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## Pianist Gets Her Due

### Remembering Mary Lou Williams, Musician Who 'Moved Through Every Era'

By  
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In the 1940s, pianists would gather at Mary Lou Williams's Harlem home, where she would demonstrate, as the pianist Billy Taylor once said, "how to touch the piano."

That home served as a salon, where he, Thelonious Monk, Bud Powell and Dizzy Gillespie, among other jazz icons, soaked up ideas about artistic purpose.



**Benny Goodman and Mary Lou Williams in 1978** *Getty Images*

Nine blocks south of that spot, "A Conversation With Mary Lou," a new production running Thursday to Saturday at the Harlem Stage Gatehouse, aims to revisit that moment and to evoke Williams' voice.

Geri Allen, who is among jazz's most distinguished pianists, and who portrayed Williams in Robert Altman's 1996 film "Kansas City," will weave Williams's and her own compositions through this theatrical presentation. Carmen Lundy portrays Williams through song and monologue scripted by Farah Jasmine Griffin, whose recent book, "Harlem Nocturne," focuses in part on Williams. S. Epatha Merkerson, an actress best known from the TV series "Law & Order," will direct. Williams is an essential thread through Ms. Allen's life. She first

explored Williams' legacy during graduate study at the University of Pittsburgh, where she now directs the jazz studies program.

Back then Ms. Allen lived in the neighborhood where Williams was raised. A decade after portraying the pianist in "Kansas City," Ms. Allen recorded Williams's demanding, 12-part "Zodiac Suite."



Gerri Allen Redferns via Getty Images

Sturdy and distinctive as Williams' compositions are, they invite personalized interpretation, said Ms. Allen. Such was the case last week, during "Mary Lou Williams: The Next Generation," the first concert in Harlem Stage's two-week Williams celebration.

The career of Williams, who was born in 1910 and died in 1981, ran through and helped fuel much of jazz's development. She rose to prominence with Andy Kirk's Kansas City-based Twelve Clouds of Joy in the '30s, composed and arranged for Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman during swing's heyday, and played duo-piano with the avant-garde hero Cecil

Taylor. (In his memoir, Ellington dubbed her "perpetually contemporary.") Her compositions range from jazz tunes to Catholic Masses.

"Mary Lou looked Jelly Roll Morton in the eye," said Ms. Allen. "She championed Thelonious Monk at a time when her peers did not. Her creative vision was the logical bridge from the swing era into bebop. The things she played and said made a rich bed for that transition."



S. Epatha Merkerson Getty Images

Four players took turns—solo, and in duet—on dovetailed pianos, each with a distinctive approach to Williams's music. Helen Sung applied formidable technique to the contrasting rhythms of Williams's "Waltz Boogie." Gerald Clayton heightened the drama between playful bass figure and shifting harmonies in "Taurus," from Williams's "Zodiac Suite." Dense rumbles and glistening high notes within Courtney Bryan's original piece, "A Tribute to Mary Lou," signified the spiritual awakening in the 1950s that transformed Williams' life and career. Kris Bowers toyed with the form of Williams's ballad, "Ghost of Love," as she herself often had, and suggested her famous sound, which he described in a post-concert discussion as "huge and full, never harsh."

Were Williams alive today, she might interact with fellow musicians online. She did, in a way, through a cyber-symposium on Wednesday that linked six universities and arts institutions; it was [streamed and archived online](#). Participants included Ms. Allen, pianists Jason Moran and Vijay Iyer, and Rev. Peter F. O'Brien, who was both Williams's pastor and her personal manager.

"A Conversation With Mary Lou" will express things best experienced in person. Ms. Merkerson, a jazz fan, had long admired Williams's music. "But I didn't know her story," she said. "We want people to leave the theater feeling the force of this woman who at a very young age became an incredible artist and who, throughout her life, gave with a large heart."

Ms. Griffin drew her script from interviews, oral histories and Williams's handwritten autobiography. "We want to show how Williams really was front-and-center in all these different stages of musical development—the only musician to move through every era," she said. "But her story is also about much more than music. We want to relate her vision of her music as a spiritual force to do good in the world."