



Louis Armstrong In The Beginning

Louis Daniel Armstrong was born in the Storyville District of New Orleans, Louisiana, on August 4, 1901 but he always celebrated his birth as July 4, 1900 because that is what he was told and believed. His real date of birth was not known until after his death July 6, 1971. His father Willie, a laborer, left the family soon after he was born, his mother, a domestic servant and part time prostitute called Mayanne, left Louis and his sister Beatrice, also called 'Mama Lucy', in the care of his grandma much of the time, however he always believed the love of his family helped him make it through those rough times.

In his autobiography, 'Louie' describes his neighborhood, "It was called the Battlefield because the toughest characters in town used to live there, and would shoot and fight much. In that one block between Gravier and Perido Streets more people were crowded than you ever saw in your life." He dressed in rags and usually shopped in garbage cans. He sang with other boys on the streets for tips and begin to develop his musical talents. At this time in his life, it was not 'A WONDERFUL WORLD' for young Louis.

To celebrate the New Year in 1913 Louis discharged a borrowed pistol into the air and was arrested. A very fortunate occurrence for Jazz and probably for him, he was admitted to the city's Colored Waif's Home for Boys, where he came under the very capable tutorship of Peter Davis, the music instructor at the home. Louis had some background in harmony singing, as a natural ability, and the experience of singing on the streets, but under Mr. Davis he began to study music. First vocals, then percussion, then he became the home bugler, and finally cornet. The music was very structured, mostly marches and other ensemble music.

Louis Armstrong: The Early Years

Upon being released from the waif's home at age fourteen, Louis worked selling papers, unloading boats, and selling coal from a horse and cart. He also listened to bands at clubs like the Come Clean Dance Hall, Funky Butt Hall, and Mahogany Hall, in Storyville. Joe "King" Oliver with the Kid Ory Band was his favorite and he quickly became young Louis's mentor. By 1917 Louis was playing in various groups at dive bars in New Orleans' Storyville section. In 1919 he joined Fate Marable's band in St. Louis, and stayed with him until 1921. Marable headed a band that worked on the Streckfus Mississippi River Boat Lines. When Louis returned to New Orleans he played in Zutty Singleton's Trio, Papa Celestin's Tuxedo Orchestra, The Silver Leaf Band, and from time to time with Kid Ory's band. He also played in parades with the Allen Brass Band. When King Oliver left New Orleans in 1919 to go to Chicago, Louis took his place in Kid Ory's band, at the suggestion of Oliver.

In 1922 Louis received a telegram from Joe Oliver, asking him to join his Creole Jazz Band at Lincoln Gardens in Chicago. At one point Nat Gonella commented, "I can't imagine Louis playing second trumpet to anyone". However, Louis learned much working with Oliver. The experience of playing second cornet helped to develop his ear and harmonies, and, the importance of playing straight lead, as Oliver did, were lessons that he would use for the remainder of his life. While playing in Oliver's Creole Jazz Band, Louis met Lillian Hardin the piano player for the band, and they were married in February of 1924. By the end of 1924 she pressured Louis to leave the Oliver band. He moved to New York to play in Fletcher Henderson's Orchestra for 13 months. While in New York he worked many recording sessions with numerous Blues singers including Bessie Smith on her 1925 classic recording of "St. Louis Blues".

In 1925 Armstrong moved back to Chicago and joined his wife's band at the Dreamland. He recorded his first Hot Five records that same year. This was the first time Louis had made records under his own name. The records made by Louis Armstrong's Hot Five and Hot Seven are considered to be absolute jazz classics and the peak of his creative powers. The band never played live, but continued recording until 1928.

Louis Armstrong: The Bandleader

In 1925 Louis began Okeh Record's dates with his Hot Five band featuring Johnny Dodds on clarinet, Kid Ory on trombone, Johnny St. Cyr on banjo, and his wife Lil on piano. The record company left him pretty much on his own to choose musicians and songs for these recordings, a wise decision since these are considered to be among the finest Jazz classics ever recorded even to this day. On November 12, 1925 Louis Armstrong made his first records that bore his name as bandleader. The songs on the first Okeh 78 rpm record were "My Heart", and "Yes, I'm in the Barrel". Masterpieces such as "Cornet Chop Suey", "Potato Head Blues", and "West End Blues", recorded later, turned jazz into a soloist's art form.

Louis Armstrong, with his Hot Five and Hot Seven, recorded between November, 1925 and December, 1928 changing the landscape of Jazz forever, taking it from well organized ensemble playing to a world of 'Hot solos'. During this three year period the instrumentalists changed somewhat for different sessions, although all the sessions had some of the same people as those first recordings. The most interesting change to note is the replacement of Lil by Earl 'Fatha' Hines. In 1928 Okeh switched from an acoustic means of recording music to an electrical based system. The acoustic recording process couldn't cope with the vibration created by drums or bass, thus recording engineers preferred not to have these instruments in a session or placed them so far from the recording horn, that they could rarely be heard. The Louis Armstrong with his Hot Seven band added Pete Briggs on Tuba, and Baby Dodds on drums.

The Okeh recordings not only changed Jazz into a 'Hot solo' art, but also revealed Louis as a pioneering vocalist. In the February 26, 1926 session in Chicago while recording 'Heebie Jeebies', according to Louis himself, the sheet music fell off the stand and rather than stop the recording he

continued with sounds similar to an instrumental break as he was used to doing occasionally. This was the first recorded example of what became known as 'scat singing', a Jazz vocal form used yet today (most notably by Ella Fitzgerald).

In 1928 Louis returned to New York, and in 1929 was hired to play in the pit band of the popular all black musical review 'Hot Chocolates' on Broadway which featured the music of Fats Waller and lyrics of Andy Razaf. The show was a great success and 'Louie' stole the show with his rendition of 'Ain't Misbehavin' which he recorded July 19, 1929, and it became his biggest selling record to date.

Louis Armstrong: The 'Big Band Era'

Louis moved to Los Angeles in July of 1930 where he fronted a band called Louis Armstrong and his Sebastian New Cotton Club Orchestra. The band also featured a young Lionel Hampton on drums and vibes. In 1931 he went back to Chicago and assembled his own band for touring purposes, and in 1932 returned to California, before leaving for England where he was given the name 'Satchmo' (short for satchel mouth, a knick name of his since the 'King' Oliver days). This name is synonymous with Louis Armstrong, and his big wide grin, to this day. During the early 1930's Louis began to use the trumpet rather than a cornet. For the next three years he toured constantly criss-crossing the country dozens of times and returned to Europe playing in England, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Holland.

In 1935 he returned to the States and hired Joe Glaser to be his manager. Glaser remained Armstrong's manager until his death in 1969. Glaser hired the Luis Russell Orchestra as Louis' backup band. This was like being at home for Louis, because the band was made up of predominately New Orleans musicians, many who, like 'Satchmo', had played with King Oliver. The band was renamed Louis Armstrong and his Orchestra and was one of the most popular bands of the Swing era. For the next five years Louis toured and recorded with this group; the records are classics. In 1940, Glaser fired the band and Louis put together another group containing younger musicians such as John Brown (alto), Dexter Gordon (tenor), Arvell Shaw (bass), and Velma Middleton sharing the vocals with him. It lasted until the summer of 1947, but swing bands were on a downward slide and he was tired of leading a large group.

Louis fronted large bands, usually 15 or more musicians, during most of the 1930s through the late 40's and recorded with just about every musician around. His reputation as a friendly warm personality followed him throughout his life and so did the tradition of jazz music. He appeared in a Hollywood movie, "Pennies From Heaven" in 1936. Louis Armstrong was a star. He began recording more often and began a number of year-long touring schedules that took him and jazz around the world. Louis was a musician first and foremost, and delighted in the fact that his career took a turn in the 1940s toward that end.

Louis Armstrong, The Golden Years

As the 1940's drew to a close so did the popularity of the 'Big Band'. It became increasingly difficult and expensive to keep a large group together and on the road. Louis later in life commented, "Too many make bad friends". In 1947 promoter Ernie Anderson presented him with a small band at New York's Town Hall. The response this group achieved signaled the end of his big-band career. For the remaining years of his life, Louis led his All Stars, a six-piece band which featured, to begin with, Jack Teagarden, a long time friend on trombone, Earl 'Fatha' Hines, from the Hot 5 band on piano, Arvell Shaw on bass, and Velma Middleton, continuing to share the vocals with him. The personnel of the All Stars Band changed occasionally but always had some of the finest instrumentalists of the time including, Barney Bigard and Ed Hall (clarinet), 'Big' Sid Catlett, who's solo on "Steak Face" on the 'At Symphony Hall' album is one of the great drum events in jazz history (drums), and, a strong right arm, Trummy Young (trombone). Recordings made with the All Stars, such as Louis Armstrong Plays W. C. Handy, Satch Plays Fats, Louis Armstrong And The All Stars At Symphony Hall, and Louis Armstrong And the All Stars at the Crescendo, are Jazz classics today.

During the 1950's Louis found himself paired with many other singers, most notably Bing Crosby, Louis Jordan, and Gary Crosby. These sessions produced some pleasing recordings though not his best work. In 1956 & 57 he teamed up once again with Ella Fitzgerald, this time with the Oscar Peterson Trio providing the backing. This resulted in the cleanest sound of any of Louis' records. While working with Peterson in 1957, Louis took the opportunity to lay down other tracks that are among his best. The ability to record an obscure song and catapult it to popularity is a true sign of musical genius. Until Louis recorded the song "Mack The Knife" from the German opera called "The Three Penny Opera", by Kurt Weill (music) and Bertold Brecht (libretto), in 1955, the song and the opera were unknown even to opera fans. Louis' recording made the opera known even to non-opera fans around the world. Lotte Lenya, the original performer of the song telephoned Louis to thank him for his wonderful rendition. Other unforgettable classics such as "A Kiss to Build a Dream On", "When it's Sleepy Time Down South", "All of Me", "On the Sunny Side of the Street", "(What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue", and "Do You Know What it Means to Miss New Orleans" were also recorded in the 1950's.

In 1961 'Satchmo' found himself paired for a session with the great Duke Ellington to record some of Duke's songs. Another classic Jazz album on the Roulette label was the result. While spending many hours in the studio in the 1950's and 60's Louis also maintained a crippling world wide touring schedule with the 'All Stars'. In 1963, he recorded some songs in New York before leaving for an overseas tour. Months later in London the band received many requests to play "Dolly". Louis asked his manager what these people were talking about. It was at that time, he learned, the song "Hello Dolly" (a song he didn't even remember recording in New York) was such a huge international hit that it knocked the Beatles off the top of the charts in the States. 'Satchmo's' popularity soared to its all-time peak. He was suddenly in demand for every television venue available. Louis was a remarkable singer, his throaty voice, lazy-sounding delivery, perfect timing and immaculate presentation, were even more apparent in the later years when he could no longer blow his famous horn. His style of delivery added texture, warmth, and understanding often far exceeding anything that had been put there by the songs' writers. A fine example of this is his last big hit, "What a Wonderful World" which in 1968 rose to the number one spot in the UK, although, it didn't really leave its mark until its inclusion in a popular film much later here in the United States.

The song "What a Wonderful World" is truly the perfect song for Louis 'Satchmo' Armstrong to leave us with. All lovers of the music called Jazz, owe much to this man, not only as a pioneer of Jazz trumpet and vocals, but also as a very genuine human being. Anytime he appeared on film, played on stage, or performed on record, Louis Armstrong helped to make this 'A Wonderful World' for us all. He truly remains the 'King of Jazz'.

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