

Satchmo at the Waldorf in New York: The life and times of jazz great Louis Armstrong

By Fred Mazelis
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The one-man show currently playing at the Westside Theatre in New York City, *Satchmo at the Waldorf*, makes effective use of hundreds of audio recordings by jazz great Louis Armstrong, one of the iconic figures in American musical history, to reveal something of the man behind the myth.

The audio tapes are now stored at an archive in Queens College, not far from Armstrong's modest former home, which was opened about a decade ago as the Louis Armstrong House Museum. Playwright Terry Teachout—the theater critic for the *Wall Street Journal* and the author of a biography of Armstrong published five years ago—has used the tapes to fashion a lively and moving memoir of the great jazz genius, largely in his own words.

Using a simple but effective set, the play places Armstrong (played by John Douglas Thompson) in a dressing room at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York a few months before his death in July 1971, about a month short of his 70th birthday. This was to be the last public performance for the man known universally as Satchmo, a shortened version of “satchelmouth,” a nickname referring to his large mouth.

As Armstrong reminisces, the main biographical details emerge: his birth in the notorious Storyville section of New Orleans—the “red-light” district, his mother 15 years old; his father's abandonment of his family; Armstrong's early years of abject poverty; and his arrival at the Colored Waifs' Home for Boys before he reached the age of 12.

Alongside the deprivation and degrading conditions faced by Armstrong, there were also some brighter moments and opportunities. At the age of seven he did odd jobs for an immigrant Jewish family, the Karnofskys, who owned a small junk-hauling business. They would welcome the fatherless boy into their home and offer him meals with the family as well as encouragement, later lending him the money that enabled him to buy his first cornet. Afterward, in the unlikely circumstances of the Waifs' Home, Armstrong received formal musical instruction and soon became the leader of the Home's band.

All this and much more is covered in the 90-minute show, with Thompson in an excellent performance, which for the most part does not attempt to impersonate Armstrong so much as bring out the essence of his life, his emotions and his experiences.

Necessary drama and contrast are added with the introduction of two other characters, each also portrayed by Thompson. This theatrical technique, by no means unique in recent years, is extremely effective here, as swift lighting changes mesh with Thompson's rapid shifts in style and delivery to depict the relationship between Armstrong and his long-time manager, Joe Glaser.

Making a briefer but still important appearance is Miles Davis (1926-1991), the trumpeter and musical genius a generation younger than Armstrong. Davis, one of the pioneers of bebop and later developments in jazz, also became known for his bitter denunciations of Armstrong as an Uncle Tom, “jumping around and grinning for the white man.”

The playwright allows these three main characters to speak for themselves. His enormous respect for Armstrong is unmistakable and understandable, but the man is also portrayed honestly, as he presented himself in his candid and at times angry and bitter reminiscences. The play begins with rueful comments such as “How'd I get so old?” Of course there is plenty of profanity from Armstrong, directed at himself as well as others.

Glaser, the tough-talking Jewish manager from Chicago (and one-time associate of gangster Al Capone) who guided Armstrong's career for 40 years and died about 18 months before Armstrong, emerges as a ruthless businessman who nevertheless understood and respected Armstrong's genius.

The New Orleans-born musician had found wide recognition for his work with King Oliver's band in the early 1920s, and a few years later through the superlative recordings of Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five or Hot Seven on Okeh Records. During the 1920s he worked with Fletcher Henderson, Sidney Bechet, Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, among other extraordinary talents. It was Glaser who helped make Armstrong a wealthy man, however, after the musician turned in some desperation to him for help when Armstrong was threatened by Chicago gangsters.

Glaser is portrayed as savvy but cynical. He declares with some astonishment that Armstrong does not care about money, and “gives away \$1,000 a week.” According to the manager, it is Armstrong's renowned gravelly voice that made him famous, not the horn. “You're like Jolson, or Sophie Tucker,”

he says, and that is where the big money is.

Armstrong makes no apologies for showcasing his vocal abilities. Speaking of his much later rendition of “Hello Dolly,” he confides to his tape recorder, “Dolly ain’t much of a song, but I made it what it became. Dolly knocked the Beatles off the charts”—an event whose 50th anniversary was marked a month ago, on May 9.

Armstrong “replies,” however, as the lighting changes to shift the scene from Glaser to him, rejecting the idea that his horn was less important. His relationship with his horn has shaped his entire life, he declares. They are one and the same. “The horn done save me.”

Glaser, himself answerable to the mob and threatened by them with the exposure of a 1928 statutory rape charge that involved a 14-year-old girl, signed over 50 percent of the business to mob lawyer Sidney Korshak and left nothing to Armstrong. One of the strongest moments in the show comes when Armstrong, who left all the business dealings to Glaser and trusted him his whole life, bitterly notes that “I was the business, but he left nothing for me. I felt like he used me up and threw me out.”

Nor was Glaser free of racist prejudices, as evidenced in the play’s portrayal. Armstrong points out that in all their decades of the closest possible professional collaboration, he was never invited to Glaser’s home.

Another theme emerges in Armstrong’s resentment over the clashes between the rival generations of jazz musicians. “That Dizzy Gillespie, he didn’t treat me right,” he angrily declares. When *Time* magazine put Armstrong on its cover and Gillespie was asked for his reaction, he said, “us cats, we study,” and disparaged Armstrong for supposedly possessing only “soul.”

Armstrong, reminiscing, brags of his musical credentials and experience. He read music and his playing reflected real training. “I played country music with Johnny Cash,” he declares. “And the St. Louis Blues with Bernstein....I played classical too. Like Caruso. Caruso or the blues--soul is soul. I love that grand opera--love that Pagiaccio.”

There were undoubted tensions between the early jazz pioneers and big bands of the 1930s, on the one hand, and the young generation of musical innovators that introduced bebop. As Armstrong claims, “You want to please the people. You can’t get too far out in front like the goddamn beboppers did.”

As time passed, however, passions cooled and collaborations took place between Gillespie and Armstrong, although that is not referenced in the play.

Miles Davis introduces another controversial subject: the relationship between jazz musicians and the bitter struggle for racial equality that gathered steam in the post-World War II period.

Satchmo at the Waldorf gives Davis some eloquent words, while also highlighting Armstrong’s self-defense. Armstrong complains bitterly over being called an Uncle Tom, and is resentful over the fact that he lost much of his

African-American audience in the last years of his career.

“I told off President Eisenhower over Little Rock,” says Armstrong. “I said Eisenhower ain’t got no guts. And that John Foster Dulles, he’s another mother--...I played down South with a mixed band. I said if you can’t stay [at a hotel] you don’t play.”

While Armstrong’s comments are heartfelt, he was also a man of his time, born barely 35 years after the end of the Civil War, and the product of a period when open resistance to Jim Crow segregation and the brutalization of African-Americans, particularly in the South, was rare.

A younger generation, influenced by wartime experiences and also decisively by the mass movement of industrial workers that built the CIO, was far more militant and inevitably criticized many of its elders. At the same time, in class terms, Miles Davis’s views may have reflected something else. Armstrong tellingly refers to Davis as a “stuck-up doctor’s son.” Davis voiced the feelings of those who turned in the reactionary direction of black nationalism. The play has him declaring, in a notorious comment, “If I had an hour to live I’d spend it choking a white man.”

These issues cannot be looked at in isolation from their whole social and political context in the postwar period. This was a period of rising militancy among black workers and youth, and of combativity and confidence among trade unionists as a whole, then at the peak of their numbers as a percentage of the labor force. It was also the period, however, of the Cold War, the grip of the reactionary union bureaucracy and the witch-hunt against those who sought to fight Jim Crow on the basis of a class struggle socialist program. These conditions created circumstances in which nationalistic views at times were looked on as the alternative to “accommodationism.”

A significant feature of *Satchmo at the Waldorf*, and no doubt a conscious one, is the almost complete absence of Armstrong’s music. There is a solo from the classic “West End Blues” and a few other snippets, but nothing more substantial. Undoubtedly, the playwright felt anything more would detract from the story told by the tapes.

This may well be true, but this play is nevertheless a wonderful introduction to the life and times of Louis Armstrong, and those who want to experience the music of this genius do not have very far to look.

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