Introduction

She sits a bit forward on the piano bench, her feet away from the pedals marking off tempo while she nods to that sense of balance that combines drive and relaxation. A half smile lights up the high cheekbone nearest the listener. If she is playing with a band there is sometimes a slight inclination of the head in awareness. But the concentration is in the hands; slender, strong fingers reaching unerringly for the note, the chord, the mood.

— CHARLES EDWARD SMITH
(his liner notes to *Mary Lou Williams and Her All Star Five*)

MARY LOU WILLIAMS'S childhood, like that of Ethel Waters and Billie Holiday, two other great black female musicians of her era, was rough and short. Like Waters and Holiday, she had to earn her own livelihood while still a child, and became a woman before she was ready. Also like them, Mary succeeded against forbidding odds. Yet no matter how much she accomplished, she could not crack the carapace of her parents' fundamental indifference to the fact of her existence. It was musicians, not family, who nurtured her talent, who shared her life of poor-boy sandwiches, broken-down cars and rooming houses, the many stretches with no pay. But more than anything else, it was Mary's own innate vision of possibilities, her tremendous grit and

empathy, that molded her musical gift. That and later her religious faith kept her going through many hard years—what she called the "muck and the mud" of American show business.

From the time she was a child, Mary (the name she was born with, the name her family and close friends used) had an innate sense both of the depth of her own talent and of the significance of the African-American musical heritage. Throughout a career that lasted more than half a century, she was careful to save the piles of her reviews and notices, telegrams, photographs, and other memorabilia, all of which found their way into scrapbooks that tell nearly as much about the twentieth century as they do about her own career. And there was the music, of course; she wrote stacks of it. Though a good deal of it was never commercially recorded, she saved some on a collection of private tapes.

Mary had a funny, even jolly side, but she was an intensely private person, difficult to know well, and she was highly protective of her own (and others') pain. Seldom did she discuss the hurtful events in her life, and never publicly. Yet she revealed a good deal of her life story in letters and in the small spiral notebooks where she made an attempt at an autobiography. At the bottom of a dusty box of her effects, I found a piece of paper with just these four lines jotted down:

Jazz created for all people.
Jazz created through suffering.
Got beaten everyday.
And school—Amy Frank.

Cryptic and clipped—a kind of Rosetta stone to her life—these lines are emblematic of the distinctive, triumphant personal philosophy that Mary forged out of a difficult existence. They contain, I think, the essence of her personal struggle.

Jazz [was] created for all people.

With this simple, deeply felt declaration, Mary reveals her instinct and her yearning for universal acceptance and harmony. Moreover, she refuses to bow to any ethnocentrism, any limitations, from any side. Like Duke Ellington—who said that there was good music and

there was bad music—she only reluctantly accepted the designation "jazz" for the music that was born of African-Americans.

Mary sought and fought all her life for equal acceptance of this uniquely American art form within the musical power structure, the European-derived canon of symphonic music. And when in the sixties, after she had been playing professionally for more than forty years, some African-Americans criticized her when she did not jump on the Black Nationalist bandwagon, Mary replied that she did not want to go back to Africa. Yet when she started tapping her foot and bore down on the piano, there was no doubt about Mary's roots. She was, as Ellington's oft-quoted assessment of her put it, like "soul on soul." She and her music were undeniably *African*-American.

She also saw jazz as a world music, universally accessible. Jazz would be her bridge, her passport, to other people's worlds. It was African-American music that moved her white teachers and principal to take her from her poor neighborhood to play in Pittsburgh's citadels of wealth, as later it carried her around the country, around the world. And everywhere she went, she found an audience that responded to the music she played.

Jazz [was] created through suffering.

When Mary discovered as a little girl, as gifted children do, that she could live in her head, she found in the world of her people's music what she could not find in her family: order, grace, a meaning beyond daily struggle. Moreover, she built up a richly mystical interior life (if at times out of balance) through her music. Gaining meaning through suffering was, indeed, a major motif for Mary. It gave incalculable emotional heft and resonance to her playing, especially after her conversion to Catholicism in the mid-1950s, when the Christian tenet of redemption alleviated her own emotional pain and answered a lifetime of searching for meaning. But Mary's concern was not so much with her own suffering; rather, she focused on the historical impact of suffering on a people—black people in America. As a little girl, she would eavesdrop on conversations of her elders about the cruelties of slavery, the wickedness of racism. She came to understand how the slaves, out of their anguished condition, developed a vital musical communication, combining spirituals and work songs with rhythms

that, in Mary's words, "reached deep into the inner self, giving expression of sincere joy." This was her definition of jazz, and she played it that way.

But even as Mary became convinced from her own experience that one's "crosses," as she liked to call her sufferings, can deepen and even ennoble a person's character, she grew aware that for many people, suffering merely degrades and deadens hope. She became a rescuer, trying to help many desperate people, most of them musicians. At times she was abused for her kindness, and seldom was she able to rehabilitate others. After some years of this, she noted, sadly, that some people were too weak to withstand suffering and come out the other side to redemption. But she never stopped caring.

Continually tested in the tempering fire, Mary played the strongest music of her life when she was old and in great physical pain. She had mastered the blues, alchemizing the form into boiling restiveness or tender lyricism or resolute triumph. If she had any one message, it was that jazz meant very little indeed if it lacked the emotional resonance that comes from understanding not only the *form* of the music but where the blues came from. "You ain't said nothin'," she played in a song, "'til you play the blues."

Got beaten everyday.

Mary left few clues about the cruelty she knew as a child, none so stark as this: *Got beaten everyday.* Nearly everything worked against her as a young person—her place and time, her class, her race, and her sex. During her early years, child labor was common, often necessary, to feed a family, and many of the harsh childrearing dictates of the brutal slave era had survived. Mary's was an impoverished southern family, struggling in the cold, smoke-choked air of Pittsburgh, where the family defenses—the demons of drink and indifference—flourished. Mary and her older sister both left home when they were barely in their teens, but their ties to the family remained steadfast and they continued to feel responsible for their younger brothers and sisters. If music became Mary's refuge, her castle, her life, conditions on the road in the 1920s were often as meager, mean, and violent as at home. Mary wrote only peripherally about beatings and neglect from her mother and from the flawed musician lovers who attracted her with

their highly intelligent, sensitive playing, but who could become violent when they drank. But clues are scattered in her diaries and in snapshots where her shy, beautiful, smiling face is shadowed by pain. Though she accepted it, kept quiet about it, physical violence cast a long shadow across her life.

And school—Amy Frank.

A careful separation, this, between the private violence of family, and the public. Mary's family, one of thousands of southern black families that poured into the industrial North seeking a better life, were feared and resented by other recent poor immigrants. In Germantown, where Mary's family, the Risers, moved, the neighborhood was composed mostly of Poles, Italians, and Germans. Amy Frank was a white youngster from Germantown, a schoolmate at the red-brick Lincoln School who bullied eight-year-old Mary, just arrived in a cheap cotton shift and her mother's narrow black Oxfords. Rocks were thrown, followed by taunts, hair-pulling, shoving, slaps. As if that were not enough, the light-skinned blacks who lived nearby ostracized her: with her satiny dark brown skin color, Mary was judged too dark for the café au lait children to play with.

But Mary had a special gift. A child prodigy, she could play back by ear on the piano nearly anything she heard and obligingly performed the pop tunes of the day whenever she was asked. Soon, she was welcome as the "little piano girl of East Liberty" at the parlor pianos in all the houses around the neighborhood, taming Amy Frank and the rest as she took requests, and climbing into chauffeured cars to be taken to entertain the wealthy at bridge parties in their hillside mansions above the smoke and slums of the city. It was the first of many dragons she would slay in her life with her beautiful music.