Louis Armstrong - Ultimate Jazz & Blues (2011)



01. Alexander"s Rag Time Band (02:33) play *02. Georgia on My Mind (03:22) 03. Basin Street Blues (03:23) 04. Sweet Sue, Just You (02:43) 05. On the Sunny Side of the Street (02:55) 06. Savoy Blues (03:11) 07. Twelfth Street Rag (03:18) 08. I Can"t Give You Anything but Love (03:30) 09. Struttin" With Some Barbecue (03:01) 10. Ain"t Misbehavin" (03:17)* play *11. Rockin" Chair (03:20) 12. Wild Man Blues (03:14) 13. Mahogany Hall Stomp (03:54) 14. Body and Soul (05:30) 15. I Cried for You (04:35)*

Personnel: Louis Armstrong, cornet, trumpet, vocal, with collective personnel including: Henry "Red" Allen, Clark Terry, trumpet; J.J. Johnson, Kid Ory, Jack Teagarden, Trummy Young, trombone; Buster Bailey, Barney Bigard, Johnny Dodds, clarinet; Sidney Bechet, clarinet, soprano sax; Jimmy Dorsey, clarinet, alto sax; Coleman Hawkins, clarinet, tenor sax; Edmond Hall, clarinet; Louis Jordan, alto sax, vocal; Dexter Gordon, Lucky Thompson, tenor sax; Lil Armstrong, Bill Doggett, Earl Hines, Hank Jones, Oscar Peterson, piano; Fletcher Henderson, piano, arranger; Luis Russell, piano, conductor; Johnny St. Cyr, banjo; Herb Ellis, guitar; Ray Brown, bass; Louie Bellson, Sid Catlett, Cozy Cole, Baby Dodds, drums; Bing Crosby, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, the Mills Brothers, vocals

The flood of Armstrong collections and boxed sets has only grown in the aftermath of Ken Burns' Jazz documentary. If you're in the market for one, Verve's latest triple-disc release would have to rank as an exceptionally good value. With 21 tracks on the first two discs and 17 on the third, there's no skimping at all. The packaging is attractive and durable, and the thick booklet contains photos, artwork, a biographical essay by Alun Morgan, and meticulous, track-by-track annotation. The music spans the better part of the American Century, from 1924 to 1968, underscoring the stunning breadth of Armstrong's recording career. From the Vocalion and Decca 78s of the 1920s and 30s to the pop hits of the 60s ("Hello Dolly," "What a Wonderful World"), the compilation plays out like a mini-movie of Armstrong's volatile and monstrously influential career. There's unevenness in sound quality — in a couple of instances extreme — as one proceeds from track to track, but that's the nature of the beast. The remastering by Kevin Reeves is commendable.

On the majority of these tracks, Armstrong is featured with various orchestras: his own and those of Fletcher Henderson, Erskine Tate, Jimmy Dorsey, Gordon Jenkins, and Sy Oliver. Glories abound, of course, but the freshest and most captivating cuts are with the oddball small groups, such as Jimmy Bertrand's Washboard Wizards, who perform "I'm Goin' Huntin'." With just Armstrong, Bertrand on washboard and woodblocks, Johnny Dodds on clarinet, and Jimmy Blythe on piano, this 1927 ensemble zips along with an economy quite unlike anything else on the album. (Bertrand's woodblocks suggest the aural equivalent of tap dancing.) There's a similar uniqueness in Armstrong's partnership with the Mills Brothers a decade later, on the track "In the Shade of the Old Maple Tree," or in the 1940 small group with Sidney Bechet that performs "Perdido Street Blues," "2:19 Blues," and "Coal Cart Blues." Also a gem is the 1950-51 All Stars lineup with Earl Hines, which takes the stage toward the end of disc two.

("You Rascal, You," a vocal duet with Louis Jordan, ought to give us a bit of historical perspective on the Eminem controversy. How's this for a blues chorus: "I'm gonna kill you just for fun, you rascal, you/I'm gonna kill you just for fun, you rascal, you/I'm gonna kill you just for fun/The bugs can have you when I'm done/I'll be glad when you're dead, you rascal, you." Slap a warning sticker on the thing and alert Charlton Heston.)

Giving a good, hard listen to this anthology is a tonic, for it enables us to encounter the music as it is, without the grating hagiography that is Ken Burns's stock in trade. ---David Adler, allaboutjazz.com

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