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K. T. Ewing

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Profiles of *African Americans* in Tennessee

Lillian "Lil" Hardin Armstrong (1898-1971)

Acclaimed musician Lil Hardin Armstrong was born in 1898 to William and Dempsey Hardin in Memphis, Tennessee. In the late 1900s, Memphis was a city that flowed with the pace of the Mississippi River. Sometimes peaceful, at times turbulent, always in motion, the Bluff City was home to a significant black population that grew larger after the Civil War. The Hardin family was among the residents who relocated there in hopes of a better life. Lil grew up in a home with her parents and her grandmother, a woman who had intimately known slavery. As the shadow of Jim Crow grew darker over the South, Priscilla Martin resolved that her granddaughter would have a better future than anyone imagined possible.

After recognizing her daughter's keen interest in an old harmonium, Dempsey invested in music lessons with Ms. Violet White, a private tutor. Young Lil took quickly to formal instruction and soon outgrew Ms. White's teaching. Pleased by her daughter's progress, Dempsey enrolled her in the Hooks School of Music, headed by Mrs. Julia Britton Hooks. Mrs. Hooks, a well-known civil rights activist, founded the school as an extension of her mission to provide young black children with the best possible opportunities to excel. Lil's talent continued to flourish, and she generously referred to herself as a child prodigy in later interviews.

The Hooks School of Music was not Hardin's only influence. Swirling, strong, and pulsing with rhythm, Beale Street was a nexus of black Memphis. It was home to everything from legitimate commerce to illicit crime. It served saints and sinners alike. Beale Street was also the perfect place for mid-Southerners to listen to the growing blues genre. Like fellow Memphian Alberta Hunter, Lil was fascinated with the sounds of W. C. Handy's band slowly strolling down Beale, playing tunes that would shape the sounds of the city for decades to come. However, the street's reputation did not sit well with Dempsey. She forbade her daughter to visit Beale Street.

In the fall of 1915, Lil made the two-hundred-mile journey from Memphis to join Fisk University's college preparatory program in Nashville, Tennessee. By the time she arrived, the university had a reputation for excelling in music, most notably because of the Jubilee Singers. In addition to the school's musical reputation, its stringent adherence to Christian moral principles appealed to Dempsey's urge to keep her young daughter away from the temptations of Beale Street. Lil chafed under the strict rules at Fisk, but she also grew as a musician. One of her biggest disappointments was learning that she'd been taught incorrect techniques at the Hooks School. In spite of her progress at Fisk, she withdrew from the university in search of more adventure.

Lil found another opportunity to pursue music when her family relocated to Chicago with her stepfather. The petite teenager secured her first job in the Windy City as a music demonstrator at Jones Music Store on State Street. When an employee was unable to impress her with his performance of a piece of sheet music, Lil asked to play it for herself. She surprised him and the store owner with her ability to read and flawlessly perform sheet music on the spot. Not only could Lil read sheet music, she could also quickly memorize and play any song by ear. These talents served her well as she climbed the city's entertainment ladder. She worked a series of entry-tier entertainment gigs until she landed bigger opportunities at the De Luxe Café and the Dreamland Café. She was enamored with the big city. However, remnants of the South met her in the Midwest. Coincidentally, she played accompaniment for another Memphis native, Alberta Hunter, at the Dreamland. Though their careers eventually drove them in different directions, they would continue to cross paths and praise each other's artistry, aesthetics, and professionalism.

Lil also met another talented musician at the Dreamland. When he arrived in Chicago, Louis Armstrong was playing second trumpet to bandleader King Oliver in his Creole Jazz Band. Lil initially paid little attention to Louis until King Oliver mentioned his superior skills. Professional appreciation soon turned into romantic love, and the hot new couple became the band's centerpiece. Lil and Louis Armstrong married in 1924.

Rightfully credited with identifying Armstrong's potential for stardom, Lil Hardin's legacy is often mentioned only in relation to Louis. However, her music catalog and business acumen speak for themselves. These accomplishments stand on their own artistic and professional merits.

For roughly fifty years Lil's entertainment career included work as an accompanying pianist, band leader, and soloist. She cut several records for large companies such as Decca Records and Riverside Records. She composed a number of original songs, most notably "Just For A Thrill", "Struttin' With Some Barbecue", "Perdido Street Blues", and "I'm Not Rough." Ray Charles amplified the popularity of "Just for a Thrill" in his 1959 rendition of the song. In 1961 Lil reunited with Alberta Hunter and Lovie Austin, another entertainment veteran, to record "Chicago: The Living Legends." The album, a reflection on the impact of black women in music, was one of her last.

Following Louis Armstrong's death in July 1971, Lil Hardin Armstrong collapsed at her piano during a tribute concert for him in Chicago in August. She died on August 27, 1971, and is interred in Lincoln Cemetery in Chicago. The City of Chicago renamed a community park in her honor in 2004. She was posthumously awarded with induction to the Memphis Music Hall of Fame in 2014. Her music catalog remains among the most influential in jazz history.

K. T. Ewing, Ph.D.
Tennessee State University
