

# Hot Five and Hot Seven Recordings—Louis Armstrong (1925-1928)

Added to the National Registry: 2002

Essay by Cary O'Dell



*Louis Armstrong*

Just as painters often have their phases (consider Picasso with his blue and pink periods), musicians too can have their epochs (Dylan's long Christian phase comes to mind). Like those men, Louis Armstrong also enjoyed particular eras within his larger and legendary career. For example, his professional stint in Chicago between 1925 and 1928 was one such era and it would prove to be a highpoint in his remarkable creative output; it marked Armstrong's first time as a bandleader, the first time we saw his name on the record label, and the first time he recorded for the Okeh music company.

The "Hot Five" and "Hot Seven" era got its name from the number of musicians (first five, then seven) Armstrong employed in his ensemble. These "Hot Five" and "Hot Seven" recordings, made between 1925 and 1928, were named to the Registry in 2002.

Louis Armstrong (1901-1971) was born in the cradle of American jazz and blues--New Orleans. His early years were hard ones. Poverty and abandonment haunted his youth. His father left his mother when Louis was an infant. His mother also later abandoned the family (which also included Armstrong's younger sister). Louis would be taken in by his grandmother who later turned him and his sister over to their uncle. In 1913, while again living with his mother (who, it was rumored, may have been working at this time as a prostitute), Armstrong got sent away to a school for wayward boys after he shot off a gun during a New Year's Eve celebration.

But even before his shipment off to the New Orleans Home for Colored Waifs, Armstrong began to explore music, mainly by hanging out at local music halls. But it was at the Home that Armstrong began to truly develop his musical talents. There, he was given his first cornet and began to play in the institution's band. Later, he began to study music with teacher Peter Davis who often visited.

After leaving the Home, Armstrong fell in with some local Orleans musicians including Kid Ory and, most importantly, Joe (King) Oliver. In 1922, Oliver brought Armstrong to Chicago to be his second cornetist.

Armstrong was a prodigious talent and in Chicago found himself quickly singled out and sought after. After apprenticing with Oliver's band, Armstrong flitted over to Fletcher Henderson's before then striking out on his own. Armstrong's rapid ascent from background musician to band leader was a result of his great talent and his savvy, determined second wife Lil Harden whom he married in 1924. (An earlier, five-year marriage had begun, and ended, while Louis was still in New Orleans.)

Armstrong's first records, as a bandleader and soloist, were cut in 1925 and are part of his Hot Five era. The Hot Five consisted of: Armstrong (trumpet), Lil Harden Armstrong (piano), Johnny Dodds (clarinet), Johnny St. Cyr (guitar/banjo), and Kid Ory (trombone). Notably, this group was united only for recording purposes and only twice during their existence did they play live. Among the sides they cut were "My Heart," "Gut Bucket Blues," and "Yes, I'm in the Barrel."

In 1926, the group reunited to set down other songs including "Heebie Jeebies," possibly the first recorded example of "scat singing," as well as "I'm Gonna Gitcha," "Georgia Grind," "Jazz Lips," and "Irish Black Bottom," among others. The group did about 20 tunes total. These too were pressed for the Okeh label. At times the five core players were joined by guest musicians including jazz guitarist Lonnie Johnson, who sat in on the playing of "Hotter Than That" and "Savoy Blues," and Earl Hines, who joined in on the recording of "Basin Street Blues."

By 1927, the Hot Five was rechristened the Hot Seven when tuba player Pete Briggs joined along with Baby Dodds on drums. (Erskine Tate also took over for Kid Ory.)

All told, the Hot Five/Seven sessions constitute 89 recordings including dozens of Armstrong-penned numbers including "Potato Head Blues," "Gully Low Blues," "Cornet Chop Suey," and "You're Next." The recordings also showcase performances of songs penned by Lil Armstrong such as "Knee Drops," "Hotter Than That," and "Lonesome Blues."

For Armstrong, as each year's musical yield was released to the public, his fame and reputation—and that of jazz as well—was enhanced. By the time the last of the Hot Seven recordings dropped, Armstrong was intensely famous, the best known and most renowned jazz trumpeter in the world.

Additionally, as the records were made and released, Armstrong's musical experimentations and progression was plainly apparent as well. As James Lincoln Collier noted in his book, "Louis Armstrong: An American Genius," though the very first Five records adhered strongly to the New Orleans style of contrapuntal improvisations, later recordings moved Armstrong more to the forefront, highlighting him as a soloist.

Armstrong's rapidly progressing technical skills were also traceable. If he was a good to gifted musician in the beginning, by the end, he was a bone fide genius. As Collier also notes: "Armstrong's work, at first tentative, becomes firm and sure.... [Armstrong] uses the melody less and less as a guide and embarks more and more on wholly original voyages, navigating only by the chord changes—the song's underlying harmonies." In his break with the strict harmonies of the music and his perchance to improvise, Armstrong was forging the ground for a new type of modern jazz expression, one that would be copiously copied in the decades to come.

Among the most notable selections from the Five and Seven recordings was "Heebie Jeebies," not only for introducing scat singing to the masses, but also for its extraordinary popularity. Some reports state that that song sold over 40,000 copies in a matter of weeks upon its first pressing, a truly awesome achievement in the days of no major music stores or chains. Also of note, "Cornet Chop Suey" which, as one author noted, displayed Armstrong "in complete command of his horn, playing almost clarinet figures with his trumpet.... The melody of 'Cornet

Chop Suey,' which he wrote, is very forward-thinking, a harbinger of snake-like melodies that would come later on in the bop era."

Another number from the session, "Big Butter and Egg Man," contains, arguably, Armstrong's finest solo of the era, while "Willie the Weeper" contains another superb Armstrong solo. "Potato Head Blues" (from the Seven sessions) is yet another notable track as it illustrates Armstrong's play with chord changes; he abandons the melody altogether in order to fully improvise. Throughout all the recordings, there's a remarkable degree of invention, a stunning display of nearly bottomless creativity.

For many artists, an achievement as profound and influential as the Hot Five and Hot Seven recordings would cap a career. But, for Armstrong, it was just the beginning. The years immediately following his work for OKeh would include live performance triumphs on both coasts and throughout Europe. In 1936, he made his big screen debut in "Pennies from Heaven" opposite Bing Crosby. In it, Satchmo (as Armstrong was also called) performed "I'll Be Glad When You're Dead You Rascal You." (Armstrong and Crosby would reteam years later, in 1956, when Armstrong was featured in the movie musical "High Society" with Grace Kelly.)

Along with a few movies and many television appearances, Armstrong was a tireless touring artist, often playing as many as 300 shows a year. He also recorded prolifically. Some of his best known latter-day songs, sung in his snug, gravelly voice, include his highly popular "What A Wonderful World," a cover of "Hello, Dolly!" as well as "Stardust," "When the Saints Go Marching In," "All of Me," "Dream a Little Dream of Me," and "Ain't Misbehavin'."

Long before his death in 1971, Armstrong was recognized as an American treasure. After his death he has been honored by the US Post Office (via a stamp in 1995), the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the Grammy organization, and his home town of New Orleans who renamed its airport in his honor.

*Cary O'Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books "June Cleaver Was a Feminist!" (2014) and "Women Pioneers in Television" (1997). He also served as assistant editor of "The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2009) and "The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2010).*