Louis Armstrong: The Complete Hot Five and Hot Seven Recordings. Eighty-nine tracks. Compilation produced by Phil Schaap. Liner notes by Phil Schaap, Robert G. O'Meally, and George Akavian. 2000. Columbia/Legacy C4K 63527.

Jazz devotees have long sought to craft the finest tributes in praise of Louis Armstrong, his significance to jazz, and his essential place in American musical culture. Showered with acclaim, Armstrong has been called the sky of American music, the musician who charted the roadmap for jazz, the inventor of the soundtrack for the twentieth century. Some critics further contend that he not only decisively influenced jazz but largely determined the music's subsequent history. The performances that first brought Armstrong to national attention enjoy a comparable reputation. Considered the peak of his career by many purists, Armstrong's recordings in the latter half of the 1920s with his Hot Five and Hot Seven have received similarly florid praise. Produced by small groups with shifting personnel and released initially as 78–rpm double-sided singles by Okeh Records, this music has been described as the birthplace of jazz, the musical shot heard 'round the world, the Alps of jazz—indeed, both the music's Holy Grail and its Rosetta Stone.

Surprisingly, in view of such profound critical admiration, the 2000 release of Columbia/Legacy's compilation *Louis Armstrong: The Complete Hot Five and Hot Seven Recordings* marks the first time an American-based record company has produced a full-blown CD box set of these landmark performances. While the recordings have been in print in various formats for many decades, the best CD collections have come from overseas, such as JSP Records' *Louis Armstrong: Hot Fives and Sevens* (JSP Records JSPLOUISBOX 100, 1999), which delivers excellent sound in a relatively spartan package. The first attempt by Columbia to digitally remaster this material in the late 1980s yielded disappointing results: individual discs that were marred by uneven sound, murky at times, shrill at others (Columbia release, seven volumes of the *Louis Armstrong Collection*, CK44049–44253–44422–45142–46148–46996–48828). But their new compilation disregards the old adage: here, the *second* time is a charm. Columbia/Legacy's lavish box set offers splendid sound, worthy of the music's significance.

By almost any measure, the Hot Five and Hot Seven records helped to change the course of American music. The performances captured on *Louis Armstrong: TCHFAHSR* chronicle the transformation of jazz from a collective endeavor toward an individual soloist's art, illustrated most indelibly by the virtuosic Armstrong. Jazz enthusiasts and fellow musicians were captivated by his remarkable cornet and trumpet playing, expressed in increasingly expansive solos that showcased his gift for improvisation, reflected a keen sense of musical drama, and extended the instrument's range and its typical mode of expression. Armstrong's singing became equally influential, inspiring generations of vocalists from Bing Crosby and Billie Holiday to Cassandra Wilson. All the while, these recordings display his unique sense of rhythmic timing. By pushing or tugging at the beat with either his horn or his husky voice, Armstrong, as Duke Ellington famously pronounced, taught the world to swing.

Released for his long centennial—the birthday Armstrong maintained, July 4, 1900, or the presently accepted date, August 4, 1901—*Louis Armstrong:*

TCHFAHSR was produced by the ultimate jazz aficionado, Phil Schaap, who deems Armstrong "the most important jazz musician on the face of the earth." Presented thematically rather than in absolutely strict chronological order, the four-disc set gathers every authenticated Hot Five and Hot Seven performance along with several dozen "attendant sides," which document Armstrong and his colleagues playing in other related ensembles between 1925 and 1929. Enthusiastic throughout, Schaap devotes several pages of liner notes to explain his selections, which encompass performances by the Hot Five and Hot Seven *and* singles released under either group's name, regardless of actual personnel. Bonus tracks feature Armstrong and friends moonlighting under the name Lill's Hot Shots for Vocalion Records, accompanying singers Hociel Thomas and Lillie Delk Christian, and recording as Johnny Dodds Black Bottom Stompers, a group considered to be the prototype for the Hot Seven. While most of the extra tunes have their merits, academic or aesthetic, early jazz buffs will especially enjoy the Stompers' alternate versions of "Melancholy." With respect to the bonus material, however, the contents are not quite as complete as advertised. Approaching the storage capacity of four CDs necessitated axing several additional sides with Christian, on which Armstrong's contributions originally went uncredited. Nor does the collection try to present a complete account of Armstrong's recording activity in this period, offering, for instance, only one of the sides he recorded with larger Chicago bands.

The eighty-nine tracks that made the cut sound terrific. While diehards claim that listening to original 78s cannot be matched, the audio reproduction delivered by *Louis Armstrong: TCHFAHSR* should delight today's digital consumer. Schaap and his team of engineers have managed to extract a remarkable amount of musical sound from the remaining original masters and original-pressing discs. Most tracks still contain surface noise—hiss, crackling, and so on—but the clarity improves measurably on later sessions, signaling Okeh's switch to electrical recording equipment. The sound is bright throughout, especially on the high end, which bolsters Armstrong's horn and Dodds's clarinet. Softer musical gestures are amplified as well, including Zutty Singleton's use of cymbals on "Sugar Foot Strut" and the lively strumming of guitarist Lonnie Johnson on "I'm Not Rough." The collection thus meets the high audio standards set by John R. T. Davies, who remastered most of the same material for JSP.

Further devotion has gone into Columbia/Legacy's sumptuous packaging. Designed like an old-fashioned picture album, the clothbound booklet embraces eighty-four pages of Armstrong-related material, ranging from historic New Orleans photos to candid vacation snapshots, from glossy promotional paraphernalia to informative business correspondence. Sprinkled with excerpts from Armstrong's memoirs, the product seeps nostalgia, which is reinforced by a consistent color scheme of black, tan, and sepia. The booklet's contents, however, also emphasize Armstrong's subsequent influence on jazz and world culture. The four written contributions include a history of the Hot Five and Hot Seven recordings by Phil Schaap; two essays by American studies professor Robert G. O'Meally that, respectively, gauge Armstrong's cultural impact and comment on selected tunes; and a brief piece by George

Akavian that fondly describes his acquaintance with Armstrong and the experience of reissuing his music.

Save for a handy photo gallery of selected musical collaborators, *Louis Armstrong: TCHFAHSR* focuses on Louis Armstrong, starting with the glossy cover photograph: an Okeh promotional shot of the stylish young musician, wearing a tux and carrying his horn. By slighting his musical colleagues, and mentors like Joe "King" Oliver, the Columbia/Legacy collection seeks to canonize Armstrong, promoting his solitary genius. Rather than comparing him to contemporary musicians, the box set draws parallels between Armstrong's "classical American art" and the enduring accomplishments of creative luminaries like Geoffrey Chaucer and Thomas Edison. In this light, the inclusion of a four-second track of silence at the end of each disc, which allows savvy audiophiles to program long pauses between songs, encourages listeners to adopt refined listening practices, savoring individual tunes like fine cognac. Yet, at the same time, the essays by Schaap and O'Meally, while full of admiration for Armstrong's classic feats, also reveal how increased awareness of the cultural context surrounding these recordings deepens our understanding and appreciation.

Focusing squarely upon the different incarnations of the Hot Five and Hot Seven, Phil Schaap documents the nuts and bolts of each studio session, every change in personnel, and the varied marketing strategies employed by Okeh and their eventual parent company, Columbia. While his adoration for Satchmo comes across clearly, Schaap's record-centered account also places Armstrong's achievement in stark relief against the backdrop of the music industry. His overview of these recordings contains both broad historical information for a general audience and intriguing minutiae for record hounds. The delicate task of writing for two readerships, however, is not always well served by his lofty tone. In a passage that might not convince either group, he declares that certain details "may be utter quicksand to the lay person. But the cognoscenti and the enthusiast will grok the truth of every Talmudic exegesis and delineation, even unto its innermost parts." In addition to a few small errors of exaggeration involving the uniqueness of this compilation (e.g., JSP's collection *also* features both takes of "I Can't Give You Anything but Love"), Schaap's quest for definitive answers sometimes generates new questions. For instance, due to the belief that "Cornet Chop Suey" was released originally at the wrong speed (playing back in E major), the collection presents the song twice, at two new tempos. Schaap claims to be "secure in the belief" that the faster version (in F) is "indeed correct," but nevertheless includes a slower rendition (in E flat), favored by other experts. Unfortunately, the rationale behind advocating any particular version is left unspecified. These minor points aside, Schaap's recording history is comprehensive, detailed, and commendable.

As befits such a gifted writer, who currently serves as director of the Center for Jazz Studies at Columbia University, Robert G. O'Meally's essay is a joy to read. Loath to recycle tired clichés, he describes Armstrong as "the Prometheus who stole the molten fire of improvised soloing from the gods and delivered it to the mortals." His comments are not to be dismissed as elegant hyperbole; on the contrary, his pose is both evocative and provoca-

tive. In addition to providing brief commentary on nine selected tunes, O'Meally contributes a valuable, impassioned treatment of Armstrong's lasting influence on American music and culture. Signaling the extent to which scholarly notions have been revised over the past few decades, his essay gives nearly equal weight to Armstrong's trumpet playing and his singing, gladly frames him as both an entertainer and an artist, and frankly addresses how Armstrong, an African American musician working in predominantly white America, attempted to negotiate issues of race and representation in his public and private life. Unsatisfied with simply celebrating jazz as a timeless art, O'Meally places Armstrong within a modernist pantheon, next to Picasso, Stein, Joyce, and more. Stacking his achievements against these artistic contemporaries threatens to detach Armstrong from his immediate surroundings, but O'Meally gestures toward at least two ways that modernism might be linked to Armstrong's lived experience. To explain his characterization of Armstrong as a beacon of modernism, O'Meally describes his music as offering "not merely a reflection of the modern world" but also "an encoded strategy for *surviving* modern times." In this way he suggests how one might connect Armstrong's life and music, a link that grows stronger when listening to the performances on *Louis Armstrong: TCHFAHSR*, while bearing in mind the conditions under which they were made in 1920s Chicago.

Brought together to produce records for the city's burgeoning black population, the Hot Five first entered Okeh's Chicago studio on November 12, 1925. Named as leader, Louis Armstrong was joined by trombonist Kid Ory, Johnny Dodds on clarinet and alto sax, banjoist Johnny St. Cyr, and Lillian Hardin Armstrong, Louis's second wife, on piano and occasional vocals. Okeh originally intended to produce symphonic jazz along the lines of Paul Whiteman's Orchestra, but the final product presented a New Orleans–style quintet that incorporated the latest urban musical touches, as Brian Harker's dissertation documents in fine detail ("The Early Musical Development of Louis Armstrong, 1901–1928," Columbia University, 1997). Although the band performed together in public only twice, they were already familiar with one another either from down South—on their first single, "Gut Bucket Blues," Armstrong announces, "everybody from New Orleans can really do that thing"—or from gigs on Chicago's South Side. Once they became accustomed to Okeh's acoustic recording setup, these skilled musicians wasted little time on fancy arrangements, extensive rehearsals, or more than a few takes. While Louis coordinated the order of soloists and Lil copied out difficult passages, the music was not intricately planned. Baby Dodds later recalled that Armstrong preferred a collaborative process, encouraging everyone to offer ideas, thus granting each musician substantial leeway along with significant responsibility. The band's efficiency also reflected their means of compensation: a small, fixed sum for each finished master disc. According to a letter reproduced in the booklet for *Louis Armstrong: TCHFAHSR*, by 1927, the band shared $150 per accepted selection, the final verdict made by Okeh executives who otherwise adopted a hands-off policy in creative matters. Like most of their contemporaries, Armstrong and his colleagues chose to sell their tunes outright, so they earned no royalties.

The Hot Five's music was not designed initially with Louis Armstrong at

the center. Kid Ory and Lil Hardin Armstrong contribute almost as many solos on the early records, while Johnny Dodds nearly doubles his output. But *Louis Armstrong: TCHFAHSR* makes clear how quickly Armstrong began to outdistance many of his colleagues. Even on titles that suggest otherwise, like "Ory's Creole Trombone," it is Armstrong's entrances that provide a special lift. Only a few could match his pace, most notably Dodds on tunes like "Weary Blues" and pianist Earl Hines, who joined a new Hot Five lineup in 1928 and interweaved famously with Armstrong on "Skip the Gutter" and "Weather Bird," among others. Because of his musical growth and widening popularity, Armstrong moved to the forefront over the course of the Hot Five and Seven sessions. Instead of settling for a single solo, he began to dominate these recordings, occupying center stage through spoken banner, multiple breaks, vocal choruses, and extended solos. His most celebrated instrumental passages sound dazzling here, from the inspired lines that dance on top of stop-time chords in "Potato Head Blues" to his majestic playing throughout "West End Blues." Moreover, the collection duly rewards listeners who explore its entirety. In one of the more remarkable moments, Armstrong sounds on "Muggles" as if he were testing the water in a pool filled with rhythm, his spare horn solo distilling the essence of swing with slight variations of just a few notes.

Until recently, Armstrong scholarship has focused on his trumpet-playing, but to neglect the human voice would short-change more than half of *Louis Armstrong: TCHFAHSR*, encompassing blues shouts, scatting, comic routines, and much more. Armstrong sings on nearly thirty tracks, the band accompanies vocalists on a dozen more, and spoken introductions and interludes surface throughout. Indeed, it was Armstrong's scat singing that produced the group's first hit, "Heebie Jeebies." As clarinetist Mezz Mezzrow later recounted, Chicagoans would greet each other accordingly—one yelling "I got the heebies," the other responding "I got the jeebies"—before breaking into renditions of the song. Armstrong's voice quickly became widely known, as made clear by three tracks—included on this set—which the Hot Five recorded in 1926 for Vocalion as Lill's Hot Shots. Okeh's company president summoned Armstrong to his office, the story goes, and played the record "Georgia Bo Bo," after which Armstrong is said to have remarked, "I don't know who that is singing, but I won't do it again." Of course, he did sing over and over again, as long as it was for Okeh. Although this compilation does not feature the illustrious blues women whom Armstrong accompanied several years earlier—in place of Sippie Wallace, her less-accomplished niece, Hociel Thomas—their music permeates his repertoire. Armstrong's frank expression of his physical needs in "I'm Not Rough" calls to mind another track on this compilation, sung by the risqué duo Butterbeans & Susie, who get along perfectly because, it turns out, they both "like it slow." Drawing upon the earthiness of the blues and the sentiment of popular song, Armstrong's flexible voice delivered a wide range of performances: compare the rough-and-tumble approach of "Gully Low Blues," the virtuosic scatting in "Hotter Than That," and the warm, comforting vocals for "I Can't Give You Anything but Love," which prelude the decades to come.

Since tools for editing recorded sound were not yet invented, occasionally

the performances on *Louis Armstrong: TCHFAHSR* contain audible flubs and missed notes, giving the proceedings an air of informality and mortal imperfection. The budding technology also fostered a sense of playfulness, heard in barely rehearsed skits and humorous musical effects, and an openness toward experimentation, which led to constant opportunities for musical improvisation. The rarity of alternate versions—since engineers normally wiped the recording drum clean between takes—might contribute to a false impression that all of this music was hastily written or completely improvised. Conversely, although Armstrong and other band members did quickly compose many songs for upcoming studio dates, the song "Cornet Chop Suey" was copyrighted several years prior to recording, while others were part of their standard working repertoire. Listeners interested in issues of improvisation may find intriguing the close resemblances between "S.O.L. Blues" and "Gully Low Blues," songs that were recorded a day apart but feature a common structure and remarkably similar solos. The set also contains an alternate version of the 1929 big band tune, "I Can't Give You Anything but Love." Comparing it with the original may take some doing, however, since the audio quality of the alternate track suggests it was recorded on a flatbed truck driving down a gravel road.

What we can hear much more clearly throughout *Louis Armstrong: TCHFAHSR*, as O'Meally asserts persuasively, are sounds that tell us "how it felt to be human at the time and place when the language of jazz was being created." Echoes of Chicago in the 1920s reverberate, evoking the bustling city to which hundreds of thousands of African Americans moved during the Great Migration. Although this compilation does not encompass the full range of music that band members were making—including show tunes, pop songs, symphonic jazz, and classical music—many songs directly reflect an urban environment. For instance, the lively cross-rhythms of "Struttin' with Some Barbecue" project urban swagger while commemorating Armstrong's favorite rib joint. Another tune, "A Monday Date," mentions Mrs. Searcy, a well-known Windy City bootlegger, serving as a reminder that all of this music was recorded during the Prohibition Era. Chicago's notoriety as a hotbed for entertainment continues to resound in titles like "Sunset Café Stomp," named for a local nightclub. Likewise, to attract local consumers, Okeh once exploited the popularity of a Chicago dancehall by marketing the band as the "Savoy Ballroom Five." By any name, the group's music held special appeal for urban black audiences, as Armstrong's lyrics often addressed themes shared by his fellow emigrants. For instance, "Gully Low Blues" tells the story of a country boy who hopes to repair a relationship with a city girl, while the protagonist of "Lonesome Blues" implores a long-distance beloved, "won't you write me?" The arresting song, "That's When I'll Come Back to You," models a more troubling relationship. Here, Lil Armstrong's fragile voice sings to Louis: "You can knock me down, [treat] me rough, and even kick me / Black both my eyes, but, daddy, please don't quit me." While it would be irresponsible to characterize such gender relations as characteristic of or historically unique to the 1920s, the existence of these sentiments indicates how much cultural information resides within the gritty blues songs of that era.

Traditional jazz narratives about Louis Armstrong have downplayed such moments, partially due to disturbing content but more broadly because of

what vocals often have come to represent: an unwanted intrusion that detracts from Armstrong's instrumental prowess. Undoubtedly, it is difficult to correlate early vocal material with typical portraits of Armstrong that extol his untarnished genius as a young trumpeter and frown upon his subsequent commercial success as a popular entertainer. As evidenced by O'Meally's overview, however, the conventional stance has been dislodged to some degree over the last few decades, thanks to thorough reexaminations of his musical career. On the one hand, as Gary Giddins has eloquently argued, any worthwhile jazz aesthetics must be able to embrace Armstrong whole. Accordingly, recent years have yielded the first-rate collection, *Louis Armstrong: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, 1923–1934* (Columbia/Legacy C4K 57176, 1994), which includes twenty-nine Hot Five and Hot Seven tunes and positions them between earlier material and later popular recordings, as well as *Jazz*, the 2000 documentary series by Ken Burns, which stars Armstrong in a central (some would say *too* central) role in the 1920s, 1930s, and beyond. Such projects have redrawn the contours of Armstrong's long, productive life. On the other hand, *Louis Armstrong: TCHFAHSR* already provides overwhelming evidence of his crowd-pleasing flair in the 1920s. In addition to his brilliant horn solos, Armstrong performs dance numbers, sings novelty tunes, acts in vaudeville send-ups, scats joyously, and shouts the blues. Furthermore, the box set manages to tell a partial history of early commercial recording: making audible the transition from acoustic to electrical recording, reproducing rare source material, and offering Schaap's discussion of record production and marketing practices. Consequently, the rich documentation and sonic evidence on this compilation firmly bind Armstrong and his colleagues to the commercial music industry and reflect their ongoing interactions with the world of popular entertainment.

As a result of its thoughtful presentation along with its admirable restoration of sound, *Louis Armstrong: The Complete Hot Five and Hot Seven Recordings* was awarded the 2000 Grammy for Best Historical Album and selected as the year's finest reissue by the Jazz Journalists Association. Since recording compilations have come to function as digitized monuments in today's music libraries, this box set should quickly assume a prominent place in every comprehensive collection of American music. Music students, and other first-time listeners, will enjoy this valuable introduction to early jazz as well as its gorgeous appearance, which makes Columbia/Legacy's product the most attractive compilation available today. Current owners of equally well remastered collections, like the set from JSP, are advised, however, to weigh their purchasing decision as much on Columbia/Legacy's elegant packaging as on the bonus musical tracks it contains. Because Armstrong recorded prodigiously over the years and several record companies own the rights to his music today, it is unlikely that a fully comprehensive Armstrong compilation will be released for many years to come. In the meantime, we can hope that producers planning to document other rich episodes of Armstrong's career, perhaps looking back to his earlier work as an accompanist for blues singers or forward through his years recording for Decca, will furnish their projects with the same blend of care, precision, and style displayed here.

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