"For Posterity": The Personal Audio Recordings of Louis Armstrong

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That's my story folks. I guess I'm stuck with it.
—Louis Armstrong

Abstract

Louis Armstrong exerted a defining influence on one of the most influential products of the American imagination: jazz. As noted by one of Armstrong's biographers, however, Armstrong's character was "buffeted by the forces of racism and commercialism." From the perspective of the archives, Armstrong's reaction to these influences was a form of psychological withdrawal that often coalesced around his interaction with recording technologies. Armstrong developed an intimate relationship with audio recording and relied upon its particular form of capture to shape a posthumous identity that was beyond the distortive influences that shaped his public and commodified image, and that was appreciably honest in its relationship with, to use Armstrong's word, "posterity."

Introduction

Late one night at their home in Queens, New York, Louis Armstrong and his wife, Lucille, quarreled. Their argument, fight really, had at its center Armstrong's interest in sex and his wife's disinterest, and it was well fueled by alcohol. This may not seem remarkable at first. As their argument intensified, however, Lucille noticed that Armstrong was recording their conversation. She was appalled.

> *Lucille:* And turn your television, thingamigig off. And what the shit. You got that fuckin' thing on.
> *Louis:* Honey would you go on . . .
> *Lucille:* Turn your tape-reorder off. Don't be floffin me off.
> *Louis:* I got thousands of tapes.

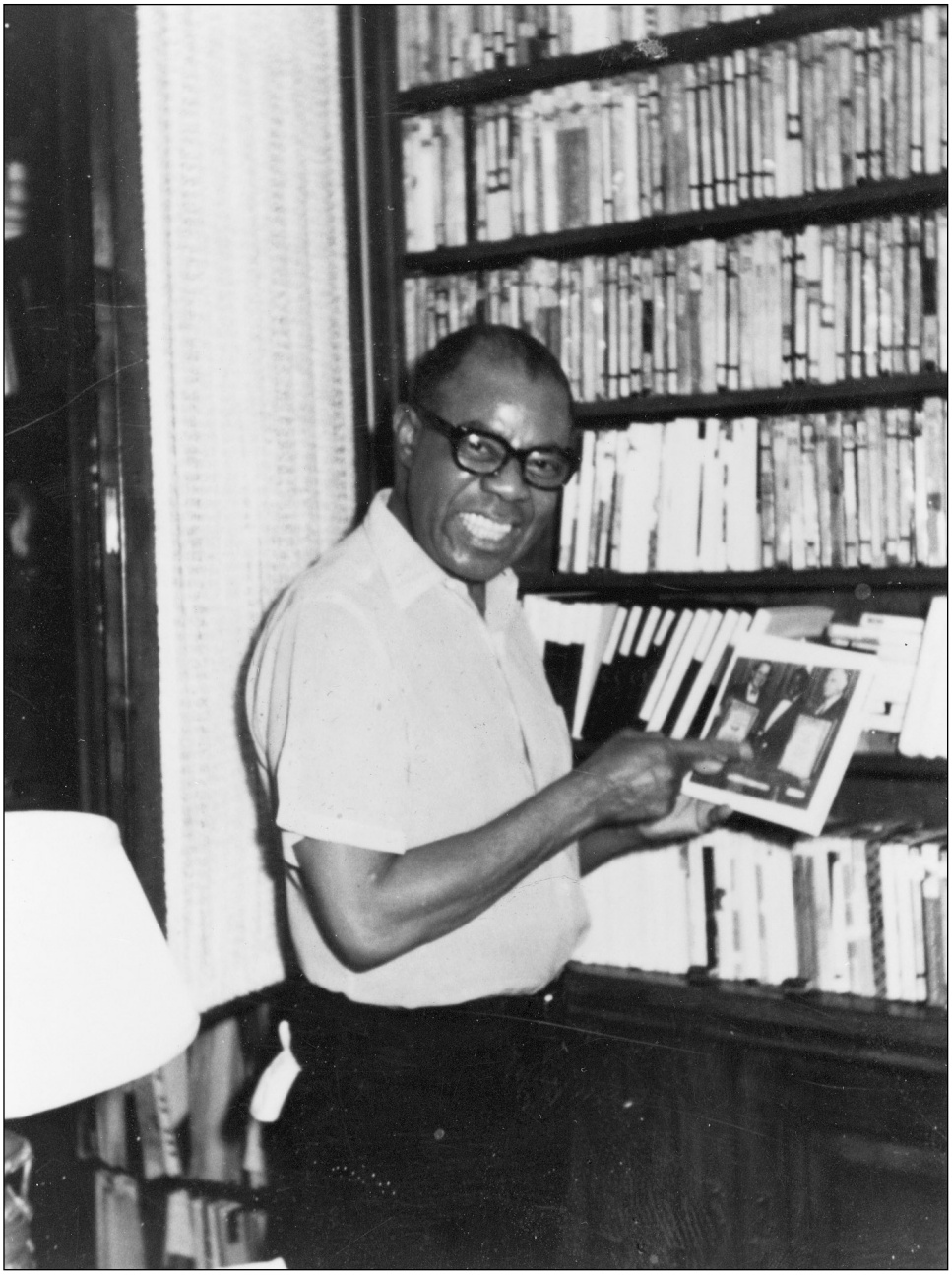
Lucille: I wouldn't give a shit about your thousands of tapes. You can [inaudible] with them tomorrow. Turn your tape off. In fact erase off some of that shit.
Louis: [Laughing] O you're gettin' nervous now.
Lucille: I ain't getting nervous but you ain't got no better sense . . .
Louis: [Interrupting] That's for posterity.[1]

Much is remarkable about their exchange. First is its very preservation. Second is Armstrong's admission that he has "thousands" of such tapes. Six hundred and fifty tapes (many in hand-decorated boxes) survive and are preserved today in the Louis Armstrong Archives at Queens College, the City University of New York. The collection also includes 1,600 commercial recordings; 86 scrapbooks; 5,000 photographs; 270 sets of band parts; 12 linear feet of personal papers including correspondence and biographical manuscripts; 5 trumpets; 14 mouthpieces; and 120 awards and plaques. Third, and most important, is Armstrong's insistence that his collection of tapes was "for posterity." For the very reasons (understandable as they may have been) that Lucille wanted the tape destroyed, Armstrong was adamantly committed to its preservation. His commitment is the topic of this paper. Armstrong's passion for documenting his lived experiences across a range of media serves as a point of entry into a discussion of Armstrong's fascination with audio recording. As much as possible, I have allowed Armstrong to be the primary narrator of this investigation. Permitting Armstrong's own articulations (including their written, recorded, and visual representations) to shape my historical analysis further emphasizes Armstrong's passion for using audio technology as a strategy for self-preservation.

Louis Armstrong

By any definition, Louis Armstrong is an American icon. For more than half a century, his innovative genius exerted a defining influence on one of the most recognized products of the American imagination: jazz. Indeed, such was Armstrong's influence, that for several decades it could well be argued that Armstrong *was* jazz. Fittingly, much about Armstrong's life is quintessentially American. He accomplished that most celebrated of American achievements, rags to riches, by relying on the most sacred of American values: hard work, self-reliance, and a kind of picaresque individualism. "My mother had one thing

[1] The Louis Armstrong House and Archives, Queens College, the City University of New York. See http://www.satchmo.net/thearchives/louis.shtml, accessed 13 October 2007. The Satchmo Collection, Tape 5. References to Louis's tapes will be cited as Armstrong followed by a comma and then a tape number followed by a period—for example, Armstrong, 5. The author transcribed these quotations from repeated listening to twelve tapes. As far as is known, these are the only extant transcriptions of these recordings. The tapes were selected based on a rough index of their contents available at the Louis Armstrong Archives.



Armstrong with his tape collection, pointing to one of the 650 hand-decorated covers preserved by the Louis Armstrong Archive. ***Courtesy of the Louis Armstrong House Museum, 24-11a.tif.***

that no matter how much schooling anyone has—and that was Good Common Sense (and respect for human beings)," Armstrong wrote. He continued, "*Yea. That's My Diploma*—All through my life I remembered it. To me, no college in this whole world can top it, as far as I am concerned."[2] "There isn't anything nicer to know and feel deep down in your heart that you have something—anything—that you've worked and strived for honestly—rather than do a lot of ungodly things to get it," he wrote on a separate occasion. "Yes—you appreciate it better."[3] The insights that Armstrong's recordings provide reveal that he lived according to such values.

Throughout his life, Armstrong was zealous in his determination to document his life. The strength of his determination is made fully evident by the range of media with which he experimented. "Louis Armstrong, who was born July 4th 1900, in the Back O' Town section (Jane Alley) in New Orleans,"[4] begins one autobiographical manuscript. Perhaps not surprisingly, Armstrong's enthusiasm for preservation was especially fervent during his later years. Less than two years before his death, Armstrong composed a lengthy autobiographical fragment entitled, *Louis Armstrong + the Jewish Family.* Armstrong drafted his manuscript from his bed in Beth Israel Hospital, fully aware that he was nearing the end of his life. Armstrong introduces his narrative with a prefatory comment that provides the reader with important biographical context and serves as a kind of informal title page.

> Louis Armstrong + the Jewish Family in New Orleans, La., the Year of 1907
> Written by Louis Armstrong—ill in his bed at the Beth Israel Hospital
> March 31st, 1969
> New York City, N.Y.
> A real life story and experiences at the age of seven years old with the Karnofsky (Jewish) Family, the year of 1907.
> All Scenes happened in New Orleans, La., where Armstrong was born, the year 1900.[5]

Armstrong's interest in autobiography, especially when considered in its immediate biographical context, is not surprising. There is, of course, extensive precedent for historical figures developing an interest in the genre that often intensifies with age. While the purpose of autobiography is debated, without question the process fulfills a deeply personal need that is inextricably linked to a conscious shaping of posthumous identity. In many regards, however, Armstrong is unique in that his process of drafting his memoirs from his bed at

[2] Thomas Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 10.

[3] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words*, 10.

[4] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words*, 7.

[5] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words*, 5.

Beth Israel continues a fascination with documentation that reaches far back into his youth and crosses an impressive breadth of media. From an archival standpoint, a biographical orientation to Armstrong's life that relies on the variety of materials he used to document it offers appropriate context for analysis of the importance (both personal and historical) of his audio recordings.

Armstrong started with nothing. He was born into one of the most impoverished of New Orleans' neighborhoods in 1901. His mother, May Ann, was a prostitute. His father was distant during his formative years. "The man who May Ann told us was our father left us the day we were born,"[6] recalled Armstrong. "We moved from Back O' Town (the rear of N.O.)—Jane Alley into the city, into the Third Ward, located at Franklin and Pardido Streets, where the Honky Tonks were located," Armstrong wrote on a separate occasion, adding,

> My mother May Anne (Mary Ann)—Young with a nice smile, a little on the chubby side. Beatrice, which was Mama Lucy (nickname), was Two years younger than me. We had a few Step Fathers through the years since we never did see our real Father, whose name was Willie Armstrong.[7]

As a child, Armstrong worked for the Karnofskys, a nearby Jewish family. The Karnofskys owned a scrap business. Armstrong later documented his experience in a manuscript he entitled, *Louis Armstrong and the Jewish Family*. The Karnofskys, Armstrong describes, "started a little *business* in *no* time at all." He continued,

> *That's* where I *came* in. With the *little* money that they had they *Bought Two Small Horses—Two Small Wagons—Harnesses* for the *Horses*. Their *two* sons, their ages *19* or *20* years old—went into *business*. I *alternated* with the *two sons*. One went out in the street, buying Old Rags—Bones—Iron—Bottles—Any kind of old Junk. Go back to the house with the big yard—empty the wagon—pile up the old Rags in one place, the bottles—Bones and the rest of the junk, all in separate places.
>
> Soon there would be big piles of everything. There was enough Room for piles of Stone Coal which the older son Morris sold in the streets also. Especially in the Red Light District—mostly in the evenings—way into the nights. He sold it for Five Cents a Water Bucket, to lots of the Sporting (Prostitutes) Women, standing in the doorways. Alex would go out early in the morning on his Junk wagon—stay out all day. Me—right alongside of him. Then I would help Morris at night. The first job that I ever had. So I was very glad over it.[8]

Armstrong collected and sorted junk for resale in the Karnofskys' shop. His efforts paid off. "One day when I was on the wagon with Morris Karnofsky," wrote Armstrong, "we were on Rampart and Perdido Streets and we passed a

[6] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words*, 20.

[7] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words*, 7.

[8] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words*, 12.

Pawn Shop which had in its window—an old tarnished beat up "B" Flat Cornet." He continued,

> It only cost Five Dollars. Morris advanced me Two Dollars on my Salary. Then I put aside Fifty Cents each week from my small pay—finally the Cornet was paid for in full. Boy was I a happy kid.[9]

The Karnofskys' influence was formative.

> The little cornet was real dirty and had turned real black. Morris cleaned my cornet with some Brass Polish and poured some Insurance Oil all through it. Although I could not play a good tune Morris applauded me just the same, which made me feel very good. As a Young Boy coming up the people whom I worked for were very much concerned about my future in music. They could see that I had music in my Soul. They really wanted me to be Something in life. And music was it. Appreciating my every effort.[10]

In 1912, Armstrong was arrested and sent to a waifs' home for firing a pistol into the air during a New Year's celebration. In the waifs' home he received musical instruction from band director Peter Davis. Later, Armstrong became the leader of the waifs' home band.

The geography of Armstrong's childhood connects intimately to his musical achievement. Indeed, the two are indistinguishable. New Orleans is, of course, regarded as the birthplace of jazz. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, New Orleans's diverse culture facilitated an integration of European and West African musical traditions. Musical conventions such as blue notes, call-and-response, improvisation, and syncopation combined to produce new innovations in musical expression.

Armstrong was a child himself during jazz's infancy in the famous Storyville section of New Orleans. "As a youngster in New Orleans in those Musical Days coming up and ambitious, I saw and listened to everybody who was supposed to have been Somebody,"[11] recalled Armstrong. As a youth he listened to the evolution of jazz as it developed in the brothels and honky-tonks along Basin Street's notorious Red Light District, as well as its incorporation into African American funeral processions. "One could hear real good jazz telling it—like it was. Anyplace you should go in the District, whether it was a Cafe—Cabaret or Saloon—or if you should just stop in some place for drinks and listen—you heard the best in jazz,"[12] wrote Armstrong. The influence of these early

[9] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words*, 15.

[10] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words*, 15.

[11] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words*, 25.

[12] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words*, 25.

Armstrong played with the Colored Waif's Home for Boys Band. The arrow points to him. ***Courtesy of the Louis Armstrong House Museum, 1996-39-3.***

impressions was such that as late as the final year of his life, Armstrong maintained that as a child he "looked forward to every night in the Red Light District, when I was delivering Stone Coal to the girls working in those Cribs. I could hear these wonderful jazz musicians playing music the way it should be played."[13] According to Armstrong, "The District never Closed."

> There were Actions going on at all times—Somewhere or other. Just think—during the twenty-four hours, you could hear most of the top notch musicians, such as Jelly Roll Morton, a great jazz piano man in those days—or should we use the phrase a good time pianist, or piano player. . . . He played alone in the Leading Whore House called Lulu White, where some of the Richest men in all of Louisiana used to spend many nights and many dollars. . . . If it wasn't for those good musicians and for the Entertainers who appeared nightly in the Red Light District—Clubs, etc.—the District wouldn't have been anything. Music lovers from all parts of the city came to hear them play Genuine Jazz.[14]

[13] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words*, 30.

[14] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words*, 24

Armstrong's immersion in the nascent jazz culture of the district fostered his innovative genius. Indeed, in the absence of such decisive exposure, Armstrong's talents may have well remained latent.

What is the connection between Armstrong's well-articulated and quintessentially "American experience" (both positive and negative) and his audio tapes? In short, everything. In his biographical study of Armstrong entitled *The Louis Armstrong Companion,* Joshua Berrett writes that "as a preeminent musical icon of the twentieth century," Armstrong's image has been "buffeted by the forces of racism and commercialism."[15] Armstrong's tapes are remarkable, however, because he insisted that they remain unedited and unaltered, as his drunken argument with Lucille makes clear. Armstrong wanted history to know Armstrong. Collectively, his tapes document an amazingly candid and frank relationship with, to use Armstrong's word, "posterity."

The Context of Creation

Armstrong's fascination with recording technology bordered on the obsessive. His captivation is not surprising. It is even predictable. His life, after all, was sound; or, as Armstrong explains, "My life has always been music."[16] Armstrong's interest in audio capture may be understood as a kind of hobby, a means of enjoyment, that was a natural extension of his professional experience. It was a form of enjoyment, however, that coalesced around Armstrong's regard for recording technology as an opportunity for the unmediated capture of "truth." Because he was introduced to audio preservation during its relative infancy, Armstrong learned to regard the technology for its potential to preserve history in a way that was unadulterated. This perception remained with Armstrong throughout his life and helps to explain his infatuation.

Further, and of equal importance, the reach of Armstrong's fame relied on the spread (and sale) of his music using recording technologies first introduced during the late 1920s and early 1930s, when broadcast radio was first commodified. During this era, the sale of music (principally in the form of 78 rpm recordings) was first realized to be a profitable industry. Armstrong's performances were among the first to be recorded, and so his work was among the first that audiences embraced without seeing it performed live. He was also among the first musicians to hear their own recordings. As a result, from an early age, Armstrong appreciated the potential for audio technology to preserve and transmit recorded sound across time and space.

[15] Joshua Berrett, *The Louis Armstrong Companion* (New York : Schirmer Books, 1999), 186.

[16] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words,* 27.

While the extent of Armstrong's enthusiasm for recorded sound may not be surprising, his private dedication to relying on audio capture for the purposes of self-preservation deserves careful analysis. The degree of Armstrong's commitment to audio preservation was such that, in general, he worked to assure that he was capturing unguarded conversation. Many of Armstrong's recordings are several hours in length. He simply began recording and then continued with common household activities. If company arrived, the recorder was already active and discussion generally pursued without any awareness that it was being documented. In short, Armstrong's general production techniques were not "Nixon-esque." They captured a remarkable breadth of daily activity in the Armstrong house. Such evidence suggests that Armstrong *wanted* to create an environment in which his interaction with recording technology would be both unguarded and genuine.

Armstrong also recorded the sound of entire television programs without interruption. Many of these recordings are revealing *because* of Armstrong's silence. One tape includes more than an hour's worth of reporting and commentary documenting the immediate aftermath of Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination. Broadcasts of the World Series are also preserved (Armstrong liked baseball). Such a collage of insights in coordination with Armstrong's own efforts at audio autobiography provides a remarkable composition. Decades before YouTube, Armstrong documented his life across a breadth of media in ways that serve a strikingly similar purpose. Further, and somewhat ironically, Lucille helped to facilitate Armstrong's interest in recording relaxed conversation. While Armstrong was on tour, Lucille arranged for a reel-to-reel tape machine to be installed into a bookcase in Armstrong's den. The significance of this cannot be underestimated. The recorder remained visible but was unobtrusive in the sense that it did not impose its operation on visitors in the form of a more prominent placement *and* its capture did not rely on conspicuously placed microphones. Visitors generally forgot its operation, and Armstrong himself frequently overlooked it. Armstrong also arranged for a steamer trunk to be fitted with a reel-to-reel tape player so that he could record conversation during his frequent and extended tours. (He regularly spent 300 days of each year on the road).

Armstrong's carefully positioned home recorder in combination with its traveling counterpart preserved an extraordinary range of frank conversation as well as poignant self-reflection. Throughout his lifetime, Armstrong recorded at least two thousand hours of his private life. Notably, he also hand decorated each of his tapes' protective boxes with intricate collage, and he produced a detailed catalog of his entire collection. Some tapes capture conversation that is strikingly biographical in its intent.

Louis: At home in Corona, Long Island, New York. February 26, 1956.
Lucille: February 6th.

Armstrong adjusts the record level on one of his Tandberg tape decks. ***Courtesy of the Louis Armstrong House Museum, sb53.tif.***

> *Louis:* Correction. February 6th, 1926. I'm sitting up here with Lucille and she's . . .
> *Lucille:* 1956
> *Louis:* [laughing] O pardon me . . .[17]

Other tapes are stunningly confessional. One contains Armstrong's recollection of severing his professional relationship with his mentor Joe "King" Oliver:

> Now on Oliver and Lil's[18] part, I listened very careful when Lil told me to always play the lead. Play second trumpet to no one. Joe Oliver, you know how much I love Joe Oliver regardless of all that other crap [but still now] he did make a statement to Lil during a conversation. He said, "as long as little Louis is with me he can't hurt me." When she told me that, that did it. Right away Lil got behind me when she told me this and said with a thought like that in King Oliver's mind as much as you idolize him daddy you must leave him,

[17] Armstrong, 6.

[18] Lil Hardin was Armstrong's second wife. They met while both were playing for Oliver's band in Chicago. Hardin played piano.

> immediately, because King Oliver and his ego and wounded vanities may hurt and may hurt your pride. And to me she said its all indications that King Oliver is trying to hold you back. Yes sir. I must be very quiet I didn't say a mum and a word even after she told me I didn't say nothin'. I just split. That's all.[19]

Many conversations were recorded backstage following performances.

> *Louis:* This is Louis Armstrong sending a tape for a dear friend of his Mr. Earnest Smith,[20] we call him Six because he's rich.
> *Smith:* O.K. old pal. I'll take it from here. I am dedicating this to Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong. In the backstage dressing room of the Chicago Theatre.
> *Woman's Voice interrupting:* With his barber.
> *Smith:* With his barber.
> *Woman's Voice:* And manicurist.
> *Smith:* And manicurist. Working on him at will.
> *Louis:* What's the names?
> *Smith:* The barber's name is . . .
> *Voice:* Oscar Freeman.
> *Smith:* Oscar Freeman, better known as Bert.[21]

Or, similarly, "This is Louis Armstrong speakin', what's the name of this town, Rochester State Theater." A conversation with fans follows. Comparable discussions were recorded in, among other venues, the Fox Theatre (Detroit), the Narragansett Hotel (Providence, R.I.), the Dunbar Hotel (Los Angeles), the Dusable Hotel (Chicago), and the Palomar Theatre (Seattle).

On other occasions, Armstrong recorded impromptu interviews with hotel staff:

> *Louis:* How about telling the folks your name and hello.
> *Maid:* Marianna. Hello Mr. Armstrong I like you very much.
> *Louis:* And I think you're a nice lady and you keep my room so nice and pretty.[22]

In general, however, the tapes reveal Armstrong at home being Armstrong. One conversation with Lucille's sister Janet and her husband, Charlie Phipps, concerns one of Armstrong's haircuts that had gone horribly wrong.

> *Charlie:* . . . this time on TV I swear to God it looked like a cap. Janet looked at me and she said, she said, "What happened to Pop's head?" I said that goddamn nigger did it.
> *Lucille:* You ain't said a goddamn word. Let me tell you what happened. They was in here having a haircut and I was pooped. We just come in town Friday and I went to bed. And Louis fought around here well he finally went to bed

[19] Armstrong, 189.

[20] Earnest Smith appears to have been a casual acquaintance.

[21] Armstrong, 5.

[22] Armstrong, 53.

and I had to get up and pee and when I came back and looked at him I said: [laughing] "What happened to your head?"
Charlie: He ruined it.
Lucille: [Screaming] I said the man scalped you.
Louis: [Laughing] She said it makes your head look bigger.[23]

The preservation of such informal discourse directly relates to Armstrong's passion for preserving unmediated conversation. When sensitively placed within their biographical context, Armstrong's collection of recordings resonates with his powerful commitment to preserving a genuine self-identity that opposed the influences that shaped his public persona.

Popular Perception

Contemporary audiences have difficulty appreciating the extent of Armstrong's fame and influence during his lifetime. It is generally agreed that for several decades he was the most recognized person on earth. From a musical standpoint, Armstrong's defining contribution to jazz was the introduction of the impromptu solo. Before him, collective melodic playing generally characterized jazz. Armstrong infused a stunning individualized form of improvisation into this evolving genre. From the standpoint of cultural history, Armstrong's innovative genius is a fascinating articulation of the American mythos of individualism and self-invention. However, even though Armstrong's art was deeply rooted in the American context, his influence on the development of jazz captivated audiences across the world.

Armstrong's fame arose from a combination of innovative genius, extreme dedication, and the global spread of popular entertainment, as well as his magnetic and compassionate personality

Racism

While the geography of Armstrong's youth was fortuitous in its association with the development of jazz, growing up in turn-of-the-century New Orleans meant that Armstrong was intimately aware of the greatest failure of the American experiment. From an early age, Armstrong knew the most insidious workings of racism. And, he knew them well: "At *ten* years old I could see—the Bluffings that those Old *Fat Belly Stinking* very *Smelly Dirty* White Folks were putting *Down*." Armstrong recalled in *Negro Neighborhood:*

It seemed as though the only thing they *cared* about was their Shot Guns or those Old time *Shot* Guns which they had strapped around them. So they get

[23] Armstrong, 5.

> full of their Mint Julep or that *bad* whisky, the poor white Trash were Guzzling down, like water, then they get so *Damn* Drunk until they'd go out of their minds—then it's Nigger Hunting time. *Any* Nigger."[24]

Armstrong recalled that the district defined a culture of strict segregation. "The Negroes were only allowed to work in the Red Light District," Armstrong wrote in an autobiographical manuscript entitled *For White People Only*. "Pay was swell," he recalled,

> no matter what your vocation was. Musicians—Singers and all kinds of Entertainers were always welcomed and enjoyed. Just stay in your place where you belonged. No Mixing at the Guests Tables at no time. Everybody understood Everything and there weren't ever any mix ups etc.[25]

"Most of the musicians were Creoles," Armstrong noted. "Most of them could pass for white easily—They mostly lived in the Down Town part of New Orleans, called the Creole section."[26]

Sadly, remembers Armstrong, "I did not get to know any of the White Musicians Personally." The reason was simply, "New Orleans was so Disgustingly Segregated and Prejudiced at the time—it didn't even run across our minds."[27]

Throughout the 1930s, Armstrong's frequent tours through the South forced a direct confrontation with the intolerance he witnessed as a child. "Lots of times we wouldn't get a place to sleep," Armstrong wrote in 1936,

> So we'd cross the tracks, pull over to the side of the road and spend the night there. We couldn't get into hotels. Our money wasn't even good. We'd play nightclubs and spots which didn't have a bathroom for Negroes. When we'd get hungry, my manager, Joe Glaser, who's also my friend, Jewish and white, would buy food along the way in paper bags and bring it to us boys in the bus who couldn't be served.[28]

In September 1957, Americans saw on their television screens the darkest side of their democracy unfold in Little Rock, Arkansas. Armstrong caught glimpses of events while touring in Fargo, North Dakota. "I am just a musician," Armstrong wrote many years later, "and still remember the time, as a American citizen I Spoke up for my people during a big Integration Riot in Little Rock (Remember?)."[29] Armstrong's outrage spurred additional action. He immediately canceled a State Department–sponsored tour of the Soviet Union. "The

[24] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words*, 17.

[25] Armstrong, 24.

[26] Armstrong, 32.

[27] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words*, 33.

[28] Berrett, *Companion*, 89.[29] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words*, 9.

[29] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words*, 9.

people over there ask me what's wrong with my country. What am I supposed to say?" he asked reporters when pressed to explain his decision. He added: "The way they are treating my people in the South, the government can go to hell."[30] When Eisenhower sent federal troops to Little Rock, Armstrong sent him a telegram. It read: "If you decide to walk into the schools with the little colored kids, take me along, Daddy. God bless you."[31]

Sadly, fame did not insulate Armstrong from prejudice. In a manuscript that was most likely composed only two years prior to his death, he recalled that in the New Orleans of his youth, the light complexion of "Jelly Roll" Morton (one of jazz's first great composers) afforded racially insidious privileges:

> Jelly Roll with lighter skin than the average piano players, got the job because they did not want a Black piano player for the job. He claimed—he was from an Indian or Spanish race. No cullud at all. He was a big bragadossa. Lots of big talk. They had lots of players in the district that could play lots better than Jelly, but their dark color kept them from getting the job. Jelly Roll made so much money in tips that he had a diamond inserted in one of his *teeth*. No matter how much his diamond sparkled, he still had to eat in the *Kitchen*, same as *we* Blacks.[32]

In a letter to his manager's secretary in 1946, Armstrong described being harassed by police officers while on tour in Shreveport, Louisiana. "Just then two old cracker sheriffs came up to me and said (kinda roughly): 'Are you Louis Armstrong?' " Armstrong continued,

> Then one of them asked me: "Is that your band?" I hurriedly said: "No, suh. I only play in the band—(tee hee), and the other said: "Just the same, we are going to take your trumpet when you finish tonight." That's when I got real loud and said: "FOR WHAT?" And they (all three of them) said: "We have a case against you and when you finish playing tonight we want that trumpet. Is that clear?" I said: "It's clear as a whistle." Haw haw haw. And sho 'nuff, when we finished the dance and finished playing "The Star Spangled Banner" here they come right into me reaching for my trumpet. But I tricked them so pretty. When they asked me—"where's your trumpet?"—I pointed to a trumpet case and said: "There it is." The promoter was kind of hip'd to the jive and asked me: "Are you sure that is your trumpet?" I said: "Yassuh, boss. That's the one I blow every night." But it wasn't. I gave them Joe Jardan's (one of my trumpet men's trumpet instead of mine) and that was that—Tee hee. Cute? You see, Joe and I made the switch during our intermission, right under their noses. So they weren't so smart after all.[33]

[30] Berrett, *Companion*, 186.

[31] Berrett, *Companion*, 188.

[32] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong in His Own Words*, 24.

[33] Berrett, *Companion*, 125.

Armstrong's tapes are one more example of Armstrong shrewdly circumventing racial prejudice. From the point of their inception, they occupied an intellectual and historical space that Arsmtrong knew was beyond the reach of such influence ("tee hee").

Commercialism

Advancements in entertainment technologies that enabled Armstrong to become one of the first celebrities to reach a world audience made possible the manufacture of his popularized image. (He was, after all, "Ambassador Satch.") During the 1930s and 1940s, the American entertainment industry, and especially Hollywood, began to capture the global imagination and Armstrong's fame spread. In addition to a recording career that spanned more than five decades, he appeared in thirty-five motion pictures, and across several decades he was regularly seen on many of television's most-watched programs. In 1937, he was selected to be the first black host of a nationally broadcast radio variety program, *The Fleischmann's Yeast Show.*

In 1936, Bing Crosby worked Armstrong into his film *Pennies from Heaven,* where he was an instant success. "As far as the most important events in Jazz during my 25 years," Armstrong wrote to the prominent British writer, critic, and composer Leonard Feather, "well the first one was when Pops booked me for my first commercial program over the—N.B.C.—for Fleishman's Yeast." He continued, "Then too—those pictures—"Pennies from Heaven"—"Artists 'N' Models"—"Everyday is a Holiday"—and that fine "Going Places."[34] Such appreciation notwithstanding, Armstrong remained well aware of his importance to what in the end was a commercial product. Of greater importance, Armstrong fully appreciated that, at its most fundamental level, that product relied on the manipulation and distortion of reality. Further, Armstrong's participation in popular entertainment had the unfortunate consequence of intensifying his sensitivity to racial prejudice. It was no accident that his role in many motion pictures was peripheral to the plot. The tangential nature of Armstrong's characters meant the films could be edited to appease the racial biases of southern audiences, a strategy he fully understood.

In addition to the racially divisive interests that always surrounded his role in popular culture, Armstrong remained well aware that profit motivated the production (and promotion) of mass entertainment. For more than thirty years, Armstrong was one of popular culture's most lucrative icons. In addition to "box office appeal," his popularized image was associated with products ranging from beer and automobile tires to toys. While Armstrong may have indulged and

[34] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words,* 147.

enjoyed his participation in the American entertainment industry, he surely understood the extent of its disingenuous commercialism.

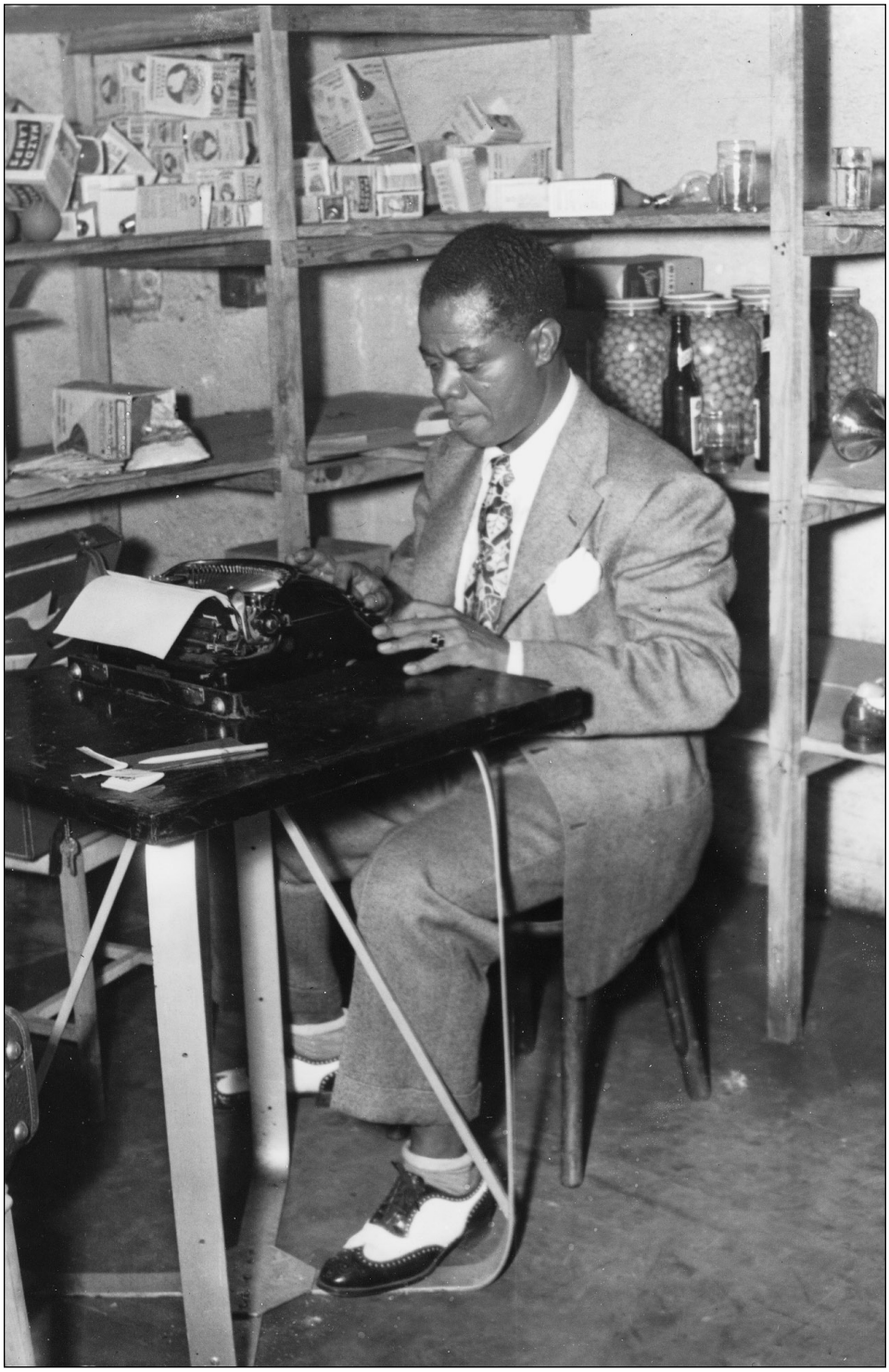
The Relationship of the Tapes to Other "Traces"[35]

The evidence contained in Armstrong's tapes complements his autobiographical manuscripts and the visual evidence Armstrong compiled in his scrapbooks. He developed a particular affinity for typewritten texts and composed copious autobiographical manuscripts. In addition to traveling with a reel-to-reel audio recorder, Armstrong generally arranged for a typewriter to accompany him during his travels. Like his dedication to audio preservation, Armstrong's production of typewritten autobiographies identifies a comparable interaction with another recording technology to construct and preserve identity. While Armstrong's interest in autobiography suggests his determination to establish an unmediated personal and historical space, comparing the insights he captured in manuscripts with those in his tapes and scrapbooks reveals striking differences; differences that Armstrong clearly appreciated.

Armstrong never conceived of his private recordings as interviews, nor did he regard them as attempts at autobiography conventionally associated with the production of a manuscript. It is one thing to sit, pen in hand, and construct an autobiography, or, at least, to write autobiographical fragments. It is another thing entirely to sit in front of a tape recorder and speak in autobiographical terms. Writing is a process of conscious reflection, careful construction, and most importantly, revision. Even a cursory look through Armstrong's manuscripts reveals that, despite their often relaxed tone and apparently casual process of composition, Armstrong's written remembrances were heavily revised. His interaction with recording technology facilitated a comparatively fluid and strikingly sincere process of revelation and self-discovery. "Man, my mother used to tell me and Mama Lucy, my sister, 'Always stay physic minded. You may not get rich but you won't ever have those terrible ailments such as cancer etc.,' " Armstrong confided to his recorder. He continued,

> I could go on and on. When you got cancer, oh boy, you really are in trouble. You keep yourself cleaned out, you duck all that shit, man. I've always said my slogan, ya know, "leave it all behind ya' . . . And she used to go out by the railroad tracks and pick a lot of pepper grass, dandelions and shit, you know. And

[35] The idea of historical "traces" refers to the important theoretical contribution that editors Sue McKemmish, Michael Piggott, Barbara Reed, and Frank Upward provide in their volume entitled *Archives: Recordkeeping in Society* (Wagga Wagga, Aus.: Charles Sturt University Centre for Information Studies, 2005).



Armstrong was a consummate diarist and correspondent. He often traveled with a typewriter, as he did here in the kitchen of the Band Box, a Chicago nightclub. ***Courtesy of the Louis Armstrong House Museum, 25-3.tif.***

> she'd bring it home and boil that stuff and give us kids a big dose of it. . . . When May Anne would boil that stuff and give it to us, man, my god we'd make splits getting to the toilet and on time too. Oooh, boy. And afterwards we'd feel so good, all cleaned out and stuff. That's why I invented my slogan. "Leave it all behind ya'."[36]

The subject of Armstrong's memory is not a revelation. He recalled similar memories in written manuscripts. The audio version of Armstrong's articulations are, however, distinct. Spoken memory coalesces around the subconscious progression of associations and insights of unique value. One can literally hear the progression of Armstrong's memory unadulterated by concern for accuracy (as evidenced in revision) that marks textual evidence.

Armstrong's audio recordings relate a process of relaxed composition distinct from the more precise articulations that mark his autobiographical writings. "We cracked down on the first note and that band sounded so good to me after the first note that I fell right in like old times," Armstrong *wrote* while describing his first night performing with Joe Oliver in Chicago. He continued,

> The first number went down so well we had to take an encore. That was the moment Joe Oliver and I developed a little system whereby we didn't have to write down the duet breaks—I was so wrapped up in him and lived his music that I could take second to his lead in a split second. That was just how much I lived his music. No one could understand how we did it, but it was easy and we kept it that way the whole evening. I did not actually take a solo until the evening was almost over. I never tried to go over him, because Papa Joe was the man and I felt any glory that should come to me must go to him—I wanted him to have all the praise.[37]

Despite their informal tone, Armstrong's written reminiscences are more formally structured and his use of language is conspicuously more precise. In short, the dynamics of exchange specific to recording technology encourage a verbalization of memory appreciably more fluid than the more structured formation of memory that results from written composition

The degree of Armstrong's commitment to spoken preservation makes clear his understanding of the unique opportunities for self-discovery allowed by audio recording. Further, the social context of many of Armstrong's recordings shaped a process of reflection further distinguished from written autobiography *and* conventional oral history. Because both Armstrong and his guests often forgot that their conversations were being recorded, their comfortable discussions facilitated a collaborative energy so that storytelling became a kind

[36] Armstrong, 426.

[37] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words*, 50.

of performance. Often, the result is a process of recall that coalesces around a dramatic or even comic intent that informs the narrative process. "On the West Coast of California 1931," begins Armstrong during one conversation with friends. He continued,

> . . . Vic Barton, THE top drummer in all of Hollywood, and I got busted together, it was during our intermission at this big night club which were packed and jammed every night with all sorts of my fans including movie stars. Anyway, while Vic and I were blasting this joint, having lots of laughs and feelin' good, enjoying each other's fine company, we were standing in this great big lot in front of some cars. Just then, two big healthy dicks (detectives that is) come from behind a car man, nonchalantly and say to us, "We'll take the roach boys." Mmmmmmmm! (laughs) Vic and I said nothin'. So one dick stayed with me until I went into the club and did my last show. He enjoyed it too. Because, when he and I were on our way down to the police station, he and I had a heart-to-heart talk. First words that he said to me were, "Armstrong, I'm a big fan of yours and so is my family. We catch your programs every night over the radio. In fact, nobody goes to bed in our family until your program's over. And they're all great." Which I was glad to hear especially coming from him (laughs). Then I confiscated . . . no, confiscated not the word. Then I confidentially told him these words, "Since you and your dear family are my fans, they'd be awfully sad, awfully sad, if anything drastic were to happen to me, the same as the other thousands of my fans. So PLEASE, don't hit me in my chops. When he said to me, "Why I wouldn't think of anything like that," that's all I wanted to hear. I immediately said to him, "Okey, ride me!" (means let's ride, you know). I also told him, "After all I'm no criminal. I'm no criminal. I respect everybody and they respect me. And I never let them down musically." "Hell," he said, "You ain't doin anymore than anybody's doin'." . . . When we reached the police headquarters, there were several officers including the man on the desk sittin' around. And the minute we came through the door, they all recognized me right away. They too had been diggin' my music nightly over the radio. Get that radio out sittin' around the police house or some chick's house. . . . Oh boy were those guys glad to see me. Even the policemen, they knew I wasn't bothering anybody. Just blowin' out my horn . . . sang my ass off. That's all. They gave me one look with glee and said, "What the hell you doin' here this time of night away from the club?" And we yakity yakity while I was being booked. . . . Now, back to the time I was busted on the coast for smokin' pot. I spent nine days in the downtown Los Angeles city jail with two guys who were already sentenced to 45 years or something else. . . . One night real late, those two cats started fightin' among themselves in the cell I was in . . . and they was fightin' over somethin', I don't know. But the first words they said to me was, "Move out of the way Pops. We don't want to hurt them chops." And they fought their asses off until the jail keeper came and made them stop.[38]

[38] Armstrong, 426.

Because Armstrong intended these kinds of stories for the enjoyment of friends, his audience's responses shaped their delivery (indeed, their narrative form). The resulting narratives are appreciably unique in terms of their autobiographical construction and noticeably distinct from both the recollections heard in Armstrong's private conversations and from the memories preserved in his manuscripts.

In addition to his impressive volume of written and recorded evidence, Armstrong also produced a remarkable range of visual compositions. Most notable is his collection of scrapbooks. Today, the Louis Armstrong Archives contains eighty-six that he compiled. Some of the scrapbooks document specific events in Armstrong's life, for example his move from Chicago to New York. Others contain collaged pages of seemingly unrelated visual materials. Every scrapbook, however, is replete with a narrative autobiographical subtext that compares interestingly with Armstrong's texts and recordings. Images and words patterned onto a page create tensions and ambiguities that allow an interpreter to discern a narrative form. The scrapbook documenting Armstrong's travels to the East Coast reveals a process of personal growth and development, a kind of visual *kunstleroman,* a story in which a character grows as an artist, with Armstrong as the protagonist. (Life, after all, is a journey). Volumes that contain pages of seemingly unrelated compositions lead to a greater range of interpretations.

A particularly notable page contains a large image of Armstrong playing the trumpet that is carefully pasted into the center of a leaf. Smaller pictures of jazz musicians applied around the margins of the page surround the image. The leaf reads as a visual concert featuring Armstrong playing prominently at center stage. One can "read" Armstrong's intentions in many ways. The interaction between Armstrong and the secondary figures suggests creative interplay (and perhaps influence), and, as a whole, the dynamics of jazz performance. Given the disproportionate size of Armstrong's likeness relative to the other images one could argue that the composition intends a statement of creative authority. Closer scrutiny, however, reveals that in this case size may not matter. Further inspection revels that in the very center of his forehead Armstrong has pasted a small image of his mentor, Joe Oliver. The placement expresses Armstrong's profound appreciation of Oliver's formative influence.

"Joe Oliver had always been my inspiration and my idol," Armstrong recalled in an article published in 1950 and entitled *Joe Oliver Is Still King*. He added,

> No trumpet player ever had the fire that Oliver had. Man, he really could punch a number. Some might have had a better tone, but I've never seen *nothing* have the fire, and no one created as much as Joe.[39]

[39] Louis Armstrong, "Joe Oliver is Still King," *The Record Changer* (July 1950), 10.

A page from one of Armstrong's scrapbooks. Armstrong surrounded his likeness with pictures of fellow musicians Bunny Berigan, Bix Biederbecke, Judy Garland, Jelly Roll Morton, Florence Mills, Bing Crosby, Duke Ellington, Jack Teagarden, Ruth Brown, and Big Sid Catlett. Armstrong taped an image of Joe Oliver, his mentor, prominently to his forehead. Franklin Delano Roosevelt appears to be listening to Armstrong's trumpet. ***Courtesy of the Louis Armstrong House Museum, sb20oliver.tif.***

While Armstrong's insistence that his tapes were for posterity was undoubtedly genuine, their composition also served a profoundly personal need. His emotional investment in the inventive process of creating them far exceeded simple audio capture, as seen in the fact that he decorated many of their protective boxes by hand with intricate collage. Armstrong's interest in collage appears to rival only his fascination with audio recording. His choice of medium is unsurprising and fitting. Collage, after all, is a kind of visual jazz. One manipulates (improvises) found objects into a new aesthetic. This helps to explain Armstrong's seemingly intuitive gift for this visual art. Armstrong delicately cut out common images from newspapers, magazines, and greeting cards, and shaped them into remarkable compositions using, for the most part, Scotch tape. The problems this adhesive poses for archivists and conservators not withstanding, aesthetically, the results of Armstrong's work are astounding.

Interestingly, Armstrong did not obviously coordinate the images he used to collage the boxes protecting his tapes and the content of the tapes themselves. Indeed, many decorated tape boxes contain blank tapes, and many undecorated boxes house tapes filled with audio content. For Armstrong, collage and audio

A 1958 image depicting the west wall of Armstrong's den covered in collage. Photo by Charles Graham. ***Courtesy of the Louis Armstrong House Museum graham.tif.***

capture were parallel activities. In many ways, this is not surprising. Armstrong collaged entire walls of his den. When he ran out of wall space, he proceeded to apply collage work to his ceiling.[40] Armstrong often returned home from an extended road trip to find that Lucille had removed much of his collage work. (Lucille disliked collage.) He simply enjoyed the process of collage.

While the tape boxes provided one more opportunity for Armstrong to explore an aesthetic medium he clearly enjoyed, they reveal a method of selecting images from the popular press and manipulating them into narratives that are often revealing from an autobiographical point of view. One cover contains a newspaper article from June 1971 describing Armstrong's release from Beth Israel Hospital after suffering heart and kidney ailments. Armstrong's tapes and

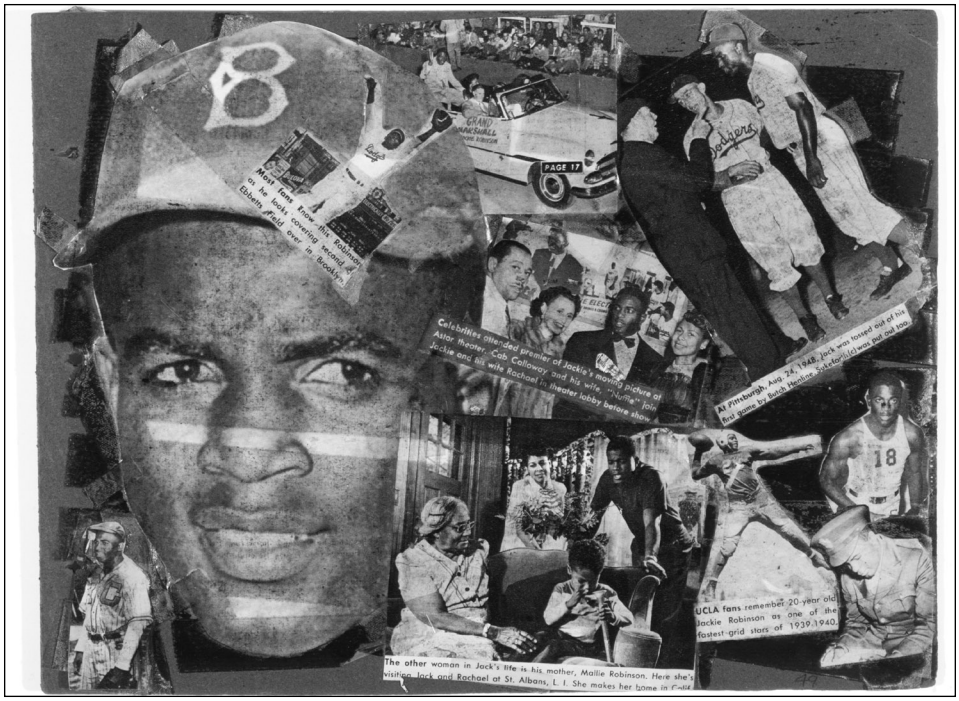
[40] Armstrong's extensive interest in collage also suggests a continuation of practices rooted in slave culture. It was not uncommon for slaves to use newspaper to cover the walls of their plantation cabins. The newsprint provided important insulation but was also used for decorative interest. Available archival evidence does not confirm that Armstrong was aware of this tradition. While Armstrong does appear to have documented his interest in extending the reach of this tradition, his fascination with the practice of collage documents a further continuum of African American tradition. Given the geography of his birth and historical proximity to the end of slavery, he was likely aware of many strategies used by slaves to endure plantation life.

One of Armstrong's hand-decorated tape covers. Note Armstrong's precise numbering (26) and copious use of Scotch tape. Pictured are Armstrong and his wife Lucille embracing; Clarence Williams, a pianist and composer; and Velma Middleton, vocalist for the All Stars. ***Courtesy of the Louis Armstrong House Museum, box26back.tif.***

their decorative coverings are most accurately seen as independent intellectual and creative exercises that unite to produce a single artifact preserving an intriguing combination of oral and visual clues.

Ultimately, the intricate (and intimate) attention that Armstrong invested in his tapes reveals a depth of personal meaning. For Armstrong, the process of creating one of his tapes allowed for an imaginative and psychological withdrawal that was intensely private. The tapes are profoundly personal spaces within which Armstrong both documented and explored his individuality without commercial interference, racial prejudice, or public scrutiny.

During a radio interview, Armstrong described his investment in his tapes:



Armstrong composed a page in a scrapbook with this collage from photos of Jackie Robinson. Robinson broke major league baseball's color barrier in 1947. Robinson lived near Armstrong in St. Albans, Queens. ***Courtesy of the Louis Armstrong House Museum, sb20robinson.tif.***

> I have all my records on tape, interviews, and uh every classical number that you can think of. See what I mean. And I index them, that's my hobby. And I index them and I put my finger on them and everything like that . . . I got over a thousand reels.[41]

Armstrong's use of "hobby" to describe a psychological and physical interaction based on intense emotional investment is deceptive. General consideration for the contents of Armstrong's collection as a whole further substantiates this. Armstrong often recorded directly from commercial radio. He also carefully recorded commercial sound discs that he borrowed or selected from his private collection. (He kept track of the commercial recordings he transferred to open reel by applying the handwritten note, "Recorded," to the disc's label). The result is the preservation of an audio library documenting recordings and commercial programs of importance to Armstrong.

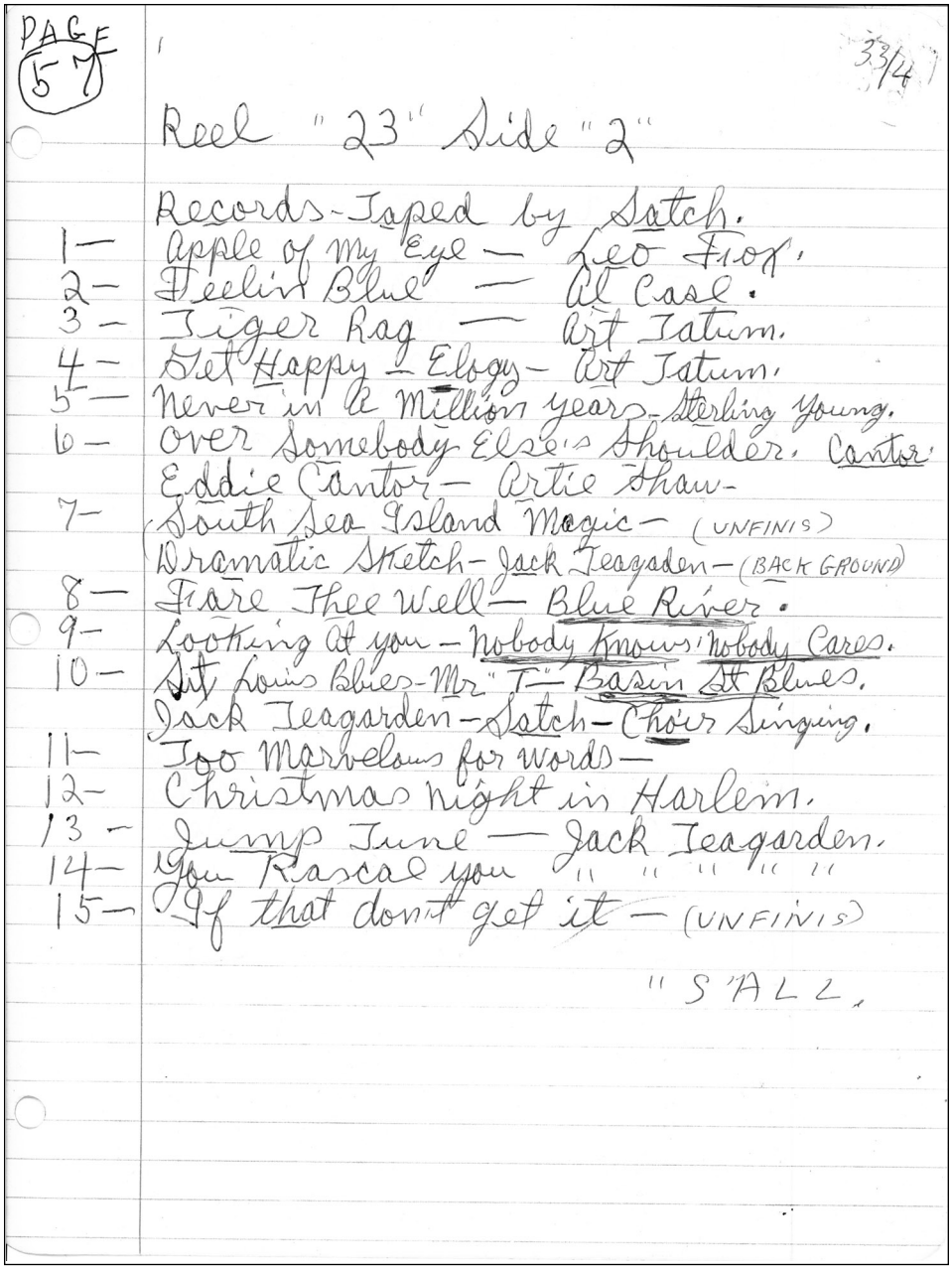
The intricate organization of his recordings further demonstrates the depth of his investment in them. Armstrong numbered each of his tapes. He

[41] Armstrong, 525.

One of Louis Armstrong's 650 hand-decorated audiotape box covers preserved at the Louis Armstrong House Museum. Index relates to contents of tape that Armstrong recorded both in his home in Corona, Queens, as well as during his extensive travels. ***Courtesy of the Louis Armstrong House Museum box9.tif.***

also listed the content of each tape individually and produced a cumulative table of contents for his entire collection. Armstrong's commitment to such documentation reveals as much as does his enthusiasm for hand decorating his tapes' protective cases. He also indexed the tapes. His process of indexing was precise, detailed, and unique. He organized the index by the first letter of the last word of the entry. For example, if Armstrong recorded the song "In the Mood," he listed it under the letter "M." Similarly, if he recorded a conversation about New Orleans, he included it in the "O" section of his index.

The purpose of an index is for reliable retrieval, and Armstrong made certain that *he* could access the intimate memories he preserved.



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33/4

Reel "23" Side "2"

Records-Taped by Satch.

1— Apple of My Eye — Leo Frost.
2— Feelin Blue — Al Casa.
3 — Tiger Rag — Art Tatum.
4— Get Happy - Elegy — Art Tatum.
5— Never in a Million years - Sterling Young.
6— Over Somebody Else's Shoulder. Cantor
Eddie Cantor — Artie Shaw.
7— South Sea Island Magic — (UNFINIS)
Dramatic Sketch - Jack Teagaden — (BACK GROUND)
8— Fare Thee Well — Blue River.
9— Looking At you — Nobody Knows, Nobody Cares.
10— St Louis Blues - Mr "T" — Basin St Blues.
Jack Teagarden — Satch — Choir Singing.
11— Too Marvelous for words —
12— Christmas night in Harlem.
13 — Jump June — Jack Teagarden.
14— You Rascal you " " " " "
15— If that don't get it — (UNFINIS)

"S'ALL,

A page from the cumulative table of contents Armstrong created to provide access to contents of all his tapes. ***Courtesy of the Louis Armstrong House Museum.***

"When I came out of the Waifs' home, I stayed a while with my father, Willie and his other wife and family," Armstrong confided to his recorder. He continued,

> He had another wife named Gertrude, a nice woman. She talked quite a bit about me and she liked me pretty good and I thought she was nice chick. . . . I really kinda liked her. She and my father had two boys and a girl so I stayed with them for a while when I first got out of the waifs' home. But, I got lonesome for my mother, Mary Anne. May Ann, you know that's her nickname and my sister Beatrice who they called Mama Lucy for her nickname. And, before I realize it, I was back living with them again and as happy as could be, in that great big room where the three of us were so happy and we lived there so happily so very long. Of all my memories that was my choice one.[42]

As valuable as his tapes are to historians today, and as unquestionable as Armstrong's concern for posterity remains, his tapes were also intensely important to Armstrong during his lifetime. They defined a personal space within which he could reflect, discover, and preserve without the distractions and interests that "buffeted" his popular and commodified persona. Indeed, the tapes provided one of the few spaces available to him within which he could engage in such entirely private exploration.

Oral History

The interests that informed Armstrong's creation of his tapes underscore the difference between his recordings and oral history. Oral history implies a process of reflection that coalesces around the strategies of an interview. The interests of the interviewer, as purposefully neutral as he or she may try to remain, mediate the process. The interviewer determines the questions and their order, and selects the topics for discussion. Armstrong appreciated the dynamics of the interview process as well as did any celebrity of the twentieth century. He quite simply circumvented the limitations of this construct.

Armstrong's tapes are most accurately viewed as a continuation, perhaps subconscious, of a tradition of orality within the African American community in the United States, a tradition deeply rooted in cultures of western Africa. Armstrong was born only thirty years after the end of Reconstruction. His elders experienced slavery. "My mother May Ann and my Uncle *Ike* Miles used to tell us about Slavery Times," Armstrong explained in an autobiographical manuscript, adding, "May Ann and Uncle Ike had a little touch of Slavery. Because their Relatives before them came up' right in it."[43] Armstrong appreciated his ancestors' dependence upon spoken language to shape historical understanding as well as to preserve heritage in a way that was beyond the reach of cultural authority.

[42] Armstrong, 426.

[43] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words*, 16

Armstrong's formal education ended with the fifth grade and was based largely on personal initiative despite his family's poverty. "I managed to go to school through it all," he maintained, adding, "Of course, not like I had wanted to. But I did a pretty good job pertaining to my Studies. I had to help *May Ann* with the Rent and our foods, etc."[44] "I only went to Fifth Grade because I had to work along with my schooling," he later wrote.

> I wasn't fortunate to have parents with enough money to pay, like some of these Idiots whom I see making these big Soap Box Speeches, etc. I had to work and help May Ann,—put bread on the table, since it was just the three of us living in this one big room, which was all that we could afford.[45]

Armstrong's education was not only curtailed, it was incomplete: "Most of my schooling was done in the Waif's Home for boys . . . (boy's jail),"[46] he later confided. As Armstrong observed, his limited access to formal education was a product of the racism that dominated the culture of his youth. He was both denied entrée to learning and forced into work at an early age. While he produced an abundance of personal manuscripts and autobiographical fragments, it is not surprising that Armstrong was most comfortable relying on spoken narrative to document his life.

Armstrong's interest in spoken narrative, and especially its potential to transmit cultural memory across time, is by no means unique among members of the African American community of his generation. In an article written for *Oral History Review,* Alex Haley describes a family history he learned while listening to his elders exchange memories on his grandmother's front porch in Henning, Tennessee. His narrative has at its center a linguistic lineage rooted in preslavery West Africa that had been passed through (and survived) the experience of slavery in the United States. In addition to a compelling family history, Haley's is a gripping story of personal discovery and self-awareness. "Sometimes they would talk about individuals, and I didn't know what these individuals were often," writes Haley. He continues:

> I didn't know what an old massa was, I didn't know what an old missus was. They would talk about locals; I didn't know what a plantation was. And then at other times, interspersed with these, they'd talk about anecdotes, incidents which had happened to these people of these places. The furthest-back person that they ever talked about was someone whom they would call "The African." And I know that the first time I ever heard the word Africa or African was from their mouths, there on the front porch of Henning.[47]

[44] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words,* 18.

[45] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words,* 18.

[46] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words,* 122.

[47] Robert Parks and Alistair Thomas, eds., *The Oral History Reader,* 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 28.

For Haley, his grandmother's porch defined a culture of historical sympathy predicated on spoken language and emphasizing the importance of oral exchange to the African American experience. Haley recalls being intrigued by fragments of a foreign vocabulary and particularly by the words *ko* and *kamby bolongo*. As an adult, Haley's fascination ultimately led him to Gambia where he was introduced to oral customs that remained well established in rural villages. "They told me that back in the old country and particularly in the older villages of the back country, there were old men called *griots,* who are in effect walking, living archives of oral history," writes Haley.

> They are the old men who, from the time they had been in their teen-ages, have been part of a line of men who tell the stories as they have been told since the time of their forefathers, literally down across centuries. The incumbent *griot* will be a man usually in his late sixties, early seventies, and underneath him will be men separated by about decade intervals, sixty, fifty, forty, thirty, twenty, and a teen-age boy, and each line of *griots* will be the experts in the story of a major family clan; another line of griots another clan; and so on for dozens of major clans. Another line of griots would be the experts in the history of a group of villages. Another would go into the history of the empires which had preceded it, and so forth. And the stories were told in a narrative, oral history way, not verbatim, but the essential same way they had been told down across the time since the forefathers.[48]

It would be historically tenuous to assume that Armstrong used audio recording to propagate the tradition Haley describes. He never documented such concern. Nonetheless, his fascination with recording technology and, especially, his commitment to recording both autobiography and unguarded conversation, recall the historical interests that shaped the culture of verbal exchange that the young Alex Haley experienced and that a mature Haley traced to its origins in West Africa.

Armstrong's tapes also occupy a fascinating space within the development of oral history, especially as the field evolved during the decades following the end of World War II. These years were formative in the establishment of oral history as an accepted strategy for historical preservation. "As the practice emerged after World War II," writes Ronald J. Grele, "the attitudes and traditions within which it did so reflected the tension between those who saw oral history as archival practice and those who envisioned oral history as the handmaiden of social history."[49] Grele notes that those who advocated using oral history as a form of archival practice in general maintained that "interviews were to be collected to become the basis of the publication of more history books by

[48] Parks and Thomas, *Oral History Reader,* 33.

[49] Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless, eds., *Handbook of Oral History* (Lanham, Md.: Alta Mira Press, 2006), 44.

people other than the people who gathered the interviews and the individual oral history itself was to be treated as a book." Grele continues,

> The oral history was to be transcribed, indexed, and edited as if it were a publication. In some cases this transcript was called a memoir, and it was often edited just as a published manuscript would be edited.[50]

Part of the justification for subjecting the interview to such scrutiny was, according to Grele, "to protect the interviewee from any embarrassments that the spontaneous interviewing technique might engender." Grele further notes that often,

> transcripts were returned to the interviewees for their correction. While a case could be made that this produced a much more reliable document and therefore more reliable evidence because it included a second, more measured consideration on the part of the person interviewed, the major consideration seems to have been the feelings of unease on the part of archivists about the collection of potentially embarrassing, if not slanderous, material.[51]

Not surprisingly, as Grele observes, "in terms of who was to be interviewed, most projects were elitist to the core."

During the mid-twentieth century, in general, those who viewed oral history as an effective tool for archival preservation opposed strategies used by social historians to document experiences that had either been ignored or remained on the periphery of the accepted historical record. "Archival projects separated the creation of the interview from the end use," notes Grele, adding,

> while social historians argued that those who did the interviews should also be responsible for their use and interpretation, thereby introducing one of the most crucial distinctions between oral history and other forms of historical research: the fact that in this case historians themselves were creating the very documents that they were called upon to interpret.[52]

We cannot assume that Armstrong purposefully opposed the philosophies that shaped the development of oral history as a historical practice; his use of audio capture is distinct from the roughly contemporaneous and formalized practices that dominated discussion within the field. Armstrong's passion for audio preservation is historically aligned with traditions of oral exchange deeply rooted in the African American experience. His strategies circumvented the corruptive influences that oral history was subject to in the hands of both social historians and archivists. In short, Armstrong's interest and approach to oral preservation was well in advance of his time.

[50] Charlton et al., *Handbook*, 45.

[51] Charlton et al., *Handbook*, 46.

[52] Charlton et al., *Handbook*, 9.

The Tapes in Archival Context

From the perspective of the archives, Armstrong's tape collection offers a compelling story. Armstrong was committed to posterity but did not consider the practical administration of his materials following his death. After he died on 6 August 1971, his tapes remained in the home he shared with his wife in Queens, New York, subject to a range of disruptive influences. While available evidence suggests that Armstrong's collection remains remarkably intact, it is possible that some tapes were lost. Armstrong's claim that he had "thousands of tapes" is a bit suspect; if genuine, his claim would place the tapes' survival rate at only 25 percent. It is certain that following Armstrong's death his tapes were also moved throughout the house, distorting his original order. While Armstrong numbered each of his tapes, he was less than precise, and he frequently reused numbers. The combination of Armstrong's imprecise numbering scheme and the repeated manipulation of the tapes' order makes it difficult to detect any order Armstrong may have intended. The only definitive evidence is a photograph of Armstrong standing in front of several shelves of tapes in his den, but little can be discerned. Further, almost certainly by the time of their transfer to the archives, many tapes had been removed from their protective boxes, further complicating any attempt to coordinate the contents of the tapes with their collaged exteriors. Following Lucille's death in 1983, possession of the contents of the house, and the property itself, was transferred to the Louis Armstrong Educational Foundation. The foundation auctioned many of the Armstrong's possessions, including furs, jewelry, and even his Cadillac. Today, the City of New York owns the house (as well as its furniture and furnishings), and Queens College administers it as a historic house museum. The remaining contents, the Louis Armstrong Collection, was donated to Queens College and comprises the original contents of the Louis Armstrong Archives. It is impossible to know if the items in the Louis Armstrong Collection were consciously withheld from auction or if they simply did not sell.[53]

When the Louis Armstrong Archives opened in 1994, access to Armstrong's tapes was limited because of concern for their preservation. The tapes are seven-inch open reel analog recordings, and they vary in terms of their manufactured quality. (Armstrong was notoriously frugal in his purchase of tape stock). They are made from either acetate or polyester. Acetate predates polyester and is a less stable recording medium. During the period between Armstrong's death and the transfer of the tapes to Queens College, they were exposed to extreme ranges of temperature and humidity. Armstrong's regular habits of recording as much as possible on a single tape and even splicing tapes together pose other preserva-

[53] In addition to the Louis Armstrong Collection, the archives also houses the Satchmo Collection (comprising items that have been collected by archives staff), the Phoebe Jacobs Collection (containing materials donated by noted publicist Phoebe Jacobs), as well as the Jack Bradley Collection (including the personal collection of Armstrong's close friend and photographer, Jack Bradley).

tion problems. Because of their physical deterioration as well as Armstrong's often haphazard recording practices, the intelligibility of the tapes varies widely.

When the tapes arrived at Queens College, every effort was made to arrest their deterioration, preserve their physical and intellectual integrity, and, especially, make their contents available for research. Director of the Louis Armstrong House and Archives, Michael Cogswell, arranged for the recordings' transfer to ten-inch open reel polyester tapes. Many of the tapes onto which the original recordings were transferred, however, suffered sticky-shed syndrome, "a condition resulting from the deterioration of the binder in the magnetic tape that results in gummy residues on tape heads during playback."[54] A change in the manufacturers' production techniques often causes this, and it results in portions of the recording medium separating from the medium itself. The consequence is a sporadic loss of sound. Sticky-shed syndrome is, sadly, a condition common in the history of analog tape manufacture. Tapes that suffer from this condition may be played once if they are first baked at a temperature that allows the recording medium to re-adhere to the tape stock. Selected tapes from the Armstrong collection were then again transferred to cassette tapes used as service copies. Cassettes are problematic for access because they make it difficult to locate specific tracks, and searching is destructive because the tape repeatedly stretches and weakens during the process of forwarding and rewinding. Fortunately, the use of cassettes was a short-term solution.

In 1998, then–first lady Hillary Clinton visited both the Louis Armstrong House and the Louis Armstrong Archives. During her tour of the archives, Cogswell introduced Clinton to Armstrong's tape collection. He stressed the tapes' historical value and especially their susceptibility to further deterioration. Subsequent to Clinton's visit, the archives applied for and received a Save America's Treasures Grant in the amount of $300,000 to be spent on the preservation treatment of Armstrong's tapes. Unfortunately, the vast majority of tape boxes have received no attention; only seven have been treated by a preservationist at the cost of approximately $1,000 each.

The Save America's Treasures Grant allowed for the limited appointment of a sound engineer. The engineer transferred the contents of the original tapes onto a hard drive. Additional sets of preservation copies were then transferred onto "Gold" (archival quality) CDRs and ten-inch open reel analog tapes. Service copies were produced on a standard CD format. During transfer from CDR preservation copy to CD service copy, the sound engineer edited the sound files to improve their general intelligibility, reducing background noise and largely eliminating superfluous sounds that originated from Armstrong's equipment. Intellectually, it is important to distinguish between

[54] Richard Pearce-Moses, *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005).

preservation and service copies. Service copies are edited to facilitate access and research. They do *not* authentically represent Armstrong's articulations within the context of a precise historical moment and a particular recording technology.

To facilitate access, the engineer also composed a rudimentary index of the tracks. In consultation with the curator of the Armstrong Archives, the engineer also produced an Access database of the tapes' contents. The database is only available on site. Researchers, however, may request archives staff to perform searches. The database is keyword searchable. The sound engineer compiled a list of basic content and topic descriptors that the curator translated into standard descriptive language. In the absence of a comprehensive transcript, however, it is impossible to index Armstrong's recordings in a way that approaches the precision of a bibliographic index.

Transcription

Of the 650 surviving tapes, only three have been transcribed for public use. The quality of the recordings makes the production of a transcription extremely problematic. Furthermore, because in general Armstrong's intentions were to capture unguarded conversation, many exchanges take place with substantial background noise (a television or a radio might be playing) or an entire discourse could occur at a distance or from a position that limited its capture. One tape is a recording of Armstrong receiving a phone call from drummer Cozy Cole, a conversation Armstrong was intent on capturing. Throughout the phone call, however, only Armstrong can be heard. He later confessed that he had put the wrong end of the telephone to the microphone.

Volunteers whose qualifications were based largely on personal interest prepared these limited transcriptions. Although dedicated and sincere, their work raises important questions about the transmission of Armstrong's language. To begin, the collective efforts of the volunteers do not adhere to any standardized transcription practice. The often complex nature of Armstrong's language further complicates standardization. Despite his lack of formal education, Armstrong's genius is evident in his imaginative use of speech and intuitive gift for narration. He was also a wonderfully inventive speller and could devise words and neologisms with comic and stunning effect. He would often conclude his letters with "S'all" (that's all) or phrases such as "soulfoodly yours." It is often exceedingly difficult to distinguish between error (as relative and pejorative as this word may seem) and creative intent. For example, for many years Jack Bradley was Armstrong's photographer and personal secretary. Today he lives on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Bradley recalls visiting Armstrong and noticing a pile of photographs that captured him in performance. Armstrong planned to throw these

images away. Being a consummate collector as well as an accomplished photographer, Bradley asked Armstrong if he could select several pictures to keep. Armstrong agreed and offered to autograph one of the photographs. He wrote: "To my friend Jack Bradley. The world's best photo taker." Bradley read the inscription and assumed that Armstrong was unable to spell "photographer." He was wrong. In this instance, Bradley was no photographer. He was, in fact, a "photo taker." Several years after Armstrong's death, Bradley realized his error, and recognized Armstrong's gift for manipulating language ("tee hee").

Armstrong's use of slang further complicates transcription. Much of Armstrong's vernacular is geographically specific, often no longer in use, and racially grounded. His speech, especially his unguarded speech, bears obvious evidence of the environment of his youth. The volunteers who transcribed Armstrong's tapes have been white, comparatively affluent, and formally educated. The convergence of these discrepancies raises questions. Despite undoubtedly good intentions, such migration of language across cultural lines implies a process of mediation.

Finally, transcription is *always* an interpretive practice that imposes a process of mediation. My research into Armstrong's recordings placed me in the difficult position of acting *both* as interpreter (transcriber) and author. In addition, readers of this article are further distanced from Armstrong's articulations because readers depend on my interpretation of the *service* copies of Armstrong's recordings. I listened to approximately twelve tapes. My strategy for migrating Armstrong's spoken language into print reflects two intentions: first, to appreciate that Armstrong's recordings were never meant to be read; and second, to use the abundance of surviving manuscript material to provide important insight into how Armstrong used written language with often stunning force. That is, analysis of Armstrong's manuscripts provides an important context to inform my own transcription.

In one manuscript, Armstrong writes that "Jelly Roll" Morton "claimed he was from an Indian or Spanish race. No cullud at all."[55] Armstrong's use of "cullud" is powerful. His adaptation (vernacularism) of the word *colored* resonates with the essence of the conspiracies that remain at the center of racial discrimination and that allowed Morton to transcend such barriers. A similar poignancy is found in Armstrong's use of "suh" while describing (again in writing) his harassment by police officers in Shreveport, Louisiana:

> Then one of them asked me: "Is that your band?" I hurriedly said: "No, suh." I just play in the band—(tee hee), and the other said: "Just the same, we are going to take your trumpet when you finish tonight."[56]

[55] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words*, 24.

[56] Berrett, *Companion*, 125.

Armstrong ingeniously manipulated a word that articulates the baseless racial empowerment of the police officers and, within the specific context of his harassment, inverts its meaning to highlight their susceptibility to Armstrong's orchestrations. While no transcription can relate the power of spoken language, I hope that my own choices convey Armstrong's sincerity and his gift for narrative, and respect his authenticity and humanity. Armstrong's tapes support the theoretical paradigm that by its very definition the process of transcription lacks definitive historical value. Oral memory imparts its full meaning only within the context of its spoken articulations. From the perspective of historiography, the connection between Armstrong's spoken memory and the technology that allows for its capture and preservation is indissoluble.

"Posterity"

Armstrong appreciated the depth of his influence on twentieth-century American culture and was well aware of how his image had been incorporated into the popular imagination. He was also keenly aware that his popularized image would remain firmly in place within the general consciousness of American culture long after his death. Armstrong, however, remained poignantly sincere in his associations with fans *and* with history. For Armstrong, fame did not afford historical privilege. His tapes make this abundantly clear. Armstrong perceived no conflict of historical interest between the preservation of a drunken argument with Lucille, the recording of sexual jokes backstage, private discussions of his love for marijuana, and the future appreciation of his genius and his humanity.

During the same heated conversation in which Armstrong insisted to Lucille that his tapes were for posterity, he made the following comments:

> *Louis:* You know the horn comes first. Then you and Joe Glaser.
> *Lucille:* Bullshit. I come first then the horn.
> *Louis:* No. The horn then you.
> *Lucille:* You can tell me what you want.
> *Louis:* The horn's first. That's what keeps you ass happy.[57]

By any measure, Armstrong's comments are cruel and meant to hurt. And, while they may have been unconsciously recorded, they were purposefully preserved. Armstrong's gesture is one of profound historical honesty, an honesty that can be heard throughout Armstrong's personal recordings.

In the spring of 1970, Armstrong was again hospitalized as a result of heart and kidney ailments. He was aware that his body was beginning to fail. When he was released from the hospital, he composed a lengthy manuscript entitled *Open*

[57] Armstrong, 5.

Letter to Fans. The manuscript is dated 1 June 1970. "Well Folks, here I am—at home at last," Armstrong begins.

> I've just gotten out of the Beth Israel Hospital after being there Twice for Fatigue—Rundown Body, Exhaustion—and Kidney Ailment which effected my Heart and Liver. My Doctor, Gary Zucker (a Great Man and Jazz Fan of mine), he worked hard over me and took me out of my Crisis. He took me out of INTENSIVE CARE Twice (2 times) which is something very seldom heard of with any Human Being. While I was in intensive care and was coming back to normal and life again, and I talk to Dr. Zucker whenever he visited me, he and I would have some heart talks. Knowin that he was also one of my Dear Fans, I felt at ease talking to him.[58]

It was during his interaction with recording technology, however, that Armstrong was most relaxed and candid. Armstrong begins one tape with a direct address to history:

> That's my story folks. I guess I'm stuck with it. I usually say nice things about human beings, if they deserve it. I never wanted to be anymore than I am, and what I don't have I don't need it anywoo. I've always loved and I always lived a normal life which I appreciate very much. And I always loved everybody. Still do. Well, folks, that was my life. And I enjoyed all of it. Yes, I did. I don't feel ashamed at all. My life has always been an open book. So I have nothing to hide. And well Mary Wana honey, that's marijuana to you, but its Mary Wana honey, you sure was good and I enjoyed you berry, berry, very much. But the price to pay has gotten a little too high today, law-wise. At first you was a misdemeanor. But as the years rolled on, you lost your Misto and got meaner and meaner—jailhousely speaking. Soon I'll have to put you down, dearest. Bye Bye.
>
> Love a Plenty. Soulfoodly. "Satchmo" Louis Armstrong.[59]

Here one of the world's first celebrities to reach a truly global audience speaks candidly to history in a manner that is sincere and resistant to outside interests, and above all, with motivations that were quintessentially honest. It is impossible to be certain of the date of this recording. Its content, and certainly Armstrong's voice, suggest the late 1960s or early 1970 (roughly contemporaneous with his *Open Letter to Fans*). The content is striking, especially since Armstrong was fully aware of the range of intimate evidence that he had already recorded, decorated, and indexed, and that, by his admission, was awaiting its reception by "posterity."

[58] Brothers, *Louis Armstrong In His Own Words*, 180.

[59] Armstrong, 426.

Conclusion

Armstrong's passion for documenting his life and imagination across a breadth of media resulted, fortunately, in the preservation of a body of evidence that allows for unique and broad insights into the private persona and creative process of one of the twentieth century's true artistic geniuses. Further, Armstrong's passion for documentation resulted in a rare breadth of archival traces. For example, insights into Armstrong's relationship with Joe Oliver are preserved in Armstrong's written reflections, his use of collage, as well as his autobiographical recordings. The tapes, however, are unique because of Armstrong's obvious comfort interacting with recording technology and also because of his commitment to using the technology to capture unguarded conversation. Other media that Armstrong used to document his life resist the capture of such frank insight. Writing and collage require the conscious manipulation of words and images. Furthermore, Armstrong's insistence that his tapes were "for posterity" is especially powerful. While his autobiographical writings may have had a similar intent (though to my knowledge Armstrong never claimed so in his writings), the collage work shows Armstrong at leisure. It does not reveal the kinds of frank communication with history that is specific to his audio recordings.