

“A beautifully written and expertly researched biography of one of the most fascinating Catholic artists of our time. Deanna Witkowski, a musician herself, brings to life a whole era in this engrossing new book about art, music, love, perseverance, and faith.”

—James Martin, SJ, author of *Learning to Pray* and *In All Seasons, For All Reasons*

“When Mary Lou brought jazz to the Mass, she was inviting us to universal love and the joy of the resurrection. May we all become, like the great Saint Mary Lou Williams, people of universal love.”

—Rev. John Dear, author of *Living Peace, The Questions of Jesus, The Beatitudes of Peace, and Lazarus Come Forth* and director of www.beatitudescenter.org

“I had the good fortune of meeting Mary Lou Williams one summer day in the seventies when she came to visit her friend, Dorothy Day, at the Catholic Worker Farm in Tivoli, New York. I’ve been collecting Williams’s recordings ever since. Now there is also Deanna Witkowski’s biography. Its author is the pianist who has done so much to introduce a new generation to one of the musical geniuses of the last century.”

—Jim Forest, author of *Writing Straight with Crooked Lines: A Memoir*

“In this brief biography, Deanna Witkowski retrieves for Catholics, African American Catholics in particular, the life of jazz virtuoso Mary Lou Williams. Witkowski offers readers a glimpse into the inner life of a ‘musical contemplative,’ who was one of the great jazz pianists, arrangers, and composers of the 20th century. Although befriended, encouraged, and counseled by several priests and women religious, Mary Lou Williams remains unknown among most African American Catholics. This contribution to the People of God series provides an opportunity for us to discover and appreciate the musical talent and spiritual commitment of one of our own.”

—Dr. M. Shawn Copeland, Professor Emerita, Department of Theology, Boston College

“This is a long-overdue study of an important American artist and unconscionably neglected figure in our particular communion of saints. I am an unabashed fan of Mary Lou Williams, this book, and its author. Deanna Witkowski—a jazz pianist, musicologist, and convert to the Catholic faith—is uniquely qualified for her role in Mary Lou’s revival. Read these pages, and you’ll grow immeasurably richer in history, in music, and in soul.”

—Mike Aquilina, EWTN host, author of many books, songwriter,
executive vice-president of the St. Paul Center for
Biblical Theology

“Deanna Witkowski’s *Mary Lou Williams: Music for the Soul* is a thrilling account of the extraordinary life of a brilliantly successful African American jazz artist who became a devout Catholic—and it is so much more besides. The reader who accompanies Mary Lou on her journey bears witness to the historical circumstances that shaped her era: the evolution of jazz music in America, the challenges African American musicians faced as they tried to practice their art, the sexism of the jazz world, the difficult and often tragic lives of professional musicians, and the powerful appeal of the Catholic Church to artists in search of meaning in life, stability, and a spiritual home. Witkowski, as a jazz artist herself who converted to Catholicism, is the ideal person to write this biography of Mary Lou, a figure from the great pantheon of jazz musicians in whom she ‘unexpectedly found a soul companion and lifelong mentor.’ Her extensive musical knowledge makes her the perfect guide to Williams’s work, and her identity as a fellow Catholic enables her to empathize with Mary Lou’s spiritual journey. A meticulously researched and well-told tale, *Mary Lou Williams* is rife with cliffhangers, foreshadowing, tragic losses, psychic and religious visions, and unexpected intrusions of grace. It is also, to this reader’s delight, a labor of love.”

—Angela Alaimo O’Donnell, author of *Flannery O’Connor:
Fiction Fired by Faith*

“I’ve known Deanna Witkowski as a friend and jazz pianist for more than two decades. I’ve experienced her compassion, her artistry, her gift for translating the sacred into intricate and gorgeous melodies. I’ve known her as a musician, but now I’m pleased to also know her as an author. I can think of few people better equipped to bring the story and music of Mary Lou Williams to life. Deanna shines brilliant light on Williams’s humanity, faith, and immense influence on jazz music. But she also builds a strong case for why Williams was one of our most important modern composers of sacred works. I suspect the music of Mary Lou Williams will be added to many new playlists as a result of this excellent book.”

—Edward Gilbreath, author of *Reconciliation Blues* and
Birmingham Revolution

“Witkowski’s book presents Mary Lou Williams as both human and saint. Williams’s compassion for the human dilemma and her advocacy for jazz both as musical artform and as the prescription for conveying the love of God to all people is laid bare before the reader. One cannot help but come away from this excursion into the life of Williams with the whole point of the Gospel: love of neighbor. And jazz is the cure. What perhaps is equally as palpable is the role of many in the Catholic Church as patron of the arts. The fact that Mary Lou Williams found spiritual solace in the Catholic faith is not lost on this reader, especially at a time when there is much racial strife in the country and African American Catholics may wonder, ‘Where is the Church?’ Witkowski’s sharing of Williams’s journey reminds us of the potential of a home for Black Catholics.”

—M. Roger Holland, II, Director of The Spirituals Project,
University of Denver

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Mary Lou Williams

Music for the Soul

Deanna Witkowski



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Standing apart from a crowd that she is more likely to lead than to follow, Mary Lou Williams can rely on history to accord her a proper place.

—Phyl Garland, “The Lady Lives Jazz,”
Ebony (October 1979)

Contents

Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	1
<i>Chapter One</i>	
Changing the Scene (1910–26)	7
<i>Chapter Two</i>	
Eleven Men and a Girl (1927–42)	16
<i>Chapter Three</i>	
Waltz Boogie (1942–52)	28
<i>Chapter Four</i>	
Restless and Revolutionary (1952–54)	41
<i>Chapter Five</i>	
Reaching the Right Sound (1954–58)	49
<i>Chapter Six</i>	
Keep Your Heart High (1958–62)	63
<i>Chapter Seven</i>	
Saint Martin and the Steel City (1962–67)	72
<i>Chapter Eight</i>	
Eternal and Everyday (1967–69)	85

x *Mary Lou Williams*

Chapter Nine

A Musical Contemplative (1968–74) 99

Chapter Ten

The Whole Point Is Love (1974–81) 115

Notes 129

Selected Bibliography 141

Index 145

Acknowledgments

After having spent more than twenty years performing the music of Mary Lou Williams and researching her life and work, my own life is yielding unexpected, and yet inevitable, gifts. The book you hold in your hands is one of them. My heartfelt thanks go to Andy Edwards and Barry Hudock, who recognized that Williams's story belongs in the People of God series as well as the fact that my perspective as a musician, scholar, and adult convert to Catholicism uniquely qualified me as the person to write this volume.

The largest of my book-related gifts is a city: Williams's welcoming hometown of Pittsburgh. After having spent twenty-three years as a Manhattan apartment dweller, I relocated to Pittsburgh in the fall of 2020. My love affair with the place I call "the city where jazz is love" began with a solo concert I was booked to perform at the Hillman Center at Shadyside Academy in December of 2018, for which I thank Christa Burneff. Knowing that Williams had grown up in Pittsburgh, I decided to arrive nine days early to familiarize myself with the city. At the time, I had one friend here, Bryan Perry, who, along with his beautiful family, hosted me in their Highland Park home. In the course of my stay, I met many musicians and historians of the Pittsburgh jazz scene, gave a keynote performance-lecture on Williams at the University of Pittsburgh where I met some of Williams's relatives,

and was featured on the local jazz radio station, WZUM. Thank you to Grace Aquilina and Scott Hanley for these opportunities. I was embraced so wholeheartedly by everyone I encountered that by the time I played my Hillman Center concert on my final night in town, I seriously began to consider what it might be like to live here.

Mary Lou Williams kept bringing me back to Pittsburgh. The following spring, I received an invitation to perform several Williams compositions with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra on a recommendation from producer and guitarist Marty Ashby. On returning again in the fall of 2019 to continue my research and delve deeper into the Pittsburgh jazz scene for seven weeks, Marty met with me to ask how my book was progressing. When I mentioned my desire to record a full album of Williams's compositions—especially as the purpose of this book is to lead the reader to Williams's music—Marty replied, “Well, let's make that happen.” After a delay of nine months due to the coronavirus pandemic, in January of 2021, I recorded at Manchester Craftsmen's Guild in Pittsburgh with both local musicians and my regular trio mates, who traveled from New York City and Austin, Texas, to make the sessions. All of these musicians—Daniel Foose, Scott Latzky, Clay Jenkins, Dwayne Dolphin, and Roger Humphries—have encouraged me in ways that have expanded my heart and given me joy. Thanks to Marty's commitment to extending the Pittsburgh jazz legacy, these three days in the studio are documented on my all-Williams recording, *Force of Nature*.

I remain grateful for the entire Pittsburgh jazz community, where fans of the music ply me with questions about Williams and enthusiastically listen to me perform on their bandstands. I am particularly thankful to guitarist John Shannon, who has made me feel at home at Con Alma, the new jazz club that continues the rich legacy of Pittsburgh

jazz history, and to drummer Thomas Wendt, who proofread my book chapters with the eye of a jazz historian.

Non-Pittsburghers I must thank include Vincent Pelote, Tad Hershorn, and Elizabeth Surles at the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey, where I paid multiple visits to Williams's archives. Thanks also to Williams's late manager, Fr. Peter O'Brien, SJ, who paid me a high compliment when he enthused that I "played the hell out of Mary Lou's 'Gloria'" at a 2013 performance of *Mary Lou's Mass*. Thanks also to Linda Dahl and Tammy Kernodle for their earlier, much-needed biographies of Williams and for their collegiality.

My deep thanks to Don Ottenhoff and the Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research for hosting me at two invaluable residences: first as a short-term scholar, when I spent a month in quiet, making frequent jaunts uphill to the library at Saint John's University; and several months later in the "Apart, and Yet a Part" writing workshop led by Michael McGregor. Michael's reminder to keep Williams beside me as I wrote was the single greatest help to creating this book, and the encouragement of that group of eleven writers—especially at our 6:30 a.m. Facebook check-ins—carried into my daily work.

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Remembering the people who have entered my life over the last three years because of Williams's story, I realize that the biggest gift of this project is that it has widened my circle of friends. For this, I am truly thankful.

Introduction

As a new resident of Mary Lou Williams's hometown of Pittsburgh, I see Williams everywhere. The cigarette-stained keys on her well-worn Baldwin upright piano are on display among belongings of other local jazz legends at the Heinz History Center. She gazes at me from the murals of Pittsburgh icons that appear on downtown buildings and along the East Busway. Minutes after boarding a bus from Saint Benedict the Moor parish in the historic Hill District, I gasp on seeing Williams's image on the side of an old theater as I whiz by. I later find out that the building was the New Granada Theatre (formerly the Pythian Temple and the Savoy Ballroom), a major jazz venue where Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, and Louis Armstrong performed.

Williams keeps leading me deeper and deeper into the musical legacy of this welcoming city. Less than a year prior to moving here, while renting a room for seven weeks, I often mentioned Williams in conversation. Almost invariably, whether I was speaking with a lifelong Pittsburgh resident, a professional jazz musician, or a college music student, I heard variations on the same refrain: "Wow! Williams was a great pianist, right? And didn't she compose a lot of important jazz tunes? I mean, I don't know any of

2 *Mary Lou Williams*

her pieces. What did she write? Wasn't she a mentor for [pianist] Thelonious Monk?"

These responses reminded me that, to this day, most jazz musicians—let alone historians or Pittsburgh residents rightfully proud of their city's rich jazz legacy—know Williams's name and almost none of her music. Her compositions are not played in piano trios (piano, bass, and drums), one of the standard instrumentations in jazz. And while some of her big band music is available and is starting to receive more programming, it's not yet in the regular repertoire of collegiate or professional jazz orchestras. In the "great man" narrative all too common in jazz history today, Williams is often reduced to a role as an early big band arranger and a mentor to bebop musicians whose names and compositions are front and center in the pantheon of jazz greats, such as Monk, saxophonist Charlie "Bird" Parker, and trumpeter John Birks "Dizzy" Gillespie. Williams's work—her musical output—is understudied and underperformed.

Williams's spiritual journey is also commonly reduced to a one-dimensional story emphasizing how her mid-life conversion to Catholicism made her somewhat of a religious fanatic. Rather than honoring the months of rigorous religious education and decision-making that a person wishing to enter the Catholic faith undertakes prior to baptism, Williams's choice to embrace Catholicism gets glossed over as a retreat from her arduous life as a performer in which "she trusted everybody and was treated so bad."¹ Yet as her friend Dorothy Day knew all too well, Christianity is not simply an interior, personal faith. It requires seeing God in all things—in all people—and demands that we care for the poor in our midst. Williams cared for the poor and, like Day, chose voluntary poverty in order to rehabilitate the sick in her community, especially jazz musicians. She per-

formed these works of mercy even prior to her religious conversion. A 1950 album cover of a recording by pianist Bud Powell shows Williams—partially hidden—and Powell at an upright piano, perhaps at Mary’s piano in her Harlem apartment. Mary was a behind-the-scenes, one-woman support system for Powell, not only coaching him musically and recommending him for gigs but calming him when his mental exhaustion turned into explosive episodes, which led to several stays in mental institutions.

Williams’s charitable work via her two Manhattan thrift shops and her founding of the Bel Canto Foundation, a charitable nonprofit organization dedicated to rehabilitating jazz musicians who suffered from drug addiction, is well documented. Less discussed is her ministry of letter-writing conducted over decades with fans from all walks of life, including priests and nuns. Williams cultivated nascent friendships by writing to religious sisters who she met during her many spiritual retreats. In the 1960s, her frequent letters to Fr. Michael Williams, the new director of the Catholic Youth Organization in Pittsburgh, facilitated the production of the first Pittsburgh Jazz Festival, a historic piano workshop including Williams, Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington, and Willie “the Lion” Smith, and a teaching position at Seton High School where she wrote her first jazz Mass.

Williams found sustenance for her daily work in letters she received from men and women religious as well as from listeners who found healing in her music and her words of encouragement. Her kindheartedness extended to notes she wrote on the backs of torn envelopes from fans who shared how their lives had been transformed after they heeded her admonitions to go back to church or after she spoke with them following a performance. Her scribbled writing often simply said, “Send record [her recordings].” And send she

did. Williams gave away everything she had—her scant physical possessions, her apartment, her music, her time—to save the world.

As Dorothy Day said, quoting Dostoevsky, “Beauty will save the world.” Williams showed that the discipline, freedom, and beauty inherent in being a jazz musician and a person of faith has the power to heal the troubled soul.

* * *

A further word about my own connection to Williams. As a professional jazz pianist, composer, and liturgical musician, I was introduced to Williams in 1999, when pianist and educator Dr. Billy Taylor invited me to perform at the Kennedy Center’s Mary Lou Williams Women in Jazz Festival. On accepting, I realized that I knew almost nothing about the festival’s namesake. Like the majority of jazz musicians, I only knew that Williams had been a lauded pianist-composer who had mentored other jazz stars whose music I *did* know. I asked myself why I had never heard any of this woman’s music.

My eagerness to learn more about Williams came at an opportune time: *Morning Glory*, a new Williams biography by Linda Dahl, had just been published. Trumpeter Dave Douglas had recently released a Williams tribute album, *Soul on Soul*, so I emailed him asking for a list of essential Williams recordings. I started listening to Mary’s music—and, since then, have never stopped.

From Dahl’s biography, I learned that Williams was a liturgical jazz pioneer who had composed three Mass settings. I was astonished. Just two years earlier, I had relocated from Chicago to New York to serve as a full-time music director at All Angels’ Episcopal Church. I had recently

composed my second jazz Mass for the congregation and began presenting my music in churches outside of New York. I realized that I shared a goal with Williams, whether composing for a specific congregation or playing in a jazz club: to make jazz—or, more broadly, all of my original work—*accessible* to all. Like Williams, I believe that jazz should be played everywhere: in the club, at the community center, on the sidewalk, in church. In Williams, I had unexpectedly found a soul companion and lifelong mentor.

Over the intervening years, Mary (whom, from this point on, I will call by her first name) has become more and more a part of my life. As an adult convert to Catholicism who converted through the influence of the Jesuits—even attending a lay spirituality program at the same New York parish where Mary presented “Saint Martin de Porres,” her first major liturgical work, in the early 1960s—I began to realize that I was literally walking in Mary’s footsteps. As a musician who presents jazz in churches of all different denominations, I often picture Mary seated at the piano in St. Patrick’s Cathedral on Fifth Avenue, playing her joyous *Mary Lou’s Mass* with her trio in front of 3,000 people as five priests process to the altar. Mary gives me courage. Sometimes I speak with her before I play, knowing that in a very real sense, she has been here before me. Once I began spending extended time in her hometown of Pittsburgh, I came to realize that the warmth I felt in the welcoming, soulful people in the city where she grew up was the same warmth I’ve experienced in all of Mary’s playing. Now I, too, call Pittsburgh home. Each time I step onto the stage to play just mere feet from the Charles “Teenie” Harris photo of her that hangs proudly at the Pittsburgh jazz club Con Alma, I send a quick prayer to Mary, thanking her for being with me, and then I start pressing down the keys,

6 *Mary Lou Williams*

letting the sound, the space, and everything it has taken to get me to this moment, all come out. I hope that a fraction of what I feel when I play is expressed in these pages and that Mary's story will bring you to what, for her, was the most important thing: her music.

CHAPTER ONE

Changing the Scene (1910–26)

Looking back, I see that my music acted as a shield, preventing me from being aware of many of the prejudices that must have existed. I was completely wrapped up in my music. Little else mattered to me.

—Mary Lou Williams, quoted in Linda Dahl,
Morning Glory: A Biography of Mary Lou Williams

In many interviews over the last twenty years of her life, Mary Lou Williams gave a particular narrative of her life story, rarely going off script. Starting with her mother's recognition of her young daughter's extraordinary musical gift, her moniker at the age of six as "the little piano girl of East Liberty," and her gigs on the road beginning at the age of twelve, Mary's life confirmed that she would always be a musician. Music for Mary was both a refuge and a vehicle for spreading love in communities separated by race and fear, even among neighbors who welcomed her family to Pittsburgh by throwing bricks through their windows. She tended to her gift and trusted it as her lifelong companion, more than any human relationship. She also believed in the

bonds of family and community, and gave away all that she could to help her relatives and musicians in need. Mary's music and her unyielding belief in its power to heal gave her the strength, stubbornness, and stamina to forge a life as a pioneering jazz musician in a field where she saw few others who looked like her. Her knowledge that she was different began with a sign at her birth.

* * *

On May 8, 1910, Mary Elfrieda Scruggs was born as the second of eight children to Virginia Riser in the Edgewood neighborhood of Atlanta, Georgia. The midwife who delivered Mary told her mother that her daughter had been born with a "veil," a thin membrane of placenta, over her eyes. In African American culture, children born with such a veil were believed to have the gift of second sight—an ability to see visions that were not apparent to others. In his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois describes the "veil" as a symbol of double consciousness for African Americans, who knew that their true identities were not recognized by white society. As a child who was viewed as "different" because of her frequent visions and her musical ability, and throughout her life as an African American and as a woman, Mary had to have a strong sense of self in order to break through many constant but unseen barriers.

Mary's extraordinary perception extended to her sense of hearing. Her mother, Virginia, was a live-in domestic who was allowed to visit her family only twice per month. On the weekends when she was at home, she danced and played a reed organ in a local Baptist church on Sundays. Holding three-year-old Mary on her lap as she practiced, Virginia was astonished one day when Mary reached up to the keys

and played back exactly what she had just heard her mother play. Mary recalled, "It must have really shaken my mother. She actually dropped me and ran out to get the neighbors to listen to me."¹ Mary claimed that from this point on, she never left the instrument. As a young girl, Virginia had taken piano lessons, but felt that she had lost her ability to improvise after studying with a teacher. Fearing that Mary might suffer the same fate, Virginia would not let a "regular" music teacher near her daughter. In lieu of traditional lessons, Mary soaked up music from traveling performers who frequently visited her home. In later years, Mary's firm belief that jazz could not be taught out of books became a core aspect of her musical philosophy.

In her family's shotgun house, so named because if a gun was "fired through the front door, the shot passed through all the rooms and out into the backyard,"² Mary lived with her mother, Virginia; her sister, Mamie, four years her senior; her aunt Anna Mae; her grandparents Anna Jane and Andrew Riser; and her great-grandmother Matilda Parker. Until she was twelve or thirteen, Mary thought that her biological father was Mose Winn, a man Virginia had been married to for a short time just after Mary's birth. It was only through a stinging comment from a relative that Mary learned that she had been born out of wedlock and that her real father was a man named Joseph Scruggs. Although Scruggs was not involved in Mary's life, Willis, his son and Mary's half brother, helped Mary in her early practice sessions on the reed organ by pumping the pedals, as she was too short to reach them herself.

When she was five, Mary's family moved to Pittsburgh, an industrial center of coal and steel production, where her mother hoped to find a better life. Virginia was not alone in choosing the Smoky City as an escape from the poverty

of the rural South. Many families, including “northern Blacks” from states such as Maryland and North Carolina, came to Pittsburgh as part of the Great Migration in the early 1900s. Producing 40 percent of the country’s steel before the start of World War I, the city had already grown exponentially in the late 1800s when Eastern European immigrants arrived to work in the steel mills. Tension in the highly segregated city existed not only between races but between Blacks who had migrated from different parts of the country. Fortunately, Mary’s family had relatives in the North: Virginia’s grandparents were already living in the Steel City and two of her aunts were in Philadelphia. Fletcher Burley, Virginia’s beau and the man who would soon become Mary’s stepfather, made plans to come join the family several months later.

Arriving to the smoke-filled city by train, Mary’s family settled in the East Liberty neighborhood, four miles from downtown Pittsburgh. While living between two white families, the family endured acts of prejudice: Mary herself recalled that bricks were thrown through their windows. Undaunted by fear, Mary became a goodwill ambassador by playing piano in neighbors’ homes. Her mother was unaware of her daughter’s visits until neighbors began appearing at the family’s house to ask what had happened to “the little piano girl” after Mary broke her arm while playing with friends. Mary recalled, “Not knowing it, I think my little visits changed the entire scene, and love began to flow.”³

After Fletcher Burley joined Mary’s family in Pittsburgh in 1916, he and Virginia were married. The first of six Burley children, their son Howard was born three years later when Mary was nine. Fletcher encouraged Mary’s music making, buying her a player piano and often requesting that she play two of his favorite styles of music, blues and boogie-woogie.

By slowing down the piano rolls, Mary learned classical pieces as well as solos by ragtime pianist Jelly Roll Morton and James P. Johnson, the originator of stride piano. Mary's talent was soon noticed at Lincoln Elementary School. As in all Pittsburgh public schools in the 1920s, Lincoln had no African American teachers. White teachers taught Mary's classmates, themselves a mix of Irish, Italian, and African American. In third grade, while hiding under her great-grandparents' bed, Mary overheard stories of the atrocities her relatives had endured while growing up as slaves under white owners. Mary was so infuriated that when she arrived at school the following day, she hit one of her teachers with a ruler, saying, "You hate black people and I hate white people."⁴ Feeling empathy for Mary, her teacher brought her to the attention of the principal, Miss Mulholland. Learning that Mary was a gifted pianist with perfect pitch, Mulholland soon began taking her to afternoon tea at Carnegie Tech (now Carnegie Mellon University), where she would improvise on popular classical pieces. Back at school, Mary would play a march to get the students to walk up the stairs, occasionally segueing into a boogie-woogie for her classmates to dance. School was also where Mary's love of shoes developed: without enough money to purchase shoes that fit, Mary walked to school barefoot and then slipped into a pair of her mother's oxfords during the day, her heels hanging over the back. After classes she took off the shoes to walk home, again barefoot.

Mary soon found that her music could bring in much-needed income. Her stepfather, Fletcher, would bring her with him to poker games, sneaking Mary in under his large overcoat. On arriving, Mary would sit down at a piano to play while Fletcher placed a dollar in his hat and passed it around, encouraging others to add to the kitty. At the end

of the night, he gave all of the money, minus his start-up dollar, to Mary. Fletcher's pride in his stepdaughter gave Mary the confidence to perform in any type of environment. Another early supporter who encouraged Mary's musical growth was her brother-in-law, Hugh Floyd. After Mamie, Mary's sixteen-year-old sister, married Hugh, Mary moved out of her mother's house to live with the couple. An amateur saxophonist, Hugh often took Mary to the Hill District, the center of African American musical and cultural life in Pittsburgh, where Mary heard traveling vaudeville performers as well as local musicians including singer Lois Deppe and pianist Earl "Fatha" Hines. Pianist Jack Howard became one of Mary's major influences, showing her how to play her left hand louder than her right because, as Mary explained, "that's where the beat and the feeling was. It's just like a drum keeping a steady beat."⁵ While most of the pianists Mary heard—and saw—were men, there was one female player who stood out. Lovie Austin, a Chicago-based pianist and recording artist, was performing locally at a theater on Frankstown Avenue. On seeing Austin perform in the orchestra pit, Mary was in awe, recalling, "She sat cross-legged at the piano, a cigarette in her mouth, writing music with her right hand while accompanying the show with her swinging left! Impressed, I told myself: 'Mary, you'll do that one day.'"⁶ Indeed, Mary accomplished the same ambidextrous feat while touring with Andy Kirk and the Clouds of Joy in the 1930s.

In 1924, Mary started at Westinghouse High School, a school that boasts a storied alumni of jazz musicians including pianists Earl Hines, Billy Strayhorn, and Erroll Garner, but soon left to join a traveling vaudeville show called Hits and Bits. Buzzin' Harris, the group's leader, visited Mary's home to audition her for the piano opening on the recom-

mendations of local musicians. When he arrived, he saw her outside playing hopscotch and initially thought he had been played as the brunt of a joke. His feeling changed when Mary sat down and played a ragtime piece and then quickly picked up the tunes Harris hummed to her to learn by ear. Amazed, he immediately asked Mary's mother for permission to bring Mary on the road. Virginia agreed after arranging for a friend to travel with her daughter as a chaperone, and Mary left school two months early to perform at regional theaters on the TOBA (Theatre Owners' Booking Association) circuit. Featuring all-Black shows performed for all-Black audiences, TOBA venues were known among performers as "Tough on Black Asses" because of their harsh working environments, which often did not even provide working bathrooms for performers. Regardless, the taste of being on the road whet Mary's appetite for the life of a touring musician.

Back in Pittsburgh, Mary played solo engagements for the wealthy Mellon family and performed with local union bands. Traveling musicians brought her to their gigs where they would spend hours "jamming" at various clubs stretching from East Liberty to the Hill District. They often ended up at the Subway, a club on Wylie Avenue that Mary remembered as "a hole in the ground to which the cream of the crop came to enjoy the finest in the way of entertainment. For me it was a paradise."⁷ If Mary's mind was always on music, others were looking out for her safety. Roland Mayfield, a wealthy man known as "the Black prince of East Liberty," befriended Mary; he gave her rides in his Cadillac to the venues where she performed and taught her how to drive. Mayfield viewed himself as Mary's protector and was the person she called on many occasions when she was stranded after an out-of-town theater refused to pay the musicians. Mayfield showed up with his Cadillac throughout

Mary's life, even driving her back and forth between Pittsburgh and New York as late as the 1960s.

With her many performance requests, Mary did not stay in school for long. After her first tour, she returned to Westinghouse for the fall semester, but in December, Fletcher became ill and was unable to work. In an effort to support her family, Mary went back on the road with Hits and Bits. Playing in Chicago in the winter of 1925, she met her idol Lovie Austin and trumpeter Louis Armstrong. In Cincinnati, a baritone saxophonist named John Williams joined the band. John recalled his reaction on hearing Mary for the first time: "She hit on the piano and I'd never heard nothing like that in my life. Terrific. She outplayed any piano player I'd ever played with. She played note for note anything that she heard . . . and heavy like a man, not light piano. At fourteen."⁸ At nineteen, John was well liked and became the show's musical director. He soon began courting Mary, who, though initially reluctant, eventually gave in to his advances. Mary feared that her mother would force her to stop traveling if she did not have the protection of a man. Indeed, many traveling performers became couples simply to split the cost of living expenses. In later interviews, both Mary and John claimed there was never much love between them. Mary explained bluntly, "My music was always first. I didn't love him."⁹

After a year on the road, Hits and Bits disbanded in Kansas City when work ran out. Under John's leadership, the band's instrumentalists had formed a sextet called the Syncopators. When he heard that the popular dance duo, Seymour James and Jeanette Taylor, were performing at the Pantages Theater and were searching for an instrumental group, John booked an audition. Seymour and Jeanette, as they were known professionally, performed on the all-white

Keith-Orpheum circuit, a step up from TOBA venues. Due to heart issues that left him short of breath, Seymour had decided to shorten the duo's performances and add a short jazz set. After a successful audition, the Syncopators toured with the duo throughout the Midwest before arriving in New York on Easter Sunday of 1926. Since vaudeville acts had summers off, after two months of playing regional theaters, Mary had time to explore the music in Harlem, where she met James P. Johnson and Jelly Roll Morton, the pianists whose solos she had learned from the rolls on her player piano in Pittsburgh.

Stimulated by a summer spent listening to musicians she had idolized for a decade, and with a full ten-month season ahead of her with Seymour and Jeanette, Mary was inspired and happy. But after just three weeks on the road in the fall of 1926, Seymour became too ill to continue the tour, and John and Mary had no choice but to return to Pittsburgh. Although Mary's first extended period on the road had been cut short, she would soon begin a twelve-year stretch in a popular band that would secure her reputation as one of the foremost swing pianist-composers in the country.