Louis Armstrong – Plays W.C. Handy (1996)

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Side 1   *"St. Louis Blues" (Handy) - 8:50   "Yellow Dog Blues" (Handy) - 4:16   "Loveless Love" (Handy) - 4:28*   [play]   *"Aunt Hagar's Blues" (Brymn, Handy) - 4:57   "Long Gone (From Bowling Green)" (Handy, Smith) - 5:08*   Side 2

"Memphis Blues" (Handy, Norton) - 2:59

[play]

"Beale Street Blues" (Handy) - 4:56   "Ole Miss Blues" (Handy) - 3:25   "Chantez Les Bas (Sing 'Em Low)" (Handy) - 4:48   "Hesitating Blues" (Handy) - 5:20   "Atlanta Blues (Make Me a Pallet on Your Floor)" (Elman, Handy) - 4:33
 1996 CD bonus tracks
    "George Avakian's Interview with W. C. Handy - 2:44   "Loveless Love" (Handy) - 5:55 "Hesitating Blues" (Handy) - 5:38   "Alligator Story" - 0:47   "Long Gone (From Bowling Green)" (Handy, Smith) - 7:53
 Performers   Louis Armstrong – trumpet, vocals   Barney Bigard – clarinet   Barrett Deems – drums   W. C. Handy – performer   Billy Kyle – piano   Velma Middleton – vocals   Arvell Shaw – bass   Trummy Young – trombone

Louis Armstrong Plays W. C. Handy is a 1954 studio release by Louis Armstrong and His All Stars, described by Allmusic as "Louis Armstrong's finest record of the 1950s" and "essential music for all serious jazz collections". Columbia CD released the album on CD in 1986 in a much altered form, with alternative versions in place of many of the original songs, but restored the original with its 1997 re-issue, which also included additional tracks: a brief interview by the producer, George Avakian, with W. C. Handy; a joke told by Louis Armstrong; and several rehearsal versions of the songs. --- wikipedia.org

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The reading of a new biography, "W.C. Handy: The Life and Times of the Man who Made the Blues" (2009) by David Robertson inspired me to revisit Handy's music in this recording by Louis Armstrong and his All-Stars. Originally issued in 1954, the recording became an international best-seller. Handy himself heard and loved it. The recording has been reissued several times and it is offered in this new release at a bargain price. Armstrong and his musicians offer a joyful, urbane improvisatory and highly rhythmical account of Handy's most famous songs. Armstrong is at the center of this album with long, imaginative solo flights on his trumpet in every number. Velma Middleton and Armstrong do the singing. This CD is regarded as one of the best in Armstrong's (1901 -- 1971) long career.

W.C. Handy (1873 -- 1958) was a band leader and composer who became attracted to the blues when he heard a rural musician play with the "sadness of the ages" at a railroad station in 1903 in Tutwiler, Mississippi. His most famous composition, "St Louis Blues" dates from 1914. It initially received little attention, but beginning in 1920 it became, with the possible exception of "White Christmas" the most recorded song in the Twentieth Century. The song is a mixture of blues, tango, and ragtime. Armstrong made two earlier stellar recordings of this work, the first in 1925 with Bessie Smith and the second in 1929. The song has been done in many ways. This 1954 recording is fast, angular and highly rhythmical. In the reading, "St Louis Blues" becomes almost a rock song. It opens with a lengthy virtuosic solo by Armstrong on the tango theme of the piece (which accompanies the words "St. Louis woman! with all her diamond rings). Middleton takes the vocal solo in a low, laid-back voice that contrasts with Armstrong's horn. Armstrong and Middleton trade some banter followed by a pulsating return of the theme with the band. This is a swinging, upbeat and convincing performance of Handy's classic.

The "St Louis Blues" has eclipsed some of Handy's other songs. Handy's works which deserve to be better known include "Memphis Blues", "Yellow Dog Blues", "Beale Street Blues" and "Aunt Hagar's Blues", all of which receive inspired hard-driving performances from Armstrong. The "Memphis Blues", was Handy's first blues composition which he wrote for a political campaign in 1909. Handy later foolishly sold the copyright to this song for $50.00. The "Yellow Dog Blues" incorporates the line "Goin where the Southern Cross the Dog", which Handy heard repeated from the lone rural blues singer he encountered at Tutwiler in 1903. "Beale Street Blues" celebrates what has been called "The Captiol of Negro America" in Memphis, Tennessee where Handy spent his most productive years as a composer. This song rivals "St. Louis Blues." The wonderfully evocative "Aunt Hagars Blues" captures the reaction of many African Americans to the beat of blues and ragtime.

This CD also includes "Chantez Les Bas", a late Handy composition based on New Orleans Blues. The only instrumental in this compilation is "Ole Miss" which features solos by pianist Billy Kyle and drummer Barrett Deems. "Loveless Love", "Hesitating Blues" and "Atlanta Blues" are Handy arrangements of earlier folk material.

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Armstrong and his musicians play in a rousing spontaneous way with a feel for Handy. This CD is essential for lovers of jazz or the blues. ---Robin Friedman

This recording was not only Louis Armstrong's finest record of the 1950s but one of the truly classic jazz sets. Armstrong and his All-Stars (trombonist Trummy Young, clarinetist Barney Bigard, pianist Billy Kyle, bassist Arvell Shaw, drummer Barrett Deems, and singer Velma Middleton) were clearly inspired by the fresh repertoire, 11 songs written by W.C. Handy. Their nearly nine-minute version of "St. Louis Blues" (with witty vocals, roaring Young trombone, and a couple of long majestic trumpet solos) is arguably the greatest version of the oft-recorded song. Other highlights include "Loveless Love," "Beale Street Blues," and a romping version of "Ole Miss Blues." The CD reissue also includes rehearsal versions of three songs, Louis Armstrong telling a joke, and a brief George Avakian interview with W.C. Handy. Essential music for all serious jazz collections. --- allmusic.com

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