

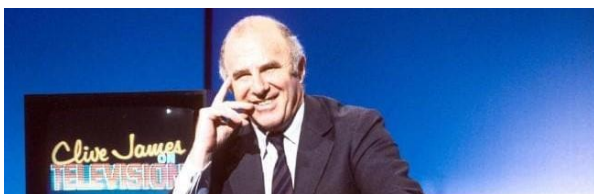
LOUIS ARMSTRONG

by Clive James*

[This piece appeared in Clive James's 2008 book "Cultural Amnesia: Notes In The Margin Of My Time", pp 23-30]



Louis Armstrong...PHOTO CREDIT CARL MYDANS



**Clive James, who died in November, 2019, was the author of more than 40 books. As well as essays, he has published collections of literary and television criticism, travel writing, verse and novels, plus five volumes of autobiography. As a television performer he appeared regularly for both the BBC and ITV.*

Louis Armstrong was born in New Orleans in 1900 and died at home in New York in 1971, having done, in the intervening years, as much as anyone since Lincoln to change the history of the United States. The theory that art can have no direct impact on politics has the advantage of staving off wishful thinking, but it takes a beating when you think of what Armstrong did, or helped to do. Jazz would not have been the same without him, and the whole artistic history of the United States in the twentieth century, quite apart from the country's political history leading up to the civil rights movement, would not have been the same without jazz. There was no easy conquest, and Armstrong himself was the object of prejudice right to the end. He had to be brave every night he went to work. All the more edifying, then, that he himself was colour-blind when it came to the music he had helped to invent.

*

Those pretty notes went right through me.
LOUIS ARMSTRONG,
talking about Bix Beiderbecke

Before we let these words stir up bad memories, we should console ourselves with how they once started the long process of putting fallacies to rest. The first fallacy was that white men could not play jazz. Bix Beiderbecke was white; Louis Armstrong was the strongest creative force in the early history of the music; so if Armstrong thought this highly of Beiderbecke, it follows that at least one white man could play jazz.



Bix Beiderbecke (above) was white; if Louis Armstrong thought this highly of Beiderbecke, it follows that at least one white man could play jazz...

Everything was against Armstrong's forming an objective judgement. Armstrong had good cause to believe that jazz had been invented by black musicians, who had been systematically robbed of the rewards. Segregation dictated that it would have been inconceivable for Armstrong to hold Beiderbecke's chair with the touring orchestra of Paul Whiteman, whose very name might have been chosen by a satirist to illustrate what black musicians were up against. Armstrong and Beiderbecke would never have been allowed to play together in public. The magnitude of the insult would have excused a bitter view. Yet Armstrong thought Beiderbecke was wonderful, and said so. Nevertheless, and sometimes all the more, the fallacy lingered on until long after World War II.



Paul Whiteman Orchestra 1928 L-R, Roy Bargy, Lennie Hayton. Standing Paul Whiteman. Seated: Irving Friedman, Michael Pingitore, George Marsh. Standing left: Charles Gaylord, Eddie Pinder, Austin Young, Min Leibbrook, Rube Crozier, Charles Strickfaden. Standing right: Kurt Dieterle, Mischa Russell, Marty Malneck, Charles Margulis, Wilber Hall, Mike Trafficante, Roy Mayer, Chester Hazlett. Standing back row: Frankie Trumbauer, Bill Rank, Jack Fulton, Bix Beiderbecke, Boyce Cullen, Harry Goldfeild.

At Sydney University in the late 50s I was introduced to New Orleans jazz by well-heeled college students who had been brought up listening to the shellac record collections of their well-travelled fathers. These were still the early days of vinyl. The definitive Jelly Roll Morton LP had just come out and was used as a teaching aid by proselytes for New Orleans jazz, with the Louis Armstrong Hot Five and Hot Seven collections waiting further up the line for advanced students. It was held to be axiomatic that you had to appreciate the drive and syncopation of Morton's Red Hot Peppers playing *Black Bottom Stomp* and *The Chant* before you could move on to the

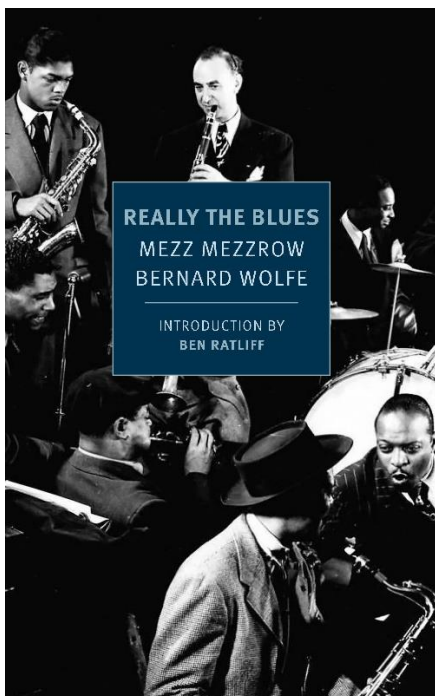
challenging, ensemble-shattering solo subtleties of Armstrong playing *West End Blues*. It went without question that jazz was black music. One of the set books of our informal jazz faculty actually said so: *Shining Trumpets* by Rudi Blesh. In retrospect, Blesh's book is a touching example of inverse racism: a white scholar, himself from a beleaguered minority, he was claiming, on behalf of blacks, exclusive rights to an art-form.



SHINING TRUMPETS A HISTORY OF JAZZ

RUDI BLESCH

The white clarinetist Mezz Mezzrow had done the same by immersing himself in a black culture: he did everything but black up. It was Jim Crow in reverse. Mezzrow's barely coherent book *Really the Blues* was on the course. Fated to supply the dull passages in some of the finest records Sidney Bechet ever made, Mezzrow was an average player and a worse than average writer, but his sacrificial passion was food for thought.



REALLY THE BLUES

MEZZ MEZZROW

BERNARD WOLFE

INTRODUCTION BY
BEN RATLIFF

Unfortunately the thought was likely to be scrambled by self-indulgent, unearned empathy. The emotion was admirable — disgust at racial inequality — but the speculative edifice that arose from it was painfully shaky on its base. Later on, Terry Southern questioned even the emotion, when he wrote a short story about a white jazz fan trying to make up for his inadequacies by hanging out with the black musicians. But it didn't need Southern to put the whole idea into doubt. The idea was Jim Crow — white prejudice against blacks — stood on its head, and would have seemed so from the beginning if there had not been such a concerted effort on the part of white liberal commentators to play a role in fighting Jim Crow when it was standing the right way up.

The effort was commendable, but it depended on the suppression of evidence. Black creativity in jazz was everything the inverted racists said it was, and more. But white creativity was real, and could be discounted only at the cost of obfuscation — a high price to pay for feeling virtuous. By the end of my Sydney University years, the pre-war Benny Goodman small group recordings had been collected onto an LP and were among my regular listening. The crisp ensemble playing and the lilting sequences of short solos were just as dazzling as anything from Morton or Armstrong. Goodman was white. End of argument.



*A Benny Goodman small group, L-R, Gene Krupa, Teddy Wilson, Goodman: the crisp ensemble playing and the lilting sequences of short solos were just as dazzling as anything from Morton or Armstrong... PHOTO COURTESY THE WORLD OF JAZZ
RODNEY DALE*

But the argument had been over for more than 30 years. It was over when Armstrong went to hear Beiderbecke at the Savoy. If Armstrong hadn't known something was up, he would never have gone. Even without Armstrong's generous testimony, it would be foolish to admit unquestioned the assumption of automatic black

supremacy in a given musical art-form. It cuts out too much white achievement. You can still hear, from black ideologues and their white sympathizers, that Fred Astaire couldn't really dance. He is held not to have possessed the proper, syncopated improvisational skills of Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson, who could lead and drag the beat with different strata of his body simultaneously. There might be something to it. Astaire rarely swayed a hip. Even in mid-miracle, the armature of his body was upright: underneath, he was strictly ballroom. But when you consider what Astaire could do, the idea that he should be measured by what he couldn't is absurd.



Fred Astaire: when you consider what he could do, the idea that he should be measured by what he couldn't is absurd...

It should have been patently absurd, but there was a political aspect, which applied beyond the kingdom of the dance to the world of American music in general. White men were in control, and they robbed the blacks. Armstrong never saw a dollar of royalties from all his Hot Five and Hot Seven recordings: there were more than 60 of them, they sold in the millions, but for too much of the rest of his life they didn't save him from a single week of one-night stands. His Hollywood earnings bought him the occasional vacation, but the royalties from his early masterpieces never materialized. The white men not only took the money, they took the opportunities. Bojangles never got the chance to be Fred Astaire. Billie Holiday bravely refused the demeaning coon-turn roles that Hollywood offered her. On top of the ravages of her abused childhood,

her frustrations as an artist drove her to drugs, and her whole tragedy — the tragedy of black talent in a white business — was part of the picture evoked by her signature tune *Strange Fruit*. The song is about lynch law but so was her life.



Billie Holiday at the Commodore Records Session on 20 April, 1939, when she recorded "Strange Fruit". Musicians are L-R, Johnny Williams (bass), Frankie Newton (trumpet), Stan Payne & Kenneth Hollon (saxophones)...

Bessie Smith, Charlie Parker, Charlie Christian — you could make a long list of victims just on the level of genius, let alone of mere talent. Even when you take due note of the equally long list of those who never lost control of their lives — Ella Fitzgerald is a long list all by herself — the cruel scope of the injustice still shrieks to heaven. The joy of the music is populated with unsleeping ghosts, and anyone who doesn't see them isn't using his eyes. But it's a bad reason not to use our ears, which will hear, if we let them, an awkward truth. Nothing can redress the flagrant inequalities of the past. We can, however, refrain from compounding the insult.

A man like Benny Goodman, for example, can't possibly be fitted into a schematic history that would base itself on the white exploitation of a black invention. He carried within himself the only answer to the conflict, and, as things have turned out, he presaged the outcome: a measure of tolerance and mutual respect, and at least a step towards a colour-blind creative world. He was born as poor as any black; he was Chicago, meat-packing poor; as poor as you could get. Being white, he was able to translate his prodigious talent into economic power: the very power to which black

musicians, however successful, were always denied access. But Goodman used his power to break the race barrier. Though his mixed small groups existed mainly in the recording studios and only rarely on stage — the Carnegie Hall appearance with Count Basie was strictly an interlude — the music they made was the emblem of a political future, and in the aesthetic present it was a revelation. It is still a revelation, because in aesthetics the present is the only tense there is.



Goodman's mixed small groups existed mainly in the recording studios and only rarely on stage — the Carnegie Hall appearance with Count Basie (pictured above with Goodman) was strictly an interlude...

There will always be a few diehards who deduce from those three-minute masterworks that Goodman's clarinet was metronomic compared to Charlie Christian's guitar. But the diehards were born dead. They have had no living thing to say since Armstrong heard Beiderbecke's pretty notes and saluted an equal. If the two avatars had the same stature, how could they sound so different? It raises another question. Armstrong, with everything against him, knew how to lead an ordered life. Beiderbecke put as much energy into self-destruction as into creation. His father didn't want him to play jazz. Trying to prove to his father that his music would get him somewhere, the prodigal son sent home copies of all his records. His father never listened to them. You could call that a psychological obstacle: but there were no other obstacles that began to compare with what Armstrong had to put up with every day. The main reason Beiderbecke could not stop drinking was that he was an alcoholic. His short adult life was a long suicide. But the cautionary tale had

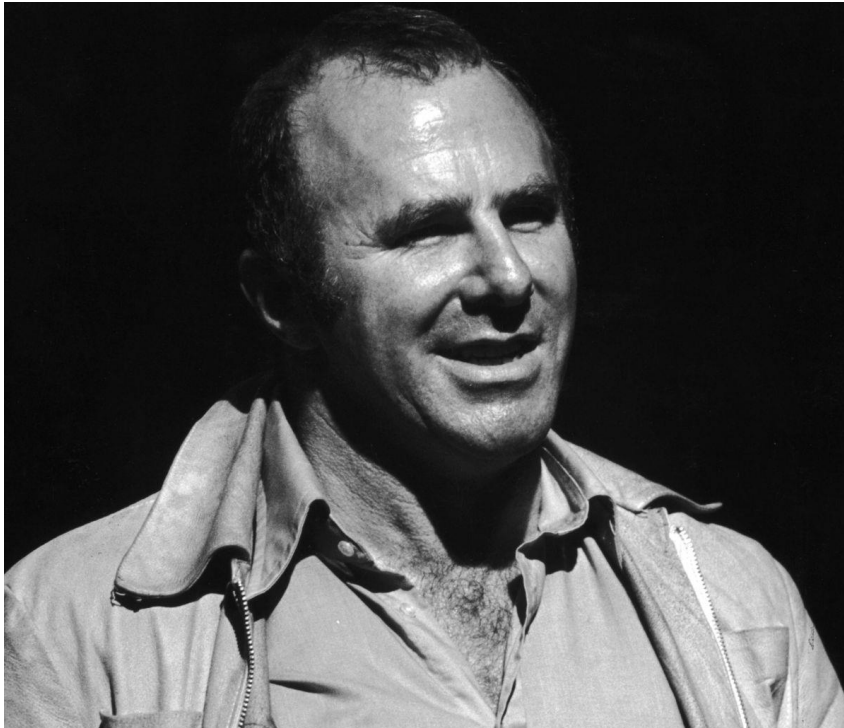
an awkward corollary: his underlying melancholy got into his tone, and helped to make it unmistakable. Armstrong could play blues with unmatched inventiveness, but his soul moved in jump-time: a sharp, staccato attack was basic to him. Crackling excitement was his natural mode. Beiderbecke, on the other hand, was blue to the roots. Even his upbeat solos were saturated with prescient grief, and the slow numbers remind you of Ford Madox Ford's catchline for *The Good Soldier*: this is the saddest story ever told.



Beiderbecke: his underlying melancholy got into his tone, and helped to make it unmistakable...

I listened to most of Beiderbecke's Jean Goldkette and Paul Whiteman sides before I left Sydney (even the most fanatical New Orleans purists among my friends seemed to have them on hand), but it wasn't until I was down and out in London in the early 1960s that I first heard *I'm Coming, Virginia*. An Australian homosexual ballet buff — a lot of Australian homosexuals were still prudently sending themselves into exile in those days — persuaded me to sit down and listen to a piece of music he held to be the most beautiful thing in his life: better even than *Swan Lake*. (I wonder if he lived long enough to see *Swan Lake* danced by boys: I hope so.) For a while *I'm Coming, Virginia* — I used to make rude jokes about the title, but they conveyed my appreciation — became the most beautiful thing in my life too. The coherence of its long Bix solo still provides me with a measure of what popular art should be like: a generosity of effects on a simple frame. The melodic line is particularly ravishing at its points of transition: there are moments when even a silent pause is a perfect note, and always there is a piercing sadness to it, as if the natural tone of the cornet, the instrument of reveille, were the first sob before weeping. Armstrong could probably have done that too, but he didn't want to. He wasn't like that. Beiderbecke was,

always: his loveliest-ever outpouring was an example of the artistic freedom that can be attained through being trapped in a personality. Perhaps for personal reasons, I took it as an encouragement. I wanted to write prose sentences that way, and lines of poetry: as a shining sequence of desolate exuberance, of playful grief. I loved the spareness of his technique: a wordless song with one note per syllable and no lapses into mere virtuosity. It helped me to conceive the notion that the only permissible obscurity is an excess of vividness, or the suggestive hiatus that comes from removing the connecting tissue between transparencies.



Clive James: Beiderbecke's loveliest-ever outpouring was an example of the artistic freedom that can be attained through being trapped in a personality...

In my last two years before I left Sydney I had moved on to bebop and modern jazz in general, but although I tried to enjoy some of the headlong sprezzatura stuff I always thought that it was only in the slow numbers that the virtuosi really showed what they could do. I liked it best when Thelonious Monk dragged his hands like tired feet in *Round Midnight*, and my favourite Charlie Parker number was the last-ditch, half-ruined but drenchingly lyrical *My Old Flame*. At Cambridge I was still listening to that one almost every night. Mechanisms of influence are hard to trace. Writers tend to think that the way they write was influenced by literature, and of course scholars make a living by following that same assumption. But a writer's ideal of a properly built sentence might just as well have been formed when he was still in short pants and watched someone make an unusually neat sandcastle. He might have got his ideals of composition, colour and clean finish from a bigger boy who made a better model aeroplane. To the extent that I can examine my own case of such inadvertently assimilated education, I learned a lot about writing from watching an older friend

sanding down the freshly dried paint on his rebuilt motorbike so that he could give it another coat: he was after the deep, rich, pure glow.

But for the way I thought prose should move I learned a lot from jazz. From the moment I learned to hear them in music, syncopation and rhythm were what I wanted to get into my writing. And to stave off the double threat of brittle chatter and chesty verve, I also wanted the measured, disconsolate tread of the blue reverie. Jazz was a brimming reservoir of these contending qualities. Eventually I was listening to so much classical music that I left jazz aside, but I never thought that I had left it behind. Later on, when I took holidays from classical music, it was *Tin Pan Alley* and Broadway that attracted me, and there were years on end when I listened to everything happening in pop and rock. The second lustrum of the 60s was a particularly good time for that: you could slide a coin into a jukebox and hear Marvin Gaye singing *I Heard It Through the Grapevine*, and wonder whether there had ever been, or would ever be again, anything quite so addictive as the triumphal march of a Tamla anthem.



You could slide a coin into a jukebox and hear Marvin Gaye (above) singing “I Heard It Through the Grapevine”...

Jazz, however, was always there underneath all that, and begging to be revisited. I couldn't muster an affection for John Coltrane or Sonny Rollins — I don't think I was meant to — but the tradition that led up to them still had many glories to reveal. The great period of Duke Ellington was a constellation of glories that made Berg and Webern seem very thin gruel. Listening on the same day to the Lester Young quintet and a string quartet by Ravel, I could hear no incongruity: they seemed comparable events to me, although there was not much evidence at the time to suggest that the



Listening on the same day to the quintet led by Lester Young (above) and a string quartet by Ravel (below), James could hear no incongruity: they seemed comparable events...YOUNG PHOTO CREDIT CHARLES PETERSON



same was true for anybody else. Such catholicity of taste has only recently become respectable. At the time when the divinely gifted and cruelly doomed cellist Jacqueline du Pre was breaking our hearts with Elgar, the boys around her were thought rather daring when they vamped and jammed a few jazz figures on their strings. But the argument about a supposed hierarchy of genres would have continued much longer if Leonard Bernstein had not put a stop to it. In the first chapter of his television series about music, after giving brief, instantly enchanting examples from the classical repertoire, Broadway, Tin Pan Alley, jazz, rock and pop, he said the only thing that mattered: 'I love it all.' He had jazz in his blood.



Leonard Bernstein (above) conducting in the 1940s with Benny Goodman (right). After giving brief examples from the classical repertoire, Broadway, Tin Pan Alley, jazz, rock and pop, Bernstein said the only thing that mattered: 'I love it all.'

His show song *Lonely Town* is a melody that Bix Beiderbecke would have loved to play, and it would not have been composed in quite the same way if the broken heroes of jazz had not first lived their dangerous lives. The paradox was that the most persuasive witness to the lyrical distillation of Bix's broken life, Louis Armstrong, was a man whose life was never broken, even by the full force of America's most tenacious social malignancy, white prejudice. If it is a political nightmare no longer, Armstrong's shining trumpet certainly contributed to the wake-up call. But there is only so much art can do against injustice, and the blues, from which jazz took flight, were an embodiment of the sad truth that much beauty begins as a consolation for what can't be mended.



Louis Armstrong: his life was never broken, even by the full force of America's most tenacious social malignancy, white prejudice...