

Something “Hot and Abstract”: Thomas Merton, Mary Lou Williams and the Spirituality of Jazz

By **Thomas T. Spencer**

Readers familiar with Thomas Merton know that music, particularly jazz, was an integral part of his life that brought him much enjoyment. His interest developed at an early age. As an eleven-year-old Merton writes of being in Lucerne, Switzerland and befriending the drummer of a jazz orchestra playing in his hotel’s dining room. He added that his grandfather “did not approve of jazz,” and the experience in the hotel was the only pleasure he himself got out of Switzerland.¹ As a young student at Oakham in England he frequented Levy’s, a large department store, and was captivated by the recordings of Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong and others he listened to there. His passion for jazz continued while a student at Columbia in the 1930s and throughout the remainder of his life as a Trappist (see *SSM* 78-79, 157). Friends and scholars have attested to Merton’s knowledge of jazz,² and Merton’s journals contain many references affirming his passion for the music.

Much has been written about Merton’s interest in jazz and the artists he enjoyed, but there is one story that is less well known. Reflecting in his journal one fall day in October 1958 he writes: “To what extent is jazz spiritual?” He admits he found the question “impossible to answer intelligently,” but noted it was jazz that was “hot and abstract” like “Fifth Dimension” by Mary Lou Williams that struck him as “quite spiritual.”³ Williams’ music resonated with him in a special way. On New Year’s Eve 1967 he recorded a meditation in which he further discussed her music. It is obvious from listening to this reflection that she was one of his favorite jazz artists. Little did he realize as he talked that evening of the impact he would have on her life as well. There is no evidence the two ever corresponded or spoke, but they shared much in common and each would derive much from the other’s gifts and talents. Most significantly, they both appreciated and embraced the spiritual aspects of jazz.

Mary Lou Williams was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1910, and grew up in Pittsburgh. Blessed with special musical talent and perfect pitch she was described as a musical prodigy. With the assistance of her mother she learned to play the organ and piano. By age 7 she was earning money playing for parties and eventually in clubs in the Pittsburgh area. She developed the title of “little piano girl.” In 1927 Williams married saxophonist John Williams and eventually moved to Kansas City where she helped develop the unique sound of Kansas City jazz. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s her reputation continued to rise as she composed her own music and arrangements for many jazz greats including Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman and Duke Ellington. During her career she would make over 100 recordings. In 1946 she performed a 12-piece jazz suite, *Zodiac*, at Carnegie Hall.⁴

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Merton was especially attracted to the sound of Kansas City jazz that Williams personified (see *SS* 227); he referred to it as “boogie woogie,” a music characterized by a “percussive” style of playing on the piano along with a quick tempo and repeated base line. “Boogie woogie” also has a blues influence, an African-American musical genre with a distinctive and repetitive underlying rhythm. Williams herself described the blues as “the spiritual feeling of jazz” (O’Brien 6). On New Year’s Eve 1967 Merton made an unusual audio recording and noted he was there with his “girlfriend” Mary Lou Williams, although he laughingly clarified she was on the record and not sitting in his hermitage. He again noted how he “dearly loved this type of music,” adding it had a beat and bump, a good rhythm and was the “most beautiful kind of thing I can think of.” He stated, “I don’t know why I like it, but I do,” as he played another of her songs in the “boogie woogie” style (Sisto, “Jazz Monk”⁵).

Merton found her music spiritual, not just because of the rhythmic style of the recordings, but the poignant memories the music invoked. He notes in his journal when pondering the question of how jazz was spiritual that he thought the question made sense and was not absurd. He added that it was “Hard to judge because things which remind us of the past are accidentally disturbing. Anything at all sweet is disturbing” (*SS* 227). In his New Year’s Eve reflection ten years later, he adds some clarity to this statement by revealing that her music reminded him of his days in New York when he would go to Greenwich Village to listen to jazz. The music rekindled memories Merton found significant in a spiritual way (Sisto, “Jazz Monk”). Listening to jazz was, in many respects, a spiritual experience for Merton. Ron Seitz, one of Merton’s close friends in Louisville, writes about a night when he accompanied Merton and other friends to a Louisville jazz club. Watching the group performing Merton whispered to Seitz, “They’re going to start talking to each other now. Listen.” He then left the table and went up to the stage to get a closer look. When he returned his eyes were wide open as he told Seitz, “Now that’s praying. . . . That’s some kind of prayer! . . . the new liturgy. – Really, I’m not kidding” (Seitz 114-15). David Brent Johnson, who narrated “The Jazz Monk: Thomas Merton” on his show *Night Lights*, speculated on what he saw as Merton’s love of jazz. He noted listening to the music was like a spiritual journey, the “ability to lose oneself and find yourself in the process,” a description Merton would have undoubtedly found fitting (“Jazz Monk”).

Merton lamented in his meditation that he wished he could play the piano like Mary Lou Williams. He may not have played it as well, but according to Dick Sisto, Merton did play a “little boogie woogie” on the piano in addition to playing the bongos. He also enjoyed Sisto’s African “thumb drum,” that he wanted to play to the frogs out at the hermitage. Sisto was a young jazz musician in Louisville who became friends with Merton after seeking him out for spiritual counseling. He visited Merton often at the hermitage, picnicking with friends and according to his account “acting as a beer runner.” He also got to observe his passion for jazz. Sisto would occasionally see Merton at a jazz club on 118th St. in Louisville, called Eddie Donaldson’s “Shack,” when he was playing there. One night the owner let him know “the monk was in again.” Merton is credited with helping found the Louisville Jazz Council at Eddie’s, along with local jazz artists Jamey Aebersold and Bobby Jones.

By the early 1950s Mary Lou Williams was struggling with numerous personal issues. Twice divorced and beset with significant financial debt, she lost interest in playing jazz. Living in Paris, she was unhappy and contemplating giving up her musical career. Her decision to stop playing on a regular basis was in part a spiritual crisis. She noted in her diary she was looking for peace of mind

and was committed to giving up “music, night life and all else that was sinful in the eyes of God” (Dahl 243). While in Paris she met Colonel Brennan, a man who helped her with some of her debts and would become a good friend. A devout Catholic, Brennan showed her a small church with a walled garden that Williams found peaceful. She later claimed she “found God in a little garden in Paris,” and noted that it was the beginning of “an intensely mystical journey” (Dahl 233). After returning to New York in December 1954, she began visiting Our Lady of Lourdes Church, close to where she lived. With the encouragement of several Catholic friends, including Father John Crowley, she converted to Catholicism in 1957. In May 1958, she penned a piece for *Sepia Magazine* entitled “What I learned about Jazz from God” (Dahl 256-58).

Williams’ conversion to Catholicism was a turning point in her life, although personal issues relating to debt and her mental and physical health would continue to be significant for her. She did return to her music and performing, but on a more limited basis. In 1968, while in Copenhagen for a pending engagement, she found a room with the Benedictine Sisters at the St. Lioba cloister. It was there she first read Merton’s *Seven Storey Mountain*. The book would have an immediate impact on her. Writing to a friend she noted that her life was parallel to Merton’s although she added, “I think I suffered more when I was 3 and 16” (Dahl 302).

It is evident from Williams’ letter to her friend that she was either already aware of Merton prior to reading his autobiography or took the time to find out more about him after she read the book. She referenced his commitment to universal civil rights and Merton’s insisting on “the white man’s taking responsibility for wrongs of the black man” (Dahl 302). She was also aware of Merton’s composition of the “Eight Freedom Songs,” poems written for Robert Lawrence Williams, a young African-American tenor in 1964. Four of the songs were put to music by Alexander Peloquin and performed at the Liturgical Conference in Washington, D.C. as a memorial tribute Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968.⁶ Reading Merton inspired Williams to model her own autobiographical reflections after his. Her memoir *Zoning and the History of Jazz* was never completed or published, but the first few sentences of the draft reportedly mirrored Merton’s opening passage in *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

Merton’s untimely death in Bangkok in December 1968 coincided with Mary Lou Williams’ reading of his autobiography. At the time of his death there is no evidence Merton knew of the spiritual direction her music was taking. She developed a motto in the sixties that “jazz is healing to the soul.” She had long been a spiritually oriented person and well before her conversion to Catholicism she pondered the idea of writing sacred music, combining jazz with the spiritual. Following her conversion, she became friends with several Catholic priests. In addition to Fr. John Crowley, Fr. Anthony Woods would become a spiritual counselor, and Fr. Peter O’Brien a mentor, sometime manager, and later executor of her estate. All encouraged her to pursue her passion for composing sacred music. She also befriended Janet Burwash of the Pax Christi peace movement and met Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker movement at a Pax Conference in 1966. Day, along with others, suggested she compose a “jazz Mass.” Merton was involved with Pax and a frequent correspondent with Day, but if he knew of Williams’ connections with Pax or Day or her interest in writing such compositions his letters and journals give no indication. It is likely, however, that Williams learned more about Merton, his involvement in civil rights, and possibly his “Freedom Songs” through her association with Burwash and Day.⁷

In 1962 Williams composed her first published work of spiritual jazz, which she entitled “St.

Martin de Porres or Black Christ of the Andes.” Martin de Porres is considered the first person of color to be canonized by the Catholic Church and Williams created a 6½-minute hymn, written for a choir as a tribute to him. She performed the composition at St. Francis Xavier Church in New York in November 1962, and later that month at New York’s Philharmonic Hall at Lincoln Center (Dahl 273-76). Over the next several years she composed music for three jazz masses. One was written in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. following his assassination. The most memorable piece was *Music for Peace*, often referred to as “Mary Lou’s Mass,” a composition commissioned by the Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace. Although she would fail in her dream to have her Mass celebrated at the Vatican, “Mary Lou’s Mass” was performed at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City in February 1975. Williams continued to promote the spirituality of jazz in the years prior to her death in 1981.⁸

When she performed her first spiritual jazz composition in the early sixties, *Mary Lou Williams Presents Martin de Porres*, she would distribute a one-page mimeographed sheet titled “Jazz for the Soul.” On that sheet she talked of the “The Spiritual Feeling: The Characteristic of Good Jazz.” Her description of what constituted the spirituality of jazz was very similar to what excited Merton about the music. She noted that “the spiritual feeling, the deep conversation, and the mental telepathy going on between bass, drums, and a number of soloists, are the permanent characteristics of good jazz. The conversation can be of any type, exciting, soulful, or even humorous debating” (O’Brien 6).

Merton would undoubtedly have enjoyed and taken a great interest in “Mary Lou’s Mass.” Unfortunately, the two would never have the opportunity to discuss their mutual love of jazz or the spirituality they derived from the music. Equally unfortunate, neither would learn how much of an inspiration they were to each other through their writings and compositions.⁹

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 46-47; subsequent references will be cited as “SSM” parenthetically in the text.
2. Several of Merton’s friends have written of his love for jazz: see for example Ron Seitz, *Song for Nobody: A Memory Vision of Thomas Merton* (Liguori, MO: Triumph Books, 1993) 112-15; subsequent references will be cited as “Seitz” parenthetically in the text. Dick Sisto is a Louisville jazz musician who knew Merton well and composed the musical score for the Morgan Atkinson documentary *Soul Searching: The Journey of Thomas Merton*; his reminiscences can be heard in David Brent Johnson, “The Jazz Monk,” *Night Lights: Classic Jazz* at: www.indianapublicmedia.org/nightlights/soul-swing-jazz-religion (subsequent references will be cited as “Sisto, ‘Jazz Monk’” parenthetically in the text); see also the February 1, 2016 piece in *The Louisville Courier Journal*. See also Jim Knight, “The Thomas Merton We Knew,” Part 1, at: www.therealmerton.com and Tommie O’Callaghan’s humorous story of a night listening to jazz with Merton: “Remembering Merton: Part 2 – I’m Thomas Merton” at: www.fatherlouie.blogspot.com/2008/05/remembering-merton-part-2-im-thomas.html. Other writers have discussed at length Merton’s affection for the music: see Dianne Aprile, “The Art of Spontaneous Invention,” *Bellarmino: The Magazine of Bellarmine University* (Summer, 2007) 6-9; Christine M. Bochen, “Jazz,” in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 227-28 (subsequent references will be cited as “Merton Encyclopedia” parenthetically in the text); Kenneth J. Gray, “Song of Life: Merton, Music and Jazz,” *The Merton Journal* 11.1 (Easter 2004) 15-19; James Harford, *Merton & Friends: A Joint Biography of Thomas Merton, Robert Lax, and Edward Rice* (New York: Crossroad, 2006); Angus Stuart, “Merton and the Beats,” in Ross Labrie and Angus Stuart, eds., *Thomas Merton: Monk on the Edge* (North Vancouver, BC: Thomas Merton Society of Canada, 2012) 79-100; Carla Reuchert McCarty, “The Good Old Days of Jazz (An Interview with Gary Falk),” *Louisville Jazz Society Newsletter* (Spring, 2007); Robert Weldon Whalen, “Thomas Merton and John Coltrane: Jazz and the Mercy beyond Being,” *The Merton Annual* 30 (2017) 184-203.

3. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 227; subsequent references will be cited as "SS" parenthetically in the text.
4. Background on Williams' life and career can be found in Linda Dahl, *Morning Glory: A Biography of Mary Lou Williams* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) 8-62 (subsequent references will be cited as "Dahl" parenthetically in the text); see also her obituary in *The New York Times* (May 30, 1981) and Peter O'Brien, SJ, "Mary Lou Williams: Jazz for the Soul," *Smithsonian Folkways Magazine* (Fall 2010) (accessed at: <http://folkways.si.edu/magazine-fall-2010-mary-lou-williams-jazz-soul/ragtime/music/article/Smithsonian>) (subsequent references will be cited as "O'Brien" parenthetically in the text).
5. These comments can also be heard at the beginning of the 2014 Morgan Atkinson documentary, *The Many Storeys and Last Days of Thomas Merton*.
6. Background on the "Freedom Songs" can be found in William H. Shannon, "Freedom Songs" (*Merton Encyclopedia* 167); for an analysis of the entire set, see Patrick F. O'Connell, "'Eight Freedom Songs': Merton's Sequence of Liberation," *The Merton Annual* 7 (1994) 87-128.
7. See Dahl 270, and Robert Ellsberg, ed., *The Duty of Delight: The Diaries of Dorothy Day* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2008) 398.
8. Ian Marcus Corbin, "A Jazz Mass: The Vexing Legacy of Mary Lou Williams," *Commonweal* (December 7, 2012) (accessed at www.commonwealmagazine.org/jazz-mass).
9. Readers interested in hearing Williams' composition "Fifth Dimension," which Merton found "hot and abstract," can go to "Mary Lou Williams Girl Stars – Fifth Dimension (Mh Out)" at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBq6-fJ9SR4.