



KANSAS LEGEND BIOGRAPHY

Julia Lee (1902-1958)

In addition to her exceptional musical talents, Julia had the ability to bring the truth out of her listeners. She often ended a group of songs by offering the audience an invitation: "Let's sit down and drink it over." Listeners would pour out their hearts to Lee, and she, in turn, would put the emotions into song with boogie-woogie rhythm and a whole lot of soul.

A native Kansas Citian, Lee was brought up in a musical family. As a child, she made her debut performance with her father's string trio. Additionally, her older brother George developed a career in music. Lee attended Lincoln High School, during which time she entertained house parties and church socials with her music. Following graduation in 1917, she began playing piano at Love's Theater and singing in numerous Kansas City clubs.

Lee was known for her vocals and her abilities as a pianist. She sang with Bennie Moten's band while Count Basie played the piano. Many of her songs were risqué for the time, but she sang them well and audiences identified with them. Tunes such as "Two Old Maids in a Folding Bed" and "The Fuller Brush Man" could be heard throughout the streets of Kansas City.

When the depression hit, Lee continued performing at Milton's Taproom for just \$12 a week. She also performed with her brother for 15 years in a trio that worked primarily at Lyric Hall. The brother and sister both had magnificent voices, and George's work on the saxophone complemented Julia's work on the piano. Julia Lee became a Kansas City legend, and jazz greats would seek her out when visiting the area.

Lee earned recognition outside of the state when fellow Kansan Dave Dexter, Jr. used two of Lee's songs in a Capitol Records album titled "History of Jazz" in 1944. Lee's pieces were instantly the most successful on the album, and Capitol Records coaxed Lee out to Hollywood to record an additional 12 tracks in 1946. One of the title tracks, "Snatch and Grab It" sold 500,000 copies the following year.

Lee's success put her name in a category with the likes of Bessie Smith, one of the greatest blues singers in history. Lee's unique style offered an energetic tone, unlike many of the darker, more solemn voices of other blues singers. Lee accredited her style to her hometown roots.

Throughout her career, Lee rarely left home. She preferred not to fly and got homesick easily. In 1949, Julia and drummer Baby Lovett played at the White House for the annual dinner of the White House Correspondents Association during Harry S. Truman's presidency. In 1950, Lee ended her engagements at Milton's and began playing at the Cuban Room. She always had a white porcelain "kitty" on her piano, which helped her earn as much as \$60 a night from adoring fans. Kansas City's Sweetheart of Song passed away in 1958.

