

# Celebrating African American History

## February 2019 – Week 4

28 biographies for 28 days  
compiled by Reverend Carolyn Matthews

### **Mary Beatrice Davidson Kenner (1912-2006)**

There are some things we use that we probably never give much thought to as to where they came from or how they were developed. Yet, they have some significance in how we move about in our lives on a daily basis. What is presented here would fit in that category.

Mary Beatrice Davidson Kenner was born in Monroe, North Carolina and credited her father, Sidney Nathaniel Davidson, with giving her a thirst for discovering things. Her sister, Mildred Davidson Austin Smith was also an inventor.

Kenner invented a sanitary belt in 1956, a sanitary belt with moisture-proof napkin pocket, and a bathroom tissue holder in 1982 (among other hygienic inventions). The sanitary belt gave women a better alternative for handling their periods. It was patented 30 years after she invented it, because the company who was initially interested in her creation rejected it when they learned that Kenner was African American.

Although tampons were available to women, they were discouraged from using them because it was considered “indecent.” Another alternative was to use a cloth or rag, but this method was often unsanitary and inconvenient. Women and girls who opted for cloth usually needed to stay indoors during cycle. Sanitary belts were not only more practical, they were more liberating. It wasn't until the 1960s that maxi pads became more readily available.

As for the bathroom tissue holder, Kenner's design was an improved version of the common holder that allowed the loose end of a bathroom tissue roll to be accessible at all times. She received patent #4,354,643, on October 19, 1982 for this device. Kenner's prolific creations also include a mountable back washer and a carrier attachment for an invalid walker.

Kenner worked as a professional floral arranger and had her own business in the Washington DC area. Her intent, with her inventions, was to make people's lives easier.

<https://blackthen.com/hid-mary-beatrice-davidson-kenners-hygiene-inventions-changed-bathroom-experience/>  
<https://www.ncpedia.org/industry/women-inventors>

### **Percy Julian (1899 – 1975)**

Percy Julian's story brings to mind the question, “How farther along would we be, or what has the world lost in the way of knowledge and invention because some child who held a future cure or discovery was kept from reaching his/her full potential?” It is a strange and painful feeling (disconcerting?) to read about someone who has the ability and temperament to advance in a field but is told not to try – because of other folks' issues. What he eventually was able to give to the world benefits all humankind – including those folks who set fire to his house.

Percy Julian was born April 11, 1899 in Montgomery, Alabama. He attended elementary school in Birmingham and moved back to Montgomery, Alabama where he attended high school at the State Normal School for Negroes. Upon graduation in 1916, Julian applied to and was accepted into DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana. At DePauw, he began as a probationary student, having to take higher level high school classes along with his freshman and sophomore course load. He proved himself well, going on to be named a member of the Sigma Xi honorary society as well as a Phi Beta Kappa member. Finally, upon graduation from DePauw in 1920, he was selected as the class valedictorian. Although he graduated at the top of his class, he was discouraged from seeking admission into graduate school because of potential racial sentiment on the part of his future coworkers and employers. Instead, he took the advice of an advisor and took a position as a chemistry teacher at Fisk University, a Black college in Nashville, Tennessee.

After two years at Fisk, Julian was awarded the Austin Fellowship in Chemistry and moved to Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Finally given an opportunity at graduate level work, Julian excelled. He achieved straight A's, finishing at the top of his class and received a Masters Degree in 1923. Even with this success, Julian was unable to obtain a position as a teaching assistant at any major universities because of the perception that White students would refuse to learn under a Black instructor. Thus, he moved on to a teaching position at West Virginia State College for Negroes. He left West Virginia and served as an associate professor of chemistry at Howard University in Washington, D.C. for two years.

In late 1935, Percy Julian decided to leave the world of academics and entered the corporate world by accepting a position with the Glidden Company as chief chemist and the Director of the Soya Product Division. This was a significant development as he was the first Black scientist hired for such a position and would pave the way for other Blacks in the future. The Glidden Company was a leading manufacturer of paint and varnish and was counting on Julian to develop compounds from soy-based products which could be used to make paints and other products. Julian did not disappoint, coming up with products such as aero-foam which worked as a flame retardant and was used by the United States Navy and saved the lives of countless sailors during World War II.

Percy continued his success as he next developed a way to inexpensively develop male and female hormones from soy beans. These hormones would help to prevent miscarriages in pregnant women and would be used to fight cancer and other ailments. He next set out to provide a synthetic version of cortisone, a product which greatly relieved the pain of those suffering from rheumatoid arthritis. The real cortisone was extremely expensive and only rich people could afford it. With Julian's discovery of the soy-based substitute, millions of sufferers around the world found relief at a reasonable price. So significant was his work that in 1950 the City of Chicago named him Chicagoan of the Year. While the honor should have signaled Julian's acceptance by his white counterparts in his field and community, when he soon after purchased a home for his family in nearby Oak Park, the home was set afire by an arsonist on Thanksgiving Day 1950. A year later, dynamite was thrown from a passing car and exploded outside the bedroom window of Percy's children. Despite the fact that many residents of the town relied upon his methods to relieve their pains and provide for their safety, some still could not stand to have him as their neighbor simply because he was Black.

In 1954, Julian left the Glidden Company to establish Julian Laboratories which specialized in producing his synthetic cortisone. When he discovered that wild yams in Mexico were even more effective than soya beans for some of his products, he opened the Laboratorios Julian de Mexico in Mexico City, Mexico which cultivated the yams and shipped them to Oak Park for refinement. In 1961 he sold the Oak Park plant to Smith, Kline and French, a giant pharmaceutical company and received a sum of 2.3 million dollars (nearly 16 million dollars today).

Percy Julian received more than 130 chemical patents. He was one of the first African Americans to receive a doctorate in chemistry; was the first African American chemist inducted into the National Academy of Sciences and the second African American scientist inducted (behind David Blackwell) from any field. Percy Julian was an active fundraiser for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) for their project to sue to enforce civil rights legislation. Julian died on April 19, 1975 in Waukegan, IL.

More on Percy Julian:

<https://www.chemheritage.org/historical-profile/percy-lavon-julian>

<http://www.biography.com/people/percy-julian-9359018>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/julian/lrk-whowasjulian-exp.html>

### **Anna Julia Haywood Cooper (1858 – 1964)**

Anna Julia Haywood Cooper was a writer, teacher, and activist who championed education for African Americans and women. Born into bondage in 1858 in Raleigh, North Carolina, she was the daughter of an enslaved woman, Hannah Stanley, and her owner, George Washington Haywood. In 1867 Anna began her formal education. In 1877 she married George A.G. Cooper, a teacher of theology. When her husband died in 1879, Cooper decided to pursue a college degree. She attended Oberlin College in Ohio on a tuition scholarship, earning a BA in 1884 and a Masters in Mathematics in 1887. After graduation Cooper worked at Wilberforce University and Saint Augustine's before moving to Washington, D.C. to teach at Washington Colored High School.

Cooper published her first book, *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South*, in 1892. In addition to calling for equal education for women, *A Voice from the South* advanced Cooper's assertion that educated African American women were necessary for uplifting the entire black race. The book of essays gained national attention. In 1902, Cooper began a controversial stint as principal of M Street High School (formerly Washington Colored High). The white Washington, D.C. school board disagreed with her educational approach for black students, which focused on college preparation, and she resigned in 1906.

In addition to working to advance African American educational opportunities, Cooper also established and co-founded several organizations to promote black civil rights causes. Since the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) did not accept African American members, she created "colored" branches to provide support for young black migrants moving from the South into Washington, D.C.

Cooper resumed graduate study in 1911 at Columbia University in New York City. When her brother died she postponed her doctoral studies to raise his five grandchildren. She returned to

school in 1924 when she enrolled at the University of Paris in France. In 1925, at the age of 67, Cooper became the fourth African American woman to obtain a PhD.

In 1930, Cooper retired from teaching to assume the presidency of Frelinghuysen University, a school for black adults. She served as the school's registrar after it was reorganized into the Frelinghuysen Group of Schools for Colored People. Cooper remained in that position until the school closed in the 1950s. Anna Julia Cooper died in 1964 in Washington, D.C. at the age of 105.

See full article and source material at:

<http://www.blackpast.org/aah/cooper-anna-julia-haywood-1858-1964#sthash.PNNW5IIV.dpuf>

### **Eartha Kitt (1927-2008)**

Born in North, South Carolina, famed singer and actress, Eartha Kitt, had a difficult childhood. Her mother abandoned her, and she was left in the care of relatives who mistreated her. Kitt was often teased and picked on because of her mixed-race heritage—her father was white, and her mother was African-American and Cherokee.

As a child, Kitt moved to New York City to live with an aunt. There, she eventually enrolled in the New York School of Performing Arts. As a teen, she won a scholarship to study with Katherine Dunham, and later joined Dunham's dance troupe and toured with the group for several years before going solo. In Paris, Kitt became a popular nightclub singer. She was discovered in Europe by actor-director Orson Welles. Welles, who reportedly called her "the most exciting woman alive," cast her as Helen of Troy in his production of *Dr. Faustus*.

Kitt became a rising star with her appearance in the Broadway review, "New Faces" of 1952. In the production, she sang "Monotonous." Her performance helped launch her music career with the release of her first album in 1954. The recording featured such signature songs as "I Want To Be Evil" and "C'est Si Bon," as well as the holiday classic "Santa Baby."

On the big screen, Kitt starred opposite Nat "King" Cole in the W. C. Handy biopic *St. Louis Blues* (1958). She netted her one and only Academy Award nomination the following year, for her role as the title character in *Anna Lucasta*. In the film, Kitt plays a sassy young woman who is forced to use her womanly wiles to survive. She stars opposite Sammy Davis Jr.

In the late 1960s, Kitt played one of her most famous parts—the villainous vixen "Catwoman." She took over the role, on the TV series *Batman*, from Julie Newmar. Kitt only played Catwoman on a handful of episodes of the short-lived campy crime show, but she made the role her own with her lithe, cat-like frame and her distinctive voice. The series found a second life in reruns.

Always outspoken, Kitt was able to channel her celebrity into activism. In May 1967, she testified before Congress along with Washington D.C. youth group, "Rebels with a Cause," on behalf of President Lyndon B. Johnson's juvenile delinquency bill.

Lady Bird Johnson subsequently invited Kitt to her "Women Doers' Luncheon" on Jan. 18, 1968, for a discussion of what women could do to help eradicate crime on the streets. Towards the end of the luncheon, Lady Bird asked the room of 50 women, from groups such as the Association of

Colored Women's Club and the League of Women Voters, including a few governor's wives, for their comments. Kitt raised her hand and told the first lady of the United States exactly what she thought — juvenile crime was in part a pushback against being drafted to serve in the Vietnam War.

"Boys I know across the nation feel it doesn't pay to be a good guy," Kitt said. "They figure with a record they don't have to go off to Vietnam. You send the best of this country off to be shot and maimed. They rebel in the street. They will take pot and they will get high. They don't want to go to school because they're going to be snatched off from their mothers to be shot in Vietnam." Kitt continued: "Mrs. Johnson, you are a mother too, although you have had daughters and not sons. I am a mother and I know the feeling of having a baby come out of my guts. I have a baby and then you send him off to war. No wonder the kids rebel and take pot. And, Mrs. Johnson, in case you don't understand the lingo that's marijuana."

The cultural and political backlash was swift. The Washington Post reported at the time that President Johnson had Kitt blacklisted. According to Broadly, Kitt alleged that the White House, which had sent a car for her, didn't arrange a car for her departure and she had to catch a cab.

Unable to get jobs in the United States, Kitt was forced to perform in Europe until she returned to America in 1978 to headline the Broadway musical *Timbuktu!* It was later unveiled by the New York Times that the CIA, prompted by the Secret Service in 1968, had kept a dossier on her. "It was really heart-breaking to her and very upsetting that her own government turned on her for something as simple as just giving an honest response to a question," said Kitt Shapiro, Eartha Kitt's daughter. "And that was really something, I think, that she really never let go of, that disappointment." Kitt enjoyed a career renaissance with her performance on Broadway in "*Timbuktu!*" She earned a Tony Award nomination for her role in the play, and received an invitation to the White House by President Jimmy Carter. In 1984, Kitt returned to the music charts with "Where Is My Man." She continued to win acclaim for her music, including scoring a Grammy Award nomination for 1994's "Back in Business."

Throughout her adult life, Kitt had a tremendous work ethic. She kept up a busy work schedule well into her 70s. In 2000, Kitt netted a Tony Award nomination for her work in "*The Wild Party*" with Toni Collette. She picked up a Daytime Emmy Award for her vocal performance on the animated children's series "*The Emperor's New School*" that same year, and again in 2007.

For many years, Kitt performed her cabaret act at New York's Cafe Carlyle. She continued to wow audiences as she had so many decades before, when she was the toast of Paris. With her voice, charm and sex appeal, Kitt knew how to win over a crowd. Kitt learned that she had colon cancer in 2006, a disease that ended up taking her life on December 25, 2008.

<https://www.biography.com/people/eartha-kitt-9366124>

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2018/02/16/eartha-kitt-and-lady-bird-johnson-vietnam/321602002/>

### **Nichelle Nichols (1932)**

Nichelle Nichols was born Grace Nichols on December 28, 1932, in Robbins, Illinois. Her father was both the town mayor and its chief magistrate. Her parents, Samuel Earl and Lishia (Parks) Nichols, encouraged her early interest in singing and acting. Nichols studied dance at the

Chicago Ballet Academy and aspired to perform on Broadway; she admired African-American female vocalists such as Lena Horne, Eartha Kitt and Mahalia Jackson.

In her early career, Nichols sang with the Duke Ellington Orchestra and the Lionel Hampton Orchestra. She made her film debut in 1959, as an uncredited dancer in a film adaptation of the opera "Porgy and Bess" starring Sidney Poitier, Dorothy Dandridge, and Sammy Davis Jr. For her work in the theater, she was twice nominated for the "Sara Siddon Award" as best actress and is an accomplished dancer and singer. Her first "Siddon" nomination was for her portrayal of Hazel Sharp in "Kicks and Co.," and the second for her performance in "The Blacks." Nichols also began to work in television, including an appearance on the series "The Lieutenant" in 1964 where she met Gene Roddenberry which led to an offer from him to join the cast of "Star Trek." She was ultimately cast in the now-legendary series as Lieutenant Uhura, communications officer for the Starship Enterprise. (The name "Uhura" was adapted from "uhuru," the Swahili word for "freedom.")

Nichols's groundbreaking television performance as an African-American woman in a confident, authoritative role drew immediate notice from Star Trek's audience. Nichols, still envisioning herself as a theater performer, considered leaving the series after the first season. However, a conversation with the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr., during which he told her she couldn't give up—that she was a vital role model for young black women in America. Needless to say, she changed her mind.

Nichols appeared throughout the run of Star Trek, from 1966 to 1969. As Uhura, she enacted television's first interracial kiss, with William Shatner's Captain James T. Kirk in the 1968 episode "Plato's Stepchildren." Nichols also appeared in six Star Trek motion pictures released between 1979 and 1991.

Nichols has added other movie credits to her resume, the film "Truck Turner" in 1974, the Disney comedy "Snow Dogs" in 2002, and the family comedy "Are We There Yet?" in 2005. She appeared as a recurring character in several episodes of the television series "Heroes" in 2007.

Nichols also made occasional returns to live performance, as in her one-woman show Reflections, a tribute to women of jazz and blues. She showcased her singing in two albums, Down to Earth and Out of This World.

Building on her name recognition from "Star Trek," in the late 1970s and 1980s Nichols participated in the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's efforts to recruit women and minorities for the space shuttle program. For her work, she received NASA's distinguished Public Service Award. She has a consultant firm, "Women in Motion Inc." through which she produced and starred in the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum film "What's in It for Me?". Nichols flew aboard the C-141 Astronomy Observatory, which analyzed the atmospheres of Mars and Saturn, on an eight-hour, high-altitude mission. She was also special guest at the Jet Propulsion Lab in Pasadena on July 17, 1976 to view the Viking probe's soft landing on Mars. Along with the other cast members from the original Star Trek, she attended the christening of the first space shuttle, Enterprise, at Cape Canaveral. With all this, she has not neglected her singing making a series of video albums. She has written two science-fiction novels, Saturn's Child and Saturna's Quest. In 1994 she published her autobiography, Beyond Uhura: Star Trek and Other Memories.

<https://www.biography.com/people/nichelle-nichols-21218845>  
[http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0629667/bio?ref\\_=nm\\_ov\\_bio\\_sm](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0629667/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm)  
[http://www.startrek.com/database\\_article/nicholsnichelle](http://www.startrek.com/database_article/nicholsnichelle)

### **Oscar Brown (1926 – 2005)**

Oscar Cicero Brown Jr. was born on October 10, 1926, in Chicago, Illinois. His father, Oscar Sr., was a lawyer and real estate agent and his mother, Helen Clark Brown, taught school. Though African Americans were legally, socially, and economically second-class citizens throughout most of the country, Brown and his sister Helen enjoyed a comfortable middle-class upbringing. "I really enjoyed growing up in Chicago, you could say I was fat, dumb and happy," Brown told *Black World Today*. "I wasn't aware of a lot of the problems." However, Brown soon learned about activism by example. His father was a leader of the Chicago branch of the NAACP and both of his parents were active church-goers, committed to giving back to their community.

At the age of 15, Brown got his first taste of show business when he landed a role on the national radio series, *Secret City*. During his early education, Brown had been an excellent student. For the next few years Brown bounced from Wisconsin to the University of Michigan to Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. With the exception of English, Brown was a failure in college. "I never got out of my college freshman year," Brown told *Global Black News*. "However, I was turned on to writing."

After returning to Chicago in 1947, Brown landed a broadcasting job with Chicago's first African-American radio news show, *Negro News Front*. It brought him face-to-face with the current events affecting the black community. "[That] sort of pivoted me," Brown told *Black World Today*, "it changed me around and made me not only an actor but also an activist." He became involved with the Civil Rights Congress, a movement led by Chicago activist Will Patterson that openly accused the U.S. government of genocide against black peoples. Brown also joined the Communist Party.

At the age of 21, Brown decided to go into politics. He joined the Progressive Party and ran for Illinois State representative. Although defeated, he ran again in 1952 in the Republican Primary for Congressman of the 1<sup>st</sup> District which he also lost. As Brown became more politically active, his on-air commentaries became increasingly radical. By 1953 the white station owners had had enough and *Negro News Front* was cancelled. By the mid-1950s the Communist Party had also had enough. "I got kicked out for being a black nationalist.... We were too black for the Reds," he was quoted in *Black World Today*.

Over the next few years Brown served in the U.S. Army and worked for his father. Eventually he returned to his first love—writing—and started to compose songs. In order to get them heard, he began singing in local night clubs. In turning to music, he did not abandon politics. "The liberation of black people from the domination of racist whites can only be achieved by application of the necessary force. Can music provide this force? Yes, it can, due to its matchless ability to stir the human spirit," he wrote in an essay entitled "Music: The Liberating Force," published on his Web site.

In 1959 Brown attended the Chicago opening of Lorraine Hansberry's play, "A Raisin in the Sun." There he met the playwright's husband, Robert Nemiroff, a music publisher from New York. Impressed with Brown's music, Nemiroff made an introduction to executives at Columbia

Records. Columbia promptly offered Brown a recording contract. Brown was not so sure. "When they first sent me the contract for a singer, I wanted to go in as a writer," he told Global Black News. "I let a year go by before I realized that was the best offer I was going to get so I signed as a singer."

Brown's 1960 album "Sin and Soul" debuted to critical acclaim and made Brown a national celebrity. The 12 songs moved from hard-hitting social commentary to light-hearted humor, all bound by the rhythmic flow of classic jazz. "Bid 'Em In" offered a somber look at slave auctions delivered with a lyrical style that many critics have called a foreshadowing of rap. "Signifyin' Monkey" was a humorous reworking of an old black folk tale. "Brown Baby" was a lullaby written for his newborn son, Oscar III. It was later made famous by gospel legend Mahalia Jackson. Several songs were instrumentals by other jazz artists to which Brown added lyrics, including Mongo Santamaria's "Afro Blue," Nat Adderley's "Work Song," and Bobby Timmons' "Dat Dere."

The success of "Sin and Soul" introduced Brown into the world of jazz greats. Brown's performance style made him an instant sensation. Brown was soon sharing the stage with names like Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, and John Coltrane. He teamed up with drumming great Max Roach to pen lyrics for Roach's 1960 Civil Rights album, "We Insist! Freedom Now Suite." In 1962 he headlined a sold-out shows in London called "Oscar Brown Entertains."

Even as "Sin and Soul" was cementing his fame as a singer, Brown remained a writer at heart. Making the rounds of New York's music scene he always had a copy of his musical, "Kicks and Company," in hand. Dealing with racism and revolution, Kicks was both timely and riveting. Determined to produce the show on Broadway, Brown embarked on a string of fundraisers including private performances for guests from Martin Luther King to Harry Belafonte. In an unprecedented—and never repeated—display of support, NBC's Today Show dedicated a full-two hour program to Brown and Kicks. Though the play never made it to Broadway, it did have a brief run in Chicago in 1961.

In 1962 Brown moved to Los Angeles to host the television program Jazz Scene USA. There he met singer and dancer Jean Pace. The two would eventually marry and collaborate on dozens of projects during a 30-plus-year partnership. Back in Chicago, Brown wrote and produced the musical "Opportunity Please Knock." It was a success, not only for its music but for its performers—members of the notorious Chicago street gang, Blackstone Rangers. The Washington Post wrote that Brown originally confronted the gang members about "steppin' on my hustle, scaring my audience." Eventually he recruited them to appear in the show. The result was a reduction in gang violence and national fame. Members of the gang were invited to perform on the popular TV show The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour. Brown was also recruited by Gary, Indiana, officials to launch a talent search in that town's troubled inner-city. Among his early discoveries were five brothers known as the Jackson Five.

Brown produced several other plays during the 1960s, including "Joy 66," "Summer in the City", and "Buck White." The latter, a musical based on themes of black power and militancy, made it to Broadway with Muhammad Ali in the title role. At the time Ali was under a government-enforced hiatus from boxing due to his refusal to join the Vietnam War draft. Meanwhile Brown continued to write and record music all for Columbia. In 1965 he moved to Verve and recorded the critically hailed "Mr. Oscar Goes to Washington." Like "Sin and Soul," this album showcased Brown's vocal dexterity and ability to swing from politically confrontational songs

such as "Brother Where Are You" and "Forty Acres and a Mule" to lighthearted humor as in "Living Double in a World of Trouble," about having two girlfriends at once.

By 1972 Brown had recorded nine albums and collaborated on dozens more. Though jazz aficionados considered him a visionary, Brown could not get a new recording contract. Nonetheless, Brown stayed active in music and theater. He served as artist-in-residence at Howard University in Washington, D.C., where he produced "Slave Song," a musical drama told in rhyme. He produced a television special, "Oscar Brown Is Back," that won two Chicago Emmy awards. In 1983 his play "Great Nitty Gritty" debuted in Chicago, once again with local youth in the cast. Brown also made television appearances, hosting music specials such as the 13-week PBS series "From Jump Street: The Story of Black Music," and guest starring on shows like "Brewster Place" and "Roc." He also regularly performed onstage, often with his daughter, jazz singer Maggie Brown. His son Oscar III had also shared the stage with his father until his 1996 death in an auto accident.

Brown made a comeback in 1995 with the album "Then and Now," a compilation of old and new songs. Despite his age, his voice was still commanding and his message still relevant. Three years later, Brown recorded the live album "Live Every Minute" during a tour of Europe. He was 72 at the time. Over the next few years Brown toured worldwide, headlining shows and appearing at political rallies, including several against the Iraq War. He also became an honored guest on the Russell Simmons show "Def Poetry Jam." In 2003 the show "Serenade the World: The Music and Words of Oscar Brown Jr." debuted to packed houses in New York. In 2004 a documentary about his life, "Music Is My Life, Politics Is My Mistress," premiered.

In 2004, when asked by NPR radio host Tavis Smiley what he gets out of performing at the age of 78, Brown responded, "Same thing I got out of it at 38...people are applauding." He added, "That's the best of all possible worlds. And so, you know, the more I can keep that going..." Brown did keep it going, all the way to May 29, 2005, when he died of respiratory failure. The loss was great, but as his daughter Maggie said in a statement quoted in the Chicago Defender, "he has left a wealth of works that will continue to touch the world."

Oscar Brown Jr. was not a man easily defined. Labels like songwriter, composer, actor, singer, director, producer, playwright all fit, but not quite. He was also an activist, a visionary, and a social commentator. As influenced by the Harlem Renaissance as he was by the Civil Rights Movement, Brown had a desire to create and to communicate. "I wanted to present a picture of black culture to anyone who could hear it," the Los Angeles Times quoted him as saying. In doing so he penned over 1,000 songs, recorded 11 albums, and wrote several plays. Though he never received the recognition many felt he deserved during his life, his music and words have had a continued influence on a whole new generation of artists and activists.

Full article and further reading:

<http://biography.jrank.org/pages/2789/Brown-Oscar-Jr.html>

<https://www.allmusic.com/artist/oscar-brown-jr-mn0000894827/biography>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/31/arts/music/oscar-brown-jr-entertainer-and-social-activist-dies-at-78.html>

## **Mary Lou Williams (1910 – 1981)**

Mary Elfrieda Scruggs was born on May 8, 1910, in Atlanta, Georgia. She grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. When Scruggs was a small child, she surprised her mother by playing a song she had just heard on the family's pump organ. Trained by her mother, and aided by her gift of perfect pitch, she was playing professionally by the age of seven.

Appearing as Mary Lou Burley (her stepfather's last name), she worked in locations that ranged from gambling dens to the vaudeville stage. As a teenager, she started performing with saxophonist John Williams. The two married in 1927, thus making her Mary Lou Williams. A few years later, Williams followed her husband to Kansas City, where she would become an integral part of the swing scene.

Though relegated to menial tasks at first, Mary Lou Williams began performing with the Twelve Clouds of Joy, a Kansas City band led by Andy Kirk. In addition to being the group's pianist throughout the 1930s, she also composed and arranged much of its music. Her success with the Twelve Clouds of Joy meant Williams was soon sending compositions and arrangements to bandleaders such as Tommy Dorsey, Earl Hines, Benny Goodman, and Duke Ellington. Her work as a composer and arranger for Andy Kirk's Twelve Clouds of Joy in the early 1930s reveals one of the earliest examples of a woman given due respect from her peers for her musicianship. Williams' career opens a window into the critically important Kansas City jazz scene that produced such giants as Count Basie, Lester Young, and Charlie Parker.

In 1942, Williams left Kirk's band. When her second marriage to trumpeter Shorty Baker ended, she settled in New York City. There, she performed at a Greenwich Village nightclub and on a weekly radio show. Her Harlem apartment became a gathering place for musicians, and was where Williams mentored talents like Thelonious Monk and Dizzy Gillespie.

During her time in New York, Williams demonstrated her musical adaptability. Not only did she incorporate bebop into her playing, she created longer pieces such as the "Zodiac Suite." Three movements of this 12-part composition were performed at Carnegie Hall in 1946. In 1952, Williams relocated to Europe, where she remained until she walked out of a performance in Paris in 1954.

Even after Williams returned to the United States, she refrained from performing, as she felt that her spiritual needs were incompatible with the world of jazz. However, she eventually found solace in Catholicism. In 1956, Williams underwent a spiritual conversion to Catholicism and gave up playing to concentrate on spiritual matters until reemerging in 1957 with a performance alongside Dizzy Gillespie at the Newport Jazz Festival. Compared to her rigorous schedule of touring over the previous 30 years, she played only sporadically over the next decade. She formed the Bel Canto Foundation to assist drug- and alcohol-dependent musicians in 1958. This initiative prefigured her founding of Cecilia Music, a publishing firm to release her compositions, and the establishment of her own record label, Mary Records, the first started by a woman, to issue her and other selected artists' recordings. Given her newfound Catholic faith, Williams began to work on sacred pieces, composing several masses. One of these was Mary Lou's Mass (originally called Music for Peace).

In 1971, Mary Lou's Mass was interpreted by choreographer Alvin Ailey. Four years later, it became the first jazz piece to be performed at New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral. Williams still

continued to perform, including at President Jimmy Carter's White House Jazz Party. In 1977, her career undertook yet another significant turn. Duke University formalized William's role as an educator by appointing her as artist-in-residence, a position she held until her death in 1981. Duke permanently honored William's contributions by opening the Mary Lou Williams Center for Black Culture in September 1983 with an address by Nobel Prize winning author Toni Morrison.

Williams was 71 when she succumbed to bladder cancer in Durham, North Carolina, on May 28, 1981. She left behind more than 350 compositions. Though she is known for being one of the first women to succeed in jazz, she had a career whose accomplishments place her in the top echelon of musicians.

Jazz fans and historians long ago concluded that Mary Lou Williams was the most important female jazz musician to emerge in the first three decades of jazz. William's multidimensional talents as an instrumentalist, arranger, and composer made her a star from her earliest days and, over the long haul, an equal to any musician successful in those endeavors. Her longevity as a top-flight jazz artist was extended because of her penchant for adapting to and influencing stylistic changes in the music. In his autobiography, *Music Is My Mistress*, Duke Ellington wrote, "Mary Lou Williams is perpetually contemporary. Her writing and performing have always been a little ahead throughout her career. Her music retains, and maintains, a standard of quality that is timeless. She is like soul on soul."

<https://www.biography.com/people/mary-lou-williams-9532632>

<http://newarkwww.rutgers.edu/ijs/mlw/intro3.html>

<https://www.npr.org/2017/08/07/541822331/shocking-omissions-mary-lou-williams-choral-masterpiece-black-christ-of-the-ande>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjM63eZmsao> (on Mr. Rogers neighborhood)