Lil Greenwood

walking and singing the blues

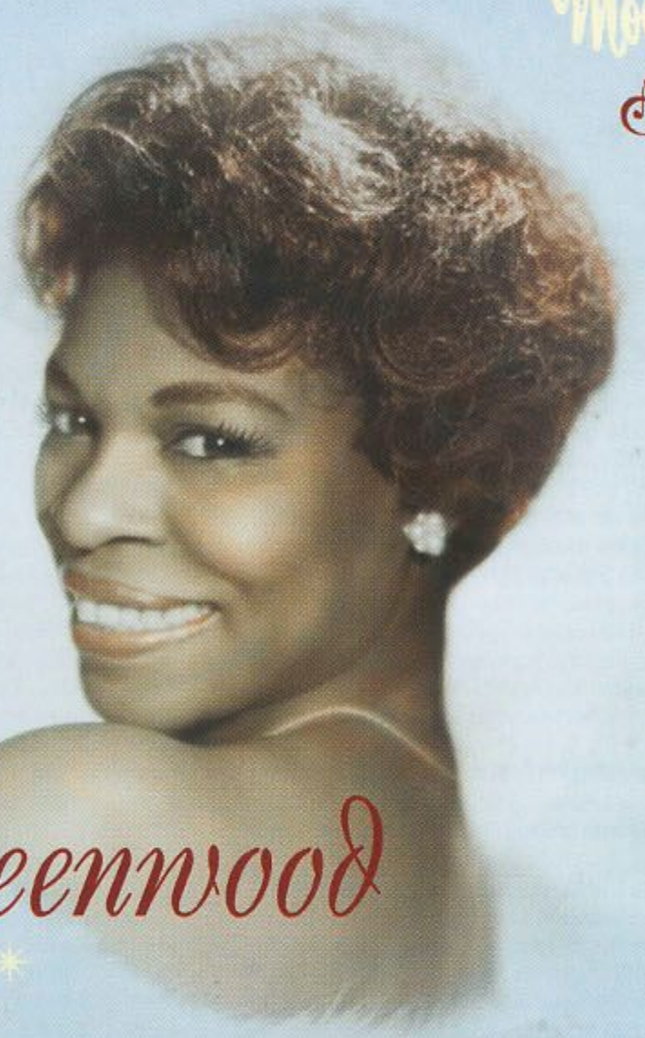
1. **HEART FULL OF PAIN**
(Lil Greenwood, Roy B Milton) Sony/ATV Songs LLC (1950)
2. **SITTING AND WONDERING**
(Lil Greenwood) BMG Music Pub Ltd (1951)
3. **ALONG ABOUT MIDNITE**
(Jimmy Witherspoon) Alley Music Corp/Trio Music Co Inc (2000)
4. **I'M GOIN' CRAZY**
(Lil Greenwood) Sony/ATV Songs LLC (1950)
5. **YOUNG BLOOD**
(Lil Greenwood, Johnny G Rogers) Sony/ATV Songs LLC (1951)
6. **COME BACK BABY**
(Lil Greenwood, Roy B Milton) Sony/ATV Music Pub (UK) Ltd (1950)
7. **FOR YOU MY LOVE**
(Paul Gayten) Cecil Lennox Ltd (2000)
8. **DISSATISFIED BLUES**
(Lil Greenwood, Jules Taub) BMG Music Pub Ltd (1950)
9. **ONCE IN A WHILE**
(Michael Edwards, Bud Green) EMI United Partnership Ltd (2000)
10. **AIN'T GONNA CRY**
Copyright Control (1950)
11. **IT'S TOO SOON TO KNOW**
(Deborah Chessler) Chappell-Morris Ltd (2000)
12. **NO MORE HEART FULL OF PAIN**
(Lil Greenwood, Roy B Milton) Sony/ATV Songs LLC (1951)
13. **OPEN YOUR EYES**
(Lil Greenwood, Roy B Milton) IQ Music Ltd (1951)
14. **BOOGIE ALL NIGHT LONG**
(Lil Greenwood, Roy B Milton) Sony/ATV Music Pub (UK) Ltd (1950)
15. **GRANDPA CAN BOOGIE TOO**
(Rick Ravon Darnell, Mario De Lagarde) Lark Music Ltd (1952)
16. **MERCY ME**
(Jesse Ervin, Lil Greenwood) Fort Knox Music Inc/Trio Music Co Inc (1954)
17. **I'M CRYING**
(Lil Greenwood) Armo Music (1953)
18. **MONDAY MORNING BLUES**
(Rick Ravon Darnell, Mario De Lagarde) Fort Knox Music Inc/Trio Music Co (1952)
19. **NEVER AGAIN**
(Mario De Lagarde, Lil Greenwood) Fort Knox Music Inc/Trio Music Co Inc (1952)
20. **MY LAST HOUR**
(Rick Ravon Darnell, Mario De Lagarde) Fort Knox Music Inc/Trio Music Co Inc (1952)
21. **I'LL GO**
(Lil Greenwood) Fort Knox Music Inc/Trio Music Co Inc (1953)
22. **ALL IS FORGIVEN**
(Lil Greenwood) Fort Knox Music Inc/Trio Music Co Inc (1954)

Labels courtesy Opal Louis Nations, Peter Gibbon and Chris Strachwitz
Thanks to Chris Strachwitz, Chris Bentley, John Broven & Alec Palao for tracking down the elusive last Modern single.
NB: Lil was sometimes billed as Lillie Greenwood on her singles, but we've chosen to use Lil Greenwood throughout on this compilation.

CDCHD 874

walking and singing the blues

Modern Federal



Lil Greenwood

ace

Walking & Singing the Blues: The Lil Greeenwood Story

by Opal Louis Nations

Lil, or Lillian, Greenwood's name would come pretty close to the top of the list of those black American artists who have enjoyed some measure of recognition in R&B and blues during the 1950s, despite her naturally retiring personality. Quiet, reserved, nervous, introspective and sometimes introverted, Lil let herself be guided down the wrong path at times, trusting those with little care for her welfare. She neither smoked nor drank. Duke Ellington said of her that, "the girl's so clean livin' she don't even wink at the bandleader". On a serious note, he described her voice as possessing a mixture of Marian Anderson, Ella Fitzgerald, Dinah Washington and Mahalia Jackson. "I don't know but what," says Ellington, "whether she's better on spirituals or when she's walking and singing the blues." Lil was Ellington's band singer between 1958-1960 and afterwards sang for him occasionally and for Mercer Ellington, the Duke's son, after his father's death.

One of seven children (she had three sisters and three brothers), Lil was born on 18 November 1924 in Pritchard, Alabama, north of Mobile. Lil grew up in a close-knit but poor, church-going family. Her father, Sylvester (born 1894), was the minister of the Cedar Grove Baptist Church in Pritchard and cut quite a striking figure. Just as soon as she could walk, Lil was up and singing with the choir. It was not long before Sylvester, a travelling preacher, took her with him to sing on his circuit of local ministries around Mobile and Baldwin counties, much like the path Shirley Caesar took during her childhood. Lil was closely attached to her mother, Maggie George (born in 1898), and remembers fondly the rustic little house she grew up in, with rudimentary outdoor plumbing. The running joke around the household was that they often wondered where all the waste water went.

Lil swore to always take care of her parents, no matter what. She did pretty well at school and graduated from Alabama State College. All the while, she gave her mother what little money she earned singing on the side. After graduation Lil taught, but singing was her overwhelming passion. She met and married Elmer Greenwood, but the marriage did not last. After moving to California on her own in 1949 she began to play and hang out on the San Francisco club scene, and ended up gigging at West Oakland's most popular and lavishly appointed black and tan club on Seventh Street, called Slim Jenkins. The club tried to convey a ritzy, cosmopolitan tone and black artists with both large and small reputations played there, although as, to a lesser extent, in San Francisco, Oakland's fabulous club scene was in a state of decline in the late 40s. When Roy Milton and His Solid Senders came to play at Slim Jenkins, talent agent Ben Waller introduced him to Lil. Milton was extremely impressed with Lil's strong, exuberant contralto and as a result Lil and the Milton band came together for almost three years, during which time Lil cut six records in Los Angeles for Modern, then one for Specialty. This was a happy time for Lil; she became close friends with Bay Area singer/pianist Gladys Palmer and Milton's enormously talented singer/boogie woogie pianist Camille Howard.

Modern sides included the gutsy, deep blues-bellowed 'Heart Full Of Pain', impregnated with the inimitable Greenwood fire and spirit, coupled with 'Boogie All Night Long', a swing opus set up to show off the alto talents of Jackie Kelso and the frenzied fingers of Camille Howard at the ivories. 'Heart Full Of Pain', Lil's first release of July 1950, brought a measure of recognition. ['Boogie All Night Long' appeared recently on an Ace jump blues collection entitled "Let's Jump" - Ace CDCHD 809.] The initial release was followed weeks later by the fine, moody, worry-ballad 'Ain't Gonna Cry', a chart coloured with shadings of Billie Holiday-like sadness and melancholy. The song was paired with a fine juke jumper called 'Come Back Baby', laced with booting sax and nimble piano.

During the autumn of 1950, Modern issued the upbeat dancehall stepper 'I'm Going Crazy', with scat-singing and tenor that cooks. The B-side offered the hot blues-flavoured belter 'Dissatisfied Blues', done up with righteous alto trimmings. In April 1951, Modern released the highly energised floor-mopper 'Young Blood' with its rolling piano and tough trumpet, alto and tenor breaks. 'Young Blood' was sandwiched with the Christine Kitrell-sounding 'Sitting And Wondering', a doom-filled weeper given a slight upbeat twist. The label's last release gave us 'No More Heart Full Of Pain' matched with 'Open Your Eyes'.

Four fine, previously unreleased (except on a limited edition Ace CD) piano-accompanied songs were found in the Modern vaults, and for your listening enjoyment we have included them here. First up is Lil's strong LaVern Baker-sounding 'Along About Midnite', followed by a lively boogie treatment of Larry Darnell's 'For You My Love', a classic torchy reading of the Dinning Sisters' arrangement to 'Once In A While', plus an energised, somewhat sultry, serving of the Orioles' winner 'It's Too Soon To Know'.

On 24 September 1951 Lil recorded the smoky ballad 'Love Will Make You A Slave' for Specialty, with select members of the Milton band accompanying. The song demonstrated Lil's awesome, sultry vocal tones and absolutely magnificent vibrato. Also on that session Lil, with little hesitation, recorded a gospel song entitled 'I Must See Jesus For Myself', which was kept in the can and issued for the first time in 1994 on a Specialty gospel reissue distaff collection entitled "Women Of Gospel's Golden Age Volume 1" (now deleted).

Lil's version of 'I Must See Jesus For Myself' (which was also gospel diva Marie Knight's first hit) is a priceless gem. Backed by Billy Hadnott on bass, Camille Howard on piano and Bessie Griffin's gospel group, the Gospel Consolators, Lil moans and wails her way through the song like a true Baptist professional.

During the spring of 1952 Lil was introduced through her manager, Ben Waller, to Ralph Bass of King/Federal Records, which led to the resumption of Lil's recording career. Bass was then the Los Angeles A&R man for Syd Nathan's King/Federal operation. It was Bass' intention to record Shirley Haven, Cora Williams and Lil

Greenwood separately but in one long session backed by a pick-up vocal group he labelled the Four Jacks.

According to information gleaned by fellow researcher Todd Baptista, the Four Jacks were composed of the late Bowling Mansfield, first tenor, the late Buell Thomas, second tenor, George Comford, baritone, and Ellison White, bass. They were background vocalists who came to California from southern states and had had experience in background work for film soundtracks. In the gospel field they worked with the Wings Over Jordan Choir, who had moved out to the Golden State from Cleveland. Buell Thomas recorded as a blues soloist for Dootsie Williams in 1952. The outfit never appeared in public as the Four Jacks. The group was rewarded by Bass by being given two sessions to record for themselves. Ellison remembers only one prior rehearsal. To save time and money, Bass rushed the first Haven, Williams and Greenwood session through on the same day.

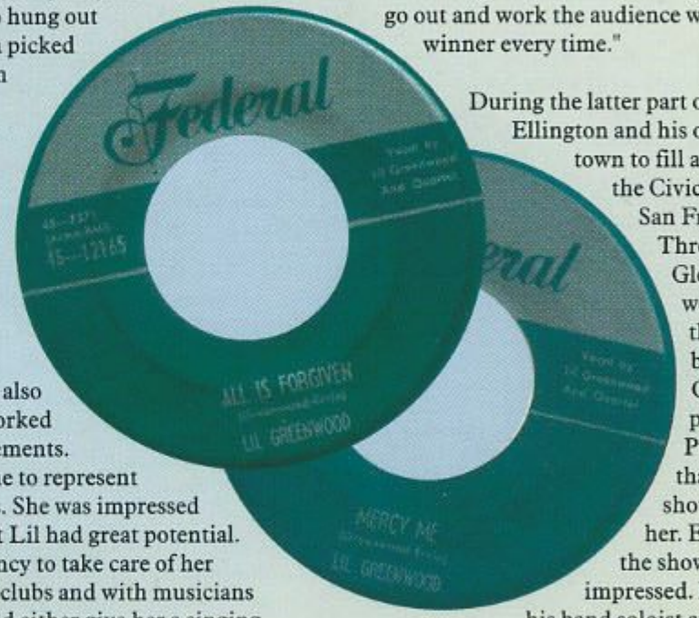
Lil's first Federal release of June 1952 gave us the mournful and down-in-the-back-alley 'Monday Morning Blues', where she sings as blue as Bessie Smith, alongside Little Willie Littlefield, who warbles with her in harmony. This was Little Willie Littlefield's first outing on Federal prior to his own session in August. The chart was admirably topped off by Joe Lutcher, who blows as blue as night. The flip, 'My Last Hour', finds Lil back in the deep recesses of absolute despair with her drawn out wails and tear-stained farewells. There has rarely been heard another record in the entire early R&B repertory that captures so perfectly total loss of hope. The Four Jacks did an admirable job with the backing vocals.

Her second Federal release pitched the ballad 'Never Again' with the jumping double-entendre 'Grandpa Can Boogie Too'. Wynonie Harris had kicked off the invigorated grandpa craze in 1949, and Roy Brown picked up where Lil Greenwood left off in December 1952 when he waxed his comic 'Grandpa Stole My Baby'. Neither of Lil's Federal records caught fire, but she was given a third chance in October 1952 when she waxed with members of the Johnny Otis Band, who were then enjoying quite a bit of session work at King. Two more Federal singles emerged. The first took us back to wretched unhappiness with Lil's rendering of 'I'm Crying' backed with the less doom-laden 'I'll Go', supported by Thurston Harris and the Lamplighters - composed of Harris, lead tenor, Willie Ray Rockwell, tenor, Al Frazier, baritone, and Matthew Nelson, bass.

Lil's second release offers the mid-tempo 'All Is Forgiven', with Jesse Irwin or Pete Lewis's excellent guitar fills and what sounds like Linda Hopkins with the Lamplighters, or could it be Bobby Nunn and the Robins filling in on duet harmonies and background vocals? The single's B-side, 'Mercy Me', is a blazing, belting opus in the Dominoes' 'Have Mercy Baby' mould and is an R&B killer which should have generated healthier sales but failed to click. All of Lil's Federal singles are extremely fine and fetch vast sums on collectors' auction lists. They should help to put Lil on the musical map in a rightly deserved place in the R&B Hall of Fame.

Lil went back to working the clubs in the San Francisco Bay Area. She had made enough money to buy the house her parents rented so that they were obliged to work less hard to pay their bills and were substantially better off as a result.

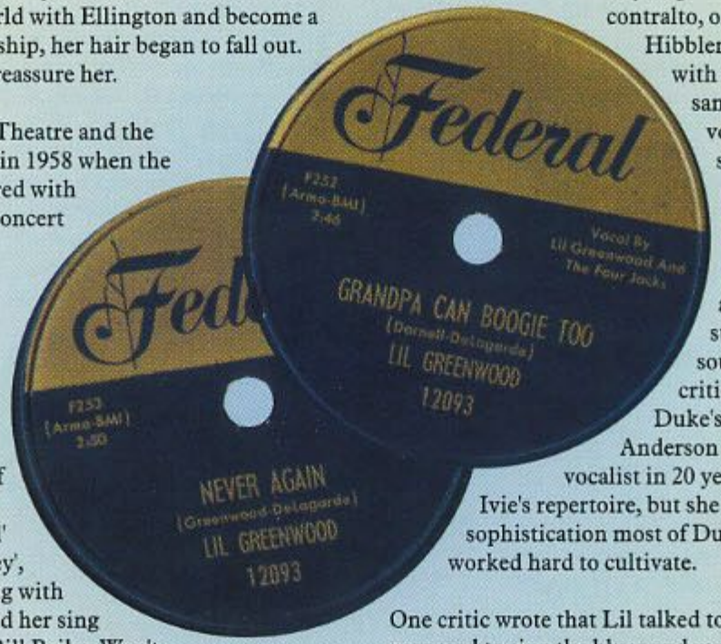
This is where Gloria Gundry comes in. Gloria, a bookkeeper with an interest in artist representation, was a regular attendee at the Bay Area's night spots in the early 1950s. She loved the night life, the jazz singers and the celebrities who hung out on the lively club scene. Gloria picked up a few management tips from folks she would meet at the niteries. Eventually she grew confident enough to take on talent. One day she walked into the black-owned and operated Mono Club in Sacramento (an R&B venue) and caught Lil Greenwood's act. At this time, Lil was featured vocalist with the late Edith Griffin Band. Edith was also the pianist in the group and worked closely with Lil on her arrangements. Finding out that Lil had no one to represent her, Gloria offered her services. She was impressed by what she heard and thought Lil had great potential. Lil was without a booking agency to take care of her engagements; she hung out in clubs and with musicians in the hope that someone would either give her a singing spot or, if she was lucky, regular work.



Gloria took Lil to Ann's 4-40 Club in North Beach. The 4-40 was a lively, popular place where the young college track star Johnny Mathis dropped in from time to time to sing a number. Lil went down so well that she stayed at the 4-40 for two years. Gloria then took her to The Purple Onion in place of the Kingston Trio and Phyllis Diller, who had just finished their contracts. Lil stayed at The Purple Onion with the house band for two and a half years, during which time she was interviewed by a scout from Arthur Godfrey Talent Show and was asked to appear on Godfrey's programme. On the Godfrey Show, Lil sang George Gershwin's 'Summertime', a tune the producers of the programme insisted upon. Lil, with Edith Griffin on piano, came in second place. "It was a mistake to have Lil sing 'Summertime'," says Gloria. "I wanted Lil to do Faye Adams' 'Shake A Hand'. This was one of her strongest numbers at that point. Lil would go out and work the audience with it. It was a winner every time."

During the latter part of 1956, Duke Ellington and his orchestra came to town to fill an engagement at the Civic Auditorium in San Francisco. Through a friend, Gloria had passed word to Ellington that a fine vocalist by the name of Lil Greenwood was playing The Purple Onion and that Ellington should go out and see her. Ellington caught the show and was deeply impressed. He wanted Lil as his band soloist and invited her out to The Blue Note in Chicago where she would join the band. Of course, Lil accepted. She immediately signed up with the nationwide Joe Glaser Booking Agency. Under Gloria's guidance Lil had changed from wearing loud red dresses to simple, full length costumes in pastel shades, but Ellington wanted his girls to wear white just as the great Ivie Anderson had done. Anderson was Ellington's first and most celebrated band vocalist.

Gloria also tutored Lil in stage-craft and hired a vocal coach who was also an opera singer. The teacher was impressed with Lil's range and even suggested that she could become a fine opera singer should she choose to enter the profession. Gloria encouraged Lil to showcase ballads as she thought her voice best suited them. Lil was so nervous with anxiety that when she learned that she would tour the world with Ellington and become a star under his sponsorship, her hair began to fall out. Gloria did her best to reassure her.



Lil played the Apollo Theatre and the Newport Jazz Festival in 1958 when the Ellington Band appeared with Gerry Mulligan. The concert was recorded and is currently available on the Columbia Jazz Masterpieces series. "At Newport, Ellington had Lil do a song which really did not show her talents," says Gloria. "Instead of one of her ballads like 'Solitude', 'I Got It Bad' or 'Sentimental Journey', tunes Lil regularly sang with the band, Ellington had her sing a novelty show tune, 'Bill Bailey Won't You Please Come Home', which didn't impress the audience - or most of the critics, for that matter."

Apart from other people's songs, Lil wrote her own material. She carried an acoustic guitar with her on the road with which she would practice and work on new tunes. She was able to play drums and tinker around on the piano. Sometimes Lil travelled on the band bus, sometimes she chose to be alone and drove her own car. Ellington, for the most part, treated her like a baby sister.

Lil and the band played the French Lick Jazz Festival. Ellington's band found they had to deal with quite a different kind of singer. They were not used to a woman like Lil Greenwood. Gone was the smoothness and sophistication of a Billie Holiday or Sarah Vaughan. Lil was "country", down to earth and for real. What you saw was what you got. Yes, she had a fine contralto, often borrowed from Al Hibbler, and could play tricks with her vocal timbre and sang in excellent falsetto voice, but this was sometimes not good enough. Her own most critical task-master, Lil worked hard at her craft. She was humble and modest, wore little stage makeup and rarely sought publicity. Some critics wrote that Lil was Duke's best singer since Ivie Anderson and was his only vocalist in 20 years to be able to sing Ivie's repertoire, but she lacked the degree of sophistication most of Duke's other singers had worked hard to cultivate.

One critic wrote that Lil talked to God every time she prepared to sing the blues and made a point of sharing her blues experiences with her audience. At the 1958 Newport Jazz Festival, Lil and Mahalia Jackson became close friends. Mahalia Jackson was slated to close out the festival that year. They both admired each other's work. Leonard Feather (the famous jazz critic) also praised Lil's artistry. Every night, Lil was able to give an electrifying stage performance. She meditated a whole hour before showtime and attributes her vigour to this.

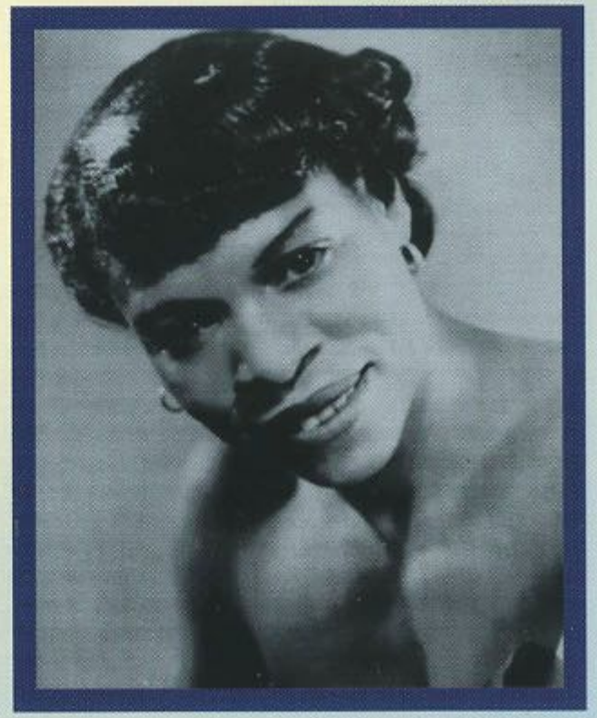
Lil and Gloria toured the Far East with Ellington and on a trip to Europe stopped off in Paris, Stockholm, Oslo and Berlin before venturing behind the Iron Curtain. Lil was featured on an Ellington album entitled "My People", but then it all came to an end. Gloria was disappointed with the fact that Lil did not record more with the band.

The one song that Lil Greenwood will always be remembered for is 'Walking And Singing The Blues', a number she co-wrote with Ellington and Billy Strayhorn and recorded on Columbia in 1959 (Columbia 41401.) The song's horn arrangement set down a staccato background for Lil's tough and echo-chambered vocals, which seem always ready to explode into a thousand places but never quite get to a point where one feels she gives the song her best shot.

Lil cut an album for NRC, then met Rene Robin in an LA club in 1962. A year later Lil and Rene recorded 'Tennessee Waltz' as a duet with HB Barnum's Orchestra backing them for Reprise Records. Two years later, as backup singers, the couple waxed 'The Good Life' with Ray Charles, which was issued on his Tangerine label out of Los Angeles. Neither single took off. When the Duke died, son Mercer Ellington took his place. But Lil was not very happy with Mercer and only worked with him for a while. Gloria, opting for change, went to work for Encore Attractions before Lil left Mercer Ellington. Lil made a few TV appearances such as The Tonight Show, Good Times and The Jeffersons. Her life changed when her mother died in 1986.

Lil played with the Lewis Brothers Band, her repertoire filled with jazz standards. She recently hooked up with the Rick Denton Quintet. Denton is an excellent keyboard player and arranger, and is well suited to Lil's style. Lil and the quintet put out a vanity CD on which Lil really jams on a Crescent City-sounding jump song called 'Crazy About Your Love'. 'Walking And Singing The Blues' is given a new life, and a fabulous reading of the self-penned opus 'Love Is A Game' delivers a glimpse of the good old glory days of the early 1950s. The CD, entitled "From Lil With Love", was recorded live at the Jazz Street Club in Mobile, a venue where the 77 year old Lil is often asked back to sing her unique blend of gospel and blues.

Opal Louis Nations, 2002

With invaluable help from Lil Greenwood, Gloria Gundry, Todd Baptista, Billy Vera and Lee Hildebrand.

Courtesy of Richard Reicheg