

Genius: the triumph and tragedy of Louis Armstrong

*One of the most provocative, controversial and disturbing book about jazz music is undoubtedly Eric Nisenson's **Blue, the murder of jazz**. Expressing growing pessimism about the future of jazz, his misgivings about the current jazz scene after John Coltrane's death in 1967, he claims that this continually innovative music has now become reactionary and staid.*

In a whole chapter devoted to Louis Armstrong he stresses the avant garde aspect of his music and reminds all those who have long forgotten the part played in XXth century music by this amazing musician whose genius is today often underrated.

Armstrong was a true revolutionary, a genius with the hubris to change the very way we think about the creation of music. His innovations did more to change jazz forever. He brought to music a new type of consciousness that can only be called modern. Louis Armstrong like James Joyce, Freud, Eliot, and Einstein, is a twentieth century titan, one of the architects of modern culture and modern consciousness. His break with the classic New Orleans ensemble jazz style is as audacious as the innovations of any other twentieth century rebel like Picasso or Stravinsky...

In many ways, Armstrong's revolution was more audacious than even that of the boppers twenty years later... As would happen throughout the evolution of jazz, both Armstrong's innovations and the reasons that some opposed them had at least some basis in societal parallels. Armstrong, needless to say, was a man deeply affected by the society in which he lived and his own hopes and dreams for that society. Armstrong had only recently moved north to Chicago when he began recording, along with many of his black brethren who sought what they hoped to be a more tolerant atmosphere. I don't think it is hard to hear in the Hot Fives and Sevens and his work of the early 30s Armstrong's celebration of the new feeling of freedom he was experiencing after having moved north... In the north he felt he could express himself as an individual rather than as part of a group in which his singular personality was swallowed ... So Armstrong's stepping forward with the Hot Fives and Sevens and asserting his individuality with such artistry was in itself a powerful statement reflecting the changes in his life since leaving New Orleans... He is a firebrand, a man filled with creative energy, animated from within by the fires of his imagination... The bursting creativity and visionary imagination heard on Armstrong's Hot Fives and Sevens is astonishing. In its way, it surpasses the creative heights of the two other great jazz geniuses who are often considered ultimate jazz geniuses: Charlie Parker in the 1940s and John Coltrane in the 1960s.

Eric Nisenson, **Blue, the murder of Jazz**, Da Capo Press, 1997

Roses for Satchmo

*The following tributes to Louis Armstrong come from jazz musicians from all styles, schools and backgrounds, most were published in **Down Beat** special issue(July 9, 1970): Satchmo at 70: a birthday salute to the King.*

Stan Kenton: There can be no dispute about it, Louis Armstrong is the father of modern jazz. We all derive from Louis. He's the one man who has all the ingredients ... Louis had it all. And you know something – he still has it.

Paul Desmond: Louis is such a giant. There won't ever be anybody like him. People forget how much he invented... He practically invented jazz.

Roy Elridge: He's just the greatest!

Buck Clayton: He's been my inspiration since the first time I heard him in 1932 ... He is and always will be the greatest.

Miles Davis: You know you can't play anything on a horn that Louis hasn't played before.

The history of jazz can be summed up in four words: Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker.

To me, the great style and interpretation that Louis gave to us musically came from the heart, but his personality was developed by white people wanting black people to entertain by smiling and jumping around. After they do it they call you a Tom, but Louis fooled all of them and became an ambassador of good will.

Quincy Jones: What can you say about Louis – he's the daddy. His playing has influenced everyone; his singing has influenced everyone... He and Duke form the most vital links that gave us the golden age of music... everything that swings stems from Louis Armstrong.

Ornette Coleman: Louis Armstrong is the best loved performer in the white society and his contribution to western culture has certainly enhanced the black man's social position in the struggle for human achievements.

Zoot Sims: He's my all-time favorite musician.

Al Cohn: I think Louis Armstrong, more than anyone else, is the greatest single influence on jazz and jazz musicians.

Max Kaminsky: He's the greatest musician that ever lived... Many years from now, they will finally discover what a great genius he was.

Dizzy Gillespie: Louis? He's the cause of the trumpet in jazz. ..He's the father of jazz trumpeting. What else can you say –his *name* is enough!

