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Why is it that we are still talking about Louis Armstrong, almost 100 years after his birth?

Oh, man. I think the true, profoundly intellectual contribution of Louis Armstrong has not been fully understood by the general public. Here's this wonderful, warm, avuncular guy who's known to the people around the world as the guy who sang, "Hello, Dolly," smiling and laughing. But it reminds of a story of a, Freeman Dyson said about the physicist Richard Fineman. He said when he first met him he thought he was half genius and half buffoon. But after knowing him for a long time he realized he was all genius and all buffoon. And people, people expect art to be serious and, and dry and something, whereas Louis' art is as deep and as profound as any art that's ever been on earth. And yet it's, it's an art of joy and, human experience embodied. So, and yet I think at the same time Louis was just part of the intellectual trend that was going on in other, in the arts and in the sciences. He was the first person to embody abstraction musically. Other people used abstraction in music, but over time. Composers would sit down and take an idea and toy with it over time, but Louis could spontaneously take a melody and abstract it, that is remove all the unessentials from this melody and be left with just this pure vision of what the melody could be. And this is of course an idea that has been the grist for jazz musicians since that, since that time. And it can all be traced back to Louis, this idea of abstracting a melody.

You had a quote about they say that all philosophy...

Oh, yeah. I think it was Alfred North Whitehead, a philosopher, said that all of Western philosophy can be reduced to commentary on Plato. You can say that all of western philosophy is merely commentary on Plato. Well it's absolutely true that all of jazz is commentary on Louie Armstrong. And you can show specific examples of this when you listen to the Miles Davis of "The

Kind of Blue" album, the way he plays on "So What." Ba, ba, boo, boom, boo, boo, bee, bum, bee, bum, bum. Boo, boo... a simple melody that a, an initial motif is developed over time. That idea comes from Louis, and Miles himself said, "You cannot play anything on a trumpet that Louie Armstrong, Louie Armstrong did not play already." If you listen to his, the, the most profound advances that Louie Armstrong made were in the area of rhythm. Jazz is the ultimate temporal artform. Music is a temporal artform, but jazz is ultimately the temporal artform. And it's about the human experience of time. How is time embodied? So you listen to Louis playing a quarter note, and suddenly your whole experience of that day has changed. You hear him playing this one quarter note, and time is not moving along in the way that it normally moves along. And if you listen to modern jazz, it's taken sixty years for Louis' idea of sophisticated polyrhythm to meld down into the jazz rhythm section, that is into the drums and the base. When Louis was playing, he sounded like he came from Mars. He's playing the most sophisticated things imaginable and the other guys are playing very, what sounds now very dated. Louis' music never sounds dated, but the bands that he played with often did. But now sixty years later you have bands that are finally absorbed his messages, his ideas rhythmically. And that's still, this is still what jazz musicians are working on, sixty years after his main recordings.

That's terrific. Can you imagine a moment in Denmark — what's this story?

Well, all of us have had these epochal moments where you, you see your, you see something or you hear some music and your life is changed forever. For me, it was seeing a film on television of Louie Armstrong playing in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1933, playing the tune "Dinah." He is absolutely on fire, unbelievable. And, and his solo on "Dinah" is a, is a perfect example of this abstraction. And it occurred to me that it was possible and no one will tell me otherwise, it's a fantasy that I treasure, that Werner Heisenberg could have been in the audience in Copenhagen in 1933. He lived in Copenhagen at that time, and in 1933 he won the Nobel prize for his work on quantum mechanics. And I've always had this fantasy that he and a couple of other scientists after a hard day of work on quantum mechanics went out that night, heard Louie Armstrong, and were completely blown away, and realized that in a completely different idiom, he embodied everything that they were working on. Profound new ideas about time, space and human, the human place in the cosmos. And they saw Louis playing and they thought, "Wow, that's it." In a language utterly different than their scientific language.

And yet it's the same... a modern response, this is the story of modernism.

If you look at these paintings by Mondrian, when he started out painting a bridge when he was a young man, it looked like a bridge. You see it, it's a bridge. Then gradually over time, he would remove elements from that picture of the bridge, remove more elements, boil these elements down until,

until there was just a gesture of a bridge, until the 1930's you would just see two lines in space. And, and Louis I'm sure was not thinking, "Oh, my God, I've got to do something just like Mondrian on the trumpet." But innately he was. Somehow these ideas were in the cosmos, and I personally would rather hear Louie communicate these ideas than anybody else, either Hizenberg or Mondrian or anybody. Because for him, these ideas are embodied, experienced and can be communicated in an embodied and experiential kind of way.

I wanna just talk a little bit about Einstein, because I really think the greatest parallel between Armstrong is with Louis, is, is with Albert Einstein. First of all, there are these obvious parallels that both of them were founders of new ways of looking at the world. Louis Armstrong founded jazz phrasing, a new way of experiencing time. And, and Albert Einstein founded the theory of relativity. They were thought of by the general public in similar kinds of ways. They were avuncular, warm people who were known all over the world. I mean, Albert Einstein was known by everyone, even people who had no idea of what his theories were about. And they generally liked him, they liked his vibe. He was a warm, kind of strange-looking kind of guy who smiled alot. Louis Armstrong was known all over the world by people who had no real interest in jazz, as this incredibly warm communicator of joy, even if they didn't know exactly why he should be so famous. So on, on that obvious level there's some relationship to them. But it occurred to me that there are a number of components that people commonly understand to be part of the theory of relativity. And one of those is that as you move closer to the speed of light, time slows down. So it occurred to me once while listening to a Louie Armstrong solo that he embodied this aspect of, of the theory of relativity. The faster the music would go, the more Louie sounded utterly at ease and utter, utterly relaxed. And you can actually do an experiment, what Einstein called "gedanken experiments," thought experiments. If you imagine all of the music removed except Louie's playing. And when you're left with just Louie's playing, what you have is freedom and eternity and rest. It's a paradox of music that music is both about being and becoming and music is the ultimate art of change and becoming. And yet at the same time, Louis' playing embodied being, just eternity, there is no time. And, and the faster the music went, the more Louis sounded relaxed.

He had slowed down time..

He had slowed, I think so. I really think so.

Say it again.

Somehow in his gut he was able to make time stop. And I think that's true for all great musicians, but no one more so than Louis Armstrong. That the faster the music went, the more it sounded like he was utterly at peace and utterly at ease. It's an extraordinary thing, really extraordinary.

Do you feel there's a connection between Einstein and Armstrong?

I've always felt that there's this connection between Louis Armstrong and Albert Einstein. And there's a connection between them on a variety of levels. They both initiated radical changes in human thought in their particular fields. Armstrong in music and Einstein in physics. Also paradoxically enough, they both, although they started these revolutionary schools, they both were kind of left behind by the, by their progeny. That is, Einstein never really got on board with quantum mechanics. He would say to Nils Bohr, "I refuse to believe that God plays dice with the universe." And Nils Bohr would say, "Stop telling God what to do." And Louis Armstrong, who really gave birth to bebop, essentially in his solo on "Ding Dong Daddy from Dumas," he plays da, da, doop, da, doop, da, dap, do, dat, salt peanuts, which became the theme of Dizzy Gillespie. But he never really dug bebop, and the beboppers never realized their incredible debt to Armstrong.

Was there another scientific thing you wanted to throw out?

Yeah, I read a book by James Gliche called *Chaos*, which is about complexity theory and the Mandelbrot set. And it proves that in a finite space you can have infinite detail. And when I was listening to Louis play, I thought, "This is it. One note of Louis Armstrong is a finite amount of time." It takes place in three seconds, but there's an infinite amount of detail in that one note, it's complexity embodied.

I think we needed Louis Armstrong to get through this century. Do we need him?

I, you know, I'm just very happy to be on earth when there is Louis Armstrong. People try to imagine what it was like to be on earth before Mozart. Mozart's music is so important to us. Try to imagine what it was like to be on earth before Louis Armstrong. It has meant so much to so many people, his music. It is, he makes people happy. I can't imagine a higher calling in life than that, I, I, I can't imagine a higher calling than making people feel joy.

Rolling sound. (Louis Armstrong playing)

Okay. So the saxophones come in playing the melody, really corny. And he's like coddling them, condescending, "Uh huh, yeah." Yeah. Sure. Like you would say to an insane person or something. They're playing the melody in a very stiff, old fashioned kind of way. And then Louis comes in to show them a new way to play melody. Articulated, completely free rhythmically, boiled down to one note, abstracted. Free, no time. All one note, he's boiled down this complex melody to its essential impulse. Just to a triad--one, three and five, everything's boiled down. Then he decides to go improvise. A phrase that would be appropriated by the beboppers. And you can tell he's swinging, you know, like he would say, "Boy, am I riffing this evening, I hope."

So they're, they're playing fast, it sounds like they're nervous, it sounds like they're having a hard time coping with this fast tempo. The hectic nature of the modern world it, it's, it's change and, they're after him. The temporal nature of the modern world, but he's ready and now there's gonna be no time when he comes in suddenly, just one note. Free. Completely relaxed. Floating above this. It sounds like an aria. Da. So this is a new way to experience the modern world in all of its hectic movement. It's like the platonic world has entered for a moment into the modern world. Just relaxation and freedom and jazz has been dealing with this concept since Louie made this record. I mean it's still to this day, now drummers and base players and everyone can get into that groove. In those days, he was the only guy to have this idea.

Is this about the slowing down of the tempo...

Albert Einstein says as you get closer to the speed of light, the faster you go, the more time slows down. And if you could actually get to the speed of light, there'd be no time. You'd stop and, and Louie had figured that out in his gut some way. The faster you go, the more relaxed you can be. Just relaxed, holding a note forever, no time, you know. That's the idea of that.

What is it about jazz. Why is it different and why do we like it?

Well there are eight hundred levels on which you can answer that question. I mean on a sociological level, it's democracy writ small. It's an amazing experiment in democracy. Let's say in a traditional five piece group, everyone's interacting, everyone has their voice. Louis Armstrong has brought forward this idea of the individual soloist. Prior to that, jazz was not about the individual soloist as much. So you have five people all prepared to be the individual soloist yet all prepared to work together in a group. I mean, if corporations could be run like a jazz group, we'd have no problem. So from a sociological standpoint it's clearly revolutionary. But I think from an intellectual standpoint, I mean there's no frame that's big enough to encompass everything that jazz has to teach us. That's what I think, at least.

What is it teaching us?

Well, I'm most interested in the metaphysical lessons about rhythm and. You know, being a musician is an interesting thing because music is one of the few things that involves your body, your emotions, your mind and your spirit, all operating simultaneously. It's hard to think of other things. You're playing, your body is involved. You're feeling emotions, you want to express something emotionally. Your mind is active, it's constructing structures over the chord changes of this particular tune. And your spirit, it's a, if your, it's a prayerful kind of thing, so in that sense it's a very rare gift to be a musician, to be able to spontaneously as a jazz musician have conversations with other

people in which all of the parts of themselves are embodied and happening at the same time. It, it's pretty amazing.

What is the difference between jazz and all other music?

Well, one interesting difference that I think leaves a lot of people in the dust is this. Especially nowadays, all jazz musicians are referring to something that no one is playing. It's a hidden art in a way, because everyone is referring to a melody and no one is playing that melody. When you're playing "How High the Moon," no one's actually playing the melody of "How High the Moon," but everyone is referring to it obliquely in some way. They're improvising off of that melody. So in all other styles of music, what you see is what you get. A equals A. When you play Mozart's symphony, you play the score of the Mozart symphony, there's no hidden agenda. But in jazz, there's all this stuff that's not being played that's crucially important to the enjoyment of the music. That's why when you, the, the hipper listener you are, the more appreciation you will get out of a performance. When people quote another tune, the more in tunes you know, the more likely you are gonna be to, to dig what quote they're making. And the more hip you are to other performances of the same tune, you'll know that someone's referring to an earlier performance. So it's a very, it's almost like an, an, an initiatory artform. The more you are initiated, the more you can appreciate it. But of course even without any initiation there's still tremendous joy and happiness to be found in this. But...

What can people without experience be drawn to with this music-- what is it that they're being drawn to?

Well, the creation of beautiful new melodies. The unbelievable compelling nature of swing, which is never to be used up. An infinite reservoir of rhythmic joy. That's something that everyone can appreciate. And you know Louis was a guy who wanted people to feel happy. He didn't, even though he was playing stuff that from an intellectual standpoint was at the highest level of composition, he wanted people to feel happy. He wanted to make people feel happy, and people felt happy when he played. I mean that's the bottom line. When you're lying on your deathbed, you don't want to be challenged by great intellectual this or that. You just want to feel something profoundly joyful and I hope that jazz has not lost touch with, with that ethos of Louis Armstrong.

Tell me about "Tickle Toe" and Lester Young.

You know they, you can think of all artists as either Apollonian or Dionysian, as minimalists or maximalists. Louis Armstrong was the, Lester Young was the great minimalist of, of jazz. He was like Emily Dickinson or Paul Klee. He was the ultimate exponent of Achebe's razor in jazz. That is, do not multiply elements needlessly when fewer will do. So he was an incredibly gentle man with a language all his own that only a few people really understood of, an

actual verbal language all his own. And a beautiful soul, unbelievably beautiful soul. And he was the, the great improviser between Louis Armstrong and Charley Parker. And it really a transmitter into the bebop school of the lessons of Louis Armstrong. Charley Parker was known to practice some of these Lester Young solos at twice speed to warm up on "Shoeshine Boy" and "Tickle Toes" an interesting solo because it starts (vocalizes). Now, in those few bars, what he did is so amazingly prescient and he was one of the few jazz musician who could change your feeling about what had happened in the past by what he played at, in the present. That is, when you heard him play something you would reevaluate what had gone before it. So he plays, ya, ba da ba dap do boo dee. dap dob bo dee, dope do boo die, he uses this motif to start his solo, but he uses the motif in his break. Normally that little two bar break is something that people would just throw away, little, some little flashy little idea. But Lester initiated a compositional idea and then used it to develop his whole solo. There's a story about Lester which is very interesting that when he played in a club for three or four nights in a row, he would play a ballad let's say. And the first night he would play the melody of the song and a few choruses of improvising. Apparently on the second night of the gig, he would start that tune by playing his first course of improvisation from the previous night, and then develop more ideas. And then the third night of the gig, he would start from the second chorus of the first night and develop his ideas. So you have this sense then of a long arch of improvising ideas that take place over time. Not just for that one night, but some ideas that he's been working on for years and decades and it's like whenever he puts his saxophone in his mouth, he continues that conversation with himself that's been going on for decades.

Sonny Rollins.

People have really underestimated the intellectual achievement of jazz and the, what it tells us about the human mind and how capacious the human mind is. And for me, Sonny Rollins is a prime example of this. I went to see him play a couple of years ago, on the Saturday night before Easter Sunday. And I went to see the late show and he was playing, it was around a quarter to eleven, quarter to twelve, he started to play his main favorite theme songs, "Saint Thomas." And he's improvising on it. He's renowned for playing solos that go on for half, if he, if he's turned on, he'll play a solo that goes on for half an hour. He's playing, improvising just the most magnificent stuff you've ever heard. At exactly ten seconds to midnight, I hear, amidst his soloing, he plays (vocalizes "In Your Easter Bonnet"), back to "St. Thomas." The piano player cracks up, a few people crack up. He had quoted, "With your Easter bonnet, with all the frills upon it," at exactly midnight, that is exactly the time it had turned into Easter Sunday, he quoted "Easter bonnet." I mean, what kind, after playing a solo for fifteen minutes, what kind of mind does this tell us about? Isn't that the most unbelievable thing you've ever heard? He could quote, he could reference any theme he had ever heard in his life, immediately interpolate it into his solo. That shows that

his mind could cast a net wider than anything we presently have a theory to explain, I think, you know.

Does he remind you of anyone?

I would put him in the same category as Walt Whitman or Jackson Pollock, these grandiose American guys who liked lists and liked chaos and liked energy, just liked vital energy, expanding beyond bounds. Kind of the Dionysian opposite of Lester Young, who liked balance and restraint and delicacy. Not that Sonny Rollins couldn't be delicate, but he plays these solos. I have a record of him playing three little words and he plays this tune for thirty-five minutes. It's a live, it's a live record, bootleg, and he plays three little words for thirty-five minutes without his inspiration flagging for one moment. It's just, it's mind-boggling. And swinging, you know, his, he is one of those heirs of Louis Armstrong that embody the idea that you don't need pitches to play jazz, you just need...

I think Sonny Rollins was one of the heirs to Louie Armstrong who understood that pitches are not centrally important in jazz, rhythm is, and that he could play a solo using one pitch that would swing so violently you couldn't believe it, and would be so inventive. There's no end to what you can do with rhythm. You know a lot of these rhythmic ideas come out of African traditions, of what's called polyrhythm, which is a complicated word which just means two different rhythms going on simultaneously. Now this was not something that jazz could have gotten from Western classical music because it didn't exist in Western classical music. There's a harmonic basis of jazz that you can say, can be found in Western classical music. But polyrhythm is something utterly alien to the Western tradition. And to fuse polyrhythm with complex harmony is this, is an amazing achievement of jazz. So for, the basic idea of polyrhythm is two, two things happening at the same time as three things are happening. So you can say, "Hot cup of tea, hot cup of tea, hot cup of tea," those are three things. "Hot cup of tea, hot cup of tea," but the exact same rhythm can be expressed, "Play the rhythm, play the rhythm, " (snaps fingers). And when you shift your attention to one, you have "Play the rhythm, play the rhythm." When you shift your attention to the other one, you have "Hot cup of tea, hot cup of tea." It's that tension between these two manners of expressing the same rhythm that infuses all of jazz expression and can be traced back to Louis Armstrong's solo on "Hotter Than That," where he comes in singing (vocalizes). How the rhythm section kept their place against that, it is still to this day an utterly revolutionary idea, and things that drummers and base players are toying with to the present time.

Can you do your modernist tap dance one more time? Jazz is sort of an antidote, is it not?

Yeah, I see it more as an antidote and as spiritual refuge that embodies the best of what is modernism, without any of the illnesses of what is

modernism. For me, that's the way I view it. And it's a spiritual refuge because of the healing component of the blues and the healing act of creating new melodies that have not been heard before. For any musician will tell you, that is a truly amazing experience to have, it happens very rarely. But you're playing, and you create a melody that has not been heard on the earth before, using just the twelve tones of the chromatic scale. So it's healing and yet it embodies certain things about modernism. It embodies the subjectivity that's implied by things like quantum mechanics. Quantum mechanics says that when you observe an experiment, you change the outcome of the experiment. And this is a property of nature. That the active observing an experiment changes it. So that's a real big mystery that shows the power of human consciousness and awareness brought into any situation. And when you're conscious, you're listening to someone else, you hear them play a phrase. You comment on it and elaborate on it. There's something very profound going there, so it relates to quantum mechanics in that sense. It relates to the utter weirdnesses of, of modern physics in terms of the theory of relativity. It relates to abstraction, which was a, an idea that was an obsession of modern art and has not really been recognized as being as much of a component of jazz as it is. It's as much a component of jazz as it was for Mondrian's art and it at exactly the same time in history.

How can we possibly put our arms around what swing is?

Well, once again it's one of these mysteries about music that relates to the exact duration of a note, the exact beginning in time of a note, how long that note, when does that note get louder, when does that note get softer. In a matrix of other people and their notes. You know the, the quote of Gunther Schuller about swing which is, "An equilibrium, a forward moving equilibrium between the vertical and horizontal elements of music." Now if I, if there's ever been a non-swinging definition of swing, that must be it but, people have struggled with this. But of course ultimately it's something you know as soon as you hear it and feel it, that is a transcendent experience. When things are swinging, it is transcendentally uplifting. You come into a club, you feel depressed, you're bummed out, you broke up with your girlfriend, the bills are unpaid, you feel like your life is a failure. The band starts to swing and you are lifted up. You feel physically lifted up out of your seat. It's a real mystery that people have stumbled onto. That is, to me, a much more interesting product of modernism than rocket ships or fax machines or anything like that.

Where did jazz come from?

Well, people will tell you that it's the product of a meshing of Western European classical harmony and African polyrhythm fused through the soul of American musicians. That's one way of looking at it. And another way of looking at it is it's a divine gift bestowed specifically on certain musicians in America, for the sake of uplifting people and communicating essential things about life. Now, there's an interesting book by a Scottish surgeon named

Sullivan about Beethoven called *Beethoven's Spiritual Development*, and he says in it, the reason, when we talk about music, the reason we use terms that sound vague, it's not because there's anything vague about music, but because music expresses human experience so specifically, in such specific ways that when you attempt to find language to describe that, the words fall short. What's falling short in that equation is language, not the music. The music expresses things about human experience that cannot be expressed any other way. That's why it's so important.

Beauty.

You know Einstein, sometimes people would show Einstein an equation that looked, that was right, and he would go "Ugh, that's so ugly." He was interested in beauty, and physicists to this day have inherited this ethos of looking for beauty in their equations. And that correlates them very much with Louis Armstrong who said, "He's looking for those notes." His whole life has been dedicated to finding those notes. He went through three marriages, he said, because his wives didn't appreciate that he lived for finding those notes. It's this platonic ideal of beauty in science or in jazz that is guiding people forward to make new and greater developments and seeing the light ahead of them in the tunnel. They can't really hear it yet, they can't see it. Thelonius Monk sitting at the piano saying, "I can't hear that yet, I can't, I can't hear that." He's hearing something in his head, vaguely, amorphously, that he's trying to pull down from the platonic world onto earth so that we can partake of it. And when it's here, we think it's been here, the reason you know it's real is once it's here, we, we think it's been here forever. Mozart, we think Mozart's always been around, but there was a time when there was no Mozart on earth. There was a time when there was no Louis Armstrong on earth.

The End