

Louis Armstrong's Melrose Publications and the Mythos of Print Culture

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In 1969, Louis Armstrong spent roughly two months in New York's Beth Israel Hospital recovering from a life-threatening illness that had pulled the 68-year-old from his still rigorous tour schedule. A prolific writer, Armstrong used his down time partly to draft some remembrances of his early life in New Orleans. The document's stream-of-consciousness narrative is at one point interrupted by Armstrong's reflections on his legacy. Convinced that "I have always done *great* things about *uplifting my race* . . . but *wasn't appreciated*," and seemingly referencing charges of Tomming which he endured throughout his mid and late career, Armstrong pens a scathing retort to a curious adversarial demographic.¹ College-educated blacks, at least those who in Armstrong's view, "have Diplomas which some of them *shouldn't* have *received* in the *first* place," bear the brunt of his censure.² These "*Hep Cats [sic]*," Armstrong suggests, are frauds as equally wasteful of their resources as the craps shooters from his childhood "gambling off the money [they] should take home to feed their starving children."³ Facing his own mortality, Armstrong writes with candidness that betrays his good-natured public persona. His words bear the burden of decades of persistent criticism, revealing Armstrong to be deeply conflicted toward this unnamed group of "*over Educated [sic] fools*."⁴

While Armstrong stops short of citing any specific instances of criticism, documents and anecdotal evidence dating to Armstrong's early career in 1920s Chicago and New York reveal a pattern of unrelenting judgment about his appearance, his mannerisms, and most importantly, his musicianship. My paper today places these criticisms in context with a little-known pair of jazz study books entitled *Louis Armstrong's 125 Jazz Breaks* and *Louis Armstrong's 50 Hot Choruses*. I intend to show that the books' publication reconciled *the* central conflict in Armstrong's early career—that between oral and written musical traditions. Uneducated formally and unpolished socially upon his departure from New Orleans, Armstrong practiced and represented a primarily oral musical tradition that was antithetical to the musical values, social temperament, and cultural objectives promoted by the African American intellectual leaders and elite classes of the 1920s. When Melrose Brothers Music Company in Chicago published Armstrong's books in 1927, it distributed his musical inventiveness for the first time through the medium of print. And in the view of at least one critic, the books legitimized Armstrong's role as an artistic leader of the race. His authorship of notated jazz studies thus allowed Armstrong, however fleetingly, to traverse social prejudices both against and among blacks which viewed oral musical traditions as less than their written counterparts.

¹ Louis Armstrong, "Louis Armstrong + the Jewish Family in New Orleans, LA., the Year of 1907," in *Louis Armstrong, In His Own Words: Selected Writings*, ed. Thomas Brothers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 9; Armstrong's italics.

² *Ibid.*, 10; Armstrong's italics.

³ *Ibid.*, 10; Armstrong's italics; 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9; Armstrong's italics.

The publication of *Louis Armstrong's 125 Jazz Breaks* and his *50 Hot Choruses* was novel in concept, production, and marketing. As the Foreword of *Choruses* indicates, the Melrose Company sought to capitalize on the notion that “Hundreds of jazz cornetists . . . will tell you they conceived many of their tricks and ideas from the Armstrong style of playing.”⁵ The books prominently feature Armstrong, tuxedo-clad, jovial, and somewhat heavysset, on the flashy checkered covers of each, and they were first released in New York and Chicago, the two towns in which he had firmly established his reputation as a performer. Melrose also sought to exploit the novelty of technology. Armstrong did not actually ink a single musical passage in the *Breaks* or *Choruses*. Rather, both books’ Forewords boast of their contents as Armstrong’s “genuine inspirations” captured by and extracted from a “special phonograph apparatus”: “Get hot and stay hot,” the publisher proclaims, while implicitly marketing its own catalog of music.⁶ After all, on which better titles to feature Armstrong’s improvisations than those drawn from one’s own storehouse of sheet music?

While Melrose paid Armstrong \$600 for his role in the production of the books and for his namesake, the anonymous distinction of transcribing Armstrong’s audio recordings is held by a less renowned figure in jazz history, one Elmer Schoebel, a Melrose staff arranger and former New Orleans Rhythm Kings pianist. Almost forty years later, Schoebel would confide that recording Armstrong was not the original plan. Rather, he and Armstrong met together at least once to set the trumpeter’s ideas immediately from horn onto paper. One can imagine Schoebel sitting behind Armstrong, dutifully attempting to jot down one strain after another, perhaps requesting Armstrong to repeat what he had just performed. The banality of such an exercise would only have been amplified by slight changes in Armstrong’s improvised choruses. Rooted in oral tradition, the creative mindset of Armstrong would not have been to repeat his “genuine inspirations” exactly the same. Such attempts would likely have produced substantial alterations in note choice, rhythms, and inflections. For reference, Schoebel’s transcription of Armstrong’s chorus on *Chicago Breakdown* bears few if any similarities with his playing on a commercial recording cut in May 1927, just weeks after the Melrose project. Schoebel recounts that he and Melrose executives apparently gave up on the exercise and instead “bought a \$15 Edison cylinder phonograph and 50 wax cylinders, gave them to Louis and told him to play.”⁷ Still, even with the aid of technology, Schoebel faced further unspecified difficulties. Perhaps he struggled with Armstrong’s intricate rhythmic phrasing or his uncanny ability to bend and slide between pitches in imitation of traditional black vocal practices. But whatever the causes of Schoebel’s persistent struggles, he nonetheless completed what some believe to be the first published collection of transcribed jazz improvisations by April 1927.⁸

Authoring a book of jazz studies could hardly have been on Armstrong’s radar when he arrived in Chicago to join King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band in August, 1922. At just twenty-one years of age, Armstrong exhibited apprehension at the prospect of leaving New Orleans permanently, despite his maturation as a young man and musician performing aboard the riverboats of the Mississippi. Both Chicago and New York featured a social presence that was

⁵ Foreword to *Louis Armstrong's 50 Hot Jazz Choruses* (New York: Edwin H. Morris & Company, Inc., 1927); repr. as *Jazz Giants—Louis Armstrong: Dixieland-Style/Trumpet* (New York: Charles Hansen, 1975).

⁶ Foreword to *Louis Armstrong's 125 Jazz Breaks for Trumpet* (New York, Edwin H. Morris & Company, Inc., 1927; repr. 1944); and Foreword to *Louis Armstrong's 50 Hot Choruses*.

⁷ Elmer Schoebel, “The Elmer Schoebel Story,” *Doctor Jazz* (October 1968), quoted in Terry Teachout, *Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), 405n.

⁸ Chris Washburne and Franco Fabbri, “Lick,” in *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World*, vol. 2 (New York: Continuum, 2003), 564.

barely existent in a New Orleans still very much under the shadow of Jim Crow—that of a black, educated, upper-middle class. A Fisk University Valedictorian, Lil Hardin Armstrong was, in her own words, “disgusted” by her future husband’s weight, dress, and manner of speaking, illustrating just how far removed from polite society Armstrong was upon his arrival in Chicago.⁹ Fletcher Henderson biographer Jeffrey Magee writes that, even two years later, upon his introduction into the Henderson Orchestra in New York, “Armstrong’s rube-like appearance clashed with the band’s urbanity.”¹⁰ Henderson arranger Don Redman’s account of first meeting Armstrong parallels Hardin’s precisely: “He was big and fat and wore high top shoes with hooks in them and long underwear down to his socks. When I got a load of that, I said to myself, who in the hell is this guy?”¹¹ Recruited to New York by Henderson, Armstrong’s reputation and abilities as a performer clearly preceded him, establishing expectations with which his attire, physical frame, and mannerisms were incongruent.

Armstrong’s unpretentious, comparatively impoverished appearance in bustling post-War Chicago provided ample ammunition for professional rivals and wary bandleaders. He wrote to biographers Jones and Chilton that, after leaving Oliver, he was turned down for a position in a band led by Sammy Stewart because “I wasn’t ‘dicty’ enough, regardless of how good I played, I wasn’t up to his society.”¹² His experiences dealing with the pretenses of “hep” urban musician and “dicty” middle-class standards are not unique among black southerners who travelled north for better opportunities. Armstrong would have related to author Richard Wright’s recollections moving from Mississippi to Chicago in 1927. His 1945 autobiography *Black Boy* tells of a group of young black students who dressed “more formal than their white counterparts: they wore stylish clothes and were finicky about their personal appearance.”¹³ Wright judged their formalities to be facades masking deficiencies in intellectual rigor: “always reading, they could never really learn.”¹⁴ It is indeed striking how much Wright’s sentiment mirrors the diatribe in Armstrong’s Bethel Hospital memoirs against the college-degreed “*Hep Cats*,” some of whom “can’t even *spell cat correctly*.”¹⁵

We should credit Fletcher Henderson for *hearing*, and valuing, the depth of musical potential Armstrong wielded despite his lower-class, lower-educated roots. Henderson’s recruitment of Armstrong is even more remarkable considering his own middle-class upbringing. Every member of the Henderson family played the piano, both of Henderson’s parents were college educated, and Henderson himself had post-graduate aspirations before deciding to pursue music. In contrast, Armstrong’s formal education came to an end upon his release from the Colored Waif’s Home at the age of twelve, and he only first began to read music consistently as a member of Fate Marable’s riverboat orchestra. Armstrong’s brief stint with Henderson’s Rainbow Orchestra beginning October, 1924 proved acrimonious. Henderson would chastise

⁹ Lil’ Hardin Armstrong quoted in Max Jones and John Chilton, *Louis: The Louis Armstrong Story* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), 69.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Magee, *The Uncrowned King of Swing: Fletcher Henderson and Big Band Jazz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 72.

¹¹ Don Redman quoted in Frank Driggs, “Don Redman: Jazz Composer-Arranger,” *Jazz Review* 2 (November 1959), in *Jazz Panorama: From the Pages of the Jazz Review*, ed. Martin T. Williams (New York: Da Capo Press, 1979), 96.

¹² Louis Armstrong, “Satchmo Says,” in Max Jones and John Chilton, *Louis: The Louis Armstrong Story* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), 211.

¹³ Richard Wright, excerpt from *Black Boy* (1945), in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 2nd ed., ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 1478.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Armstrong, “Louis Armstrong + The Jewish Family,” 10; Armstrong’s italics.

Armstrong on the bandstand for his reading skills, and Armstrong would reflect that Henderson was “[too] carried away with that society shit and his education” to appreciate what he brought to the ensemble.¹⁶ Ultimately, Henderson’s experiment to blend New Orleans Jazz with a syncopated orchestra from the northeast thrust together literate and illiterate cultures and musical traditions at a time and place in which their differences were hardly reconcilable.

Once characterized by Alain Locke as “rowdy, hectic, [and] swaggering,”¹⁷ the music of Armstrong and Oliver’s Chicago, and by extension New Orleans, offered little to an emerging black middle class that sought equality through assimilationist ideals. Subscription to these ideals meant adopting European priorities toward art and intellectualism, a demonstration of refinement and civility “to rise above prejudice,” in the words of Locke’s 1925 Preface to *The New Negro*.¹⁸ Which is not to say that black intellectual leaders did not find worth in African-American oral musical practice. On the contrary, they judged the folk traditions of the black race to be of immense cultural value, if only their innate rawness could be refined within the European paradigm of notated concert music. Citing ragtime and spirituals, James Weldon Johnson proclaimed the black race to be “the creator of the only things artistic that have yet sprung from American soil.”¹⁹ *Notated* ragtime and *arranged* spirituals perhaps modeled Locke’s view that successful black music “transposes the elements of folk music . . . to the more sophisticated and traditional musical forms.”²⁰ Locke similarly praised such bandleaders and composers as James Reese Europe and Will Marion Cook because they “organized Negro music out of a broken, musically illiterate dialect and made it a national music with its own peculiar idioms of harmony, instrumentation, and technical style of playing.”²¹

Henderson’s band was firmly rooted in the tradition of James Reese Europe’s Society Syncopators, even playing to all-white audiences at the Roseland Ballroom in New York. The band prided itself on its ability to read music. And its members “quietly challenged the primitivist stereotype,” writes Henderson biographer Magee, “with their refined image, . . . difficult arrangements, and prestigious jobs.”²² The French jazz critic Hugues Panassié once described Henderson disparagingly as the “Paul Whiteman of the Race,” but from the perspective of black elites, Henderson’s band did more as representatives of the race than any other musical ensemble.²³ The *Chicago Defender* heralded Henderson’s ensemble for being “not at all like the average negro orchestra, but in a class with the good white orchestras,” and praised its “special treatment musically of the Negro spirituals and folk songs” as a “great step in the right direction.”²⁴ The Henderson band thus set the standard for black musicians in the early-to-mid 1920s: an ability to match the musical proficiency of white orchestras while utilizing

¹⁶ Armstrong, “Satchmo Says,” 211.

¹⁷ Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (1936), quoted in Paul Burgett, “The Writings of Alain Locke,” in *Black Music in the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Samuel A. Floyd Jr. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), 33.

¹⁸ Alain Locke, Preface to *The New Negro* (1925), in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 2nd ed., ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 991.

¹⁹ James Weldon Johnson, Preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 2nd ed., ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 883.

²⁰ Locke, *The Negro and His Music*, quoted in Burgett, “The Writings of Alain Locke,” 36.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

²² Magee, *The Uncrowned King of Swing*, 74.

²³ Hugues Panassié quoted in Magee, *The Uncrowned King of Swing*, 27.

²⁴ Quoted in Joshua Berrett, *Louis Armstrong & Paul Whiteman: Two Kings of Jazz* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 208; and “Potter’s Pot Shots,” *Chicago Defender* March 28, 1925.

elements of black musical creativity, albeit within the *controlled* medium of notated society music.

The jazz of Buddy Bolden, King Oliver, and Louis Armstrong, while celebrated today as one of the foremost original American artistic products, nonetheless did not meet the standards of taste, literacy, or refinement of what Locke referred to as the “representative classes.” The “upper-crust” of black society, writes Harlem Renaissance historian David Levering Lewis, “still mostly recoiled in disgust from music as vulgarly explosive as the outlaw speakeasies and cathouses that spawned it.”²⁵ And Armstrong remained an embodiment of such “vulgarity” both during and well after his short stint with Henderson. One March 1927 review of Armstrong’s orchestra in the *Chicago Defender* characterizes the group as “noisy, corrupt, contemptible and displeasing to the ear. You have to put your ear muffs on to hear yourself talk. . . . Louis will come to learn in time to that noise isn’t music. He should hire a capable violin director with experience, who knows expression and orchestral conduct.”²⁶ The reviewer, Dave Peyton, whose weekly column *The Musical Bunch* appeared in the *Chicago Defender* between 1925 and 1928, frequently adopted an overtly assimilationist stance toward musical practice, calling on black musicians to study the European learned traditions of counterpoint, harmony and composition, and frequently making comparisons to the “the famous white orchestras”: “We wonder why most of our own orchestras will fail to deliver music as the Nordic brothers do,” Peyton chides, “There is only one answer, and that is, we must *get in line*.”²⁷ Peyton’s negative review of Armstrong reaffirms the upper-middle class’s preference for musical restraint at the same time that Armstrong is producing his heralded Hot Fives and Sevens recordings. And while Peyton had formerly praised Armstrong for his “wicked trumpet” as “an important asset . . . in a real orchestra, under a real leader,”²⁸ he maintains that Armstrong does not exhibit the musical temperament to be a credible band leader.

Peyton serves thus as a somewhat paradoxical champion for Armstrong’s *125 Jazz Breaks* and *50 Hot Choruses*. Just one month removed from his devastating review of Armstrong, Peyton announced Melrose’s ongoing production of the publications in his weekly column under the notable subheading, “Armstrong’s Books.” “Our jazz cornet king” Peyton proclaims, “has edited two books that will add much to the development of jazz music in America.”²⁹ A second column on Armstrong’s books appear in June, in which Peyton gushes over the potential of Armstrong’s printed editions to disseminate across geographical and racial boundaries.³⁰ And while in subsequent columns, Peyton never comes around to the idea of Armstrong as a bandleader, he nevertheless describes Armstrong as a “Jazz Master,” nomenclature invoking both the technical and intellectual expertise of a learned mentor. If indeed Peyton’s estimation of Armstrong improved between early and late spring 1927, as the language of his columns suggest, then it is difficult not to consider Armstrong’s notated volumes as contributing factors.

In closing, it may be valuable to consider the place of Armstrong’s *125 Breaks* and *50 Hot Choruses* as cultural documents. As African-American intellectual substance, they appear contemporaneously alongside other prominent volumes such as Johnson’s *Book of African*

²⁵ David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue* (New York: Knopf, 1981), 173.

²⁶ Dave Peyton, “The Musical Bunch,” *Chicago Defender*, March 19, 1927.

²⁷ Peyton, “The Musical Bunch,” *Chicago Defender*, May 12, 1928.

²⁸ Peyton, “The Musical Bunch,” *Chicago Defender* July 31, 1926; and Peyton, “The Musical Bunch,” *Chicago Defender*, April 16, 1927.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Peyton, “The Musical Bunch,” *Chicago Defender*, June 18, 1927.

American Poetry from 1922, Locke's *The New Negro* of 1925, and W.C. Handy's *Blues Anthology* of 1926. As pedagogical studies, the *125 Jazz Breaks* might even draw comparisons to J.S. Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, as Armstrong provides examples of breaks in each of the 24 major and minor keys. But whatever their broader significance, the books represent for Armstrong the fruition of a struggle not simply to find professional success through his musical novelty and physical prowess on the cornet, but also to achieve credibility for his genuine mastery of the instrument and substantive musical contributions. They thus serve as powerful conveyors of Armstrong's personal and artistic growth, in less than a decade, from New Orleans apprentice to unsurpassable professional.