



THE CASTLE OF THE ORIGINAL KING OF CORONA

Born of a prostitute, raised in a brothel, and facing racism enforced by law, he saw his opportunities for success diminish even further when he dropped out of school in the fifth grade. Yet in spite of these drawbacks (or perhaps because of them) his legacy as a musician, entertainer, humanitarian, goodwill ambassador and cultural icon continues to resonate within the world consciousness forty years after his death.

AROUND TOWN

Baptized a Catholic, defined as a Baptist and attracted to Judaism, he counted presidents and popes among his friends, mixed freely with movie stars, served as an enduring influence on the musical style of such singers as Frank Sinatra, and was equally at home with just plain folks.

His raspy singing voice, akin to the sound of velvet ripping on barbed wire, was as much a trademark as his virtuoso skills on the trumpet and coronet. His name was Louis Armstrong, and his ability to crash social barriers, develop jazz as a new dimension in music, and serve as a conscience for a nation makes him at once a fascinating contradictory and unique individual.

Born in New Orleans in 1906, Armstrong was singing on the streets of The Big Easy at the age of 11 to help augment the meager income his mother earned in that city's red light district. In the early twenties, he moved to Chicago, where he joined the Creole Jazz Band. At that time, the Windy City was rife with Prohibition-era gangsters and served as the American epicenter for the musical format of jazz. Urged by his second wife, Lil, to expand his reputation and influence as an entertainer, Armstrong began moving between Chicago and New York City, where he played with a variety of musical companies.

Her suggestion allowed him to develop a musical style that continues to have a major impact down to the present time. Today's aficionados of Rap music can easily recognize Armstrong's influence through his development of "scat" singing, a technique using nonsensical words to flesh out a jazz musical work. In 1926, during his time with the Chicago-based Little Symphony Band, he and his fellow band members recorded the scat classic, "Heebie Jeebies." So popular was this work that the Little Symphony became the most famous jazz group in the United States.

In keeping with his ability to break new ground, Armstrong's unprecedented musical talents allowed him to open new venues in American culture and entertainment. In February of 1947, he was the first jazz musician to appear on the cover of Time magazine. Seventeen years later, his trademark song, Hello Dolly, became his biggest selling record as it went to number one on the pop music charts. At the age of 63, he was the oldest person in pop music history to accomplish this feat. In so doing, Armstrong managed to push aside The Beatles, who had topped the charts for over fourteen weeks.

Always concerned about his health and especially his weight, Armstrong was a lifelong user of laxatives as a way to control the pounds. He often used Swiss Kriss to purge his bowels and sang its praises to all who would listen, thus becoming an unofficial spokesman for this product. His unabashed support for Swiss Kriss even led him to extol its virtues to England's Royal Family, perhaps giving a whole new meaning to the term Royal Flush.

Like many entertainers of a later era, Louis Armstrong professed political and social views that drew the attention of the FBI. While it was not generally known at the time, he was a strong financial supporter of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights activists. When President Eisenhower initially waffled on school integration in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957, Armstrong publicly labeled Ike as "two-faced" and "gutless;" an observation that drew national headlines. Serving as a roving ambassador of American goodwill at the time, Armstrong was so incensed by the president's inaction, he cancelled a State Department sponsored tour of Russia, saying, "The way they're treating my people in the South, the government can go to hell."

On July 6, 1971, Louis Armstrong died at his home of a heart attack. Yet Armstrong's death only served to underscore his impact on the world. Representing a cross section of politics and entertainment, his honorary pallbearers included Bing Crosby, Governor Nelson Rockefeller, Johnny Carson, New York City Mayor John Lindsay, Pearl Bailey and Ed Sullivan. Unlike lesser mortals, death did not end Louis Armstrong's life, but rather, served as a spring board for his continuing presence in today's world.

A millionaire several times over, Louis Armstrong enjoyed a level of success that gave him the opportunity to live in a Manhattan penthouse that matched his bigger-than-life image as an entertainer and impresario. Yet in 1943 he and his third wife, Lucille, chose to live in a comfortable but unassuming house in the Corona section of Queens, New York. Designated a National Historic Landmark, Armstrong's home opened as a museum in October of 2003. Attracting thousands of music fans annually, this well-maintained and carefully preserved edifice gives visitors an intimate and up-close look at the entertainer and the man who was Louis Armstrong. The museum's extensive collection includes over 1,600 recordings, 5,000 photos, trumpets, plaques, awards and assorted letters. Today, visitors have the opportunity to see these items in the living space this remarkable man

called home. Open six days a week, with the exception of Mondays and major holidays, the adult admission price of \$8.00 is less than the local multiplex and makes a visit to the Armstrong museum a bargain for New Yorkers and out-of-towners alike.

While the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs owns the Armstrong house, and Queens College oversees its administration, the day-to-day operations lie in the capable hands of Deslyn Dyer, its Assistant Director. Although she was born after Armstrong's death, Ms. Dyer's daily exposure to his home environment and memorabilia gives her an unusual perception of this musical genius and his place in popular history. "The out-and-out racial prejudice Louis faced is hard to fathom today," she says. "We have an old black-and-white movie clip where Louis is singing a love song, not to a woman, but to a horse. The idea of romance among black males was just too threatening for white audiences a couple of generations

ago. That kind of thinking represents a lesson about tolerance today's generation would do well to remember," Dyer notes.

Visitors who take the forty-minute tour of the house soon realize that although Louis Armstrong is dead, his home and legacy are still very much alive, especially in regard to children. "Louis never had children of his own" Ms. Dyer states, "but he loved youngsters, and they loved him in return. He traveled extensively and performed more than 300 times a year, but whenever he came back to this residence, the kids in the neighborhood were only too glad to greet him and help carry his baggage into the house." His affection for the young is apparent even today. Every May, the Louis Armstrong House Museum plays host to kids through a free three-day jazz festival designed to introduce young people to this particular style of American music.

As interest in Armstrong continues to grow, so does this

museum. With an anticipated opening date in 2012, a \$15,000,000 Visitors Center will be constructed across the street from the Armstrong house. This center will allow visitors to gain more information about Louis Armstrong and his contributions to American music and culture. During the course of his life, Louis Armstrong was generous to a fault. Stories abound concerning his donation of jackets stuffed with hundred dollars bills that he casually gave to homeless people on the street. The legacy of his life, combined with his generosity, continues to thrill and fascinate a growing legion of fans and admirers. The Armstrong House Museum will be a point of reference for each generation as it discovers the man, the myth and the music forever defined by Louis Armstrong – What a Wonderful World. ■

The Louis Armstrong House Museum is located at 34-56 107th Street, Corona, NY 11368. For more info, call 718-478-8274 or email info@louisarmstronghouse.org.