

LOUIS ARMSTRONG, SWEET AND HOT

The master as trumpeter and composer. His early recordings, now reissued, are monuments to the "golden age" of jazz. . . . Alvah Bessie passes judgment on the reluctant Mr. Disney's dragon.

NO BOOK on modern music, so far as I know, lists Louis Armstrong, the great Negro trumpeter, as a composer. Yet some day the records he made ten and fifteen years ago will be placed among the highly important contributions to American music. Not available for many years, these records are now being reissued, and I envy those who will hear them for the first time. The album of records by Armstrong and his Hot Five, recently pressed by Columbia in its series of "Jazz Classics" reissues, contains typical examples of the early blues jazz.

The blues are an American folk music whose importance is only now being fully understood. When they first became popular, in the twenties, the blues were regarded as erotically suggestive in both words and music. Yet blues songs did not go beyond the frankness which can be found in any folk art. Their content resulted in part from the demoralizing effect of poverty and exploitation upon Negro family life, and also from the fact that most Southern Negro singers and musicians of that time could not get jobs except in "less respectable" places of entertainment—a phase of Southern city life supported by white politicians. Besides, owners of the recording companies and cabarets were exploiting the market for eroticism. The businessman who hired blues singers and musicians to perform "what would sell," at the same time censored the bitter social content of the music.

Nevertheless, the blues had a simplicity of structure and sincerity of emotion which lifted them far above most of the sentimental ballads of the twenties. Most important, they were perfect for instrumental jazz improvisation since their short, poignant phrases could be woven into innumerable complex, exciting patterns.

Many jazz musicians then, both white and Negro, improvised imaginatively and feelingly upon the blues. In Armstrong, however, ideas flowed so freely, with each "chorus" a development of the one before, that the music attained a tighter unity, a greater resemblance to a complex, thought-out, "written" composition. The music was still partly a collective creation. Yet there is no contradiction between such collective work and artistic unity (as can be seen by studying the folk art of the Middle Ages, for example). The musicians Armstrong worked with, such as Johnny Dodds, Jay Higginbotham, "Kid" Ory, all "spoke the blues" as a natural language, giving Armstrong ideas and backing up his most imaginative flights with perfect taste. The record of "S. O. L. Blues" listed below, in

which Armstrong provides a searing climax to Dodds' blues solo on clarinet, is a perfect example of such fine collective composition.

The trumpet style created by Armstrong, while new to jazz, was basically only an adaptation of structural forms implicit in instrumental blues jazz. One of these forms was the interweaving of two melodic lines, the small band "counterpoint" so natural to the blues. Armstrong's trumpet style suggested a two-voice counterpoint, playing a "lead" melody and accompanying arpeggios and decorative figures at the same time (in the manner, for instance, in which Bach, Handel, and Vivaldi wrote for violin). Fine examples are the succession of trumpet choruses in "Knockin' a Jug," "Twelfth St. Rag," and "Tight Like This," and the affectionate adornments of the melody in "Squeeze Me" and "Basin St. Blues." (The last-named is one of the finest blues-inspired tunes of the twenties.) Another basic device was the "riff," the constant repetition of a short blues phrase to tie a performance together. This is the structure of "St. Louis Blues" and "Mahogany Hall Stomp," in which the melody gradually resolves itself into the pounding, climactic insistence upon a single figure.

Armstrong's decline as a composer came when the conditions for jazz performance banished the style and content of the small band blues. Today he is as great a master of the trumpet as ever, but the sentimental tunes and large-band harmonies are a barrier to free creation, just as the blues and small band improvisation were an inspiration. The records listed below are only a sampling of his finest work, much of which is still not available. They are not only a monument to the "golden age" of jazz, but splendid music in their own right, revealing the possibilities of jazz in a future when musical creation is less dominated by the market and the businessmen who run it.

Columbia's album of records by Louis Armstrong and his Hot Five contains typical examples of the early blues jazz. The recording itself is acoustically poor, dating from 1925, and I have heard finer blues tunes than some of these. But everyone interested in jazz

should own at least the discs containing "Skid-Dat-De-Dat," "Muskrat Ramble," and "Cornet Chop Suey," and play them through a dozen times.

"Skid-Dat-De-Dat" is a summation of the instrumental blues. The opening choruses, with trumpet, clarinet, and trombone weaving together and apart, are a perfect example of the "ensemble" texture, partly harmonic, partly contrapuntal, which makes this blues jazz at once restrained and moving. Equally fine are Johnny Dodds' clarinet answers to Armstrong's comic vocal, and Louis' simple, touching cornet phrases at the close. This kind of music takes careful listening, but will reward anybody who gives it proper attention. "Muskrat Ramble" is a fine, jolly, exuberant "rag" featuring Kid Ory's driving, rough "folk style" trombone. "Cornet Chop Suey" is a perfect example of a performance built out of "stop-time" and "breaks," the shattering, powerful arpeggios which were an integral part of the developing blues style for trumpet.

Other Armstrong records in the Columbia series of Hot Jazz Reissues are: "Knockin' a Jug," "Twelfth St. Rag," "S. O. L. Blues," "Squeeze Me," "Mahogany Hall Stomp," and "Beau Koo Jack." You might also throw in Bessie Smith's "Cold in Hand Blues," with Louis on cornet. The following may be found on either Vocalion or the new Okeh label: "St. Louis Blues," "Basin St. Blues," "Tight Like This." (The Columbia records are fifty cents, the Okeh thirty-five.)

MARTIN MACK.

Disney Disappoints

The Grahame fable is twisted into a blurb for the Disney Studio.

NOW that the reluctant Disney has consented to bargain collectively with his employees of the Screen Cartoonists Guild, the public may conscientiously see his latest picture, *The Reluctant Dragon*. What they will get is a glorious disappointment on almost any score. For the new feature-length production is a glorified trailer celebrating the life and works of Walt Disney, with the Kenneth Grahame fable running about twenty minutes at the end of the celebration.

The whole thing comes at a moment of supreme irony, for the subject matter of the film is intended to demonstrate to the audience what a fine, successful man is Mr. Disney, what a magnificent plant he possesses for the production of his animated cartoons (it sure is), and what a great and happy little family collaborates with him in these productions.



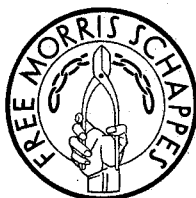
Therefore the gods of Hollywood and all points east must still be holding their sides when they contemplate the strange fact that this man Disney has been paying his host of ingenious people wages averaging around fifteen and twenty dollars a week, and after much reluctance has finally been brought to heel by the union members in collective bargaining assembled.

But you may take a look at Mr. Disney's plant—it is enormous. If you take it all at face value, you will want to work there, for all the working girls are as beautiful as Central Casting can manage to make them. All the young men who make the cartoons and animate them are smiling and handsome. And not only are all these people utterly charming (they probably are at that), but so contented and happy with their landscaped factory, their art life-classes, and their air-conditioned sweatshop that you would never think they wanted more than twenty dollars a week for the simple tasks they perform.

Let it go. *The Reluctant Dragon* takes you on a conducted tour of Disney Productions in the genial company of funny-faced Robert Benchley. For purposes of "plot" it is Mr. Benchley's screen wife who wants him to sell Walt the idea of filming the Kenneth Grahame children's story about the dragon who did not want to breathe smoke and fire, but was an earlier Ferdinand; and the knight, Sir Giles, who would rather drink tea than kill dragons; and the disappointed little boy who finally arranged a setup so the terrified villagers would feel that their champion, Sir Giles, was not being remiss in liberating them from the scourge.

It is a charming story, but it is scarcely made more charming by changing the dragon from Grahame's original—who was a poet—to the peculiar conception of a male homosexual. In fact, you will probably find it revolting.

These things are not incidental phenomena. It's true that during the conducted tour you learn something—too little—of the way cartoons are animated and technicolored, and you will see one beautiful satirical short that is worth the price of admission (if the price is small). That is the job called *How to Ride a Horse*—it is a scream. But you will also see other evidences of the sort of insensitivity that made Mr. Disney so reluctant to bargain with his employees. One sequence occurs in a sound studio, where Mr. Benchley listens to an orchestra warming up on the overture to *Martha*. Enter a lady of advanced age, who is about to sing. Benchley, on learning her name, remarks that he has heard her sing at the Metropolitan. He settles back, anticipating a few moments of charming classical music sung by an accomplished soprano. You will therefore be appropriately embarrassed when this lady, who obviously has a trained voice and has seen better days, is exhibited in public singing an aria *as though she were a hen*. It is nearly heart-breaking, and it is an index of the producer's taste as well as his sensitivity.



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