

FOSTER: I played in mixed bands for years. We played all the hotels, all over New Orleans. It wasn't like today.

INTERVIEWER: Do you run into many race-conscious musicians?

ARMSTRONG: No. Anybody that knows his horns don't pay much attention to color. What you got to realize about restrictions and things, such as in New Orleans now—

INTERVIEWER: Wait a minute, what do you mean, "such as in New Orleans now"?

ARMSTRONG: Since 1954, in New Orleans, they don't want white and Negro musicians playing together. The people who made those laws don't know anything about music. Because in music, it doesn't make any difference. I don't run into much trouble with segregation, 'cause I don't go where I'm not wanted. And—please don't take this out, I'm going to tell this straight—I don't go to New Orleans no more.

Source: Interview conducted in San Francisco by Albert M. Colegrove, published as "Jazz Grew Up 'On the Wagon,'" *San Francisco News*, September 25, 1958, p. 13.

Louis (Satchmo) Armstrong charged today that President Eisenhower was a "two-faced" man with "no guts" who was letting Gov. Faubus of Arkansas run the federal government. Explaining in Grand Forks, N. D., why he canceled a good-will concert trip to Russia, Armstrong said: "The people over there ask me what's wrong with my country. What am I supposed to say?" He added, "It's getting almost so bad a colored man hasn't got any country."

Source: *New York Post*, September 19, 1957.

Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong, justly famous Negro trumpet player and jazz singer, plays what the boys in the trade call a "gang o' horn." But in politics, it is evident now, he blows sour.

In the past "Ambassador Satch," as he enjoys being dubbed, has gained a lot of good will for the United States on his jazz tours abroad. He made a grievous error, however, when he put his horn down and blasted President Eisenhower, "the government," and various other persons and places for their handling of the Negro problem in the United States.

Thoughtful, responsible folk in both the South and the North, at every level of government and in all fields of endeavor, know that the exercise of the most painstaking statesmanship is needed to meet the difficulties linked with school segregation and all phases of civil rights. They know that the settlement of these issues, no matter how troublesome, must be achieved through the orderly processes of government acting under law. They want no violence. They reject the use of force on any side.

Obviously, from the tenor and content of the President's meeting at Newport with Gov. Orval Faubus of Arkansas, this is the path—law and order—that Mr. Eisenhower wishes to tread. And the governor has said he agrees. The dispute in Little Rock is to be resolved in the courts.

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# Louis Armstrong on Music and Politics

BY THE MID-1950S, LOUIS ARMSTRONG HAD become much more than a great jazz trumpeter and popular singer—his recordings, concerts, and appearances in nearly fifty movies had made him one of the best-known entertainers in the world. Fame made his opinions news, and although he toured internationally with U.S. State Department sponsorship, Armstrong did not shrink from commenting on the civil rights struggles of the time, which often pitted grass-roots activists and community leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. against local, state, and federal officials. One such clash came in 1957, when Arkansas governor Orval Faubus defied the Supreme Court's 1954 ban on racial segregation in public schools, ordering the Arkansas National Guard to block integration of Little Rock Central High School. President Eisenhower dispatched federal troops to enforce the Court's order, but not before he received strong criticism for having delayed.

This set of newspaper clippings traces some of Armstrong's participation in the public debates of the time, showing too how his charges generated angry rebuttals.<sup>1</sup> Although he had been dismissed as an Uncle Tom by some critics earlier in his career (see the comments by Dizzy Gillespie in this volume), Armstrong now was being attacked for being too militant. His cosmopolitan perspective, born of frequent world travel, made him painfully aware of the contradictions between his status as a "jazz ambassador" and the struggles of African-Americans for basic civil rights. Note in the fourth excerpt how one paper chose to transcribe Armstrong's accent (and imagine the effect if journalists were to do the same for white politicians such as Jimmy Carter or Ted Kennedy). The first excerpt, from a joint interview of Armstrong and bassist Pops Foster, upsets any assumption that racial injustice diminishes through gradual and inevitable progress.

INTERVIEWER: Was there race segregation among the musicians in New Orleans?

<sup>1</sup>These clippings were found in the Armstrong file at the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. Some details of their source citations were missing.

*From: Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History*

For Armstrong to charge the President with "no guts" because he has taken the orderly road is to indulge in pointless insult.

Source: *Redlands (California) Facts*, September 23, 1957.

The new, subdued Louis Armstrong granted a brief backstage interview last night. He had just played a concert to an almost-packed Massey Hall and there was nothing subdued about the music. It's just about the same as ever. The step-easy policy appears to have taken over in the opinion department. Pencils hovering, reporters asked:

"How is the race situation going in the South?"

"Oooooh, dear."

"Your manager says you don't talk about things like that anymore. Is that so?"

"Yaah, ya might say."

"Why?"

"Well, talkin' about it don' do no good."

"Have you tried talking about it?"

"Man, have Ah eveh. Papahs all ustah be fulla me talkin'."

"So what do you talk about now?"

"Music."

"What's new with music?"

"Pretty well the same ol' thing."

"Did rock 'n' roll ever cut into your audience when it was at its height?"

"Nah. It nevah came close."

"Why not?"

"'Cause Ah play good music."

"How much longer are you going to play?"

"Ah've been at it 'bout fohty-se'm yeahs now. Go on fo-evah, Ah guess."

Source: "Satchmo Silent on Racial Crisis," source unknown, April 27, 1960.

Jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong, on his way to a concert tour of Africa, today said he didn't care whether he plays in South Africa or not. "I don't know nothing about politics," he said. "I just play."

A ban on the 60-year-old Negro artist and his six "All Stars" was imposed by South African authorities several weeks ago. Armstrong, beginning a 45-concert tour of African countries, said he did not know about the South African ban. "If they book us into South Africa, we're looking forward to playing for them cats," he said.

First stop on the tour will be Saturday at Accra, where all 50,000 seats in the Ghanaian capital's open-air sports stadium have been sold. Armstrong described the trip as "the most important event of my life." It is sponsored by the U. S. State Dept. and an American soft drink firm.

Source: "Satchmo is Real Cool About S. Africa Ban," *New York Post*, October 12, 1960.

Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong, famed jazz trumpeter, said last night he "got sick" after watching television films of racial violence in Selma, Ala. Armstrong said he didn't take part in freedom marches because: "They'd only smash my face so that I couldn't use my trumpet." When a newsman expressed surprise that anyone would "beat up" someone like "Satchmo," Armstrong said of the white segregationists: "They would even beat Jesus if He was black and marched."

Something must be done about the intolerable circumstances in Alabama, he said. "How is it possible that human beings can still treat each other that way?" He is in Denmark on his way to jazz concerts behind the Iron Curtain. "My mission is music," he said.

Source: *Toronto Telegram*, March 11, 1965.