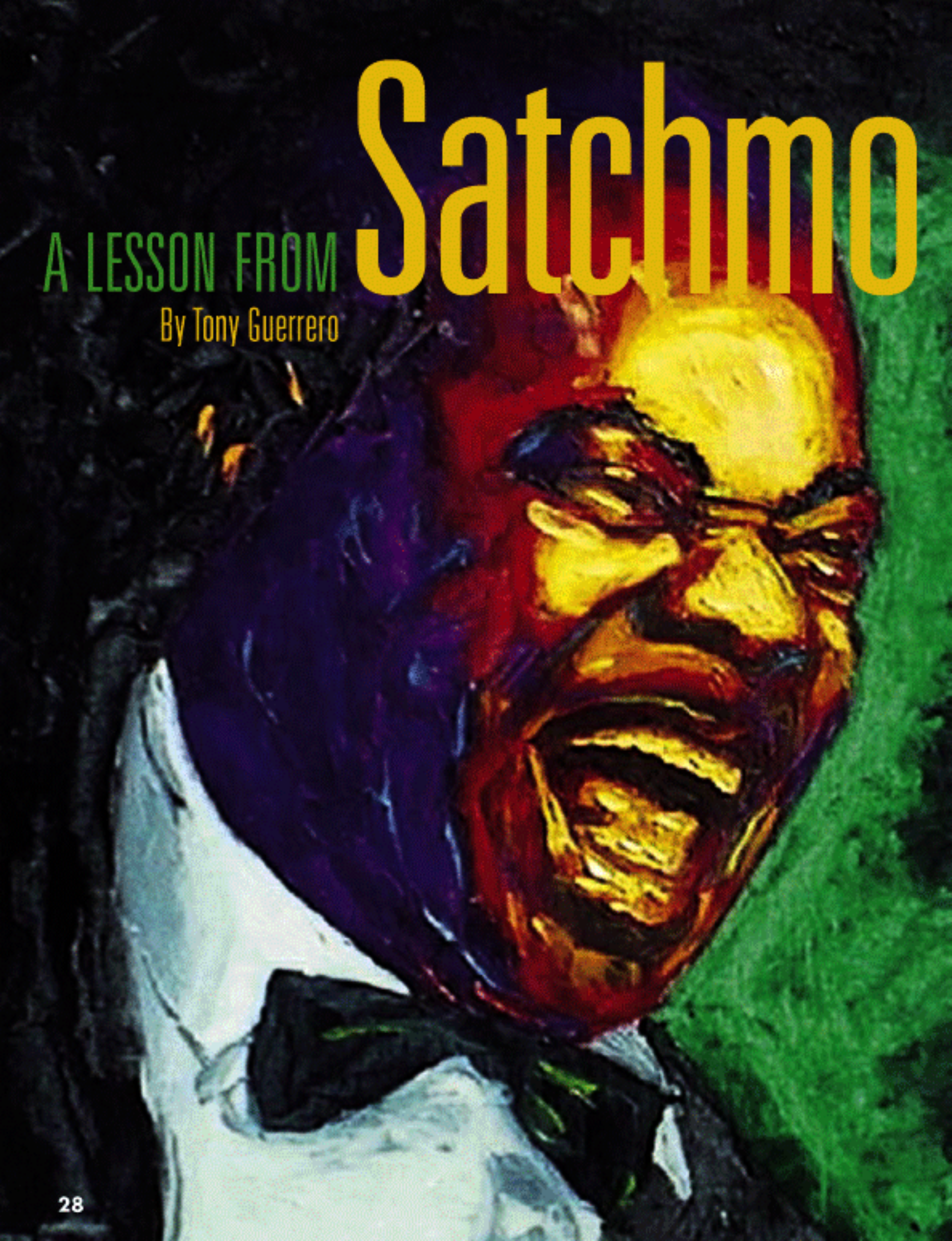


Satchmo

A LESSON FROM

By Tony Guerrero



am a huge Louis Armstrong fan. In fact, some might say I'm a bit obsessive. There have been public displays of and newspaper articles written about my personal collection of Armstrong memorabilia. I even have a band I play with regularly that pays musical homage to him. I know, I know—aspects of Armstrong's lifestyle were not exactly cohesive with traditional Christianity. He's not quite the ideal hero for a Christian, but rest assured he is not a moral role model for me. He is, however, arguably the greatest musician in American history, having single handedly re-defined and reshaped contemporary music in the first decades of the twentieth century, the effects of which are still resonating today (even in the arrangements of modern worship music). So, as a musical hero, I stand by my man.

But this isn't an article about him. Rather, it's about a Christian lesson I learned from him. Years ago, I read a story he'd told about his grandmother. Sadly, the source was lost to me long ago, so you'll have to forgive my retelling, but it went something like this:

Louis's grandmother was a devout Christian who loved church and, like the rest of the congregation, adored the preacher of the church. Every Sunday he'd speak with fervor and ignite the roaring approval of his congregation. Louis's grandmother would lead the way, whooping and hollering at his every statement. One day the preacher was absent and a substitute preacher stood in his place. He had nowhere near the charisma of the regular preacher and most of the congregation sat stone faced as he bored them out of their minds. Except for Louis's grandmother, who continued to whoop and holler her approval.

When the service was over, her friends came to her and asked, "Why in the world were you so excited for this preacher? He was nowhere near as good as our regular man!"

She answered, "Well, when our pastor is up there, I can look at him and see Jesus standing right there with him. Today, when this man was up there, I simply looked around him and saw Jesus there, just the same."

MISSING THE POINT

How often are we like that congregation? How often do we miss God because we are distracted by what is on stage? When the pastor isn't famous enough or doesn't speak in our style, we lose interest. When the worship leader doesn't rock as much as other well-known worship heroes or doesn't do the kind of music we like, we complain that we didn't "get anything out of worship." If there isn't the appropriate

amount of mood lighting we simply can't "engage."

I recently participated in a worship concert. The band was great, the music was loud, the leader was energetic, the lights were flashing, the crowd was jumping, yelling and singing. The night was a success by most standards. But as I walked offstage after the last song I needed to be alone for a minute and apologize to God. I had gotten so caught up in the concert atmosphere that I became distracted from the primary reason I was there—to worship Him.

SEEING JESUS

The challenge before us as Christians in the modern worship environment is that we not get caught up in the "show"—the celebrity pastors and worship leaders, the lights, the beat, the volume, the hooks, the energy of the crowd. Our aim needs to be that we can somehow look beyond all that and see Jesus standing there. If Jesus is to be worshiped, He does not need fancy lighting. He does not need atmosphere. He does not need great pop worship tunes. But He does desire our hearts.

Our feeble minds will almost always fail in this. It's simply human to get distracted and to look for that which appeals to us in our humanity. Some people like bright, sunny sanctuaries, some people like dark, candle-lit rooms. Some like hymns, some like rock. There is nothing inherently wrong with this—God created our diversity. The problem is that we often let our tastes dictate where and when we will encounter God and to what degree. When our sensory demands are not met to our satisfaction, we shut down our receptibility. There can be no doubt that this is a dangerous thing to do if God is trying to speak to you. I wonder, how many of God's words I have missed

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because I simply tuned out?

Louis's grandmother had it right—it doesn't matter who is up there. It doesn't matter how dynamic the speaker is. The band could be anybody. The songs could be lame. We are not at church for a "show," but to be in the presence of God and to engage our hearts, souls and minds in that holy meeting. In my life, I plan to try harder to look beyond the human efforts on the platform and see Jesus.

I can't tell you where Louis is spending eternity, but I hope he is in heaven—I'd love to hear him and Gabriel trying to out-blow each other!

Tony is the Director of Creative Arts for Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, CA. He is also an active composer and producer as well as an established jazz trumpet player. www.tonyguerrero.com