It’s impossible to overstate the importance of New Orleans in the history of not just jazz, but all forms of Black American Music. Yes, New Orleans gave the world jazz, but also so much more: the shouting gospel coming out of the Baptist churches, made most famous by native Mahalia Jackson; dozens early R&B staples recorded at Cosimo Matassa’s famed studio that paved the way for rock ‘n’ roll, with many early hits by Little Richard and New Orleans’s own Fats Domino waxed in that sacred space; the funk of the Meters and the Neville Brothers, the voodoo of Dr. John, the swagger of the Dirty Dozen Brass Band, right up to the bounce music of Big Freedia today. New Orleans has not stopped being at the forefront of every major musical revolution for over a century.

Absorbing and detailing that history is a task that can fill up a lifetime, but boiling the essence of New Orleans down to one song is surprisingly easy: it would have to be “When the Saints Go Marching In.”

On a daily basis, visitors to the Crescent City will hear “The Saints” emanating from a drunken Bourbon Street bar, from an authentic traditional jazz group on Frenchmen Street, from a powerful brass band on a street corner, closing the set of a top rhythm-and-blues outfit; you might even hear it in the place it originated: church. It’s also no surprise that the city’s beloved local NFL football franchise is named the Saints.

Outside of New Orleans, “When the Saints Go Marching In” has been recorded by everyone from Elvis Presley and Bruce Springsteen to Van Morrison and B.B. King. Children are taught to sing it at an early age and it’s a common choice for beginner musicians to get a familiar melody under their belt. In short, the song is everywhere.
The person to thank--and some might say blame--for all of the above is one of the most important and influential musicians of the 20th century--and another New Orleans native--Louis “Satchmo” Armstrong.

Armstrong did not invent jazz and he did not write “When the Saints Go Marching In” but he put both on the map.

The song itself is a traditional Christian hymn, most likely written in the late 1800s or early 1900s (a different spiritual titled “When the Saints Are Marching In” was published in 1896 but it bears no resemblance to the more fabled tune except for the similarity of the title). In New Orleans, spirituals were performed in church, but also made their way into the repertoires of the earliest jazz bands (though the word “jazz” had not been applied to the music yet). At funerals, brass bands began the habit of “swinging” the spirituals while marching on the way back from the cemetery, inspiring joyful dancing from the group of raggedy kids affectionately known as the “second line.”

One of those kids was young Louis Armstrong, who grew up captivated by the musical sounds of his birthplace. Later in life, Armstrong said that while working for the Karnofsky family as a young boy, he spotted a cornet in the window of a pawn shop and asked for a loan against his salary to purchase the battered instrument. He soon taught himself the rudiments of blowing the horn, but spent most of his free time singing with a quartet of friends on Rampart Street. It was there on December 31, 1912, that the 11-year-old Armstrong was arrested for firing a gun in the air while celebrating the start of the New Year, resulting in his being sent to the Colored Waif’s Home for Boys. He would spend the next year and a half at the Waif’s home, thriving under the musical mentorship of Peter Davis. In 1959, Armstrong recalled, “The first thing I played was ‘Home Sweet Home’ and then a week later, I was playing, ‘When the Saints Come Marching In,’ marching to the church.” Peter Davis eventually named Louis the leader of the Home’s Brass Band and, reminiscing on the television game show “I’ve Got a Secret” in 1965, named one of the tunes the Brass Band played: “When the Saints Go Marching In.”

Armstrong left the Waif’s Home in 1914 and though he continued to work a series of odd jobs to earn money for his family, he practiced the cornet every chance he could get, falling under the spell of the future “King,” Joe Oliver. While still a teenager, Armstrong began working more as a musician, including playing funerals with brass bands all over the city. In 1973, Armstrong’s younger sister, Beatrice, was asked if she remembered any of the songs her brother performed in this period. “Well, all I remember is they used to play church hymns coming back from the graveyard, ‘A Closer Walk With Thee,’ ‘When the Saints Come Marching In,’” she recalled. “The people would be skipping all over the banquette.”

Having established “The Saints” as a cornerstone of Armstrong’s early musical experiences, we can skip ahead to 1922 when Armstrong eventually left New Orleans to join King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band in Chicago. In 1925, Armstrong made his first recordings as a leader, launching the celebrated “Hot Five”--and later, “Hot Seven”--series that altered the course of jazz and American popular music. The success of these records inspired OKeh Records to move Armstrong off of its “Race” roster, aimed at African American and urban communities, and
make him a “Pop” artist. OKeh gave Armstrong the pop hits of the day to interpret, including future standards such as “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love,” “I’m Confessin’ (That I Love You),” “Body and Soul” and more, but it also allowed the trumpeter to record personal favorite showpieces such as “St. Louis Blues,” “Dinah” and “Tiger Rag.”

OKeh was happy to let Armstrong record whatever he pleased—except for one item: “When the Saints Go Marching In.”

In early November 1931, Armstrong’s band performed an engagement at the Palace in Chicago. OKeh took advantage of Armstrong’s Chicago stay by asking him to come in for four days in a row to record two songs per session. Armstrong knew he wanted to record “When the Saints Go Marching In” and asked his second trumpeter and musical director Zilner Randolph to write an arrangement of it for him. Randolph later said he “kept putting him off,” “I felt like there were other tunes that I could jazz rather than [that one].... I just didn’t want to sit down and just be doing this.” In the studio, and without an arrangement, Armstrong didn’t care. According to his friend Charles Carpenter, who was present in the studio, Armstrong decided to do it right then and there for the OKeh executives, singing it and “playing ten of the most inventive choruses I ever heard in my life.” When it was over, Armstrong asked OKeh’s A&R man, “How was that?”

“Louis, I hate to say this, but I think you're a little ahead of your time with that song,” came the reply. Armstrong wasn’t buying it.

“What do you mean?” Louis asked. “The Holy Rollers and everybody else do it in that tempo.”

“Yeah, Louis, but the masses are not too much aware of the Holy Rollers,” the executive responded. “I think they'd take my head off in New York if I sent this in.”

Armstrong was out of luck for the time being.

Even if he had gotten his wish in 1931, Armstrong would not have been the first artist to record “When the Saints Go Marching In.” That distinction belongs to the Paramount Jubilee Singers, who recorded it in November 1923 as “When All the Saints Go Marching In.” Five years later, in January 1928, Blind Willie Davis recorded “The Saints” accompanied solely by his bluesy guitar. In 1930, “When the Saints Go Marching In” was included in the Broadway stage production of “Green Pastures,” as well as in the 1936 film version of that play. However, none of these early recorded versions have the “Holy Rollers feel” of how they did it in New Orleans.

By 1938, Armstrong was signed to Decca Records, touring the country with a big band. Decca loved to have its artists record in a variety of settings, resulting in Armstrong recording pop tunes, jazz instrumentals, Hawaiian music, antebellum material with the Mills Brothers, Latin novelties and more. On May 13, 1938, Armstrong convinced the executives at Decca to let him record his New Orleans version of “When the Saints Go Marching In,” featuring an arrangement by Armstrong’s pianist and music director Luis Russell. It was the fourth and final tune recorded at the session, which featured a scaled down version of Armstrong’s big band, utilizing only two trumpets (Armstrong and Shelton “Scad” Hemphill), the preaching trombone of J.C. Higginbotham and three reeds, Rupert Cole, Charlie Holmes and Bingie Madison. In addition to
pianist Russell and guitarist Lee Blair, the band featured an authentic New Orleans-born duo in the rhythm section in bassist Pops Foster and drummer Paul Barbarin.

Barbarin’s parade drumming sets the mood perfectly as he sticks mainly to his snare drum while unleashing all sorts of perfectly placed, funky accents on his tom-toms and bass drum. Referencing Barbarin in a 1955 interview, Armstrong said, ‘Paul Barbarin is still playin’ today y’know. If you to want to hear him fo’ yourself, pick up that drum solo on the first record of ‘The Saints’! Listen to him playin’ that and you can imagine yourself in a parade ma, feel yourself in there wavin’. Hey, you can really dig that New Orleans rhythm.”

But besides that rhythmic bounce, the arrangement eschews any hints of the famed New Orleans polyphonic style of Armstrong’s youth. As the congregation of horns gives Armstrong some mellow padding, “Reverend Satchmo” steps up to the microphone to announce that he’s “getting ready to beat out this mellow sermon for ya. My text this evening is ‘When the Saints Go Marchin’ In.’ Here come Brother Hickenbottom down the aisle with his tram-bone. Blow it, boy….”

Armstrong had been parodying reverends since he was a teenager in New Orleans, creating a character that he would feature in live performance during his New York and Chicago days, as well as on records such as “Lonesome Road.” Of course, his announcement of “Brother Hickenbottom” is a reference to the band’s all-star trombonist, J.C. Higginbotham, who really “sings” the melody with his shouting reading of the “text,” getting cute responses from the high reeds and some somber moaning from the low ones. Russell arranged a neat little interlude to separate the music portion from the start of the vocal, four short bars that stick in the listener’s mind long after listening (and which is still a staple of many New Orleans brass band versions to this day).

Armstrong then delivers the vocal, sounding joyous in his tenor register, getting echoing responses from the members of the band, as well as a female voice somewhat prominent in the mix, the mother of Louis’s goddaughter Joan Hudson, whose name, unfortunately, is not known at the time of this writing. Barbarin lays down the parade beat as alto saxophonist Charlie Holmes takes a fairly bluesy solo, Armstrong telling him to “Blow it, Brother Holmes.” Another Barbarin drum fill leads to the second chorus of singing, featuring the same words as the first. The traditional spiritual featured different verses but Armstrong was content to do only the first, skipping other variations such as “when the sun / refuse to shine.”

Before Armstrong’s even done with the vocal, the strutting trombone of Higgy can already be heard in the distance. The song really takes off during Higginbotham’s solo with Russell’s written figures for the reeds providing a nice counterpoint. Another, rendering Russell’s four-bar interlude sets up Armstrong’s trumpet, taking it out for two choruses. His first sticks pretty close to the melody, but the additional little notes and changes in phrasing carry the day. In pure New Orleans fashion, Armstrong doesn’t even finish the melody after the first chorus, instead holding a high tonic G to signal the beginning of the next chorus. He’s stays on the G before playing a run that works up to an F#, the major seventh and more or less a direct quote from Armstrong’s composition “Struttin’ With Some Barbecue” (in future versions it would become more direct).
Armstrong keeps up his variations before building up to an ending where he nails a high concert D. The band reprises the Russell interlude one last time and the record ends with a bang.

“When the Saints Go Marching In” was officially finished but Decca was in no hurry to issue it. Instead, they brought Armstrong back to the studio one month later on June 14, 1938 to sing more sober versions of spirituals backed only by Lyn Murray’s Decca Mixed Chorus. Decca knew it had something special with these voice-and-choir recordings and rushed a single of “Shadrack” and “Jonah and the Whale” out for release in August.

“To say that the idea was a success would be putting it mildly, for much to the amazement of Joe Glaser, Jack Kapp and a score of critics who were invited to hear the first pressings of the disc, the recordings by Louis Armstrong and the Lyn Murray Choir provided a most refreshing musical innovation,” David Kane wrote in “The Pittsburgh Courier.” Meanwhile, “The Brooklyn Daily Eagle” said it was “highly recommended to hepcats.” “Billboard” named it one of “The Week’s Best Records” (in the “vocal” category) and Walter Winchell gave one of his “New Yorchids” to “Louis Armstrong’s platter of ‘Shadrack,’ a weird and compelling jungle rhythm.” Armstrong quickly added “Shadrack” to his live repertoire, performing it and another of the spirituals he recorded in June, “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen,” at a Carnegie Hall concert on Christmas Eve.

But as the calendar turned to 1939, Decca still hadn’t released “When the Saints Go Marching In.” They finally snuck it out in February as the flip side of a forgettable pop tune, “If It’s Good (Then I Want It).” As originally feared, many listeners were not pleased, especially in the African-American community. Rev. George W. Harvey, associate religious editor of “The Pittsburgh Courier,” wrote, “The sacrilegious desecration of Spirituals, the only real American music as it is swung in gin shops dance halls, over the radio and on records in various non-descript amusement places is a disgrace to the whole race.” Harvey called for a protest and in the ensuing weeks, 60 churches representing a total of 8,000 members protested the song. Harvey followed up by doubling down on his criticism of Armstrong, “The Courier” reporting, “Our age needs a new demonstration that there are some militant and courageous Negroes. [Harvey] says all the ‘Uncle Tom’s’ are not dead yet, but there are members of the race old and young, whom he believes will gladly support and take a stand on his side, on curbing and stopping all irreligious use of the songs of our foreparents.”

Armstrong’s own sister, Beatrice (known by the nickname “Mama Lucy”), also had a problem with her brother’s treatment of “The Saints.” As Gary Giddins reported in his book “Satchmo,” “Danny Barker remembers how Mama Lucy criticized her brother for tarting up a piece from the church. When Barker told Armstrong what she had said, he got angry and remarked that she didn’t see anything wrong with playing bingo in the church.”

When Armstrong began performing the tune live with his big band, it was also met with resistance in certain quarters. Pops Foster, Armstrong’s bass player at the time, recalled, “In the ‘30s when I was in Louis Armstrong’s band we nearly got run out of a little town in Texas for playing ‘When the Saints Go Marching In’ at a dance.”
Armstrong was perplexed by the controversy. “I don’t think there’s any harm in my record, ‘When the Saints Go Marching Home,’” he told reporter Isabel M. Thompson. “That’s the same way I played it years ago in brass bands down in New Orleans, my old home-town. We played it in parades and at church affairs, and no one took offense. In fact, various ministers and other church persons have praised me for the recording of this piece.” Fifteen years before Ray Charles inspired similar controversy by mixing gospel chord progressions with rhythm and blues on “I Got a Woman,” Armstrong upset the religious community by mixing gospel with jazz.

But Armstrong did not back down and it’s his version of “When the Saints Go Marching In” that turned it into one of the most recognizable--and oft-played--anthems of New Orleans jazz. And instead of discouraging him, Armstrong had the support of Jack Kapp of Decca when he jazzed up another traditional spiritual, “Bye and Bye.”

Slowly, others in the jazz world began to catch on. Trumpeter Wingy Manone recorded his take on “The Saints” in 1939, more or less turning in a copycat imitation of Armstrong’s Decca recording. That same year, the publication of the book “Jazzmen” led to a resurgence of interest in New Orleans jazz and the rediscovery of Bunk Johnson, a forgotten pioneer trumpeter who was turned into a folk hero of sorts. Johnson recorded “The Saints” in 1944 and began featuring it in his live performances, which became something of a phenomenon when he came to New York in 1945. Though the “New Orleans Revival,” as it was dubbed, remained mostly an underground trend, it was highly popular on college campuses into and throughout the 1950s, especially the tours of New Orleans-born clarinetist George Lewis, who also featured “The Saints” every night.

By the late 1940s, Louis Armstrong scrapped his big band and formed a sextet, the All Stars. The malleable small group could adeptly perform Armstrong’s current ballad hits like “Blueberry Hill” and “La Vie En Rose” and then break into exciting New Orleans polyphony for romps on “good old good ones” like “Muskrat Ramble” and “High Society.” Armstrong began featuring “When the Saints Go Marching In” at every show, something that did not stop until the end of life in 1971. There can be no doubt that Armstrong’s visibility in this period helped spread the notoriety of “When the Saints Go Marching In”; he even performed it in a 1951 MGM film “The Strip,” starring Mickey Rooney.

As Armstrong hit new peaks of popularity in the 1950s and 1960s, he started being called “Ambassador Satch” for his appeal overseas. In the Edward R. Murrow documentary “Satchmo the Great,” Armstrong is shown getting off a plane in Switzerland, where he is greeted by a group of local musicians. Armstrong pulls out his trumpet and starts playing “When the Saints Go Marching In,” effortlessly joined in by the Swiss musicians, who played the song as if it was their own.

By that point, “The Saints” had gone global; it has never looked back. Any musician in any country that’s looking to convey a taste of New Orleans just has to call “When the Saints Go Marching In” to get the job done and to get audiences of all ages singing and dancing along. And it wouldn’t be possible if Louis Armstrong hadn’t acted on his instinct to record “The Saints” the way the Holy Rollers swung back in New Orleans. All the initial hesitations and controversy have been forgotten and, today, everyone wants to be in that number.
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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.*