Louis Armstrong: His Childhood, And Early Years Of His Music Essay, Research Paper

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Louis Armstrong: His childhood, and the early years of his music

“He was born in the south at a time when a black boy could expect nothing but to grow up, work hard at the lowest jobs all his life, and hope somehow, somewhere manage to stay healthy and get a little out of life.”(P.1 Collier) Get a little out of life Louis did, a pure genius he revolutionized America’s first true form of art, jazz. Doing a paper on Louis Armstrong has been enjoyable to do and the information that is available on Armstrong is endless. So much that this paper is going to concentrate on Louis Childhood how he got involved with music and the early years of his music career with King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band and the recordings of the Hot 5’s and Hot 7’s. Satchmo, which is only one of his nicknames originated from people saying he had a mouth like a satchel, is a truly an extraordinary man. He started his life living in the slums of New Orleans, but would go one and play in front of some of the most important people in the world such as presidents, kings, and queens.

Piecing together the facts around Armstrong’s birth and childhood is difficult. What is known depends almost entirely on what he later told people. He was born sometime around 1900. Louie was raised by his grandmother Josephine Armstrong as an infant. His father abandoned him and his mother around the time of his birth. Louis spoke scathingly about his father when he spoke about him at all. He loathed his father so much that he told reporter Larry King, “I was touring Europe then my father died. Didn’t go to his funeral, didn’t send nothing. Why should I He never had no time for me or Maryann (his mother).” (p. 19 Coller)

Louis had a genuine affection for his mother, though she was very undependable, leaving her son to take care of himself and his sister for days at a time. There is very little we know of Armstrong’s family as you can see.

Louis grew up in New Orleans in a tough area known, as “The Battle Field” where knife fights and gun play were common. At the age of about seven he moved to black Storyville. It consisted of dance halls honky tonks and brothels. It was an entertainment district like London’s Soho. He grew up with music all around him. He could hear music from outside is house when he woke up and when he went to bed.

It is recorded that Louis did attend school at the Fisk school where he learned to read and write. How long he attended this school is another mystery. One fact we do know about Louis is that he was arrested on New Years Eve 1912 for shooting a gun. Louis was around eleven at the time, and this was a very serious offense. He was sent to the Coloreds Waif House a reform school on the out skirts of New Orleans. Here Louis was introduced to organized music in the form of the school band. The school band was run by Captain Joseph Jones in a military fashion that was extremely strict. This is where Louis’s life changed from delinquent to a disciplined young man this was also when Louis was introduced to playing a musical instrument. The teacher, Professor Pete Davis, first had reservations of letting Louis play in the school’s brass band because he thought Louis was a bad kid. Finally Louis was let into the band, and received his first formal training on an instrument. More importantly than the music training Louis received from Professor Davis were the real life lessons Lois received. Professor Davis had more to do with Louis’ self respect and discipline than with musicianship. Even more important was that Louis finally formed a positive relationship with an older male, a father figure, whose discipline Louis was willing to except. “Until this time, he had more or less acquiesced to the life into which he had been born, a world of pimps, thieves, hookers, and gamblers, of random violence and enigmatic jolts of good fortune.” (Bergreen P. 75)

After time Louis earned Davis’ trust and Davis asked Louis to lead the Colored Waif’s Home band. This is when Louis began to come into his own as a performer. His personality was born, he wasn’t just a musician, he was a true entertainer. “I remember Louis used to walk funny with his feet pointing out and at the first not of music he would break into comedy,” Davis said. (Bergreen P. 77) Louis was only around twelve at this time and it was foreshadowing of Louis as an entertainer down the road. Up until Louis’ release he was leader of the band and led them through many picnics and parades. He left the home at age fourteen and for all practical reasons his childhood was over. Louis Armstrong’s next three years would be the wildest and most traumatic of his life. He returned to the old neighborhood living amongst chaos of gambling, pimps, prostitutes and drug dealers. He was released to the custody of his father, surprisingly. Even though Willie worked real hard for his son’s release, he had no more use form him then he did at Louis’ birth. Between the ages of 14 and 17 Louis spent most of the time hauling coal on a horse drawn carriage, not once picking up the instrument he fell in love with at the Waif Home. After his father asked him to leave due to the birth of another child, Willie Armstrong figured he couldn’t feed four mouths so he asked Louis to leave. He moved back in with his mother and started playing music again. He played back in the old neighborhood dance halls and saloons that were run by gangsters. Then in 1917 prostitution in Storyville was outlawed. People left and Storyville became a ghost town.

“For Louis Armstrong, the closing of Storyville meant more than a bawdy diversion it was the end of a way of life on which he had relied since he was a child.” (Bergreen p. 110) He hooked up with bandleader Edward (kid) Ory, and started playing in New Orleans Country Clubs, expensive restaurants, and even at private parties in the homes of wealthy whites. Louis loved playing for Kid Ory, but yearned to play for King Oliver, his idol. Louis started to find out where King Oliver was playing and would show up and ask to carry his bag and help out with other things. King Oliver started to help Louis out with his cornet. King Oliver recognized his talent and gave Lois jobs that he couldn’t take.

Storyville had closed and there was a mass exodus of musicians going North to Chicago. King Oliver Louis’ mentor left while Louis stayed behind; he still didn’t earn enough from his music to support himself. He took over King Olivers position in Kid Ory’s band and made a name for himself around Chicago. He landed a job in Fat Marable’s Orchestra and finally learned to read music. This also meant that Louis had to leave New Orleans in order to travel up and down the Mississippi to play on the riverboats. For a couple of years he played on these river boats, but felt restricted by Fat Marables formula for success in the music business. “Louis now wanted to play his own music but, the boss would not allow that aboard the river boats.” (Bergreen P. 168) Just as Louis was getting tired of his stay on the riverboats, what he was waiting for arrived. An invitation from King Oliver to join his band in Chicago. Louis soon became a great asset to King Olivers’ band. Louis and Oliver were meant to play together, Louis and Joe complimented each other when they played. Drummer George Wettling said, “He (Oliver) and Louis Armstrong had some breaks they played together that I’ve never heard played since. I don’t know how they knew what was coming up next, but they would play those breaks and never miss.” (Jones & Chilton p.60)

For Armstrong his years with King Oliver were inspiring. Armstrong confessed later that his days with the Creole Jazz band were the most thrilling days of his life. King Oliver took Louis and molded him into the next great trumpet player. Louis was well known throughout Chicago and people came to see him and the Creole Jazz Band play at the Lincoln Gardens. Louis’ name was also well known throughout the jazz world. He was being asked to play with all the big name musicians. In 1928 Louis received a telegram from Fletcher Henderson asking Louis to come to New York and play with him. Louis accepted and took a pay cut to do so. Louis had an unbelievable effect on the band; Fletcher Henderson’s group never sounded better. The bulk of their shows were played in the Roseland Ballroom, but from time to time the band would go on the road and tour New England, Pennsylvania and elsewhere.

Armstrong had a great impact on other musicians which started in Chicago, but with King Oliver and the Creole Jazz Band Armstrong didn’t get much solo exposure, with the Henderson band it was different. He was a featured musician and soloed on approximately half the records. He was getting a great deal of exposure at the Roseland where white musicians came to hear him and he also was getting exposure from the black by playing clubs in Harlem.

Armstrong was also taking another step and that was to have an enormous consequences for him and inevitably for the history of jazz. He began to sing with the Henderson Band.

By 1925 Satchmo had established himself as a force in the music business, but was till unknown by the public. He could have stayed with Henderson as long as he wanted but he was getting restless in the band. He was annoyed that Henderson didn’t take his singing seriously and didn’t think that many of the musicians within in the band took their jobs seriously. So in November 0f 1925 he left Henderson and went back to Chicago. This was a critical move for the history of Jazz. Armstrong almost immediately entered the studios and started recording a series of recording called the Hot Fives and Sevens, which gave him a lasting name. Had he remained with Henderson sharing solo space with other musicians he still would have been influential but he wouldn’t had the impact on the jazz world.

When Armstrong returned to Chicago in 1925 it was different than before. Jazz was now a national fad with a wide audience that included whites as well as blacks. Another thing that had changed was the influence of the mob in Chicago. Most of the clubs in Chicago were owned by gangsters.

“The Five dozen records generally titled the Louis Armstrong Hot Fives constitute one of the most significant bodies of American recorded music.” (Collier P. 169)

These records were immediately recognized by musicians, and jazz fans. All across the United States musicians were enthralled at what Armstrong was doing and they all wanted to do the same. The Hot Fives wiped away the old style of New Orleans style. It came to be that you either played like Armstrong or you might as well not play at all.

The Hot Fives and Sevens put Louis on the map and opened all kinds of doors that were normally closed to Afro-Americans at this time. Through his music he became a movie star , staring in such films as Jam Session and When the Boys Meet the Girls. He also became an ambassador of goodwill throughout the world, in Africa several nations issued stamps in his honor. He was known all over the world as one of the greatest entertainers of his time. His popularity also allowed him to meet some of the most important people of his time including Pope Paul IIV in 1968. Satchmo lived a full life that was amazing for anyone, never mind for an Afro-American that had everything working against him from day one.

1)Collier, James Lincoln. “Louis Armstrong: An American success story.” Macmillan Publishing company, New York 1985.

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3)Bergreen, Lawrence. “Louis Armstrong: An extravagent life.” Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing, New York 1997.

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6) Giddons, Gary. “Satchmo.” Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing 1988.

7)Louis Armstrong: The best of the Decca Years, Volume One. MCA Records INC, Universal city, CA. 1989