

Queens College Louis Armstrong House



Louis Armstrong House Museum

"From a humble, two-room shack in New Orleans, he rose to the top of the world and having risen to the top of the world, he came to live in Corona," former New York Mayor John Lindsay once said of the famed jazz genius and pioneer Louis Armstrong. Armstrong lived for nearly three decades in the modest, brick-fronted Corona, Queens home that today is the Louis Armstrong House Museum, which is partnered with Queens College, and open to the public for events, school tours, research or simple homage to Satchmo's life and incomparable contribution to American culture, the museum holds troves of Armstrong memorabilia -- thousands of items from recordings and photographs to letters, manuscripts, trumpets and artifacts. In 1986, the Louis Armstrong Educational Foundation gave the house to the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA) and arranged for Queens College to administer it under a license agreement. The house, built in 1910, was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1977, six years after Armstrong's death. Designating the house a New York City landmark in 1988, the Landmarks Preservation Commission thus described the house's history and its connection to "probably the foremost genius of American jazz"

Landmarks Preservation Commission

December 13, 1988;

THE LOUIS ARMSTRONG HOUSE, 34-56 107th Street, Borough of Queens. Built 1910; architect, Robert W. Johnson; builder, Thomas Daly.

On November 12, 1985, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Louis Armstrong House (Item No. 10). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Five witnesses spoke in favor of designation; one statement and one letter on behalf of designation were read aloud. The Commission received several letters in support of designation.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

Summary

Louis Armstrong -- dubbed Satchmo -- was a world-renowned jazz musician, singer, entertainer, and film star. This modest brick-covered frame house, purchased in 1943 by Louis and Lucille Armstrong, remains substantially as it was during the Armstrongs' residence. Designed by Robert Johnson, built in 1910 by Thomas Daly, and located in Corona, Queens, a community to which the Armstrongs developed strong ties, this house is closely associated with the famed musician, "probably the foremost genius of American jazz," ... during a significant portion of his long and dazzlingly successful career as a trumpet player without peer. Despite his international travels, the house in Queens remained Armstrong's home base for nearly thirty years until his death in 1971. His widow continued to occupy the house until her death in 1983. She willed the house and its contents to the city of New York for the creation of a museum and study center devoted to Armstrong's career and the history of American jazz, to serve as a tangible memorial of his contributions to American culture.

Louis Armstrong: A Career Synopsis.

A native of New Orleans, the birthplace of jazz, Daniel Louis Armstrong was born in Jane Alley on August 4, 1901. From about the age of ten, he was a tenor in a children's street quartet, singing "sweet, ragtime, and comedy songs." On New Year's Eve, 1912, he was arrested after firing a pistol and was sent for eighteen months to the Colored Waifs' Home; there, the warden, Professor Peter Davis and "Captain" Joseph Jones, director of the Home, taught him to play the cornet, and when he left, he was able to play "marches, tunes like Home Sweet Home and the brass band repertoire played with a ragtime flavor." From 1915 to 1917, Armstrong worked at various jobs while performing in and around New Orleans with Sam Dutrey's Band, Allen's Brass Band and other groups; toward the end of this period, he had his first professional jobs at Ponce's and at Henry Matranga's honkytonk. During these years, Armstrong also sold coal, quitting on Armistice Day, 1918. From February until May 1919, he replaced the cornetist King Oliver (1885-1938), who had become his mentor, in the famous Kid Ory's (1886-1973) Band. He was also married briefly to Daisy Parker. In 1919, he joined Fate Marable's (1890-1947) Band playing aboard Mississippi riverboats until 1921. In New Orleans again, he played at Torn Anderson's Cabaret Club and then with drummer Zutty Singleton (1898-1975). He also did parade work.

In 1922, he joined King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band (a blues band in the New Orleans tradition) in Chicago, which had become a center of jazz after the closing of Storyville in New Orleans. After Armstrong's debut, a local newspaper wrote:

"This newcomer brought us an entirely different style of playing than King Oliver had given us. He was younger, had more power of delivery, and could send out his stuff with a knack."

Records made in 1923 as a member of King Oliver's Band marked his recording debut; although the Band's performance on these records was not actually improvised, the effect of spontaneity is conveyed. In February 1924, he married pianist Lillian Hardin. In 1924, he worked in a band led by drummer-vocalist Ollie Powers before joining Fletcher "Smack" Henderson's (1897-1952)

jazz big band in New York at the Roseland Ballroom. Around 1925, Armstrong made recordings with Henderson, pianist-composer Clarence Williams (1893?-1965), the Red Onion Jazz Babies (named for the New Orleans dive, the Red Onion), and Blues singer Bessie Smith (1895-1937). In that year, he began recording under his own name in Chicago. Having by then been called the "World's Greatest Jazz Cornetist," he played at the Vendome Theatre and at the Sunset Cafe. William Russell observed that "At last Louis was in his element and was playing the kind of music he knew and loved. The public loved it too ... It had to be loud and hot for the hip-liquor toter of the mid-twenties."

The mid- to late 1920s were a period of great importance in Armstrong's career, during which he took the elements of New Orleans jazz (then frequently termed ragtime) and created a powerful lead-and-solo style "that unavoidably left most of the conventions of ensemble jazz behind." During this period, he also developed as a vocal performer and introduced "scatting," (wordless singing); his singing style, which combined joking, creative paraphrasing, showmanship, blues inflections, and unfailing swing, resembled his playing.

In 1927, Armstrong continued at Chicago's Sunset Cafe with Carroll Dickerson (1895-1957), and then with his own band "Louis Armstrong and his Stompers." In 1927-28, he also led his own recording groups - "The Hot Five" and "The Hot Seven." In his 1928 recordings, Armstrong broke away from the New Orleans style and gave "fuller reign to his soloistic fancy." According to Armstrong's biographers, the jazz authorities Max Jones and John Chilton, if Armstrong had "played nothing since the Oliver, Henderson, Clarence Williams, Bessie Smith and Hot Five and Seven recordings of the '20s, his place in jazz and in music as a whole, would have been assured."

By 1929, New York was superceding Chicago as the jazz center, and Armstrong soon followed the music's course. He then went to New York, appearing at Harlem's Savoy Ballroom, at Connie's Inn and in the Hot Chocolates Revue. By the beginning of 1930, Louis was fronting Luis Russell's (1902-1963) band and early in 1930 worked with a new band made up with members of the Mills' Blue Rhythm Band. In 1930-31, he was featured as a cabaret soloist at Frank Sebastian's New Cotton Club in Culver City, a suburb of Los Angeles. Armstrong became identified as an interpreter of popular "commercialized" songs and ballads and as an individual "name" attraction.

In 1931- 32, he recorded about two dozen titles, including original interpretations of songs that are now standards. After a brief return to cabaret work in California he sailed for Europe, arriving for British tour, on July 14, 1932. According to legend, upon his landing in Plymouth England, he was dubbed Satchmo (a play on Satchelmouth, the nickname for his trumpet that was also applied to him) by Percy Brooks, then editor of Melody Maker. In 1933-34, Armstrong once again returned to Europe, playing in Great Britain, Scandinavia, Holland, Belgium, Italy, Switzerland, and France.

During the 1930s, Armstrong continued to record popular songs, as well as starting to reinterpret "good old good ones"; at the same time, he solidified his position as an entertainer, band leader, and recording artist, and he appeared in such feature films as Everyday's A Holiday (1938), Doctor Rhythm (1938) and Artists and Models (1938), and had his own radio series. He continued to tour widely throughout America and Canada. After divorcing Lil Hardin, he married Alpha Smith in 1938.

In 1939-40, he performed at Harlem's Cotton Club. From 1940 to 1946, Armstrong continued to work with his own band, to appear in films, and to make select solo appearances. After divorcing Alpha Smith, he married Lucille Wilson, a dancer and "the wife who lasted" in 1942; the following year, she purchased the house in Corona that remained their home throughout their married life.

In 1946, Louis traveled to Hollywood for an important acting role in the film New Orleans.

In 1947, he began playing lead trumpet and chief soloist in his own traditional improvising sextet "The All Stars," (the first of "many small units" with which he would tour the world until 1970, earning himself the nickname Ambassador Satch) which played its first overseas engagements in France in 1948 and returned to Europe again in 1949. Although members of the band changed frequently from 1950 to 1955 the All Stars enjoyed great success and toured extensively throughout the world.

In 1956, Armstrong toured Australia and the Far East, and played in Great Britain for the first time since 1934. The All Stars then traveled to Africa; Armstrong returned once again to Britain in December for a solo appearance at the Royal Festival Hall. In October of 1957, the All Stars toured South America; Louis appeared at the Newport Jazz Festival in both 1957 and 1958.

In 1957, Armstrong denounced Eisenhower and the United States government for its handling of the desegregation issue in Little Rock, Arkansas, thus altering his previously apolitical stance. Although a long European tour in 1959 was briefly interrupted by illness, Armstrong continued to travel widely. In 1960, he returned to Africa under the sponsorship of the State Department, which came to view him as a valued envoy for "the magic Esperanto of his music."

Between 1961 and 1967, international demand for Armstrong and the All Stars remained great, and they traveled widely throughout the world.

In 1964, a year also marred by illness, Louis achieved great success with his single of "Hello Dolly!" Louis' vocal rendition of "What A Wonderful World" (1968) topped the charts. In 1969, he appeared in the Academy-award winning film "Hello Dolly." In 1970 and 1971, Louis was regularly featured on American television, and he continued to work, recording a new album for release on his seventieth birthday. Armstrong died peacefully in his sleep on July 6, 1971.

Critical Evaluations of his Career

Armstrong's career has been the Subject of extensive commentary. Virgil Thomson wrote that Armstrong's "style of improvisation would seem to have combined the highest reaches of instrumental virtuosity with the most tensely disciplined melodic structure and the most spontaneous emotional expression, all of which in one man you must admit to be pretty rare." Hughes Panassie, author of *Le Jazz Hot* (1934), one of the pioneering books on the subject, viewed Armstrong as not only "the greatest of all jazz musicians," but as "one of the most extraordinary creative geniuses that all music has ever known." Jazz authority and Armstrong biographer Leonard Feather noted that as a singer Armstrong "really used his voice as if it were an instrument" and praised the "dedicated, seminal artist who earned the awed admiration of fellow-jazzmen, who more than any other individual performer, before or since his original impact affected the entire course of an indigenous American music." The jazz writer Max Jones believed that Armstrong "set the course of what was called 'hot music' ... It is impossible to assess the influence that this man had upon his contemporaries. A genuine original and a completely dedicated professional, Louis gave more pleasure to more people than any other individual in jazz -- perhaps than any other entertainer of our time. He was unquestionably the best-known Negro musician of this century. For decades, not years, he was the foremost instrumentalist of jazz. There will never be another like him: of that we can be certain." At the time of his death, John S. Wilson, in an article for *The New York Times*, summarized Armstrong's importance: "Through the sheer power of his musical imagination and personality, he reshaped the relatively limited urban folk music in which he grew up, opening up the possibilities that have made it part of a global culture." Recently, Gary Giddins observed that: "If the twentieth century has proven to be the American era in music an assessment made with increasing frequency and confidence -- it is fitting also to characterize it as the Armstrong era. Through the visionary genius of Louis Armstrong a new music asserted itself in all its native glory and took possession of the world."

The House

Despite his peripatetic career and his international renown, Louis's home base for the last twentyeight years of his life was the house in Corona, Queens. Corona developed in the late nineteenth century as a predominantly Italian neighborhood, filled with relatively modest freestanding houses. A major racetrack was an important influence on the area's development. By the early 1920s, a sizable black community existed there. As New York's Mayor John Lindsay noted: "From a humble, two-room shack in New Orleans, he rose to the top of the world and having risen to the top of the world, he came to live in Corona." His widow Lucille hoped the house would become a jazz museum after her death in 1983, thus commemorating her husband's legacy in the community to which he had such strong ties. The name of the Meadow School was officially changed to The Louis Armstrong School, Public School 143 in May 1977. Although thought had been given to naming Northern Boulevard after Armstrong, Lucille felt that naming a school for him would be more appropriate; thus another school, Intermediate School 227, close to the Armstrong House, was named for him and a garden at the school was also named for Lucille. In 1975, Armstrong was posthumously inducted into the Community Hall of Fame in recognition of his "many years of devotion, contributions, and civic mindedness to our community." Lucille Armstrong's ties to the community are exemplified by the citations that she received from such civic organizations as the Queensboro Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Inc. and Queensboro Community College, City of New York. She was an honorary member of the Board of the Queens Child Guidance Center, Inc. From 1971, she served as an Honorary Chairperson of the Louis Armstrong Memorial Project in Corona and devoted much of her time to the fundraising events of the communitybased, nonprofit organization.

Lucille recounted the story of Louis' arrival at the house, which she had bought and furnished (because, as she noted, "Louis didn't live anywhere then and didn't want to"); one day, she handed him the key: "This is for your new home." When Armstrong came to see it, "he left his bags in the cab, and told the driver to wait for him. But to his surprise, he fell in love with the house and stayed enamored for the 28 years he was in Queens." According to Jones and Chilton, he commented that "it was their pad, it was paid for, and he wasn't ever going to move." Lucille recalled that the house -- which from the '40s through the '70s was often a "gathering point for Satchmo band members" -- had given him a stability and a happiness he never had before." Lucille remained in the house until her death in 1983.

Designed by architect R.W. Johnson of 60 Grove Street, Corona, and built by Thomas Daly in 1910, this three-story structure was originally a twenty by forty-eight foot two-family, two-story frame structure with a flat roof, similar to many others in the community. Occupying a forty by one hundred foot lot, it was built at an estimated cost of \$3,500. In 1925, a garage was added to the house. The house retains its original bracketed cornice and frieze. The original projecting bay at the front of the house is now visible only at the second story; at the first story, it is concealed by a first-story addition (replacing the original veranda) pierced at the front and sides by double-hung windows which are topped by faux keystone treatments. Originally a frame structure, the house was later sheathed in aluminum siding. During Armstrong's tenure, the lower two stories were covered with brick. Garden walls were added to the left on the front elevation and extend around the adjacent garden (not part of the designated landmark site). A matching wall was built to the right of the stoop. In addition, the third story, which has a peaked roof and is wood-shingled, appears to have been added by the Armstrongs. The side walls have one-over-one double-hung windows with faux keystones piercing the brick as does the rear elevation, which also has a leanto vestibule. The appearance of the house today is essentially the same as when the Armstrongs lived there.

FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture and other features of this

building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Louis Armstrong House has a special character, and special historical interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, the Louis Armstrong House was the home of Louis Armstrong dubbed Satchmo a world-renowned jazz musician, singer, entertainer, and film star; that this modest brick-covered frame house, purchased in 1943 by Louis and Lucille Armstrong, remains substantially as it was during the Armstrongs' residence; that it was designed by Robert Johnson, built in 1910 by Thomas Daly, and located in Corona, Queens, a community to which the Armstrongs developed strong ties; that this house is closely associated with the famed musician, "probably the foremost genius of American jazz," during a significant portion of his long and dazzlingly successful career as a trumpet player without peer; that, despite his international travels, the house in Queens remained Armstrong's home base for nearly thirty years until his death in 1971; that his widow continued to occupy the house until her death in 1983; and that she willed the house and its contents to the City of New York for the creation of a museum and study center devoted to Armstrong's career and the history of American jazz, to serve as a tangible memorial of his contributions to American culture.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 21, Section 534, of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Louis Armstrong House, 34-56 107 street, Borough of Queens, and designates Tax Map Block 1748, Lot 36, Borough of Queens, as its Landmark Site.