

94 And Not Dead Yet: Cold Cuts

by [Reg Green](#) (December 2023)



Louie Armstrong and Humphrey Lyttelton, 1956, National

Portrait Gallery

Revenge, as we know, is a dish best eaten cold. Mine was waiting in the fridge for more than fifty years till this past weekend. I put it there when I lived in London and the most commanding voice in British jazz at the time, Humphrey Lyttelton, said (in print) that I was unworthy of my profession! It didn't hurt so much as intended since my profession was an economics writer who strayed from time to time into the music world only to earn enough for a pint of beer and maintain a balanced diet.

Still, what could I possibly say to refute a man so formidably well-connected, so popular with the media, a man on familiar terms with some of the jazz greats? Dammit, I was impressed by his achievements myself!

The dispute arose when I said in an otherwise-admiring review for the *Daily Telegraph* of a concert by Louis Armstrong that I wished he hadn't played *West End Blues*. My motives were the purest, the reasoning sympathetic. I was arguing that the original 1928 version was so exquisite that it would have been better to have left the world with only that version to remember him by. But Humph (Eton, Grenadier Guards, leader of a famous band) humphed outrage, real or fake, while the rest of the jazz critics maintained a discreet silence.

For all those years the dish remained in cold storage until I read *Pops*, the closely-observed biography of Armstrong by Terry Teachout, and was struck by his disappointment at another of Louie's performances of *West End Blues* including, devastatingly, this phrase, "the cadenza sounds overblown, almost gross, next to the lapidary elegance of the original."

Vindication at last! Better still, if the lesson I take from

this incident—that the most vocal experts are often wrong-headed, however red in the face they get—nudges some readers to revisit (or, better still, ascend for the first time) the topmost peak of early jazz, it will have performed a valuable service after all.

Meanwhile, all my thoughts about Humph are serene and I'm enjoying piping-hot dinners again.

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Reg Green is an economics journalist who was born in England and worked for the *Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian* and *The Times of London*. He emigrated to the US in 1970. His books include *The Nicholas Effect* and his website is nicholasgreen.org.

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