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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Claude “Fiddler” Williams (22 February 1908 – 25 April 2004), violinist and guitarist was born Claude Gabriel Williams in Muskogee, Oklahoma, the son of Lee J. Williams, a blacksmith, and Laura Williams, home maker. The youngest of six children, Williams learned to play piano, guitar and four string mandolin from his brother-in-law Ben Johnson. He picked up the violin at age 8 or 9 after hearing Joe Venuti. After becoming proficient on violin, Williams joined his brother-in-law’s string band. The band traveled by train on a circuit between Muskogee, Tulsa, and Oklahoma City. The band performed ragtime, popular standards and blues for tips in barbershops, hotels, and on the street.

In 1927 Williams joined T. Holder’s Dark Clouds of Joy at the Louvre Ballroom in Tulsa. The band alternated between Tulsa and Oklahoma City playing jitney dances, so called because management gave away a car, commonly referred to as a jitney, as a door prize on Saturday nights. Williams modeled his big tone after the reed and brass sections. A strong soloist, he improvised off song changes.

In December 1928 Andy Kirk took over the band after an irregularity with the payroll and shortened the name to the Clouds of Joy. In July 1929 the band opened at the Pla-Mor Ballroom in Kansas City, a wide-open entertainment mecca for the Midwest. Kirk moved the band’s headquarters to Kansas City and established a regional circuit. In January 1930 the band replaced the Fletcher Henderson band at the Roseland Ballroom in New York. Williams resisted Kirk’s repeated request to set aside his violin and concentrate on playing guitar with the rhythm section. When Williams fell ill while on the road, the band left him behind.

Back in Kansas City, Williams worked for a year with a small ensemble at a taxi dance hall. After a short stint with the Chick Stevens band in Peoria, Illinois, Williams joined the Eddie Cole band, featuring Nat Cole, in Chicago. A top local pianist with a stutter, Cole had yet to discover he could sing. Williams left the band when work became scarce during a southern tour and returned to Chicago.

In early fall 1936 Count Basie sent for Williams to join the Barons of Rhythm at the Reno Club in Kansas City. With the support of John Hammond and the Willard Alexander Agency, Basie expanded the band to 14 pieces for a tour to New York. Lacking suitable arrangements, the band got off to a rough start. The band arrived in New York to mixed reviews. George Simon in his “Dance Band Reviews” column in *Metronome* February 1937 tempered his criticism of the band’s debut in New York by praising Williams’ “good hot fiddle passages.” Nevertheless, at the urging of Hammond, Basie let Williams go for guitarist Freddie Green, a steady rhythm player, during an engagement at the Hotel William Penn in Pittsburgh.

Williams returned to Kansas City and formed the Three Swing Men of Swing, a string trio that opened at Lucille’s Paradise, a popular club on 18th Street. In 1938, Williams moved to Flint, Michigan, and joined a WPA band. During World War II, Williams worked a day job welding tanks before being inducted into the service in 1944. Discharged after nine months of service, he returned to Chicago where he worked with the Four Shades of Rhythm and guitarist Austin Powell, the former leader of the Cats and the Fiddle.

After being stranded in New York, Williams left Powell and traveled to the west coast where he replaced the guitarist in Roy Milton's Solid Senders. Williams easily mastered the electric guitar and adapted to the band's orchestral style of rhythm and blues. The Milton band toured widely up the west coast and across the Midwest. Williams left the group in Wichita and returned to Kansas City.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Williams worked mainly in Kansas City, playing the Blue Room, Orchid Room, Fandango and other small night clubs. Williams, doubling on guitar and violin, employed organist Charles Kynard, alto saxophonist Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson and other top players. In the late 1960s, when work became scarce in Kansas City, Williams freelanced in Los Angeles.

In the early 1970s, Williams teamed up with pianist Jay McShann and toured the Midwest. Although the two hailed from Muskogee and came of age musically in territorial bands, they previously had little opportunity to work together. Williams' fluid phrasing complemented McShann's boogie woogie and barrelhouse piano style. In 1972, McShann recorded the *Man From Muskogee* for the Sackville label. The recording prominently featured Williams, giving his career a boost. The next year McShann and Williams appeared at Newport in New York at Lincoln Center. They worked regularly together throughout the 1970s, touring Europe and recording prolifically. Williams and McShann went their separate ways in 1979.

In 1984, Williams joined the cast of the revue *Black and Blue* in Paris. Originally booked for a six week run, the revue that celebrated the legendary Cotton Club ran for eight months. Williams left the revue before it opened on Broadway and returned to Kansas City to care for his ailing wife.

Williams enjoyed critical acclaim during the last two decades of his career. In 1985, he was the subject of the documentary *Fiddler's Dream*. In 1989, he became one of the first inductees into the Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame. In 1990, he was featured with Dr. Billy Taylor on *CBS News Sunday Morning*. Williams played for President Clinton's first inaugural; then returned in 1998 for an encore performance in the East Room. He played a regular circuit of jazz festivals, conducted clinics, recorded numerous albums, and toured internationally well into his 90s.

Throughout a career that spanned the history of jazz, Williams refused to compromise and put down his violin and blend into the rhythm section. By virtue of his perseverance in the face of adversity, longevity, and devotion to his instrument, Williams enjoyed a great deal of well-deserved acclaim in the twilight of his career.

Biographical sketch by Chuck Haddix

SCOPE AND CONTENT

The Claude “Fiddler” Williams Collection was gifted to the Dr. Kenneth J. LaBudde Department of Special Collections in January 2009 by Blanche Fouse Williams, widow of Claude Williams. Inclusive dates are circa 1960s-2008, with the bulk of the collection dating from 1989-2004, the year of his death. Included are correspondence; contracts; numerous awards; event programs; posters; news clippings; photographs; and miscellaneous ephemera and memorabilia. In particular, the correspondence, awards and various honors illustrate the profound impact that Williams had on the world of jazz; and the photographs tell the story of a passionate musician who seemed to have more soul, ambition and energy than those half his age. While it lacks personal information about his childhood and early years in the music business, the collection clearly documents Williams’ latter-day accomplishments and critical acclaim that began in the late 1980s.

SERIES NOTES

Series I: Biographical Information

This series is located in box 1, folder 1; and contains information such as obituaries, news articles, sketches, tributes and a discography.

Series II: Correspondence

This series is located in box 1, folders 2-24; and is divided into two sub-series: General Correspondence (including postcards, emails and faxes) and Greeting Cards (mostly birthday, with emphasis on Williams’ 92nd and 95th birthdays). Dates range from 1980-2000, including some undated.

Series III: Professional Papers

This series is located in box 1, folders 25-28; and box 2, folders 1-13. Included are contracts, invoices, booking and recording lists, itineraries and promotional press material. Dates range from 1970-1999.

Series IV: Event Packets

This series is located in box 2, folders 14-18; and contains bulk press packets for major events, including Williams’ induction into the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame.

Series V: Programs

This series is located in box 2, folders 19-29; box 3, folders 1-4; and box 8, folder 2. Material is divided into three sub-series: Flyers; General Programs; and Souvenir Programs. Dates range from 1979-2004.

Series VI: Awards

This series is located in box 3, folders 5-13; boxes 5-7; box 8, folders 3, 4 and 6-8; and map drawer 19, folder 1. Material is divided into four sub-series: Certificates; Proclamations/Resolutions; Plaques; and Trophies. Dates range from 1977-2008.

Series VII: Posters

This series is located in box 8, folder 9; and map drawer 19, folders 1 and 2. Dates range from 1988-2001, with some older ones undated.

Series VIII: Journals/Newsletters

This series is located in box 3, folders 14 and 15. Some titles, including *Jam Magazine*, *Wholenotes*, *Jazz Singer*, *Kansas City Magazine*, *Missouri Alumnus* and *Artlogue* have been integrated into Special Collections' general periodical collection. A majority of this series contains articles related to Williams within the publications.

Series IX: News Clippings

This series is located in box 3, folders 16-34; and contains news clippings dating 1973-2004. Folder 34 covers publicity related to Robert Altman's movie *Kansas City*, on which Williams worked as an extra.

Series X: Miscellaneous

This series is located in box 4, folders 1-5; and box 8, folder 5. Included are ephemera, business cards, memorial programs, song sheets, and other miscellanea.

Series XI: Memorabilia

This series is located in box 7, and includes items such as buttons, medals, identification tags, miniature fiddles, and a license plate personalized with "The Fid".

Series X: Photographs

This series is located in photograph boxes 1 and 2; and includes nearly 306 snapshots and promotional photographs dating circa 1960s-2010.

Box Folder Description

CONTAINER LIST

SERIES I: BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Box	Folder	Description
1	1	Obituaries; News Articles; Tributes; Biographical Sketches; Discography

SERIES II: CORRESPONDENCE

Box	Folder	Description
A: General Correspondence		
	2	2007-2003
	3	2002-2000
	4	1999
	5	1998
	6	1997
	7	1996
	8	1995
	9	1994
	10	1993
	11	1992
	12	1991
	13	1990-1980
	14	Undated
	15	Notes & Postcards
	16	Email & Faxes
B: Greeting Cards		
	17	Get Well
	18	General Birthday [1 of 2]
	19	General Birthday [2 of 2]
	20	95 th Birthday Celebration [1 of 2]
	21	95 th Birthday Celebration [2 of 2]
	22	92 nd Birthday [Capitol Hill Day School Cards] Box 8, Folder 1
	23	Personal Cards between Claude and Blanche Williams [includes Wedding Invitation]
	24	Miscellaneous Greeting Cards [e.g., Christmas and Valentine's]

SERIES III: PROFESSIONAL PAPERS

Box	Folder	Description
1	25	Contracts, 1999

Box	Folder	Description
1	26	Contracts, 1998
	27	Contracts, 1997
	28	Contracts, 1996-1995
2	1	Contracts, 1994
	2	Contracts, 1993
	3	Contracts, 1992
	4	Contracts, 1991
	5	Contracts, 1990
	6	Contracts, 1989/1979
	7	Business Ledger
	8	Invoices; Receipts
	9	Booking Lists
	10	Recording Lists
	11	Itineraries
	12	Press Releases
	13	Press Kit Material

SERIES IV: EVENT PACKETS

Box	Folder	Description
2	14	Induction/Music Hall of Fame, Oklahoma
	15	Kansas City Blues and Jazz Festival
	16	Australian Tour
	17	Fiddler Fete
	18	National Folk Festival, Tennessee

SERIES V: PROGRAMS

Box	Folder	Description
		A: Flyers
2	19	Flyers and Event News, 2004-1979/Undated [Flyer: Live at J's, vols 1 and 2] Box 8, Folder 2
		B: General Programs
	20	Programs [1 of 3]
	21	Programs [2 of 3]
	22	Programs [3 of 3]
		C. Souvenir Programs
	23	1999: Capitol Jazzfest; National Heritage Fellowships; Crusaders for Jazz
	24	1998: 20. Erdinger Jazztage; Lost Jazz Shrines
	25	1997: Jazz in the City; Jazz Hall of Fame

Box	Folder	Description
2	26	1996: Kayebill; International Jazz Hall of Fame; Midwest Jazz
	27	1993-1997: Mid America Arts Alliance
	28	1995: Kansas City Blues and Jazz '95
	29	1995: Jazzman of the Year,
3	1	1994: Walton Arts Center
	2	1991: Stagebill; Gospel and Blues, Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame
	3	1990: Playbill; Stagebill; Kansas City Spotlight
	4	1987: Masters of the Folk Violin

SERIES VI: AWARDS

Box	Folder	Description
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A: Certificates

3	5	2003: Focus - Kansas City 2002: Palestine Community Center, 10 th Anniversary 2001: Jackson County Honor Roll 2000: Kansas City Blues Society 1999: Frank Smith Spirit of Kansas City 1996: Manhattan School of Music 1995: Council Legislative Docket 1994: Marriage Renewal 1993: Black History Month 1986-87: Traditional Apprentice Program 1977: Black History Week Animal-Kind, undated
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B: Proclamations/Resolutions

- [2004: Missouri State Senate, Final Tribute] **Box 8, Folder 6 -1/3**
[2004: Missouri House of Representatives, Final Tribute] **Box 8, Folder 6 - 1/3**
[1988: Missouri House of Representatives, 80th Birthday] **Box 8, Folder 6 - 1/3**
[2008: City of Kansas City, MO, 100th Birthday Observance] **Box 8, Folder 7 - 2/3**
[2003: City of Kansas City, MO, Grand Marshal, Heritage Day] **Box 8, Folder 7 - 2/3**
[2003: City of Kansas City, MO, 95th Birthday] **Box 8, Folder 7 - 2/3**
[2001: City of Kansas City, MO, Grand Marshal, KC Blues & Jazz] **Box 8, Folder 7 - 2/3**
[2000: City of Kansas City, MO, 92nd Birthday] **Box 8, Folder 8 - 3/3**
[1999: City of St. Louis, MO, "Claude 'Fiddler' Williams Day] **Map Drawer 19, Folder 1**

Box	Folder	Description
		[1998: City of Kansas City, MO, Heritage Fellowship] Box 8, Folder 8 - 3/3
		[1998: City of Kansas City, MO, 90 th Birthday] Box 8, Folder 8 - 3/3
		[1997: City of Kansas City, MO, 89 th Birthday] Box 8, Folder 8 - 3/3
		[1988: City of Kansas City, MO, 80 th Birthday] Box 8, Folder 8 - 3/3

C: Plaques

3	6	2000: K.C. Jazz Ambassadors
	7	1999: Coleman Hawkins Neighborhood Festival
	8	1999: Crusaders for Jazz
		[1996: 18 th & Vine Authority/Kansas City Jazz Award] Box 7
		[1995: Annual Black Musicians Conference] Box 8, Folder 3
	9	1994: Ace's Jazz Night
	10	1988: Mutual Musicians Foundation
	11	1986: Kansas City Jazz Commission
	12	1985: Jazz Musicians' Award
		[1982: Diamond Jubilee] Box 8, Folder 4
	13	Charlie "Bird" Parker/S. Florida Cruises, undated

D: Trophies

[2008]National Fiddler Hall of Fame/Inductee] **Box 6**
[2004: Coda Jazz Fund/Lifetime Achievement] **Box 5**
[2001: Classic Black Legacy Award/Lifetime Achievements, Pioneering] **Box 5**
[2001: Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame/Inductee 2001] **Box 6**
[2001: Lynn Riggs Award/Arts in Oklahoma] **Box 5**
[2000 Jackson County Links, Inc./Lifetime Achievement Award] **Box 6**
[1999: Pitch Weekly's 3rd Annual Klammies/Musician of the Year] **Box 5**
[1999: Warren R. Watkins SR Pioneer Award] **Box 5**
[1997: Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame] **Box 6**
[1994: Charlie Christian Jazz Award/Outstanding Achievement] **Box 5**
[1989: Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame] **Box 5**

SERIES VII: POSTERS

Box	Folder	Description
		[2001: Kansas City Blues and Jazz Fest] Box 8, Folder 9
		[2001: American Jazz Museum Endowment Fund] Map Drawer 19, Folder 1
		[1999: Kansas City Blues and Jazz Fest] Box 8, Folder 9
		[1999: Kansas City Blues and Jazz Fest] Map Drawer 19, Folder 2
		[1999: Kansas City Blues and Jazz, Local 627] Map Drawer 19, Folder 2
		[1998: 11 e saison Chorus] Map Drawer 19, Folder 1

Box	Folder	Description
		[1997: Claude "Fiddler" Williams, Kunsela, Auditorium] Box 8, Folder 9
		[1992: Fiddler Claude Williams Swing Quartet] Map Drawer 19, Folder 1
		[1988: Frankfurt Swing All Stars] Map Drawer 19, Folder 2
		[Dutch Swing College Band, n.d.] Map Drawer 19, Folder 2
		[3 rd Annual Historic Northeast Fall Festival, n.d.] Map Drawer 19, Folder 2
		[Claude Williams on Tour, n.d.] Map Drawer 19, Folder 1

SERIES VIII: JOURNALS/NEWSLETTERS

Box	Folder	Description
3	14	Jazz; April 1995 Red Bank Special; March 2003 KC Jazz Ambassador; July 1990
	15	Fiddler Magazine; Spring 1995 & Winter 1995-96 Jazzbeat; 1994/95 Jazz Beat; August-September 1998 & February-March 1998 All that Jazz; January 1996, December 1995 & November 1995 Corpus Christi Town Club; September 1994 National Museum of American History; Winter 1997 Backstage Pass; 2000 Pension Fund Notes; March 1998 Jazz Time; January 1997

SERIES IX: NEWS CLIPPINGS

Box	Folder	Description
3	16	2004
	17	2003-2000
	18	1999
	19	1998
	20	1997
	21	1996
	22	1995
	23	1994
	24	1993
	25	1992
	26	1991
	27	1990
	28	1989-1988
	29	1984-1982
	30	1981
	31	1980
	32	1978-1973
	33	undated
	34	Robert Altman's Kansas City

Box Folder Description

SERIES X: MISCELLANEOUS

Box	Folder	Description
4	1	Music Sheets/Song Lists
	2	National Fiddler Hall of Fame Script [Blanche]
	3	Fiddle Camp Sponsorship
	4	Kansas City, Labor History Tour
	5	Miscellaneous Ephemera: Memorial Programs; Business Cards; Addresses; Caricature of Claude; etc. [Pencil Sketch of Claude at the Zoo Bar] Box 8, Folder 5

SERIES XI: MEMORABILIA

Box	Folder	Description
7		Miscellaneous Name Tags [13] Miscellaneous Buttons [3] Miscellaneous Medals [4] Fortune Cookie fortune from 92 nd birthday celebration Manufacture's tag, Clemens Violins License Plate, "The-Fid" Miniature Fiddle with Bow in Leather Case Miniature Fiddle with Bow Christmas Ornament Miniature Brass Fiddle on Stand Pencil Sharpener with sharpener removed

SERIES XII: PHOTOGRAPHS

An inventory of the photograph collection is accessible through an in-house database. Contact sheets are available for viewing to walk-in patrons or can be accessed online through the following web page: <https://library.umkc.edu/archival-collections/williams-claude>. Contact Special Collections with specific questions or for more information.