

Rare Items (1935-1944) by Louis Armstrong



This album contains some of the greatest recordings Louis Armstrong has made ... and we all know that Louis Armstrong is the greatest of all jazz musicians — indeed, one of the foremost artists of our century. It ought to be sufficient just to say that, and let the music speak for itself.

But the fact that none of the selections in this album have been previously available on LP in this country (most of them have been collector's items for a quarter century or more), and that they are not among those usually cited by jazz authorities as Louis' best, requires some further comment.

It is one of the many peculiarities of jazz criticism that Louis' work with small groups (his pioneering Hot Five and Hot Seven from 1925 to 1928, and his post-1947 All Stars) has received the highest praise, while his work with big bands during the intervening years has been neglected, nit-picked, or slighted. By the critics and historians, that is. Musicians and dyed-in-the-wool Armstrong devotees, on the other hand, more often than not will cite examples of Louis' big band work when asked about their favorites. It would be hard to imagine two more different trumpet stylists than Bobby Hackett and Maynard Ferguson, yet both of them have named the version of *Struttin' With Some Barbecue* included in this album as their first choice among Louis' records — and small wonder. It is a masterpiece, far surpassing the earlier Hot Five version of the tune.

The trumpet players, of course, were concerned with Louis' playing, whereas the critics are always more concerned with such matters as the superiority of small-group collective improvisation over the soloist-with-big-band concept. Yet the fact of the matter is that a big band was the best backdrop conceivable for the singular and matchless virtuosity of the Armstrong trumpet in its "middle period." A full band, with appropriate arrangements especially designed for the purpose, set off his playing and singing more dramatically than a small group could have—and there is no sound in jazz more thrilling than the Armstrong trumpet soaring above the full-bodied textures of a large ensemble. (Did I say "in jazz"? It is one of the most thrilling sounds in music.)

All this is not meant to take away from Louis' small-group work — the kick of hearing him lead a traditional "front line" as only he can, or the beauty of his horn or voice just by itself — but the perspective needs straightening.

The masterpieces in this album — in my opinion, *Barbecue*, *Jubilee*, *The Skeleton In The Closet*, *Ev'ntide*, and the fantastic *Swing That Music* — stand as unique performances in the history of jazz. They are a kind of miniature concerti for trumpet (and sometimes also voice) and orchestra, but miniature only in size; the conception is grand.

Here we can enjoy to the fullest Louis' fabulous command of his horn, matched with his genius as an improviser and his gift for melodic exposition. No matter how slight the basic material (or no matter how good, and there are good tunes here), Louis transforms it, lifts it to the highest musical level.

It has been said that the Armstrong big bands were usually unworthy of his talent, that they were frequently not in tune, that the arrangements were often unimaginative, and that the “pop tunes” which comprised the bulk of his big band material were inferior to the New Orleans classics, and “true” jazz pieces in general. There is some truth in these contentions, but not much, and what there is matters very little. The big bands Louis led always included fine musicians, as a glance at the personnel listings will bear out. (His rhythm sections were always first-class.) But there were also lesser lights. Louis always kept a busy schedule of work, and not every musician was prepared to do constant traveling. More significantly, Louis so overshadowed other soloists that there was little featuring of other players in the band (on record, that is; in person, the band would play for dancing or listening to warm up the audience before Louis appeared).

Sometimes the bands *were* out of tune, and some of the best Jazz bands in history have also been guilty of this. Often, there was little time to rehearse material introduced at record dates; just as often, the time and place were practical but not ideal from the band's point of view. Today, much time is spent in preparation of record dates; in the golden age of jazz, when musicians worked much harder on the road, a date was squeezed in when the band was available. For the same reasons, the arrangements were not always well crafted or inventive. But they always gave Louis plenty of elbow room, and that was their main function. Again, the problem was a unique one — more than any other big jazz bands, Louis' were there to back up one man, and some arrangers faded to see the challenge in this.

But there are superior arrangements in this album — notably those by Chappie Willet for *Barbecue* and *Jubilee*. And in the late Shelton Hemphill, Louis had one of the best lead trumpeters in the business. Ironically, the same critics who complain about “ragged” bands where Louis is concerned are quite willing to accept the sloppiest playing if the context is traditional or avant-garde.

As for the material, there are pop tunes that are very fine — even little-known ones — and in Louis' repertoire there were quite a few written especially for him, such as Hoagy Carmichael's lovely *Ev'ntide*, and the same composer's *Jubilee* and *Lyin' To Myself*. And Louis himself contributed some choice items, among them *Swing That Music*.

Besides, it is just plain snobbishness to criticize jazz musicians for using popular material. Would they'd do it more ... it is perhaps no coincidence that the greatest public acceptance of jazz came at a time when jazz musicians were playing more popular tunes than before or since.

Well, enough preaching. Now to a few words about the recording. *Thanks A Million* (from the long-forgotten movie of the same name, which incidentally featured Paul Whiteman's orchestra) opens with Louis' trumpet in warm and mellow middle register; then, an effortless climb to the top, a lovely vocal chorus, and an unusually straight conclusion and coda.

Lyin' To Myself is a wonderful performance, from start to finish. The tempo is relaxed, and Louis swings to the utmost in everything he does. What poise there is in his playing and singing! Dig his break at the conclusion of the vocal, and his superbly timed re-entry on trumpet. The elaborate and beautiful cadenza is in the great tradition of classical concerti and grand opera.

Ev'ntide is made to order for Louis. No one else, to my knowledge, has played or sung this piece, though it is lovely ... perhaps nobody dared to follow the master. You will never tire of this romantic *tour de force*.

Swing That Music is a fantasy for trumpet. The tune, like so many great jazz pieces, is simple. The tempo is way up, and stays there, not least due to Pops Foster's magnificent bass playing. (By today's standards of virtuosic bass displays, Foster may seem simple, but what a beat he lays down.) There are eight choruses: first the ensemble, then a happy Louis vocal (this was also the title of his autobiography, published the same year), then an intricate and well-executed saxophone section chorus, and then four trumpet choruses, starting with a stark exposition of the melody, building through some fabulous improvising to a conclusion fashioned entirely of perfectly placed high notes. (To my knowledge, no trumpeter has ever equaled this, and none ever will.

Thankful brings us a bit further down to earth again. Louis' lovely singing basks the spotlight here; his voice is unusually well recorded, and it bathes the listener in a warm glow. His trumpet sings, too.

The Skeleton In The Closet was a novelty feature for Louis in his first big-time movie, "*Pennies From Heaven*," which also starred Bing Crosby and the Jimmy Dorsey band. There isn't much to the song, but Louis invests the vocal segment with his vibrant personality, and then, after a band interlude, transforms the slight melody with his trumpet and imagination into a flight of lyricism perfect in structure and profoundly moving. The masterly cadenza is pure Armstrong.

Jubilee keeps up the pace. This, too, is from a movie — Mae West's "*Every Day's A Holiday*." It is a parade number, and Louis puts his best New Orleans foot forward for the march. Barbarin's drumming is very good here (another New Orleans man); in fact, the band is at its best throughout, and the arrangement has musical substance. Louis struts and soars and sets off a string of Roman candles.

Struttin' With Some Barbecue is a 1927 Armstrong classic revisited. This, again, is a superior arrangement. Louis leads the opening chorus and the tricky interlude by the trumpet section.

Bingie Madison's clarinet solo is soon followed by some excellent Charlie Holmes' alto which concludes with a break that sets up Louis in tine style. After a magnificent exposition of the melody, Louis creates a chorus that is perhaps his greatest on record — certainly one of the greatest.

I Double Dare You, a nice tune, has a charming vocal (Louis throws in a "hot mama") and fine Higginbotham trombone, as well as a spot of better than usual Madison tenor. Then Louis takes it out on the trumpet over riffing from the band.

It's Wonderful, (not to be confused with Gershwin's *Wonderful*) was penned by the great jazz violinist Stuff Smith. A pretty melody it is, and Louis, vocally and instrumentally, is very relaxed. The tenor is again by Madison.

You're A Lucky Guy, from the 6th edition of the "Cotton Club Parade," was also recorded by Billie Holiday (she did *It's Wonderful*, too) and their vocals have much in common. Louis is in fine form on the trumpet, too, and the band is in a Jimmie Lunceford groove. Big Sid Catlett was an ideal drummer for Louis; note how he supports him in the last trumpet chorus before the vocal reprise. Higgy takes a meaty trombone break.

Ev'rything's Been Done Before and *Hey Lawdy Mama* are small-group performances, made with members of Louis' 1941 big band. They are extremely relaxed and easeful. The opening chorus of *Ev'rything* is played with a straight mute (the only kind Louis uses). The vocal is touching and masterfully phrased. *Mama* is a blues that was quite popular at the time and Louis sings it with gentle humor. Lucie's guitar, Russell's piano and Washington's trombone all have solo spots before Pops takes it out.

Groovin' is issued here for the first time anywhere. It is the only instrumental from a 1944 session which remained in Decca's vaults. The lineup of the band is entirely new; not one of the old faces remains in this war-time edition, which includes Dexter Gordon in his recording baptism (no solo, though — Ted McRae, the band's musical director, takes the tenor spot). The tune and arrangement are both typical of late swing-era style. Louis sounds as modern as always; his conception never dates, and fits any surrounding. There is plenty of his trumpet here, and Milt Gabler, who supervised the session (his first of many with Louis) is to be thanked for bringing it to the light of day and filling a gap in the Armstrong saga.

I envy those who will hear the masterpieces on this album for the first time. But maybe not; having lived with them for many years, I can testify that the magic doesn't fade.

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