

ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



[This is the seventeenth article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

LOUIS ARMSTRONG

Satchmo, Pops, Dipper, Satch, Ambassador Satch – more nicknames than the average trumpet player from New Orleans - but he loved them all. He always felt it endeared him to his audiences. Louis had an uncanny knack for recognizing how to market himself. He had to, given his humble and tough beginnings. Before we delve into his early life, the reader may ask: "Is it Louie or Louis?" Actually he made a point of introducing himself as "Louie" (although listening closely to his smash hit "Hello Dolly," it's easy to discern his line "Hello, Dolly. This is Louis-s-s-s." One of his many attributes was the ability to reinvent himself, which is why he maintained his popularity for nearly 60 years!

Armstrong often stated that he was born on July 4, 1900, which, if true, would have been fitting for such an American icon. Actually, his true birth date of August 4, 1901 was discovered by examination of baptismal records. Armstrong was born into a very poor family in New Orleans, the grandson of slaves. He grew up in poverty in a very rough neighborhood. His father and mother, both with their separate issues, left Louis and his younger sister Beatrice in the care of his grandmother, Josephine Armstrong. After that, the only time he saw his father was in parades.

To make money, Louis found and sold discarded food to restaurants, was a paperboy and hauled coal to the infamous red-light district of Storyville. When he left school at age 11, he found music, first singing, and then the trumpet. He also worked for the Karnofsky family, of Lithuanian-Jewish descent, who gave Louis odd jobs in their junk hauling business. Louis was so grateful for being nurtured and being treated as a member of their family, and recognizing that this family was subject to discrimination, that he wore a Star of David pendant for the rest of his life.

By the age of 14, he was released from the New Orleans Home for Colored Waifs, where he did time for his frequent general delinquency, and took up the cornet and began playing with bands in the dance halls. He played in the city's brass band parades, and was influenced by and played with local superstars such as Kid Ory and Joe "King" Oliver. Playing strictly by ear, the versatile Armstrong was at home on riverboats as well as in society bands. By age 20, Louis could read music, opening up a whole new path for his career. Understanding the structure of arrangements allowed him to insert extended trumpet solos, creating his own rather unique sound. Early on, Louis began to sing and use patter (aka "scat singing") in his performances.

Joe Oliver's band moved to Chicago, where Armstrong related "I lived like a king, private bath (his first) and all." Chicago was the epicenter of jazz in the early 20s. Other "horn men" tried to unseat the new arrival by challenging him to "cutting contests," a test of

musical endurance. Armstrong blew the rest away by often blowing 200 high C's in a row! His second of four marriages, to pianist Lil Hardin, was perhaps just what the doctor ordered. She persuaded him to expand his marketability by playing classical music in church concerts, dressing more stylishly and to seek more prominent billing. Leaving Oliver's band for the Fletcher Henderson Band, Louis grew his talents in NYC for a few years, but, at Lil's bidding, returned to Chicago to play with the newly formed Lil Hardin Armstrong Band. He also began recording with his famous "Hot Five" and "Hot Seven" which set the jazz standard bar much higher than ever before (just listen to his original recording of *West End Blues*, for example).



Over the next several years, he played in, or along side of, nearly every famous band and musical personality (Ellington, Teagarden, Hoagy Carmichael, Bing Crosby, Lionel Hampton, to name just a few). As his popularity grew, he began to appear in movies, like Crosby's 1936 *Pennies From Heaven*. In 1937, Armstrong sat in for Rudy Vallee on the CBS radio network and became the first African-American to host a sponsored, national broadcast.

For the next thirty years, he would play as many as 300 gigs a year, appeared in over thirty films, and recorded dozens of albums and singles, including his 1964 biggest-selling record, *Hello Dolly!* This was huge for a couple of reasons. First at age 63, he was the oldest to have a pop single hit #1 on the charts. Second, his hit knocked *The Beatles* out of the top spot which they had occupied for fourteen consecutive weeks with three different tunes. He toured Africa, Europe and Asia, sponsored by the U. S. State Department. At age 69, he succumbed to a heart attack in his sleep. But, oh, how his legacy lives on.

When you fly into New Orleans, you're arriving at Louis Armstrong New Orleans International Airport. I usually shed a tear when I hear his *What A Wonderful World*. He received the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, and has numerous tunes in the Grammy Hall of Fame. Louis appeared on the cover of *Time*. Read more about this fascinating man in Terry Teachout's *Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong* (available on Amazon, ISBN-10: 0547386370, from Mariner Books). Hear him on my favorite album, *Ambassador Satch* (also available on Amazon on the Sony UK/Zoom label, ASIN: B00GG3H0AS).

Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as "Just Me 2", a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at www.JustMeLiveMusic.com.