

# Louis Armstrong—Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man 1923-1934

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## The Artist as a Young Man: 1923 - 1934

Louis Armstrong's recording career spanned six decades—from 1923 to 1971—and produced many hundreds of items, not counting the myriad live performances captured on acetate or tape. Why, then, limit this survey to the years 1923 to 1934?

For several reasons. First, it would scarcely be possible to do full justice to this great artist's entire output within the limits of four CDs or cassettes. Second, the years we have chosen form a logical entity: from Louis's recording debut with King Oliver to highlights from his first European record date almost a dozen years later. A year would elapse before he recorded again—the longest such hiatus in his career—with a new band, for a new label, and with new repertory, marking a new phase in his development. Third, the chosen period lends itself very well to the four-CD/cassette format, though the choices made are from a veritable embarrassment of riches.

And that brings us to the fourth point: it is fascinating to follow the evolution of a musical genius in such detail, and we are most fortunate that this stage of his evolution is relatively well documented by recordings. From the start, Louis Armstrong was phonogenic: the special sound of his horn and his voice was made to order for the medium. And like his dear friend Fats Waller, Louis made himself at home in the recording studio. As pianist Jaki Byard put it so beautifully, "I felt he was the most *natural* man—playing, talking, singing—he was so perfectly natural the tears came to my eyes. I was very moved to be near the most natural of all living musicians."

If there are no moments on these performances that will bring tears to your eyes, dear listener, we would be very surprised.

## DISC/CASSETTE ONE

### 1. Chimes Blues (2:51)

(J. Oliver)

KING OLIVER'S CREOLE JAZZ BAND

Joe Oliver, Louis Armstrong, cornets;

Honore Dutrey, trombone; Johnny Dodds, clarinet; Lil Hardin, piano; Bill Johnson, banjo; Baby Dodds, drums, chimes.

Richmond, Indiana. April 6, 1923.

mx 11387-A. Gennett 5135.

"Chimes Blues," the fifth piece ventured at the King Oliver band's debut session, contains Louis's first recorded solo. By then, Louis had been a member of the band for eight months. The attractive composition, a blues with four 12-bar strains, is by Oliver, who plays lead in the ensembles. Louis's solo sticks close to the melody, but his tone and time are already strictly his own.

### 2. Snake Rag (3:15)

(J. Oliver)

KING OLIVER'S CREOLE JAZZ BAND

Joe Oliver, Louis Armstrong, cornets; Honore Dutrey, trombone; Johnny Dodds, clarinet;

Lil Hardin, piano; Bud Scott, banjo, vocal; Baby Dodds, drums.

Chicago, June 22, 1923.

mx.8391-A. OKeh 4933.

Of all the Oliver band's records, "Snake Rag" best displays the two-cornet breaks the band was famed for. We get no less than seven of them; the last two are especially exciting. The Dodds brothers, clarinetist Johnny and drummer Baby, also make fine contributions, and the ensemble swing during the last two choruses is remarkable for 1923—or any year.

### 3. Tears (3:07)

(Louis Armstrong/Lilian Armstrong)

KING OLIVER'S CREOLE JAZZ BAND

Joe Oliver, Louis Armstrong, cornets; Honore Dutrey, trombone; Johnny Dodds, clarinet;

Lil Hardin, piano; Baby Dodds, drums; Johnny St. Cyr, banjo; Charlie Jackson, tuba.

Chicago, October 25, 1923.

mx.8476-B. OKeh 40000

"Tears," of all the numbers Lewis recorded with Oliver, gives us the best picture of just how advanced his musical ideas already were. It is the nine dazzling cornet breaks that give us this revealing glimpse of a genius at work. In the third, he plays a beautiful phrase he would use again, in a different key, four years later on "Potato Head Blues." The composition, with a 16-bar verse and 40-bar chorus, is Louis's own, with assistance from his future wife, Lil. The prominence of Honore Dutrey's trombone in the ensemble is probably due to the awkward studio placement, but it nevertheless has a certain quaint charm.

#### **4. Texas Moaner Blues (3:07)**

(C. Williams/F. Barnes)

CLARENCE WILLIAMS'S BLUE FIVE

Louis Armstrong, cornet; Charlie Irvis, trombone; Sidney Bechet, clarinet, soprano saxophone; Clarence Williams, piano; Buddy Christian, banjo.

New York, October 17, 1924.

mx.72914-B. OKeh 8171.

"Texas Moaner Blues" comes from the first session to join the talents of jazz's two greatest early masters, Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet. They share solo and break space on this slow, expressive 12-bar blues. Bechet plays clarinet in the ensembles and the concluding break, but switches to his favorite, the soprano sax; for his masterful chorus. The band's sole non-New Orleanian, trombonist Charlie Irvis (then a member of Duke Ellington's band) acquits himself honorably, but the two masters tell a story.

#### **5. Everybody Loves My Baby (2:33)**

(J. Palmer/S. Williams)

CLARENCE WILLIAMS'S BLUE FIVE

Louis Armstrong, cornet; Aaron Thompson, trombone; Buster Bailey, soprano saxophone; Clarence Williams, piano; Buddy Christian, banjo; Eva Taylor, vocal.

New York. November 6, 1924.

mx, 72959-B. OKeh 8181.

This was the biggest hit of the early Clarence Williams's Blue Five records, partly because of the tune, which struck the public's fancy, and partly because of Eva Taylor's pert vocal. But the main reason was the fiery cornet solo that concludes the performance. It is one of Louis's very rare plunger-muted excursions; he learned this art well from Oliver, its first master, and his solo is phrased in the King's manner. But the rhythmic panache is strictly Armstrong. The soprano here is played not by Bechet but by Buster Bailey, born in Memphis in 1902 and, on Louis's recommendation, by then his colleague in Fletcher Henderson's band. He had listened so well to Bechet that for years his work with the Blue Five was mistaken for Sidney. Close listening shows the difference: less rhythmic thrust, less vibrato, and less passion.

#### **6. Naughty Man (3:00)**

(C. Dixon/D. Redman/S. Ward)

FLETCHER HENDERSON AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Elmer Chambers, Howard Scott, Louis Armstrong, trumpets; Charlie Green, trombone; Don Redman, clarinet, alto saxophone; Buster Bailey, clarinet, alto saxophone;

Coleman Hawkins, clarinet, C-mel saxophone, tenor saxophone, bass saxophone; Fletcher Henderson, piano; Charlie Dixon banjo; Ralph Escudero, tuba; Kaiser Marshall, drums.

New York, November 14, 1924.

mx. 140139-3. Columbia 249-D.

"Naughty Man" offers proof of Louis's natural superiority to his Henderson colleagues.

Trombonist Charlie "Big" Green and Coleman Hawkins are the other soloists (Hawkins on C-melody saxophone for his first effort, tenor on the second). When Louis comes in for his too-

few bars, it is as if sunshine had suddenly broken through the clouds. In every respect—tone, rhythm, melody—he is light years ahead, and perhaps most significantly, he expresses real feeling when he plays.

### **7. Changeable Daddy of Mine (2:42)**

(Wooding/Schaffer)

MARGARET JOHNSON ACCOMPANIED BY CLARENCE WILLIAMS'S BLUE FIVE

Margaret Johnson, vocal; Louis Armstrong, cornet; Aaron Thompson, trombone; Buddy Christian, banjo; Clarence Williams, piano.

New York, November 25, 1924.

mx. 72997-A. Okeh 8185.

“Changeable Daddy Of Mine,” like “Tears,” offers a clue to the future. Margaret Johnson sings in a pleasant vaudeville style; the song, co-composed by band leader Sam Wooding, is of no great distinction. But Louis, in commanding charge of the accompaniment from the first note, not only leads a startling double-timed ensemble passage and continues the double-time feel in the Charleston beat riffs behind Johnson’s re-entry, he then rips off a cascading break that also serves to restore the original tempo. That break, commented on as early as in the *1942 Jazz Record Book*, was not identified as what it really is until musicologist Lewis Porter annotated a Smithsonian collection anthology, *Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet in New York*, in 1981. The sharp-eared Porter spotted the break as the blueprint for perhaps the most famous of all Armstrong solo passages, the opening cadenza to “West End Blues,” recorded in June 1928. Was Armstrong caring this seemingly spontaneous invention in his head for almost four years, until the proper occasion for its reuse arose? Or did he work on it in the intervening time, making use of it in the hundreds, maybe thousands, of solos performed outside the studios? Suffice it to say that this discovery casts new light on the concept of “improvisation.”

### **8. Anybody Here Want to Try My Cabbage? (3:19)**

(Razaf/Waller/Dowell)

MAGGIE JONES

Maggie Jones, vocal; Louis Armstrong, cornet; Fletcher Henderson, piano.

New York, December 10, 1924.

mx. 140174-2. Columbia 14063-D.

This recording finds Louis in the company of our first real blues singer, Texas-born Maggie Jones. As the only horn, he has plenty of opportunity to display his gift for inventing beautiful phrases that complement the singer. And as a bonus, we get two solo passages, one of eight bars and one of four; in the former, Louis utters one of his super-rare growls. The recording captures his sound extremely well.

### **9. Good Time Flat Blues (3:12)**

(S. Williams)

MAGGIE JONES

Maggie Jones, Henderson, vocal; Louis Armstrong, cornet; Fletcher Henderson, piano;

New York, December 17, 1924.

mx. 140191-2. Columbia 14055-D.

“Good Time Flat Blues,” another Armstrong-Jones collaboration, has an introduction by Louis as well as a beautiful solo passage, and his accompaniment is inspired. If the melody (by Spencer Williams) sounds familiar, it’s because it was reincarnated as “Goodbye to Storyville” in the 1946 film *New Orleans*, in which Louis starred. Decades after these Jones collaborations, someone played the discs for Louis. He was pleasantly surprised and said he liked them as well as his much more famous records with Bessie Smith.

### **10. Cake Walking Babies**

**(from Home) (2:56)**

(C. Williams/C. Smith/H. Troy)

CLARENCE WILLIAMS’S BLUE FIVE

Louis Armstrong, cornet; Charlie Irvis, trombone; Sidney Bechet, soprano saxophone; Clarence Williams, piano; Buddy Christian, banjo; Eva Taylor, vocal.

New York, January 8, 1925.

mx. S 73083-A. OKeh 40321.

This tune had been recorded two weeks earlier by an almost identical band (under the name Red Onion Jazz Babies), so Armstrong and Bechet had not only the tune well in hand here, but also their recollections of the previous meeting. On that first occasion Bechet bested Lewis, if only slightly. Here it is the cornetist who takes charge, turning the second of the two rousing ensemble courses after Eva Taylor’s vocal into the most thrilling display of his prowess captured on disc to date—and it’s still electrifying. Bechet’s breaks in the first ensemble chorus are full of bravura, but Armstrong’s in the second move beyond Bechet in terms of rhythmic subtlety and swing. His climactic stop time-figure is a miracle of juggling subliminal note-values. This is one of the first masterpieces of recorded jazz—and a rousing affirmation of life.

### **11. Pickin’ on Your Baby (3:18)**

(Reynolds/James)

CLARENCE WILLIAMS’S BLUE FIVE

Same as “Cake Walking Babies (from Home).”

New York, January 8, 1925.

mx. S 73084-A. OKeh 40330.

“Pickin’ on Your Baby,” recorded immediately after the volcanic “Cake Walking Babies,” is a study in contrast. The sentimental song (quite sweet, if we put political correctness aside) is almost *crooned* by Louis after Eva’s vocal. He stays in the singer’s key, though it sits very high for the cornet, and fashions a lovely melodic statement in the uppermost regions of his range—he ends on a high D—that presages his famous 1929 treatment of “When You’re Smiling.” And what a gorgeous tone he gets!

### **12. St. Louis Blues (3:10)**

(W. C. Handy)

BESSIE SMITH

Bessie Smith, vocal; Louis Armstrong, cornet; Fred Langshaw, harmonium.

New York, January 14, 1925.

mx. 140241-1. Columbia 14064-D.



### **13. Sobbin' Hearted Blues (3:01)**

(Bradford/Layer/Davis)

BESSIE SMITH

Bessie Smith, vocal; Louis Armstrong, cornet; Fred Langshaw, piano.

New York January 14, 1925.

mx. 140249-2. Columbia 14056-D.

These two numbers are from Louis's first session with the Empress of the Blues. Though the singer has frequently been quoted as stating that her preferred hornman was Joe Smith, one suspects that the originator of these "quotes" was John Hammond, who valued Smith higher than Armstrong. In any case, there could be no more perfect partnership between singer and player than here. On W. C. Handy's "anthem," perhaps the most famous of all blues songs, Bessie's regular accompanist, Fred Langshaw, plays the harmonium (a small reed organ often used in rural churches), and the performance achieves an almost churchly stateliness. Bessie's wonderfully flexible phrasing is complemented by Louis's controlled but passionate fills, and the result is a classic performance. On "Sobbin' Hearted," Langshaw switches to piano. The mood is more intimate, and Louis's phrases have a vocal quality.

### **14. Papa De Da Da (2:59)**

(S. Williams/C. Williams/ C. Todd)

CLARENCE WILLIAMS'S BLUE FIVE

Same as "Cake Walking Babies (from Home)," but add Buster Bailey, soprano saxophone; Don Redman, alto saxophone.

New York, March 4, 1925.

mx. 73205-A. Okeh 8215.

One of Clarence Williams's most durable tunes, "Papa De Da Da" celebrates a New Orleans swell. No less than three reeds (two sopranos and an alto) back Louis's firm lead with riffs, no doubt scored by Redman. Williams's piano comes to the fore in accompaniment to his wife's cheerful vocal, and then Louis comes up with some stinging breaks in the course of leading the out-chorus. This was the last Armstrong-Bechet collaboration of the '20s; they would not get together again in a studio until 1940.

### **15. Sugar Foot Stomp (2:49)**

(W. Melrose/J. Oliver)

FLETCHER HENDERSON AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Fletcher Henderson, piano; Elmer Chambers, Joe Smith, Louis Armstrong, trumpet; Charlie Green, trombone; Buster Bailey, clarinet, alto saxophone; Don Redman, clarinet, alto saxophone, arranger, speech; Coleman Hawkins, tenor saxophone, clarinet; Charlie Dixon, banjo; Ralph Escudero, brass bass; Kaiser Marshall, drums.

New York, May 10, 1925.

mx. 140639-2. Columbia 395-D.

"Sugar Foot Stomp" shows just how much Louis had done for the Henderson band in seven months. The piece is really the King Oliver staple "Dippermouth Blues" a title probably considered too rustic by Henderson and Don Redmond, who's arrangement adds a new strain

scored for clarinet trio. In his three-chorus solo, Lewis follows in Oliver's footsteps, but with superior rhythm. Charlie Green takes a nice muted trombone solo, and Kaiser Marshal's drumming is excellent. The Henderson band has learned to swing.

### **16. Alone at Last (3:11)**

(Kahn/Fiorito)

THE SOUTHERN SERENADERS

Same as "Sugar Foot Stomp."

New York, August 7, 1925.

MX. 140820-2. Harmony 5-H.

Here is a little known Armstrong gem. The band is almost certainly Henderson's, recording for Columbia is 35-cent Harmony label under a pseudonym (and, alas, still acoustically, hence the contrast and sound to the previous electric track). Because the vocalist on the other song recorded at this session was white, discographical speculation arose that this was a session conjoining Henderson and Sam Lanin personnel—Lanin was the leader of the band performing opposite Fletcher's at the Roseland Ballroom. But aural evidence supports no such theory. In any case it's only Armstrong who matters here. Given a full chorus, he once again subtly varies the note values, makes his lines dance, and completely refashions the song's melody. This charming solo is a veritable definition of swing and taste.

### **17. T.N.T. (2:51)**

(E. Schoebel)

FLETCHER HENDERSON AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Same as "Sugar Foot Stomp."

New York, October 21, 1925.

mx. W 141170-1. Columbia 509-D.

"T. N. T." comes from Louis's last session with Henderson. The typically busy arrangement (by Redman) gives the soloists limited opportunities, but Louis makes the most of his—two four-bar passages and one of 16 bars. We also hear a much-improved Hawkins, reliable Green trombone, and a trumpet solo by Joe Smith. A record like this tells us why Louis left Henderson: he'd done what he could within this restrictive framework.

### **18. You Can't Shush Katie (3:03)**

(White/Creamer/Warren)

CLARENCE WILLIAMS'S BLUE FIVE

Louis Armstrong, cornet; Charlie Irvis, trombone; Don Redman, clarinet, alto saxophone; Coleman Hawkind, tenor saxophone; Clarence Williams, piano; Buddy Christian, banjo; Eva Taylor, vocal.

New York October 26, 1925.

mx. 73739-B. OKeh 8342.

This song describes a lady who seems, melodically at least, a first cousin to the more famous "Hard-Hearted Hanna." Eva Taylor, as usual, brings the lyric to life—she had very good diction—but the main thing here, as elsewhere with the Blue Five, is Louis, who drives the ensemble

chorus, making it sound almost like a solo. This, aside from a Perry Bradford session a few days later, was Louis's New York swan song. But he would be back.

### **19. Low Land Blues (2:54)**

(L. Nichols)

BERTHA "CHIPPIE" HILL

Bertha "Chippie" Hill, vocal; Louis Armstrong, trumpet; Richard M. Jones, piano; Chicago, November 9, 1925.

mx.9456-A. OKeh 8273.

"Low Land Blues" was recorded just days after Louis's return to Chicago. No doubt it was the pianist, Richard M. Jones, who was also a recording supervisor and talent scout for OKeh, who so swiftly grabbed the returned prodigy. Bertha "Chippie" Hill (1900-50) was no Bessie Smith—her voice was limited in range and lacked color—but she had temperament and a strong beat, and she knew how to sing real blues, as distinguished from the vaudeville kind. Louis certainly took to her, and his accompaniment and solo feature some of his toughest, guttiest playing on record.

### **20. Gut Bucket Blues (2:42)**

(L. Armstrong)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT FIVE

Louis Armstrong, cornet, vocal; Kid Ory, trombone, vocal; Johnny Dodds, clarinet; Lil Armstrong, piano, vocal; Johnny St. Cyr, banjo.

Chicago, November 12, 1925.

mx. 9486-A. OKeh 8261.

On "Gut Bucket Blues," from the first Hot Five session, Louis introduces the band. (He himself is introduced by Kid Ory, his former leader back in New Orleans.) The Hot Five was Richard M. Jones's brainstorm, and it was devised, aside from showcasing Louis, to cater to the musical tastes of the many southern blacks who had recently settled in Chicago and other northern cities, as well as record buyers who'd stayed back home. In fact, the framework was more traditional than the Williams Blue Five's New Orleans sensibilities refined by New York. But the leader, of course, transcended the traditional trimmings, and pretty soon even listeners who found the sidemen old-fashioned rushed to get the records for Louis's contribution. On this blues, his voice is heard on records at length for the first time; his concept of introducing the musicians was often copied later. But no one could copy the sound of Louis's cornet, heard here in a still Oliver-tinged blues chorus, and his solid lead.

## DISC/CASSETTE TWO

### 1. Listen to Ma (3:18)

(unknown writer)

HOCIEL THOMAS

Hociel Thomas, vocal; Louis Armstrong, trumpet; Hersal Thomas, piano.

Chicago, February 24, 1926.

mx. 9521. OKeh 8436.

“Listen to Ma” is not here because of the singing, which leaves much to be desired, but because of the extraordinarily beautiful solo by Lewis. In contrast to what he did on “Pickin’ on Your Baby,” where he went sky-high he explores the lower register of the cornet, producing a wondrously mellow sound. Only a few—all Armstrong disciples—have explored these nether regions: Bunny Berrigan, Rex Stewart, Ruby Braff (the latter two cornet specialists).

### 2. Heebie Jeebies (2:52)

(B. Atkins)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT FIVE

Louis Armstrong, cornet, vocal; Edward “Kid” Ory, trombone; Johnny Dodds, clarinet; Lil Armstrong, piano; Johnny St. Cyr, banjo.

Chicago, February 26, 1926.

mx.9534-A. OKeh 8300.

This was the Hot Five’s first hit and the record that put scat singing on the map. The later story—that Louis dropped the sheet music with the lyrics and improvised the scat sequence on the spot—doesn’t hold water, if only because he sings the lyric all the way through before the scat chorus. But it’s all good fun, with some nice instrumental work added.

### 3. Cornet Chop Suey (3:14)

(L. Armstrong)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT FIVE

Same as “Heebie Jeebies,” but delete Louis Armstrong, vocal.

Chicago, February 26, 1926.

mx. 9535-A. OKeh 8320.

“Cornet Chop Suey” was, as we’ve noted, composed by Louis in 1924 but still “modern” two years later. His stop-time chorus is the highlight here, but his lead work is scintillating throughout, and dig that ending! Johnny Dodds comes up with some wrong notes here and there—this was a tricky piece to learn.

### 4. Stomp Off, Let’s Go (2:55)

(Schoebel)

ERSKINE TATE’S VENDOME ORCHESTRA

Erskine Tate, director; Louis Armstrong, James Tate, trumpet; Eddie Atkins, trombone; Angelo Fernandez, clarinet, alto saxophone; Stump Evans, alto and baritone saxophones; Norval Morton, tenor saxophone; Teddy Weatherford, piano; unknown piano; Frank Etheridge, banjo; John Hare, brass bass; Jimmy Bertrand, drums, wood blocks.

Chicago, May 28, 1926.

Mx. C 337. Vocalion 1027.

Here is one of those rare 1920s Armstrong items actually recorded with a working band. Erskine Tate was a well-schooled musician—he later became a highly respected music teacher in Chicago—and the band he led at the Vendome Theater was a versatile one. This frisky piece shows its hot jazz side and is one of the most vigorous records of its kind. Louis is in there throughout, leading ensembles and taking dazzling breaks. The band's other star, pianist teddy Weatherford (1903-45), is the first soloist, backed by an unknown second keyboarder. Weatherford was considered the equal of Earl Hines but left for the Far East in 1926 and spent the rest of his life there, mostly in India.) Then Louis comes to bat. His stop-time solo, energetically abetted by percussionist Jimmy Bertrand (Lionel Hampton's first idol) on washboard, is thrilling. This is much more "contemporary" 1926 Chicago jazz than the Hot Five brand.

### **5.The Bridwell Blues (3:29)**

(Welsh/ Jones)

NOLAN WELSH

Nolan Welsh, vocal; Louis Armstrong, cornet; Richard M. Jones, piano.

Chicago, June 16, 1926,

mx. 9727-A. OKeh 8372.

This is one of the few records made by Nolan Welsh, nicknamed Barrelhouse and more of a country blues singer than anyone else backed by Louis. The lyric, quite possibly autobiographical, deals with one of Illinois's most notorious prisons. (As we shall see, this record had at least one significant fan.) Louis takes a soulful chorus and provides splendid commentary.

### **6.King of the Zulus (3:03)**

(L. Hardin)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT FIVE

Same as "Heebie Jeebies," but add Clarence Babcock, Louis and Lil Armstrong, speech.

Chicago, June 23, 1926.

mx. 9776-A. OKeh 8396.

"King of the Zulus" takes as from serious blues to good-natured hokum. The title is prophetic: in 1947, Lewis did become King of the Zulus and presided over the Mardi Gras festivities in his hometown. Here we deal with a Jamaican intruder on a barbecue, but the real meat is the cornet solo (in minor) and Louis's thrilling lead on the out-chorus. This was one of the few Hot Five records favored by young Roy Eldredge, who based his own tune "Minor Jive" on Louis's solo.

### **7. Skid-Dat-De-Dat (3:01)**

(L. Hardin)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT FIVE

Same as "Heebie Jeebies."

Chicago, November 16, 1926.

mx. 9891-A. OKeh 8436.

Despite its playful title, “ Skid-Dat-De-Dat “ ( a kind of pig Latin on the word *scat*) create a somber, minor mood. Once again, Lewis displays his beautiful lower register, and his vocal breaks are impassioned and moving. Johnny Dodds, a master of the blues, is at his Hot Five best here, and the piece as a whole is one of the little bands most successful ensemble efforts, very original in conception.

### **8. Big Butter and Egg Man (2:57)**

(P. Venable/L. Armstrong)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT FIVE

Same as “Heebie Jeebies,” but add May Alix, vocal.

Chicago, November 16, 1926.

mx. 9892-A. OKeh 8423.

“Big Butter and Egg Man” is in an entirely different vein; it takes us back to vaudeville. A collaboration between Louis and Ralph Venable, director of the Sunset Cafe’s stage shows, it was certainly performed in that venue by Louis with his big band and the assisting vocalist here, May Alix. She had no sense for jazz but was a very handsome woman and a good dancer. Here she is a foil for Louis, who follows her chorus with a half-spoken one of his own which gives us a taste of his comedic acting of the day, in rather broad strokes. (His “Come here, baby, kiss me” is almost pure Al Jolson.) But then, in one of those miraculous shifts of sensibility, he constructs a cornet chorus that is sublime, from the initial triple call through the supremely relaxed reinvention of the melody. (You can sense that young Lester Young, who heard all the Hot Fives, was hip to this solo.)

### **9. Pleadin’ for the Blues (2:59)**

(unknown writer)

BERTHA “CHIPPIE” HILL

Bertha “Chippie” Hill, vocal; Louis Armstrong, cornet; Richard M. Jones, piano;

Chicago, November 23, 1926.

mx.9949-A. OKeh 8420

This piece brings back Chippy Hill, well worth hearing again. Louis’s horn is particularly well recorded here, and he’s in fine fettle. His solo is almost a translation to music of the word *pleading* and must rank with his most moving. His expressive range and instrumental command were constantly increasing.

### **10. Wild Man Blues (3:05)**

(Martin/Armstrong)

JOHNNY DODD’S BLACK BOTTOM STOMPERS

Louis Armstrong, cornet; Roy Palmer, trombone; Johnny Dodds, clarinet; Barney Bigard, tenor saxophone; Earl Hines, piano; Bud Scott, banjo; Baby Dodds, drums.

Chicago, April 22, 1927.

mx. C 796. Brunswick 3567.

Here we have one of the Louis’s infrequent appearances as a side man; undoubtedly he was doing *his* side man Johnny Dodds a good turn. The band is bigger than the Hot Five, and a

notable feature is Baby Dodds's bass drum. (In those early days of electric recording, engineers didn't like bass drums, as we shall see.) This was the first record date on which Louis and Earl Hines appear together, but the pianist is heard only in a supporting role on this piece, credited to Louis and Jelly Roll Morton—the latter is recording of it, also with Dodds in the band, is vastly inferior both to this version and to the one by the Hot Five. Louis's solo on this Dodds session is even better than on his own slightly later date. Many musicians learned it by heart. His open horn sound is beautifully captured here, Hines gives him a much better harmonic foundation than Lil, and he is in inspired form—at this period, he loved breaks, and this piece is full of them. Dodds, who follows, can't match Louis's virtuosity or his familiarity with the piece (after all, Louis wrote it), yet holds his own by means of beauty of tone and depth of feeling. A classic.

### **11. Chicago Breakdown (3:24)**

(F. Morton)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG STOMPERS

Louis Armstrong, Bill Wilson, cornets; Honore Dutrey, trombone; Boyd Atkins, clarinet, soprano and alto saxophones; Joe Walker, alto and baritone saxophones; Albert Washington, tenor saxophone; Earl Hines, piano; Rip Basset, guitar, banjo; Pete Briggs, tuba; Tubby Hall, drums. Chicago, May 9, 1927.

mx. 80851-C. Columbia 36376.

"Chicago Breakdown" is really a Jelly Roll Morton piece, and this performance of it is the sole remaining evidence of the big band Louis led at the Sunset Cafe in early 1927. Hines is on hand—he functioned as co-leader in the club—as is old Oliver colleague Honore Dutrey. This is a band one would like to hear more from: with Louis leading the brass and Hines at the keyboard and a full-sounding reed section, it beats many a more frequently recorded con-temporary. Hines solos first, and what strikes us is the compatibility of his conception with Louis's. The leader solos next, as if to emphasize that point, and then Boyd Atkins, composer of "Heebie Jeebies," is heard on somewhat frisky soprano, followed by Joe Walker's big-toned baritone. Then Louis returns to the spotlight, backed only by guitar, to fashion a gem of a solo. His concluding high note calls the ensemble back, and he stays on top for the rideout. (The coda is strictly 1920s avant garde and not to be taken too seriously.)

### **12. Potato Head Blues (2:54)**

(L. Armstrong)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT SEVEN

Louis Armstrong, cornet; Johnny Thomas, trombone; Johnny Dodds, clarinet; Lil Armstrong, piano; Johnny St. Cyr, banjo; Pete Briggs, tuba; Baby Dodds, drums.

Chicago, May 10, 1927.

mx. W 80855-C. OKeh 8503.

"Potato Head Blues" introduces the Hot Seven, an augmented Hot Five, electrically recorded. The new kids on the block are tubaist Pete Briggs, a master of his craft, and old pal Baby Dodds, who isn't allowed to use his bass drum but makes good use of cymbals, snare, and wood blocks. The trombonist, journeyman John Thomas, replaced the touring Kid Ory. The piece, by Louis, is much prettier than the jocose title implies, and has nothing to do with the blues; the melodies are redolent with the New Orleans spirit. Dodds is on form, Johnny St. Cyr has a long break, and

then Louis takes a stop-time solo that became one of his most famous. It is a landmark in his recording career in its complete mastery of instrument, melody, time, and feeling. The beauty of his tone and the breadth of his ideas are something to behold. After this masterful display of prowess, he leads the final ensemble with ultimate swing. What joyful music this is!

### **13. Weary Blues (2:57)**

(Matthews)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT SEVEN

Same as "Potato Head Blues."

Chicago, May 11, 1927.

mx. 80863-A. OKeh 8519.

"Weary Blues" is again not a blues, but a multi-strained piece by the St. Louis ragtime composer Artie Matthews. The Hot Seven treat it pretty much as the ensemble number it should be, but there's room for a fine low-register Dodds clarinet solo, a taste of Thomas's trombone, and a strapping stop-time solo by Louis, plus more of that vigorous cornet lead. For a studio band, these guys were pretty tight.

### **14. Gully Low Blues (3:14)**

(L. Armstrong)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT SEVEN

Same as "Potato Head Blues," but add Louis Armstrong, vocal.

Chicago, May 14, 1927.

mx. W 80877-D. OKeh 847 4.

Finally, a real blues, in two tempos. "Gully Low Blues" moves from fast ensemble to slow Johnny Dodds preaching and a first-rate two-chorus sample of Louis's blues singing. More of that plaintive Dodds clarinet, and then a startling cornet solo based on five descending phrases, each beginning with a high C, played with tremendous force. Though similar in outline, the descending phrases vary considerably in detail. It's yet another example of the burgeoning imagination of this young genius of music.

### **15. Put 'Em Down Blues (3:13)**

(E. Bennett)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT FIVE

Same as "Heebie Jeebies."

Chicago, September 2, 1927.

mx. W 81302-B. OKeh 8503.

"Put 'Em Down Blues" brings back the Hot Five format, with welcome returnee Kid Ory; the much lesser Thomas has made us appreciate Ory's personality and ensemble expertise. This piece is again not a blues, but a jaunty pop original. In the opening ensemble, Ory takes a lusty break, and then comes a long vocal by Louis, the first recorded example of his singing in its more developed stage. It is as if, up to now, he hasn't taken this aspect of his art too seriously (except perhaps in the wonderful scattling on "Skid-Dat-De-Dat"), but here the singing, with a more sophisticated vocal production, really begins to mirror the playing. Just hear how beautifully he hits a high tenor note on the line "you for me." Of course, the humor is still there,



as in the mock-British enunciation on the break “Honey and you caahn’t go wrong.” After this delightful vocal, a jaunty Lil (she hadn’t much finesse, but a great beat) sets up the trumpet solo, and it’s a beauty. Louis continues to dominate through the final ensemble and adds a brief coda. By now, his is clearly the dominant presence, the others merely supporters.

### **16. Struttin’ with Some Barbecue (2:59)**

(L. Hardin/D. Raye)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT FIVE

Same as “Heebie Jeebies,”

but delete Louis Armstrong, vocal.

Chicago, December 9, 1927.

mx. 82037-B. OKeh 8566.

This was one of Louis’s great favorites among his own compositions (yes, it’s credited to Lil, but every note of it is pure Armstrong), and with good reason: it’s a marvelous piece of music. Louis leads the opening ensemble joyfully; Dodds, in his favorite low register, splits a chorus with a forceful and quite inventive Ory (he knew his limitations and how to turn them into strengths); and then comes the climax, another masterful cornet statement over stop-time chords. An arranged ensemble break, and then some more spectacular Louis in the rideout. The cute suspended ending is probably Lil’s idea.

### **17. Hotter Than That (2:59)**

(L. Hardin)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT FIVE

Same as “Heebie Jeebies,” but add Lonnie Johnson, guitar.

Chicago, December 13, 1927.

mx. 82055-B. OKeh 8535.

“Hotter Than That” is a variation on one of the decade’s favorite jazz numbers, “Tiger Rag.” Louis only employs the main strain. After the brief opening ensemble, trumpet and clarinet solo. The centerpiece is one of Louis’s greatest scat vocals, in which he’s first supported by, and then exchanges phrases with, the great New Orleans guitarist (and blues singer) Lonnie Johnson (ca. 1988-1970), who also recorded with Duke Ellington and in duet with Eddie Lang. Louis’s singing here is as instrumental as can be, including some rips characteristic of his playing. Ory takes a jaunty solo, and then a spiraling cornet break launches Louis into a break-laden finale. He and Johnson split the closing cadenza. Another masterpiece.

### **18. Savoy Blues (3:28)**

(E. Ory)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT FIVE

Same as “Heebie Jeebies,” but add Lonnie Johnson, guitar, and delete Louis Armstrong, vocal.

Chicago, December 13, 1927.

mx. 82056-A. OKeh 8535.

“Savoy Blues,” made right after the preceding number, was the last piece recorded by the original Hot Five. One of Ory’s best compositions, it’s taken at a relaxed tempo. Louis opens it, then an ensemble riff brings on a guitar duet by Johnson and St. Cyr. Louis now takes a two-chorus solo that is a model of flowingly relaxed invention. Ory sounds primitive after this, but his long glissandi are effective in the ensuing riff (it became a swing era staple). Louis leads the closing improvised ensemble, but sounds like a soloist; he also offers a brief coda. As this performance clearly shows, it was time for the old Hot Five to fold its tent. In its lifespan of almost exactly two years, the group had made an enormous contribution to the growth of jazz. Its members had served the leader well. But now he had outgrown them for good, and it was time for something new.

### **19. Too Busy (2:52)**

(Miller/Cohn)

LILLIE DELK CHRISTIAN ACCOMPANIED BY LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT FOUR

Lillie Delk Christian, vocal; Louis Armstrong, trumpet, vocal; Jimmy Noone, clarinet; Earl Hines, piano; Mancy Carr, guitar.

Chicago, May 26, 1928.

mx. W 400955-B. OKeh 8596.

This piece offers an interlude between the old and the new Hot Five. The session (made the day before the new Hot Five’s first) features one of the more inexplicable phenomena in the annals of recorded jazz, a singer who seems to have no talent whatsoever, yet is surrounded by some of the greatest musicians of all time. This was Lillie Delk Christian’s fifth date for OKeh and the third in which the great clarinetist Jimmie Noone (1895-1944) participated. Christian is a kind of Helen Kane (the original boop-boop-a-doop girl), with a squeaky voice and no aptitude for phrasing. (In 1970, I met Ms. Delk Christian at a reunion of veteran African-American performers. More than 40 years after her recording career had ended, she was still a strikingly beautiful woman.) This and a slightly later session were the only recorded encounters between Louis and Noone, the other great New Orleans clarinet master active in Chicago, and very unlike Johnny Dodds. Of the Creole reed school, Noone was a consummate technician, with a pretty, almost dainty sound. Though he excelled at sweet tunes he was also a fine blues player, and a great influence on young Benny Goodman. Here he plays a secondary role to Louis, but in the ensemble passages we can hear just how well they go together. When Earl Hines is added to the mix, sparks fly, and the opening instrumental chorus is a delight, as are the brief solos by the three stars. Then comes the highlight: when Delk Christian returns, Louis joins her in a vocal duet, scatting behind her imperturbably corny singing. It is a rare moment, and if anyone needs a definition of swing and the lack thereof, this is made to order.

### **20. Skip the Gutter (3:04)**

(S. Williams)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT FIVE

Louis Armstrong, trumpet; Fred Robinson, trombone; Jimmy Strong, clarinet; Earl Hines, piano; Mancy Carr, banjo; Zutty Singleton, drums.

Chicago, June 27, 1928.

mx. W 400961-A. OKeh 8631.

Armstrong and Hines have plenty of space to trade on this Spencer Williams composition. The arrangement must rank as one of the odder ones in the Armstrong canon; the deep structure emanates from the trumpet and piano interludes. Given the harmonic infelicities of the clarinet and trombone, it's fair to assume this was a one-taker. Hines knew that his tune "Monday Date" was up next, and he alludes to it during his solo. There is another premonition in the last chorus: Louis and Earl play an off-the-beat chord that surfaced in their duet version of "Weather Bird." Red Nichols's innovative recordings in New York were tremendously influential (as was his trombonist Miff Mole, whose work is reflected in that of Robinson), and they echo across many of these titles.

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## DISC/CASSETTE THREE

### **1. A Monday Date (3:12)**

(E. Hines/S. Robin)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT FIVE

Same as "Skip the Gutter," but ass Louis Armstrong, vocal, speech; Earl Hines, speech.

Chicago, June 28, 1928.

mx. W 400962-B. OKeh 8609.

The voices we hear are those of Louis and Earl, with a reference to Mrs. Searcy, a leading Chicago bootlegger. Louis triumphs over the cluttered ensemble with great panache, and then it's just him and Earl for the vocal chorus. One passion of King Oliver's that Louis didn't share was for the mutes, derbies, and various accoutrements that distort the natural tone of a brass instrument. Here, he almost bursts at the seams with emotion, blended, as always, with a sublime sense of form.

### **2. West End Blues (3:16)**

(C. Williams/J. Oliver)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT FIVE

Louis Armstrong, trumpet, vocal; Fred

Robinson, trombone; Jimmy Strong, clarinet; Earl Hines, piano; Maney Carr, banjo; Zutty Singleton, drums.

Chicago, June 28, 1928.

mx. W 400967-8. OKeh 8597.

"West End Blues" is simply one of the handful of unsurpassed artistic achievements of the 20th century. Should it come as any surprise that Armstrong plumbed the depths of his soul on a tune written by the man who changed his life, King Oliver? Every barrier—instrumental,

linguistic, metric—is transcended by the pure beauty of Armstrong’s conception. With a gravelly voice and a heraldic trumpet he changed the world.

### **3. Two Deuces (2:53)**

(L. Hardin)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT FIVE

Same as “West End Blues,”

but delete Louis Armstrong, vocal. Chicago, June 29, 1928.

mx. W 400973-8. OKeh 8641.

This was written by Louis’s wife, Lil, from whom he was already estranged at this time. Hines makes the most of some tremolos that would sound glib in lesser hands. The double-time section is gratuitous, and only highlights the tune’s natural tempo when it ends. Louis combines his burgeoning technical mastery with a grand, operatic stance that still astonishes. One of his early disciples was the Chicago cornetist Muggsy Spanier, who picked up early on this specific, almost melancholy, facet of Louis’s genius.

### **4. Symphonic Raps (3:12)**

(B. Stevens/I. Abrams)

CARROLL DICKERSON’S SAVOYAGERS

Carroll Dickerson, director; Louis Armstrong, trumpet; Homer Hobson, trumpet; Fred Robinson, trombone; Bert Curry, Crawford Wethington, alto saxophone; Jimmy Strong, clarinet, tenor saxophone; Earl Hines, piano; Mancy Carr, banjo; Pete Briggs, tuba; Zutty Singleton, Drums. Chicago, July 5, 1928.

mx. W 40092-B. Argentine Odeon 193329.

Here we have an accurate picture of Louis’s working environment in 1928. Carroll Dickerson’s ensemble is a sophisticated band consisting of expert musicians, and the writing is also first rate. It was playing in this context that encouraged the rapid developments in Armstrong’s style, and it was during their time together in ensembles such as this that Louis and Earl freely exchanged musical philosophies. Listen for how vividly the band responds when Louis is playing the lead—he taught them, and the world, to swing.

### **5. Basin Street Blues (3:18)**

(S. Williams)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG & HIS HOT FIVE

Louis Armstrong, trumpet, vocal; Fred Robinson, trombone; Jimmy Strong, clarinet; Earl Hines, piano, celeste, vocal; Mancy Carr, banjo, vocal; Zutty Singleton, drums.

Chicago, December 4, 1928.

mx. W 402154-A. OKeh 8690.

Many riches are to be found here, from Hines’s tasteful celeste to Louis’s rhythmically complex closing solo to Singleton’s bass drum, included for the first time. The resolving dominants of Spencer Williams’s song turned Louis on, and he drapes some of his most extravagant and

penetrating ideas over them. The high C with which he bridges his closing choruses must have been truly thrilling in person, and it still sends chills up the spine today. Equally enthralling is Louis's sudden shift downward in both range and dynamics for the last eight bars. He plays with a dense tone that was not lost on one of his most brilliant disciples, Henry "Red" Allen.

### **6. No One Else but You (3:21)**

(D. Redman)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT FIVE

Louis Armstrong, trumpet, vocal; Fred Robinson, trombone; Don Redman, clarinet, alto saxophone, arranger; Jimmy Strong, clarinet, tenor saxophone; Earl Hines, piano; Dave Wilborn, banjo, guitar; Zutty Singleton, drums.

Chicago, December 5, 1928.

mx. W 402168-8. OKeh 8679.

Don Redman makes a welcome reappearance with this title. He had left New York and Henderson band to become musical director of the Detroit-based McKinney's Cotton Pickers and was also writing prolifically for many groups, including Paul Whiteman. Redman was brought in to give some order to Louis's recordings. The focus is placed firmly on Louis and Earl, who, along with Zutty, respond with some of their best and most playfully abstract work.

### **7. Beau Koo Jack (2:57)**

(A. Hill/L. Armstrong/W. Melrose/D. Redman)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT FIVE

Louis Armstrong, trumpet; Fred Robinson, trombone; Don Redman, clarinet, alto saxophone; Earl Hines, piano; Dave Wilborn, banjo, guitar; Zutty Singleton, drums; Alex Hill, arranger.

Chicago, December 5, 1928.

mx. W 402169-C. OKeh 8680.

"Beau Koo Jack," meaning plenty of money, is a creation of both Louis (the tune) and Alex Hill (the extremely creative arrangement). As Gunther Schuller has noted in *Early Jazz*, "Hill was one of the very best early arrangers in jazz... 'Beau Koo Jack' reveals a high degree of skill and imagination, and is one of the best arrangements ever made for Armstrong." This tempo and approach were new territories for jazz, and Louis's sheer joy in his own virtuosity established goals that all jazz musicians will always aspire to.

### **8. Weather Bird (2:42)**

(J. Oliver)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND EARL HINES

Louis Armstrong, trumpet; Earl Hines, piano. Chicago, December 5, 1928.

mx. W 402199-A. OKeh 41454.

This is one of jazz's high-water marks—of invention, sheer swing, melodic beauty, and cohesiveness. Up through the advent of John Coltrane, all of jazz's major innovators had experience playing in big bands, a background that gave them an orchestral concept to base their performances on. At the base of this performance is Louis's and Earl's intuition for

structure. This was not, as has been suggested, a totally impromptu recording. Given that they were in at least two different bands together and were extremely fond of each other's playing, this tune must have been, if not a staple, at least part of their repertoire at the time. The proper emphasis should be, as Schuller has noted, on the compositional and structural unity these men Wove into their improvisations. As Arnold Schoenberg said, "Composition is slowed down improvisation"; this recording proves the inverse.

### **9. Muggles (2:49)**

(L. Armstrong/E. Hines)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT FIVE

Louis Armstrong, trumpet; Fred Robinson, trombone; Jimmy Strong, clarinet; Earl Hines, piano; Mancy Carr, banjo; Zutty Singleton, drums.

Chicago, December 7, 1928.

mx. W 402200-B. OKeh 8703.

"Muggles begins as a slow blues, before Louis doubles both the meter and tempo. After hearing his ideas played back at us for 60 odd years, it's worth remembering how startling they must have been at the time. His first chorus illustrates how much can be done with a single note, and these lessons certainly weren't lost on the young Lester Young. The second chorus, with its dramatically melodic flourishes, harks back to "West End Blues."

### **10. I Must Have That Man (3:11)**

(D. Fields/J. McHugh)

LILLIE DELK CHRISTIAN ACCOMPANIED BY LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT FOUR

Same as "Too Busy."

Chicago, December 12, 1928.

mx. W 402209-B. OKeh 8660.

"I Must Have That Man" is a return engagement for the inept Ms. Delk Christian, again accompanied by the sublime Armstrong-Noone-Hines combination. This is a much better tune than "Too Busy" and represents Louis's first recorded encounter with the work of Jimmy McHugh and Dorothy Fields. (It is in fact his first rendition of a mainstream Tin Pan Alley tune.) He opens with a marvelous introduction then leads the singer gently into the verse and lets Hines carry the bulk of the accompaniment. When she gets to the chorus, Louis, now with a mute in the trumpet's bell, backs her sublimely (this is where Bobby Hackett came from). Lower-register Noone surfaces on the bridge and last eight. Then Louis leads a wonderful half-chorus of ensemble—but it's really a trumpet solo with accompaniment. Clearly, he relishes the harmonic opportunities offered by this sophisticated tune—an augury of things to come. (We've been hard on Delk Christian, so let it be noted that she does sing in tune.)

### **11. Tight like This (3:18)**

(Curl)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS HOT FIVE

Louis Armstrong, trumpet, speech; Fred Robinson, trombone; Don Redman, alto saxophone,

speech, arranger; Jimmy Strong, clarinet, tenor saxophone; Earl Hines, piano, speech; Mancy Carr, banjo; Zutty Singleton, drums.  
Chicago, December 12, 1928.  
mx. W 402226-C. OKeh 8649.

It would be difficult to find a better example than this recording to illustrate the gulf between the showbiz conventions of the day and Armstrong's artistry. Louis's and Earl's solos stand in stark contrast to the vocal reminders of the tune's title that are interspersed throughout. Hines's is especially inspired, and his free-association places him somewhere between Salvador Dali and Groucho Marx. Duke Ellington remarked that modern jazz began with Hines, and we also know that Art Tatum's horizons were expanded by early Earl. Louis's entrance is worthy of Shakespeare: we are immediately placed in a situation ripe with dramatic potential. The opening interval sets up an *idée fixe* that Louis ingeniously develops as he plumbs successively deeper into the performance's emotional core. The reality of where Louis and Earl were conceptually in 1928 renders terms such as "modern" in relation to jazz ultimately meaningless.

### **12. Knockin' a Jug (3:14)**

(L. Armstrong/E. Condon)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Louis Armstrong, trumpet; Jack Teagarden, trombone; Happy Caldwell, tenor saxophone; Joe Sullivan, piano; Eddie Lang, guitar; Kaiser Marshall, drums.

New York, March 5, 1929.

mx. W 401689-B. OKeh 8703.

If any recording represents the mythic all-night-through-daybreak jam session immortalized in fiction (and some jazz history), this is it. Upon his return to New York in 1929, Louis met with adulation from both the public and the musical community. Musicians would congregate in Harlem to catch him after their nightly jobs were over, and frequently great times would follow. It was after one such night that this recording was made. It documents the first meeting in a recording studio between Louis and one of his most devoted admirers, Jack Teagarden. Big Tea, as he was known, fondly recalled the impression Louis made playing his majestic choruses while leaning nonchalantly against the studio wall. This was also the first truly inter-racial jazz recording. There had been isolated incidents—Jelly Roll Morton recording with the New Orleans Rhythm Kings in 1923, for example—but "Knockin' a Jug" speaks of a time when black and white musicians shared freely and benefitted mutually from the interchange of approaches.

### **13. I Can't Give You Anything but Love (3:33)**

(D. Fields/J. McHugh)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Louis Armstrong, trumpet, vocal; J.C. Higginbotham, trombone; Albert Nicholas, Charlie Holmes, alto saxophones; Teddy Hill, tenor saxophone; Luis Russell, piano; Eddie Condon, banjo; Lonnie Johnson, guitar; Pops Foster, string bass; Paul Barbarin, drums.

New York, March 5, 1929.

mx. W 401690-C. OKeh 8669.

A landmark recording for Louis and the entire entertainment field. The recording industry gave Louis the chance to reach a mass audience, by selecting a pop tune and issuing it as part of their general release. It became a prototype for all his big-band recordings to follow: he plays the opening melody (sometimes muted), sings, and concludes with a climactic trumpet solo, ending off a high note (in this case, the notorious augmented fourth, or flatted fifth, of bebop fame). Probably no other early recording of his since “West End Blues” had as much impact. Even such an established star as Ethel Waters paid tribute to Louis by recording an imitation of it—big names with established styles rarely did that. Another indication of its influence is the tremendous effect it had on Bing Crosby. As Gary Giddins has discovered in research for his upcoming Crosby biography, it was precisely at this time that Bing spent a great deal of time absorbing Louis’s style. The band is that of Luis Russell (save the trumpeters) with a few ringers added, including two significant pletrists: Lonnie Johnson was a master bluesman whom we’ve already met (“Hotter Than That”), and Eddie Condon, who played a large part in getting “Knockin’ a Jug” recorded, was already a mover and shaker who specialized in making good music happen.

#### **14. Mahogany Hall Stomp (3:14)**

(S. Williams)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Same as “I Can’t Give You Anything but Love,” but delete Louis Armstrong, vocal.

New York, March 5, 1929.

mx. W 401691-B. OKeh 3680.

Spencer Williams’s tribute to a famed New Orleans night spot was originally titled “Mahogany Hall Blues” and was conceived much slower. Both Louis and the band knew the place well, and brought the tempo up to a nice, medium rock. Following altoist Charlie Holmes and guitarist Johnson, Louis fashions three muted choruses that were to be as influential as Oliver’s “Dippermouth Blues” solo was a few years earlier. These choruses are masterpieces of construction. The first, with its melodic variations, leads naturally into the second, with its sustained note (and stomping rhythmic backing); the third consists of an inevitable ascending phrase, repeated. (It wasn’t only instrumentalists who copied these ideas; arrangers for bands both big and small applied them to virtually everything they wrote.) J.C. Higginbotham has a typically unique chorus before Louis leads the ensemble out. The trumpet break in the coda is reminiscent of the Hot Fives, and perfectly summarizes this evocative performance.

#### **15. To Be in Love (3:07)**

(R. Turk/F. E. Ahlert)

SEGER ELLIS

Seger Ellis, vocal; Louis Armstrong, trumpet; Tommy Dorsey, trombone; Jimmy Dorsey, clarinet; Harry Hoffman, violin; Justin Ring, piano, celeste; Stan King, drums.

New York, June 4, 1929.

mx. W 402417-C. OKeh 41255.



Seeger Ellis was an inoffensive singer (later a big-bandleader) who had the good fortune to be backed by a coterie of top New York studio musicians augmented by Louis himself. Yet another racial barrier was broken, although it would be more than a decade before any real strides were made in this regard. As with any artist, Louis was sensitive to his surroundings, but it's stretching it a bit to suggest, as some have, that he altered his style to fit in with this band. His solo (bridge by Tommy Dorsey) is prime 1929 Armstrong—full of ravishingly melodic figures, arching phrases, and plaintive asides.

**16. Ain't Misbehavin' (3:13)**

(A. Razaf/T. Waller/H. Brooks)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Louis Armstrong, trumpet, vocal; Homer Hobson, trumpet; Fred Robinson, trombone; Jimmy Strong, clarinet, tenor saxophone; Bert Curry, Crawford Wethington, alto saxophone; Carroll Dickerson, violin, director; Gene Anderson, piano; Mancy Carr, banjo; Pete Briggs, tuba; Zutty Singleton, drums.

New York, July 19, 1929.

mx. W 402534-B. OKeh 8714.

**17. (What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue (3:01)**

(A. Razaf/T. Waller)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Same as "Ain't Misbehavin'."

New York, July 22, 1929.

W 402535-B. OKeh 8714.

**18. That Rhythm Man (3:09)**

(A. Razaf/T. Waller/H. Brooks)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Same as "Ain't Misbehavin'".

New York, July 22, 1929\_

mx. w 402540-C. OKeh 8717.

These tunes from the show *Hot Chocolates* will forever be associated with Louis. The band is his Chicago crew, who acquit themselves honorably. The rhapsodic trumpet solo on "Misbehavin'" became one of Armstrong's set pieces, and brings to mind Virgil Thompson's statement that Louis's "improvisation would seem to have combined the highest reaches of instrumental virtuosity with the most tensely disciplined melodic structure and the most spontaneous emotional expression, all of which in one man you must admit is pretty rare." We'll never know whether it was the rapid development of recording techniques or an expansion of his emotive devices, but the breathy tone Louis uses in his first eight bars on "Black and Blue" are new, and thrilling. "Rhythm Man" is more of a feature for the ensembles and the various soloists. Zutty Singleton finally gets to record on his full drum kit, and propels the entire performance with his

infectious bass drum beat. Dave Tough, as well as Gene Krupa, certainly learned much from Face, as Singleton was affectionately called.

### **19. When You're Smiling (2:50)**

(Fisher/Goodwin/Shay)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Louis Armstrong, Homer Hobson, trumpet; Fred Robinson, trombone; Bert Curry, Crawford Wethington, alto saxophone; Jimmy Strong, clarinet, tenor saxophone; Carroll Dickerson, violin, director; Gene Anderson, piano, celeste; Mancy Carr, banjo; Pete Briggs, tuba; Zutty Singleton, drums.

New York, September 11, 1929.

mx.402924-B. OKeh 8729. (non-vocal take)

Record companies would occasionally have their artists record non-vocal versions of tunes for international distribution (Hollywood captured the same market by making foreign language versions of some of their films—have you ever heard Laurel and Hardy speak Spanish?) In this instance, we gain an extra 16 bars of Louis, plus solos by Robinson and Strong. The concluding chorus has Louis, in his upper register, floating the melody over the band in a truly heroic fashion.

### **20. St. Louis Blues**

(alternate take B) (2:55)

(W. C. Handy)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Louis Armstrong, Henry "Red" Allen, Otis Johnson, trumpets; J.C. Higginbotham, trombone; Albert Nicholas, clarinet, alto saxophone; Charlie Holmes, soprano and alto saxophones; Teddy Hill, tenor saxophone; Luis Russell, piano; Will Johnson, guitar; Pops Foster, bass; Paul Barbarin, drums.

New York, December 13, 1929.

mx. W 490016-B. Columbia CK 46996.

This is another non-vocal take, one that remained unissued (and unlisted in any discography) for over 60 years. The band is Russell's, and for many years people have been intrigued by Red Allen's claim that he and Louis traded with each other so smoothly on one of these titles that it was impossible to spot. The track that is usually nominated is "I Ain't Got Nobody," but with the issuance of this take, I think the mystery may have been solved. Listen for the trumpet lead following Higginbotham's verse; on the issued version, this leads up to Armstrong's vocal. On this non-vocal take, Louis plays instead, and the change in proximity of the two trumpet sounds may reveal Allen's lead. Fellow New Orleans clarinetist Albert Nicholas has a chorus before Higginbotham. Louis's closing choruses on the original issue take are so well now that the slight emendations found here are doubly fascinating. The canard that jazz is totally improvised, off-the-top-of-the-head music still persists in some camps. What it really is, in one form or another, is composition. Hearing Louis subtly alter one of his masterpieces is analogous to examining Beethoven's sketchbooks or watching the outtakes from Chaplin's classic films. The last chorus

here, identical to the original, was adapted into Eddie Durham's classic 1938 arrangement of "Swinging the Blues" for Count Basie.

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## Disc/Cassette 4

### **1. Song of the Islands (3:28)**

(C. E. King)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Louis Armstrong, trumpet, vocals; Henry "Red" Allen, Otis Johnson, trumpets; J. C. Higginbotham, trombone; Albert Nicholas, clarinet, alto saxophone; Charlie Holmes, alto and soprano saxophones; Teddy Hill, tenor saxophone; unknown violins; Louis Russell, piano; Pops Foster, bass; Will Johnson, guitar; Paul Barberin, vibes; unknown drums.

New York, January 24, 1930.

mx. W 403681-A. OKeh 41375.

Paul Barbarin's vibraphone introduction and coda here are the first of their kind on an Armstrong record, and precede Lionel Hampton's much more heralded debut (on "Memories of You" below) by several months. Pops Foster's arco (bowed) bass and Louis's soaring trumpet provide the registral extremes that border this relaxed reading.

### **2. My Sweet (3:16)**

(Carmichael/Gorrell)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Louis Armstrong, trumpet, vocal; Ed Anderson, trumpet; Henry Hicks, trombone; Bobby Holmes, clarinet, alto saxophone; Theodore McCord, alto saxophone; Castor McCord, clarinet, tenor saxophone; Joe Turner, Buck Washington, pianos; Bernard Addison, guitar; Lavert Hutchinson, tuba; Willie Lynch, drums, leader.

New York, April 5, 1930.

mx. W 403896-D. OKeh 41415.

There are more bells in the introduction to "My Sweet," which may very well have been played by one of the two distinguished pianists in the orchestra, Joe Turner and Buck Washington. Washington was half of the famous dance team Buck and Bubbles but was also an accomplished composer-pianist, and he was undoubtedly added to the band at Louis's behest. Two-piano teams were very popular at the time; among the most notable were James P. Johnson and Fats Waller. Louis's conception was continuing to grow by leaps and bounds. He began to use space more dramatically, as he does at the beginning of his solo here. The figure played by the band during his trumpet bridge and again at the end later became the basis of "Song of the Vipers."

### **3. I Can't Believe That You're in love with Me (3:08)**

(Gaskill/McHugh)

## LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Same as “My Sweet,” but delete Buck Washington, piano.

New York, April 5, 1930.

mx. 403897-A. OKeh 41415.

Drummer Willie Lynch’s band had some very fine players—most notably pianist Turner, the McCord brothers, and guitarist Bernard Addison. Cass McCord’s tenor work during the opening chorus is unusually coherent and creative for the time, and illustrates why his peer Benny Carter held him in such high regard. Composers were eager for Louis to record their tunes. Not only did his records sell well, but on a musical level he pointed up a piece’s strengths and diminished its weaknesses. The shape of his solos is changing gradually, and becoming more sparse in notes and grand in import.

### **4. Blue Yodel No. 9 (2:38)**

(J. Rodgers)

JIMMIE RODGERS

Jimmie Rodgers, guitar, vocal; Louis

Armstrong, trumpet; Lil Armstrong, piano.

Hollywood, July 16, 1930.

mx. PBVE 54867 -2. Victor 23580.

This is a most unusual item in the Armstrong discography. Jimmie Rodgers (1897-1933), known during his lifetime as the Singing Brakeman and later as the Father of Country Music, began to record in 1927 and made more than 100 sides before his untimely death from tuberculosis. Much influenced by African-American music, especially the blues, Rodgers was famous for his Blue Yodels, of which he recorded a dozen. Shortly after Louis went to California to star at Frank Sebastian’s New Cotton Club, he was invited by Rodgers to record with him. For years, collectors argued about Louis’s presence on the disc; it was eventually confirmed by the man himself, but who could doubt that the trumpet work is Louis’s? He adapts himself well to Rodgers’s somewhat unpredictable bar lines and takes a fine solo; his fills are notable for his use of double-time phrases. The pianist’s identity was also disputed, but Rodgers scholars settled the matter when they found a note by the singer to himself reading: “Remember to thank Miss Lil.” It is in fact Lil Hardin Armstrong, in her last recording with Louis; she had come to Los Angeles in a final attempt at reconciliation. It has also escaped the ears of most discographers that Rodgers plays guitar on this side. “Blue Yodel No. 9” may have been obscure to most jazz fans, but country music aficionados were well aware that their hero had recorded with Louis. In 1970, not long after recording an album of country music in Nashville, Louis guested on a Johnny Cash television special; they joined forces in a recreation of this classic. “Blue Yodel No. 9” was the last blues accompaniment recorded by Louis—until he backed Velma Middleton in some items for his 1957 musical autobiography project. If you have listened well, you’ll note that the first vocal stanza here is lifted from Nolan Welsh’s “Bridwell Blues.”

### **5. I’m a Ding Dong Daddy (from Dumas) (3:08)**

(P. Baxter)

## LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Louis Armstrong, trumpet, vocals; Leon Elkins, trumpet, leader; Lawrence Brown, trombone; Leon Herriford, Willie Stark, alto saxophones; William Franz, tenor saxophone; L. Z. Cooper or Harvey Brooks, piano; Ceele Burke, banjo, steel guitar; Reggie Jones, tuba; Lionel Hampton, drums.

Los Angeles, July 21 1930.

mx. W 404403-A. OKeh 41442.

Having conquered Chicago and the East Coast, it was time for Louis to spread his gospel to environs west. This tune, written from the perspective of a boastful cowboy, inspired him to produce another one of his masterpieces. During the trumpet choruses that follow his vocal, Armstrong unleashes a slew of ideas that were to shape the development of jazz for generations to come. It's not that these concepts came out of this recording exclusively (although it was tremendously popular), but that many of his concepts of that period coalesced during this performance. Armstrong was also inspired in particular by two members of Leon Elkins's band, which had been engaged to back him at Frank Sebastian's Cotton Club in Culver City. Louis wrote about them in an unpublished manuscript in the collection of the Institute of Jazz Studies: "I discovered the greatness of those two youngsters [trombonist Lawrence Brown and drummer Lionel Hampton] the very first day I went to rehearsal—and Lionel was so young and vivacious (still is) on those drums—and he had taken to like me (personally) so well and I felt the same way about him. And he was one of the swingiest drummers I had ever seen and heard in my life ... Lionel used to get so enthused over my playing trumpet he would get 'soaked wet.' And beat a whole gang of drums, saying to me 'wa-wa-won' mo' Pops—meaning one more chorus. Especially on tunes like 'Tiger Rag' and 'Ding Dong Daddy'—and me enthused over him being enthused would play chorus after chorus. I went up to forty-one one night—well, I was much younger in those days myself."

### **6. 'I'm Confessin' (That I Love You) (3:22)**

(A. J. Neiburg/D. Daugherty/E. Reynolds)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS SEBASTIAN NEW COTTON CLUB ORCHESTRA

Same as "I'm a Ding Dong Daddy (from Dumas)."

Los Angeles, August 19, 1930.

mx. W 404405-A. OKeh 41448.

Not many artists can create something powerful enough to overcome a twangy Hawaiian guitar, but Louis could. The second chorus has an early recorded solo by Brown, who had already assimilated many of Armstrong's more sophisticated ideas. The vocal marks yet another stage in Louis's development, as he adds the parenthetical asides to the melody that became a major component of his style. There is also a relaxation, even in his more passionate episodes, that culminated in the almost abstract stylings to be heard on the early Decca recordings.

### **7. Memories of You (3:12)**

(E. Blake/A. Razaf)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS SEBASTIAN NEW COTTON CLUB ORCHESTRA

Louis Armstrong, trumpet, vocals; George Orendorff, Harold Scott, trumpets; Luther

Graven, trombone; Charlie Jones, clarinet, tenor saxophone; Les Hite, alto and baritone saxophones, leader; Marvin Johnson, alto saxophone; Henry Prince, piano; Bill Perkins, banjo, guitar; Joe Bailey, string bass, tuba; Lionel Hampton, drums, vibes.

Los Angeles, October 16, 1930.

mx.W 404412-D. Okeh 41463.

By this time, Elkins's band had been replaced at the Cotton Club by Les Hite, who had come to Los Angeles from Chicago a few years earlier with his friend Lionel Hampton. Hite was to stay there for the better part of the decade, and it's easy to hear why. He had taken over Paul Howard's band and turned it into a first-rate ensemble. This is the recording Hampton always cites as the first recorded vibraphone solo, and while it certainly wasn't that, it was the debut on that instrument of one of jazz's most inspired and durable statesmen. Eubie Blake and Noble Sissie's superior ballad provides ample material for Louis to create more magic with, including a repeated phrase in the last eight bars that became another hallmark of his.

### **8.Sweethearts on Parade (3:17)**

(C. Newman/Lombardo)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS SEBASTIAN NEW COTTON CLUB ORCHESTRA

Louis Armstrong, trumpet, vocals; George Orendorff, Harold Scott, trumpets; Luther Graven, trombone; Les Hite, alto and baritone saxophones, leader; Marvin Johnson, alto saxophone; Charlie Jones, clarinet, tenor saxophone; Henry Prince, piano; Bill Perkins, banjo, guitar; Joe Bailey, string bass; Lionel Hampton, drums.

Los Angeles, December 23, 1930.

mx. W 404417. Columbia 2688-D.

One of the aspects of Louis's genius that makes him a truly American figure was his integration of what he needed from various artistic traditions with his own African-American heritage. While opera obviously provided the general design for his grand, declamatory style, the more intimate, muted stylings heard in the opening chorus here recall the literary discipline's interior monologue. There is a direct link with jazz's future here: the famous "High Society" phrase was codified into the jazz vocabulary by Armstrong's inclusion of it in this solo, and 15 years later Charlie Parker used the same phrase in his classic "Ko-Ko" solo.

### **9.When It's Sleepy Time Down South (3:21)**

(L. Rene/O. Rene/C. Muse)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Louis Armstrong, trumpet, leader, vocals, speech; Zilner Randolph, trumpet; Preston Jackson, trombone; Lester Boone, clarinet, alto saxophone; George James, clarinet, soprano and alto saxophones; Albert Washington, clarinet, tenor saxophone; Charlie Alexander, piano, speech; Mike McKendrick, banjo, guitar; John Lindsay, string bass; Tubby Hall, drums.

Chicago, April 29, 1931.

mx. 404424-8. Okeh 41504.

This tune, which became Louis's theme, was written by a pair of songwriting brothers, Leon and Otis Rene. They recalled that as soon as Louis heard this one, he jumped up from the dinner table and exclaimed, "That's mine!" The dialogue at the beginning with pianist Charlie Alexander was particularly gratifying to Louis for its naturalness. The band is the first one put

together for him by trumpeter-arranger Zilner T. Randolph. Louis recalled: “This place used to be the old ‘My Cellar’ where Wingy Manone once held sway, and used to rock the joint. I made up a little band and took it into the Show Boat. Now there’s a band that really deserved a whole lot of credit that they didn’t get. They made some of my finest recordings with me.”

### **10. Blue Again (3:08)**

(Fields/McHugh)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Same as “When It’s Sleepy Time Down South,” but delete Louis Armstrong, Charlie Alexander, speeches.

Chicago, April 28, 1931.

mx.W 404425-A. OKeh 41498.

Louis’s instrumental consistency was matched only by his unflagging inspiration during these years, and in the introduction to “Blue Again” he revisits “West End Blues.” This may explain why this recording was a particular favorite of Gil Evans, who, along with his close friend Miles Davis, was a lifelong Armstrong devotee. Indeed, throughout his later years, Evans would frequently call on Dan Morgenstern to supply him tapes of what were at the time rare and unavailable records from this era of Louis’s career. The trumpet solo after the vocal here is another brilliant moment, as Louis effortlessly spins variations off of a single note.

### **11. When Your Lover Has Gone (3:06)**

(E. Swan)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Same as “When It’s Sleepy Time Down South.”

Chicago, April 29, 1931.

mx.W 404873-A. OKeh 41498.

This song’s rarely heard verse is set out in a deep and almost mournful fashion by Louis before he sings the more famous chorus. Randolph benefitted from the constant exposure to Armstrong as a member of his band, and wrote arrangements that provided Louis with exactly what was needed—no more, no less. During his closing trumpet solo, Louis takes the song’s characteristic opening notes and places them in a startlingly provocative rhythmic setting—try and sing along with him, and you’ll get a feeling for what he added to American music. The great pianist Art Tatum shared this approach with Louis—you can get away with any amount of musically sophisticated ideas if they are grounded in a constant reiteration of the melody.

### **12. Lazy River (3:04)**

(Carmichael/Arodin)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Same as “When It’s Sleepy Time Down South.”

Chicago, November 3, 1931.

mx. W 405058-4. OKeh 41541.

Hoagy Carmichael set the words to Sidney Arodin's melody and created a piece made to order for Louis. The scat chorus was one of his favorites among his own recordings and includes the wonderful aside "Oh, you dog! Boy, am I riffin' this evening, I hope somethin'!" The phrase that inspired that remark is reprised during his trumpet solo, which reveals some new techniques that are called glissandos but sound more like soaring.

### **13. Chinatown, My Chinatown (3:14)**

(Schwartz/ Jerome)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Same as "When It's Sleepy Time Down South."

Chicago, November 3, 1931.

mx.W 405059-A. OKeh 41534.

It seems only natural that a man who created his own musical language should also be a master musical "quoter." Louis alludes to a variety of pieces here, but it is what he makes of them that reveals his compositional mastery. This recording was a particular favorite among musicians in general and trumpeters specifically. It provides a matrix for performance style that was at once superficially exciting and full of deeper qualities. It was a live version of "Chinatown " that converted the young Roy Eldridge into an Armstrong man and changed his entire conception of soloing.

### **14. Stardust (3:34)**

(Parish/Carmichael)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Same as "When It's Sleepy Time Down South."

Chicago, November 3, 1931.

mx.W 405061-1. OKeh 41530.

### **15. Stardust (alternate take) (3:27)**

(Parish/Carmichael)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Same as "When It's Sleepy Time Down South."

Chicago, November 3, 1931.

mx.W 405061-4. OKeh 41530.

Many of the great popular composers of Louis's day frowned on the liberties jazz musicians took with their work-Jerome Kern and Richard Rodgers were among the most prominent in this regard. George Gershwin, Harold Arlen, and Hoagy Carmichael, on the other hand, were jazz fans and were thrilled when a great jazz musician came up with a new slant on one of their pieces. Indeed, Milt Gabler, proprietor of the legendary Commodore Music Shop in New York and subsequently a major producer at Decca Records, recalled that Hoagy looked for years for a copy of the rarer take of "Stardust" (the first heard here), in which Louis repeats "Oh memory" three times to great effect Much of Hoagy's musical vision was formed by early exposure to the work of both Armstrong and Bix Beiderbecke, and there are echoes aplenty of their particular



musical spheres throughout his work. In tracing the genealogy of this classic, some have suggested that part of its inspiration may well have come from Louis's "Potato Head Blues" solo. While there is a phrase in common (where the words are "dreaming of a song") between the two, it's stretching it quite a bit to suggest any definite relationship, since the notes in question outline a chord common to all music since Bach. Of far greater import is the surpassing artistry with which Armstrong imbues both his vocal and trumpet choruses. Throughout his career he prized his ability to play a melody, pure and simple, and make it swing. The freedom, then, with which he virtually recomposes Carmichael's melody and Parish's lyrics, was well-earned. These two versions provide the opportunity to compare Armstrong's power of invention from a unique advantage point—as Gunther Schuller has done so brilliantly in *The Swing Era* (1989).

### **16. Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea (2:58)**

(T. Koehler/H. Arlen)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Same as "When It's Sleepy Time Down South."

Chicago, January 25, 1932.

mx. W 152086-4. Columbia 2600-D.

At this time, Louis's playing embodied the past, present, and future of jazz; in the same way that he straddled eras, he also straddled musical measures. His phrasing during his muted chorus manages to anticipate where this song is headed, while at the same time looming almost lazily over where he is at any given moment. Both Lester Young and Charlie Parker also had this ability, and they are among the very few who picked up on this most abstract of Louis's powers. Credit for bringing to light this rare take goes to Dan Morgenstern, who discovered it back in the '60s and was responsible for its first issue, on the epic *Louis V.S.O.P.* album.

### **17. I've Got the World on a String (3:19)**

(H. Arlen /T. Koehler)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Louis Armstrong, trumpet, vocal; Ellis Whitlock, trumpet; Zilner Randolph, trumpet, arranger; Keg Johnson, trombone; Scoville Brown, George Oldham, clarinet, soprano and alto saxophone; Albert "Budd" Johnson, clarinet, tenor saxophone; Teddy Wilson, piano; Mike McKendrick, banjo, guitar; Bill Oldham, string bass; Yank Porter, drums.

Chicago, January 26, 1933.

mx. 74891-1. Victor 24245.

### **18. Basin Street Blues (3:28)**

(S. Williams)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Same as "I've Got the World on a String."

Chicago, January 27, 1933.

mx 75103-1. Victor 24351.

The series of recordings Louis made for Victor in 1933, with the new band Zilner Randolph had put together for him, are among the most astonishing of his career. In writing of Armstrong, especially early Armstrong, one has to reach so frequently and deeply into the well of superlatives that the words may lose their significance; nonetheless, Louis surpassed himself again on the sessions. Composer Harold Arlen (“World on a String”) wrote not only beautiful melodies but specific harmonic progressions that fit jazz musicians, and naturally Louis, like a glove. The same can be said of Spencer Williams’s “Basin Street Blues,” which had so inspired Louis back in 1928. His wordless vocal creates a truly international language that can be understood across all borders. In *Night Creature* (1981), Whitney Balliett wrote: “Both his singing and trumpet playing have a quality they had not had before and would not have again... Armstrong’s playing on [these recordings] is supernal. He wheels around in the higher register is like a gull, he uses sorrowing middle-register blue notes no other trumpeter his matched, he performs incredible rhythmic tricks, he plays with and exulted lyricism. He is majestic and simple and elegant. He invents a generation of trumpeters.”

### **19. On the Sunny Side of the Street (part 1) (2:55)**

(D. Fields/J. McHugh)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Louis Armstrong, trumpet, vocal; Jack Hamilton, Leslie Thompson, trumpet; Lionel Guimaraes, trombone; Pete DuConge, clarinet, alto saxophone; Henry Tyree, alto saxophone; Alfred Pratt, tenor saxophone; Herman Chittison, piano; Maceo Jefferson, guitar; German Arago, string bass; Oliver Tines, drums.

Paris, October 1934.

mx. 1481 1/2 wpp (part 1).

French Brunswick A 500491.

### **20. On the Sunny Side of the Street (part 2) (3:06)**

(D. Fields/J. McHugh)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Same as “On the Sunny Side of the Street” (part 1).

Paris, October 1934.

mx. 1482 1/2 wpp (pt 2).

French Brunswick A 500491.

### **21. Song of the Vipers (2:52)**

(L. Armstrong)

LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS ORCHESTRA

Same as “On the Sunny Side of the Street” (part 1).

Paris, October 1934.

mx. 1484 wpp.

French Brunswick A 500492.

“Street” had been around since 1930, and Louis’s version was first recorded three years after that—but not by Louis! Though he had performed it live with Chick Webb’s band countless

times, the band recorded it with trumpeter-vocalist Taft Jordan in Louis's place. We'll never know why Armstrong chose not to wax it himself until he got to Paris in 1934, but the wait was worth it. His band was made up of musicians from all over Europe and a few expatriates, including two New Orleanians: drummer Ollie Tines and reedman Peter DuConge. The tune comes at a slow medium tempo, and there is even more deliberation than usual in both the vocal and the trumpet solo. By 1935, Louis was using more concision in his playing, and these 1934 recordings contain significant indications of that change. "Vipers," with its odd form and majestically floating trumpeting, has long fascinated Armstrong fans. It serves as an appropriately open-ended conclusion to this vital collection of 20th century masterpieces.

All recordings are monaural.

Music commentary by Dan Morgenstern for  
Disc/Cassette One, selections 1-20;  
Disc/Cassette Two, selections 1-19;  
Disc/Cassette Three, selection 10;  
Disc/Cassette Four, selection 4.

Music commentary by Loren Schoenberg for  
Disc/Cassette Two, selection 20;  
Disc/Cassette Three, selections 1-9 & 11-20;  
Disc/Cassette Four, selections 1-3 & 5-21.

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## Portrait of the Artist: 1901- 1971

*What would we have done without Louis?*

– Benny Morton

*You can't play anything on the horn that Louis hasn't played... even modern.*

– Miles Davis

He never was billed as the king of jazz, but Louis Armstrong is the sole legitimate claimant to that musical throne. Without him, there would still be the music we call jazz, but how it might have developed is guesswork. He was the key creator of its mature vocabulary, in though nearly three-quarters of a century have passed since his influence first manifested itself, there is still not one musician partaking of the jazz tradition who does not, knowingly or unknowingly, make use of something created by Louis Armstrong.

For those who basked in the living presence of Armstrong, it is sobering to contemplate that we are at a point in the history of jazz where many among us know him only in his posthumous audio-visual incarnation, and many, alas, not even that well—unable instantly to recognize that voice, that trumpet sound, that face, that smile. Our age consumes even the most consummate art at such a pace that Armstrong’s universality is no longer a given. Yet the infinite reproducibility of his recorded works ensures his immortality, and future generations will surely come to know that jazz and Louis Armstrong are synonymous. The language he created is a marvelously flexible and expandable one that can be spoken in ever so many accents, and as long as it remains a living tongue, it will refer back to its creator.

So if you are someone who is hearing the music in this collection for the first time—and that is an enviable way to discover what took some of us years of searching for rare old records, a few at a time—it will be most surprising if there are not familiar strains in it. Miles Davis knew what he was talking about.

## Early Life

By all odds, Louis Armstrong, born out of wedlock on August 4, 1901 in New Orleans, raised in the city’s poorest quarter, out of school and working for a living before he’d finished fifth grade, was not slated to become world-famous. Yet against all odds he not only survived but thrived. Sent to reform school at age 12, he learned the fundamentals of music there and by the time he was 16 was able to supplement his income from work as a longshoreman or day laborer by playing his cornet on weekends in such rough joints as the Brick House, where, as he tells us in his autobiography, *Satchmo: My Life in New Orleans*, “Levee workers would congregate every Saturday night and trade with the gals who’d stroll up and down the floor and into the bar. Those guys would drink and fight one another like circle saws. Bottles would come flying over the bandstand like crazy, and there was lots of just plain common shooting and cutting. But somehow all that jive didn’t faze me at all, I was so happy to have some place to blow my horn.”

Indeed there was not much that ever fazed Louis Armstrong. He was blessed with a perfect physique for blowing that most demanding of instruments, the trumpet (actually a cornet for the first decade or so, but as we shall see, the difference is slight), and with a perfect disposition for making his way in the toughest of environments. “Little Louis,” the first nickname he was known by, could be tough when required but mostly made friends wherever he went. He credited his maternal grandmother—the one permanent adult presence in his early childhood years—with instilling in him the system of values that would carry him through his extraordinary life and enable him to confront with equanimity situations and experiences he could not have imagined in his youth. As he describes them, these fundamentals seem deceptively simple: “I didn’t go any further than fifth grade in school myself. But with my good sense and mother-wit, and knowing how to treat and respect the feelings of other people, that’s all I’ve needed through life.”

Armstrong's "good sense and mother-wit" covered a lot of ground. He also had, in abundance, what used to be called character—a currently unfashionable concept, since we are all supposed to be molded by environment. Of course, New Orleans was and is a very special place, and at that time it had a unique musical culture-in-the-making, something that gave young Louis inspiration. But even early on, his love of music and of life was combined with an extraordinary sense of responsibility, toward himself and what he very soon conceived of as his work. We speak of "playing" music, and young Louis certainly found exhilaration in playing his horn. But he also quickly noticed that musicians who didn't watch their intake of alcohol or take care of their health in other ways were less likely to play consistently well.

Armstrong was never a puritan, but he was a firm believer, early and late in life, in the separation between work and play. Thus he never table-hopped between sets, always warmed up before taking the stand, and reserved his pleasurable indulgences for after working hours. But, as we learn from his autobiography, he certainly did not practice deprivation of the senses. He writes of a musician on board the Mississippi riverboat that carried the band, led by Fate Marable, in which the young cornetist honed his playing and reading skills. This man nearly starved himself in order to invest all his earnings in cotton farming, but the boll weevils devoured his cotton and he became near-suicidal. "I'll never be rich," Armstrong concluded from observing this, "but I'll be a fat man." He did become rich, however (and sometimes fat as well), but never spent much on himself. His wives were well provided for, but he had no need for "a flock of suits," and perhaps because he never forgot the generous tips his early playing had inspired from his audience of whores, pimps, toughs, and hustlers, he gave away what he could afford as long as he lived, without the slightest ostentation.

Sharp powers of observation also led Armstrong to let others handle the business side of bandleading, including hiring and firing. This decision was often misunderstood, but he explains it perfectly well in *Satchmo*: "I never cared to become a bandleader; there was too much quarreling over petty money matters. I just wanted to play my horn as I am doing now [1954]. I have always noticed that the bandleader not only had to satisfy the crowd but that he also had to worry about the box office." Of course Armstrong did not leave all bandleading decisions, especially hiring, to his musical directors or managers; he simply did not want to take energy away from his playing in order to deal with the everyday banalities of music as a business. Making the music was a full-time job; he let others count the house.

Throughout his long career, Armstrong looked back on his New Orleans apprentice years with the greatest warmth and respect for his peers. First, of course, came King Oliver, who had treated him somewhat like a son, given him pointers, and groomed him to take his job with trombonist Kid Ory's band when Oliver left in 1919 for Chicago. Then came such other influential cornetists as Buddy Petit, Bunk Johnson, and Freddie Keppard, and a host of other musicians: clarinetists, drummers, bass players, guitarists. And most of all, there were the brass bands with which Armstrong loved to march, and to the strains of which he had "second-lined" (danced in the streets) as a child.

It was in New Orleans, too, that he'd heard the strains of European music, not only the marches, quadrilles, and waltzes so inventively transformed by the early jazz players, but also the operatic arias popular in the city that took such pride in its French Opera—the center of New Orleans social and cultural life. Operatic themes were also prominent on the programs of the concert bands that played on Sundays in the park band shells and featured cornetists as their star soloists, and on a lesser scale, these themes were also ground out on barrel organs.

And there was yet another, strictly modern, influence: the phonograph. Armstrong first acquired one after his marriage (at 17) to Daisy Parker, whom he'd first met when he was her customer. (The marriage didn't last long, for reasons well described in *Satchmo*.) In 1966 he recalled those early records: "Most of my records were the Original Dixieland Jazz Band—Larry Shields and his bunch. They were the first to record the music I played. I had Caruso records too, and Henry Burr, Galli-Curci, Tettrazini—they were all my favorites. Then there was the Irish tenor, McCormack—beautiful phrasing."

Many ingredients went into the making of Armstrong's musical mind. Early writers on jazz emphasized ragtime, spirituals, blues, marches, and dance music; few, if any, mentioned opera. More recently musicologists have been taking some notice of the parallels between Armstrong's formal solo structure (including such elements as opening and closing cadenzas) and operatic arias. As we shall see, Armstrong not only listened to such material, he later played it as well.

When he joined the Fate Marable orchestra aboard the steamer St. Paul, which cruised up the Mississippi as far as Davenport (where a young man with a horn, Bix Beiderbecke, first encountered Armstrong), the repertory included the latest popular hits. These were learned from sheet music, and Armstrong's reading knowledge was rudimentary. Marable thought so well of his playing that he hired the young man nonetheless, with the understanding that he would apply himself diligently. David Jones, who played saxophone and tenor horn in the band, took Little Louis under his wing and taught him to read (and write) music; the pupil caught on quickly. Also in the band were such stellar players as the brothers Dodds, clarinetist Johnny and drummer Baby; the bassist Pops Foster; and the guitarist Johnny St. Cyr, all of whom would become Armstrong associates in the next decade.

About this time Armstrong also showed his first gifts as a songwriter. He whipped up a little number called "Get Off Katie's Head," and sold it outright for \$50—a good deal of money in 1920—to society bandleader A. J. Piron and pianist Clarence Williams, partners in a publishing company. The song became a big hit under the more saleable title of "I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate," and thus Louis learned a lesson: on the business end of music, nobody could be trusted very far. Williams soon moved his organization to New York, where he prospered, though not always with the methods he had applied to Louis. Their future collaborations would be more equitable.

We know little about Armstrong's playing at this point, other than what musicians have related. Sidney Bechet, four years older, confirmed that Louis started to play around age ten, and

recalled that the kid stunned him a bit later by playing the famous “High Society” clarinet solo on cornet, something quite unheard of. This alone tells us that a very young Armstrong (Bechet left New Orleans in 1917) already had the technique to execute a passage that would have challenged the best cornetists of the day.

Reliance on recordings is at once jazz’s blessing and curse. Without this evidence, we would have no case on which to build a sensible history of the music, yet it is only circumstantial. The annals of oral jazz history are filled with players and bands that never encountered a recording device. In Armstrong’s case, we have been fairly lucky, though it’s a pity he didn’t get to record before March 31, 1923—some seven months after he came to Chicago at King Oliver’s beckoning to join the King’s Creole Jazz Band at the Lincoln Gardens. That move would forever remain in Armstrong’s mind as the key step in his career, the one that made him.

## First Recordings

The year 1923 was a watershed in jazz recording. Black bands and singers had been recording for some time: James Reese Europe’s was the first, in late 1913, that was remotely jazz related; Mamie Smith’s 1920 “Crazy Blues” started the business of “race records”—recordings specifically made for the African-American market, which turned out to be considerable. And of course the first “real” jazz records, by the white New Orleans Original Dixieland Jass Band [*sic*] were made in 1917 (and bought by Armstrong along with his first Victrola in 1918). Kid Ory, who’d moved to California, made records there in 1922, but they hardly circulated outside that state. But in 1923 King Oliver, Bessie Smith, and Jelly Roll Morton all made their first records—a major breakthrough.

Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band has gone down in history as a true New Orleans band, but it is more accurate to see it as a development of the parent style. Though its best records feature two cornets, trombone, and clarinet with a rhythm section of piano, banjo, and drums, there are frequent additions, such as C-melody or bass saxophone, and changes in personnel that do not quite measure up to Armstrong, Oliver, and the Dodds brothers. Be that as it may, the band’s recorded legacy became the sacred texts of the 1940s traditional jazz revival that coincided with the coming of bebop—which is another story.

From the testimony of musicians (and fans) who heard the 1922-24 Oliver band live, its most potent attraction was the unique two-cornet team. Oliver and Armstrong worked out fancy double-cornet breaks that seemed to be miraculously harmonized and synchro-nized, of which we get an echo on such records as the two versions of “Snake Rag.” Though they seemed purely spontaneous to the listeners, these breaks were in fact worked out in a most ingenious way: at a given point in the preceding collective band chorus, Oliver would play what he intended to use as his part in the break, and Armstrong, lightning-quick on the uptake, would memorize it and devise his own second part—which always fit to perfection. No doubt some of the most successful breaks became standardized in the band, just as Oliver’s famous three-chorus solo on “Dippermouth Blues” became what is known as a “set” solo, repeated not only by its author

but by others playing the piece—which, incidentally, was co-composed by the two cornetists. (Dippermouth was Armstrong’s first nickname among musicians, often shortened to “Dipper.”)

Armstrong played his first recorded solo at the first Oliver studio session, on “Chimes Blues.” It sticks close to the attractive melody but, in its sound, phrasing, and swing, stands out like a little gem that blends with its plainer setting. What isn’t discernible to the listener on these recordings is that Armstrong was so much more powerful in tone that he had to stand much farther back from the recording horn than Oliver. On “Tears,” a tune composed by Armstrong, his solo breaks are the strongest indicators of the future in his recorded work with Oliver.

In early 1924, Armstrong married the band’s pianist and best reader, Lillian Hardin. She was certain that Oliver had hired her man to keep him under wraps as a potential rival to his crown. She was aware how far superior Louis’s playing was to Oliver’s, something the modest young man would not admit without constant hectoring. Eventually she succeeded in cutting Armstrong loose from his mentor, not least, perhaps, because the King was caught holding out money from his men—the bane of many bands in the history of the music. In a charming recorded memoir, *Satchmo and Me*, Lil describes how, after she left the band, she would hear her husband whistling on his way home, inventing the most beautiful music. One night she asked him why he didn’t play like that, since he could whistle it. Reluctant at first, he eventually came around, of course. This story raises the issue of what kind of music the Oliver band played outside the recording studios.

Just as he had been nervous about joining Oliver and had shyly remained outside the Lincoln Gardens doors when first confronted with the impact of the band, thus Armstrong now felt somewhat intimidated by the New York swells on Henderson’s bandstand. He arrived during a rehearsal already in full swing, causing some amusement with his wardrobe, his thick-soled “policeman’s shoes”—by his own account sharp in Chicago, perhaps, but rube-like in Manhattan. Also by his own account, he committed a gaffe by blowing lustily through a passage marked *pp* (*pianissimo*, “very softly”), whereupon Henderson stopped the music and asked him what the mark meant. “Pound plenty,” the always inventive Armstrong answered, provoking laughter all around. There was no laughter, though, when the new kid took his first solos. Before long, New York jazz trumpeters were wearing policemen’s shoes.

Henderson’s 1924 music was far removed from the lilting New Orleans rhythms of King Oliver. Though the band contained some gifted players—and at least one who could play real blues, trombonist Charlie “Big” Green—its arrangements, designed for Roseland’s white dancing public, were rhythmically stiff, its players stilted in phrasing and only technically, not musically, adept in solo work—Green aside. As Armstrong begins to contribute to the band’s recordings, his solos—often no longer than eight, twelve, or sixteen bars, seldom a full chorus—stand out not like gems in a fitting setting as with Oliver, but like poetry in a sea of doggerel. Even so accomplished a saxophonist as Coleman Hawkins sounds like a stumblebum behind Armstrong. By the time Louis leaves the band 14 months later, the changes that have been wrought are substantive. A case in point is “Sugarfoot Stomp,” arranger-saxophonist Don Redman’s setting of Armstrong and Oliver’s erstwhile “Dippermouth Blues.” The rhythm is smoothed out to an



Armstrongian 4/4 feel; the sections phrase much more smoothly; and the centerpiece, Armstrong's three-chorus tribute to his ex-leader, is set in a fitting context. That solo (played, incidentally, with a straight mute where Oliver used a plunger mute) reveals the pupil's rhythmic and tonal superiority to the teacher.

There are other noteworthy Armstrong solos with Henderson, and the gradual improvement in Hawkins's playing is remarkable. (His subsequent rise as the first great soloist on his instrument is most certainly due to that year of proximity to Armstrong, combined with his own superb musical gifts.) But the finest recorded work by Armstrong during his first New York period can be found on a series of small-group recordings made outside the Henderson fold and in accompaniments to blues singers. The small groups were led by the New Orleanian entrepreneur Clarence Williams, then the leading producer of race records. (That term, by the way, is not pejorative; it was widely used by the black middle class. Nor did it represent a racist or segregationist attitude by record companies, then accustomed to catering to various ethnic groups with special catalog series, including all sorts of European, Eastern, and Asiatic musics and the native idiom called "old time" or [unflatteringly] "hillbilly.")

What was most special about the Clarence Williams Blue Five recordings was the teaming of Armstrong with the only other horn player then capable of giving him real competition: fellow New Orleanian Sidney Bechet, who had already been to Europe and there had added the soprano saxophone to his formidable clarinet. When these two, the only true jazz virtuosi of the day, get together on "Cake Walking Babies (from Home)," sparks fly. They engage in actual rivalry, each man soloing and presenting a sequence of slashing breaks. It's almost a draw, but what wins Louis the prize is his superior rhythm; even Bechet, a powerful swinger, cannot match the Armstrong juggling of almost subliminal time shifts. Like a great tightrope walker, Louis never makes a wrong move. In 1924, jazz here reaches a first plateau of maturity, balancing instrumental mastery and what would later become known as "soul." These two men had taught themselves how to tell a story in music.

Among the blues singers with whom Armstrong collaborated, Bessie Smith stands out. She presumably preferred Joe Smith (who rejoined Henderson's band shortly before Armstrong left), and from her point of view this may have made sense: Smith was a perfect foil, while Armstrong was her equal. Yet Louis's fills and counter-lines consistently enhance the singing, and as far as he was concerned, Bessie was the greatest. "Everything I did with her, I *like*," he said years later.

Of course Armstrong already considered himself a singer, and this was one of his reasons for leaving Henderson. The few half-spoken breaks at the end of one of the two issued takes of Henderson's "Everybody Loves My Baby" are Armstrong's first recorded vocal efforts, but he seldom sang with the band in person, and there were no other recorded vocals. This still rankled him years later. During my last visit to his home, in December 1970, he was in a feisty mood when the conversation brought up Henderson. We already knew some things. There was a weekly talent contest at the Roseland, and sometimes when the customers proved shy the bandsmen would offer some specialty numbers-comedy and so on. On one occasion Armstrong

sang and brought the house down, but Henderson did not respond; at most, he sometimes let Armstrong sing when the band performed for black audiences.

This we knew, but now Armstrong, who seldom uttered an unkind public word, let go. Henderson, he said, was a light-skinned, college-educated Negro who'd never accepted the darker Armstrong for what he was and could do. Louis didn't mind sharing trumpet solos with Howard Scott, who could play, but resented getting barely more solo space than the third member of the section, Elmer Chambers, a Henderson favorite, "with his nannygoat sound and ragtime beat" (here Armstrong gave a devastating vocal imitation of Chambers's corny phrasing and tone). Fletcher wouldn't let him sing, he said, because his gravel voice actually embarrassed the "dicty," high-toned bandleader—though he did let Armstrong do a Bert Williams imitation! It was clear that Armstrong had never forgiven Henderson, and it is also clear that he was right: for more than a year, Louis Armstrong sat in Fletcher Henderson's trumpet section at one of New York's most famous ballrooms, and apparently the only people aware of his presence were fellow musicians, black and white. It wasn't the last time Henderson missed the boat: ten years later, he turned down a chance to hire young Ella Fitzgerald.

It wasn't just the issue of singing that caused Armstrong to return to Chicago: "After a while, the cats in [the band] would drink so much, and they'd come out on the stand and goof, wouldn't keep time, didn't hit notes on time... I didn't appreciate that. I was always serious about my music."

His wife had a band at Chicago's Dreamland Ballroom, and when he returned she had prepared a banner that read 'The World's Greatest Trumpet Player.' Louis was embarrassed, but the banner stayed up and nobody questioned it. Soon he was doubling with Erskine Tate's big band at the prestigious Vendome Theater, the South Side's first-run movie palace, where the stage shows included semiclassical features for Armstrong, such as the Intermezzo from *Cavalleria Rusticana*, as well as jazz specialties.

We must remember that much popular music in the first two decades of this century was still rooted in "the classics." Paraphrases of operatic arias were a regular part of the concert band repertory, and not just in New Orleans. (When I asked trombonist Vic Dickenson, born in 1906, about early models for his instrument, he pulled out an ancient disc of "Celeste Aida" performed by Arthur Pryor, who'd been John Philip Sousa's star trombonist before starting his own concert band.) Ragtime was rooted in the classical piano tradition; its star performers had in their repertory the sort of operatic paraphrases that Liszt had specialized in.

Armstrong's work at the Vendome included performing special scores written for major silent pictures, and overtures such as "Poet and Peasant." He now perfected his sight-reading skills and became a full-fledged virtuoso of the trumpet, which he had taken up in place of the cornet. The trumpet's greater range and tonal brilliance suited his rapid development as an executant.

Most significantly for the future of jazz, Armstrong now began to make records as leader of his own group, the Hot Five. This was strictly a studio combination; it performed in public only once (at a benefit concert) during its two-year existence. It also reflected the record company's needs: the main market for race records was the South—via mail order—and the public there was still fond of the New Orleans ensemble style. Armstrong was the youngest member of his own band, which otherwise included Lil (two years his senior) on piano; his former boss, Kid Ory, on trombone; and two riverboat and Oliver bandmates, Johnny Dodds, clarinet, and Johnny St. Cyr, banjo. The absence of bass and drums was not so much an artistic or economic decision as a technical one: the OKeh company was still recording acoustically in late 1925 in Chicago, and these two instruments could not be reproduced well. In fact, by May 1927 the Hot Five had become the Hot Seven, with drummer Baby Dodds and a tuba player added for the now electrical recordings.

Traditional-minded jazz commentators used to argue that the Armstrong groups de-destroyed the wonderful collective New Orleans style, but this manner of ensemble play-ing was on its way out anyway, what with ever-larger bands, the rise of the saxophone, the changing jazz repertory, and other factors. In fact, the Hot Five/Seven more likely helped to keep the parent style alive for a while, though clearly Armstrong's was increasingly the dominant musical voice. Even though this Hot Five and Seven music did not represent what he was playing day by day (or rather, by night), it gave him his first opportunity to play extended solo passages regularly on records, and to display fully his powerful lead work. For most musicians (as distinct from critics, who came to jazz about a decade later) the work of the other players was simply something to sit through, but we should not be as hard on Ory, Dodds, et al. as critic Andre Hodeir, who barely allows them standing as professionals. Dodds had a beautiful clarinet sound and deep feeling for the blues, and Ory was a past master of the New Orleans "tailgate" ensemble style for his instrument; in fact, he had probably played a major part in shaping its role. Yet only Armstrong's work on these records remains undated—the difference between genius and mere talent.

The more room Armstrong gave himself on these records, the better were the results, and when we arrive at such masterpieces as "Big Butter and Egg Man," "Potato Head Blues," and "Hotter Than That," we are fully in the presence of the revolutionary young Armstrong. With solos such as these, he created a vocabulary of phrases that would echo in the music for decades, even unto this day, in the work not only of such older players as Ruby Braff (born 1927) but also that of Wynton Marsalis and other young neo-traditionalists (or post-modernists—whatever your favorite nomenclature). He now proceeds with utter fearlessness and freedom, crossing bar lines; extending the working range of the horn; mastering breaks, stop-time, and other rhythmic devices; and creating lovely melodies and phrases that linger in the mind and stir the emotions. Hundreds upon hundreds of musicians, not only in America but wherever records were sold (it was possible to special-order race records in white stores, but clever store owners began to stock whatever was in demand, and OKeh's overseas affiliates soon ordered the Armstrong masters for domestic pressing), studied these solos note by note—to memorize if not actually to play, for the technical demands, not to mention the rhythmic and harmonic ones, were well beyond the capacity of most musicians of the day.

Armstrong's phraseology began to enter the mainstream of the music; it would remain a cornerstone at least until the advent of bebop—and a close analysis of Charlie Parker's vocabulary clearly shows that he, too, was steeped in Armstrong. In a 1986 *Down Beat* Blindfold Test, in which records are played for musicians without identifying them, veteran tenorist Bud Freeman (born 1906) commented about the Jimmie Lunceford band's 1942 recording of "Blues in the Night" as follows: "It was all Louis. That arrangement was all taken from Louis Armstrong phrases. Louis created every bar in that thing. Whoever it was really idolized Louis, even to the singing." This would hold true, more or less, for more than 50 percent of the records made in that or any other year between 1930 and 1945. In this instance, it's interesting to note that the arranger was Sy Oliver, an Armstrong-inspired trumpeter and singer who in the 1950s was musical director for many Armstrong studio sessions. The Lunceford singer-instrumentalists included Trummy Young, a member of Armstrong's All Stars for 12 years in the '50s and '60s.

Armstrong also sang on the Hot Five/Seven discs, at first in a pre-microphone style that sounds bucolic compared with his later work, but already reflects his playing. It is probably more accurate to say that Armstrong sings like he plays than vice versa, there being so many trumpet-like aspects to the voice, among them, as English critic Eric Thacker said, "using dentals, labials, and gutturals as he would use tonguing in a cornet solo, and enlivening the vowel colors with abrasive flutterings of the throat." Be that as it may, Armstrong's singing had a profound effect on his listeners. On the 1926 "Heebie Jeebies," he claimed that he dropped the lyric sheet while recording and substituted "scatting" for the words; chances are that this was a bit of deliberate legend-making—and there are earlier examples of scat. Yet it was this record that made scatting catch on, with among others the Paul Whiteman Rhythm Boys (young Bing Crosby; Al Rinker, the brother of singer Mildred Bailey; and Harry Barris).

The repertory of the Hot Five/Seven consisted, in the main, of original compositions by the members. Armstrong himself, as we have seen, was showing gifts as a composer, and Lil was no slouch.

The old Hot Five/Seven bowed out with a December 1927 date. A new Hot Five (really Seven), sometimes known as the Savoy Ballroom Five, made its debut the following June. It included members of the band with which Armstrong was now working at Chicago's Savoy Ballroom, led by Carroll Dickerson, and was a much more "modern" unit than its predecessor. Its second star was pianist Earl Hines, a key representative of a new breed of players to whom the Armstrong vocabulary was second nature. Also on hand was Armstrong's New Orleans buddy, drummer Zutty Singleton, perhaps the best player on his instrument in 1928. The trombonist and clarinetist were merely competent, lacking the personality of Ory or Johnny Dodds, and the banjoist, Maney Carr (whose name has been misspelled *Cara* since time immemorial), was serviceable. The group was sometimes augmented by Don Redman, then the musical director of McKinney's Cotton Pickers, who provided excellent arrangements.

The most famous by far of the “new” Hot Five sides is “West End Blues,” a jazz landmark largely because of Armstrong’s dazzling introductory cadenza. This masterful creation, with its “spectacular cascading phrases” (Gunther Schuller), has often been imitated but never successfully; its rhythmic pitfalls are not really negotiable, and reading won’t help the player much. Cootie Williams came closest, but he simplified matters cleverly. The first and most disastrous attempt came not long after the appearance of the original, when Louis Metcalfe, recording with a band under King Oliver’s leadership, made a travesty of his attempt to copy Armstrong. (Poor Oliver was credited with this mishap as recently as 1991, on a CD reissue.)

Other works by this band come close, including a lovely “Basin Street Blues” with another wordless vocal, backed by a glee club of band members, and a concluding solo that is a dramatic example of the operatic influence on Armstrong—as is the “West End Blues” cadenza. Musicologist Joshua Barrett, who has made a study of Armstrong’s relationship to opera, has traced that cadenza’s genealogy, making use of Lewis Porter’s discovery of it in a 1924 germ-cell recording, in a break filling in behind singer Margaret Johnson on “Changeable Daddy of Mine.” What such discoveries imply is that, far from being as gloriously spontaneous as it sounds, Armstrong’s “West End Blues” opening was the result of years of refining an idea that is spectacular even in its embryonic form. (This is yet another demonstration of the need for stringent reconsideration of the concept of jazz improvisation—always nebulous at best.)

The Hot Five/Seven/Savoy Ballroom Five stage of Armstrong’s recordings ends with further masterpieces, among them “Beau Koo Jack,” with a concluding Armstrong invention that quickly found its way to transcription for whole trumpet sections. It was surpassed, however, by a piece performed by Armstrong and Hines alone, “Weather Bird.” The piece comes from the Oliver Creole Jazz Band canon; that band’s recorded version on some labels credits Armstrong and Oliver, but the earlier Library of Congress deposit (in his own hand) credits Armstrong alone. The duet is among the all-time masterpieces of recorded jazz, stunning in its almost symbiotic teamwork and joint virtuosity. In his seminal book *Early Jazz*, Gunther Schuller devotes nearly three pages of analysis to the piece, in the course of which he states that “the cohesiveness of this performance is at a level we usually attribute to consciously premeditated composition. When we realize that it is the result of spontaneous creation born of the passing moment, we can only marvel at the musicianship displayed.” But years of listening have convinced me that this is by no means an unpremeditated “first” spontaneously created in the studio. The piece is in three strains, and there is no way Hines could have familiarized himself with its structure on the spot. A far more likely scenario is that the two by then inseparable friends, who by their own testimony often got together to play without any others being involved, had fooled around with this piece until they felt ready to record it. They certainly hit upon fresh ways of playing in the studio, but there can be little doubt that they knew where they were going—which does, not in the least detract from the magnificence of their work.

The Hot Five era extended from November 12, 1925 to December 12, 1928—three years, within which this specific recording activity adds up to about three weeks of real time. During the same period Armstrong also recorded with various singers, mostly of the blues but also of popular songs; twice with other leaders; and on a mere three occasions with actual working

bands. These produced the only recordings made by him with Erskine Tate; a 1927 session by Louis Armstrong and His Stompers, the band he led at the Sunset Café, from which just one side, Jelly Roll Morton's "Chicago Breakdown," survived, not issued until 1942; and two 1928 sides by Carroll Dickerson's band from the Savoy.

These few glimpses suffice to show us that the music of the Hot Five was a far cry from what Louis was playing outside the studio. All three big bands have a typical 1920s approach to orchestral jazz, with the earliest (Tate) being the most explosive. In any event, this handful of items can do no more than dimly illuminate what Armstrong himself and other contemporaries have told us. For instance, pianist Art Hodes spoke of hearing Armstrong improvise at the Sunset for half an hour on "Poor Little Rich Girl," a sophisticated Noel Coward tune. Nothing remotely like that survives for us to hear, but the statement tells us that the switch from New Orleans-type originals, so-called stomps and blues, to popular songs of the day (the jazz critics' *bêtes noires*, at least until Broadway composers gained cultural stature) took place much earlier in his working repertory than in his recorded repertory. In fact, such late Hot (or Savoy Ballroom) Five pieces as "Squeeze Me," "Save It Pretty Mama," and "Basin Street Blues," all by black songwriters, already presage this change, but since they were recorded with small groups they have escaped critical censure.

The breakthrough recording for Armstrong took place during a brief visit to New York in March 1929. He joined the Luis Russell band on a Jimmy McHugh—Dorothy Fields song, "I Can't Give You Anything but Love," performing it at a very slow tempo. He opens with a muted trumpet solo (Armstrong seldom used a mute, and when he did, from 1926 on it was never anything but a straight mute, the kind that least alters the tone of the open trumpet) backed by chords from the band, then sings a passionate vocal and, after a trombone break, constructs an aria-like open horn solo, ending with a climb to the top. Schuller doesn't even discuss this record, other than to dismiss it as "insipid"; nevertheless, it represented something rare in jazz recording: letting a black artist sing a standard pop song. Only Ethel Waters, the much lesser Lillie Delk Christian, and the McKinney's Cotton Pickers' popular vocalist George Thomas had done so before, with far less of an "African retention" than Armstrong's voice displayed. On that very morning, he had made another kind of breakthrough, recording an impromptu blues, "Knockin' a Jug," with a racially integrated group.

A few months later Armstrong went to New York to stay. He had been invited by Tommy Rockwell, Okeh producer and booking agent, to come alone to try out for a new Vincent Youmans musical, *Great Day*, but couldn't bear to leave his band behind (knowing that without him they'd soon fall apart). The bandsmen ventured east in a fleet of more-or-less dilapidated cars and were surprised to find, on their stopovers, that Armstrong had become a celebrity through his records. Rockwell was aghast that the band had come along but found them a job at Harlem's Connie's Inn—a good move, since *Great Day* (which in any case became a costly flop) had no place for Armstrong.

The nightspot was the chief rival of the Cotton Club and, like it, a venue for elaborately staged, specially written and choreographed floor shows featuring singers, dancers, and specialty acts.

As luck would have it, the 1929 edition of Connie's revue, *Hot Chocolates*, was so good (with a score by Fats Waller and Andy Razaf) that it moved to Broadway, where it earned rave reviews and a respectable run.

Initially, Armstrong was in the pit band, standing up only during the *entr'acte* playing and singing the show's prime hit, "Ain't Misbehavin'," already introduced by the romantic male lead. Soon Louis had to be moved up onstage and was also given a spot in a trio billed as "One Thousand Pounds of Rhythm," which included Waller and the show's female lead singer, Edith Wilson. After each night's show, Louis taxied uptown to lead his band (still the Dickerson crew from Chicago) at Connie's, where it was subbing for the regulars now ensconced in the Broadway pit. He was in such demand that for a while he also did a spot in the late show at the Lafayette Theater next door to Connie's. "Had to get my sleep coming through the park in a cab," he recalled years later. "I was only 29 years old [actually 28]. Didn't exactly feel I had the world at my feet, but it was very nice that everyone was picking up on the things I was doing, and all the bandleaders wanted me. Pretty soon I had to get in front of my own band. Nothing else I could do."

"Ain't Misbehavin'" was Armstrong's first real hit record, backed with another song from *Hot Chocolates*, "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue." In the wake of a 1993 biography of lyricist Andy Razaf, it needs to be reiterated that it was Armstrong who turned this song (which in the show functioned as a dark-skinned lady's lament about being a loser in the game of love, as compared to lighter rivals) into what has long been regarded as a protest song. (Indeed, as such, it [and Armstrong] are made emblematic of the hero's plight in Ralph Ellison's masterful novel *Invisible Man*.) By stripping it of the verse and singing it in a male voice, and with such dignity and passion as to gloss over some of the lyrics' less fortunate turns of phrase and turn them into poetry, Armstrong forever transformed the song, adding some majestic opening and closing trumpet passages for good measure.

The success of this record established the pattern for Armstrong's recordings through the next two decades. Henceforth, his material would be popular songs, often of high quality and sometimes written specifically for him, with a smattering of novelties. And he would perform them with his own big bands, whose task was very specific: to back the leader's playing and singing. Record buyers wanted Armstrong, and most of his bands served competently in their self-effacing role.

What is significant is the repertory: Armstrong was the one who turned many Tin Pan Alley tunes into jazz evergreens. He had a special relationship with Hoagy Carmichael, who shares the vocal on the first recording of his "Rockin' Chair" with Louis, in 1929. In 1931 Armstrong found inspiration in Carmichael's masterpiece, "Stardust," cut a definitive version of "Georgia on My Mind" (Ray Charles wasn't the first African-American to put his distinctive imprint on this song), and made "Lazy River" (a collaboration between Carmichael and New Orleans clarinetist Sidney Arodin) his own for keeps—this piece remained in his repertory to the end.

Armstrong also showed a special affinity for songs by Jimmy McHugh and Dorothy Fields, starting with "I Can't Give You Anything but Love." Both "Exactly Like You" and "I Can't Believe That You're in Love With Me" were three years old when Louis recorded them in 1930; they've been jazz standards ever since. "On the Sunny Side of the Street" entered the working Armstrong repertory before he first recorded it in Paris in late 1934; one of his sincerest imitators, trumpeter-singer Taft Jordan, beat him to it by almost a year. (From 1929 on, record companies tried to groom rivals to Okeh's Armstrong: Brunswick had the fleet and inventive Jabbo Smith, Vocalion the lesser-known Ruben Reeves, and Victor the brilliant New Orleanian Henry "Red" Allen. Not one proved viable competition, creatively or commercially, though Allen showed a remarkable grasp of Armstrong's musical essence.)

As early as 1930, Armstrong pioneered in what the record industry would later call "crossovers." At the special request of Jimmie Rodgers, accurately described as the father of country music, Louis and Lil joined him in recording "Blue Yodel No. 9," incidentally the last in a string of brilliant blues accompaniments by Armstrong that had begun with Ma Rainey in 1923. Louis also crossed over to Hawaiian music, recording (with three violins added to the Luis Russell band) "Song of the Islands." And with his 1930 version of "The Peanut Vendor," a Cuban specialty, Louis can be said to have initiated Latin jazz.

This last was recorded in Los Angeles, where Armstrong was appearing at Frank Sebastian's New Cotton Club, a nightclub catering to the movie colony. During his eight-month stay, the young drummer in both bands that Armstrong successively fronted was Lionel Hampton, who credits the trumpeter with getting him started on the vibraphone. He plays it on the memorable recording of Eubie Blake and Andy Razaf's "Memories of You," yet another song made a jazz classic by Armstrong. Other key recordings from this California sojourn include "You're Driving Me Crazy," which directly inspired arranger Eddie Durham's "Moten Swing" based on the chords of the Walter Donaldson song and considered the anthem of Kansas City jazz; "Sweethearts on Parade," which constitutes a kind of summation of Armstrong's vocal and instrumental artistry at this point in his career; and "I'm a Ding Dong Daddy (from Dumas)," with its remarkable stop-time breaks, including one that contains the riff later expanded into the bebop classic "Salt Peanuts."

In Chicago in early 1931, Armstrong and his new manager Johnny Collins formed the first Armstrong big band proper—not a pre-existing unit fronted by the trumpeter but a specially assembled crew. It contained several New Orleanians and was later described by its leader as the happiest band he ever led. With it, he made his first trip to his hometown in nine years. The tour of the South that culminated in that visit was unplanned, a spontaneous reaction to an unwelcome backstage visit by a notorious New York gangster, who brought Louis a message from his former employers at Connie's Inn, that he was to return there promptly. Collins's response was to take Louis and the band immediately to points south.

In New Orleans, Louis received a triumphant welcome, including a parade (not an honor commonly accorded blacks in 1931); had a cigar (the Louis Armstrong Special) and a baseball team (Armstrong's Secret 9) named for him; and, in a typically quick response, became the first



performer of his race to do his own announcing on radio when a bigoted announcer refused to introduce him on opening night. The man was fired, but Louis had been so effective that he continued to fill the role for the duration of the long engagement.

Before and after this historic visit, which included a sentimental journey to the Waif's Home (his old reform school), Armstrong recorded some of his biggest hits to date with this "happy" band. Among them: his theme song from then on, "When It's Sleepy Time Down South," and the humorous novelty "You Rascal You," which, though recorded by many others, became permanently identified with Armstrong.

There was also room for trumpet specialties like "Chinatown, My Chinatown," with its "battle between the trumpet and the saxophones"—no other instrumental virtuoso created such miniature skits within which to frame his flights—and "New Tiger Rag," in which he announces that it will take eight choruses to catch the big cat. (This was nothing compared to Armstrong's live performances of the venerable "Tiger" during the period, as a climax to which he would offer as many as 200 high Cs, topped by some Fs. This kind of display of course gave rise to grumblings from the budding esthetes of jazz, and Armstrong himself later disowned such acrobatics, saying he was just trying to impress his fellow musicians. Which he certainly did.)

This period also finds Armstrong's first recorded encounters with Gershwin ("I Got Rhythm," the anthem of jazz to be) and Arlen ("Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea," extant in two takes, of which the slower contains a muted trumpet passage that, in its mastery of melodic double time, presages Charlie Parker). And in his vocal on "When Your Lover Has Gone," Louis sets the stage for the kind of impassioned crooning sometimes identified with singers of Italian-American background. There were many strings to Armstrong's bow.

It should not be forgotten that the years 1931-32 were the absolute nadir for the record business in the U.S. The fact that Armstrong did so much work in the studios at this lean time speaks volumes for his popularity, growing apace among blacks and whites. During this period he also made his first appearances in films, including a surrealistic Max Fleischer cartoon that mixes animation and photography as Armstrong's disembodied head, singing "You Rascal You," chases a creature through the jungle, and a comedy short in which he appears dressed in a leopard skin. The social implications of these films may be debatable, but the music is outstanding.

In July 1932 Armstrong made his first transatlantic foray. Of course there had been many jazz-related American performers in Europe already, starting in 1919 with the white Original Dixieland Jazz Band and the black Southern Syncopated Orchestra, led by Will Marion Cook and featuring young Sidney Bechet (who would spend much of the 1920s touring all over Europe with various bands, including his own). But Armstrong was the first jazz artist to appear as an individual star, not a bandleader or member. He did not bring his own accompanists but was featured first with a band of black musicians of various nationalities (including some Americans) assembled for him in Paris, and then, in another Armstrong first, at the helm of a group made up of some of Britain's best white jazzmen.

Reception was mixed: enthusiasm from musicians and jazz fans (there was a substantial number of the latter by 1932, and 38 Armstrong performances were available on record in England by that date), and puzzlement and sometimes outrage (primarily among older attendees at the London Palladium). Among the more amusing sidelights was a delegation of musicians asking to examine Armstrong's trumpet to ascertain that it, and his mouthpiece, had not been doctored in some odd fashion. His virtuosity was still something not quite credible.

If nothing else, this first three-month European visit made it clear to Armstrong that there were people of means who took his music quite seriously, and that (though London and the British hinterlands of 1932 were far from free of prejudice) there were places where racism was not a constant factor. He would return soon, and for a considerably longer stay. A non-playing visit to Paris topped off the first trip abroad.

Back home, Armstrong toured with a new *Hot Chocolates*—far from the first in quality—accompanied by the Chick Webb band, with which he recorded in December. By then he was increasingly plagued by lip problems (he used the pressure system, and the abundance of high notes was taking its toll), but the date produced fine results. He was under a new contract with Victor, then the most prestigious record label, and the famed Camden studios captured his sound in all its awesome beauty better than any previous recording environment had.

By January 1933 a new band had been assembled in Chicago, in some ways the best of the Armstrong big bands yet. The brilliant young pianist was Teddy Wilson (who made his recording debut with Armstrong), and the Johnson brothers—Keg on trombone, Budd on tenor sax—were first-rate soloists. Recording sessions on three consecutive days were taxing on the embouchure, yet Armstrong is in brilliant form on such wonderful Arlen tunes as “I’ve Got the World on a String” and “I Gotta Right to Sing the Blues” and creates a new and very special “Basin Street Blues.”

When a projected summer engagement for the band fell through, Armstrong told his manager, Johnny Collins, that he wanted to return to Europe. He opened in London in August 1933 at the helm of a band that included several of the members of the previous year's Paris-based group. He soon rid himself of the unsavory Collins, who, after being dismissed, left with Louis's passport (quickly replaced, of course) and dire threats that the trumpeter would never work in the U.S. again. Under new management (British bandleader and entrepreneur Jack Hylton) Armstrong toured Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Holland, and Belgium. By a stroke of luck, the Danes were making a musical film at the time of his visit and included a set of three tunes with him and his band in a straight-forward performance on the concert stage, without gimmicks. The sequence also benefits from the fact that it was filmed “live,” not with the customary synchronized sound. And from Sweden, there survives a partial transcription of a concert broadcast. Since Armstrong would not record in a studio again until a full year later, these performances are doubly important.

Armstrong's reception in Copenhagen, incidentally, was the most enthusiastic he had yet received. A crowd estimated by the unhyperbolic Danes at some 10,000 awaited his arrival

inside and outside the train station; there was a band, a sea of flowers, and a motorcade. Not until after World War II would there be anything comparable in the way of a public demonstration of affection for Armstrong, and he was very moved—at first he thought all those people were waiting for someone else.

After more performances in England, Armstrong, accompanied on this trip (as on the 1932 one) by Alpha Smith, whom he would eventually marry, took what was to be the longest vacation of his life, from April to October 1934. In an interview that January, he had made the point that he'd had very little time off during the past ten years. He rented an apartment in Paris, and he and Alpha did much "hanging out" with musicians: fellow Americans and locals, such as gypsy guitarist Django Reinhardt, who idolized Louis. (It was an Armstrong record, "Dallas Blues," that first led Django to jazz.)

With yet another manager-N. J. Canetti, who had ties to the record industry—Louis reorganized a band, again with some of the same players who'd been with him before. This time there were records, made in Paris prior to a series of Salle Pleyel concerts in early November. Though there'd been all sorts of rumors about lip problems, Louis sounds just fine on these discs, and at his first Paris concert he had to take so many curtain calls that he'd changed into his bathrobe by the time of the last one. There were further concerts in Belgium, Switzerland, and Italy, but then Armstrong quarrelled with Canetti and abruptly decided to return home, arriving in New York in late January 1935. He'd planned to front Chick Webb's band again, but Johnny Collins threw a wrench into the contract; to make matters worse, Lil sued for sizeable back maintenance. The old lip trouble was the official excuse for the ensuing six months of inactivity, but trouble with Collins (and perhaps with other gangsters from the past) was certainly a factor. At this low ebb in his career, Armstrong contacted an old acquaintance from the Sunset Cafe days, Joe Glaser. There was a tie between Glaser and Tommy Rockwell, who had played a central role (if from the sidelines) in Louis's 1931 Chicago gangster trouble and had been an executive of O'keh Records during Louis's tenure there. Glaser proved the right man at the right time: he solved the gangster problem.

The relationship with Glaser was unique. Nothing was signed; a handshake sufficed. Glaser took a desk in the Rockwell-O'Keefe booking agency's office, at first with Armstrong as his sole client. In June, Louis was back in front of a band, again organized in Chicago, with Zilner Randolph (of the '33 band) as musical director. With this group, said by some to be an excellent one, he returned to New Orleans for another welcoming parade and then proceeded to break attendance and salary records at Harlem's new Apollo Theater. A long-term booking at Connie's Inn (again, shades of the 1931 gangster trouble) was obtained, but Louis's Chicago musicians could not get the union's approval to play a regular New York club engagement. Thus it was arranged for Louis to front, once again, the Luis Russell band. This time the collaboration stuck (until late 1942); it also inaugurated a contract with the newly formed Decca Records.

This began auspiciously with yet another Jimmy McHugh song, "I'm in the Mood for Love," and an interpretation of "You Are My Lucky Star" that contained a startling trumpet solo which introduced the "new" Louis Armstrong of the swing era. This was a much more controlled and

sober Armstrong than the one heard prior to the second European stay, or even the one from just the year before, captured in Paris—though the two-part 1934 “On the Sunny Side of the Street” hints at the new sobriety. Along with more measured cadences came an almost majestic phraseology, utterly relaxed and rhythmically secure. And the tone, burnished and mellow, was also imbued with new maturity. All this is not to say that there were no further flights of high-note fancy or startling ideas: there was the double-timing on “Lucky Star,” for instance, and that solo’s oblique approach to harmony.

The singing, too, was new, in that Armstrong now took greater care to convey the lyrics clearly. To be sure, he still throws in the mamas and the hummed or scatted asides and fills of yore. But there is a new clarity of diction—without, however, a trace of affected “correctness.” This is Louis’s own voice, as always the most natural medium, but with a new discipline.

The Decca repertory was in the main oriented toward the desires of song publishers, but because Louis was now entering a new phase of popularity he could be a bit more choosy than other artists, black or white. He also began to write songs again, as he had in the ‘20s. “Old Man Mose” was a hit for him and for Eddie Duchin; “If We Never Meet Again” was a fetching ballad; the 1936 “Swing That Music” was launched to coincide with the publication of his first book, the rather heavily ghostwritten but not uninformative “autobiography” of the same title. Later came “Heartful of Rhythm,” “What Is This Thing Called Swing?” and several others.

Hoagy Carmichael weighed in again with special material. One of his best was the rustic “Eventide,” but the most spectacular was “Jubilee,” written for the 1937 film *Every Day’s a Holiday*, a Mae West vehicle in which Armstrong appeared. The previous year had seen his first major feature film, *Pennies from Heaven*, produced by and starring Bing Crosby. Louis’s showstopper, “The Skeleton in the Closet,” found him doing in an old minstrel stereotype, the black scared of ghosts: Louis smites the skeleton with his trumpet. A cameo in another Crosby feature, *Dr. Rhythm*, wound up on the cutting room floor, while his long sequence with a lightly blacked-up Martha Raye in *Artists and Models* was removed by many southern exhibitors. There was no controversy about Louis in *Going Places*, an amiable comedy in which Ronald Reagan had the junior male lead (Dick Powell was the star). Here Louis launched a perennial, “Jeepers Creepers,” sung by him to a horse, which was apparently acceptable to the South. The song was nominated for an Academy Award.

An unusual collaboration was that between Louis (music) and Ben Hecht (words) on the song “Red Cap,” a celebration of the members of A. Philip Randolph’s powerful Pullman porters’ union. The now largely forgotten Hecht was a man of many parts: novelist, play-wright, screenwriter, director, muckraking journalist, and political activist. We don’t know how he and Louis got together, but it’s sort of nice that they did. (The tune is charming.)

Periodically, Louis also revisited some of his landmark recordings. Best of these is the 1938 “Struttin’ with Some Barbecue,” with an excellent arrangement (by Chappie Willet) and a trumpet solo that first states the melody with matchless accents, then transforms it into something new and startling, and concludes with a cadenza in which fingering and tonguing

combine uniquely. (It was through musicians that I was made aware of this and other Armstrong masterpieces not mentioned in the jazz literature. In a late 1950s *Down Beat* panel on Armstrong, two trumpeters as stylistically and esthetically polarized as Bobby Hackett and Maynard Ferguson both cited the Decca “Barbecue” as a special favorite.)

Decca experimented with bringing together in the studios various contract artists—a kind of precursor of the LP-era sampler. Sometimes the results were excellent, as with Louis and the Mills Brothers, in several encounters; their “Darling Nellie Gray” is a little masterpiece. At other times, things got a bit far-fetched, as when Louis joined Andy Iona and His Islanders “On a Little Bamboo Bridge.” He was also teamed, as a singer only, with the Lynn Murray Mixed Choir in some spirituals. A special moment occurs on “Going to Shout All Over God’s Heaven” when the chorus (white) repeatedly sings “hebben” and Louis responds each time with a clearly articulated “heaven.”

One of Louis’s Decca milestones was another spiritual, “When the Saints Go Marching In.” The 1938 record was a hit, yet it is seldom noted that this tune’s entry into the jazz repertory dates from that release. Had he been in a position to copyright the piece, Louis would have died even richer than he did. To some Armstrong fans, his 1941 remakes of “Sleepy Time Down South” (without vocal) and “You Rascal You” are superior to the originals, not least due to the presence of the great Big Sid Catlett on drums and the excellence of the Russell band at that time. Another gem was the 1939 all-instrumental “Wolverine Blues,” with its climactic Armstrong-Catlett collaboration.

## Clearing the Way

During the 1930s Armstrong succeeded in desegregating many motion picture theaters in the downtowns of many major American cities outside the South. In those days, theaters featured stage shows along with first-run movies, and big bands were favorites in these shows. Armstrong was the first black band leader to perform in many of these venues, as can be gleaned not from histories of jazz but from a perusal of black newspapers, such as the *Chicago Defender* or the *Pittsburgh Courier*. He was also the first black performer, in 1936, to have his own sponsored radio program, when he and his band substituted for several months for singer Rudy Vallee on the *Fleischman’s Yeast Show*. (Vallee was one of many Armstrong fans in show business; Louis’s artistry had long since transcended categories.)

World War II took its toll on Armstrong’s band, as it did on all the big orchestras. The recording ban imposed in 1942 by the musicians’ union didn’t prove helpful to jazz and contributed to the already rising popularity of singers as compared with big bands. But Armstrong, like many other leaders, hung in. He did a record number of engagements at military installations during the war. These jobs didn’t pay as well as civilian ones, and often travel and accommodations were problematic. But Armstrong and Glaser shared a patriotic spirit; the trumpeter was especially keen on entertaining black men and women in uniform.

Glaser, meanwhile, had become an empire builder. He had long since established his own talent agency, Associated Booking Corporation, and expanded his roster from one to dozens of clients. Armstrong always came first, but Glaser was now the leading booker of black musical talent. In the early days he had gone along on every Armstrong road trip himself; now he delegated such responsibilities but still saw to it that Armstrong was shielded as well as possible from the pervasive problems of racism. Still, the Armstrong band was not as well off on their frequent southern trips as the Ellington orchestra, which traveled in its own Pullman car. Armstrong shared the tribulations of his men—unlike some other leaders who traveled separately. And while he gladly left everyday business matters and even most personnel and salary decisions to Glaser and his staff, he was far from a passive leader.

For example, Armstrong himself hired one of the outstanding members of his 1944 band, tenorist Dexter Gordon. He heard him at a Los Angeles jam session and invited him to join the band then and there, according to Gordon himself. And when Gordon eventually told him he wanted to quit, Armstrong immediately offered him a substantial raise. Clearly, the picture of Louis Armstrong as someone who let others run his band is distorted, as is so much else said and written about this man—especially when we come to the period from 1945 on, when bebop, later called modern jazz, gradually became dominant. Initially, as his hiring of Gordon (the premier modern tenor sax stylist) indicates, there was no hostility from Armstrong toward the “new sounds,” as proponents soon called them. But bebop was as much an attitude as a music, and that attitude, too complex to analyze in detail here, triggered a war of words between traditionalists and modernists that tore the world of jazz apart.

Not that the boppers were the only sinners. By some twist of irony, the advent of modern jazz coincided with a rising interest in pre-swing music, specifically New Orleans style, as symbolized by the rediscovery of Bunk Johnson. A legendary New Orleans trumpeter who had left music around 1931, Johnson was rumored to have played in Buddy Bolden’s band and said to have taught young Louis Armstrong. Louis himself aided in Johnson’s rediscovery and presented him with a trumpet. He didn’t protest when Bunk began to tell eager critics how much he had taught Louis when he was a boy, and it wasn’t until after Johnson’s death in 1949 that Louis took the gloves off and corrected the record: Bunk was too busy drinking port wine and chasing women to pay attention to a kid wanting to learn to play trumpet, he said. Bunk did have a lovely tone, and little Louis had enjoyed listening to him. But a teacher? That had been King Oliver, not Bunk.

Bunk told a lot of bunk, in fact, but while he was alive, his personality, imagination, and historical aura made it all seem convincing. We know now that he was younger by some considerable years than he gave out, that he had never played with Bolden, and that much of what he had to say about early New Orleans music was learned or imagined; however, Bunk did have a fertile imagination, and he cut a dashing figure. He was also a much more sophisticated musician than the players his sponsors surrounded him with, and whom he privately dubbed “emergency musicians.” When left to his own devices, he hired men who could read music well, taught them arrangements from the *Redback Book of Rags* and asked them to play things like “Out of Nowhere” and even “Marie Elena” enough to give traditionalists heart attacks.

Bunk was a symbol; the traditional movement would have happened without him. In fact, the seeds were sown as early as 1938, when Tommy Ladnier, Sidney Bechet, and Mezz Mezzrow recorded in New York under the aegis of visiting French critic Hugues Panassie. Though Panassie also idolized Armstrong, that worthy was often blamed for having destroyed the intimate ensemble fabric of New Orleans style with his egocentric solo excursions, as early as with the Hot Five.

The traditionalists were dubbed “moldy figs” by the moderns, to whom Armstrong increasingly became a symbol of the past—if not entirely from a musical standpoint, then certainly from a social one. Journalists fanned the fires, and pretty soon ugly statements found their way into print, triggering equally ugly responses. Stung by the boppers’ accusations of Uncle Tomming, the man who’d so long been idolized by his fellow musicians and opened so many doors for jazz now spoke of “the modern malice,” called bop “jiujitsu music,” and warned that young trumpeters would quickly ruin their embouchures by attempting to follow in Dizzy Gillespie’s musical footsteps. (Louis exempted Dizzy himself from criticism. They were then neighbors and on good personal terms, and their wives had been dancers together in nightclubs years before. Aside from that, Louis was quite right when he called Dizzy “an old fox” and said that the trumpeter knew exactly what he was doing instrumentally.)

Ironically, Louis himself and his own big band were not at all immune from “modern” influences. Thus, on his first issued post-recording-ban session, from early 1945, one hears long-lined, harmonically complex trumpet playing on both the sinister “Jodie Man” and the beautiful “I Wonder,” a rhythm-and-blues ballad composed and recorded by the short-lived singer-pianist Cecil Gant. In a more traditional vein, Armstrong is in wonderful form on a V disc (record made for the Armed Forces) date a month before, which brought him together with Jack Teagarden and Bobby Hackett, among others, and was a kind of preview of the Armstrong All Stars to come. In any case, Louis was much more comfortable here than at a public event in early 1944, the much-touted First Esquire All-American Jazz Concert, held at New York’s Metropolitan Opera House. While Teagarden was on hand there as well, so were Coleman Hawkins, Art Tatum, and Louis’s chief trump-pet rival of the day, Roy Eldridge. It never came to a “battle” between the two, though Eldridge later admitted he’d have loved to lock horns with his erstwhile idol, who wasn’t having a very good night.

Such encounters with smaller groups not only offered interesting contrast to Armstrong’s everyday big band work but also pointed toward the future. So did a 1946 film, *New Orleans*, in which Armstrong was prominently featured. Unlike the several films he’d appeared in during the war years (*Cabin in the Sky*, *Jam Session*, *Atlantic City*, *Pillow to Post*), this one gave him acting as well as playing opportunities. The rather hokey script dealt with New Orleans at the time of Storyville’s closing. Billie Holiday was cast as a society lady’s maid, and Armstrong was seen at the helm of a band made up of Crescent City veterans like Kid Ory, Bud Scott, and Zutty Singleton, performing traditional material as well as the film’s hit song, “Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans.” At the end, Louis is seen at Carnegie Hall (where else?) with his 1946 big band, but the film’s musical message clearly was that the good old days had been the golden ones.

The making of this film provided an opportunity for the critic, record producer, song-writer, and promoter Leonard Feather to organize a record date in Los Angeles that surrounded Louis with some of the players from the film's small group but substituted the swing trombonist Vic Dickenson for Ory and ex-Goodmanite guitarist Allan Reuss for Scott. It was a delightful session, with Armstrong in a relaxed mood, vocally and instrumentally, on "Sugar" and "I Want a Little Girl." The film band also recorded, and in between there was a session with Louis's big band, which had been brought to California for some dates between shooting sessions.

Feather kept nudging Louis and Glaser to present the trumpeter in New York in a small-group setting. (Like most critics, Feather hated Louis's big band, and though he was a champion of bebop, he also greatly valued Armstrong.) Eventually Louis agreed, with the proviso that it be a two-part concert, with his big band also included. The event took place at Carnegie Hall on February 8, 1947. Armstrong appeared with a working sextet led by a fellow New Orleanian, clarinetist Edmond Hall, in a program of tunes long identified with Louis, among them "Lazy River," "You Rascal You," "Muskrat Ramble," "Struttin' with Some Barbecue," and "Dippermouth Blues." Though Big Sid Catlett was brought in to beef up the big band, and Billie Holiday made a second-half cameo appearance, the press (both jazz and lay) waxed ecstatic over the small-group half and generally panned the second.

## End of the Big Band

Esthetics aside, Armstrong's big band had fallen on lean days. There was a recording contract, to be sure, and some of the recent records ("I Believe," "You Don't Learn That in School," and "Back o' Town Blues") were quite good and even modestly successful. But the asking price for the band had gone down to \$750 for a one-nighter, and while Louis was loathe to let 16 men and one woman go, the handwriting was on the wall.

The decisive instance was the concert (actually concerts: a second event at midnight had to be added, so great was the demand for tickets) at New York's Town Hall on May 17, 1947. This time there was no trace of the big band, though Sid Catlett shared drumming chores with George Wettling. The rest of the hand-picked cast included Teagarden and Hackett. There was a recording device on the premises, and a portion of the concert was issued a few years later on Victor. (Other portions had to wait more than 30 years.) What one hears is Armstrong in magnificent form, clearly inspired by the love that surrounded him on the bandstand and in the packed house.

The big band was put on notice, and Glaser and Louis began to make plans for a small group. Three weeks later, Teagarden, Hackett, and some others joined Louis in the Victor studios for a session that produced a lovely first recording of Louis's own "Someday" and a caloric "Jack-Armstrong Blues," on which Louis's long concluding solo shows that he'd been cocking an ear in the direction of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie—not obviously, yet clearly, if one wanted to



hear. A week later, there was another public event, the opening of the film *New Orleans*, with Louis fronting a small group.

Soon thereafter, he was off again to Hollywood to participate in the making of a bigger film, the Danny Kaye vehicle *A Song Is Born*, which also had parts for Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, Charlie Barnet, Lionel Hampton, and other notable jazzmen. Not long after shooting ended, the Louis Armstrong All Stars made their debut at Billy Berg's club in Los Angeles. A new chapter in the Louis Armstrong saga had begun.

## The All Stars

Glaser had not been idle. First, seeing how well Louis and Jack Teagarden worked together, he had persuaded the trombonist-singer to get rid of his big band—a veritable millstone around his neck which had gotten him deeply into debt. Clarinetist Barney Bigard had been with Louis in *New Orleans*, and though he'd left Duke Ellington in 1942 to venture out on his own, he had most recently been a sideman in Kid Ory's band. It didn't take much persuasion to make him join his fellow New Orleanian. Big Sid Catlett was doing well, free-lancing on 52nd Street and in the recording studios, where recent associates had included Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, but he loved Louis and was ready to give him that special beat once again. On piano, the nod went to Dick Cary, who'd been involved in the Town Hall concert, sketching out arrangements, doing a fine job as accompanist and occasional soloist, and generally making a good impression. Louis knew whom he wanted on bass: a youngster who'd been in his big band long enough to impress the leader with his solid time, big sound, and show-manship. Arvell Shaw was the baby of the All Stars in age only. The girl singer, as they said then, was also a given: Velma Middleton had been in Louis's big band since 1942, and they had a special relationship, working and personal.

It only took a short while for the All Stars to find their groove. The first recording session, in October 1947, yielded four current numbers: one the title tune from Louis's latest film, another a charming ballad by Catlett, "Before Long," and two rather lightweight novelties. None of these numbers was in the program at a concert recorded live in Boston that December and eventually issued on Decca. The mixture performed there, of individual features, ensemble numbers, Armstrong-Teagarden and Armstrong-Middleton duets, and evergreens from the Armstrong annals, pretty well defines the musical pro-file of this most durable group, which lasted until the end of Armstrong's life.

The initial success of the All Stars was great when compared to the final years of Armstrong's big bands, but it wasn't an overnight smash. There were ample bookings in leading jazz clubs and a first visit to Europe in the winter of 1948 for a star turn at the world's first international jazz festival, in Nice. (History generally assigns that distinction to the Paris event of the following year, which starred Charlie Parker and Sidney Bechet, but Nice was first.) By now the All Stars had become even more so: one of Joe Glaser's prime clients had decided to give up his big band, and thus Earl Hines was reunited with his old friend from the Chicago years.

Musically this reunion didn't quite draw the sparks one might have hoped for, though Hines was even more brilliant at the keyboard than in the '20s. Years of big band work had clearly affected all the players in the group, and in a sense it was more a collection of soloists than a band with a style of its own. But when Louis played lead, there was a special sound and feeling. There was never any doubt that he was in charge. In fact, as the drummer who replaced the ailing Catlett, the powerhouse Cozy Cole, once stated, Louis was active in the All Star performances "at least 80 percent of the time." He was featured on his own specialties, partnered the two other vocalists, led the ensembles on the other instrumentalists' features, and did all the announcing. This was different from the big band era when, at least for dance dates, the band would open without Louis, who would be featured in a show segment after the set. And when the big band did a stage show, it would not be nearly as long as a night-club set by the All Stars.

As the All Stars settled into their routine, it became clear that this was one of the hardest-working bands in jazz history. Louis had been consumed by the work ethic all his life, and Glaser was a man to whom turning down a solid booking was a crime against nature; consequently, the more in demand the All Stars became, the more they worked. If either man had been less obsessive, there could have been a much easier life for the band than the constant travel, work, more travel, and more work that was the rule for over 20 years.

But the public was blissfully unaware of how tired the All Stars might be when they hit the stage, because when Louis Armstrong hit, he put on a show that never let his audience down. "We got to keep it moving," he'd say periodically, and keep it moving he did. Certain things, after the first few years, became set. The opener—after the theme, "Sleepy Time Down South"—was always "Indiana," a fast-paced instrumental. (It got to be so that Armstrong fans were able to tell from his trumpet solo on this number whether Louis was in great or just good form.) From then on until the closing "Sleepy Time" reprise, the order would be whatever the leader felt was right under the specific circumstances—he had an acute sense of what an audience wanted. The band's repertory was always large (much larger than that of most organized jazz groups, though the critics always harped on Armstrong's playing "the same things"), and often numbers were added or dropped. While there were many warhorses, surprises were also frequent. And always there was the pacing, at which Armstrong was a master. There were no dull spots, even when the sidemen were not of the highest caliber.

Personnel was surprisingly stable during the All Stars' first decade. Catlett left for health reasons; Earl Hines left because he wasn't cut out for a sideman role (after all, he'd led his own bands from 1929 on) and accepted it solely with Armstrong; Teagarden gained so much exposure from his All Stars tenure that he would have been foolish not to seize the opportunity to front a similar group of his own (as he did until his death, though reunions with Louis were frequent and always warm). The new permanent trombonist (after the short-timer Russ Phillips) was Trummy Young, who stayed for 12 years and was Armstrong's closest friend and strongest musical supporter among the All Stars. He was replaced by Big Chief Russell Moore, an Armstrong big band alumnus, and then, for the duration, by the dependable Tyree Glenn. Hines's permanent replacement, Billy Kyle, was another 12-year man; unfortunately, it was

sudden death that ended his tenure. Bigard, the charter clarinet, remained until late 1956. His successor, Edmond Hall, was the best clarinet in All Stars history; after him came the able but somewhat bland Peanuts Hucko and the excellent Buster Bailey; the final incumbent, Joe Muranyi, knew what Armstrong represented and gave him all he had. Arvell Shaw left often but always came back. Among the other basses, Buddy Catlett was the most gifted, Mort Herbert the most reliable. Drummers included Barrett Deems, in for several key years and much better than the critics said, and Danny Barcelona, who stayed from the late '50s until the very end. No matter what the weak spots, the All Stars were held together by the leader, who in a very real sense could be the whole show when he had to.

That he sometimes did have to was probably unavoidable. Great players who'd have loved to work with Armstrong refused to risk their health by undertaking the All Stars' notoriously grueling pace, though the pay was good. The examples of Kyle and Bailey, who succumbed to the road—or at least so it seemed to their colleagues—were not encouraging. Perhaps even more poignant was the fate of Velma Middleton, whose devotion to Armstrong was legendary. She suffered a stroke during the All Stars' tour of Africa in 1961 and had to be left behind in a Sierra Leone hospital, where she died three weeks later. Louis was an iron man, but even he could fall ill, as the 1959 Spoleto episode demonstrated. It is by now nearly certain that this bout with "indigestion" was a heart episode that both patient and doctors deliberately misidentified. It was an indication of Louis's fame that his collapse made front page news throughout the world. Aside from China and the USSR, there was hardly a country the All Stars hadn't performed in.

He was "Ambassador Satch," and, mainly through his international success, jazz had become a valuable commodity in the cultural cold war. It was through his example that other jazz artists soon were enlisted by the U.S. Department of State to make goodwill tours all over the world.

## Beyond the All Stars

The All Stars was Armstrong's everyday musical environment, yet much of the group's repertory was born and bred outside of it. Starting in 1949, Armstrong often recorded with augmented All Stars personnel, or entirely without them—with big bands, with strings, with choirs, and as in earlier days, in partnership with other stars. The All Stars' own records, many of them live, almost never gained the popularity of such items as the 1949 "Blueberry Hill" (a revival of a 1941 Gene Autry hit and a direct inspiration for Fats Domino's hugely successful 1956 version) or the 1951 "A Kiss to Build a Dream On," even bigger in Europe than at home. His versatility expressed itself in a beautifully tender "La Vie en Rose"; another French hit for Louis was "C'est Ci Bon." From an All Star studio date came the astonishing "That's for Me," with a vocal in the upper part of his range that ranks with his greatest. Teamed with Ella Fitzgerald (they first met on records in 1944), he came up with "Can Anyone Explain?" and the sublime "Dream a Little Dream of Me." When producer Norman Granz got Ella away from Decca and onto his own label, Verve, there were the marvelous LPs *Ella and Louis* and *Ella and Louis Again* and the spectacularly packaged and lovingly produced *Porgy and Bess* with these

two matchless voices in the title roles. (Louis's trumpet took no back seat in these enterprises, by the way.) The 1956-57 *Autobiography* was a four-LP box of re-creations, on some of which Armstrong surpassed his early masterpieces.

Granz also paired Louis with Oscar Peterson in a thoroughly mainstream repertory, including some fine songs the great man hadn't previously tackled, like "What's New?" and "Moon Song." On the other side of the musical coin, there were recorded meetings with the hugely popular Dukes of Dixieland; the results were surprisingly good for Louis, since this New Orleans-based group treated him with profound love and respect. In 1960 he got together with old fan Bing Crosby for an album of relaxed duets. But it was 1961 that saw some spectacular get-togethers.

Louis had a small but prominent role as a trumpeter named Wild Man Moore in the film *Paris Blues*, for which Duke Ellington scored the music. Duke didn't have his band at hand for a jam session scene starring Louis, but made a group of French players and American expatriates sound very Dukish. The two stars had fun, and a few months later record producer Bob Thiele had the bright idea of bringing them together for the first time in a recording studio.

Since the protagonists were signed with different companies, he had to act quickly, and there was no time for rehearsals. Also, the budget only allowed for Ellington to take the piano chair in the All Stars, to which ex-Ellingtonian Barney Bigard had briefly returned. Made in two sessions—one late at night, the other the following afternoon, then the All Stars hit the road that evening—the results (though Louis's lips were sore throughout the second session) were remarkable, not least because Louis learned new material on the spot and then performed it as if it had been in his repertory for years.

Six months later came an encounter with another pianist-composer, Dave Brubeck, who in collaboration with his lyricist wife, Iola, had composed a kind of jazz oratorio intended for the concert stage: *The Real Ambassadors*, a paean to jazz starring Armstrong as the music's incarnation. In the company of the All Stars, singer Carmen McRae, and the popular vocal trio Lambert, Hendricks & Ross, Armstrong again mastered brand new material in record time and deeply impressed Brubeck with his dedication and professionalism. (Much nonsense has been written about Armstrong as an "intuitive" artist. Having had the privilege of seeing him work on new material [such as on the two above-mentioned occasions], I can assure the reader that this was a man who combined remarkable natural gifts with thorough discipline, and that he was able to sight-read highly sophisticated music and absorb it instantly.)

An example of the Armstrong ability to transform unexpected material was his 1955 encounter with Kurt Weill's "Mack the Knife," also known as "Theme from the Threepenny Opera." This became a big Armstrong hit, and Louis noted that his New Orleans childhood made it easy for him to capture Mack's unsavory essence. But hits like this or "Blueberry Hill," or the success of such album concepts (with the All Stars) as music by W. C. Handy (hailed even by professional Armstrong detractors) or Fats Waller (for whose music Armstrong had a genuine affinity), were dwarfed by the totally unexpected success of Louis's version of the rather unsophisticated but

goodnatured title song from a new 1963 Broadway show, *Hello, Dolly!* It was another tune from the Jerry Herman score, "I've Got a Lot of Living to Do," that was considered the more viable of the two tunes recorded at a hastily arranged session for a new label, Kapp.

To give proper early 1900s period flavor, a banjoist was added to the All Stars for the occasion, but Louis's main concern was that his dear friend Trummy Young was leaving the band—indeed, this was his final All Star recording session. The two sides were soon made and had almost been forgotten by Louis when the disc, a single, was released in early 1964, with overdubbed strings. It was one of those things that can't be planned or manufactured: an instant smash hit, soon heard on the radio, in the street, everywhere. It knocked the Beatles from the number one perch on the Top 40 list which they had occupied for months, and it gave Armstrong tremendous pleasure as well as plenty to put in his bank account. No one else, not even Barbra Streisand, could do much with the song, as demonstrated in the film version of the musical, in which she and Armstrong appear together. Only he knew how to make that song sound good, and he was stuck with it from then on—which bothered him not one bit. The Dolly cameo was his final film role; his next-to-last, in a Sammy Davis, Jr., vehicle about a bebop trumpeter, *A Man Called Adam*, gave him some moments to show what an actor he was, and contained some good music as well.

In 1967 a new song, "What a Wonderful World," became a number one hit for Louis in England and on the Continent, and did nicely at home. Another title song from a Broadway musical, "Cabaret," also did well for him that year, and in 1968 he proved once again that he could work wonders with unlikely material, on an album of Disney-related songs, notably the dark and oddly ominous "Chim Chim Cheree." (His trumpeting was, by earlier standards, somewhat impaired on this, but the musical message was almost overwhelming.)

By September 1968, Louis was seriously ill and hospitalized; he was released the following January but back within a month. Not long after, Joe Glaser, who'd been considering urging Louis to retire, suddenly suffered a massive stroke and was taken to the same hospital. The news was kept from the recuperating trumpeter, but he found out and was devastated that Glaser, in a deep coma, didn't respond to him. Glaser died on the 6th of June without regaining consciousness. By then Louis was well enough to sing at a benefit for Louis Metcalfe, a veteran trumpeter who'd challenged Armstrong when he came to New York in 1929. In October 1969 he returned to the studios, recording {vocally only, the trumpet forbidden by doctors} the theme song "We Have All the Time in the World" for a new James Bond film.

Remaining time for Louis was considerably less, but it was filled with a long-overdue outpouring for him by the so-called jazz community, which for once acted as such. In May 1970 a recording session brought into the studio (in addition to a large complement of playing musicians) an unusual group of backup singers: Miles Davis, Ornette Coleman, Chico Hamilton, Tony Bennett, Eddie Condon, Bobby Hackett, Ruby Braff, and even a bunch of jazz critics.

For his 70th birthday {really only his 69th}, *Down Beat* magazine (then edited by this writer) gathered tributes from 86 musicians covering the entire spectrum of jazz, including some who

decades before might not have been quite so forthcoming. Perhaps most interesting were the statements of Kenny Dorham, Cal Massey, and Thad Jones that it was Armstrong who'd been the cause of their taking up the trumpet. Critics had been saying that his active influence had ceased by the early '30s, and current academic wisdom perpetuates that fable.

There was a star-studded pre-birthday party in Hollywood, at which Louis's old friend and collaborator Hoagy Carmichael cut a giant cake. And at the Newport Jazz Festival in July, a red carpet was spread for Louis. There was a night of musical tributes from trumpeters, including Hackett, Ray Nance, young Jimmy Owens, Joe Newman, Wild Bill Davison, and Dizzy Gillespie. The Eureka Brass Band came up from New Orleans to march for Louis, and Mahalia Jackson (a hometown girl) duetted with him on "Just a Closer Walk with Thee." The event, including backstage and rehearsal sequences, was filmed, and later inter-view passages with Armstrong were inserted. And of course there was "Hello, Dolly!"

Armstrong still wasn't allowed to play trumpet, though friends knew he was practicing at home. But by September, the All Stars were reactivated for a two-week Las Vegas stand. At their first rehearsal, according to Joe Muranyi, Louis played like a man possessed. In October he flew to England for a charity concert, and in late December, after a rare Christmas celebration at home, he was back in Las Vegas. In February 1971 he and Bing Crosby were reunited for the last time on the David Frost television show, doing "Blueberry Hill" together. There wasn't much trumpet playing on the show, but in his dressing room Louis warmed up, with a mute in the bell, on "Pennies from Heaven." I won't forget that.

The All Stars played their final engagement in March, at the Waldorf Astoria's Empire Room. Louis clearly was ill by the end of that two-week stint, and he then suffered a heart attack. Released in May, he recuperated at home. On his birthday he was seen on a television newscast with trombonist Tyree Glenn of the All Stars at his side. Frail but smiling, he ventured a few notes of "Sleepy Time Down South" and told the visitors (and of course the world at large) that he would be back to entertain them soon. In the early morning of July 6, 1971, Louis Armstrong died peacefully in his sleep.

It was a young trumpeter from Louis's hometown who, having come to sudden fame in the 1980s for his unique combination of great jazz and classical skills, began to change fundamentally the perception of the master among contemporary jazz musicians. Wynton Marsalis, by speaking of Armstrong always in reverential tones, and even more by his ex-ample of performing Armstrong music and by his insistence that the jazz tradition must be honored in more than just words, brought about a new image of Louis Armstrong and spawned some even younger acolytes. It is today no longer surprising that a Byron Stripling or a Nicholas Payton can perform almost note-perfect Armstrong simulations (Stripling also sings à la Louis), or that Marsalis and the somewhat older Jon Faddis {well versed in Armstrong before it became *de rigeur*) shared the excruciatingly difficult Armstrong solo from 1936, "Swing That Music," at a 1993 JVC Festival concert. But the man himself had some surprises left in store for us.

As if there hadn't been enough Armstrong firsts during his lifetime, he came up with a posthumous encore. In the 1989 film *Good Morning, Vietnam*, the star disc jockey plays many records, among them Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World." The artist's name isn't mentioned, nor is his face seen. There is no trumpet, just that voice. On the strength of this unannounced performance, the quickly reissued record "charted," as they say in the music business, staying on *Billboard's* Top 100 for many weeks and reaching the number 33 spot.

Louis would have been pleased. He didn't realize he was immortal.

—Dan Morgenstern

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## Credits

Executive Producer: Bruce Talbot

Compilation Producer: Nedra Olds-Neal

Project Director: Adam Block

Digitally Mastered by Mark Wilder, Sony Music Studios, New York

Disc Transfers: Mark Wilder, Bruce Talbot

Additional Mastering: Tom "Curly" Ruff

Art Direction: Joel Zimmerman

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Box Cover Design: Alan Carter

Packaging Manager: Hope Chasin

Notes, Musical Selection and Consultation: Dan Morgenstern

Additional Notes: Loren Schoenberg

Text Editor: Jane Sapp

Photographs: Louis Armstrong Archives at Queens College/CUNY;

Frank Driggs Collection; Sony Music Photo Library; Lisa Haun.

Box Cover Photograph: c. 1930; Duncan Schiedt.

Book: Front cover from press & advertisement scrapbook, 1927; Inside covers from Armstrong's personal clipping collection (courtesy of Louis Armstrong Archives at Queens College/CUNY).

Record labels courtesy of the Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University.

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This collection of recordings is part of **America's Jazz Heritage: A Partnership of the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund and the Smithsonian Institution**, a ten-year national program that celebrates and explores jazz history \_with travelling exhibitions, performances, recordings, publications, and radio programs. The Smithsonian honors the legacy of Louis Armstrong through these recordings and the exhibition "Louis Armstrong: A Cultural Legacy."

DAN MORGENSTERN has been director of the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University since 1976. Born in Germany and reared in Austria and Denmark, he came to the U.S. in 1947. He was the American correspondent for Britain's Jazz Journal (1958-61), was editor of the magazines *Metronome* and *Jazz*, and became New York editor of *Down Beat* in 1964, serving as editor in chief from 1967 to 1973. He has taught jazz history at Brooklyn College, the Peabody Institute, Rutgers, and the Schweitzer Institute of Music; has produced concerts and radio and TV programs; and has served as a jazz panelist for the National Endowment for the Arts. A prolific record annotator who has also produced reissues, Morgenstern has won five Grammy Awards for his album notes. His book, *Jazz People* (with photographer Ole Brask), which received the ASCAP-Deems Taylor Award in 1977, was reprinted by Da Capo Press in 1993.

LOREN SCHOENBERG, saxophonist and pianist, has lectured and performed internationally. He is the leader of his own big band in New York City, was conductor of the American Jazz Orchestra, and is currently associated with the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra. He has recorded with Benny Carter and Benny Goodman, and is on the faculty of the New School.

Producer's Note:

This collection contains 81 recordings made between the years 1923-1934. During the first two years represented, the phonograph record was still sonically a primitive entity and music was recorded by the acoustic process, resulting in recordings that harmonically and texturally left much to be desired. Fortunately electrical recording began before the end of the first volume of this chronological collection ("Sugarfoot Stomp") and the listener will find that the sonic quality of these original recordings improves as the collection progresses. In order to demonstrate as completely as possible the evolution of Louis Armstrong's art, we have included some extremely rare recordings—"Changeable Daddy of Mine," "You Can't Shush Katie," and an alternate take of "Stardust" are just a few of them. We sought out many sources for these seldom heard 78 rpm recordings. Due to their age and rarity it is unlikely that any better copies now survive, however we feel strongly that the musical content, and in particular Louis Armstrong's contribution, overrides the indifferent quality of the source material.

Many of the recordings in this collection were originally produced by Richard M. Jones, Justin Ring, Tommy Rockwell and Bob Stephens. The producers of this collection would like to acknowledge their contribution to Louis Armstrong's recorded legacy.

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producing a noise-free recording while perfectly preserving the original sound for the ultimate in sound quality.

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