

Louis Armstrong's America

Allen Lowe and the Constant Sorrow Orchestra

The poet and critic Denise Levertov on the work of the poet Mina Loy, as Levertov distinguished Loy's poetry from that of certain modernists who had abandoned form:

"(it) is a poetry that in thought and in feeling and in perception seeks the forms peculiar to these experiences."

To me the past is the present, to be re-used and even abused, and form is not a signifier of reactionary artistic ideas but rather a stimulus for a new and radical ideation of creativity and artistic/creative engagement. In the process, I reject what sound to my ears like prevalent and false ideas of artist innovation as a function of random and strange sounds. My attitude may sound like it places me as a cultural conservative, but it does not because it covers a whole and complex world of creativity in sound, full of linear surprise. It requires a repeated and stormy engagement with the troubles of a conflicted consciousness; the operative philosophy of my encounter with notes, rhythms, tones, history and form is Fight or Flight. The original definition of *Avant-garde* characterized the leaders of new arts movements (like Dada) as soldiers in the first wave of battle, willing and very likely to die for their right to exist (sic). In our current day, the battle (led by no one in particular but populated by malcontents like myself) continues in the shadows of the arts world. For me those shadows are populated by the combative yet brilliantly persistent sounds of old black musical forms, by the unattainable profundity of black language, by the African-American history that isn't (because it has faded and been misinterpreted by many of its own academic advocates), and, finally, the ghosts of minstrelsy.

But where does Louis Armstrong fit into all of this? As I once wrote, "I think that Louis Armstrong may have been the first true post-modernist, picking and choosing between a hierarchy of personal and public musical sources and tastes, but without any concern for the way in which hierarchy acted on all of this in terms of class and even, ultimately, race (e.g.; think of Armstrong's reverence for opera and the way it effected his broad and classically expressive method of phrasing). So he fits all the definitions of *post-modernism*, even as a kind of anachronistic vessel for so much that was still to come not just in jazz but in all of American popular music, in particular but not only through the mediation of black life and aesthetics. Black song, vernacular and popular, is amazingly flexible in its ways and means of expression, lyrically, rhythmically, and sonically."

Post-modernism has often had a combative relationship with those artistic styles that it borrows from, and which it sometimes even mimics and parodies. Armstrong's use of these other styles—even, and maybe *in particular*, minstrelsy—was neither hostile nor combative nor confrontational, at least not in the sense with which we have come to identify certain other new and radically ascending artistic movements. But it was mired in parody—silently and subversively ridiculing the cruelty inherent in minstrelsy's distancing of itself from true black life. The new generation(s) of great African-American entertainers, like Armstrong (thinking also of Bert Williams, as well as the thousands of Black barnstormers who were then traveling in Black minstrel groups) took hold of

these stereotypes and, with more than a little sense of irony and revolutionary purpose, stood them on their heads.

The songs on these four CDs were all composed by me as an expression of an older American musical aesthetic, sensibility, and cultural consciousness, at least as I hear it in my head, and are thus aspects of Louis Armstrong's America, where music was perpetually new, where style was inseparable from life and daily reality, where black (and on occasion white) music coordinated itself with the minutia and rhythms of life as lived at the margins of existence. These were, in their collective yet subtly radical aesthetic restructuring of American song, the essence of Louis Armstrong's life and times.

The art of it all is undeniable, devoid as it is of social posturing and the kind of social linkage that has turned current-day music granters of the world into, essentially, notary publics; they exist, it seems, only to certify that everything in sound is in polite, strict official order, the same-old-same-old disguised as innovation, and usually under the cover of youth; all in accordance with the prevailing aesthetic politics of the non-profit music world, conforming to their own rigid social views, which are often disguised as wokeness (in which diversity, in the name of diversity, suddenly means that everything is the same).

In the process of its own creation this music made its own history.

ALL COMPOSITIONS ARE BY ALLEN LOWE/BMI

CD 1

1. Mr. Jenkins' Lonely Orphan's Band 6:15 – inspired by the famous Southern orphan youth orchestra that nurtured Jabbo Smith, Freddie Green, Cat Anderson, and others. Check 'em out on YouTube: a combination of racial caricature, youthful mimicry, and just plain-old black swing, displaced by a generation of jazz as it entered American life, as did almost all forms of American vernacular music, astride the ghosts of minstrelsy.

2. Aaron Copland Has the Blues 5:32 – or at least he thought he did. He recorded a related piano piece in the 1940s, as a topically obvious yet musically unclear reference to a vernacular to which he, of “elevated” musical status, could only aspire to. So here we follow him off that stylistic cliff, ending up trapped yet happily ensconced with him in his fascinating musical *cul de sac*.

3. Bo Did It 3:04 – Bo Diddley is truly the great black rocker; you can keep Chuck Berry. This is a breath of black country air amidst the true whiteness of the form (I have argued unpopularity that rock is mainly a white thing, or “a white way of thinking about black music.” This idea, as you may suspect, has generally gone over like the proverbial lead balloon).

4. Calling All Freaks 6:33 – ode to Luis Russell, who led a great modern 1920s band. He was also Armstrong's musical director for many years, and singer Catherine's father. Swing swing swing, 1920s style, with a new, sort-of early post-Armstrong musical world view.

5. Sepia Danceteria 4:15 – thinking of Duke's “Dancers in Love.” The original title, when I got a bit stuck on where to go with the melodic phrases, was “What Would Duke Do?” Every once in a

while I try to hypnotize myself into an Ellington mood while composing, which to me means pithy melodies that go from conventional to quirky, made up of small cells of off-kilter lines, freely embellished by unorthodox harmonies and surprise resolutions. And it is worth the price of admission to hear Loren Schoenberg, one of our great contemporary pianists, improvise in a “free” setting.

6. The Old Regulars 5:34 – the Old Regular Baptists were the white castoffs of fundamentalist religious sanctification, singing their own way out of hell. Who knows how many, from the old Jim Crow South, made it?

7. The Last Bebop Tune 4:36 – we come to both bury bebop and to praise it as the music that taught us almost everything we know about jazz as a *feeling* (and form). But it’s time to cut the cord (chord?), though I do not know if I have the musical courage to do so.

8. Laughin’ with Louis 4:00 – based on a very rough transcript of a stoned-out Armstrong solo, improvised and recorded while everyone, including the leader, was high as a kid’s kite. Just say yes: weirdly boppish at times, yet basically a free improvisation, reminding us of what Miles Davis said: that no matter what anyone played in jazz, Armstrong had played it first.

9. Utah Smith Visits MOMA 3:23 – the greatest guitar evangelist, whose playing is the Rosetta Stone of rock and roll. Forget the blues and rhythm and blues, this is where it (rock and roll) all started, where country music arrived to unbend those ancient blue notes and then turn it all over to the great prophets of rock: Elvis and then Hendrix, with a dash of Harmonica Frank. And guess what? Smith performed, sometime in the late 1940s, at the Museum of Modern Art.

10. One Two Fuck You: Steve Albini Ascends into Heaven 2:22 - there’s nothing like a dose of good old-fashioned nihilism to get the blood flowing and the mind panicking into a state of near-total hopelessness. Albini, who died as we recorded the last stages of this project, represents the pissed-off legacy of punk from The Seeds to Big Black (and let’s not forget the Sex Pistols). A return to roots, yes, but with more than a hint of inchoate anger and pointless rage. Also a paean to the Ramones.

11. Love Is a Memory 4:16 – taken from the title to the B-movie actress Barbara Payton’s autobiography. Like all such bad yet exploited actresses, may she forever saunter like a tragic ghost across our television screens (or in this case through the empty yet crowded halls of YouTube).

12. Mr. Harney Turn Me Loose 3:31 – Ben Harney was one of the founders of ragtime as a form of popular music. Billed as white, he had African ancestry; I once suggested he was white for white audiences, black for black audiences. Both James P. Johnson and Eubie Blake insisted he was black and cited him as one of the great pianists of their time, though sadly we have no recorded examples. Here Matthew Shipp and I work off of a section of “Mr. Johnson Turn Me Loose,” one of Harney’s early and biggest hits.

13. Valley of Sorrows 3:59 – from the Valley of Ornette Coleman, great prophet of the land of the truly free. Some today seem, I say without any intent at irony, to be captive of their own musical freedom. Both form and its opposite can both feel like the walls of a prison cell. But not with

Ornette, though he might have agreed with me that with great musical freedom comes great aesthetic responsibility.

14. Riot on the Sunset Strip 4:30 – from the same title of my favorite drug-tripping film, based on the actual 1960s Sunset Strip riots. Rock blues in absentia with some substitute harmony. Also note that the Buffalo Springfield tune about the same incident has often been mistaken for an anti-war piece.

15. Hello Dali 3:07 – well, the title says it all. A trip down memory lane through the pre-space age mechanics of fake musique concrete

16. I Should Have Stayed Dead (ballad) 3:21 – another in my saga of cancer-related self-pity. There are certain instrumentalists who are so deep that they can just lean on a note and sound profound, as though that single note contains endless possibilities and implications. Matthew Shipp, playing piano here, is one of them.

17. Shufflin' the Deck (or: Take Five, PLEASE!) 4:16 – covering the Curse of Brubeck, Jack of all forms of sincerity, Master of no forms of music. We start as parody, studiously avoid farce, and end as BMI affiliate.

18. Muskrat Rumble 3:05 – by way of “I Feel Like I’m Fixin’ to Die Rag,” without the lawsuits. Part Kid Ory, part Country Joe. I love the Fish Cheer.

CD 2

1. The 7 Foot Policeman 3:07 – from a strange old recounting of an American village square, where a “Seven foot policeman” corrals a group of revelers and beseeches them to behave. A march in ragged time with Ivesian intent.

2. When Dave Schildkraut Goes Marching In 3:33 – Davey was one of the greatest saxophonists who ever lived, as testified to by Bill Evans, Jackie McLean, and Dizzy Gillespie. Really (they all said this to me). This piece is based on a live recording in which Schildkraut plays “Saints” with Herman Autrey, he of Fats Waller’s group. So we did this to evoke Dave going Dixie; figuratively speaking, listen as Bird, too, flies South. Davey was an intrinsic part of Armstrong’s America, a Jewish genius who shielded himself from real life with family and flying saucers.

3. Bathing with Doc Walsh 2:14 – religion as ecstasy in pain and sorrow, imaginary blood of the martyr as a form of dry cleansing, banjo as a reminder that white folks actually have a soul when they know how to access it.

4. Under the Weather 3:56 – we are birds of the weather and we still think of Armstrong and Earl Hines, who flew in the same general direction for as long as they could tolerate each other. Genius, to once again use an over-used word, cannot always make peace with genius.

5. Candy, Darling 3:57 – oh Massapequa, the devil home of Candy’s tormented youth in the years that she was in-between sexes. As a former resident, I can say that the best thing about Massapequa was, to quote Merritt Brunies in another context, the next train out of town, which took Candy

straight to The Factory under the “protective” wings of Andy Warhol. The rest is history and narcissistic self-abuse.

6. **On the Other Side of the Tracks** 7:24 – American song form as reimagined in the Armstrong spirit.

7. **Little Rock Goddamn** 4:40 – Louis on fire against American life and the fate of small children, stuck between the rock of Jim Crow and the hard place of Southern white terrorism; and then haunted by Eisenhower’s warning about “big black bucks;” all fertilized by the terrorism of the white imagination. Armstrong, contrary to myth, stood up and yelled at Ike’s inertia, at his passively racist idea of equal rights.

8. **Blue Mist** 3:39 – oh Duke, oh Ray Nance! Oh, Andy Stein –

9. **Back Home Rag** 3:52 – per James Reese Europe, perhaps the first great black musical liberator of the 20th century. And also, though few seem to agree, the man who gets my nomination for being leader of the first real recorded jazz orchestra (1913). His was the new idea of swing, which felt like someone rushing to get to work on time. If you are going to do something for him musically in the current day, you gotta escape the salon and play to the street; current-day tributes almost always get stuck in middle-class hell.

10. **In a Lonely Place** 1:51 – ode to (and for) the Nick Ray film of the same title. Gloria Graham’s last stand?

11. **Roswell’s Dream** 8:34 – for the last Great Spirit, Roswell Rudd, who died for the virtues of life, music, and the pursuit of some of the purest personal expression I have ever known. **I miss him terribly.**

12. **I Should Have Stayed Dead (Theme)** 5:32 – theme song to the documentary of the same name, another medical bulletin, care of the Cleveland poet D.A. Levy; a line of his from a poem I have since misplaced. On certain bad days I do wonder whether I should have. You only get one chance to stay dead, to actually make a choice to live in the kind of twilight that informs people you are never coming back.

13. **Pullin’ the Plug** 4:15 – a medical interlude; or maybe a treatment plan. In memory of the me that used to be, a dream of putting myself out of my own misery.

14. **Pleased** 4:12 – you cannot free James Brown from the chains of his own mental bondage, but your ass should still follow his whenever it can.

15. **Speckled Red’s Revenge** 5:47 – for want of a better title, based on the feeling of perhaps the free-est piano player I have ever heard.

16. **Greenwich Village Dada** 2:50 – for my great historical love, the Dada poet Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, who showed us how to escape the strangling chains of life, to flee middle class traps of cultural conformity and expressive sameness. This took her on a treacherous path, one trod by few (and I am no exception); one soon discovers in life that even those who think they have

liberated themselves tend to still be captive of middle-class unimaginativeness; which leads to a lot of entrenched and immovable ideas. Not so for Elsa.

17. **Brother Claude Ely Ascends into Heaven** 6:40 – whiteness in search of Glory, which it found under the sponsorship of the Holy Rollers. Which under the right conditions turns into white ecstasy, as denied historically by both embarrassed white observers and, in my brief experience, black academics (one of whom once informed that there were no white Holy Rollers!). All of which we celebrate here with musical solemnity.

CD 3

1. **Apocalypse Next** 5:56 – from the place where hell doesn't freeze over but instead congeals into the kind of music which makes gospel the true gospel of gospel, though it is a gospel unheard and unfelt by the vast majority of religious Americans.

2. **Beefheart's on Parade** 4:00 – I never liked Captain Beefheart much, his work always seemed like second-hand improvisation and second-hand free-association to me. But since I cannot beat him, I will try to defeat him with Guy Lombardo's **own** tools of the trade (simple chord changes; this is based on "Sweethearts on Parade") and Ray Suhy's brilliance (and actual improvisational skills). Check out Armstrong's original version, an ingenious re-shaping of melody as pasted onto the most eccentric rhythmic sense in jazz (which is why I prefer his recordings from 1929-1933, a time when he seems to have liberated himself from a concentric sense of swing in favor of time and space as a function of marijuana—just my hunch here, but Armstrong loved his smoke).

3. **Get Hopped Up** 4:51 – Bud Powell, writ backwards; mistitled, based on "I Want to Be Happy," not "Get Happy," but who's gonna know unless they read these notes? At the end of the day, Bud is still the deepest of the deep.

4. **I Should Have Stayed Dead (variation)** 4:09 – once again, sometimes I think I should have stayed dead when I had the chance; jazz as a job is a cruel, cold, indifferent world of professional loneliness, creative isolation, and just plain personal frustration (with the more-than-occasional humiliation). So why do I keep recording this stuff? Because it's fun, and what the hell else would I do? And here's another clue for you all: this project may have kept me alive.

5. **Dance of the Occupiers** 2:50 – Per Red Norvo and Benny Goodman who combined, in 1933, to present the very first jazz avant-garde.

6. **Black and White Fantasy** 6:34 – looking at Duke once more, a 1920s voyage to the higher and lower depths of that strange aesthetic alliance between black and white.

7. **Miss Ann Returns** 3:44 – if, as they said in the show *Hair*, white boys are so pretty, then what are white girls? Nancy Cunard took a voyage up to Harlem and wrote a book about it (sort of).

8. **What Did I Do (to be so blue)?** 6:06 – what did I do to be so damned blue? What did I do to Andy Razaff, prince of jazz? Well, I wrote this song, for one thing, crossing a harmonic moat.

9. **Spiritual Impunity** 4:13 – how can you not love a guy like Albert Ayler, who set the (jazz) world on fire by splitting the improvisational atom? The result was an explosion like none we had ever seen or heard before—nor have we since.

10. **The Murder of Jaki Byard** 5:34 – ode to the great and wonderful and all-knowing Jaki, murdered and left behind for history to rediscover—or ignore. When can I stop grieving for Jaki?

11. **Bix's Silver Chalice** 3:14 – in this we celebrate two great poets of early jazz, Bix Beiderbecke and Bill Challis. Bix is truly the tragic artist of our imagination; Challis conceived of a way of presenting the Whiteman Band as a great, chugging engine of early swing; take that, Tony Thomas!

12. **Gone to Heaven** 2:19 – the great religious giveaway; at this place, at this musical intersection of white and black cold and hot, prepare your soul for Death. White folks be not proud, black folks be not white. Only occasionally shall the religious twain meet, though here we try a merger of the black sanctified with the white “civilized,” of the white folks who sit in hand-folded prayer, while the black folks dance all over and around their graves (though there are, of course, the white Holy Rollers, see above).

13. **In the Mode** 7:25 – Glenn Miller meets modalism on the local, off-peak Trane to Eddie Durham's house. We ascend the scales, remembering, when we think about it, that Johnny Carisi was there first. And as Johnny told me, he was stationed with the Miller band in New Haven during the War.

14. **Requiescat (Bird Has Flown)** 5:19 – as Doc Cheatham said to me some years ago, “everybody dies,” and I have actually come to believe it. In a not-so-sly reference to Tristano's Requiem, we praise Bird because he was the greatest of the great. **And we still mourn him almost 70 years after his death.**

15. **Hittin' the Jaw** 3:19 – Mingus took a swing at Jimmy Knepper and connected, loosening a tooth or two. Still, Jimmy eventually came back into the fold; the Masochistic Copyist?

16. **Middlebrow Blues: William Grant Still at Carnegie Hall** 3:22 – there is a whole school of African-American symphonic composition personified by William Grant Still, who tried to serve his heritage with the kind of blues references that could only be made by someone who didn't really understand the blues. And to think that at one time he studied with Edgard Varese....

17. **John Cage Turns the Page (Or: 3:02)** 3:02 – Wither John Cage? Hey, my kid could write something like that...an improvisation on paper (literally).

CD 4

1. **Sorrow Song: On the Cooling Board** 3:54 – per Du Bois, Matthew Shipp and I explore the sadness of memory (or the memory of sadness).

2. **Garner's Mood** 5:45 – Garner's intros are worth the price of admission; this is based on one such performance.

3. **Jelly's Last Breath** 6:22 - offered as an antidote to that damned musical, revived this year in order for the historically clueless to pat themselves on the back and reassure themselves that they are doing the right thing by reviving a piece of crap that they call a play about Jelly Roll Morton. It is not, it is an a-historical and a-cultural insult to his name; and talk about cultural appropriation—proving once and for all that you can be an appropriator no matter your color; it just takes a little bit of class entitlement and class arrogance, because YOU are the privileged who can do whatever you like no matter how false it is, because you are woke and clueless, a deadly combination.

4. **Charlotte Osgood Mason Dances the Africain** 4:35 – for Charlotte Osgood Mason, white lady Patron Patronizer of the Harlem Renaissance, but really in retrospect not a bad person; she at least had ideals, and a sense of *the real thing*, of authentic blackness and of Africa in America, years before this was trendy and hip. She sat on her throne and her throngs called her Mother, and she *was* the mother of all things primitive and raw in New York City during the somewhat de-natured Harlem Renaissance.

5. **I Am a Woman Again** 2:59 – Gladys Bentley was born gay, died gay, and married gay in between. We pay tribute to all three stages of her/their/them/whose life. All I know is she was a great singer and pianist, a true iconoclast in a world of both real and synthetic iconoclasts.

6. **Pete Brown** 3:45– one of the founders of funk, a great alto saxophonist who ground the blues down to its essence in black forms and sounds. No one could touch him at this, except maybe Horsecollar Williams.

7. **Naked Dancer** 5:32 – for Morton once again, who early on made his living in the musical shadows of black life (though according to that stupid play he was a racial and class snob, a Creole separatist; utter bullshit).

8. **Lester Lopes In** 4:31 – to the saxophonist who burrowed his way into our collective unconsciousness, not just as a musician but as a feeling (and how's your feelings today?). But the question is: is Lester, as a musician, really a state of mind? Cool, collected, in control, self-possessed, high?

9. **Tiger Rage** 5:39 – all praise to the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, unjustly condemned for “stealing” from black groups, an unproven allegation that periodically gets them called out for cultural larceny in places like Facebook. Tell me what black groups they stole from and THEN we will talk, because no one else sounded like them (except, on occasion, ironically after the fact, a black group like Wilbur Sweatman's). This is inspired by the bebop version of “Tiger Rag,” from Dizzy and Bird and Lennie Tristano's astounding broadcast version. These are dangerous cats on the attack, hence the title.

10. **In Dreams Begin Isaac Rosenfeld** 4:04 – there is a type of linear modernism personified by Isaac Rosenfeld, Isaac Babel, Bernard Malamud, Wallace Markfield, Delmore Schwartz.... all Jews, and all reflecting—and influencing—my own blurry concepts of both modernism and post-modernism. The work of these brilliant writers is a complex, violent mess of artistic self-consciousness mixed with and sometimes diluted by the equally brutal self-consciousness of the working-man aesthete; tied down as he or she is by the practical essences and duties of daily life yet liberated by the stimulus of not only imagination but by the concept of a demented and crookedly

linear narrative, as well as an essentially human(e) yet perilously taunting view of humanity's flaws. These flaws are at once understood and cited with compassion, tolerated and even encouraged, while being simultaneously treated with ridicule and contempt. It is at the meeting of these two points—compassion and ridicule—that Jewish humor turns itself into not only art but into an active and life-shaping (or is it mis-shapen?) point of view (and let us not forget Lenny Bruce).

11. **Lewis Lewis** 4:57- Hail Hail Richard Berry, the Kingsmen, Paul Revere and the Raiders, and other Northwestern rockers who spawned, if not punk, then punk musical attitudes (and hail hail the great pianist Lewis Porter, to whom this is dedicated). Three chords and a lie or two, of the kind we tell ourselves to keep ourselves sane.

12. **Tea with Me** 5:54 – based on one of my favorite tunes, by Vincent Youmans and Irving Caesar, with nice, ripe changes immortalized by Bud Powell and Art Tatum.

13. **Poem for D.A. Levy** 4:08 – once again, for the great countercultural poet of Cleveland. A kindred soul, I tell myself, though I have no real idea if he would have even looked my way before shooting himself at the tender age of 26.

14. **Joi Lansing Escapes from the Web of Love** 3:02 – from the files of Exploited Blond Hollywood Actresses, put through the meat grinder of Hollywood sexploitation and the overall callous indifference of the publicity machine. In this case we speak of Joi Lansing, who died of the opposite of neglect.

15. **Name Her** 2:08 – From an older session, a reference to a famous Coltrane ballad named for his ex-wife. Nicole Glover, an ex-sideperson, solos on tenor.

16. **The Dying Musician** 5:00 – per Louis Moreau Gottschalk, not **really** a contemporary of Armstrong but a major part of the world that made Armstrong what he was. Gottschalk cited “The Dying Poet;” I looked in the mirror and wrote this.

17. **Blues No End** 4:37 – my “West End Blues.” We subdivide and conquer.