

Nashville bends a little

Usually, the stars come to them,
but to do an LP with Satchmo,
the musicians happily hit the road

By MARY CAMPBELL

NEW YORK — (AP) — "This country-Western knocks me out." Louis Armstrong is talking, as he reaches for the lyrics for his next song on the new Avco-Embassy "Louis 'Country-and-Western' Armstrong" album.

It was August, at a recording session, in New York. Most country albums are recorded in Nashville and "Sweetened" — backup voices and a few soft instruments added — in New York.

THIS ONE WAS DONE the opposite. Armstrong's director had advised against his traveling so he stayed in New York where he lives, and six Nashville studio musicians came to him.

They weren't making as much money as usual. Some days in Nashville they work on three sessions a day, with different recording stars. In New York they were doing one a day, with Armstrong. But pianist Larry Butler said they were eager to do it. "It gave us a chance for a little relaxation, and to pick with Louie."

The session turned into a mutual admiration society, with Armstrong complimenting the musicians on the arrangements they devised on the spur of the moment. And they complimented him on his quickness. Not everybody, they said, mentioning no names, so quickly grasps the arrangements they work up in their personal, musical shorthand and knows how to fit his voice in.

WE ARRIVED AS Armstrong started on "Black Cloud." The album, in which Armstrong sings 12 songs, contains some well-known songs, some unfamiliar and a couple that are funny. Most of them have Armstrong's well-known singing fadeout.

Session leader, guitarist Billy Grammer, sings "Black Cloud" at Armstrong's side, to give him the tempo. Then everybody starts to play and Armstrong starts to sing.

Grammer: "Larry, you come out of your bridge and do your little turn around, so he can mark it down and get the timin'."

Butler: "It is just one of those old 1950s songs."

Grammer: "It needs something else. It has got to have it. Should we slow it down? I'm sorry, Louie, we're wasting your time."

Armstrong: "No, no, I've got all the time."

Grammer: "We're going to modulate. Oh, it is getting to sound like 1912. I'll sing it."

That version doesn't suit, either.

Grammer: "Anything you guys can think of, just do."

Drummer Willie Ackerman leaves his drum set, sits, crosses his legs and hits his drumsticks against one shoe.

GRAMMER: "I KNOW. Louie, you come in cold. Let's give him his pitch and the lead instrument play it with him.

"Try bass (Henry Strazelecki) and guitar (Jack Eubanks) with him. It might work."

It doesn't.

Butler: "We could do a 4-4 shuffle. It might stir up some excitement. We're locked in that 1950s. I think that would be better than what we're doing."

Grammer: "Anything you want."

Ackerman goes back to his drum set. "I was having fun. I just want you guys to know that."

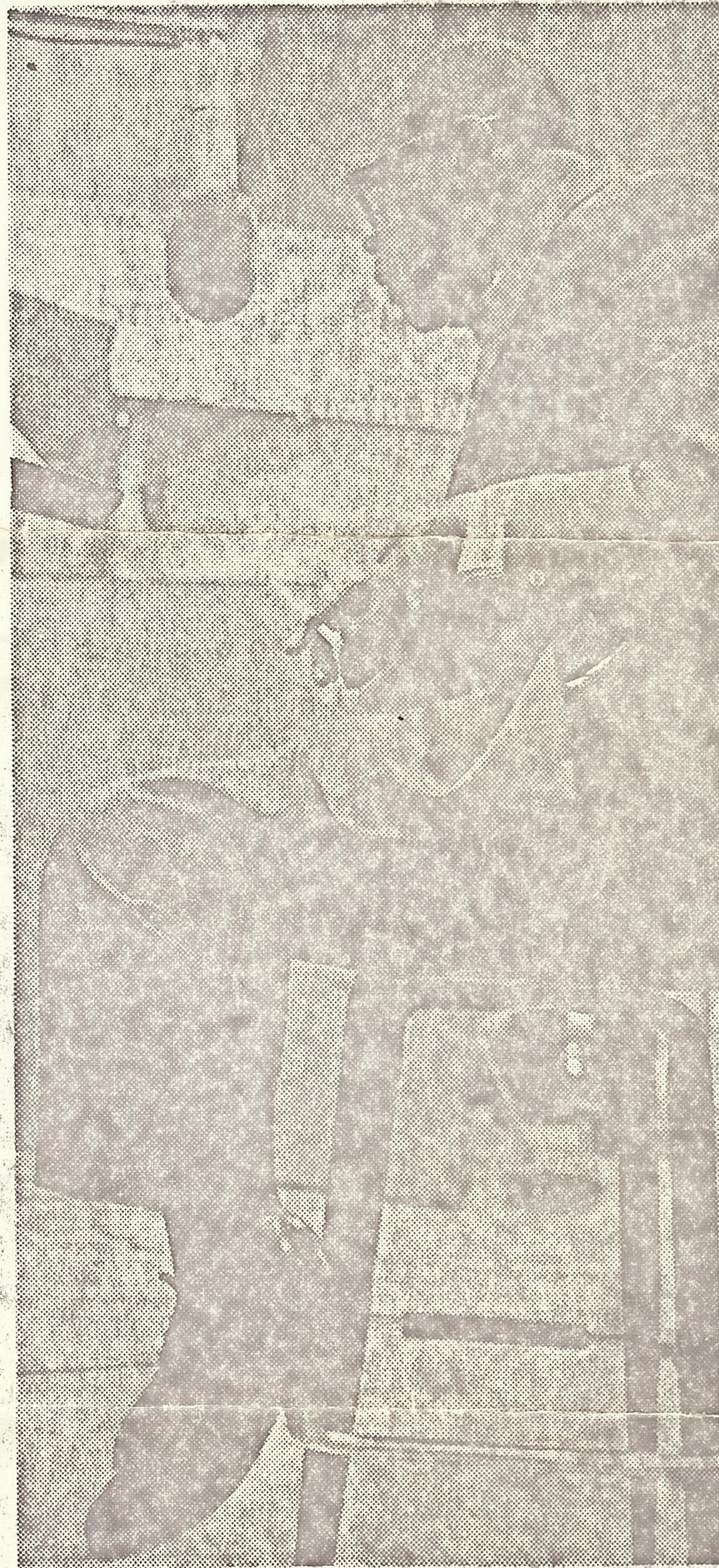
NOW, SUDDENLY, THEY have it. Grammer: "Hey, that's better. Are we turning it any place?"

Butler: "We're modulating it every time. That gives it a little kick. Bridge, verse, bridge, modulation. Verse, bridge, modulation. Verse, bridge, modulation."

They do it, and record it. Armstrong: "Once we've got it, we've got it." Armstrong smiles while he sings, though as far as he knows nobody is looking at him, and in fact, only one reporter is.

At the end, Grammer says, "As astute as Louie is, if you give him five minutes on the electric, he'll do it better than us."

Armstrong: "It's just my hustle, baby. That's all there is to it. Hustle."



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