

Louis Armstrong

Tarenah Henriques

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Period 4

"Louis Armstrong"

Born in August 1901 (not Independence Day 1900, as he was always told and believed), Louis Armstrong sang on the New Orleans streets in a boyhood quartet and in 1913 was admitted to the Colored Waifs' home for firing a gun into the air. In the home he learned the trumpet, and within four years was challenging every trumpet king in his home town, from Freddie Keppard to Joe Oliver, his first father-figure, whom he replaced in Kid Ory's band in 1919. In 1922 Oliver (by now King Oliver) invited Louis to join him in Chicago to play second trumpet. Tempting as it is to echo Nat Gonella's incredulous comment, "I can't imagine Louis playing second trumpet to anyone", Oliver was able to teach Armstrong a little. The regular harmonic experience of playing second (his ear, even then, was faultless) and, above all, the importance of playing straight lead in "whole notes", as Oliver did, were lessons that Armstrong was to remember for life.

Experience was by now, however imperceptibly, toughening the young man up. His second wife Lil Hardin helped to focus his streak of ambition and he was learning that people could be devious - Oliver, it transpired, was creaming his sidemen's wages. Although he loved Oliver until the end, by 1924 Armstrong had made the jump to New York and Fletcher Henderson's orchestra. It was hot city company for a country boy, but he had the humor and talent to counter mockery ("I thought that meant 'pound plenty'!", he quipped, when the stern Henderson ticked him off for a missed "pp" dynamic); somewhere along the way he decided he was the best, and got ready to defend his title if necessary. "Louis played the Regal Theater in Chicago," remembers Danny Barker, "and they had this fantastic trumpeter Reuben Reeves in the pit. So in the overture they put Reuben Reeves on stage doing some of Louis's tunes. Louis listened - then when he came on he said, "Tiger Rag". Played about thirty choruses! The next show? No overture!"

In 1925 Armstrong, already a recording star, began OKEH dates with his Hot Five and Seven (featuring Johnny Dodds, Kid Ory and his wife Lil, until Earl Hines replaced her). The music on masterpieces such as "Cornet Chop Suey", "Potato Head Blues", "Sol Blues" and "West End Blues" turned jazz into a soloist's art form and set new standards for trumpeters world-wide. At the peak of his young form, Armstrong peeled off top Cs as easily as breathing (previously they were rare) and pulled out technical tours de force which never degenerated into notes for their own sake. His singing introduced individuality to popular vocals and, just for good measure, he also invented scat singing, when he dropped the music one day at a recording session. Best of all was his melodic inspiration: his creations were still being analyzed, harmonized and celebrated half a century later. Rather than playing ever higher and harder, Armstrong simplified his music, polishing each phrase to perfection, while keeping his strength for the knockout punch.

By 1930 he was a New York star, with imitators all around him, but his business life was at a temporary impasse. Then he found his Godfather-figure, a powerful, often ruthless Mafia operator called Joe Glaser, who was to steer his client's fortunes for 35 years. In 1935, with Glaser's approval, Louis teamed with Luis Russell's orchestra, an aggregation of old New Orleans friends, and for five years he was to tour and record with them: the records are classics, and helped to get Armstrong into films such as Pennies from Heaven (1936) and Artists and Models (1937).

In 1940, Glaser's office brusquely sacked the band and Louis put together another containing younger "modernists" such as John Brown (alto), Dexter Gordon

(tenor) and Arvell Shaw (bass), a long Louis associate, with Velma Middleton sharing the singing. It lasted until summer 1947, but big bands were on a downward slide and Armstrong found leading a headache.

In 1947 promoter Ernie Anderson presented him with a small band (directed by Bobby Hackett) at New York's Town Hall. The acclaim that greeted the move signaled the end of his big-band career, and for the last 24 years of his life, Louis led his All Stars, a six-piece band which featured, to begin with, a heady mixture of real stars ("too many make bad friends", said Armstrong ruefully later), including Jack Teagarden and Earl Hines. It developed into a more controllable and supportive team featuring, at various times, Barney Bigard and Ed Hall (clarinet) and, a strong right arm, Trummy Young (trombone). With his All Stars, Armstrong presented a tightly arranged show which, right down to repertoire and solos, seldom varied in later years, a policy which was sometimes criticized. But great records made with the All Stars, such as Plays W. C. Handy, Plays Fats and At the Crescendo, became jazz anthems, and solos such as Louis and the Good Book and its superior follow-up Louis and the Angels revealed Armstrong at a wonderful late peak.

At his own wish the All Stars maintained a crippling touring schedule and in 1959 he had his first heart attack. For his last ten years, amid hit-parade successes, unabated touring and recurring illness, Armstrong gradually slowed down: by 1969, when he visited Britain for the last time, it was noticeable that though his playing was rationed (though still painfully beautiful) and that he was looking older. He died in bed (smiling) on 6 July 1971; his records have all remained in catalogue ever since and in 1994 a late Armstrong single, "We Have All The Time In The World" rose high in the pop charts.

It's impossible to discuss "Satchmo" without remembering the man: "He was a very joyous host," says Ruby Braff, "even in his dressing room with fifty people standing round." It is time to kill off the legend that Armstrong's big-heartedness was a pose: says Barney Bigard, "There never was any hidden side to him. He came 'as is'." Another legend deserves demolition: that Louis was simply the lucky one of countless talents in and around New Orleans (Jabbo Smith and Punch Miller are two cited contenders): the records prove otherwise. More recently it's been suggested that recurrent lip trouble (which Armstrong certainly suffered) caused a musical decline from the 1930s on: again, his performances demonstrate a continuing achievement.

"He left an undying testimony to the human condition in the America of his time": Wynton Marsalis's way of saying, in 1985, that Louis was simply the greatest jazz trumpeter ever and, with Charlie Parker and Duke Ellington, the most influential jazzman of the classic era.

Bibliography

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