

Moving with the Spirit: The Sacred Jazz of Mary Lou Williams
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Jazz has always maintained a peripheral relationship with the sacred music traditions of the larger Black community. While scholars, musicians, and historians have acknowledged the contributions of John Coltrane, Duke Ellington, and most recently, Mary Lou Williams, there were a number of musicians whose works preceded and paralleled the contributions of these individuals.

This handout is divided into two sections: first, an annotated list of musicians in the 1950s/60s who experimented with sacred jazz; second, a list of present-day musicians who are actively writing or performing sacred jazz.

Sacred Jazz in the 1950s and 1960s:

Although John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme" is held as one of the first manifestations of spirituality in jazz, **tenor saxophonist Ed Summerlin** (1928-2006) preceded the landmark album with a number of sacred jazz compositions in 1959. Summerlin's career included stints with Steve Kuhn, Eric Dolphy, Pete LaRoca, and David Baker. He also arranged for and played with Freddie Hubbard. Summerlin founded the jazz program at City College New York and in 1969 teamed with alto saxophonist/jazz journalist Don Heckman to co-lead the Improvisational Jazz Workshop. Summerlin began writing jazz for use in churches in 1959, upon the death of his nine-month old daughter ("Requiem for Mary Jo"). In addition to "Requiem" he also produced "Liturgical Jazz" (a setting of an order of morning prayer; Ecclesia Records) and "Ring Out Joy" (all composed and performed in 1959). In subsequent years he also wrote "Evensong- A Jazz Liturgy and Liturgy of the Holy Spirit."

- *Key Albums:* "Liturgical Jazz" (Ecclesia, 1959); "Ring Out Joy" (Avant Garde)

Summerlin's contributions to defining early liturgical jazz were expanded when pianist **Mary Lou Williams** (1910-1981) converted to Catholicism in 1957 and began composing hymns and masses in the early 1960s. Her music was composed with the celebration of the liturgy in mind. The masses, in particular, were not performance pieces, but liturgy. Her compositions, which were a synthesis of blues, gospel, and jazz, redefined and revitalized the music of the Catholic Church in the early Post-Vatican II years. Williams' music reflected a consciousness that reflected the social chaos of the 1960s and early 1970s.

Resources on Mary Lou Williams:

- Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies MLW site:
<http://newarkwww.rutgers.edu/ijs/mlw/intro1.html>
- Mary Lou Williams Foundation/Fr. Peter O'Brien:
<http://www.marylouwilliamsfoundation.org/>
- Kernodle, Tammy. *Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams* (Northeastern University Press, 2004)
- Kernodle, Tammy. "This is My Story, This is My Song: The Historiography of Vatican II, Black Catholic Identity, Jazz, and the Religious Compositions of Mary Lou Williams," *U.S. Catholic Historian* vol 19 no. 2 (Spring 2001): 83-94.
- Kernodle, Tammy. "'Anything You Are Shows Up in Your Music': Mary Lou Williams and the Sanctification of Jazz," (Diss. The Ohio State University)

- Murchison, Gayle. "Mary Lou Williams's Hymn Black Christ of the Andes (St. Martin de Porres): Vatican II, Civil Rights, and Jazz as Sacred Music" Musical Quarterly, vol. 86 (WINTER 2002): 591 - 629.

Recordings of Mary Lou Williams' sacred compositions:

- "Black Christ of the Andes" (Folkways, reissued on CD in 2004)
- "Mary Lou's Mass" (Folkways, reissued on CD in 2005; features 32 page booklet with notes by Father O'Brien and Tammy Kernodle)

Other notable composers/performers of liturgical jazz:

In 1963, the rector of San Francisco's Grace Cathedral, Rev. Charles Gompertz, expressed a desire to achieve a "modern setting for the choral Eucharist." Along with Barry Mineah, choral director at St. Paul's Church of San Rafael, Gompertz sought out San Francisco resident **Vince Guaraldi** (1928-1976) to help achieve this goal. The result was the Grace Cathedral Concert (1963).

In the late 1960s **Duke Ellington** (1899-1974) began writing what would become known as his "sacred concerts." Unlike the works of Williams, these compositions were concert or performance works (rather than works designed to be used as part of a specific liturgy). Duke called these concerts a "form of worship" and they marked a considerable compositional shift in the later years of his career. Ellington discussed his motivation for writing such works as follows: "Several people have asked what prompted me to write the music for the sacred concerts. I have done so not as a matter of career, but in response to a growing understanding of my own vocation..." (Notes to *Second Sacred Concert*).

The first sacred concert was written in 1965 and used portions of "Black, Brown, and Beige" and "My People" (from 1963-Chicago- musical theater piece). It also contained the fifteen minute composition, "In the Beginning God." In 1968 Ellington wrote his *Second Sacred Concert*. It was premiered in New York at the cathedral of St. John the Divine and consisted of all new material. From 1968-73, Duke continuously presented this work. The news of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination interrupted an April 4, 1968 performance at Carnegie Hall. The *Third Sacred Concert* contains the centerpiece, "The Majesty of God."

Resources on Ellington's Sacred works:

- Steed, Janna Tull. Duke Ellington: A Spiritual Biography (Crossroad, 1999)

Pianist/composer **Dave Brubeck** has written over forty sacred works, many of which incorporate choral composition. In 1965, he composed the short choral piece, "Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled" (1965), for his brother Howard, whose son had died of a brain tumor at age sixteen. At the height of his popularity Brubeck temporarily disbanded his popular quartet in order to pursue an interest in writing large-scale compositions. These experimentations led to sacred works like "To Hope! A Celebration, a jazz Mass," and "The Light in the Wilderness" (1968), an oratorio which focused on the temptations and teachings of Christ. In his cantata "The Gates of Justice" (1969), Brubeck, who had long been concerned with racial equality, turned his attention to justice. During the 1950's, Brubeck's integrated quartet regularly played throughout the South, refusing to accept segregation. When violence erupted in cities throughout the United States between blacks and Jews, Brubeck's "Gates" offered a meditation on biblical justice, drawing his text from the book of Isaiah and the works of Martin Luther King, Jr. The work was first performed following MLK's assassination in April 1968.

Several contemporary musicians in sacred jazz:

Lance Bryant, saxophonist <http://lancebryant.com>

Bill Carter, pianist <http://presbybop.com>

Chuck Marohnic, pianist <http://sanctuaryjazz.com>

Ike Sturm, bassist <http://ikesturm.com>; <http://saintpeters.org>

Deanna Witkowski, pianist/vocalist <http://deannajazz.com>;
September 2008 sacred jazz release with Donny McCaslin (tenor/soprano saxes),
John Patitucci (bass); and Scott Latzky (drums).