

The Solos of Lil Hardin Armstrong

by Adam Bravo

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In my opinion, Lil Hardin Armstrong is one of the most underrated pianists of the early jazz era. She's often remembered only as a footnote to the biography of her former husband, Louis Armstrong, relegated to either a personal influence who convinced him to pursue a solo career, or, at most, as the composer of the standard, "Struttin' With Some Barbecue." Though she wasn't the titanic innovator that her replacement Earl Hines was, I think she was the only one of the Hot Five that could swing on Louis' level. Check out her solo on her own composition "My Heart."

Lil Hardin Armstrong on "My Heart"

Swing ♩ = 195

Chords: Eb, D7, Eb, D7, Eb, Eb7, Ab, A⁰⁷, Eb, C7, F7, Bb7, Eb

Isn't that just the nastiest, most swinging left hand? Let's take a closer look at how she creates that big rumbling foundation. We'll start with her solo on "Come Back Sweet Papa," also by Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five.

Lil Hardin Armstrong on Come Back, Sweet Papa

Swing ♩ = 203

Chords: C, A⁷, D⁷, G⁷, C, E⁷, A⁷, D⁷, G⁷, C

What's immediately interesting to me is that on the downbeats of chords, she hardly ever plays roots on the bottom! In "Come Back, Sweet Papa" she only does so once (bar 2, on the A7 chord). Instead she relies heavily on first and second inversion triads in the low register.

Let's take a look at a more downtempo solo. This is "You're Next," again recorded by the Hot Five:

Lil Hardin Armstrong on "You're Next"

Swing ♩ = 124

The musical score is written for piano in 4/4 time, featuring a swing feel with a tempo of 124 beats per minute. The key signature is three flats (B-flat major or D-flat minor). The score is divided into five systems, each with a measure number (1, 5, 9, 13, 16) at the beginning of the first staff. The notation includes treble and bass staves with various chords and melodic lines. Chord symbols are placed above the staves: Ab, Eb7, Ab, Eb7, Ab, Ab7, Db7, Ab, F7, Eb/Bb, Bb7, Eb7, and Ab. The piece concludes with a double bar line at the end of the fifth system.

Notice how she approaches the thirds of the chords chromatically and sometimes harmonizes those approaches in 5ths. Bars 9 and 15 of "You're Next" are good examples. Some of those added 5ths clash with the prevailing harmony, but because the motivation is a strong melodic gesture, it works. I love slight harmonic clashes and melodic basslines, so the combination of them is a favorite of mine.

I also enjoy her use of the octave figure in bars 10 and 11, with 8th note pickups in the lower octave preceding downbeats in the high octave. This has the effect of accenting the offbeats in a subtle but really grooving New Orleans kind of way.

In the 30s, Lil became a successful swing bandleader. Her bands are great and she's a swinging singer. Unfortunately, to my ears, on piano she doesn't always lock in very well with the modern rhythm sections. Like many pianists of her era, she's such an expert at driving the bus that, when bass and drums take over that role, she sounds a little lost. There are times when she hits the mark, though, and in those moments she's almost like a New Orleans Teddy Wilson: melodically, harmonically, and texturally engaging. Her solo on "Let's Get Happy Together" (which I believe is her own composition), though still a bit on top of the beat, is a great example:

Lil Hardin Armstrong on "Let's Get Happy Together"

Swing ♩ = 177

(Gb⁷)

Piano

Cm⁷ F⁷ Cm⁷ F⁷ Cm⁷ (Gb⁷)

Pno.

4 F⁷ Bb⁷ 5 6

6 Eb⁶ C⁷ F⁷ Bb⁶

Pno.

9 Cm⁷ F⁷ (Gb⁷) Cm⁷ F⁷ Cm⁷ (Gb⁷) F⁷ F⁷

Pno.

13 Bb⁷ Eb⁶ (Edim⁷) 3

15 (F⁷sus) C⁷ F⁷ B^b6 (trombone solo) 7

25 (E^b6 F⁷ E^b6 F⁷ E^b6) Cm⁷ F⁷ Cm⁷ F⁷ Cm⁷ F⁷

29 (G^b7 F⁷ F¹³b⁹) B^b7 E^b6 C⁷ F⁷ B^b6

I find it interesting that doesn't always even play the chords of the song! She's hitting the important resolutions, but connecting them however she wants (I've put the chords of the song are on bottom and the chords she's playing are on top in parentheses). Since the bass can't follow her, this probably wouldn't work with a modern, amplified bass sound, but with the unamplified acoustic bass and old recording, I don't even hear the discrepancy.

After the Swing Era, during the "Dixieland Revival," she resumed playing with many of her New Orleans contemporaries. By this time, traditional jazz fans had rightfully recognized her as one of the architects of the music, and she remained active through the 60s. I feel she's been a little lost to the wider music world, but it's my hope that as we continuously reevaluate the history of this music she will be recognized for the great player she was.

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