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Black Artists and White Space:
Race and Political Economy in Louis Armstrong’s Career

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the jazz music industry in the early 20th century through an intensive case study of Louis Armstrong. As one of the seminal figures in jazz music, Armstrong was a link between white popular culture and black popular culture throughout his career. Combining insights from the political economy of communications and cultural industries approaches to examine how Armstrong found success in both the mainstream pop music market and the African-American race music market, I explore the ways in which the structure of the music industry influenced Armstrong’s career, and how he navigated the prejudiced and racist roadblocks that affected the career paths and profits of his contemporaries. This approach emphasizes the ways in which creators like Armstrong are able to exercise creative autonomy within industrial structures. By examining the relationships between race labels and major labels in the twentieth century, and specifically the relationships that encouraged Armstrong to move from the former to the latter, this paper reinforces an argument that the economic factors that drive success in the music industry also, in part, drive our conception of popular culture. This paper finds the synergy of white power structures and Armstrong’s own talent in managing interpersonal relationships influenced the degree to which he was able to succeed.
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INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that the relationship between musicians and music labels is often contentious, exploitative, and guided by profit. This was particularly true in the decades following the emergence of jazz music in the United States: jazz has roots as a uniquely African-American art form and, because of the systematic disadvantages African-Americans faced in garnering economic and political power in the early twentieth century, the production and popularity of jazz records relied on the existing structures historically managed by white executives. This thesis aims to examine how these relationships affected popular culture by blending perspectives from cultural industries and political economy within the jazz music industry. Specifically, I focus on the career of Louis Armstrong, examining his move from race labels to major labels, and his subsequent mainstream success.

In this paper, I will begin by explaining how I arrived at this topic, why it deserves closer study, and how it is situated in the existing body of literature on the political economy of music. Throughout this process, I will explore the following questions about Armstrong’s position in the music industry: How did Louis Armstrong get “discovered,” and what were the factors that caused his managers to move him from OKeh and Gennett, two race labels, to Decca and Columbia, two mainstream labels? How did he negotiate the demands of the industry to exercise creative autonomy during this time? What was the process Armstrong used to navigate the music industry in the early to mid-20th century? Each of these questions center around a pivotal moment in the music industry,

1 See Kofsky, Frank, Black Music, White Business (Atlanta, GA: Pathfinder Press, 1998)
when black artists began negotiating recording contracts with major labels.

This paper will identify and explicate the timing of this shift from race labels to major labels that black musicians experienced in through the early 20th century, using the success of Louis Armstrong as a case study. Armstrong’s life and career serve as a perfect vehicle to examine this shift for several reasons: first, Armstrong is one of the most monetarily successful black jazz musicians to come out of this era; second, Armstrong worked within both integrated and segregated spaces to drive his success across racial lines in the United States; third, Armstrong’s musical innovations in jazz are unique among his contemporaries; fourth, more dedicated textual resources exist about Armstrong’s career than about other successful black musicians of his time; and fifth, Armstrong is one of just a handful of musicians whose works remain popular to date, making his recordings widely accessible.

Musically, it is clear that Armstrong’s New Orleans upbringing influenced his creative growth in his early career. Armstrong’s music is grounded in the complex history of race in the United States. Operating within the mélange of New Orleans musical culture, which draws deeply from the African slave trade, French colonialism, and indigenous Caribbean communities, Armstrong came up in a city that cultivated musical and social skills side by side an intensely stratified social system. New Orleans is also culturally distinct from other urban centers in the United States because of this history, and so in the early 20th century, the sounds of New Orleans music were largely unknown throughout the white, northern United States, even as vaudeville acts, ragtime, and jazz began to garner larger audiences. Biographer Thomas Brothers (2014) characterizes this as a “transforming vernacular culture” that sounded the oral traditions of Southern slave
plantations in the performance spaces attended by white and Creole upper-class residents of New Orleans (3). Those sounds of the slaves on Louisiana plantations follow a “fixed and variable” musical model that Brothers credits to the people of sub-Saharan Africa; Armstrong’s music brought this model, and his “deep connections to sub-Saharan Africa and to racially conditioned culture in the United States,” to a broad base of American listeners in Chicago, New York City, and the cultural sphere of the white middle class (Brothers 2014, 6-7). His compositions took African musical influences into the American mainstream in a way that had never been done before, and so his “new” sound in a new genre, jazz, contributed immeasurably to his success.

As it stands, many of Armstrong’s contemporaries would not go on to see the same level of attention paid to the preservation of their works that Armstrong’s estate has ensured. This was in part due to the overwhelming success Armstrong built as a black man in a white-dominated industry, and in part due to the explicit racially-biased cultural norms and structures that served to keep other marginalized musicians down. Throughout his career, Armstrong performed, recorded, and toured with countless black musicians whose work was as valuable as – and contributed to – his own; and yet, many of these artists have largely been forgotten specifically because they could not engineer the same opportunities to navigate the structures of the music industry in the same way Armstrong was. Above and beyond this, many talented artists never had the opportunity to compete within the industry at Armstrong’s level. The realities of Jim Crow era racism and the vestiges of the American slave trade kept the life of a career musician out of reach for much of the rural Southern population, despite the fact that the genre is built on those subcultural foundations, and its monetary success reliant on their purchases and
contributions. Armstrong was able to move his career path in ways other musicians were not.

Armstrong’s star power drove this compulsion to maintain and preserve his works, and that level of celebrity was hard won. His process of playing the game, finding pathways within a closed industry to build success, helped to make him one of the most prolific and most beloved jazz artists of the 20th century. The accessibility of Armstrong’s life and music make his work a worthy site of study, both because so much information is available, and because this availability sheds light on the degree to which his fellows were mistreated and forgotten by a system designed to exclude them. Armstrong is an outlier, and this is in part why his story and his successes are so compelling.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Exploitation of black artists and musicians is a widely researched area. Beginning in the 1920s, African-American musicians would typically be offered recording contracts on so-called “race labels” like OKeh or Emerson Records. Often owned and operated by white people, these record labels were created for black musicians, and the music produced was marketed solely to black audiences (Calt 2002, 87-88). If a record met success on the race label, only then would it be given to the broader market. OKeh Records is a well-known race label that typically followed this model: while it primarily produced race records aimed at the African-American community, it was founded by Otto Heinemann, a German-American immigrant, in 1918 (Jackson 2012, 114).2 Emerson Records, founded and run by Victor Hugo Emerson, is another. Gennett Records, a third label with a famous race record series, was also owned and operated by a white Board of Directors. Each of these labels worked with black musicians for black audiences, but were operated by white men. At the beginning of his career, Louis Armstrong was a part of this structure; he began his solo recording career in 1928 with “Hotter Than That” at OKeh Records years before his music was ever marketed to white audiences (Willems 2006, 22). In the past, scholars like Norman Kelley, Mark Anthony Neal, and Frank Kofsky have used the lens of critical political economy to explore the ways in which black artists were being exploited by white businessmen at record labels with varying levels of market access.

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2 OKeh's race recordings were actually managed by a black musician, Clarence Williams, for a short time in the 1920s. However, the bulk of the records made for OKeh's race series follow the overarching pattern of white manager, black musician.
In broad terms, critical political economy examines and assesses patterns of systemic or structural change in cultural industries by stressing the importance of power relations in the economics of those industries. At its most basic, political economy studies production and trade patterns, and how they interact with law, custom, and government. Applying this approach to the music industry provides a view of the power dynamics that help to build contemporary popular culture. By understanding the patterns of creation and distribution of popular music, we begin to see the ways these systems can influence the content and material that defines an era.

Each of the authors mentioned above explicitly examine the position of black musicians as a whole rather than on an individual scale, taking the time to explicate problematic ownership practices of music labels in particular. In his book *Black Music, White Business*, Kofsky specifies a focus on “such questions as alienation, underemployment, and racist contempt for black music” for the study of race in the music industry, because while “a jazz artist does own the tools of his trade, he is nonetheless alienated from [his creation]” (Kofsky 1998, 19). Producers, sound engineers, and managers responsible for recording the music often retain ownership of the recording, rather than the musician who composed or performed it. Especially in the mid-20th century, record labels would claim the copyright for a song’s sheet music or lyrics, and pass it to several artists on their label, establishing many versions of copyrighted music to which the company could then lay monetary claim to. While a musician may be performing a certain song, then, it is no guarantee that is their song, nor that they are directly profiting from it.

Ronald Bettig frames this ownership issue through copyright law, arguing that
ownership of the copyright “determines who owns the ‘results’ of intellectual creativity,” where “results” are profits (1992, 150). This argument separates the creators from their profit via copyright, a tool seen extensively used in the music industry to dictate control over recordings. While Bettig does not specifically examine the music industry, his notion of the capitalist class has a clear analog in the class of industry owners. He further argues the separation of creation and copyright serves to reinforce this class divide in the United States:

“Capital is able to use its control over access to the means of communication to monopolize [cultural artifacts]….With the exclusive control conferred by copyright, capitalists decide where and when to distribute the artistic or literary work to achieve the highest possible return on their investments. Cultural artifacts are transformed into investment instruments for capital along with real estate, bonds, stock, licenses, franchises, precious metals, etc. Ultimately, the bulk of these assets, in terms of net wealth, rest in the hands of the capitalist class” (Bettig 1992, 151).

By defining this class divide through the lens of capitalism, Bettig exemplifies a dichotomy between creators and owners that separates those with creative potential and those with the money. This can be directly applied to my examination of the 20th century American recording industry: profits seen by those who write and perform the music are separate from those who record and distribute the music, as demonstrated by the racial divide between the owners of race labels and the musicians recorded on those labels noted above. It would be an oversimplification to always identify the rich class of industry owners as white, and all artists as poor and black, but the dynamics of race in the
United States do complicate any discussion of creation and ownership in the jazz era, and especially within the structure of the music industry. During this time, musicians could file copyright claims on written musical compositions through the U.S. Copyright Office via mail. The owner of the copyright was then due royalty payments for each printing of that music; often, recording companies would claim ownership of any music written or recorded at their studio as part of the terms of recording contracts (Brothers 2014, 282). This system of filing copyright by mail remained largely in place until the Copyright Act of 1976, which remains the primary basis of copyright law in the United States today.

Armstrong worked within this system until his death in 1971. By requiring musicians to sign away copyright claims, or only record uncopyrighted music, record companies were able to keep much of the profit from the music produced at their studio. Managers and producers could negotiate this on behalf of artists, but it was up to the artist to garner enough personal success to be able to afford a manager in the first place.

In the recording industry, playing the music is therefore separate from owning the music. Kofsky’s argument aligns with this framework from Bettig, where the emphasis on contracts that pay artists through royalties keeps the bulk of the wealth generated in the hands of labels and producers instead of in the hands of the artists (Kofsky 1998, 28-29). Kofsky uses examples of numerous artists and labels to display the uneven pattern of wealth distribution across the industry. Mark Anthony Neal does similar work in the article “Soul for Sale: The Marketing of Black Musical Expression,” discussing the advent and evolution of black-owned labels like Motown as “vehicles for black middle-class mobility” throughout the twentieth century (Neal 2002, 158). Both writers look at disparities between economic and popular success through the lens of race relations at the
industry level.

Norman Kelley also focuses on systemic inequalities within the music industry from a political economy framework. In the introduction to his anthology *Rhythm and Business: The Political Economy of Black Music*, Kelley discusses the implicit racism in the music industry, arguing that “the relationship between the two races has historically rested on whites’ ability to exploit and dominate blacks’ bodies, images, and cultures. In the case of music, black artists have rarely received the just benefits of their work, especially in comparison to their white counterparts and those who control the music industry” (Kelley 2002, 6-7).

It is clear that the focus of much past research has been on how the relationships between artists and labels were inherently exploitative, rather than on the outcome of these relationships for the artists, or the impact on popular culture. Drawing from Neal, Kelley, and Kofsky, and the deep lexicon of critical political economy scholarship, this project examines Armstrong’s role more explicitly in connection to the larger framework of political economy studies of the American music industry. By looking at the artist on an individual level, one can more clearly demonstrate the impact of systemic exploitation.

Based on these examples, the focus of past critical political economy approaches to race in the recording industry has been on tracing ownership and remuneration of and for specific songs or records, and how an industry dominated by white people exploits the labor of black musicians as a group. Though this approach is valuable for understanding the structures and tendencies of capitalism more generally, critical political economy tends to overlook the degree to which artists can exercise creative agency or control within their industry. Seeking to compensate for these shortcomings, the cultural
industries approach allows for an examination of specific situations like Armstrong’s. Especially within the jazz industry, having a deeper understanding of what contributed to success of specific black artists within white popular culture requires a closer examination. I argue that there is important information at a more granular level. Illuminating relationships between artists and managers, or artists and labels, is key to understanding the cultural impact made by jazz music in the mid-20th century.

David Hesmondhalgh (2013) offers another approach to critical political economy in his book *The Cultural Industries* that “is more attuned to the ‘micro’ level of what happens in the worlds of cultural production” (48). Hesmondhalgh’s cultural industries approach incorporates several modifications of the broader framework that help create a finer understanding of specific situations within the cultural industries. In particular, Hesmondhalgh accounts for “problems and contradictions within industrial, commercial cultural production,” and “puts symbol creators in the picture” alongside an analysis of historical social movements to help assess the sociocultural situation of productions and industries (Hesmondhalgh 2013, 45-46). The traditional political economy approach often sees social movements and creators as outside the realm of influence to the industry being examined. By teasing out these problems within industries and involving the position of the creator in analyses of these industries, this approach allows for a closer reading of the agency artists exercised, a view not typically explored in critical political economy. Where traditional political economy offers a “macro” view of movement in the industry, the cultural industries approach helps to drill down.

This approach provides good context for examining Louis Armstrong’s career. Armstrong came to prominence alongside the growth of mass media, and took advantage
of the changing mediums around him, releasing records and singles that gave him access to growing audiences. This was happening at a time when African-Americans were systematically oppressed by “separate but equal” laws established following the end of the Civil War. Even where it was not made explicit, the realities of racism, segregation, and Jim Crow laws directly impacted how the music was made, who got to record, and who got to perform. Armstrong was not the only mid-century jazz artist whose success was in part reliant on segregated audiences; Billie Holiday, Charles Mingus, Sidney Bechet, Ella Fitzgerald, and Charlie Parker are a few among many who relied on success and promotion in segregated spaces. Though some bands were integrated on the stage and in the studio, jazz in the twentieth century still followed a deep racial divide when it came to selling and marketing of the music and performance. It would be fallacious to claim that this social system did not influence the popularity or diffusion of Armstrong’s records. By incorporating Armstrong’s own decisions with an analysis of what Hesmondhalgh calls the specific “historical variations in the social relations of cultural production” it is possible to directly apply Hesmondhalgh’s method to analyze this moment in music history (2013, 47). It is important to incorporate the situational and historical context to any analysis of the American music industry, since black musicians like Armstrong are foundational to so much of its growth.

Researcher David Sanjek’s article “One Size Does Not Fit All: The Precarious Position of the African American Entrepreneur in Post-World War II American Popular Music” provides an intelligent overview of various modes of thinking about the cultural position of black artists, saying “too often the dominant narrative of the history of American popular music depicts a racially charged terrain wherein virtually all power lies
in the hands of white businessmen who prey upon African Americans and gain prosperity at their expense” (Sanjek 1997, 538-9). Instead, he argues the existence and virtues of “pockets of individual African American private enterprises [that] coexist within the entrenched hierarchy of the white-dominated music industry” (Sanjek 1997, 539). Sanjek explores the counterflow of black musicians and label executives who established businesses and made records in and around the predominately white music industry. In doing so, he identifies pathways that African American musicians found for parlaying talent into money in a system that privileged white profit. The hegemony of the white-run music labels and the racist agendas they often employed exacerbated the difficulties that Armstrong faced. Ultimately, Armstrong can be viewed as a similar artist to those identified by Sanjek. As a successful black artist entrenched in the white industry, and one with a powerful white manager in Joe Glaser, Armstrong’s position was precariously navigated but profitable for both him and the labels for which he worked.

Louis Armstrong in particular was a successful black musician whose complex relationship with race and business informed a calculated presentation of his public persona. Though much has been previously written on Armstrong’s life and musical talent, there is an opportunity for more scholarship on the power structures within the jazz music industry, and specifically for more in-depth study into how and why he was able to break into white cultural spaces. As a black man who was involved in highly regarded white cultural spaces throughout his career, the situation and production of Armstrong’s work provides an invaluable and incomparable look into the mechanisms that build popular culture. An examination of Armstrong’s career provides access to an intersection of how the economics of race affects cultural space and success in the United
States.

In sum, my research explores a moment in the jazz music industry when black artists began to find popular success among white audiences, blending insights from critical political economy and David Hesmondhalgh’s cultural industries approach. I will lean on work done by critical political economy researchers to illuminate choices made by and for Louis Armstrong that allowed him to find success in the music industry. As Kelley argues, “black music is now an essential and integral piece in a corporate structure that is primarily owned and operated by whites for the benefit of white shareholders” (Kelley 2002, 21). Armstrong’s life and work are an excellent vehicle to examine how this situation in the music industry informs and produces popular music with staying power. My approach helps to offer a more complete image of the developing jazz industry in the mid-twentieth century.
Without denying the exploitation baked into the industry at large, I have researched how the unequal power dynamic between white industry owners and black musicians contributed to the success of Louis Armstrong in the broader context of American popular culture. In the above discussion, I laid out a roadmap indicating existing gaps in the research around the jazz industry. I argue that a combined cultural industries and political economy approach can be applied to the music industry to effectively answer questions about how race impacts the structure of the industry, and the results of what it produces in popular culture. Through my research, I will seek to answer the following questions about Armstrong’s career and his journey into mainstream success:

1. How did Louis Armstrong get discovered in his early career?
2. What were the factors that caused the label executives or managers to move Armstrong from various race labels to mainstream, white-focused labels early on in his career?
3. How did Armstrong negotiate the demands of the industry to exercise creative autonomy in the early to mid-20th century?
4. What was the process Armstrong used to build his success within the white-owned spheres of the music industry?

In order to begin answering my above questions, I have utilized two primary methods, archival research and document analysis, to collect and interpret artifacts of material culture produced by Armstrong and the labels for which he recorded. I will begin this section by discussing how I chose relevant documents, what materials I
collected, and why these materials will help to answer the research questions above. I will also justify the use of archival research and document analysis within the scope of this study. Then, I identify the major players in Armstrong’s career and assess the impact they made on Armstrong’s success. By assessing the influencers within Armstrong’s professional sphere, I address the first portion of my research, which focused on “how” questions. I identify the stakeholders in the music recording process and major roadblocks black jazz musicians faced throughout Armstrong’s career. By identifying the potential problems within the jazz musician’s career path, I then address the factor- and process-based research questions above. In using Hesmondhalgh’s cultural industries approach, I have drilled down to incorporate the power dynamic between individual artists, managers, and producers in an analysis of the patterns of cultural production in the 20th-century jazz music industry. To get a close read on the pressures Armstrong faced from his various managers and labels during his early years as a recording artist, I visited the Louis Armstrong Archives at Queens College in New York City. I found sales figures and broadcast data from Columbia Records, playtime information from radio stations, and popular music charts from the mid-20th century. Using the evidence found in historical archives allowed me to create a more nuanced understanding of the intersections between exploitation, capitalism, race, and industry for popular jazz artists. To help round out this picture of the industry, I have also consulted biographies of Armstrong, most notably Louis Armstrong: Master of Modernism by Thomas Brothers, and Louis Armstrong, An American Genius by James Collier. These biographies tell stories of Armstrong’s business relationships that have not been captured in other places. The archives of Armstrong’s recordings and personal documents available
through the Louis Armstrong House Museum Archives in New York City are integral to my research for this paper. The existence of this archive is a testament to the prominence of Armstrong as a popular figure in the 20th century. It collects material produced by Armstrong himself, who was an avid writer and diarist, in addition to materials surrounding Armstrong’s life and career. The archive holds documents from companies in the recording and distribution industries that are relevant to Armstrong, personal ephemera, tapes, photographs, and films featuring the artist. In January 2019, I visited Queens College and collected data and materials from Armstrong’s personal records, and journals, as well as a variety of documents and letters from his various managers and the labels he recorded under. These materials were made available to me through the archivist and Director of Research Collections, Ricky Riccardi, whose additional biographical works of Armstrong presented a solid foundation for understanding Armstrong’s role in the business-side of his career, and Sarah Rose, the Research Collections Manager. I communicated with Riccardi for several months in 2018, discussing my research topic and the existence of relevant materials within the archive, before making the decision to visit and use the archive’s collections. As the archivist, Riccardi’s expertise helped me to navigate the archive materials for what might be most useful and relevant. Within the documents produced by the archivist, information on the labels Armstrong worked with at the beginning of his career were especially illuminating. During my visit, I also conducted an informal interview with Riccardi to help understand the source and relevance of materials he curated for my purposes. The materials referenced throughout this paper are listed in Appendix A.

In his 1990 book *A Matter of Record*, John Scott lays out foundational criteria for
using documentary sources of information in scholarly research. Evaluating each
document along the four criteria developed by Scott – authenticity, credibility,
representativeness, and meaning – provided an easy system for assessing the validity and
usefulness of the documents made available through the archive. Scott allows archival
access as a clear source of credibility, based on the scrutiny applied to the materials
archives collect (1990, 25). However, Scott also stresses that both public and private
archives can be subject to bias through selective deposit, the choice to include or exclude
materials (Scott 1990, 79). By relying primarily on this archive as a source of research
material, I might then be reflecting an unconscious bias in the material available. With
this potential pitfall in mind, I have attempted to create a more complete image of the
power dynamics shaping Armstrong’s career by enriching the archival material collected
with material from additional historical and biographical sources.

I have thus assessed the materials from the archive using Scott’s framework, with
the idea of selective deposit in mind. The documents provided were first curated by the
archivist with reference to my academic interest before I was given access, and so went
through two levels of verification: first, by being sourced directly from the archive, and
second, by being purpose-chosen for this research by Riccardi, an expert. Each document
from the archive could then be counted as a valid and credible source. Addressing
authenticity, many of the documents found were photocopies of originals, and some were
original letters or internal memos from record labels. I was able to obtain digital copies of
much of the material provided by the archive to refer back to throughout the writing
process. Several documents were accompanied by anecdotal notes on their original
source; for example, one contract detailing the American Federation of Musicians pay
rates for a recording session in 1954 was submitted to the archive with a handwritten note from George Avakian, Armstrong’s longtime producer with Columbia Records, detailing how the document would have traveled within the studio. Finally, many of the documents I utilized are filled forms and blanks from studios and agencies. These forms are representative of the type of document in use at the time, because they are standardized for use by various musicians and across various recording sessions. By using Scott’s framework for document assessment, I was able to determine the archives provided primary and secondary source material for analysis in relation to the theoretical base established by other cultural industries and political economy scholars, as discussed above.

Aside from forms, contracts, and blanks, Scott’s framework proved useful in analyzing the personal memos and letters that are preserved in the archive as well. Within the materials produced at the archive, copies of personal communication were by and large the most prevalent. Many of these letters were part of ongoing negotiations between various managers claiming representation of Armstrong, producers at record labels, union representatives, and lawyers.

Due to the historical nature of the topic, a mixed approach using historical, biographical, and archival research was the most logical method for this intensive case study. The historical context of the music industry during Armstrong’s lifetime is foundational to this project, and the best way to form a complete picture of the industry at the time was by using a variety of sources from many stakeholders working with and around Armstrong. By choosing Armstrong as the focus of this study, I have been able to draw on a wide swathe of material from both archival and non-archival sources. The
archive’s existence is also an outlier in terms of material available about Armstrong’s contemporaries: information and documents about Sidney Bechet, Charlie Parker, or Ella Fitzgerald, for example, may be collected in the National Museum of African American Music, but none of these artists has a research archive dedicated solely to them in the same way that Armstrong does.

Additionally, document analysis and archival research are common methods employed in critical political economy scholarship, which often gives alternative readings to corporate and government documents produced by industry stakeholders. Thomas Corrigan framed this practice as an effective way to “interrogate the observable discourses and practices [industry structures] shape” for those studying the political economy of communications (Corrigan 2018, 2754). An intimate familiarity with the documentation and other publications of the industry is foundational to the study: “Through close, sustained reading, PEC researchers can familiarize themselves with industry players, relationships, and interests; develop understandings of industry jargon, cultural nuance, and historical context; and learn to distinguish important events and statements from unimportant ones” (Corrigan 2018, 2764). By becoming familiar with the paper trail of the music recording industry in the mid-20th century, I have been better able to understand the language of the industry and decode the relationships that drove Armstrong’s success. Because of the intense focus on Armstrong’s music, and the critical lens I am applying to this research, these joint methods of document analysis, biographical study, and archival research were chosen to best illuminate the intricacies of the topic.
RESULTS

At the beginning of my research process, I anticipated that Armstrong’s musical talent was not the only factor in the decision to move him to a major label, but that a willingness to “play the game” – that is, work within the existing white-majority power structures of the time, as identified by Sanjek and others – was a major factor in success and therefore builds into the larger understanding of how popular culture is made. This idea was supported throughout my research process. At each turn, Armstrong was able to find pockets in the industry that increased his fame and his income, typically by utilizing white producers and managers to navigate the scene with and for him. Armstrong had a keen eye for the human side of the record business, and this eye led him through his early days as a musician in New Orleans, Chicago, and New York City, allowing him to make a living from his various performances.

In this section, I used the documents from the Louis Armstrong Archive along with the additional biographical information and record company sales information to address the research questions posed above. To show how Armstrong was able to navigate the industry towards personal success, I will first identify the stakeholders in the industry at the time of his early successes, and simultaneously identify common roadblocks that career jazz musicians faced. I will then discuss how musicians like Armstrong made money by utilizing copies of receipts and contracts he and his managers received from the various stakeholders identified previously. Finally, having laid the foundation for understanding the structure of the industry in which Armstrong lived and worked, I will discuss his various managers and the conflicts surrounding his representation in the early 1930’s, immediately prior to his first mainstream label work
with Decca Records. Though the majority of my research lies within that decade, I will
use some supporting documentation from later in Armstrong’s career.

Within the Louis Armstrong Archive I found a series of documents spanning
1926-1954 that detailed various royalty checks and rates throughout his career. This was
the way in which I began to compile a list of industry stakeholders that may have
influenced Armstrong’s early career. These entities include print and manufacturing
companies for music, including Wurlitzer, Consolidated Music Publishing House, Clark
Orchestra Roll Company, Columbia Graphophone Company, and National Piano
Manufacturing Company; each of these businesses had separate contracts with Armstrong
for various pieces of music he wrote and recorded throughout the 1920s and as he began
working with the Hot Five or Hot Seven, including “Heebie Jeebies,” “Papa Dip,” and
“Perdido Street Blues” (LAHM 1998.49.1). Included also in this list are the recording
companies that Armstrong worked with during this time: Gennett, Columbia, and
Paramount, where he recorded with the King Oliver and Fletcher Henderson bands
beginning in 1923, and OKeh, where he began recording music to be released under his
own name in 1925 (Willems 2006, 31). Starting in October of 1926, Armstrong began
receiving drafts directly from music distribution companies Wurlitzer and Consolidated
Music Publishing House for royalties earned on “Heebie Jeebies,” an early song recorded
and published by Armstrong. These receipts detailed number of rolls printed and the
royalty rate going to Armstrong for each: $0.02 per roll, for a total of $15.48 between the
two companies for that month (LAHM, 1998.49.1). Through publishing his copyrighted
music, Armstrong saw a small but steady source of income earned via royalties.

In his biography of Armstrong, musicologist Thomas Brothers discusses the
process of music copyright and royalty earnings that Armstrong and his contemporaries used:

“Recordings for Gennett and OKeh did not generate much cash, but if a disc became popular and other musicians decided to record the piece, then the composer (that is, the holder of the copyright) might see a steady stream of royalties based on the sales of the new recordings. This, along with an expanded reputation, was the opportunity that race recordings opened up….This was the chain of economic logic that drove a great deal of composing, recording, and notation in the early 1920’s” (Brothers 2014, 107-8).

Not many of these receipts or the accompanying letters survive. “Heebie Jeebies” is one track that made steady royalty income for Armstrong, though the record label promoted cover versions for a white audience rather than Armstrong’s original. “Papa Dip” is copyrighted in his wife Lillian’s name. Royalty income would have continued to come in for songs Armstrong copyrighted throughout his life. Armstrong also had songs published that he chose not to copyright; one contract with Consolidated Music Publishing House in 1926 gives the company sole rights to “Gate Mouth,” with Armstrong retaining 50% of all royalties and an additional $0.02 for each printed copy sold (LAHM 2013.12.1).

Copyright law played a big part in the development of jazz as a legitimate genre, and therefore in the way jazz musicians established themselves in the industry. In 1909, Congress revised the U.S. Copyright Act to cover all works of authorship, including musical compositions and records, and extended the time frame for those works to be protected (U.S. Congress, 1909). Artists were able to register musical copyright by mailing their sheet music to the U.S. Copyright Office along with the required form. In
his early career, Armstrong and his contemporaries saw copyright ownership as a route to financial success through royalties: Brothers (2014) credits “this economic situation – the financial incentive to create tunes that could be easily written down and copyrighted” as a factor that “shaped Armstrong’s creative development” by motivating him to write music in New Orleans style that could also be traditionally notated (108). This trail of receipts and contracts indicates a route by which Armstrong would have been discovered early on. By composing and performing original music, Armstrong put himself in the Chicago music scene. By filing copyrights, publishing scores, and through performance of that music, Armstrong was able to begin to collect real income from his work and simultaneously garner more attention in the local scene.

Between these documents and various biographical works, it appears Armstrong followed an established path in the music scene: once his work began drawing larger audiences and earning him an income, he also began getting attention from managers and producers, who then offered Armstrong contracts and representation. His first managers, Tom Rockwell and John Collins, were key to his “discovery,” but Armstrong’s own tenacity had to bring him to a certain level beforehand. In other words, both parties contributed to Armstrong’s success by exercising agency within the industry: Armstrong’s sharp choices about where and when to perform and record during his early years in Chicago and New York City showed an astute understanding of the structure of the industry; later, Rockwell and Collins exercised their agency by providing gateways for Armstrong to enter the mainstream establishment, through work at OKeh and through performance venues, as we will see shortly.

At this point, when Armstrong was still filing his own copyrights and booking his
own gigs in Chicago and New York, he was not working with a formal manager. Instead he relied on his wife and fellow musician Lillian Hardin Armstrong to manage his career. This is clear not only from the lack of formal contract documentation or personal communication between Armstrong and any potential manager, but also from the detailed scrapbook Lillian put together in the later half of the 1920’s (LAHM 1987.8.83). Within, Lillian saved performance announcements, profiles, reviews, and other articles that mentioned Armstrong directly, as well as their work with the Hot Five. The Hot Five recorded twenty-six cuts between November 1925 and November 1926 at OKeh; during this year, Armstrong was also featured on records with Lill’s Hot Shots, Erskine Tate’s Vendome Orchestra, Chippie Hill, and Sippie Wallace, among others (Collier 1983, 171-77). For each of these sessions, either Lillian or Armstrong himself would have negotiated his participation and position, either as a band member or leader on the various records.

Beginning in 1926, he would go on to work with a series of white managers and producers, some of whom served in either or both roles throughout the next decade as Armstrong chiefly recorded at OKeh and RCA Victor. They were all men, and include Tom Rockwell, John Collins, and Joseph Glaser. Producers at Decca and Columbia also mix in later, with George Avakian chief among them. The collection of letters and other supporting documentation from the Armstrong Archive suggest that by hiring Tom Rockwell as a producer for the Hot Five and Hot Seven sessions, Armstrong set himself up for greater access to the recording and distribution resources at OKeh. OKeh Records was acquired by Columbia in November 1926, at which point Rockwell began working as Armstrong’s producer. It is an important distinction that Rockwell was a producer for
OKeh, and not Armstrong’s personal manager at this point. Though Armstrong put the Hot Five and Hot Seven groups together and set the recording sessions, Rockwell worked with the band during those sessions and was responsible for only some of the decisions about what music to record (Collier 1983, 180-189). Armstrong had a large volume of original work, much of which was recorded during his time at OKeh, but over time he also was able to record popular material that OKeh held licenses to, like “Sweethearts on Parade” and “You’re Driving Me Crazy,” perhaps because of Rockwell’s influence. This is the major distinction between producers and managers: producers work with the band as a representative of the label in the studio, while managers work with individual artists to book venues and negotiate contracts with studios. Additionally, Collier claims that Rockwell was part of the mob in New York City, alleging that the music industry was in part under gang influence or control (Collier 1983, 224). By working closely with Rockwell at OKeh for the Hot Five and Hot Seven sessions, Armstrong was able to showcase his own creativity as well as his versatility as a pop artist, and secure himself a position that would be lucrative for him so long as he continued to produce material the label asked for.

An additional set of influencers are the musicians who recorded alongside Armstrong. Looking at the complete Louis Armstrong discography compiled by Jos Willems, it is clear Armstrong took every opportunity to record and perform that came his way. After the success of his early work on “Heebie Jeebies” with the Hot Five, there was a sense that recording with Armstrong would launch any piece of jazz music into profit (Brothers 2014, 207-8). Though Armstrong didn’t hold the copyright to “Heebie Jeebies,” OKeh marketed his version with the Hot Five aggressively, at one point
advertising it as “the biggest selling record ever known” (Brothers 2014, 211). The phenomenal volume of performances and commitments Armstrong made during these years is supported by the advertisements preserved in Lillian’s scrapbook, which include bookings at the Vendome Theater and the Savoy Ballroom in Chicago, a tour in Italy and Germany, work with the Hot Five and Louis Armstrong’s Sunset Stompers, to name a few (LAHM 1987.8.83). Between 1926 and 1930, Armstrong built a strong network of musicians in Chicago and New York City, as well as abroad. This network allowed him to identify musicians that would boost his own career, and gave him an ear on the ground for recording and performance opportunities – two important pathways for musicians to succeed.

His early records with the King Oliver Creole Jazz Band and the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra in Chicago and New York lent Armstrong a familiarity with the recording scene and the process of making a living from his music. Many musicians Armstrong worked with during this time were members of the Local 802, a chapter of the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) operating in New York City, or the Local 10-208, working out of Chicago. Several AFM contract blanks are preserved in the Louis Armstrong Archive. Union members were paid on an established scale for live performances as well as for recording sessions; the status of musicians as members or non-members would have factored into which musicians got paid how much for which sessions, and therefore also influenced which musicians’ managers would encourage or discourage Armstrong to work with. Therefore, the union itself was also a significant stakeholder in the music industry during this time.

This basic setup of musicians, copyright claims, record companies, and printing
companies drove much of the music industry during the early 1930’s as Armstrong began gaining critical and popular acclaim. While Armstrong navigated this scene fairly deftly, he also faced significant roadblocks during this time that negatively impacted other black artists he worked with. One of Armstrong’s major breakthroughs was having his name heading the Hot Five and Hot Seven albums: they were Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five, billing Armstrong first even when other musicians in the band held copyrights or composed some of the music being performed (Brothers 2014, 514). This status as band leader was significant, both because he did not have a formal manager to negotiate this deal for the Hot Five record, and because it lent him an air of legitimacy within the industry as a name that could sell records. Even then, by virtue of the contract with OKeh, the choices of release and distribution were not under Armstrong’s control – Rockwell was making the choice to keep Armstrong and the Hot Five and Hot Seven records on the OKeh’s race side. Rockwell’s supervisor, E. A. Fears, required of most OKeh contracts that any royalties earned from the music recorded at OKeh stayed with the company (Brothers 2014, 282). Fears also headed Consolidated Talking Machine Company, which distributed OKeh records throughout the country, and so it is clear Fears and Rockwell had an eye for the profitability of these records above most else (Collier 1983, 170). To record at OKeh, Armstrong had to be willing to take significant monetary risks and relinquish direct control of the music. Any sort of movement within the industry was a matter of negotiating the relationships between the various stakeholders, and was not always successful or profitable for the musicians. Armstrong would have to prove his profitability in the race market before OKeh would invest more in him, and so the ability for his early music to make money was a major factor in his
career advancement.

The Hot Five sessions at OKeh presented an immense opportunity for Armstrong to prove himself to the label. OKeh pressed nearly 10000 copies of the first two Hot Five sessions in 1925 and 1926, using Fearns’ distribution network to bring the music to the race market (Anderson 2007, 192). Beyond the physical copies, OKeh’s distribution network also took the music to radio; after World War I, the commercial radio industry had begun to take off. Commercial stations began broadcasting around 1919, and were regulated under the Federal Radio Commission beginning in 1926 (Bensman 2000). This regulatory body was replaced by the Federal Communication Commission in 1934, still very early in Armstrong’s career.

Though it is difficult to know when and how often Armstrong and the Hot Five were featured, airtime provided direct access to new and growing audiences for musicians and record companies, and served as a new metric by which record companies could measure the popularity of their artists. Despite the lack of information on airtime, some inferences can be drawn based on other research about the emergence of radio into the national consciousness. In her book *Radio Voices*, author Michele Hilmes addresses the role of the American commercial radio system in its earliest days, saying:

“Radio’s early period as a “local” medium, with stations owned and operated within a city or community, both preserved certain forms of social separation and threatened, by virtue of its diversity, pervasiveness, and escape from the usual physical mechanisms of control, many of those separations that maintained local social order. [A child] would never be allowed to go to a local jazz club, but the radio could bring the club into her living room” (Hilmes 1997, 16).
Hilmes works to illuminate the tension in early radio between hyperlocal, community driven stations and the emergence of national stations that unify the American cultural experience. In particular, by demonstrating the way early radio shows like *The Rise of the Goldbergs* were created by and for specific local audiences before meeting national success, Hilmes provides examples of stations that existed to cater to small markets. In effect, this means stations which operated in the same physical market as where OKeh was selling race records were also likely to feature those same records. National news stations, including NBC and CBS, would form around the same time Armstrong was recording at OKeh; however, nationally syndicated music stations did not become widely available until the early 1930s. As mass media worked its way into the cultural consciousness, Armstrong’s music followed that same path via radio, moving from the smaller, rural race markets the physical albums were distributed within and into larger urban soundscapes.

Radio presented one way Armstrong was able to break the racial barrier between white and black audiences. Collier attributes some of this ability to specific decisions made by Rockwell to try and “move Armstrong into the white market” and “distribute his records more widely in white stores” as early as 1928 (1983, 190). Rockwell would begin releasing alternate takes of Hot Five tracks on OKeh’s pop music label, intended for white audiences, in addition to on their race label, where black musicians were almost exclusively released, that same year (Brothers 2014, 358). In 1929, Armstrong formally hired Rockwell as a manager, and continued to work with him in both roles for the better part of a year (LAHM 1996.50.1). Armstrong’s work with Rockwell between 1928 and 1930 took his recordings with the Hot Five and Hot Seven into both the pop market and
the race market, with approximately twenty singles given a dual release and therefore
dual OKeh catalogue numbers in just that two year period (Brothers 2014, 514). With this
new contract, Armstrong moved from OKeh’s Chicago studios to their New York City
studios, and began recording more pop songs in earnest, releasing several singles under
OKeh’s pop series as Louis Armstrong and His Orchestra, including “Ain’t Misbehavin’
and “Black and Blue,” two songs he would continue to perform throughout his career
(Willems 2006, 64). During his earliest recording sessions, Armstrong was able to build
audiences across racial lines by virtue of his relationships with Rockwell and Fears at
OKeh.

In 1931, Armstrong moved back to Chicago and signed on with his second
manager, John Collins, to begin a new exclusive recording contract with RCA Victor
(LAHM 2013.20.1). Collins was another notable gangster; Collier (1983) credits him as
part of Al Capone’s group, though not a particularly high-level one (226). This new
contract specified Armstrong would record at least 12 pieces for RCA Victor in 1932,
with Collins acting as manager, and that both Armstrong and Collins would receive $0.02
per piece in royalties, and those checks would be sent to Collins for him to disburse to
Armstrong (LAHM 2013.20.1). At this point, Armstrong has found major success from
his work at OKeh, whose parent company Columbia had been reissuing releases of
successful OKeh pop sides since 1930 (Willems 2006, 74). Between touring, recording,
and royalty income, Armstrong had made a ton of money over the last several years;
money that Rockwell/OKeh had evidently been forthcoming with. Collins’ new contract
arrangements saw Armstrong as a money-making opportunity, and over the next four
years he would embezzle thousands of dollars from Armstrong, while also pressuring him
to declare bankruptcy after a European tour in 1934 (Collier 1983, 273). Working with Collins was perhaps a setback rather than the advantage Armstrong initially saw it as.

Even more, there was a conflict with Armstrong’s existing contract with Rockwell in New York, and Armstrong found himself in the middle of mob-related violence, in which he was seen as a tool for both gangs to make money and not much else (Collier 1983, 224-5). In 1932, both Rockwell and Collins set up performances for Armstrong at once in both Chicago and New York, and this continued conflict wound up sending Armstrong on a West Coast tour and then a European tour to avoid the violence. Eventually, it was settled in a court case brought by OKeh against RCA Victor, essentially working as proxies for Rockwell and Collins (LAHM 1996.50.1). RCA Victor settled with OKeh on behalf of Armstrong, and Collins continued to try and work with Armstrong until Joe Glaser bought him out in 1935 (Collier 1983, 275). Armstrong continually signed on gang- and mob-affiliated managers, including Rockwell, Collins, and Glaser; by allying himself with powerful players in the industry, he was able to secure higher-paying gigs at more prestigious venues across the country – but this came at a steep price in the early 1930s.³

Interestingly, after the Rockwell-Collins OKeh-RCA debacle, Armstrong would go on to record at Decca for several years, through a deal organized by Glaser’s connections to the label’s owner, Jack Kapp. This label was where he really began to launch into super-stardom, because Decca dealt almost exclusively in popular,

³ For a more thorough overview of the relationship between organized crime and the music industry in the 20th century, see Robert Morris’s book *Wait Until Dark: Jazz and the Underworld, 1880-1940*. Morris provides a history of immigration, the mafia, and jazz clubs throughout the height of the genre.
commercial music. Many of Armstrong’s most commercially successful albums were released on Decca. Both Collier and Brothers attribute Armstrong’s early years with Glaser to some of the key work that would solidify Armstrong as a mainstay in American popular music.

An important way for musicians (even mob-affiliated ones like Armstrong) to move through the industry and get paid was through unionization. The American Musicians Federation provided one avenue for musicians to keep their voice in the industry. Armstrong was a member of the Local 802, and was able to use personal managers to negotiate additional payment throughout his career. Collier notes that before having signed any manager, for the 1925 Hot Five sessions at OKeh, the entire band would “collect fifty dollars each” (1983, 170). This would change significantly as Armstrong began to work with white managers and producers. Documents collected from the archive show Joe Glaser negotiating his pay at or above going AFM rates for various recording sessions: in July 1954, an AFM contract blank for a record session at Columbia shows Armstrong written in as a member of the 802 to be paid “at union scale,” which at the time was $165 for a 3 hour session for the leader, and $82.50 for the side musicians (LAHM 2017.103.1). Then, in May of 1955, George Avakian at Columbia sent Glaser a letter regarding “the $165 per session for Louis” followed by “Louis’s extra money ($6,000 less what we paid him personally through the union)” for the same sessions (LAHM 2013.12.1). The correspondence between Glaser and Avakian does not specify Armstrong’s total take, but it is clear that this late in his career he is being paid well above the basic union scale his other musicians have negotiated.

It is also important to note that the purchasing power of this money was much
greater during Armstrong’s life than it seems in 2019. Converted to 2019 dollars, Armstrong’s 1925 rate of $50 per session compares to $726 today, and his 1955 rate of $165 per session compares to $1,556 today (Officialdata.org). These rates are comparable to the AFM’s current session scales, as musicians are still assigned pay rates based on similar roles. The value of Armstrong’s 1955 take is almost double that of the basic session scale rate AFM advertises today for a band leader on a 3-hour session, at $818.56 (American Federation of Musicians 2017, 1). The union was a powerful tool to ensure musicians were compensated fairly; Glaser’s ability to lobby for additional payments above and beyond the union rate demonstrate the amount of freedom Armstrong had earned within the industry by this point.

The Louis Armstrong Archives possess a collection of internal memos from Columbia Records, mostly written by and for Avakian. Included among the Columbia memos is a document titled “Summary of Royalty Earnings of Louis Armstrong for All Albums From Individual Release Date to Jan. 31, 1956” (LAHM 2013.12.1). This document only tracks the recordings Armstrong made for Columbia starting in 1951, and does not account for the OKeh re-issues from the 1930’s, though it does show they were issued for another time that year. For his albums sold over that five-year period, Columbia shows he brought in $22,089.74 (LAHM 2013.12.1). Several parties take a cut of these profits: Armstrong himself, Glaser, Columbia and Columbia’s distributors included. This is perhaps the height of Armstrong’s celebrity.

These numbers are all the more impactful when seeing how much Glaser was able to ask for when recording Armstrong at his most popular. In December of 1955, after the correspondence between Glaser and Avakian noted above took place, Avakian wrote one
memo on a phone conversation with Glaser:

“I spoke to Joe Glaser this morning about getting together next week to discuss a long term exclusive contract with Louis Armstrong. Glaser said he appreciated the fact that we had done so much for Armstrong, but he had so many offers from all the major companies that he had to take a realistic view and he felt that it would take a $50,000 advance to land Armstrong….in my case I feel that to make a large advance to get Armstrong would be a worthwhile investment” (LAHM 2013.12.1).

Though Columbia did make that offer, Glaser and Armstrong did not sign an exclusive contract with Columbia in 1955 or 1956. Glaser was able to lobby Armstrong’s star power as a commodity in and of itself, and this is part of the reason Armstrong stuck with him as manager from 1935 onwards: Glaser made money for Armstrong, and kept Armstrong busy on tour.

In sum, in his early career, Armstrong faced the same roadblocks to success in the music industry as a black musician as his contemporaries, but was able to overcome them with a series of astute choices. His move to Chicago in the early 1920’s let him into a performance scene where recording companies were actively looking for black artists to add to their race labels; his ability to notate his original compositions generated early income for him via copyright and royalty earnings; his talent and growing fame as a performer helped him to put together the Hot Five and book a recording session at OKeh that featured him as band leader. This history suggests that Armstrong was “discovered” early in his career not by chance, but through consistent work and specific choices. Many of these choices are supported by documentation preserved in the Louis Armstrong
In addition to finding out the way Armstrong was discovered, this thesis also set out to examine the process he used to build success, the ways he negotiated the demands of the industry, and to identify certain factors that drove his move into the popular, white-facing market. This historical and archival research suggests that by working with powerful individual managers, including Tom Rockwell and Joe Glaser, Armstrong was able to carve himself a path across racially segregated audiences and into mainstream success. His mangers’ connections to organized crime are unverified but potentially significant pieces of influence. This influence is demonstrated by OKeh’s early experimentation with releasing Hot Five and Hot Seven records on the pop and race sides, as evidenced by the dual OKeh catalog numbers; it is also demonstrated by the changes in existing contracts and receipts that show Armstrong’s growing fame through his increased profit. Armstrong relied heavily on his own talent, but he also relied on a network of personal relationships with powerful industry figures to help him bring his talent into mainstream American culture, crossing intracultural racial boundaries in ways other musicians of his time were often unable to do.
DISCUSSION

Throughout this thesis paper, I have demonstrated ways in which the choices of specific individuals in the music industry influence an artist’s progression into mainstream success. I began with an overview of the industrial situation artists like Armstrong faced in the 1920’s, where individual musicians could garner acclaim through booking their own performances, and whereby they could make money notating their compositions and filing copyright claims by mail. I used existing archival documentation and biographical works to demonstrate how Armstrong followed that path toward his first work as a band leader on record, which opened up further management and recording opportunities. In this way, I have shown how Armstrong’s hustle in his early days influenced his ability to work with major labels, and conversely how his work with increasingly bigger studios led to an ability to negotiate extreme profit while continuing to record and perform music that showcased his talent and value as an artist. By using Armstrong as an example, I have outlined a path toward commercial success that was closed to many African-American artists in the 20th century, indicating the contradictions and counterflows that worked within larger industrial structures of the time.

Through this discussion of the music industry’s framework, I have leaned on industrial analysis done by several other scholars, notably David Sanjek, Frank Kofsky, and Norman Kelley. I blended insights from critical political economy and Hesmondhalgh’s cultural industries approach in order to examine the individual decisions Armstrong and his managers made during his career. This approach also allowed me to illustrate how these decisions related to the larger structures that, in Kelley’s words, “rested on whites’ ability to exploit and dominate blacks’ bodies, images, and cultures”
The cultural industries lens generally accepts the structural analyses done by critical political economy scholars and uses it as a base from which to drill down and explore individual situations, outliers, and counterflows within those larger industrial patterns. In essence, this approach has allowed me to define and assess the social and cultural situations of production that brought Louis Armstrong success in the 20th century.

Importantly, as hinted at in the introduction of this thesis, Armstrong was one of very few black jazz musicians whose work has endured in the decades since his death. His contemporaries largely did not go on to see the same preservation and continued popularity that his work has seen. That preservation is in part due to his continued presence in the American cultural consciousness, but is also due to purposeful efforts by the Louis Armstrong Educational Foundation, which was established by his wife Lucille after his death in 1971, and which manages his estate and receives continued royalty funds from Armstrong’s music. Armstrong’s ability to navigate the white-dominated establishment in and around racialized cultural norms and structures was key to his success, and he used his connections with powerful figures to network within the industry throughout his life. This network contributed to the mission and continued influence the Louis Armstrong Educational Foundation has exerted.

Limitations of the Research

Though this paper has focused intensely on the business situations surrounding musical production, a deep exploration of Armstrong’s personal life was necessary to put those situations in better context, and in turn, a functional understanding of the musical underpinnings of Armstrong’s work was also needed. In the biographies that were
consulted for this paper, John Collier and Thomas Brothers both credit the city of New Orleans and Armstrong’s upbringing within the city’s unique musical culture with influencing Armstrong’s ability to succeed as a career musician. Brothers (2014) begins his own analysis by pointing to Armstrong’s “fixed and variable” musical model for his Hot Five and Hot Seven compositions, arguing that “Armstrong intensified the audible presence of his African heritage” and this led him to the first stages of popularity during his time in Chicago (7). A study of musicology was not undertaken for this paper, but the musical influences that made Armstrong stand out in the first place are significant. As such, I offer an introductory analysis below of the African musical traditions identified by Brothers. I follow this with a discussion of potential areas for additional research that may round out some of the information collected throughout this process.

It is clear that not only did African musical traditions make their way to Louisiana and the Gulf Coast early on in American history, but that those musical traditions were then kept alive by generations of musicians in New Orleans long before Armstrong was born. Slave music, the blues, improvisation, and call and response are just a few of these traditions that would have been alive and well, having percolated through the Caribbean and into New Orleans, to culminate in the music scene that was present when Armstrong was coming of age. His lifelong passion for music, from his early days in the Waif’s Home band to his later success as he organized the Hot Five recording sessions, led him to a career that is underlined by its deep musical connection to New Orleans culture. Drawing on those elements in Hot Five and Hot Seven songs like “Heebie Jeebies,” “Gut Bucket Blues,” and “West End Blues” allowed Armstrong to find
moderate success at each step. The most popular songs from Armstrong’s early bands were the ones that relied most heavily on African musical foundations.

From the advent of popular jazz music in the early 20th century, musicians and academics have been cognizant of the influence of African music on the culture of the Gulf states. In their article “Jazz is African Diasporic Music,” Joshua Vincent and Lydia Lindsey quote Louis Armstrong directly on the influence from African music:

“It seemed to [Armstrong] ‘that if New Orleans was the cradle of jazz the Gold Coast or Ghana as they call it, it must be the mother,’ that implicitly placed emphasis on African as the origins of jazz…he recognized African retentions that shaped the outward manifestations of musical and communicative sycophantic rhythms.” (Vincent and Lindsay 2017, 174).

Though Armstrong did not make these comments publicly until late in his career, after a 1961 visit to Ghana, the connection between New Orleans and the west coast of Africa was no secret to him. Vincent and Lindsey (2017) further identify that Armstrong had been able to trace his ancestry to Ghana on his mother’s side (174). Throughout his life, Louis Armstrong was knowledgeable of and connected to his African ancestry, running tandem to his connection to the New Orleans musical scene. These elements are present in some of Armstrong’s early hits.

Armstrong himself is an example of a musician whose upbringing and natural talent influenced his future career. Early in his life, he lived at the New Orleans Waif’s home, where he played in the band in his early teens (Vernhettes 2016, 38). Photographs and newspaper articles from this time provide documented evidence that he was a talented performer from an early age. One such newspaper article in *The Daily Picayune*
from 1913 lauds “the sene-gambian music-makers … of the negro band from the Waif’s home” as “a big part” of one performance (Vernhettes 2016, 38). This was followed by a picture of the band, in which Armstrong was 12 years old. The news article goes on to discuss the quality of the music and response of the audience to the performance mentioned above, saying: “the negroes sang all the old familiar songs of the South, and mingled the ragtime melodies of today, responding to many encores” (Vernhettes 2016, 39). Talented musicians like Armstrong were identified at a young age and were performing throughout New Orleans in the early 20th century.

Vincent and Lindsey also argue in support of influential cultural context in the development of jazz. They argue that New Orleans’ “cultural melting pot provided the social and cultural phenomena that led to the creation of jazz within the African Diaspora by successive generations of people of African Ancestry” (Vincent and Lindsey 2017, 163). Inside that mix of New Orleans cultures, steeped in his own ancestral history and in the popular music of the times, this news article provides direct evidence that Armstrong’s experience supports Vincent and Lindsey’s theory of cultural influence on the creation of jazz. Examining the ways in which these traditions impacted Armstrong’s success as an artist is one way to further this research.

Opportunities for Future Study

Musicology does not represent the only opportunity for further scholarship on this subject; several more culturally-focused angles exist, and this research process produced additional unanswered questions about later industry developments in Armstrong’s career. Three opportunities for more research stand out.
First, this cultural industries analysis examined the role of race in certain business decisions made by and for Armstrong, but it did not examine Armstrong’s own experiences or beliefs regarding race relations. In public, Armstrong was reticent to comment on racial tensions in the United States. Often when asked directly or confronted with racially charged situations, he would change the subject to his music as a sort of palliative. In 1956, he recorded several hours of interviews with Willis Conover for a Voice of America program, discussing his upbringing and career; this was recorded shortly after a fiasco with Nat King Cole, where Cole was attacked by white supremacists in Birmingham, Alabama. Cole had responded publicly that he was not attempting to fight segregation, and as a response the NAACP began boycotting his records. This was one of just a handful of times where Armstrong was compelled to speak publicly about race relations in the United States:

“I’m so glad my people have begun to dig it, because they get a little too offensive over the smallest things and I think it’s bad. They don’t give us a break, especially the musicians and artists that’s before the public. I think if they’d leave us alone we could do more than a whole lot of that violence…I’m just so satisfied with everything I don’t see why we should worry about anybody” (Armstrong 1956).

He goes on for several more minutes, asking his listeners to leave well enough alone. He then settles on a discussion about his song “Black and Blue,” as an example of something he perceives as small that seems to agitate certain listeners. The song features lyrics explicitly about race: “my only sin is in my skin” and “I’m white inside, but that don’t
help my case,” but Armstrong dismisses their lyrical power with a quick “There ya go, what’s wrong with that?” before moving on (Armstrong 1956).

It is interesting to see this sort of dissonance from so popular an artist; it seems clear that Armstrong was aware of how race impacted his own career trajectory thanks to his repeated hiring of white managers, but by refusing to engage in a discussion of the changing race relations in the United States he effectively dismisses the argument for increased civil rights. This presents an additional research angle for this topic: how did Armstrong’s personal beliefs impact his success in the music industry? The Louis Armstrong Archives houses a collection of personal recorded memos from Armstrong, including tapes of his private thoughts, and his journals. It appears Armstrong kept his personal life and his public life largely separate, providing only small glimpses within in a handful of interviews like the one cited above for Voice of America. More research is needed to determine if and how Armstrong’s personal politics impacted his success.4

Second, the scope of this research project extended into the first decade of Armstrong’s mainstream success, but much information is missing on Armstrong’s activity between 1935 and 1945. This is not because he was not active – during this time, he recorded more than 100 sessions with Decca, Ambassador Records, Jubilee, and various radio stations in addition to an extensive catalog of live performances (Willems 2006). None of Armstrong’s specific contract information with Decca in the pre-war

4 This situation of a powerfully popular artist refusing to address a hot-button social issue is not unique to the civil rights movement of the 20th century; look at Taylor Swift refusing to discuss her politics during the 2016 presidential election cycle. By refusing to comment, Swift made it clear she was afraid of alienating her pro-Trump audience. There is another parallel in the fallout from the Dixie Chicks protesting the Bush administration’s invasion of Iraq in 2003; the band took a political stance, and as a result lost huge numbers of listeners and revenue from a planned stadium tour.
years was available during my visit to the Louis Armstrong Archives. More research on Armstrong’s Decca work is a potential future avenue to explore, perhaps by contacting Decca, Universal Music Group, or Associated Booking Corporation directly. These companies might be able to provide sources that could further illuminate the process by which Armstrong moved into white-majority spheres of influence. Additional work on the contracts and relationships that influenced Armstrong’s career during these years is needed to more fully answer questions about his move into white spheres of influence. Further time needs to be dedicated to turning up additional source documents. An exploration of the copyright owners for the music he recorded during this time would likely yield an interesting discussion of how money circulated in the industry during this time.

Finally, Armstrong was chosen for this research in part because his material is easily accessible and still well known to date, but he is not the only popular musician from this era; an additional opportunity for research exists in creating a comparative case study. Do Armstrong’s decisions serve as a model for other successful African-American artists he worked alongside, specifically Ella Fitzgerald or Duke Ellington, and how did they navigate the same industry? How did artists in other sub-genres of jazz, like John Coltrane, Charles Mingus, or Charlie Parker make decisions that led them toward mainstream success? How does Armstrong’s career compare to popular white jazz musicians and composers, like George Gershwin, or perhaps Bix Beiderbecke, and how does race appear to influence their careers and legacies? By applying a cultural industries lens to more than one case study, a more complete picture of the jazz music industry can be drawn.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

This table describes the exact documents referenced from the collections at the Louis Armstrong Archive at Queens College. Each document is first listed by the folder number, organized by date, and then given a short description of contents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Folder Number</th>
<th>Document Date</th>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LAHM 1996.50.1</td>
<td>05/18/1929</td>
<td>Dated contract between Rockwell and Armstrong, produced as evidence in RCA-OKeh court proceedings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>07/29/1943</td>
<td>Letter from Leeds Music Corp. to E.A. Fearn regarding original contracts with Consolidated Music Publishing House</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAHM 1998.49.1</td>
<td>Undated</td>
<td>Schedule of OKeh’s releases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>07/22/1926</td>
<td>Contract with National Piano Mfg. Co. to print/press “Heebie Jeebies”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>08/18/1926</td>
<td>Contract with Clark Orchestra Roll Co. to print rolls of “Heebie Jeebies”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>08/27/1926</td>
<td>Contract with Consolidated Music Publishing House for “Gate Mouth”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10/15/1926</td>
<td>Receipt from Consolidated Music Publishing House for 620 rolls of “Heebie Jeebies,” which net Armstrong $12.40 in an enclosed draft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10/20/1926</td>
<td>Receipt from Wurlitzer for royalties earned on “Heebie Jeebies” -- $3.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11/06/1926</td>
<td>Copyright granted to Armstrong for “Perdido Street Blues”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>01/14/1927</td>
<td>Letter from Armstrong to Columbia, notifying “Papa Dip” and “Too Tight” are being printed by Consolidated Music Publishing House</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>02/02/1927</td>
<td>Copyright granted to Lillian Hardin for “Mad Dog”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAHM 2013.12.1</td>
<td>05/17/1955</td>
<td>Letter from Glaser to Avakian specifying Armstrong’s payment contract -- $165 per session for Louis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Event Description</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/29/1955</td>
<td>Internal memo at Columbia by Avakian, mentions potential $50,000 advance to sign Armstrong again</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01/19/1956</td>
<td>Internal memo at Columbia listing all Armstrong Decca recordings with 5-year restrictions (4 pages)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>01/31/1956</td>
<td>Columbia records summary of royalty earnings for all albums</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>02/06/1956</td>
<td>Internal memo at Columbia on how to verify existence of Decca’s 5-year restrictions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03/26/1956</td>
<td>Letter from Avakian to Glaser regarding decline of contract</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>03/28/1956</td>
<td>Letter from Glaser to Avakian negotiating potential contract, outlines problems with Columbia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06/14/1956</td>
<td>Letter from Glaser to unknown party, listing recordings made at Columbia since 1954</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**LAHM 2013.20.1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12/23/1931</td>
<td>Original contract with Collins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/16/1932</td>
<td>Letter between Armstrong and Collins, accepting management through 11/14/1933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/14/1932</td>
<td>Letter from RCA to Collins outlining royalty terms for recording session on 12/20/32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09/05/1934</td>
<td>Letter from N.J. Canetti (lawyer) claiming existence of legal affidavit for representation other than Collins (copies in English, French)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09/20/1934</td>
<td>Internal memo from RCA representative Darnell stating Collins is Armstrong’s manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09/21/1934</td>
<td>Letter from RCA to Canetti, outlining terms of Collins contract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/04/1934</td>
<td>Letter from Canetti to Collins stating Canetti is his current legal representative, mentions affidavit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/11/1934</td>
<td>Letter from Collins to RCA accepting continuation of contract with Armstrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07/15/1935</td>
<td>Letter from Glaser to RCA stating Glaser is now representing Armstrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07/17/1935</td>
<td>Internal memo from unknown (initialed DM at bottom) discussing details of various contracts with Collins and Armstrong</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**LAHM 2017.103.1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>07/12/1954</td>
<td>Contract with American Federation of Musicians and Columbia for recording sessions on 7/12 and 7/13. Specifies pay rate is “union scale.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

This table shows a selection of the dual catalog numbers given to some of Armstrong’s early works with OKeh records, demonstrating songs that were marketed to the pop audience and the race audience. This table was compiled using *All of Me* by Jos Willems.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song Title</th>
<th>Recording Date</th>
<th>Pop Catalog Number</th>
<th>Race Catalog Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fireworks</td>
<td>6/27/1928</td>
<td>41078</td>
<td>8597</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skip the Gutter</td>
<td>6/27/1928</td>
<td>41157</td>
<td>8631</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West End Blues</td>
<td>6/28/1928</td>
<td>41078</td>
<td>8597</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knee Drops</td>
<td>7/5/1928</td>
<td>41157</td>
<td>8631</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basin Street Blues</td>
<td>12/4/1928</td>
<td>41241</td>
<td>8690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>12/4/1928</td>
<td>41241</td>
<td>8690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Save it Pretty Momma</td>
<td>12/5/1928</td>
<td>41180</td>
<td>8657</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No One Else but You</td>
<td>12/5/1928</td>
<td>41204</td>
<td>8669</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. James Infirmary</td>
<td>12/12/1928</td>
<td>41180</td>
<td>8657</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Can’t Give You Anything but Love</td>
<td>3/5/1929</td>
<td>41204</td>
<td>8669</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ain’t Misbehavin</td>
<td>7/19/1929</td>
<td>41276</td>
<td>8714</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black and Blue</td>
<td>7/22/1929</td>
<td>41276</td>
<td>8714</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That Rhythm Man</td>
<td>7/22/1929</td>
<td>41281</td>
<td>8717</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some of These Days</td>
<td>9/10/1929</td>
<td>41298</td>
<td>8729</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When You’re Smiling</td>
<td>9/11/1929</td>
<td>41298</td>
<td>8729</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After You’ve Gone</td>
<td>11/26/1929</td>
<td>41350</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I Ain’t Got Nobody</td>
<td>12/10/1929</td>
<td></td>
<td>8756</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dallas Blues</td>
<td>12/10/1929</td>
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<td>8774</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis Blues</td>
<td>12/13/1929</td>
<td>41350</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rockin’ Chair</td>
<td>12/13/1929</td>
<td></td>
<td>8756</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song of the Islands</td>
<td>1/24/1930</td>
<td>41375</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bessie Couldn’t Help It</td>
<td>2/1/1930</td>
<td></td>
<td>8774</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue, Turning Grey Over You</td>
<td>2/1/1930</td>
<td>41375</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Sweet</td>
<td>4/5/1930</td>
<td>41415</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Can’t Believe That You’re in Love With Me</td>
<td>4/5/1930</td>
<td>41415</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian Cradle Song</td>
<td>5/4/1930</td>
<td>41423</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exactly Like You</td>
<td>5/4/1930</td>
<td>41423</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinah</td>
<td>5/4/1930</td>
<td></td>
<td>8800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiger Rag</td>
<td>5/4/1930</td>
<td></td>
<td>8800</td>
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</tbody>
</table>