WORDS on PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

Satchmo at the Waldorf

by Terry Teachout
Directed by Gordon Edelstein
Starring John Douglas Thompson

The Geary Theater
January 13–February 7, 2016

Words on Plays Volume XXII, No. 4

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Made possible by
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Overview of *Satchmo at the Waldorf*

*Satchmo at the Waldorf* was written in 2010. The world premiere was at Orlando Shakespeare Theatre in 2011. The production starred Dennis Neal and was directed by Rus Blackwell. The play’s New York premiere was at the Westside Theater in 2014, directed by Gordon Edelstein and starring John Douglas Thompson. The West Coast premiere was at the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts in Beverly Hills, California, in 2015, also directed by Edelstein and starring Thompson.

**Creative Team**
- Scenic Designer: Lee Savage
- Costume Designer: Ilona Somogyi
- Lighting Designer: Kevin Adams
- Sound Designer: John Gromada
- Assistant Director: Tyrone Davis

**Characters and Cast**
- Louis Armstrong, Joe Glaser, and Miles Davis: John Douglas Thompson

**Setting and Time**
March, 1971. The dressing room backstage of the Empire Room in the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City.

**Synopsis**
Renowned jazz musician Louis Armstrong enters his dressing room after performing at the Waldorf Astoria, a landmark hotel in New York City. He is old, sick, and frail. He has a tape recorder and explains that he is going to record himself telling his life story, which he will then get someone to transcribe for him. He begins to speak into the microphone. Throughout the play, the same actor who plays Armstrong also transforms into the roles of his white, Jewish, mob-connected manager, Joe Glaser, and jazz musician Miles Davis.

Armstrong begins to reminisce, and he recalls that Glaser didn’t like him to talk about his past growing up in a rough New Orleans neighborhood. His past wasn’t exactly glorious, Glaser had said, and painted Armstrong in a bad light. Armstrong
remembers that he began working with Glaser in the mid-1930s. Armstrong was fired from a gig in New York and moved to Chicago, but when the venue’s owners wanted him back, they sent gangsters to threaten him into returning. Armstrong did not want to return to New York, so he went to Glaser for help.

The actor playing Armstrong transforms into Glaser, who tells us two things about himself: “First, I gotta bad temper, so don’t fuck with me. . . . Second, Joe Glaser always keeps his word. Always. You just gotta know what his word is!” Speaking to us some time shortly before his death, Glaser looks back on his partnership with Armstrong. He believes his client is a genius. Armstrong has never failed to take his advice or to respect him, and Glaser feels like the musician is a son to him. The actor transforms back into Armstrong, who concurs that he thought of Glaser like a father. They were together from the day Armstrong called him to the day Glaser died.

Glaser takes the stage again and remembers the first time he heard Armstrong play at the Sunset Café in Chicago, owned by Al Capone. Armstrong was so good that Glaser put a sign out front acclaiming the musician as the “World’s Best Trumpeter.” A few years later, he got a call from Armstrong, who was broke, scared, and in trouble with the mob. Glaser gave up all of his other business and focused solely on Armstrong.

Armstrong also remembers the moment when Glaser put up that sign in front of the Sunset Café, because one of Capone’s men ordered Glaser to take it down, saying that a black person couldn’t be the world’s best anything. Glaser stood firm, however, and that’s how Armstrong knew he would protect him later. Life was better after joining up with Glaser, he says; not only did his new manager fix his troubles with the mob, but it was also nice to have a friend.

Although he had Glaser to protect him, Armstrong says he fought an uphill battle due to his race. Hotels and concert halls would book him, but they wouldn’t allow him to stay, eat, or drink in their establishments because of the color of his skin. Still, he is grateful that so many white people love his music, and, at any rate, he knows his audience doesn’t want to hear him talk about such heavy topics. The reason he plays music is to make people smile, and it was Glaser who taught him how important that is. He also told Armstrong to lose the trumpet. It was Armstrong’s voice and personality that sold records. No one cared about the jazz.

As always, Armstrong listened to Glaser’s advice, but he still loved the trumpet and found solace in jazz. For other black musicians, however, particularly those of the younger generation, merely loving music isn’t enough. They use their fame as a platform to fight for racial equality—something Armstrong has avoided.

Miles Davis, who is particularly critical of Armstrong, takes the stage. He says he admires the way Armstrong played the trumpet, but thought he acted like a clown in order to appeal to white audiences. He concedes that Armstrong is now old and things may have been different in the past, but times have changed.

Despite what Davis says, Armstrong holds that he did a lot of positive things for his race. He fought for the right to stay at the segregated hotels where he played. He also publicly told off President Eisenhower for his silence regarding the segregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.
Glaser says he was particularly proud of Armstrong for speaking up about Little Rock, seeing it as proof that his client was no Uncle Tom. But Glaser’s opinion did not sway Davis, back onstage, who takes issue with the relationship between Armstrong and his manager. He thinks it was more like that of master and slave than manager and musician.

Over the years, Armstrong says, his relationship to Glaser grew distant. Despite that, Armstrong professes that he considered his manager one of his closest friends. So it was a terrible shock when, after Glaser died, Armstrong found he had been left nothing in his manager’s will. He didn’t even get a share of Glaser’s talent-managing company. In the dressing room of the Waldorf Astoria, Armstrong realizes that Glaser didn’t care about his music at all, and maybe not even about him as a person—his manager was just using him to make money.

Back onstage, Glaser reveals that, a few years before he died, he was visited by Sidney Korshak, an infamous lawyer for the mob, who made him sign a document that would give half of the company to Korshak after Glaser died. Glaser didn’t want to sign it, but Korshak blackmailed him with a rap sheet from 1928 that proved Glaser was guilty of statutory rape. Glaser considered explaining the whole situation to Armstrong, but decided against it; Armstrong was always so joyful, and he didn’t want to ruin that happiness.

Armstrong reflects that he has had some bad times, and finding out he wasn’t in Glaser’s will was chief among them. But jazz, he believes, always needs to be happy music, so he embraces looking forward. He acknowledges that, before he met Glaser, no one had heard of him; after he met Glaser, everybody in the world knew his name. Then he picks up the microphone of the tape recorder and speaks his opinion of Glaser directly into it: “The motherfucker.” He leaves to go upstairs to his room at the Waldorf Astoria. He has two shows tomorrow, and he needs to get his sleep.
A Major-Key Artist
An Interview with Playwright Terry Teachout

By Shannon Stockwell

It is a Sunday evening in 1964. An eight-year-old boy plays in the backyard of his small-town Missouri home. His mother leans out the door and tells him to come in. When he walks inside, he sees that the television is on. His mother says, “I want you to watch this. I want you to see this man, because he won’t be around forever.” On the screen are Louis Armstrong and His All Stars, playing “Hello, Dolly!” on The Ed Sullivan Show.

The young boy is entranced.

This is Terry Teachout’s first memory of the music of Louis Armstrong. Teachout later went on to become a jazz musician, a music critic, the theater critic for the Wall Street Journal, the author of Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong and several other biographies, a blogger, a librettist, and the playwright of Satchmo at the Waldorf. We caught up with Teachout to talk about the inspiration behind his first play, the complexity of Louis Armstrong, and the pure joy of Satchmo’s music.

What inspired Satchmo at the Waldorf?

There is a photograph in Pops of Armstrong sitting backstage in his dressing room in Las Vegas, taken nine months before his death, in which he looks old, tired, and introspective—as we don’t often see him in photographs. One day I looked at this photograph and a stage picture flashed into my mind, together with the opening line of the play. I sat down and started writing, and within three or four days, I had the first draft. That was how it came, as quickly as that. Of course, there followed a year of very intensive revisions. But when I look back at the first draft, which I still have, the essence of the show is there.

The big change that I made along the way was that in the first draft, the actor only played Armstrong. Everybody else, he just talked about. I sent this draft to a very theater-savvy friend of mine, and she wrote back and said, “I like this. I think this would be producible. But I also know that you like one-person plays in which the actor plays more than one character. Have you thought about that?” This was like somebody shooting an arrow into my forehead, because immediately I thought: Joe Glaser. I actually rushed to get her off the phone and sat back down, and within a day, I had written Glaser into the play. At that point, early in 2010, the central conflict of the play had become clear.
After the play’s first production in Florida in 2011, which starred Dennis Neal and was directed by Rus Blackwell, Shakespeare & Company [in Lenox, Massachusetts,] decided to do it. On the first day of rehearsal, Gordon Edelstein and John Douglas Thompson suggested to me that I might want to try putting Miles Davis into the play, because it would give John a chance to show a bit more theatrical virtuosity. Also, since Davis was talked about so often in the play, it made dramaturgical sense to bring him onto the stage. I went home that night and wrote Davis into the script, and we knew the next day that it worked.

What is it about Glaser’s relationship to Armstrong that is ripe for the stage?

Even in the first draft of the play, *Satchmo at the Waldorf* was already about the complex relationship between Armstrong and Glaser, who was Armstrong’s manager throughout most of Armstrong’s life. Glaser started managing Armstrong in 1935. From that moment on, the nature of the relationship between them snapped into focus. Armstrong wanted to be able to go onstage every night and perform without having to worry about what to pay the members of the band or who the bass player should be or where they were going to play the next night. He simply wanted, as he liked to say, to blow his horn. Glaser made that possible for him. He told Armstrong where to play and chose the members of the band and gave Armstrong advice about how to present himself as a popular entertainer. And Armstrong trusted his judgment.

In the ’30s and the early ’40s, this kind of relationship wasn’t looked at askance by anyone. But that generation gave way to a more politically conscious generation of black musicians, like Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis, and the way that Armstrong talked about Glaser in public made them uncomfortable. He [Armstrong] always called him “Mr. Glaser,” and he made it clear that Glaser was the boss. Along with this generational shift, younger blacks, more generally, became ill at ease with Armstrong’s stage manner, which they saw as ingratiating to the point of obsequiousness.

Finally, the world of music itself was changing after World War II. The traditional jazz that Armstrong played gave way first to bebop and then to rhythm-and-blues and rock-and-roll. As a result, Armstrong lost most of his black audience. He became a person who, for the most part, played for white people in white nightclubs and concert halls.

Armstrong was aware of this. It was something that genuinely troubled him and that he didn’t understand, because he felt, correctly, that he had been a figure of real importance in terms of seeking out opportunities for his people. He couldn’t understand why anybody would want to condescend to him simply because he liked to be entertaining and make other people happy.

It was Armstrong’s growing awareness of this conflict that I put at the center of the play. Most one-person plays about historical figures are plays in which we spend an hour and a half with a historical figure, standing center stage, telling you what a great guy he was and what great things he did. I don’t like plays like this—they’re too static—and didn’t want to write one. I wanted to write a conflict-driven play in which Armstrong is actively trying to come to terms with what happened between him and Glaser.
Why did you decide to make this a one-person show?

I first imagined that the play would be performed by one person, who would switch between the roles. Once I read that second draft, I asked myself, “Is this really a play for two actors?” And almost immediately, I said, “No, it’s not.” I knew that having the play done by one actor who has to cross a racial line to play the part of Glaser was what would give the play its dynamism.

In a sense, Armstrong and Glaser are two sides of the same coin. It’s as though the same actor is playing Othello and Iago. Glaser is Armstrong’s dark shadow. He was connected with the mob. He did the dirty work that Armstrong didn’t want to do and didn’t even want to know about. My Glaser explicitly talks about all this at the end of the play; by aligning himself with mobsters, he had made it possible for Armstrong to go onstage and be the fundamentally radiant, optimistic figure that he was as a performer. Glaser never actually talked about anything like that, of course. This is the fictional part of the play. But I imagined a Glaser who somehow felt he had, in a sense, sacrificed himself, his moral integrity, for Armstrong.
So, once I accepted that the play was going to be performed by one person, I knew I had something that, if I could make it work, would be very exciting theatrically. And when John and Gordon had the idea of adding Miles Davis to the mix—well, that just made it even more volatile.

It adds a lot of complexity.

Davis has a completely different function in the play. He is exterior to the relationship between Armstrong and Glaser. He sees their relationship from the outside and provides the perspective of the younger generation of blacks who don't like what they see when they see Louis Armstrong.

Now, again, this Miles Davis character is a character. He's fictionalized. The real Davis truly admired Armstrong, but that's not what he's in the play to do. He did in fact have these deeply equivocal feelings about him, and in making him a kind of Greek chorus in the play, I stress those negative feelings rather than the positive ones. He's in the play to dramatize this new attitude in the black community that Armstrong was aware of and disturbed by.

What has your working relationship with Gordon Edelstein and John Douglas Thompson been like?

This is my first play. I knew that I had a great deal to learn and that these two people could teach it to me. It was the most extraordinary professional experience of my life, working with them in Lenox and later at Long Wharf Theatre [in New Haven, Connecticut], revising the play. At first I was the student, and then, somewhere along the way, I realized that I had learned their lessons, and the changes started to come increasingly from me rather than from them.

Your day job is as a theater critic. What is it like to be on the other side of the theater and review processes?

Well, I've spent my life getting reviewed in other capacities. I've written a few books. I was a professional musician before becoming a full-time writer. So it's not a new thing for me to open the paper and read what somebody thinks of my work. I did read the reviews of Satchmo at the Waldorf—which is insane, because I always tell other people not to. But I had a feeling that it wouldn't be harmful to me, and it wasn't. It didn't really have any effect on me at all. My internal compass was already adjusted, and I knew what I was up to.

Above all, I learned more about the process of direction from this experience. And I'm sure that has affected my work as a critic. Now that I've been on the inside of the process, I feel that I can see direction as a critic better now than I could have before. I've learned things about the process of making theater that I couldn't have learned any other way. I know that I profited as a critic from having this experience.
There is a lot of strong language in this play. Why is that an important part of *Satchmo at the Waldorf*?

My mother didn’t live long enough to see this play. I wish she had, but I was always anxious to see what she would think to discover that her son wrote a play in which the word “motherfucker” is used 16 times. [Laughs.] I myself don’t talk like that—which really tickles Gordon, who does. Some way through the rehearsal process, he looked at me in wonder and said, “You don’t use any of these words when you’re talking, do you?” Fortunately, I had the wit to say, “Fuck, no!”

But the language is important to the play. It’s relevant. Not just because this is the way that Armstrong and Glaser talked in real life, but because it *immediately* tells you that you are seeing something new to you. The second word of this play is “shit,” and that’s not just a cheap surprise effect. It’s a kind of credential. It tells you right up front that the Armstrong you’re going to meet in this play is somebody you’ve never met before.

Now, the public Armstrong was real. His smile wasn’t a mask that he wore. He really was a happy, loving, accepting person. But there was more to him than that, and that other Armstrong is a big part of what *Satchmo at the Waldorf* is about.

In *Pops*, the epigraph is a quote from artist Constantin Brancusi: “Don’t look for obscure formulas, nor for *le mystère*. It is pure joy I’m giving you.” What does that quote mean for you and for Armstrong’s life?

I have described Armstrong as a major-key artist. I don’t mean that he was naïve. He *really* understood how hard the world could be—remember the life he had as a child in Storyville. But his orientation, even when playing the blues, was essentially an affirming one. He accepts the good and the bad of the world, and, through his art, transmutes it into something beautiful. And what you feel listening to this music, what he wants you to feel, what he felt playing it, is pure joy.

I might add that you don’t have to understand music theory to appreciate Armstrong’s music. It’s always fascinated me that, even though he was a very sophisticated musician, he never talked about his music in musical terms. He always talked about it in straightforward, often autobiographical terms. So even though it’s useful as a musician to understand how he put together “West End Blues,” the theory of it is not relevant to the experience.

That’s also how I want you to feel watching *Satchmo*. There’s a great deal of conflict and tension in this play. We see Armstrong’s capacity for rage. But the play doesn’t end in anger. It ends in acceptance and joy, and that is true to the spirit of Armstrong and his great art.
Letting the Tiger Out of the Cage
An Interview with Director Gordon Edelstein

By Simon Hodgson

When director Gordon Edelstein ran into drama critic Terry Teachout outside a theater on 42nd Street, the two realized they shared not only a love of theater, but a fascination with Louis Armstrong. “I’d read Pops—Terry’s biography of Armstrong,” says the jazz-loving Edelstein. “I told him I admired it.” Teachout revealed that he’d written a play based on Armstrong’s life, and Edelstein, who is the artistic director at Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut, asked to read it. “He sent me the play,” says Edelstein, “and I thought it had the bones of something really interesting. Then I heard that John Douglas Thompson was joining the team for a reading and I knew we had something. It’s an extraordinarily demanding role, and you need an actor of extraordinary theatrical abilities to pull it off.”

We sat down with Edelstein to talk about his collaboration with Teachout and Thompson.

We heard you’re a jazz fan. Was that a major factor in working on Satchmo at the Waldorf?

I’m a huge jazz fan, and it’s impossible to be a jazz fan without adoring Louis Armstrong. You could make an argument that he invented jazz improvisation, or at least that he is one of the two or three most important artists in the history of jazz. He is a miraculous artist, one of the great artists of the twentieth century, so the thought of working on a project about him was fantastic. When you listen to that music, it’s hard to imagine that it does not come from a profoundly generous and loving soul. The music is so joyous. What we all love about Pops is the joie that he brings to every note he plays.

What’s it like working with someone from the other side of the curtain, a man who’s better known to you as a drama critic?

Working with Terry was a total dream. As a playwright, he came to this project with great humility, because he realized what he didn’t know. And he was willing to learn and listen. Not that I know so much, but I know a little more because I’ve been in the rehearsal room. I’ve done a lot of new plays and I helped Terry shape Satchmo. He
approached this process with tremendous humility. Totally undefensive, completely collaborative, and also super smart. If I was on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, he’d be my Lifeline, because he knows everything. But the other thing about Terry, and I didn’t realize this at first, is because he comes from journalism, he’s unbelievably fast. In terms of responding to the needs of the director or the actor or the stage manager, he’d come up with a solution before you’d finished your sentence.

You mentioned your confidence in the project when you heard that John Douglas Thompson was interested. What does he bring to *Satchmo*?

Number one: he’s got a highly developed classical technique. He’s played many of the iconic roles with great distinction, so he’s immensely comfortable in Shakespeare. He lives there. He’s got tremendous vocal and physical chops—he’d go toe-to-toe with any of the best classical actors on either side of the Atlantic. I’ve had the fortune to work with many of the great artists. I have directed Jason Robards, Julie Harris, Sam Waterston, and Mia Farrow. John’s in that group of truly remarkable stage talents.

Number two: John is all in. When he’s working on a project, he’s like a monk. If he’s got a show on a Tuesday night and then a show on Wednesday, I’m like, “Come on man, let’s go out for a beer. It’s Tuesday.” “No. I gotta go home.” [Laughs.] He’ll be home at 9:30, drinking tea, then he’ll get up in the morning and do his routine. He’s kind of the highest level of athlete.

Why does this need to be a one-person play?

It doesn’t. You could have two actors or three actors. But one of the things we love about the theater and the performing arts is the virtuosity of the performer. We go to see the dancer, we go to see the soprano, we go to see the actor. The virtuosity of the performer is so thrilling to us. That’s as old as storytelling, as old as entertainment.

The other part of this is that you get to see the flip sides of the two guys. At one point Joe Glaser says, “I’m Louie and Louie is me.” Casting one man somehow captures the love they had for each other. One day somebody may do the play with two actors. It would be interesting, but if you can get one actor who can pull it off, how much more fun, right?

The three of you have worked on this production in a number of different theaters. What’s challenging about directing it at A.C.T.?

This will be the biggest space we’ve done it in. But here’s the blessing: John is a very large performer. In some of the smaller spaces we’ve done it in, he’s had to bring his performance down. He is extremely comfortable in a large place with a high ceiling. It’s all about the cubic feet. The Geary’s a beautiful theater. With the style of John’s performance and the size of his talent, it’ll be like letting the tiger out of the cage.
The Kid from Storyville
A Biography of Louis Armstrong

By Shannon Stockwell

Louis Armstrong was born in New Orleans on August 4, 1901. The city had always been known for its thriving prostitution industry, which stretched all the way back to its early days as a burgeoning French colony. By the turn of the twentieth century, prostitution was legal in the city and was confined to the racially segregated district of Storyville. In white Storyville, prostitution was a scandalous yet high-class industry. Black Storyville was more impoverished and home to routine violence, drunkenness, and drug addiction, but it was also full of dance halls, honky-tonks, and music. It is often said that black Storyville is where jazz was born. It was here that Louis Armstrong grew up.

Armstrong’s father left the family around the time he was born. His mother worked many different jobs, sometimes resorting to prostitution, in order to support him and his sister, Beatrice, two years his junior. When Armstrong was old enough, he also began working odd jobs in order to contribute to the family. One of these was working for the Karnofskys, a Jewish family to whom he grew very close. They fronted him the money to buy his first cornet, and he immediately began to teach himself how to play. He received further instruction while in the band at the Colored Waif’s Home, a boarding school for black juvenile delinquents, where Armstrong was sent in 1912 after firing a blank round out of a shotgun on New Year’s Eve.

After leaving the Waif’s Home in 1914, Armstrong fell under the mentorship of Joe “King” Oliver, the best cornet player in New Orleans. When Oliver left for Chicago in 1918, he invited Armstrong to take his place as the cornet player in Kid Ory’s renowned band. Armstrong played with the Kid Ory band for about a year, and then he began to play on riverboats. As he traveled to other cities along the Mississippi River, fellow jazz musicians started to recognize and imitate his unique musical style.

In 1922, Oliver called upon Armstrong to join him in Chicago as the second trumpet in his Creole Jazz Band. In Chicago, Armstrong showed a skill for predicting and adding harmony to Oliver’s improvisations. He also met and fell in love with the pianist in the band, Lil Hardin, and they married in 1924. She was influential in advancing his career, and she encouraged him to go to New York to join Fletcher Henderson’s orchestra, one of the best-known bands in the city.

Armstrong had achieved recognition while playing on riverboats, but that was primarily among jazz musicians. With Henderson’s band, he began to gain mainstream
popularity. People bought Henderson’s records just to listen to Armstrong’s trumpet playing. Soon, however, he grew tired of dealing with his bandmates’ drunkenness and sloppy behavior. In addition, he wanted to sing, but Henderson thought his rough voice was inappropriate for white audiences. Frustrated, Armstrong quit in 1925 and moved back to Chicago.

Almost immediately upon his arrival, Armstrong began recording for OKeh Records with a band often called the Hot Five. From 1925 to 1929, Armstrong revolutionized jazz. Previously, jazz had primarily been an ensemble genre, but it was with the Hot Five that Armstrong introduced the concept of the extended solo, in which a single musician (usually Armstrong himself) played front and center for a section of a song. In addition to these instrumental changes, he also transformed jazz singing. He made his vocal debut with the Hot Five, and his unique, raspy voice became immediately recognizable. The Hot Five’s song “Heebie Jeebies” is the first recorded instance of “scat”—singing in improvised nonsense syllables—which Armstrong is credited with inventing. He didn’t; it was something many jazz musicians did back in New Orleans when he was learning the ropes of the genre. But “Heebie Jeebies” was the first time many musicians heard anything like it, and it inspired countless imitators.

In 1929, Armstrong signed with Tommy Rockwell, a tough, mob-connected manager at OKeh Records, who believed that Armstrong had commercial appeal and could be marketed to mainstream white audiences. Rockwell knew that musicals and
revues with all-black casts had become feverishly popular among white audiences, so he sent Armstrong to New York to sing and play trumpet in *Hot Chocolates*. This black revue was performed at Connie’s Inn, owned by brothers (and mobsters) Connie and George Immerman. Here, Armstrong first sang “Ain’t Misbehavin’” from the orchestra pit. While the rest of *Hot Chocolates* was largely unremarkable, this song was a breakout hit. Soon the Immerman brothers expanded Armstrong’s role until he was performing the song on the stage and doing an additional number. After the show closed, however, the Immerman brothers didn’t need Armstrong for anything else, and they fired him.

Despite this minor setback, Armstrong’s career was doing well. He was gaining mainstream appeal, just as Rockwell had believed he would. When the Great Depression hit, Rockwell convinced his client to leave behind the members of his band and move to California, where there was a larger audience willing to pay for music. Armstrong decided to stay on the West Coast and ended his professional relationship with Rockwell, who was still based in Chicago. While in California, Armstrong was arrested for using marijuana, but he received a light sentence and had to serve only 9 days of a 30-day jail sentence. After his release, he returned to Chicago.

In Chicago, things got worse. After one of Armstrong’s shows, he was approached backstage by two gangsters associated with the Immerman brothers. They threatened him with a gun and demanded that he play at Connie’s Inn in New York the next night.
His new manager, John Collins, was also mob-connected, but he wasn’t much help. Armstrong was able to avoid the immediate threat, but he spent much of the next five years on the run.

By 1934, Armstrong was hiding out in Paris, dealing with a long list of troubles. Lil Hardin was divorcing him and suing him for six thousand dollars. His longtime girlfriend, Alpha Smith, was pestering him to marry her, which he did not want to do. He had fallen out with Collins, who was now suing Armstrong for breach of contract. To top it all off, he had a debilitating oral injury—he had begun to blast countless high notes to impress audiences, but improper mouth placement (a result of being self-taught) caused his lip to split twice. He needed help.

When Armstrong returned to Chicago in 1935, he promptly called upon a man named Joe Glaser. The two had met in 1926 when Armstrong played a gig at the Sunset Café in Chicago, owned by Al Capone and managed by Glaser. Armstrong was deeply impressed. He remembered, “I always admired Mr. Glaser from the first day I started working for him. . . . He seemed to understand Colored people so much.” In 1935, Armstrong recalled his positive interactions with Glaser and felt that he could trust him to take care of everything. Take care of everything he did, and much more. He fixed all of Armstrong’s legal troubles, convinced him to cut down on blasting the high notes, and had him play pop songs with big bands. By the end of the 1930s, Armstrong’s career was back on track. His romantic life was improving, as well. During these years, he met Lucille Wilson, a dancer at the Cotton Club in New York. They married in 1942, and they would stay together until his death in 1971.

Swing music was all the rage during World War II, and while Armstrong’s sound couldn’t exactly be qualified as swing, his big band was moderately successful. The economic fallout of the war, however, made big bands impractical. Venues simply couldn’t pay for that many musicians. Seeing the writing on the wall, Glaser put together a small band—it ranged from about five to eight members over the years—and called it Louis Armstrong and His All Stars. Armstrong would play with them for the rest of his life. The group became the highest-paid band in jazz, and Armstrong was solidified as a major part of American cultural history. He was no longer just a musician; he was an icon.

His iconic status as one of the most joyful performers in the world made it all the more shocking when, in 1957, he publicly condemned the president of the United States. The Supreme Court had ordered the integration of all schools in the country, but when nine black students attempted to enter the all-white Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, they were stopped at the door. Armstrong told a reporter that he thought President Eisenhower had “no guts” in dealing with the situation. At the time, the United States was arranging for Armstrong to tour the Soviet Union as a goodwill ambassador, but after the events of Little Rock, he said, “The way they are treating my people in the South, the government can go to hell.” These statements were especially surprising coming from Armstrong, who famously avoided all discussion of politics, much to the chagrin of younger black jazz musicians.
Despite avoiding political discussions, Armstrong held that the many advances he had made as a black musician were beneficial to his race. He was the first black jazz musician to write an autobiography. He was the first black person to get featured billing in a major Hollywood film for *Pennies from Heaven* (1936). He also became the first black entertainer to host a nationally sponsored radio show. Armstrong said, “I think that I have always done great things about uplifting my race.”

Throughout his career, Armstrong had an incredible work ethic and would get anxious if he had to stop performing for any length of time. For the last 25 years of his life, he and the All Stars were almost constantly on the move. Armstrong, for his part, loved it:

I don't mind traveling, and that's where the audiences are—in the towns and cities—and that's what I want, the audience. I want to hear that applause.

... I'm a musician and I still got to blow.

But it was difficult to rest properly and eat well while on the road, and so many years of endless touring, traveling, and performing finally caught up with him. By the time he recorded his hit “Hello, Dolly!” in 1963, his health was already failing. He had his first heart attack in 1959, and by the mid-'60s, he was suffering from a chronic heart condition. Over the next five years, he was in and out of hospitals, but he still continued to perform. His doctor said, “He made it abundantly clear that the only thing that was important to him was to continue to make music. If he couldn't make music then he was through, and life wasn’t worth anything.” His last public performance was at the Waldorf Astoria—a performance that his doctor recommended he cancel out of concern for his health. Armstrong died of kidney failure due to heart failure on July 6, 1971.

Following his death, there was an outpouring of remembrances and obituaries praising Armstrong and his influence on American musical history. President Nixon called him “one of the architects of an American art form, a free and individual spirit, and an artist of worldwide fame.” Twenty-five thousand mourners came to see his body lying in state at the National Guard Armory in New York. His influence continues to touch us today. Biographer James Lincoln Collier says:

In the music of the twentieth century, the presence of Louis Armstrong is simply everywhere, inescapable as the wind, blowing through the front door, seeping in the windows, sliding down the chimney. He is a mountain in the path: you can go over him or around him, but you cannot avoid his effect.

A Struggle and a Joy
An Interview with Actor John Douglas Thompson

By Simon Hodgson

John Douglas Thompson didn’t intend to become an actor. For more than six years, the Brooklyn-based performer—dubbed “our greatest classical actor” by the New Yorker—worked as a corporate executive selling computers. It was only after he showed up for a date at Yale Repertory Theatre (she stood him up, but he went anyway) that he realized he wanted to be an actor. “The play was August Wilson’s Joe Turner’s Come and Gone,” says Thompson. “I thought, ‘This is nobility in action. I know what I have to do now.’” By the time he enrolled in acting classes at Brown University’s Trinity Repertory Company, he was nearly 30. Since then, he has earned acclaim for his performances of leading roles in Othello, Richard III, Tamburlaine the Great, and The Emperor Jones, among others. We spoke with Thompson about sales, storytelling, and his role as Louis Armstrong in Satchmo at the Waldorf at A.C.T.

What drew you to the role of Louis Armstrong?

Terry Teachout, who is the drama critic of the Wall Street Journal and the author of Pops [a 2009 biography of Armstrong], approached me and asked me if I would do a workshop of the play. I had no particular interest in Louis Armstrong. He wasn’t necessarily a substantial figure in my life, politically, musically, or artistically. But I felt the play was interesting, so I did the workshop. It was over the course of preparing to do the Satchmo production at Shakespeare & Company that I fell in love with Armstrong.

At the Louis Armstrong Archive at the Queens College library in New York, they gave me access to all these reel-to-reel audiotapes. He was a big fan of the reel-to-reel machine. He carried it with him everywhere. Concerts, parties, conversations with critics, interviews—he audiotaped pretty much his whole life. Listening to those tapes, I received a much more alive Armstrong, who was not concerned with his public persona. You hear how he felt about musicians; women (because he was a philanderer); race; political figures, black and white. What the play excavates is that real Armstrong, in juxtaposition with the public Armstrong. And they’re very different men.
How do you choose a play and a role? What are you looking for?

I look for characters that have an Achilles heel that the character is conscious or unconscious of. Then I look for a catharsis that gives the character some evolution. Once I’ve found that, I start upon a course of rigorous research. If it’s a Shakespeare play, I read all the different editions and adaptations of that play, and I also study other productions to see what other people have done.

During the process, I find some music that is what I would consider the character’s theme song. That’s a mysterious process, because I don’t actively seek it. It’s just something that speaks to me. I also set up situations in which I have the character that I’m working on talk to other characters that I’ve worked on. I try to imagine those conversations, even if the characters are from different centuries. It helps me find that particular character’s place in the universe of the play.

Louis Armstrong is an old man in this play—he’s 70 years old and he’s dying. How do you build that physical condition into your characterization?

For the actor, good characterization comes from good writing. Terry has deftly factored Armstrong’s age, ailments, and physicality into the script. I also studied a lot of Armstrong on film, from the late ’60s to his passing, whether he was performing or on talk shows, just to get an idea of his countenance, and how he maintains his physical space. As an actor I start to think of other people of that age and how they move. I studied my father—not that my father’s sick or ailing, but he is in his early 80s—and I watched how he moved. That source of movement is in my DNA.

How about the musical aspect to the character—can you play the trumpet?

I wanted to learn how to play, because I was going to be doing this show. I went to two people to teach me how to play the trumpet like Armstrong. They said, “That can’t be taught. He played notes that we still haven’t codified. We can’t teach you what Armstrong did.” He was prodigious. He was unlike any other musician.

Was this play always designed for one actor?

At one time, there was discussion of having a black actor play Armstrong and a white actor play Glaser. Terry would have none of it. He really wanted the actor playing Armstrong to cross the color line, to show the symbiotic relationship that Glaser and Armstrong had for so long.

The first draft of the play that I did had no Miles Davis. The addition of Davis came out of the conversations we had with director Gordon Edelstein. He said, “We need a voice of dissent here, a voice that objects not to Armstrong’s music but to Armstrong’s presentation of himself. We need that voice to be the voice of a generation, this young lion, Miles Davis.”
How did you research Joe Glaser?

There’s not much on film of Glaser. He was well under the radar. But there were pictures and some audio. Glaser was a big guy, very forceful, very aggressive—kind of a bull in a china shop. I had to imagine how he moved through a room. I started to look at gangster movies from that period, particularly *Little Caesar* [1931], starring Edward G. Robinson. I used Robinson as my template for Glaser. How he holds himself. His toughness. His level of aggression. His emotional state. His pathos. The cadence of the way he talks, the way they talked in those gangster movies, matched what I heard in the audio of Glaser. Because there was so little on Glaser, Robinson became my bridge.

You started your career not on the stage, but in sales.

That’s right. At Le Moyne College [in Syracuse, New York], I studied business, marketing, and economics. When I was a sophomore, I needed a little spending money so I could enjoy myself as a student instead of living on ten bucks a week. I saw this sign for an internship at Burroughs (it’s now Unisys). I remember going by the counselor’s office and continually ripping that sign down so I’d be the only person to get the job. I really just wanted that job as a source of revenue, but after doing it, I began to like the whole idea of marketing. I thought, “When I graduate, I’d like to continue this career track.” The company found me a job in Connecticut. I was living in New Haven. I went to Yale Repertory Theatre, right around the corner from my apartment, to see a play. And the play that I saw made me want to be an actor. Now that I’m a little older and I look back, it all happened the way it was supposed to. [Laughs.] I was supposed to go by my counselor’s office and pull those job signs down. It’s all serendipity.
What’s the difference between your personality now and when you were an executive?
My heart is much more open. I’m a far more empathetic person. For people to believe you on the stage, you need to express yourself and have compassion for others. And I’m a more physical being in the world that I’m in. When I was selling computers, I was an executive. We see executives all the time—the suits and ties and briefcases. I was stale, stiff, and stoic. When I became an actor, I gave away all my suits to the Salvation Army.

What were the most valuable lessons you learned at Brown University’s Trinity Repertory Company?
When I got to school, it was such a different environment [from working in the corporate world]. I didn’t know what “stage left” and “stage right” meant. I felt inadequate. On top of that, I didn’t know about being open—being open to yourself, opening yourself to be daring, to be fearful. I’d be fine if you gave me an overhead projector and a laser. But to talk about myself, to allow myself to be affected by the work . . . those things were really difficult for me.

I was in a voice class, and we were told to get up in front of everyone and talk about our voices. I didn’t want to do it. I thought I was above that exercise because I’d been giving corporate presentations. I gave my presentation anyway, and the teacher asked me if I wanted to talk. I said no. She said, “You look like you have something to say.”

At that moment, a story came out of me, something that had happened the day before, something that hurt me emotionally. Two white women were walking toward me carrying purses, but when I walked past them, they shifted their bags, as if they felt I would grab their purses. That was the experience I took into the first week of school. I had no way of processing it. It lived in my subconscious, and it came up in that class. Sharing it was very emotional for me, and it became very emotional for my classmates.

Why did you find yourself reaching for that memory?
It was something that came to the surface because I was feeling incredibly vulnerable up there. The teacher said, “If you can stand up there and tell us that story, you can be a good actor. You just have to be honest.” That was a turning point for me. Her name was Paula Langton. She’s now head of acting at Boston University. She made me an actor.

What has it been like working on a one-man show and collaborating with Edelstein and Teachout?
This is the first one-person play I’ve done. I have never had such a close-knit collaboration. I’ve had great collaborations, don’t get me wrong, but they’ve never been as intimate as Satchmo. The intimacy came because it was one performer, one playwright, one director. We all exchanged disciplines as we worked. Sometimes I would direct something, or Terry would give me an acting thing, or Gordon would give Terry an acting thing. It was quite beautiful.
I can also say it’s the most lonely feeling in the world to work on a one-person show. It’s devastatingly, heartbreakingly lonely. Because it’s just you up there, and you’re required to do everything as if there were ten of you. Doing the performance night after night demands a great deal of stamina and rigor. Just physical rigor.

It’s been a struggle and a joy. Even though I’ve performed the play more than two hundred times, suiting up to do it again at A.C.T. will be just as hard as the first time. I may have a couple of shortcuts because there are certain things that I know. But I can never take the things that I know for granted. It takes the same amount of hard work to get to the place where I was the last time I did Satchmo.

You’re at the summit of your profession. What goals do you have left?

I’d love to do more television and film. But theater is my heart, and there are some other roles within the Shakespeare canon that I want to do. Partly the ambition is personal, but it’s also political. When I started doing Shakespeare, I didn’t see people who looked like me playing the major roles. When I saw August Wilson’s Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, I saw a bunch of people onstage who looked like me. That made me feel like I had a place in the theater. So I know how powerful it is for people to see themselves represented. I want to get more people who look like me telling stories through this amazing art form called classical acting.
There is nothing so uniquely American as jazz music. In its simplest form, jazz embodies the essence of the American people: bold and inventive. The improvisation of the jazz ensemble can even be seen as a metaphor for the American democratic ideal: musicians playing solos have the liberty to express themselves as long as they adhere to the overall structure of the tune—individual freedom but with responsibility to the group. The evolution of jazz music also carries with it the social development of our nation from slavery to the swinging songs of World War II. Musically, jazz contributed immensely to the way contemporary musicians approach instrumentation, composition, and vocal arrangements. It is difficult to find a popular tune today that does not derive from such jazz icons as Joe Oliver, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Thelonious Monk. Jazz is the great equalizer; for more than a hundred years, it has been the common ground between blacks and whites, men and women, radicals and conservatives.

The early origins of jazz trace back to two sources in New Orleans history: African slaves and Creole descendants. By 1808, the Atlantic slave trade had brought half a million Africans to the United States, where they were forced to work on southern plantations. While working in the fields, slaves sang work songs that combined African tribal chants with Christian hymns incorporated from the Southern Baptist Church. Together, these influences created Negro spirituals that had strong, percussive beats and were accompanied by intense physical dancing. White slave owners felt that this music and dance distracted slaves from their work, and in New Orleans, slaves’ participation in Negro spirituals was confined by law to Congo Square in 1817. The strong, rhythmic music played in Congo Square remains a distinctive tone in jazz today.

After the abolition of slavery in 1865, the United States was confronted with the need to rebuild the nation out of the wreckage of the Civil War. The Reconstruction Era was a period of revitalization of the U.S. economy and government, as well as the redefinition of race relations between blacks and whites. In New Orleans, this racial reconsideration influenced the sound of jazz. Creoles, the light-skinned descendants of white French and Spanish colonists who had had sex with their black female slaves, identified more with their European roots than with their African ancestry. They often
looked down on their dark-skinned counterparts and avoided association with slave stereotypes. Many Creoles were classically trained in music and played with the elegance of European orchestras, which became a means of distancing themselves from “crude” slave music. The blending of Negro spirituals and Creole classical music, along with Civil War military marches, would contribute to a new genre: ragtime.

In the 1890s, pianists in New Orleans took to playing this new style of music set to syncopated rhythms—previously unaccented beats were now strongly accented. This gave the tunes ragged rhythms, hence the term “ragtime.” First circulated by itinerant musicians, ragtime songs were eventually printed as sheet music, something that had not been done for Negro spirituals. Ragtime was popularized by Scott Joplin, who composed the iconic tune “The Entertainer.” The genre’s syncopated musical meter remains one of jazz’s defining characteristics.

As the Reconstruction Era came to an end in the late nineteenth century, racial tensions between blacks and whites intensified with the passing of Jim Crow laws in the South. These laws mandated racial segregation in the southern states and would remain in effect until 1965. Nominally, African Americans were under a “separate but equal” status, but Jim Crow laws made life brutal. Many African Americans followed the Mississippi River out of the South’s interior to settle in New Orleans, where the city’s complex racial history lessened the severity of segregation. Blacks who found their way to New Orleans carried with them the pain of their enslaved predecessors, as well as the oppression they endured in the segregated South. As an expression of their hardships, these African Americans sang the blues, music built on three chords in 12-bar sequences called choruses. The blues was an emotional style of music in which musicians played shaky notes to imitate a voice of intense sorrow. It is filled with call and response, moans, and exaltations meant to stomp away the sadness.

The end of the nineteenth century was full of the vivacity of ragtime and the despondency of the blues, two ends of the musical spectrum—but from their surprising union, jazz was born. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly who the first musician was that brought ragtime and the blues together, but many jazz historians point to New Orleans cornetist Buddy Bolden. His biggest contribution to the evolution of music was a new syncopation called “the big four.” This meant the drummer accented the fourth beat of a march. This is the source of jazz’s syncopated lilt. Once the new beat had been established, Bolden added other instruments to speak over it. By 1906, Bolden had become the best-known black musician in New Orleans; he went by the title “King Bolden” well into the 1920s.

Following in Bolden’s footsteps was Jelly Roll Morton, a Creole pianist who went to Storyville’s houses of prostitution to play piano for the dancing girls. Because jazz was considered sexual, rough, and indecent, its development was confined to Storyville in New Orleans, where brothels and bars hired musicians to entertain patrons. Jazz was sometimes referred to as “gutbucket music” because it was usually played only in the seediest bars. Morton was the first known to improvise music, altering his piano style
to match the girls’ choreography. He would later write down the music he played in arrangements, proving that jazz could retain its essential characteristics when notated despite its basis in improvisation.

During the 1920s, New Orleans witnessed the rise of another cornetist, Joe Oliver, who transformed the traditional sound of the horn into the bold brassiness associated with jazz today. Oliver utilized various mutes to alter the timbre of his horn’s sound; he worked with all kinds of objects, from plumbers’ plungers and derby hats to bottles and cups. His trademark playing emulated a “wah-wah” sound, lending the name to the wah-wah mute commonly used among jazz trumpeters. Oliver quickly rose to fame in New Orleans, earning the title “King Oliver.” Oliver’s jazz knowledge and connections with bandleaders and musicians gave his protégé Louis Armstrong his start in New Orleans.

The early twentieth century brought the innovations of Joe Oliver, Buddy Bolden, and other musicians like them, but jazz remained a niche interest. Before the 1920s, the only way to hear this music had been by going to live performances. Usually, these were played by black bands in black nightclubs located in black neighborhoods. Although some white individuals did go to these clubs to hear musicians play, most whites did not...
listen to jazz regularly. The invention of the gramophone popularized in-home access to music, and jazz benefited from the production of records. A huge contributor to the nationwide circulation of jazz records was the Victor Talking Machine Company in New York City. In 1917, the Victor Company offered Nick LaRocca, a white cornetist, and his Original Dixieland Jass Band a deal to record “Livery Stable Blues.” It would be the first official jazz recording and the first time many Americans would hear the music. LaRocca’s jazz overshadowed the artistry of black musicians who had been playing the music since its inception. Because LaRocca made jazz mainstream, he boasted that it was a completely white creation and that blacks had made no real contribution to the genre.

Despite LaRocca’s false claim, the best and most innovative African American musicians began to attract huge crowds comprised of all races in nightclubs and concert halls. And no longer only in New Orleans; jazz was spreading. New Orleans had nurtured many of the biggest names in jazz at the beginning of the twentieth century, but great cultural shifts were changing the location—and the sound—of jazz.

Between 1910 and 1970, six million African Americans left the southern states for the North and Midwest in what is now called the Great Migration. One of the areas most affected by the Great Migration was Harlem, in upper Manhattan. Harlem attracted African Americans from all backgrounds: poor, middle class, educated, and cultured. The neighborhood’s high concentration of literary scholars and artists led to a cultural awakening in which like minds explored “the Negro condition” in America. The period spanning the 1920s through the 1930s encompassed the height of what historians have labeled the “Harlem Renaissance.” Jazz came into its own during this period, broadening its audience among the white middle and upper classes.

Along with Harlem, Chicago and New York City’s Times Square also became jazz meccas due to the Great Migration. These three places attracted great musicians like Oliver. Although Oliver contributed to the overall sound of jazz, it was his mentoring of Louis Armstrong that solidified his place in the jazz canon. In 1918, Oliver left New Orleans for Chicago to try his luck in famous clubs, leaving a spot open in his New Orleans band for Armstrong. Armstrong quickly became more than an understudy during Oliver’s absence, showing exceptional skill and inventiveness with the cornet. Oliver, hearing of Armstrong’s success in New Orleans, invited his protégé to Chicago to play with him in his Creole Jazz Band. Armstrong and Oliver played flawless duets and mesmerized audiences with their incredible chemistry onstage.

Many music historians pinpoint Armstrong’s entrance into the music scene as the moment jazz became an art form. His playing embodied a desire to speak eloquently through jazz, instead of playing the fast, high-flying music of the Jazz Age. His horn expressed the notes with a unique conversational quality that pulled listeners into what he had to say. Armstrong’s playing defined the sound of mainstream jazz for the next 50 years. In 1924, Armstrong joined Fletcher Henderson’s band in New York. With musical phrasing that flowed out with an easy punch and bounce, his choruses transformed the
band. He seamlessly fused the blues with popular music and was the first to create a coherent solo. He also extended the range of the trumpet, and he authored the melodic and rhythmic vocabulary from which every big band would play.

Armstrong’s skill with the cornet was only exceeded by his vocal additions to jazz tunes. After spending some time in New York, he returned to Chicago and recorded “Heebie Jeebies,” a 1926 jazz tune that featured Armstrong scatting (improvising nonsense sounds) with his voice. From 1925 to 1928, Armstrong made 56 recordings that have been studied and admired by jazz musicians everywhere.

While Armstrong was transforming the sound of improvisation, pianist Duke Ellington was gaining momentum in jazz composition. In 1927, Ellington secured a gig at Harlem’s Cotton Club, one of the most popular white nightclubs during the Prohibition Era. Ellington astonished the club’s patrons with his hot music filled with trumpet growls and clarinet squawks. It was so exotic sounding that many took to calling it “jungle music.” He sat at the piano playing dissonances and harmonies that broke all the compositional rules (which ironically would become the rules for future jazz composers). That same year, CBS elevated Ellington’s fame to national proportions when a live radio broadcast of his music brought the Duke into the homes of Middle America. Ellington
drew a large white following by presenting jazz in an nonthreatening way. He had “made a lady out of jazz” by bringing her to family-friendly radio programming. His elegance, charm, and classy demeanor dissipated stereotypes whites held of blacks. The Duke Ellington Orchestra included the best black jazz musicians in the country and played more than a thousand original pieces written by Ellington himself.

Even after the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, jazz never missed a beat in its evolution into America’s music. Armstrong’s early form of swing snowballed into a craze of lively, jumping music that got people out of their seats, onto the dance floor, and away from their troubles. Swing (a type of jazz in which the rhythm section leads the tune with an emphasis on the offbeat) ushered in a new era of music.

Benny Goodman, a white clarinetist and bandleader, made a name for himself as the “King of Swing.” In 1936, Goodman became one of the first bandleaders to conduct an integrated band; he felt that jazz could only evolve if the best musicians—black and white—learned by playing off of each other. Goodman’s elevation of jazz from cult music into American pop music inspired show bands like the Glenn Miller Orchestra.

As swing grew in popularity, jazz purists felt that commercial jazz was smothering the individuality of the music. In response, musicians in Kansas City, Missouri, began to reinvent jazz. Based on improvised and continuously evolving choruses called “head arrangements,” Kansas City jazz brought new musical constructs to the mix.

By the 1940s, Kansas City jazz would progress into bebop, a genre that brought jazz back to improvisation. Bebop was characterized by racing tempos, nervous notes, and fragmented choruses with little framework. It was jarring to the ear, especially for an American public accustomed to neatly arranged and danceable swing music. Pioneer bebop musicians included pianist Thelonious Monk and trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie. Gillespie played with rhythmic sophistication and extended the trumpet’s range past Armstrong’s level. Monk created compositions and improvisations that featured dissonances and a dramatic use of silences and hesitations. Second only to Ellington, Monk would be the most recorded artist in the whole of the jazz canon.

Today, jazz artists fall into one of three categories: traditionalists, contemporary mainstream artists, and “anything-goes” musicians. Traditionalists adhere to pre-1960s styles, modeling their music after artists like Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. Contemporary mainstream artists play mostly from the innovations of jazz after 1960. Anything-goes musicians draw from every aspect of jazz, as well as other genres of music. Regardless of the style in which it is played, jazz music is an integral part of American history and culture. It continues to evolve with the times and to carry artists to new musical heights.

Miles Apart
A Biography of Miles Davis

By Cecilia Padilla

From the mid-1940s to the early 1990s, Miles Davis was at the center of every significant innovation and stylistic advancement in jazz. He led the way with his own recordings, performances, and dynamic collaborations with musicians who strove to forge new musical pathways. Davis’s instrument of choice was the trumpet, which he played with a mute that gave him his intimate and melodic sound. Always pushing jazz into uncharted territory, Davis created some of the most challenging and influential music of the twentieth century.

Davis grew up in an affluent African American family that moved to East St. Louis, Illinois, shortly after his birth on May 26, 1926. His father was a successful dental surgeon and his mother was a piano teacher who instilled in Davis a love for music. At the age of 12, Davis began to take trumpet lessons and quickly mastered the basics. He excelled on the trumpet well into high school where, in 1942, he joined bandleader Eddie Randle’s Blue Devils. At 18, Davis heard modern jazz for the first time when Billy Eckstine’s ensemble came to town for a two-week engagement. The jazz ensemble included saxophonist Charlie Parker and trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, bebop pioneers who would later become Davis’s mentors. Davis received the opportunity of a lifetime when the band’s regular trumpeter fell ill and the young man sat in for that night’s gig. Playing in Eckstine’s band left Davis with a lifelong desire to leave his mark on music.

Upon graduating high school, Davis was accepted into The Juilliard School in New York. By day he trained in classical music, by night he played in New York jazz clubs. He often joined Parker in his nightly jazz sets, and by 1945 Davis had abandoned his studies for a full-time career as a jazz musician. For the majority of his career, Davis remained in New York, where he emerged as a bebop leader in 1949 after the release of his album The Birth of the Cool. For African Americans at that time, being “cool” centered on the idea of remaining calm and controlled under stress caused by social oppression. Davis not only defined cool with his aloof demeanor and placid expression, he also brought the concept of cool to music. A biography on Davis published by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame says that he “tempered bop’s heat with a supple, serene lyricism.”

Throughout the 1950s, Davis worked on expanding his sound. His record Walkin’ demonstrated that he could play with a bluesy yet jarring quality. He formed a
quintet that guided the beginning of the hard-bop era, a subgenre of jazz that incorporated gospel music and rhythm-and-blues. In 1958, he released *Milestones*, the record that marked the beginning of his experimentation with modal music—improvisation based on a single “mode” (scale) instead of chord progressions. Davis didn’t stop there; his interest in the ’60s rock revolution generated a whole new form of musical experimentation. Drawn to the guitar music of James Brown and Sly Stone, Davis added a guitarist to his quintet and blurred the line between jazz and rock with driving funk rhythms. In 1969, he recorded *Bitches Brew*, the jazz/rock/funk album that became the gateway for the jazz-fusion movement.

Although Davis claimed that his music spoke for itself, his personality spoke just as loud. Davis’s increasing addiction to heroin significantly hampered his playing style, and his music became more chaotic and difficult for his collaborators to follow. Often he burst out in fits of drug-induced rage or completely destroyed the self-esteem of musicians who played even a single note out of tune. When band members played solos, Davis would leave the stage in a huff or defiantly turn his back to the audience. His artistic opinion bordered on the fine line between honesty and rudeness.

As a black man, Davis knew that race would be a defining characteristic of his lifestyle and music. Instead of striving to please white society, he constantly challenged white entitlement, which enraged his critics. In a collection of interviews titled *Miles on Miles*, editors Paul Maher Jr. and Michael Dorr note that “admiration [of Davis] from black listeners grew, while whites, who still waited for Davis to entertain them, thought of him as just another nigger.” On the other hand, not all blacks felt that Davis truly embodied the social origins of jazz. Coming from a middle-class family with bourgeois values, Davis suffered from the prejudice of black musicians as much as he did white audiences. In response to black artists who felt that he was too high-society to play soulfully, Davis stated, “You don’t know how to play better just because you’ve suffered. The blues don’t come from picking cotton.”

In addition to his musical fame, Davis gained notoriety for his contention with Louis Armstrong. Although both played the trumpet, Davis and Armstrong stood at opposite ends of the jazz spectrum. Armstrong favored an easygoing style with a bit of swing, while Davis played fast and complex. Armstrong felt that jazz was about entertainment,
but Davis believed it was governed only by the musician's desires. Modern jazz fell flat with Armstrong; he criticized that bebop “got all them weird chords which don’t mean nothing. . . . It’s really no good and you got no melody to remember and no beat to dance to.” The two also approached racial issues from opposite angles. Davis, having come of age at the end of the Harlem Renaissance, castigated the older musician for his onstage persona: “I hate the way Louis acts onstage. Man gets up there and pulls out that hankie and starts jumping round like Jim Crow on a stick. . . . I won’t do it. Never would. Anybody don’t dig Miles Davis, fuck ’em.”

Although he did work professionally with white people, Davis used jazz as a means of racial empowerment by circumventing white supremacy in the music business. Maher and Dorr observe that “by not Uncle Tomming to his audience, by not grinning like Louis Armstrong or performing upon a shoesine box, [Davis] swore musical fidelity to self-respect.” Armstrong, they argue, worked the system in his favor by taking on a white manager to handle business in a racist industry and by catering to a mostly white audience to sell out performances. Maher and Dorr point out that “Satchmo’s philosophy was that he got better results . . . with courtesy than with confrontation and with cuteness than with controversy.”

Despite disagreeing on each other’s business and performance styles, Davis did respect Armstrong’s music. He acknowledged, “You can’t play nothing on trumpet that doesn’t come from [Armstrong], not even modern shit. . . . He had great feeling up in his playing and he always played on the beat. I just loved the way he played and sang.” Similarly, Armstrong said he “had been quoted as saying this and that about Bop . . . but any time we [the beboppers and Armstrong] would run across each other, there would be a lot of warmth amongst us.” Armstrong accepted that it was important for bebop to keep pushing the limits of musical composition in order for jazz to thrive.

Davis continued to do just that until his death in 1991. Unlike Armstrong, who wanted to reach the general public with his music, Davis used jazz to challenge the crowd. Maher and Dorr remark that “his music became denser, cacophonous, dissonant, as if daring the listener to cut through the thicket . . . in order to absorb Miles’s intentions.” This deliberate separation from his listeners contributed to Davis’s contention with the people-loving Armstrong. But although they were opposites in so many ways, both musicians embody the essence of jazz.

**SOURCES**

Cool versus Fool
Criticisms of Louis Armstrong

By Shannon Stockwell

At the beginning of his career, Louis Armstrong successfully walked the thin line between art and entertainment. His jazz recordings with the Hot Five are regarded as some of the most influential in music history, but at the same time, the records contain enough of his comedy and distinctive singing to attract those who aren't jazz aficionados. By the end of the ’30s, however, it was clear that Armstrong’s music had become decidedly pop oriented. As he grew more popular with mainstream audiences, jazz scholars turned up their noses. Among these purists, the consensus was that Armstrong didn’t have the same technical proficiency that he once did, his repertoire was stale, and he had sacrificed musicality for mainstream entertainment value.

Around the 1940s, young black jazz musicians who had once admired Armstrong found themselves with similar criticisms, but they believed Armstrong had sold out in another way. They believed he had sold out his race. They called him an “Uncle Tom,” an insult that implies a black person behaves in an overly subservient and compliant manner in order to please white people. Jazz trumpeter Miles Davis said:

I always hated the way they [Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie] used to laugh and grin to the audiences. I know why they did it—to make money and because they were entertainers as well as trumpet players. They had families to feed. Plus they both liked acting the clown; it’s just the way Dizzy and Satch were. I don’t have nothing against them doing it if they want to. But I didn’t like it and didn’t have to like it.

For Davis and critics like him, Armstrong’s comedy routines, mugging, popping eyes, and giant grin were too close to the minstrel performances of the past, when white people—and later black people—donned blackface and acted out stereotypes of African Americans that portrayed them as happy-go-lucky, dumb, and subservient.

Armstrong’s critics weren’t entirely wrong. He had been influenced by minstrelsy. Many black Americans who grew up at that time were, because minstrel shows were among the most popular form of entertainment at the turn of the twentieth century. In the world of Armstrong’s youth, minstrelsy was often white people’s primary exposure to images of black men, so white people came to expect minstrel-character behavior from actual black men. And because of the white-supremacist social system of the time, black
men were forced to succumb to the behavioral expectations of white people. By taking on minstrel characteristics like subservience and docility, these black men were actually donning a form of protection. According to sociologist Joel Dinerstein, “Hiding one’s feelings under the grinning black mask was a survival skill of great importance to all black males up through World War II; a black man could get lynched for pretending to be on equal terms with a white man under almost any circumstances.”

As time went on, black American culture began to shift. During the 1920s and '30s, many African Americans living in the South sought work opportunities in cities in the Northeast and Midwest. The Great Migration, as this phenomenon came to be called, instilled feelings of opportunity and economic freedom in many of these black Americans. The improved conditions suggested that there was hope that further social change was on the way.

Change was coming, but slowly. Although the Northeast and Midwest were marginally less racist than the South, black people still faced discrimination in employment, housing, and nearly every other part of their lives. Some young African
Americans, however, had had a *taste* of improvement, and the potential of better conditions was enough to make it clear that a happy-go-lucky minstrel attitude was no longer appropriate. A demeanor was needed that was antithetical to the docile, compliant stance that white people had expected of them for so long. The answer was “cool.” Writer and activist Amiri Baraka said, “To be cool was . . . to be calm, even unimpressed, by what horror the world might daily propose [such as] the deadeningly predictable mind of white Americans.” “Cool” meant that one was reserved, quiet, and in control—a countenance in direct opposition to the exuberant stage manner of Louis Armstrong.

The philosophy of cool was particularly important to a new genre of jazz that began to appear in the mid-'40s. Bebop was a response to mainstream pop jazz, which was dance music—fun and easy to listen to. Bebop was different. Like “cool,” bebop did not exist to entertain white audiences. To young African American jazz lovers, this was preferable to the ingratiating presence of artists like Armstrong. Some of the major originators of bebop, like trumpeters Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis, were heavily involved in promoting the rights of African Americans, and bebop came to be associated with rising black political consciousness. This also set up a contrast to Armstrong, who often proclaimed, “I don’t get involved in politics. I just blow my horn.”

As one of the most famous black men of the mid-twentieth century, did Armstrong have an obligation to be a more outspoken crusader for civil rights? By not doing more, or by performing the way he did, was he somehow betraying his race?

Armstrong saw himself as an entertainer, first and foremost. He felt he was in the business of making people happy. But he also felt that his entertainment value—the same thing jazz purists and young black musicians criticized—was actually the most powerful force in his fight for equality among the races. He knew most of his fans were white, and he knew many of them could very well be racist. Any member of his white audiences “may go around the corner and lynch a Negro,” he said. But he didn’t believe that entertaining racist white audiences encouraged them to be *more* racist. In fact, he felt it had the opposite effect: “While they’re listening to our music, they don’t think about trouble. What’s more, they’re watching Negro and white musicians play side by side. And we bring contentment and pleasure. I always say, ‘Look at the nice taste we leave. It’s bound to mean something.’”

**SOURCES**

A Hell of a Businessman

A Biography of Joe Glaser

By Simon Hodgson

Born in 1897, Joe Glaser was the son of a successful Russian Jewish physician in Chicago. He originally intended to follow a similar career and entered medical school, but after passing out in the operating room, he realized he wasn’t cut out to be a doctor. He started off in business selling used cars, but found better luck managing prizefighters. In his biography of Al Capone, Laurence Bergreen notes, “Glaser’s power to fix fights earned him a reputation as a sage of boxing, especially among reporters.” With advanced word as to which fights were fixed, Glaser could predict the results—and even the number of rounds—of many bouts in Chicago. His connections with organized crime continued in his next career change, when he began running nightclubs and whorehouses in the South Side for the Chicago Outfit, the powerful underworld gang led by Capone.

Glaser’s tendency toward illegal action nearly ended his career. In 1928, he was sentenced to ten years in prison for the statutory rape of a 14-year-old girl, but he dodged the charge by marrying her. Although his connections with Capone were enough to help him escape a similar charge months later, the scandals forced Glaser out of the nightclub business and back to boxing.

When Louis Armstrong approached Glaser to become his manager in 1935, both men were at a crossroads in their careers. While Glaser’s rise had been stalled by his run-ins with the law, Armstrong was looking for protection. He’d been threatened by several mobsters, including notorious New York gang leader Dutch Schultz, and after a series of inadequate managers, he wanted a partner with both savvy and steel. For the trumpeter, the businessman’s link to Capone and his reputation as a tough customer only added to his appeal. “You don’t know me,” Glaser would tell new acquaintances, “but you know two things about me: I have a terrible temper, and I always keep my word.”

From the start, the partnership was profitable. Glaser gave up his prizefighters, made Armstrong his sole focus, and went on the road with the musician and his band, where he quickly learned the ropes of touring. More importantly, he took on the “bad cop” role of negotiating contracts and firing band members, leaving Armstrong free to blow his horn.
Their symbiotic relationship was not just based on business. Armstrong saw in the older man the father figure he’d been searching for all his life. Glaser felt a similar loyalty. “I’m Louis and Louis is me,” he said in an interview with *TIME* in 1949. “There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for him.” Barney Bigard, a clarinetist and longtime collaborator with Armstrong, said that the relationship between the two men was genuine. “When Louis said in an interview that Joe was the greatest man he had ever met, he probably meant it. They really were plain old-fashioned friends. Louis wasn’t just saying that for business reasons.”

With the former nightclub manager handling the business and the trumpeter drawing the crowds, Glaser and Armstrong made millions. Glaser steered the musician toward mainstream audiences by securing spots on television shows, in national magazines, and in Hollywood movies, not to mention lining up his most successful single—“Hello, Dolly!” The resulting publicity helped turn Armstrong into an iconic figure in American public life.

While Glaser kept a lower media profile, he also enjoyed the rewards of their joint success, spending his time raising thoroughbred bulldogs, attending baseball games, and driving a blue Rolls-Royce convertible. The company he founded, Associated Booking Corporation (ABC), went on to represent not only Armstrong but also Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington, and dozens of African American musicians. “If I have Joe Glaser’s word,” said TV-show host Ed Sullivan, “I can go to sleep. And the performer he is booking can go to sleep too.” Glaser was “a hell of a businessman,” said Bigard. “I don’t think anyone else could have taken Louis as far as he did.”

Although Glaser’s career and his relationship with the musician were secure by the time of his death in 1969, his old criminal connections would sour Armstrong’s memory of him. Only after Glaser’s death did Armstrong realize the financial imbalance of their “partnership.” Control of ABC went not to him—as he had expected—but to gangland lawyer and fixer Sidney Korshak. The switch in succession had taken place seven years before; court documents from 1962 show Korshak’s acquisition of stock and voting rights. While *Satchmo at the Waldorf* suggests that the mob lawyer used blackmail to persuade Glaser, exactly how this transfer of corporate control happened remains a mystery.

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**SOURCES**

From Reel to Real
Louis Armstrong and Personal Recording

By Simon Hodgson

For Louis Armstrong, a man who experienced the world through sound, recording himself came naturally. When commercially manufactured reel-to-reel tape recorders became available in the late 1940s, Armstrong was an early adopter. He was introduced to the new machines by his friend Bing Crosby, who saw the value in the magnetic tape technology exported from post–World War II Germany. The trumpeter invested in a Recordio reel-to-reel tape machine manufactured by Wilcox-Gay Corporation and took the bulky device with him on the road, transporting it in a steamer trunk.

While Crosby went on to use reel-to-reel tapes professionally and revolutionized broadcasting (he prerecorded radio shows rather than performing live), Armstrong used the new equipment in a more personal way. Initially, Armstrong used the audio technology to record his stage performances, enabling him to listen to and polish his sets. Gradually, however, he started recording ordinary life as well. He would tape postshow radio interviews, intimate conversations with dressing room visitors, dirty jokes with friends, or just himself tinkering around at home while watching a baseball game on television.

By the time he died in 1971, Armstrong had 650 reels of taped personal conversations as well as thousands of music recordings stashed in his house in Queens. For researchers, the hundreds of reels stored in an archival center in the Queens College library in Flushing, New York, are a gold mine. Previously, biographers had to track down Armstrong’s old collaborators for nuggets of information. Now, they can listen directly to the source. Author, drama critic, and playwright Terry Teachout used these tapes in writing his biography of Armstrong, Pops, as well as the play Satchmo at the Waldorf. Actor John Douglas Thompson, who plays Armstrong in Satchmo, also traveled to Flushing to listen to the tapes and hear the difference between the cultural icon and the man: one folksy, upbeat, and entertaining, the other capable of rage, resentment, and joy.

History has a way of revealing the flaws of the famous. Generals, presidents, and sports stars usually fade in the unblinking glare of hindsight. But in the recordings he left, Armstrong emerges stronger, more human, more believable. Yes, he could be angry, or crude, or embittered. But even in his most vulnerable moments—exhausted or irritated, high on his beloved “gage” (marijuana) or trying to get his wife into bed—he was never afraid to reveal himself.
Armstrong had a sense of himself as a public figure and a cultural leader. That explains his 1954 autobiography, about a musician who comes from the streets of Storyville and rides his talent to the top. He was proud of his rags-to-riches story—it was true, and he wanted people to hear it—but there was more to his life and personality than that one narrative, and he wasn’t afraid of sharing it with the public. It is that sense of himself as a historic figure that explains his frequent references in the tapes as to why he was making the recordings: “It’s for posterity.”

Armstrong didn’t just leave behind recordings. The Queens College library archive contains a trove of information for fans of the jazz man, including more than 80 scrapbooks full of newspaper articles and photos, 1,600 phonograph records, and even books by his nutrition advisor, Gayelord Hauser, the German-born doctor who became a Hollywood guru preaching the virtues of natural foods and laxatives.

Armstrong’s hundreds of recorded personal conversations show more than just a man who lived life through music. They disclose a musician of stature and integrity, who retained a sense of himself as a public figure—a jazz trumpeter who came from the streets and rode his talent to the very top. In the end, they reveal a man who was able to look history in the eye and be at peace with himself, his feats, and his foibles.

**SOURCES**

A Trick of Lighting
An Interview with Scenic Designer Lee Savage

By Michael Paller

Scenic designer Lee Savage has worked at regional theaters across the country and has extensive credits in New York City. He joined the creative team for *Satchmo at the Waldorf* in 2011 and has been with the crew ever since. “I love working on one-person shows,” says Savage. “It’s a very intimate experience.”

We spoke with Savage about the challenges and exciting discoveries that have come from designing *Satchmo at the Waldorf*.

**What sparked your interest in designing *Satchmo***?

I had been approached by [director] Gordon [Edelstein] to do it, and I had never worked with him before, so I was very excited by the opportunity. After reading the play, I was really thrilled by its theatricality. Not only the biographical aspects of Louis Armstrong and his manager, Joe Glaser, and their relationship, but how they were being embodied by one actor. There’s an innate theatricality and awesome skill that only actors have: they can transform not only from who they are every day into a character, but they can also transform *between* characters right in front of your eyes. That was something that, after meeting John [Douglas Thompson] and seeing what he could do, was really inspiring.

**Is designing for a show with one actor different from designing a show for multiple actors?**

Yes. [The actors in one-person shows] bring a lot to the process. You get to know the actor really well. We involved John in the selection of props and whatnot. There were things that John found in his research and in his character development that he felt were important to include in the space, so we worked together to do that. Sometimes those decisions are made solely by the director or the designer.
Was there a particular challenge in designing this set?

It definitely evolved. It started at Shakespeare & Company [in Lenox, Massachusetts], which has a really deep thrust, and is a much bigger stage area than subsequent productions. What we learned [in Lenox] is that John's connection to the audience was very immediate and really important to the storytelling. When we went to Long Wharf Theatre [in New Haven, Connecticut], the relationship between John and the audience was less immediate because the space was an end stage. The set became a very realized interior with a ceiling and walls. Although it was successful and we got to have more detail in the set, we learned that it was too enclosed; it felt like John and the audience were in different rooms. When we got a chance to do it again at The Wilma Theater [in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania], we eliminated a portion of the ceiling and sidewalls so it really opened up. That turned out to be the most successful version and the one that will be onstage at A.C.T.

So, more of an open approach?

It's like a kind of shadowbox, I guess you could say. The room's implied, there's definitely architecture, but it opens up in the front, so it's not an enclosed box. There's no separation between John and the audience. There's no frame around him. He's thrust out into the audience as much as possible.

Working in the theater, you learn what you don't need. The set at Long Wharf Theatre looks fairly realistic, but I was wondering what you chose to leave out.
It’s real, but it also has to respond to this gesture of changing character. I was trying to find the real dressing room at the Waldorf Astoria, which is where the play takes place, but there were no formal dressing rooms for performers that I could find, and I even went there to ask them. It turns out that a star who performed there would probably just get ready in his hotel room. So we looked at some hotel rooms, and we looked at a lot of research about Louis Armstrong when he was on the road and the different dressing rooms that he spent time in. That was very inspiring to us.

But we also wanted to respond to the fact that we needed some sense of transformation when he switched to Joe Glaser. So, without giving too much away but giving it all away, the mirrors in the dressing room become the windows of Joe Glaser’s office by a trick of lighting and a two-way mirror. The set is able to respond to the character shifts, so we can actually change the location without changing anything except light.

So when John Douglas Thompson transforms, the set transforms with him.

Yes. We realized after version two [at Long Wharf Theatre] that we didn’t need the space to be completely real. It needed to be a little less real, more flexible, more open, more accessible to the audience. So it was great to have the opportunity to revisit the design and make it better each time.

Sometimes you want a set to make a big statement, have a very muscular, spectacular design. This set is really about supporting John, the play, and the story. It’s a supportive set, I like to say. Everything is there to serve the play.
A Satchmo at the Waldorf Glossary

Al Capone (1899–1947) was one of the most notorious Chicago gangsters of the twentieth century. He controlled a large portion of the sale and distribution of illegal alcohol during Prohibition (1920–33), and he owned many nightclubs, dance halls, and speakeasies in the city.

Al Jolson (1886–1950) was a white singer, vaudevillian, and blackface comedian. He starred in The Jazz Singer (1927), the first film with synchronized speech and an infamous example of the use of blackface that has been the subject of much social and scholarly criticism. Jolson’s character, like Jolson himself, was a Russian immigrant who became a blackface singer and comedian.

Associated Booking Corporation was the talent management agency that Joe Glaser and Louis Armstrong formed when they first teamed up in 1935. At its height, it was the third-largest talent agency in the nation and represented such artists as B. B. King, Billie Holiday, and Dinah Washington.

B. B. King (1925–2015) was a blues singer, songwriter, and guitarist. He signed with Associated Booking Corporation in 1968.

Barrelhouse is slang for a cheap or seedy bar.

Bebop is a genre of jazz that originated in the mid-1940s. It is marked by fast rhythms, complex harmonies, and improvisation. Some of the most famous beboppers were saxophonist Charlie Parker, trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, and pianist Thelonious Monk.

Billie Holiday (1915–59) was a jazz singer and songwriter. She was represented by Associated Booking Corporation in the 1930s.

Bing Crosby (1903–77) was a white singer, songwriter, and actor who achieved fame by singing jazz standards in a casual, relaxed vocal style. In 1936, Louis Armstrong became the first African American to have featured billing in a major motion picture when he starred in Pennies from Heaven alongside Crosby. Armstrong also appeared several times on Crosby’s various radio shows. The two musicians also recorded music together. One of those songs was “Lazy River,” written by Hoagy Carmichael and Sidney Arodin and published in 1930. Armstrong and his orchestra first recorded it in 1931, and in 1960 he recorded it with Crosby.
Black Benny Williams (c. 1890–1924) was a bass drummer in New Orleans in the early years of jazz, known for his musical skill and his tough demeanor. In the rough neighborhood of Storyville, Williams became Armstrong's protector and mentor, often giving him advice about how to get along in the world. In a 1955 letter from Armstrong to Glaser, the trumpeter said that it was Williams who gave him the following advice: “As long as you live, no matter where you may be—always have a White Man (who like you) and can [and] will put his Hand on your shoulder and say—‘This is “My” Nigger’ and, Can’t Nobody Harm Ya.”

The blues is a style of music that originated among black communities in the rural southern United States at the end of the nineteenth century. It is believed to have developed from the fusion of work songs sung by plantation slaves, minstrel show music, ragtime, and church hymns. The blues is characterized by a call-and-response pattern, specific scales and chord progressions, and lyrics expressing feelings of sorrow and melancholy.

Enrico Caruso (1873–1921) was an Italian operatic tenor. In his prime, his voice extended up to a high D-flat.

The Colored Waif’s Home for Boys was founded in 1906 by an ex-cavalryman named Joseph Jones. The school’s intent was to reform delinquent black boys to give them a chance at improving their lives. Louis Armstrong was sent there in 1912 after firing a blank shotgun round on New Year’s Eve. The Waif’s Home had a strict routine and required the residents to be involved in activities. Armstrong joined the Home’s brass band and received instruction on the cornet for the first time there.

Connie Immerman and George Immerman were Jewish American brothers who owned many delicatessens in New York City that they turned into speakeasies during Prohibition (1920–33). One of these speakeasies was Connie’s Inn in Harlem. Connie’s Inn opened in 1923 and catered to a whites-only audience, but featured primarily black performers.

Coon is a derogatory term for a black person.

A cornet is a brass instrument, similar to a trumpet or a French horn. Louis Armstrong originally played the cornet, and continued to play the instrument until the mid-’20s when he made the permanent switch to the trumpet.

The Cotton Club was a music venue in Harlem, New York, where black performers played for upper-class white audiences. Vaudeville Old & New explains, “The Cotton Club was a safari stop for white audiences looking for exoticism without encountering any of Harlem’s earthy reality.”

Country music is a style of music that originated among white people in the rural southern and western United States in the first half of the twentieth century. It originated from ballads and folk songs of Irish, Scottish, and English settlers in the Appalachian mountains. In its early days, country music often featured guitars, fiddles, banjos, and lyrics about nostalgia, poverty, and unrequited love. In 1970, Armstrong released a rather
unpopular album called *Louis “Country & Western” Armstrong* in which he sang over prerecorded vocal tracks.

**Creoles** are a mixed-race people in New Orleans, Louisiana. In the early nineteenth century, mixed-race women from the Caribbean islands immigrated to the French colony of Louisiana to escape the Napoleonic Wars. There, they often became mistresses to white Frenchmen, with whom they had children: black Creoles. Because they had white fathers, these children were often provided for and educated in a way that darker-skinned people were not. However, in 1894, segregation laws in Louisiana specified that a person with any amount of black blood was to be considered completely black. Biographer James Lincoln Collier writes, “They did not accept their new status willingly.” Many darker-skinned people saw the light-skinned Creoles’ unwillingness to mix with them as arrogant. This may have been a large part of why Louis Armstrong went by “Lewis” and not “Louie.” His wife Lucille explained, “He’s not French.”

**Darky** is a derogatory term for a black person.

**“Dror Yikra”** is a Jewish Shabbat song, written in the tenth century by poet Dunash ben Labrat. The lyrics that Armstrong sings in the play mean: “Seek my home and my temple / And give me a sign of deliverance / Plant a choice vine in my vineyard / Turn to the need of my people.”

**Dinah Washington** (1924–63) was a singer whose rhythm-and-blues songs reached the height of their popularity in the years between 1949 and 1955. She was one of Associated Booking Corporation’s clients.

**Dizzy Gillespie** (1916–93) was a jazz trumpeter, composer, and bandleader. He was one of the originators of the bebop movement. Beboppers were notoriously hostile to pop jazz performed by musicians like Louis Armstrong; they felt the music was old news.

“**Drop a nickel in the slot**” means to use a payphone.

**Duke Ellington** (1899–1974) was a jazz pianist, composer, and bandleader. He was a client of Associated Booking Corporation.

**Dutch Schultz** (1902–35) was a notorious Jewish New York gangster, involved in burglary, bootlegging, and illegal gambling. He supplied Connie’s Inn with bootleg liquor and bankrolled *Hot Chocolates*, the all-black revue in which Armstrong performed. Schultz may have been involved in sending gangsters to threaten Armstrong into returning to New York and Connie’s Inn in 1930.

**East Jesus** is slang for a location that is remote and difficult to get to.

**Ed Sullivan** (1901–71) hosted *The Ed Sullivan Show*, a variety talk show that ran from 1948 to 1971. The show was famous for hosting a wide variety of musical acts, from Elvis Presley to the Beatles to the Supremes. In 1948, Louis Armstrong and His All Stars made their television debut on *Toast of the Town*, also hosted by Sullivan (it later became *The Ed Sullivan Show*). Armstrong would be a frequent guest on the show for the rest of its run.
**Frenchy**, or Pierre Tallerie, was the head of Armstrong and His All Stars' road staff. Many members of the band disliked him because he was racist. Some commentators believe that Joe Glaser kept Tallerie on the staff to spy on the band and report any bad behavior.

**Gene Krupa** (1909–73) was a white jazz and big-band drummer. He joined Benny Goodman's band in 1935, and in 1938 he formed his own band with Roy Eldridge and Anita O'Day. In 1943, he was arrested for possession of marijuana and served 84 days in jail. The arrest forced the breakup of his band.

**Grass** is slang for marijuana, which was Louis Armstrong's drug of choice. In California, where Armstrong was arrested for possession of marijuana, the drug had been illegal since 1913.

**Harlem** is a neighborhood in New York City that, in the 1920s, was populated primarily by African Americans. After World War I, Harlem became the epicenter of artistic development among African Americans. This outpouring of art, literature, and music—including jazz—became known as the Harlem Renaissance. The neighborhood was also home to a number of music clubs, such as Connie's Inn and the Cotton Club.

“Hello, Dolly!” is a song from the 1963 musical of the same name, written by Jerry Herman and Michael Stewart. Louis Armstrong and His All Stars recorded the song in late 1963, and it was released in 1964. It quickly rose to the top of the charts and beat out the Beatles’ “Can't Buy Me Love” in May of that year.

A **high C** is a musical note two octaves above middle C. It is considered one of the most difficult notes to play on a trumpet. To play a high C, a trumpeter must be able to vibrate his lips at very high frequencies. For a time, Louis Armstrong was one such trumpeter, but his improper mouth placement caused his lip to split twice during the early 1930s.

**High yallers**, or “high yellows,” is a derogatory term for light-skinned black people, derived from the golden skin tone of some mixed-race people. It was also used as a social class distinction; in the days of segregation, light-skinned African Americans or mixed-race people were treated with more respect than those with darker skin, so some dark-skinned black people saw light-skinned black people as “snobbish.” In New Orleans, where Louis Armstrong grew up, the term was used particularly to refer to black Creoles.

**Honky-tonks** are cheap nightclubs or dance halls.

**Jelly Roll Morton** (c. 1890–1941) was a Creole jazz pianist who was one of the musicians responsible for the creation and development of jazz in the early twentieth century.

**Jigaboo** is a derogatory term for a black person. It’s a combination of the word “jig,” which is another slur for a black person, and “bugaboo,” which is an object of terror or torment.

**Jim Crow**, or **Jump Jim Crow**, was the name of an early-nineteenth-century act performed by Dartmouth Rice, who is considered the father of minstrelsy.
He was not the first white person to perform in blackface, but *Jump Jim Crow* was certainly among the most popular of these performances, and it inspired countless imitators. Frequently used to refer to the racial segregation laws passed in the southern United States, the phrase “Jim Crow” also refers to someone who employs minstrel-like behavior.

**Joe Oliver** (1881–1938), or “King Oliver,” was a black jazz cornetist and bandleader. He is often recognized for his innovations concerning the cornet mute and his musical contributions to the early days of jazz, but he is primarily known for his mentorship of Louis Armstrong. He also led the *Creole Jazz Band* in Chicago, of which Armstrong was a member between 1922 and 1924.

**John Foster Dulles** (1888–1959) was the secretary of state in the Eisenhower administration from 1953 through 1959. Dulles was extremely anti-Communist. Fearing the global spread of Communism, Dulles and his State Department wanted Armstrong to perform in developing countries in order to prove that U.S. democracy was better than Soviet Communism. Later, he wanted Armstrong to tour the Soviet Union itself. After the events of Little Rock, Arkansas, however, Armstrong refused to be the U.S. government’s goodwill ambassador, although three years later he did tour Africa and Asia.

**John Lennon**, **Paul McCartney**, **George Harrison**, and **Ringo Starr** were the four members of the Beatles.

**Johnny Cash** (1932–2003) was a white guitarist and singer-songwriter. His music spans country, rock and roll, rockabilly, blues, folk, and gospel. In 1970, Cash invited Louis Armstrong onto *The Johnny Cash TV Show*, and the two musicians performed “Blue Yodel No. 9.”

The *Karnofskys* were a Jewish family in New Orleans for whom Louis Armstrong worked when he was young. He grew quite close to the family during his time with them; they provided him meals and fronted him the money to purchase his first cornet. Through his relationship with them, he recognized that, as Jews, they were also discriminated against. Perhaps because of his closeness to the Karnofskys, Armstrong was an “ardent philo-Semite,” according to biographer Terry Teachout; “for luck,” he often wore a *Star of David* necklace, given to him by Joe Glaser.

**Lawrence Welk** (1903–92) was a white musician who hosted *The Lawrence Welk Show* (1951–82). The show was known for its light, fun, “decent” performances aimed primarily at older audiences. Critic Todd VanDerWerff says, “Watching the early episodes of *The Lawrence Welk Show* . . . is watching a culture struggling to hold onto itself in the face of a coming youth movement.”

**Leonard Bernstein** (1918–90) was one of the most prolific American composers of the twentieth century. In 1956, Louis Armstrong played with the *New York Philharmonic Orchestra*, of which Bernstein was the music director.

**Lionel Hampton** (1908–2002) was a black jazz vibraphonist, pianist, and percussionist. He was a client of Associated Booking Corporation.
Little Rock, Arkansas, became a center of unrest in 1957 when nine black students enrolled in Little Rock Central High School, which had previously been all white. Although the nine students were supported by the Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, they were denied entry on their first day of school by a mob of white protesters and about 270 soldiers of the Arkansas National Guard, who were under orders from Governor Orval Faubus. President Dwight “Ike” Eisenhower remained silent on the issue at first, but he eventually met with Faubus and the mayor of Little Rock, and the nine students were permitted entry to the school building under military supervision.

*Looney Toons*, in the 1930s, were animated shorts produced by Warner Brothers and played before feature films. These shorts were also called *Merrie Melodies*. In a 1937 *Merrie Melodies* short called “Clean Pastures,” Louis Armstrong appears in animated caricature form as a trumpet-playing angel.

*Jungle-bunny* is a derogatory term for a black person.

*Massa* means “master” (slave master) in historic representations of black slave speech patterns in the United States.

*Mumbo Jumbo* is a god said to have been worshipped by people in West Africa. The term now refers to something that is nonsensical, unintelligible, and often rooted in superstition.

*The Outfit* refers to the Chicago Outfit, a mob organization that originated in the city’s *South Side*. The height of the Outfit’s power was in the 1920s, when it was primarily involved in the distribution of bootleg liquor and was led by Al Capone and Johnny Torrio. It still exists today.

*Pagliaccio* is a corruption of *Pagliacci*, an 1892 Italian opera about a sad clown, written and composed by Ruggero Leoncavallo.

*Pops* was one of Louis Armstrong’s nicknames, derived from the fact that he often called his friends “Pops.” Another nickname was “Satchmo.” He had often been called “Satchelmouth,” due to his large mouth. On a trip to the United Kingdom, a fan mispronounced this name as “Satchmo,” and the name stuck.

*Putz* is a Yiddish word for a fool; it is also Yiddish slang for penis.

*Ragtime* is a syncopated, upbeat musical genre that was the predominant style of American popular music in the early twentieth century and one of the origins of jazz. Ragtime’s roots are in minstrel songs, African American banjo music, European classical music, and the syncopation of cakewalks (a style of ballroom dance that originated among black slaves in the nineteenth century).

*Rhythm and blues* is a genre that describes several kinds of postwar African American music. It developed throughout the 1930s and came into its own during World War II, when bands began combining the blues with boogie-woogie, which had funny lyrics and upbeat sounds. It became extremely popular among African Americans, especially teenagers.

*Rickety-tick*, also “ricky-tick,” describes the styles of jazz popular in the 1920s.
The term particularly connotes music that is old-fashioned or unsophisticated.

**Scatting** is a style of singing in which the performer vocalizes in improvised nonsense syllables. Although it was popular among many jazz singers in the early days of the genre, especially in New Orleans, Louis Armstrong popularized the style with his recording of “Heebie Jeebies” with the Hot Five in 1926.

**Schvartze** is a derogatory Yiddish term for a black person.

**Sidney Korshak** (1907–96) was a Los Angeles–based labor lawyer who was a notorious “fixer” for the Chicago mob, Hollywood, and the American music industry. A 1976 investigative report by the *New York Times* revealed, “In 1962 . . . Joseph Glaser, head of Associated Booking Company, the nation’s third largest theatrical agency, assigned all of the voting rights, dominion, and control of his majority stock in the concern to Mr. Korshak and himself. The agreement meant that Mr. Korshak was able to assume complete control of the company upon Mr. Glaser’s death in 1969.” It is unclear exactly how Korshak was able to convince Glaser to do this.

**Silent partners** are those who provide money or goods to a business in exchange for a share of the profits, but who are not involved in the running of the business. Dutch Schultz was a silent partner of the Immerman brothers, because his only involvement with them was providing liquor and money for productions.

**Sophie Tucker** (1887–1966) was a popular white singer, actress, and comedian, known for her risqué performances and songs.

**Spade and Spook** are derogatory terms for a black person.

“**St. Louis Blues**” is a classic blues song composed by W. C. Handy in 1914. By the time Louis Armstrong and his orchestra recorded it in 1929, it had already been recorded by several other bands and musicians. When Armstrong played with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra in 1956, he performed “St. Louis Blues” as the finale, with Handy in the audience.

**Storyville** is the district in New Orleans where Louis Armstrong grew up. It was the only legal red-light district in the city between the years 1897 and 1917. It contained many dance halls and honky-tonks, but it was also infamous for violent crime, so it was sometimes known as “the Battlefield.”

**The Sunset Club**, or the Sunset Café, was a jazz club in Chicago that opened in the 1920s and closed in the ’40s. The club was supposedly owned by Al Capone and managed by Joe Glaser. Louis Armstrong met Glaser for the first time at this club when he played a gig there in 1926.

**TIME**, an American news magazine, featured on its cover in February 1949 a drawing of Louis Armstrong with a crown made of trumpets. This honor illustrated how ingrained Armstrong was in American cultural consciousness.

**Tommy guns** are a kind of submachine gun. They became infamous during the Prohibition era due to their popularity among gangsters.

**Uncle Tom** was the main character in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel, *Uncle
Tom’s Cabin. Although the book advocated the abolition of slavery, the character was replicated in minstrel shows over the years and was made to be a fool or an apologist. The name has come to refer to a black person who is overly subservient and compliant in order to please white people.

The Village Vanguard is a jazz club in Greenwich Village, New York. When it opened in 1935, it featured all kinds of music and poetry performances, but in 1957 it switched to an exclusively jazz lineup.

The Waldorf Astoria was built at the end of the nineteenth century by cousins William Waldorf Astor and John Jacob Astor IV on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 33rd Street in New York City. The hotel quickly became one of the most famous luxury hotels in the city—it was the first in the era to offer electricity throughout the building, private bathrooms, and room service. At the end of the ’20s, the original hotel was demolished, and the Waldorf Astoria name was purchased by businessman Lucius Boomer, who reopened the hotel in a different building on Park Avenue. This hotel quickly became known for its service and extravagant parties, as well as the number of celebrities that stayed there, including Marlon Brando, Cole Porter, Ella Fitzgerald, and Marlene Dietrich. The Empire Room is the hotel’s performance and event hall, which, over the years, has seen such musical acts as Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Benny Goodman, Lena Horne, and Louis Armstrong. The Waldorf Astoria and the Empire Room are both still open to this day.

“Walking Smithsonian Institution of jazz” is a quote from John S. Wilson’s New York Times review of Louis Armstrong’s last performances at the Waldorf Astoria in 1971.

“West End Blues” is a mostly instrumental song, written by Joe Oliver and recorded in 1927 by Louis Armstrong, jazz pianist Earl Hines, and four other musicians. It features complex piano solos by Hines and smooth-yet-gravelly vocalization by Armstrong in one of the first recorded examples of scat singing. The song begins with an impressive 15-second trumpet cadenza by Armstrong, ending in a high C. At the time, it was the most technically demanding trumpet passage ever recorded. All of these elements combined have made the song a sensation among jazz musicians and historians.

“What a Wonderful World” is a song written by George Weiss and Bob Thiele and recorded by Louis Armstrong in 1967. The song became a number-one hit in England, but in the United States, it wasn’t until it appeared in the movie Good Morning, Vietnam in 1987 that the song became widely known. “The bright blessed day, the dark sacred night” is a lyric from the song.

“When the Saints Go Marching In” is a Christian hymn made famous by Louis Armstrong’s 1938 recording. Notably, it was one of the first songs Armstrong learned how to play on the cornet, as it was part of the repertoire of the Colored Waif’s Home band.

Wop is a derogatory term for an Italian American person.
Questions to Consider

1. Armstrong reckoned he could do more good for civil rights with entertainment than with confrontation. What approach do you think is more effective? What are the benefits and drawbacks of each approach?

2. How do contemporary audiences view Louis Armstrong’s stage persona? How might this be different from audiences in the 1930s and '40s?

3. What challenges did Armstrong face as an African American trying to make his living as a musician and entertainer in early-twentieth-century America? Which challenges still exist? What are some new challenges faced by African American musicians today?

4. Why do you think Satchmo at the Waldorf is designed for one performer? How might it be different if three actors played the roles of Louis Armstrong, Joe Glaser, and Miles Davis?

5. How does John Douglas Thompson transform between the three characters in Satchmo at the Waldorf?

6. How can music and theater be sources of racial equality and cooperation? How can they be sources of racial tension?

7. Why do you think Louis Armstrong has remained a huge pop-culture icon in America?

8. Do you agree with Joe Glaser’s decision not to tell Armstrong about his deal with Sidney Korshak?

For Further Information . . .


