

Louis Armstrong, The Complete Louis Armstrong Decca Sessions (1935-1946)



Dan Morgenstern Grammy Award for Best Album Notes 2010

In order to enhance the enjoyment of the wonderful music contained in this collection, let's set the stage and briefly review Louis Armstrong's activities in the year preceding his Decca debut on October 3, 1935, kicking off the longest sustained relationship with a label in his 48 years of recording.

The fall of 1934 found Louis in Paris, ready to end the most extended vacation of his life. After performances in England in April, he had settled in the City of Lights with his companion, Alpha Smith,

resting his embouchure and enjoying some well-earned leisure and the company of the numerous African-American musicians and entertainers living in or passing through the French capital. By mid-October, he was ready to begin rehearsing with a newly assembled band including players who'd worked with him in 1932 and 1933, among them hometowners Pete Ducong and Oliver Tines.

They opened to great acclaim (Louis recalled he had to take so many curtain calls that he was in his bathrobe by the last) in the Salle Pleyel. He also recorded in early November for French Brunswick, some 19 months after the last U.S. session for RCA Victor in Chicago on April 26, 1933. This ended the longest dry spell in the Armstrong recording career, which had begun a decade before, on April 6, 1923. The Parisian recordings and concerts were followed by performances in France, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, and finally Italy, where Louis performed in Torino (unlike Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy did not at this stage ban black artists) on January 15th and 16th. On the 24th, he left for home onboard the liner *Champlain*.

Though Louis had been set to front Chick Webb's band at Harlem's Apollo, an injunction served by his former manager, Johnny Collins, prevented that, and to add insult to injury, Lil Armstrong served papers for back alimony. Louis repaired to Chicago, warmly welcomed by old friends and colleagues, but aside from a surprise vocal appearance with Duke Ellington, he did not perform in public until July 1, when he unveiled a new band in Indianapolis. By then, Collins and Lil had been handled by Louis' new manager, Joe Glaser, who'd run the Sunset Café where Louis starred in the '20s and whom Louis had remembered when trouble brewed. Reduced by Depression

economics to handling second-string boxers and such, Glaser was more than happy to resume relations with a man he knew was a huge talent. They shook hands (nothing was signed) and the two men, an odd but most effective couple, would be parted only by Glaser's death in 1969. The new band, with Zilner Randolph, Louis' musical director in 1931 and '33, again in charge, was recalled by several members as a very good one, but it was short-lived and undocumented—no records or airchecks. With it, Louis revisited New Orleans and toured busily, but a September week at the Apollo was its last stand. Louis had been booked for a three-month run at Connie's Inn — a plummy deal — but union rules did not permit an out-of-town-based band to play a long engagement in New York (each individual musician had to “sit out” his new card for six months, with only casual gigs allowed).

As luck would have it, a ready-made band was available, and it was one with which Louis was very familiar. Though major changes had taken place in the ranks of Luis Russell's orchestra since it had last toured with Armstrong in 1930, some of the old faces were still there — most importantly, New Orleanians Pops Foster and Paul Barbarin, a bassist and drummer who could provide the kind of strong propulsion that the trumpeter favored. Even Russell himself was an adopted Crescent City guy, having moved there from his native Panama while still in his teens.

So it was a bit of an old-home week when Louis and Luis and the cats got together to prepare for their opening at the club where Louis had made his New York debut in 1929, launching the Broadway hit show *Connie's Hot Chocolates*, with which he (and Glaser) had made peace after some rather stormy misunderstandings during the Collins regime. The opening was set for October 29, but Glaser had signed his client with an enterprising new record label run by Jack Kapp, already a veteran in a business that had been badly bruised by the Depression, and he wanted records on sale before that date.

As a major producer (the term “A&R man” had not yet been invented) at Brunswick, Kapp had recorded much jazz, created the first album (many younger people don't understand that the 78 era was dominated by singles; only operas and longer classical works were marketed in album format) to feature black stars (Blackbirds of 1932, with Cab Calloway, Ethel Waters, Bill Robinson, Adelaide Hall, the Mills Brothers and the bands of Duke Ellington and Don Redman — so rare that this veteran observer has only seen it once), and otherwise indulged in a passion for combining the label's major artists. It was a passion he'd carry over to Decca, as we will hear.

When he founded Decca (the name borrowed from a British label that backed him) in 1934, the record business had just begun its slow climb up from the rock-bottom hit in 1932. Few labels survived from the previous decade's plethora. Dominant and relatively unscathed was RCA Victor. Brunswick had changed hands three times in rapid succession. And Columbia, already in trouble before the market crash, was now among the brands acquired by the American Record Company, which was owned by a manufacturer of buttons.

Records featuring name artists sold for 75 cents; there were cheaper ones, such as Victor's Bluebird, but these carried lesser-known or regional performers only. Kapp's idea was to sign major talent and sell records for 35 cents (four for a dollar). His ace was Bing Crosby, who had a stake; another potent early act was the Mills Brothers, whose enormous popularity, on radio and screen as well as records, has almost been forgotten. There can be little doubt that Crosby, a huge Armstrong fan, was all in favor of his signing. Also among the starters on Decca was the band on Bing's radio show, Jimmy Dorsey's. (Kid brother Tommy, on Victor, sold for almost twice the price.) Louis' first

Decca date took place more than three weeks before his Connie's Inn opening; his first release bore the catalog number 579. (The first Decca, numbered 100, was by Bing Crosby.) This was the start of something big!

As we mentioned, the Russell band was no longer the one that had backed Louis on masterpieces like the 1930s **DALLAS BLUES** and **BLUE TURNING GREY OVER YOU**, and on its own, been responsible for a string of brilliant discs with a unique quality combining the spirit of New Orleans' polyphony with the punch of a swinging larger ensemble. By the advent of its final record date, on August 8, 1934, it was into a Casa Loma bag, like so many bands of that day, and featured the sweet and high tenor of Sonny Woods (who, by the way, remained with Louis well into the 1940s, but never recorded; Armstrong also always had a girl singer). With the notable exception of Rex Stewart, the featured soloist, the personnel was almost identical to the one on this opening session. In addition to Foster and Barbarin, holdovers from the glory days were two saxophonists, Charlie Holmes (alto) and Greely Walton (tenor). The lead trumpeter was Leonard (Ham) Davis, who'd been with Charlie Johnson's fine band and is best remembered for his work on the famous Eddie Condon's Hot Shots session that combined Harlemites with Chicagoans then in New York and Jack Teagarden. His section mates were Gus Aiken, a product of the famous Jenkins Orphanage in Charleston, South Carolina, whose recording career began in the early '20s and peaked with Sidney Bechet in 1940, and Louis Bacon, briefly with Duke Ellington (when he was married to Ivy Anderson) and later active in Europe. The trombones were Jimmy Archey, who'd made frequent appearances with King Oliver on Victor and would become a mainstay of the traditional revival, and Harry (Father) White, a gifted arranger who'd been with Cab Calloway — composer of **EVENIN'** of Lester Young-Jimmy Rushing fame. With Holmes and Walton in the reed section were altoist Henry (Moon) Jones and Bingie Madison on tenor, clarinet and occasional baritone. Madison, an erstwhile bandleader in his own right, soon became the straw boss of the band, Russell being too nice a guy to serve as enforcer of discipline — a role Armstrong always eschewed. That job enabled Bingie to claim the lion's share of clarinet and tenor solos on record dates, not always with the most fortunate results. Rounding out the rhythm section was Lee Blair, who'd recorded with Jelly Roll Morton on banjo and would much later revert to that instrument with Wilbur De Paris.

Because Russell had been responsible for most of the arranging in the golden age of his band, it's been assumed that he also was its primary arranger during the Armstrong era, until the arrival of Joe Garland, but I doubt that this was so. Unfortunately, very few of the band's vintage charts have survived. White, as mentioned, was a skilled arranger, and so was Madison, and we do know that Chappie Willet did a good deal of writing for Louis in 1937 and possibly later as well. And some of the early charts in particular were doctored stock arrangements; it is a little-known fact in jazz circles these days that such arrangements were turned out in huge numbers during the heyday of Tin Pan Alley — roughly from the late 'teens to the mid-40s of the past century. They were a by-product of sheet music and served the needs of the hundreds of bands throughout the nation to provide danceable versions of the latest pop tunes, which issued forth in a steady stream from music publishers. The jazz academics of today have scant comprehension of the ties between music publishers and the record business, confusing, for example, racism and business practices. Critics and biographers of Armstrong haven't done much better in this respect, devoting much verbiage to downgrading the tunes, arrangements and performances on the recordings presented here. Even as notable a commentator as Gunther Schuller reflects this attitude. As I have often pointed out, the music speaks for itself, negating most of those words, but some 50 years after first coming to the defense of Louis' Blue Deccas in print there is still a need to put things right, alas. Max Harrison, the

fine British critic, is among the few who understand and appreciate what Armstrong accomplished in this stage of his development as an artist.

A few words about repertory. Of the 137 selections included herein, quite a few in alternate versions, 47 are the work of major composers. While there's only one Ellington and one Gershwin, Hoagy Carmichael has six, Irving Berlin and Jimmy McHugh five each, and Johnny Burke four. Others include Arlen, Warren, Schwartz and Mercer. There are 18 numbers that could be considered Armstrong canon classics, such as **DIPPER MOUTH**, **WEST END BLUES** and **MAHOGANY HALL STOMP**, and no less than 13 Armstrong compositions — one under two titles, **COAL CART BLUES** and **SACHEL MOUTH SWING**. Another batch consists of spirituals and Americana (some of the Mills Brothers collaborations, and the Lyn Murray chorus items). And the remainder is by no means all of inferior caliber, unless you disdain novelties and samples from the not-so-great American Songbook. And everything on this varied menu is given the Armstrong treatment — this man never disdained what was served up but always found a way to enhance it. He had that magic touch, which also enabled him to rise above the shortcomings of his accompaniments, be they lack of imagination (arrangements) or flaws in execution (improving as we move along).

(A) OCTOBER 3, 1935

I'M IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE, one of those many tunes turned into jazz standards by our man, gives us Louis right from the start — his muted horn (straight mute — the only one he employed) presenting McHugh's good melody with only minor embellishments, yet making it his own. Since we will hear this special kind of paraphrase so often, let me quote Max Harrison: "The effect of the changes he makes...is inexplicable: the melodies remain themselves yet are utterly transformed." The beautiful sound he makes, of course, is part of that effect, as is the ease of execution he has achieved at this stage. This also applies to the singing, as subtle and varied in its inflections as the trumpeting - and, at times, almost as rangy. Here he launches himself over moaning saxophones with an "ooh" that settles the tempo. Open horn, with more improvisation than the muted passage, and one of those patented (but always different) cadenzas.

YOU ARE MY LUCKY STAR, also brand-new, is among the best inventions of the prolific team of Nacio Herb Brown and Arthur Freed. Louis opens the proceedings with an infectious scat break (note how he almost always sets him-self up, vocally and instrumentally, with a break, thus avoiding having to enter, so to speak, in moving traffic; like a conductor, he can control the tempo for what follows), then puts the words across with a nice obbligato from Bacon's muted trumpet. And now a surprise: the tempo, balladic up to now, almost doubles, and Louis creates a free and fanciful improvisation on open horn that is star-tlingly fresh and new in phrasing and harmonic movement. As Henry "Red" Allen once told me, this was Louis' way of "showing that he had something new for us," not having been heard from on records in the U.S. for two-and-a-half years (those French Brunswicks were not issued here until after World War II). The alto spot by Holmes gets nice Pops Foster hacking, and then Louis takes it out, triumphantly.

LA CUCARACHA, a Mexican hit about a pot-smoking cockroach, was verbally sanitized for north of the border consumption, but the ferocious scattling Louis offers (after a muted trumpet opening over pretty, well-executed rumbaing by the rhythm section and a happy hut fairly straight

vocal reading of the lyrics) makes me suspect he knew what that cockroach indulged in. A Walton tenor spot, and then open trumpet takes it out with a single chorus.

GOT A BRAN' NEW SUIT, by the team of Schwartz and Dietz from the Broadway musical *At Home Abroad* is treated to the best chart yet and a nice, relaxed tempo. Louis, sounding very youthful here, seems to enjoy the words (a sharp dresser, he certainly identified with the topic). The alto hit is by Moon Jones rather than Holmes, after some Walton tenor, then Louis enters (on the originally issued take) with a quote from **SWEET AND HOT**, which he refers to again in a fine, creative open solo, ending with a call to bring in the hand, over which he lands, for once without a coda. The alternate take, first issued on CD, is not as interesting; only the tenor spot is better solo-wise and trumpet and hand don't clinch as well after Louis' outing, which does not contain the **SWEET AND HOT** references.

(B) NOVEMBER 21, 1935

I'VE GOT MY FINGERS CROSSED, like **I'M SHOOTING HIGH**, stems from the McHugh-Ted Koehler score to the film *King of Burlesque*, starring comely Alice Faye. Waxed by Fats Waller, who appeared in the film as well, it's a happy ditty, treated to a sunny vocal at a nice bounce tempo. First muted (16 bars), then open, in on a break, Louis fashions a splendid bridge; the arranged ending is good. The alternate take is slower, as is almost always the case with the earlier version, but in spite of a slight glitch in medias res, the open solo is more audacious. I think this is a Father White arrangement.

OLD MAN MOSE, a Louis original, is a piece of humorous but also somewhat weird folklore of the kind he loved. The three(!) takes differ considerably in terms of setting. The first opens with a hand intro and chorus; then Louis sings the verse and the bandsmen, glee-clubbing, do the responses on the choruses. After a drum break, they do a gospel end-ing, Louis tenoring above. Take two is faster; piano starts it, then an open trumpet chorus, and a repeat by Russell sets up the vocal business, Louis sounding more nasal this time — the rest proceeds as take one. Take three is essentially the same as two, except for a more sprightly trumpet episode. This piece gained notoriety (and no doubt nice royalties for the composer) when recorded by Eddie Duchin's popular hand; the glee-club responses to Patricia Norman's vocal-made "bucket" sound like something with a different initial consonant, getting it banned from airplay.

I'M SHOOTING HIGH, at a relaxed middle tempo that suits the pleasant melody, offers muted trumpet in front, with ideas that still sound modern, if you like that term, while Bingie's tenor sounds archaic, a fine vocal framed by scat breaks, open trumpet exchanges with the hand, and some interplay with Barbarin's drums.

WAS I TO BLAME FOR FALLING IN LOVE WITH YOU is one of those Armstrong transformations — as the theme song of Richard Himher's staid hand it was far from memorable. This one has special meaning for me. Like most young jazz fans, I had arrived at Louis via the Hot Five and Sevens and gone a hit beyond by the time I met my mentor, trumpeter Nat (Face) Lorber, who among other things introduced me to the blue Deccas, and to a listening-enhancing herb. And this was the first Louis I heard under the influence, picked by Nat because I already liked it. Decades later, my friend Loren Schoenberg interviewed the great arranger-composer-pianist Ralph Burns, who, *mirabile dictu*, had experienced the same initiation! At a bright ballad tempo it starts right on

with open Louis, working his wizardry on the theme, with a lovely, mellow, slightly veiled tone. Trombones do the bridge, then a few bars of poor Gus Aiken, sounding positively ugly compared to the master. When he sings, Louis sounds as if he has a cold — he was going through some tonsil problems at the time — but that’s kind of enhancing. He does a couple of scat breaks, and dig how he utters the word “happy” (twice)! After a strident clarinet outburst, Louis improvises from the bridge on, climaxing with one of those almost operatic endings. It’s a gasser, as Lord Buckley would have put it.

(C) DECEMBER 13, 1935

RED SAILS IN THE SUNSET, of British origin and nothing to write home about, is floated by our man, right out of the gate, muted. Then a lovely bridge but an awful sax section, making Louis moan to bring on the vocal. He does the best he can, and note his articulation — no word wasted. Awful band again (this is probably a stock), prompting an almost pained downward glissando from Louis, who then creates a gentle landing. **ON TREASURE ISLAND**, a better song and a somewhat better chart, again opens right on with a muted melodic paraphrase, the last eight bars cast entirely in his own mold. Orchestra bells (discographies insist on vibes, but this shorter version was what drummers were likely to set up in the studio) dress up the vocal -dig Louis’ time on the bridge — then a band interlude and open horn right into the coda, which turns out to be the origin of, 22 years later, his vocal ending to **HIGH SOCIETY CALYPSO** (“Did you hear old Satchmo swinging in that beautiful High Society?”) in the opening scene of the eponymous film. He never forgot a good invention.

(D) DECEMBER 18, 1935

THANKS A MILLION, theme song of a 1936 film that featured Paul Whiteman’s orchestra (Ramona, his singing pianist, introduced it) is given royal treatment by our Pops, who brings it right on, open horn in mellow mid-range, then climbing in that unique, never copied manner — it seems as if he could do what he wanted on the horn, as naturally as breathing. Turgid band passes, then a soulful vocal with good (and prominent) Russell backing and transition to half-chorus trumpet recap of theme and top ending. The alternate is quite similar, the main difference being a bit more embellishment in the opening statement, and a tad faster tempo, but everything is just as sure-footed and spot-on. (This is an instance where the sorry arrangement, poorly executed, is truly off-putting in its extreme contrast to Louis’ mastery.)

Fortunately, the band improves as this highly productive day in the studio progresses. **SHOE SHINE BOY**, by the prolific team of Sammy Cahn and Saul Chaplin, will no doubt be considered politically incorrect by some, but I very much doubt it was so perceived by the song’s subjects. This was 1935, still deep Depression time, and there is nothing about the words of this song that seems insulting or belittling, certainly not in the way Armstrong interprets them. Unquestionably he was able to put himself in those shoes, considering his youthful experiences. It would be a pity if a listener would let anything get in the way of fully appreciating this masterpiece. It is among the highlights of this collection, from the opening vocal, with a gem of a scat break at the end of the bridge, and nice Russell backing made up all of Louis phrases, leading up to the trumpet solo, so perfectly relaxed at true ballad tempo, and so romantic in conception (Louis turned the trumpet into a romantic instrument, of course). A high point is the subtle use of double time in the bridge, leading up to the grand climax of the final eight (Red Allen dug this, believe you me), up to the clear and clean final climb. Perfection! (And from this sprang **SHOE SHINE SWING**, of course, as well as

Roy Eldridge's vocal and instrumental offerings — the latter alas too brief on Fletcher Henderson's recording.)

Not content with one masterpiece, Louis moves on to another, which has survived in no less than three takes — the C one, I'm happy to reveal, discovered by me among the treasures in the Institute of Jazz Studies collection, in this instance part of the Marshall Stearns legacy, and first issued on the leadoff LP set in a series Ed Berger and I produced for Franklin Mint's long since vanished record division. **SOLITUDE** is the only Ellington tune recorded by Louis until the advent of their joint record date in 1961, though **DON'T GET AROUND MUCH ANYMORE** was in his repertory in the '40s (an aircheck exists), whatever the reason, if any, might be. **SOLITUDE**, perhaps Ellington's biggest hit of the decade, is made to order for Louis, who responds to its emotional turbulence as well as its dramatic structure. The three-minute form allows for an opening cadenza, a passionate vocal chorus, a powerful trumpet solo with an exceptionally expressive stop-time bridge, and a spectacular climactic climb to the stratosphere. All this at a tempo neither too slow nor too fast, the whole development perfectly poised. The band plays a purely supportive role, with Russell's piano again excellent behind the vocal (the engineer on this session must have been a piano fan); there are also vib or bell touches. There are only the faintest time differences between the takes, and not much else to set them apart — the trumpet execution from demanding start to lip-smarting finish is almost flawless throughout. But subtle differences in phrasing are present and make it more than worthwhile to have these three versions — try the stop-time segment, or the opening, in turn! The unflagging inspiration and consistency manifested here is truly awesome — for once the proper word.

Is it jolting to move on from such sublimity to the fun and games of **I HOPE GABRIEL LIKES MY MUSIC**. Clearly not for Louis, so why should it be for you, dear listener? Gary Giddins has so well illuminated that Louis did not distinguish between art and entertainment, perceiving none of the dichotomy that intellectuals insist upon. He has fun with this novelty, a musical category he felt at home with, as did his disciple Louis Jordan, starting with such things as **KING OF THE ZULUS** and flowering with **YOU RASCAL, YOU**. This one is one of those “introducing the band” numbers, and we meet the Messrs. Walton, Archey and Russell, and can enjoy the superb timing of the spoken passages. There's room for some sparkling trumpet in a minor key, and when Louis asks, “How's that, Gabe?” he makes you believe he really is serving it up for Gabriel — and of course he IS!

(E) JANUARY 18, 1936

A month later, we get two more novelties, the first a cover of a big hit by trombonist Mike Riley, a.k.a. “The Man with the Funny Little Horn,” active on 52nd Street, and recording for Decca **THE MUSIC GOES 'ROUND AND AROUND (AND IT COMES OUT HERE)** The band takes a full chorus, scored in concert, at a very relaxed tempo, then Louis sings (to make its point fully, it really needs a visual element, but he makes us see the instrument described) and takes up the trumpet, sounding great in middle register, doing a spiffy bridge, then up an octave for his second chorus — and dig this bridge! By the end, he has once again transformed a piece of harmless fluff into genuine musical substance. We get two takes of **RHYTHM SAVED THE WORLD**, one of those little lessons in history a la Swing. The main event is the trumpet work (aside from the scat breaks), a full chorus with breaks and a brief coda that's a bit slower on the B take, on which the breaks with the band come off just a bit better, as does the chorus, in spite of a slight clam.

(F) FEBRUARY 4, 1936

This session for some reason teams Louis with 10 first-call New York studio cats, all white and including Louis' favorite disciple, the marvelous Bunny Berigan, who gets no spots but leads the ensemble with his unmistakable tone for four bars after the vocal on **I'M PUTTIN' ALL MY EGGS IN ONE BASKET**, a very nice Berlin number, introduced by Louis' trumpet a capella, then with ensemble, Paul Ricci's tenor on the bridge. Sid Trucker's clarinet is heard behind the vocal, as well as Fiji McGrath's good piano, and we end with four solid bars of trumpet and a cadenza. Stan King's good time and sound (he's on a myriad records from the '20s and '30s) shores things up, also on **YES-YES!, MY-MY! (SHE'S MINE)**, a lesser example of the songwriters' art but inspiring Louis' best work of this date; note his wonderfully secure time as he paints it blue after the vocal; don't miss that descending passage. (Trombonist Al Philburn will be heard from again.) This was not Louis' first session with an otherwise all white band — he did it in 1929 on two occasions with Seger Ellis, Stan King on hand for both of them.

(G) APRIL 28, 1936

A couple more novelties, both by the concoctor of **I HOPE GABRIEL LIKES MY MUSIC**, Dave Franklin. Someone named Dutch Smith contributes to the vocal exchanges, but aside from Louis' fine 16 bars of open trumpet, the main event is half that amount of solo space for the new man in the band, Snub Mosley, replacing Harry White. Snub, a former star of the great Alphonso Trent band from Texas, and lately with Claude Hopkins, didn't stay with Louis long, moving on to lead his own groups for the rest of his life. He was an original. **I COME FROM A MUSICAL FAMILY** is perhaps an even lesser effort, but for a fabulous, transformative trumpet solo that makes us forgive and forget the rest.

(H) APRIL 29, 1936

The next day's session was reserved for just one number, Louis and Horace Gerlach's lovely ballad **IF WE NEVER MEET AGAIN**. The opening passages pit the composer's muted obbligato against Madison's doleful "hotel" tenor melody; blessedly, Louis has the bridge to himself. That muted stuff is the Louis Bobby Hackett came from, as the late Dick Sudhalter pointed out. Then he sings, again proving himself a master balladeer, and takes it home with a brief but potent open horn ending, up high. Dormant for years, this fine piece of music was revived by Keely Smith on a Capitol LP from the '60s, no doubt turned on to it by then hubby (and Armstrong worshipper) Louis Prima. Lyricist and likely co-composer Gerlach (he was a pianist, and later spent some time playing intermission at Jimmy Ryan's on 52nd Street) had also collaborated with Louis on his first autobiography *Swing That Music*, celebrated in the next session.

(I) MAY 18, 1936

This is perhaps the greatest of our sessions — a veritable banquet of masterpieces. In fact, Australia's Swaggie label, which specialized in "little" LPs, issued it on one simply titled **MAY 18, 1936**. It starts with two Hoagy Carmichael specialties for Louis: **LYIN' TO MYSELF** and **EV'NTIDE**. Hoagy and Louis had memorably duetted on the debut recording of Hoagy's **ROCKIN' CHAIR** in 1929, and their friendship would culminate with Hoagy hosting a star-studded birth-day party for Louis in 1970.

LYIN' TO MYSELF starts without an introduction with Louis' open horn. He improvises from the git-go, knowing that the melody will come into its own when he sings it, and it's clear that the chops are in superb shape, the phrasing so free and almost fluid that he seems to be speaking the notes, his mid-register sound so full and burnished. The vocal portion begins with a half-spoken passage, and there are further asides during the exposition of Stanley Adams' nice lyrics. He ends with one of those special scat breaks. A brief trumpet recap of the theme melds into a splendid, harmonically challenging cadenza with a spectacular climax, yet the entire performance has a charmingly intimate ambiance. **EV'NTIDE**, though little known (only Bob Wilber, to my knowledge, has recorded it since Louis), is one of Carmichael's most soulful paeans to nature; here he is both composer and lyricist. Louis responds to Hoagy's rustic romanticism, as he did to **LAZY RIVER** this kind of stuff is up his alley — and the vocal is totally convincing, with such special touches as the break in midstream, and the phrasing of the last eight before the scat break finish. What follows is a textbook demonstration of how to enhance and make one's own a melody (a good one in this instance), with sublime use of repeated notes and phrases, and how to build up to and conclude a dramatic (but not theatrical) finish. This solo is one of many reflecting what Louis Armstrong learned from the great opera singers whose records he owned and cherished, but it has a nobility all its own.

The scene changes for **SWING THAT MUSIC**, the title of his brand-new autobiography — the first book by and about a jazz artist. A challenge to the band, this romp, which has something in common with the New Orleans jazz classics that grew out of that city's street parade tradition, is set up by the band en bloc, paced in particular by Pops Foster's potently propulsive bass (he was using an aluminum instrument then, as was young Israel Crosby, and as Vince Giordano is today) at a very brisk tempo. Louis' vocal makes the line "I'm as happy as I can be when they swing that music for me" ring true, and then the sax section does itself proud, setting the stage for a true bravura turn by the star, who, after restating the theme with panache, launches himself into space, floating long notes, and then firing off 42 rounds of Cs above high C, placed with maximum swing in the band's racetrack stream. (It took two young trumpet stars to replicate this tour de force in a Louis tribute of the 1990s - Jon Faddis and Wynton Marsalis shared that daunting task.) Louis' tune eventually became something of a standard in the latter-day mainstream jazz repertory, but wisely without attempts at that climax.

Things settle down for **THANKFUL**, a nice enough ballad by the Cahn-Chaplin team. Louis opens it vocally, peaking on the bridge; the tune's best part. The same thing happens in the trumpet solo, which starts pretty high up; he treats the bridge to stop time, and it bears relistening (digital recording has brought us old-timers back to 78 days, when you just put the arm back to where you wanted, which you couldn't do with LPs; now we just grab the remote). Coleman Hawkins, a Louis man from way back, dug this stage of Pops via records in Europe — listen to his **OUT OF NOWHERE** solo, for one.

RED NOSE is a cute one by the Lake Sisters (female songwriters were not uncommon, but this was the only sister team — and speaking of Hawk, he became a column item when spotted, now back home on 52nd Street, with a Lake lady on each arm; they were what was then called "lookers"). Note how Louis, in his opening vocal, gives words like "sensitive" and "defensive" special attention and weight, not to mention "death throes," which rhymes with the title. (Louis never condescends to his material, so why should we?) His open horn is very relaxed, and don't miss the pretty muted ending — no high notes there, Mr. Schuller! This great session ends on happy note, with Louis' second recorded revisit to **MAHOGANY HALL STOMP**, and his and the band's first

Decca instrumental. Pops Foster, who was on the first one back in 1929, is in there from the start — this one is faster, if not quite as up as the intervening Victor, vintage '33 — and Louis is again very relaxed in his two choruses after the band's opener. Jimmy Archey, with his typical clipped phrasing, and dependable Greely Walton, are the next soloists, both in their last hurrah with Louis — by the time the band records again, more than a year later, both are gone — and then Louis, muted, does his set stuff, including that long held note. Holmes, another '29 repeater, and Foster are heard from and open Louis rides out over the band, bringing to mind what Archey said on Louis' 50th birthday: "Compare Louis with the fox and the hounds. The hounds always try to catch the fox but the fox is always ahead of them. So keep on trottin', Louis, on and on."

(J) AUGUST 7, 1936

The combination of Armstrong and the Jimmy Dorsey band, our first instance of Jack Kapp-styled artists mix-and-match, was undoubtedly prompted by the event celebrated at the following session: the release of *Pennies from Heaven*, Bing Crosby's debut as a film producer (but not as a movie star; he was already an established one). It was also the first film to give Louis featured billing and the opportunity to act as well as play and sing. A great example of the art of film it wasn't, just a pleasant little piece of Depression-era fluff, but it was nevertheless a milestone in Armstrong's career, and the start of much professional interaction between Bing and the man he would later eulogize as "the beginning and the end of music in America." It was Rudy Vallee, a crooner of a style quite different from Crosby's, who had been among the first to comment on the musical kinship between the two, in his perceptive foreword to Louis' autobiography; we'll encounter Mr. Vallee again soon. The eponymous song from the film's score has of course become an evergreen in the Great American Songbook bouquet, but Louis' big moment was his rendition of **THE SKELETON IN THE CLOSET**. The plot involves the launching, by the impecunious Bing character, of a nightclub and ballroom set in a broken-down and rumored to be haunted house, with Louis as the floor show's star; this is mentioned to explain that the lyrics of **SKELETON** should not be heard as some kind of blackface jive — the spooks that figure here are the real thing, along with the ghosts, goblins, banshees and witches. And while the film's Armstrong character does exhibit some of the stereotypical traits assigned to black actors, his smiting of the skeleton by means of his trumpet (abetted by none other than a masked Lionel Hampton, the drummer in the band, who coaxes xylophone-like sounds from the skeleton's ribs with his sticks) is a genuine triumph over the black-folk-scared-of-ghosts film (and minstrelsy) cliché. Most jazz and film historians of later generations seem to have missed this point, not surprisingly.

On screen, Louis is backed by an all-black band; Decca turned the tables, teaming him with Jimmy Dorsey's men; there is a lovely photo from the August 17 session showing the star surrounded by admiring fellow musicians, the leader prominent among them (see left). Jimmy and Satchmo were no strangers; they had even recorded together before, on those Seger Ellis dates of 1929. The Dorsey band was then featured on Crosby's radio show; its somewhat unorthodox instrumentation of two (rather than the standard three) trumpets and three (rather than the standard two) trom-bones was a partial holdover from the Dorsey Brothers lineup, initially a single trumpet and four 'bones. It was solidly anchored in Ray McKinley's drumming; younger and more adept than Paul Barbarin, his backing of Louis, notably behind the marvelous Skeleton trumpet solo, is the best he gets here until the arrival of Sid Catlett.

The session opens with that number (issued in Great Britain as **THE SKELETON IN THE CUPBOARD**, the term “closet,” as in W.C., apparently considered somewhat offensive — social mores were different in those pre-Rap days!), introduced by spoken Armstrong warnings, and a vocal that extracts maximum mirth from words he clearly enjoys. Eight bars by the band (it has a good massed sound), and Louis enters on glorious open horn, doing amazing things with Arthur Johnston’s melody, dressed up with breaks, subtle shifts in tempo and a truly spectacular climax, all created with his own phraseology, which by this point in time had all of jazz worthy of the name speaking with his accent. After this masterpiece, the next two numbers seem mere diversions.

Louis does his best with **WHEN RUBEN SWINGS THE CUBAN’S** words (there will be better Latin things to come). Aided by the rhythm section, there are trumpet moments. Louis addresses Dorsey, who offers an alto spot, as “Brother Jimmy,” and does a nice wrap, McKinley in there with him. And so he is on the not very different new alternate take; however, Louis shouts just “Jimmy,” the “Brother” an apparent afterthought.

HURDY GURDY MAN, a Cahn and Chaplin follow-up to **SHOE SHINE BOY** in the socially conscious department, has a good band interlude, again en bloc, a bit of the Dorsey clarinet, some lovely trumpet, and another great wrap, way above the staff. A kick is Louis’ New Orleans rendering of gurdy as “goidy,” and his vocal recap suggestion to the grinder’s inevitable monkey, “Why don’t he smoke that thing?” We have a new alternate here as well, this one more interesting. Jimmy’s clarinet spot is in better sonic focus, Louis offers subtly different trumpeting, and the monkey isn’t invited to smoke. With the monkey business out of the way, time to get serious again with a visit to the past.

DIPPER MOUTH, as billed here, had “Blues” added in its first two incarnations, with King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band for Gennett and OKeh in 1923. Louis gets co-composer credit, and I’ve always wondered if he was not the one to create this most effective setting for the three comet choruses that became Oliver’s most famous solo, and — heresy! — if he did not perhaps give his mentor some ideas about that solo as well. After all, the piece is named for him (his second nickname, after “Little Louis”), isn’t it? In its second Armstrong presentation on records, with Fletcher Henderson two years later, it became **SUGAR FOOT STOMP**, via Don Redman, but the original title prevailed. Jimmy Dorsey was no stranger to the piece, having recorded it in early 1935, still under the Dorsey Brothers banner, but no doubt knew it before. Johnny Dodds’ clarinet solo with Oliver had also become standard fare, and Jimmy does Johnny (still alive then) justice, and he continues over the band (sounding quite similar to Bob Crosby’s) on his own. McKinley’s woodblock usage reminds us of Baby Dodds, another Oliver alumnus, and he also utters the required “Oh play that thing!” shout, after Louis’ majestic rendition of the solo choruses.

He’s got plenty of chops left for the final challenge, a most unusual choice, insofar as **SWING THAT THING** had been recorded less than three months before — labels commonly did not allow for such repertory duplication, but the idea may have been to further publicize Louis’ eponymous book, and get him some additional royalties. Whatever the motive, it’s certainly interesting to have this reading with a different band for comparison. The Dorsey boys are up by now and give their all for Louis, but while the reed section may be more accurate in its reading of that flashy soli chorus, the Russells are hotter! As for Louis, he is absolutely secure (we know that he did the number in his live performances at this juncture), and as was always the case with him, set in his presentation. (The idea of improvisation as the be-all and end-all of jazz is a questionable one, but too complex to be

dealt with here. Let's just say that once you have created a perfect thing, why mess with it — especially when it also depends on the assistance of others for full realization.) McKinley is again a brick, but Pops Foster's unique contribution was just that. Have fun with both versions!

(K) AUGUST 17, 1936

Ten days later, a rare 12-inch session. (The larger 78 format was generally reserved for classical music, and such longer “crossover” works like **RHAPSODY IN BLUE** and other Paul Whiteman-sponsored items, on some of which young Bing was present, as he was on Duke Ellington's **ST. LOUIS BLUES**, a Jack Kapp Brunswick brainstorm.) For Louis, this **“PENNIES FROM HEAVEN” MEDLEY** was a first, but his part is not prominent. He does give us another vocal version of **SKELETON**. First comes Frances Langford's pleasant, straight-forward **LET'S CALL A HEART A HEART** (also recorded by Billie Holiday). Langford, of course a Decca artist, is not a jazz singer, but she had talent (did a great job on **NASTY MAN**, for one) and durability. She and Bing duet companionably on **SO DO I** (Langford was not seen in the film but guested with Crosby on radio). Louis' **SKELETON** ends side one (the alternate take is quite similar in all respects but a trifle more secure by all parties, thus very probably the second of the two). We turn it over for the main event: **PENNIES FROM HEAVEN** interpreted by the three singers and Jimmy Dorsey, whose band has served well. Ladies first, then Louis. The key is high for him, but it's a special kick to hear him in that tenor range. This was quite probably his first **PENNIES**; until 2008, we didn't hear him do it again until the 1947 Town Hall Concert version, which included trumpet. But with the discovery and release of the 1937 Fleischmann's Yeast broadcasts, we have a fine big band **PENNIES** with trumpet from this era. Bing sounds more straight than usual after Louis; it is likely he was a bit intimidated. Jimmy's alto bit heats up things some again.

(L) AUGUST 18, 1936

The very next day (probably Louis was about to leave Los Angeles) Kapp involved him in another brainstorm. Hawaiian music had become a pop staple by 1936, and the producer would have known our man's first recorded encounter with the idiom, his 1930 hit (with the Russell band) **SONG OF THE ISLANDS**, also Louis' first with strings. So it wasn't that much of a stretch to have him guest with The Polynesians, beefed up by the presence of Lionel Hampton, who of course had made his vibes debut on records with Louis, also in 1930, and of course they'd just made the film together. It's the vibes that bring on **TO YOU, SWEETHEART ALOHA** (there should be a comma after “Sweetheart,” but one must have been enough for the publisher; however, Louis of course observes a proper pause, knowing that Aloha isn't the girl's name). Incapable of not swinging Louis infuses his vocal with jazz time and feeling. A long Hamp break sets up the muted trumpet, clinched seamlessly with the vocal recap. Hamp has the last say as well, and also intros **ON A COCOANUT ISLAND**, taken at a less balladic tempo that has Hamp switching to drums, which he plays well throughout. Louis again sings first, followed by a group vocal (they sing “oislands,” oy!). Then Louis launches lovely muted phrases against Sam Koki's steel guitar melody — nothing can interfere with his imagination and dedication!

(M) MARCH 24, 1937

Almost seven months later, back in New York, we get another Hawaiian encounter (the results of the first must have sold nicely). The participants are mostly the same, but for the absence of Hampton and the presence of leader ukulelist Andy Iona, a pretty big name in his circle. **ON A**

LITTLE BAMBOO BRIDGE, quite a nice tune, prompts a good vocal offering followed by steel guitar, and then the trumpet enters on a break with a signature Armstrong phrase, then an identical vocal break into a vocal reprise, with notably fine phrasing, ever so swinging — ending with that very same phrase, for the third time! It must have pleased Louis greatly, and he stored it in that capacious memory bank. It became a permanent part of his rendition of his theme song during the All Star phase. (It was Ricci Ricardi, a remarkable young Armstrong scholar at work on a book on those later years, who alerted me to this; I had heard **BAMBOO BRIDGE** before, of course, but not in recent decades, and might not have made this discovery on my unprompted rehearing.) **HAWAIIAN HOSPITALITY** is introduced by Louis in the native tongue. He then switches to English, handling the awkward tune (the bridge is passable) with aplomb and ending with some more Hawaiian. Koki again “steals” the melody, Louis entering muted on the bridge, sounding rather Bixish — Bobby Hackett dug this, I’m sure, but then Bobby, like Ruby Braff, dug everything by Louis, who here again lets nothing faze him.

(M) APRIL 7, 1937

Unlike the Hawaiian experiments, teaming Louis and the Mills Brothers made eminent sense. As mentioned before, this vocal quartet, by now three brothers and their father — John Mills Jr., the eldest and perhaps most gifted, having died in late 1935, and John Sr. having stepped in to take over the bass part, while the addition of a non-related guitarist also became necessary — had become enormously popular since their 1930 discovery. It was John Jr. who basically created the group’s distinctive blend and unique imitation of instruments, a recipe that proved so durable that even after John Sr. retired in 1956 they continued as a trio and eventually a duo, with Donald, the last surviving brother, joined by a nephew! It was their earliest work that was most jazz-oriented, but they remained musical and always had good time. The first date with Armstrong took place just two days before the trumpeter and his band made their debut on the Fleischmann’s Yeast Show. Dubbed *Harlem*, it cast Louis as the first black star of a sponsored network radio show; he had been selected by Rudy Vallee, host of the popular Fleischmann’s program since 1929 (it premiered on Black Thursday!), when he decided to take a three-month leave, among other things to attend the coronation of George VI. It was a milestone, but on a very long road: almost 20 years later, Nat King Cole failed to find a sponsor for his widely praised TV show; it ran for just one season in 1956–57. More years would pass before Bill Cosby, Redd Foxx and The Jeffersons broke the ice, but Louis’ Fleischmann’s stint remains, and likely will remain, the only broadcast show in its league starring a black jazz artist. During this spell, Louis and the band, always at the helm of an all-black stage show, broke Benny Goodman’s recently set and highly publicized attendance record at New York’s Paramount Theater, set similar records in Chicago, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, and became the first black act at many flagship theaters elsewhere in the land. It is in this context that Louis’ two consecutive Mills Brothers sessions should be heard — and enjoyed.

The material Kapp selected was not so much prompted by the fact that three of the four tunes were in the public domain as by interest in antebellum Americana. Even the 1905 **IN THE SHADE OF THE OLD APPLE TREE** reflects that kind of nostalgia, against a backdrop of ominous rumblings abroad and persistent economic problems at home. Those who hear **CARRY ME BACK TO OLD VIRGINNY** as politically incorrect might not know that it was composed by a black man, and even if the words are unpalatable, the melody is a fine one. Louis and the Brothers take it at a nice clip, stripping it of much of its sentimentality, and it’s instantly clear how compatible they are. (A word here also for guitarist Bernard Addison, already a much experienced musician with a fine ear

and beat.) There is nice contrast between the smooth blend of the Brothers and Louis' special timbre, and from the first number on, the backgrounds, often Swing Era riffs, are both musical and sympathetic, serving Louis well in both his roles. The subtlety of his trumpet playing in this intimate context is a joy to behold. On **VIRGINNY**, his offering could be described as sublime in its minimalist alternations of the melody and relaxed swing. This opener is the only piece done in a single take.

DARLING NELLY GRAY is my personal favorite of these first Mills encounters; it is a touching song of loss, words and music, and these artists put it across in a moving and imaginative fashion. The Brothers depart from their usual blend (the tenor lead is Donald, I think) as they present the verse. Louis sings the chorus, plays a muted melody solo, then backs the Brothers with perfectly spaced and conceived obbligato touches. Then he preaches, melodically, and concludes with an extended scat cadenza. Something else! And so is the alternate, with more subtle differences than the use of "think" rather than "know" in launching the sermon. Each is a gem, and Louis and the Brothers must have liked Nellie too, since they chose her for their Fleischmann's guest spot on May 14, giving us a third version to savor.

(O) JUNE 29, 1937

The second meeting is in the same spirit. On **IN THE SHADE OF THE OLD APPLE TREE** number one, Papa Mills has a prominent role in the opening chorus, then Louis enters with a vocal break, and his subsequent outing swings to the hilt as he throws in one of those patented "mamas." His trumpet, open this time, is again a model of purity in conception and execution. The Brothers close it over sustained trumpet notes. **APPLE** number two, no doubt the earlier take, is not as secure in overall execution, yet good to have, particularly for the more embellished trumpet solo — he pared himself down. Stephen Foster's **THE OLD FOLKS HOME** is the most controversial of these offerings, but there is nothing problematic about the open trumpet rendition of the melody, pure and simple, restrained over the Mills whole-note backing. The Brothers sing it, Harry emerging solo, and then Brother Armstrong proceeds to preach in a mockingly hortatory mode. It is impossible to miss the sarcasm with which he renders the most offensive of Foster's words, and the signifying ending also speaks for itself. This, and the alternate, with a bit more freedom in the trumpet opening and even more bite in the preaching, represent a strictly 1937 approach to such material, and we can be certain that it was so perceived by its knowing audience, black and white. In future meetings, the Armstrong-Mills menu will be quite different, if with an up-to-date contro-versial dish included.

(P) JULY 2, 1937

Louis' next film after *Pennies from Heaven* was the musical *Artists and Models* starring Jack Benny. Armstrong was featured with Martha Raye, who was an avocational jazz singer, and a good one, lightly blacked up, as Hollywood standards of the day demanded (remember that Barney Bigard and Juan Tizol are seen in blackface with the Ellington band in *Check and Double-check* from 1930; no progress had been made in the interim). **PUBLIC MELODY NUMBER ONE**, not one of Harold Arlen's most memorable creations, was the musical theme for an elaborately staged number (by the young director Vincente Minelli) with dancers portraying G-Men (white) and gangsters (black, with musical instruments as "weapons"). Gang leader Louis deploys his trumpet in a manner that for once fits film and jazz critic Krin Gabbard's conception of it as a phallic symbol, while Martha's moll character wears a skintight, short-skirted dress and does some suggestive wiggling. This combination did not please Southern film distributors and the sequence was not seen by white audiences below

the Mason-Dixon line. The filming had been done in May, requiring Louis to fly to L.A. from Chicago, then back to New York, between two Fleischmann's shows and an Apollo opening; his westward flight was delayed for five hours due to a sandstorm (nothing new under the sun, folks). He recaps the number here, just after his Fleischmann's run had ended, in good humor. The main event is the trumpet pyrotechnics, in interaction with the band (good Barbarin work), with some half-valve stuff and a grand climb to the cadenza, the band exhorting Louis with a "Look Out, Satch!"

The mood changes for **YOURS AND MINE**, a Brown-Freed ballad not without merit (it was also done by Billie Holiday). Louis invests it with considerable feeling, vocally and instrumentally, a very slight clam reflecting his involvement in rephrasing the melody. The nice ending, written into the score, makes me suspect that this is the first of several charts by the excellent Chappie Willet, of whom more later.

The session ends with an Armstrong original, **RED CAP**. His collaborator on this tribute to an African-American branch of the working class was none other than Ben Hecht, man of many parts, among them playwright and screenwriter (coauthor of the big success in both media, *The Front Page*, later remade as *His Girl Friday*), novelist (*Count Bruga*, a most fanciful twentieth-century picaresque, is ripe for rediscovery) and political activist. (If anyone knows how Ben and Louis got together, please let me know!) Not sure Hecht wrote any other song lyrics, but these are pretty good, no doubt with input from his collaborator. The clarinet trio intro hints of Russell's hand, and after the vocal, the band (again, dig the drummer) offers good support for an open trumpet flight graced with embellishments and little slurs before the final climb. I have a hunch that Louis probably did several run-throughs of the taxing **PUBLIC ENEMY** climax and now tries to ease it on the chops after having nailed it.

(Q)JULY 7, 1937

Just five days later he's certainly back on form, and this is a very productive day in the studio. Our friends the Messrs. Cahn and Chaplin produced the long-titled **SHE'S THE DAUGHTER OF A PLANTER FROM HAVANA**. Don't make the mistake of anticipating a piece of Latin fluff — the lyric refers to "a young Americana (who's) teaching her swing," and in Louis' good hands, this daughter has it made. The vocal (verse and chorus), backed by good rhythm-section work, is a nice warm-up for a muted trumpet exploration not to be missed — you'll want to hear it again. It's yet another demonstration of Louis' absolute transcendence of such limiting concepts as "modern." It, and the subsequent open horn excursion, in contrasting swing rhythm, bring to mind Ellington's "beyond category." I got this on 78 around 1950 and would gladly pocket a nickel for every time I've listened to it since.

Chappie Willet is definitely the author of the terrific arrangement of Irving Berlin's breakthrough opus, **ALEXANDER'S RAGTIME BAND**, already hoary in 1937. Louis, Chappie and the band give it new life, from dramatic band opening to brass fanfare announcing the vocal, delivered in declamatory style, with typical Satchmo interjections ("listen, gate"). A band interlude with a **SWANEE RIVER** interpolation extending its quotation in the tune sets up open trumpet and Louis parses plenty, offering some more pointers for future practitioners. He then leads the trumpet section in a nifty ending that will be echoed in the intro-duction to the upcoming serving of some hot **BARBECUE**.

CUBAN PETE, the flip side of the Havana daughter, and not surprisingly in rumba rhythm, at a nice clip, has muted Louis in front, very relaxed and making good use of stop time. The vocal's groove is a carryover from Alexander's — both are about band leaders. Open horn with breaks, and an octave jump for the high ending.

I'VE GOT A HEART FULL OF RHYTHM is yet another Armstrong opus, with Horace Gerlach of **SWING THAT MUSIC** collaborating. The vocal's message is once again Depression-oriented and aimed at the most affected audience. It gets spirited delivery — Louis was up for this date — and is followed by Albert Nicholas' clarinet, as welcome as it is rare (as we now know from airchecks, this notable New Orleans master was much more in evidence outside the recording studio). Holmes takes the bridge, but Nick comes back. Then open Louis, up high from the start — the tessitura of this solo is elevated — launches himself into his second chorus with a long note, then improvises (catch the bridge — like Benny Carter, Louis was a master bridge builder) up to the no-coda ending. Again, the band is very good.

The day's work ends with **SUN SHOWERS**, a ballad by Brown and Freed at their best (again, also recorded by Billie). This is an emotion-packed performance, from start to finish. Louis is a bit hoarse by now, but that in no way impedes his ability to tell a story with exceptional phrasing, giving maximum value to every word. A piano flourish sets up the trumpet solo, and it maintains the warmth of the singing, indeed raises it. This is Louis the transformer, the creator of musical drama of the highest order. Note the use of double time and of contrasting four-bar phrases, and the harmonic daring of the climax, up to the powerful sustained high note. And to those who have disdained the Armstrong penchant for high-note endings — pray tell, what would you substitute for comparable effect? Nothing in this superb reading of what is not extraordinary material fails to reach the highest level.

(R) NOVEMBER 15, 1937

More than four months later, a reduced personnel tackles an old and a new song. We're in L.A., and thus the substitute for a temporarily sidelined Pops Foster is a very young and gifted local bassist, George Red Callender, making his recording debut in august company.

ONCE IN A WHILE, the new song, starts with an Armstrong vocal that strips the words of their sentimentality but by no means is lacking in sentiment. The chorus by the band begins with Bingie Madison's clarinet, not at its worst, but marked by his saxophone embouchure. The great J.C. Higginbotham, already on board in July but not heard from in solo until now, takes the bridge — and what a difference! Louis enters on an elaborate break, pulling the not so swinging group uphill.

He had long since put the other tune on the jazz map; as composer Jimmy McHugh said, "Louis put the beat in **SUNNY SIDE OF THE STREET**" Interestingly, he did not get to record it until that Paris session in late 1934, but before that, Taft Jordan had recorded it with Chick Webbs band, copying Louis both vocally and instrumentally, doing it twice, for Columbia in December 1933 and again for Decca in September 1934. Louis had a chance to reclaim it on a broadcast before his Connie's Inn opening (on which he was introduced by Walter Winchell), but since the French record was not imported, this was a long overdue U.S. debut for what became an Armstrong staple. The tempo here is brighter than on both Webbs and the two-part French Brunswick, and things begin with a jaunty Higgy solo, dependable Holmes on the bridge. Louis' vocal is strongly inflected with a march-like rhythm; again he intends to boot the band (nice as Callender is, we miss Pops Foster's

propulsion). A tenor break sets up the switch to trumpet, and now he's floating; fun to hear his set bridge at this new tempo, but the next eight are new, as is the rest. Barbarin's use of temple blocks lend the performance an oddly archaic hue.

(S) JANUARY 12, 1938

We're still in L.A. two months later — Louis had been making two more movies, as this session commemorates, and enjoying long and very successful bookings, among them four record- (and color-line) breaking weeks at the Vogue, and a happy return to an old haunt, Sebastian's Cotton Club in Culver City, where in fact they were closing the very day (or rather, night) of this Decca date. It opens with a refurbished Armstrong classic. **SATCHEL MOUTH SWING** is the same melody as **COAL CART BLUES**, a 1925 recording with Clarence Williams' Blue Five, with updated Swing Era lyrics. The band sounds a hit like Chick Webb's here — could Edgar Sampson be the arranger, or Van Alexander? The tune lends itself to riffing, and there's a lot of that. After a nice band setup, Louis delivers a happy vocal loaded with Satchmo references, the name varied as much as if it were a musical phrase. Holmes and Higgy, the latter saying a lot in a few bars, are heard from, and then open Louis takes over, articulating some unusual rips in his opening phrases (when other trumpeters try this, it always sounds corny). We'll encounter this melody again, in a recreation of the 1924 version.

After this sunny prelude things get serious with **JUBILEE**, introduced by Louis in the Mae West picture *Every Day's a Holiday*. In the film, Louis, resplendently attired in a white uniform and plumed helmet, does some fancy stepping as well as horn tooting. He's leading what's supposed to be a street cleaners' parade, part of an election campaign, and the band is a veritable who's who of local black jazzmen, only a few holding their customary instruments. But the record date surrounds him with a better arrangement (probably by Willet) in a longer version of the piece, yet another Carmichael opus designed for Louis. In his notes for a Decca CD reissue, my dear departed friend Dick Sudhalter, author of the definitive Hoagy biography *Stardust Melody*, and himself a trumpeter, wrote that **JUBILEE** "has never been played or sung better. The wisdom, balance and vision of Louis' two choruses places them almost beyond musical analysis; placement of phrases, a tip-of-the-fingers knowledge of when to hold back and NOT play; understanding of those moments when one long note will do the expressive work of many short ones." He also uses the apt phrase "untrammled joy" in his description of what unquestionably is among the greatest of Armstrong recordings. The band does well; this may be Barbarin's best effort, the Hemphill-led trumpet section, now also including Red Allen, is on target, and Pops Foster is back.

But Louis isn't done — creating back-to-back master-pieces was the order of this day. The 1927 **STRUTTIN' WITH SOME BARBECUE** (not, by the way, a food reference — it means showing off with a pretty girl on your arm) enjoyed iconic stature in the Armstrong discography more than a decade later, but Louis was never burdened by his own history, and while he never paid attention to critics, it may just be that in this first recorded revisit to the Hot Five-Hot Sevens canon, he meant to show them that he was quite capable of surpassing himself. In a discussion set up by *Down Beat* in the early 1960s, Maynard Ferguson and Bobby Hackett — hard to think of more contrasting musi-cal and instrumental aesthetics — agreed that the Decca **BARBECUE** was their favorite Armstrong record. The Willet setting of what surely is Louis' own composition — Lil claimed it, Glaser wanted to countersue, but Louis said, "Let her have it — she needs the money more than I do!" — opens with a trumpet section fanfare, then Louis leads the statement of the buoyant theme, a rising interlude set-ting up the notorious Madison clarinet solo that's marred by an under-pitch E

natural and redeemed by a typically well-crafted Holmes effort, ending with a break. The rest is Louis, stating his melody almost straight, but with majestic sound and phrasing, for his first chorus, then on to a triumphant recasting in his own mature 1938 language (note the lip trills throughout) and a cadenza unlike any other, with unique half-valve ingredients. The alternate take, surely the first, has not been issued before; it was an anonymous gift to the Institute of Jazz Studies. It offers few differences (Bingie may be just a tad better) but clearly there are some, notably in the phrasing of the first solo chorus. But he had that cadenza down!

You'd think Louis would say "enough" after this, but he was an iron man, and since he was about to embark on a long tour with the band, Kapp wanted to make sure there was material on hand — Louis' records were doing well, and he had made another film appearance, in a Bing Crosby vehicle, *Doctor Rhythm*. We know that his feature was **THE TRUMPET PLAYER'S LAMENT**. Production stills show him at the helm of a big band, all elegantly attired, and in a two-shot with Bing, who is in a policeman's uniform, but except for showings in black theaters, his part was omitted from the final cut. There was much speculation in the black press, including interviews with Crosby, but the bottom line had nothing to do with prejudice; there were production disputes, the film was recut, female star Beatrice Lillie was given more footage, and Paramount agreed to furnish a version including Armstrong upon demand (we know from Klaus Stratemann's *Louis Armstrong on the Screen* that such versions were shown, at least, in New York, Chicago and Baltimore). However, no such prints have survived, nor has any Louis audio from the film been found. What we do know is that his performance was set in a police department ben-efit show, and that he also had some scenes with Crosby. The record is all we have — union contracts indicate that the instrumentation for the film was the same as Louis' band, so we can surmise that the arrangements are identical, and if so, by Georgie Stoll. The trumpeter's lament is that he "must always play hot music/music that's not music," which of course becomes ironic as rendered by Louis, but that great actor manages to imbue it with genuine pathos, and gets maximum mileage from the classical references, including **VESTI LA GIUBBA**, a perfectly pro-nounced "Mozart" and a wonderful New Orleans rendering of Jose Iturbi (a then very popular concert pianist, with whom Louis perhaps not incidentally had appeared on the air by this time) — it comes out "Itoiby," rhyming with "derby." There is a rare growl brass ensemble passage, and the trumpet solo (it's a minor-key piece, of course) is yet another gem, dramatic and gliss-full, and he's got enough chops left to make that ending — a high F — not once but twice, the alternate being almost identical, though the vocal bridge cuts the one that was issued.

(T) JANUARY 13, 1938

Did I say iron man? Here he is back in the studio the very next day, now with just seven of his bandsmen in sup-port (maybe the others were too worn out!). Of the four numbers recorded, no less than three have surviving alter-nates, including the session's first (and best), **I DOUBLE DARE YOU**. Jazz pianist Terry Shand, a Texan, wrote the melody, still in the repertory of some traditional bands in 2009. The ensemble work is makeshift but that matters not one whit; Louis of course dominates, and there is potent work by J.C. Higginbotham — two explosive breaks frame the vocal, the second linking with an equally caloric solo (unfortunately, Bingie's tenor completes the chorus, but it's an improvement on his clarinet), and Barbarin comps on brushes like a tap dancer. Settling in with a break, Louis fashions a solo of wondrous continuity and freedom on the issued take. On the alternate, again surely the first attempt, he's getting acquainted with the changes and is just a bit less settled; the same goes for the vocals, both also little gems, where he inserts a "mama" on the first, who becomes a "hot mama" by the second.

TRUE CONFESSION, a collaboration between Sam Coslow and one of the many refugees from Nazi Germany to settle in Hollywood, Friederich Hollander of *Blue Angel* score fame, would be rather dire in other hands (lugubrious Madison gives us a hint), but Louis again comes to the rescue, and it's a treat to hear him deliver the lines "go to most any extreme." Once again, the issued take is best, for everyone, including well-featured Charlie Holmes and a very relaxed, harmonically inventive Louis.

Dick Whiting and Johnny Mercer are a notable team; in this case, Mercer takes the cake, and Louis has much fun with Johnny's words on **LET THAT BE A LESSON TO YOU**, topping them off with a scat break that no doubt knocked out Johnny, quite a scatter himself. Higgy has half choruses and breaks on both takes, good on both, better on the issued one (dig his break), while Louis' relaxed, flowing phrasing is special both times. He has hardly any melodic material to work with here, but makes it sound like something.

The session finally comes to an end with a single take of **SWEET AS A SONG**, another minor opus, almost rescued by Louis' muted theme statement. He launches his vocal with a "hmmm" and renders the silly words without a trace of irony. He's in good voice and shows off the top and bottom of his range, then takes this trifle out on big-toned open horn, finding something of beauty to say, up to the smack-on final note.

(U)MAY 13, 1938

Back in New York four months later we again find Louis with a reduced lineup, albeit a bit larger one, and with bet-ter arrangements. **SO LITTLE TIME (SO MUCH TO DO)** has quite an attractive melody, treated nicely by muted Louis, so delicate behind Madison's mooring tenor. Holmes serves up the obbligato to the vocal, then open trumpet — he trills and glisses, ending on high C. (The Armstrong literature is full of lip-trouble stories, and certainly there was some of that, sometimes quite serious, but he always bounced back, and we haven't encountered any evidence of problems herein, taxing situations notwithstanding.)

MEXICAN SWING, another Terry Shand opus, is one of those south-of-the-border dance tales, rather nonsensical, but note how Louis sets himself up after the vocal with two stabilizing notes. There's some nice Hemphill lead work, but what matters here is Louis' stop-time bridge and imagi-native ending.

Johnny Mercer's up again, this time with old buddy Bernie Hanighen, his partner on **AS LONG AS YOU LIVE YOU'LL BE DEAD IF YOU DIE**, a not exactly revelatory finding, cast here in a rather threatening mold and a minor mode, which spur Louis to a fine full chorus, followed by a Higgy bit and vocal reprise that includes "You're gonna wake up dead one morning," — a neat trick that segues logically to the considerably more enlightening and certainly more durable **WHEN THE SAINTS GO MARCHING IN**, which Louis here puts on the jazz map. Eventually, it became a bore in the hands of untalented traddies, but if Louis could have collected royalties, he would have become even richer. This is much fun, and very musical, Louis donning his "Reverend Satchelmouth" robes. (It has been claimed that Louis wanted to record **SAINTS** in 1932, but Okeh didn't like the idea.) Higgy responds to Louis' verbal introduction, intoning the theme (and offering a fine solo later on) and Brother Holmes is also heard from. This is a nifty arrangement, the repeated riff interlude echoing Lunceford's (and Sy Oliver's) **FOR DANCERS ONLY**, and the atmosphere is very much like a

Louis Jordan record (Jordan briefly worked with Louis and certainly learned from him but had his own thing), our Louis' elevated trumpet peroration of course in a class of its own. The congregational respondents clearly include a female voice, almost certainly that of Midge Williams, then the band's girl singer.

(V) MAY 18, 1938

Five days later, we're back with the same smaller lineup, starting with two good numbers also recorded by Billie Holiday, who takes **ON THE SENTIMENTAL SIDE** at a much slower pace. This stems from the score of Doctor Rhythm, but Louis doesn't hold that against it — both he and band seem in good humor and Louis romps, singing with a clear throat and fashioning a happy climax.

IT'S WONDERFUL, not to be confused with the Gershwins' **'S WONDERFUL**, was a minor composing hit for the brilliant fiddler Stuff Smith. Louis takes it at ballad tempo, singing in that uncommonly clear voice of this day, and when the band drops out after the bombastic Madison, Louis comes in on open horn ever so relaxed, creating a solo well described by Doug Ramsey as "blooming like a rose" in its ending of five repeated Gs, an A and a B. This is another one that conjures up Bobby Hackett, at whose request I taped all my Louis blue Deccas; he thanked me warmly, but added, "Gee, Dan - your tape recorder is a quarter tone sharp!" (The curse of perfect pitch)

SOMETHING TELLS ME is yet another Mercer lyric, set to Harry Warren's melody, both quality products. Nice brisk tempo, opening with Louis' muted paraphrase; his vocal does Mercer proud. Then Higgy enters on a break, bucket-muted, and takes a full chorus of remarkable swing and flexibility. Hemphill's good tone is glimpsed before Louis comes in open, with a break passage informed by harmonic sophistication, as is the subsequent conclusion. Satch was fired up by Higgy, who also had this effect on his frequent sidekick Red Allen. Why did Allen, for whom there was nothing to do on Louis' records, stay with the band for so long? It wasn't just the steady job — Red fronted the band when Louis was otherwise engaged, had a featured spot in stage shows, and warmed up the crowd at dances until Louis made his appearance. Was the sustained exposure to an obviously superior but closely related talent good for Allen? I think not, but that's another topic.

This lighthearted session ends with the first Armstrong-Gershwin combination since **I GOT RHYTHM** at the decade's dawn, the quite recent **LOVE WALKED IN**. Louis comes right on here, stating the melody to perfection at a bright tempo, then singing in a range rather low for him, but as always adapting, and giving this superior material the treatment it deserves, second to no Great American Songbook practitioners, though the scat break is strictly Satch. The rideout is in keeping with what has come before, glorifying the tune. A pity the composer didn't live to hear this!

(W) & (X) JUNE 10 & 13, 1938

Quite a different menu for this reunion with the Mills Brothers. **THE FLAT FOOT FLOOGIE** put the duo of Slim (Gaillard) and Slam (Stewart) on the map — their record was even put in the time capsule at the 1939 World's Fair. Muted trumpet is nicely hacked by riffs (think of the Brothers as a hand) and has the message. Harry M. has eight bars, and Louis has great fun with verbal variations on the foot theme, climaxed with his emphatic "and Satchelfoot!" That's what you might call putting your mouth in it.

The two Irving Berlin songs get elegant treatment, as befits Fred Astaire material. **THE SONG IS ENDED** opens with a Louis vocal with “trumpet” obbligato by brother Donald, including strictly non-Louis wa-wa effects, the Brothers do a call-and-response chorus, Harry solos well, and then Louis plays open horn, his sound enhanced by the vocal backdrop, after which there is a trombone imitation and a brotherly ending, this being more of a feature for them than for Louis. But he asserts himself on **MY WALKING STICK**, a minor theme that suits him well, vocally and instrumentally. The team finds yet a different combination when the Brothers sing with a vocal obbligato from Louis.

(Y) JUNE 14, 1938

In the studio for the second day in a row, Louis is here cast in a purely vocal role, hacked by a professional white choir and his own rhythm section, not present on all selections. Lyn Murray, British-born, was still in his 20s; he would go on to become a prolific film and TV composer-arranger, while Robert McGimsey, author of the psuedo-spirituals that bookend the session, seems to have specialized in that sort of stuff, quite well done. It was a good idea to present Louis in this kind of setting with this kind of material, and he would revisit **NOBODY KNOWS DE TROUBLE I’VE SEEN** throughout his remaining years. His approach, needless to say, is quite different from Paul Robeson’s or Marian Anderson’s, and much more in the gospel tradition, contrasting with the work of the chorus.

SHADRACK’s Old Testament tale gives Louis a chance to show his dramatic talent. He wastes not one word and art-fully varies his delivery. **GOING TO SHOUT ALL OVER GOD’S HEAVEN** provides more interaction with the chorus, which has a lengthy introduction to itself. It is very satisfying to hear him repeatedly and clearly pronounce “heaven” in marked contrast with the choristers’ “hebben,” as scripted. Louis was something else, as you should know by now.

NOBODY KNOWS THE TROUBLE I’VE SEEN offers beautiful singing by Louis, in his natural tenor range, his phrasing as nuanced as that of a great opera singer. And he makes the scored choral stuff sound corny. **JONAH AND THE WHALE** is more of a recitative than a song, and Louis again shows his dramatic chops, with wonderful timing. One listener who liked what he heard was Paul Whiteman, who presented Louis and the Murrays at his annual Christmas Concert, marking Louis’ Carnegie Hall debut, doing **SHADRACK** and **NOBODY KNOWS**, the two best numbers.

(Z) JUNE 24, 1938

Once again, Louis gets hacking from a small white studio hand, with an accomplished rhythm section. Drummer Sam Weiss had been in Benny Goodman’s first big band, and Dave Barbour with Red Norvo, hut the most interesting member was pianist Nat Jaffe, who would die at 27 yet make his mark as an original stylist. I’m pretty sure that Al Philhurn, already a veteran, plays valve trombone here. The arrangements are not interesting, hut Louis most certainly is, notably on the two revisits to old friends.

Of the new tunes, **NATURALLY** is by Harry Barris of Rhythm Boys fame, who of course did better elsewhere. Sid Stonehurn’s clarinet emerges from the ensemble, and Louis settles in for the concluding solo. **I’VE GOT A POCKETFUL OF DREAMS** would become something of a standard; Louis treats it somewhat casually, vocally and instrumentally, hewing close to the melody. We get two two-bar spots and finally one whole four-bar spot for Jaffe.

But Louis was just saving himself for the challenge of **I CAN'T GIVE YOU ANYTHING BUT LOVE**, his 1929 break-through record. He picks a faster tempo here, but still treats it as a ballad, the vocal less intense and romantic. But look out! He enters in mid-chorus and, utterly relaxed, creates a magisterial solo. Andre Hodeir, the great French critic, in a long and brilliant analysis, calls it “the most beautiful solo Armstrong ever recorded (sic) but also one of the most successful feats in the history of jazz,” and speaks of its “purity of expression.” It should be read in its entirety and can be found in *Jazz: Its Evolution and Essence*. Louis revisited this song in the film *Jam Session* (1943), and then again in 1956, for one of the highlights of the remarkable **AUTOBIOGRAPHY** set produced by Milt Gabler. For Louis, this was a lucky number.

If **AIN'T MISBEHAVIN'** may not be as exalted, it nevertheless has high-level Louis, both in range and imagination. His closing solo flows. Jaffe has a neatly done bridge in the ensemble's chorus, after Louis' vocal; again, the tempo's faster than in 1929, when he introduced this Waller classic-to-be in *Connie's Hot Chocolates*, his Broadway debut and his first record to be issued in Okeh's general as well as Race series.

(AA) AUGUST 11, 1938

Bert Williams (1874-1922) was an iconic figure in African-American theater history, and Louis was among his great admirers, though he probably never got to see him — except perhaps on film. But he certainly heard him on records, of which Williams made many; his biggest hit, **NOBODY**, stayed in catalog from 1906 to 1933, with several remakes. Louis must have persuaded Jack Kapp to let him take a crack at recreating two mock sermons by the Williams character Elder Eatmore, enlisting Harry Mills for some vocal and instrumental assistance; I seriously doubt that Lyn Murray had much to do with the little bits of choral, or rather, congregational singing on the **GENEROSITY** sermon, in which Louis also briefly vocalizes, hitting a low note. Some whites thought the whole enterprise did just that, but Williams fans were delighted, as Louis himself surely was. This was a rarity — a 12-inch nonclassical 78. Louis loved the spoken word; his very last recording was a recitation of **THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS**.

(BB) JANUARY 18, 1939

The long lull between sessions was mainly caused by work on the film *Going Places*, which began in August, with the band out on its own. Louis rejoined it in late September for a tour that included New Orleans; on October 11, he finally married long-time companion Alpha Smith. More touring, and on January 6 the opening of the film at the Strand in New York. Thus **JEEPERS CREEPERS**, the big hit from *Going Places*, was embedded in Louis when he came to record it. The film gave him his best role to date, as the groom of a racehorse named Jeepers Creepers who would only run when Louis played and sang for him; in the climactic race, he rides alongside the track on a scooter and of course is instrumental (forgive the pun) in winning the race. The song, by Harry Warren and Johnny Mercer, was an Oscar nominee, and Louis also joined forces on screen with Maxine Sullivan. They would soon team up in *Swinging the Dream*, an ambitious musical adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with a cast also including Benny Goodman's Sextet (with Charlie Christian) and Bud Freeman's Summa Cum Laude band, not to mention Butterfly McQueen. It opened on Broadway to good publicity but flopped, closing after 13 performances. Louis never again performed the score's sole hit, **DARN THAT DREAM** — ironically well named.

This session marks the first of a number of changes in the band's personnel, and a key one it is. It was not Big Sid Catlett's debut as an Armstrong sideman — he is present on the April 24, 1933, RCA Victor band date — but this time he'll be around much longer, until September 1942 (excepting five months with Benny Goodman in 1941), and then of course again as the All Stars' first drummer. Sid was favorite drummer, with Zutty Singleton a close second, and he makes his presence felt immediately. **JEEPERS CREEPERS** starts with a riff, then Louis sings the verse and chorus, ending with a break echoed by the band. When he takes up the trumpet, he swings and soars, and there are breaks punctuated by Sid, who supports splendidly. This is a Louis special and one of his better-selling Deccas. (By the way, the film's second male lead, behind Dick Powell, was one Ronald Reagan.)

WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED SWING? is the final collaboration between Louis and Horace Gerlach; also recorded by Jimmie Lunceford, it would be performed by Louis and the band in his second Carnegie Hall appearance, at ASCAP's 25-year festival in October. It's one of those "meet the band" features of the Swing Era, fast, in minor, with a good chart. Louis spotlights the sections, with a solo turn for Sid, mentioned by name, and rides out over the churning band.

(CC) FEBRUARY 20, 1939

Another Kapp album project, this a tribute to Hoagy Carmichael featuring the Casa Loma Orchestra with Louis as special guest, no doubt due to his association with the composer-pianist-singer, dating back to their duet on **ROCKIN' CHAIR** in 1929, one of those Satchmo firsts in integration annals. Here it is Pee Wee Hunt, a much better trombonist and singer than his huge 1948 hit with a deliberately corny version of **12TH STREET RAG** would imply, who partners Louis. The band's intro gives us a hint of its high quality as an ensemble (it was an essential factor in the birth of the Swing Era and is long overdue for a reassessment). Hunt, though from Ohio, sounds Texan in the father's role — he was a Teagarden fan — and goes well with Louis, who, when he picks up his horn, offers a very rangy solo, with an alto sax bridge from multi-instrumentalist Murray McEachern.

On **LAZYBONES**, lyrics by Johnny Mercer, Louis and Pee Wee again make a nice match, Louis handling his part in an animated, more spoken than sung manner. (Some consider this a politically incorrect number, but Mercer's character is generic Southern rather than specifically black — it's all in the ear of the behearer.) The nice Harmon-muted trumpet solo (first encounter with that sound — Louis never used it) is by veteran band member Grady Watts, with a bridge by the band's famed trombone team, led by Billy Rauch, a match for Tommy Dorsey in the tone and intonation departments, joined by McEachern and another notable doubler, Sonny Dunham. The reed section pops up near the end.

(DD) APRIL 5, 1939

Again, it was probably Kapp's idea for Louis to look back to the Hot Five/Seven recordings. Jazz was becoming conscious of its history. 1939 was the year of publication of two important books, the famous *Jazzmen*, an anthology with a point of view favoring the New Orleans tradition, and Wilder Robson's more objective and largely forgotten *American Jazz Music*. Kapp may also have been prodded by Dave Dexter, *Down Beat*'s man in Kansas City, who was compiling and annotating album collections for Decca. It's always risky for an artist to revisit his own past, but in this instance, things worked out very well. This session marks the arrival of a new musical director, Joe Garland. A

multi-reedman, arranger and composer, Garland replaces Albert Nicholas who left of his own volition (“I got tired of traveling and pulled out,” he said years later; he may also, and rightly so, have been frustrated at getting almost no exposure on the band’s records). Following on the heels of Paul Barbarin’s departure (he was let go when Catlett became available), it heralds more changes to come, as well as a decided improvement. (Russell remains as titular band director, but his role has obviously been curtailed.)

HEAH ME TALKIN’ TO YOU (on the original 78 and some other releases as **HEAR ME TALKIN’ TO YOU**), a Louis original, spots a good chart, no doubt by Garland (author of **IN THE MOOD**, his arrangement for Glenn Miller doctored by the leader). The tempo is well chosen, and Catlett’s presence notable throughout. Nice work by the reed section, better-than-average Madison clarinet, good Higginbotham, and Louis sailing over the band. The brief vocal incursion is probably by Midge Williams, but could also be a male falsetto, as on the original.

SAVE IT PRETTY MAMA, a fine Don Redman tune, never seems to be mentioned as a pre-**I CAN’T GIVE YOU ANYTHING BUT LOVE** Louis ballad recording. As back when, Louis starts muted, phrasing ever so beautifully — he clearly adores this melody. Holmes’ alto and Higgy’s ‘bone share one, and then Louis offers a relaxed vocal, cushioned by the reeds, before taking up his horn, now open, for the imaginative conclusion, Sid in there.

The stage is now set for what of course is the session’s piece de resistance, **WEST END BLUES**, already a recognized landmark of jazz. Tackling his fabulous opening cadenza, Louis wisely does not attempt an exact copy, but hews close, employing more lip trills. Higgy follows with a robust offering, not stating King Oliver’s theme, as Fred Robinson was asked to do (thus forever being accused by critics of lacking imagination, poor guy) but playing the blues. Lee Blair’s rarely heard guitar sets up Louis’ vocal. His scatting is new, quite different, and instead of solo clarinet responses, the whole section doubles them. A piano transition, then a trumpet solo tinged with nostalgia, very moving, held note and ending almost as in 1928.

Kid Ory’s **SAVOY BLUES**, a riff number, is taken at a faster tempo than at that final session by the original Hot Five. Muted Louis brings on the theme, Holmes sounds more like Willie Smith than his usual Hodges, and then Louis, still muted, paraphrases his brilliant original solo, laid back and flowing. Rupert Cole’s clarinet spot lets Louis take out the mute, and he wraps things up in style with very contemporary blues changes.

(EE) APRIL 25, 1939

The first two numbers continue the revisiting theme. **CONFESSIN’** is post-Hot Fives; Louis memorably waxed it in Los Angeles in 1930, young Lionel Hampton at the drums, star-to-be Lawrence Brown on trombone. This was one of his greatest early ballad records, the vocal outstanding. After Holmes’ nice introduction, an improvement over Ceele Burke’s steel guitar back then, Louis sings a bit less passionately. Higgy’s break and solo are in the Brown mode — both big-toned Louis lovers. As of yore, Louis launches himself with a break. Garland’s musicianly tenor has the bridge, and then Louis builds to a climactic, glissando-laden cadenza modeled on the original.

OUR MONDAY DATE is Earl Hines’ best tune (**ROSETTA** was by Jimmy Woode) and Louis has fun with it, as in 1928. So does the band, which romps, notably the reed section. Holmes has two breaks and a solo, Madison gets the tenor spot (I’m pretty sure), and Louis’ happy vocal inserts

“little” before “baby” and “place.” Crisp trumpet and a high ending top off what amounts to a new version, not a re-creation. Could these be considered the start of the jazz repertory genre? Or does that go back to Bix and his Gang with the ODJB numbers?

Quite different fare concludes this date. **IF IT’S GOOD** is not really so, but the trombone section is, in the opening band chorus. Louis does his is best to rescue the lyrics and turns in some trumpet that *is* very good. His own **ME AND BROTHER BILL** is all vocal and one of those folkloristic Louis things, à la **OLD MAN MOSE**. It’s a humorous tale about an unfortunate hunting expedition, and the author knocks himself out. This one remained in his repertory for quite a while — it’s also a welcome respite for the chops.

We conclude with a gift to Bing Crosby from the pre-digital dark ages — Louis and the band making a private recording which then would have been mailed to “Papa Bing” for his 35th. The band fakes it, Louis dedicates to “Papa Bing, Madame Bing and all the little Bingsies” and the horses as well, then sings **HAPPY BIRTHDAY** pretty straight, whereupon he and band double the tempo and wind up in a jazz groove, Papa Bing becoming “Brother Crosby.” (One of the last times I spent with Louis, he had his final reunion with Bing, on *The David Frost Show*. I was in his dressing room when Bing came in; they embraced, exchanged pleasantries, and decided what to do together (**BLUEBERRY HILL**). Bing left to get made up, and Louis, warming up, with a little wooden practice mute in the bell, started to play **PENNIES FROM HEAVEN**, so touchingly, it clouded my eyes. Wish they’d picked that one!)

(FF) JUNE 15, 1939

We start with an oldie, but one never done before by our man. **BABY WON’T YOU PLEASE COME HOME** would become a fixture for the All Stars during the Jack Teagarden era, a feature for Jack, with Louis always taking a trumpet share. Here he is the vocalist, of course, and in fine fettle. Holmes gets a full chorus (he’s being featured more; Garland must have liked him — they had been section mates in the Mills’ Blue Rhythm Band), catch his last four bars! Soulful Higgy’s next, laced with long notes, as always very trombonish (we lost that with J. J. Johnson, but guys like Wycliffe Gordon are bringing it back). Louis enters on a break, the way he likes to kick off, and Sid’s there behind him on a relaxed climb to the finish line.

POOR OLD JOE, a Hoagy Carmichael opus vintage 1932 was premiered by Fletcher Henderson with a Harlan Lattimore (first of the “Black Bings”) vocal; two attempts by the composer remained unissued. It’s Louis who brings the unfortunate Joe (“too fast a pace” brought him to his end at “only 42”) back to life. Joe had plenty of good times along the way, as Louis describes with relish on this fast-paced ride. Garland has a stop-time tenor bit, and Louis solos with an attractively cloudy tone, ending with some upper-range stuff supported by Sid. We’ll encounter Joe again soon.

The mood changes for **SHANTY BOAT ON THE MISSISSIPPI**, a pleasant Terry Shand opus delving into the kind of rustic Southern lore Louis always could relate to. His vocal is laced with scat breaks as only he could relate serve up, and there are breaks (great ones) in the trumpet excursion as well, then some octave-voiced saxes, and Louis turns it on with that stop-time stuff, up to a final gliss. Louis This is a keeper.

(GG) DECEMBER 18, 1939

Here's **POOR OLD JOE** again, the first version issued only on Argentine Odeon; they must have misplaced or damaged the mother, all for the best, for this is superior. Tempo and chart are the same, but Louis and Big Sid are inspired here, the drummer making himself felt from start to finish, but in a supportive, never intrusive way. Louis' vocal delivery is different, more emphatic, and the trumpet climax, buoyed by Sid, is in there, as they used to say.

YOU'RE A LUCKY GUY and **YOU'RE JUST A NO ACCOUNT** are both from that year's Cotton Club show, starring Louis, and both were also recorded by Billie Holiday, providing interesting comparisons (with Lester Young as an added attraction). Roy Eldridge, singing and playing, also ventured **LUCKY GUY** with his own band, so the Messrs. Cahn and Chaplin got lucky. Louis starts with the better of the two, vocal first, then open trumpet, in on a break, exposing (and enhancing) the melody in upper range, with telling asides, constructing a clarion bridge. Good lead trumpet on the ensemble passage, a Higgy break, and vocal reprise with different words, about luck, quite probably Louis' own. **NO ACCOUNT** offers less melodic substance; the words an urbanization of **LAZYBONES**, but Louis does wonders trumpet-wise, improvising in middle register with a very warm tone, then climbing a bit to a perfect high-note ending. Both charts are good, the band getting a Lunceford-like sound; maybe Garland, maybe we'll never know, the band books from this and earlier stages not having survived, except for a few numbers that remained in the repertory to the end.

BYE AND BYE is a Louis opus, words and music, no doubt a follow-up to **THE SAINTS**. Drums bring it on, Louis is in his gospel bag for the vocal, Higgy has a break and solo (as in **SAINTS**), a scat break sets up the second vocal, band glee clubbing, then Louis calls on "Brother Catlett" and wraps up the service with three open choruses, the last all upstairs stabs. Later on, **BYE AND BYE** included an elegy for departed jazz greats.

(HH) MARCH 14, 1940

A great day in the studio, and this edition of the full band's last recording stand. Red, Higgy, Holmes, Bingie, Blair and Foster would all be gone by November of the next year — Red, Higgy and Holmes of their own volition, the others perhaps not. But they're in fine fettle here, and have good material to work with. For starters, the first of three Armstrong originals, this one a collaboration with none other than Willard Robison, and another veteran, Jack Palmer. **HEP CATS' BALL** is loaded with current Harlem jive, of which "on the mellow side" fits it very well indeed. "Are you ready?" Louis asks, then instructing "jump steady." And so they do, at a very relaxed tempo that the dancers at the Savoy would have relished. A Lunceford flavor again prevails, and the saxes are very smooth by now. At this tempo, staying mostly in mid-range, with perfectly timed breaks (another dancers' delight), he has that contemporary sound and style, as bears repeating — this is up-to-date swing music. A promising opening.

YOU'VE GOT ME VOODOO'D lists Luis Russell as a collaborator with the leader. It's in a minor key, with a misterioso opening, tom-toms by Catlett (he gets such a great sound from every component of his kit). Louis sings of magic potions, and asks for "moicy" in his best New Orleans-Brooklynese. Cole's clarinet, more tom-toms, and then caloric trumpeting (we like him in minor), with a great descending bridge and extended coda.

Higgy and his niece Irene, a gifted songwriter, came up with **HARLEM STOMP**, a typical 1940 swing number with call-and-response stuff (good work from the still Hemphill-led trumpets) setting up the declamatory vocal (about a dance, of course), half-spoken at times, and ending with a “...Stooooomp” flourish. The solo extends that rhythmic thrust as it moves upward, breaks never impeding the flow.

But that’s just a warm-up for **WOLVERINE BLUES**, which takes its place alongside **SWING THAT MUSIC, STRUTTIN’ WITH SOME BARBECUE** and **JUBILEE** in the Decca row of masterpieces. The excellent arrangement smacks of Willet and finds the band in finest fettle, almost literally conducted by Big Sid Catlett’s extraordinary drumming, ever-changing textures behind soloists and sections (Cole’s quite agile clarinet, Holmes’ up-to-par alto, fine sax soli, Higgy at his best), then shoring up the ensemble crescendo that launches Louis’ majestic entrance. He sails over the band’s cushion (Foster in there) for two superb choruses, first restating Jelly Roll Morton’s melody (not a blues, of course; originally titled **THE WOLVERINES**, but by 1919 blues was a fashionable publisher’s add-on); then improvising in grand style, drums - stabilizing, prodding, enhancing, with a sound like no other drummers - an almost equal partner in building to climax. It’s no wonder that Sid told the French jazz pope Hugues Panassie that this was his favorite own recording - and he was on so many great ones.

After this peak, they (and we) need to wind down a bit, but Louis’ own **LAZY ‘SIPPI STEAMER**, Luis again a collaborator, is no mere trifle for dessert. It’s yet another river romance, the band again à la Lunceford, sound and rhythm — and tempo, too. Sid punctuates the ensemble interlude after the warm vocal, and when Louis enters, the sun shines. Once again, he builds a perfectly balanced bridge, and of course takes us out in style. This was a date to rival May 18, 1936.

(II) & (JJ) APRIL 10 & 11, 1940

Together again, for the last time, Louis and the Mills Brothers don’t let us down, but the opener on these two consecutive spring days would prove controversial. I doubt that Jesse Stone, who already had an interesting jazz back-ground (see Schuller’s *Early Jazz*) and would go on to play a major role in **R&B**, and soon pen **IDAHO**, with its advanced changes, meant any harm with **W.P.A.** The initials, as everyone then knew, and President Obama still does, stand for Works Progress Administration, a New Deal enterprise that gave us Hoover Dam, T.V.A. and the beautiful George Washington Bridge, among much, much else in its creation of infrastructure and jobs. But as the song good naturedly tells us, some of those jobs almost turned into sinecures. Since F.D.R. was up for a third term, by no means as unopposed as in 1936, this was not the best timing, and indeed the record had limited airplay; however, it was not withdrawn, as some sources claim. Louis and the Brothers have fun with “three little letters that make life O.K.,” hitting it off once again (it’s a wonder why Milt Gabler didn’t put them together again later on, when both were still Decca artists). Louis’ open horn solo is a little gem, but he doesn’t sing a lot here.

BOOG-IT, a little jive number that took three people to concoct (though Cab Calloway, like most band leaders, might just have got his name on it via recording it, before our gang), has something rare for this collaboration — an instrumental intro, by Louis and Norman Brown’s guitar, and as he proceeds, I’m pretty sure he’s got a piece of felt or other soft cloth cover over the bell. What he creates here is simple, direct, made up all of his own phrases and imbued with his melodic conception. He also sings, and gets in a patented scat break.

Two standards about desirable women, by Don Redman and Irving Berlin respectively, had already been well treated in the jazz discography, and **CHERRY** would continue to be. For example, in 1942 the Louis-loving Harry James commissioned Redman to produce one of his finest arrangements (with strings) of this number — no doubt prompted by the rendition heard here. Louis' muted chorus is so utterly relaxed that it brings Lester Young to mind, and the vocal coda is sweet.

MARIE by this time had become inseparable from Bunny Berigan and Tommy Dorsey, whose definitive recording also featured a backup vocal routine by the band, conceived by a black outfit, The Sunset Royals, which Tommy heard, liked and purchased, and which is echoed by the Brothers here behind Louis, whose vocal opening shows he's in the mood, and whose trumpet outing is kicked off by the Brothers' "Louis!" (as in T.D.'s "Bunny!"). Louis does not copy his favorite follower but in his own muted creation there are subtle hints. **MARIE** makes for a warm and friendly ending to a productive musical partnership.

(KK) MAY 1, 1940

Memorable solely for its one non-novelty, this session, discographies to the contrary notwithstanding, finds Louis at the helm of a reduced personnel, certainly not an unusual Decca practice. I would suggest trumpet, trombone, three reeds and rhythm, but my ears are far from infallible.

SWEETHEARTS ON PARADE was immortalized by Louis in 1930, and we might recall that almost exactly two years earlier, he had backed singer Lillie Delk Christian (who made up in looks for what she lacked in talent) in her attempt at this Carmen Lombardo opus transformed by Louis into an ode for the lovelorn. A decade later, he takes it at a jauntier tempo. Muted theme statement, less romantic vocal (more audibly backed by Russell's piano than usual, as the case throughout this date) and an open horn solo in a more reflective mood, no doubt reminiscing, but not aiming for another bull's eye. Hear Sid behind him at the end.

Ex-wife Lil, a productive songwriter, came up with **YOU RUN YOUR MOUTH, I'LL RUN MY BUSINESS**. It's all about the words, not much musical meat, but after having fun with the former (as did Fats Waller in his outing), he somehow manages a trumpet romp, set up by Sid with a double rimshot knock. Pops Foster, in his swan song with the band, does well as usual.

CUT OFF MY LEGS AND CALL ME SHORTY, by Van Alexander of **A-TISKET A-TASKET** fame, and Don Raye of many credits, is more jive of little consequence. Russell is quite active on band interpolations, a tenor spot is probably by Garland, and two trumpet outings make you aware once again that Louis will find a way to make some music, Big Sid helping him out.

CAIN AND ABEL may be biblical but still is jive; Louis dons his preaching robes, memorably proclaiming that "you can't run from the shadow of retribution." The band is unquestionably reduced here, as Louis again manages to make something from nothing: a serious open-horn middle-register solo with particularly fine tone.

(LL) MAY 27, 1940

Quite a change, though the opening number is again by Lil Armstrong. This notable session was part of an album project, **NEW ORLEANS JAZZ**, spawned by the previous year's **CHICAGO JAZZ** — the brainchild of Yale undergrad George Avakian, barely 20. That was certainly not the first assemblage of jazz singles in album format, but the very first instance of jazz records specifically produced for album release, and featuring musicians identified with a particular style. New Orleans was the logical follow-up (Kansas City came next), but Avakian had gone to work for Columbia, recently retrieved from ARC by the network of the same name. His first project was an Armstrong Hot Five reissue album — so Kapp enlisted Steve Smith, whose Hot Record Society was the umbrella for a record store, reissue label and magazine. (The label subsequently recorded fresh material, as memorably collected in Mosaic's **THE COMPLETE H.R.S. SESSIONS**.) Sessions were held in Chicago (Johnny Dodds and Jimmie Noone leading) and New York (Red Allen, Lil and Zutty Singleton, a.o.), but the unquestioned centerpiece was this session, bringing together for the first time since 1924, Louis and one of his very few peers, Sidney Bechet. They had known each other in their hometown, but Bechet left too early (1917) for them to become close, musically or personally, though Bechet was very impressed when hearing Little Louis play the already famous **HIGH SOCIETY** clarinet solo on the cornet. When they met again in New York, Bechet had already been to Europe; three years older than Louis, he considered himself a man of the world and certainly the equal of this youngster. They locked horns on the two separate versions of **CAKE WALKING BABIES FROM HOME**, Bechet winning round one, but the second going to Louis.

In 1940, Bechet had recently begun the rise to recognition in his homeland that had eluded him, due in the main to his frequent travels abroad, but also because the big bands of the Swing Era were not his best surroundings. He was featured with Noble Sissle, but that was not a first-string band, though when it was signed to Decca, Bechet got his own date, and also appeared on the label's Sepia Series, backing blues artists. During his Sissle days, he'd also been prominent on big band and small group dates for Variety and then led an unusual sextet on Vocalion (these can be found on Mosaic Select 22). But it was the rise of interest in traditional jazz that was bringing Sidney into fuller view, his 12-inch **SUMMERTIME** for the young Blue Note label making quite a stir. His quartet date with Muggsy Spanier (on Mosaic's **H.R.S.** box), and the one-man-band disc he'd soon make for RCA Victor, the label he'd just signed with, would finally get him some overdue recognition.

But this welcome attention did not place Bechet on the same public plateau as Louis, and from his later comments about the reunion we can sense some bitterness, quite uncalled for when considering the musical results. Bechet's attitude continued to be odd; he was invited to participate in the Town Hall Concert of 1947 but didn't show, and 10 years later, history repeated itself at the Newport Jazz Festival. Louis, on the other hand, always spoke well of Bechet in public, and was happy for him when, late in life, he finally reached proper star stature in France. Another reunion involved here was with Lil, who served the album project as a musical advisor, provided sketch arrangements and certainly was present in the studio. In spite of occasional spats, the two remained friendly for life, and of course Lil died at the keyboard in the middle of a memorial tribute to Louis in Chicago. Yet a third reunion was with boyhood and Chicago pal Zutty Singleton; they parted when the band fronted by Louis at Connie's Inn broke up and the drummer went out on his own without first telling his friend of his plans. So the atmosphere was fraught with potential tension, but all went well musically.

Lil's **PERDIDO STREET BLUES** was one of four sides recorded in 1926 by the New Orleans Wanderers, an ad-hoc sextet that included the entire cast of the Hot Five sans the leader, replaced by George Mitchell. The unique Bechet clarinet over stop time introduces the piece, first high, then

low, plenty of grit, as personal (and as great) as his more famed soprano. Russell's piano bit is rhythmically weak in contrast, and then the two non-New Orleanians solo, Addison's acoustic guitar pleasant, Claude Jones' trombone moving (he is an underrated pioneer of his instrument, contemporary of Miff Mole and as technically adept early on). Bechet's soprano backs Claude, and then Zutty ushers Louis in for a relaxed and authoritative two choruses of pure blues, Bechet embellishing the finale. Wellman Braud of Ellington fame is in there.

We stay with the blues for **2:19 BLUES**, also known as **MAMIE'S BLUES** and thus immortalized by Jelly Roll Morton, who credited it to Mamie Desdoume, a Storyville Madam "who could hardly play anything else" but nailed this one, according to Jelly, who sang more verses than Louis does here. Zutty kicks this off with his great bass drum sound (it is interesting to compare Louis' first favorite drummer with Catlett), Bechet's clarinet responses to trumpet's lead flawless — and don't miss his and Jones' joint obbligati to Louis' heartfelt vocal; he's a blues master. Now on soprano, Bechet solos in splendid form, as authoritative in his way as Louis, and then Zutty again brings his old friend on, Sidney not vying for the lead, as he often did with lesser trumpet partners.

DOWN IN HONKY TONK TOWN is a rouser, and its composer, Chris Smith of **BALLIN' THE JACK** fame, was in the studio, aged 61 — ancient for anyone in jazz circles in 1940. This was a big Smith day, for in addition to producer Steve, liner note writer Charles Edward was also on hand, and so was New Orleans-born producer-publisher Clarence Williams, who'd first brought Louis and Sidney together on records, also to be found on that Mosaic Select 22. This was a number in the book of Fate Marable's band, so Louis would have played it some 20 years before. He's certainly at home with both verse and chorus, the latter a fine vehicle for variations. After two slow numbers, the band, now sounding like one, is ready. Louis leads the melodic verse, Jones tailgating well, and the ensemble chorus, Bechet on soprano and ready for his big moment of the session, jumping into the rhythmic stream and creating a powerful statement, swinging hard and firing up Jones for his half-chorus, with an appealing burr. Bernard Addison completes the chorus well enough, and there's something very attractive about acoustic jazz guitar, available in 2009 almost only from Marty Grosz, bless him. However, Jones should have continued — he never got another chance like this on record. A Louis fanfare brings on Zutty for his quick turn, with that typical snare drum roll, topped off by cymbal (I can see him now, in his crouch), backed by stop-time horns. Then Louis leads, not selfishly, as Bechet later claimed, but with the panache and momentum that he couldn't possibly have shed, and without crowding Bechet, who contributes mightily along the way out. While both are splendid, the master take has the edge, everyone more at home with the tune and the routine, Bechet besting his solo, ending with a repeated phrase, Louis more settled in, the balance better too, the rideout even hotter — an intimation of the Armstrong All Stars.

After these efforts, the two protagonists join forces with just the strings for an intimate revisit to **COAL CART BLUES** of more than 15 years before - a lifetime in the jazz annals of that day. The unique timbres of trumpet and soprano as played by these two blend wonderfully well, and they phrase as one, Sidney raising the curtain for Louis' vocal with two sweeping solo bars. The lyric, about Louis' hardworking youth, is presented in his storytelling mode, and then the two masters go out in harmony, sonically entwined — and swinging. Alas, these two giants never got together productively again.

(MM) MARCH 10, 1941

A recording lull of nearly 10 months, during which the band did intensive touring and underwent considerable personnel changes, some reflected in these two small-group sessions. Prince Robinson, a fine clarinet and tenor man, was a big improvement over Madison while Lawrence Lucio (still with us at 101 at this writing in early 2009) and Johnny Williams have replaced long-timers Lee Blair and Pops Foster. Was it Jack Kapp's idea to put Louis in this band-within-the-band setting, and was he motivated by the success of such units featured by Goodman, Shaw, Tommy Dorsey and Calloway — or was he looking for a follow-up to the critically well-received New Orleans discs? We'll never know, but this overlooked music is, in retrospect, a kind of preview of All Star days to come.

The material for the first septet session (Kapp could have billed them as the New Hot Seven) is a mixture of fairly recent and very old. **EV'RYTHING'S BEEN DONE BEFORE**, from the Jean Harlow film *Reckless*, vintage 1935, has a very attractive melody that Louis makes his own, from the muted opening theme statement on. Robinson's clear clarinet tone and musical conception mark his transition to and accompaniment of the vocal, which ranks with the best. He sings with such feeling (hear how he stretches the words "know" and "knew," and how he phrases the last eight bars) that he makes you believe the romantic sentiments, and since at this time he had already met and fallen in love with dancer Lucille Wilson, his fourth (and last) wife-to-be, we might suggest he had her in mind. His open-horn conclusion and beautifully sober ending carry the same emotional weight.

While this was his first recording of **I COVER THE WATERFRONT** Louis was no stranger to Johnny Green's 1933 hit from the eponymous film, starring Claudette Colbert. It was featured in Louis' repertory in Europe that year, and captured on film in Denmark. An arranged intro launches Louis leading a collective ensemble, George Washington's trombone splitting the bridge with Robinson's nice clarinet. From the "Now baby" opening, Louis is in splendid form, in a key high for him but handled gracefully, with plenty of "hms." Larry Lucie's transition offers our first taste of electric guitar, and hear Big Sid behind Louis, leading the once again collective rideout.

IN THE GLOAMING takes us from 1933 to 1877, when Anne Fortesque Harrison composed it — she later married Lord Alfred Hills, comptroller to Queen Victoria. Would the Lady have dug the way Louis handles her song? Bet you she would: he treats it gently, muted theme statement with organ backing from the horns (how he articulates the bridge!), showing us how to croon, infusing the rustic imagery with nostalgia, and staying muted for the instrumental conclusion.

LONG, LONG AGO is aptly titled — even older than **GLOAMING**, it dates from 1833, and served, I'd wager due to Louis' recording, as the inspiration for the following year's hit, **DON'T SIT UNDER THE APPLE TREE**. Unlike the respect with which he handled **GLOAMING**, he has untrammled fun with this folk-like number, turning it into the tale of a poker game and asking Joe Glaser "to grease my hand," making it all up on the spot. But the ensuing solo, backed by rhythm section only, is not just for fun and not to be missed. Then he leads a fine ensemble out, spotting his man Big Sid.

(NN) APRIL 11, 1941

Everyone must have been happy with the results, for here's the same small group just a month later, mining somewhat similar material, if of more recent vintage. **HEY LAWDY MAMA**, a traditional blues, had already been recorded for Decca by the excellent white singer Teddy Grace, and instrumentally by Count Basie with his famous rhythm section, and would be done once more for the label after Louis, and with the greatest commercial success, by Andy Kirk's band with June Richmond. It's always good to hear Louis on the blues. A rare Luis Russell solo here — nice enough, but his time is so-so - an intimate Louis vocal, Washington doing a Kid Ory, a Louis trumpet break, and Robinson on tenor in the out chorus.

On the next three numbers, the band members double as a vocal group. **I'LL GET MINE BYE AND BYE** is of country and western origin and treated to a brisk tempo. Louis leads with a bright and sunny sound, a Big Sid brush break sets up the first vocal, then Robinson solos on tenor (no less than Coleman Hawkins spoke of Prince as a predecessor, and he did some fine stuff with McKinney's in the '20s); the second vocal turn is followed by a Washington outing that's in his own style, yet another vocal yields to a spot for Johnny Williams' bass, and Prince is on clarinet for the finish.

NOW (not New) **DO YOU CALL THAT A BUDDY** was shorn of the "Now" when waxed by Louis Jordan, and by Larry Clinton's band with a Butch Stone vocal; it sounds like a folk piece, but is not. In minor, at a stately tempo, Louis' open horn has a burnished sound here, on a theme à la **ST. JAMES INFIRMARY**. It's a tale of a double-crossing friend ("You ate up all my rice and stew beef/ And tried to cut out my Home Relief"), mock serious, and yet another sample of Louis' dramatic talent.

YES SUH! came with considerable jazz credentials, as part of the Rhythmakers wonderful legacy, vintage 1932, with Fats Waller, Red Allen, Zutty Singleton and Pee Wee Russell on funky tenor among the perpetrators, but Louis easily cuts Billy Banks as vocalist and Red trumpet-wise, though a bit more of that horn would have been welcome here. We start right out with open Louis and Big Sid cymbal support, congregational vocalizing behind Louis' story of an aborted wedding party, fleet clarinet and trombone with more of that wonderful Catlett support, and Louis flying home but landing too soon. It would be quite a while before Louis was heard again in this kind of relaxed small group context.

(00)NOVEMBER 16, 1941

Another lengthy pause, Louis & Co. busy touring. This first session in a long while by the full band finds them in Chicago, with fine results, artistically and sonically. Unique in the Decca annals is the balance of instrumentals vs. numbers with vocals we get no less than three to one. This is also the first opportunity to witness the many changes in personnel. Not surprisingly, several of the men who were let go in the spring of 1940 later claimed that Glaser had fired them for money-saving reasons, and this was also reflected in the Chicago Defender, but logic dictates that it was a musical, not a monetary move, and that it was Joe Garland, more than likely with Louis' blessings, who was the primary instigator. J.C. Higginbotham, who left soon after his long-time associate Red Allen, to join his newly formed group, is the only one who is missed.

This session begins and ends with masterpieces. **WHEN IT'S SLEEPY TIME DOWN SOUTH** had been Louis' theme song for a decade and since he opened and closed all his appearances with at least a short and sometimes a full version, he would by late 1941 have played it thousands of times. Yet this, to many Louis lovers including myself, the very best recording of it, offers inspired playing. As Max Harrison noted, "It contains not a superfluous note...and distills all the qualities he brought to music." The tempo is flawless, Sid Catlett's drumming provides ideal support, and Louis' sound is majestic — music of the highest level.

YOU RASCAL YOU is the most compact and perfect representation of Louis' ability to combine earthy humor and sublime music, the several brief trumpet episodes so perfectly poised and concentrated, the verbal comedy so well-timed. Again, Catlett plays an essential supportive role, lifting the ensemble's timing almost to Louis' level. The rideout is a killer!

Compared to this level of genius, **LEAP FROG** and **I USED TO LOVE YOU** are mere fillers, but do serve to demonstrate that the Armstrong band is very up to date. The former, which became a hit for Les Brown's band, is all Garland's party, with just a brief appearance by Louis at the end. It's a good example of riff-based 1940s swing, and the first sample of trumpets in cup mutes in this collection. The clarinet spot is Rupert Cole, not Prince, and the tenor, I'm pretty certain, is the composer's. And could it be that **I USED TO LOVE YOU** was a follow-up to Harry James' huge hit **YOU MADE ME LOVE YOU?** Louis states the melody with much feeling and that matchless sound is well captured. Sid keeps the sedate dance tempo afloat.

(PP) APRIL 17, 1942

For Louis' last pre-recording ban session, a few changes in the brass section, and John Simmons (Big Sid's pal and briefly section mate with Benny Goodman) in on bass for Hayes Alvis. **CASH FOR YOUR TRASH**, a Fats Waller opus with lyrics by manager Ed Kirkeby that reflects wartime home-front conditions, opens with Louis intoning "Any rags...", which no doubt brought back memories of his youth, his vocal followed by a potent trumpet solo. The melody is quite reminiscent of **PENNIES FROM HEAVEN** (perhaps the shared currency theme set this off in Fats' memory bank), except for the bridge. The sax section sounds good, as does the chart, probably Garland's, and the trombone spot is by the underrated Henderson Chambers, later briefly subbing in the All Stars.

AMONG MY SOUVENIRS, vintage 1927, was memorably revived by Benny Carter in 1940; fittingly, saxes intro it here, muted Louis stating the theme at this medium-up, very danceable tempo. (Dancers were the meal ticket of the Swing Era, a fact mostly ignored by jazz commentators — the term critic should be reserved for the few who merit it.) The alternate take's slightly faster tempo lends Louis' vocal a jauntier quality. But he's just as secure in the final climb upstairs.

COQUETTE, just a year younger than the previous number, same vintage as **CHERRY** (they are oddly similar, by Irving Berlin and Don Redman respectively), sounds strictly 1942 in the hands of Louis, Big Sid and Garland (tenor spot and chart). It opens with vocal and modulates for the open trumpet solo, the band a bit overly active behind, but nice later work by the trumpet section. We have a first-time alternate, rescued from oblivion by the sure hands and fine ears of engineer Andreas Meyer who seamlessly fixed some rough spots. It's not very different, more so in the tenor

spots than in Louis' close-to-the-melody solo, and the section work's not as secure, though the end is more exciting.

Still more 1920s material in **I NEVER KNEW** (1925). This arrangement has been credited to Sy Oliver and includes a nice countermelody to the vocal (also catch the drumming here behind the bridge!). Between fine trumpet offerings, more of the Garland tenor and a Catlett break. In my opinion, the band at this stage is the best big one Louis ever had; further evidence exists on airchecks. Then the draft and such would take their toll, though quality improved once again when Garland returned as music director in the spring of 1945, remaining to the end.

(QQ) AUGUST 9, 1944

Decca has settled with the Musicians' Union, and Louis' first post-ban session finds him with an entirely new band, and with a new producer in the booth (they didn't call them A&R men yet). That new man is Milt Gabler, of Commodore Records fame, now wearing two hats and no stranger to Louis. Also new, of course, is the band's music director, again a tenor player and arranger. His name is Ted McRae, a veteran of the Chick Webb band, among others, who later became involved in R&B and also produced records, briefly for his own label, RaeCox. Competent as a player (he liked Chu Berry) and writer, he provided the instrumental **GROOVIN'**, quite typical of its time and based on updated **HONEYSUCKLE ROSE** changes. In this, and also in the chart's layout, it harks back to **SWING YOU CATS**, waxed in 1933 for RCA Victor. The tune is introduced by Louis and drummer James Harris, nicknamed Coatesville, he should not be confused with Joe Harris of Gillespie fame. (Harris was no Big Sid — but a good crapshooter, according to Louis). After Louis embellishes the theme, we get an interlude with trumpet breaks, and, after McRae's solo, 16 not-to-be-missed bars of that trumpet.

BABY DON'T YOU CRY, of unknown provenance, is a ballad interpreted vocally with nice Ed Swanston piano backing, and trumpet-wise on open horn with fine execution and conception, then wrapped by a vocal reprise with a neat coda. We know a bit more about **WHATCHA SAY**. Louis, the band and pretty Dorothy Dandridge had filmed it just then for a nightclub sequence in *Pillow to Post*, otherwise only distinguished by the great Sidney Greenstreet and the talented Ida Lupino, yet to be DVD'd. One of Burton Lane and Ted Koehler's lesser efforts, it has very little to recommend itself as a record (seeing the comely Miss Dandridge, destined for an unhappy fate, makes her nasal singing more palatable) except for two brief bits of Louis, singing and playing. Nothing from this session was issued until the LP era; **GROOVIN'** saw the light of day on a Decca album, **RARE ITEMS**, with notes by yours truly and the other two, discovered as test pressings at the Institute of Jazz Studies, on collectors' labels. It would not be until April 1946 that Louis fronted a big band of his own in the studio again.

(RR) JANUARY 14, 1945

This is the beginning of a long series of Armstrong studio sessions, almost all in New York, with backing from first-call session cats, mostly white, and, later on, selected members of the All Stars, in fare of a contemporary nature and of wide variety. Many gems would result, including these two.

JODIE MAN deals with a wartime topic, the sneaky civilian (probably 4-F) who walks in “when the PFC walks out.” (Billy Eckstine also ventured this.) It opens with trumpet à la **ROCKIN’ CHAIR**, the band (made up of Louis lovers and headed by bassist-arranger Bob Haggart of Bob Crosby band fame) sounds good, Louis in on the bridge, then singing with conviction. Band and Louis trade, and then he comes into his own, handling the minor changes with a very con-temporary harmonic touch. The ending is Ellingtonian.

I WONDER was a huge R&B hit for its composer, a singer and pianist billed as Private Cecil Gant (he didn’t live long, but made other good records). Louis “covers” this ballad with complete mastery, vocally (fine backing by pianist Dave Bowman and cup-muted Billy Butterfield, in a preview of what he would do behind Louis on **BLUEBERRY HILL**) and instrumentally, the band laying down a plush carpet for the harmonically audacious and melodically impassioned inventions (what tone — new again). This is a masterpiece, and hearing Louis like this, as we enter the bebop era, throws into bold relief the musical ignorance of the schism that would follow.

(SS) JANUARY 18, 1946

In the footsteps of Jack Kapp, Milt Gabler comes into his own with the inspired pairing of Louis with Ella Fitzgerald. The backing is again provided by a Bob Haggart–led cast including Armstrong All Star-to-be Cozy Cole, who broke the studio color line as far back as the mid-’30s. In this first of many recorded encounters between Louis and Ella — a match made in musical heaven — the material is of current vintage. It would take a decade before Norman Granz brought truly suitable material to their table, but Milt would do better for their next Decca encounter, which for inexplicable reasons didn’t happen until August 1950 and produced the sublime **DREAM A LITTLE DREAM OF ME**

But there’s plenty to enjoy here, including an unheard alternate and an amusing breakdown. **YOU WON’T BE SATISFIED**, a quite pleasant little number, begins with sunny-voiced Ella, a bit busily backed by Joe Bushkin, who would briefly occupy the Armstrong All Star’s piano bench (Ella is at home with Haggart who had music-directed some of her recent hits). Then Louis enters confidently but soon botches the words, singing “naggin’ draggin’, my heart is saggin’” instead of “nagging and braggin’, my poor heart is saggin’.” Laughter in the studio, and Milt Gabler’s voice emerges from the booth with “That lyric is from the other song!” No harm done, and the next attempt turns out just fine, Ella more relaxed and Louis, who phrases much more freely than his partner, nicely backed once more by Billy Butterfield’s obbligato. When he takes up the horn for 16 bars, he’s in that up-to-date bag, and Ella’s now turned on as they trade phrases and go out together.

THE FRIM FRAM SAUCE is a harmless bit of nonsense that Nat King Cole turned into a big hit. A noted jazz-and-film academic hears the food references as erotic. Maybe so, but this got plenty of airplay! The first attempt opens with Ella, as always so expressive with the lyrics, and then Louis, clearly amused by the words (eating was one of his great pleasures in life), and getting safely past the bridge. But then he messes up again, knocking himself out in the process but carrying on through the instrumental ending, thus giving us a trumpet passage quite different from the perfect take’s; knowing that it won’t be issued, he nonetheless can’t help creating something worthwhile, if in a more off-hand and less chop-taxing manner. The format now changes, with Louis going first vocally, and you can almost see the smile on his face. Billy B. is in there again. (Compare Satch and

Nat, and see who's the daddy!) Ella, properly Louis-fied by now, phrases her chorus splendidly, her voice with that youthful quality (she never quite lost that). One could have wished for more of that trumpet — he's inspired. But then, when wasn't he?

It's fitting to end this decade-long journey with something that points to the future, but having so intimately reacquainted myself with this music proves that all of it does. Miles Davis wasn't kidding when he said that one can't play anything on the horn that Louis hasn't played already, adding "and I mean even modern." Partake of the cornucopia of phrases Louis Armstrong creates here, listen well, and you will hear them echo not only in what jazz trumpeters did and still do, but in all instruments played by genuine jazz musicians, and notes sung and scored by real jazz singers and composers. Louis Armstrong is the man who wrote the Book of Jazz, and as long as the music connects to him, it will live. As Ruby Braff so sagely put it, "Louis Armstrong is a forever study." I've been at it for close to 70 years and I'm still learning. Thanks, Mosaic, for letting me take this trip with our blessed Satchmo!

— **Dan Morgenstern**

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