

Lil Hardin Armstrong's Secret Ambition: Unravelling the Mystery of Mrs. Louis Armstrong's All-Girl Orchestra

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Accounts of Lillian Hardin Armstrong's All-Girl Orchestra (ca. 1932–1934), also known as the Harlem Harlicans or the Chicago Creolians, are frustratingly vague.¹ Although brief references to this Black women's band appear regularly in biographies of Hardin and surveys of women's jazz history, they are typically based on oral histories collected years later and sometimes rehearse recycled secondary claims. As a result, accounts often disagree on basic facts such as dates, venues, personnel, and even the band's name. Drawing on contemporaneous print sources, including promotional material, tour listings, society columns, and theatrical reviews, this article reconstructs a working chronology of Hardin's dance orchestras and reconsiders the most repeated claims against documented records. The evidence also connects Hardin and her ensemble to a wider network of Black women instrumentalists and suggests she worked closely with violinist-bandleader Mae Brady and the Negro Women's Orchestral and Civic Association (NWOCA) leader, Olivia Shipp. Whereas many historical accounts treat Hardin's All-Girl Orchestra as a historical footnote, this new research repositions the band as an important instance of early intergenerational exchange within Black women's jazz communities, providing an opportunity for collaboration between vaudeville-trained professionals and emerging swing-era musicians. Because the surviving historical record is incomplete and there are no extant arrangements or recordings, I combine documented fact with carefully framed inference where necessary to weave a more salient narrative of Hardin's orchestral musical projects.

¹ The term "All-Girl" will be used often in this article, and it is not meant to be pejorative. Rather, this is the technical name for this genre of band and was the preferred term by the women musicians themselves at the time. It will be capitalized throughout the article unless appearing in a direct quote.

"MRS. ARMSTRONG WILL SOON BE SEEN WITH HER OWN ORCHESTRA"

Musicologist Sherrie Tucker argues that "jazz history has been memorialized in ways that 'invisibilize' women as productive cultural citizens" and that the trope of "male genius overshadows community efforts that included both men and women."² Women who do appear in mainstream jazz historiography are often framed either through what Tucker describes as an "exceptional woman" (a singular woman admitted into a "man's world," but treated as an anomaly) or as "jazz wives" (a category that foregrounds women's supportive labor while minimizing artistic and professional agency).³ As historian Rosetta Reitz notes, this erasure extends into women's musical labor, including composition, arranging, and organizational work. This is especially common in the case of early practitioners who are, as Black studies scholar Daphne Brooks argues, "the most neglected in jazz and blues history despite the fact that many contributed to the foundations of the music," echoing Reitz's assertion and reflecting both limited documentation and interest on the part of many scholars to clarify the record.⁴

Hardin's is a particularly revealing case because she has been made to carry both roles at once: celebrated as exceptional but persistently subordinated to her identity as Louis Armstrong's wife and early manager. Although scholars have increasingly acknowledged her role in shaping the repertory and arrangements for the Hot Five and Hot Seven recordings (1925–27), and her initial leadership of the group as "Lil's Hot Shots," her creative work remains underexamined.⁵ Furthermore, while Hardin's early life and relationship to Armstrong has been meticulously catalogued and analyzed, her post-separation career remains far less documented, and biographical accounts generally emphasize her role in Armstrong's ascent over her later creative and professional ambitions.⁶ Even so,

² Sherrie Tucker, "Jazz History Remix: Black Women from 'Enter' to 'Center,'" in *Issues in African American Music: Power, Gender, Race, Representation*, ed. Portia K. Maultsby and Mellonee V. Burnim (Routledge, 2017), 257, 260.

³ Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker, "Introduction," in *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, ed. Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker (Duke University Press, 2008), 12.

⁴ Daphne A. Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021), 178.

⁵ Jeffery Taylor, "With Lovie and Lil: Rediscovering Two Chicago Pianists of the 1920s," in *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, ed. Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker (Duke University Press, 2008), 50; D. Antoinette Handy, *Black Women in American Bands and Orchestras* (Scarecrow Press, 1981), 41.

⁶ Hardin has given detailed accounts of her early years and time with Armstrong through a series of recorded interviews, most notably to Bill Grauer (1956) and Chris Albertson (1961). However, she is rarely asked about her life post-Armstrong, and even Hardin's biographer James

the surviving record points to Hardin's deliberate attempt to expand her training, build new networks, and establish herself as an orchestral bandleader in the early 1930s.

As her marriage deteriorated in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Hardin sought greater autonomy through formal study, completing a music education degree at the Chicago College of Music in 1928 and studying privately with pianist-composer Louis Victor Saar (1927–29).⁷ She relocated to New York in 1931 to undertake post-graduate study in piano performance from the Institute of Musical Arts,⁸ but after a hand injury curtailed her classical ambitions, she returned to jazz with renewed focus on composition, arranging, and orchestral leadership. By December 1931, the *Pittsburgh Courier* had already announced that “Mrs. Armstrong will soon be seen with her own orchestra, which she is getting ready for action while in Gotham.”⁹ Because writing for a twelve-to-fifteen-piece swing orchestra demanded a different skillset than writing for a small combo, such as the Hot Five, Hardin also undertook private studies with arranger and trumpeter Zilner T. Randolph, musical director for the Louis Armstrong Orchestra.¹⁰

While her desire for a solo career is evident, what remains unclear is why and how she came to lead an all-women ensemble. The next section identifies the most repeated claims about Hardin's All-Girl Orchestra and traces them back to their sources so that they can be validated, revised, or set aside before a fuller reconstruction of the events between 1932 and 1934.

CLAIMS IN CIRCULATION: A SOURCE-CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Documentation for early Black women instrumentalists and the first All-Girl swing ensembles is uneven as surviving recordings and scores are rare and scholarship on this period has relied heavily on oral histories. Though these

Dickerson spends considerably less time on the last forty years of her life compared to her early career, often focusing on her later encounters with Armstrong; Lillian Hardin Armstrong. “Satchmo and Me,” *American Music* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 106–18; James L. Dickerson, *Just for a Thrill: Lil Hardin Armstrong, First Lady of Jazz* (Cooper Square Press, 2002).

⁷ “Louis V. Saar Presents Mrs. Armstrong May 27,” *Chicago Defender*, May 18, 1929, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/1135955647/>, 4.

⁸ Bessye Bearden, “New York Society,” *Chicago Defender*, December 12, 1931, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/1135753199/>, 13.

⁹ “Armstrongs Rift, Rumor is Afloat,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 26, 1931, 3.

¹⁰ Zilner T. Randolph, “Zilner T. Randolph Oral History Interview,” interview by Don DeMichael, February 20, 1977, <https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/66086/JPEG/read/#page/1/mode/2up>, 61.

sources are indispensable, they also invite the predictable problems of misremembering and narrative smoothing. In Hardin's case, this has produced an influential cluster of claims repeatedly cited in the secondary literature.

Most writings about Hardin's group rely on paraphrased recollections that appeared in an October 1961 interview for *Record Research* with John Steiner, which was later rediscovered and preserved by Reitz.¹¹ In the article, Steiner reports that "Lil spoke about her all girl orchestra which played theaters in 1932." He notes that the band "played the Apollo" and that "Hazel Scott's mother [Alma Long Scott] was on sax, Leora [Meaux] Henderson, Fletcher's wife, was on trumpet" and "the outstanding instrumentalist in the band was a girl now remembered only as Doll on trumpet."¹² This short passage has proven unusually generative, supplying a year, one marquee location, and a handful of personnel claims that later writers repeat, sometimes with added venues and extended timelines.

A more detailed account comes from historian Frank Driggs in his survey, "Women in Jazz," for the liner notes of the Stash Records compilation *Jazzwomen: A Feminist Retrospective* (1977). He writes that Hardin "organized one of the first all-girl swing bands which played the Lafayette Theatre (1932), the Apollo Theater (1934), the Graystone Ballroom and other locations over a three-year period."¹³ Driggs was at least partially correct in identifying the general outline of Hardin's post-separation orchestral activity, though several of his venue and date specifics do not survive scrutiny against period print evidence. While the 1934 Apollo Theatre engagement is documented and explored at length later in this article, records show that a scheduled Graystone Ballroom booking for October 1, 1934, was cancelled in favor of an engagement at the Regal Theatre in Chicago.¹⁴ Hardin's first documented Graystone appearance occurred in 1935 with her later all-male aggregation, the 14 Kings of Rhythm.¹⁵ As for references to the Lafayette Theatre performance, it remains the most frequently cited but also the one hardest to substantiate, as I examine in detail later.

Though Hardin only mentions a trumpet player named "Doll" in the Steiner interview, her identity as Dolly Jones is supported through multiple sources. In

¹¹ Brooks, *Liner Notes*, 189.

¹² John Steiner, "Beyond the Impression," *Record Research*, no. 38 (October 1961): 4.

¹³ Frank Driggs, "Women in Jazz: A Survey," liner notes for *Jazz Women (A Feminist Retrospective)* (Stash Records, 1977), <https://harvester.lib.uidaho.edu/collection/items/lumber1571.html>.

¹⁴ Rollo S. Vest, "The Lowdown," *Detroit Tribune*, September 29, 1934, 5.

¹⁵ "Mrs. Armstrong To Play Detroit," *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 20, 1935, A8.

their retrospective article on Jones, *Dolly Jones Armenra* (2020), Howard Rye and Robert Ford also repeat the assertion that “1932 is... the year mooted for Dolly’s appearance with Lil Armstrong’s Harlem Harlicans,” citing Driggs from *Record Research* (no. 41, February 1962) and Theo Zwicky.¹⁶ Reitz supports this claim through a handwritten note from her personal archives which offers a brief anecdote regarding Hardin and Jones’s relationship, stating that “someone tells Louis – there’s a woman who plays just like him – he and Lil talk about it...they go hear her” and that “she played later with Lil.”¹⁷ It is also important to note that Reitz was the only scholar to mention the inclusion of violinist and band director Mae Brady, whose larger role in not only the orchestra, but also the early development of the All-Girl swing band movement has never been acknowledged until this research.

Rarely mentioned, though vitally important, is Hardin’s relationship to bassist and cellist Olivia Sophie L’Ange (Porter) Shipp, which is most clearly documented in D. Antoinette Handy’s *Black Women in American Bands and Orchestras*. Shipp was a member of trombonist and conductor Marie Lucas’s Lafayette Theatre Ladies Orchestra and founder of the Negro Women’s Orchestral and Civic Association (NWOCA). When interviewed by Handy, Shipp indicated that when Hardin had been approached to bring her All-Girl Orchestra to Harlem’s Apollo Theatre in the early 1930s, but didn’t have the musicians she needed, Shipp provided members of the NWOCA to staff the band. Furthermore, she mentioned that she handled all business matters concerning her musicians, even when they “played under the name of Lil Hardin Armstrong,” hinting at more engagements than just the Apollo.¹⁸ Handy’s critical account identifies a concrete connection between Hardin and the network of Black women musicians that Shipp represented through the NWOCA.

Finally, there is the recurring mention of Baby Briscoe, a vocalist, dancer, and future frontwoman of the Harlem Playgirls, as a member of Hardin’s All-Girl band.¹⁹ This claim appears to be incorrect. The confusion seems to stem from a 1938 profile on Briscoe and the Harlem Playgirls from the *Pittsburgh Courier*

¹⁶ Howard Rye and Robert Ford, “Dolly Jones Armenra,” *Names & Numbers* 95 (October 2020): 4.

¹⁷ Brooks, *Liner Notes*, 498.

¹⁸ Handy, *Black Women in American Bands*, 78, 199–200.

¹⁹ Dave Doyle, “Baby Briscoe: Crescent City Queen, Sweetheart of New Orleans,” *The Syncopated Times: Exploring the World of Hot Jazz, Ragtime, and Swing*, May 30, 2020, <https://syncopatedtimes.com/baby-briscoe-crescent-city-queen-sweetheart-of-new-orleans/>, accessed January 13, 2026.

that identifies her as a member of “Lil Armstrong’s band.”²⁰ However, the only printed evidence linking Briscoe and Hardin places them together in 1935—where Briscoe appeared as an additional featured act alongside Hardin’s 14 Kings of Rhythm, not as a member of an all-women orchestra.²¹

Most sources recycle variations of these points with differing timelines, generally placing the group’s activities somewhere between 1931 and 1936. Hardin’s biographer, James Dickerson, dedicated only two sentences to this period of her life, writing that after her separation from Louis Armstrong, she was “fed up with men” and had formed two all-female bands in 1931 and 1932. He names only Alma Long Scott and Leora Henderson (as a trombonist rather than a cornetist) as band members.²² The group’s name also appears inconsistently as the Harlem Harlicans, the Chicago Creolians, or most often as an undifferentiated All-Girl Orchestra or band.²³

In short, beyond the recurring narrative motifs of a specific year (1932 or 1934), two marquee venues (the Apollo and the Lafayette), and select personnel (Henderson, Scott, and Jones), reporting on Hardin’s All-Girl Orchestra is surrounded by unstable or internally contradictory details. Furthermore, most of these retellings strikingly underemphasize two pivotal figures: Mae Brady and Olivia Shipp. These relationships are core elements of the band’s history and will be examined in detail below.

MRS. LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND OLLIE PORTER

Despite a higher profile than many female contemporaries, Hardin was still subject to the same mechanisms of “invisibilization,” especially at the start of her solo career. In a recently unearthed 1961 oral history, she recalled that when she first got her own agent in late 1931, he insisted that she be promoted as “Mrs. Louis Armstrong,” claiming that “nobody wanted to bill [her] as Lil Armstrong,” her preferred moniker. Hardin explained that while she did not “mind adding ‘Armstrong’” nor being called “Lil Hardin Armstrong,” she did not want “to be known as Mrs. Louis Armstrong.”²⁴ Her wishes were ignored,

²⁰ “Directs Play Girls,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 5, 1938, 21.

²¹ “Mrs. Louis Armstrong at Lincoln,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, March 28, 1935, 12.

²² Dickerson, *Just for a Thrill*, 171.

²³ Mary Lazarus Woodbury, “Women Brass Players in Jazz: 1860 to the Present” (DMA diss., University of Cincinnati, 1995), 21; Handy, *Black Women in American Bands*, 130.

²⁴ Lillian Hardin Armstrong, reel-to-reel audio recording (oral history/interview), December 11, 1961, Louis Armstrong House Museum (LAHM), Queens, NY. Special thanks to Ricky

and the billing strategy positioned her as an extension of Armstrong rather than as a bandleader in her own right, effectively folding her into the familiar “jazz wife” economy.

Hardin also described a deliberate typographic tactic in which promoters set “Mrs.” so small that audiences could only see “Louis Armstrong” unless they looked closely. She resented the practice because it deceived audiences into believing they were paying to see Armstrong and she “didn’t figure that [she] had to ride on Louie’s name.”²⁵ In a later 1969 BBC interview, she recalled raising this concern with her agent: “If they expect to see Louis and if they don’t see Louis how you know they’re going to like us?” His reply, “Well, you make them like it,” captures the bind of this marketing logic: Hardin was expected to succeed on her own merits while also absorbing the fallout of a gender-based comparison she had not chosen.²⁶

Even when promoters made clear that she, not Louis Armstrong, was performing, advertising often still relied on the “Mrs. Louis Armstrong” branding, treating her as a proxy for her husband’s repertory rather than an artist in her own right. One early example appears in promotion for the *Ebony Follies* revue at Philadelphia’s Standard Theatre (March 1932) where audiences were invited to “come out and hear the ‘Mrs.’ sing the songs made famous by her husband.”²⁷ Despite being “disgusted” by the practice, Hardin used the “Mrs. Louis Armstrong” moniker frequently from 1932 to 1936, though archival traces also show her moving between the “Mrs.” branding and her own name depending on venue and context.²⁸ During late-1932 radio broadcasts on NBC and WJZ alongside Clarence Todd and Clarence Jones, for instance, she often appears simply as “Lillian Armstrong.”²⁹

Although Hardin’s theatrical work was branded by her marital status, her activities in Black women’s social clubs and community organizations reveal a

Riccardi, Director of Research Collections at the Louis Armstrong House, for making me aware of this resource and facilitating access to it.

²⁵ Armstrong, reel-to-reel audio recording, 1961, LAHM.

²⁶ Lillian Hardin Armstrong, interview by Geoffrey Haydon, BBC radio interview (audio recording), November 10, 1969, Louis Armstrong House Museum (LAHM), Queens, NY; access provided by Ricky Riccardi.

²⁷ “Shelton Brooks and Mrs. Lou Armstrong Standard Reopening,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, March 24, 1932, 7.

²⁸ Armstrong, BBC radio interview, 1969, LAHM; Sally Placksin, *American Women in Jazz: 1900 to the Present, Their Words, Lives, and Music* (Wideview Books, 1982), 62.

²⁹ R. Vincent Ottley, “Are You Listenin’?: Didja Know That-,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, December 21, 1932, 7; “394m-WJZ-760Ke,” *Asbury Park Press*, November 21, 1932, 4; “WJZ-760 Ke,” *Patriot-News* (Harrisburg, PA), December 5, 1932, 5; “Monday,” *Afro-American*, December 10, 1932, 10; “Monday,” *Afro-American*, December 24, 1932, 10.

parallel sphere in which she typically appeared under her own name. Unlike her theatrical bookings, these events were rarely advertised as performances and instead surface mainly in society columns, with Hardin's name embedded among dozens of attendees. Her involvement in such organizations was long-standing, with examples as early as 1929, when she performed at the social hour of the Chicago Young Woman's Club.³⁰ In New York, multiple society notices (1932–34) place her repeatedly within civic-professional women's networks that also intersected with the women's orchestral community.³¹

Notably, Hardin often appears from 1932 onward in the same organizational orbit as "Ollie Porter," an alias used by Olivia Shipp when operating in respectable "polite" society.³² Shipp, like Hardin, maintained a dual identity, using her maiden name in performance contexts and her married name when presenting herself as a music teacher or organizational leader. Hardin's documented presence at events involving Shipp does not, by itself, prove a business relationship, but it does establish a plausible point of contact between Hardin and the institutional networks that Shipp administered, including the NWOCA. That overlap remained visible later in the decade: a 1939 photograph shows Hardin alongside both Shipp and Leora Henderson at a community dance organized by the Business and Professional Women's Club (later the National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women's Club), an organization Shipp helped found and for which she served as first national president.³³

³⁰ "Young Woman's Club," *Chicago Defender*, June 15, 1929, 19.

³¹ "Colonial Tea," *Afro-American*, February 27, 1932, 10; "Long Island News Notes and Social Items," *New York Age*, December 24, 1932, 8; "Marvello School of Beauty Culture," *Chicago Defender*, February 11, 1933, 17; "Women's Auxiliary of Urban League Entertain," *Chicago Defender*, February 24, 1934, 6.

³² Shipp's use of this alias is confirmed by the appearance of "Ollie Porter" in an article from early 1936 that lists notable performers of 1935, including names such as Earl Hines and Duke Ellington. Shipp as "Porter" is listed between "Three Rhythm Queens" and "Una Mae Carlisle." Allan McMillan, "Theatre Chat: A Farewell to 1935," *Afro-American*, January 4, 1936, 9.

³³ "Business, Professional Women Hear Nat'l Prexy," *Chicago Defender*, March 31, 1951, 10; "Business and Professional Women Dance in Harlem," *Chicago Defender*, November 4, 1939, 18.

BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL WOMEN DANCE IN HARLEM



One of the swankiest affairs of the season was the dance staged by the Business and Professional Women's club at the Renaissance Friday night. The majority of the members were in costumes, that part of the program being optional. Shown here between dances are,

front row: Mesdames M. Jackson, M. Wiggins, L. Henderson, Mary Hueier, P. Robinson, and back row: Mesdames Ollie Porter, Sadie Williams, Lillian Tynes, Lillian Armstrong and Laura Gibbs.—McAlpin photo.

Figure 1. Photo of members of Business and Professional Women's Club at a community dance. Included in photo are Lillian Hardin Armstrong (back, second from right), Leora Henderson (front, third from right) and Olivia Shipp (named as Ollie Porter) (back, first on left).

Taken together, the "Mrs. Louis Armstrong" moniker and Hardin's civic-organizational affiliations clarify the conditions under which an All-Girl orchestra could be imagined and assembled. If Hardin sought to relaunch her career as an orchestra leader independent of Armstrong, forming an all-women aggregation of Black musicians carried professional risk at a moment when women's bands were still framed as novelty acts, associated more with vaudeville than swing. After all, this activity took place years before groups such as Ina Ray Hutton and Her Melodears or the Harlem Playgirls achieved commercial success. While Hardin's separation from Armstrong in 1931 might have led her to collaborate with more women, her repeated appearance in these organizations indicate that the project emerged just as much from sustained ties to a professional community of Black women. Rather than treating Hardin's All-Girl Orchestra as an anomaly, the next section situates this group within a longer

institutional lineage of Black women's orchestras and a recruitment infrastructure that made such ensembles possible.

FROM THE LAFAYETTE LADIES TO THE NWOCA: INFRASTRUCTURE AND LINEAGE

Hardin's group was not the first all-women band, nor even the first all-women swing orchestra, despite occasional claims to the contrary. The first iteration of the Dixie Sweethearts had been active since March 1930, and women's instrumental ensembles had circulated since the nineteenth century as brass bands, theatre orchestras, and vaudeville groups.³⁴ Another relevant early precedent was the Chicago-based Musical Spillers from 1906, a mixed-gender band that included female improvisers such as Alice Calloway and future Hardin collaborator Leora Meaux Henderson.

The most direct institutional lineage for Hardin's all-woman ensemble runs through Marie Lucas and the Lafayette Theatre Ladies Orchestra. Lucas, the daughter of minstrel star Samuel Lucas, was unusually well-trained for the period, having undertaken conservatory studies in Europe.³⁵ In 1915, she became the director of the Lafayette's orchestra, which had become a "permanent fixture" of the Harlem theatre and also held a contract with the Elite Amusement Corporation to train young women for theatre work across its venues.³⁶ This made the Lafayette Theatre not only a famous Harlem stage, but also a long-term employer and training site for Black women instrumentalists.

Its productions widely reported in the Black press, the Lafayette served as a major platform for artists such as Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, Bessie Smith, and Ethel Waters. The theatre was also an early site of desegregation, and by 1912, African American theatregoers were permitted to sit in the orchestra pit. During its existence, administrative control of the theatre shifted repeatedly, and for a time, the theater was under Black management under journalist Lester Walton from 1914–1916, who facilitated Lucas's hiring and the formation of her Ladies Orchestra. From 1919 to 1923, the theatre was staffed exclusively by Black Americans, though this changed when Frank Schiffman and Leo Brecher bought the venue.³⁷ Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, these two men controlled a substantial part of Harlem's theatrical landscape, including associations with the Roseland Ballroom, the Harlem

³⁴ "Girl Orchestra Wins Recognition Out West," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, May 9, 1931, 18.

³⁵ Handy, *Black Women in American Bands*, 55.

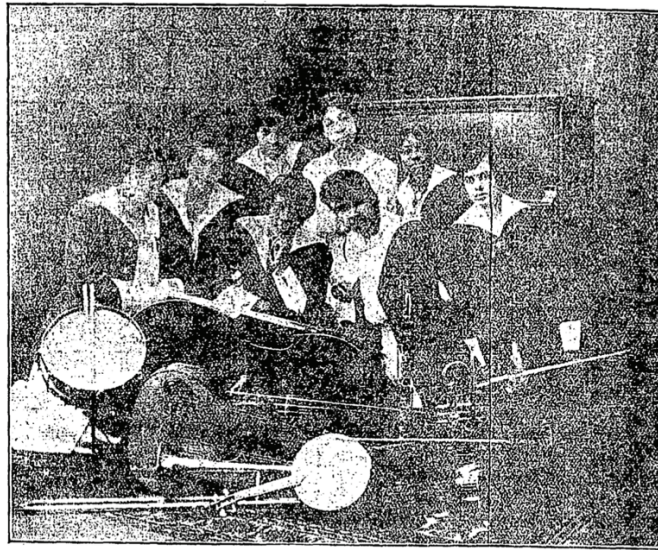
³⁶ Placksin, *American Women in Jazz*, 46; Handy, *Black Women in American Bands*, 56.

³⁷ Astrid Haas, "Lafayette Theater," in *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Cary D. Wintz and Paul Finkelman (Routledge, 2004), 678–79.

Opera House, and later, the Apollo Theatre, which Schiffman and his family ran for decades.

By 1916, the Lafayette Ladies Orchestra's core membership included violinist Mildred Franklin, pianist Hallie Anderson, and drummer Alice Calloway, alongside trumpeter Henderson, trombonist Della Sutton and Olivia Shipp on bass and cello, three musicians who later appear in Hardin's orbit.³⁸

FAMOUS LAFAYETTE ORCHESTRA



The leading ladies' orchestra of New York City, led by Miss Lucas. A number of Chicago girls are seen here.

Figure 2. The Lafayette Ladies Orchestra. Pictured are Leora Meaux-Henderson, Della Sutton, Mildred Franklin, Hallie Anderson, Olivia Porter, Alice Calloway, and two unidentified members.

These musicians also toured in Black all-women jazz and dance band aggregations in the 1920s. Sutton's Melody Girls performed throughout the 1920s and shared bills with major groups such as Earl Hines's Orchestra.³⁹ Reported to "surpass many of their male contemporaries," they were even

³⁸ "Famous Lafayette Orchestra," *Chicago Defender* (Big Weekend Edition), July 29, 1916, 4; *Jazz Advertised 1910-1967*, vol. 4: *Out of the Chicago Defender, 1910-1934*, ed. Franz Hoffmann (University of the District of Columbia, 1999), 7.

³⁹ "Three Orchestras," advertisement, *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 14, 1923; in *Jazz Advertised 1910-1967*, vol. 1: *Out of the New England Negro Press, 1910-1934*, ed. Franz Hoffmann (University of the District of Columbia, 1999), 57.

described as the “undisputed world’s greatest female jazz band.”⁴⁰ In 1928, Sutton and saxophonist Ruby Mason co-led the Bandana Girls, an all-star configuration that included future NWOCA musicians linked to Hardin’s band—saxophonist Minette Fraction, trumpeters Betty Lomax and Hilda Manigault, and legendary cornetist Diyaw Jones (mother of Dolly Jones).⁴¹

By the late 1920s, Olivia Shipp had assembled her own dance band, the Jazz-Mines. Promoted as providing “music for all occasions,” they performed consistently at public events, and provided the core membership for the NWOCA, which was founded around 1930. Under Shipp’s direction and administration, the organization was formed with the assistance of Local 802 of the American Federation of Musicians and future mayor Fiorello LaGuardia. As New York City’s first civic orchestra, this institutional backing lent an air of respectability that many Black ensembles lacked at the time.⁴² It also functioned as an employment network, loaning musicians to other orchestras, and thus served as an ideal recruitment hub for Hardin. A rare circa-1930 photograph identifies the personnel and underscores the organization’s scale and instrumentation.⁴³

⁴⁰ “Della M. Sutton’s Melody Girls Orchestra at Wonderland,” advertisement, *Afro-American*, May 16, 1924; in *Jazz Advertised 1910–1967*, vol. 1: *Out of the New England Negro Press, 1910–1934*, ed. Franz Hoffmann (University of the District of Columbia, 1999), 86.

⁴¹ Blanche Taylor Dickinson, “Music in the Air,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 4, 1928, 8.

⁴² Woodbury, “Women Brass Players,” 21, 30.

⁴³ Handy, *Black Women in American Bands*, N199. The original photograph is currently housed at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division of the New York Public Library; Olivia Shipp Photograph Collection, Schomburg, New York Public Library.



Figure 3. The Negro Women's Orchestral & Civic Association circa 1930. Left to right (front): Bell, Mazie Mullen, unknown, unknown, violins; Della Sutton, trombone; Hilda [sic] Manigault and Edna Buchanan, trumpets; leader unknown; Betty Lomax, guitar; Gladys Bell (Seals), Minette Fraction, Lula Richardson, unknown, Leora Meoux [Meaux] Henderson, saxophones; (rear): Dillon, piano; Gertrude Martin and Olivia Shipp, bass; Corinne Schyver (Shipp's daughter), drums; Alberta Conklin and unknown, piano.

Though Hardin's interactions with this community in the 1920s were likely limited, two pieces of evidence establish a clear link. First, it is well documented that Louis Armstrong, at Hardin's urging, left Chicago in October 1924 to join Fletcher Henderson's orchestra in New York, where he remained until November 1925. Numerous accounts describe the Henderson home as a gathering place for prominent musicians of the late 1920s and early 1930s, and the Armstrongs formed both professional and personal ties to Fletcher and Leora. Leora in particular recalled a warm relationship with Armstrong, whom she credited with "teaching her to play 'hot trumpet.'"⁴⁴ Her role in this environment was substantial, as she was not merely present as Fletcher's wife, but was also a highly regarded multi-instrumentalist and arranger who, in addition to her regular work with the Lafayette Ladies Orchestra, also led her own all-women dance orchestra in 1927. This group, The Twelve Vampires, performed at "well-known theatres and occasionally at the Roseland Ballroom

⁴⁴ Handy, *Black Women in American Bands*, 130.

in New York City, opposite [her] husband, Fletcher Henderson, and his orchestra.”⁴⁵

Furthermore, in the 1961 oral history recording discussed earlier, Hardin confirmed performing with both Henderson and Sutton, explaining that “Della Sutton and Leora Henderson, Fletcher’s wife, had a woman’s band and I played some gigs with them.” She goes on to mention that “Della played drums and Leora was an excellent trumpet player” who had “previously toured all over Europe with a band.”⁴⁶ Whether this was an iteration of Sutton’s Melody Girls, Henderson’s Twelve Vampires, or another aggregation, Hardin’s statement establishes a relationship between herself and this community of female instrumentalists that predates her own All-Girl Orchestra.

The connection to the larger NWOCA orbit via Henderson and Sutton provides a logical pathway to Shipp. It not only supports Handy’s assertion that Hardin used the organization to staff her 1934 Apollo engagement, but also makes the formation of a 1932 iteration of her All-Girl Orchestra more plausible. Taken together, the NWOCA connection, documented social encounters between Hardin and Shipp, and Hardin’s later cryptic recollections, present enough evidence to permit a carefully qualified reconstruction of Hardin’s activities in 1932, even if the surviving record remains incomplete.

HARDIN’S 1932 ORCHESTRA AND A ROSELAND BALLROOM AUDITION

Despite the persistent claim that Hardin’s All-Girl Orchestra performed at the Lafayette Theatre in 1932, an exhaustive survey of archival sources from that time yields no explicit mention of the group or of any performance by an all-women orchestra at the Lafayette. Given the frequency of novelty billing at the time, the lack of such notices is striking, though this absence of evidence cannot by itself disprove the group’s existence. While other Black All-Girl groups were active at the time, notably the Pittsburgh-based Rhythm Queens and the Minnesota-based Dixie Sweethearts (routinely promoted as “the only colored girls’ orchestra in the Northwest”), surviving notices do not place a comparable Black all-women orchestra in New York’s major theatres or dance halls in 1932.⁴⁷ Furthermore, a recently discovered typewritten retrospective engagement list by Hardin circa-1961 makes no mention of the Lafayette that

⁴⁵ Woodbury, “Women Brass Players,” 20.

⁴⁶ Armstrong, reel-to-reel audio recording, 1961, LAHM.

⁴⁷ “Look Who’s Coming Back,” advertisement, *Daily Times and Daily Journal-Press* (St. Cloud, MN), April 11, 1932, 4; “Women’s Orchestra To Make Debut Soon,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 20, 1932; in *Jazz Advertised 1910–1967*, Vol. 1: *Out of the New England Negro Press 1910–1934*, ed. Franz Hoffmann (University of the District of Columbia, 1999), 366.

year. Instead, her 1932 entry only mentions engagements at the Harlem Opera House with Ralph Cooper, at the Lincoln Theatre in Philadelphia with Bessie Smith, at the Standard in Baltimore with Shelton Brooks (in *Ebony Follies*, as mentioned above), and at the Royal Theatre with Alberta Hunter.⁴⁸

Hardin was also conspicuously vague about this period in the 1961 interview. After giving a detailed account of her first public performance as Mrs. Louis Armstrong with Ralph Cooper and the Kongo Knights at the Harlem Opera House (March 1932), she says only that she “went to Philadelphia for a week and from then [she was] gone,” adding that “Connie’s Hot Chocolates had put a road show up and they had introduced [her] to a fellow named Avon Long to work with.”⁴⁹ However, this recollection appears to omit roughly a year, since her duo work with Avon Long in the touring *Connie’s Hot Chocolates* revue did not begin until April 1933. Hardin’s omission of the Lafayette engagement from both the typewritten note and from her oral history is striking and was perhaps purposeful rather than a simple misremembering.

First, clear evidence shows that Hardin performed at the Lafayette Theatre as Mrs. Louis Armstrong during the week of May 14–20, 1932. Second, an interview with Ralph Matthews of the *Afro-American* for his weekly column “Looking at the Stars” describes both her treatment in the industry and her thwarted attempt to form a “female orchestra.” In the June 4, 1932, piece, “Lillian Armstrong, She Hid Her Light Under a Bushel while Hubby Shone,” Matthews paraphrased Hardin as follows:

Lil was stumped for a while. She could still play and sing, too, but her name had no box office value. At first she decided to drop her husband’s name because she did not want to be sailing under his colors. But she thought better of it. After all, she had contributed to his success while allowing her own reputation and personality to be submerged in making him the star he was. She had stuck by him through seven years of ups and downs. She was entitled to use the name that was on everybody’s lips. Then, after all, the severance of relations was not of her making. That is why she is billed as Mrs. Louis Armstrong... In New York she started a female orchestra, but when the booking agents looked it over they decided most of the members

⁴⁸ This is clearly an incomplete list, as it omits a number of confirmed appearances: a three-day stint at the Harlem Opera House supporting Lucky Millinder the week of May 5; a duo performance at Baltimore’s Afro Club in the first week of June with vocalist Audrey Thomas; and numerous radio appearances with Clarence Todd and Clarence Williams towards the end of the year. Lillian Hardin Armstrong, “Lil’s Work Itinerary,” typescript, ca. 1961, Louis Armstrong House Museum, Queens, NY (LAHM); access provided by Ricky Riccardi.

⁴⁹ “Around the Theatres,” *Afro-American*, March 19, 1932, 16; Armstrong, reel-to-reel audio recording, 1961, LAHM.

were too fat. Now she's looking for chorus girls who can play instruments. So far she has only been able to find pianists and violinists. Few girls have studied brass and reed instruments, she complains. She had hoped to become a concert pianist but injured a finger and gave up this high hope.⁵⁰

Beyond confirming that Hardin had attempted to organize an All-Girl Orchestra in New York in the spring of 1932, this account reveals the gendered prejudice that shaped that effort and the constraints imposed by her public identity as a "jazz wife." It also helps explain why her orchestral ambitions stalled despite clear artistic intent. Reflecting the tone of the Matthews interview, Hardin appears visibly subdued in a candid photograph taken during her duo performance with Audry Thomas at Baltimore's Afro Club in early June.⁵¹ In this context, Hardin's later reluctance to discuss either the Lafayette performance or an attempted 1932 All-Girl Orchestra becomes more understandable. Drawing upon evidence of a genuine creative desire to form an orchestra of women who could perform her original music only to have it blocked almost immediately due to the professional gender barriers of the time strongly suggests that this was a painful experience for her that had a lasting personal impact.

⁵⁰ Ralph Matthews, "Looking At the Stars: Lillian Armstrong, She Hid Her Light Under a Bushel while Hubby Shone," *Afro-American*, June 4, 1932, 18.

⁵¹ "They Entertained for the Afro Club," *Afro-American*, June 11, 1932, 12. I have not been able to locate other photos of Hardin looking this way. She usually presents as being either happy or content, especially for the press. Her demeanor is so striking here that a cropped version was later recycled for a gossip piece "Now, Who is Mrs. Armstrong?," *Afro-American*, December 3, 1932, 1.



Figure 4. Hardin pictured several weeks after the Lafayette engagement at the Afro Club in Baltimore with Audrey Thomas.

Hardin's confirmation of the existence of her 1932 All-Girl Orchestra enables a hypothetical reconstruction of its activities and personnel. The first clue comes from a short notice published on April 5 in the *Philadelphia Tribune*. After her successful engagements at the Harlem Opera House with Ralph Cooper and at the Standard Theatre as a solo act, the paper reported that "Mrs. Lillian Armstrong and her band are contracted to play at the Roseland Ballroom, New York...following the departure of Claude Hopkins." He was taking a ten-day break from his residency there to tour a new revue, *Roseland Frolics*.⁵² If the notice reflects an actual negotiation rather than advance publicity, Hardin may have been asked to audition and would have needed to supply an orchestra. If so, the attempt was unsuccessful—the May 4, 1932, edition of the *New York*

⁵² "Hopkins' New Revue Now in Rehearsal," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 4, 1932, 7; "Mrs. Lou Armstrong's Band at Roseland," *Philadelphia Tribune*, April 21, 1932, 8.

Amsterdam News reported that singer and tap dancer Cora LaRedd had been awarded the ten-day engagement.⁵³ Whether for Roseland or another venue, Hardin told Matthews that at least one audition took place, raising the question of personnel.

As discussed above, Hardin would likely have drawn upon her earlier ties to working female instrumentalists, especially Leora Henderson and Della Sutton. It is unclear whether she had prior contact with Olivia Shipp, but the earliest printed evidence appears in a society-column report on a party honoring soprano Caterina Jarboro (April 30, 1932), where Hardin's and Shipp's names appear together on the guest list. This places them in the same social orbit and provides an entry point for Hardin's recruitment of NWOCA musicians.⁵⁴ Assuming that Hardin drew upon the NWOCA to staff her 1932 ensemble, a partial reconstruction of personnel is possible from the captioned photo reproduced in Handy's book (see previous section), which identifies most of the women pictured.⁵⁵ Saxophonist Gladys Bell Seals stated in a 1996 interview that Alma Long Scott was a regular NWOCA performer at the time, and though absent from the photo, likely may have been included.⁵⁶ Hardin's preexisting ties to Sutton and Henderson, together with their jazz profiles and NWOCA membership, likewise make their inclusion plausible. It is possible to tentatively identify the musicians most often called upon for "hot" jazz work by cross-referencing Handy's photo with profiles of Sutton's ensembles and a 1936 account of a NWOCA performance.⁵⁷ Assuming a standard twelve-piece orchestra, a reconstruction would include Gladys Bell Seals, Minette Fraction, Alma Long Scott, Lula Richardson (saxes); Leora Meaux Henderson, Hilda Manigault (trumpets); Della Sutton (trombone); Betty Lomax (trumpet and/or banjo); Alberta Conklin (piano); Olivia Shipp (bass); and Shipp's daughter Corrine Schyver (drums). Most of these women had already been professionally active for decades, placing them in their thirties or forties, so the age- and

⁵³ "Cora La Redd and Band at Roseland," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 4, 1932, 7.

⁵⁴ Geraldyn Dismond, "New York Social Chat: Miss Jarboro Feted," *Afro-American*, April 30, 1932, 4.

⁵⁵ Handy, *Black Women in American Bands*, N199.

⁵⁶ Delilah Jackson, "Saxophonist Gladys Seals, 93, still jamming," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 26, 1996, 26.

⁵⁷ A general distinction can be made between "dance" music (such as fox trots and waltzes) and what was referred to as "hot" jazz, meaning a closer connection to African American blues and swing music that more heavily utilized improvisation; Dickinson, "Music in the Air," 8; "Orchestral Unit in Introduction," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 23, 1936, 7.

appearance-policing practiced by male agents likely contributed to a lack of interest in booking them, as Hardin's comments illustrate.

Personnel reconstruction also raises the question of Dolly Jones's involvement, named by Hardin herself and repeatedly identified as a group member in subsequent accounts. Frequently described in the press as the "female Louis Armstrong," Jones was a renowned Chicago cornetist whose virtuosity is documented on recordings from 1926–1941. Although she was an obvious candidate and had prior contact with Hardin and Armstrong (via Reitz's note), her only plausible availability aligns with Hardin's Lafayette week, leaving her unavailable for earlier auditions or later performances in 1932. According to the newspapers, Jones was performing regularly with Walter Barnes and His Royal Creolians from January to early May 1932, and was busy with her own band, The Twelve Spirits of Rhythm, from June onwards. The one relevant gap coincides with Hardin's Lafayette engagement, when Barnes and much of his group were hospitalized after an automobile accident while on tour.⁵⁸ That documented gap supports repeated claims that Jones performed with Hardin at the Lafayette.⁵⁹

Yet the printed record still conflicts with oral recollection. Coverage of the Lafayette week is sparse, and there is no mention of an All-Girl band appearing with Hardin. A short *Chicago Defender* notice by Walter Barnes Jr. specifically states that "Lil Armstrong, wife of the famous Louis, is now appearing at the Lafayette Theater in New York as a single, playing the piano and singing," adding that "after making appearances in Baltimore, Boston and Atlantic City, Lil plans to organize her own band when she returns to New York."⁶⁰ However, the consistency of oral recollections, combined with Jones's scheduling window, warrants a closer look. As Barnes Jr., writing from Chicago, may simply have repeated a circulated press release without direct knowledge of events in New York, the possibility remains that the ensemble appeared for at least some portion of the engagement.

⁵⁸ Floyd G. Snelson Jr., "Newsy Newsettes," *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 14, 1932, A6.

⁵⁹ Following the Lafayette performances, Jones was in Chicago performing with Erskine Tate's Orchestra at the Savoy Ballroom. "Savoy Ballroom," advertisement, *Chicago Defender*, May 28, 1932, in *Jazz Advertised 1910–1967*, vol. 4: *Out of the Chicago Defender, 1910–1934*, ed. Franz Hoffmann (University of the District of Columbia, 1999), 285.

⁶⁰ Walter Barnes Jr., "Hittin' High Notes with Walter Barnes Jr.," *Chicago Defender* (National edition), May 28, 1932, 5.

FOUR STAR REVUE AT THE LAFAYETTE

Despite being the most plausible opportunity for a public appearance by Hardin with an all-women orchestra that spring, surviving records for the Lafayette Theatre engagement from May 14–20 are scant and largely vague, a striking contrast to the theatre's otherwise substantial coverage in the Black press. Newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender*, *New York Age*, and *Pittsburgh Courier*, and especially the *New York Amsterdam News* routinely covered Lafayette performances and backstage disputes in detail. In the weeks surrounding Hardin's appearance, the orchestras of Duke Ellington and Don Redman received substantial attention, whereas Hardin's week is documented only through advertisements and brief commentary, none of which describe her performance or mention an All-Girl Orchestra.⁶¹ Only Hardin is ever mentioned as "Mrs. Louis Armstrong" without any further details as to whether she was appearing with a group or just as a soloist.

Billed as *Four Star Revue*, the week's headliner at the Lafayette was Cora LaRedd and her Red Peppers (fresh from their ten-day Roseland Ballroom run), with Sunshine Sammy and His Pals sharing top billing. The Alberta Hunter Trio appeared as a supporting act, and Hardin, promoted as "Mrs. Louis Armstrong," occupied the bottom of the bill.⁶²

⁶¹ "Benefit Show at Lafayette," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 11, 1932, 7; "Don Redman and Cab Calloway at Lafayette," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 25, 1932, 7.

⁶² "4 Star Revue," advertisement, *New York Age*, May 14, 1932, 6.



Figure 5. Advertising notice for Hardin's appearance in 4 Star Revue at the Lafayette Theatre, May 14–20, 1932.

I only located two brief first-hand accounts of the revue. The first is a short *New York Age* notice emphasizing LaRedd as the clear star, reportedly performing “eight numbers at each performance.”⁶³ The second is a three-sentence review by *Pittsburgh Courier* critic Chappy Gardner: “Show only fair. Slowed down by band and earnest Miss La Redd who dances better than she

⁶³ “Lafayette Theatre,” *New York Age*, May 21, 1932, 6.

conducts band. Rest of bill registers O.K.”⁶⁴ Gardner’s reference to “the band,” however, is ambiguous. It may refer to LaRedd’s ensemble, a house or pit orchestra or—less likely given the absence of billing—Hardin’s rumored women’s orchestra.

One puzzling aspect of the bill itself is the inclusion of Alberta Hunter and how Hardin’s All-Girl Orchestra may have been booked but not advertised. In a short report of a labor dispute from the *New York Amsterdam News* between Frank Schiffman and the week’s promoted comedians, Harrison Blackburn and Amon Davis, the writer also wonders about Hunter’s involvement. He briefly mentions an earlier “disagreement” between Hunter and Schiffman, but simply assumes that a “happy medium must have been reached” as neither party was forthcoming with more information.⁶⁵ This was actually not the case, as Schiffman and Hunter had been engaged in a highly publicized and reportedly bitter legal dispute over wage theft and breach of contract since 1930, which had consequences for Schiffman in other suits.⁶⁶ As Hunter was officially barred from performing at the Lafayette, her presence on the bill and her close association with Hardin warrants further consideration.

Leading up to the Lafayette performances, Hardin and Hunter frequently appear near each other both as performers and in private life, and Hunter is even included on the guest list for Caterina Jarboro’s April 30th party where Hardin is confirmed to have met with Shipp.⁶⁷ Given their close friendship, it is possible that Hunter could have agreed to settle her dispute with Schiffman in exchange for allowing Hardin to appear with her All-Girl Orchestra, and that Schiffman, known for having tight control over the reporting on his establishment, may have directed his newspaper contacts to not mention the band. This is, of course, speculation, but it may explain why the orchestra was booked in the first place and why no mention of it can be found in the press. It also speaks to Hardin’s state of mind in early June.

⁶⁴ Chappy Gardner, “Along the Rialto: Reviewing Lafayette,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 21, 1932, A6.

⁶⁵ In another instance of Hardin’s “invisibilization,” she is referred to as “Louis Armstrong,” without the ‘Mrs.’ in this piece. “Comedians Out of the Current Lafayette Show,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 18, 1932, 7.

⁶⁶ For a more detailed description of this incident, see Geraldyn Dismond, “Alberta Hunter Goes to Bat for N.Y. Performers,” *Afro-American*, October 18, 1930, 9; “Charles Doyle Wins Salary Suit,” *New York Amsterdam News*, October 22, 1930, 10.

⁶⁷ Geraldyn Dismond, “New York Social Chat: Miss Jarboro Feted,” *Afro-American*, April 30, 1932, 4.

The possibility of a public performance at the Lafayette by Hardin and her All-Girl Orchestra is thus supported by several pieces of evidence, including the frequency with which the performance appears in oral accounts, Hardin's own recollection that Dolly Jones played with the group combined with her documented availability, Gardner's ambiguous reference to "the band," and the background of Hunter's dispute with Schiffman. Whatever happened, the episode appears to have had both personal and professional consequences for Hardin. In the weeks that followed came the Matthews interview and the candid Afro Club photograph in which she appears uncharacteristically subdued. Most importantly, there is a gap in documented attempts to lead an orchestra from mid-1932 to 1933, as she instead focused on work as a solo act and accompanist. The year 1933 was prolific and her duo act with Avon Long appeared regularly in the touring *Hot Chocolates* revue, serving as a vehicle for premiering some of her best-known compositions, including "My Hi-De-Ho Man," "Brown Gal," and "Just for a Thrill."⁶⁸ Despite this success, her dream of leading her own orchestra had effectively stalled until 1934 when Mae Brady reentered her orbit.

MAE BRADY AND A NIGHT IN HARLEM

Hardin's type-written notes for her 1934 itinerary includes the following entry: "Toured with 'CREOLIANS,' an all-girl band about 3 months," and "Signed with Charles Green, opened up in Buffalo with 16-piece band at the 'Vendome' (night club)---Played Apollo Theatre, New York then went on tour (101 one-night stands)."⁶⁹ Hardin's second documented opportunity to lead an All-Girl orchestra appears to have begun in spring 1934, when she was likely contacted by violinist and band director Mae Brady. Hardin had worked with Brady at Chicago's Dreamland café in 1921, between Hardin's engagements with King Oliver. In the 1961 interview, Hardin described Brady as a "shrewd businesswoman, but a terrible violinist and musician."⁷⁰ Whatever the accuracy of that musical judgement, Brady functioned less as a featured performer than as an organizer and director within early All-Girl touring ensembles.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Though she did not have the opportunity to record these songs until the late 1930s with an all-male group, it is possible that she was arranging and adapting this material for her fifteen-piece all-girl orchestra in 1934.

⁶⁹ Armstrong, "Lil's Work Itinerary," ca. 1961, LAHM.

⁷⁰ Armstrong, reel-to-reel audio recording, 1961, LAHM.

⁷¹ Photo of Mae Brady with her 1919 Orchestra, Lippmann+Rau-Musikarchiv Eisenach, Theo Zwicky Collection, 155Fo/16 p.16.



Figure 6. Mae Brady pictured with her 1919 orchestra. Courtesy of Lippman+Rau-Musikarchiv Eisenach.

Basic biographical information on Brady remains limited. The *University of Kentucky Research Guide* lists her birth year as 1892 and there is no confirmed trace of her after 1935.⁷² Between 1932 and 1935, however, newspaper notices and promotional materials repeatedly place her in leadership roles across multiple All-Girl configurations.⁷³ In October 1932, she was reported as a member of an All-Girl quintet led by Dolly Jones (Hutchinson) called “Doll Hutchinson and [her] Rhythm Girls.”⁷⁴ In April 1933, Brady joined the second iteration of the Dixie Sweethearts and soon assumed leadership after a bus accident near Lynchburg, Virginia, on June 21 incapacitated the band’s leader

⁷² “African American Women Play Musical Instruments: Violin,” *University of Kentucky Research Guides*, last modified June 9, 2025, accessed July 2, 2025, <https://libguides.uky.edu/c.php?g=640452&p=4504014>.

⁷³ Howard Rye documented Brady’s connection to both the Dixie Sweethearts and the Harlem Playgirls in “What the Papers Said: The Harlem Play-Girls and Dixie Rhythm Girls (and Dixie Sweethearts),” *Storyville 1996/7*, ed. Laurie Wright. (L Wright, 1997), 172–87.

⁷⁴ Another notable member of this quintet was Chicago saxophonist Lula Edge, who, while not directly connected to Hardin’s band, was a member of the Dixie Sweethearts, Billie Bailey’s Chicago Rhythm Girls, and ultimately the Harlem Playgirls with other Hardin alumni. Bob Hayes, “Here and There,” *Chicago Defender*, October 29, 1932, 5.

and drummer, Sophie “Billie” Bailey.⁷⁵ Touring thereafter as Mae Brady and Her Chicago Rhythm Girls, she returned to New York by fall 1933 and was hired to direct a short-lived All-Girl band backing trumpeter Valaida Snow.⁷⁶ Initially billed as Mae Brady and Her 12 Sepia Syncopators, the group was later known as “Valaida Snow’s All-Girl Band.” The ensemble performed with Snow at major New York theatres including the Lafayette, the Apollo, and the Capitol, often promoted as the “World’s Only Colored Girl-Band,” a holdover from earlier Dixie Sweethearts publicity.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ The original version of the Dixie Sweethearts was led by Earl Clendenon. Bailey, the group’s drummer, purchased the name and reformed it by combining some of the original personnel with more seasoned jazz musicians from Chicago. “Billie Bailey Organizes Orchestra in Norfolk,” *The Call*, June 2, 1933, 19; “Orchestra Bus in an Accident,” *Standard-Speaker* (Hazelton, PA), June 23, 1933, 13.

⁷⁶ “Mae Brady and Her Chicago Rhythm Girls,” advertisement, *Philadelphia Tribune*, August 3, 1933, 11.

⁷⁷ “Valaida Snow and ‘Nyas Berry,” advertisement, *New York Amsterdam News*, October 4, 1933, 7; “Mae Brady’s 12 Sepia Syncopators,” advertisement, *The Tribune* (Scranton PA), January 1, 1934, 13; “Valaida & Berry Bros. and World’s Only Colored Girl-Band,” advertisement, *New York Daily News*, February 16, 1934, 47.

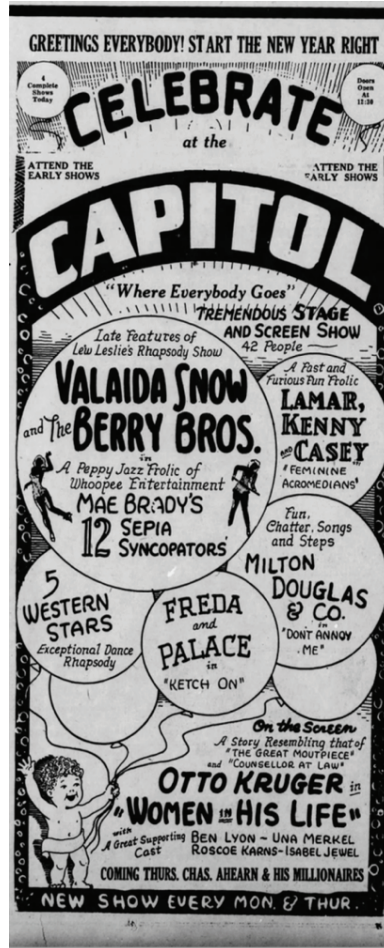


Figure 7. Advertising notice for Valaida Snow and the Berry Bros. with Mae Brady's 12 Sepia Syncopators at the Capitol Theatre on January 1, 1934.

On May 8, 1934, *Variety* announced that Billy Creedon, an independent producer known for assembling inexpensive “flash acts” on short notice, would soon premiere his newest production, *A Night in Harlem*, featuring a “35-people cast... headed by Mae Brady and her all-girl band.”⁷⁸ With Snow no longer fronting the group, Brady would have needed a high-profile name to sustain major theatre bookings. It is therefore plausible that she approached Hardin with a mutually advantageous arrangement: Brady could offer Hardin a second

⁷⁸ Flash productions did not carry the same prestige as large-scale revues designed by producers like Lew Leslie or Clarence Robinson, but their reliance on novelty and low-budget production value made them an accessible vehicle for Brady and her musicians. “Vaudeville: Vaude Flashes Made to Order,” *Billboard*, July 28, 1934, 13; “Creedon’s Colored Unit,” *Variety*, May 8, 1934, 50.

chance at orchestral leadership and a creative vehicle for her large-ensemble compositions and arrangements, while Hardin's commercially viable "Armstrong" name could strengthen the troupe's appeal.

The earliest advertising supports the possibility that Hardin joined after the initial engagements. For example, she is not listed for the first two confirmed stops: the State Theatre in Poughkeepsie, NY (May 10–13), and the RKO Capitol Theatre in Trenton, NJ (May 16–19). Instead, Brady headlined with her "All Girl Creole Band," also described in one notice as "15 Sepia Syncopating Beauties."⁷⁹



Figure 8. Advertising notice for "Harlemania" at the State Theatre for May 11, 1934, featuring Brady's All Girl Creole Band.

However, there is circumstantial evidence that Hardin may have appeared informally with the group before officially joining the production. On April 21, 1934, a society columnist in the *New Journal and Guide* (Norfolk, Virginia) reported on an exclusive "impromptu night for the celebs" at the Sunset Inn,

⁷⁹ The revue is billed as *Harlemania* on the posters but referred to as *A Night in Harlem* in reviews and press releases. Such inconsistency in branding is typical of many of Hardin and Brady's performances together. "Harlemania," *Poughkeepsie Eagle-News*, May 11, 1934, 22.

highlighting “Lil Armstrong... and orchestra.”⁸⁰ Hardin had not led an orchestra since 1932, and so this report may reflect an early trial appearance with Brady’s ensemble. A review of *A Night in Harlem* at the Capitol Theatre from May 1934 also hints at Hardin’s presence, noting that “there’s a colored lady in Miss Brady’s band, Lil Anderson by name, who is not advertised in the program, but she tickles the piano keys like nobody’s business in a special number.”⁸¹ Whether the surname “Anderson” resulted from misreporting or from a conscious decision to appear under a pseudonym, the combination of “Lil” as the piano feature and her omission from the program implies that Hardin appeared as a surprise guest. Promotional material soon began naming Hardin openly—Creedon updated the billing to announce “Mrs. Louis Armstrong, wife of the internationally famed orchestra leader” for performances on June 2–3 at RKO’s Keith Theatre in Brunswick, New Jersey.⁸² *A Night in Harlem* had a short run, but Hardin continued her partnership with Brady with two possible overlapping aims: raising her profile to the level of major orchestra leaders (including a possible European tour) and reclaiming her own name for professional billing.

LILLIAN ARMSTRONG AND HER TWELVE HARLEM HARLICANS AND *BLACKBIRDS*
OF 1935

Currently, there is only one confirmed instance of Hardin performing under the name Lillian Armstrong and Her Twelve Harlem Harlicans. From July 6th to 12th, 1934, the band appeared as the featured musical act in a revue entitled *Black and White Jamboree* at Boston’s Metropolitan Theatre.⁸³

⁸⁰ Carolyn Lamb, “New York City Society,” *New Journal and Guide* (Norfolk, VA), April 21, 1934, 4.

⁸¹ “Capitol Revue is Fast-Moving,” *The Times* (Trenton, NJ), May 17, 1934, 18.

⁸² Will Baltin, “Movies: Local Rialto Notes,” *The Sunday Times* (New Brunswick, NJ), May 27, 1934, 11.

⁸³ “Films and Vaudeville: Metropolitan,” *Daily Boston Globe*, July 8, 1934, A39; “Black and White Jamboree,” advertisement, *Boston Daily Globe*, July 5, 1934, 11.



Figure 9. Advertising notice for “Black and White Jamboree” at the Boston Metropolitan Theatre featuring Lillian Armstrong and Her Twelve Harlem Harlicans.

The revue cast also appeared on WBZ Boston radio on July 9th with “Lillian Armstrong and her red-hot Harlem Band” furnishing the “musical background” for the broadcast.⁸⁴ Firm documentation of this Boston engagement beyond short booking notices remains sparse, and it remains the only instance I have found where Hardin’s ensemble is explicitly named the Harlem Harlicans. The name’s later prominence in secondary accounts, despite limited documentation, attests to either additional unlocated performances or an internal label that Hardin preferred and was generally adopted. At present, neither explanation can be confirmed.

The personnel of the Boston Harlem Harlicans booking is likewise unclear, though the surviving descriptors provide some clues. The advertisement cited

⁸⁴ Lloyd Greene, “Radio Broadcasts: Program Highlights,” *Boston Daily Globe*, July 8, 1934, B6.

above specifies twelve musicians, matching the number of Brady's 12 Sepia Syncopators, and the WBZ listing's description of a "red-hot Harlem band" highlights continuity with the earlier ensemble. As many of the Chicago-based former Dixie Sweethearts later confirmed for Chicago Creolians performances were unavailable, the Boston band likely retained a primarily New York-based personnel core from the *Night in Harlem* run.⁸⁵

Based on that assumption, the musicians who are on record performing with both the Valaida Snow All-Girl band and the Chicago Creolians likely also performed with the Harlem Harlicans in Boston. A 1939 profile of the Harlem Playgirls notes that trumpeters Marjorie Ross and Alice Proctor and drummer Jennie Byrd had performed with both Valaida Snow's and Mae Brady's orchestras.⁸⁶ Additional evidence also places saxophonists Alma Long Scott and Mabel Rodgers (formerly of Pittsburgh's Queens of Rhythm) in these aggregations.⁸⁷

These traces identify only part of a twelve-piece unit, leaving the rhythm section and several horn chairs unaccounted for. NWOCA stalwarts such as Sutton, Henderson, and Lomax, are strong candidates, but cannot be confirmed. Moreover, Dolly Jones may have also been included as her last documented 1934 appearance was in early June with Bud Harris's revue *Dixie on Parade* at the Alden Theatre in Jamaica, Long Island.⁸⁸ Frustratingly, beyond short notices confirming the Boston engagement, no reviews or detailed performance descriptions have been located. Even so, I believe the performance is not a one-off, but part of a broader effort to stabilize an all-women orchestra under Hardin's preferred name.

There is also evidence indicating that Hardin and Brady attempted to take the band overseas. Over the spring and summer of 1934, notices in the Black press and entertainment trade papers insinuate that Brady and Hardin launched a behind-the-scenes campaign to secure a place in Lew Leslie's new production *Blackbirds of 1935*, scheduled to open in London that fall. Despite a troubled short run, Leslie remained publicly committed to Valaida Snow and her All-Girl Band as the headlining act, with the *Chicago Defender* reporting that Snow

⁸⁵ These musicians are confirmed to have been touring with Billie Bailey's Chicago Rhythm Girls in June and July 1934. "Here and There," by Bob Hayes, *Chicago Defender*, June 16, 1934, 8; "Billie Bailey and Rhythm Girls Back," *Chicago Defender*, July 14, 1934, 8.

⁸⁶ John Jordan, "Baby Briscoe a Real McCoy: High Class Syncopation," *New Journal and Guide* (Norfolk, VA), March 4, 1939, 16.

⁸⁷ "Popular Musician Visiting Relatives," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 24, 1935, 7; Chilton, *Hazel Scott*, 30.

⁸⁸ Bud Harris, "Harlem Parades with Bud Harris," *Chicago Defender*, June 2, 1934, 6.

would “head an all femmie band on a tour of Europe starting early next month.”⁸⁹ However, as Snow’s personal difficulties had generated significant negative press, Brady may have seen an opening to position Hardin as an alternative frontwoman who offered recognizability without the same liabilities. The first sign of this European campaign appeared in a short *Billboard* item, where Brady circulated a rumor that her “colored band will sail August 18th to open August 31st in Geneva, Switzerland, followed by Italy, France and Germany” in a band that featured “Miss L. Armstrong.”⁹⁰ Notably, the reference to Hardin as “Miss” rather than “Mrs.” supports her broader rebranding effort visible in mid-1934 notices.

The only published hints that Leslie may have been receptive to Brady and Hardin’s overtures come from two sources. A 1935 profile states that Hardin had previously “organized her own band and started booking under Lew Leslie” and a short *Afro-American* notice from late July 1934 reports that, in addition to Snow and Berry, *Blackbirds of 1935* would include “a star from the coast whose name Leslie would not divulge.”⁹¹

A separate item in the same issue recounts that “Lillian Armstrong, the piano playing ex-mate of Louie, the trumpeter, [had] realized one of her secret ambitions when she made her bow in Boston recently with an all-girls’ orchestra with great success.”⁹² This short notice accomplishes several things at once. It not only reaffirms Hardin’s professional identity under her own name, but also announces the split between her and Armstrong, and indicates the group’s high quality. Most importantly, it asserts that leading an All-Girl Orchestra had long been a secret ambition of hers, which seems a valid claim considering her failed 1932 attempt and her rebranding in 1934.

Perhaps acting on tips from Brady and Hardin’s team, the *Chicago Defender* prematurely reported in early September that “Lillian Armstrong, piano and her Harlem band (12 girls)... will sail for Europe around the first of September,” matching the scheduled departure window for the *Blackbirds* cast.⁹³ She did not. Despite the efforts of Brady and Hardin, the campaign failed, and Leslie instead

⁸⁹ Snow had ongoing legal problems concerning a bigamy charge and her controversial marriage to dancer Annaias Berry, nine years her junior. See “Versatile Performer On Bail of \$1000 as Fugitive from Justice,” *New York Age*, October 21, 1933, 1; “Valaida Snow May Lead Girl Band Abroad,” *Chicago Defender*, July 7, 1934, 6.

⁹⁰ “Vaudeville Notes,” *Billboard*, June 23, 1934, 15.

⁹¹ “Mrs. Louis Armstrong Off On Tour Of The South,” *Chicago Defender*, September 7, 1935, 8; Gardner, Chappy, “All Shades to Be in Lew Leslie’s ‘Blackbirds,’” *Afro-American*, July 28, 1934, 8.

⁹² “Realizes Big Ambition,” *Afro-American*, July 28, 1934, 9.

⁹³ Jack Ellis, “The Orchestras,” *Chicago Defender*, September 15, 1934, 8.

sailed with Snow. Though the failure of the *Blackbirds* bid did not end Hardin's orchestral ambitions, it appears to have pushed her back toward the more familiar "Mrs. Louis Armstrong" billing and the pre-established east coast touring routes that knew her by that name.

THE CHICAGO CREOLIANS

As Hardin and Brady pursued their behind-the-scenes effort with the *Blackbirds* production, they also maintained a regular touring schedule from July through late-September in 1934. A *Billboard* notice announced that Creedon and Joe De Grasse would tour "Mrs. Louis Armstrong and her Chicago Creolians thru the ballrooms of New England and New York State" in a band that featured "Hilda Rogers and Mae Brady."⁹⁴ Despite Hardin's apparent effort to reclaim her own name with the Harlem Harlicans, Creedon continued to market the ensemble through the more commercially viable "Mrs. Louis Armstrong." Building on the earlier promotion of the orchestra as an "All-Girl Creole Band," the group was formalized in print as the Chicago Creolians.



Figure 10. Advertising notice for Mrs. Louis Armstrong and Her Chicago Creolians aboard the S.S. Steel Pier for July 26–27.

⁹⁴ "Vaudeville Reviews: Vaudeville Notes," *Billboard*, August 4, 1934, 15–16.

A survey of summer 1934 advertisements allows for a partial reconstruction of the band's itinerary. Confirmed dates begin with two dance-cruise appearances out of Boston on the *S.S. Steel Pier* (July 26–27), followed by the Island Ledge Casino in Wells Beach, Maine (July 28). Although the *Billboard* notice implies additional New England dates, the next confirmed appearances were on August 21st at the Arcadia Ballroom in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, followed by engagements in Portland, Maine (August 23), and Bridgeport, Connecticut (September 2–3).⁹⁵ Soon after, the band rejoined the cast of *A Night in Harlem* for a WXYZ radio broadcast (September 6) and a three-day run of *Harlem's Hot Chocolates* at the State Theatre in Poughkeepsie, New York (September 13–15).⁹⁶ Across these notices, both the band's name and Hardin's billing shifted between "Creolians," "Creole Band," and the generic "All-Girl band," an inconsistency that underscores how women's orchestras could be treated more easily as interchangeable novelty units, unlike the more stable ensembles of some famous, male entertainers.⁹⁷

The tour ended on a high note with an engagement at Chicago's Regal Theatre from September 23rd to 29th. Returning as a hometown hero, Hardin and her band were treated with far greater respect in Chicago than in many East Coast notices. Although still promoted as the "year's most unusual attraction," advertisements consistently used Hardin's own name, with one featuring "Lil Armstrong" in large type and "Mrs. Louis Armstrong" in smaller type and parentheses underneath.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ "Mrs. Louis Armstrong and Her Chicago Creolians Aboard S.S. Steel Pier," advertisement, *Boston Daily Globe*, July 26, 1934, 29; "Only Colored Girls' Orchestra Will Play at Casino," advertisement, *Sanford Tribune and Advocate*, July 26, 1934, 11; "Grand Season Opening! Arcadia," advertisement, *Fitchburg Sentinel*, August 21, 1934, 2; "Jack O'Lantern Tomorrow Night," advertisement, *Evening Express* (Portland, ME), August 22, 1934, 12; "Gala Week End of Dancing At Pleasure Beach," advertisement, *The Journal* (Meriden, CT), August 31, 1934, 3.

⁹⁶ "Highlights of the Program," *Detroit Free Press*, September 6, 1934, 22; "Harlem Hot Chocolates," advertisement, *Poughkeepsie Eagle-News*, September 13, 1934, 8.

⁹⁷ "Harlem Hot Chocolates," advertisement, *Poughkeepsie Eagle-News*, September 13, 1934, 8; "Ends Today On The Stage," advertisement, *Poughkeepsie Eagle-News*, September 15, 1934, 20.

⁹⁸ "Lil Armstrong (Mrs. Louis Armstrong)," advertisement, *Chicago Defender*, September 22, 1934, 6.

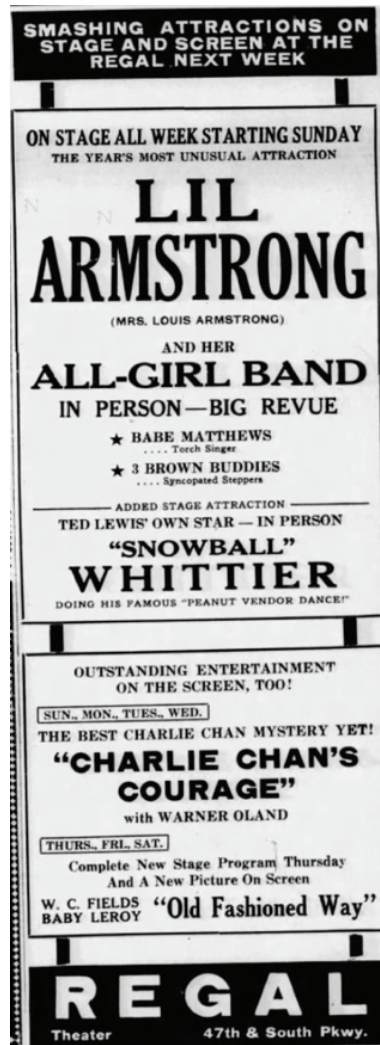


Figure 11. Advertising notice for the Regal Theatre engagement from September 23-29, 1934.

Rob Roy, critic for the *Chicago Defender*, attended several performances and emerged a convert to “girl bands and musicians” who played as capably as “any of the masculine orchestras.” Initially skeptical that Hardin’s group would “please beyond being a novelty,” he admitted his “surprise” that they were not merely “a bunch of girl musicians travelling under the name of Armstrong,” but a first-rate orchestra. In his view they did not “suffer in comparison with that of her more famous hubby” or with “Ellington, Hines, and Claude Hopkins.”⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Rob Roy, “Mrs. Louis Armstrong’s Band at Regal: Harlem’s Female Orchestra Great,” *Chicago Defender*, September 22, 1934, 6; Rob Roy, “Lil Armstrong Rivals Her Famous

Crucially, the reporting surrounding the Regal engagement is the most thorough in the band's history. Unlike the 1932 orchestra, much of the Chicago Creolians's personnel is identified in print. Jack Ellis of the *Chicago Defender* wrote:

Lil Armstrong and her all-girl band scored at the Regal last week with the following lineup: Alice Proctor, Marjorie Ross, Anna Cooper, first and second and third trumpets; Alma Long, Madge Fontaine, Frances Bird [Byrd], Elizabeth King, first, second, third, and fourth saxophones; Mae Brady, fiddle; Jennie Bird [Byrd]; drums; Glen [Gwen] W. Kelly, bass horn; Myrtle Richardson, piano, and Lil, piano and director. Lil wants to hear from a girl guitar player.¹⁰⁰

Their billing as “15 Syncopating Beauties” during the *Harlem Hot Chocolates* run implies a fifteen-member group, though Ellis lists only twelve. Available evidence points to a small set of plausible candidates for the missing musicians. In a letter to the *Chicago Defender*, former Dixie Sweetheart saxophonist Curtis Burnson confirmed that she had joined Hardin after completing a spring tour with Billie Bailey and Her Chicago Rhythm Girls.¹⁰¹ Ellis's remark that Hardin was seeking a “girl guitar player” alludes to either a recent vacancy or an effort to expand the touring lineup.

Two short notices support the former possibility and point to Jean Berry as a likely candidate. Berry was a recurring figure in All-Girl band coverage between 1931 and 1935 and a founding member of the Dixie Sweethearts.¹⁰² A short *Afro-American* notice from December 8, 1934, indicates that Berry was still recovering from a serious illness in early fall and remained bedridden through year's end.¹⁰³ Furthermore, evidence of Berry's connection to Hardin appears in a 1936 *New York Amsterdam News* society item, which lists her alongside Sutton and fellow Dixie Sweetheart, trombonist Ada Anderson, as guests at a cocktail party hosted by Hardin.¹⁰⁴

Hubby: Her Band, Billed as Mrs. Louis Armstrong's Outfit, Triumphs,” *Chicago Defender*, September 29, 1934, 8.

¹⁰⁰ Jack Ellis, “The Orchestras,” *Chicago Defender*, October 6, 1934, 8.

¹⁰¹ Bob Hayes, “Here and There,” *Chicago Defender*, September 8, 1934, 9.

¹⁰² “Girl Orchestra Wins Recognition Out West” *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 9, 1931, A8; “All-Girl Band Playing South,” *Chicago Defender*, June 24, 1933, 5.

¹⁰³ Berry is named as “Jean Barrie” in this article. Her name appears in numerous iterations across multiple sources, including “Jean Berrie,” “Jean Barry,” “Jean Bayrrie,” or “Jean Bayrice.” Allan McMillian, “Theatre Chat: Short Savings,” *Afro-American*, December 8, 1934, 9.

¹⁰⁴ “She Scored in Another Field—This Time as Cocktail Hostess,” *New York Amsterdam News*, January 18, 1936, 6.

Separate from the Regal lineup, the NWOCA-affiliated Sutton and trumpeter Betty Lomax are listed for a final performance and post-tour cocktail party at a Chicago club in October.¹⁰⁵ Taken together, these traces elucidate how the Chicago Creolians relied on the intergenerational recruitment pattern outlined earlier: younger touring-band personnel associated with the Dixie Sweethearts circuit (described in one account as “dainty and attractive girls of high school age”) and older New York-based professionals linked to Olivia Shipp and the NWOCA.¹⁰⁶ That said, personnel cannot always be fixed to exact dates. Despite the strong Chicago reception, the group’s longer-term prospects seemed limited, as a European tour had failed to materialize. Their oft-mentioned and ill-fated Apollo Theatre engagement in October of 1934 would be Hardin’s last with the group, though the nature of the performance was far stranger than previously indicated.

FREAKS!!! LIVE AT THE APOLLO

Since the Apollo’s 1934 transformation from a white-only burlesque theatre into a Black performance venue, its manager Howard Sussman had been engaged in a behind-the-scenes “war” with Frank Schiffman and Leo Brecher.¹⁰⁷ In late October, that rivalry spilled into the press when both sides promoted the Don Redman Orchestra for the week of October 26th to November 3rd. The Harlem Opera House announced a shared bill of Redman’s orchestra and Bessie Smith, while the Apollo advertised the band’s appearance alongside *Ripley’s Believe-It-Or-Not* “Freak Show,” apparently as part of Sussman’s effort to poach the act from Schiffman for that week.¹⁰⁸ The dispute was moderated by the American Federation of Musicians, which ultimately ruled in Schiffman’s favor, leaving Sussman without a musical headliner two weeks before opening.¹⁰⁹ To showcase Ripley’s “Freaks” as the main attraction, producer Clarence Robinson hastily organized a circus-themed novelty revue called *Hoop-La* which featured chorus dancers on stilts—reportedly rehearsals resulted in multiple injuries, including

¹⁰⁵ Ann Cooper is not listed in this article, so perhaps she and Lomax were not in the group at the same time. “Merriment Reigns at Farewell Cocktail Party,” *Chicago Defender*, October 6, 1934, 21.

¹⁰⁶ “In Chicago Theatres,” *Afro-American*, February 27, 1932, 8.

¹⁰⁷ “New Harlem Theatre War Centers in 125th Street,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 22, 1934, A8.

¹⁰⁸ “Battle of Music at the Apollo,” *Afro-American*, October 27, 1934, 7; “Don Redman and His Band,” advertisement, *New York Daily News*, October 26, 1934, 59.

¹⁰⁹ “Local Managers Stage Fight for Orchestra,” *New York Amsterdam News*, October 27, 1934, 11.

one serious case.¹¹⁰ However, with Redman's orchestra no longer an option and unable to secure a major orchestral booking on short notice, Sussman filled the musical slot by doubling down on the "unusual" or "rarity" aspects of novelty entertainment culture by booking an all-women band.



Figure 12. Classified ad in the Chicago Defender seeking "girl musicians" for immediate work from October 13, 1934.

Hardin had just returned to New York when she was contacted for the engagement. Accepting what must have seemed an excellent opportunity, she and Brady frantically tried to reassemble the group, most of whom were based in Chicago and apparently could not get to New York on such short notice. With only a week to assemble a band, Hardin and Brady mostly relied on Olivia Shipp and the NWOCA for additional players, while also placing a classified advertisement seeking "girl musicians" for "immediate work."¹¹¹ In the end, the promised fourteen-piece orchestra—advertised as "14 Queens of Rhythm"—did not fully materialize, and according to a *New York Age* review, only a ten-piece group appeared, likely including NWOCA mainstays that had a performance history with Hardin such as Sutton, Henderson, and Lomax, as well as the Byrd sisters, Frances and Jennie.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ "Hazel Coles and Tom Whaley Grateful," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 10, 1934, 11.

¹¹¹ This ad appears in the *Chicago Defender* and not in any New York publications. This suggests that Shipp had already provided whatever New York musicians were available, and that they, short a few players, needed to expand their search to Chicago. It also tells the applicants to contact "Micky Creedon," likely a relative of Billy Creedon, indicating that he was still booking the band. "Help Wanted—Female," *Chicago Defender*, October 13, 1934, 21; Handy, *Black Women in American Bands*, 78.

¹¹² "Mrs. Louis Armstrong and Her Famous Terrace Gardens Chicago Creolians," advertisement, *New York Amsterdam News*, October 27, 1934, 11; "Real Freaks; Girl Band, Apollo Has Novel Show," *New York Age*, November 3, 1934, 4.

Figure 13. Advertising notice for the ‘Hoop-La’ revue featuring Ripley’s Believe-It-Or-Not Freak Show at the Apollo Theatre from October 26–November 3, 1934.

Only two musicians for this final iteration of the Chicago Creolians can be confirmed in print: Mabel Rodgers (via an August 1935 profile) and Alma Long Scott (via Chilton).¹¹³ Press coverage of the week emphasized Ripley’s performers and treated Hardin less favorably than the Chicago critics had. Articles such as “Freak Show Here as Apollo Attraction” and “The Wife of Louis Armstrong at Harlem’s Apollo Theatre,” only briefly mention the orchestra. The remaining commentary focuses on Ripley’s attractions using dehumanizing language typical of the period, such as “Susie the Elephant Girl,” the “half man, half woman Martha,” and “Selo the Seal Boy.”¹¹⁴ Reviews were mixed. The *New York Amsterdam News* described the band as “a very weak ladies’ orchestra” adding that “the freaks [took] a big spot in the arrangements of the producers.”¹¹⁵ Robinson may have treated the orchestra as secondary

¹¹³ The article states that Rodgers had been playing with the Chicago Creolians for “the past ten months,” marking October 1934 as her start date; “Popular Musician Visiting Relatives,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 24, 1935, 7; Chilton, *Hazel Scott*, 33.

¹¹⁴ The promotion apparently misled members of the audience into assuming that Louis Armstrong was performing, suggesting a possibly hostile crowd. “U.S. Will Not See Armstrong For Long Time,” *Chicago Defender*, November 3, 1934, 9; “Freak Show Here as Apollo Attraction,” *New York Amsterdam News*, October 27, 1934, 11; “The Wife of Louis Armstrong at Harlem’s Apollo Theatre,” *Chicago Defender*, July 7, 1934, 8; Ralph Cooper and Steve Dougherty, *Amateur Night at the Apollo: Ralph Cooper Presents Five Decades of Great Entertainment*, (HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), 78.

¹¹⁵ “Eddie South and Arcadians Will Head Apollo Program,” *New York Amsterdam News*, November 3, 1934, 11.

accompaniment to the spectacle. By contrast, the *New York Age* praised the women for “whip[ping] up a lot of pep” and singled out the “sax and a couple of trumpet players” as the “outstanding features of the band.”¹¹⁶

Two first-hand accounts underscore the chaotic nature of the engagement. By chance, the week coincided with the very first installment of the now famed *Amateur Night at the Apollo*, which host Ralph Cooper later recalled in his autobiography. Using grotesque descriptors, his account largely focusses on the Ripley’s performers’ physical disabilities and the shocked reactions they elicited, although he also confirms that they overshadowed Hardin and her band, which Sussman had mostly booked due to her fame as “Louis’s wife.”¹¹⁷ In contrast, Karen Chilton’s biography of Hazel Scott recounts another anecdote from the same week in which a fourteen-year-old Scott unexpectedly stormed the stage to sing, surprising Hardin and the musicians.¹¹⁸ Charming as that story may be in isolation, in context it also demonstrates how turbulent the venue was both on and off stage.

This chaotic and professionally humiliating experience seems to have pushed Hardin to her breaking point, and these performances were her last with the Chicago Creolians. Although the *New York Daily News* announced a follow-up appearance of “Mrs. Louis Armstrong & Ladies Band” or the Chester Theatre in the Bronx (November 24–27), she did not appear. More significantly, after the Apollo engagement she abruptly ended her professional association with Brady.¹¹⁹ Although Hardin’s reasons remain unclear, she might have been motivated by three factors: the collapse of the European plan, the unprofessional and demeaning nature of the Apollo engagement, and the opportunity to hire new management. It’s unclear exactly when Hardin signed with Charles E. Green, but it appears that he used the Apollo chaos and Hardin’s disappointment in the all-women orchestral project to pivot her back towards a more conventional (and male) touring-band approach.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ “Freak Show Here as Apollo Attraction,” *New York Amsterdam News*, October 27, 1934, 11.

¹¹⁷ Examples of Cooper’s descriptions include “a small crippled kid with withered arms,” “an armless girl,” or a “420-pound fat lady called Personality Girl” whose act consisted of “walking fast across stage, stopping suddenly, and letting her dancing flab do the rest.” Cooper and Dougherty, *Amateur Night at the Apollo*, 78.

¹¹⁸ Chilton, *Hazel Scott*, 33.

¹¹⁹ “James Cagney in ‘The St. Louis Kid,’” advertisement, *New York Daily News*, November 24, 1934, 24.

¹²⁰ Ralph Matthews, “Looking at the Stars: An Exponent of Swing Music,” *Afro-American*, March 14, 1936, 10.

By December 1934, Green had installed Hardin as the frontwoman of an all-male, Buffalo-band based with a residency at the Vendome Hotel. Billed as “Mrs. Louis Armstrong and Her 14 Kings of Rhythm,” Hardin initially only sang and danced with the group and was not featured as a pianist. At first, the band reportedly refused to perform her compositions and arrangements, though she later appears to have won them over. Throughout 1935, Hardin and her Kings of Rhythm toured consistently and received strong reviews. Early promotion explicitly distanced her from the All-Girl orchestra and emphasized male personnel in an atypical way, describing her group as a “male aggregation” and even billing the band as “Mrs. Louis Armstrong and Her 14 Men.”¹²¹ Hardin never again attempted to lead an all-women band and rarely spoke publicly about the experience, allowing the group to fade into obscurity.

Figure 14. Promotion for Mrs. Louis Armstrong and Her Kings of Rhythm at the Apollo Theatre for the week of February 1, 1935.

¹²¹ “Anniversary Week Opens Greater Season at Apollo,” *New York Amsterdam News*, February 2, 1935, 10; “Mrs. Louis Armstrong and Her 14 Kings of Rhythm – 14 Men,” advertisement, *New York Amsterdam News*, February 2, 1935, 10.

CODA: LASTING IMPACT AND LINGERING QUESTIONS

Ironically, the decline of Hardin's orchestra coincided with the broader commercial rise of the All-Girl swing band. In July 1934, Irving Mills financed Ina Ray Hutton and Her Melodears, a white, all-women orchestra. By 1935, the Melodears had become widely known through recordings and filmed appearances, generating a wave of imitators, including Rita Rio and Her Rhythm Girls and Ava Leonard and Her All-American Girl Orchestra. Unlike the more self-governed Black women bands formed through the professional networks of Brady, Shipp, and Hardin, the Melodears operated within a top-down managerial structure in which key musical decisions were often made by men.¹²²

After parting ways with Hardin, Brady continued touring with the Chicago Creolians through 1935. A promotional photo taken before the group left New York may document how the band presented itself onstage and helps identify musicians likely present during the Apollo engagement.¹²³ Advertising notices from 1935 indicate a shrinking booking circuit, with progressively smaller Midwestern venues, and by October, it was reported that the band had "blew up," and their future appearances were cancelled.¹²⁴

¹²² Athan Maroulis, liner notes to *Ina Ray Hutton – The Definitive Collection 1934–1944*, by Ina Ray Hutton, Fantastic Voyage FVTD110, 2011, compact disc, 8.

¹²³ Notable in this photo is the musicians' use of blond wigs, a detail also mentioned in a 1980 interview with historian Franklin Boblit. Carole Cantor, "Big Band sound lives in his memory," *Sioux City Journal*, June 16, 1980, 18.

¹²⁴ This photo is often mislabeled as being of the Harlem Playgirls, and a simple google search of that group will usually bring it to the top of the results. "Mae Brady and Her Chicago Creolians," *Columbus News*, February 22, 1935, 10; "Extra! Extra! Extraordinary," *The Dunsmuir News*, October 11, 1935, 4.

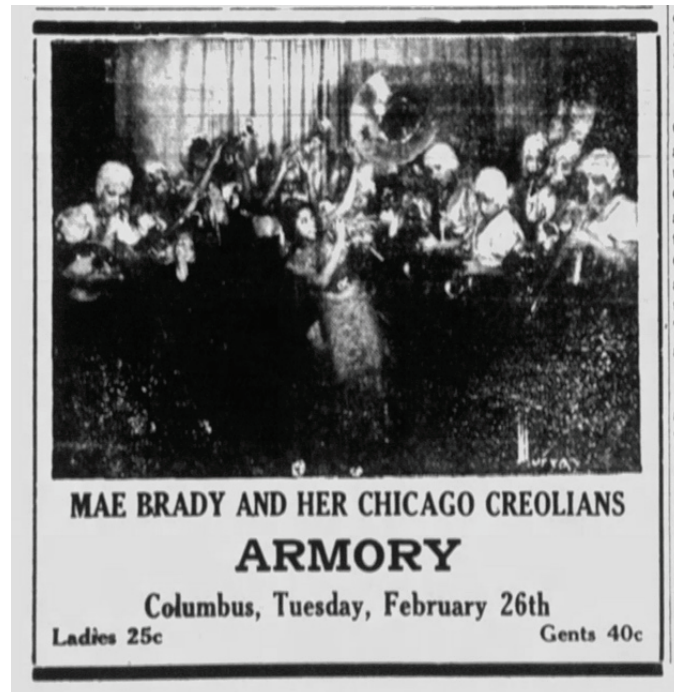


Figure 15. Promotional notice for Mae Brady and Her Chicago Creolians from 1935.

The Creolians's disappearance coincides with the rise of Sylvester Rice's Minnesota-based Harlem Playgirls. Rice's oft-cited account about the group's formation describes poaching key players from the "Dixie Sweethearts," naming Marjorie Ross, Madge Fontaine, Jennie Byrd, and Gwen Twiggs Kelly, and identifies their leader as "Mayme Lacy."¹²⁵ This account is demonstrably inaccurate, as the Dixie Sweethearts had not existed as a touring entity since 1933 and the musicians Rice names are documented members of the Chicago Creolians. In addition, there is no existing record of a "Mayme Lacy," the name likely a misremembering of Mae Brady. After the dissolution of the Chicago Creolians in October 1935, Brady herself disappears from the available record. Mentions of Hardin's All-Girl Orchestra are sparse after early 1935 and often reduce the band to a cautionary anecdote. One example appears in a Harlem Playgirls profile piece remarking that "at one time Lil Armstrong made an unsuccessful attempt to gather feminine musicians into a band but complained that there were not enough diversified players."¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Driggs, "Women in Jazz," 15.

¹²⁶ Sallye Bell, "On the air... and in It," *The Call*, December 2, 1938, A17.

While the journalistic evidence assembled here allows for the fullest reconstruction of Hardin's ensemble to date, there is substantial room for future research. This includes the exact contours of her 1932 attempt, the details of her business relationships with Brady and Shipp, and the extent of Dolly Jones's involvement. As no recordings or scores are known to survive, the ensemble's sound can only be inferred from press accounts, oral recollections, and later recordings made elsewhere by some members.¹²⁷ Furthermore, despite their commercial success, the Harlem Playgirls remain woefully under-researched, and existing scholarship usually treats them as a starting point for a larger history, emphasizing their role as an early outfit that featured musicians who would later appear in bands such as the International Sweethearts of Rhythm and the Darlings of Rhythm while their early history and links to both Hardin's group and the Dixie Sweethearts are never explored.¹²⁸ Finally, Hardin's own reflections on the project remain frustratingly elusive and extant evidence paints an incomplete picture with major gaps in her historical record.

What the record does show, however, is that Hardin and her short-lived All-Girl Orchestra was far more than the historical footnote that it is usually treated as and served as an important instance of early intergenerational collaboration that brought together vaudeville-era Black improvising female musicians and their younger swing-era counterparts. Her band offers a missing link that connects the Harlem Playgirls, and by extension, later and better documented Black All-Girl swing bands to earlier women's orchestras and jazz dance bands such as the Dixie Sweethearts, the NWOCA, the Melody Girls, and Marie Lucas's Lafayette Theatre Ladies Orchestra. Although Hardin may have viewed it as a creative failure, this ensemble in its larger historical context is most certainly not. The legacy of the band and her "secret ambition" supports a traceable intergenerational lineage within early Black women's jazz communities, one which operated alongside and in dialogue with those featured in mainstream jazz histories. Thus, this research provides evidence of a dense yet under-documented infrastructure of Black women's musical labor without which jazz history remains incomplete.

¹²⁷ An example are Ann Cooper's 1939 recordings with the Harlem Hamfats. Dave Doyle, "Weaned on the Horn' – The Mysterious Life of Ann Cooper," *The Syncopated Times*, October 30, 2021, <https://syncopatedtime.com/weaned-on-the-horn-the-mysterious-life-of-ann-cooper/>.

¹²⁸ Two notable examples are trumpeter Ernestine "Tiny" Davis and saxophonist Vi Burnside who became star soloists with the International Sweethearts of Rhythm.

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NEWSPAPERS

Afro-American
Appleton-Post Crescent
Billboard
Boston Daily Globe
The Call

Chicago Defender
Columbus News
Daily Times and Daily Journal-Press (St. Cloud, MN)
Detroit Free Press
Detroit Tribune
Dunsmuir News
Evening Express (Portland, ME)
Fitchburg Sentinel
The Journal (Meriden, CT)
New Journal and Guide (Norfolk, VA)
New York Age
New York Amsterdam News
New York Daily News
Philadelphia Tribune
Pittsburgh Courier
Poughkeepsie Eagle-News
Richmond Item
Sanford Tribune and Advocate (Biddeford, ME)
Sioux City Journal
Standard-Speaker (Hazelton, PA)
The Sunday Times (New Brunswick, NJ)
The Times (Trenton, NJ)
Variety

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Described as “an imperious presence on tenor sax” (Eddie Myer, *Jazzwise*), Canadian improviser, composer, and researcher Jonathan Lindhorst is an internationally recognized performer, composer, educator, and leading researcher in the emerging field of Tone-Clock Theory. With over 25 years of professional experience and creative bases in both Montreal and Berlin, Jonathan has toured, recorded, and lectured across North American and Europe. He holds a bachelor’s degree in Jazz Performance from the Schulich School of Music of McGill University, a Master’s in Music from Queens College CUNY, and is currently a Doctoral candidate in Jazz Performance at the Schulich School of Music under the supervision of Professors John Hollenbeck and Robert Hasegawa, where he has taught theory, analysis, composition, as well as directed the Chamber Jazz Ensemble and organizes regular public workshops on Tone-Clock Theory.