

# contact

Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

## Citation

Dommett, Kenneth. 1971. 'Louis Armstrong's Greatest Years, Part 1'. *Contact*, 3. pp. 24-27.  
ISSN 0308-5066.

**Goldsmiths**  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

LOUIS ARMSTRONG'S GREATEST YEARS

(The first of two articles about one of the greatest American jazzmen).

Legend has it that Buddy Bolden first played the blues in Lincoln Park (or was it the Odd Fellows Hall?) in New Orleans in 1894. If true the occasion marks the beginning of the history - of the recorded history, that is - of jazz. Louis Armstrong was born in that same city on 4th July 1900, so for all practical purposes his life may be regarded as synchronous with that of the music to which his name has become inseparably attached.

Jazz has produced several significant figures in its seventy-five years, but none more important to its development than Louis Armstrong. Up to his death, a few days after his seventy-first birthday, Armstrong had survived all but two of the major contributors to his art, Earl Hines and Duke Ellington. If one cares to call the roll of just a few of the great creative talents who predeceased him - Jelly-Roll Morton, Sidney Becket, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Archie Shepp - it is possible to discern the extent to which jazz has been transformed from its confident, uncomplicated beginnings to its present state of musical and quasi-political uncertainty.

Armstrong's role in that transformation was prime, and crucial. It could, of course, be argued that had Armstrong not appeared he would have had to be invented. The state of jazz at the time of his emergence was in any case conducive to such an appearance. Comparison between the earliest aural evidence of traditional New Orleans ensemble playing known to us - the 1917 recordings of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band (1) - and a similar type of ensemble in what may be termed its 'classic' phase - the 1923 recordings of King Oliver (2) - reveal an expansion of the two - and four-bar basic 'break' patterns into more extended solos. Evidence of this is to be found in Oliver's own celebrated solos on Dippermouth Blues, in Dodd's clarinet work on many titles with the band, and in Armstrong's own solo (his first on record) on Chines Blues (3). Even stronger evidence of this transition is to be found in the records by the New Orleans Rhythm Kings who by 1922 had already established something close to the ensemble introduction followed by a string of solos routine. All this lends support to the assumption that outside the recording studios - our only real source of information - solo performances were already a well-established feature of jazz well before Armstrong appeared in 1925 with the first of his epoch-making Hot Five recordings.

If that is the case, wherein lies the special importance of the Armstrong contribution? The short answer<sup>is</sup> in his virtuosity. By that is meant not just his technical command over his instrument (that is something in which Fred Keppard for one is said to have been his equal) but in the quality of the musical thinking to which he

harnessed his technique. He was blessed with a fertile musical imagination, no doubt largely instinctual, which drove him beyond the formal confines generally accepted by his contemporaries - with perhaps the sole exception of Bix Beiderbecke. In later years the technique began to show signs of wearing out, but the imagination never clouded, and we are fortunate that we are able to examine through the medium of his recordings stretching out from the first chorus in Chines Blue to Hello Dolly! some forty years later, the course of that remarkable amalgam of ends and means.

It is scarcely deniable that Armstrong's most exciting work is to be found among the 63 titles recorded between November 1925 and December 1928 with small groups variously entitled the Hot Five, Hot Seven and Savoy Ballroom Five and discussion of his work is usually confined to these. These three years were for Armstrong a period of experiment and consolidation and the small group format suited the blossoming talents of the young virtuoso perfectly.

Nevertheless, in my opinion, to concentrate exclusively on these performances at the expense of his work with Fletcher Henderson between 1924 and 1925 and his accompaniments to blues singers is to ignore an important slice of his apprenticeship. Equally to dismiss quite as casually as some writers do the period immediately following his departure from Chicago and the beginning of the long period of fronting big bands is to reject the final flowering of imagination and technique which is Armstrong's great contribution to the history of jazz.

Armstrong was invited to join Henderson in 1924 as featured soloist. He was not Henderson's first choice: that honour was reserved to Joe Smith, a cornettist of great gifts, who at that time felt unable to accept a permanent place with the Henderson Orchestra. Armstrong's first records with the band, Shanghai Shuffle and Copenhagen, already tell us something important about him.

Neither solo is particularly original but both are infused by a confident assurance and a relaxed style which contrasts strongly with the stiff arrangements and the conventional approach of his colleagues in the band. It is interesting to observe how, during the thirteen months of his stay with Henderson, Armstrong's influence had leavened the lump of the collective Henderson imagination, and his last records with the band, Sugar Foot Stomp (a speeded-up version of Dippermouth), T.N.T., and Carolina Stomp find the band swinging easily, no longer a carbon copy of Roger Wolfe Kahn but a viable jazz band.

This was no insignificant achievement. Henderson's orchestra was then a powerful social influence among Negro musicians and the black public, and membership of it conveyed prestige; but it now

became an important musical influence and remained so for most of the next decade. It is not too great an exaggeration to claim that Armstrong's residence with Henderson not only influenced the personnel, particularly Charlie Green, Jimmy Harrison, Don Redman and Coleman Hawkins, but it actively influenced the kind of arrangements that Redman, Henderson and others were henceforward to make for the band. These in turn influenced virtually the entire course of big band jazz which dominated the field throughout the Thirties and early Forties.

If Armstrong's influence on Henderson was profound the debt was largely repaid in the experience he gained from playing with relatively sophisticated musicians and from the need to play easily from complicated arrangements. It also gave him his first opportunity to develop his solo style in relative freedom.

The elements of that style, dimly observable in the King Oliver records, are now fully illumined for the first time. The choice of notes is invariably apt and their delivery is direct, unencumbered by any unsureness of intonation. The tone is rich and powerful, the timing subtle, and the accentuation and placement of one phrase relative to another is so acutely judged that each strong beat generates within itself the maximum forward thrust, propelling the music on with unquenchable buoyancy and irresistible logic. And the technique by which these remarkable results are achieved, the infinite variations of pressure coloured by a variety of vibrato, especially the celebrated 'terminal vibrato', and the use of the choked half and three-quarter valve technique which opens out into a full, upward-rising sound, inspire excitement and admiration.

In marvelling at his brilliance in instrumental numbers it is sometimes forgotten that Armstrong possessed a great lyric gift and was also capable of discretion and restraint in the company of singers where the 'leading' qualities, for which he was already famous by 1925, were in less demand. One is always aware of his presence in an ensemble, but when he found a singer whose temperament matched his own he could work near-miracles of taste. Curiously he was less successful with Bessie Smith than with some other blues singers. Perhaps Bessie's genius offered too strong a challenge to his own individuality; certainly she preferred Joe Smith to accompany her, and he proved to be the perfect foil for her own elemental style. All the same Louis can be heard to advantage in several of the numbers he recorded with her while still a member of the Henderson band (4). Particularly notable are the Oliverish 'wa wa' accompaniment to Cold in Hand and the ensemble work in Sobbin' Hearted Blues and Careless Love. But the gem without doubt is Reckless Blues where he is heard muted throughout filling in behind one of Bessie's most inspired lyric performances and offering a useful corrective to Fred Longshaw's lachrymose harmonium.

But it was in Bertha 'Chippie' Hill that Armstrong found his ideal blues partner. Between November 1925 and November 1926 he partnered her in a series of classic performances beginning with Low Land Blues and Kid Man (5) which encompassed the beautiful Trouble in Mind and Pleading for the Blues, the strident Pratt City, (6, 7, 8) and ended with Lonesome Weary Blues. The backing he gave her in these recordings were of the kind blues singers dreamed of and confirm him as a master of the art of judicious understatement, while the deft and thoughtful support he gave to singers like Alberta Hunter, Victoria Spivey, Maggie Jones and Sippie Wallace adds a touch of immortality to material that rises only a little above the mundane..

Most of these accompaniments stem from the Henderson period or from the first year of the Hot Five and are in a sense complementary to that phase of his development since they involve him in the difficult problem of following and implementing ideas created by someone else and impose upon him a stricter discipline even than leadership.

But outside the recording studios Armstrong's life during the entire span of the Hot Five - Hot Seven era was dominated by the big band, the small groups being assembled for recording only. He left New York and Henderson not to return to the home-town atmosphere of the New Orleans aggregation but to double in two large orchestras, Erskin Tate's Vendone Theatre Orchestra and Carroll Dickerson's Dreanland Orchestra. Tate's orchestra, an under-valued because largely unknown factor in the musical life of Chicago, was a quasi-symphonic pit orchestra whose members were required to play light classics as well as the 'hot' music enshrined in their recordings (two featuring Armstrong as lead trumpet, the rest Keppard).

The association with Dickerson is more closely documented. It was from the ranks of this orchestra that Armstrong drew the members of his second Hot Five and with whom he subsequently made several recordings as 'front' man. As a corporate body Dickerson's orchestra presents a better impression than Henderson did, but the general effect it created was one of suavity unenlivened by any strong injection of red corpuscules.

KENNETH DOMMETT © 1971

- (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