

Though she projected an aura of elegance, there was nothing demure about Lillette Jenkins-Wisner, who regularly had audiences on their feet long before the end of her nightclub or concert shows because of the speed of her fingers and the fire and spirit in the music. A child prodigy who became a groundbreaking musician dubbed the Queen of the Keys by Duke Ellington, Jenkins-Wisner spent years living and performing in Sarasota, working with young artists, and earning honors through her 80s. She was born in 1924 in Harlem, and by 3 was able to “play anything she heard” by ear, Harris said. At age 11, Jenkins-Wisner performed at Carnegie Hall, “and that was a time when Black people didn’t perform there,” she said. She was trained as a classical musician but developed an affinity for gospel and jazz even while a student at the Manhattan School of Music. She later took special classes at the Juilliard School of Music and studied pipe organ at Westminster Choir College in Princeton, N.J. She performed around the country as a jazz musician and singer. She married entertainer and entrepreneur Bud Harris, who opened a club for her in Sparks, Nevada, called Lillette’s Rhythm Club. The name became the title of a one-woman musical Adrienne Harris developed about her mother that has been presented in the Tampa Bay area and elsewhere. She was African-Americans to have a nightclub/casino in Nevada.