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## A Harlem Suite for Three Women

By [FELICA R. LEE](#)



William P. Gottlieb, Jack Teagarden, Dixie Bailey, Mary Lou Williams, Tadd Dameron, Hank Jones, Dizzy Gillespie and Milt Orent in Williams's apartment, New York, August 1947.

In the book “Harlem Nocturne: Women Artists & Progressive Politics During World War II,” Prof. Farah Jasmine Griffin breathes life into three prominent women who lived and flourished in a Harlem brimming with clubs like Café Society and with anti-Jim Crow protests: [Ann Petry](#), the novelist; [Mary Lou Williams](#), the pianist and composer; and [Pearl Primus](#), the dancer and choreographer.

Petry’s first novel, “The Street” (1946), about a working-class single mother, was the first by a black woman to sell a million copies. Williams, who composed “Zodiac Suite,” was a child prodigy who went on to help shape jazz and lend her talents to political causes. Primus was a critical darling and pioneer whose work like “Strange Fruit” incorporated African and slave traditions into modern dance. Published this

month, [“Harlem Nocturne”](#) examines personalities and politics in the country’s most famous black neighborhood. Professor Griffin, who teaches English, comparative literature and African-American studies at Columbia University, was interviewed in her office at Columbia. These are edited excerpts.

Q.

You point out that the Harlem of the ’40s is overlooked, wedged between the better known Harlem Renaissance and the foment of the ’60s.

A.

In the 1940s it’s very exciting, you get this influx of new people: it’s the second great migration of black Americans from the South and the development of El Barrio with immigrants from Puerto Rico primarily. It’s a new kind of political energy with Adam Clayton Powell. It still has the Savoy and the Lindy Hop and the Apollo and all of those clubs.

Q.

What drew you to the period?

A.

They were glamorous, the women. There was a sense of confidence on the part of black people in particular, a sort of boldness about the war years. It wasn’t the Harlem Renaissance, which I knew fairly well and it wasn’t the Depression era, where everybody was suffering and struggling. But this was a period when there were all these boycotts and various forms of political organizing.

Q.

Was that confidence and activism tied to the war?

A.

It was tied to the war. It was a good war – this is a war against Hitler, it’s a war against Nazis. In World War I there was a move to be quiet about racial inequality in the United States while we presented a united front and fought. This time around, it was, ‘no we’re not going to be quiet about our condition here. In fact, we’re going to point out the

hypocrisy that we're fighting this war and yet we're sent to a Jim Crow South boot camp where our soldiers are treated really badly or we can't get jobs in the defense industry.'

Q.

And the war was a good time for women to assert themselves?

A.

The war definitely provided opportunities for black women and for white women. Petry talks about taking this very competitive writing course at Columbia. She gets into the course and she says it's all women – the men are at war. Mary Lou's husband is in the military, so it does provide her some personal freedom when he's away. Black women are getting better employment opportunities: they're moving out of domestic service and into factory work because of the war.



Edna Guy Ann Petry.

Q.

Did you figure out why Ann Petry, Pearl Primus and Mary Lou Williams are not household names now?

A.

It's a complicated answer. By the end of the decade, for different reasons, they fall out of style in some ways, aesthetically and politically. By the '70s and '80s we get them again, by those people coming out of the feminist movement and black power movement who start to look for forebears and discover them.

Q.

Was the end of Harlem's romance with Communism a part of their fading? Primus was affiliated with the party.

A.

She was under surveillance. But [because of communism] some of the venues and publications that supported Mary Lou and supported Ann Petry were targeted. A place

like Café Society [where Williams was a regular] closes down because the owner is under investigation. Aesthetically, in the case of Ann Petry, you get the emergence of writers like Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Gwendolyn Brooks, who aren't really doing that kind of social realism work anymore — it's more experimental, complex modernist techniques and that becomes more attractive.

Q.

What did these women share?

A.

They were very intellectual. They were interested not only in the creative aspects of their art form but they were all interested in the history and the critical aspects. Mary Lou was not only composing and performing, she was also editing pieces about modern jazz, writing critical pieces about modern jazz. Ann Petry was not only writing fiction, she was writing criticism. And Pearl Primus was a researcher. Even before she became a graduate student at Columbia to study anthropology, she did ethnographic research on the dances she would create.

Q.

What was the genesis of the book?

A.

I had been approached about doing some liner notes for the rerelease of a Lena Horne CD. I did all this research and just fell in love with the '40s, the period when she's first in movies — "Stormy Weather," "Cabin in the Sky." I had spent all this time at the Schomburg reading microfilms of old Amsterdam News and Pittsburgh Couriers and I realized there were these women being covered who seemed to be fairly well known for their art during their period.

Q.

What do you hope readers get from your book?

A.

To see the role of artists in social movements. None of these were artists creating a social movement. They just came along at a time when there was a social movement that

embraced them and there was a place for them, there was a give and take and they gave to those movements and those movements also helped inform the work they were doing. And, there are ebbs and flows in progressive black politics: it's not just the '60s; it's not just the Montgomery bus boycott. There's this long back and forth, this forging ahead and then retreating. The '40s can be seen as one of those periods that contribute to what we all identify as culminating in the civil rights movement.