

My World with Louis Armstrong*

Charles L. Black, Jr.

In the middle of May 1955, at the Savoy Ballroom on Lenox Avenue in Harlem, a philanthropic organization in the black community gave a reception in honor of the thirty or so lawyers who had worked on the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the 1954 Supreme Court decision that declared school segregation unlawful and thus began the end of the old Southern racist regime. I, by the grace of somebody or something, was there. Thurgood lined us all up in front of the orchestra to receive the applause of the whole crowd, Margaret Truman, Averell Harriman, everybody. I turned and looked, a little wistfully, at the trumpet-player in the orchestra, a young black; "I wonder," I thought, "whether I wouldn't rather have been honored in the Savoy Ballroom for trumpet-playing?" Then I heard Thurgood, moving down the line, ". . . Charlie Duncan. And next over there is Charlie Black, a white man from Texas, who's been with us all the way."

All the way. Yes, I guess so, if you can say that about something without beginning or end. I looked at Barbara, out at our table; no knight reaching to take the garland of victory ever saw eyes more glowing than hers as they fixed mine. We had been married just over a year; the children were still waiting to be born.

Then it was all over, Margaret Truman had to go, and Averell Harriman, and we said goodbye to Charlie Duncan, and to Thurgood, and took a taxi back to our apartment at 300 West 109th Street, near Columbia, where I still taught, and where Barbara was just finishing Law School. We were quiet on the elevator, quiet into the vestibule, the living room. I went over to the record-player, and put on Louis's *Savoy Blues*, the 1927 Okeh. It was twenty-eight years old then; now it is fifty years old. I listened to it all through; Barbara stood silent behind me. When it was over, I stayed still a moment more, then I turned to her and said, "Well, baby, thank God, that's one thing I didn't go back on."

What did I mean by that? I don't entirely know; one never entirely knows the ways of the power of art. I know a little of the framework, a little of the rational components. But when these are exhausted, art remains inexhaustible, unknowable. But I do know that playing that one

* © Yale University, 1979. Originally published in 69 *YALE REVIEW* 145 (1979), and more recently in a new collection of essays by Charles Black, *C. BLACK, THE HUMANE IMAGINATION* 66 (Woodbridge, Conn.: Ox Bow Press, 1986).

record, just then, for the sake of remembering, was the only right thing I could do.

I never met Louis, except for a couple of handshakes at the bandstand. Yet no first meeting in my life ever had the impact on me of my first encounter with him.

In September 1931, posters appeared in Austin advertising four dances, October 12 through 15, to be played by one "Louis Armstrong, King of the Trumpet, and His Orchestra," at the old Driskill Hotel. I was entirely ignorant of jazz, and had no idea who this King might be; hyperbole is the small coin of billboards. But a dance at the Driskill, with lots of girls there, was usually worth the seventy-five cents, so I went to the first one.

Memory is splotchy. I don't remember the moment or exactly the process of realization. But since that evening, October 12, 1931, Louis Armstrong has been a continuing presence in my life. Now, once a year—more than halfway into the fifth decade after that night, a senior professor who can hear retirement marching with audible heavy tread toward the 1931 University of Texas freshman—I present, in the Faculty Lounge at the Yale Law School, what I call my "Armstrong evening"—records of the 'twenties and early 'thirties. I have done this every year since Louis died in 1971. As the students readily discern, this is in truth a memorial service, a ritual of gratitude and blessing for the soul of this man. My children come, if they possibly can, dispersed as they are, for they understand. On the day Louis died my David, then twelve and in summer camp, wrote me a letter of condolence.

One way to describe the impression of that October night is to say that Louis seemed—as was guessed, I believe, of Paganini—under demonic possession—strengthened and guided by a Daemon. Steamwhistle power, lyric grace, alternated at will, even blended. Louis played mostly with his eyes closed; just before he closed them they seemed to have ceased to look outward, to have turned inward, to the world out of which the music was to flow.

Years ago I published the lines:

And the musicians sit there, ending phrases
By that slight taking-in of breath. The blowing musician
Pushes out from fullness of thought. He stops. There is nothing
Left but himself, empty except of himself.
His eyes open, but his look is the look of a rock
That has done what it came to do, collects and remembers
Itself eternally. Naked into the world
His world blazed forth, it patterned the blank of darkness

My World with Louis Armstrong

With clean light-lines; it is, and he is himself
Only, taking breath, waiting to enter again.

By that time, I had seen Louis on many occasions, but I think the lines were above all engendered by that first evening.

Louis was thirty-one when I first heard him, at the height of his creativity. He was just then in the borderland between his two greatest periods—the dazzlingly inventive small-band period of the Hot Five and Hot Seven, and the first period of improvisation around popular melodies—*Stardust*, *Chinatown*, *When Your Lover Has Gone*. All through these years, he was letting flow, from that inner space of music, things that had never before existed.

He was the first genius I had ever seen. That may be a structurable part of the process that led me to the *Brown* case. The moment of first being, and knowing oneself to be, in the presence of genius, is a solemn moment; it is perhaps the moment of final and indelible perception of man's utter transcendence of all else created. It is impossible to overstate the significance of a sixteen-year-old Southern boy's seeing genius, for the first time, in a black. We literally never saw a black, then, in any but a servant's capacity. There were of course black professionals and intellectuals in Austin, as one later learned, but they kept to themselves, out back of town, no doubt shunning humiliation. I liked most of the blacks I knew; I loved a few of them—like old Buck Green, born and raised a slave, who still plays the harmonica through my mouth, having taught me when he was seventy-five and I was ten. Some were honored and venerated, in that paradoxical white-Southern way—Buck Green again comes to mind. But genius—fine control over total power, all height and depth, forever and ever? It had simply never entered my mind, for confirming or denying in conjecture, that I would see this for the first time in a black man. You don't get over that. You stay young awhile longer, with the hesitations, the incertitudes, the half-obedience to crowd-pressure, of the young. But you don't forget. The lies reel, and contradict one another, and simmer in silliness, and fade into shadow. But the seen truth remains. And it this was true, what happened to the rest of it?

That October night, I was standing in the crowd with a "good old boy" from Austin High. We listened together for a long time. Then he turned to me, shook his head as if clearing it—as I'm sure he was—of an unacceptable though vague thought, and pronounced the judgment of the time and place: "After all, he's nothing but a God damn nigger!"

The good old boy did not await, perhaps fearing, reply. He walked one way and I the other. Through many years now, I have felt that it was just then that I started walking toward the *Brown* case, where I belonged. I realized what it was that was being denied and rejected in the utterance I

have quoted, and I realized, repeatedly and with growingly solid conviction through the next few years, that the rejection was inevitable, if the premises of my childhood world were to be seen as right, and that, for me, this must mean that those premises were wrong, because I could not and would not make the rejection. Every person of decency in the South of those days must have had some doubts about racism, and I had had mine even then—perhaps more than most others. But Louis opened my eyes wide, and put to me a choice. Blacks, the saying went, were “all right in their place.” What was the “place” of such a man, and of the people from which he sprung?

In the months and years just following, I avidly collected Louis's records. In those days, the great old Okeh's of the 'twenties were still in stock at the J.R. Reed Music Co. on Congress Avenue, or could still be ordered from open-stock catalogs. You paid seventy-five cents apiece for recordings by Jan Garber, Guy Lombardo, and Rudy Vallee, but Louis, on Okeh—such titles as *West End Blue*, *Knockin' a Jug*, *Tight Like That*, the *Savoy Blues* wherein I heard a trumpet blowing for me—were to be had for thirty-five cents each, being classified as “race records,” though they were even then being eagerly collected by pink-pigmented members of the human race in England and France.

I bought a lot of them, and have almost all of them yet. They are still of surprising sonic quality, though some have surely been played a thousand times. No material has ever been quite as good, for records, as the material they used them, and no engineers ever recorded Louis quite as well as the Okeh engineers did. I play them at my annual service; the students, understandably, had rather hear and even see them than listen to tapes.

I falter when I turn to describing these records. Music cannot be written about directly—not the feeling part of it. Yes, *Skip the Gutter* has a dialogue, on trumpet and piano, between Louis and Earl Hines, that is the finest example I know of the musical sense of humor—the sense of humor purely musical, in that it uses no trick effects, no barnyard “imitations,” but sticks to clean musical technique alone—Olympian laughter. Yes, *Mahogany Hall Stomp* illustrates supremely well that quality of inevitability that so often marks great music—it must have been just so, and in no other way, though who would have thought of it? Yes, *Knee Drops* is a cascade of bluish diamonds. Yes, *West End Blues* (like dozens of others of these records) sets the mind wondering how people could have heard this jazz as only “hot”—whorehouse music almost—when so much of it is quiet, stately chamber music. Yes, one has sat, so many years later, in a pub in Birmingham in England, with a bassoonist on the University music faculty there, a man good enough to have played with Dennis Brain

My World with Louis Armstrong

before arthritis impeded his fingering, listening to him talk about the two marvelous conversations Louis holds with his horn about the melody, on the two 1930 masters of *Stardust*.

But this is just talk. You have to listen to these records. They do not date. I listened to them all, over and over and over again. And now it was not a matter of shock-impact, but of slow and thorough realization, of living oneself into the work of an artist. There have been many—well, a good many—great artists in my time. But it just happened that the one who said the most to me—the most of gaiety, the most of sadness, the most of high nervous excitement, the most of religion-in-art, the most of home, the most of that strange square-root-of-minus-one world of emotions without name—was and is Louis. The artist who has played this part in my life was black.

In 1957, in the early days after the *Brown* case, when the South was still resisting, I wrote out and published my deepest thought on the nature of the agony as it presented itself:

I'm going to close by telling of a dream that has formed itself through the years as I, a Southern white by birth and training, have pondered my relations with the many Negroes of Southern origin that I have known, both in the North and at home.

I have noted again and again how often we laugh at the same things, how often we pronounce the same words the same way to the amusement of our hearers, judge character in the same frame of reference, mist up at the same kinds of music. I have exchanged "good evening" with a Negro stranger on a New Haven street, and then realized (from the way he said the words) that he and I derived this universal small-town custom from the same culture. I have seen my father standing at the window of his office with a Negro he had known for a long time, while they looked out on the town below and talked of buildings that used to be here and there when they were young.

These and thousands of other such things have brought me to see the whole caste system of the South, the whole complex net of its senseless cruelties and crippling, as no mere accidental grotesquerie of history, but rather as that most hideous of errors, that *prima materia* of tragedy, the failure to recognize kinship. All men, to be sure, are kin, but Southern whites and Negroes are bound in a special bond. In a peculiar way, they are the same kind of people. They are happy alike, they are poor alike. Their strife is fratricidal, born of ignorance. And the tragedy itself has, of course, deepened the kinship; indeed it created it.

My dream is simply that sight will one day clear and that each of the participants will recognize the other.

Buck Green was in those words, and a kind girl who played with me when I was little, and Hugh Ledbetter ("Leadbelly"), whom I knew slightly and loved a great deal, and Harvey and Maggie Crayton, and Carlene Thomas and the incomparable Teddy Wilson, and both Jim Nabrits, and all my black companions-in-arms at law, and Frankie Newton, whose heart, I have always believed, broke from the strain of being black. Jack Teagarden is there too, I think, for from the little conversation and much music I had from him, I believe that he, also a white Texan, would have agreed. (Louis, I have learned, refused for a time to play in New Orleans because Teagarden, a member of his "All-Stars," could not play with him.) How many, many more!

But Louis has the special place of the artist of my time who uniquely instructed me, as only high art can instruct, on all the matters I have written of above, and who was black.

How could I have been anywhere else when the Brown case was moving up? By the time I got there, I had left behind the feeling that I was struggling for justice for somebody else. I was, in my own heart, in an army for and with my own.

But that doesn't quite reach the end of the inquiry with which I started. I came home from that party and played the *Savoy Blues*. Not another record. Just that one. Well, I must confess there was something more direct there. Perhaps it was and is only an imagination of mine. But in the trumpet on that record, just that one, I thought I heard something said—as a self-knowing high artist might say it—gently, without stridency or self-pity, perhaps with more pity for the more pitiable wrong-doer than for the wronged, but like this: "We are being wronged, grievously, heavily, bewilderingly wronged. We don't know why, or what to do. Is anyone listening? Is there anyone to come in and help us?" Then there is the gentle coda, a coda unmistakably of resignation: "I leave it up to you."

That is a little of what Louis has meant to me, and that is what I heard in his horn—so triumphant in other places and so full of glory—in the *Savoy Blues* of 1927. And again I thank God that that was one thing I didn't go back on. And for the miracle of art. And for Louis—may he be in peace.