LOUIS ARMSTRONG'S

Hot Five and Hot Seven Recordings

BRIAN HARKER

LOUIS ARMSTRONG'S HOT FIVE AND
HOT SEVEN RECORDINGS

OXFORD STUDIES IN RECORDED JAZZ

Series Editor JEREMY BARHAM

Louis Armstrong's Hot Five and Hot Seven Recordings
Brian Harker

The Studio Recordings of the Miles Davis Quintet, 1965–68
Keith Waters

LOUIS ARMSTRONG'S HOT FIVE AND HOT SEVEN RECORDINGS

BRIAN HARKER

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further
Oxford University's objective of excellence
in research, scholarship, and education.

Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

WITH OFFICES IN
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Copyright © 2011 by Oxford University Press, Inc.

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

www.oup.com

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise,
without the prior permission of Oxford University Press.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Harker, Brian.
Louis Armstrong's Hot Five and Hot Seven recordings / Brian Harker.
p. cm.—(Oxford studies in recorded jazz)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-19-538841-1; 978-0-19-538840-4 (pbk.)
1. Armstrong, Louis, 1901–1971—Criticism and interpretation.
2. Jazz—1921–1930—History and criticism.
3. Hot Five—Discography.
4. Hot Seven—Discography. I. Title.
ML419.A75H37 2011
781.65092—dc22 2010019801

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

TO MY PARENTS

This page intentionally left blank

SERIES PREFACE

THE OXFORD STUDIES IN Recorded Jazz series offers detailed historical, cultural, and technical analysis of jazz recordings across a broad spectrum of styles, periods, performing media, and nationalities. Each volume, authored by a leading scholar in the field, addresses either a single jazz album or a set of related recordings by one artist/group, placing the recordings fully in their historical and musical context, and thereby enriching our understanding of their cultural and creative significance.

With access to the latest scholarship and with an innovative and balanced approach to its subject matter, the series offers fresh perspectives on both well-known and neglected jazz repertoire. It sets out to renew musical debate in jazz scholarship, and to develop the subtle critical languages and vocabularies necessary to do full justice to the complex expressive, structural, and cultural dimensions of recorded jazz performance.

JEREMY BARHAM
SERIES EDITOR

This page intentionally left blank

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS OF working on this book, I have benefited greatly from the wisdom and generosity of others. The first debt of gratitude must go to my dissertation advisor, Mark Tucker, a great scholar and a good man who was taken from us well before his time. Mark introduced me to a way of thinking about early jazz that took seriously the views of those who created it without dismissing the insights of critics who approached the music from a different perspective—Gunther Schuller, André Hodeir, Lawrence Gushee, and Martin Williams, among others. The dissertation I wrote under Mark's direction laid the conceptual foundation for this book. I only wish he were here to see (and help improve) the final result.

A fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities, together with grants from the Jean-Claude Baker Foundation and the School of Music and the College of Fine Arts and Communications at Brigham Young University, made it possible to conduct research in the New York City and Chicago areas. I am grateful to the many specialists and curators who guided me through their collections: Dan Morgenstern and the staff at the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University–Newark; Michael Cogswell and the staff at the Louis Armstrong House and Archives at Queens College; the staff members of the New York Public Library, Performing Arts Division, and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; and the staff members of the Chicago Public Library, Woodson Regional location.

While investigating the realm of dance, a field foreign to me, I relied heavily on a number of experts. Again, Mark Tucker pointed the way

many years ago, when in the course of advising me on my dissertation he suggested that I watch for connections between trumpet players and dancers. At the time I had no idea what he was talking about. When I finally figured it out and needed guidance, I received help from several remarkable individuals, some of whom performed small miracles on my behalf. Margo Jefferson offered valuable advice at a crucial moment. One of her tips led me to Jean-Claude Baker, who shared so much, including period photographs, financial support (through a grant from the Jean-Claude Baker Foundation), and delicious meals at his restaurant, Chez Josephine. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Pryor Dodge, the son of Roger Pryor Dodge, early jazz critic and eccentric dancer extraordinaire. Pryor was most generous in sharing knowledge and artifacts of his father's legacy. For their help in tracking down information on Brown and McGraw, I am grateful to my friends Mark and Tory Perry, Erlon Hodge of the New York Supreme Court, Margaret Hyson of the Brigham Young University Family History Center, Ernest "Brownie" Brown of the great dance team Cook and Brown, and Lane Alexander and Reggio McLaughlin of the Chicago Human Rhythm Project. Thanks also to Frank Driggs, who provided the only known photo of Brown and McGraw, and to Albert Lawrence, a nephew of Brown and McGraw, who shared his memories with me.

As always with projects like this, I am grateful to friends and colleagues in academia, both at Brigham Young University and elsewhere, for their expert advice, moral support, letters of recommendation, and willingness to read unpolished prose. I would particularly like to thank Thomas Brothers, Samuel A. Floyd Jr., Krin Gabbard, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, Michael Hicks, Steven Johnson, William Howland Kenney, Charles Kinzer, Jeffrey Magee, Lewis Porter, and Kate Van Orden. Scholarship is a lonely calling, and the association of such people provides much-needed camaraderie and a measure of protection from one's historical delusions. Whatever delusions remain in this work, I hasten to add, are mine and mine alone, cherished and coddled day and night in the padded cell that I call my office.

I want to thank Jeremy Barham, editor of Oxford Studies in Recorded Jazz, for inviting me to contribute to the series, and Suzanne Ryan, music editor at Oxford University Press, for her staunch enthusiasm and support. They have been a pleasure to work with from beginning to end. Thanks also to Liz Smith and Karen Fisher, who prepared the manuscript and did the copyediting. At Brigham Young University, Joseph Sowa helped create the musical examples.

Finally, I am grateful to my family—first of all, to my living parents, Herb and Myrna Harker, as well as to my mother, Beryl Harker, who died

when I was eight; this book is dedicated to them. My brothers and sisters have been a wonderful source of strength and diversion: Rand Harker, Kim Harker, Scott Harker, Wendy Smith, Val Ellison, and Lori Kilpelainen. As always, I am especially grateful to my wife, Sally, and sons, Daniel and Robbie. Their steadfast love and support are my daily bread, and help me remember what it's all for.

This page intentionally left blank

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION *3*

1 Novelty: "Cornet Chop Suey" (26 February 1926) *15*

2 Telling a Story: "Big Butter and Egg Man" (16 November 1926) *39*

3 Playing the Changes: "Potato Head Blues" (10 May 1927) *68*

4 Top Notes: "S.O.L. Blues"/"Gully Low Blues" (13–14 May 1927) *88*

5 Sweet Music: "Savoy Blues" (13 December 1927) *109*

6 Versatility: "West End Blues" (28 June 1928) *133*

EPILOGUE *165*

BIBLIOGRAPHY *173*

INDEX *179*

This page intentionally left blank

LOUIS ARMSTRONG'S HOT FIVE AND
HOT SEVEN RECORDINGS

INTRODUCTION

IN JUNE 1924 THE EDITORS OF *The Etude*, a magazine for musicians, surveyed the jazz of their day and made the following historical assessment: "We do know that the Jazz of ten years ago is not to be compared with that of today. Jazz has grown up, gone through high school and is ready for college."[1] The editors were right to see this moment as pivotal in the evolution of jazz, but not—or at least not primarily—for the reasons they supposed. Given a glimpse into the future, they would no doubt have been shocked to learn that the key "professor" to lead jazz through its college years would not be prominent white bandleaders Paul Whiteman or Vincent Lopez, nor composers George Gershwin or Irving Berlin, but a twenty-four-year-old African American cornet player from New Orleans named Louis Armstrong (1901–71). Shortly

1 *The Etude* (June 1924): 369.

after this statement was published, Prof. Louis opened school, so to speak, and began to "teach," producing from 1925 to 1928 a series of over seventy 78 rpm recordings for OKeh Records.[2] Featuring Louis Armstrong's Hot Five or his Hot Seven, New Orleans-style groups of varying personnel and instrumentation (sometimes including six members), the records are known collectively as the Hot Fives. Although Armstrong's previous recordings showed remarkable originality, the Hot Fives went much further, redefining jazz and placing it on a new course, one more revolutionary and far-reaching than any subsequent upheavals in the music's history. In particular, the Hot Fives helped change the nature of instrumental jazz in the 1920s, shifting the focus from lively ensembles to lengthy statements by virtuoso soloists. This book attempts to explain, in the most significant senses, how all this came about.

The Hot Five recordings ensued naturally from events set in motion by Armstrong's big break—the call in 1922 to leave New Orleans and come to Chicago to play in King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band at the Lincoln Gardens.[3] In the summer and fall of 1923, Oliver's band recorded for OKeh Records. During these sessions the recording team got a chance to hear Armstrong's playing, and Armstrong became acquainted with E. A. Fearn, the OKeh manager in Chicago, and Ralph Peer, the director of production. When Armstrong moved to New York to play with Fletcher Henderson in 1924, his new wife and de facto manager, Lil Hardin, pressed Peer to record him there. Peer, who later claimed credit for launching the blues craze with Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" (1920), saw in Armstrong a potential new star for OKeh's "race record" portfolio. During his time in New York, Armstrong played on several record dates produced by Peer, including the historically important Blue Five records made with Sidney Bechet under the leadership of Clarence Williams. By late 1925 Peer was ready to take the next step. At Hardin's instigation, apparently, he offered Armstrong an exclusive contract to make records under his own name, credited to Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five, as soon as he returned to Chicago. As sidemen Armstrong chose three fellow New Orleanians—trombonist Kid Ory,

2 Speaking of the pedagogical value of these records, New Orleans guitarist Danny Barker recalled that "all the alert jazz musicians and local music lovers waited anxiously for each of Louis Armstrong's latest releases, as there was much to learn from these classics." Danny Barker, *A Life in Jazz*, ed. Alyn Shipton (London: Macmillan, 1986), 42.

3 The best account of the Hot Fives' origins may be found in Gene Anderson, "The Origin of Armstrong's Hot Fives and Hot Sevens," *College Music Symposium* 43 (2003): 13–24; see also Terry Teachout, *Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), 91–98.

clarinetist Johnny Dodds, and banjoist Johnny St. Cyr—plus one outsider: his wife Lil on piano. (Although Hardin was from Memphis, her musical background gave her a strong New Orleans pedigree: at age seventeen she had made her professional debut with the pioneering New Orleans Jazz Band, led by Lawrence Duhé.)

With this group Armstrong made twenty-four recordings between November 1925 and November 1926. During the second week of May 1927, he replaced Ory with John Thomas, expanded the band to include tuba player Pete Briggs and drummer Baby Dodds, and recorded eleven sides under the name Louis Armstrong and His Hot Seven. From September to December 1927, he reassembled the original Hot Five to make nine additional recordings, adding guitarist Lonnie Johnson to three tracks. Then, in a sweeping personnel change, Armstrong hired four northern musicians—including the brilliant pianist Earl Hines—and one New Orleanian, drummer Zutty Singleton, to make the last eighteen Hot Five recordings, from June to December 1928 (some of which were attributed to Louis Armstrong and His Orchestra or Louis Armstrong and His Savoy Ballroom Five). To distinguish this last group from the New Orleans Hot Five and the Hot Seven, I will call it the Chicago Hot Five.[4]

Although the earlier bands were assembled strictly for recording, the members had played together a great deal in the past. Armstrong had worked with Ory and Johnny Dodds in Ory's Brownskinned Babies in New Orleans, with Baby Dodds on the riverboats, and with both Dodds brothers and Hardin in Oliver's Creole Jazz Band. The musicians' combined experience in the New Orleans idiom imparted a unity, maturity, and depth to their studio performances that was normally enjoyed only by regular working bands. The Chicago Hot Five, by contrast, was a smaller version of Carroll Dickerson's Savoyagers, the band that Armstrong played with every night at the Savoy Ballroom, and before that, the Sunset Café. Thus, the 1928 records reflect both that band's comfortable working habits and, probably, its nightly repertory as well.

4 All these recordings were made for OKeh. Armstrong made similar records for other companies, though not as a leader. On 28 May 1926, the members of the original Hot Five, billed as Lill's [*sic*] Hot Shots, recorded three sides for Vocalion under Hardin's nominal leadership. Almost a year later, a Hot Seven–like group called Johnny Dodds' Black Bottom Stompers, featuring Armstrong, the Dodds brothers, Roy Palmer on trombone, Barney Bigard on tenor saxophone, Earl Hines on piano, and Bud Scott on banjo, made two cuts for Vocalion and four for Brunswick. Shortly thereafter, Armstrong recorded three of the pieces from this session—"Weary Blues," "Wild Man Blues," and "Melancholy"—with his own Hot Seven.

By the time Armstrong began the Hot Five series in late 1925, several different approaches to jazz had emerged, including the rollicking New Orleans polyphony of King Oliver, the bouncy homophonic dance music of Jean Goldkette, and the zany musical slapstick of Ted Lewis, none of which emphasized sophisticated, extended solos. On the question of the music's future, most observers looked to a new experimental hybrid of jazz and classical music, introduced by Paul Whiteman and George Gershwin through their joint production of *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924). Conventional wisdom in white circles held that this so-called symphonic jazz would surely produce the music's highest cultural achievements. Black writers took a more ambivalent view of symphonic jazz, vacillating between high praise for the ideals of Western art music and resentment toward Whiteman for his neglect of African American features (and musicians) that made jazz special in the first place. But no one in 1925, it is safe to say, was predicting the rise and influence of someone like Armstrong. First of all, he was a performer instead of a composer, and thus seemed unlikely to determine the conditions for musical change. Black performers, in particular, were thought to be ingenious mimics or clever showmen, but not creators in any deep sense. It was unthinkable that such a person could establish a body of musical principles upon which the next generation of jazz musicians—both white and black—might base their work. And yet virtually all of the important characteristics of 1930s swing, as far as solo playing was concerned, at least, can be traced back to lucidly rendered archetypes in Armstrong's Hot Fives. By the late 1930s Whiteman was considered passé, and Armstrong was just beginning to be recognized for his seminal contributions to the music of swing and, more broadly, the language of jazz.

This much, I believe, is generally agreed upon by jazz historians. What remains to be demonstrated is how Armstrong brought these momentous developments to pass and how observers in the 1920s may have interpreted them. Some stylistic revolutions in the history of jazz—bebop, free jazz, and fusion, for instance—were immediately recognized as such. But Armstrong's was a quiet revolution whose full implications went undetected for a long time, even within the black community. This book will argue that 1920s listeners first understood his Hot Five music not as a major realignment of jazz but in more familiar terms as (1) traditional New Orleans dance music marketed toward black southern migrants (as race records), and (2) a manifestation of novelty entertainment such as one might hear on a vaudeville stage. In the former sense, the Hot Fives extended the same tradition upheld by King Oliver a few years previously and had little to offer the next generation. It was