

Louis Armstrong: A Subtle Activist



Race relations in the 1930s through the 60s were dismal. Beginning with the Jim Crow Laws, created after the reconstruction period in the south, African American's were fighting an uphill battle for equality in the United States. Because of segregation and the prejudice of white Americans, black people were systematically at a disadvantage socially and economically. One African American jazz musician, Louis Armstrong, rose to prevalence during the 1920's and remained a widely popular entertainer throughout the 50s, 60s and 70s. Although he rarely commented publicly on civil rights issues, Louis Armstrong challenged white American's perspective of African American's through his music, persona and lifestyle. His music and individuality garnered unprecedented respect for him as a black musician, and defied expectations of blacks in society. Armstrong's music had the power to unite blacks and whites. His persona was distinct and provocative and when he did comment publicly on racial inequality, it was impactful and sincere.

Louis Armstrong claimed he was born July 4, 1900, although his true date of birth is disputed. He grew up in the red light district of New Orleans, Storyville, a small area filled with dance halls, brothels and blues and ragtime music, which would ultimately transform into jazz. Armstrong was introduced to the cornet when sentenced to live in a group home after he was charged for delinquency. As a teen, he became a member of one of the leading jazz bands in New Orleans, and played in riverboat bands. Armstrong was soon playing in bands in New York and Chicago, and his career took off (Harmon). Armstrong is widely considered one of the first innovators of jazz music, and in many respects, the inventor of 20th century popular music. In his biography of Armstrong,

James L. Collier writes, "his mark appears everywhere: it is hardly possible to turn on the radio without hearing something that Armstrong helped to shape" (342). Armstrong's impact on music is recognized far and wide as a massive one: "Modernist Sun Ra said, 'His contribution to jazz is immeasurable and his contribution to music is a world thing not fully evaluated yet.' Arranger Oliver Nelson said, 'We couldn't have had what we now know as American music without him'" (348).
(Collier, 342).
(Nelson, 348).

As a musical innovator and virtuoso, Armstrong was in a unique position at a time when African Americans were valued very little in society. Simply by being such a talented performer, he challenged the idea of blacks as an inferior race. In 1929, there were "no blacks in major league sports... few blacks in public office, few famous as artists, few in high places in business and industry," while Louis was considered the best in his field; "whites themselves said he was the best trumpet player. For millions of blacks across the United States, it was profoundly important that a black man should be better at something than whites" (Collier 199). Charles L. Black, a white civil rights activist at the time, explained Armstrong's effect on him personally, saying, "It is impossible to overstate the significance of a 16 year old southern boy's seeing genius for the first time in a black. We literally never saw a black then in any but a servant's capacity.... Louis opened my eyes wide, and put me to a choice. Blacks, the saying went 'were all in their right place.' What was the 'place' of such a man, and of the people from which he sprung?" (Berrett 188). The originality of his music further challenged expectations of African Americans. In his essay on Armstrong and Civil Rights, Charles Hersch explains the danger of individuality for a discriminated-against

race, writing “many African Americans have described how segregation forced one to be as unassuming and self-effacing as possible; anything less would draw retaliation by whites who saw it as a threat” (385). Armstrong incorporated numerous African elements into his music, innovated the rhythmically robust “swing” style of jazz and sang in a unique, gravelly tone that was practically unheard of in that time. Armstrong’s “virtuosic transformations of American Popular music” represented “a public assertion of individuality, and such assertions were not welcomed, to say the least, by most whites.” (Hersch 385). While Louis Armstrong seemingly did little actively to fight for civil rights, his impact as a famous black performer did a great deal in the fight for equality. Lester Bowie, a famous jazz musician, is quoted as saying, “The true revolutionary is one that’s not apparent. I mean the revolutionary that’s waving a gun out in the streets is never effective; the police just arrest him. But the police don’t ever know about the guy that smiles and drops a little poison in their coffee. Well, Louis, in that sense, was that sort of revolutionary, a true revolutionary” (Berrett 187). Armstrong circumvented the fact that society was entirely in favor of whites, and became one of the first great American pop stars. At a time when blacks rarely went far in America, Armstrong sat at the top of the music industry. His achievements arguably did a lot to introduce the notion to white Americans that blacks could be genius too. His massive popularity as a performer gave him the freedom to experiment, which he used subtly but effectively. His musical style pushed the boundaries of how blacks were expected to be and act; Every unique quality of his music could be considered a rebellion against racism.

While Armstrong was able to covertly defy white America's expectations- "[Poisoning] their coffee", as Lester Bowie put it- he also had a profoundly positive contribution to the developing relationship between blacks and whites. The quality and beauty of his playing was universal. While his music wasn't directly affecting the system of racial inequality, it "did interrupt it in the realm of the emotions. Though band members... could not 'mingle' with the guests, they communicated with them through music, creating a bond between black performer and white audience"(Hersch 380). Hersch also asserts that, "For Armstrong, music attacked hierarchy by creating pleasure- musical pleasure that brought diverse individuals together in the utopian moments of his concerts"^{NEW PARAGRAPH}(373). Armstrong himself often recognized and prided himself on the ability of his music to create an atmosphere where people of all races could set differences aside. Describing a performance in the Congo in the midst of civil war, Armstrong said "both armies came to the concert and sat side by side, and had a ball. As soon as we left they were fighting again"(Berrett, 168). On a concert in Miami, he said "I walked on stage and saw something I thought I'd never see. I saw thousands of people, colored and white on the main floor. Not segregated in one row of whites and another row of negroes. Just all together- Naturally. When you see things like that you know you're going forward" (qtd in Hersch 380). Armstrong is famously quoted as saying, "You see that horn? That horn ain't prejudiced. A notes a note in any language." ^{NEW PARAGRAPH}(Berrett, 174). In a heavily segregated society, Armstrong's power as a musician was far more than entertainment. It meant a black man and a white man could agree on something: a love of Louis' music. While he never challenged segregation directly, he

was able to prove that whites and blacks could enjoy themselves alongside one another. In this way, Armstrong could have never spoken out about segregation and still be considered a revolutionary. This uniting of races through a love of music arguably began to prove integration could succeed.

Outside of his subtle musical rebellion, Louis Armstrong fought the oppression of blacks through his lifestyle, personality and occasional outspokenness. Armstrong made sure to dine in the best restaurants and stay in the best hotels, once remarking, "I had it put in my contracts that I wouldn't play no place I couldn't stay" (Giddens, 163). The nicest establishments were often restricted to black patrons, but "innumerable times", Armstrong made history by "becoming the first black man ever to stay at what was then the best hotel in town" (Margolick, NYT). Armstrong's significance as a revolutionary outside the realm of music wasn't recognized for the most part until after his career, and he was often criticized for staying quiet so long on issues of racial inequality. Speaking out on controversial topics, however, would have cost him a great many listeners and potentially his own safety, and for Louis, the music was paramount. Amiri Baraka said his "expression was musical and artistic and transcended that. When it was possible for Louis to speak, he spoke," (NPR). Paul Robeson, another popular black entertainer at the time did speak out, and "faced boycotts, blacklists, the denial of a passport, and government investigations for his outspokenness on civil rights". To preserve his influence and status, Armstrong avoided controversy, although he "took great pride in being African American" and "was not afraid to assert his pride in his African American heritage". Arvell Shaw, his bass player, once remarked, "Louis was the first man I heard

to say, you're black, be proud of it" (Hersch, 391). The most significant example of Armstrong's outspokenness was during the Desegregation Crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas. Following the Brown vs. Board ruling, Little Rock Central High intended to integrate their student body. Nine African American students were supposed to attend Central High on September 3, 1957. The governor of Little Rock, Orval Faubus ordered the National Guard to surround Central High to block the students from entering to avoid violence. On September 20th, the district court ordered Faubus to stop interfering with desegregation. On September 24th, Eisenhower sent 1000 paratroopers to defend the Little Rock Nine and enforce integration. (School Desegregation, ABC CLIO). In his article in the New York Times, David Margolick recounts Armstrong's comments and the ensuing reaction. On September 17th, Armstrong was scheduled to perform in Grand Forks, North Dakota. A young journalist, Larry Lubenow, landed an interview with Armstrong before his show, and asked him about the battle over desegregation. Angrily, Armstrong told him, "It's getting almost so bad a colored man hasn't got any country," and said president Eisenhower was "two faced," and had "no guts." He called Gov. Faubus an "uneducated plow boy" and remarked, "The way they are treating my people in the South, the government can go to hell". The Amsterdam News commented, "Any white confused by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s polite talk need only listen to Mr. Armstrong" and the Chicago Defender said Mr. Armstrong's words had the "explosive effect of an H-bomb." (Margolick). Armstrong's commentary on Little Rock was hugely impactful, considering Armstrong was known for his avoidance of taking any political stance. At a boiling point of anger over segregation in the nation, it seemed even the

most contented, subservient black figure had reached his breaking point. Though rarely publicly, Armstrong was a strong advocate for pride in the African American race, and equality between whites and blacks. His insistence to stay in the finest establishments, like his molding of popular music, show how Armstrong could quietly fight for civil rights without causing much commotion, or damaging his reputation. He had a unique ability to remain beloved by the mainstream while covertly staying true to, and promoting, his background and beliefs.

As a hugely popular entertainer and African American, Louis Armstrong broke many racial boundaries. Through his music and public image, although uncontroversial, he was arguably able to accomplish more for racial equality than many activists. While Armstrong's actions as a revolutionary weren't often immediately apparent, a closer look reveals he was one of the more impactful figures in support of Civil Rights.

Tim, this is an impressive paper! You have a sophisticated Thesis and you provide a great deal of well analyzed evidence to support your thesis. You do a very good job of integrating quotes with your analysis. You used a lot of primary sources. Well done! My only suggestion is to break up some of the longer pages into paragraphs.

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