

ENCORE



ADEGOKE STEVE COLSON

PURVEYOR OF DETAIL & FORM

BY JOHN SHARPE

Pianist Adegoke Steve Colson offers a salutary lesson in the folly of perceiving a career only through the lens of issued recordings. His scant discography inadequately reflects more than half a century in the business, telling only a small part of his story, filled out by touring and orchestral commissions. Even so, he appears on impressive dates by leaders as varied as David Murray, Kahil El'Zabar, Baikida Carroll and Andrew Cyrille, as well as seven sessions under his own name.

Although a New Jersey native, Colson was an early member of Chicago's Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), joining in late 1972, right after receiving his music degree from Northwestern University. He was already playing and composing by that point, but the AACM supercharged his development. As he recalls: "I'd already gotten familiar with [drummer] Steve McCall and played with him. And then he said, 'well look, why don't you maybe think about joining AACM,' because he was a founder." For someone like Colson, who already inclined to the audacious music of Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman and Albert Ayler, the experience had an indelible effect, as he recounts: "It was experimentation as well as different theories and specific references, but everybody coming at it from a different angle. Henry Threadgill would get up and show something, and Kalaparusha [Maurice McIntyre] gave a couple of talks, and Leroy Jenkins put something on the board, and you're taking it all in. So it's very adventuresome and very diverse at the same time." The same can be said for Colson's own music. At the time his band Unity Troupe was playing around town but didn't have any releases to offer those interested. A tip-off led to a session at a newly opening studio, later issued as *Triumph!* on his own Silver Sphinx label, as almost all his subsequent leadership dates have been. The mixture of exploratory forms and accessible grooves, with unbounded solos,

and expressively artful singing from his wife Iqua Colson, has set the template for much of his ensuing work, and can also be heard on the contemporaneous *No Reservation* (Black Saint, 1980). He and Iqua have remained musical partners ever since.

But with many of his AACM colleagues having already made the move, when the time came to leave Chicago in 1981, instead of relocating to Manhattan or Brooklyn alongside his peers, Colson returned to New Jersey close to family. As a consequence, work was hard to find. "It was hard for me to get in because I didn't have any real substantial playing time in the New York area. But overseas we were doing Italy, and France or wherever." Gradually Colson established himself. Gigs with Dizzy Gillespie bassist Chris White, who lived nearby, connected him with others including saxophonist Herbie Morgan and trombonist Grachan Moncur III, and through them with poet and activist Amiri Baraka, with whom he worked for 30 years until his passing in 2014. Perhaps the pinnacle of their collaboration was "...As in a Cultural Reminiscence..." an expansive and passionate tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King in which Colson led a 20-piece orchestra, including singers and speakers. Although never released on an album, the ensemble toured and was recorded by French TV, with excerpts still available on Colson's website. That's also the place to find more of his large scale works, such as "Greens, Rice and a Rope", a multi-media event staged at Newark's Symphony Hall that explores the Black experience from Africa to present day, performed by a stellar cast including Murray, Threadgill and El'Zabar. The latter joined the AACM around the same time as Colson and is eloquent about Colson's work: "He is an authentic purveyor of detail and form. He has enormous harmonic sophistication. He's aware of techniques from stride piano from the 1920s. He is very familiar with bop forms and voicings and he has spent a lot of time with extraordinary musicians in the avant garde. He has a strong sense of the traditional Black church, which I believe is the foundation for the development of many musicians of African-American descent. You hear a lot of the musical history expressed in the unique voice of Adegoke Steve Colson."

When not putting out his own albums, Colson was very busy as a sideman with Murray's Octet and Big Band, and the groups of Cyrille and Carroll. He made trenchant contributions to El'Zabar's 1997 *Return of*

the Lost Tribes by Bright Moments, a quintet reunion of AACM alumni. Colson has been a member of the organization for 54 of its 60 years, and even after all this time its importance for him endures: "It affords you the potential of being in a situation where you otherwise might not be performing. It allows you to have another level of networking with people that are thinking about similar types of things." As a recent example, in March, the Colsons worked with George Lewis and the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE) in a bill of AACM composers, presenting "Counterpoints", an extract from a commission to celebrate Newark's 350th anniversary.

After a hiatus of ten years since his impressionistic double solo piano album *Tones for Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass*, in July Colson will release a new album, *Glow: Music for Trio...Add Voice*. It's a wonderfully arresting program of swinging music, suitably elevated by the presence of drummer Cyrille and bassist Mark Helias, with Iqua's vocals featured on four of the seven tracks. But true to the ethos of the AACM, his next album may be different again: "The thing is, 'what are we trying to project at a particular time?' So for that record it's just the fact that we have a lot of material, but we don't want to just throw anything together. Those particular tunes have a good balance...I like extended pieces if they're effective, but things don't have to be that way, you know?"

For more info visit colsonsmusic.com. Colson's *Glow: Music for Trio...Add Voice* pre-album release concert is at National Jazz Museum in Harlem May 9. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Steve Colson & The Unity Troupe – *Triumph!* (Silver Sphinx, 1978-79)
- Andrew Cyrille Quintet – *My Friend Louis* (DIW, 1991)
- Baikida Carroll – *Door Of The Cage* (Soul Note, 1994)
- Bright Moments (Kahil El'Zabar, Joseph Jarman, Kalaparusha Maurice McIntyre, Malachi Favors, Steve Colson) – *Return of the Lost Tribe* (Delmark, 1997)
- Baikida Carroll – *Marionettes on a High Wire* (OmniTone, 2000)
- Adegoke Steve Colson – *Tones for Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass* (Silver Sphinx, 2015)

LEST WE FORGET



LIL HARDIN

A PIONEER IN HER OWN RIGHT

BY MARILYN LESTER

The pianist, composer, arranger, singer and bandleader was known in the 1920s as "Hot Miss Lil." She also happened to be the second wife of Louis Armstrong and so Lillian Hardin became Lil Hardin Armstrong, remembered as such for decades. But like many women of note in history, and especially jazz history, her brilliance and prominence became diminished, especially in the light of her identity as Mrs. Armstrong. Ironically, that designation became the only path for her to succeed in her own career. Hardin was a guiding light, inspiration and musical collaborator for her husband, but it was she who was responsible for tunes such as "Don't Jive Me", "Two Deuces", "Knee Drops" and "Doin' the Suzie-Q".

Herein we acknowledge and champion Lil Hardin in her own well-deserved light.

According to Ricky Riccardi, Director of Research Collections at Louis Armstrong House Museum and a GRAMMY-winning Louis Armstrong author, "For many decades, that was all Lil was given credit for. A few of her compositions, like 'Just for a Thrill' and 'Struttin' With Some Barbecue', became standards, but many of them remained unexplored." During her marriage to Armstrong, though, she wasn't idle; in her own right, in the '30s, even though she was sometimes billed as "Mrs. Louis Armstrong," she led an "All Girl Orchestra" that broadcast nationally over the NBC radio network. She also recorded for Decca as a vocalist and performed with jazz trumpeter-vocalist Henry "Red" Allen, as well as piano accompanist for other singers.

Lillian Hardin was born on February 3, 1898 in Memphis, TN, was exposed to hymns and spirituals in church and was given music lessons, beginning at age eight by Violet White and then at Mrs. Hook's School of Music. Hardin graduated from Fisk University in Nashville, moving to Chicago in 1918, where she took a job as a sheet music demonstrator at Jones Music Store.

She was spotted there by bandleader Lawrence Duhé, joined his band and was soon traveling to New Orleans, where she played at the De Luxe Café and Dreamland, leading her own units, making a name for herself, and also joining King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band. According to Riccardi, of her prowess, "Lil was an excellent, Jelly Roll Morton-influenced pianist (check her out on Oliver's "I'm Going Away to Wear You Off My Mind"), but an older generation of musicologists disparaged her skills, unfairly comparing her to giants like Earl 'Fatha' Hines."

During this time, Hardin had fallen for violinist Jimmie Johnston. They married in the summer of 1922. Fatefully, that same year, Oliver sent for his protégé Louis Armstrong to join the band at Chicago's Lincoln Gardens as second cornetist. Hardin was not impressed. From a middle-class background, in contrast to Armstrong's hard-scrabble upbringing, she considered him a country bumpkin. Yet the two began seeing each other, love bloomed, and the pair divorced their respective spouses, tying the knot on February 5, 1924. Hardin began working to foster

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