

The Genius of Louis Armstrong

Louis Armstrong (1901-1971) was undoubtedly one of the most influential 20th century American jazz musicians, due to the effect that his reconstruction of jazz music would have upon future music and styles, including rock, popular tunes, TV and film scores, and even the American classical music of Copland and Gershwin.¹ Armstrong not only adapted and engaged in the current musical trends, he continually reinvented them. This essay will examine four of his most famous songs illustrating the musical genius and ingenuity of Louis Armstrong. However, to fully appreciate these works, one must first understand the language and style from which Armstrong began his musical career: New Orleans jazz.

The origination of jazz music is unknown, due to its dependency upon an oral tradition, but there is no question that jazz was born out of ragtime, that New Orleans played a central role, and that African Americans led the way.² New Orleans “Dixieland” jazz was constructed from a repetitive chorus type structure, in which an 8- or 16-bar chorus would be repeated several times, or a 12-bar blues form. Various instruments, such as a cornet, a trumpet, or a piano, would improvise a solo over the top of the repeated chorus, adding variety and Baroque-like virtuosic solos, of which Armstrong was a master.³ While musical skills, such as reading music or notating arrangements, was always appreciated, it was definitely not necessary for early jazz musicians; the only skill necessary was a good musical ear, which Armstrong undoubtedly

1. James Lincoln Collier, *Louis Armstrong: An American Genius*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 3, 46.

2. Richard Crawford, *America's Music Life: A History*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001), 563-564.

3. *Ibid.*, 621-622.

possessed.⁴ Tempos varied, but ultimately, jazz was a form of dance music, so the tempos and syncopated rhythms supported the dance and entertainment style.⁵

Louis Armstrong took a structured “Dixieland” jazz form, combined it with solo techniques learned on the Mississippi river, as well as the language and emotion of blues from his forefathers, thereby producing a hybrid blend of tight harmonic structure (i.e. *West End Blues*, beginning at 1:43), individualized by improvised virtuosic solos (i.e. *Potato Head Blues*, 0:42), and utilizing the freedom of the blues tradition (i.e. *Heebie Jeebies*, 1:22). In many ways, Armstrong’s compositions resembled his singing and trumpet playing (i.e. *Lazy River*, 0:40), in that “Armstrong’s writing mimics his music either in terms of its interactive qualities (like a jam session), its style and structure (like notes and riffs), its improvisational effects (like word solos), its narrative voice (like his musical voice), or its expressivity (like his music’s emotional suggestiveness).”⁶ These facts alone attest to Armstrong’s unsurpassed ingenuity.

Joe “King” Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band released both *Dippermouth Blues* and *Froggie Moore* in 1923 and are excellent examples of the “Dixieland” jazz, including the almost identical harmonic structure, instrumentation, and solo techniques, as well as cleanliness and precision of performance. Two years after these New Orleans releases, Armstrong formed his Hot Five and Hot Seven recording groups in Chicago. These bands created 65 recordings between 1925-28, which “constitute one of the most significant bodies of American recorded music,” and

4. Vic Hobson, *Creating Jazz Counterpoint: New Orleans, Barbershop Harmony, and the Blues*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 127.

5. Brian Harker, “Louis Armstrong, Eccentric Dance, and the Evolution of Jazz on the Eve of Swing,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 61, no. 1 (2008): 69-70, accessed July 22, 2016, http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.bu.edu/stable/10.1525/jams.2008.61.1.67?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

6. Stein, Daniel, *Music is my Life: Louis Armstrong, Autobiography, and American Jazz*, (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 108.

consequently changed the original New Orleans jazz style; Armstrong had created a new style of his own that everyone wanted to emulate.⁷ Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five released *Heebie Jeebies* in 1925. Utilizing a loose repetitive chorus structure, versus the expected New Orleans strict harmonies and form, the chorus was repeated six times, but each chorus was distinctly different. Armstrong began the song with a solo piano introduction and then the trumpet slid into the chorus, inviting the rest of the band. The trumpet, cornet, and trombone performed simultaneous yet individual parts, a technique unheard of in the Dixieland tradition. The third chorus included a distinct cornet solo; the fourth chorus exhibited solo guitar and a hybrid blend of lyrics and “scat,” a jazz form of improvised syllables, by which Armstrong set himself apart as a master yet again.⁸ A trumpet solo led the fifth chorus, the final chorus was performed with the full band, and the song ended with a tag. Armstrong and His Hot Seven released *Potato Head Blues* in 1927, continuing his new structural trend of loosely formed choruses with a specific instrument soloing over the top. *Potato Head Blues* includes two choruses of full band, three choruses of virtuosic cornet solos (presumably Armstrong), one chorus of a trumpet solo, and one last chorus of the entire band.

West End Blues was recorded in 1928 with Armstrong and His Hot Five, which also included guest Joe “King” Oliver himself. As suggested by the title, this song returns to Armstrong’s roots and is a 12-bar blues form, but including Armstrong’s unique flair. It began with a solo trumpet, moved into two choruses led by the trumpet, and then utilized “scat” vocals as a call and response between the trumpet and voice. The fourth chorus included an impressive piano solo including classical, ragtime, and jazz technique, followed by another trumpet solo, and concluded with a full band chorus. *Lazy River* was recorded with Louis Armstrong and His

7. James Lincoln Collier, *Louis Armstrong: An American Genius*, 169.

8. *Ibid.*, 110.

Orchestra in 1931, after his original Hot Five and Hot Seven recording sessions. It began with a solo trumpet, leading into a full band chorus. Each subsequent chorus had a new surprise: the second chorus included Armstrong's spoken words ("yeah," "uh huh") and the third chorus introduced the lyrics, followed by an entire chorus of scat and more spoken words. The fifth chorus included piano and trumpet solos, concluding with the final chorus.

While the genre between "Dixieland" jazz and "Armstrong" jazz remain the same, there are clear differences between the two, mainly in form, lyrics, and instrumental soloing. New Orleans jazz retains a structured form and rarely departs from said form. While New Orleans jazz songs were sometimes sung, lyrics were considered part of the form; Armstrong treated both lyrics and sung vocal syllables as an additional instrument, capable of all the rights therein, such as melodies, solos, and improvisation. "Dixieland" jazz did include solos, one instrument at a time, and performed in strict time. Armstrong's music uses a new level of genius through his use of improvised instrument solos, while retaining the original structure, sometimes including two solos simultaneously. Armstrong embodied "supreme musicianship and a personality that seemed to welcome and embrace everyone," which is what made Armstrong's musical legacy reach so far and wide.⁹ Louis Armstrong revolutionized the world of jazz and American music as we know it.

9. Richard Crawford, *America's Music Life: A History*, 626.

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