeat the vicious cycle of drug addiction, winding up on the streets again. Then Williams would again bring them back to her apartment. Her compassion and mercy towards her charges knew no boundaries.<sup>114</sup>

Williams sought to expand these charitable activities into a non-profit organization she hoped might accomplish more over time than she could by herself. With the help of Herbert Bliss, an acquaintance of her Jesuit mentor, Father Woods, she founded the Bel Canto Foundation in 1958.<sup>115</sup> The Foundation was a legally incorporated organization with a mission statement that stated the following primary purpose: “To voluntarily assist in relief of every kind and nature to those persons suffering from or exposed to alcohol or drugs in any degree, but primarily to musicians whose health or work is affected by alcohol or drugs.”<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Dahl, 255.

<sup>114</sup> Bill Slocum, “Prayers from a Keyboard,” *New York Mirror*, (August 22, 1957).

<sup>115</sup> Kernodle, *Soul on Soul*, 190.

<sup>116</sup> “Certificate of Incorporation of Bel Canto Foundation, Inc., Pursuant to the Membership Corporation Law,” p.1, Series 4: Business Papers, Subseries 4L: Bel Canto, ca. 1950-71, 1977, Box 67, Folder “Bel Canto, Foundation Certificate of Incorporation, New York, NY, 1958,” *Mary Lou Williams Collection*, in Footnote 30,

### 3.2 Post-War Currents in Catholicism

The changing scene in Catholicism was being profoundly influenced by events in post-war America and in Europe, where Williams had performed during 1953-54. There were two main currents affecting Catholicism. As the social and moral revelations of the Civil Rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s were impacting virtually every American institution, social injustice was exposed and challenged by widespread civil interventions and social activism. Nowhere were they as exposed and challenged (except possibly in sports) as they were by the arts and by individual artists. Singer-songwriter Nina Simone immediately comes to mind as one who used their art in the service of activism on behalf of social and racial justice. Similarly, Williams' activism in this arena emerged out of her embrace of black Catholics like herself, for example, who had historically struggled for equality and a seat within the mainstream of Catholicism.

Activist currents directed at provoking changes in Catholicism were direct responses by Catholics against the Church's imposition of authority over not only religious, but secular and personal matters. It was a response, like the those of the Civil Rights and Counterculture movements, for example, to the Church's failure to react to changes in the religious, social, racial, economic and political conditions of the late twentieth century. The Church's top-down authoritarian hierarchical structure had asserted, through the First Vatican Council (1869-70), for example, that the Pope was infallible, and that women were excluded not only from the

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Vaughn A. Booker, "Performing, Representing, and Archiving Belief: Religious Expressions among Jazz Musicians," *Religions* Vol. 7, Issue 8 (August 2016), 9, accessed June 2, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel7080108>

priesthood, but from other positions of authority as well. Besides pronouncements like these, even firm positions against birth control and divorce, which affected the personal lives of Catholics, were viewed as efforts to restrict and control individual freedoms. By the 1960s, American Catholics began to question not only the authority, but the motives of the Church.

Three months after being elected Pope in September 1958, John XXIII had called for a Second Ecumenical Council to address the situation. According to Vatican documents, the resolution was born from the realization of a crisis caused by the “decaying of spiritual and moral values” in modern society. The Pope called on the Council to renew the spiritual core of Catholicism. The spiritual core had historically been the exclusive domain of the clergy. The core was now to be made accessible to all Catholics through lay participation in the spiritual dimensions of their faith.<sup>117</sup> Since the Gothic Period, for example, the celebration of the Mass had been like a performance in which the priest, as “celebrant,” performed the sacred rite facing the altar, with his back turned to the congregation, who were merely “observers” of the celebration of the Mass, with no real participatory function.<sup>118</sup> Vatican II sought to provide Catholics the means to become participants in the Mass, not observers. The priest would now face the congregation as they participated in the sacrificial death and resurrection of Christ. The distribution of the Eucharist, Holy Communion, could now include bread and wine, as had been

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<sup>117</sup> Colleen McDannell, *The Spirit of Vatican II: A History of Catholic Reform in America*, (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 73.

<sup>118</sup> Rev. Joseph A. Jungmann, S.J., translated by Rev. Francis A. Brunner, C. SS., R., *The Mass of the Roman Rite: It's Origin and Development*, (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, Inc., 1992), 117.

done at the Last Supper. These measures were supposed to create an enhanced sense of community within the Church.<sup>119</sup>

Statements like the following, from *Gaudium et Spes*, explain how the Church would try to win back the support of alienated Catholics - by focusing on the role of the Church in the modern world, and on the modern needs of humanity.

We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often-dramatic characteristics. . . For the council yearns to explain to everyone how it conceives of the presence and activity of the Church in the world of today. . . Therefore, the council focuses its attention on the world of men, the whole human family along with the sum of those realities in the midst of which it lives; that world which is the theater of man's history, and the heir of his energies, his tragedies and his triumphs.<sup>120</sup>

The Church's new focus sought to intersect the secular and the sacred under the "two orders of knowledge under the currents of "joy and hope." This was unthinkable before Vatican II, when "faith and reason" were the two ends of the Catholic continuum. In the view of the Church, humanity was flawed by original sin, and never had a chance against the perfection of God. Now it would be acceptable for Catholics to aspire to the best of the human, as well as the divine.

This Sacred Synod, therefore, recalling the teaching of the first Vatican Council, declares that there are "two orders of knowledge" which are distinct, namely faith and reason; and that the Church does not forbid that "the human arts and disciplines use their own principles and their proper method, each in its own domain"; therefore "acknowledging this just liberty," this Sacred Synod affirms the legitimate autonomy of human culture and especially of the sciences.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> McDannell, *Spirit of Vatican II*, 81.

<sup>120</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, No. 4, 1965.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.



As an African American Catholic, Williams sought to establish both her Catholic and racial identity through her sacred music. The struggles of mainstream American Catholicism during the 1960s came at a time in which a serious undermining of its authority was caused by its inability and unwillingness to engage with the racial, religious, social, economic and political conditions of its membership. Catholics, black, white and brown alike, began to question the authority of the Church.

According to biographers, it was through her friend Dizzy Gillespie that she met Father John Crowley, who would become one of Williams' first and most influential Catholic mentors. A Jesuit priest and former jazz saxophonist, Crowley had served as a missionary in Paraguay, and had returned to the States to serve as pastor at Our Lady of Lourdes parish. She had a strong relationship with him, and he seemed to take a deep interest in her spiritual life. For example, he could see that Williams only prayed for others, never for herself, so he would encourage her to pray for herself, as well as for others.<sup>122</sup>

She thought that by sharing in the suffering of others, she was tapping into the suffering of Christ, hoping to share, along with them, in the rewards redemptive suffering promised by Catholicism. But clearly, Williams was suppressing her own identity, her own needs, her own spiritual well-being. Her most repressed need was probably the need for creative musical expression, but it would take time for her to realize she could do this by creating music for the Church. She must have felt it was much more ethical, and Christian, to be concerned with the problems of others instead of ones' self. Clearly, it seems easier to consider the needs of others

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<sup>122</sup> Kernodle, *Soul on Soul*, 186.

than to turn inward towards the demands of our own needs. It might also be that to pray for oneself seems selfish, self-absorbed, considering what we might see as the heavier burdens we see carried by those around us.<sup>123</sup> Perhaps these were considerations that Williams struggled with as she tried to exercise her faith early on.

Williams had another important early mentor and collaborator, Father Anthony S. Woods, S.J., also a Jesuit priest and jazz lover who served at St. Francis Xavier Church. The mission of St. Xavier, since the nineteenth century, had sought to lighten the burdens of immigrant families in need of existential and spiritual support, and was continuing, in the 1960s, to work in that tradition. St. Xavier's mission probably resonated deeply with the views and goals of Williams' "mission" to help addicts. Today, the contemporary mission of the St. Francis Xavier parish is still grounded in outreach programs that serve the immigrant community. The Xavier website offers the history of the church's goals and activities, which reveals the continuing Jesuit mission.

The roots of social justice at Xavier date back to early Jesuit outreach efforts to mid-19th century immigrants on New York's Lower East Side. In the early 1980s during the recession, concerned parishioners of the Church began providing food and shelter in response to the plight of their fellow New Yorkers. Today our six programs operate collectively as Xavier Mission Inc., a multi-service community outreach organization housed at the Church of St. Francis Xavier.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Rachel Jones, "The Two Reasons Why You Don't Pray for Yourself (and why that needs to change), *thegoodbook.com*, (May 17, 2018), accessed June 5, 2019, <https://www.thegoodbook.com/blog/interestingthoughts/2018/05/17/the-2-reasons-why-you-dont-pray-for-yourself-and-w/>

<sup>124</sup> "Xavier Mission," The Church of St. Francis Xavier, accessed June 5, 2019, <https://sfxavier.org/xavier-mission>

Father Woods was the priest who would give Williams the religious instruction and counseling that led to her conversion to Catholicism in May 1957, and importantly, he was instrumental in helping her to get back into music. He reportedly told Williams that she was a musical artist, and that as such, she should be playing and composing music. She reports that he said, “It’s *my* business to help people through the Church and *your* business to help people through music. He got me playing again.”<sup>125</sup>

It sounds like Williams viewed this dilemma from an opposite point of view, where she felt that it *was* her business to help people through Catholicism. In this period, she became obsessed with religion and atonement for past sins. Williams would later write about her relationship with Woods, who, like Crowley, was concerned that Williams was shutting out the world for an inner pursuit of atonement, when the answer always had been that she should get back to music. She credited Crowley as well as Woods, with getting her back to the piano and jazz. It seems that at that point in her spiritual seclusion, she began to realize the truth of Woods’ words, but it would be years before she would reconcile a return to music.

By the 1960s, Williams was composing liturgical hymns and Masses, thanks to her spiritual advisors who were able to persuade her she could both return to jazz and continue her devotion to Catholicism by “offering” her music as “prayer.” As she explained to the *New York Times*, this new “prayer” music came directly from “my mind, through my heart to my fingertips.”<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Kernodle, *Soul on Soul*, 180.

<sup>126</sup> Wilson,” *Jazz: From Mind to Fingertips*,” 34.

An uncomfortable distance between secular and sacred music was most pronounced within the black community, starting in the late nineteenth-century as the Negro spiritual made its advance into music history. Many African Americans came to view the spiritual as a backward-looking, unwanted reminder of an enslaved past that did not reflect the “new Negro” that engaged the new freedoms and aspirations of post-Civil War African Americans. The following historical anecdote attests to the beginnings of the black rejection of the perceived historical “baggage” associated of with the Negro spiritual.

The spiritual was so identified with suffering, with the “sorrows and humiliations” of the past, for example, that even in 1872 black students at Howard University protested the appearance of the renowned Fisk Jubilee Singers at their school. They felt it was “inconsistent” with the goal of obtaining a sophisticated education that transcended the sorrows and humiliations of an enslaved past.<sup>127</sup>

Black opposition to popular black music, like blues and jazz, similarly, -has its roots in the post-emancipation desire of African Americans to distance themselves from the stereotypes and myths associated with their former exploitation under enslavement. They aspired to move away from the sting of minstrelsy that had appropriated and racialized the music and dance of their black American culture. But in the 1920s, the “race record” industry re-engaged the theatrical and racial fictions of nineteenth century minstrelsy to promote the blues. African American culture was on the rise in the late twentieth century American *zeitgeist*.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> “The Choral Tradition,” *The Spirituals Project Online*, accessed July 20, 2012,

<http://ctl.du.edu/spirituals/performing/choral.cfm>

<sup>128</sup> Paige A. McGinley, *Staging the Blues: From Tent Shows to Tourism*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 4.

Conservative African American views on blues, and jazz, were firm in their rejection of what they considered low class, “gut bucket” music:

Long before white midcentury fans and critics dedicated themselves to policing authenticity, black aversion to blues performance manifested in religious, class, political, and regional terms: throughout the twentieth century, blues, especially theatrical blues, were alternately understood as immoral, lowbrow, too minstrelsy, or simply too Southern. If there is one phrase that is synonymous with blues, a kind of shorthand expressive of both blues’ spiritual peril and transgressive thrill, it is *the devil’s music*.<sup>129</sup>

In the modern era there are many examples of African American singers, in particular, whose musical identities were formed in the black church, but faced criticism from the church as they went on to successful secular music careers. Bill Carpenter, author of *Uncolored Days: The Gospel Music Encyclopedia*, has cited Aretha Franklin as somewhat of an exception, as a major artist that never forgot her roots in the black church and was allowed to return, writing “The church often shuns artists who sing R&B as backsliders and reject them when they come back and sing gospel. However, Aretha’s always been given a pass.”<sup>130</sup>

Mario Hancock was a Franciscan friar that Williams met around 1962 who would be helpful in her battle to overcome this seemingly unsolvable problem. As it turned out, Williams and Hancock had some rather important things in common.<sup>131</sup> Both were African Americans,

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>130</sup> Adelle M. Banks, “Aretha Franklin started with gospel, ended with soul at 76,” *National Catholic Reporter*, (August 16, 2008), accessed June 7, 2019, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/aretha-franklin-started-gospel-ended-soul-age-76>

<sup>131</sup> Hancock and Williams met by chance at Graymoor, a Catholic community north of Manhattan.

had been raised Protestant, and had later converted to Catholicism.<sup>132</sup> Such ties seemed to allow them to develop a very deep personal relationship, and he came to know Williams very well. As a spiritual counselor, he knew that Williams could not return to music as he observed, “without the assurance that her faith would not be compromised.”<sup>133</sup> Among their frequent discussions was the topic of St. Martin de Porres, an early seventeenth century wandering Peruvian monk of Spanish and African descent known for his holiness and charity. Canonized as a saint in 1962, de Porres’ struggles as a black monk under colonialism were so inspiring to Williams, that she referred to him as the “Black Christ of the Andes.” His life, works and sainthood laid the African-Spanish foundation of not only the American Catholic Church, but of the black Catholic community in America.<sup>134</sup> Williams became devoted to his legacy and his sainthood, both spiritually and musically. His life awakened in her feelings for contemporary issues of justice, for example, the historical struggle of African Americans for equality within Catholicism.<sup>135</sup>

In addition to being a role model for her spiritual and charitable work, her return to performing in 1962 would be based on her new jazz choral work commemorating the canonization of de Porres.<sup>136</sup> “Black Christ of the Andes” is scored for a cappella chorus, with piano solo. Williams requested an original text for the piece from Mario Hancock, but he never delivered one, so she asked Father Woods to write it. Woods was able to provide a text for the

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<sup>132</sup> Kernodle, *Soul on Soul*, 194.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>134</sup> Davis, 25-27.

<sup>135</sup> Kernodle, *Soul on Soul*, 200.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

work that was based on the biography of de Porres. In Figure 4, the first stanza illustrates the use of rhyme in the piece, and how Fr. Woods adhered to an antiphonal call and response technique in the phrasing.

**Figure 4 First stanza, “St. Martin de Porres: Black Christ of the Andes”**

St. Martin de Porres, his shepherd staff a dusty broom.  
St. Martin de Porres, the poor made a shrine of his tomb.  
St. Martin de Porres, he gentled creatures tame and wild.  
St. Martin de Porres, he sheltered each unsheltered child.<sup>137</sup>

Father Wood’s text for “St. Martin de Porres: Black Christ of the Andes” portrays the humility, and the religious mission of a Catholic saint, who in his desire to emulate Christ, ministered to the poor. His life and works are summed up in the following lines of text taken from both the A and B sections of the piece’s AABA structure.<sup>138</sup> The first lines reflect on St. Martin’s vow of poverty, and his caring reputation among the poor:

St. Martin de Porres, his staff a dusty broom.  
St. Martin de Porres, the poor made a shrine of his tomb.

This line speaks to the physical and spiritual needs of the poor St. Martin served:

Oh, Black Christ of the Andes,  
Come feed and cure us now we pray.

These lines tell about the types of good works St. Martin was known to perform:

St. Martin de Porres, he gentled creatures tame and wild.  
St. Martin de Porres, he sheltered each unsheltered child.  
To feed beggars and sinners, the starving homeless and the stray.  
This humble man healed the sick.  
Raised the dead, his hand is quick.

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<sup>137</sup> Father Anthony Woods, S.J., text, Mary Lou Williams, music, “St. Martin de Porres: Black Christ of the Andes,” original manuscript reproduction, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, rqM2092.w47s2 1962X.

<sup>138</sup> See Appendix A Full text “St. Martin de Porres: Black Christ of the Andes.”

Soon after the 1964 release of Williams' recording of "Black Christ," she met a young Jesuit seminarian, Peter O'Brien, who would become her collaborator and business manager in 1970.<sup>139</sup> Curious to meet the composer of *Black Christ*, he ventured to the Hickory House in New York where she was appearing hoping to meet her. He was nearing his ordination as a Jesuit priest, was an intellectual with serious interests in jazz and musical theatre and was searching for a ministry that would enable him to serve the Church as well as his deep interests in music. It was he who provided the intellectual focus and scholarly content for her religious works, often providing the liner notes to her recordings. He was focused on Williams's use of Catholicism as a lens through which she might reach a larger, more diverse audience.

### 3.3 Performing Suffering

O'Brien wrote the following clarification of the terms of Williams's engagement with suffering, *vis-à-vis* her sacred music, in the liner notes of the 2004 Smithsonian Folkways re-release of the original 1963 recording of "Mary Lou Williams Presents: Black Christ of the Andes." I believe it demonstrates how intensely O'Brien had penetrated the core of Williams' musical universe, and it serves well as a guide to understanding Williams' roots as an African American jazz artist:

Perhaps a comment on "suffering" is in order. There was nothing self-indulgent or masochistic about Williams. She experienced much human pain and sorrow in her life, but I never heard her react with anything like self-pity. There is simply this depth of connection with three and a half centuries of black life in America, and the experiences of

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<sup>139</sup> Dahl, *Morning Glory*, 313-314.



her own life, which she calls “suffering.” There is no glorification of slavery here, but an accounting of misery, which, because she is a musician, she relates to the courageous creation of the spirituals, which she also calls songs of joy, and of jazz, which she calls an outcry of sincere joy. The music is not separate from the seriously lived life, nor in its long history, from the seriously lived collective life of black Americans. And it is triumphant.<sup>140</sup>

I believe O’Brien’s observations serve well as a guide to understanding Williams’ music, as well as her legacy as an important twentieth century African American artist. O’Brien had a profound insight into the material and spiritual life of Williams, and studied her musical strengths and motivations. He worked on her behalf, through the lens of Catholicism, to engage a broader international audience for jazz.

That engagement also included the discrimination against black Catholics within the Catholic Church. Williams engaged with this in her sacred compositions. She sought to shape a modern black aesthetic that epitomized the goals of a “new” Catholicism which aspired to embrace African Americans, women, and other minorities. Williams’ engagement with social justice and suffering in the African American experience became a point of a mutual attraction between her and the Catholic Church. One way she sought it, perhaps, was through her conviction that Catholics were much more sympathetic to the African American experience of suffering than other Christians. She saw the importance of suffering in both the services as well as the Catholic practice of participating in the redemptive suffering of Jesus Christ. In a cross-shared sense of suffering between African Americans and Catholics, through the persistent lobbying of officials within the Church on behalf of her vernacular “re-thinking” of Catholic

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<sup>140</sup> Father Peter O’Brien, S.J., liner notes, *Mary Lou Williams Presents Black Christ of the Andes*, CD re-issue, (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings Records, 2004), 12.

sacred music, she won the support of a few clergy in the Church who recognized the special opportunities inherent within her vernacular Mass style, which if promoted, could help to advance the goals and aspirations set forth by Vatican II.

Mary Lou Williams was at the vanguard of the fight against racism and other concerns of black Americans, especially regarding the struggle of black Catholics for equality within the Church.<sup>141</sup> Her Masses were instruments of protest against the discrimination of the Church against blacks, women and other minorities, beginning in 1967. In black Catholic circles, militant efforts to address racism, such as “A Statement of the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus” would not come out until 1968,<sup>142</sup> and 1970 with Lawrence Lucas’ *Black Priest/White Church*.<sup>143</sup> Subsequently, a conference seeking to create a black Catholic theology would publish a summary of the conference, “Theology: A Portrait in Black,” in 1978, a paper that would inspire the formation of the first university think-tank dedicated to black Catholics, the Institute of Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University, a historically black college or university (HBCU)

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<sup>141</sup> Black Catholics in the United States had suffered a long history of resistance against racism that began with the Negro Catholic Congresses in the late-19th century, continued with the Federated Colored Catholics in the early-20th. In the late 1960s and early ‘70s, black Catholic clergy and scholars began to organize protests against racism within the Church and American society, and produced collective theological statements addressing racism and advocating for the establishment of a separate black Catholic theology.

<sup>142</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone. eds., “A Statement of the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, April 18, 1968,” *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966–1979*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979), 322–324.

<sup>143</sup> Lawrence Lucas. *Black Priest/White Church: Catholics and Racism*. (New York: Random House, 1970).

in New Orleans.<sup>144</sup> A later pastoral letter on evangelization from black American Bishops, “What We Have Seen and Heard” (1984), urged black Catholics to share their “blackness” with the American Catholic Church.”<sup>145</sup> Cyprian Davis tried to summarize the history of the struggle of black American Catholics, *vis-à-vis*, the influence of “blackness” on American Catholicism in his *History of Black Catholic*

We can, however, draw some conclusions as we look back over the history of the black Catholic presence in the United States for the last three hundred years. First of all, it is clear that the Catholic church in the United States has never been a white European church. The African presence has influenced the Catholic church in every period of its history. More than this, the Catholic church was as much affected by the issue of slavery and its aftermath as any other American institution. The issue of slavery affected the American episcopate in its own understanding of what freedom, justice, and human dignity really mean the issue of slavery and the evangelization of the African American affected the relationship between the American episcopate and the Roman Curia.<sup>146</sup>

Some black theologians, like James H. Cone argue that black Catholic scholars like Davis “use their intellectual capital to show that Black Catholicism is not an anomaly but is deeply embedded in both the Catholic tradition and African and African American history and culture.”<sup>147</sup> Cone supports a contrary view of American Catholicism as a handmaiden of white supremacy. He illustrated this view by observing that white Catholic theologians have

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<sup>144</sup> Thaddeus J. Posey, ed., “Theology: A Portrait in Black,” *Black Catholic Theological Symposium Proceedings 1*, Baltimore, Maryland: (October 12–15, 1978).

<sup>145</sup> Black Bishops of the United States, “What We Have Seen and Heard: A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization,” (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger, September 9, 1984), 3.

<sup>146</sup> Davis, 259.

<sup>147</sup> Cone, “A Critical Conversation,” 735-736.

historically failed to tackle white supremacy as the theological problem responsible for the marginalization of blacks and other minorities within the Church.<sup>148</sup>

Lamin Sanneh (1942-2019), the late Professor of Divinity at Yale, observed that the majority of Christians today live in the southern hemisphere. This means they are mostly non-white populations, principally in South America, Africa, and Asia. Sanneh expanded on the issue of black Catholics, locating them within a global struggle he calls “world Christianity.” His theory is based on the power of vernacular languages, made possible for Roman Catholics through the reforms of Vatican II. Language, says Sanneh, is fundamental to culture and society, and once believers possess the Scripture in their own language they become decision-makers in issues of identity and ethical responsibility. Sanneh described the adoption of the “mother-tongue” as the factor most responsible for the global explosion of Christianity in the post-Vatican II period. Going on to explain how the move to vernacular languages has changed the modern face of Global Christianity, he observed that this has brought Christianity back to a dynamic that has not existed since the era of the New Testament.<sup>149</sup>

He credited the adoption of the vernacular in Christian practice during the sixties as the reason for the shift of Christianity’s “center of gravity” away from its authoritarianism and hierarchical centers of Christian power. While believers in the West say prayers and observe

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid.,731.

<sup>149</sup> Graham Hill, “A Conversation with Lamin Sanneh on World Christianity, Christian-Muslim Relations, & Translating the Christian Message,” *The Global Church Project*, (May 2, 2016) , accessed June 5, 2019, <https://theglobalchurchproject.com/conversation-lamin-sanneh-world-christianity-islam-mission-translation-cultural-renewal/>

them, Sanneh saw that World Christianity had attained a dynamic consisting of a return to the dynamism of Christianity's origins, where believers pray for "miracles, signs, and wonders, much as was the case in the New Testament."<sup>150</sup> I would locate the sacred works of Williams under this notion of a "Christian dynamism," where it attracted those, like herself, who were open to receiving "miracles, signs, and wonders," most importantly, the miracle and wonder of her music.

### **3.4 Gender and the Church**

Lenore Alford has explained that the Church's historical adherence to classical Greek ideals, in which males were associated with spirit, reason, and heaven, while women were associated with the body, fleshly passion, and earth, would seal the fate of nuns and other female clerics who sought spiritual and musical participation in the practice of Catholicism. By virtue of their feminine corporality, women in the Church were deemed to be unable to attain the Greek ideals of "spirit, reason, and heaven." This led to severe restrictions on women's musical activities and participation in the liturgy of the Church. Women resorted to embracing mysticism, inventing ways to participate in musical activities, often through the device of a mystical experience, in which they sought what mystics seek - a divine union with God and the

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

Church. Through mysticism, women were able to penetrate the gender barrier that separated them from participation in their religion.<sup>151</sup>

Among the most successful of female Catholic mystics was Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179), a twelfth century German nun, mystic, writer, and composer. Although forbidden by the Church hierarchy to compose for the Mass itself, in such musical religious offerings such as *Ordo Virtutum* and *Symphonia armoniae caelestium revelationum*, for example, she engaged the oppressive male-dominated culture of Catholicism by embracing spirituality, a domain officially reserved for men only, through the domain of femininity within her works. Alford writes about the feminist theology of von Bingen, noting that her sacred art, whether musical or literary, was deeply centered in notions of femininity that were artfully camouflaged as a response to the regressive gender norms of the Church:

Another important aspect of Hildegard's legacy is the deliberate way in which she cultivated a distinctly feminine aesthetic in her art: this is evidenced by her emphasis on female protagonists in her work, as well as her creation of a kind of feminine theology in the texts of her music. This female spirituality that poured out in her poetic writings helped to create something new in her age, that is, an answer or alternative to the male-dominated theology that was often extremely misogynistic in nature.<sup>152</sup>

It is not clear how Alford's claim of Von Bingen's "feminine spirituality" in her poetry advances the reality von Bingen seems to have been engaged with in her writings and music, i.e. that there was nothing particularly male about spirituality – it might just as well be female. It seems like an inconsistency in Alford's argument to assert a gendered spirituality, either "female" or "male." Besides the realm of spirituality, I would argue that Williams, for example,

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid..

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

put her gender front-and-center in sensual, physical ways, crafting, like von Bingen, her own “alternative” to male-dominated Catholic theology.

Unlike von Bingen and the string of other women who worked under the “heard but not seen” policy practiced in the early Church, Williams’ excursion into feminist interpretations of theology and practice saw her promoting gender as well as racial equality by putting herself, a black woman, for example, at the front of church altars during performances of her Masses. Thus, she would break down long-standing traditions in the Church which supported the racist antagonisms and suppression of women.

Women had been historically marginalized within the musical life of the Church. As described by Alford: “By definition they [women] were touted as not capable of transcending their flesh in a way fitting to service in the liturgy.”<sup>153</sup> Thus, women were excluded from writing the ultimate religious musical expression – the Mass. Despite these obstacles, women composers and musicians participated in high levels of musical activity. Women produced hymns, psalms and other liturgical music for their convents from the early Medieval period on. It is interesting to wonder, for example, beginning with Von Bingen, who was an accomplished composer and writer, if she or any other women were compelled by faith to disobey the dictate of the Church, and compose a Mass in secret. After all, any devout composer of religious music would desire to create the setting for the expression of the ultimate sacrifice of Christ, that lies at the core of the Mass.

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

If any such Masses exist, we may someday discover them, but until then, we do have the Masses of Williams, as well as a small number of Masses written by other female composers. Like Williams, these exceptions to a male-dominated sphere of Catholicism have appeared beginning with the late nineteenth century and extending into the present. As far as we know, these few works were composed by women who were not associated with the Church via a professional relationship, such as nuns or other religious female clerics. It is there that we find the *Grand Mass in Eb major, Opus 5* (1889), a Latin Mass by renowned pianist and American composer Amy Beach. In 1892, the work premiered in Boston as a concert work. It was the first large-scale choral and orchestral major work to be premiered by an American woman composer in the United States.<sup>154</sup> More than a century later, there are two Masses written by American jazz pianist and composer Deanna Witkowski. *Evening Mass* (2009), scored for SATB and jazz piano trio, appears on her CD *From this Place*.<sup>155</sup> Her *Morning Mass* (1998) is scored for vocalist and piano.<sup>156</sup> An English contemporary composer, Roxanna Panufnik, has written a concert Catholic Mass, *Westminster Mass* (1997), which is scored for mixed choirs with three possible accompaniments: (1) organ, (2) small orchestra, and (3) organ, harp and tubular bells.

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<sup>154</sup> Amy Beach, *Grand Mass in Eb major, Opus 5*, scored for chorus and orchestra, , (Middletown, WI: A-R Editions, 2018), accessed May 31, 2019,

<https://www.areditions.com/beach-grand-mass-in-e-flat-major-opus-5-a084.html>

<sup>155</sup> Deanna Witkowski, *Evening Mass*, (Tilapia Records, 2009), CD.

<sup>156</sup> Witkowski, *Morning Mass*, (Tilapia Tunes, 1998), sheet music.



#### 4.0 Williams' Major Catholic Works

Williams had begun to explore religious jazz composition as early as 1948, when she completed a bop-influenced modern spiritual, "Elijah and the Juniper Tree." Scored for SATB chorus and piano, it set a text by Ray M. Carr inspired by the Old Testament. But Williams' interest in writing for the Catholic Church came later in life, after her conversion to Catholicism in 1957. After that, it would still be ten years before she would compose her first jazz Mass. But in the interim, she had been developing a concept of liturgical jazz that drew on her multi-movement composition experience with *Zodiac Suite*. As the first multi-movement form Williams would work on, this suite does suggest a composer thinking in more literary and programmatic terms, perhaps preparing for the more demanding story-telling requirements of a Mass setting, which she completed in 1967.

Following the premiere of *Zodiac Suite*, Williams began work on "Elijah." It was a modern spiritual set within a dark Eb-minor pentatonic blues tonality, but with a modern bebop harmonic style that The piece is driven by the steady swinging walking bass pattern in the piano that contrasts offbeat homophonic vocal rhythms. "Elijah" marked an important compositional transition for Williams, from a multi-part instrumental type of writing to four-part SATB choral writing. Such was the start of her engagement with a liturgical jazz style which was strongly influenced by the spiritual on one hand, and by bebop and blues on the other.

Williams thought extensively on the function of African American music. For example, the following summary of the relationship of the blues to jazz and to the spiritual comes from an essay she wrote that was used as background information for her numerous educational

lecture/concerts about jazz. It outlines the core values of African American music, truth and spirituality.

The blues (the spiritual feeling of jazz) has always been present in all stages of the music. Listen to your spirituals and you'll hear the phrasing of the blues. In other words, without the blues feeling, all power for the healing of the soul in the music is lost.<sup>157</sup>

Like other sacred composers, Williams recycled original material from one work to another, as in the case of the Credo from her first Mass, which wound up in a later work, *Mary Lou's Mass*. Sometimes, she freely moved secular or sacred material from one domain to the other. As I detail in Chapter Five, she integrated melodic fragments both from a spiritual as well as melodic fragments taken from a movie theme into two of her movements from the Ordinary. Specifically, it seems she drew inspiration for her Kyrie from the opening of the traditional spiritual "Wade in the Water." It had landed in the public musical consciousness in 1966 because of a popular jazz version of it recorded by Chicago-based pianist Ramsey Lewis.<sup>158</sup> It is an interesting roundabout journey from sacred Negro spiritual to pop-jazz hit, and back to a sacred theme in Williams' first Kyrie. A second example of domain switching occurs in the opening measures of Agnus Dei, in which she draws on the opening of the movie theme "Laura," by David Raskin.<sup>159</sup>

The conflation of the sacred and secular has always been a particular characteristic of black music. Samuel Floyd wrote about it in a 2002 study on the African American ring shout

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<sup>157</sup> Williams, "Has the Black American Musician Lost his Creativeness and Heritage in Jazz?," Personal Papers, *Mary Lou Williams Collection*.

<sup>158</sup> Ramsey Lewis, *Wade in the Water*, Cadet Records, 1966, audio LP.

<sup>159</sup> David Raskin, "Laura," theme from the film *Laura*, (Hollywood, CA: Warner Brothers Music, 1944).

dance in which he notes that the ring shout dance was derived from African religious practices that were transplanted to America by slaves. The ring shout consisted of vocal techniques and sonic practices like variations of rhythm, tonality, call and response, vocality, and rhythmic pulses.<sup>160</sup> Floyd points out that these are all recognizable original sources for the development of African American jazz, blues, dance, and other African American art forms, for example:

. . . calls, cries, and hollers; call-and-response devices; additive rhythms and polyrhythms; heterophony, pendular thirds, blue notes, bent notes, and elisions . . . and formed the foundation of all subsequent African American music.<sup>161</sup>

The ring shout was a coagulative African cultural and religious expression derived from African dance and musical emotion, transmitted through religious practices. An important point that Floyd makes is that the ring shout was a dance in which the sacred and the secular were conflated. In fact, he writes that the conflation was a reflection of the “near-inseparability” of African American music and dance, not only within the ring shout, but within and outside of black culture. Floyd describes the resulting sonic practices of the ring shout as being the “metronomic foundational pulse” that formed the basis for all forms of African American music.<sup>162</sup>

In Europe, substituting chant melodies with popular melodies, for example, was unthinkable in Catholicism before the Renaissance, when there was no popular resistance to the authority of the Church. Plainchant provided ample melodic material for singing and there was

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<sup>160</sup> Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., “Ring Shout! Literary Studies, Historical Studies, and Black Music Inquiry,” *Black Music Research Journal*, Vol. 22, Supplement: Best of BMRJ (2002), 52.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

strict oversight by priests and superiors. Under these conditions, the Catholic Church resisted change for more than a thousand years. The development of notation for chant, around the year 900, created a competitive group of composers who tried to distinguish themselves from their contemporaries. One way was to show their cleverness in inserting secular melodies into their masses and motets. In *A History of Western Music*, Grout and Palisca describe how the fifteenth century French chanson, for example, the most popular song form of the Renaissance, often provided melodic lines and counterpoint for Masses as composers made it common practice to convert secular themes into sacred polyphony.

Chansons were freely altered, rearranged, and transcribed for instruments. Above all, they provided an inexhaustible supply of cantus firmi for Masses; sometimes the superius, sometimes the tenor voice of a chanson would be selected for this purpose. Thus, Ockeghem used the superius of his *Ma maitresse* complete and unchanged for the Gloria of a Mass. . . so that the same melody which served once for “My mistress and my own dear love” is sung to the words “And on earth peace, good will to men” – an example of the religious conversion of a secular melody extremely common in the period.<sup>163</sup>

In a reference to similar common practice in twentieth century jazz, the writer observes that the practice of domain switching lives on, in the secular as well as the sacred. Expressing the thought that sacred and secular were not mutually exclusive, often regarded as interchangeable by composers. Eisenberg even compares jazz composers to the sacred composers of the Renaissance and the Baroque, who created spiritual music from all musical sources, be they

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<sup>163</sup> Donald J. Grout and Claude V. Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1988), 222-223.

secular, sacred or otherwise, writing: “The stream Mr. Rollins stands in is the same one Josquin stood in. . .” “You Don’t Know What Love Is” or “L’Homme armé” -- the stream still glitters.”<sup>164</sup>

“Elijah” remains quite unknown, but it reflects the first attempt of Williams to synthesize modern jazz with a biblical story. It represents an important transitional phase between the instrumental *Zodiac Suite* and the choral liturgical jazz style she would develop in the 1960s. It is scored for chorus and piano. In *Morning Glory*, Dahl reports that Williams claimed that in composing *Mass*, she had tried to capture the way she felt when she prayed.<sup>165</sup> Possibly she may have felt that she hadn’t quite achieved that goal to her satisfaction in her first effort at setting a Mass. Although she didn’t think *Mass* was really jazz, she used the *New York Times* to report that she called it “jazz” anyway, in order to save jazz.<sup>166</sup> Perhaps this was a shrewd use of the media by Williams to create interest in a religious work that might have gone unnoticed coming from a jazz artist, had the artist not said that it wasn’t really jazz. And, she was also bringing attention to her crusade to save jazz.

At this time, Williams was concerned that young musicians were not carrying on the jazz tradition, instead going into R&B, pop, soul, and rock and roll developments in black music. Ironically, these new genres were often throwbacks to the blues and the origins of African American music. As a modernist bopper who had approved of the return to the spirit of the blues

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<sup>164</sup> Evan Eisenberg, “Arms and the Mass, or: Why Does This Liturgy Sound So Familiar?,” *New York Times*, (February 26, 2006).

<sup>165</sup> Dahl, 293.

<sup>166</sup> Wilson, “Mary Lou Takes Her Jazz Mass to Church,” 34.

in the bebop movement, it is somewhat mysterious that she didn't feel the same way about new popular music of the sixties, some of which was blues based or influenced.

There were other jazz artists that would follow, that agreed with Williams' defense of traditional jazz, among the most recent, trumpeter Wynton Marsalis. We see his bias against rock, for example, in an *Isthmus* article reporting on Marsalis' career. It observed that in addition to a ban on rock and fusion programming at Lincoln Center, Marsalis had hit a highpoint in his desire to set the standards for American jazz, perhaps, with his rejection of Miles Davis' electronic work in the late sixties and beyond. It really speaks to the combative type of jazz discourse that highlighted the jazz versus rock debate of the sixties. And it is highly interesting to learn the high level of control Marsalis had over the dissemination of jazz as director of Jazz at Lincoln Center:

Fusion really upsets the Lincoln Center crowd. They take the position that the work of men like Miles Davis, Wayne Shorter and Joe Zawinul since 1969 should be looked at with a jaundiced eye. Marsalis doesn't even consider *Bitches Brew* and the albums Davis made after it to be jazz. He says they're rock, and won't allow rock in his building. . . Apparently Marsalis objects to the R&B (James Brown) and rock (Jimi Hendrix) influence in Miles' work, and to his use of heavy amplification and electronic instruments.<sup>167</sup>

For Marsalis, the new black music genres of the late 1960s had elicited a close-minded approach to new forms of jazz. Williams shared his sense of conservatism in delineating what was or was not jazz. The feeling that the traditional forms of jazz were being corrupted or

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<sup>167</sup> Harvey Pekar, "The downside of Wynton Marsalis: The trumpeter is not the jazz savior he's made out to be," *Isthmus*, (July 10, 2010), accessed June 27, 2019, <https://isthmus.com/archive/from-the-archives/the-downside-of-wynton-marsalis/>

replaced with new forms was at the root of her sense that jazz was dying, and needed to be saved. However, compared to Marsalis, who remained a conservative who was not especially open to new music, Williams finally came to the realization, in the late sixties, that new forms of black music constituted the next phase of black music history, and she determined to integrate them into her religious compositions. She also realized that her support for these new expressions in black music was the only way to reach a broader and younger audience, which she felt was key to the reinvigoration of jazz. The education of young people about jazz was very important, and a central component to her mission of saving jazz. Instead of denying the new forms of jazz, Williams finally took advantage of the fact that jazz was moving into a new phase of development. An exploration of the devices with which she was able to save jazz is partly the subject of this research in Chapter Five, but these included the many references and homages to the African American spiritual, and the blues.

Williams' religious works are certainly among her most obscure contributions to twentieth century African American music. During the early sixties and seventies these works were generating excitement and appreciation primarily among American black Catholics who had been historically marginalized by the mainstream Church, even though they had historically played a major role in solidifying and sustaining the development of the American Catholic Church since the colonial period of slavery. In addition, high interest in Williams' works was widespread among the small group of Catholic clergy in and around New York City, Pittsburgh, and later, Rome, who were ardent Catholic supporters and benefactors, both within, as well as outside of the Church.

However, the goals and promises of Vatican II were unevenly embraced, especially regarding sacred music, which turned out to be a short-term adornment to a reform program that

did not have the support of many Catholics, or of many in the Church hierarchy. The sacred music of Williams was an important realization of those reforms, and thus, interest in her works rapidly declined. Upon her death in 1981, interest in her Catholic works see. Regardless of the obscurity of her major Catholic works today, there are two important aspects to the historical contributions of Williams, as a Catholic composer, and as a jazz artist. One important aspect of her contributions lies in the fact that she was the first black woman to participate in and contribute to the development of almost all the eras in jazz history, both as musician and composer. That Williams was able to transcend the gender norms in jazz to reach that success, where female musicians were judged by male standards that relegated them to the status of second-rate players, singles her out for praise. Williams also was able to penetrate the male-dominated hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church to secure a historic commission for the composition of a jazz Mass. So, her breach of two long-standing patrimonies of male domination, in jazz and Catholicism, are representative of the many ways in which Williams stands at the intersection of these two traditions, one secular, the other sacred. And certainly, and ironically, despite all she had done to promote the aspirations for social justice, for example, the Church hierarchy succumbed to their initial opposition to many of the reforms of Vatican II.

Notably, among the very few contemporary interpreters of Williams' music, was the late African American jazz pianist and composer Geri Allen (1957-2017). In 2006, under the name 'Mary Lou Williams Collective,' she recorded her re-interpretation of Williams' extended *Zodiac Suite*, on a CD called *Zodiac Suite: Revisited*. Augmenting the jazz piano trio with a second drummer, Allen brings a new view of an old, and fairly obscure work. Another Williams interpreter is jazz pianist and composer Deanna Witkowski, who regularly performs Williams' religious music, and who has written two Masses of her own. Through these efforts, Williams'



legacy as a Catholic composer has begun to be rescued from the still hazy memory of her greatness. Her contributions to African American music seem to place her efforts alongside the great creative achievements of Duke Ellington, and Charles Mingus, who, like Williams, sought to bear witness to black culture and the African American experience through their musical works.

As I have set out to explore in this project, Williams was among the earliest female composers in modern Catholic history to represent the spirituality of redemptive suffering through modern jazz Masses. To have done this through jazz, particularly, is an accomplishment that rivals that of Von Bingen, especially, who also engaged in the fight for females' right to practice spirituality on equal terms with men. Williams did this by transforming notions of the "female" domains of "earthiness, flesh and the body" into more universal, ethical, and gendered post-Vatican II Catholic values.

Such patriarchal attitudes persisted into the twentieth century, and were part of the reason for the religious and social reforms of the sixties. Of course, as has been noted, this is the backdrop to the timeframe of Williams' most important Catholic works. Ironically, in the pre-Vatican II modern era, jazz had historically been similarly linked to the medieval feminine notions of "earthiness, flesh and the body," and thus, most importantly, to sexual desire, probably the most troublesome issue responsible for the concept of "original sin" in Christianity. Sexuality, demonized by Catholicism from the start, remained, in the view of the modern Church, a major obstacle to the experience of the divine. The view of femininity as the historical cause of humanity's spiritual problems has a long shadow it seems. In the twentieth century, as such theological concepts lost some of their former gravitas, these archaic views were not abandoned, but scapegoated by white society onto such racially vulnerable areas as jazz and

blackness, even by middle-class black society, who all sought to conform to the conservative, narrow dictates of ancient Christian teachings. They also sought to add a new twist, white supremacist ideology, which perpetually seeks to deny African Americans and their culture.

In the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Paul VI seemed to produce musical policy against the jazz Mass from a position of ignorance about music, or possibly, a racist impulse against black musicians and black music. Either way, his ban aimed to weaken the Church's new desire for increased participation in the Mass. Catholics were becoming increasingly very racially, culturally, and geographically diverse, and it was hoped the use of vernacular languages and music would bring people together.

Many Church officials, however, whether in Rome or elsewhere in the world, like their leader, Pope Paul VI, had no experience, knowledge, or appreciation of African American jazz or folk music. Many were also racially intolerant and ignorant of African Americans and their most global public face, jazz, which they associated with seamy jazz nightclub activities like drinking, sex, and drugs, which to them were clear violations of Christian morality. Such was the political, cultural, and artistic milieu within which Williams and other African Americans found themselves as they were developing the new sound of the Catholic Church, apparently to the dismay of many top officials in the Church.

Despite such varied and blossoming musical activity within the community of composers writing Catholic liturgical jazz, which in fact had been unleashed by the Church itself as a result of its own Vatican II reforms, the newly elected Pope Paul VI would declare in 1967 that jazz Masses violated the norms for sacred music. This was two years after the declarations of the Second Vatican Council, which had clearly permitted allowed regional and local control over use of the vernacular Mass. Perhaps the Pope had St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, his own church,

specifically in mind when he proclaimed a ban on “strange rites” in January 1967, just six months before the premiere of Williams’ first Mass, in June. His dictum singled out not only the prohibition of the jazz Mass, but any other vernacular music and “profane” musical instruments, like the guitar, as the following excerpt from the *New York Times* announcement of the ban indicates.

Pope Paul VI and two Vatican offices joined today in outlawing “jazz” masses and other extreme distortions of liturgy that have been reported from various countries, notably in northern Europe. . . Included was a picture of a priest and a group of young people during a service in which music was provided by guitar and other “profane” instruments. This and other “jazz masses,” including those reported to have been held in the United States, would be outlawed by the Papal and Curial statements today.<sup>168</sup>

The ban seems to have been a backlash against what Paul VI saw as new and radical notions of Catholic practice that threatened the traditions of the Church, all brought on by the rapid changes to Catholicism during the sixties. It also seems like an attempt to block black Catholic composers like Williams from producing vernacular jazz Masses. Paul VI seems to have believed they were attempting to obliterate the sacred music tradition of the Latin Church. One the other hand, according to the prevailing conditions in the Church hierarchy, the Pope may have been trying to prevent blacks, women, and other minorities from being supported by the Church which had historically turned always from them. Ironically, the ban was completely contrary to what the new, more liberal policies of post-Vatican II Catholicism, which aspired to racial and gender inclusion and equality.

In *Spirits Rejoice!* Bivins proposed jazz’s spirituality as a process of the “religious reimagination” of African religious practices by African Americans. As a process that uses

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<sup>168</sup> Doty, “Jazz Mass Included In Ban by Vatican On ‘Strange’ Rites,” 1.

historical narratives about religious and cultural memory, Bivins imagines a possible explanation of jazz's origins, but it fails to recognize, as Williams had, that the experience of enslavement was the real source behind the development of jazz. Bivins stated it this way:

Jazz narrates itself in ways I regard as central to the American religious imagination, and especially to long-standing traditions of African American sacred historiography. . . The music's religious reimagination of (mostly) African American history and identity obviously employs critical declamation . . . and they produce alternative narratives wherein an African past is invoked. . .<sup>169</sup>

Williams was more interested in the American influence on the development of jazz than she was in the African influence on jazz, which she considered to be American music. She had written that "Jazz was born out of the suffering of blacks in America."<sup>170</sup> In trying to understand how jazz could emerge from that suffering, it is appropriate to revisit what some of the realities of the African American experience were under slavery. Contemporary nineteenth century observations on slavery, like the following early commentary taken from an 1850 speech by Frederick Douglass, lay out the dire circumstances under which most black slaves lived:

The law gives the master absolute power over the slave. He may work him, flog him, hire him out, sell him, and, in certain contingencies, *kill* him, with perfect impunity. The slave is a human being, divested of all rights—reduced to the level of a brute—a mere "chattel" in the eye of the law—placed beyond the circle of human brotherhood—cut off from his kind—his name, which the "recording angel" may have enrolled in heaven, among the blest, is impiously inserted in a *master's ledger*, with horses, sheep and swine.<sup>171</sup>

Douglass also described the singing of slaves, observing that their songs had "tones loud, long, and deep: they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish.

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<sup>169</sup> Bivins, *Spirits Rejoice!*, 67-68.

<sup>170</sup> Mary Lou Williams, untitled essay, *Mary Lou Williams Collection*.

<sup>171</sup> Frederick Douglass, "Lecture on Slavery, No.1," *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, edited by Philip Foner, (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 166.

Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.”<sup>172</sup>

For cultural theorist Fred Moten, these early expressions were aesthetic responses to experiences marked by suffering and resistance. His theory about the origins of African American vocality reflects on the origins in the historical reporting of Douglass a century before. He contends that “Where shriek turns speech turns song – remote from the impossible comfort of origin – lies the trace of our descent – the “performative essence of Blackness (or perhaps less controversially, the essence of Black performance).”<sup>173</sup>

Tracing the origins of blackness from the scream, to the word, to the song, the spiritual typically used Christian theological themes like those found in European hymns. However, there were coded words and concepts in the text that required some reading “between the lines.” For example, by substituting the word “slave-master” for “Satan,” “freedom” for “God,” and “death” for “gwine home,” what on the surface appears to be an existential Christian dilemma yields way to a different kind of dilemma, aroused not by theology, but by the recognition of suffering under enslavement.

By the end of the nineteenth century slaves thought of themselves as the oppressed Israelites suffering under their cruel Egyptian slave masters, held in bondage by slavery and desperate to get to Canaan, the land of freedom. In 1939, John Lovell wrote that “the slave took a

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<sup>172</sup> Fredrick Douglass, “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave,” from *The Classic Slave Narrative*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., (New York: Mentor Books, 1987), 262.

<sup>173</sup> Moten, 16.

good look at this world and told what he saw.”<sup>174</sup> Lovell’s “true interpretation” of the texts of spirituals included the observation that they were expressions of obsessions with freedom, justice, and with plans for achieving them. He concluded that a person who mistreated a slave was characterized as “Satan” while anyone who was kind to a slave was considered as “King Jesus.” “Babylon” and “winter” were terms for slavery itself, while “hell” referred to being sold further down south. “Jordan” represented the first step towards freedom, which was “heaven.”

In illuminating the content of spirituals, writers in the early twentieth century began focusing on historical views of black American music, recognizing that these songs told the history of black Americans. As the editor of *Negro Slave Songs in the United States*, Miles Mark Fisher recognized Negro spirituals as historical documents “from the Negro people,” whose most important quality was their use of song to tell the history of their people. Sidney Grew observed in 1933 that “if Negro music is the American folksong,” then “the history of America is the history of the slave.”<sup>175</sup> Other observers like Alberta Williams, for example, drew parallels between the music of the slaves and that of native Americans, neither of whom had produced a

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<sup>174</sup> John Lovell, “The Social Implication of the Negro Spiritual,” *Journal of Negro Education* VIII, (October, 1939): 636-43, In *Negro Slave Songs in the United State*, Miles Mark Fischer, ed., 2nd ed., (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968).

<sup>175</sup> Grew, Sidney Grew, “Random Notes on the Spirituals,” *Music and Letters* XVI, (April, 1933): 105, In *Negro Slave Songs in the United States*, Miles Mark Fischer, ed., 2nd ed., (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968).

substantial body of official historical documents, but whose music had preserved some records of their past.<sup>176</sup>

Perhaps the Negro spiritual “O Yes, Lord,” shown in Example. 1, illustrates that spirituals were certainly historical records, and it illuminates the process of Moten’s theory of how “shriek turns speech turns song.” “O Yes, Lord” is preserved from 1832, found at the Port Royal Islands, Virginia. Fisher claimed that the creator of “O Yes, Lord” was a freed slave on his way by ship to Liberia in 1832, under the auspices of the Maryland State Colonization Society. It was the duty of the Society, as stated in their articles of incorporation, to relocate freed African American slaves, as well as those that in the future would become free, to the colony of Liberia, in Africa.<sup>177</sup> During the voyage, the ex-slave kept hearing some of his fellow travelers singing about their home being in the wilderness, and he responded that he knew he was going home. He was headed for freedom in Africa, convinced by Satan that the civil rights sought by black Americans would never come to pass. According to Fisher, such life experiences formed the inspiration for the content of the majority of spirituals.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Alberta Williams, “A Race History Told in Songs,” *World Review* IV, (February, 1927): 30, “The Soul of a Race,” *Music and Youth* II, (January, 1927): 30, In *Negro Slave Songs in the United State*, Miles Mark Fischer, ed., 2nd ed., (New York: Russell and Russel, 1968): 24-51.

<sup>177</sup> Maryland State Colonization Society, “An Act to Incorporate the Maryland State Colonization Society,” *Hathi Trust Digital Library*, (Baltimore, MD: 183?), accessed June 11, 2016, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t6b27zw9g;view=1up;seq=3>

<sup>178</sup> Miles Mark Fisher, *Negro Slave Songs in the United States*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1953), 114-115.

As songs that were often improvisations handed down through oral tradition from generation to generation, the texts of each spiritual certainly were subjected to changes over time. The version of “O Yes, Lord” in Figure 5, is the form of the spiritual that has survived. Like most of the spirituals that survive in written form, there are usually no accompanying melodic records.

**Figure 5 Text of the early Negro spiritual “O Yes, Lord”<sup>179</sup>**

Old Satan *told* [tell] me to my face,  
O yes, Lord,  
De God I seek *I never find*,  
O yes, Lord.  
True believer, I know *when* I gwine home,  
True believer, I know when I gwine home,  
True believer, I know when I gwine home,  
I been afraid to die.

Christian references like these in spirituals were studied by V.F. Calverton, who wrote in 1940 that more than the ordinary Christian enthusiasm was found in Negro spirituals. They are not mere religious hymns written or recited to sweeten the service or improve the ritual. They are the aching, poignant cry of an entire people.” In this regard, Williams’ sacred works certainly were within the tradition of black music, renewing and recreating the function and historical value of the Negro spiritual, which as I have pointed out, was probably the main inspirational form that Williams drew on. As a post-modern champion for the widely ignored and forgotten history of African Americans, Williams voluntarily sought to embrace the spiritual, and the past

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 115.



it represented by reacquainting Americans, both black and white, with the historical suffering that had created it.

As the following text in Figure 6, from Williams' contemporary spiritual "People in Trouble," from *Mary Lou's Mass* illustrates, twentieth century suffering and hope still dominated the subjective content of the text, echoing nineteenth century pleas like those in "Oh, Yes, Lord."

**Figure 6 Text to "People in Trouble," from *Mary Lou's Mass*<sup>180</sup>**

Give us peace, O Lord. Send us peace, O Lord.  
People in trouble. Children in pain.  
Too weak to care. Too mean to share.  
Worked so hard trying to find a brother.  
Became impatient; now we hate each other.  
Oh God, come to our aid; make haste to help us.  
Oh, God, if you will, you can cure us.  
Oh, Jesus, who has loved us so much, have pity on us.  
For we believe; increase our faith.  
You are the resurrection and the life.  
Save us Jesus, before we perish. (text by Mary Lou Williams)

A subtle yet important facet of Williams' sacred music is that the familiar "entertainment value" in secular jazz, found in abundance in her earlier jazz work, is not present in her religious music. Traditionally, for African Americans, the concept of "entertainment" was rooted in negative expressions of sexuality and minstrelsy, which assaulted the dignity of black culture in America. This explains why conservative blacks had always associated blues and jazz with illicit sex, vice, and immoral behavior. These were qualities that were used to promote blues singers in

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<sup>180</sup> Mary Lou Williams, "People in Trouble," *Mary Lou's Mass*, liner notes, CD re-issue, (Washington DC: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 2005), 22.

the 1920s, for example.<sup>181</sup> These qualities, in effect, helped to maintain the control of white supremacy over non-whites, by reinforcing negative stereotypes about blacks in society.

But there are no such preoccupations in *Mass*, for example, as you become a witness to the pleas for mercy of the Kyrie (Lord Have Mercy), or the suffering and supplications addressed to the “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” in the Agnus Dei.

#### **4.1 Disembodied Jazz**

By 1954, Williams tried to distance herself from her past identity as a jazz performer, in which entertainment value had controlled the production of popular music. The record companies, agents and nightclub owners for whom she worked had all routinely exploited the profits that could be harvested from both Williams’ live and studio performances. She had become an expert herself at exploiting the commercial side of swing dance music with the *Clouds of Joy* in the 1930s. Indeed, it made her professional reputation in jazz as a performer, composer, and arranger. But in the end, the physical, emotional, spiritual, and economic ravages of providing entertainment music for profiteers became an important factor influencing her desire to break away from performing.

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<sup>181</sup> These qualities were also part of the backlash leveled at the Counter-Culture movement in the sixties and seventies, which similarly derided adherents for immorality, sexual promiscuity, drug use, and other generally anti-establishment values.

Having rejected the notion of music as entertainment, Williams came to define the central mission of her music as the affirmation, documentation, and expression of the African American experience. An interesting notion about black identity is posed by the disappearance of entertainment values from her music. Without the intent to entertain, what remains? Veering away from entertainment values seems to remove the importance of the performer in favor of the disembodied sound. Thus, a disconnect with the visual aspect of performativity suggests a “virtual” absence of the performer. This idea recalls medieval musical practices in which Italian nuns, for example, could be heard playing and singing, as Alford describes it, but due to the prejudice against their “feminine corporeality,” were not permitted to be seen:

While the Italians were heard, they were not seen: a screen or grate placed between the musician and her audience made her invisible to the public eye. The screening of the nuns served the purpose of removing the “body” element of a woman making music in church as much as was possible, resulting in disembodied choral and instrumental music.<sup>182</sup>

As Williams continued to perform in churches and cathedrals throughout the seventies, she knew that putting her black body at the front of the altar would be the strongest statement on behalf of black Catholics she could make to those within, and outside of the Catholic Church who harbored resentments against women or African Americans.

I believe she also put herself out there as an African American artist to appeal to those who, perhaps were only interested in her as a jazz performer. But she took advantage of this segment of her audience to achieve success in another layer of her “mission,” that of educating the public about jazz. This activity was embedded into her crusade to save jazz.

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<sup>182</sup> Alford, *Able Fairy*, 19.

## 4.2 Embodied Jazz

It is necessary to briefly go back to Ronald Radano, who was an early observer on black music as a racial expression delivered through the black body. The sound of black music, for him, was secondary to its embodiment of black “flesh:”

The feel of the body, the sensation of flesh, is never very far from the sound of black music. This quality of embodiment—of animated sound waves working affectively to link person to person—sits at the very heart of its aesthetic value. Listeners often describe U.S. Black music as if there were a common sentience, or even a human presence, in its audible makeup.<sup>183</sup>

Such thoughts are very sympathetic with the “fleshiness” embodied in the physical “performance” by the black body in jazz.

Jazz scholar Guthrie Ramsey takes Radano’s focus on black “flesh” further, studying not the flesh, but the “construction” of historical intellectual responses to black music within a Western culture steeped in the physical biases that have historically fueled ideas of racial difference. Ramsey locates these responses on a continuum between literary production, which sits at the top of Western artistic respectability, and athletic production, which lies at the bottom:

The physical labor associated with the legacies of slavery, sharecropping, and the institutionalization of a Black service class continues to shape how Black achievements in other spheres are interpreted. Toiling Black bodies became distanced from associations with intellectual pursuits. Musical ability seems to occupy a middle ground in this configuration. It requires a combination of physical and intellectual activity.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Ronald Radano, “The Sound of Racial Feeling,” *Daedalus, the Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences*, Vol. 142, No. 4, (Fall 2013), 126.

<sup>184</sup> Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., *The Amazing Bud Powell: Black Genius, Jazz History, and the Challenge of Bebop*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press and Chicago, IL: Center for Black Music Research, 2013), 88.

Both Radano and Ramsey entertain ideas that are representative examples of a “visual” basis for constructing black identity. So, after seeing black skin, what about the sound? For Radano, the “sound” of black music was just an alternate modality for arriving at “blackness,” in visual terms, the black body.

In her essay, “Blackness Beyond Witness,” philosopher Devonya Havis attacks this “visual bias” of Western philosophy, claiming that the visual obscures the aural, the “sonic” aspect of philosophy, which represents one of the most important expressions of the African American experience, i.e. the sounds of jazz and African American music. Havis’ work tries to move philosophy “from sight to sound and from visual witnessing to sound-based wit(h)ness to illustrate the implications of sound as a form of political resistance.”<sup>185</sup>

Havis asserts that a visual bias resides in the “speaking” face, the “manifestation of which is already discourse. The face to face both announces a society, and permits the maintaining of a separated I. The face is a living presence; it is expression.”<sup>186</sup> By exploring a concept of “auditory identity” as an alternative way to establish Lévinasian ethical relationships, Havis asserts that a notion of “black vernacular phenomena as philosophical intervention” can move us beyond visual modes to a modality of sound as an ethical intervention in the status quo, which Havis has defined as “visual witnessing.”<sup>187</sup> Havis, however, moves in the opposite direction,

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<sup>185</sup> Devonya N. Havis, “Blackness Beyond Witness: Black Vernacular Phenomena and Auditory Identity,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, Vol. 35, No.7, (2009): 748.

<sup>186</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Duquesne Studies series (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1994), 66-67.

<sup>187</sup> Havis, “Blackness Beyond Witness,” 748.

away from “sight” towards “sound,” away from “visual witnessing” towards “sound-based witnessing,” where sound can offer an “alternative framework for social change . . . as a form of political resistance.”<sup>188</sup> This sonic way of witnessing lies at the core of jazz’s affective mission, the expression of suffering.

Havis recalls Ellison’s theory on African American responses to enslavement, in which slaves created alternate “selves” using sound. Composers like Williams do this every day in the practice of musical creation. Ellison wrote “A slave was, to the extent that he was a musician, one who realized himself in the world of sound. For the art – the blues, the spirituals, the jazz, the dance – was what we had in place of freedom.”<sup>189</sup> In his book *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy adds the observation that the slave’s realization of an alternate identity in Ellison’s “world of sound” was also underpinned by a forced illiteracy which repressed the “power of language” in the expression of African American experience.<sup>190</sup>

The power and significance of music within the black Atlantic have grown in inverse proportion to the limited expressive power of language. It is important to remember that the slaves’ access to literacy was often denied on pain of death and only a few cultural opportunities were offered as a surrogate for the other forms of individual autonomy denied by life on the plantations and in the barracoons. Music becomes vital at the point at which linguistic and semantic indeterminacy/polyphony arise amidst the protracted battle between masters, mistresses, and slaves.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 747.

<sup>189</sup> Ralph Ellison, “The Blues,” review of Amiri Baraka, *Blues People*, in *New York Review of Books*, Vol.1, No.12, (February 6, 1964), 856.

<sup>190</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 74.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

Black music, then, represents a discursive space for the formation of alternate personal and collective black identity. Since ethical relationships are conducted through inter-personal relations, discursive sound becomes the key for action, because as Havis notes, “speaking,” i.e. sound, seeks a response and demands the responsibility to engage with the Other:

. . . continually evoking the politicized ethical demand via the dynamism of action. . in the vernacular group. . . The strength of the vernacular community is repeatedly drawn from ever shifting, stylized *performative utterance(s)* continually evoking the politicized ethical demand via the dynamism of action and comeback supported in the sociability of the vernacular group.<sup>192</sup>

The “performative utterances” in *Mary Lou’s Mass*, for example, would include not just musical sounds, but textual elements and sounds as well. In “One,” from *Mary Lou’s Mass*, the text, in Figure 7, provides an overview of the types of references that emerge regarding the principal obligations, both political and ethical, of discursive dialogue with the racial status quo. These references come under the general sentiment of moving away from racial division and conflict, by calling for a world that could be “as one” if only “we all could love one another.” Fr. O’Brien described the themes within “One” as “unity and peace.”<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Havis, 750.

<sup>193</sup> Rev. Peter O’Brien, S.J., liner notes, “One” from *Mary Lou’s Mass*, (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 2005), 23. Audio CD.

Figure 7 Text of “One,” from *Mary Lou’s Mass*<sup>194</sup>

If we all could love one another, all the world would be as one.  
Just take time to love one another; all the world would be as one.  
Black man, white man working together, no more fighting to be done.  
Yellow, red man dancing together: yes, the world would be as one.  
Black man, white man, red man, and yellow: yes, the world well be as one.  
Could be, must be, will be together. Yes, the world will be as one.

(Text by Leon Thomas)

The text reflects the social consciousness of the sixties, an auditory discourse between instruments, voices and the audience, to come together as a community seeking ways to effect social change. Havis explains this process of community formation through sound:

Through sound, the community comes into existence – yet it is a coming into existence that is negotiated in the exchange of sound. Hence, to the extent that one is a musician – capable of taking up ethical and political obligations in the context of performing himself or herself through sound – one becomes more than a slave. One is located within a unique community that invents itself and as a grouping of co-equals, participates in its members’ dynamic creation of selves.<sup>195</sup>

For Williams, the concept of community was synonymous with jazz. The community, she believed, was brought together through jazz by the African American experience, and this sense of identity manifested itself in black music through the “spiritual feeling in the blues.” According to Williams’ manager, Rev. Peter O’Brien, S.J., a Jesuit priest, collaborator, and confidant, this was a “big thing” with her: “Community is the word she used all the time in relation to jazz and

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<sup>194</sup> Leon Thomas, lyrics, “One,” *Mary Lou’s Mass*.

<sup>195</sup> Havis, 749.



to what she called ‘the spiritual feeling in the blues that arises out of suffering.’ That was a big thing with her. Some people don’t like this. But to her, that’s where the depth came from.”<sup>196</sup>

That the depth of her music came from bearing witness to black American suffering perhaps accounts, in part, for the obscurity of her religious works. It also reflects an atmosphere among some critics that reflected an ignorance, or denial of the African American experience, perhaps. Williams explained in an unnamed essay that it was “suffering at its origin that gives jazz the deep spiritual feeling and power that is healing to the soul.”<sup>197</sup> Spiritual feeling and healing are two affective markers that inhabit her work, but are qualities that are difficult to identify within a score.

The fifties and early sixties was still the early era of scholarly research on jazz, led by white writers like Gunther Schuller who brought out Western classical theory to explain jazz. A popular theory with them on the origins of jazz was the notion of a long term “cross-fertilization” process between European and African musical influences, which was not exactly aligned with Williams’ views. Black scholars, however, such as Baraka, Ellison, or Floyd tended to approach jazz analysis from the subjective, affective viewpoint of the African American experience. This view recognized a North American black music, born and bred by African Americans in the United States. This view aligned precisely with Williams’ view and experiences as a black musician and creator.

Beginning with the spiritual, Williams traced the early development of black vernacular in the following quote from her essay “Has the Black American Musician Lost His Creativeness

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<sup>196</sup> Rev. Peter O’Brien, S.J., in Dahl, 332.

<sup>197</sup> Mary Lou Williams, untitled essay, undated, Personal Papers, *Mary Lou Williams Collection*.

and Heritage in Jazz?” Out of the many Williams essays on black music, it is among her clearest statements on the origins and subjective content of black music in America:

From suffering came our Negro Spirituals, songs of sorrow. The main origins of Jazz are the Spirituals. Because of our deep religious background, we American Negroes were able to mix sentiments of joy and sorrow with rhythms that reach deep enough into the inner self to give expression to outcries of sincere hope. . . Hope is the underlining thing though, the basic feeling, the deep-rooted desire which the music expresses.<sup>198</sup>

### 4.3 “Black Christ of the Andes”

In 1962, Williams composed and premiered “St. Martin de Porres: Black Christ of the Andes,” an a cappella work for SATB chorus with a brief piano accompaniment. It remains perhaps her most complex modern jazz choral work.<sup>199</sup> It was the first published piece in a Catholic liturgical jazz style that would ultimately lead to the production of three Masses, and a dance suite, *Mary Lou’s Mass*, based on Williams’ third Mass, *Music for Peace*.<sup>200</sup> This would bring increased exposure to Williams’ liturgical jazz work, which reflected the results of the international vernacularization of Catholicism - the possibilities for all populations to understand the Catholic liturgy, in their own language. This began the post-Vatican II expansion of

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<sup>198</sup> Williams, “Has the Black American Musician Lost his Creativeness and Heritage in Jazz?,” *Mary Lou Williams Collection*.

<sup>199</sup> Wilson, “Jazz: From Mind to Heart, to Fingers,” 34.

<sup>200</sup> Mary Lou Williams, *Mary Lou’s Mass*, (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 2005), Audio CD.

Catholicism. It was based on the inclusion of more indigenous populations from the African continent, Central and South America, East Asia, and China.<sup>201</sup>

Williams was incorporating jazz vocal techniques like scatting, pitch-bending and glissando to complement the altered fifths and ninths of bop harmony into the score of “Black Christ of the Andes.” It was the showcasing of these techniques in the B Section, with the piano underpinning the vocals, which helped to give the work a kind of status as “jazz tune.” A *New York Times* review of its first New York performance, by John S. Wilson, included a concise analysis of the work by Williams herself, in which she gives a clear blueprint of the piece. Wilson reported the event in the hope, it seems, of explaining Williams’ unusual compositional goals in the piece:

She has written what she calls a “modern jazz hymn” - *St. Martin de Porres*, dedicated to a recently canonized Negro saint. “The tune itself is a jazz tune, but it’s arranged like a spiritual. The religious element is in the words, which were written by Father Anthony Woods, and in the arrangement,” she explained.<sup>202</sup>

So, the religious elements were, most importantly, the intelligibility of the religious text, and secondly, the arrangement, which was based on the call and response format of the spiritual. The spiritual, it should be remembered, had achieved the status of a “Sacred Short Form” in the field of choral composition, alongside the Motet, the Chorale/Hymn, the Verse Anthem and the

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<sup>201</sup> Graham Hill, “A Conversation with Lamin Sanneh on World Christianity, Christian-Muslim Relations, & Translating the Christian Message,” *The Global Church Project*, (May 2, 2016) , accessed June 5, 2019, <https://theglobalchurchproject.com/conversation-lamin-sanneh-world-christianity-islam-mission-translation-cultural-renewal/>

<sup>202</sup> Wilson, “Jazz: From Mind to Heart,” 34.

Carol.<sup>203</sup> Next, in Chapter Five, *Mass* is explored in detail through selected music analysis that engages the question – is it or isn't it jazz?

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<sup>203</sup> Robert Stephan Hines, *Choral Composition: A Handbook for Composers, Arrangers, Conductors and Singers*, (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 2001), 119.

## 5.0 *Mass*: Jazz, or Long and Drawn Out, Like a Symphony?

Musically, “Black Christ of the Andes” seems more like a personal jazz statement than an empathetic background for religious content about a black saint. It belongs, I would argue, more to the pre-liturgical style Williams had developed through jazz performance, than to the more mature liturgical style of *Mass*, which sought not to merely perform, but to use performance as a means of advancing post-Vatican II Catholic theology, i.e. redemptive suffering and joy in the resurrection. Additionally, the memorialization of the African American experience within Williams’ *Masses* through the variety of jazz styles represented in the ten independent movements in *Mass* show how the movements are supported by one of many jazz genres in black music history.

It is significant that in “Black Christ,” Williams identified a primary religious element, the prominence of the text, as the most important goal in the piece.<sup>204</sup> She identified with the traditional views of the Church, which sought to make the meaning of the sacred texts subservient to the music. But Williams also identified a second religious element in “Black

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<sup>204</sup> This view has also been shared by performers of religious music. During a personal observation of a post-performance Q&A session with *Hilliard Ensemble* at Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, PA, in October 2009, the counter-tenor Jamie Hilliard, whose performances of fifteenth-century sacred Catholic vocal polyphony with his *Hilliard Ensemble* are legendary, was asked by an audience member during a post-concert Q&A session to explain what it was that produced such deep religious feeling in their music. He replied that it didn’t come from the music, per say, but that it came solely from the text.

Christ.” It is what she referred to in a *New York Times* interview as “the arrangement” of the piece, which is based on the call and response of the Negro spiritual.<sup>205</sup>

Clearly, the use of call and response was intended to evoke not just the Negro spiritual, but to show common ground with the antiphonal devices of European Gregorian chant. And like European religious composers had done since the Renaissance, Williams recycled original material from one work to another. For example, Williams’ Credo from *Mass* wound up in later works, *Music for Peace* and *Mary Lou’s Mass*. Sometimes, she moved secular and sacred material from one domain to the other. Specifically, in *Mass*, she integrated melodic fragments both from a nineteenth century Negro spiritual as well as a secular tune from the twentieth century into two of the movements from the Ordinary. As I show in my analysis, Williams seems to have incorporated a fragment of the opening of the traditional spiritual “Wade in the Water” for the Kyrie, which had been a huge success in 1966 for Chicago-based African American jazz pianist Ramsey Lewis. It is an interesting roundabout journey from sacred Negro spiritual to pop-jazz hit, and back to a sacred theme in a Kyrie Eleison. A second example of domain switching occurs in the opening measures of Agnus Dei, in which she incorporates the opening chord progression, highlighted by major ninths, from the hit movie theme by David Raskin, “Laura.”

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<sup>205</sup> Hines, *Choral Composition*, 119.

## 5.1 Performing Catholicism

We know Williams had been actively pursuing a commission for a Mass she wanted to present at the Vatican since 1963, when she met the Bishop of Pittsburgh, John J. Wright, whom she considered an inside connection to the Pope, Paul VI.<sup>206</sup> In 1964, Bishop Wright hired Williams to teach jazz at the all-female Seton Hill High School, a school run by the Pittsburgh Diocese. It was Wright who encouraged Williams to compose a Mass, and who had approved the project to be sung during a Mass service at St. Paul Cathedral in Pittsburgh. The service was to feature a vernacular Mass sung by a thousand voices in the main knave of the cathedral, but like so many other grandiose plans in the arts, this plan was never fully realized.<sup>207</sup>

*Mass* was first sung on June 10, 1967, not by a thousand voices in the main knave, but in a basement chapel, by thirteen high school girls from Williams' Seton Hill jazz class, led by Williams at the piano. Nevertheless, the performance of *Mass* was a concerted effort by the Bishop and the Diocese to use Williams' music to help promote the reforms set in place by Vatican II. A vernacular jazz Mass by Williams would represent a "new" musical movement within Catholicism, despite Church officials who worried about how far composers might go to

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<sup>206</sup> Wright was a controversial figure who was entirely comfortable in being both a social liberal who supported the civil rights movement and was against the Vietnam war, for example, and being a theological conservative who was opposed, for example, to birth control, married priests, and the ordination of women as priests.

<sup>207</sup> "Mary Lou Williams Founds the Pittsburgh Jazz Festival at the Civic Arena 1964," Pittsburgh Jazz Festival, *Pittsburgh Music History*, accessed June 16, 2019, <https://sites.google.com/site/pittsburghmusichistory/music-festivals/pittsburgh-jazz-festival>

increase access to the liturgy.<sup>208</sup> One of the specific concerns of church leaders about music had been that the meaning of the liturgical texts was often obscured by the complexity of the Latin language, first of all, which made the texts hard to understand. Secondly, polyphony, which ironically, had traditionally been one of the Church's favored musical practices was a problem as well. When five vocal parts, for example, sang the same phrases of text in different rhythms as is common in polyphonic choral music, the text being sung could be hard to follow. In *Mass*, Williams substituted the complicated polyphony and extended vocal techniques of "Black Christ of the Andes" with much simpler unison melodies over piano accompaniment, thus improving accessibility to the sacred texts of the Mass.

While scores for most of the movements in *Mass* exist, a low-grade consumer cassette recording of the music made by Williams is the only complete original audio of the work that exists. The poor sound quality of the piano and the recording, along with the untrained voices of the young choir, were quite obviously below the professional standards of a composer like Williams. This may explain her disappointment with *Mass*, which was reported by John S. Wilson in a *New York Times* piece. He wrote, "Miss Williams dismisses it as being "like the kind of things they have in churches - it was long and drawn out, like a symphony."<sup>209</sup> Perhaps she felt that her music, not the liturgy, was the main focus of the Mass. It might be possible that what she felt was "long and drawn out" about *Mass* were the challenges of setting the rather lengthy texts of the Gloria and Credo, both of which are very difficult creative challenges that Catholic composers have historically grappled with. As a composer, the story-telling length of those texts,

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<sup>208</sup> Kernodle, *Soul on Soul*, 219.

<sup>209</sup> Wilson, "Mary Lou Takes Her Jazz Mass to Church," 34.



especially, calls for a more through-composed approach to composition due to the necessity of using a conversational style of phrasing which preserves the meaning of the words.

Williams claimed she discarded *Mass* because it wasn't jazz. Perhaps this is why she told the *New York Times* that even though she felt that her *Mass* was not really jazz, she referred to it in the press as jazz in order to help save jazz - perhaps by giving jazz the publicity it would receive by the public exposure it would have gotten had she said that it *was* jazz. But as I show here, *Mass* was indeed a jazz work, and was neither "long" nor "drawn out like a symphony." In fact, based on the recording Williams made of it, the *Mass* only runs for a total of about twenty-five minutes. Unlike the usual forty-plus minute, three movement symphony, *Mass* consists of ten discreet movements, most of which are only minutes in length.

Another explanation for her disappointment with *Mass* could be that she felt a jazz work should contain improvisation, and she had not included improvisational sections in the work. She most likely agreed with the thought that doing so might detract attention from the sacred texts. Because of this, as well as a consideration of the untrained voices usually encountered in the average Catholic congregation, she abandoned the complex choral style of writing she put forth in "Black Christ" for a much less dense and simple single line unison melodic. Despite such precautions, she discarded *Mass* after the 1967 St. Paul Cathedral performance.

At the time she wrote *Mass*, Williams was reluctant to abandon the traditional and modernist jazz styles that had driven her music and career up to that point. Her work had always been conceived in a traditional acoustic jazz style that paid homage to the four great eras of jazz which she considered the most important musical achievements of African Americans – the Negro spiritual, ragtime, Kansas City swing, and modern jazz (bebop). For example, *Kyrie* is drawn from the Negro spiritual and twelve-bar blues. *Gloria* expresses a sophisticated up-tempo

modern jazz feeling, especially highlighting harmonic devices like the tritone substitution. Credo is built on the ragtime compositional device, the "Spanish tinge," which is rhythmically represented by 3-3-2. Sanctus embraces the vocal jazz ballad of the twentieth century, while accessing the blues of the African American rural work song. Agnus Dei continues the ballad style, but instead of the rural, it evokes the harmonic and rhythmic complexity of modern, urban jazz.

Not until her work on *Music for Peace* in 1969, did she come to realize that in order to reach a larger audience for her music and message, it would be necessary to appeal to younger audiences that were turning to new forms of black music and changes in orchestration brought by technology, especially in the form of electric instruments. In *Music for Peace*, and later *Mary Lou's Mass*, she was able to incorporate electric instruments and contemporary ideas from new genres like soul, rock and pop. Thus, she was able to represent the history of African American music in her works that reflected not only the music of earlier periods of jazz and blues, but modern jazz, and contemporary 'sixties styles as well. But, as I argue here, the foundation for that expansion and accomplishment was laid down in the movements of her first Mass setting, *Mass* (1967), in which she pays tribute to the importance of African American music.

I would argue, based on Williams' assessment of the origins of jazz in suffering, that the expression of suffering in jazz can take the form of any descriptors of African American music. Jazz as an aesthetic response to slavery gives fresh understanding of black vernacular. For example, subjective responses to slavery, including the sorrow and joy of the spiritual, blue notes, and blues tonality constitute some of the primary affective qualities of jazz. They go to the core of the subjective experiences of African Americans, specifically experiences that are historically grounded in physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering. In expressing these affective

qualities Williams draws on the history of jazz and black music history, thus engaging with the much longer history of the African American experience expresses these affective qualities within blues techniques like syncopation and call and response, with elements taken from modern jazz, like tritone substitutions, walking bass lines, and extended dominant harmonies.

While the core of subjective qualities like the expression of suffering, may appear to be indistinguishable from “objective” Eurocentric qualities in music, like rhythm, form, melody and harmony, they are distinctively associated with African American common musical practice and retain an emotional, subjective distinction from non-African American musical practices. It was Amiri Baraka who long ago concluded that the techniques of European classical music could be applied by jazz musicians, for example, but only if the process would not subject, in his words, “the philosophy of Negro music to the less indigenously personal attitudes of European-derived music.” Baraka knew that it was the particular “emotional and philosophical attitudes” of each that differentiated African American-derived from European-derived music. Baraka proposed that the emotional significance of black music originated in its cultural distance, its “separation” from the “emotions and attitudes” of Western classical music.<sup>210</sup> The term affective refers to the subjective, emotional qualities and attitudes of African American music, which Moten described as the African American aesthetic response to tyranny under slavery - the “performative essence of blackness.”<sup>211</sup>

This affective core of African American music is too often overlooked in jazz scholarship in favor of the study of jazz’s European outward qualities and expressions, like those particular

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<sup>210</sup> Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 230.

<sup>211</sup> Moten, 16.

to both theory and performance. In fact, getting the word out about the affective qualities of jazz has been a highly significant motivator in the conception of this project. Some scholars who have looked at this area include musicologist Gayle Murchison, whose 2002 study of Williams' "Black Christ of the Andes" recognized the importance of studying the subjective as well as the objective qualities in black music. As Murchison observed, Williams felt that the affective, emotional qualities expressed in jazz constituted the sources of jazz's spirituality. For Williams, jazz was rooted in the African American experience of suffering, and its roots had great spiritual content, making it appropriate as the setting for religious music, including Masses. Williams had suggested that spirituals served as source material for her improvisations,<sup>212</sup> once telling *Black Perspectives in Music*: "I can play the old-fashioned spiritual and I can 'bop' on top of it."<sup>213</sup> Grounded in notions of jazz as sacred music, Murchison's musical analysis is insightful, based not only on jazz's affective qualities but on Western analysis as well. Her study carefully tries to balance the objective with equal attention to the affective and spiritual side of Williams that inhabits "Black Christ of the Andes."

Music analyses of selections from *Mass* are included within this study to advance an argument for two key elements in Williams' liturgical writing. The first is a recognition and discussion of what she termed the "spiritual feeling in the blues" as the main affective quality in her music. Secondly, my analysis proposes that a concerted effort was made by Williams to preserve black American music through her incorporation of important black musical

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<sup>212</sup> Murchison, 621.

<sup>213</sup> D. Antoinette Handy, "Conversation with Mary Lou Williams: First Lady of the Jazz Keyboard," *Black Perspectives in Music* 8, No. 2 (1980): 202.

innovations, for example, the spiritual's call and response technique, blue notes and references to black vernacular musical forms like bebop, swing, the blues, and even ragtime. This supports a view of the work as a virtual anthology of black American music. Like the anthologies *Slave Songs of the United States*,<sup>214</sup> and *Anthology of Art Songs by Black American Composers*,<sup>215</sup> *Mass* represents a compelling and concentrated resource for the study of both the oral and the written traditions of African American music.

*Mass* is an elaborate North American example of diasporic music in which Williams sublates the long and arduous history of African Americans into one multi-movement form. It becomes a collection of various genres of black American music, thus providing a more accessible, comprehensive and concise view of black music history and the African American experience than might be possible within a work that only uses one genre, in a particular song, for example. This sublation gives a heightened measure of cultural agency to the black experience in the Americas.

The similarities of Williams' extended sacred works like *Mass*, for example, to Ellington's extended jazz works like *Black, Brown and Beige*, *Creole Rhapsody*, and *A Drum is a Woman*, lie in their mutual desire to document the African American experience. Ellington discussed the genesis of these works in an interview for *Rhythm March* in 1931, around the time

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<sup>214</sup> *Slave Songs of the United States*, edited by William Allen, Lucy Kim Garrisoned, and Charles Pickard Ware, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 2011), 1st ed., ( New York: A. Simpson & Co., 1867).

<sup>215</sup> *Anthology of Art Songs by Black American Composers*, compiled by Willis C. Patterson, (New York: Edward B. Marks Music Company, Hal Leonard Corporation, 1977).

he produced *Creole Rhapsody*. Maintaining that black American music was the “American medium,” Ellington, as well as Williams, described jazz as having its origins in racial suffering during enslavement. Williams, along with Ellington and future scholars like Fred Moten, saw jazz as an aesthetic response to the tyranny of slavery. Like Williams, he saw jazz not as entertainment, or music for dancing, but as the soul of African American culture.<sup>216</sup>

Though the intent here is not a comprehensive formal musical examination, the scope and depth of the following seeks to support a detailed consideration of Williams’ liturgical jazz as a vehicle for the affective expression of suffering, blackness and the documentation of African American music history. As composer, jazz scholar and musical preservationist, Williams worked her way through the history of black music, incorporating into her music the characteristic musical elements from the major historical achievements of black music as she herself characterized them: the Negro spiritual, ragtime, Kansas City swing and bebop. I have adhered to the composer’s own concept of these four streams in black music history to catalogue her use of elements from all four, considering her choices based on their exceptional character and musicality, as well as their historical importance. These elements are identified in my musical analysis as the “spiritual feeling in the blues.”

*Mass* was not the first Catholic mass to use jazz, but it stands as a work in which modern jazz was fully integrated into Catholic sacred music. Additionally, with *Mass*, Williams became the first known female to write a Catholic Mass, challenging the gender norms of Catholicism during the 1960s. Shortly before she became known for her first published religious work,

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<sup>216</sup> Duke Ellington, “The Duke Steps Out,” *Rhythm*, (March ,1931), 20–22.

“Black Christ of the Andes,” a small group of male black clergy and jazz composers had pioneered the liturgical jazz genre beginning in the late 1950s with varying combinations of gospel, Gregorian chant, blues, spirituals, jazz and other black vernacular forms.<sup>217</sup>

Many of the compositional techniques employed in Williams’ masses were worked out in her previous composition, “Black Christ,” which I briefly discussed in Chapter Four. These include vocal techniques taken from bebop, like glissando and scatting, as well as the use of bop rhythmic and extended harmonic techniques. All three Masses were written to be sung at church services. *Mass* sets a traditional set of five movements from the Ordinary, taken from the central collection of sacred theological texts on which Catholic dogma, and the Catholic celebration of the Mass are based. These are Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei. These liturgical texts are English translations of the original Latin sacred texts of the Ordinary. The text source for English translations in *Mass* were taken from the *Roman Missal* (Vatican, 1962), which is still in universal use today.<sup>218</sup>

The Kyrie is the short form name taken from the Greek “Kyrie eleison,” or “Lord have mercy.” It is the opening prayer of the people to God asking for mercy. It has a trinitarian meaning that consists of three invocations each, of (1) God the Father (Kyrie eleison), (2) God

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<sup>217</sup> Certainly, early in the liturgical jazz movement, Lutherans and Episcopalians had led organized religion in the use of loosely defined “jazz services,” that along with the more common “folk” masses, used popular tunes and vernacular instrumentation for soloists and congregational sing-alongs.

<sup>218</sup> Rev. Peter O’Brien, from personal correspondence, December 2013.

the Son (Christe eleison), and (3) God the Holy Ghost (Christe eleison).<sup>219</sup> Gloria is the short Latin form for “Gloria in excelsis Deo,” or “Glory to God in the highest.” It is a hymn of thanksgiving and praise, more of a declamation than a song. It consists of three distinct parts: (1) the song of the angels on the night of the Nativity, (2) the praise of God, and (3) the invoking of Christ.<sup>220</sup> Credo, sometimes referred to as the Creed, is actually Latin for “I believe.” It is the profession of faith which categorizes Catholic theology into three sections: (1) belief in God the Creator, (2) belief in Christ our Lord, and (3) belief in the goods of salvation.<sup>221</sup> After the Sanctus or Holy, expressions of the joyous cries of creatures, both heavenly and earthly, proclaim the glory of Christ as he enters Jerusalem preceding his Passion, shouting “Holy, holy, holy” and “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.” Ending the sequence is the Agnus Dei, or Lamb of God, the lamb as a symbol of the crucified Christ who “takes away the sins of the world” through his sacrifice, asking him to “have mercy on us.”

I have chosen to focus my musical analysis of *Mass* on these five movements from the Ordinary, since they represent a historic early use of English translations of the Latin in a vernacular Mass, the first American translations of the Catholic liturgy. In my analysis, I explore musical examples taken from the published score.<sup>222</sup> I have also had access to rough audio mixes

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<sup>219</sup> Rev. Joseph A. Jungmann, S.J., *The Mass of the Roman Rite: It's Origin and Development (Missarum Sollemnia)*, translated by Rev. Francis A. Brunner, C. SS. R., (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, Inc., 1992), 341.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 349-358.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 463.

<sup>222</sup> Mary Lou Williams, *Mass*, Cecilia Music Publishing, (Mary Lou Williams Foundation, 1967).



of the first professional recording of *Mass*, provided to me by the late director of the Mary Lou Williams Foundation, Rev. Peter O'Brien, S.J., of a recording project currently under production by the Foundation that aims to document the unrecorded sacred works of Williams, like "Elijah" and Masses one and two.

Although *Mass* as a performance work, did not survive the summer of 1967, Credo would survive, and was included in *Music for Peace*, and *Mary Lou's Mass*. Besides the five movements from the Ordinary, there are five optional movements in *Mass*. Out of these, "Praise the Lord," "Pater Noster," "O.W.," and "Act of Contrition" were eventually included in *Mary Lou's Mass*.

## 5.2 *Mass*

Musically, *Mass* is distinguished by the creative use of bebop harmonic language. Williams draws on the timeless quality of bop's signature harmonic progressions, that some might have heard in the sixties, as the musical clichés of a heady, but bygone musical style, seem to have been resurrected in her homages to the musical achievements of composers like Thelonious Monk, Bud Powell and Dizzy Gillespie. Williams enlisted the memory of these bebop giants, sanctifying them and bop through the lens of Catholicism, hoping, perhaps, to cleanse the sinful image of the jazz scene she had internalized, that had caused her to withdraw from it for almost a decade.

As indicated in Figure 8, Kyrie uses a three-line stanza that presents an isomorphic replication of basic twelve bar blues form, which features a tertiary structure consisting of a

twice repeated “call”, followed by a third line in “response.” This corresponds to the Kyrie three-line stanza which proclaims, “Lord have mercy, Lord Have Mercy, Christ have mercy.”

Figure 8 Kyrie m.1-6

## “Kyrie (Lord Have Mercy)”

The musical score for "Kyrie (Lord Have Mercy)" is presented in two systems. The first system (measures 1-3) is marked "RUBATO" and features a choir and keyboard. The choir part has lyrics: "LORD HAVE MER - CY", "LORD, LORD, LORD, LORD HAVE", and "MER - CY". The keyboard part features a walking bass line and chords: Ebm7, Ab7, F7, Bb7, E7, Em7, A9, Ab9, and Db+. The second system (measures 4-6) continues the choir and keyboard parts. The choir part has lyrics: "MER - CY", "CHRIST HAVE MER - CY", "CHRIST HAVE MER - CY", and "CHRIST HAVE MER - CY". The keyboard part features a walking bass line and chords: C7(b9), Gb9, Bb9, C9, Db9, C7(b9), Bb7(b9), and Bb7.

Kyrie evokes the spiritual through its call and response technique, and the blues through a pentatonic tonality that highlights blue notes - flatted thirds, fifths and sevenths. A bluesy swing feel is incorporated into the piano’s quarter note walking bass line, and the lower key of Eb minor allows the melody to affect a more sorrowful and emotive tone. This affect seems to be created by the somewhat lower vocal register, that is to say, with a tessitura that is generally in the alto range, ranging from Eb above middle C to an octave above that. Interestingly, Kyrie is in

the same key as “Elijah,” probably because of the lower vocal range opportunity to create the low-range sorrowful tone of Eb minor.

An interesting example of theme borrowing occurs in Kyrie. In Figure 9, Kyrie’s melodic tones recall the blues tonality and tonal contour of the old spiritual, “Wade in the Water.” While the Kyrie melody is not an exact quote of “Wade in the Water,” there are common tonal similarities that make a comparison possible, especially highlighting the similar use of the flat third and flat seventh.

**Figure 9 Melodic comparison between “Wade in the Water” and Kyrie**

"Wade in the Water"

"Kyrie"

for the comparison, "Wade in the Water" has been transposed to match the key of "Kyrie" and note durations in "Kyrie" have been altered to allow a coherent four measure comparison

Also of interest in the Kyrie, in Figure 10, is the ascending choral glissando on the final Eb minor seventh chord at measure eleven. This is not a usual vocal technique for an ending to a piece, whether it is jazz or non-jazz, and it points to Williams’ propensity for innovation and creative braggadoccio. It interests because an upward glissando is not a common choral device, and perhaps more closely resembles an instrumental sectional upward glissando chord cluster you might consider for a big band saxophone section, for instance. In addition, asking for an ascending glissando is at the very least, certainly a bold way to ask for “mercy on our souls.”

Figure 10 Kyrie m. 7 – 11

## “Kyrie” m. 7-11

7 *Ebm<sup>9</sup>* *Ab<sup>7</sup>* *Ebm<sup>9</sup>* *B7(b<sup>9</sup>)*

CHRIST HAVE MER - CY LORD HAVE MER - CY LORD HAVE MER - CY

10 LORD HAVE MER - CY ON OUR SOULS *RIT.* *Div.*

Williams’ skill with bebop composition was developed while mentoring musicians like Monk, Dizzy, and Bud Powell, who routinely worked out their musical ideas with her in her New York apartment. She was an insightful source for the musical experimentation of the boppers. Her admiration for bebop is well stated in her own writings, as in the following characterization of bop’s beauty:

Never in the history of this music was there such phrasing of notes and beauty of sounds as in the “bop” era. The blues became a real classic when played by the bop musicians with their beautiful harmonic structures.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Mary Lou Williams, personal papers, *Mary Lou Williams Collection*.

It bears repeating that Williams' views on bebop significantly shape her music, with "blues feeling" as its central element, and modern jazz as its language.

Gloria, in Figure 11, is a full-blown modern jazz chromatic fantasy, set in motion by the rapid shifting quarter and half note rhythms and the shifting harmonic progressions in the piano. Against this, the eighth note based melodic rhythmic moves twice as fast as the quarter note pulse in the piano part. The chromatic structure of the bass part in the piano shows the characteristic bebop uses of the tritone substitute dominant in measures three, five and six.

Figure 11 Gloria m. 1-8

## “Gloria”

**Melodic rhythm**  
2:1 ratio

**Harmonic rhythm**

Choir

Key.

V Tritone Substitution

5

Choir

Key.

V Tritone Substitution

In Credo, Williams employs an important rhythmic technique routinely used by ragtime composers. Known as the “Spanish Tinge,” its origins lie in the black music of the Caribbean, Central and South America. Historically, it is derived from the more well-known Habanera rhythm, which has a characteristic rhythm pattern configured as 3-3-2. In Figure 12, a clear example of the “Tinge,” used in Scott Joplin’s ragtime hit, *The Entertainer*, outlines the 3-3-2 pattern, a characteristic rhythmic device found in many ragtime compositions. In this example, the basic note value is the sixteenth note.

Figure 12 Example of the 3-3-2 “Spanish Tinge” in Scott Joplin’s rag, “The Entertainer”<sup>224</sup>

The image displays a musical score for Scott Joplin's rag, "The Entertainer". It is divided into two sections: "Intro" and "Main Melody". Both sections are written for piano in 2/4 time, with a key signature of one flat (Bb). The "Intro" section begins with a forte (f) dynamic and features a 3-3-2 "Spanish Tinge" pattern, which is a rhythmic motif consisting of two groups of three eighth notes followed by a group of two eighth notes. The "Main Melody" section begins with a piano (p) dynamic and also features the 3-3-2 pattern. The score includes various musical notations such as eighth notes, sixteenth notes, and rests, as well as dynamic markings like f and p.

Credo, in Figure 13, incorporates the rhythm based on eighth notes instead of sixteenth notes. The 3-3-2 “Tinge” pattern is provided underneath the piano’s bass clef. Clearly, 3-3-2 is the basis for the underlying rhythmic structure of the Credo, which is most apparent in the piano part. The harmonic accompaniment contains a device in the piano part based on a prolonged Db suspended fourth chord that sustains an unresolved tension over a syncopated drone bass line on the tonic and fifth. The melody largely lies within a Db pentatonic scale – Db-Fb-Gb-Ab-Cb-Db. The dominant seventh of the tonic Db7 chord, Cb, lands predominantly on the strong beats, emphasizing the “blue” tonality.

<sup>224</sup> Scott Joplin, “The Entertainer,” *Scott Joplin: Complete Piano Rags*, edited by David A. Jasen, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1988), 30.

Figure 13 Credo m. 1-5

## "Credo"

CHOIR

KEY.

$\text{♩} = 126$

I BE - LIEVE IN ONE GOD THE FA - THER AL -

Spanish 'Tinge'

Triplet  $\text{♩}$  over  $\text{♩}$

CHOIR

KEY.

3

MIGH - TY MAK - KER OF HEA - VEN AND EARTH

Polyrhythm

Rhythmic textures are dominated by the syncopation of the “Tinge” rhythm while the vocal lines use repetition of notes and rhythms within a melody based on the blues scale, which especially highlights flat sevenths and the pentatonic minor scale. The use of the “Tinge” in ragtime was ubiquitous, and so was another rhythmic feature, polyrhythm. Notice in measures four and five, quarter note triplets are set against two quarter notes, and three quarter notes play against four eighth notes.



The opening of Sanctus, shown in Figure 14, is an evocation of the spiritual within a rubato modern jazz ballad. It begins in measure one, with a slow, blues inflected chromatic melodic descent in E minor, but modulates up to a modern II-V-I cadence whose open voiced A minor eleventh chord introduces some unexpected and sophisticated harmonic directions. The Sanctus presents a rubato jazz vocal style developed by singers like Sarah Vaughn in the 1950s. The melodic influences, once again, draw from the emotion and phrasing of the blues and the spiritual, but are steeped in the harmonic language of modern jazz.

Figure 14 Sanctus m. 1-4

**“Sanctus”**

CHOIR  
KEY.

RUBATO Emaj7 G<sup>b</sup> G<sup>#o</sup> Am<sup>9</sup> D<sup>7</sup>

HO - LY HO - LY HO - LY LORD GOD OF HOSTS

3 Gmi<sup>7</sup> F#sus B7(b9) Bbmaj7 E<sup>7</sup> Ebmaj7

HEA - VEN AND EARTH ARE FILLED WITH YOUR GLO - RY HO -

Agnus Dei relies, in part, on a continuation of the Sanctus rubato ballad. But where Sanctus alludes in its opening phrase to the E minor blues scale derived from the African American rural work song, the opening of Agnus Dei, shown in Figure 15, evokes the harmonic and melodic complexity of modern jazz.

Figure 15 Agnus Dei m. 1-4

## “Agnus Dei”

The musical score for "Agnus Dei" measures 1-4 is presented in two systems. The first system covers measures 1-3, and the second system covers measures 4-6. The score is for a choir and keyboard accompaniment. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats), and the time signature is 4/4. The tempo/mood is marked "RUBATO".

**System 1 (Measures 1-3):**

- Choir:** The melody begins on a whole note G4 (G4), followed by a half note F#4 (F#4), and then a half note E4 (E4). The lyrics are "LAMBS OF GOD, WHO TAKE A - WAY THE SINS OF THE WORLD. HAVE".
- Keyboard:** The accompaniment features a chromatic descent in the right hand: G4 (quarter), F#4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter). The left hand plays a sustained bass note of B3 (half note).
- Chords:** The first measure is D9, and the second measure is G+.

**System 2 (Measures 4-6):**

- Choir:** The melody continues with a half note D4 (D4), followed by a half note C4 (C4), and then a half note B3 (B3). The lyrics are "MER - CY ON US. LAMBS OF GOD, WHO TAKE A - WAY THE".
- Keyboard:** The accompaniment continues with a chromatic descent in the right hand: D4 (quarter), C4 (quarter), B3 (quarter), A3 (quarter). The left hand plays a sustained bass note of B3 (half note).
- Chords:** The third measure is C9, and the fourth measure is F+7.

Agnus Dei has what I would call a “Laura-esque” opening that recalls the opening of the musical theme from the 1944 Warner Brothers film-noir, *Laura*. Like the theme from *Laura*, Agnus Dei highlights a chromatic descent of the opening melodic interval of a dominant ninth. Figure 16 shows a melodic comparison of the opening of the two themes that shows both leading with a descending ninth. Dotted lines connect the resulting matching tones in the melodies, with matching chromatic descending ninths.

**Figure 16 Melodic and harmonic comparison between “Laura” and Agnus Dei<sup>225</sup>**

The image shows a side-by-side comparison of two musical staves in 4/4 time. The top staff is for the song "Laura" and the bottom staff is for "Agnus Dei". Both are in D minor. The "Laura" staff has a key signature of one flat and a common time signature, but it is transposed to match the "Agnus Dei" staff. The "Agnus Dei" staff has a key signature of one flat and a common time signature. The lyrics for "Laura" are "Lau - ra is the face in the mis - ty light." and the lyrics for "Agnus Dei" are "Lamb of God, who takes a - way the sins of the world, have mer - cy on us.\_\_\_\_". The chords for "Laura" are Dm9, G7b13, and Cma9. The chords for "Agnus Dei" are D9, G7b13, and Gm9. Dashed lines connect the notes "Lau" and "Lamb" (E), "is" and "sins" (Eb), and "mis" and "mer" (D) between the two staves, showing their melodic and harmonic relationship.

for the comparison, "Laura" has been transposed to match the key of "Agnus Dei"

It seems likely that the jazzy ballad style, along with the harmonic and melodic sophistication of “Laura” may have been a melodic and harmonic model for the Agnus Dei. Perhaps the obvious reference to “Laura” also reflects Williams’ recognition of the influence of American pop culture on jazz in the twentieth century, and of the modern composer as the mediator of sounds, public as well as private, which of course, includes movie themes, which were often popular musical vehicles for jazz performances. It is noteworthy that the sound of syllables in the two lyrics seem to be similar where the three matching pitches, E, Eb and D, converge – (1) E: “Lau” - “Lamb,” (2) Eb: “is” – “sins,” and (3) “mis” – “mer.” Either by consonant or vowel, or both, each instance seems to have a close sonic relationship. It’s tempting to speculate whether this was planned or a coincidence. Either way it points to a composer with some rather intricate compositional ideas.

<sup>225</sup> Raskin, “Laura,” 1944.

## 6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

As I began my research process, I wanted to develop a jazz studies project on jazz that could locate jazz outside of the familiar narratives of American nationalism, within a broader international sphere. At the time, I was experimenting with the composition of a jazz Mass, searching for examples from other like-minded composers. I became aware of the Catholic spirituals and jazz Masses of Mary Lou Williams, finding in them modern jazz that was non-colloquial extended works within which I might explore the universal and transformational power of jazz's affective qualities, especially the expression of suffering.

Among the initial motivators for my research was the question - why did Mary Lou Williams use the Negro spiritual, blues and bebop, particularly, as settings for the sacred liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church? The simple answer emerged, that she did this because she was trying to save jazz from becoming a historical footnote. By drawing from all the eras of jazz, from the early spiritual to ragtime, to blues and bebop, Williams made sure to document the important achievements in black music in a way that few have achieved within the confines of extended form single works. In this she can be compared to Ellington perhaps, who pioneered the use of multiple movement extended works to document the history of African Americans. In a way, her work is autobiographical, having lived and contributed to most of the eras of jazz herself.

Through primary sources, including scores, personal documents, interviews and recordings at the *Mary Lou Williams Collection*, at the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University, and a secondary location, the *Dahl Collection on Mary Lou Williams* at Duke

University, my research identified jazz's affective qualities, like bearing witness to suffering through 'spiritual feeling,' as subjective qualities at the core of Williams' religious works. This project invites further music analyses of some of Williams' other religious works, like "Elijah and the Juniper Tree" as a way of rounding out the exploration of her more obscure religious works, as I have set out to do in my work. Another area of further study concerns Williams' notion of "the spiritual feeling in the blues which arises from suffering" as an important key to understanding how jazz seems to transmit suffering, and this needs to be looked at in more depth. My current research has found, I believe, that the transmission of "spiritual feeling" represents the most basic and important function of jazz. What else I might add to this project would be a look at Williams' educational work as a university professor teaching jazz, at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, from 1975-1977, then at Duke University, from 1977 until her death in 1981. I would also delve more deeply into her interest in contemporary classical composition, begun at the time she was writing *Zodiac Suite*, later expressed in her emotionally dark, Penderecki-like treatment of the choral writing in "Lamb of God" from *Mary Lou's Mass*.<sup>226</sup>

Another important question that drove my research was the question of why Mary Lou Williams turned to Catholicism and redemptive suffering as the cornerstone of her late works. I believe there are two main answers to the question. One, at first she saw Catholicism and redemptive suffering as a way to diffuse her own personal suffering and atone for a personal past she needed to break free of. On a larger scale, she saw redemptive suffering as a practice that

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<sup>226</sup> Tammy Kernodle, liner notes, "Lamb of God," *Mary Lou's Mass*, (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 2005), 22.

could benefit others, like the hundreds of persons she prayed for every day. So, she sought to incorporate the suffering of others into her sacred music, that they might share, as she hoped to, in the rewards of Catholic redemption. Through her Masses, she could pray for the large number of African Americans who were struggling for justice by bearing witness to the long history of suffering embodied in the African American experience, especially under enslavement. Thus, by using the suffering of a people as a metaphor for the suffering of Christ during the celebration of the Mass, Williams was able to bring the history of black Americans forward during a time of civil rights activism.

In doing so, Williams enlisted her Catholic faith and her African American musical aesthetic in the service of the struggle for racial justice and social change, both within Catholicism and the Civil Rights movement. The religious works of Williams represent an effort to reconcile the pain of the past with the hope for the future, epitomizing Paul Gilroy's concept of an opposition between tradition and modernity, the past and the present: "They skirt the sterile opposition between tradition and modernity by asserting the irreducible priority of the present."<sup>227</sup>

This study has considered the ethical and philosophical implications of jazz's affective spiritual core through the religious works of Mary Lou Williams. As James Baldwin observed, "Music is our witness, and our ally" as "history becomes a garment we can wear and share . . . not a cloak in which to hide."<sup>228</sup> Williams' music surely represents a sonic realization of

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<sup>227</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Boston, MA: Harvard University, 1993), 202-204.

<sup>228</sup> James Baldwin, "Of the Sorrow Songs: The Cross of Redemption," *Views on Black*

Baldwin's historical "garment," fashioned, as it is, out of the African American experience itself. She shared that experience, and we embraced it, accepting Williams' offering of her musical prayer. In a fitting conclusion to this dissertation, Dahl called it "the kind of prayer that reached out and sought to heal."<sup>229</sup>

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*American Music*, No.2, (1984-5): 12.

<sup>229</sup> Dahl, 298.

**Appendix A Full Text, “St. Martin de Porres: Black Christ of the Andes”<sup>230</sup>**

St. Martin de Porres, his shepherd staff a dusty broom.  
St. Martin de Porres, the poor made a shrine of his tomb.

St. Martin de Porres, he gentled creatures tame and wild.  
St. Martin de Porres, he sheltered each unsheltered child.

This man of love (God) born of the flesh, yet of God.  
This humble man healed the sick,  
Raised the dead, his hand is quick.

To feed beggars and sinners, the starving homeless and the stray,  
Oh, Black Christ of the Andes, come feed and cure us now we pray.  
Spare, oh, Lord, spare thy people lest you be angered with me forever.

This man of love born of flesh, yet of God.  
This humble man healed the sick,  
Raised the dead, his hand is quick.

St. Martin de Porres, he gentled creatures tame and wild.  
St. Martin de Porres, he sheltered each unsheltered child.

Text by Father Anthony Woods, S.J.

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<sup>230</sup> Fr. Anthony Woods, S.J., text, Mary Lou Williams, music, “St. Martin de Porres: Black Christ of the Andes,” manuscript copy, (New York: Cecilia Music Publishing, Inc., 1962).



## Appendix B Complete Texts of the Ordinary from *Mass* (1967)<sup>231</sup>

### Kyrie

Lord have mercy.

Lord, *Lord, Lord, Lord*, have mercy.<sup>232</sup>

Christ have mercy.

Christ have mercy.

Christ have mercy.

Lord have mercy.

Lord have mercy.

Lord have mercy *on our souls*.

### Gloria

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace to men of good will.

We praise you, we bless you, we worship you, we glorify you.

We give you thanks for your great glory.

Lord God, heavenly King. God the Father almighty,

Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten son.

Lord God, Lamb of God, son of the Father.

You who take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.

You who take away the sins of the world, receive our prayer.

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<sup>231</sup> Holy See and Pope John XXIII, *Roman Missal*, 1962.

<sup>232</sup> Williams uses artistic license to embellish the rhythmic possibilities of the word “Lord.” Obviously, in the *Missal*, “Lord” is not repeated in this way. There are many other examples of this sort of creative manipulation of text in these movements. They are absolutely consistent with the long history of Catholic music, which despite severe regulation, managed to establish ingenious musical innovations.

You who sit at the right hand of the Father, have mercy on us.

For you alone are holy, you alone are Lord.  
You alone, o Jesus Christ are most high,  
With the Holy Spirit, in the glory of the Father, Amen.

### **Credo**

I believe in one God the Father almighty,  
Maker of heaven and earth,  
And all things, visible and invisible!

And I believe in one God, Jesus Christ, the only begotten son of God.  
Born of the Father, before all ages, God of God,  
Light of light, true God of true God.

Begotten, not made of the substance with the Father  
By whom all things were made.  
Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven.

And He became flesh by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary,  
And was made man.  
He was crucified for us, suffered under Pontius Pilate, and was buried.

And on the third day he rose again according to his scriptures.  
He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,  
And of his kingdom there will be no end.

And I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord,  
The giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and Son.  
Who together with the Father and the Son,  
Is adored and glorified, and who spoke to the prophets.

And one holy and apostolic Church,  
I confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.  
And I await the resurrection of the dead,  
And the life of the world to come.

### **Sanctus**

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of hosts.  
Heaven and earth are filled with your glory.  
Hosanna in the highest.  
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.  
Hosanna in the highest.

### **Agnus Dei**

Lamb of God, who take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.  
Lamb of God, who take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.  
Lamb of God, who take away the sins of the world, grant us peace.

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