

## **Johnny Mercer and Louis Armstrong: A Story in Three Songs**

(Revised version submitted February 2010)

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Music clip: "When It's Sleepy Time..."

Welcome to the mythic pre-20<sup>th</sup>-century south of Louis Armstrong's theme song. It is a world with "soft winds blowing through the pinewood tress—folks down there live a life of ease—ol' mammy falls upon her knees....banjos ringing, the darkies singing till the break of day." Even more than a theme song, this was one of Armstrong's greatest obsessions. Over a 40-year period, from 1931, the year of the recording you have just heard, to 1971, the year of his death, there are a staggering 161 recordings that Armstrong left, though a number of these were never commercially issued. And that does not even begin to include the countless times he performed it on other occasions.

But what does all of this tell us about the relationship between Louis and Johnny, and their idea of "home"?

Image: Johnny Mercer, Lucille and Louis Armstrong

This picture of Johnny, Lucille and Louis helps give us a clue. It comes from Special Collections and Archives of Georgia State University Library. Dating from some time in the 1960's, it is gutsy and earthy in more ways than one, attesting to a real sense of bonding between Louis and Johnny.

It is not simply that Louis paid Johnny a high compliment with such phrases as "Man more spades..." Kevin Fleming has told me that the original is a cut-out, glued onto the back of piece of paper, the reverse side of which provides guidelines to Lucille and Louis's idiosyncratic diet regimen "Lose Weight the Satchmo Way."

Now I must apologize if what I am about to tell you interferes with the digestion of your meal. But the fact is that Armstrong's regimen included a key ingredient, "Swiss Kriss," a herbal laxative that he often took three times a day. He even had thousands of cards printed with a photograph of himself, pants down, seated on his toilet, with the accompanying legend: "Satchmo says, 'Leave it all behind ya!' "

Image: Condolence letter to Lucille Armstrong

As for Johnny, a look at the condolence letter he wrote Lucille Armstrong in August 1971 shows that the warm feelings were mutual and profound, though couched in characteristically genteel language. He refers to this photograph in his opening paragraph, harks back to meeting

Armstrong at Sebastian's Cotton Club in Los Angeles in the early 30's, recalls his efforts at trying to imitate Louis's vocals, and concludes with how Armstrong was a great American original who touched him to his soul.

In many ways, Mercer's "Lazy Bones," his great collaboration with Hoagy Carmichael from 1933, delivers the same basic message as "When It's Sleepy Time Down South," but for daylight hours. With its perfectly matching melody, it hardly ever exceeds the range of an octave. The lyrics reveal Mercer as the quintessential "outdoor" writer inspired by the Southern landscape—a quality so different from what we typically see in, say, Irving Berlin, the Gershwins, or Cole Porter. Following the model of Carmichael's classic from 1930, "Rockin' Chair," "Lazy Bones" is driven by the dialogue between older and younger generations, one chastising the other. Of the nine recordings Armstrong made in the course of his career, here is a choice one with Bing Crosby coming from 1950. Their interpersonal chemistry and the presence of Armstrong's sidekick, Jack Teagarden, let alone a live audience, make all the difference.

Music clip: "Lazy Bones"

In the final analysis, "Lazy Bones" offers a valuable lesson in escapist irony. After all, in 1933 Mercer was still a relative unknown, barely eking out a living in the midst of the Depression. As for Armstrong himself, it was a very strong work ethic that defined so much of his life, from his earliest years in New Orleans to the time of his final gig at the Waldorf Astoria in New York.

Lethargy is the last thing we think of as we turn to our next example. "Jeepers Creepers" from 1938, was co-written with Harry Warren and premiered by Armstrong in the movie *Going Places* that same year.

Music clip: "Jeepers Creepers"

As the groom Gabriel playing his trumpet in this Jim-Crow period movie, Armstrong fills a highly ambiguous role. He is the only one who can soothe the savage breast of this wild horse that shares the name of Jeepers Creepers, calming the animal down enough to be ridden. In so doing, he makes it possible for the rather effete romantic hero, a riding clothes salesman with no experience as a jockey --Peter Mason, played by Dick Powell-- to successfully impersonate a star Australian jockey in the Steeple Chase and win the hand of the girl, Ellen Parker. At the same time, to quote film critic Krin Gabbard, "rather than discharging his sexual energies in the proximity of a white woman, Armstrong is here asked to play and sing the title song to a horse." (Jazz/Margins, 219) We are going to see him in the sequence where he first serenades the horse,

Film clip: *Going Places*

Armstrong playing trumpet and singing to horse----- (in the presence of the two bumbling gamblers, Maxie and Duke). There is also a second sequence where Armstrong rides with his band along the course of the steeplechase, playing the horse's favorite song as our hero rides to victory.

Now, there is a lot more to this song than what Philip Furia has called the "jovial pixiness that characterizes Mercer himself when he was not drinking." (118) The lyrics, addressed to the horse, leave one off balance, juxtaposing opposites at almost every turn. There are elements of regional slang such as "Gosh all git up!" contrasted with the jive talk of the city slicker: "How'd they get so lit up?" Then there are those archaisms such as "Woe is me!," directly followed by the phrase "Got to put my cheaters on.," with its trendy jargon for sunglasses. This focus on the eyes of the horse puts one in a sexually ambiguous, anthropomorphizing erotic zone with such lines as "When the weather vane points to gloomy, It's gotta be sunny to me, when your eyes look into mine;" Or "Oh! Those weepers! How they hypnotize! Where'd ya get those eyes?"

Finally, the name "Gabriel," (Lord as hero in Hebrew) and a biblical allusion to one of the seven archangels, the herald of good tidings, has a special resonance. Not only that, there was surely the memory of Cole Porter's hit show of four years earlier, *Anything Goes* of 1934, which included the rousing revivalist showstopper sung by Ethel Merman, "Blow, Gabriel, Blow."

Composer Arthur Schwartz once said of "Blues in the Night": "Probably the greatest blues song ever written—and that includes 'St. Louis Blues' " Written in California with Harold Arlen, this song is among the darkest and most introspective of Mercer, and is presumably a byproduct of his aborted affair with Judy Garland (Furia, 125, 126). Premiered in a 1941 movie of the same title as part of a jail sequence, it is a blues lament taking off with a "soaring, vernacular wail" (Furia, 127), and is sung by African-American prisoners with William Gillespie as lead singer.

Quite remarkably, the song has inspired some fifty recordings, each with their interpretive spin. These range from separate versions by Arlen and Mercer respectively, to ones by Cab Calloway, Jo Stafford, Ella Fitzgerald, Judy Garland, Jimmie Lunceford, Artie Shaw, and many more. And let us not forget those wacky cartoon versions by the likes of Daffy Duck and Bugs Bunny. Arlen, who wrote the music first, has given us a keen sense of the collaborative process: "...I went over his lyric and I started to hum it over his desk. It sounded marvelous once I got to the second stanza, but that first twelve was weak tea. On the third or fourth page of his work sheets I saw some lines—one of them was "my momma done tol' me, when I was in knee pants." I said "Why don't you try that?" It was one of the few times I've ever suggested anything like that to John."

Image: "Blues in the Night" draft lyric sheet

This opening line and the mournful sound of the train whistle reportedly hark back to the family reminiscences of Johnny Mercer's mother, Lilian Ciucevich Mercer, recalling the sound of the train at the end of the line in Savannah, someone from whom he inherited a certain melancholic streak that lay just below the surface of his jubilant exterior. (Furia, 11 and 277)

In this movie sequence our pianist hero, Jigger (Richard Whorf), who is committed to playing real music, has just been carted off to jail with his sideman. He has punched a patron and then the owner of a bar over a request to play commercial trash like "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles." It is in jail that he hears African-American prisoners in an adjoining cell singing

"Blues in the Night." He and his buddies are transfixed, declaring that this music is the "real low-down, New Orleans blues."

Film clip: *Blues in the Night*

F O R M . . . . .

FORM (52 meas., excluding Intro. and Tag—cf. what Arlen called "an Arlen tapeworm," as in his other song "One For My Baby" of 1943).

Intro.	4
Blues chorus (A): "My mama done tol'me"	12
Blues chorus (B): "Now the rain's a fallin'"	12
Bridge (C): "The evenin' breeze..."	8
Bridge (C1): "Take my word..."	8
Blues chorus (A1): " From Natchez to Mobile..."	12
Tag	4

Although Armstrong himself did not appear in the movie, he began including it in his repertoire very shortly after it was written in 1941. Of the five recordings he has left us, let us sample two, each strikingly different. The first from 1944 and made in Los Angeles, is a rather glitzy big band swing arrangement originally heard on Armed Forces Radio.

\*\*\*[It comes from a time when there was an influx of thousands of black migrant workers from the Southwest, not to mention a number of blues musicians from Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Louisiana. Their presence was vital in the spawning of rhythm and blues in the city as well as the emergence of new independent labels largely dedicated to jazz. Mercer's co-founding in 1942 of Capitol Records with Buddy DeSylva and Glen Wallichs is a case in point (Billie Holiday, Nat King Cole, Stan Kenton, Benny Goodman, Marian McPartland, et al.).]\*\*\*

Music clip: "Blues in the Night" (big band, AFRS)

Armstrong's remake of 1957 with the Oscar Peterson Quartet is a far more intimate affair. It is a passionately idiomatic bluesy rendition with the masterful keyboard playing of Oscar Peterson, and the beautifully nuanced support of other members of his quartet. (Herb Ellis, g; Ray Brown, b; Louie Bellson, dr) This is a kind of performance that harks back to the 1920's when Armstrong made classic recordings with blues singers such as Bessie Smith, Armstrong himself doing more singing here than trumpet playing.

Music clip: "Blues in the Night" (Oscar Peterson Quartet)

In the larger scheme of things, this 1957 recording coincides with Armstrong at the zenith of his international fame as the world-world travelling "Ambassador Satch," fronting his sextet, the "All Stars." For me, the year of 1957 stands out as the year when Armstrong affirmed his black identity like never before. It was in September that he told the U.S. State Department to go to hell over the issue of desegregation at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas,

leading to his showdown with President Eisenhower. But there was another showdown earlier that year—on July 4 at Newport—a defining moment in the Armstrong-Mercer relationship.

On his arrival there Louis had been told by the producer and his manager that he was to appear with almost every act on the bill except his own group. Adding insult to injury, Velma Middleton, the All Stars' singer, was not to perform at all. Besides, Ella Fitzgerald was on hand for the festivities, and one female singer was enough, at least according to the thinking of the concert handlers.

But things did not turn out quite as planned. Dan Morgenstern has vividly described the backstage drama that ensued:

Louis has had it by then, and he withdraws behind the tent flap that contains his private area. Soon Velma hears the news, and bursts into tears. Louis, who has fantastic ears, hears her crying. Suddenly he appears from behind the flap, wearing nothing but a handkerchief tied around his scalp. Shouts and alarums. Women shriek, grown men flinch, and everyone scatters to the winds, Louis's curses in their ears. Like an ancient African king, he smites them with his righteous wrath.

And smite them he truly did. Not only did he skip a pre-concert Newport society dinner that had been arranged in his honor; he ended up playing with only his own act and with Velma Middleton as his vocalist. Following this set, a giant birthday cake was wheeled on stage, Johnny Mercer and Ella Fitzgerald singing "Happy Birthday" before thousands. What is more, there would be no jam-session finale. "No one hangs on my coattails," says Armstrong. Instead he intones the national anthem, his All Stars falling in behind him. And he wouldn't take a taste of his birthday cake. "That night, Louis Armstrong didn't eat anything they were dishing out.