

Louie Bluie

Film Soundtrack Featuring Howard
Armstrong, Produced by Terry Zwigoff

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2. NOTHING IN THIS WIDE WORLD FOR ME - 2,6,7
3. THAT'LL NEVER HAPPEN NO MORE - 2,6,7
4. TED'S STOMP (1934) - 3,7
5. MY FOUR REASONS - 2,5,7,8,9
6. BARUSHKA - 3,6,7
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8. DARKTOWN STRUTTER'S BALL (*) - 4,8,9
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20. WHEN YOU FEEL DOWN AND OUT - Yank Rachell (1938)

(*) uncensored - not for air play

Cover by R. Crumb

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Tracks #1 - #16: originally issued on Arhoolie
LP 1095 (#4 & #12 orig. 1934)

Tracks #17 - #20: CD bonus tracks of early
recordings by Howard Armstrong and
"Yank" Rachell.

Booklet and tray card layout by Morgan Dodge

THE MUSICIANS:

Howard Armstrong: vcl.-1;
mandolin-2; violin-3;
guitar-4
Tom Armstrong: bass-5
Ted Bogan: vcl.-6; guitar-7
"Banjo" Ike Robinson:
vcl.-8; banjo-9
James "Yank" Rachell: vcl.
& mandolin-10
Willie Sievers: piano-11
Bob Cox: guitar-12
Mary Shepard: piano-13
Elsie Loweroy: vcl.-14

The Film "Louie Bluie" is available for
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Louie Bluie



Film Soundtrack featuring Howard Armstrong

LOUIE BLUIE

Howard Armstrong's daddy was a "musicianer"—played fiddle, banjo, and mandolin with black string bands around Knoxville in the early days of the century. But when he took up preaching, he handed the mandolin to Howard, with the warning that it was a "devil's instrument." Undaunted, Howard has been playing the hell out of it ever since.

He also creates incredible drawings, paintings, and diaries that, as much as his music, excite, entertain, and preserve forever a rich but fast-disappearing traditional culture. Terry Zwigoff's film *Louie Bluie* presents Howard Armstrong as musician and artist, and also as raconteur, linguist, and linchpin between many contradictory worlds: black and white, country and city, native and ethnic, yesterday and today.

Howard Armstrong was born March 4, 1909, in La Follette, Tennessee. One of eleven children, as a young boy Howard could not afford "real" musical instruments or art materials, so he made his own: a fiddle constructed from a goods box, strung with horsehair; a paint brush made from a cat's tail; watercolors drained from rainsoaked crepe paper.

Armstrong first played in a family band until, as a teenager, he met Ted Bogan and Carl Martin in Knoxville. Together and with others, as the Four Aces or as the Tennessee Chocolate Drops, they performed old time jigs, reels,

waltzes, rags, and minstrel/medicine show material, as well as more recent jazz, blues, and Tin Pan Alley popular songs—black American country music, as it was played from plantation times down to the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Black Country Music

All the world knows about jazz, blues, gospel—America's African American music, which has changed and shaped all the music of the Twentieth Century. But what has been forgotten is the black contribution to American country music.

The roots of country music came to the United States in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries with the tunes, dances, and stringed instruments (fiddle, mandolin, piano) of the English and early Scots-Irish settlers—and with the rhythms, dances, and instruments (banjo, tambourine, drums) of the black slaves. Before the Civil War, black string bands were popular with both the white plantation owners and the slaves. They played "European" jigs, schottisches, polkas, marches, and serenades—but their sound, somehow, was uncannily and appealingly different from that of white players. They were adding African polyrhythms, syncopation, and bent or slurred notes ("the blue note") from their own church services, work songs, and field hollers. By the turn of the Twentieth Century, this hybrid tradition was

developing into such musical traditions as minstrel, cakewalk, ragtime, and blues.

Black and white country string bands, featuring fiddle, banjo, mandolin, guitar, bass, and other stringed instruments (Hawaiian guitar, cello, sometimes piano), frequently added "homemade" instruments (jugs, kazoos,

washboard, tub-and-broomstick basses, cigar-box fiddles). Black string bands played for black audiences at saloons, restaurants, theatres, house parties, and public social affairs ("chittlin' struts," fish fries, "barbecue busts," "house-rent balls"), as well as informally on front porches.

But their music appealed to people on both



photo circa 1925

Howard Armstrong and his brothers (L to R): L.C. (age 8), F.L. (age 6), Howard (age 16), & Roland (age 12)

sides of the rigidly-enforced color line, and they played for blacks and whites on street corners, in tent and medicine shows, and at special events (e.g., the Kentucky Derby, circuit court days). And black country bands played for all-white audiences at private parties, including “upper-class saddy affairs.”

Unfortunately, when record companies began recording Southern country music for a national audience in the 1920s, they too drew a strict color line—and effectively took black musicians out of the emerging mainstream of commercial country music. Black players and singers had their own segregated “race music catalogs,” almost exclusively jazz, blues, and gospel. The “hillbilly” catalog was the exclusive province for white string and fiddle band music. (The few and distinguished exceptions to this include the Memphis and Louisville jug bands, the Mississippi Sheiks, and Armstrong’s own Tennessee Chocolate Drops.)

So the younger generation of black musicians ignored string and country music and went into jazz, blues, and gospel. White country musicians continued to borrow sounds and songs from blacks well into the rock’n’roll era (listen to Hank Williams, early Elvis Presley, or any Western swing). But, after World War II, steel guitars and Nashville production dropped the string band content from country music.

Today, the occasional black performer (such as Charlie Pride) can make a success in country

music—by adopting the white pop/country sound. But Howard Armstrong’s band is the last of its kind.

1930 was the year Howard and his band made their first radio appearance and cut their first record, both in Knoxville. At their record date in the St. James Hotel, Vocalion also waxed the Tennessee Ramblers, a white string band. When the two groups rehearsed, Willie Sievers of the Tennessee Ramblers listened carefully and learned the Chocolate Drops’ “Vine Street Drag” (they also recorded “Knox County Stomp”), and Howard picked up their version of “Cackling Hen.” Was it coincidence or fate that, in 1984, during the shooting of *Louie Bluie*, Howard and the film crew stopped in at a local fiddlers’ convention—and met Willie Sievers for the first time in 54 years! Musical memories were just as fresh as that April day in 1930, and they jammed on “Cackling Hen.”

Pullin’ Doors

Martin, Bogan, and Armstrong hit the highway during the Depression of 1930, playing through the Appalachian Mountains and up into West Virginia and including a stint with a medicine show managed by one Doctor Leon D. Bondara. Moving across Indiana they finally settled in Chicago in the early 30’s. In the trough of bad times, playing for tips on the black South Side, and Sundays in “Jewtown” (Maxwell Street’s flea market), was a starvation business. So, at Howard’s suggestion, they began

“pullin’ doors”—going into stores and taverns where the tips were somewhat better, in Chicago’s white immigrant neighborhoods.

Initially they would be greeted with hostility: black men just did not enter the ethnic enclaves of Irish, Italians, Poles, Germans, and Bohemians. But Howard had the key to acceptance. LaFollette, Tennessee, had been a multi-ethnic community, and as a boy he’d

visited back and forth with white immigrant kids and picked up the ability to converse in Italian, Polish, and German. Along with the languages, of course, came the songs, and now it paid off: Armstrong, Bogan, Martin, and friends survived the Depression by bringing Italians and Poles their own down-home music in their own languages.

Producer/Director Terry Zwigoff can



photo circa 1985

(L to R) Howard Armstrong, James “Yank” Rachell, “Banjo” Ike Robinson, Ted Bogan, and Tom Armstrong.

personally attest to the joyful power of this aspect of Howard Armstrong's music. While he was editing sound for the film, three Polish filmmakers happened to be in the studio working on another feature. Terry played Howard's version of "Barushka" and at once the three stopped what they were doing and crowded around the Movieola, their faces wreathed in smiles, singing along and demanding to know who, where, and what this was. Howard's "cottonfield Polish" (as he calls it) had won three more friends!

The power of Howard Armstrong's music crosses not just national lines but time and generations. By the late Thirties, the popularity of the radio and jukebox (as well as changes in musical taste) had put an end to the professional playing days of Martin, Bogan, and Armstrong. But in the 1970s they were rediscovered by a new generation of folk music fans and scholars. For Howard, this meant new recordings and new jobs on college campuses, at coffee houses, folk clubs, and festivals—even a State Department tour of Central and South America.

Carl Martin died in 1978, but Howard and Ted continued playing. Louie Bluie features them with black string band veterans Yank Rachell and "Banjo" Ikey Robinson. Yank, best known for his musical partnership with blues immortal Sleepy John Estes, was born March 16, 1910, in Brownsville, Tennessee, and played with string and jug bands on the streets of

Memphis and Paducah before recording, first for Victor in the Twenties, and more recently for Delmark and Blue Goose. Here he's featured on "38 Pistol Blues".

"Banjo" Ikey Robinson, born in 1904, grew up playing in string bands in rural Virginia but it was in Chicago in the 1920s that he became a leading stylist of jazz banjo. In the next ten years he recorded and played with the top black band leaders of the day, including Jelly Roll Morton, Clarence Williams, Fats Waller, Fletcher Henderson, Jabbo Smith, and Louis Armstrong. Besides the definitive version of his own "My Four Reasons," Ikey gives out with an unforgettable (uncensored) interpretation of "Darktown Strutters' Ball."

The biggest contributor to the music, outside of Howard himself, is Ted Bogan, Armstrong's on-stage foil and off-stage friend. Their relationship is a highlight of the film. "He was so greedy after women. . . just like a one-eyed cat trying to watch two ratholes! That's why today, he's no good as marriage material," Howard says. Howard also tells how he ruined two of Bogan's romances at once, by writing two love letters under Ted's name at the same time, then sending each to the wrong woman.

Ted was born in Spartanburg South Carolina, in 1913, and began picking solo guitar in 1929 after hearing records and broadcasts by such blues pioneers as Blind Blake and Leroy Carr. After touring, and then moving to Chicago with

Martin and Armstrong, he made records and backed up musicians as diverse as Bumble Bee Slim and Les Paul. Here, Ted's singing is featured on "Nothing In This Wide World For Me" (his 1934 composition), the "My Gal Sal" medley, and "Du, Du liechst mir im Herzen."

A Musical Self-Portrait

From an enormous assemblage of tapes and soundtracks made for the film Louie Bluie, we've culled a selection for this album that paints a musical self-portrait of Howard Armstrong—diverse influences, contradictions, and all. There's the Saturday-night Howard of "I Want a Girl" and the whorehouse rendition of "Darktown Strutters' Ball," and there's the Sunday-morning Howard of "When He Calls Me, I Will Answer." There's Howard the urbane-pop-crooner ("Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams"), the skilled string-tickler ("Vine Street Drag," "State Street Rag"), and the country clown ("That'll Never Happen No More"). There's even the original Louie Bluie record, two sides of a 78 rpm ("State Street Rag"/"Ted's

Stomp") recorded at Chicago's Merchandise Mart on Friday, March 23, 1934.

Incidentally, about that nickname: it was hung on him by a tipsy woman at a party in 1932. Ted Bogan, she decided, must be Ted Lewis. "But you're Armstrong, I know your name is Armstrong, but you're not gonna tell me you're Louie Armstrong! You're just plain old Louie Bluie!" Louie Bluie, the film, ends as Howard and band are playing "Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams" on Chicago's Maxwell Street. As the camera pulls back across the storefronts and rooftops, we hear Howard's voiceover: "I'm not ashamed to tell anybody my age. I'm 75 years—not old—but 75 years young. I have interest in life, full of energy, full of pep, and most of all I'm full of curiosity. Because that is one thing that keeps you young." For those meeting Howard Armstrong for the first time, this film (and this CD) will keep him, his energy, his curiosity, and most of all, his music, young forever.

Marty Pahls - 1985

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Mary Shepard: piano-13

Elsie Loweroy: vcl-14

Howard Armstrong is an extraordinary visual artist as well as one of the great vernacular musicians who easily blends blues, jazz, country, and pop music into his own unique sound.

"... an invaluable glimpse into the often overlooked black string-band tradition."

- Los Angeles Times

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