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WILLIAM H. YOUNGREN

Louis

WRITING IN THESE PAGES last spring about Bix Beiderbecke, I used Louis Armstrong as something of a foil to Bix. A sense of having perhaps been slightly unfair made me want to right the balance and set me listening closely to Louis again for the first time in years. As it happens, there are a number of recent LP reissues of his early work—which is, for me and for most listeners, his greatest work—and so he makes a suitable subject for this yearly records report.

It's interesting that there is no book about Armstrong remotely comparable to the brilliant Sudhalter and Evans critical biography of Beiderbecke. Long ago there were a couple of ghosted "autobiographies," done (as I recall) in his yakety-yak Satchmo manner; and in 1971 Max Jones and John Chilton published their affectionate and informative memoir *Louis*. But no one, so far as I know, has taken (or is taking) the trouble to do the sort of exhaustive research into Armstrong's life and acquaintance that Sudhalter and Evans did into Beiderbecke's. Yet of course it would have been (and still would be) far easier than it was with Bix since Louis himself was in our midst until five years ago, and there are many musicians still around who remember him at all stages of his career except perhaps the earliest. Why then has no one taken the trouble? Perhaps because there seems nothing to explain. Bix has always been a mystery, both in his life and in his music, but with Louis there seem to be no mysteries. The artists we feel impelled to make up legends about are those, like Bix, whose art has an impact upon us far in excess of the available facts about them. Shakespeare is of course the supreme example, but in jazz there are, besides Bix, Bessie Smith and Charlie Parker—and it is worth noting that reportedly excellent biographies of both of them have also recently appeared. A dearth of facts stimulates the creation of a legend, which in turn eventually stimulates a desire to dispel the legend by digging out the facts. But we are inundated with facts about Louis Armstrong. Moreover, the facts perfectly form a ready-made American legend, right down to Louis' having actually been born on July 4, 1900. It all seems too good to be true, yet it is all undeniably true, so why look further? From the Waifs' Home in New Orleans to his travels as goodwill ambassador for the government, everything fits perfectly. Instead of dying young (like Bix and Bird) or forgotten (like Bessie), Louis stayed around for seventy-one years, constantly on public view for the last forty of those years, living out his legend to the point where there seems nothing left to say.

This is of course a mistake. Louis was a genius, genius is always a mystery, and there is plenty of work left for the biographer and the critic. The most important critical questions are probably those that concern

Louis' supposed "sell-out" to commercialism in the early thirties. Is that really what happened? I and most other listeners have always thought so, but I am troubled by the fact that so acute a critic as Whitney Balliett continues to feel that some of the performances of the thirties are the greatest of all. Here I should like to investigate a more limited but still important question: how did the ambitious, hard-swinging, but slightly rigid cornetist who left King Oliver in mid-1924 evolve into the incomparable master of four or five years later? The LP reissues I mentioned earlier enable us to watch the process in fascinating detail.

Louis' first records, made with Oliver in 1923, are almost as well known and are as readily available as the great Hot Five, Hot Seven, and Savoy Ballroom Five records he made under his own name in Chicago between November 1925 and the end of 1928, while he was working with the big bands of Erskine Tate and Carroll Dickerson. But the records Louis made between his departure from Oliver and his emergence as a studio band-leader in his own right have received less attention. These fall mainly into two groups: those made with Fletcher Henderson between October 1924 and October 1925, when Louis left the band and shortly thereafter left New York to return to Chicago, and those made with various singers. On the vocal records the accompaniment is sometimes by Henderson men, sometimes by a group led by pianist Clarence Williams and usually including the great Sidney Bechet, and sometimes by the Red Onion Jazz Babies, which was really just the Williams group with Louis' wife Lil at the piano in place of Williams. There is also a large group of vocal records made after Louis' return to Chicago; these are of special interest because he is usually alone with the singer and a pianist rather than merely part of a band, as on most of the New York vocal records. Virtually all of this music is now accessible.¹

The usual way of drawing the contrast between Beiderbecke and Armstrong has been to praise Beiderbecke's tone while slighting his powers as an improviser, and to praise Armstrong's powers as an improviser while saying little or nothing about his tone. As it stands, this is nonsense. Bix was, in his way, as tirelessly inventive an improviser as Louis, and Louis' tone in his heyday was every bit as beautiful as Bix's. However, I think that behind this way of contrasting the two men lies an important truth about the essential difference between them.

Last spring I made the point that while everyone talks about Bix's *beautiful tone*—and often rather patronizingly, much as the large and awkward girl in the Noel Coward song is said to have *nice hands*—what is

¹ A generous sampling of Louis' work with Henderson is available on Biograph BLP-C12, BYG 529086, Milestone MLP 2005, and Decca DL 79227, all of which are under Henderson's name, and on Decca DL 79233, which is under Louis' name. There was also once a 4-record Columbia Henderson set, C4L-19, which bore the peculiar title "A Study in Frustration" and included several of the sides made with Louis; this seems to have gone out of print, but can still be found in cut-out bins. All of the vocal records, except those made with Bessie Smith (which are of course on the complete 10-record Columbia Bessie Smith set), are on French CBS 63092, 64218, 65379, 65380, and 64521; Biograph BLP-C6; and BYG 529076. These LP's are all under Louis' name.

actually remarkable about Bix's tone is not so much its undeniable beauty as its complete flexibility, the way in which it constantly changes in response to the expressive content of the improvised phrases. In this it is something like the voice of a great lieder-singer. As in great lieder-singing, the extraordinary tonal flexibility vividly projects the image of a living speaker's constantly fluctuating inner life, with the result that even Bix's most forthright and extroverted solos are somehow intimate, the sort of utterances in which we are at least as interested in following the speaker's moment-to-moment play of mood and sensibility as we are in what is being said. Louis' great small-band solos are not like this at all. They are more like clear, vigorous arguments, or even lectures, conducted throughout with enormous high spirits, sanity, compassion, and wit. Even the most intimate of them, the one on *Savoy Blues* for example, are also robust and even imperious. When you listen to that chorus, or to the florid stop-time chorus on *Potato Head Blues*, or to the dead serious blues chorus on *Knockin' a Jug*, or to the exuberant choruses on *Put 'Em Down Blues* and *No One Else But You*, or to the breathtaking series of exchanges between Louis and pianist Earl Hines on their duet record of *Weather Bird*, your attention seems to be all on what is being said, and on the superb logic with which points are made and paragraphs are developed, all on the objective content of the music rather than on the evolving inner life of the person producing the music. If listening to Bix's greatest solos is like listening to Janet Baker sing a Berlioz song, listening to Louis' is like listening to Toscanini or Colin Davis perform one of the late, great Haydn first movements. Of course this way of putting it won't quite do either: the objective content of a Haydn first movement comes to us stamped by Haydn's (and Toscanini's or Davis') distinctive personality, whether we are aware of it or not; and the objective content of a song like *Le spectre de la rose* plays an important part in engaging us in following the moment-to-moment inflections of Berlioz' writing and Baker's singing. No rigid separation can be maintained. Still, I can think of no better way to correct (and perhaps account for) the usual misleading way of contrasting the two men or to describe what seems to me the real difference between them.

With Beiderbecke we cannot watch the process of growth and development that took him from the rather stolid and placid playing of his Wolverine days to the very different playing of his later years, for he made no records from January 1925 to October 1926, which was evidently the crucial period. With Armstrong, as I suggested above, we are more fortunate. When he joined Henderson, the band was very much in the New York style of the time: fussy, precise, and tight in rhythm, with none of the loose-jointed swing or the easy, "singing" quality common to the bands of New Orleans and the Southwest.² The arrangements, mostly by Don Redman, were elaborate, tricky, and full of "novelty" effects; the solos were for the most part undistinguished. Redman's alto playing was

² The pre-Louis Henderson band can be heard on Biograph BLP-12039, BYG 529083, and Historical Records Volumes 13 and 18.

awkward and rubbery, with none of its later suavity. Coleman Hawkins was giving no hint of the way he would blossom forth a few years later: on tenor sax he was still playing in the fashionable "slap-tongue" style and sounded like a dyspeptic bull-frog; on C-melody he sounded, incredibly, just as one would expect those stacomb youths who people the cartoons of John Held, Jr., to sound. The only first-rate jazz soloist was trombonist Charlie Green, but he could also play straight, pit-band trombone and was required to do so a good deal of the time. The greatest lack was in the trumpet section, which usually comprised two relentlessly straight players, Elmer Chambers and Howard Scott. Joe Smith, who was later to grace some of Henderson's finest records, had played on and off with the band, but had not yet stayed long enough to influence its style. It was into these unpromising surroundings that Louis Armstrong stepped (or rather clumped) in October of 1924, wearing thick-soled high shoes and, to the immense (though short-lived) amusement of his sophisticated new colleagues, looking like just another fat boy from the country.

His first few solos start forth electrifyingly from the fudgy reeds and doo-wacka-doo brass. The one on *Go 'Long Mule* (which used to be available in the Columbia set) has been transcribed by Gunther Schuller in his excellent book *Early Jazz*.³ It is characteristic of Louis' work at this time (and also earlier, during his stay with Oliver) in being tightly organized around a few, constantly regrouped notes and a simple repeated rhythmic pattern. From these rudimentary materials he generates a terrific swing, but his solos seem both constricted and out of key with what the rest of the band is doing, mere (though most welcome) interpolations. Both the character of his playing and its relation to its musical context were to change very soon. Only three weeks after the *'Go Long Mule* session his horn speaks with a new ease and authority on *Words*, and on *Copenhagen*, though his entrance is rushed and his solo a bit nervous and rhythmically insecure, we hear him, perhaps for the first time, beginning to push himself on the rest of the band: during a 16-bar passage scored for the three trumpets his warm, vibrant tone and vocal phrasing emerge clearly beneath the pinched and clipped playing of Chambers and Scott. Evidently Don Redman heard him too. A couple of weeks later, on *My Dream Man*, Redman scored a similar 16-bar passage with Louis leading rather than Chambers or Scott.

In the weeks and months that follow, Louis' solos show him gradually extending his range and loosening up rhythmically as he simultaneously makes his presence increasingly felt on the rest of the band. On *One of These Days* he has perhaps his best chorus to date, clear and beautifully structured, which in turn calls forth some splendid shouting trombone from Green. Louis' growing rhythmic security is evident in the easily rocking solos and lead on *Meanest Kind of Blues*, the surprisingly sensitive and introspective stop-time chorus on the later of two versions of *Naughty*

³ Both Schuller's chapter on Louis and his remarks elsewhere on the Henderson band are well worth reading in conjunction with these records.

Man, and the beautifully sculpted breaks on *How Come You Do Me Like You Do*. On the earlier version of *Naughty Man* he had not even been allotted a solo: the fact that Redman rescored it suggests once again that he was fast learning how to shape arrangements around Louis and use his talents to best advantage. On *Meanest Kind of Blues* Louis in fact dominates the arrangement, leading off with a solo, later returning for another, and then returning again near the end with a high sustained lead over the reed section. Finally there is the superb chorus on *Mandy* (also transcribed by Schuller), in the closing bars of which Louis attains a grace and rhythmic freedom that he had not approached earlier.

With Louis' Henderson records, as with Bix's Goldkette and Whiteman records, we often have the opportunity of comparing alternate masters of the same tune: BYG 529086 offers masters #1 and #5 of *I'll See You in My Dreams*, #2, #5, and #6 of *Why Couldn't It Be Poor Little Me?*, and #2 and #3 of *Alabama Bound*; Biograph BLP-C12 has #1 and #2 of the splendid *Money Blues*; and the Columbia set included *Alabama Bound* #4. All of these have Armstrong solos, and detailed comparison reveals that in every case Louis, unlike Bix, made only the slightest changes from master to master: the basic solo was set beforehand, either in Louis' mind or perhaps on paper, as Walter C. Allen suggests in his indispensable book *Hendersonia*. Men who worked with Bix say that he too usually prepared a basic solo on each tune and varied it only slightly from performance to performance. But this was clearly not his practice when it came to recording: then he usually tried to play his solo differently each time, taking the risks involved in such "existential" improvising and often falling flatter than Louis ever does on the Henderson records. Sudhalter and Evans offer a good deal of evidence that Bix, with his interest in classical music and his attempts at composition, thought of his records as a link with posterity; for Louis they were probably just part of the job.

The remaining records that Louis made with Henderson complete the band's metamorphosis. Joe Smith returned, this time to stay for several years, for the April 1925 session at which *Memphis Bound* and *When You Do What You Do* were recorded. His beautiful, limpid horn, heard in solo on the former side, is a perfect foil to Louis' intensity, as it would later be to the intensity of Tommy Ladnier, Rex Stewart, and Bobby Stark. On *When You Do What You Do* Louis has one of his most inventive Henderson solos, and his surprisingly modern, jivey introduction over chromatic sax figures shows once again his liberating influence on the band and the degree to which Redman was incorporating that influence into the arrangements. Finally, there are the last four sides, *Sugar Foot Stomp* and *What-Cha-Call-'Em Blues*, recorded in May, and *T.N.T.* and *Carolina Stomp*, done the following October. Here, at last, everything works. Hawkins is beginning to sound like himself; the rhythm section has lost its stiffness; Smith's presence has freed the brass section of the last traces of doo-wacka-dooism; the arrangements are loose, free, and witty, with none of the mannered effects of only a few months before; brass and reeds are played off against each other with great skill; the solos are carefully prepared for

and led up to rather than merely plugged into holes that have been left for them. For the first time we are listening not to a good straight band that happens to have a couple of great jazz soloists but to a great jazz band, a thoroughly integrated unit. We are listening, in fact, to the first great recorded big-band jazz.

The vocal records made during Louis' stay in New York tell a slightly different but complementary story. The first session, held the same week that he joined Henderson, was with the formidable Ma Rainey. Not surprisingly, Louis plays very conservatively, very much in the manner of his mentor King Oliver. This conservatism, like the slight stiffness of his first Henderson solos, was soon to disappear. Two months later, in December 1924, Louis and Henderson, by themselves, had three sessions with Maggie Jones, a good (though by no means great), rather citified blues singer. Here, for the first time without other horns to crowd him and with Henderson's fine rolling piano behind him, Louis begins to experiment and to spread himself. No longer does he keep to the tried and true formula, usually followed by Oliver and others in their blues accompaniments, of merely alternating phrases with the singer in a call-and-response fashion. Instead he often plays along behind Maggie Jones, creating a continuous line of sensitive counterpoint, much as Lester Young was to do for Billie Holiday a decade later. On the rollicking *Anybody Here Want to Try My Cabbage?* and the sombre, very slow *If I Lose, Let Me Lose* Louis' delicately pointed commentary on the vocal line achieves a "speaking" intimacy which we don't usually associate with his work but which was increasingly to mark his vocal records and to make them an important and unique part of his recorded output. Best of all the Maggie Smith sides is the justly famous *Good Time Flat Blues*, on which Louis' by now prodigious technique is displayed lavishly but never irrelevantly, never (as was so often to be the case later) in ways inappropriate to the musical context.

Louis never returned to the strict call-and-response pattern, except for the first of his two pairs of sessions with Bessie Smith. There is an old story that she did not want to record with him; perhaps he knew this and was intimidated by her, as he had evidently been by Ma Rainey. Even so, he and Bessie produced some wonderful music together at these sessions, *Cold in Hand Blues* and *You've Been a Good Old Wagon* standing out especially. On the second pair of sessions Louis was looser, Bessie sang in a much gutsier way than before, and Charlie Green was added. The resulting sides are perhaps even better than the earlier ones, but are too well known to demand detailed comment here.

Because virtually all of the Chicago vocal records were made just with Louis and a pianist rather than with a band, as had been the rule in New York, we can follow his growth in breadth and command with particular clarity. The two outstanding singers of the Chicago period are Chippie Hill and Sippie Wallace. They were both raw, earthy country blues singers, untouched by any superficial "sophistication" of manner but able to project a wide range of feeling with what in fact was considerable musical as well as emotional sophistication. Some critics, most recently

Richard Hadlock in his useful *Jazz Masters of the Twenties*, have felt that Louis' increasingly virtuosic and "advanced" playing is out of place with such singers, and that he should have toed the line and confined himself to the orthodox call-and-response style. But what counts, after all, are results. On the best of these records one again and again hears Louis using his extraordinary, burgeoning command of his instrument to complement very satisfyingly these singers whose musical orientation was so different from his own.

The first two sides with Chippie Hill, made the week Louis returned to Chicago, are *Low Land Blues* and *Kid Man Blues*, both of which show him in fine form. On *Low Land* his tactful, even gentle backing and floridly eloquent solo give a new and surprising dimension to the stark, defiantly declaimed words ("I ain't gonna marry, ain't gonna settle down; / Gonna keep on drinkin', keep on runnin' 'round"); on *Kid Man*, omitted for some reason from the French CBS records and available only on Biograph BLP-C6, his solo is equally eloquent but perfectly simple. Of the remaining eight Chippie Hill sides, the greatest are the poignant *Trouble in Mind* and the bitter and remorseless *Pratt City*, but there are other fine ones too: *Pleadin' the Blues*, on which Louis' solo is full of smears and "covered" tones, and the unexpectedly gay and bouyant *Mess Katie Mess*.

Sippie Wallace had made two fine sides with the Clarence Williams group in New York, but though Louis was present he was not much in evidence. The two best sides from their first two Chicago sessions are *A Jealous Woman Like Me*, on which Louis' angry chorus, based on a descending riff figure, powerfully enforces the lyrics, which, as on many of the Chippie Hill sides, are direct to the point of fierceness ("You love everybody, / What is wrong with me?"), and *A Man for Every Day in the Week*, on which the lyrics are delightfully cheeky and Louis' solo is jauntily lyrical. Their third and last session together, held in May of 1927 at the beginning of a whirlwind eight-day period during which the brilliant Hot Seven sides were also recorded, marks the culmination of Louis' work with singers. An undistinguished clarinetist named Artie Starks was also present, but most of the time he keeps out of the way, leaving Louis free to do the finest work he was ever to do in this special, rather rarefied medium. The session is also beautifully recorded, and the richness and lustre of Louis' tone—not, alas, faithfully captured on the LP reissues—are beyond words. On the first chorus of *Lazy Man Blues* his languorous phrases behind Sippie perfectly set the mood of the piece, and later he has another of his great simple solos. *The Flood Blues* is a minor blues with hokum effects, but has some fine, taut, very formal arpeggiated accompaniment from Louis. On both *Dead Drunk Blues* and *Have You Ever Been Down* he plays beautifully relaxed riff choruses with the clarinet joining in under him. On the latter side Sippie joins in too, halfway through the chorus, singing wordlessly as though in a trance, and the effect is enchanting. (The French CBS dubbing of *Dead Drunk Blues* was made from an almost unlistenable 78-rpm original; another reason for also buying Biograph BLP-C6 is that it contains a satisfactory dubbing.)

The other singers whom Louis accompanied with only a piano are

hardly worth mentioning—though it is worth mentioning that he played well for almost all of them most of the time. The small-band records with singers are another story. The best of them were done with the Clarence Williams group behind a marvelous singer named Eva Taylor. Standing at the opposite end of the spectrum from Hill and Wallace, Eva Taylor—who, incidentally, is still singing—was a thoroughly trained and very sophisticated show-singer with impeccable diction and intonation. Not at all, in other words, the sort of singer likely to call forth praise from jazz critics, who have never given her her due. But she had a thrillingly dramatic voice and projection that evidently excited Louis and Sidney Bechet, and pushed them to outdo themselves on record after record. On their first two sides together, *Of All the Wrongs You've Done To Me* and *Everybody Loves My Baby*, Louis' fine, straight rhetorical declamation is clearly the result of his attempt to match her singing style. On *I'm a Little Blackbird Looking For a Bluebird* her unabashed and stunning theatricality not only evokes fine things from Louis and Bechet but even enables her to make believable and strangely moving the dreadful lyrics ("I'm a little jazzbo looking for a rainbow too, / Building fairy castles same as all the white folks do"). But the greatest of their collaborations, and one of Louis' very greatest records, is the fast and hard-driving *Cake Walking Babies*, on which he and Bechet strive to outdazzle each other, and everybody wins. There is one other fine band-singer to mention, Alberta Hunter, who recorded with the Red Onion Jazz Babies under the name of Josephine Beatty. She too was a show-singer of sophistication and dramatic power, but her voice was heavier and darker than Taylor's. Louis recorded many of the same tunes with both of them—sometimes on the same day, in fact—and the comparisons are always revealing.

After the last Sippie Wallace session Louis made no vocal records for over a year, until June 1928. At that time a sublime stroke of recording industry illogic decreed that he, Jimmie Noone, and Earl Hines be wasted on eight sides with the wretched Lillie Delk Christian, the possessor of an ugly querulous voice, no musical taste, and an improbable, hilarious down-Maine accent. ("Was it a dream, are you really mine?") Armstrong and Noone noodle brilliantly when they get the chance, but there is almost none of the sense of spontaneous collaborative creation present earlier even on records with mediocre singers. The one moment when things really come alive is on *Too Busy* when, as Lillie Delk is toiling along, Louis suddenly breaks into joyous scat-singing beneath her—with what motives one can only guess. A year later, in the summer of 1929, he and a small group made two sides with a much better singer, Victoria Spivey. But on both of them his backings are full of fluffs and badly attacked notes, and his solos are lazy and cliché-ridden. Plainly, he was not trying for much. A little over a week later he began the series of recordings with Carroll Dickerson's band (though under his own name) that were to set his style for the rest of his career. There are fine moments on these records, but they are Louis' moments and have as little to do with what the other musicians, often mediocre and badly rehearsed, are doing as did his first

solos with Henderson. He is the star and the others are the backdrop. So—with a few notable exceptions such as the 1947 Town Hall Concert—it was to remain.

The trouble with Louis' later big-band records is not, as has so often been said, that they are arranged rather than wholly improvised like the great small-band records that preceded them. Jazz critics have traditionally seen improvisors and arrangers as natural enemies: improvisors embody the spontaneous creativity which is the essence of jazz while arrangers are paid precisely to stifle that creativity. But this is sheer sentimentality. The right kind of arranged framework, intelligently designed to set off an improvisor's best qualities, can often be a more powerful stimulus to creativity than an improvised context. For while an improvised context will necessarily be somewhat different each time, an arranged framework will always be the same, and can thus give the improvising soloist a familiar and secure launching-pad for his inspiration.⁴ Bill Challis and others provided such a framework for Bix during his stay with Whiteman, and the effects on his imagination were liberating rather than stifling; Louis' last Henderson records show that Redman had learned to do the same thing for him and for the band's other soloists. Louis' later big-band records, by contrast, are vastly *under*-arranged: almost invariably they follow a fixed pattern with the other musicians making only a minimal contribution. Understandably, in such surroundings Louis stopped experimenting and increasingly relied on sure-fire clichés and routines that were to remain virtually unchanged for decades.

Louis' last records with Henderson mark a decisive moment in jazz history. Duke Ellington had not yet begun to record, and Jelly Roll Morton was not to begin his series of Red Hot Peppers sessions until a year later. Here for the first time we have arranger and improvising soloists working perfectly together to produce cohesive performances of great distinction. And things were to get even better. In the years that followed Louis' departure, Redman and then Benny Carter were to furnish arrangements of increasing brilliance that taxed the band's soloists to their limits and made it (and them) the best in the business. One can't help wondering if Louis' later career might have been different had he chosen to stay with Henderson, at least for a while, instead of returning to Chicago and allowing himself to be packaged as a star with the lack-lustre bands of Tate and Dickerson. But this is foolish. Louis was who he was, he made his choices, and no one can blame him. The small-band records he made in Chicago while working with Tate and Dickerson are, after all, his greatest records, and it is certainly possible

⁴ Sudhalter, who has not only written about Bix but also plays fine Bixish cornet with an English band that uses the old Whiteman arrangements, has remarked to me that the care and intelligence with which Bix's solos are prepared actually make it hard to play a bad chorus. (Sudhalter's group can be heard, incidentally, on *The New Paul Whiteman Orchestra*, Monmouth Evergreen MES/7074.)

to derive pleasure from his later work. I find myself unable to do so, however, when I come to it with the promise and adventurousness of his early work fresh in my ears and mind. Bix's musical ambitions were limitless, but they had only begun to dawn on him when he was too far gone in alcoholism to do more than begin to realize them. Louis' ambitions, on the other hand, seem to have been satisfied once he had gained the familiar and enduring mastery of his horn and had found a stable way of making a living. Whereas Bix caved in just when he seemed to be pushing on into exciting new territory, Louis remained for forty years an endlessly teasing reminder of what might have been. It is hard to say which of their two very different fates is the more distressing.