

Marion Williams: Packin' Up

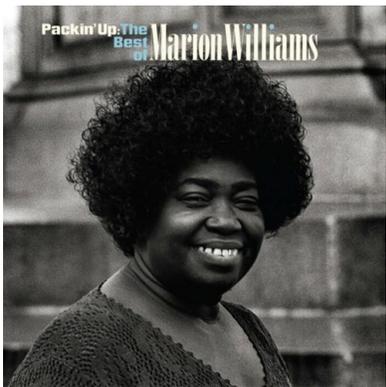
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If you track the tenor saxophone back to the artist who did the most to change the instrument's direction—transforming it from a mannered, slippery reed to a bossy, solo voice—you'll wind up on the doorstep of Coleman Hawkins. If you do the same with gospel, you will discover Marion Williams, who in the late 1940s began turning the church vocal into an expressive and individual virtuoso form. Her astonishing delivery would have a significant influence on male and female R&B artists of the 1950s as well as soul greats like Aretha Franklin.

[Photo above of Marion Williams at New York's Columbus Circle in 1981, courtesy of Hank O'Neal]



A new album, *Packin' Up: The Best of Marion Williams* (Shanachie), is a bit misleading, since it isn't a greatest hits collection. Instead, it's a magnificent 26-track compilation curated by Grammy-winning author and gospel scholar Anthony Heilbut that runs from 1957—Williams' first appearance at the Newport Jazz Festival—to 1993, a year before her death. In other words, we're given a carefully selected introductory taste of Williams' take-charge voice and its riveting power. The album's music is nothing short of astonishing and is a divine gateway to gospel.

Born in Miami in 1927, Williams sang in Pentecostal churches, where services tended to be fiery and physical endurance tests. When she turned 20, Williams joined the Clara Ward Singers, which became one of the most popular and captivating gospel vocal ensembles of the 1950s. In 1958, Williams and members of the group left over low pay to form their own group—the Stars of Faith. During this period, she found ways to add stagecraft to her performances by moving around, using her hands and looking up dramatically to illustrate song lyrics. Williams' solo career began in 1960, as she performed at churches, colleges and on tour around the world. Throughout the 1970s and '80s, Williams recorded for a range of labels before suffering from diabetes in the 1990s. Williams died at age 66 in 1994.

Williams was a pioneering vocal giant whose vocal talents and emotional qualities still haven't been matched in the secular world.



What the careful listener will notice immediately about Williams is her extraordinary breath control. On songs like *The Old Landmark* and *Motherless Children*, it's difficult to hear exactly where she takes in air. It's pure output. During her electrifying performance in 1957 at the Newport Jazz Festival, Williams hits hair-raising operatic high notes as well as the most beautiful gravely low notes. She had the pipes of a locomotive.



In listening to this album, I found myself in disbelief several times over Williams' talent and spirit. There are many moments where Williams seemed possessed by joy and overcome by her own exalted state. On other songs, she was transformed into a maternal force, caressing and comforting lyric lines. On still others, she virtually spit out words, as if chasing evil around with a broom. And then there are the stylistic wonders. Back in the 1950s, her inspired whoops added for emotional emphasis found their way into R&B hits by Little Richard and other artists who were fans of hers.

[Photo above of Marion Williams, performing at a jazz festival in Antibes, France, c. 1960]

