

Biographies

Life and times of the great ones

Louis Armstrong

From *Armstrong 101*, an educational publication produced by Jazz at Lincoln Center: www.jazzatlincolncenter.org.

Audio Sample

Chimes Blues
Recorded April 6, 1923
(Courtesy Columbia/Legacy)

Audio Sample

Cake Walkin' Babies From Home
Recorded January 8, 1925
(Courtesy Columbia/Legacy)

Louis Armstrong was born on August 4, 1901, in New Orleans, Louisiana, the birthplace of jazz. He is considered the most important improviser in jazz, and he taught the world to swing. Armstrong, fondly known as "Satchmo" (which is short for "Satchelmouth" referring to the size of his mouth) or "Pops," had a sense of humor, natural and unassuming manner, and positive disposition that made everyone around him feel good. With his infectious, wide grin and instantly recognizable gravelly voice, he won the hearts of people everywhere. He had an exciting and innovative style of playing that musicians imitate to this day. Throughout his career, Armstrong spread the language of jazz around the world, serving as an international ambassador of swing. His profound impact on the music of the 20th century continues into the 21st century.

Audio Feature

NPR's Louis Armstrong Centennial Radio Project: The Man and His Music, Part 1
Jazz critic Stanley Crouch presents the first part of an overview of Satchmo's life and music.
(Courtesy NPRJazz.org)

Audio Feature

NPR's Louis Armstrong Centennial Radio Project: The Man and His Music, Part 2
Jazz critic Stanley Crouch presents the second part of an overview of Satchmo's life and music.
(Courtesy NPRJazz.org)

Armstrong grew up in a poor family in a rough section of New Orleans. He started working at a very young age to support his family, singing on street corners for pennies, working on a junk wagon, cleaning graves for tips, and selling coal. His travels around the city introduced him to all kinds of music, from the blues played in the Storyville honky tonks to the brass bands

accompanying the New Orleans parades and funerals. The music that surrounded him was a great source of inspiration. A born musician, Armstrong had already demonstrated his singing talents on the streets of the city and eventually taught himself to play the cornet. He received his first formal music instruction in the Colored Waif's Home for Boys, where he was allegedly confined for a year and a half as punishment for firing blanks into the air on New Year's Eve.


Image courtesy of Frank Driggs Collection

As the young Armstrong began to perform with pick-up bands in small clubs and play funerals and parades around town, he captured the attention and respect of some of the older established musicians of New Orleans. Joe "King" Oliver, a member of Kid Ory's band and one of the finest trumpet players around, became Armstrong's mentor. When Oliver moved to Chicago, Armstrong took his place in Kid Ory's band, a leading group in New Orleans at the time. A year later, he was hired to work on riverboats that traveled the Mississippi. This experience enabled him to play with many prominent jazz musicians and to further develop his skills, learning to read music and undertaking the responsibilities of a professional gig.

Audio Feature

Wynton Marsalis, musician
Reflections on Louis Armstrong
(Audio Excerpt from JAZZ A Film by Ken Burns)

In 1922, Oliver invited Armstrong to Chicago to play second cornet in his Creole Jazz Band. As a member of Oliver's band, Armstrong began his lifetime of touring and recording. In 1924, he moved on to New York City to play with the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra at the Roseland Ballroom. Armstrong continued his touring and recording activities with Henderson's group and also made recordings with Sidney Bechet, Ma Rainey, and Bessie Smith. In 1925, Armstrong returned to Chicago and made his first recordings as a band leader with his Hot Five (and later his Hot Seven). From 1925 to 1928 he continued a rigorous schedule of performing and recording, which included *Heebie Jeebies*, the tune that introduced scat singing to a wide audience and *West End Blues*, one of the most famous recordings in early jazz. During this period, his playing steadily improved, and his traveling and recording activities introduced his music to more and more people.

Audio Sample

Potato Head Blues
Recorded May 10, 1927
(Courtesy Columbia/Legacy)

In 1929, Armstrong returned to New York City and made his first Broadway appearance. His 1929 recording of *Ain't Misbehavin'* introduced the use of a pop song as material for jazz interpretation, helping set the stage for the popular acceptance of jazz that would follow. During the next year, he performed in several U.S. states, including California, where he made his first film and radio appearances. In 1931, he first recorded *When It's Sleepytime Down South*, the tune that became his theme song. In 1932, he toured England for three months, and during the next few years, continued his extensive domestic and international tours, including a lengthy stay in Paris.

Audio Sample

West End Blues
Recorded June 28, 1928
(Courtesy Columbia/Legacy)

The NPR 100: "West End Blues"
John Burnett travels to the Crescent City of New Orleans, in search of the jazz masterpiece *West End Blues*. Joe "King" Oliver wrote the tune, but it was Louis Armstrong's 1928 recording that put it in the jazz pantheon.
(Courtesy NPRJazz.org)

When Armstrong returned to the U.S. in 1935, Joe Glaser became his manager. Not only did Glaser free Armstrong from the managerial battles and legal difficulties of the past few years, he remained his manager for the duration of his career and helped transform Armstrong into an international star. Under Glaser's management, Armstrong performed in films, on the radio, and in the best theaters, dance halls, and nightclubs. He worked with big bands, playing music of an increasingly commercial nature as well as small groups that showcased his singing of popular songs.

Star Dust
Recorded November 4, 1931
(Courtesy Columbia/Legacy)


Image courtesy of Louis Armstrong House & Archives

In 1942, Armstrong married Lucille Wilson, a dancer at the Cotton Club where his band had a running engagement. The following year, they purchased a home in Corona, Queens, where they lived for the rest of their lives. In 1947, Armstrong formed a small ensemble called the All-Stars, a group of extraordinary players whose success revitalized mainstream jazz. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, he continued to appear in popular films and made numerous international tours, earning him the title "Ambassador Satch." During a trip to West Africa, Armstrong was greeted by more than one hundred thousand people. In the early 1960's, he continued to record, including two albums with Duke Ellington and the hit *Hello Dolly*, which reached number one on the Billboard charts. Armstrong performed regularly until recurring health problems gradually curtailed his trumpet playing and singing. Even in the last year of his life, he traveled to London twice, appeared on more than a dozen television shows, and performed at the Newport Jazz Festival to celebrate his 70th birthday. Up until a few days before his death, on July 6, 1971, he was setting up band rehearsals in preparation to perform for his beloved public.

Phoebe Jacobs, publicist
Her view of Armstrong as a "special messenger"
(Audio Excerpt from JAZZ A Film by Ken Burns)

NPR's Louis Armstrong Centennial Radio Project: Satchmo Speaks, Part 1
Armstrong 'off the record,' speaking about his playing and practice habits and his longtime manager Joe Glazer.
(Courtesy NPRJazz.org)

NPR's Louis Armstrong Centennial Radio Project: Satchmo Speaks, Part 2
Armstrong 'off the record,' speaking about two records he made early in his career: *Weather Bird*, featuring Earl "Fatha" Hines, and *Basin Street Blues*.
(Courtesy NPRJazz.org)

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