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## Arts & Culture

Gwyn Jay Allen's life is starting to resemble that of Louis Armstrong, writes **Stephanie Bunbury**.

**G**WYN Jay Allen, 45, is certainly thinner than Louis Armstrong ever was. He is a dancer as much as a singer — not an observation anyone ever made of Satchmo — and his long designer shirt in gleaming bling white is not something Louis, strictly an evening-dress man, could ever have carried off.

Allen, however, is steadily making a career out of being Armstrong, gravel-voiced and always smiling. There is the show he has expanded from a few uncanny renditions in the local pub, just a bit of messing around, to an evening's journey through Louis Armstrong's life and music. There is his new album, *I Love Louis*. There is a full-blown musical, *Satchmo*, written with the help of Clarke Peters, creator of West End hit *Five Guys Named Moe*, that he condenses for shows like the one he is about to present at Crown. He imagines a film version and a documentary.

"That is my aim," he says, enthusiastically. "Because I think Louis is a great character! Louis sells himself. I'm literally jumping on his bandwagon." He sings *Hello, Dolly!* and *Wonderful World*, just as the man himself did. He smiles Satch's smile. He has done both in various London grand hotels, in Germany, Scandinavia and the West Indies. "It doesn't matter where you are in the world you sing a Louis song," he says. "You get the same reaction. I don't see why it shouldn't be an international big thing."

Allen has a full-blown Londoner's accent after more than 20 years in the city, but he grew up in Sierra Leone. He has some hair-raising stories of being interrogated at gunpoint by local militia during the long-running civil war in his home country. "I nearly got killed about three times," he says. "I was a suspect because I had a British passport and I was leaving the country... Maybe I looked like someone important. I don't know. In Africa, people don't have to have a reason, political or otherwise, to want to interrogate or kill you. I could have been dead and nobody would have asked questions."

None of this, however, has dented his optimism. His favourite phrase is "have my cake and eat it" — whether he can, whether he can't, the fact that he wants to. He wants to return to Sierra Leone and build a house on land his parents have bought him — he trained as an interior architect, a consultancy job that

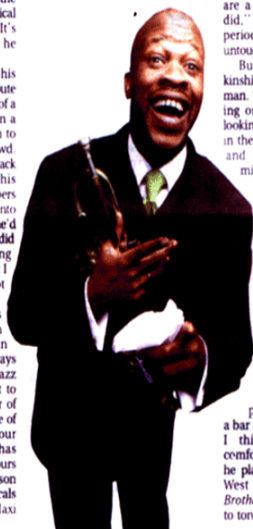


## Being Satchmo and loving it

shares life-space with his singing — and put his shoulder to the wheel of national renewal. At the same time, he wants the musical career London can offer. It's probably impossible, but he wants to try.

He has been developing his Louis Armstrong musical tribute since 1992, when he was part of a group singing anonymously in a corner of the Hilton ballroom to an indifferent black-tie crowd. The band's singer stepped back and let him do one of his messing-around Louis numbers at the end of the night. "I got into trouble with her, because she'd been singing all night and I did one song and got a standing ovation," chuckles Allen. "But I thought, 'Maybe I've got something there.'"

Clearly, his enthusiasm is sustained by his admiration for Armstrong as a musician and innovator; he was, says Allen, one of the first jazz musicians to record, the first to record scat singing, a pioneer of the instrumental solo and one of the first musicians to tour extensively. Allen himself has recorded a gospel album, tours with Latin jazzman Alex Wilson and has recorded backing vocals for artists as disparate as Maxi



Priest and Diana Ross. He is no "trick pony" himself. "There are a lot of things only Louis did," he says, "over a long period. In that respect he was untouchable."

But he also feels a strong kinship for Louis Armstrong the man. "Who he was, always looking for good in people. Even in the dark times, in Prohibition and all that when you had militant jazz musicians, Louis still had white guys in his band. He said as long as they can't play, that was all he was worried about. In many ways that is similar to the way I live my life, although of course times have changed."

"Character-wise I've always been an extrovert, you know, doing things people wouldn't dream of doing. I don't have the inhibitions other people have. I can walk into a bar anywhere in the world and I think people feel pretty comfortable about me." When he played Cab Calloway in the West End production of *Blues Brothers*, he says, he felt he had to tone himself down a bit. With

Louis he can be as big as the Mississippi.

Gwyn Jay Allen started singing, I see so many performers before him, in church. Churches in Sierra Leone were stiff and unimproving, he says; a good Christian woman would never wear earrings, for example. In London he found his way to a huge evangelical church where he met serious musicians who taught him guitar and where he was able to gain confidence singing backing vocals. "That is where I learned how to be me, really. I sang backing vocals with three or four singers... and then eventually I led on a couple of songs with guitar..."

Brits love to laugh at the plethora of tribute bands in Australia. If truth be told, people everywhere like to hear their favourites revived, but the imitators rarely get much respect. That doesn't worry Gwyn Jay Allen. "I don't mind being labelled a Louis Armstrong sound-alike," he says. "I'm not bothered, because I know I can... jump out of whatever box they want to put me in."

"And I am myself. I write myself into the show. In the current version, I play a guy who is obsessed with Louis and is try-

ing to put on a musical about him. That means there are times when I am me and there are times when I'm Louis and I'm not ashamed of that, because every singer starts with someone in particular."

The show and album both include songs he has written about Armstrong, too; it's not all the hits of yesteryear. "My album *I Love Louis* is a tribute to him but with songs I've written that I do in my style. There are times when I do Louis phrases, the things people expect, and there are times when I do it my own way, you know, so in the show you get both. Also, the show tells the story of jazz, which comes from Africa via America to the rest of the world, so it is a musical journey."

Allen can't play the trumpet, however — at least, not yet. He's teaching himself that exciting instrument in his practice room at the bottom of the garden. It's a slow process; his wife, he admits with a laugh, is not enjoying it much. "But eventually I think it is something I will do, because I'm looking ahead."

*Satchmo - I Love Louis* opens at the Pains at Crown tomorrow night and runs until September 16.

Louis Armstrong (above), being himself, and Gwyn Jay Allen (left), making a career out of being Satchmo.