

**VELMA
MIDDLETON
PARRISH
1917-1961**



**JAZZ
SINGER
WITH LOUIS
ARMSTRONG**

Velma Middleton was an American jazz vocalist and entertainer who sang with Louis Armstrong's big bands and small groups from 1942 until her premature tragic death in 1961.

She was born in September 1917 in Holdenville. As a child growing up in St. Louis, she sang in school plays and wrote lyrics. After winning a few amateur competitions, she went to New York in the 1930s where she started as a chorus girl and dancer. Throughout her career she would become famous for performing acrobatic splits on stage as well despite being overweight. She soon became a Harlem favorite, but critics rarely thought highly of her singing. She worked with Erskine Hawkins and Jimmie Lunceford before marrying jazz pianist and composer Avery Parrish in 1935.

She visited South America in 1938 with Connie McLean's Orchestra before joining Louis Armstrong's big band in 1942. They accented each other with their clowning antics and love of music. When Armstrong's orchestra disbanded in 1947, Middleton joined his All-Stars, since he felt she was an integral part of his show. She was also very loyal to Satchmo, as the two had an exciting chemistry onstage.

Hundreds of tapes saved by Armstrong showed he was closer to Middleton than any other musician on his tour, always inviting her backstage when none of the other All-Stars were present. When Benny Goodman objected to her singing during a 1953 joint tour and the Newport Jazz Festival asked her not to perform during Armstrong's 1953 set, Armstrong sprung to her defense with fierce devotion and anger.

Middleton had some problems walking for over a year because of her weight before the All-Stars embarked on a 1960s State-Department-sponsored tour of Africa. She so loved the spotlight that she refused to give up. When Armstrong was leaving, he offered to pay her salary for six months to stay at home, because he knew that the end was approaching fast for her, unless she took it easy.

On January 14, 1961, Middleton collapsed in the middle of the grueling tour. She was admitted to Hill Hospital in Freetown, Sierra Leone suffering from partial paralysis on her right side. Armstrong was strongly criticized for leaving her in the remote hospital to carry on his tour because there were contracts to honor and he believed that "the show must go on". Musician Barney Bigard was critical of Armstrong and manager Joe Glaser for refusing to arrange her transfer to a country with better health facilities.

A letter does exist of Armstrong writing to Glaser about how sick she was and how Glaser needed to try to help her out. Plans had been made to fly her back to the United States as soon as she was able to travel. A few days before her death, the doctors said she was out of danger but Middleton would never make it out of the hospital, dying alone, without family or friends nearby, in February 1961 at age 43. Later Armstrong always sounded heartbroken when discussing what happened to Middleton.

Glaser did pull strings to get her body back to the United States and paid for a big funeral for her at Convent Avenue Baptist Church in New York City on February 21, 1961. However, Armstrong and the All-Stars couldn't attend because they were legally under contract and still on tour, though Glaser tried his best to get them out of their commitments to return to the United States in time for her funeral.

The flamboyant Middleton, the big mama of the jazz world, gave her life for the profession she loved but never got the respect she deserved in her lifetime. Recordings of the duo are available online. The song "That's My Desire" can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1925998187464137> and a 1959 St. Louis Blues performance can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fbI01C9Wqrw>.