



# Just for a Thrill: Lil Hardin Armstrong, First Lady of Jazz

*James L. Dickerson*

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"Hot Miss Lil" Hardin was the star pianist of King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band when, in 1922, a trumpet player named Louis Armstrong joined the band in Chicago. The educated and polished Hardin was decidedly unimpressed with Armstrong's lack of sophistication, yet she recognized a wealth of untapped potential in the shy young trumpeter. Over the course of the next few years, Hardin taught Louis how to read music, urged him to take the spotlight, and eventually became his second wife. Encouraging his own natural talent, Lil Hardin Armstrong helped turn Louis Armstrong from a gifted second coronet into a jazz legend.

In *Just for a Thrill*, biographer James Dickerson tells Lil's remarkable story, from her childhood in Memphis with a mother who beat her for playing 'the devil's music,' to her death onstage during a memorial jazz concert for Louis in 1971. Her marriage to Louis and the musical innovations that came from their years as jazz's first power couple forms the centerpiece of Lil's story. Their divorce, according to Dickerson, was a blow from which Lil never recovered.

Dickerson guides readers through the underworld of jazz's past, when Memphis's red light district and mob clubs in Chicago were among the only places jazz musicians could perform, and when, despite Lil's warnings, Louis took on gangsters as business partners. His account of Lil's years with Louis recalls the landmark recordings they made together, the career lows that followed the highs, and Lil's commitment to free Louis from the poverty and racism that he never thought he could escape.

A prolific songwriter, an energetic recording artist, and an exemplary entertainer, Lil Hardin Armstrong has been overlooked for decades. Dickerson's book sets the record straight, revisiting the triumphs and heartbreaks of her life and calling overdue attention to her remarkable contributions to American music.

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