German History in Documents and Images

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Interview with Louis Armstrong: “They Cross the Iron Curtain to Hear American Jazz” (December 1955)

In this interview with *U.S. News & World Report*, American jazz musician Louis Armstrong talks about jazz and its reception in Europe, even behind the Iron Curtain. Armstrong, who was then on tour in Europe, compares American and European audiences and tries to explain the appeal of jazz. He shies away from the interviewer’s questions about the relationship between jazz and politics, and denies being on the U.S. State Department’s payroll. He also downplays reports about a riot at one of his concerts in Hamburg.

The music of an American Negro jazz player is outdrawing opera, smashing box-office records all over Europe. Fans slip out from behind the iron curtain just to hear it. When Louis Daniel (Satchmo) Armstrong played in Hamburg, German fans howling for encores wrecked a theater, had to be driven out with fire hoses. From Sweden to Spain, the Armstrong music is America’s voice for many.

To seek the meaning in this phenomenal overseas interest in jazz, two members of the Board of Editors of *U.S. News & World Report* interviewed Satchmo. The American musician and his wife, Lucille, received them at 2 a.m. in a Paris hotel room after a smash-hit concert for French fans.

For two hours the trumpeter, in pajamas and dressing gown, talked of American music abroad. The recorded interview follows.

Q: Is jazz really taking over in Europe, Louis?

A: Well, it always has. It came over here right after the first war, and a lot of soldiers came over in the first war and some was musicians and stayed here – Sidney Bechet and Eddie South, Combo Eddie – violinists, musicians were all comin’ over and they always appreciated good jazz in these countries.

They was attractions over here earlier’n that, why even before my time, you know, but, as generations went along, well, the music got better. [. . .]

Q: Has jazz made a lot of friends for the United States?

A: I think so. American music when it came over here was highly appreciated, yeah, highly appreciated. [. . .]

Q: Is there any difference between jazz as it's liked in Europe and jazz as it's liked in America?

A: It's the same all over the world. I always say a note's a note in any language, if you hit it on the nose – if you hit it. But, they appreciate the technical part of your music, every bit of it – everybody's been so classical-minded all over Europe. [. . .]

They say good jazz and that classical music is all the same because you play them both with art, you express yourself. And that's what they always appreciate about jazz. All this new music never did faze 'em. Well, they'd accept it, but it never did take their mind off good jazz. [. . .]

Q: You had some [people] coming over from the Iron Curtain?

A: I didn't have them. They did it. In the Hot Club in Berlin these boys were there, and one of them said, "We slipped over the Iron Curtain to hear our Louis," and they said "We don't know how we gonna get back." And I never heard of 'em since, but that's what they did.

Q: Did you see these people, talk to them?

A: Yeah, they came back to me and talked, that's how I knew they was there.

Q: They knew your music over there?

A: Sure, that's why they come – come over to hear me. If you don't believe it, lemme play in Russia and you'll have so many people goin' you'd think they was goin' to a football game.

Q: One of our ambassadors, in Czechoslovakia, behind the Iron Curtain, said they all knew American jazz behind the Curtain and your music was there –

A: Sure, they all got the records and everything. [. . .]

Q: Is it the same all over with jazz – no frontiers, no Iron Curtain?

A: That's right. [. . .]

Q: Are there Hot Clubs behind the Iron Curtain?

A: There's got to be. Those are disciples. Those are my disciples. Guns and nothin' else couldn't keep them boys from comin' over to hear hot. They come from everywhere.

Lots of them come from all over, but not all of them come up and speak. They don't want no trouble. They might just sit there and say nothin' so people don't notice them. [. . .]

Q: What kind of jazz do they go for – just the same as in the States?

A: Yeah, good music. Long's it's good, doesn't matter. [. . .]

Q: How did things go when you played in Berlin?

A: Oh, fine, fine. There was these Berlin cats that wanted me to go and blow my trumpet at that there Russian soldier guardin' some Russian Red Army statue – you know, inside West Berlin – but I wouldn't. I could see this might be somethin' important to Russians and they might get the wrong idea. All I know is the horn, not politics and things like that. And I don't think they had anything wrong in mind. But the Russians might have taken it wrong. [. . .]

Q: Would a man like Molotov, the Soviet Foreign Minister, who's never heard any jazz, spark to it?

A: Maybe, if he likes any good music. [. . .]

Q: Does it pay financially to come to Europe?

A: Well, we make out, but we don't think about money.

Q: Do you get any help from the Government, from the State Department or anybody?

A: No sir, not a penny. They're talking about that.

Q: Do you think it's a good idea for the State Department to contribute to something like that?

A: It's the first thing I said when I read that Jesse Owens [American Negro track star] is going all over Europe. We oughta do the same thing. Someone asked me about the Russians, suggested that our band should do the same thing that Jesse Owens is doing. Just think, if they sent this combo around to a big stadium where thousands of people could hear it – I think it would do a lot of good. But who am I to suggest things like that? [. . .]

Q: Tell us about that riot in Hamburg – what really happened there?

A: Nothing happened there. People just wanted us to play on some more. We played an encore. I took a bow with my shirt off, but they still wouldn't go. Nobody was hurt.

I was supposed to play two concerts that night, but they broke up the chairs – they got tired of applaudin' with their hands and started applaudin' with the chairs. And they still wouldn't go –

the police tried to get them out to clear the hall for the next concert. But they refused to go. Then the police turned the fire hose on them. The hall was a mess.

The same thing happened in Roubaix, France. And in Lyons, too. They started throwin' things at the local band when they came back to take over. So the next night the owner put the brass band up in the balcony so they couldn't get hit. But people didn't do anything to us. We played for three hours in Lyons and the people clapped from 1 to 1:30 in the morning.

But people don't want to do anything to us – I never gave it a thought. The only time they frightened me was the night we played Düsseldorf. Backstage, after the last concert, everybody had gone but the singer and myself and this old man backstage. So he was going to put the light out when we leave, and we said goodnight, and the minute he shut the door 30 German cats came up shoutin' "Autogramm, Autogramm!" I didn't know where they all came from – scared me to death. [. . .]

Q: Are your audiences here more serious than they are in the U.S.?

A: Yes, they are. I heard about two girls who came backstage for my autograph just tonight. One was an American girl in school here and the other was a German girl who heard me play in Mannheim. Somebody asked them about the audience out front – was it like an audience in the States? This American girl said, "No, they're different. These people take jazz very seriously." That's true, they don't bounce around like the bobby soxers. They listen to jazz the way they listen to classical music. They make a study of it.

In Turin, Italy, there was some little stinker in the audience, away up in the balcony – not knowin' these Italian fans came there to hear. We were playin' "Sleepy Time," and he made a little airplane out of a piece of paper, and scooted it out, and he must have been awfully good because it circled around and landed right on the stage. And about 15 Italians grabbed him. I didn't know who he was, but they grabbed him and said, "One more time and we'll kill you."

Q: Is that because you're a famous artist?

A: No, it's because I'm playin' something they want to hear.

Q: Is it better for the artist in Europe, where they listen instead of participating, clapping, and so on?

A: What good is playin' if they're making a lot of noise? Take a big band that's full of jive, they want that. Like years ago, they didn't care what kind of band was playin', people were making a lot of noise anyhow. But nowadays the minute they come to a dance they go right up to the bandstand and stand there. You give a concert anyway. That's the way they do now. They get chairs, sit down, and listen. Years ago it didn't matter.

Q: What about these American jazz players over here? How would they do back home? How would they rate?

A: Mighty few would get along back in the States, mighty few. They get careless about their instruments, sloppy. Half of them don't practice, 'cept on the cats. An' cats might like that, but the audience don't. I'd like to see a man come home that's still serious about his instruments. Then some get sloppy about their dates and contracts and all that, and a man can't get along that way back home. He can't just slam away when he feels like it – we got a union and it's strict in America. [. . .]

Q: Why do people buy jazz – 3 million of your records of one song and only 300,000 of an opera? What is it that jazz has?

A: Well, there's just more jazz fans now than there are opera fans. Take the younger generation – they only had so much chance to listen to the real opera like their mothers and fathers. See what I mean? [. . .] Well, the kids enjoy that to a certain extent. But they'll really jump into some croonin' number – or Bing or Sinatra, or somethin' like that. It's lively. Short words. They understan' it. [. . .]

Q: Louis, do you think that hot jazz will end the "cold war?"

A: Well, not knowin' about politics – but I know that hot jazz can do a whole lot for a lot of fans that don't care so much for that. If it's left to people that's peaceful with music, there wouldn't be no wars. Wouldn't be none. It comes from people that probably don't care so much about jazz, but, I mean, music has done a lot for friendships, and everything.

Q: Do you think the atomic bomb has made people go to music more than they did before?

A: Well, I don't dive into politics. Like in Geneva – that guy with the mike, you know. He would rush you with it. "Well, what do you think of the Big Four Conference?" I say, "Well, I jus' hope that combo has a good time and straightens out that jive."

Source: *U.S. News & World Report*, December 2, 1955, pp. 54-62.