



Play Mary Lou Williams
Adam Fairhall & Johnny Hunter (Discus Music)
by John Sharpe

There have been a few album-length reappraisals of the work of the late Mary Lou Williams in recent years, but this terrific set from the Manchester, U.K.-based pairing of pianist Adam Fairhall and drummer Johnny Hunter manages to be both one of the most traditional and the most adventurous. Williams, whose birthday and death anniversary fall on this month (b. May 8, 1910 - d. May 28, 1981), was a pianist, composer and arranger who worked with many big names, but never quite received her due. In the last 25 years, though, there have been notable tributes. Pianist Geri Allen's Mary Lou Williams Collective performed and recorded *Zodiac Suite: Revisited* (2000-3) and then, with Oliver Lake, Reggie Workman and Andrew Cyrille's Trio 3, Allen celebrated Williams' compositions in 2010 (at Birdland and documented on Intakt). Of more recent vintage, the Paris-based Umlaut Big Band tackled a number of Williams' less-covered charts (2021), bassist Jeong Lim Yang released *Zodiac Suite: Reassured* (2022) and Aaron Diehl and the Knights Orchestra also revisited *Zodiac Suite* (2023).

Like the aforementioned Trio 3 and Umlaut projects, *Play Mary Lou Williams* here includes a rendition of "Roll

'Em", a Williams blues composed for Benny Goodman's band in 1937. The duo's version begins straightforwardly enough, with rollicking boogie-woogie piano shadowed by crisp drum figures, then gradually loosens its moorings, briefly regaining equilibrium before completely relinquishing the beat in a series of darting conversational exchanges and flurries of ivory, wood and skin. Other cuts similarly weave in and out of time and tune, subject to a range of inventive approaches that manage to sound organic rather than forced. But that's not to say the musicians don't play off the themes on occasion, extrapolating on particular motifs or moods. "Lady Be Good", purloined by Thelonious Monk under the title "Hackensack", offers a case in point, taken on a far-reaching excursion, which nonetheless retains familial resemblance to the original. This approach is even more so in the poignant valedictory reprise that closes the album.

Fairhall has noted that the piano-drums format is one favored in both stride (e.g. Willie "The Lion" Smith with Papa Jo Jones) and free music (e.g. Don Pullen with Milford Graves), and in these hands it serves more than adequately for both styles. Fairhall enhances the period feel by his use of upright piano, while Hunter restricts himself solely to snare drum. However, that decision in no way limits his expressiveness, as can be heard from his tappy, scratchy improv textures on an otherwise stealthy interpretation of "Nicole". The joyous renditions of Williams' material are clearly full of affection, even as the pair deconstruct, fragment and even totally abandon them. Ultimately, the merry confluence of jaunty swinging grooves and spirited digressions into the weeds enriches both.

For more info visit discus-music.org. Juilliard Jazz' Mary Lou Williams Ensemble is at Blue Note May 3. See Calendar.



The Best of Berlin
Peter & Will Anderson (Arbors)
by Scott Yanow

Irving Berlin (1888-1989) wrote an estimated 1,200-1,500 songs during a period between 1907-66, including dozens of what would become well-known standards and many more that have occasionally been recorded through the years. On *The Best of Berlin*, Peter Anderson (tenor, clarinet) arranged 13 of Berlin's songs for a quintet/sextet that includes twin brother Will Anderson (alto, clarinet, flute), Rossano Sportiello (piano), Neal Miner (bass), Chuck Redd (drums) and special guest Wycliffe Gordon (trombone, vocals).

While it is mentioned in the liners that these performances cover a wide range of styles, in reality this is a '50s-style mainstream session with occasional hints of New Orleans jazz and '30s swing. The Anderson brothers have very complementary styles no matter which horns they are playing. Sportiello is one of the great pre-bop and stride pianists around today, while Miner and Redd swing at every tempo and have some short solos along the way. It goes without saying that Gordon (who appears on about half the selections) is always a major asset.

The album opener is the composer's first big hit,





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