



Perhaps the most memorable traditional musical historical site I have visited.

June 29, 2003-

QUEEENS, N.Y.--Some people slow dance to pennies from heaven. But jazz great Louis Armstrong lived a wonderful life in quarter time.

He believed he was born on the Fourth of July, 1900. In 1944, he recorded "Basin Street Blues" and "Stompin' at the Savoy" with the Esquire All-Stars. And he found lasting love with his fourth wife, a dancer at New York's Cotton Club who was named "Brown Sugar," a.k.a. Lucille Wilson.

In 1924, when Armstrong moved to Chicago, he lived with his second wife Lil at 421 E. 44th St. After Armstrong was granted a divorce from third wife Alpha in 1942, he married Wilson five days (not four) later on the road in St. Louis.

Wilson was from the Corona section of Queens; unbeknownst to Armstrong on his wedding day, Corona is where he would call home the rest of his life.

Later this year, on Oct. 15, the colorful Louis Armstrong House, 34-56 107th St. in Queens, will open to the public after a yearlong restoration. Lucille purchased the box-like, two-story home in 1943; Armstrong lived there until he died in 1971. Lucille lived in the house until her death in 1983.

Though Armstrong married four times, he had no children. Under the provisions of Lucille's will, the Louis Armstrong Educational Foundation (a private foundation established in 1969) and executors of the Armstrong estate gave the house to the city to be operated as a memorial, while the possessions went to Queens College in nearby Flushing, with the stipulation the college would catalog, preserve and make them available to the public.

Queens College lies about 10 miles east of the historic house. Armstrong is buried in Flushing Cemetery, although many think he rests in his native New Orleans.

"There's not another historic site like this in the jazz world," says Michael Cogswell, director of the Louis Armstrong House and Archives at Queens College. "No one has lived in this house since the Armstrongs. Their vibe is very much alive."

Just a few months before the Sept. 11 attacks, Cogswell was able to secure funding for the \$1.6 million

restoration project in New York City's capital budget (\$1.3 million came from the Borough of Queens, the remaining \$300,000 came from the federal Save America's Treasures program).

One of the many great things about Armstrong is that he never threw anything away. Because he lived in the same house for so long, it is the key to the archives. It's a tribute to one of America's greatest musicians and pack rats.

The Armstrong archives include 85 scrapbooks, 12 linear feet of personal correspondence, more than 5,000 photographs, and best of all, 650 reels of tape for which Armstrong hand-decorated the boxes in what is best described as hipster, outsider art. Armstrong cut personal photos, newspaper pictures and magazine ads and scotch-taped them on the boxes.

Cogswell ended up cataloging 73 shipping carts of Armstrong's stuff. Other pieces, such as the house's chandeliers, paintings and furniture were sent to a fine arts storage warehouse in Long Island City.

"We're interpreting the house as if Louis and Lucille still lived there," Cogswell says during a recent tour of the house. For example, a hidden audio system will play excerpts from the spoken word tapes that Armstrong saved, creating the effect that he is still hanging around the house, swapping stories with his friends and neighbors.

"There is one tape where Lucille is in the background, talking on the telephone, saying, 'We're going to have to move a wall to make more room for Louis' stuff. There's only two of us here, and we're crowding out the place.' And Louis says, 'Yeah, this place looks like a whorehouse on Christmas morning,'" Cogswell recalls.

With so much material, Cogswell and his four-person staff have narrowed the house's period of significance to the years between 1965 and 1971. "However, we have made changes through the house, which are necessary to bring the public in," he says. For instance, the Armstrong's one-car garage has been converted into a welcome center with a gift shop, where guests will purchase admission tickets. From the garage, visitors will walk outside, up the front steps and through the front door.

That's precisely what Armstrong did in March 1943.

"Louis lived out of a suitcase," says Cogswell, a former saxophone player. "He had no interest in owning a home. It was Lucille's idea to buy the house. She found the house, purchased it [for \$3,900, according to the Laurence Bergreen biography *Louis Armstrong (An Extravagant Life)*] and decorated it without Louis ever seeing it.

"He came in off the road early one morning. She had given him the address. He pulled up in a cab, saw the house and told the driver to take him to the correct address. The driver said it was the right address. Louis got out of the cab, walked up and rang the doorbell. Lucille opened the door and said, 'Welcome home, honey.' She had the whole house decorated. He fell in love with the place. He refused to consider moving."

Armstrong's effervescent personality quickly made him the King of Queens. Three families on the block remain from the time when Armstrong lived there, including next-door neighbor Selma Herold, who was born in the house in 1919 and has lived there her entire life. Armstrong used to get his hair cut around the corner at Joe's Artistic Barber Shop, 3306 106th St., which is still in operation.

"Neighbors told me that when the band bus pulled up, kids from the neighborhood would help Louis carry instruments and suitcases," Cogswell says. "Lucille would fix everybody ice cream. In many ways, he escaped the travails of celebrity by living here. But Dizzy Gillespie lived in Queens [on 106th Street, behind the Armstrong home]. So did Count Basie and Cannonball Adderly.

"They could have a wonderful upper-middle class existence here. They could have a house and a backyard, which is different than living in an apartment in Upper Manhattan. Many of these musicians were from the South, and they wanted trees and a backyard. But what was remarkable about Louis is that he could have

lived anywhere. He could have had a big estate on Long Island with a swimming pool in the shape of a trumpet. This is really a very modest house, when you consider his fame and fortune. Having said that, the Armstrongs did remarkable things to the house."

In 1931, Armstrong recorded "Wrap Up Your Troubles in Dreams," while living in Chicago. Years later, Lucille would be wrapping up their New York house in wallpaper.

There is not a square inch of paint in the Armstrong house.

Even the insides of the closets are wallpapered. Working with Upper East Side interior decorator Morris Grossberg, Lucille wallpapered the basement rec room in shades of bright yellow, silver and white. The stairs in this room were finished in leopard-print carpet. The Armstrongs used to make sandwiches and serve beer from a small rear basement kitchen when they would play cards with friends.

The basement space has been restored as an exhibit area and the kitchen has become a handicapped-accessible bathroom. "The restoration is a balancing act between having a historic site and bringing the public in to a historic site," Cogswell explains.

A first-floor bathroom is completely covered with mirrors and gold-plated fixtures. The upstairs master bathroom features silver floral wallpaper and speakers. A devotee of Swiss Kriss laxative, Armstrong while in repose would listen to music coming from the upstairs den.

Armstrong was a regular completist. "He never threw anything away," Cogswell says. "The question that naturally arises is 'Why did he do it?' Why did he meticulously make all these tapes and play them through the house? Why did he catalog and decorate the boxes? And annotate all his photographs? He traveled with a typewriter as early as 1922. And his earliest surviving typed letter says, 'Why didn't you answer my previous letters?' One conclusion to all this is that he did it for us. Not in an egotistical way, but he had a sense of his own legacy."

Armstrong also saved gifts. Many fans created scrapbooks for Satchmo, including one large book made by Milan Schijatschky that commemorated Armstrong's March 20, 1957, appearance at Hinsdale High School, west of Chicago.

The tour culminates in Armstrong's upstairs den, which featured his reel-to-reel tape recorders, amplifiers and turntables. Speakers are recessed into the ceiling. (All of his stereo equipment will be operational when the house opens to the public.) This is where Armstrong wrote letters and decorated his tape boxes.

He also wrote poetry like this:

The bee is such a busy soul

He has no time for birth control

And that is why in times like these

We have so many sons of bees.

"One informant told me that when Louis was home, this is where he spent 80 percent of his waking time," Cogswell says. "Lucille made changes in the room after Louis passed, so this is one location where we're turning back the clock."

When Louis held court in the room, all the walls were paneled. After he died, Lucille--you guessed it--put up wallpaper.

Hanging in the den is a portrait of Armstrong painted by singer Tony Bennett in 1970. "Tony's painting is one of the highlights of the tour," Cogswell says.

Bennett, who was born in the Astoria section of Queens, recently paid tribute to Satchmo with "A Wonderful World," a collection of duets (with k.d. lang) of songs popularized by Armstrong.

In a separate interview in his Manhattan apartment, Bennett recalls, "One time somebody came in Louis' house and asked who did the painting. He answered, 'A boy from my neighborhood.' That's how he described it. Isn't that great? He was always that way. He was absolutely humble and correct all the time."

Bennett can't recall when he was introduced to Armstrong, but he says, "I had two great meetings with Louis Armstrong. One was with my friend Bobby Hackett, who was Glenn Miller's guitar player, but later on became a great cornet and trumpet player. Bobby was on those Jackie Gleason albums [of symphonic string music]. Louis lived in the same neighborhood as Bobby. Louis used to go to Bobby's garage--Bobby was a hi-fi expert. They listened to classical music and opera.

"I went there on a rainy night after a festival. Louis always had a wonderful philosophy when he spoke. When he said goodnight, he turned around to me and said, 'Mr. Bennett, I'm the coffee and Bobby's the cream.' The next meeting was when we did a command performance for Prince Philip at the Sportsman's Club in London. That's where I gave him the painting. He kept saying, 'Rembrandt! Rembrandt!'"

The Armstrongs liked to eat. Their first-floor all-aquamarine kitchen (circa 1960) includes a custom-made Crown stove with six burners and a double broiler. Armstrong's favorite dish was Lucille's Creole red beans and rice--chased 20 minutes later with Swiss Kriss.

"One thing you sense coming into the kitchen is that this is a period room," Cogswell says. "In another 50, 100 years, it will truly be a period room. That's one of the most remarkable things about the house. Most of the other historic houses in New York City are 17th, 18th century homes."

In 1971, the Armstrongs had most of the house covered with red brick, although the alley and back side were done in cheaper brick-faced stucco, a.k.a. "Garden State Brick." They acquired the urban lot directly south of the house and landscaped it in the style of a New Orleans garden, complete with a fish pond, slate walkway and wet bar. (During the spring and summer, the Louis Armstrong Archives presents free concerts for area children in the garden.)

It has been said that 20 languages are spoken daily in Queens, perhaps America's most diverse neighborhood. Cogswell looks down the quiet street in front of the Armstrong house and says, "This used to be an Italian-Irish neighborhood. When Louis moved in, it was mostly a white neighborhood. It became a black neighborhood. Now it's Spanish-speaking. There is a section south of here which is still Italian. There's a butcher shop, a bakery. The old men play bocce in the park. It's New York City. It's always in flux."

But the Louis Armstrong House is the constant, a metaphor for a loving giant who knew the world as his neighbor.

Postscript:

Michael Cogswell died on April 20, 2020 in Manhattan from complications of bladder cancer. He was 66 years old.