“Telling a Story”: Louis Armstrong and Coherence in Early Jazz

By Brian Harker

The average [jazz] improvisation is mostly a stringing together of unrelated ideas.
—Gunther Schuller

This oft-quoted statement by Gunther Schuller (1986:87) might sound like a critical indictment of jazz, but in fact it serves an apologetic purpose. By acknowledging structural weakness in the playing of most jazz soloists, Schuller can highlight the achievement of the exceptions—those “titans of jazz history” who somehow overcame the forces of entropy at work in the act of improvisation. Unlike their less inspired colleagues, says Schuller, such figures as trumpeter Louis Armstrong and saxophonists Coleman Hawkins and Charlie Parker sometimes created solos that “held together as perfect compositions” (1986:87, italics added). Even though, for Schuller, successful solos don’t necessarily require coherence, those that have it rise to the level of “composition,” a creative process often deemed capable of producing musical “perfection,” usually through considerable forethought and revision.¹

Louis Armstrong appears first on Schuller’s list of exceptions for good reason: Armstrong’s improvised performances made compelling compositional sense, even to composers of art music for the concert hall. As early as 1936 Virgil Thomson praised the “tensely disciplined melodic structure” in Armstrong’s solos (1981:31), and twenty years later the influential French writer and composer André Hodeir made a similar assessment (1956:58). These and other like-minded observers shaped the development, in the second half of the century, of a widely shared critical view of Armstrong’s music. Current jazz history textbooks frequently emphasize the well-crafted architecture of his solos.²

Given the backgrounds of Schuller, Thomson, and Hodeir in European-based compositional practice, their interest in structural unity is easy to understand. These days, however, their writings inevitably raise the question: Is it necessary or appropriate to apply coherence, a bedrock value of Western European musical aesthetics, to the music of African-American musicians like Armstrong? According to leading scholars in black critical theory, the answer is an emphatic no. Bruce Tucker expresses the feeling of many, denouncing “traditional musicologists who have trained the heavy artillery of European formalist analysis on black music . . . leaving the cultural context—which is to say any conceivable significance—far
behind” (1991:vii). Such writers disdain a “formalist” preoccupation with “the notes” not only for its inadequacy to illuminate black music, but because, for them, such an approach implicitly derogates African-American culture by evaluating it with outside aesthetic criteria instead of its own.

The search for a culturally grounded analytical framework for black music is long overdue. And yet to discard every critical tool that is not specifically African-American ignores both the European influence on jazz and the cultural intersection of the two traditions on certain fundamentals (for example, triadic harmony). More important, many jazz musicians seem not to share Tucker’s reservations. Oral histories make clear that jazz musicians have always practiced “close listening” to musical texts, and that they have found—to answer Tucker’s objection—plenty of “significance” in the notes themselves, aside from any explicit cultural ties.

On the subject of Armstrong and coherence, a wide range of jazz musicians—both black and white, early and late—corroborate the composer-critics mentioned earlier. Wynton Marsalis, world-renowned jazz trumpet virtuoso, composer, and pedagogue, addressed the topic in a recent interview. Responding to a question about Armstrong’s “specific technical achievements,” Marsalis declared that “first, he created the coherent solo” (1994). In this statement Marsalis echoes seventy years of interpretation about Armstrong’s music from within the jazz community. Armstrong himself allegedly described his approach to improvisation in terms suggesting logical development and progressive expansion: “The first chorus I plays the melody. The second chorus I plays the melody round the melody, and the third chorus I routines” (Sudhalter and Evans 1974:192).

As Paul Berliner (1994:201-05) has shown, jazz musicians have traditionally characterized this sort of sequential unfolding in a solo as a kind of “storytelling,” a notion presupposing concern for “matters of continuity and cohesion” (1994:202). Indeed, trumpeter Roy Eldridge, widely viewed as Armstrong’s stylistic successor, initially perceived the latter’s solos as climactic narratives. When he first heard Armstrong in 1932, he recalled, “I was a young cat, and I was very fast, but I wasn’t telling no kind of story” (Pinfold 1987:59–60). By contrast, “every phrase [Armstrong played] led somewhere, linking up with the next one, in the way a storyteller leads you on to the next idea. Louis was developing his musical thoughts, moving in one direction. It was like a plot that finished with a climax” (Porter and Ullman 1963:168).

Other musicians from the Jazz Age have similarly emphasized the powerful teleology of Armstrong’s live performances. Tenor saxophonist Bud Freeman said that at Chicago’s Sunset Cafe (ca. 1926–27) “Louis would play twenty or more improvised choruses, always to an exciting climax.” Pianist Earl Hines remembered another time in Chicago when Armstrong
and trumpeter Johnny Dunn engaged in a “cutting contest,” that ubiquitous competitive ritual of early jazz: “When it came Louis’s turn I don’t know how many choruses he played, but every time he played a new one he just kept getting higher and higher. That was the end of the trumpet for that night” (Pinfold 1987:49–50). Cornetist Rex Stewart recalled a showdown in the late 1920s between Armstrong and his chief rival, Cladys “Jabbo” Smith. According to Stewart, “Louis never let up that night, and it seemed that each climax topped its predecessor. Every time he’d take a break, the applause was thunderous” (Stewart 1965:26).

Two closely related points stand out in these accounts: the inexorable, climactic trajectory of Armstrong’s solos, and their sheer length. Both elements stunned 1920s listeners because they displayed a rhetorical conception far removed from the norm. Armstrong inherited a performance tradition in which cornet soloists typically either played “breaks” or melodic paraphrases (embellished versions of well-known melodies). Breaks tended to be flashy, clever, and short—usually no more than two measures—while melodic paraphrases were more stylistically reserved and could span an entire chorus (i.e., the length of the melody itself). As long as a soloist followed the contours of a pre-existing melody, coherence was not at issue. The problem arose when a musician tried to play an extended solo on abstract, break-like material: it could sound disjointed and capricious. Judging from early 1920s recordings, most nonparaphrase solos before Armstrong were either lengthy or coherent, but not both.

The lack of structural continuity, however, may have reflected aesthetic ideals rather than poor craftsmanship. Jazz musicians of this period embraced vaudeville entertainment values summed up in the catchword “novelty.” This term denoted qualities in an act that struck the audience as original, surprising, or humorous; it could be applied to an enterprising dancer or juggler as well as to a musician. Early jazz bands performed frequently on vaudeville programs, and their music—which often comically evoked animal sounds, crying babies, and other real-life phenomena—amply satisfied the demand for novelty. Significantly, W. C. Handy recalled that the music eventually known as “jazz” was first termed “novelty music” (Kenney 1986:234).

Few contemporary musical treatises indicate what “novelty” might have meant in technical terms. One important exception appeared in 1923 under the title The Novelty Cornetist. The author, Louis Panico, was the star soloist of Isham Jones’s Orchestra, a leading white dance band in Chicago in the early twenties. In the book Panico gives detailed explanations and illustrations of such performance gimmicks as “the laugh,” “the sneeze,” “the horse neigh,” “the baby cry,” and the “Chinese effect.” Panico also provides a catalog of two-bar breaks (on both tonic and dominant harmonies) and brief essays on such topics as “jazz melody,” “blues,” and “im-
provisation.” Panico identifies “stop-time improvisation,” in particular, as “the most difficult [practice] . . . known to the novelty cornetist.” “Stop-time,” a routine borrowed from tap dancers, was essentially a series of contiguous solo breaks punctuated by accented downbeats in the ensemble. Panico considered the practice difficult because it compelled the soloist to “keep on going,” that is, to sustain the flow of original material beyond the confines of the two-bar break (Panico 1923:87).

The main challenge of stop-time, according to Panico, was not to produce a unified solo. On the contrary, in keeping with the novelty emphasis on unpredictability and surprise, he admonishes the aspiring soloist to strive primarily for “variety, inasmuch as that quality of avoiding monotony and repetition is essential.” As a rule of thumb, Panico recommends that “never more than two measures of similarity be used, proceeding into a new idea about every other measure” (1923:83). The lively but rambling recorded solos of players like reedmen Don Redman and (early) Coleman Hawkins, both members of Fletcher Henderson’s band, suggest that other dance band musicians held similar aesthetic views.

Armstrong’s music created a sensation in the twenties in part because his solos exhibited none of the discontinuity advocated by Panico. The difference was readily apprehended by Bix Beiderbecke and Esten Spurrier, young white musicians who regularly attended Chicago’s Lincoln Gardens in 1922–23 to hear Armstrong play with King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band. They recognized that in his solos Armstrong “departed greatly from all cornet players . . . in his ability to compose a close-knit, individual 32 measures with all phrases compatible with each other.” Such organization produced, in their words, “correlated choruses.” Echoing the language employed by Eldridge, Spurrier elaborated on this idea: “Bix and I always credited Louis as being the father of the correlated chorus: play two measures, then two related, making four measures, on which you played another four measures related to the first four, and so on . . . to the end of the chorus.” Contrary to Panico’s formula and prevailing practice, Armstrong presented “a series of related phrases” (Sudhalter and Evans 1974:51, 100–01).

When Ralph Ellison once called Armstrong a “rowdy musical poet” (1964:192) he was not just using picturesque language, for Beiderbecke and Spurrier’s idea of “related phrases” pertains to musical “rhyme.” One can hear it in Armstrong’s music as early as 1923, on a Creole Jazz Band recording of Armstrong’s own composition, Tears. In the middle of the piece Armstrong plays a long series of breaks that alternate every two measures with ensemble passages—a design similar to stop-time. Yet he binds the breaks together motivically as though they were simply successive phrases in a chorus-length solo. The second break in Tears, for example, mirrors, parallels, or “rhymes” with the first break in a number of
ways: it begins on the second beat; it inverts the sawtooth contour from descending to ascending; and it reverses the sequence of events, placing the running eighth notes in the first bar and the sustained note in the second (ex. 1). But the strongest link with the first break is in the last five notes. Here the rhythms, contour, minor mode, and final whole step interval are identical, and even the pitches are never farther than a whole step away from their counterparts in the first break. By reserving the strongest similarities for the end of the phrase, Armstrong creates a musical rhyme not unlike that which binds together two lines of traditional spoken poetry. The "rowdiness" referred to by Ellison comes both from Armstrong's rollicking manner of delivery and, in structural terms, from the complex network of internal relationships between the breaks—secondary rhymes, one might say—prior to the closing five notes.

This knack for connecting similar ideas allowed Armstrong to expand his solos beyond the limits of the two-bar break—even beyond the horizon of the single chorus—without losing the thread of continuity. As Marsalis explained it: "[Armstrong] developed, from the conception of playing on breaks, playing solos in which phrases were like—matched phrases that could be played in the context of the rhythm section. And that created the long form solo" (1994). That evolution from break to full-length solo involved negotiating with convention on several levels. At first, Armstrong fashioned his solos around commercial and other "outside" melodies, obscuring them to varying degrees with his own melodic ideas. As Armstrong left the structural safety of pre-existing melodies, he had to rely to an unusual extent (for the time) on harmonic progressions. In one respect this worked well, since his abstract melodic vocabulary consisted primarily of arpeggios and scales. But now the full weight of melodic design fell upon him. As a result, Armstrong took a judicious approach to improvisation. Rather than start from scratch with each new solo, he apparently used improvisation as a means to refine his ideas from one performance to the next—in a sense, "composing" his solos publicly. Over time his best solos acquired a sense of "inevitability" through a frequently climactic overall structure and tight motivic relationships among phrases. That Armstrong often repeated these final incarnations essentially note-for-note explains Schuller's expression "perfect compositions."

An investigation of coherence in Armstrong's solos from the 1920s requires that we first address the following dichotomies: improvisation vs. "composition," melodic paraphrases vs. newly invented lines, and melody-based vs. harmony-based solos. Although these principles are intimately related, we shall see that Armstrong's recordings with Fletcher Henderson illuminate particularly well the roles of improvisation and melodic paraphrase, while his Hot Five (and Hot Seven) recordings reveal more about
Example 1: Tears: musical rhyme between Armstrong’s first two breaks.

his use of original lines based on harmonic progressions. These issues will then inform an examination of Armstrong’s breakthrough recording, Big Butter and Egg Man, in which he achieved an unprecedented balance and clarity of structure within a complex web of motivic cross-relations.

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More and more studies of early jazz are suggesting that before the Swing Era, freely improvised solos were the exception, not the rule. Critics have long known that certain classic solos of the 1920s, such as King Oliver’s Dippermouth Blues, had eventually become “set,” that is, largely unchanged from one performance to the next. Such acknowledgments, however, had to contend with the vociferous ideology, born in the thirties, that jazz without its spontaneous “folk” element—improvisation—was not true jazz. Writers for Metronome magazine, for example, reported in amazement in 1938 that the late, legendary Bix Beiderbecke had “pet choruses” that he played over and over again in the 1920s (1938:19). The same could be said of Armstrong. The recordings he made with Fletcher Henderson in 1924–25 open a window onto his creative processes during this early period because of the relative abundance of alternative takes, including those on Shanghai Shuffle, Words, Copenhagen, Naughty Man, How Come You Do Me Like You Do?, Everybody Loves My Baby, Mandy Make Up Your Mind, I’ll See You In My Dreams, Why Couldn’t It Be Poor Little Me?, Play Me Slow, Alabamy Bound, and Money Blues. As Jeffrey Magee has observed, Armstrong played quite similar solos from one take to the next on most of these pieces (1992:326–31). Some alternative takes, though, show subtle changes between otherwise identical solos, revealing improvisatory impulses at work. The question, then, becomes: How did Armstrong strike a balance between preset routines and improvisation?

The first issue to be addressed concerns Armstrong’s use of melodic paraphrase. To whatever extent he relied on an existing melody, after all,
to that extent he was not improvising. In the forty-five solos he recorded with Henderson, Armstrong’s paraphrases range from transparent re-phrasing to only distant echoes of the melody. To grasp the scope of his technique it may be useful to propose five types of paraphrase in his playing, even though most solos incorporate aspects from more than one type. The five types outline a scale of increasing melodic abstraction:

1. Armstrong plays original melody with only minor rhythmic alterations.
2. Armstrong plays original melody, but adds extensive melodic embellishments and interpolations as well as new rhythms.
3. Armstrong creates new melody based on fragments of the original melody.
4. Armstrong creates new melody based on important pitches of the original melody.
5. Armstrong creates new melody that is almost independent of the original one, sometimes basing lines explicitly on the harmonic structure.

Armstrong frequently employs the first type. In *Tell Me, Dreamy Eyes* and *My Rose Marie*, for example, the melodies stand out unambiguously in Armstrong’s lines. Except for a few added pitches, Armstrong simply adjusts rhythmic values without distorting the character of the original melodies. In the first takes of *Words* and of *Naughty Man* Armstrong exemplifies the second type. While preserving recognizability, he radically transforms the old rhythms and spikes the melody with elaborate neighboring riffs, often supplanting an inactive measure with a flourish of new material. The third type brings us to *Go ‘Long Mule*, a solo with a specific melodic shape correctly identified by James Lincoln Collier and Magee as one of Armstrong’s own creations. But they go too far, in my opinion, to assert that Armstrong made “a clean break from the original melody,” as Magee put it (1992:151). Example 2 shows how much Armstrong relied on the tune to construct his ideas. In the first two measures he works over the opening interval of the melody, E♭–C, resolving to B♭ in the third bar (though his point of arrival is G). Similarly, he mirrors the C–B♭ alternation in mm. 5–6. After an arpeggiated break unique to the solo, he repeats the pattern, referring more obliquely to the melody at first (mm. 9–11), but then reflecting the C–B♭ oscillation as before (mm. 13–14). Although one might not easily recognize *Go ‘Long Mule* in this solo, the melody (as distinct from the harmony) clearly provided the structure for Armstrong’s ideas. Nor did he simply extract a seed from which to grow an entirely new specimen: the core elements—the alternations of E♭–C and C–B♭—appear in the same places and fulfill similar roles in Armstrong’s solo as in the melody.
Example 2: *Go 'Long Mule*: melody and Armstrong’s solo.

Sometimes Armstrong reduces the content of a tune to a few important pitches, then builds a new melody around them. This fourth type of paraphrase appears in his solo on *Copenhagen*. As shown in example 3, Armstrong lifts what might be called in Schenkerian terms the “structural” pitches from the clarinet trio played earlier, and in a sort of “composing out” process, elaborates his own impressively coherent melody on the foundation thus laid. Here it seems that behind his solo statement Armstrong is no longer “hearing” the entire original melody (as seems evident in, say, *Tell Me, Dreamy Eyes*), but rather a skeletal version that suggests global contours for his solo but nothing more.

The melodic reduction in his thinking becomes more evident (and severe) in his solos on four takes of *Why Couldn’t It Be Poor Little Me?* I propose a fifth type of paraphrase to explain this approach because the relation between melody and solo dwindles so much, sometimes vanishing completely. Armstrong’s solo in the first take loosely paraphrases the
Example 3: *Copenhagen* (Oct. 30, 1924), first take: melody, reduction, and Armstrong’s solo (adapted from Magee 1992:327).

opening melody, primarily by coinciding with the pitches on the first beat of mm. 1, 3, and 5 (ex. 4). After that, Armstrong abandons the melody until the last half of the solo, when he matches the first pitches of each measure again. The next three takes, recorded “probably a few days later,” according to Walter C. Allen (1973:154), show still greater independence from the melody. At first glance the second take might seem almost totally unrelated, but actually the first three-and-a-half measures of the solo represent an ornamented expansion of the melody’s opening figure (ex. 5).
Example 4: Why Couldn’t It Be Poor Little Me? (mid-Jan. 1925): melody and Armstrong's four solos (break and first eight measures).

While the third take largely repeats the expansion, the fourth is modified just enough to sever this fragile link with the original melody. From this point on, the solo in takes 2, 3, and 4 repeatedly elaborates a blues figure around the lowered third. One point, however, merits attention: in m. 7 Armstrong experiments with various forms of the F-major triad, showing an effort to replace melodic thinking with ideas based specifically on the
Example 5: Why Couldn't It Be Poor Little Me? take 2: ornamented expansion of melody's opening figure.

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harmony. Few, if any, of Armstrong's other solos with Henderson stray this far from their melodic moorings. If such departures were exceptions for him in 1925, though, they laid the groundwork for more adventurous forays in the future.

Why do the second, third, and fourth takes of Why Couldn't It Be Poor Little Me? connect less strongly to the original melody than the first? Whereas the first and second takes vaguely paraphrase the melody in their own ways, the third and fourth paraphrase the paraphrase of the second take, thus drifting progressively further away from the melodic source. For this reason, the first take is quite different from the other three, which are, in turn, very similar to one another. Since the last three takes were recorded a few days after the first, Armstrong may have developed a number of transformations in the intervening period, thus accounting for the thematic disjunction between the first take and the relatively unified ones that followed. By the second recording session Armstrong had rethought his approach to the solo and fashioned each take according to his new ideas.

Despite the apparent individuality of the first solo, a couple of spots common to all four takes support this evolutionary hypothesis. Immediately after the opening, take 2 elaborates material beginning two beats earlier in take 1, which takes 3 and 4 then elaborate in turn (ex. 6). The genealogy becomes especially clear in mm. 6–7. Take 4, with its blues inflections, might bear little resemblance to take 1 in m. 6, but takes 2 and 3 provide a link to show the descent. And the next measure confirms the relationships beyond doubt. The first two takes each present "variations" on the F-major triad: a descending arpeggio in take 1 and an ascending chromatic triplet in take 2. Take 3 returns to the descending arpeggio, but take 4 combines the two ideas, unifying all four solos. Such examples prove that while Armstrong had moved to a different level of thinking by the second recording session, he continued to develop ideas from the first.
The subtle interactions among the various takes on *Why Couldn’t It Be Poor Little Me?* reveal Armstrong’s apparent improvisational method: to tinker with already stable designs (whether a preset melody or one of his own) rather than to start fresh with each new performance. Not surprisingly, there seems to have come a point in the life of certain solos at which he largely stopped tinkering and simply repeated what he had played before. In this he may have been following a common practice in the 1920s. In the *Metronome* article mentioned earlier, bandleader Paul Whiteman recalled that Bix Beiderbecke “would never play a chorus the same way until he got just what he wanted. Then he’d stick to that chorus and play it that same way over and over again. Once in a while he’d try to improve on his finished product, but most of the time he didn’t distort his new composition” (1938:19).

Similarly, multiple takes of Armstrong’s solos on *Copenhagen* and *Shanghai Shuffle* reveal not the searching experimentation of a restless artist, but the finished product of a satisfied one. The second take of *Copenhagen*, recorded the same day as the first, shows none of the almost constant melodic and rhythmic variability found in the alternative takes of *Alabamy Bound*, *Money Blues*, and the last three takes of *Why Couldn’t It Be Poor Little Me?* There are three barely noticeable changes in the second take of *Copenhagen*, and at least one of them might have been a mistake. But as Magee observes, there is good reason for the nearly identical repeat. The solo is extraordinarily well-crafted; so much so that even tiny changes in the second take seem to diminish its effectiveness. Louis Metcalf recalls being greatly impressed by Armstrong’s *Copenhagen* solo
with the Henderson band (Shapiro and Hentoff 1955:206). Armstrong probably honed this and other famous solos through many performances for appreciative audiences.\footnote{22}

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As the foregoing musical examples indicate, Armstrong relied heavily on pre-existing melodies to shape his solos with Henderson. Yet he manifested two distinct styles during this period: melodic paraphrase (including the five types discussed above) and breaks or break-like material. This duality can be heard in many solos, including *Go 'Long Mule, My Rose Marie, Words, Naughty Man* (both takes), *Shanghai Shuffle* (second take), *I Miss My Swiss*, and *Tell Me, Dreamy Eyes*. Whereas melodic paraphrases attest to Armstrong’s debt to King Oliver and the previous generation of jazz musicians, breaks often expose running arpeggios, a radical approach (for cornetists of the time) that Armstrong borrowed from clarinetists in New Orleans.\footnote{23} The breaks in *Go 'Long Mule* and in the second take of *Shanghai Shuffle*, for instance, exploit the sawtooth arpeggiated pattern—so characteristic of New Orleans clarinet style—we first encountered in Armstrong’s opening breaks on *Tears*. Armstrong uses arpeggios in breaks in many other ways as well. Example 7 shows some characteristic breaks he played with Henderson, most of which use arpeggios.

Such abstract melodic ideas do not appear only during breaks. The first two “breaks” on *Tell Me, Dreamy Eyes*, for instance, are not breaks in the truest sense of the word because the ensemble continues playing behind Armstrong. But they occur in the designated spot for breaks—at the end of each eight-bar phrase—and Armstrong shifts gears accordingly, leaving his paraphrase style and surging upward with broken chords. Armstrong occasionally introduces break-like material elsewhere in his solos, usually at the ends of phrases. At the end of his solo on *Words*, he unfurls descending triplets in a flamboyant manner typical of breaks. He executes a similarly intricate falling figure, this time with sixteenth notes, in the fourth bar of *Mandy, Make Up Your Mind* (the end of the first phrase of the tune). Both of these complicated passages appear unaltered in second takes. That Armstrong shows no hesitation in playing them suggests that he had worked them out in advance.

The division between melodic paraphrase and arpeggiated breaks so evident in Armstrong’s recordings with Henderson would increasingly break down in the years to come. Around 1926 Armstrong began working his flashy arpeggios into the body of his solos rather than confining them to the fringes. Indeed, one of Armstrong’s central concerns at the beginning of the Hot Five recording series was to integrate the two approaches—melodic paraphrase and arpeggios—into a unified solo style.\footnote{24} This
Example 7: Characteristic breaks Armstrong recorded with Fletcher Henderson, 1924-25 (mm. a-b represent measures immediately preceding solo choruses).

Mandy (mm. 15-16)

Go' Long Mule (mm. 7-8)

Tell Me, Dreamy Eyes (mm. 7-8)

Tell Me, Dreamy Eyes (mm. 15-16)

Tell Me, Dreamy Eyes, 2nd solo (mm. a-b)

My Rose Marie (mm. 15-16)

Words, take 2 (mm. a-b)

Naughty Man, take 1 (mm. a-b)

Naughty Man, take 1 (mm. 7-8)

Naughty Man, take 2 (mm. a-b)

Naughty Man, take 2 (mm. 7-8)

Shanghai Shuffle, take 2 (mm. 15-16)
required him to rely on harmonic progressions far more than he had done in the past.

Of the eleven pieces featuring cornet solos in the earliest group of Hot Five recordings, five show the relation of melodic paraphrase and newly created lines in Armstrong’s playing: Oriental Strut, Muskrat Ramble, Sweet Little Papa, Big Butter and Egg Man, and You Made Me Love You. For various reasons the other six pieces prove unsatisfactory in this regard: Armstrong’s solos on (Yes!) I’m In the Barrel and King of the Zulus consist of fragmentary lines over a minor vamp; You’re Next and Sunset Cafe Stomp feature Armstrong and the rhythm section playing the verse melody (which never reappears); on Gutbucket Blues he plays simple ideas over a blues chorus; and the stop-time chorus in Cornet Chop Suey, while impressive, turns out to be just another strain (the “patter”) in Armstrong’s written-out composition. Unlike these pieces, the first five listed above give Armstrong “solo space” in the conventional sense of the term: the opportunity to improvise variations on the structure of the piece being played.

In his discussion of the Hot Five series, Schuller implies that Armstrong moved gradually, in evolutionary fashion, from a solo style based on the melody to one based on the harmony: “Louis’s solo conception developed in exact proportion to the degree his solos departed from the original tune. His later [Hot Five] solos all but ignored the original tune and started with only the chord changes given” (1968:103). This view, while accurate in some respects, oversimplifies Armstrong’s musical development. As Collier points out, Armstrong never stopped using melodic paraphrase as a shaping device for his solos (1983:181). On the other hand, he began “ignoring” the original tune to follow the “changes” as early as February 1926. His solo on Muskrat Ramble, for example, is only vaguely related to the melody of the B section, the part of the harmonic progression used for solos (ex. 8). In mm. 3–4 of his solo, Armstrong does toy with the B♭–A♭–G–F figure from m. 4 of the melody, and the octave descent in mm. 6–7 roughly follows the original tune. But the rest of the solo bears little relation to the melody, having a form and logic all its own. Muskrat Ramble lacks the intricacy and grandeur of later chord-based solos such as Struttin’ With Some Barbecue, but it establishes an equivalent melodic independence.

Armstrong’s solos on Sweet Little Papa, You Made Me Love You, Big Butter and Egg Man, and Oriental Strut reflect their original melodies much more closely. Yet Oriental Strut presents an unusual case. With regard to the relation between melodic paraphrase and arpeggios, this solo represents a departure from Armstrong’s approach in his recordings with Henderson. In his book Ellington: The Early Years, Mark Tucker contrasts the solo styles in 1924 of Armstrong and Ellington trumpeter James “Bubber” Miley. While the two solos on Ellington’s Rainy Nights and Henderson’s Naughty Man
Example 8: *Muskrat Ramble* (Feb. 26, 1926), B section: melody and Armstrong’s solo.

share the same chord progression, Tucker observes that “Miley almost sounds like an old-timer when placed next to Armstrong, with the latter’s rhythmic vitality and athletic leaps” (1991:149). Yet Armstrong, like Miley, stays close to the melody, saving arpeggios mostly for the breaks. A year later Armstrong recorded *Oriental Strut*, a piece that recalls the harmonies of *Naughty Man*, except that the chords change every two bars rather than every one (ex. 9). Here Armstrong continues to structure his solo around the melody, but now connects each melody note with wide-ranging arpeggios. The solo on *Oriental Strut*, however, sounds more experimental than finished in nature. By attaching arpeggios to certain goal notes, Armstrong seems as yet unsure how to merge his two instincts for chord-derived and tune-based melody. In mm. 17–18, for example, the arpeggios

Convey a studied quality reminiscent of the preset figures in early solos like *Chimes Blues* and the introduction to *Cornet Chop Suey*.

As *Muskrat Ramble* demonstrates, during this period Armstrong sometimes rejected the technique of melodic paraphrase to create essentially new melodies in his solos. Largely unfettered by predetermined contours, he began constructing melodies around arpeggios rather than vice versa, as in *Oriental Strut*. Perhaps the clearest example of this practice occurs in Armstrong’s famous stop-time chorus on *Potato Head Blues*, one of the Hot Seven recordings made slightly more than a year after *Oriental Strut*. As example 10 shows, Armstrong makes passing reference to the melody most strongly at the beginning (mm. 1–3), middle (mm. 17–20), and end (mm. 29–30) of the solo. Otherwise he follows his own muse, treating virtually every phrase in arpeggiated fashion. Although one phrase (mm. 15–16)
Example 10: *Potato Head Blues* (May 10, 1927): melody and Armstrong’s stop-time solo.

appeared first in his solo on *Tears*, the solo manifests a strong melodic coherence at both background and foreground levels of structure. The solo unfolds in pairs of phrases, most of which exhibit a call-and-response relationship in which the second phrase recalls elements from the first. This relationship is especially clear in the two phrases that begin the solo: Armstrong augments in mm. 3–4 the short-short-long rhythm from m. 2; the D–D octave descent in mm. 3–4 inverts the F–F ascent in m. 1; and the oscillating A–C motive that opens the first phrase returns at the end of the second.
Armstrong creates large-scale coherence in a number of ways. At A prime, the beginning of the second sixteen measures, he recalls the opening of the solo, especially in m. 19, which reiterates the emphasis on D in mm. 2-3, and in m. 20, which nearly duplicates the melodic content of m. 4. Yet the dominance of F over D in m. 19 suggests a registral expansion which, indeed, continues throughout the second half of the solo. Armstrong, in fact, builds a climactic series of three descending arpeggios, shown in brackets in example 10. The ledger-line A that begins the first descent reappears much more emphatically exactly four measures later, with an introductory “rip,” lengthened duration, and lip shake. After the second descent Armstrong breaks the pattern by waiting two extra measures and by staying well within the lower register. This creates a suspense
that makes the final rip to high C and the arpeggiated two-octave descent in mm. 31-32 much more dramatic. The last three measures—by reviving the oscillating A–C motive, and by following an F-major arpeggio with a sustained D—also recall the first three, thus rounding off the solo.

The seemingly spontaneous—yet coherent—delivery in *Potato Head Blues* suggests that Armstrong had learned to use arpeggios in an unself-conscious manner as fluent elements of his musical language. The somewhat stiff deployment of arpeggios in *Chimes Blues* and *Cornet Chop Suey* had given way to unpredictability and invention. Most importantly, arpeggios became the stuff of melody—the very substance of Armstrong's improvisations. In *Potato Head Blues* Armstrong fuses together the previously separate tuneful and chordal aspects of his melodic approach.

The relatively weak allusions to the melody in *Potato Head Blues* might tempt one to assume that an exploration of arpeggios had driven Armstrong from melody-based to harmony-based improvisation. Certainly arpeggios contributed to that shift. But Armstrong ignored the melody in *Muskrat Ramble* and that solo does not show a preoccupation with arpeggios. This raises the question: Why do arpeggios appear with such unusual prominence in Armstrong's *Oriental Strut* solo, which clearly paraphrases the melody, and in *Potato Head Blues*, which shows much greater independence? The answer lies in the stop-time setting of these two solos. Since Armstrong was accustomed to playing arpeggios during breaks, and since stop-time was really just a series of breaks, it became natural for him to fill stop-time solos with arpeggios. Yet even though the stop-time structure of *Potato Head Blues* partitioned Armstrong's lines into two-bar phrases, the performance hangs together as a coherent, well-developed solo. *Potato Head Blues* (and surely countless similar solos played outside the studio) thereby set a precedent for non-stop-time solos based on arpeggios as well. Later Hot Five solos such as *Struttin' With Some Barbecue* and *Beau Koo Jack* provide good examples of this practice.

Still, as mentioned above, Armstrong never ceased playing outright paraphrases, and arpeggios never replaced the other techniques in his soloistic arsenal. Rather, he alternated arpeggiated and linear playing (whether paraphrases or newly invented melodies) to achieve maximum variety and surprise. Looking beyond the Hot Fives we can see this method in his solo on *Sweethearts On Parade*, recorded with his large orchestra in 1930. The second eight-bar phrase of his solo begins with an arching melodic line followed by running arpeggios in double time. Neither passage invokes the original melody very strongly, but each possesses a melodic beauty of its own. While it could well be said that Armstrong is playing on the "changes" here rather than on the melody, arpeggios constitute only one aspect of his harmonic approach. The prism through which Armstrong
shone his luminous ideas was constantly turning, revealing a new creation here, a paraphrase there, a chordal conception followed by an interest in pure linear melody.

* * *

Armstrong once described his state of mind during performance: “When I blow I think of times and things from outa the past that gives me a image of the tune. . . . A town, a chick somewhere back down the line, an old man with no name you seen once in a place you don’t remember. . . . What you hear coming from a man’s horn—that’s what he is” (King 1967:69). As mentioned earlier, Armstrong’s telling of these “stories” from his past took the syntactical form of dramatic poetry. Eldridge heard the stories in terms of narrative plot, complete with complication and denouement. Beiderbecke and Spurrier, on the other hand, heard “correlated choruses,” in which each melodic phrase would echo a preceding phrase—a notion suggesting musical rhyme. Both elements—the dramatic and the poetic—figure strongly in Big Butter and Egg Man (1926), the earliest Armstrong solo widely acclaimed for its architectural elegance.

The solo spans the thirty-two measures in the chorus of the song, following the conventional form, ABCA. In the first sixteen measures (AB), Armstrong plays four two-bar phrases, then two four-bar phrases, making six phrases in all (ex. 11). As in Potato Head Blues, the phrases may be heard in terms of call-and-response. In example 11a, the first three phrases sound like repeated “calls” and the fourth a “response.” One might even hear a question-answer relationship. The insistent repetition, ascending contour, restless rhythms, and migrating vibrato of the calls connote uncertainty, while the change of harmony every two measures suggests that the “question” is being constantly restated. And the response—with its rip to the top-line F, inverted contour, precipitous descent, and downward octave-transfer of the primary structural pitch A—supplies a decisive “answer.” In addition, the move from the repeated As (mm. 1-5) to G–F (m. 7) gives a 3-2-1 tonal resolution, underscored by the return of the F triad in the harmony.

The sense of call-and-response between the two four-bar phrases suggests an antecedent-consequent relationship (ex. 11b). Figures common to both phrases appear at the anacruses (the sixth phrase simply drops the last two eighth notes), the beginnings (mm. 9 and 13, beats 1–2, 4), and especially the endings (mm. 11 and 15, beats 3–4). The registral identity and melodic affinity of the two endings bind the phrases together even more strongly than the four eighth notes. In particular, the down-up pattern of the figure in m. 15 counterbalances the down-down pattern in m. 11, just as the rising minor third (boosted by a chromatic appoggiatura) complements the falling minor third by filling in its spaces.
Example 11: Big Butter and Egg Man (Nov. 16, 1926): opening six phrases of Armstrong's solo (first 16 mm.).

Armstrong creates other relationships, however, that cut across the phrase divisions in example 11. To discover them, it will help to consider Hodeir's claim that Armstrong paraphrases the original melody (ex. 12). The first five measures echo the melody by dwelling on A, but the contour of the lines would not suggest a resemblance. Hodeir maintains that in the second eight measures "the paraphrase spreads out, becoming freer and livelier" (1956:57). Yet starting at the end of m. 9 the paraphrase actually becomes more strict in pitch and contour. And Armstrong's final phrase (mm. 13–15) is a recognizable variant of the corresponding phrase in the melody—far more recognizable than his opening lines. The melody in mm. 13–16, in fact, outlines a melodic kernel that shapes the entire sixteen measures of Armstrong's solo. Example 13 shows this kernel, a descending pentatonic scale. Armstrong's opening, then, is indeed a paraphrase, but of the melodic kernel in retrograde (minus the G). After three subtly varied statements of this backward version, Armstrong presents three compensating phrases in forward position (ex. 14). Whereas in the backward version he omits the G, in the forward version he adds to the kernel an auxiliary note E between A and G. The forward phrases successively fill in the pitches of the kernel: the fourth phrase includes...
Example 12: *Big Butter and Egg Man*: melody and Armstrong’s solo (first 16 mm.).

Example 13: *Big Butter and Egg Man*: melodic kernel governing Armstrong’s solo.

A–E–G–F; the fifth phrase, A–E–G–F–D; and the sixth, A–E–G–F–D–C. That this six-pitch kernel truly governs the AB section of the solo is evident from its appearance in its clearest, most concise form at the return of A, immediately after the bridge (ex. 15). Armstrong’s approximately reverse approach to his material—choosing a melodic fragment from the end of a section, beginning with retrograde forms, and saving the most transparent paraphrase for the middle of the solo—counterst traditional assumptions that jazz variations move from the familiar to the abstract.
Example 14: *Big Butter and Egg Man*: three forward and three backward phrases in Armstrong's solo.

Example 15: *Big Butter and Egg Man*: melodic kernel at return of A (m. 25).

The three backward kernels followed by three forward kernels create a tripartite melodic arch-form (ex. 16). Armstrong uses this arch-form as scaffolding for a more elaborate structure, especially in the last three phrases. The fifth and sixth phrases, for example, recall all the elements of the fourth phrase, not just the melodic kernel (ex. 17). The fourth phrase provides a skeleton; the fifth and sixth phrases each add an anacrusis; the fifth elaborates the second half; and the sixth elaborates the first half. The endings of the last two phrases clearly echo the ending of the fourth phrase. The B♭–G ending elaborates the fourth phrase by descending a whole step and repeating the figure, and the A–C ending “resolves”
Example 16: *Big Butter and Egg Man*: tripartite melodic arch-form in Armstrong’s solo.

Example 17: *Big Butter and Egg Man*: relationships among phrases 4, 5, and 6.

both previous endings. We have already seen how it complements the fifth phrase ending. The rising A–C “resolves” the fourth phrase ending even more strongly, by exactly inverting it. I will provisionally compare the three phrase-endings to two half-cadences followed by a full cadence in Western tonal art music. This analogy will appear in revised and extended form below.

Whence come the figures that surround the melodic kernel in the fourth phrase, and the “elaborations” in the fifth and sixth phrases? The F–C–A that opens the fourth phrase clearly inverts the three previous F-major ascents, approaching the A from above rather than below; this figure reappears an octave lower at the end of the phrase (ex. 18). The anacrusis to the fifth phrase is, in turn, an inverted response to the first half of the fourth: the first four pitches are identical save the octave-transfer of the F, and the eighth-note-dotted-quarter rhythm is simply transposed (ex. 19). The added figures in the second half of the fifth phrase paraphrase the melody, not the melodic kernel (ex. 20). And to understand the first part of the sixth phrase we must consider yet another “antecedent” to it. By combining the third and fourth phrases, a new relationship with the sixth phrase comes into view (ex. 21). The semitone anacrusis in the sixth phrase (and, for that matter, the fifth) comes from the only variation in pitch among the first three phrases: the C–D in m. 4. The other three semitone gestures in the sixth phrase are permutations and reflections of the anacrusis (ex. 22).
Example 18: *Big Butter and Egg Man:* inversion in fourth phrase of previous F-major ascents.

Example 19: *Big Butter and Egg Man:* inversion relationship between phrases 4 and 5.

Example 20: *Big Butter and Egg Man:* melodic paraphrase in fifth phrase.

Example 21: *Big Butter and Egg Man:* relationship between combined phrases 3 and 4 and phrase 6.

Example 22: *Big Butter and Egg Man:* permutations of semitone anacrusis in sixth phrase.
The antecedent-consequent relationship mentioned above suggests yet another way of considering the form of the music—as four four-bar phrases (ex. 23). We have already seen how the fourth phrase in example 23 in a sense "resolves" the second and third phrases, with the strongest resolution occurring between the fourth and the second. Similarly, the second phrase in example 23 exhibits a pattern of rhythms, pitches, and contours similar to the first. Because it also concludes with the emphatic "answer" to the repeated "question" mentioned earlier, the second phrase seems to resolve the first as well. Thus, to continue the analogy advanced earlier (and as the arrows along the left-hand side of example 23 intend to show), the phrases interact in a manner comparable to a classical cadential formula:

antecedent, half-cadence
consequent, imperfect authentic cadence
antecedent, half-cadence
consequent, perfect authentic cadence

with the fourth phrase resolving not only the third but also—and more conclusively—the second.\textsuperscript{32}

Still another parsing of the music reveals correspondences every other measure. Due to the constancy of pitch (A), the beginnings of mm. 1, 3, and 5 sound like rhythmic experiments that Armstrong alternately discards for the eighth-note-dotted-quarter figure at m. 7 (ex. 24). The first "experiment" presents the simplest combination: three quarter notes. The second retains the downbeat on beat three and introduces the dotted quarter on the upbeat of beat one. The third retains the syncopation on the upbeat of one and brings back the downbeat on one. And the fourth combines elements of the three preceding "experiments" by retaining both downbeats on one and three \textit{and} the dotted quarter on the upbeat of one. The resulting eighth-note-dotted-quarter figure is thus the "answer" to Armstrong's "question" which, figuratively, might be, "What rhythm should I use?" As if finally satisfied with this figure, he thereafter presents it at the beginning of the other odd measures (ex. 25). One variation of the rhythm at m. 11 (which recalls m. 3) saves the pattern from sounding mechanical. Otherwise, the figure (as well as its precursors in mm. 1, 3, and 5) supplies structural coherence, dividing the passage into two-bar segments.\textsuperscript{33}

In the first half of \textit{Big Butter} (just discussed), Armstrong creates a rich network of melodic relationships, inviting us to consider the music from various angles: as four groups of two-bar phrases followed by two groups of four; as two groups of three unequal phrases; as four groups of four-bar
Example 23: *Big Butter and Egg Man:* division of Armstrong’s solo into four four-bar phrases.

* indicates inverted contour

Example 24: *Big Butter and Egg Man:* rhythmic “experiments” in first four phrases.

phrases; and as eight groups of two-bar phrases. The phrases interact like the lines of a particularly complex poetry, calling back and forth multifarious “rhymes” that vary in strength and structural prominence. This interaction suggests an interpretation of “Signifyin(g)” — the African-American rhetorical device that quotes and comments (“Signifies”) upon preexisting sources; in this case, the sources are the song melody and Armstrong’s own musical ideas, which are transformed with each restatement. Armstrong paraphrases aspects of the melody en route, but he also employs a single melodic fragment to build a clear and elegant underlying form.

Every musical event recalls a preceding one, and several possess multiple meanings, not unlike a pivot chord in European music of the tonal period. Although Armstrong's variational technique may seem extravagant, no gestures are superfluous; all have a demonstrable origin and purpose.

Schuller calls the bridge (C section) the "imaginative climax" of the solo. It is hard to know what he means by this, for "imaginative" suggests a high level of invention or originality, and by almost any standard the bridge is far more straightforward than the beginning. It paraphrases the melody more transparently than is done anywhere else in the solo, and the melodic and rhythmic relationships show less subtlety. Nevertheless, the bridge embodies the climax of the solo by virtue of its emotional intensity: the emphatically repeated Cs contrast with the undulating contours of the preceding section. Equally important, the bridge transposes the melodic kernel at higher pitch levels than the AB section,
thereby continuing the thread of coherence, but with greater energy. The first phrase of the bridge presents the kernel a fourth higher and the second phrase a whole-step higher (with the exception of the B-flat) than the original (ex. 26). Yet the second phrase doesn’t complete the kernel; it ends on A rather than the melody note G that Armstrong played in the opening ensemble (ex. 27). The resulting dissonance, which Armstrong emphasizes by repeating the A, creates a tension that is broken by the final figure of the bridge, which Schuller justifiably calls “the high point of the solo” (1968:105). Schuller and Hodeir admire this phrase for its hard-driving rhythmic swing, more characteristic of later jazz eras than the twenties. Structurally, however, the phrase marks the strongest point of the solo because of its recapitulatory nature: it represents a compact variation of the final phrase of the AB section (ex. 28).

The impressive coherence of Big Butter and Egg Man suggests that this solo, like Copenhagen, had become perfected and “set” through many live performances, a notion supported by documentary evidence. Armstrong performed the piece regularly with Mae Alix (the singer on the recording) at the Sunset Cafe. Pianist Earl Hines recalled that Alix “would throw her arms around [Armstrong’s] neck and sing, ‘I need a Big Butter and Egg Man.’ He would stand there and almost melt . . . and the whole house cracked up” (Pinfold 1987:51). One night Armstrong invited white cornetist Muggsy Spanier to sit in on the piece. Spanier played Armstrong’s solo note-for-note, later explaining that since “no one in the world can improve on the way he plays it . . . I’m frank to say that as nearly as possible (because I heard him play it so much and listened so intently) I’ve always tried to do those famous breaks as Louis did them” (Shapiro and Hentoff 1955:116–17). Spanier’s language here implies that he heard the solo repeatedly in live performances, not on a record.

* * *

Although I have tried to ground my analysis in views held by jazz players who knew Armstrong well, I recognize that Armstrong himself would have rejected the very task I have undertaken—partly out of sheer modesty and partly from a homespun ideology that refuses to sully music with logic: “I don’t think you should analyze music. Like the old-timer told me . . . ‘Don’t worry about that black cow giving white milk. Just drink the milk.’” (quoted in Meryman 1966:104). By the same token, Armstrong—and other readers—might have objected to my repeated use in this essay of the word “coherence,” loaded as it is with both analytical and cultural assumptions. “Coherence,” however, is just a convenient symbol for a musical reality that—as I have tried to show in the case of Armstrong—Western Europe did not invent and does not own. Whatever we choose to
Example 26: *Big Butter and Egg Man*: presentation of melodic kernel in first phrase of bridge.

![Example 26: Big Butter and Egg Man](image)

1st phrase

2nd phrase

* alternate fingerings (B-flat trumpet key)

Example 27: *Big Butter and Egg Man*, bridge: second phrase of melody as played by Armstrong in the opening ensemble.

![Example 27: Big Butter and Egg Man](image)

Example 28: *Big Butter and Egg Man*: variation (at the end of the bridge) of the final phrase of the AB section.

![Example 28: Big Butter and Egg Man](image)

call it, whether “telling a story,” or “building to a climax,” or presenting a “series of related phrases,” or unleashing a “rowdy musical poetry,” the fact remains that Armstrong traversed the rhetorical gap between two-bar break and full-length solo with a structural eloquence generally unmatched by his peers. Early jazz musicians hailed him for this achievement, and present-day theorists and historians should do the same—by trying to understand it. The current effort to formulate a culturally based analytical framework for black music can speed this understanding if
scholars do not repudiate the *raison d'être* of cultural context: the actual music, which by definition includes the actual notes (or at least the sounds they represent). Even Armstrong, for all his aversion to "analysis," gave profound attention to "all them beautiful notes"—the essence, as he put it, of "my livin' and my life" (Hentoff 1957).

Notes

1. Ted Gioia makes a common argument against jazz when he asserts that "improvisation is doomed ... to offer a pale imitation of the perfection attained by composed music. Errors will creep in, not only in form but also in execution; the improviser, if he seriously attempts to be creative, will push himself into areas of expression that his technique may be unable to handle. Too often the finished product will show moments of rare beauty intermixed with technical mistakes and aimless passages." Thus, "any set of aesthetic standards which seek perfection or near-perfection in the work of art will find little to praise in jazz." Gioia proposes an "aesthetics of imperfection" to rescue jazz from the burden of its own limitations (1988:66).

2. See, for example, Porter and Ullman (1993:57) and Gridley (1997:71).

3. Invoking against overemphasis on structural coherence, Samuel A. Floyd Jr. asserts in a similar vein that "explanations of musical works and performances as realizations of 'ideal form' [or] achievements of 'organic unity' ... are insufficient for black music inquiry because they all separate the works from their cultural and aesthetic foundations" (1991:274).

4. Cultural historians have joined the attack on close readings (i.e., close hearings) of jazz. In his book *Jammin' At the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema*, film historian Krin Gabbard regrets that "with few exceptions, the mainstreams of jazz criticism today are still devoted to an internalist aesthetics that closes out sociocultural analysis." Gabbard considers most discussions emphasizing musical structure to be based on an obsolete paradigm of jazz "as an autonomous art form." "I would suggest that the myth of jazz's autonomy has served its purpose," he declares, and invites his reader to explore a more pertinent view of the music—from the outside, as it were. One problem with close reading, according to Gabbard, is that "most jazz isn't really about jazz, at least not in terms of how it is actually consumed. Jazz is usually about race, sexuality, and spectacle" (1996:1, italics added). For other revisionist perspectives on jazz analysis by cultural historians, see Gabbard's anthologies (1995a, 1995b), and Mark Tucker's cogent review of them in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* (1998:131-48).

5. The foundation for an analysis grounded in African-American cultural practice was laid years ago by authors like LeRoi Jones—a.k.a. Amiri Baraka—(*Blues People*, 1963), Albert Murray (*Stomping the Blues*, 1976), and Lawrence Levine (*Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 1977). Recent studies that build upon the work of these writers include the entire fall 1991 issue of *Black Music Research Journal*, Samuel A. Floyd Jr.'s *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (1995), and Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr.'s address at the 1997 American Musicological Society convention, "Music Analysis and the Practice of Blackness."
6. This point has been exhaustively demonstrated in Paul Berliner’s groundbreaking ethnomusicological work *Thinking In Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*, a book that uncovers a long and vibrant tradition of critical thinking among jazz performers about their own musical process and product.

7. Unfortunately, such protracted improvisational excursions as described in these accounts cannot be corroborated by recordings since early recording technology limited each “take” to approximately three minutes.

8. This generalization might not apply as well to blues solos, which ordinarily did not paraphrase a melody but often manifested a certain riff-based coherence, nonetheless. A famous early example is King Oliver’s three-chorus solo on *Dippermouth Blues* (1923).

9. See recordings by the Original Dixieland Jazz Band such as *Livery Stable Blues* (1917) and *Bow Wow Blues* (1921), which feature, respectively, the sounds of farm animals and a barking dog. Jelly Roll Morton’s *Sidewalk Blues* (1926) introduces traffic noise (arguing motorists and honking horns). Though unrecorded, King Oliver’s crying-baby routine was well known by club patrons on Chicago’s South Side in the early twenties.

10. Little is known about Panico, who does not show up in standard jazz reference books. We do know that Panico frequently attended the Lincoln Gardens to listen to King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band, for whom Armstrong played second cornet. Trombonist Preston Jackson recalled that Panico and Paul Mares, the cornetist for the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, “were both taking lessons from Joe [King Oliver] then” (Jackson 1935:19). An already accomplished player in the conventional sense, Panico sought out Oliver for his widely recognized mastery of unorthodox muted techniques; thus Panico’s book almost surely contains some of Oliver’s teachings and perhaps, more obliquely, his aesthetic assumptions. That Armstrong admired Panico is evident from his description, in his 1954 autobiography, of opening night at the Lincoln Gardens: “The place was filling up with all the finest musicians from downtown including Louis Panico, the ace white trumpeter, and Isham Jones, who was the talk of the town in the same band” (1986:237). Panico made a number of recordings of his own novelty playing, producing “satirically comical effects reminiscent of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band,” according to William Howland Kenney. In 1925 musical entrepreneur Edgar Benson “lured” Panico away from Jones, “setting him up with his own band in vaudeville and at Guyon’s Paradise” (Kenney 1993:82, 84).

11. Other scholars have studied coherence in jazz, often through Schenkerian principles; see Stewart (1973), Martin (1996), Larson (1997), and Strunk (1997). Schenkerian apparatus occasionally appears in the present paper. However, although my diagrams show “structural” pitches, these are privileged not by any abstract system of harmony or voiceleading—but by Armstrong’s recurring, even systematic, deployment of them—particularly in *Big Butter and Egg Man*. For non-Schenkerian approaches to jazz analysis, see Gushee (1981) and Porter (1985).

12. See, for example, Tucker (1991:246, 253) for an account of Bubber Miley recycling essentially the same solos (with refinements) for Ellington’s celebrated
recordings of *Black and Tan Fantasy* and *East St. Louis Toodle-O*, and Magee (1992:326–31) for a discussion of Armstrong’s near-identical choruses on repeated takes with Henderson (to be discussed below). David Chevan’s dissertation *Written Music in Early Jazz* (1997) makes the case that more recorded solos followed a notated source than had been previously supposed. New Orleans jazz bands, once the supposed exemplars of unadulterated improvisation, are now recognized to have relied on memorized (or written) material. Of such bands Lawrence Gushee wrote: “In general there is little improvisation in the sense that term acquired after the early 1920s; routines, once learned, are quite stable” (1988).

13. This conviction has gripped jazz commentary with remarkable tenacity: as late as 1968 Schuller disparaged the Original Dixieland Jazz Band for the “exact repetitions of choruses and . . . great deal of memorization” in their playing, despite the fact that King Oliver’s band followed similar if, perhaps, less rigid routines (1968:180).

14. These recordings are available on “The Complete Louis Armstrong with Fletcher Henderson” two-volume series of CDs produced by King Jazz (KJ 119FS and KJ 120FS).

15. The “original melodies” shown in the following musical examples have been transcribed from the ensemble sections that first present them in Henderson’s band.

16. Another example of this type is his solo on *Shanghai Shuffle*. Here Armstrong reconfigures the G–A♭–F pattern in the taut, brooding melody to generate rhythmic excitement.

17. Collier claims that Armstrong “frequently paraphrased the original melody, as on ‘How Come You Do Me Like You Do?’ but at other times, as on ‘Go ‘Long Mule,’ he made original melodies [of his own],” implying that the latter solo bore no relationship to the melody played by the Henderson band (1983:132).

18. Henderson recorded six takes of *Why Couldn’t It Be Poor Little Me?* (matrix number 5811) of which the first and third were never released. For the sake of clarity I will refer to takes 2, 4, 5, and 6 as the first, second, third, and fourth (issued) takes in the following discussion. For pioneering articles on improvisation that compare multiple versions of a prominent jazz musician’s solo on the same piece, see Dodge (1934:105–10) and Gushee (1981:151–69).

19. Magee speculates in a similar vein: “It seems unlikely that the music [for Armstrong’s solos] was actually written down. More likely, Armstrong’s encounter with a new melody caused him to recompose the tune (on trumpet) and use his revision as the basis for later solos. From this perspective, Armstrong’s approach resembled that of a traditional composer more than of a band musician who renders his part the same way each time” (1992:327).

20. Jeffrey Magee has explicated the stability of these two solos, with an especially perceptive analysis of *Copenhagen* (1992:326–31).

21. In the eighth bar Armstrong plays a high B♭ rather than an A♭, as before. Since the same fingering serves for both notes, he may have simply over-reached for the A♭, a common error among brass players.

22. For a detailed discussion of the process by which jazz musicians pass solos and licks through several generations of improvisatory treatment, gradually adding
new technical and stylistic features over the course of many performances, see the chapter “Improvisation and Precomposition: The Eternal Cycle” in Berliner (1994:221-42).

23. For more on the influence of the clarinet on Armstrong’s style, see Harker (1997:124–37).

24. The complete Hot Five/Hot Seven recordings are available on four CDs in the Columbia Jazz Masterpieces series produced by Columbia/CBS records (CK 44049, CK 44253, CK 44422, CK 45142).

25. David Chevan has shown that Armstrong notated essentially his entire solo to Cornet Chop Suey on a copyright deposit two years before he recorded it in the studio (Chevan 1997:295–306).


27. This hearing suggests parallels with the rhetorical structure of the black sermon, a topic that merits extensive further study by jazz scholars. For one approach to sermonic rhetoric in jazz, see Lewis Porter’s analysis of John Coltrane’s solo on A Love Supreme (1985:613–19).

28. Hodeir notes that “this solo makes sense in the way a melody should. . . . It stands as a finished example of an esthetic conception that other solos of that time merely suggested in a confused way. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end” (1956:58). For Schuller, the solo “displays [Armstrong’s] intuitive grasp of musical logic and continuity” (1968:103).

29. Xs below the staff in example 12 indicate correspondences of pitch between the melody and Armstrong’s lines.

30. It also mirrors the anacrusis in the second phrase (see ex. 12, mm. 2 and 8).

31. The G–F# figure also paraphrases the melody (see ex. 12, m. 13).

32. It may seem that I have abandoned the metaphor of “call-and-response” for its classical analogue, “antecedent-consequent,” but that is not my intention. I use the latter term here (and earlier) for convenience: it bears formal connotations relevant to Armstrong’s music that, to my knowledge, have no counterparts yet in African-American critical theory.

33. Schuller acknowledges this figure as a unifying device, but denotes only the three instances that descend by whole step in the first sixteen measures (mm. 7, 9, 15) (1968:104).

34. On Signifyin(g), see Gates (1988).

35. Spanier apparently is using the term “break” to mean “phrase” in the solo, perhaps reflecting his arch-traditional, somewhat purist, view of jazz, both in the twenties and in subsequent years.

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Discography


