

MEDIA REVIEW

Louis Armstrong's Black & Blues: A Sasha Jenkins Jammie. An Imagine Documentaries Production in association with Polygram Entertainment (streaming on Apple TV+). Released Oct. 28, 2022

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Director Sasha Jenkins has previously made documentaries on the Wu-Tang Clan, Cypress Hill, and Rick James, and here he focuses on Louis Armstrong. Prior to his career in television, Mr. Jenkins worked as a journalist focused on African American cultural production—founding and contributing to early ‘zines and newspapers dedicated to graffiti and hip-hop, eventually serving as the music editor for *Vibe*. As such, Jenkins is particularly well equipped to tackle the subject of Armstrong, whose pioneering contributions to jazz and popular entertainment placed him at the center of the flow of Black art into the twentieth-century mainstream. This is a beautiful tribute to a great artist that explores many more layers to the man than have been seen in any other program on Armstrong. And while the story has been told before, this presentation of Armstrong as a Black artist maneuvering in a segregated world and carefully balancing entertaining and maintaining his personal integrity is creatively and artfully done.

Thankfully, like many new documentaries, *Louis Armstrong's Black and Blues* moves away from the expert “talking heads” approach where people say their say as they don’t look into the camera. That is not to say that we don’t hear a lot of voices. Musicians (Danny Barker, Archie Shepp, Barney Bigard, Wynton Marsalis are some), friends and those who chronicled his life (Dan Morgenstern, Jack Bradley), wives (Lil Hardin, Lucille Wilson), Armstrong’s biographer and Director of Research Collections at the Louis Armstrong House Museum (Ricky Riccardi), and Armstrong’s own words from letters and articles—spoken by rapper Nas—feature prevalently in the documentary. Along with vintage stock film clips, the design is often like an animated graphic novel, with drawings and rare photos from Armstrong’s scrapbooks.



Figure 1. Reel to Reel Tape Box Cover. Collage of Armstrong, manager Joe Glaser, and a trumpet. (*Louis Armstrong's Black and Blues*, 39:42)

Most importantly, we hear Louis from his legendary tape collection—reels and reels of elaborately decorated boxes made up of conversations with visitors, compilations of music (often with his spoken commentary), and just plain Armstrong speaking whatever crosses his mind, in effect a verbal record of a man's thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Many of us have hungered for an opportunity to explore this rich treasure trove, and we are finally given some juicy samples—unexpurgated Armstrong that gives this movie an R rating. One of those samples: when talking about a man who approached him and told him he was a big fan who usually doesn't like Black people (you can figure out how he said this), Armstrong said, "You can take the majority of white people, two-thirds of them don't like n*****, but they always got one n***** they're crazy about, g-ddammit... ain't that a bitch?" This documentary isn't going to be shown in high school classrooms anytime soon, but at least it's real!!!

Most of the primary sources included in *Black and Blues* have rarely been seen. Samples are TV interviews on the Mike Douglas, Dick Cavett, and David Frost talk shows, a beautiful videotape of Armstrong performing “Black and Blue,” performance clips from rare ‘50s kinescopes, and 35MM film. The documentary also includes one of the few clips that exist of the NBC Steve Allen *Tonight Show*, in which Peter Davis, Armstrong’s first cornet teacher, describes how he made Armstrong the leader of the Colored Waif’s Home for Boys Band.

Perhaps the most important highlights are Armstrong being quite candid about race. Louis relates the story of his conversation with manager Johnny Collins’s conversation on the ship going to England where Collins tells Armstrong what he should perform, and then calling Armstrong the “N” word, which almost caused Louis to break a wine bottle over his head. We also hear Louis’s comments about politics in his country, particularly to foreign reporters. He’d lived through the most stringent Jim Crow era, and the documentary makes very clear that conditions for Black people were very much on his mind. Lucille Armstrong assures us that she and Louis would discuss these issues often away from the spotlight, even if he did not always voice his opinions in public. When he did speak out, many were shocked, and even some Black entertainers were uncomfortable with his words. The documentary makes clear that he was hardly an Uncle Tom!!! He was very conscious of alienating his audience and is now widely admired for juggling his private and public words.

Mr. Jenkins has presented us with a rich, balanced tapestry of a man’s life, in this case a man who was a pioneer musician and a great humanitarian who broke a lot of musical and racial barriers. The bar has been set high for future Armstrong documentaries.