

Lunch with Louis Armstrong
On the 50th Anniversary of his Death, His Message for Blacks in America
Today

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Abstract:

The author's first-hand experience with Louis Armstrong, the entertainer. This is a personal recollection of a 1964 lunch (and subsequent 10 days) with the jazz great, on the eve of massive civil rights protests and legislation in the U.S. While Armstrong rarely involved himself with politics, his music and his philosophy of entertaining sought to bring the races together. The author was a boy of 15 years at the time, but the impact of those days together stayed with him and seems even more relevant to today's struggles for equality.

The first time I met Louis Armstrong, the great Black jazz trumpeter and performer, was back in 1964 when he was having a rage attack in the lobby of the Leamington Hotel in downtown Minneapolis.

My father and I arrived for a lunch date with him. There he was, the man I had seen on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and in *Pennies from Heaven* and *The Glenn Miller Story*, swiftly kicking his tan Samsonite luggage and trunks down the landing stairs in the lobby, cursing at the top of his lungs. The bellman, the only other Black man in the hotel lobby (and in the hotel), held his white gloved hands to his face in horror.

Black men in those days were not allowed to show anger in public. (They still aren't.)

As I recalled his temper tantrum now some 50 years after the entertainer's death, and my time with him during a long tour, I wondered why more Blacks today aren't having more constructive tantrums about the glacially slow grind of equality in America.

Frankly, not much has changed along the racial divides in the past half century. So to use current eyes to dismiss Louis Armstrong as an minstrel version of Uncle Tom would be as foolish as it would be wrong. He was a hero at bridging the gap between white and Black. His efforts have been underappreciated. I'll try to set the record straight based on my own experience with him and show how much he can guide us today.

Back to the lobby of the Leamington Hotel, why was Louis Armstrong having a fit? The short answer is he thought his trumpet case had been stolen. The real answer: he was dog tired from 300 performances a year and slow-motion death from heart disease.

Frenchy saved the day. Frenchy always saved the day. He was really Pierre Tallerie, hired by Armstrong's agent, Joe Glaser, to keep an eye on Armstrong as his "roady." True to his moniker, Frenchy was a short, hefty, white-haired Frenchman, who always wore a beret. That day, Frenchy calmly brought forth the trumpet and case, soothed Armstrong's nerves, and turned the trumpeter over to us.

A sweet elderly hostess in high heels and an orchid corsage led us into the tableclothed dining area. As the three of us sat at a booth, isolated from the tourists, munching on hamburgers and French fries and drinking sweet tea, the first thing that struck me was the contradiction of the moment: Black people don't eat in a rich white person's hotel, even in the North. Yet here we were.

Not that I cared. My father pioneered bringing Black entertainers on the road, and dismissed racial prejudice as "ridiculous." We had suffered the worst anti-Semitism in Duluth. My father couldn't get a job until he substituted the word "Polish" for "Jewish" on the religion line of job applications. This prejudice followed my father even after he had been awarded The Distinguished Flying Cross in WWII, fighting the Nazis and Japanese from a B24 bomber.

This is said not to dismiss my own inherent white privilege, no matter how much I'd like to disown it.

Back then, when local white officials warned my father not to promote Black entertainers, my father said to me under his breath, "the hell with that," and promptly booked into Midwest and then national venues the likes of Nat King Cole, Johnny Mathis, The Mills Brothers, Pearl Bailey and even Johnny Cash, who was part Cherokee.

My father's instincts were spot on. White audiences stood in line and packed the auditoriums. "White people have a curiosity toward these super-talented minorities," my father once told me. "They'll pay good money to see them, as long as they don't have to live next door to them."

As we sat in the booth in the Leamington, I admit to being more wowed by my plate of French fries than Louis Armstrong, as a boy coming from a family that didn't eat in restaurants.

On the other hand, I was from a family who had these movie stars at our table often, so it was not as unusual as French fries.

“You can’t keep doing this level of touring,” my father said to his friend Louis Armstrong. “It’s putting your nerves on edge. Look what happened in the lobby.”

“Yeah, Lenny. I know. I know. Yeah.”

“Have you even thought of retirement?” my father asked.

Louis nodded his head, and then flashed his signature large, white toothed grin. “Oh, I have. I have. Yeah.”

I noticed then that Armstrong had a yellow callous on his top lip that I could tell looked shaved. His trumpeter lips were giving out. The sight shocked me, and my elbow twitched, knocking my fork off the table. I slid down beneath the tablecloth to retrieve it. Suddenly I was looking at Louis Armstrong’s bare legs, his pants hitched up as he sat there. His legs were white. I’d never seen a Black man with white legs, which made me wonder a little which of the two he really was. Later my father explained that the bleached legs were a symptom of his heart and bad circulation.

“And what would you do if you retired, Louis (my father said ‘Louiee’)?”

“I know exactly what I want to do,” Armstrong said. “I want to get out of New York, buy a place back in New Orleans, on the Mississippi River, and sit around fishing for catfish all day.” Then he gave his signature laugh, a drawn-out gravely giggle, ending with a long, raspy, three second, “Yeah.”

Subsequently, my father, me, Louis Armstrong and Frenchy were together for two weeks, where Armstrong headlined mostly river-town festivals up and down the Mississippi River. The ice breaker for these shows was Stonewall Jackson, whose single *Waterloo* was the rage. He strutted onstage in a white, outrageous western outfit with gold sequins on the shirt pockets and up and down the legs. Even though I was 15 years old at the time, the irony of someone named after a Confederate general warming the crowd for a Black trumpet player and singer seemed ironic. The real Stonewall Jackson owned six slaves and believed “the Creator had sanctioned slavery.”

Louis Armstrong was born into the minstrel tradition. He sang, danced, acted, played almost any instrument, and loved to entertain. He generally steered clear of racial issues and, in

some ways, led a myopic life consumed with marriages, divorces, gambling, some mob connections, Hollywood and jazz.

But in 1957, faltering efforts to desegregate Little Rock, Arkansas schools infuriated Armstrong, and, as I'd just seen, when that man was mad, he had a temper. He publicly snarled at President Dwight Eisenhower for not taking a stronger stand sooner against Gov. Orval Faubus, cancelled a U.S. goodwill tour of the Soviet Union and said, "The way they're treating my people in the South, the government can go to hell." He was proud that the FBI subsequently kept a file on him.

Ironically, America was, by this 1964 lunch, in a paroxysm of hate and fury, desperate for authenticity and racial justice. Protests against the Vietnam War roiled cities. Only four years before, the U.S. government desegregated interstate highways. The Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1961 was followed by the forced integration of Ole Miss in 1962 and the 1963 March on Washington.

The fight for equality among the races zigged and zagged, then as now. In 1964, Barry Goldwater became the Republican nominee for President of the United States, objecting to civil rights legislation and uniting the West with the South in a new amalgam of white power that solidified the Republican Party as a white people's only party. Disingenuously, they continued to call themselves the Party of Lincoln.

Still, that fall, Lyndon Johnson won by a landslide. His answer to Bloody Sunday in March of 1964, where Alabama State Troopers bludgeoned civil rights marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, was to push through the Voting Rights Act of 1964, making it easier for Blacks to vote.

Louis Armstrong danced through it all, at least as far as the public could see, making movies without deep messages and singing wistful, sweet songs to calm the Nation's rattled soul:

*"Up the lazy river where the old mill run
Meet the lazy river with the noon day sun
Linger in the shade of a kind ole tree
Throw away your troubles, dream a dream of me."*

It would be easy, looking back, and excepting his 1957 rumblings, to label Armstrong as becoming increasingly irrelevant, then and now. It would be easy, but it would be wrong.

I watched Armstrong for ten nights in a row that summer of 1964 up on the stage (I was the spotlight operator), in front of all-white audiences, seeking their approval as an ambassador from the racial divide. Never did he get a catcall or a slur thrown upon the stage.

Once, during a break in the performance, in Waterloo, Iowa, I sat with him and Frenchy in their trailer. These were muggy nights, mayflies and moths swarming the light poles. Armstrong notoriously would sweat when he performed. Midway through his act, he took a break and changed shirts behind the stage. “Frenchy,” he said back in the trailer, “get me a clean, white shirt and a clean white handkerchief.” Then he took a swig of a mint julep and ambled down the trailer steps and back onto the stage. He looked tired in a biblical way. He walked like every joint hurt.

I ran out to the spotlight and snapped it on. The second the light reflected off his face, the audience saw a changed man. His eyes beamed like headlights and his million-dollar smile lit up the summer night and fought for attention from the stars overhead. He held his trumpet and that clean white hanky in his left hand and took a bow. Already, his forehead dripped with sweat. He paused, dramatically, switched the trumpet to his right hand and dabbed his forehead with the hanky. Then he looked at the hanky, his forehead wrinkled in curiosity.

“Hot chocolate!” he said into the microphone. The crowd erupted and applauded. The second half was off and running to his rendition of “Stardust.”

The nightingale tells his fairy tale

A paradise, where roses bloom

Though I dream in vain.

What he just did was masterful. With silly, self-deprecating humor, he won over the audience while poking fun at their ignorance of his race. Calling him an Uncle Tom would be as cruel as it would be wrong. Louis Armstrong was never apologetic about being Black. His music, his character, his determination all came out of his slave ancestors and was paraded before as many crowds as he could gather. His was the gospel of Blackness.

His rendition of “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen” came from his life experiences and his heart:

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen

Nobody knows my sorrow

*Nobody knows the trouble I've seen
Glory, Hallelujah.*

It's never been easy being Black in America. For four hundred years, Blacks have had to turn the other cheek to constant injustice. When they'd had enough, they were and are met with white scorn or death threats. They're expected to be humble and appreciative of society's crumbs, else they be labeled "uppity."

The maltreatment courses through every aspect of society. Take sports, for example. When Hank Aaron hit more home runs than white Babe Ruth, his thanks were threats of assassination as he rounded the bases with home run 715. Even today, whites celebrate Black football players, as long as they know their place in white society. When Colin Kaepernick, a talented quarterback, took a stand for racial justice, he was thrown out of the sport by the white team owners.

In just this past year or so, a policeman or even a citizen can kill you if you are Black and: jog in a white neighborhood, drive with a missing taillight, pass a counterfeit \$20 bill; hold up the drive-through lane at a fast-food restaurant; sleep in your bed; raise up a mobile phone; sell CDs and DVDs on the street; ride in the back of a police van; or sell unpackaged cigarettes. How would whites feel if those rules applied to them?

The past four years, Donald Trump took actions to "Make America Great Again," which everyone knows is code for "Make America White Again." He built a wall to keep out brown-skinned people and, by executive order, forbade Muslims (often Black) from even traveling here. He objected to states removing the Confederate flag or monuments to Confederate leaders. As testament to his belief that non-whites were less than human, he had no qualms from separating brown-skinned immigrant children from their mothers at our southern borders, if that's what it took to stop them from seeking asylum.

When he ran for re-election in 2020, 74 million Americans voted for him. His strength came from the South and West (but not the West Coast), harkening back to that white power political alignment first established by Barry Goldwater and still very much alive.

The unsaid, unwritten belief in America is that whites can't do well unless Blacks do poorly, economics that were the basis of slavery. Whites live in fear that if Blacks do well, whites will do poorly. We inhabit the same country, with enough opportunity to go around, but it seems that never the twain shall meet. Even liberals, even Northerners, will not let go of white privilege

without leaving claw marks on it. White privilege is a false god. It demeans our humanity. It is our legacy and our curse.

So, what can we learn, today, from the life of Louis Armstrong, who died 50 years ago this year? How could he possibly be relevant to racial struggles today? Besides his flap with Eisenhower over school integration, Armstrong stuck to his knitting. He entertained. He also showed millions of Americans that a Negro could be respected. But his message to us now, more by his deeds than anything he said, was this: Be unapologetic for who you are. Lead with your talents. Bring people together in celebration. Live reverently toward life. Do not be controlled by fear.

One of Louis Armstrong's signature songs was "When the Saints Go Marching In." He wanted society to be colorblind, but he knew the time had not yet come. Instead, with the song's lyrics, he planted the seed for racial integration wherever he sang:

We are all traveling in the footsteps

Of those that'd come before

And we'll all be reunited

On that new and sunlit shore.

Even though Louis Armstrong told my father at our lunch at the Leamington Hotel that he longed to retire, he never did. Instead, Armstrong soon booked two more tours in Europe. The first was separated from the second while he recuperated in New York from another heart attack. He died of heart disease in 1971, at age 69, a performer to the very end.

But back to our lunch conversation in 1964.

"So retire, Louis!" my father said to him. "Do it now, before it's too late."

Armstrong smiled his wide, beaming smile again, first at me and then at my father. "I will," he said. "I will." He shook his head wistfully. "But you know, Lenny, here's the thing. When I retire, I won't be Louis Armstrong any more. I'll just be an old Negro. I don't think that'll be much fun, Lenny. Because you and I know this ain't a country that cares much for Negroes."

He didn't smile this time. His tired brown eyes looked down at the tablecloth, and he slowly shook his head.