

George Wein - liner notes

After listening to the CD "A Gift to Pops" performed by the Wonderful World of Louis Armstrong All-Stars and produced collectively by Wycliiffe Gordon, Jackie Harris and Nicholas Payton, I am happy to advise the true Louis Armstrong fan that his music is alive and well with this fascinating group of New Orleans musicians.

Having been born in 1925, there are not too many left from my era with whom I can share my youthful musical experiences. I was first immersed with Pops on a recording of "When the Saints go Marching In" in 1938-39. After noticing in *Downbeat* when Harry James, (who had just won Best in Trumpet), said that Louis Armstrong should be the winner as he "was the greatest of all trumpeters," it further pushed me into the world of Louis Armstrong.

In his later years, Pops had several hit records. "Mack the Knife" was big and "Hello Dolly" was number one, displacing The Beatles. Versions of two other successful songs appear here: "What a Wonderful World" and "Give Me a Kiss to Build a Dream On." The balance of the tunes on this recording are all familiar to me from Louis' repertoire of the late 1920s and 30s. To hear Wynton Marsalis play "Peanut Vendor" from 1930 was a joy, as I haven't heard that tune in many years. "Struttin' with Some BBQ" is from the 20s, "I'll be Glad When You're Dead You Rascal You," ("I'll be standing on the corner high when they bring your body by" flips me out) "St. Louis Blues," "Swing that Music," and "Black and Blue" all bring back memories of all the wonderful hours of music that became so important to me.

Few musicians who matured after the language of Bebop and Charlie Parker took over the jazz world were able to go back and carry the melodic and excitement of the swing era. It's interesting to me that Wynton Marsalis born in 1961, and Nicholas Payton born in 1973, both swing in each way. That they fully understand and appreciate the genius of Louis Armstrong and can personally evoke it is refreshing to me and I am sure it is to any lovers of Pops. Wynton appears on one number on this recording, but Nicholas'

strength, talent and creativity carry the ball through almost every composition. I'm continually amazed at his talent. Two additional trumpeters, Ashlin Parker and Wendell Brunious, add to the joy of this album.

The rhythm section – Herlin Riley on drums, with whom I have had the pleasure of working, Reginald Veal on bass, Don Vappie on banjo and Davell Crawford on piano are born swingers. I was impressed by the saxophone player, Roderick Paulin, with whom I was not familiar, but who I will be paying attention to in the future.

Louis Armstrong was as famous for his singing as he was as a trumpet player. Since then, just about every musician I have ever known would like to be a singer. There is a reason for this, because no matter how well you play an instrument, musicians feel they communicate more directly by singing a song themselves. This group is no exception. Wycliffe Gordon, who by the way, is a musician who could have been a part of the contemporary music scene, but has given it up to become a major figure in exploiting and preserving the joys of traditional jazz, loves to sing. As does Herlin Riley. Even Reginald Veal sings a chorus on “Glad When You’re Dead, You Rascal You”.

But it is Davell Crawford, a singer and a pianist, who steals the day with his version of Hoagy Carmichael’s “Rocking Chair.”

Fats Waller, with lyrics by Harry Brooks and Andy Razaf, wrote a song called “Black and Blue,” which was extraordinary for its racial consciousness in the time in which it was written. Nicholas Payton plays a beautiful solo and sings the words with deep feeling and meaning. In addition, Common was invited as a special guest to speak the words of this vital statement of the prejudice and sickness of society which, in many respects, is still with us. He is joined by Big D Perkins on guitar. This is an unforgettable musical statement.

Back in 1970, I had the good fortune of filming a tribute to Louis Armstrong at Newport. Among the guests were Mahalia Jackson (I’ve always said about Mahalia – if we could

hear the angels sing, they would sound like Mahalia.) I asked Mahalia and Louis to sing together and they chose “Just a Closer Walk with Thee.” It was an historic moment. Here, Reginald Veal, Davell Crawford and the Wonderful World of Louis Armstrong All-Stars pay homage to Louis and Mahalia in their rendition of this gospel standard.

A long time ago, 1950 to be exact, I took the biggest leap of my life and opened up a club in Boston called Storyville. The only experience I had as a club owner was having played in jazz clubs on the Boston scene. All my life, I’ve followed where motivation took me and have had the joy of success and despair of failure. The band I opened with at Storyville was Bob Wilbur featuring Big Sid Catlett on drums. Big Sid had been Louis Armstrong’s drummer for many years.

Louis Armstrong and the All Stars with Jack Teagarden, Earl “Fatha” Hines, Cozy Cole, Barney Bigard and Arvell Shaw were playing a concert at Symphony Hall. My instincts as a promoter took hold. I gave Big Sid the night off and told him to get those guys to come to the club as my guests when the concert was over. Not only did they come to Storyville, they brought their instruments and one by one they went directly to the bandstand. I had been in business for three weeks at that time. With all the musicians on the stage, Pops came in and walked right to the microphone and sang “Sleepy Time Down South” and forever changed my life. The excitement and electricity created by Louis Armstrong at Storyville in Boston on a September night in 1950 made me realize what my career would be ad infinitum. “A life in jazz.”

With this recording, the music of Louis Armstrong demonstrates how he created the language of jazz and influenced all the music that followed – from swing to bebop and even to rap, as demonstrated by Common. But, there’s one thing for sure: this band and record demonstrate that there was nothing common about Louis Armstrong. He was one of the most extraordinary men I have ever known.