

Handout - Louis Armstrong Personal Narrative

Louis Armstrong was a trumpeter, singer, composer, and band leader who contributed enormously to the sound of the Harlem Renaissance. Born in New Orleans, Armstrong was mentored at a young age by Joe “King” Oliver and made an early career performing jazz on riverboats. From there, his career expanded as he joined bands in New York and Chicago, before forming his own band, Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five, which he brought to New York. Armstrong and his band would become staple performers in Harlem, on one of the pivotal creative figures in the Harlem Renaissance.



In the following account, Armstrong describes moving his band from Chicago to New York City in 1925 in a letter to his friend Robert Goffin, a Belgian lawyer, poet, and author who was writing a biography on Armstrong. Armstrong’s idiosyncratic writing style in the letter has been reproduced.

The life of the Savoy were very interesting. —Business began to get slow, just like any other big Amusement, etc. that opened up in Chicago—go real big for awhile then, “KA’BLIP” —The ‘Bottom would ‘drop out. —So Mr. Fagan the ‘owner would come to us with a hard luck “story” every week. And the way he would “lay” this Story on us, we Just couldn’t leave him that’s all. After all we were all “Troopers.” But looks like Mr. Fagan was laying that hard luck story on us a little too often. And payments on our (Lil + I) home was “way” ‘past due. An Zuttie and I would talk it over every ‘pay night and we would say to each other—If Fagan comes with no money this week we were sure to quit.

Again the usual thing would happen - no money. —So I was still signed up to the “Okeh” Record Co. —But Mr. Fern turned my Contract over to Mr. “Tommy Rockwell whom was Stationed in New York. And at the same time Mr. Fagan was coming up short with our money—Mr. Rockwell sent for me to come to New York immediately to make some “Records” and also Book me into a show called “Great Day” produced by Vincent Youmans.” It was a great show. When I received Mr. Rockwell’s Telegram in Chicago I showed it to Carroll Dickerson, Zuttie and the rest of the Band Boys. They as well as myself were so attached to each other until we hated like hell to Break up our Band. —Because it was a good Band. —And we just couldn’t see the idea of Breaking it up. And although Mr. Rockwell only sent for Me - I was one Guy who always stuck with a Bunch of fellows, especially if I liked them. . . .

Mr. Rockwell ‘wires me again to come to New York Right Away. Myself and the Band held a private meeting. —I told them—”Well fellows—you all know how well I love you all—And you Boys love me too—What say if we have our Cars fix up and Mr. Rockwell has just sent me enough money—And I can give each man in the Band \$20 to eat off of and help Buy Gas, and we’ll all go to New York together?” —They all jumped up into the air with Joy, and said that’s great. —And it makes us all very happy to know you’re not going to leave us, and we’ll still be together. —I told them, “When we get to New York and Mr. Rockwell won’t have anything for us to do, we’ll just “Take ourselves a job that’s all —Because we have a Band good enough to get a Job Any place.”

. . .We left ol Chicago. —All of our Friends were on hand to wish us luck, etc.. . . .At last we all ‘hit the Town of New York. Zuttie and I were riding in my ‘Car, in fact Zuttie did pretty near all the Driving—I did most of the “Sleeping.”. . . And when ‘Zuttie arrived in New York the minute we were Crossing ‘42nd and Broadway - My Radiator Cap Blew off - And Steam was going every place - And were we Embarrassed. —The “Cops” came over and saw we had a Chicago License on our car, and asked us, “Hey there have you boys any ‘Shot Guns in that Car?” We gladly said “No Suh Boss.” He smiled and went away. In those days, the gangsters were very popular in Chicago . . .

We all finally arrive in Harlem, ‘everybody ‘Suffering with the ‘Shorts meaning - We were all Broke. —So I immediately went down town to Mr. Rockwell’s Office - He certainly was glad to see me. — He said “Louis - I’ve just arranged to put you in The ‘Great Day Show.” I said - “Oh fine Mr. Rockwell —But—’er, wer—I brought my Band with me and you’ll have to Book us Some place.” Mr. Rockwell Hit the Ceiling saying—“Band? I did not send for your Band—I sent for you only.” I said, (very calmly) “Just the same Mr. Rockwell, we’re here now - I just couldn’t leave my Boys ‘that’s all — I know you can Book us ‘Some place. “Another thing we all need money — so you’ll have to let me have about ___ Dollars to keep us eating - Room Rent and our Laundry until we go to work. After all, they must hold their heads up, and ‘stay ‘sharp because they’re all Sharp Cats, and can play their ‘Asses off.”

Finally Mr. Rockwell gave in and gave me all the money I wanted and inside of “Two Week’s we had a job Down in ‘Connie’s Inn’ in Harlem, at 131st + 7th Ave. That Club and the Cotton Club were the Hottest Clubs in Harlem at that time. — And Harlem was really “Jumping.” All the white people would think it was a real treat to spend a night up in Harlem. After my Band was set at Connie’s—I started ‘Doubling in ‘Connie’s Hot Chocolate show, down down.—Then I also had a show of my own at the Lafayette Theater, in Harlem just opposite Connie’s Inn—Connie’s Inn was downstairs in the basement. My Band really used to ‘play the hell out of Connie’s Show.—’Ol Louise Cook—I shall never forget her, and her Dance.—She was so wonderful in her ‘Shake dance she would take 5 and 6 encores. And ‘ol ‘Zuttie used to ‘kill me Beating those Tom Toms for her to Shake that thing.

. . .One night, a Sunday, all the White Musicians from Down on Broadway, came up to Connie’s Inn’ gave me a big ‘party—certainly a Swell Affair. —’Ben Pollack ‘Presented me with a Beautiful gold ‘Wrist ‘Watch, that was from the Boys from ‘Down Town. The inscription on the watch Read as “follows—

GOOD ‘LUCK ALWAYS
TO “LOUIS ARMSTRONG
FROM
THE MUSICIANS
ON BROADWAY

And did we have a Ball.” My My My.

Source: Louis Armstrong, in His Own Words: Selected Writings. Edited by Thomas Brothers (Oxford University Press 1999)