"Serendipity: the occurrence and development of events by chance in a happy and beneficial way"
Oxford Dictionary

Sometimes it can take years before one recognizes how the alignment of time and divine order serve as the impetus for a shift in the trajectory of one's life and work. This project is the most recent offering of the Mary Lou Williams Resurgence Project, a mechanism that marks Cecilia Smith's two decade-long journey of discovery and advocacy that has centralized the musical contributions of composer, educator, pianist, and activist Mary Lou Williams more strongly within the contemporary framings of jazz's history. The intersection of the cultural work and music of Cecilia Smith with that of Mary Lou Williams extends back to the year 2000, when members of the congregation of Our Lady of Victory Catholic Church in Brooklyn, asked the vibraphonist to perform a concert featuring the music of Williams.

This seemingly simple request led Smith to the Mary Lou Williams Collection, which opened at the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University (Newark) months earlier. The collection, which contained all forms of ephemera related to Williams' life and career, illuminated to Smith the true depth and breadth of the pianist's compositional voice. Williams' oeuvre consists of 300-plus compositions and arrangements that range from big band arrangements to small group settings and choral works. The collection also documents Williams' history of cultural work and advocacy for the elevation of jazz music and the jazz musician. Smith's initial engagement with this vast and diverse collection raised many questions: Who was Mary Lou Williams and why wasn't she included in the pantheon of jazz greats alongside Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie or Thelonius Monk? Why are her compositions not included as part of the standard repertory of jazz? While some of Smith's questions were easily answered by her early research trips, those that went unanswered fueled her zest and interest in Williams.

Mary Lou Williams was born Mary Elfrieda Scruggs in Atlanta, Georgia on May 8, 1910. Her first exposure to music came through her mother Virginia's playing at a local Baptist church. Mary often sat on her mother's lap during rehearsals, and it was during one of these moments that she first displayed her musical abilities. Blues, ragtime, black Protestant hymnody and spirituals t saturated the soundscape of Williams' early years and they remained of her sound identity throughout her life.

In 1915 the Burley family migrated to Pittsburgh, PA becoming part of a vibrant black community. Mary's talent blossomed during these early years. Musical influences ranged from the T.O.B.A. theater shows that her stepfather Fletcher Burley, often took her to, to the piano rolls of Fats Waller and Jelly Roll Morton that were played on the family piano. They all contributed to her evolution into the "Little Piano Girl of East Liberty," a wunderkind that by the age of 12 was traveling on the black vaudeville circuit known as T.O.B.A. (Theater Owners Booking Association). Her tenure with this circuit lead to her meeting and later marrying saxophonist John Williams, whose subsequent invitation to the join T. Holder's Dark Clouds of Joy (later called Andy Kirk's Twelve Clouds of Joy) brought the couple to Kansas City, Missouri in the late 1920s.

It was during the Kirk band's early recording sessions that Mary recorded two of the first solo records to be released under her name--*Drag 'Em* and *Nite Life*. Both showcased her mastery of the Harlem stride tradition and the elemental trademarks of her style—strong rhythmic left hand and intricate improvisations. Thinking that Mary alone was too plain, recording executive Jack Kapp added "Lou" to her name. From that point until her death in 1981, she would perform under the professional name of Mary Lou Williams.

For twelve years Williams served not only as pianist of the Kirk band, but also as the group's primary arranger. Her driving piano style became the foundation of the rhythm section and arrangements like *Mary's Idea*, *Walkin' and Swingin'*, and *Little Joe from Chicago* were central to the popularity of Clouds of Joy extending beyond Kansas City. By the early 1940s most big bands in the U.S. had a Mary Lou Williams arrangement in their book, but she never garnered the type of name recognition or money that Fletcher Henderson, Don Redman or other male arrangers received. She left the Kirk band in 1942, less than a year later, launched her solo career working at the nightclub Café Society in New York.

For the next decade Williams became a staple on the New York jazz scene performing nightly and hosting her own weekly radio show on WNEW. She also frequented the after-hours jazz session taking place at Minton's and Monroe's Playhouse uptown in Harlem. In time her Hamilton Terrace apartment became the meeting spot for the young generation of musicians who sought an escape from the formulaic culture of swing. It was there in that small apartment that Williams nurtured the creative energy that birthed a cultural revolution. Thelonius Monk, Dizzy Gillespie, Sarah Vaughn, Tad Jones, and many others frequently gathered at Mary Lou's to listen to records or showcase their newest compositions. Williams became one of the strongest musical and personal ties between the previous generation of jazz musicians and the young, emerging voices that were deemed the modernists. Despite the difference in age and professional experience, these musicians and Williams shared a desire to elevate readings of the black jazz musician and black art.

It was also during this period that Williams experienced a creative peak that mirrored her desire to push the creative boundaries of jazz. Like Ellington she visualized the jazz dance orchestra or big band as an Americanized version of the European symphonic orchestra and advanced the jazz suite as one of the ways in which a new symphonic jazz aesthetic could be promoted. Her *Zodiac Suite*, a set of twelve symphonic poems based on jazz musicians born under various zodiac signs, was evidence of this. While Ellington is often credit with furthering this mode of jazz composition, Mary Lou Williams was the first jazz composer of the post-World War II epoch to have her work played by major chamber orchestras including the New York Philharmonic.

Despite this level of activity and creativity, Williams struggled during the late 1940s to recapture the critical success she had garnered during her early years with the Kirk band. In 1952, like many of her peers, Williams went to Europe where she received much acclaim. However, the heavy work schedule coupled with the continued exploitation by her management, and the circus-like environment of music industry in London and Paris, began to take an emotional and physical toll on her. In 1954 she walked away from the industry, disappearing for three years.

During her departure from the jazz scene she converted to Catholicism, which became one of the singular events that would impact her perspective of the world and her music for the next twenty-four years. She composed several hymns and four Catholic masses that reflected the intersection of her faith, the mid-century Black civil rights movement, and changes in the celebration of the Catholic liturgy that were precipitated by the Second Vatican Council. The form of liturgical jazz that she created and promoted during the late 1960s and early 1970s embodied the notion of a black Catholic liturgical aesthetic. Williams experienced a new level of popularity as the feminist movement and the emergence of women in jazz festivals celebrated her pioneering status within the genre. Reissues of some of her early recordings in addition to new recordings like *Zoning* (1975), *Free Spirits* and a live recording of her set at the 1978 Montreux Jazz Festival garnered her new listeners. In 1977 she joined the music faculty of Duke University as its first Artist-in-Residence. In the four years that she served there she continued

to educate the audiences on the historic and musical roots of jazz as well as promote the creative spirit of young players. Mary Lou Williams died on May 28, 1981, at the age of 71.

The late 1980s and early 1990s were marked by a wave of activity that sparked a resurgence of jazz culture. Despite all of the work of cultural institutions, historians, and jazz musicians engaged in, Williams' music was still largely ignored. This lapse in the performative and historical aspects of jazz pedagogy inspired Cecilia Smith to launch the Mary Lou Williams Resurgence Project (MLWRP) shortly after that initial concert in 2000. The MLWRP and this recording project represents two decades of advocacy, preservation, and emanation that illuminates the timelessness of Williams' compositional voice.

In 2002, a residency at the New England Conservatory resulted in Smith launching the concert series, "The Sacred and Secular Music of Mary Lou Williams." This collaborative program, which featured NEC students surveyed Williams' big band, small ensemble, and choral compositions. Shortly thereafter, Smith was encouraged by her mentor Cecil Bridgewater to repeat this program with professional musicians. The result was a multi-generational, co-ed collective of musicians that Williams had worked with or influenced during her five-decade long career. This group debuted at the 10th annual Mary Lou Williams Women in Jazz Festival in May 2005 at the Kennedy Center. Over the years, Smith has expanded the musical reach of this program through collaborations with young musicians throughout the country.

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This recording is the first of two that interprets Williams' music in a chamber group setting. The featured musicians have worked together for decades trying to master the harmonic and rhythmic complexities that exemplify the Mary Lou Williams sound. The filtering of compositions drawn from the latter part of Williams' career through the sonic lens of the hard bop/straight ahead jazz idiom is a strong reminder of the timeliness of her compositional voice.

The opening track, *Sketch I: Truth be Told,* is a musical collage that uses musical quotations extracted from Williams' compositions. The "truth" this tune elucidates is the depth and scope of Williams' musical influence. One of the prominent musical quotations heard is taken from Thelonious Monk's "Rhythm-ing." However, Monk based this melodic idea on a motive presented in Williams' big band arrangement "Walkin' and Swingin'." It exemplifies one of the ways Williams influenced the modern jazz idiom. Other quotations include the bassline motive from the song "Nicole", a modern blues tune that appeared on the 1963 album *Mary Lou Williams Presents The Black Christ of the Andes*, and the bassline motive from "Waltz Boogie" and a small portion of "Scratchin' at the Gravel." The former was featured on the recording *Girls in Jazz*, which featured Williams with an all-girl line-up and the latter was one of the many arrangements that catapulted the Kirk band to stardom in the 1930s. *Sketch 3* was written in honor of Williams' 100th birthday. Nested in a musical setting that invokes a gospel-waltz feel, this composition invokes the intricacies of Williams' complex harmonic approaches.

Smith and Layfette Harris' motivic interplay on the tunes *Body and Soul* and *St. Louis Blues* reminds us that Williams' legacy was not defined only through her original compositions, but also through her note-worthy interpretations of jazz standards.

What's Your Story Morning Glory? is one of Williams' most iconic compositions. It underscores her ability to capture the essence and soul of the blues no matter the setting. The song was first recorded

by the Kirk band in 1938 and served as a feature for vocalist Pha Terrell. Over the years a number of different artists recorded it including the Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra, the Glen Miller Orchestra and vocalists such as Ella Fitzgerald and Anita O'Day. However, most Mary Lou enthusiasts point to many different versions for solo piano that Williams recorded during her lifetime. This version features vocalist Carla Cook, who is responsible for finding the rarely recorded second verse heard here.

During her lifetime, Mary Lou Williams often commemorated her friendships by composing works that captured the personality traits of that individual. She often moved in a number of social circles that included intellectuals, artists, and wealthy socialites. In the years that marked her conversion to Catholicism in 1957 and return to jazz during the early 1960s, Mary Lou Williams devoted herself to the rehabilitation of addicted musicians. Her Hamilton Terrace apartment, which had supported the creative voices of a generation of musicians only a decade earlier became a rehabilitation facility and half-way house for some of those same individuals after they fell victim to proliferation of the drug culture in jazz. Williams subsequently expanded these efforts through the formation of the Bel Canto Foundation, which was supported by a number of musicians and philanthropists like Doris Duke, heiress of the Duke tobacco fortune. Williams had hoped that a more expansive facility could be built to further Williams' work, but the foundation never raised enough money to bring this to fruition. *Miss D.D.* was written in honor of Duke and appeared the 1963 album *Mary Lou Williams Presents The Black Christ of the Andes.*

Until his death in 2015 Father Peter O'Brien headed the Mary Lou Williams Foundation. As one of the most ardent champions of the pianist's music, O'Brien often entrusted a select number of musicians with unknown "gems," from Williams' collection that have little to no recorded history. Two of these works appear on this album, *Tell me How Long the Train's Been Gone* and *Spiritual II*. The former is a wonderful, catchy tune that features lyrics by Paula Stone. It is not clear if Williams ever recorded this song and there is even more speculation as to who Stone was. To date none of the scholarship on Williams has referenced this tune, but her activity in New York during the 1940s and 1950s may provide some answers to the question of the lyricist's identity. It was during this period that Williams hosted a weekly radio show on WNEW. At the same time actress Paula Stone hosted a show that focused on the gossip and news of Broadway. While there is no direct evidence to date that establishes Stone firmly as the lyricist, but we can surmise that as two of the only women artists hosting radio shows on WNEW at the time, both would have known each other. Regardless, vocalist Carla Cook expertly captures the sense of longing exemplified in the song's lyrics. *Spiritual II* is one of several compositions Williams wrote during the late 1960s and early 1970s that bore that title. It reflects one form of the type of liturgical music that she wrote, recorded and performed during the period. It existed only as a musical fragment and is featured on the recording *Mary Lou Williams: Solo Recital, Montreux Jazz Festival 1978* in a medley titled "The Lord is Heavy."

One of the bonus tracks contained on this album is a live, soul-stirring rendition of pianist/educator Dr. Billy Taylor's *It's A Grand Night for Swinging.* Taylor met Williams during the early 1940s when they both became part of the budding bebop scene. Over the years they maintained a close relationship, which extended to their work with the earliest iteration of the Jazzmobile in the early 1960s. Taylor was an ardent champion of Williams' music and spoke openly about the gendered politics she navigated. During his tenure as artistic director for jazz at the Kennedy Center he developed the Mary Lou Williams Women in Jazz Festival. Taylor first recorded *Grand Night for Swinging* in 1955 and Williams covered it eight years later for the *Black Christ of the Andes* sessions. It was a favorite of Williams, who often played it during her live performances. Evidence of this can be found on a number of the albums released in the late 1970s.

Over the past two decades, interest in the music of Mary Lou Williams has grown exponentially. Within this spectrum of activity, The Mary Lou Williams Resurgence Project continues to chart its own course and lead the pack in finding ways to expand our sonic understandings of Mary Lou Williams. It is clear that the world and jazz culture as a whole has finally caught up with Cecilia Smith and now, they know what she discovered decades ago. That the life and musical contributions of Mary Lou Williams is unparalleled. So, as you listen to this album, remember the serendipity that underscores the vast history of musical advocacy and artistry embodied in these performances. They all in their own unique way echo back to an invitation extended by a Black Catholic parish in Brooklyn.

Dr. Tammy Kernodle – Musicologist