

What a Wonderful World – or was it?

Nearly half a century ago an African-American recorded a song that was to define not only his career, but also Music in general. The song itself had already been rejected by Tony Bennett, one of the top singers of the time. In hindsight, it probably turned out to have been a very bad decision by Bennett. Anyway, the song was referred to an ageing 66 year old jazz musician who eagerly agreed to record the song. The musician was Louis Armstrong and the song was entitled “What a Wonderful World”.

Over the decades since it was released it has become a beacon of hope for the future, as well as being a staple song at weddings during the father and bride dance. With lyrics such as:

“I see trees of green, red roses too. I see them bloom for me and you. And I think to myself what a Wonderful World”.

It is easy to see the positiveness in the song. A song of hope, of a bright future and of the things in life that we take for granted but ultimately we should be thankful for. Indeed, from a certain angle it could be seen to be a very spiritual type of song. However, I have recently been wondering if in fact it is quite the opposite. If we look at the era in which it was released it could be deemed to be a very sarcastic take on society. Let me explain further.

The song was released in the US in 1968. At the time the US were well and truly entrenched in a war in Vietnam that would ultimately end in a stalemate. From documentaries and films we know that a lot of young Americans were enlisted to fight the Viet Cong and ended up being there for a number of years as well as witnessing many atrocities. Statistics show that somewhere in the region of 58,000 servicemen lost their lives fighting in Vietnam. At the time of the song there were many anti-war protesters who were against the US involvement in Vietnam. Protests up and down the country were growing in numbers virtually by the day.

In 1968 the African-American Civil Rights movement was going from strength to strength. For more than a decade up to then African-Americans had been staging non-violent protests and civil disobedience in an attempt to end racial discrimination and segregation. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X were two prominent leaders in this movement.

1968 also saw the assassination of two prominent progressive public figures. The aforementioned Martin Luther King was assassinated on 29th March in Memphis. Less than two months later the President-elect Robert F Kennedy was assassinated in Los Angeles. These two assassinations had a profound effect on the nation.

Likewise, Louis Armstrong was seen as a colourful character. He was one of the few African-Americans that enjoyed celebrity status and benefits that were generally only apportioned to White Americans. He was often seen as an anomaly amongst his own people. Armstrong was born in 1901 and was the grandson of slaves. He spent much of his early life living in poverty in a rough neighbourhood of New Orleans. At a young age he learnt to play the cornet which was to define his career.

Biographers have always had trouble trying to map out Armstrong's true life story. Louis Armstrong was known to tell many stories and innuendos about his upbringing and early years. So much so that no-one is really sure as to what the truth is and what is false. Although Armstrong was not as politically active as other African-Americans he did take a stand for desegregation during the Little Rock Crisis. He even called President Eisenhower "two-faced" and "gutless" over his handling of the crisis.

So, given the above, it is clear that the song was released against a background of social upheaval and political activity. Although Louis Armstrong did not write "What a Wonderful World" it can be seen that during the late 1960's it was a time of change. In addition, this was also the time of the Summer of Love and hippy power was taking off. The times were certainly a changing as Bob Dylan would sing.

When you look at this era it can be safe to assume that the supposedly uplifting song "What a Wonderful World" was actually a bleak outlook on American Society. Certainly for a large number of African-Americans racism and segregation were still huge issues and they, for one could not see *"trees of green and red roses too"* unlike their White-American compatriots.



The Single "What a Wonderful World" that became one of the most well-known songs of all time.



Louis Armstrong aka 'Satchmo' or 'Pops'