

Mary Lou Williams: Found faith in Christ's Church

February's celebration of Black History Month in the United States traces its roots back to the 1920s, although it gained more formal recognition in the '70s. All during February, we'll be sharing stories of holy and often unknown black Catholics.

Life as a globetrotting musician caught up with Mary Lou Williams while performing at a Paris nightclub in 1954. The jazz pianist and composer later said that the “‘greed, selfishness and envy” she saw in her life caused her to get up and walk out that night mid-performance and leave her career. “I got a sign that everybody should pray every day ... I had never felt a conscious desire to get close to God. But it seemed that night that it all came to a head. I couldn't take it any longer. So I just left – the piano, the money, all of it,” she said.

She spent the next three years in something of a contemplative state, passing the majority of her days in prayer at a Catholic church near her New York City apartment, which she loved because it was the only church she could find open at all hours.

After converting to Catholicism in 1957, Williams was a changed woman.

Williams returned to music at the urging of many friends, including priests and jazz legend Dizzy Gillespie. Her revived career reflected her new-found faith and included a mix of teaching and composing – including three Mass settings and a well-known piece honoring St. Martin de Porres.

“I am praying through my fingers when I play,” she said. “I get that good ‘soul sound,’ and I try to touch people's

spirits.” Williams died in 1981.

- [Read more about Mary Lou Williams.](#)
- [Read more about the contributions of black Catholics to the U.S. Church.](#)