

48. Louis Armstrong

West End Blues

(For Unit 6: Further Musical Understanding)

Background information and performance circumstances

The genesis and early development of jazz are the subject of much debate. Recorded evidence from the early years of the twentieth century is slight. Much of the anecdotal evidence was provided years later, and coloured by the vested interests of commentators. However, it is clear that the particular circumstances of New Orleans in the second half of the nineteenth century brought together the elements from which the new musical style developed among the black community. The importance of the River Mississippi as a trade route before the expansion of the rail network had brought jobs, wealth and an influx of immigrants. The population included black descendants of former slaves, European settlers (more Spanish and French than north European) and an important 'Creole' group – a term originally referring to second generation immigrants but increasingly applied to people of mixed race.

Music was everywhere in this society: notably work songs and blues songs, imbued with African rhythms and melodic traits, and hymns with European harmonies. Brass and wind bands, successors to the military bands of the civil war, entertained in the dance halls and favourite outdoor recreational areas such as Lake Pontchartrain, whose 'West End' gave its name to the work under discussion. Groups playing plucked and bowed string instruments – mandolin, guitar, violin and bass – serenaded at private parties. Pianists played ragtime in the bars and the red light area of Storyville – known simply to residents as 'the District'; at the other end of the social scale, concerts and operas could be heard at one of half a dozen theatres and concert halls.

Louis Armstrong claimed an iconic date for his birthday – 4 July (Independence Day) 1900; recent research, uncovering his baptismal certificate, has amended this to 4 August 1901. His father deserted the family and Armstrong was brought up by his grandmother and then by his mother, who may have been involved in prostitution. At 7, he started work, delivering coal in the red light district. When he was 12, he was arrested for shooting blanks from his stepfather's revolver in the street on New Year's Eve, and sent for 18 months to the Colored Waif's Home for Boys. He had already started playing cornet – given an instrument by a local Russian–Jewish family – and in the Waif's Home he trained in the band, playing, among other music, compositions by Bach, Haydn, Liszt, Rachmaninov and Mahler. After his release he worked driving a coal wagon, and played with bands in New Orleans – notably on the Mississippi steamboats with Fate Marable, in the band of Joe (later 'King') Oliver, and – when Oliver moved north to Chicago – with Kid Ory. The decisive step in his career took place when Oliver invited him to join his Creole Jazz Band in Chicago. During the early 1920s, Armstrong divided his time between Chicago and New York, where he played in Fletcher Henderson's band.

Early jazz developed in a highly charged atmosphere, both socially and morally. After originating in the southern black community, jazz became increasingly popular across the United States, among white as well as black audiences, and white musicians were soon forming their own jazz bands. Respectable opinion viewed the new musical styles – and the dances that accompanied them in the dance halls and speakeasies of prohibition America – with great alarm. As early as August 1921, Anne Shaw Faulkner, head of the Music Department of the General Federation of

Women's Clubs warned of the evil influence of jazz, and in particular 'the demoralizing influence of the persistent use of syncopation, combined with inharmonic partial tones', which could lead to incapacity for 'distinguishing between good and evil, right and wrong'.

In addition to the northward migration of black jazz musicians (part of the Great Migration that saw a million and a half African Americans move north between 1915 and 1930), improvements in recording techniques during the 1920s were also decisive in the spread of early jazz. Accessible, portable and of increasingly good quality, 78 rpm records provided music that could be heard repeatedly. Ironically, it was the all-white Original Dixieland Jazz Band that opened up the market, making its earliest recordings in 1917. At that period, the band repertoire consisted largely of up-tempo rags and dances, as distinct from the melancholy tradition of vocal blues. *West End Blues* illustrates the fusion of the two genres, with solo instrumentalists combining virtuosity with an expressive vocal style.

Louis Armstrong's Hot Five was a studio-only group, first brought together in 1925 to make records for the Okeh label. The original players were from 'King' Oliver's Creole Jazz Band, but the brand was to prove more important than the individual players: Armstrong was the only member of the original Hot Five to play in the 1928 session that created *West End Blues*. The new group included Jimmy Strong (clarinet), Fred Robinson (trombone), Earl Hines (piano), Mancy Carr (banjo) and – actually making it a sextet – Zutty Singleton (percussion).

West End Blues was a 12-bar blues composition by Joe 'King' Oliver with words subsequently added by Clarence Williams. It was played by Oliver's Dixie Syncopators and recorded by them on 11 June 1928. Students might like to listen to this recording (it is easy to find online) and compare it with Armstrong's version, recorded just over a fortnight later, on 28 June. Armstrong set new standards, which other bands were soon to imitate. Striking evidence of the impact he made comes from 'King' Oliver himself: on 16 January 1929, Oliver recorded the piece again, reproducing as closely as possible the trumpet and piano solos of Armstrong and Hines, played in this instance by Louis Metcalfe and Luis Russell, respectively.

Notation and the actual sound

While analysing *West End Blues* it is important to remember that we are dealing with notation which has been made on the basis of the recorded performance. Indeed, among early jazz players, the ability to read music was often considered a handicap. Set portions of the music were played from memory, and improvised sections depended on the musician's ear, sensitivity and skill in the physical act of playing. Quality of sound was a key priority for the players. Armstrong's mentor 'King' Oliver claimed to have spent ten years refining his tone. Inflections of pitch, rhythm and dynamics, aiming to reproduce the nuances of the human voice, are an essential part of the expressive quality of the jazz of this period. Pitch and rhythm used in this way can only be captured approximately by conventional notation, and dynamic shading – essential to the expression – is not shown in the transcript.

However, for the purposes of the examination, students should refer to the anthology version when commenting on aspects of the music.

Performing forces and their handling

- *West End Blues* uses a typical New Orleans front line of trumpet, clarinet and trombone with a rhythm section of piano, banjo and percussion.
- Armstrong was a leader in the move away from the early New Orleans style of jazz counterpoint, with its interweaving lines for clarinet, trumpet and trombone, towards a style dominated by soloists.
- A live dance band would typically include a string bass or tuba to reinforce the rhythm (as in Oliver's original recording). Studio conditions allowed Armstrong to dispense with this, throwing even more emphasis onto the solo instruments.
- During the clarinet solo Armstrong introduces scat singing – vocalisation with no words. Armstrong is often credited with originating this in his influential 1926 recording of 'Heebie Jeebies', but there were earlier examples.

The table below shows the deployment of instruments in the various sections.

Introduction (Bars 1-6 ³)	Trumpet solo. Florid virtuoso playing across a wide range. Pause on tutti dominant triad (with augmented 5th).
Strain 1 Trumpet solo (Bars 6 ⁴ -18)	Trumpet solo introduces the Joe Oliver melody with mainly sustained accompaniment from clarinet and trombone and repeated chords in rhythm section. Trombone articulates note changes with pitch bends. Trumpet uses vibrato and pitch bends (esp. bar 11). Solo line with improvised decoration towards the end.
Strain 2 Trombone solo (Bars 18 ⁴ -30)	Second strain of the composed melody. Sustained line with vibrato, glissando slides into and between notes. A small amount of melodic decoration. Percussion ('bock-a-da-bock' cymbal) added in swing rhythm. Trumpet and clarinet are silent. Piano continues comping.
Strain 3 Clarinet solo with scat answers (Bars 30 ⁴ -42)	Presentation of the melody in the deep 'chalumeau' register of the clarinet, below the break in the instrument's range. (This is very different from the showy, high clarinet solos of the Dixieland style, as in Oliver's first recording of this song.) Clarinet uses vibrato. Answered by Armstrong's scat phrases, which retain a notably light and relaxed tone as they become increasingly adventurous. Clarinet part keeps to its original manner.
Strain 4 Piano solo (bars 43-54)	Florid virtuoso free improvisation over left hand partly in 'stride' style (alternately playing low bass notes and middle-register chords). Hines's trademark 'trumpet-style' octaves in bars 47–50. Tremolo technique (bar 50). The rest of the band is silent.
Strain 5 Trumpet solo (Bars 54 ⁴ -62)	Chords again on piano and banjo with sustained notes for clarinet, and trombone renewing its note each bar. Long held high solo note breaking into an elaborate improvised run.
Coda (Bars 63-68)	Descending chordal figure on solo piano; solo trumpet joins, then chords for whole band. A single percussion sound at the end.

Structure

- 12-bar blues, five choruses long, with two contrasting strains, introduction and coda. See the table below for bar numbers of different sections.
- In the vocal version (listen, for example, to Ethel Waters, 1928) the two strains clearly alternate, but in Armstrong's version Hines's piano solo makes no reference to the melody of strain 2 as presented by the trombone in bars 18-30.
- The final trumpet solo breaks off in mid-stream, but the blues pattern continues, with solo piano and coda creating an extension of the 12-bar shape.

Tonality and harmony

- E flat major throughout.
- 12-bar chord structure with substitution chords, based on the pattern:
I : I : I : I : IV : IV : I : I : V : V : I : I/V

This pattern is maintained with few changes during most of the choruses, with occasional substitution chords and more complex harmonic progressions in the piano solo, as shown in the following table.

Strain 1 Bars 7-18	Strain 2 Bars 19-30	Clarinet/scat Bars 31-42	Piano solo Bars 43-54	Trumpet solo and coda Bars 55-end
I	I	I	I7 inverted	I
I	V7 of V – V7	I	ii-V7	I
I	I	I	Ib, chromatic pass to ii-V7	I9
I7	I7	I7	I, chromatic pass to I7	I79
IV	IV	IV	IV – - I7	IV
IV (.. + 6th)	IV minor	IV minor	IV – dim. 7	IV
I	I	I	Ic – Ib	I
I - Ib	I - Ib with passing dim. 7	I	Ic chromatic pass via V7b of G minor	I
V7	V7c-V7	V7c-V7	ii	See below
V7	V7	V7	V of V – V7	
I with chromatic decoration	I with chromatic decoration	I with chromatic decoration	I – ii7 (with flat 5th notated as a B natural)	

I – V Turnaround	I – V Turnaround	I – V Turnaround with chromatic twist	Ic – V Turnaround with new chromatic twist	
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For the coda, Hines plays a descending sequence based on chord VI (C minor), over a dominant pedal, landing at 65⁴ on an inverted half-diminished seventh on F (compare the last chord in bar 53). The last three chords form a chromatic variant of a plagal cadence (partially concealed by the inverted chords in bar 67 and the notation using B natural) – A flat maj7/C; A flat min7/C flat; E flat added 6.

- Note the chromatic consecutive chords in bar 54, creating the progression C minor, B major, B flat major.

Melody

Melodic lines in *West End Blues* vary in character from player to player. The sweeping, aerobic trumpet and piano lines of Armstrong and Hines have differing characters, and both are in marked contrast to the much gentler contours of the solos for trombone and clarinet by Robinson and Strong.

Sung blues melodies are often characterised by notes or phrases that are ‘out of step’ with the changes in background harmony, either persisting as dissonances against a new chord or anticipating a resolution. (For example, see the fall from the dominant through the blue third to the tonic, which pervades Howlin Wolf’s ‘I’m Leavin’ You’ – NAM 51.) This effect is heard in *West End Blues*, e.g. bars 10⁴–14, with the trumpet’s insistence on C and B flat; in the repeated G of bar 40 (dominant 13th, anticipating the tonic chord); in the persistent E flat, against the dominant harmony, in bar 453 (piano RH); and spectacularly in bar 59, where the high B flat persists across the change of chord, as the repeated jumping-off point for Armstrong’s improvisation.

Armstrong’s style of improvisation

Joshua Berrett (in *Musical Quarterly*, Spring 1992) argues that Armstrong’s improvisation blends techniques learned from jazz players (both trumpeters and clarinetists) with influences from opera. Armstrong included opera arias in his early record collection, and frequently quoted from popular arias and other well-known songs in his solo breaks: Berrett quotes examples from Verdi’s *Rigoletto* and Leoncavallo’s *I Pagliacci*, among others.

Armstrong might also have heard the opera-inspired Italianate flourishes of romantic piano music, evident in the music of Thalberg (a leading nineteenth-century piano virtuoso) and Chopin. These various influences can be seen in:

- the use of leaps of an octave or more
- the balancing on very high notes before a descent
- the mix of diatonic and chromatic decoration
- the irregularly curving ascents and descents
- the prevalence of appoggiaturas
- the free subdivision of the beat into irregular rhythmic groups
- the incorporation of mordent-like figures.

Armstrong's introduction

These are six of the most famous bars in the history of jazz recording. Gunther Schuller wrote that 'The clarion call of *West End Blues* served notice that jazz had the potential capacity to compete with the highest order of previously known expression.' (*Early Jazz*, 1968).

- The opening phrase sweeps down then up again across a range of a 13th, based around the chord of E flat added 6th, plus F and the F# that will be such a characteristic part of the *West End Blues* melody.
- The second phrase covers an even wider range (two octaves and a tone), swooping down in swung rhythm through blue G flats and D flats and zig-zagging through little chromatic triplet figures that Armstrong had already developed in earlier recordings (especially in a solo break in Margaret Johnson's 'Changeable Daddy of Mine').
- The diminuendo on the last few notes, with a hushed vibrato on the final Ab, anticipates the melancholy tone of the blues melody.

Blues strain 1

- Only a few phrases are needed to establish the identity of the melody before Armstrong starts to embellish it, gradually moving from added blue notes through diatonic figuration (bars 13-14) to increasing chromaticism (bars 15-17) and a return to the rising triplet arpeggio of his introduction.
- The improvised phrases, from bar 13 onwards, typically start on, or leap to, a dissonance against the prevailing chord.
- In bars 14-16, note the rapid mordent-like figure (demisemiquavers), leaps onto dissonant notes, and the tension between the melody and supporting harmony in bars 15-16.

Trombone solo

Fred Robinson's solo has a strongly vocal quality.

- There is emphasis on 'blue' notes throughout, e.g. G flat/G natural in bars 18-21, and D flat/D natural in bars 26-28.
- Note the glissando between major and 'blue' third at the start.
- Phrases droop expressively through small intervals, most typically a second followed by a third.
- Note the contrast between the longer, expressively 'bent' notes and the much cleaner pitching of the figures in shorter notes.
- Compare this treatment of the melody with vocal recordings of *West End Blues* such as Ethel Waters (August 1928) and Eva Taylor (July 1929).

Clarinet and scat duet

Jimmy Strong simplifies the theme to a series of brief, simple phrases, allowing room for Armstrong's vocal answers. These become increasingly elaborate, in the style of his trumpet improvisations – compare bar 14 with bar 37 (descent from D to G) and with bar 40 (rapid alternation between G and B flat).

Piano solo

Earl Hines's solo includes a wide variety of melodic effects, including echoes of earlier solo phrases, which serve to integrate this solo into the whole performance:

- virtuoso show-piece arabesques spanning between two and three octaves, based on chord shapes: E flat added 6th (bars 43, 45), F minor (bar 51)
- short expressive phrases recalling Armstrong's scat phrases (bar 44, compare bar 40)
- chromatic figurations (bar 46 – possibly an echo of bar 5 of Armstrong's introduction).
- 'trumpet-style' rhythmic phrases in octaves, again based on added 6th chord shapes (bars 47-50)
- right-hand tremolo (bar 50), which adds colour to a surprising harmonic twist
- bars 51-54 picking up ideas from the end of Armstrong's solo in bars 15-18
- little reference to 'blue' notes except the chromatic D flat/D natural in bars 46 and 52.

Second trumpet solo

High notes were a speciality of jazz clarinetists and trumpeters, with long high notes creating particular excitement because of the sustained tension in the sound and the demands on the player. Armstrong's dramatic 12-second top B flat, with its gradually intensifying tone and vibrato, is at the same time a variation on the 'West End' melody and an extreme melodic gesture. The ensuing run discharges the tension after winding it up even further with five short descents from the same top B flat. The piano chords (bars 63-65) provide a transition between the extrovert solo and the final trumpet phrase that recaptures the blues character in a descending pentatonic scale.

Texture

- Monophonic at start (bars 1-6).
- Thereafter, melody and accompaniment (melody-dominated homophony). Accompaniment typically in repeated chords for banjo and piano; sometimes with slow-moving accompanying lines for clarinet and trombone with occasional 'fills'.
- Parallel thirds between trumpet and clarinet (bars 8-9), and parallel tritones between clarinet and voice in the chromatic turnaround (bar 41).
- Antiphony between clarinet and scat voice (bars 31-42).
- Keyboard textures include LH parallel tenths (bars 43-44) and RH octaves (bars 47-50).
- Dominant pedal in bars 64-66.

Rhythm

Swung rhythm

Swing is a much-debated jazz term. As Duke Ellington's 1931 song goes, 'It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing'. Louis Armstrong has been credited with introducing swing into jazz (Norton online *Jazz*). When the trumpeter Cootie Williams was asked to define swing, he said he would rather 'try to describe Einstein's theory'.

Swing is heard most obviously in the long–short rhythm into which the beats are subdivided – roughly equivalent to repeated crotchet–quaver groups in compound time. It is notated either as quavers, or (as in this transcription) as dotted quaver–semiquaver. However, players using swing also anticipate ('push') or delay ('lean') notes to increase the expressive and 'speaking' quality of the phrase, and to shape groups of three or four notes with rubato rather than playing in metronomic time. Variations in accentuation also contribute to the sense of swing, for example the constant variation of the semiquaver groups in bars 59-61.

Syncopation

In ragtime, the rhythmic bounce of the music is created by systematic syncopation, with longer and higher notes often given an unexpected accent by starting on weak semiquavers, as in the well-known Scott Joplin rag 'The Entertainer'. Syncopated notes are marked 'x'.



In *West End Blues*, with its swung rhythm and expressive style of playing and vocalisation, syncopation takes more varied forms. Many phrases end with an offbeat note extended in a lingering manner e.g. bars 32, 33, 39 and 40 in the scat vocal line. Also in the scat section we find bars with no syncopation (bars 35 and 41) and bars with syncopations in mid-phrase (bars 36, 37, 38). The same mixture can be found in the trombone solo, bars 19-30. In both of these passages the syncopations all occur as the phrase falls away, rather than at its peak. The few moments of syncopation in the piano solo, similarly, occur towards the ends of phrases.

Other rhythmic features

- Quadruple metre except for bar 66, when the three-beat solo breaks the momentum and prepares for the final chords. (With the *rallentando*, these three beats take about the same time as the previous 4-beat bar.) For convenience, the music is notated in 4-4 time, but given the swung rhythm, it does not make sense to describe it as 'simple' quadruple.
- A background 4-beat rhythm of regular crotchets is heard from bar 7 to bar 62.
- The anacrusic rhythm of the main melody (as in bars 6⁴-9¹) is the only rhythmic feature that could be described as thematic.
- The rhythm of other phrases is extremely varied and spontaneous. Phrases start at many different points during the bar. Notes lasting one beat or longer are mixed with (and often tied to) subdivided groups of two, three or four shorter notes.
- Armstrong's improvised choruses tend to break into shorter and shorter note values (e.g. bars 12-16, 33-38).

Armstrong's introduction uses four rhythmic motifs that summarise the shift from nineteenth-century straight rhythm to twentieth-century swing:

- a four-note fanfare in straight quavers
- a syncopated third beat – the kind of rhythm used in ragtime
- a rising arpeggio in triplets
- a long, showy descending phrase in double-speed swung rhythm.

Rhythm in the piano solo. Earl Hines took classical piano lessons as a boy, and this is reflected in his solo, where glittering virtuoso passage work appears. In the octaves section the quavers are markedly straight, but semiquaver pairs (notated as dotted semiquaver–demisemiquaver) are swung.

Further reading

Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz* (Oxford, 1997)

Joshua Berrett, 'Louis Armstrong and Opera' (*Musical Quarterly*, Spring 1992)

Louis Armstrong, *Satchmo* (New York, 1954)

Norton StudySpace. An outline of the section on Louis Armstrong is at <http://www.wwnorton.com/college/music/jazz/ch/06/outline.aspx>

'85 Years of "West End Blues"' <http://dippermouth.blogspot.co.uk/2013/06/85-years-of-west-end-blues.html> This is not a technical analysis, but the blog of a persuasive and encyclopaedically well-informed enthusiast.

Recordings

Students might like to listen to the recorded versions mentioned in these notes, which can all be easily accessed through Spotify.