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Meet Our Museum Podcast: Mary Lou Williams: Jazz Master

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Audio-only Podcast online at: <http://americanhistory.si.edu/thinkfinity/podcast/marylou.mp3>

Codes:

MR = Matt Ringelstetter

KK = Ken Kimery

“ “ =interrupting, pause

[] = not speaker's words

MR = Like jazz? Enjoy learning about jazz history? Then you might be interested in some of the jazz resources from the Smithsonian and National Museum of American History. Today on the History Explorer Podcast we'll be hearing from Ken Kimery, producer of the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra and himself an established percussionist. Ken is going to discuss the life of jazz artist Mary Lou Williams whose music was performed by the Masterworks Orchestra at a recent concert. Ken stresses the importance of learning about the lives and stories of jazz musicians like Mary Lou Williams in addition to her musical performances as a unique way of gaining an insight into American history.

KK = My name is Ken Kimery and I'm the executive producer of the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra, an in-resident orchestra at the National Museum of American History and so happens to be the twentieth

anniversary this year of the birth of this orchestra which came through a congressional appropriation from Congress. What I'm going to talk about here is something that this year also is a very important moment of celebration which is the centennial year of a wonderful composer, pianist, and also band leader by the name of Mary Lou Williams. She was born on May 8, 1910 in Atlanta, GA and early on defined herself as being somebody of great talent on the piano at a young age of three or four by being able to listen to piano roles of Jelly Roll Morton and James B. Johnson and pretty much replicate that style of playing. This developed a real strong sense of the history of the music and learning boogie-woogie and that style of music during that period of time. This was recognized pretty early on too and also with bandleaders around her community that this young lady had incredible talent and was of desire to hire her for various local bands. So, at the age of 14, she actually was a performing professional musician on the road with a vaudeville act. As her career progressed there was a particular band that she became known as not just as a pianist but as a composer and actually started her career in a direction that we now have recognized as being a very important contribution to the history of jazz but also to the repertoire that the Smithsonian Jazz Masters Orchestra performed this year. The band that she started, really got her start with, was a band by the name of Andy Kirk and Twelve Clouds of Joy. At first she came in more as a they say an ersatz pianist, or the second pianist and also [did] some arrangements and by 1930 through fate she then was brought on as the primary pianist and identified recognized early on too that her piano skills and composition skills were something that elevated the band as just being a territory band or a dance band to something that really had great popularity. So, I should mention that Mary Lou when she began her tenure with the Andy Kirk Band which lasted almost about ten years, she was actually in Kansas City and of course who was in Kansas City also during that period of time, was Count Basie, so there was a lot that was happening during this period of time in the formation of this kind of music. Now Andy Kirk, listening to her arrangements in that period of

time one has to transpose himself back to what the music was about. Really it was popular music it was dance music and so that was the real parameter of her writing though it had virtuosic soloing which was her soloing being framed in there you can hear it throughout that period of time in her stride piano was by far some of the best stride piano ever heard and she was a very, very strong player. One typically associates a woman as not being a very physical player but this was not the case and she proved that was not the case because her playing was very, assertive very strong, very, very masterful and it turned a lot of heads in a way that put her in a position of actually being a teacher to some of the great pianists that followed that being in the bebop era; Thelonious Monk and Bud Powell. So she influenced a lot of players based upon her incredible talent as a pianist. She had then left Andy Kirk's band due to a variety of elements there and to her benefit too she was being noticed for her writing and arranging skills which led her to a short period of time as a staff arranger for Duke Ellington and one selection that was that stood above all of them that she had arranged was called "Blue Skies" and "Blue Skies" can be heard, many different versions or performances of it, but Mary Lou really set the standard. And, going back, just one more point to Andy Kirk, the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra in its centennial celebration did a sampling of her musical career by looking back to her early days with Andy Kirk all the way forward as far forward and one of the samplings of that period of time is a selection called "Walking and Swinging," which is a wonderful piece that you can tell is a dance piece but it also showcases that point in the composition/arrangement where the piano stands out and it shows that mastery of her ability. (music)

She also found herself not just as an arranger but as a solo artist. The opportunity came in 1943 when Café Society in Greenwich Village ended up featuring her as a headliner and this provided her the opportunity to actually then write music for this ensemble. She chose in a setting that allowed her to further explore music beyond just the parameters of being

an arranger/composer for a dance band. The exploration which one can hear in the development of her playing really probably came about because of this transition to Café Society where she had that opportunity to push the envelope. This can be heard I would say probably starting in 1948 maybe a little earlier than that but there's a piano trio recording called "The Zodiac Street" and very, very harmonically progressive. She really started pushing the envelope and it turned a lot of heads again because here's somebody who came out of the swing era primarily popular dance was able to make the transition and there were a lot of musicians who had difficulty making that transition because they not able to develop the skill set, were resistant to it or found that the music just didn't resonate and she was of that mind and had the ability to continue to reach and develop her craft. So she really, throughout her whole career, was always developing, always searching not content with the idea of just enjoying the success and the fame of her those earlier days but really as a true artist reaching to new heights and new depths to figure out where this path might lead her.

MR = It sounds like Mary Lou Williams was not only involved with and influenced some of the bigger names in American jazz history, but she was also really involved in the different eras of it as well. Was it common for a woman to have been influencing people like Thelonious Monk and Bud Powell or been involved in jazz history as much as she was?

KK = No, typically if you go back and look at the history of women within the music and the music itself is primarily a male-dominated music so you'd find woman primarily being in the role of vocalist or pianist and outside of that really not having an opportunity or rarely having the opportunity to find themselves in other areas of the orchestra. Then on top of that how they would influence that period of time be recognized for their artistic excellence and there's very few who have had that opportunity. One could say that Ella Fitzgerald fits within that mold because of the fact that she, after being discovered at the Apollo Theatre and then joining the Chick

Webb band, who was a hunchbacked drummer, him passing away she was the one who was anointed to take over the band and that said a lot about the recognition of her artistic strength which she brought to this band and the respect. Mary Lou was the same thing. She was one of those few [that was] recognized because of the fact that she could hold her own. She was one who actually not only played the instrument but defined the period of time with her ability and then also pushed it forward. You look at parallel Ella and Mary Lou, they both were rooted in a swing era period of time but they continued to move forward in a way that advanced the music and they were an integral part of that body the select few who had that ability and vision and intestinal fortitude to do exactly that.

MR = Now sometimes in maybe high school or middle school history classes, the topic of jazz in American society and American culture comes up, but a lot of times it's just brought up in the context of some other topic and of course it's covered in music classes, but uh, why do you think jazz history is important when learning the history of the United States of America?

KK = You know it's interesting and this is something that we struggle with and have been struggling with for a long time is that we separate the fact that when we think about jazz we only think about musicians on stage. You think of them as performing musicians. The reality is that these individuals have been instrumental within the historical moments in time that define who we are and help define who we are. Case in point, a gentleman by the name of John Levy, who was born in 1912 in New Orleans, great migration, ended up in Chicago, bass player, continued to learn his craft [while] at the same time he was running numbers for the mob. So, that talks about a little bit of American history there; we're talking about New Orleans to Chicago, those things are studied [in] 20th century American history. Well here's somebody who was a jazz musician that is a reflection of that and so much a part of that. His life then took him to New York, 52nd Street, playing with a violinist by the name of Stuff

Smith, John, transition to a British blind pianist by the name of George Shearing. Now we say John Levy, Levy's a Jewish name, John is an African American man. So we can go back and say, okay wait a minute, we've got a Jewish name, he's African American, what's that all about? So, there's a bit of American history there, just look at that. There's American history there. We're talking about a plantation, we're talking about slavery. We're talking about a whole bunch of things that are folded in there that by this one individual following his life story, start to realize, wait a minute, we can take something instead of talking just about dates but personalize it by one individual and showing his life's history which becomes something that I find to be more interesting because of now being able to identify this individual because we're now looking at a person not just a historic event but this individual who is threaded through this and actually is an integral part of it. Therein lies back to the original question. The problem is that when jazz is talked about they only talk about the element of performance. They don't look at it in a way that shows how these individuals were very much, very much had to deal with the societal issues of this country. What happened, what I see is that that has not been clearly or successfully incorporated within primary education in a way that shows these unique stories really are 20th century American history.

MR = That was Ken Kimery discussing Mary Lou Williams and jazz history. To learn more, go to smithsonianjazz.org. Join us again next time as we take another look into what goes on behind the scenes here at National Museum of American History. This podcast has been made possible by a grant from the Verizon Thinkfinity Foundation. Music provided by the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra.