“Mack the Knife”—Louis Armstrong (1956)

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Essay by Terry Teachout (guest post)*

Louis Armstrong

Original 45

Lotte Lenya

For all the enduring success and significance of their other collaborations, Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill are both best remembered for “Die Dreigroschenoper” (“The Threepenny Opera”), their caustically witty 1928 adaptation of “The Beggar’s Opera,” John Gay’s 1728 ballad opera about low life in eighteenth-century London. But it was not until a quarter-century after “Die Dreigroschenoper” opened in Berlin that the American public at large first heard any part of “The Threepenny Opera”—and it was Louis Armstrong, the most important figure in the history of jazz, who introduced them to it. On September 28, 1955, Armstrong and His All Stars recorded “Mack the Knife,” Marc Blitzstein’s English-language version of “Die Moritat von Mackie Messer,” a “murder ballad” about the vicious exploits of the show’s principal character that was the most popular number in “The Threepenny Opera.” Armstrong’s swinging cover version became a hit single, one of a handful of small-group jazz recordings ever to do so, and he would perform it for audiences the world over until he died in 1971.

Armstrong was introduced to “Mack the Knife” by George Avakian, his producer at Columbia Records. Avakian, who was determined to put his beloved Satchmo back on the pop charts, had recently seen a performance of the 1954 off-Broadway revival of “The Threepenny Opera.” While the original 1933 Broadway production had closed after just ten performances, this small-scale staging, newly translated by Blitzstein, the author of “The Cradle Will Rock,” became a sleeper hit—among the first in the history of off-Broadway theater—and ultimately enjoyed a six-year run. Avakian came home from Greenwich Village’s Theatre de Lys certain that “Mack the Knife” had the makings of a hit single, but was unable to persuade any of Columbia’s artists to play his hunch. Dave Brubeck, Erroll Garner, and Gerry Mulligan all turned him down flat, finding the simple tune of “Moritat” to be too repetitious.

It was Turk Murphy, a San Francisco trombonist and early-jazz revivalist, who suggested that the song might suit Armstrong. Murphy wrote and recorded a combo arrangement that Avakian brought to the trumpeter, who agreed on the spot to record it. His attraction to “Mack the Knife” was easy to understand. Not only was Weill’s riff-like melody instantly appealing, but Blitzstein’s rendering of Brecht’s lyric, an acid-etched portrait of a switchblade-wielding street thug, was no less immediately memorable: “Just a jack-knife has Macheath, dear/And he keeps it out of sight.” Armstrong found the song richly evocative of his New Orleans childhood, laughing out loud as he listened to the demo. “Oh, I’m going to love doing this!”

he told Avakian. "I knew cats like this in New Orleans. Every one of them, they'd stick a knife into you without blinking an eye! 'Mack the Knife'! Let's go!"

Murphy's arrangement, which the All Stars recorded more or less intact, was a spare sketch well suited to the talents of the All Stars, the instrumental combo that had been accompanying Armstrong ever since he gave up his big band in 1948. "Dig, man, there goes Mack the Knife!" the trumpeter rasped genially by way of introduction. Arvell Shaw and Barrett Deems laid down a springy, pulsing two-beat accompaniment on bass and drums over which Billy Kyle, the All Stars' pianist, strewed Basie-like twinkles. A muted Armstrong played the penny-plain melody, with the clarinetist Edmond Hall and the trombonist Trummy Young riffing softly behind him. Then he put down his horn and told the tale of the bloodthirsty Macheath with a glee that had nothing whatsoever to do with the grim lyric: "Oh, the shark has pretty teeth, dear/And he shows them a-poi-ly white." Armstrong also overdubbed a trumpet obbligato behind his vocal. At the end he pulled out his mute, shouted "Take it, Satch," and led the band through a rocking out chorus.

The results were irresistible, and no one tried to resist them, least of all "Time's" record reviewer: "Satchmo plays a lilting chorus and growls some free variations on the fine Marc Blitzstein lyrics…. Then he hears a shouted 'Take it, Satch,' and the Armstrong trumpet takes it high."

Released as fast as Avakian could slap it onto a 45, "Mack the Knife" rose to #20 on "Billboard's" pop chart, and though Bobby Darin's hard-charging cover version, cut three years later, sold even better, it was Armstrong who turned "Mack the Knife" into a jazz and pop standard that has since been performed and recorded by such artists as Tony Bennett, Michael Bublé, Bing Crosby, the Doors, Bill Haley and the Comets, Johnny Hodges, Peggy Lee, Lyle Lovett, Liberace, Les Paul, Oscar Peterson, Sonny Rollins, Frank Sinatra, and Sting. His recording also inspired Ella Fitzgerald to add the song to her repertoire in a version that featured her pitch-perfect imitation of his gravelly voice. But Armstrong's version remains *sui generis,* a quintessential example of his fabled ability to take unlikely-sounding songs and make them his own.

A historical footnote: Lotte Lenya, Weill's widow and the star of both the original 1928 production of "Die Dreigroschenoper" and the show's off-Broadway revival, was in the recording studio when Armstrong and the All Stars taped "Mack the Knife." Armstrong paid tribute to Lenya by interpolating her name into his version of the lyric, in which the singer recites a list of Mackie Messer's victims ("Look out, Miss Lotte Lenya"). He also recorded a second version of "Mack the Knife" that same day in which Armstrong and Lenya performed the song as a duet. Not released until years later, it reveals Lenya to have been incapable of swinging, but her lone recorded encounter with Armstrong is oddly endearing nonetheless.

Terry Teachout, the drama critic of "The Wall Street Journal," is the author of "Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong," "Duke: A Life of Duke Ellington," and "Satchmo at the Waldorf," a one-man play about the relationship between Louis Armstrong and Joe Glaser, his manager.

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.