

## NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

*Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions*

*By Ned Hémard*

### **Just For a Thrill**

A major hit song when recorded by Ray Charles in 1959, "Just For a Thrill" was the title song on country music star Ronnie Milsap's twenty-third studio album (which peaked at #4 on the Billboard charts for Jazz). Peggy Lee and Aretha Franklin also recorded this sultry love song. The lyrics tell the story of a man who cheated and a woman who still loved him. This talented woman was influential in shaping and promoting the career of New Orleans' own and the world's most influential Jazz performer of all time, Louis Armstrong.

Lillian (Lil) Hardin Armstrong (1898-1971), besides becoming Satchmo's second wife, was a jazz pianist, bandleader, singer, arranger and composer. Born in Memphis, Tennessee, Lil will always be remembered for her influence in persuading Armstrong to leave King Oliver's band and accept an offer from Fletcher Henderson in New York (and for her work with Louis' Hot Five and Seven); but she actually had a most interesting career both before her marriage and after she parted from Louie.

She collaborated with Louis on many 1920s recordings, and her compositions include "Struttin' With Some Barbecue", "Two Deuces", "Doin' the Suzie-Q", "Don't Jive Me", "Clip Joint", "Knee Drops", and "Bad Boy" (a hit by the Jive Bombers in 1957 featured in John Waters' 1990 film "Cry-Baby" with Johnny Depp). Ringo Starr recorded "Bad Boy", too, in 1978.

But her most touching composition was "Just For a Thrill", written after Louis had begun an affair with Alpha Smith. It was 1931, Lil and Louis had separated and Smith eventually threatened to sue Louis for breach of promise. The errant Armstrong beseeched Hardin not to grant him a divorce. She felt sorry for him but recalled Louis "had two-timed me, so I gave him a divorce just to teach him a lesson—and I sued him, too." And (with Don Raye) she wrote this song:

"Just for a thrill

You changed the sunshine to rain  
Just for a thrill  
You filled my heart with pain"

The song continues:

"Although you're free and havin' your fun  
To me you're still the only one  
Cause you made my heart stand still  
Well, it was just for a thrill"

Before meeting Louis and this sad break-up, Lil Hardin moved to Chicago in 1918 with her mother and stepfather. Proficient at reading music, Lil landed a job as sheet music demonstrator in a music store. New Orleans' renowned Jelly Roll Morton visited, and Lil wrote of the event in her unpublished biography:

"the piano rocked, the floor shivered, the people swayed while he attacked the keyboard with his long skinny fingers, beating out a double rhythm with his feet on the loud pedal. Oh, was I thrilled and amazed. He finally got up from the piano, grinned and looked at me as if to say, 'Let this be a lesson to you.' Well it was a lesson."

Soon she began embellishing the store's sheet music with her own ideas, and the customers loved it. Three weeks later Lawrence Duhé's "New Orleans Creole Jazz Band" came into the music store and heard Lil do her "best to be a miniature Jelly Roll Morton." Duhé decided to hire her and raised her salary from \$3 to \$22.50 a week.

Soon cornetist Joe "King" Oliver's Creole Jazz Band replaced Duhé's group at the Dreamland Café, and Oliver asked Hardin to stay. Lil's rhythmic piano helped keep the band's arrangements solid, and Papa Joe's band was enjoying enormous success. He decided to send for Louis Armstrong back in New Orleans. Oliver was Armstrong's mentor and teacher. Two of Louie's famous recordings, "West End Blues" and "Weather Bird", were Oliver compositions. Joe also wrote "Canal Street Blues", "Dippermouth Blues", "Sweet Like This" and "Doctor Jazz". Armstrong claimed, "if it had not been for Joe Oliver, Jazz would not be what it is today".

Some say that Oliver viewed Louis (also a cornetist) as a threat to his position as Jazz leader, and that hiring him was a way to control the competition. Lil Hardin met Louis Armstrong at the time he joined Oliver's band in Chicago, and a romance grew. At first she thought he sported clothes and a haircut "too country" for Chicago, but she helped polish his image. Their marriage lasted from 1924-1938. And it was Lil who convinced Louis that a move from Oliver was a way of moving on up. He surely did.

Then Hardin got together a band of her own and a job at the Dreamland. While there, she prepared for Louis' return to Chicago by having a huge banner made to advertise him as "The World's Greatest Trumpet Player". She was a great advocate for Louis until he stepped out "Just For a Thrill".

During the late 1930s, Lil was house pianist at Decca Records, recording twenty-six titles as a leader (mostly as a vocalist) during 1936-1940 (including "Just For a Thrill"). She made a recording in 1959 on which she reminisced about her days with her famous husband. When Louis Armstrong died in 1971, Hardin was deeply shaken. She made the funeral in New York and rode in the family car (with the OK from fourth wife, Lucille). Less than two months after Louis' death, Lil collapsed at the piano while playing the "St. Louis Blues" at a televised Armstrong tribute concert. She died an hour later.

Another Memphis-born chanteuse and pianist, Di Anne Price, sings and explains the poignant story of Lil, Louis and lost love. Perhaps you'll get a chance to listen to her steamy interpretation "Just For a Thrill".

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