In late 1925, Lil Armstrong enticed her husband back to Chicago from New York City where, for the past year, he had been blowing hot solos in the Fletcher Henderson Band. Lured by an unprecedented salary of $75 per week and billed as the “World's Greatest Trumpet [sic] Player,” Louis starred in Lil's Syncopators at the Dreamland, a “black and tan” cabaret on the South Side. Lil had petitioned Ralph Peer, OKeh Records’ director of production, to secure recording opportunities for Armstrong in New York, and to do so again upon his return to the Windy City. Peer, the first to act on the implications of Mamie Smith's “Crazy Blues” phenomenon of five years earlier by founding “race records”--music directed to black audiences--willingly accommodated Lil's entreaties. Within days of his arrival, Armstrong, Lil and three New Orleans friends cut the first Hot Fives at OKeh's portable studio in downtown Chicago. The group's drumless and bassless instrumentation, atypical for New Orleans bands, was modeled after that of Clarence Williams' Blue Five, with which Louis had recorded in New York.

Strictly a recording band, the Hot Five made only two known public performances outside the studio. Records were cut acoustically (OKeh did not adopt electronic recording with microphones until 1927) in the morning between the completion of members' gigs and their heading home for a few hours of sleep. Although the youngest at 22, Louis was the unchallenged leader--calling the shots at the studio and making final decisions on musical matters. Routines of familiar tunes were talked through, new ones briefly rehearsed before waxing, and an occasional head arrangement spontaneously created to round out a set. Repertoire was left to the band; lead sheets were the only music employed. A formally trained musician, Lil supplied the minimal arranging needed. The rest of the band were capable, if not proficient, readers. Armstrong, in fact, could write music as his 18 January 1924 copyright deposit of “Cornet Chop Suey” attests.
Over 12 sessions between November 1925 through December 1927, the “New Orleans” Hot Five recorded 33 sides, augmented by 11 Hot Sevens (with the inclusion of bass and drums) in May 1927. These recordings consisted of popular songs or novelty tunes intermingled with several blues and a few rags or rag-tinged numbers. Personnel remained the same throughout the series, except for the addition of New Orleans guitarist, Lonnie Johnson, on the final session. The Armstrongs, together, separately or as co-composers wrote the majority of the tunes. Besides the smash hit, “Heebie Jeebies,” “Big Butter and Egg Man,” “Hotter Than That,” “Muskrat Ramble” and “Struttin' With Some Barbecue” also became bestsellers--the latter two further enduring as jazz standards.

Even though Armstrong begged to sing with Oliver and Henderson, they allowed him only few opportunities, of which none were recorded. With himself in charge, he now sang frequently and scatted often. Not the first to scat, a vocal technique using nonsense syllables, Louis, however, popularized it with “Heebie Jeebies,” which caused a sensation upon its release in March 1926 and for the rest of the year. Beyond a specially invented dance, there were Heebie Jeebies shoes, hats and sandwiches.

Early in the collection Armstrong exhibited his technical mastery on “Cornet Chop Suey,” but his improvisation skills expanded gradually. Solos on the first Hot Fives tended to be melodic paraphrases (a practice never completely abandoned) rather than new melodies based on the chord structure. This harmonic improvisation emerged tentatively in St. Cyr's “Oriental Strut” of February 1926, and matured authoritatively in the Hot Seven with his own “Potato Head Blues” of May 1927. He worked out building coherent solos from rhythm/melodic motives, pitch-cells or parallel phrases—the so-called “correlated chorus” or “telling a story”--most effectively in “Big Butter and Egg Man” of November 1926 and “Hotter Than That” of December 1927. Armstrong's solo style was shaped as well by his prodigious memory and sense of perfection. Able to play widely divergent solos on successive recording takes, he nevertheless treated others, either prepared in advance or conditioned by repeated performances, as set pieces unchanged for years.

While with his wife's Syncopators, Armstrong's style broadened when he began doubling with Erskine Tate's Vendome Theater Orchestra and switching permanently from cornet to trumpet. In addition to jazz numbers, Tate exposed him to light classics and featured him on bravura operatic pieces, such as “Intermezzo” from Mascagni's “Cavalleria rusticana.” When the Dreamland closed for liquor violations in early 1926, Armstrong doubled with Carroll Dickerson's Sunset Café band, in which he emerged as an entertainer—mugging outrageously, dancing the Charleston furiously with other hefty band members and swooning hilariously in romantic duets with Mae Alix during floor shows.
Armstrong's relatively restrained swooping, gliding solos on Ory's “Savoy Blues” from the final Hot Five session stand among his best. His advanced musical ideas compared with those of his band mates make the piece a fitting transition to Armstrong's next, or “Chicago” Hot Five (really a “hot six”) comprised of friends from Dickerson's band, which Louis took over in early 1927 and renamed His Stompers. (Despite Gene Anderson's appearance in the photo below, Earl Hines was the pianist on the group's recordings.)

The Chicago Hot Five, recording with the same personnel as Armstrong's Orchestra and, with the addition of reedman, Don Redman, as the Savoy Ballroom Five, cut 19 sides in the last half of 1928. Though formally identical to the previous Hot Fives, the content of these more up-to-date, relatively highly arranged tunes leaves echoes of the Crescent City far behind. Dodds had unconfidently played alto sax on two New Orleans Hot Fives, but both the alto and/or tenor sax appear on over a quarter of the Chicago Hot Fives—notably in the hands of conservatory-trained Redman, who was also hired as an arranger. Earl “Fatha” Hines, Armstrong's musical equal, broadened and enriched the group's sound with imaginative accompaniments, as on “Two Deuces”; inventive solos, as on “Beau Koo Jack”; and innovative dialogues with the trumpet, as on “Skip the Gutter.” Moreover, the group was a working band that performed regularly at the Savoy Ballroom, honing their repertoire before live audiences and bequeathing “Tight Like This” to contemporaries as a best-seller and “Basin Street Blues” to posterity as a jazz standard.

Armstrong's enhanced stylistic palette, expansion of register, heightened musical imagination and command of improvisation are on consummate display in his reinterpretations of King Oliver's “West End Blues,” which Oliver recorded with his Dixie Syncopaters earlier in 1928, and in “Weather Bird,” which Oliver recorded as a rag with his Creole Jazz Band in 1923. The latter title, while nominally a Hot Five, is actually a duet, in which Armstrong and Hines--two jazz legends at the height of their powers—exuberantly exchange totally improvised ideas in a brilliant musical conversation.

“West End Blues,” celebrating the New Orleans resort on Lake Ponchartrain, opens with an “operatic” trumpet cadenza followed by alternating phrases of hot, “gut-bucket” and cool, moody blues of varying textures and timbres. Hines's hot virtuosic piano solo precedes a final phrase unifying the number's differing styles: four bars of tension-building trumpet pedal point on high C, four bars of tension-releasing arpeggiated trumpet descent (recalling the opening) and four-bars of tension-eliminating piano arpeggiation before resolving into a quiet ensemble tag.

The Hot Five/Seven recordings, whose individual titles remain largely obscure, are memorable, if only for Armstrong's presence alone. They chart the evolution of the trumpeter's genius, which altered the
course of jazz history by shifting the emphasis from ensemble to solo playing--the feature of jazz to come.

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