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LOUIS ARMSTRONG'S GREATEST YEARS

(The second of two articles)

Exactly why Armstrong chose to break with his old New Orleans background after December 1927 has never been satisfactorily explained. Personal problems may well have had something to do with it, and it may be that his colleagues as well as his wife, Lilian Harding Armstrong, felt that Louis was getting a bit above himself. That he was getting above them musically is clear enough from many of the records. It is noticeable that Dodds, a fluent and inventive clarinetist, often seems inhibited under Armstrong's leadership, while Ory, never the most inventive of musicians, is sometimes driven to a degree of ineptitude that seems only explicable if we regard him as being under severe nervous strain. That the entire group was capable of much better things, even though their musical horizons might be smaller, is demonstrated by the recordings made for Columbia in 1926 as the New Orleans Bootblacks and New Orleans Wanderers. For contractual reasons Armstrong had to be replaced in these sessions and they found in George Mitchell, Jelly-Roll Morton's great cornet player, someone whose conceptions closely reflected their own.

Not all the original Hot Five, certainly not the Hot Seven records, suggest this degree of strain. Dodds, for instance, was much more at ease with the added tuba and drums of the Seven's line-up though Ory was dropped and temporarily replaced by A.N. Other whose uncertain identity masks a trombonist of more than usual poverty of ideas. Nevertheless it was this group which produced one of the finest of all the early performances, Potato Head Blues, a performance outstanding for Armstrong's second solo, a breathtaking demonstration of the perfectability of judgement. In it Armstrong soars across the compass of the instrument and the confines of the bar-line with destructive ease. It is a tour de force, this solo, but it is the high point of the four sessions (May 10, 11, 13 and 14, 1927) on which it was recorded. The four titles which followed (the fifth, S.O.L. Blues, was not released until years later) show a sharp decline in preparation and concentration only partially restored in the last two titles, Gully Low Blues and That's When I'll Come Back To You. (9).

These and the other products of these recording years have been discussed in depth elsewhere, nowhere with greater sympathy and critical acumen than by Gunther Schuller (10), and there is little point in re-appraising them in detail here except perhaps to draw attention to Big Butter And Egg Man among the earliest efforts of the group, and the added stimulus of Lonnie Johnson on three of the last four sides, I'm Not Rough, Hotter Than That and the nostalgic Savoy Blues. The first two of these count among the short list of wholly successful, therefore classic, performances of these years.

With the exception of Earl Hines, the new pianist taken, like the rest of the group, from Carroll Dickerson's ranks, the members of the new Hot Five were ciphers. Previously the group had literally consisted of five players; now the Five became six with Armstrong no longer primus inter pares but undisputed leader and dominant personality. Hine's powerful and decorative keyboard style was the only outright gain since its empathy with Armstrong's thinking was well-nigh absolute. Neither Jimmy Strong nor Fred Robinson could match the individuality of Dodds and Ory, while Mancy Cara's banjo playing was no match for St.Cyr's. The added member was Zutty Singleton, a drummer greatly admired by Armstrong, whose contribution to these sides consists principally of demonstrations on choked cymbals that sound depressingly like teaspoons being wielded by an energetic busker.

Apart from Louis, now apparently free of inhibitions, only Hines continues to hold our interest. Technically many of the performances are flawed by flashy arrangement and indifferent rehearsal, the quest for effect being pursued, one feels, without proper concern for its appropriateness as in Basin Street Blues where Hines commits the solecism of exchanging the piano for a celeste with deflating results.

All this notwithstanding, it is clear that Armstrong felt an aesthetic necessity for such a change. Its justification, if any were needed, is to be found in West End Blues which has been described as Armstrong's crowning achievement. Curiously, it is the one side from its period which most nearly reverts to the earlier uncluttered style of Potato Head, though its introductory cadenza is far removed from any implication of naivete. Six months later, in December 1928, Armstrong almost equalled it with Beau Koo Jack; not, this time, in spite of his arranger but because of him. Alex Hill's contribution to the Armstrong saga is as far as I know confined to this single item which is a pity since it is one of the best arrangements Armstrong ever had and far superior to the majority of those Redman did for him.

The polarisation of the Armstrong-Hines association came the same day with their duo recording of King Oliver's Weather Bird which appears to have resulted from a chance decision to continue at the end of a day's recording. Bereft of the trappings provided by the rest of the band it is easier to judge the true quality of the two contestants in what amounts almost to a "cutting" contest. Each stimulates the other to greater flights of fancy; Hines to increasingly daring harmonic adventures, Armstrong to increasing freedom from the strictures of time and theme. Here then, if anywhere, is the summation of Armstrong's deliverance of jazz from the Egypt of its tradition.

But there was still one other great performance to come. Muggles is all Armstrong, in effect if not in fact, and the effect is concentrated into a few remarkable moments of pure drama as Armstrong picks up the last two notes of Strong's conventional chorus, shakes it into double time and bursts the shambling blues into shreds with explosive interjections before settling back into the original tempo to rebuild the fabric with one of the most beautiful and emotional blues choruses he ever recorded.

The very last record of all, Tight Like This, is total Armstrong, in fact as in essence. Except for a short introduction and chorus from Hines Armstrong dominates the performance from beginning to end. Dramatically introduced with two notes from the lowest register the solo coruscates like a Bellini aria, glittering darkly and passionately, no longer concerned with the external world, barely pausing even to take account of the murmured interjections of Redman whose verbal exchange with Armstrong at the beginning of the record are, by its end, reduced to awed admiration.

This marks the end of Armstrong's apprenticeship. What followed was a decade of untroubled virtuosity and increasing commercial success. Though it is, in general, not a period which continues to excite much curiosity it is not, at its outset at least, entirely devoid of

interest. In May 1926 under his own name Armstrong had recorded one number Chicago Breakdown with the Carroll Dickerson Orchestra; in July 1928 he appeared with them again, this time under Dickerson's imprimatur, in two exotically-titled numbers, Stomp and Blues con variaciones (11), better known as Symphonic Raps and Savoyagers' Stomp. All are typical of what Armstrong was to do for the next ten years, to be spot-lit against a background of sophisticated and anonymous jazz Muzak. Apart from a one-off sit-in with a group of Chicagoans including Jack Teagarden in March 1929 which produced the lumpy Knockin' A Jug, Armstrong remained with large orchestras until 1940.

With one of these, Luis Russell, he rediscovered some of the heady excitement of earlier days. Russell, recently associated with the declining King Oliver, had in his ranks several New Orleans men including Henry Allen, Albert Nicholas and Paul Barbarin. He also had a fiery trombonist in J.C. Higginbotham and in Pops Foster a bass player of sterling rhythmic qualities. In this congenial atmosphere Armstrong produced a number of excellent performances which if they no longer excite us by their audacity continue to impress us with their brilliance and ebullience. The first of these is Mahogany Hall Stomp (12) preceded by a warm account of I Can't Give You Anything But Love. These were followed in December 1929 by the first - and best - of Armstrong's many versions of Rockin' Chair with Hoagy Carmichael, and what is in my view the quintessence of the principle of reductio ad absolutem, St. Louis Blues.

Here we are presented with the exact opposite of the sort of thing Armstrong did with Weather Bird. After two powerful and florid choruses from Higginbotham against a thundered-out tangana rhythm by the band Armstrong enters and takes the tune out with four skeletal choruses of perfectly placed notes which become increasingly functional until by the third and fourth choruses they have been reduced virtually to "single note rhythm". It is a remarkable achievement and a unique one. Apart from the chains of high notes with which in 1933 he regaled his audiences in this country he never repeated this feat, and only here did he give it musical coherence.

One might perhaps suppose that he needed to purge himself of some of the excesses to which, paradoxically, he was about to address himself. Certainly with very few exceptions (I Hope Gabriel Likes My Music, Jubilee, Struttin' With Some Barbecue and Savoy Blues) the Thirties passed in seeming irrelevance. But if the music no longer was able to instruct the technique itself inspired a new generation of performers, Rex Stewart, Roy Eldridge and ultimately Dizzy Gillespie.

Briefly, on May 27, 1940, Armstrong joined forces again with Sidney Bechet, with whom he had not played since the days of the Red Onion

Jazz Babies in 1924. Prompted by a rhythm section consisting of Luis Russell, Bernard Addison, Wellman Braud and his old Hot Five companion Zutty Singleton, and with the assistance of Claude Jones, they produced four sides, Perdido Street Blues, 2.19 Blues, Down in Honky-Tonk Town and Coal Cart Blues (13) which mark Armstrong's return to the fold of small-group Traditional jazz. They show that, however much water had flowed under the bridge, 'King' Louis was still alive and kicking. And so in spirit he remains.

- (1) The Original Dixieland Jazz Band RCA RD-7919.
- (2) King Oliver's Jazz Band. Parlophone PMC7032; also The Immortal King Oliver. CBS Milestone 63806.
- (3) Louis Armstrong with King Oliver. London AL3504 (10") deleted.
- (4) Examples in (a) Fletcher Henderson: A Study in Frustration CBS62001 (deleted) and (b) The Immortal Fletcher Henderson CBS Milestone 63737.
- (4a) The Bessie Smith Story Vol. 1 CBS62377.
- (5) In Recording the Blues CBS52797.
- (6) In Jazz Vol. 4 - Jazz Singers. Folkways FJ2804 (? deleted).
- (7) In Jazz Sounds of the 20s Vol. 4. Parlophone PMC1177 (deleted)
- (8) In Story of the Blues Vol. 1 CBS66218.
- (9) Louis Armstrong - His Greatest Years - 4 volumes. Parlophone PMC1140, 1142, 1146 and 1150. These include all the Hot Five, Hot Seven and Savoy Ballroom Five recordings.
- (10) Gunther Schuller: Early Jazz. OUP 1968.
- (11) In Louis and the Big Bands 1928-1930. Parlophone PMC7074.
- (12) In Louis in Los Angeles 1930. Parlophone PMC7098.
- (12a) In Satchmo Style. Parlophone PMC7045.
- (13) In New Orleans Jazz. Ace of Hearts.

This discography is partly reprinted here from the last issue for the sake of completeness.

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