

# Cultural Diplomacy and All That Jazz



***Bei mir bist du schoen.*** Of all the persons I've known, you're really swell, I have to admit you two deserve expressions that really fit you. I'll use English to help tell you how grand you are.

Two titans, black celebrities who achieved success and fame at the pinnacle of their vastly different professions, in public service and musical entertainment, and who were totally different personalities. are saluted for their contributions to American life. Unlike each other in so many ways, both shared a common history and trait: both as youngsters received vital help to start their lives from Jewish people, and both spoke, or understood, the Yiddish language.

Colin Powell, statesman, diplomat, and four-star General, born on April 5, 1937, of two immigrants from Jamaica of African and Scottish ancestry, a middleclass family, and who lived as a youngster in the Bronx, NYC, died of COVID- 19 on October

18, 2021, at age of 84. Louis, Satchmo, Armstrong, born in poverty in New Orleans on August 4, 1901, died on July 6, 1971: he was abandoned while an infant by his father, and his mother often resorted to prostitution. Both contributed to American life with pride and in ambitious way. Both were Ambassadors of the country with skillful virtuosity.

Colin Powell was a remarkable person, the maker of history as the first black man in several official senior positions. He joined the Reserve Officers Training Corps at CCNY and that inspired him to join the U.S. army. He fought in South Vietnam as a second lieutenant and was wounded, and later was awarded the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star.

His accomplishments are historic: national security adviser to President Ronald Reagan 1987-1989, he was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. 1989-1993, under President George H.W. Bush, who commanded the first Gulf War, and Secretary of State 2001-2005 under President George W. Bush.

As Secretary of State, there were disagreements with Israel, clashes with Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon over Israel's action during the Second Intifada, the Roadmap to Peace, and Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. He was the first U.S. official in 2001 to suggest that the probable outcome of successful negotiations would be a Palestinian state. Unlike James Baker or John Kerry, Powell differed with Israel without animosity, holding one can, he said, make critical remarks about Israel: "They're a democracy, they can take it and we can take it in return. we shouldn't feel it necessary to agree with Israel on every issue."

Powell acknowledged in his autobiographical memoir that he had benefited from equal opportunity and affirmative action. This was not unusual but what is more significant is that Powell was one of two great black Americans who were helped and given crucial advice at the start of their lives by Jews. That experience was shared with Louis, Satchmo, Armstrong.

Living in the South Bronx, Powell was a Shabbos goy, a non-Jew employed by Orthodox Jews to perform certain activities, such as using electrical appliances and cooking, that Jewish religious law prevents Orthodox Jews from doing on the Sabbath. Powell who, among other activities turned synagogue lights on and off during the Sabbath, joined the list of celebrated Shabbos goys, an illustrious list that includes Harry S. Truman, Mario Cuomo, Thurman Marshall, Martin Scorsese, Elvis Presley, and as adults on an occasional act, Barack Obama and Al Gore.

Powell, in addition to actions as a Shabbos Goy, worked for a toy store in the Bronx run by a Jewish man named Jay Sickser. It was Sickser who gave him his start in life. After complimenting Powell for his work in the store, Sickser said to him, "you can't stay here forever, you have to get your education, you are smart, make sure you get your education, and move on." Powell did move on, to City College of New York where he majored in geology. He also indicated the lesson he got from the Jewish store, "Don't just show kindness in passing, or be courteous, show it in depth, show it with passion, and expect nothing in return."

Powell can be seen as an exemplar of the Black-Jewish alliance of the Civil Rights movement of his early years. He was always concerned with Jewish sensibility, apologizing to the Jewish community for holding in 2014 the first summit meeting of a volunteer group, Promise America, to improve the lives of young people, of which was the president, on Passover.

In a speech before the World Jewish Congress in 2017 he spoke of the joy experienced throughout his neighborhood in the Bronx when the creation of Israel was declared in 1948: "It wasn't just the Jews who were celebrating, the rest of us were celebrating for the Jews. We all shared in their joy, the joy of having a homeland.

It was in Sickser's shop that sold goods to a clientele, many

of them Jews who spoke Yiddish as a first language, that Powell largely learned some Yiddish. It is not clear whether Powell was fluent in the language, but he used it on official as well as social occasions. He did say "I understand Yiddish a *bissel*, a little." In meeting Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Shamir in 1991 he suggested, to Shamir's astonishment, "men kent reden Yiddish", we can speak in Yiddish.

Jews have been a part of the U.S. jazz world, as well as prominent as composers and lyricists, from Irving Berlin to George Gershwin, Jerome Kern and Rodgers and Hart, in the Great American Songbook. Among the most well-known Jews are Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Stan Getz, Lee Konitz, Willie the Lion Smith, Herbie Mann, and Buddy Rich, but none of them wore a Jewish Star of David round their neck for the whole of their life to symbolize their association with Jews as did Louis Satchmo Armstrong.

Satchmo was born in poverty in New Orleans on August 4, 1901, and died on July 6, 1971. He was abandoned as an infant by his father and his teen age mother often resorted to prostitution. The young Louis found a home among the Karnofsfy family, a local Lithuanian-Jewish family who hired him to do odd jobs for their peddling business. Mrs. Karnofsky sang lullabies in Yiddish and Russian to him at night. The family gave him food, and loaned him money to buy his first instrument, a \$5 cornet from a pawn shop.

It is a matter of dispute whether the nickname Satchmo was coined by the Karnofsky family, the work in Yiddish means "fat cheeks," but he had a life-long admiration for the Jewish people. He even said, late in life, that "even my race, Negroes, were having a little better break than the Jewish people, and we were better off than them in New Orleans. I was only seven, but I could easily see the ungodly treatment that the white folk were handing the poor Jewish family who I worked for."

There is no matter of dispute that Armstrong, as trumpeter and vocalist, became one of the most influential figures in jazz in a career that spanned five decades and different jazz eras. After a stay with King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band, Satchmo as a virtuoso formed his own groups, the Hot 5 and the Hot 7, making outstanding creative records that are memorable today with their intense rhythmic swing, ingenious improvisation, and accentuated upbeat. His style of singing, gravelly voice and vocal improvisation, and skilled use of scat singing, became an archetype for jazz vocal interpretation, influencing many including the young Bing Crosby as well as the poet Langston Hughes.

Certainly, he used Jewish melodies in some of his compositions: St James Infirmary, Go down Moses. He sang Shadrach, the children of Israel would not bow down to Babylonian idols. It is possible that Satchmo derived his particular style of scat exuberant improvisation, from the Jewish nigunim, forms of Jewish religious songs or tunes sung by groups, often without formal lyrics.

Armstrong was one of the first black entertainers to "cross over" with great success with a white audience. For some Blacks he was colorful and charismatic in the wrong way, and was for his vaudevillian style, his props, use of handkerchief, grimaces. He was reluctant to speak out publicly against racism, leading some fellow black entertainers to brand him an uncle Tom, but he did criticize President Eisenhower for being "twofaced" and not solving a school crisis in Alabama.

During the Cold War, Armstrong was sent as a cultural Ambassador to Africa, Europe, and Asia, by the U.S. State Department which sent of the U.S. jazz musicians to improve America's image abroad. Armstrong went to many countries but especially in Africa to Ghana and the Congo.

It is fitting that Satchmo's home in Corona, Queens was

declared a national historic landmark and is now a museum, but aware of this Yiddish speaking friend of Jews who loved eating matzahs there should be a mezuzah, with Hebrew verses from the Torah, on the door.