

## 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](http://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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Armstrong's career. Riccardi says that, "Lil earned her place in the pantheon by being the architect of Louis Armstrong's stardom." It was Hardin who gave Armstrong the push to leave Oliver, and later, to leave Fletcher Henderson, and go out on his own. Riccardi notes: "Louis might have remained a very talented sideman for much of his career. For that alone, Lil's role in Louis' story—and the story of jazz history in general—is secure." Cracks in the relationship began to appear in 1925. The couple separated in 1931 over Armstrong's affair with dancer Alpha Smith, and finally divorced in 1938.

Hardin was prolific in the '30s, including accompanying and recording with blues vocalist Alberta Hunter in a group with trumpeter Charlie Shavers, clarinetist Buster Bailey and bassist Wellman Braud. But by the late '40s, she worked mostly as a piano-vocalist soloist. She remained in music, based in Chicago, and by the '50s, her activities were measured. In 1961 she recorded a volume for Riverside's *Chicago: The Living Legends* series (with bassist Pops Foster, clarinetists Darnell Howard and Franz Jackson, et al.), which led to an NBC network special, *Chicago and All That Jazz*—and a follow-up album in 1962 on Verve. In the '60s, Hardin appeared in several Broadway shows and made a series of vocal sides for Decca. A month after Armstrong died in July 1971, at a televised memorial concert for him, Hardin suffered a heart attack, collapsed onstage and died on the way to the hospital.

Says Riccardi, "Personally, I've been thrilled to see younger musicians in the 21st century, such as pianist Caili O'Doherty, paying more attention to Lil as a complete person, studying her background, studying her solos, digging up lesser-known compositions and giving them a modern spin. Lil was much more than just the woman behind Louis Armstrong. She was a pioneer in her own right and it's about time that she's being treated that way."

For more info visit [louisarmstronghouse.org](http://louisarmstronghouse.org)

#### Recommended Listening:

- King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band—*Centennial* (Archeophone, 1923)
- Louis Armstrong—*The Complete Hot Five and Hot Seven Recordings* (Columbia-Legacy, 1925-30)
- Johnny Dodds—*Definitive Dodds* (Retrieval, 1926-27)
- Lil Hardin Armstrong and Her Swing Orchestra—*The Chronological* (Classics, 1936-40)
- Sidney Bechet Trio—*New Orleans In Paris* (Vogue, 1952)
- Lil Hardin Armstrong and Her Orchestra—*Chicago: The Living Legends* (Riverside, 1961)

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and psychologically. But if you're asking me about the scene, the scene has nothing to do with me. The scene is created by other people, many of them who have the power to make decisions that I might not agree with, so I have nothing to do with that.

**TNYCJR:** Have you always avoided the music scene and carved your own path?

**PRIETO:** You better stay clear or you become what people [expect from you.] I do music because this is what I do and have been doing all my life. I don't know what's happening in the music industry but I am able to see it's not getting better. People have an optimistic [view] of things but I don't see that. I see that the music business has become more entertainment than music. It has become more fake and hollow. I'll keep doing the music that I like doing until I get tired and retire.

**TNYCJR:** Has it always been like that?

**PRIETO:** No, I don't think so. There was a sense of culture and people in the music business had a sense of what music is and what direction it should be going, respecting individuality. Now everyone has to be the same. The people that have become successful all sound the same. Before, there were people with culture, now it's all about business and money. It has little to nothing to do with music...I just think it's a hollow state in the music business, or whatever it's called. I wouldn't even call it a music business anymore: where's the music and where's the business?

**TNYCJR:** That loss of culture reminds me of a quote of yours from a *DownBeat* interview, "The only reason we have a Charlie Parker is because there is one Charlie Parker. If we had a thousand, it wouldn't be Charlie Parker." Everyone is trying to fit the mold of what they expect the general public will like rather than creating their own art.

**PRIETO:** We live in a fake society and this has increased big time. This affects the culture of people, attention span, the level of intelligence and the behavior. Music cannot escape that because it is made by humans. If humans are affected by those things, then the music is going to be affected as well.

**TNYCJR:** Is this the general consensus within the jazz community and people will pretend to put a different optimistic spin on the future of the genre?

**PRIETO:** I don't know. I've lived [through] a few things in my life already and I don't understand how positive it can be if it keeps going in that direction. People are just pretending to give each other calm and relief and optimism to avoid the pain of confronting reality. I'm not that kind of person, I cannot deal with this because when you know, you know. After your eyes have been opened then it's hard to close them and ignore that reality.

For more info visit [dafnisonmusic.com](http://dafnisonmusic.com). Prieto is at Birdland May 6 (with Shelly Berg Trio) and The Jazz Gallery May 30-31 (with Henry Threadgill and Vijay Iyer). See Calendar.

#### Recommended Listening:

- Henry Threadgill & Make A Move—*Everybody's Mouth's A Book* (Pi Recordings, 2001)
- Arturo O'Farrill—*Live in Brooklyn* (ZOHO, 2003)
- Dafnis Prieto—*About the Monks* (ZOHO, 2005)
- Michel Camilo—*Spirit of the Moment* (Telarc Jazz, 2006)
- Dafnis Prieto Si o Si Quartet—*Live at Jazz Standard NYC* (Dafnison Music, 2009)
- Dafnis Prieto Sextet—*Transparency* (Dafnison Music, 2020)

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they tend to do), meaning that at points Georgia Hubley was the Arkestra's drummer and Ira Kaplan their vocalist and guitarist. The set varied widely, with such familiar Ra fare as "Space Is the Place", "Rocket Number 9" and "We Travel the Spaceways", trading off with Yo La Tengo tunes that included Kaplan and Hubley harmonizing on their gentle ballad "Dreaming". There was a sublime musical rapport—these rockers like noise as much as the jazzers do, and their set opener featured delightful cacophony.

The current edition of **Fieldwork** is a 20-year partnership between Vijay Iyer (piano, keyboards), Steve Lehman (alto) and Tyshawn Sorey (drums). The group was both loud and intense, with bursts of melody and amped-up collective improvisation. Lehman's solo

spot proceeded in squeaks, squawks and short staccato bursts before the trio's explosive entrance. Sorey played like a man possessed, making Iyer's contributions not always audible—but certainly *felt* in any case. Drummer **Barry Altschul** led Axiom 5, an all-star unit with Jon Irabagon (saxophone), Uri Caine (piano) and Mark Helias (bass). The octogenarian leader showed he remains as explosive on the skins now as he was in bands with Chick Corea, Anthony Braxton, Dave Holland, Paul Bley and others. Pianist **Kris Davis**, in a tight trio with regular collaborators Robert Hurst (bass) and Johnathan Blake (drums), proved worthy of all the accolades. They played music from the leader's latest, *Run the Gauntlet* ("Little Footsteps" and the title track) as well as some older songs plus the new and as-yet unrecorded "Congestion Pricing". As played, the pieces tend to be expansive (averaging 10-15 minutes each), shifting tone and tempo abruptly with wonderful dramatic effect.

Does British saxophonist **Alabaster DePlume** play jazz? I'm not sure, but does it matter? Not at Big Ears. Heard in a trio with Jeremiah Chiu (piano, ambient electronics) and Gregory Uhlmann (guitar), the leader's extremely breathy tenor playing is like none other, yet perhaps like Ben Webster's if taken to an extreme. He whispers into the instrument, and the result is strikingly original. Big Ears' emphasis is on musicians who are not only on the cutting-edge, but those who are making their mark now, which includes veteran musicians and young turks alike. A few acts that were missed (because you simply can't catch everybody at Big Ears) were esperanza spalding, Wadada Leo Smith (in various configurations), Joe Lovano's Paramount Quartet, Nels Cline's Consentrik Quartet and violinist Jenny Scheinman's All Species Parade with three guitarists—Frisell, Cline and Julian Lage. Sadly there was a cancellation from the highly anticipated Asha Puthli, the Indian-American singer who appeared on Ornette Coleman's *Science Fiction* (Columbia, 1972).

Other groups, which played jazz-adjacent music, included **Rich Ruth**, a thrilling group of improvisers and close listeners that also has its prog rock roots. Guitarist-keyboard explorer **Michael Rother**, the German rock pioneer—who played with Kraftwerk, Neu! and Harmonia—revisited his high-energy back pages with wife Vittoria Maccabruni (electronics), Franz Bargmann (guitar) and the wholly impressive powerhouse Hans Lampe (drums). It was a rare chance to hear this kind of music in the U.S. Immersion, the duo of former Wire songwriter and vocalist **Colin Newman** and his partner, singer-sound artist Malka Spigel, performed ecstatic trance music in darkness in front of a screen, which featured rapidly moving videos reminiscent of the light shows during the heyday of the Fillmore East and was just one of many shows that required "we're at capacity" announcements. There was the young **Magic Tuber String Band**, from Durham, NC, which played music based in old-time country but used it as a template for some striking original compositions that had both jazz and classical allusions. Courtney Werner proved to be an outstanding fiddle player, while Evan Morgan performed captivating drone-type sonics on pump organ.

At Big Ears, it is wholly possible to go from explosive jazz to quiet folk in venues along Gay Street, which are all within walking distance, from the historic, opulent Tennessee Theater to the Civic Auditorium, the most accommodating of the venues. As the festival site description aptly states of its mission in music and the overall experience since its inaugural 2009 edition, Big Ears presents "...joyful, meaningful, and transcendent cultural experiences that defy boundaries, fuel curiosity, ignite the spirit, and nourish the soul." Here's to more of the same with 2026's programming, which of course will prove to be anything but the same in open- and big-ear sounds.

For more info visit [bigearsfestival.org](http://bigearsfestival.org)