

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

# Louis Armstrong

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*Louis Armstrong (1901-1971) was an African American trumpeter, composer, singer, and actor. Armstrong's career spanned five decades and he continues to be remembered today. In this informational text, Jessica McBirney discusses Armstrong's life and career as a jazz musician. As you read, takes notes on how Armstrong's influence changed mainstream jazz.*

[1] Louis Armstrong is one of the world's most famous jazz musicians. The musical style of jazz became popular around the world largely due to his talent as a cornet<sup>1</sup> and trumpet player, his unique "scatting"<sup>2</sup> singing style, and his strong and charming personality. He was also an important African American public figure during the decades of racial tension<sup>3</sup> leading up to the Civil Rights Movement.



*"Louis Armstrong, Aquarium, New York, N.Y., ca. July 1946 2" by Ky is licensed under CC BY 2.0.*

## Music in Hardship

Armstrong was born on August 4, 1901 in New Orleans, Louisiana. His father left the family shortly after he was born, and his mother often left him in the care of his grandmother while she went to work. Armstrong himself had to leave school in 5th grade to work and earn money for the family. The neighborhood he lived in was so poverty-stricken<sup>4</sup> and run-down people called it "the battlefield."

Armstrong first fell in love with music in 1913. He developed his skills at the New Orleans Colored Waif's Home for Boys,<sup>5</sup> a facility he was sent a number of times, most notably for firing an empty round from his stepfather's pistol into the air at a New Year's Eve party. During his stay, he took cornet lessons and discovered his love for music. After he was released from the home he continued to play, sometimes in public, and gained recognition around New Orleans. Soon he was discovered by the best cornet player in the city, Joe "King" Oliver, who mentored him and let him play in some of his shows.

## A Rising Star

A few years later Armstrong took over Oliver's spot in New Orleans' most popular band, Kid Ory's band. In 1919 he took a summer job playing the cornet on a riverboat. This gig<sup>6</sup> taught him how to read music and introduced him to the style of jazz, which he connected with deeply.

1. a brass instrument similar to a trumpet but shorter and wider
2. to sing using the voice in imitation of an instrument
3. a state in which people or groups disagree with and feel anger towards each other
4. extremely poor
5. a reform school

- [5] In 1922 Armstrong moved to Chicago with Oliver to play in the Creole Jazz Band. Armstrong enjoyed certain luxuries, living in his own apartment for the first time and having his own private bath. Armstrong and Oliver became well known for playing duets, so they decided to produce some jazz records together. Over the next few years Armstrong also produced some records on his own as well as with some friends from New Orleans. Later he cut ties with Oliver and joined Fletcher Henderson's Orchestra in New York City. Henderson had a very different style and introduced him to swing music.<sup>7</sup> Henderson's Orchestra was one of the first "big bands," and they frequently performed for all-white audiences, which was unusual for African American musicians at the time.

## Armstrong Takes the Lead

Armstrong didn't play in New York for very long before moving back to Chicago and starting his own band, Louis Armstrong and the Hot Five. The artists who played with him enjoyed his fun personality and relaxed conducting style; he tried to feature each musician's special talents. From 1925 to 1928 they produced over 60 records, some of the most important jazz records in musical history. During that time Armstrong switched from playing cornet to playing the trumpet. He also partnered with pianist Earl "Fatha" Hines to record duets. One of their pieces, "West End Blues," is considered to be one of the most artful pieces of jazz, and it brought greater respect to the musical style and introduced it to a wider audience.

He faced several ups and downs in his career over the next few decades, but ultimately still remained popular and continued creating new music. He played briefly on Broadway<sup>8</sup> in the 1930s. But, in the same decade he had to take two years off from playing and recording because his lips hurt from playing the trumpet so frequently over the years. However, he did get to restart his career after taking a rest. In the 1940s he recognized that swing music's days were numbered, so he formed a smaller band that he would play with for the rest of his career. After that, his popularity with international audiences earned him the nickname Ambassador Satch.

## Legacy

Armstrong suffered a heart attack in 1959, but that did not stop him; he kept a rigorous<sup>9</sup> touring schedule throughout his life and into the 1960s. In 1967 he produced one of his most well-known songs, "What a Wonderful World." In 1968 he first began having health problems, although he continued to perform sometimes. In 1971 Armstrong passed away from a heart attack he suffered while sleeping. The following year he was posthumously<sup>10</sup> awarded the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award for having made creative contributions of outstanding significance<sup>11</sup> to the field of recording music. It is just one of the many honors and awards he received.

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6. a job
  7. a kind of jazz characterized by a lively rhythm good for dancing
  8. a famous theater district in New York City
  9. extremely thorough, exhaustive
  10. occurring or awarded after a person's death
  11. **Significance (noun):** the quality of being worthy of attention

Armstrong was a significant African American celebrity. He was the first African American jazz musician to write an autobiography, the first to get top billing in a Hollywood movie, and the first to host a national radio show. His personality won over fans of all races, nationalities, and backgrounds. For many years he tried to keep his political and social opinions about the Civil Rights Movement private, but after he saw the consequences of school segregation<sup>12</sup> on TV, he made a public statement against segregation.

- [10] He was also known for his unique musical style. He was very good at musical improvisation, not only on his trumpet but also in singing. "Scatting" is a form of improvisational singing he popularized, in which the singer does not sing pre-written, real words, but instead sings whatever sounds and notes they feel fit with the music in the moment. Armstrong made scat singing an important part of jazz and blues music. He revolutionized jazz from a folksy group performance to an individual performance. He influenced and set the bar for dozens of famous musicians after him, including Billie Holiday and Frank Sinatra. A star was unveiled on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 1960, and he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1990.

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12. **Segregation** (*noun*): the enforced separation of different racial groups in a country or community

## Text-Dependent Questions

**Directions:** For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best identifies the main idea about Armstrong in the text? [RI.2]
  - A. He succeeded internationally as a jazz musician and introduced new styles of music.
  - B. He didn't realize his full potential until he was an adult due to hardships as a child.
  - C. He is well-remembered musician but his style is no longer practiced today.
  - D. He used his popularity to address injustices during the Civil Rights movement.
  
2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
  - A. "Armstrong himself had to leave school in 5th grade to work and earn money for the family. The neighborhood he lived in was so poverty-stricken and run-down people called it 'the battlefield.'" (Paragraph 2)
  - B. "One of their pieces, "West End Blues," is considered to be one of the most artful pieces of jazz, and it brought greater respect to the musical style and introduced it to a wider audience." (Paragraph 6)
  - C. "In the 1940s he recognized that swing music's days were numbered, so he formed a smaller band that he would play with for the rest of his career." (Paragraph 7)
  - D. "but after he saw the consequences of school segregation on TV, he made a public statement condemning segregation." (Paragraph 9)
  
3. How does the characterization of Armstrong's neighborhood in paragraph 2 contribute to author's description of his life? [RI.5]
  - A. It shows that he overcame difficulties at a young age.
  - B. It suggests that he got into fights when he was younger.
  - C. It proves that he didn't feel at home in his neighborhood.
  - D. It provides reasoning for why he was motivated to leave his neighborhood.
  
4. Which of the following best describes the progress of Armstrong's career? [RI.3]
  - A. Armstrong was less successful as styles other than jazz began became popular.
  - B. Armstrong's career never fully recovered from his mouth injury that forced to take a break from music.
  - C. Armstrong's contributions to music were not fully accepted or respected until after his death.
  - D. Armstrong produced successful music from the beginning of his career until the end, despite challenges along the way.

5. How does the author support her claim that Armstrong changed jazz? [RI.8]

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## Discussion Questions

**Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.**

1. Armstrong did not share his opinions on the Civil Rights Movement for a long time, but eventually he did share them. What do you think about celebrities who express their opinions? Do you think that they should share their ideas with their fans, or keep them to themselves? Why?
2. In the context of the text, how do people succeed? What made Armstrong a successful trumpet player? What personal traits did he possess that contributed to this?
3. In the context of the text, what makes America unique? How have Americans contributed to the development of music and different musical genres? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or music in your answer.