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The Original Hot Five Recordings of Louis Armstrong

by GENE H. ANDERSON

Edited by Michael J. Budds

Pendragon Press
Hillsdale, New York

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Introduction

"... just glad to play."

Louis Armstrong, quoted in Max Jones and John Chilton, *Louis* (1971), 112.

Contemporary musicians—black and white—recognized the genius of Louis Armstrong immediately on the release of his Original Hot Five recordings. By the time of the New Orleans revival in the late 1930s and early 1940s, he and these performances were already well on their way to achieving the iconic status famously articulated by French critic André Hodeir a decade or so later:

> On November 12, 1925, in its Chicago studios, the OKeh Company recorded a little five-piece Negro ensemble for the first time. This apparently insignificant event was to have quite a repercussion on the history of jazz. . . .[1]

> Just as they are, the Hot Five recordings . . . constitute the most impressive, if not the most authentic, evidence of what the New Orleans style was like in its Golden Age. Beneath an apparent equilibrium, there are already signs of the powerful creative urge which, through Louis Armstrong's perfect rhythm and settled individual style, was going to lead to classicism. More than a quarter of a century later, these records . . . show clearly that Johnny Dodds and Kid Ory may have been precursors but Louis Armstrong was the first great classical figure of jazz.[2]

Although one might argue how authentically the Hot Five embodied the New Orleans style, Hodeir's assessment of the quintet's importance has become commonplace since his 1956 pronouncement. Today, the ensemble's position in jazz hagiography long secure, its music has been extolled as probably contributing "more than any other single group of

[1]André Hodeir, *Jazz, Its Evolution and Essence*, trans. David Noakes (New York: Grove Press, 1956; reprinted New York: Da Capo Press, 1975), 49. For early recognition of Armstrong's importance to jazz history, see Frederic Ramsey, Jr., and Charles Edward Smith, *Jazzmen* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1939; reprinted New York: Limelight Editions, 1985), 130-34; and Charles Edward Smith, Frederic Ramsey, Jr., Charles Payne Rogers, and William Russell, *The Jazz Record Book* (New York: Smith & Durrell, 1942; reprinted Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 130-36.

[2]Ibid., 62.

recordings to making jazz famous and a music to be taken seriously."[3] With time the Hot Five performances established beyond any dispute Armstrong's titanic profile as the "first great soloist,"[4] an "American genius,"[5] and the "single most creative and innovative force in jazz history."[6] The impact of his example, of course, extended powerfully beyond the nebulous boundaries of the jazz tradition in the years to follow.

The Nature of This Study

When determining the scope of a Hot Five-related project, perhaps surprisingly, one encounters the problem of what to include. In addition to the fifty-three titles released as Hot Fives or Hot Sevens between 1925 and 1928, Armstrong recorded almost two dozen more with the same or similar personnel under an assortment of names: Lil's Hot Shots, Johnny Dodds's Black Bottom Stompers, Jimmy Bertrand's Washboard Wizards, Carroll Dickerson's Savoyagers, Armstrong's Stompers, Armstrong's Orchestra,[7] and Armstrong's Savoy Ballroom Five. Some or all have been considered by various compilers to fall under the Hot Five / Seven rubric.[8] Complicating matters further, the style and personnel of the first Hot Five changed radically with the formation in 1928 of a second or "Chicago" Hot Five, which, by the addition of drums, was actually a "Hot Six."

In this study I avoid questions of inclusion or omission by limiting my consideration to the recorded performances of the "Original" or "New Orleans" Hot Five, under the assumption that examination of thirty-three

[3]Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 98.

[4]*Ibid.*, 89.

[5]James Lincoln Collier, *Louis Armstrong: An American Genius* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). Collier's title makes his assessment explicit.

[6]Gary Giddins, *Satchmo* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 86.

[7]Editor's Note: The indiscriminate application of the term "orchestra" to groupings of instrumentalists became commonplace in the realm of popular entertainment during the early twentieth century. Up to that time the word had been primarily used to designate string-dominated ensembles, often with additional instruments, dedicated to the performance of fine art music, theatrical music, or music for social dancing. Careful usage would prevent a connection to any combo of jazz soloists. Presumably, in the spirit of Madison Avenue, by borrowing it, prestige and a desired cachet of "class" accrued to musicians and their audiences.

[8]For the most inclusive compilation yet, see *Louis Armstrong: The Complete Hot Five and Hot Seven Recordings* (Sony Music Entertainment, 2000). On page 20 of the accompanying booklet, Phil Schaap argues for a total of eighty-nine cuts (including alternate takes) to be regarded as Hot Fives or Hot Sevens.

recordings by the same group, leader, and record company over a two-year period allows the most meaningful comparisons to be drawn and conclusions to be made.[9] Unfortunately, this approach filters out such acknowledged masterpieces as "Potato Head Blues," "West End Blues," and "Weather Bird." These titles, nevertheless, are among the most thoroughly discussed in the literature and, in my opinion, deserve separate attention in the context of their own Hot Seven or Chicago Hot Five milieu.

The purpose of this investigation is to determine the extent to which the Original Hot Five and its leader deserve their hallowed position in jazz history. Despite the plethora of Armstrong-related materials, few writers scrutinize his music beyond his most celebrated solos; fewer still attempt to contextualize his achievements, to develop a reliable chronology of his activities during his music-making, and to relate individual pieces to available copyright deposits; and none provide a satisfactory explanation for the origin of his pioneering recordings. I hope that applying these heretofore neglected strategies to a comprehensive study of the Original Hot Fives will help clarify and verify Armstrong's and the group's already formidable stature in jazz history.

Because the analytical portions of this study are best confirmed by ear as well as by eye, those Hot Five performances discussed in the greatest detail are supplied on the compact disc that accompanies this volume. Its playlist is provided on page 258. An asterisk (*) following a title in both the Table of Contents and chapter subheadings identifies the twenty pieces under special scrutiny.

The Transcriptions

The unique quality of Armstrong's solos was recognized from the beginning. His slightly younger contemporary, "Bix" Beiderbecke, noted their coherent structure,[10] Tiny Parham transcribed one for his 1927 arrangement of "Wild Man Blues,"[11] and a collection of them was

[9]Allowance must be made for the inclusion of Hy Clark as Ory's substitute on two of the Original Hot Fives and of guitarist Lonnie Johnson as an invited guest on three of the Original Hot Fives. Hereafter for the sake of simplicity, "Hot Five" is synonymous with Original Hot Five.

[10]Leon "Bix" Beiderbecke, quoted in Richard M. Sudhalter and Philip R. Evans, *Bix: Man & Legend* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1974), 100-01.

[11] Recorded with Johnny Dodds's Black Bottom Stompers on 22 April 1927.

published the same year.[12] Later players memorized his solos, and a discussion of Armstrong's style appeared in his own 1936 autobiography, *Swing That Music*.[13] Transcriptions of Armstrong's most memorable Hot Five and Hot Seven solos can presently be found in numerous studies of his music as well as in several collections; entire pieces have also been fully or partially transcribed (see my bibliography). In 1989 the Hot Five repertory was written out for *The Louis Armstrong Connection*, a fifteen-CD re-creation of Armstrong's pioneering works.[14] Efforts to locate relevant transcriptions for this project, produced in Germany and featuring British trumpet player Kenny Baker, have so far proved unsuccessful.

Jazz is notoriously difficult to write down in European notation. Communicating pitches, rhythms, harmonies, and their inflections is challenging enough, but changes in tone quality, varieties of articulation, and the elusive ingredient called swing can at best be only approximated in notation, if at all.[15] Armstrong's performances often embody all these features in the extreme. His rhythm, in particular, frequently seems to float above or hover around the beat rather than being exactly on top of it.[16]

Transcriptions for this inquiry attempt to balance accuracy with utility. Swing eighths are understood unless otherwise indicated. Excessive playing before or behind the beat and timbral variety are designated. Unless important to the analysis, articulation signs have been kept to a minimum. Ascending or descending straight lines identify rips and fall-offs; a wavy line specifies a shake; an ascending wavy line represents a long glissando; and u-shaped lines mark bends or lipped pitches. Ghost notes or fluffs are shown by x note-heads. All transcriptions and tempo markings are based on Sony's *Complete Hot Five and Hot Seven Recordings* (see note 8) and, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

[12]Louis Armstrong, *50 Hot Choruses for Cornet* (Chicago: Melrose Bros., 1927).

[13]Louis Armstrong, *Swing That Music* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1936; reprinted New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), 125-34.

[14]Werner Burkhardt, liner notes to *The Louis Armstrong Connection, Vol. I: The Hot Five* (Germany: Pastels, 20.1801-PA, 1989).

[15]On defining "swing," see James Lincoln Collier, *Jazz: The American Theme Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 71-88.

[16]My assessment of Armstrong's rhythm is based on the numerous transcriptions made for this book and shared by many other writers. A recent study by James Lincoln Collier and Geoffrey L. Collier found, however, that in "Cornet Chop Suey" and "Potato Head Blues," both with substantial sections in stop-time, Armstrong tended to play off-beat notes behind the beat but downbeat notes on the beat; see "A Study of Timing in Two Louis Armstrong Solos," *Music Perception* 19/3 (Spring 2002), 463-83.

The Early New Orleans Jazz Band

The instrumentation of the Original Hot Five combo—cornet, clarinet, trombone, banjo, and piano—emerged from the pragmatic spirit of early New Orleans practice, which embraced various ensemble combinations. Rooted in the tradition as well was a distribution of labor within such entertainment units, that is, the assignment of specific duties to specific instruments. In this case, the cornet, clarinet, and trombone carried out the tasks of the "melody group," and the banjo and piano functioned as the "rhythm group." It is equally important to appreciate this system's general fluidity, which allowed the banjo or the piano to participate as a "melody" instrument in addition to providing a bass line, supplying harmony, and keeping time.

The make-up of Armstrong's Hot Seven—cornet, clarinet, trombone, piano, banjo, tuba, and drums—is more reflective of early New Orleans jazz or ragtime bands than that of the Original Hot Five. Even so, there are major differences. New Orleans dance bands used a string bass instead of a tuba or a sousaphone (considered marching band instruments) and a guitar instead of a banjo. They seldom had the benefit of a pianist but frequently included a violinist, whose responsibility as the only music reader was to play parts from stock arrangements for his comrades to learn by rote. "Kid" Ory's band in New Orleans was a seven-man outfit with a violin but no piano,[17] as was the Creole Band (all New Orleanians) that toured the country on various vaudeville circuits between 1914 and 1918.[18] The possible model for these was Buddy Bolden's 1905 band of cornet, two clarinets, trombone, guitar, string bass, and drums.[19]

When New Orleans bands left the Crescent City, they dropped the violin; retained the standard front line of cornet, clarinet, and trombone; and varied the rhythm section. In 1915 Tom Brown's Ragtime Band (cornet, clarinet, trombone, piano, drums), which may have lacked a regular violinist, initially left its bassist behind for an engagement at Chicago's Lamb's Café.[20] The following year Stein's Band from Dixie,

[17]Gene Anderson, "Johnny Dodds in New Orleans," *American Music* 8/4 (Winter 1990), 423.

[18]Lawrence Gushee, "How the Creole Band Came to Be," *Black Music Research Journal* 8/1 (1988), 83-100.

[19]Don M. Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden: First Man of Jazz* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 78-79.

[20]Richard M. Sudhalter, *Lost Chords: White Musicians and Their Contributions to Jazz, 1915-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 4-5.

the progenitor of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band (ODJB), assembled in the New Schiller Café on Chicago's South Side with instrumentation identical to Brown's.[21] Pianist Lil Hardin's replacement of guitarist Louis Keppard and the subsequent departure of violinist Herb Lindsay produced an ODJB instrumentation plus string bass in Lawrence Duhé's band at Chicago's DeLuxe Gardens in 1917.[22] The 1921 Friars Society Orchestra, the first incarnation of the New Orleans Rhythm Kings (NORK), added a tenor saxophone and banjo for a total of eight pieces on the bandstand at Chicago's Friar's Inn,[23] and in Los Angeles "Kid" Ory's 1922 Sunshine Orchestra (Spikes' Seven Pods of Pepper) recorded with the same instrumentation as Duhé.[24]

Adopted by NORK, "King" Oliver's Creole Jazz Band, and numerous others groups, the banjo became the string instrument of choice in the Windy City. Hot Five member Johnny St. Cyr bought his unique guitar-banjo hybrid in 1919, when on the riverboats with Armstrong in Fate Marable's band, and played it on all of his Chicago recordings.[25] But to my ears, St. Cyr never takes full advantage of the instrument's guitar capabilities during Hot Five or Hot Seven sessions with the possible exception of "Savoy Blues" (see Table 9.7). It would seem, then, that without either a drum or bass instrument, the makeup of Armstrong's Original Hot Five was anomalous. In anticipation of the discussion to follow, it is my contention that the instrumentation of the Hot Five was driven more by commercial than artistic reasons.

[21] *Ibid.*, 11.

[22] Gene Anderson, "The Genesis of King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band," *American Music* 12/3 (Fall 1994), 286.

[23] Richard M. Sudhalter, *Lost Chords*, 28-32.

[24] Brian Rust, *Jazz and Ragtime Records, 1897-1942*, 2 vols. (Denver: Mainspring Press, 2002), II, 1610. Saxophonist Earl Whaley, reported in the *Chicago Defender* (28 August 1920), 5, as a member of Ory's band at Oakland's Creole Café and identified in the *Chicago Defender* (22 July 1922), 8, as a member of the Sunshine Orchestra, did not participate in the recordings. He may have rejoined Ory in Los Angeles for ensuing radio broadcasts and dance gigs.

[25] Johnny St. Cyr, "Jazz as I Remember It, Part Three: The Riverboats," *Jazz Journal* 19/11 (November 1966), 9. For a consideration of the guitar-banjo, see John Bright, "Idle Musings on a Banjo Theme: Johnny St. Cyr," *New Orleans Music* 8/4 (December 1999), 6-9.