In the 1960’s, America was rife with racism, prejudice, and racial barriers. African americans specifically were discriminated against. In turn this spawned race riots, the rise of the
black power movement, and peaceful civil rights protests. Within many civil rights movements there were leaders. Civil Rights leaders at the time were viewed as either famous or infamous. Some could even be considered celebrities. Such as Malcolm X the leader of the Black Panthers, or Martin Luther King Jr. who led many peaceful civil rights protests. Louis Armstrong was not a civil rights leader. However, he was a celebrity. This photograph represents the power of celebrity in breaking down racial barriers.

The title of this photograph is called “Louis Armstrong plays trumpet while Joey Adams, president of the American Guild of Variety Artists Youth Fund, presents him with an award at Carnegie Hall.” It was taken in 1966 by a photographer by the name of Orlando Fernandez. The title is rather self explanatory as it describes exactly what is happening in the photograph. The picture is a black and white medium shot and has a low angle with both only the upper torsos of Joey Adams and Louis Armstrong being shown. Joey Adams, who is to the left of Louis Armstrong, is holding an extremely large award for Armstrong that takes up most of his torso. Joey Adams is facing Louis Armstrong, while Armstrong is gazing directly at the camera. Both people in this photograph are dressed in formal attire.

The medium shot combined with the attire gives a feeling of professionalism from the picture. However, the picture doesn’t seem staged as evident by the stance of both Armstrong and Adams. Adams is looking directly at Louis Armstrong, but Armstrong is looking directly at the camera almost at the viewer. This non transactional reaction between Armstrong and Adams creates a barrier between them. This invisible barrier is strengthened by a vector made of the frame of the award and the bell of Armstrong’s trumpet. This creates a visible barrier. This
barrier shows a binary of segregation with a black Louis Armstrong on the right and a white Joey Adams on the left.

While this non transactional reaction between Armstrong and Adams shows a barrier, it also can be inferred that Louis Armstrong is the focus of the picture. Louis Armstrong’s gaze demands attention from the audience making him the focus. The award is also very specific to Armstrong to the point where even his nickname “Satchmo” is emblazoned onto the award. This implies further that Louis Armstrong is the focus of this picture, and that the award is of great importance.

The gaze of Adams and the award highlights the barrier. However, the award is supposed to be given to Louis Armstrong. This would destroy the created barrier and eliminate the racial binary between the two. To gain this award Louis Armstrong had to be skilled and had to be known to the point of being a celebrity. This shows the photograph illustrating the power of celebrity breaking racial barriers.

However, celebrity to be better understood needs to be defined. Neal Gabler, a journalist and professor of film at the State University of New York, Stony Brook’s, has written an essay called Our Celebrity Ourselves(Gabler Intro). Gabler in his essay shows how many different people have defined celebrity. Then Gabler gives his own impression on celebrity. Gabler cites Boorstin, Goldsmith and Sullivan, and Gamson(Gabler 1-2). However, in regards to the photograph, Gabler’s claim is the most relevant. Gabler’s view claims that celebrities are a narrative similar to television, books, or movies, but the medium is life(Gabler 3). This narrative is one of self discovery, and because life is unpredictable, the “story” of the celebrity is unpredictable(Gabler 3). Thus the narrative is enticing(Gabler 3).
This picture shows a glimpse of Louis Armstrong’s “narrative.” In 1966 when this picture was taken, civil rights was a controversial topic. Louis Armstrong to many people was a success story of a black man succeeding in what was considered at the time a white man’s world. Armstrong had countless hits, he had an acting career, and in the picture he is accepting a prestigious award in Carnegie Hall. The public liked Louis Armstrong, or at least they liked his music. Thus people cared what he did, had to say, or what happened to him. He had power over portions of the public without being a political leader. He had power by only being a celebrity.

Louis Armstrong, while a very famous black celebrity, was not the only black celebrity famous with whites in this time period. *Stars for Freedom*, written by associate professor of history at Virginia Commonwealth University Emilie Raymond, is a book specifically about African American celebrities risking their careers to be outspoken on civil rights, and the effect that had (Raymond Preface ix-x). Raymond talks more specifically about who she claims to be 6 celebrity trailblazers (Harry Belafonte, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Sammy Davis, Jr., Dick Gregory, and Sidney Poitier) who relentlessly pushed for racial equality (Raymond Preface ix).

Contrary to Louis Armstrong, these trailblazers radically and obviously pushed their political motive behind the camera as well as in front of it. However, this is an alternate approach to utilising one’s power as a celebrity. Many of those 6 trailblazers had connections to Black Power and civil rights groups (Raymond Preface xiv). Some even helped fund Martin Luther King Jr. (Raymond Preface xiv). Louis Armstrong being a celebrity had connections as well. Possessing these connections that normal people otherwise wouldn't have would be considered power. Using that power of having friends in high places is exercised in this photograph by Louis Armstrong. Armstrong knowing the white president of the American Guild
of Variety Artists Youth Fund and accepting an award from him is Armstrong using his power of
celebrity to make a subtle political maneuver that tries to break down racial barriers.

Because Louis Armstrong was characteristically loved by the white public by way of his
talent, he had to be subtle in regards to his political stances and maneuvers(Hersch 378-379).
Otherwise it would have affected his public image(Hersch 378). Armstrong was very apolitical
is some aspects, but was quite political in others. For example, his manager called him a
“nigger,” and Armstrong remembers being enraged saying “I could bash his fucking brains
out…. But, it is a different story. It’s a white man. So I don’t fuck with Johnny(Hersch 379).”
Charles Hersch’s piece “Poisoning Their Coffee: Louis Armstrong and Civil Rights” argues that
Louis Armstrong supported civil rights through his music (Hersch 373). Louis Armstrong didn’t
attack the status quo with his music, but rather he created bonds between the white audience and
the black performer(Hersch 380).

Armstrong in the photograph is performing for at the very least Joey Adams and the
photographer. Armstrong is not just posing for a picture either. His embouchure is set and his
middle finger is primed to push down the middle valve. This shows that the black celebrity
performer, Louis Armstrong,is creating a bond with the white audience, Joey Adams. Just by
being a well known celebrity and playing for a white audience, Armstrong broke down racial
barriers.

The breaking down of racial barriers and changing the social norm from prejudice to
equality was an important step in American history. What hasn’t changed still today is
celebrities pushing a certain social agenda or social change on the public such as breaking down
racial barriers. Celebrities still today exercise their power by participating in charity events,
endorsing politicians, or even running for political office. This photograph serves as a reminder of the power that celebrities have and how it can destroy the notions of racial barriers.
Works Cited


