

*August 2- 4,  
2001, New  
Orleans  
went festive  
with the cel-  
ebration of  
the 100th  
birthday of  
Louis  
Armstrong.*

# REMEMBERING SATCHMO

by Niyi Osundare

LIKE JAZZ, THE MUSIC WHICH GAVE HIM FAME, WEALTH, AND A measure of immortality, Louis 'Satchmo' Armstrong rose from grass to grace. Born in New Orleans by a prostitute mother and a father he hardly knew, Armstrong was arrested and sent to the Colored Waif's Home for firing a pistol at the age of 12. Fortuitously enough, it was at this remand home that the man who would become the world's most famous jazz trumpeter encountered his first 'run in' with the bugle. He went through a rapid apprenticeship, distinguished himself by the authentic virtuosity of his style, then moved 'up north' to Chicago and New York where he captured the ears of the world. Once dismissed as 'nigger noise' and the raucous pastime of those who didn't know what to do with the second-hand trumpets in their hands, jazz fought through its way by a dint of inimitable spontaneity and seamless inventiveness. It was soulcry and wail, a zestful deconstruction of existing music



forms with a polyphony and bravura, leisured craft, and literate orality.

What would New Orleans have been without jazz, and what would jazz have been without Louis Armstrong? Perhaps more than any other musician, Armstrong pushed back the frontiers of jazz, snatched it from dingy street corners, placed it in glittering halls before pundits and potentates, subverted the rigidity of ideological walls with its power, left its soundprints for ever in the wind. For over four decades he commanded the world's attention with his croaky voice, liberal smile, and that patented white handkerchief which fluttered joyously to the wind of his horn. He redefined rhythm and added a loop to the swing. From spirits like Armstrong, the world came to know that jazz is not just music. It is the muse of suffering and perseverance, the triumph of freedom over bondage, a pean to the irrepressibility of the human spirit.

So when New Orleans rolled out the drums from August 2 - 4, 2001 in celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Louis Armstrong, it did more than celebrate a man; it celebrated its own flair and flaws, its vigorous if sometimes contentious diversity, its sense of itself. Dubbed 'Satchmo SummerFest', the festivities involved an array of activities and events ranging from Jazz Mass to jazz parade, from museum exhibits to a taste of New Orleans cooking (complete with a 'red beans and rice mosaic workshop'). In a typically New Orleans style there was an exuberant trooping of colors, generous bonhomie, a lot of dancing in the streets and at the Old US Mint on Esplanade Avenue, venue of most of the festival's events. While revelers held sway in the bright summer sun outside, a series of activities took place within the walls. Tagged 'Informances and Seminars', these activities explored the astounding dimensions of Louis Armstrong, the power and reach of jazz, and the central place of New Orleans in the emergence of this important music form.

The seminars provided a forum for toasts and tributes by city politicians and university professors, jazz historians and veteran musicians, some of whom actually played in Satchmo's famous All Stars band. There were poignant reminiscences, testimonies and observations, some of which we have already encountered in the many books on Armstrong and the history of jazz, but quite a number of which struck the audience as fresh and helpfully authoritative, coming as they did from those directly involved with the art and business of jazz in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The panel titled 'Ambassador Satch: An Agent for Change' had New Orleans Mayor Marc Morial and prominent



The legendary Louis Armstrong on his 'return' to Africa in 1956 is greeted in Ghana by comedian Ajax Bukana and highlife trumpeter E.T. Mensah(left)

A page from drum magazine, Ghana edition, 1961

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jazz historians exploring the impact of Armstrong as 'a world figure, humanitarian and virtuoso', while most of the other panels concentrated on 'Memories of Louis Armstrong'. In one of these panels, Phoebe Jacobs, Vice President of the Armstrong Foundation and close friend of the Armstrong family, described Armstrong as a gift to music and human culture, a natural, accommodating man who lived a humble and modest life despite his fame and wealth. Her co-panelist, David Gold, founder of the Louis Armstrong Jazz Institute at Columbia University, spoke of the need to put jazz in the classroom, to "teach teachers how to teach youngsters what jazz is all about". He regarded Armstrong as a hard worker, consummate artist, a natural human being, a "gentle soul in a rough world" who made you feel easy in his presence.

The next session featured interviews with 'stars and legends' of the Satchmo era": Joe Muranyi who played the clarinet for the Armstrong band, Franz Jackson who handled the tenor sax, and Arvell Shaw





who played the bass guitar. Each of these eminent veterans had something valuable to say about Armstrong the band leader and the man, but the most dramatic account came from Arvell Shaw who was discovered in his native St. Louis by a touring Armstrong, recruited for two weeks as replacement for an absent band member, but ended up as the band's bass guitarist for 25 years! He was with the band when Armstrong took jazz beyond the 'iron curtain' and thrilled large audiences in East Berlin; he was there when they played in the Congo (shortly after the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the country's first Prime Minister). Armstrong "made the City of New Orleans known to the world", Shaw declared, "he made more friends than any U.S. politician or diplomat".

Arvell Shaw's views and reminiscences resonated melodiously in the preoccupations of the next session fascinatingly titled 'Two Jazz Guys and a Thousand Jazz Stories'. The two 'guys' here were Herman Leonard, the famed jazz photographer, and Frank Tenot, a French publisher, who both rendered striking testimonies about Armstrong and the music form he has made so irresistibly popular. The French are not only "crazy about jazz", Herman Leonard confirmed, they were, indeed, "the first to take jazz seriously". Leonard who said he first photographed Armstrong in Birdland, New York, in 1958, told the audience about the trumpeter's quiet, contemplative off-stage moments, declaring quite frankly: "These are the moments I like to photograph". Frank Tenot's testimo-

nies were no less unstinting: "Louis Armstrong changed my life. The man is for me a godfather".

The Armstrong celebration moved on to the Lakefront Arena of the University of New Orleans on Saturday August 4. Highly publicized and meticulously organized, the Lakefront show, no doubt the *grande finale* to a week of tremendous festivities, unfolded under the title 'Satchmo to Marsalis: A Tribute to the Fathers of Jazz'. And what a night of continuities and departures, of nostalgic endings and bold beginnings! Organized by the University of New Orleans whose Jazz Studies Program is one of the most valuable initiatives of its kind in the United States, the event of August 4 celebrated Louis Armstrong whose remarkable life commenced at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the inimitable Marsalis family well poised to take jazz to fabulous frontiers on this threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup>. Ellis Marsalis, undoubtedly the most phenomenal 'Jazz Father' in the world, played publicly (for the very first time?) with his sons Wynton, Branford, Delfeayo, and Jason, and with Harry Connick Jr, a spectacular performer and former student of his. A truly memorable night for Ellis who was described by University of New Orleans, Chancellor, Dr. Gregory O'Brien, as "the greatest jazz teacher in history." It is a measure of that greatness that, as he retires from the leadership of the university's Jazz Studies Program this year, he will be succeeded by Terence Blanchard, his former student, and noted jazz trumpeter and composer.

August 2001 was surely Louis Armstrong's month in New Orleans. Satchmo's copious talents and distinctive virtuosity gave the city an opportunity to take another look at itself, its boundless possibilities and avoidable failings. For, the truth be told, the Armstrong who placed New Orleans on the world map had an uneasy relationship with the city of his birth, especially its withering racism and segregationist practices. But times do change even if slowly and, at times, imperceptibly. The city which did nothing to preserve the signposts of Armstrong's life, the city which once ignored and spurned his achievements marked his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday by naming its airport after him – an honor usually reserved for Presidents and other powerful figures. In many ways, the 2001 Satchmo Summerfest was both celebration and atonement. GR