

BOOK REVIEWS

## Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams

By Tammy L. Kernodle. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2020, 2nd edition.

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In the second edition of *Soul on Soul: The Life and Music of Mary Lou Williams*, Tammy Kernodle builds on the echoes of Mary Lou Williams's legacy. A musical legacy can be a fraught portrait, made challenging by the competing interests between heirs of that legacy and otherwise interested parties, and further distorted by perpetual reframings. Managing the politics of jazz's genre boundaries presents another difficult task. Throughout this text, Kernodle encourages us to listen closely to the music and read deeply into the remarkable life of this child piano prodigy turned innovative arranger. Our reward for doing so is a book that seamlessly joins personal biography with jazz historiography.

Kernodle's new preface begins by musing on the concept of metanarrative. Here, she extends Mark Burford's use of the term in his recent book, *Mahalia Jackson and the Black Gospel Field*, which employs a conceptual frame that, in turn, builds obviously on *Soul on Soul's* first edition.<sup>1</sup> According to Kernodle, metanarratives "of relationships, insecurities, and personal challenges frame how the general public views the lives of female creatives" and also obscure "any substantive discussion of their creative work" (xv). As evident in Burford's work, this approach continues to clear valuable descriptive and conceptual ground for those who would revisit the legacies of Black female musicians.

*Soul on Soul* is organized chronologically, and the chapters typically follow Mary Lou Williams to specific geographic locations and gigs. The book begins by describing common aspects of Black life in Atlanta, Georgia, around 1910, when she was born with the name Mary Elfrieda Scruggs. Where available, Kernodle provides biographical details, but she makes it clear where these details end and where a more general type of historical description begins. The book's second chapter thus similarly blends historical and biographical information, following her family's move to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1915, which is where her stepfather began to facilitate local performance opportunities. These gigs gradually increase to the point when, at age twelve, she joins the traveling vaudeville show *Hits and Bits*.

In chapter 3, Kernodle continues chronicling the performer's life story, detailing her first marriage to Theatre Owners Booking Association (TOBA) bandmate and saxophonist John Williams and their life together on the road, which took them from Memphis, Tennessee, to Kansas City, Kansas, with several tours in between. In time, they both became members of Andy Kirk and the Twelve (and sometimes Seven) Clouds of Joy. Kernodle notes that while playing with this group, Mary Lou Williams's skills as an arranger developed considerably, and her musical style moved beyond the types of "sweet" swing arrangements Kirk desired. In 1942, she left Kirk's ensemble and moved back to Pittsburgh. Kernodle surmises that Williams's return was an attempt to combat the sense of loss she felt after spending so many years away from her family while on the road during her adolescence and twenties. Insights like this demonstrate how Kernodle's narrative never loses sight of the impact that Williams's professional success had on her personal life.

Drawn back into playing piano by her second husband, trumpeter Harold "Shorty" Baker, and drummer Art Blakey, Williams returned to New York in the subsequent years, where she became

<sup>1</sup>Mark Burford, *Mahalia Jackson and the Black Gospel Field* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

part of the Café Society roster. In chapter 5, Kernodle places Williams's story in conversation with Hazel Scott, a contemporary Black female pianist to whom she was often compared. These women made divergent marketing choices that were informed by their life experiences. Whereas Scott's musical talent was often upstaged by her conventionally attractive physical appearance, Williams strove to be taken seriously as a musician, a position that entailed rejecting efforts by various managers to foreground her gender at the expense of her talent. But even though she studiously avoided commenting on gender politics throughout her career, Kernodle details how critics nonetheless centered Williams in that conversation. It is, in fact, the author's reading of the *Down Beat* magazine archives for this and other aspects of Williams's life that demonstrates one of *Soul on Soul's* many non-biographical contributions to the field. Indeed, the primary source contexts she provides throughout confirm that gender bias in jazz is hardly a new topic, showing that its debates extend as far back as the 1930s.

Kernodle's discussions about Mary Lou Williams's political leanings also offer a richer picture of her public life. It has been widely assumed that she held leftist views based on her association with Barney Josephson, the proprietor of Café Society. However, Kernodle posits that Williams and many other musicians "became associated with left-wing politics only through their participation in benefit concerts that supported political initiatives," clarifying that their involvement was largely coordinated by their managers (101). The author then avoids making the same assumptions by paying close attention to the sources of information on Williams's political opinions, differentiating between the words and letters of her managers and Williams herself. This passage in chapter 6 both identifies speculation as such, and provides more information about the power dynamics in the 1940s New York jazz scene.

The book ultimately follows Williams through the composition of her *Zodiac Suite*, the two years she spends in Europe, and her final return to the United States in 1954. Many other readings have claimed that Williams's nervous breakdown, pause in her musical career, and religious conversion from agnosticism to Catholicism at this point demonstrated a rejection of the music itself, caused by a schism between the sacred and secular. Kernodle instead insightfully historicizes these events as a reaction to the rampant substance abuse issues plaguing the jazz scene, issues that were exacerbated by a vortex of racist mismanagement. Kernodle describes how Williams empathized with those suffering from these issues and used her time off to house, feed, and nurture several musicians to health, helping them to get clean for the sake of their careers. The author also details how Williams's religious outlook was an important aspect of her political views, and perhaps the most deliberate expression of them, as evidenced by the fact that she insistently pushed for the inclusion of Black Catholics in the Church by composing for, and attempting to program jazz masses into, liturgical settings (beginning with the *Mass for Lenten Season* and later with *Mary Lou's Mass*). Fittingly, the preface to this new edition of *Soul on Soul* begins with *Mary Lou's Mass*, demonstrating how Kernodle bears witness to not only a celebration of it, but also to the continued evolution of Williams's legacy.

The breadth and depth of this work leaves little to be desired, instead opening doors for the inclusion of Mary Lou Williams in further research areas, some of which Kernodle highlights in the preface. One such area that would be of particular interest to me is the philanthropic core of Williams's efforts in the late 1950s with the Bel Canto Foundation, and later with the Mary Lou Williams Foundation. Situating Williams in a philanthropic tradition would further elucidate aspects of both her career and community commitments.

Throughout *Soul on Soul*, Kernodle weaves a steady current of tension between the topics of tradition and innovation as they figure into both Mary Lou Williams's individual story and the larger jazz narrative she constructs. Despite this tension, we learn that Williams exists not between genres, but comfortably among genres, a point demonstrated frequently through the author's analysis of her recordings. Williams therefore defied being easily categorized into jazz's periodized sub-genres, mainly because her career stretched over these rapidly changing periods and she challenged herself to continue innovating until her final decade. With its comprehensive coverage of biographical and musical details, *Soul on Soul* is well suited to carry that legacy forward.

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currently writing a book about the influence of global aid on the contemporary practice of classical music in Haiti. Additional work traces the practice of sampling across genres with roots in the African American experience, including hip hop and gospel music.

## Motor City Music: A Detroiter Looks Back

By Mark Slobin. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

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Do not be fooled by the title of this book or its cover art. The most recent volume by prolific and stalwart ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin makes no effort to survey the music of Detroit, Michigan, one of the largest and most bustling urban centers in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. It is not about rhythm and blues, and it is not a survey that seeks to present a balanced history of music in the city over time. The narrative is instead deeply personal, drawn from the author's own experience growing up in Detroit. I suppose that I was asked to review Slobin's book because of my professional proximity to the music of Motown, perhaps Detroit's greatest musical export. But throughout the process of reading and seeking to understand this work, I found myself drawing much more on a personal connection to the city.

Slobin's topics range from things like neighborhood character to immigration, religious life, and cultural organizations in the city. His study helps to reinforce what many have long known but so rarely expressed in written form: Detroit has a fascinating, multi-layered historical relationship with music that is deeply ingrained in both its past and present residents. Music has always been central to life in the city, and *Motor City Music* provides a series of micro-studies to show how and why this is the case in a variety of settings. The book is at once extremely narrow and impossibly broad. It is about a single person's journey but also the manner in which it might overlap with the history of millions of others.

There is no underlying critical argument in the book. Instead, each section is rooted in a connection with the author—something he experienced or that was formative to his own musical and cultural journey. Slobin uses his memories and life as a starting point and then ventures into sources that range from interviews to archival sources and a wide range of secondary writings. He often finds that there is little previous work to support his claims, which is understandable with such a vast perspective on the city and its people.

Slobin slices information in a highly idiosyncratic manner. To list the topics of the book in order would not make much sense without the context of the author's perspective. The years Slobin discusses most fully—the 1920s to the 1950s—were the boom years of Detroit as the automobile capital of the world. The place of car manufacturing thus looms throughout many of the book's pages and even provides the conceptual frame for the book, as Slobin applies the metaphor of motorized transportation to his analysis. The chapters are titled accordingly: "A City in Motion," "The Traffic Circle," "The City in the Rearview Mirror," etc. I am not particularly taken by this organization, finding the actual topics themselves more descriptive and compelling. They are full of important histories, though, that delve into topics often mentioned casually in writings or discussions about Detroit but rarely so thoughtfully researched. His memories lead to probing work on music in the public schools, immigration and migration, the isolation and sometimes interesting interactions between ethnic groups (Jewish, Armenian, Polish, African American, and so on), urban design, the role of local media, in addition to many other topics.

If the frame is at all clunky, the details are far from it. The memoir aspect of the book is documented through the analysis of (often fascinatingly esoteric) archival recordings, popular and not-so-popular vernacular songs, Detroit's classical tradition, biographies of local actors, and histories