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artsnews

Supreme Satchmo

Gwyn Jay Allen not only impersonates Louis Armstrong, he also tells his story, writes

CATHERINE LAMBERT

LOUIS Armstrong is in such a class of his own that it would seem impossible to impersonate the great master.

English singer Gwyn Jay Allen was modest enough to see the dilemma.

"I'm not trying to impersonate him but, rather to tell his story through modern eyes," he said.

"At the same time, audiences will see Louis Armstrong come to life on stage because I have studied him so closely."

As much as Allen has studied Armstrong, it is still essentially a natural connection.

"We're actually very similar in lots of ways and he reminds me so much of my grandfather," he said.

"I really don't know whether I chose Louis, or Louis chose me."

In fact it was one of Allen's friends who ensured that his interpretation of Louis Armstrong made him famous.

Allen had always had a similar vocal style to Armstrong, even when singing with stars such as Diana Ross or Maxi Priest.

So many people commented on the similarity that he recorded a demo tape of Armstrong's songs.

Without his knowledge, a friend sent the tape to an English talent show, *Stars in Their Eyes*, and Allen went on to reach the finals.

Then he became serious about a connection that had begun as a child listening to his



Oooh, yea: Jazz artist Gwyn Jay Allen blows his trumpet for Satchmo. Picture: TIM CARRAFA

father play Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, Frank Sinatra and, of course, Armstrong.

"I started collecting all of his albums and studied his movements and phrasing," he said.

"Now I've done the show in 17 different countries. It's still not an easy act, but he's such a big, lovable character to play that it's an honour, really."

"As a musician and from a human point of view he was the biggest jazz man ever."

Blessed with a naturally husky voice, Allen, 45, nurses his voice off stage with tea and honey. To sing like Satchmo all night takes some practice.

"Luckily, I've found a place in my voice where Louis sits well, but I could still easily damage it, so it needs a lot of attention," he said.

Allen will perform in Melbourne with local musicians in the Alligator City Jazz Band.

The repertoire covers the scope of Armstrong's career from his Hot Fives and Hot Sevens in the 1920s through to the 1950s.

Naturally, his film career is covered, with *Hello Dolly* among the best known Satchmo moments.

"There were so many great

jazz musicians, but the reason why Louis Armstrong is different is that he was one of the first guys to take one of the great American products to the rest of the world, hence he was dubbed Ambassador Satch," he said.

"In musical terms, apart from making jazz popular, he pioneered the solo instrumental.

"On another level, he just appealed to everyone whether little kids or old people. His character is just as fascinating as his music."

Satchmo - *I Love Louis* is at The Palms at Crown from September 5-16. Bookings: 132 849.