

# art connections

summer 2005

## *a teacher resource guide*

### *the life of Louis Armstrong*

This teacher resource guide provides information and cross-curricular, multi-disciplinary activities for the study of jazz history and jazz musician Louis Armstrong.

**THEME:** The study of American Jazz is the study of American history. Jazz is considered to be the only “true” form of American music, developed during the twentieth century and brought to prominence primarily by the African-American community. When studying jazz, one can also explore: the migration of the African-American from the southern United States; the Harlem Renaissance; the Civil War; and, the political landscape of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s.

*The story of Louis Armstrong, who was born in 1901, is the story of the struggle of the African-American, trying to live and work successfully in a country segregated by racial identity.*

**BACKGROUND:** Louis Armstrong was born on August 4, 1901 in New Orleans, Louisiana. His father abandoned Louis and his mother Mayann just days after Louis’ birth. Louis and his mother lived in a very poor section of New Orleans, called *Jane’s Alley*. His mother had to work to support herself and her son, so Louis spent most of his first two years living with his grandmother. At age two, Louis’ parents briefly reconciled, and Louis’ sister Beatrice was born, but his parents did not stay together, and by age five, Louis began working odd jobs to care for his family.

At age six, Louis began attending the Fisk School for Boys and working for a family called Karnoffsky, selling buckets of coal for a nickel. To draw attention to the coal cart, Louis would blow on a tin horn, attracting so much attention that the Karnoffsky’s helped Louis purchase his first **b-flat cornet** from a pawn shop. When Louis would talk about his years working for the Karnoffsky’s, he would speak of them fondly, stating that they treated him as a member of their family, sharing their meals and their home. At age 11, Louis quit school and began working full-time to better support his family.

On New Year’s Eve, 1912, Louis fired a gun into the air in celebration and was arrested. He was sent to the *Colored Waif’s Home*, a reform school located on the outskirts of New Orleans. Luckily, the home had a music program led by Professor Peter Davis. Davis soon realized Louis’ musical abilities and made him part of the school’s brass band. Louis said of this experience, “My whole success goes back to the time I was arrested as a wayward boy of twelve. Because then I had to quit running around and begin to learn something. Most of all I began to learn music.”

Released from the Waif’s Home in June 1914, Louis began playing the cornet around New Orleans, and took a day job driving a coal cart for 15 cents a load. He would play music all night and deliver coal by day. He began meeting and playing with important, well-known musicians, including trombonist Kid Ory and cornet player/band leader Joe Oliver, making a name for himself in the New Orleans music scene. In 1918, at age 17, Louis fell in love and married his first wife, Daisy, and had accomplished as much as a jazz musician could in New Orleans.

In the spring of 1919, Fate Marable, a well-known band leader, invited Louis to join his riverboat orchestra. This group of musicians were “reading musicians” - they knew how to read music - a skill that Louis had not yet achieved. During the time Louis played with Marable’s orchestra, he learned to read music and performed on a riverboat that traveled from St. Louis, Missouri north to St. Paul, Minnesota, and back.

*“During Louis’s stint with the orchestra, Fate Marable gradually changed the face of jazz, at least outside New Orleans. Hardly anyone was calling the music jazz yet, not even the musicians who played it. They called it New Orleans-style music, or even ragtime, because of its kinship to the piano rags of Scott Joplin.”*

**{LISTEN TO A SCOTT JOPLIN RECORDING}**



*A young Louis Armstrong*

At some point before or during his time with Fate Marable, Louis began stating that his birthday was July 4, 1900. There has been a lot of speculation as to why Louis would do this; however, it is widely believed that Louis wanted to be another year older in order to access the places where music was being played.

Louis worked on the riverboat until he was 20 years old, and returned to New Orleans in August 1922. By this time, Louis’ marriage to Daisy was failing, and he had outgrown the New Orleans music scene. It was then that Louis received a telegram from his mentor and friend Joe Oliver, who asked him to come to Chicago and join his Creole Jazz Band, which played regularly at the Lincoln Gardens. Louis was on the next train, making \$52.00 a week. He would also meet Lil Hardin, the band’s pianist, who would become his second wife.

As Louis became more confident playing with “King” Oliver and the Creole Jazz Band, Oliver began giving Louis more opportunities to play and perform as a soloist. In December 1923, Louis’ divorce from Daisy became final, and he married Lil Hardin the following February. Hardin believed in her new husband’s talent and recognized that he needed opportunities to play that would increase his skill and popularity. On her advice, Louis left the Creole Jazz Band and Joe Oliver, and traveled to **Harlem, NY** to join the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra, earning \$55.00 per week.

*“Louis’s arrival in New York at the end of October 1924 coincided with the exact moment the **Harlem Renaissance** burst into the national consciousness, and Harlem itself started jumping. His timing was impeccable. Once again he was part of a wave of **immigration**, not the broad-based movement of blacks from the south to Chicago, but a far more specialized influx of talent into Harlem. Within a few years - months actually - Harlem became the newest center of black culture.”*



*The Hot Five*

At the end of 1925, Louis returned to Chicago to join his wife and take a job she had arranged at the Dreamland Cabaret. For the first time, Louis was making \$75.00 a week, more than he had ever dreamed, as was billed, “The World’s Greatest Trumpet Player.” By now, Louis had captured the attention of the music world at large, and although **discrimination** remained, Louis was becoming equally popular to both white and black audiences. In November 1925, Louis made his first recording with the **Hot Five**: Kid Ory, the trombone player from Louis’ childhood; Johnny Dodds, the clarinetist from the Creole Jazz Band; New Orleans musician Johnny St. Cyr on banjo; Lil Hardin on piano; and Louis Armstrong on cornet and vocals. This recording session was the first of many between 1925 and 1929, and with the Hot Five (and sometimes the Hot Seven), Armstrong created the most prolific early recordings of jazz.

**{LISTEN TO DISC ONE, TRACKS 1, 2, AND 3 OF LOUIS ARMSTRONG, THE COMPLETE HOT FIVE AND HOT SEVEN RECORDINGS}**

On some of these early recordings, Louis would sing along with the melody, singing what sounded like nonsense syllables instead of words. This kind of singing is called **scat**, and although it had been a form of vocal performance for a long time in New Orleans, this was the first time scat was being heard across the U.S. Louis’ scat singing immediately became popular, and influenced many great future vocalists like Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald.

**{LISTEN TO DISC ONE, TRACK 6, “HEEBIE JEEBIES,” AND DISC 2, TRACK 8, “HOTTER THAN THAT,” OF LOUIS ARMSTRONG, THE COMPLETE HOT FIVE AND HOT SEVEN RECORDINGS}**

*“Even though Louis didn’t invent scat singing, he did have the brilliant notion of merging it with jazz, and this little innovation revolutionized jazz singing, for it freed singers who were quick to take up the gimmick, to develop distinctive nonsense lyrics and rhythmic patterns, and to improvise with the instruments. All at once, the vocalist was liberated from the music to think and perform creatively, which was, of course, the essence of jazz.”*

By the spring of 1926, Louis and Lil’s marriage had fallen on hard times, and Louis left the Dreamland Cabaret to work with Carroll Dickerson’s Orchestra at Chicago’s Sunset Cafe. Eventually Dickerson was fired and the name of the band changed to Louis Armstrong and His Stompers. Throughout 1926 and 1927, Louis continued to record with the Hot Fives and Hot Sevens, with the last recording of the original Hot Five taking place in December 1927. In June 1928, Louis returned to the studio to record “West End Blues.” This recording is said, “...to represent the peak of Louis’s art,” and of the Hot Five and Seven recordings it has been said, “No one had ever made music like these recordings, and no one, not even Louis, would ever manage to again.”

**{LISTEN TO DISC FOUR, TRACK 5, “WEST END BLUES” OF LOUIS ARMSTRONG, THE COMPLETE HOT FIVE AND HOT SEVEN RECORDINGS}**

In 1929, Louis returned to Harlem to work at Connie’s Inn, then began playing and touring as a soloist. At the same time, the **depression**, brought on by the stock market crash, hit Harlem hard, and with the economic collapse came the end of the Harlem Renaissance.

In 1931, on a tour of the southern United States, Louis returned to New Orleans, where he visited the Waif’s Home and spent time with old friends. In July 1932, Louis traveled to Europe for an extensive tour, and upon his arrival in Britain, was greeted by a reporter as “Satchmo.” Although Louis had many nicknames, Satchelmouth and Pops the two most common, the name Satchmo stuck, and remained Louis’ nickname for the rest of his life.

The middle of the 1930s found Louis involved in filmmaking. He appeared in many Hollywood films, including *Pennies From Heaven* with Bing Crosby; *Going Places*, in which he performed and received an Academy Award nomination for *Jeepers Creepers*; and the comedy *Artist and Models* with Jack Benny. In 1938, his divorce from Lil Hardin was finalized, and just a few days later he married his long time companion Alpha Smith. Shortly after, he met and fell in love with Lucille Wilson, a dancer at the Cotton Club, where Louis was working. By 1942, his marriage to Alpha ended and in October 1942, Louis married Lucille, to whom he would remain married for the rest of his life.

The 1950s started very much like the 40s ended. Louis was working non-stop, touring the United States, making films, and publishing his first book, “Satchmo, My Life in New Orleans,” which was quickly “...acknowledged as an essential document about both Louis and the origins of Jazz.” In 1956, Louis and his band The All Stars traveled to West Africa and Europe on a tour sponsored by the U.S. State Department, and where he was given the nickname Ambassador Satch.

*“In the illustrious history of jazz, Louis Armstrong was the first superstar. He was the first jazz artist to tour Africa, Australia, Europe, and Far East and portions of the former Soviet Union, and he appeared in nearly forty feature films and film shorts. Miles Davis says about ‘Pops’ in his own autobiography: ‘You can’t play nothing on the trumpet that doesn’t come from him.’ From 1925 through about 1950, Armstrong created a monumental body of work that throughout the rest of the century has remained vital, influential, and exciting; from 1950 up until the day he died, he was merely the most widely recognized and beloved entertainer in the world.”*

On September 19, 1957, Louis watched the television coverage of the school **desegregation** crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas, and for the first time in his life, became publicly critical of the U.S. Government, stating, “It’s getting so bad, a colored man hasn’t got any country.” When President Eisenhower finally sent federal troops to Arkansas to enforce desegregation, Louis sent a telegram to the President stating, “If you decide to walk into the schools with the little colored kids, take me along, Daddy. God Bless You.”



Louis Armstrong



Louis Armstrong featured on the cover of Time Magazine, February 21, 1949.



In June 1959, while in Italy, Louis suffered a heart attack. Concerns about his health mounted, but by 1960 Louis was working again, and made two recordings with **Duke Ellington**. Then, Louis recorded the song “*Hello Dolly*.” The recording didn’t mean much to Louis and his band, and immediately after the recording session, they went back on the road. *Hello Dolly* hit the popular music charts in February 1966, and on May 9, the song, “astounded the music industry, to say nothing of the jazz world, by reaching the number-one spot for one gorgeous week, at a time when the Beatles and other British rock groups were thought to have an absolute lock on the charts.” Louis and his band, performing in Puerto Rico, were unaware of the song’s success, and confused about why the audience continued to ask to hear the song. Finally, Louis’ manager sent the sheet music from New York, and with great hesitation, the band performed the song live. That night, the audience made Louis take eight curtain calls.

**{LISTEN TO A RECORDING OF HELLO DOLLY BY LOUIS ARMSTRONG}**

In the late 1960s and early 70s, Louis’ health began to fail, but he worked as much as he could, performing at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1970. In March 1971, Louis suffered a second heart attack and on July 6, 1971, Louis Armstrong died.

*“Armstrong’s achievement in the twentieth century is that he took the expression of the slaves (and their children), and of their masters (and their children), and answered the American Renaissance’s call - also called the Harlem Renaissance - for powerful indigenous creation. In the form of the Hot Fives and Hot Sevens, Armstrong produced a kind of ‘native grand opera’: on his horn and with his singing voice, Armstrong created the language of jazz as a medium for telling the American stories he knew, stories that touched those around him in an expanding circle that eventually included, literally, a whole world of listeners.”*

**Classroom Connections:**

Language Arts

1. There are many great stories about travel on the Mississippi River. One of them is *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. Read this book. Write your own story about traveling on a river.
2. It was Louis’ dream to play the cornet with his hero “King” Joe Oliver - a dream that eventually came true despite many obstacles. Think about the way Louis Armstrong accomplished this dream. What is your dream, and what steps are you taking or plan to take in order to accomplish this dream? Write a paragraph stating your dream, and how you hope to achieve it.
3. Louis Armstrong wrote lots of letters and kept journals about his life. Many of his letters were nostalgic - remembrances of good times. Write a letter to a friend or family member you haven’t seen in a long time. The subject of the letter might be something you remember doing with this person along with a description of the activity and how it made you feel.
4. Research the history of jazz. Create some kind of presentation about jazz history, using important dates, images, and playing audio examples.

Mathematics

1. Louis Armstrong bought his first cornet from a pawn shop with monies saved from a job and a loan from his employer. Identify a purchase you’d like to make for yourself. How much does it cost? How much do you have saved, and how much more do you need to make the purchase? Think about the ways you earn money (allowance, paper route, job). What strategy do you have for earning money, and how long will it take you to earn enough to make your purchase?
2. Estimate the number of miles Louis traveled when playing on the riverboat and traveling from St. Louis, Missouri to St. Paul, Minnesota, and back.

Social Studies:

1. Louis traveled on a riverboat between St. Louis, Missouri and St. Paul Minnesota between 1918 and 1920. Using a map, trace the route of the Mississippi River. What cities did he pass by that would have been considered “big” cities - or large ports of call during this time in the U.S.? Which cities on the route are considered “big” today? Are they the same? Why or why not? Why do you think riverboat travel impacted city development?
2. What is desegregation, and why is it important when studying the history

of the United States? Why and how is the study of desegregation related to jazz history?

Social Studies/Science:

1. Compare/contrast popular music and entertainment today versus the early 1900s. When was radio invented, and by whom? What about the record player? The television? How did these inventions influence and change the way individuals were entertained?
2. Trace the development of the record. Discuss the ways households incorporated the record player into the home and everyday life.

Music and Art:

1. Listen to the music of Louis Armstrong, from his earliest recordings with the Hot Fives through his most contemporary recordings, like *Hello Dolly*. How is the music similar? How is it different? Listen for examples of improvisation and scat.
2. As you listen to the music, think about the way it makes you feel. Happy? Sad? Energetic? Sleepy? What colors would you associate with the different songs? Create an abstract picture that visualizes the way one of the songs makes you feel.



## *the life of Louis Armstrong*

### VOCABULARY:

- b-flat cornet* A valved instrument of the trumpet family, tuned to the key of b-flat.
- Colored Waif's Home* A facility similar to a prison or juvenile delinquent home that young African-American boys were sent to if they were caught breaking the law in New Orleans.
- Depression* A period during which business, employment, etc., decline or remain at a low level of activity.
- Desegregation* The elimination of segregation - so that separations, usually between races, do not exist.
- Discrimination* To make a distinction in favor of or against, based on a prejudice.
- Duke Ellington* Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington was the most prolific composer of the 20th century. He was born in 1899 and is considered by many to be America's greatest composer, band leader, and recording artist. Duke Ellington died in 1974.
- Great Migration* The period of history after the Civil War in which thousands of African-Americans traveled from the southern United States to the north looking for work and a better way of life for themselves and their families. During World War I (1914-1918), there were many jobs available for anyone who could work, and some companies brought black Americans to cities like Pittsburgh, PA, to assist in the war effort.
- Harlem, NY* A city in New York that, from 1916 through the mid-1930s, saw an influx of African-Americans as they migrated from the southern United States to cities in the north. In the 1930s, almost 35,000 African-Americans lived in the five square miles that make up Harlem, NY.
- Harlem Renaissance* A period of history from 1920 to about 1930 in which the African-American population, due to the migration of African-Americans to northern cities between 1916 and 1926, had great success in the literary, visual, and performing arts. Originally called the "New Negro Movement," the Harlem Renaissance celebrated the heritage and cultural significance of the African-American population.
- Hot Five* A group of musicians, led by Louis Armstrong, who recorded for Okeh records between 1925 and 1929 and changed the face of jazz. The other members of the Hot Five were: Kid Ory, trombone; Lil Hardin, piano; Johnny St. Cyr, banjo; and, Johnny Dodds, clarinet.
- Immigration* To go from one region to another or one country to another, usually in a large group, or frequently over a period of time.
- Improvisation* To do something without advanced preparation, whether performing or composing - to use whatever materials are available to accomplish a goal.
- Jane's Alley* Sometimes called James Alley, it is the birthplace of Louis Armstrong. Jane's Alley was a street located in a very poor and busy section of New Orleans, called "Back o' Town" at the turn of the 20th century.
- Jazz* Music that combines composed music with improvisation.  
*"The music called jazz was born sometime around 1895 in New Orleans. It combined elements of ragtime, marching band music, and blues. What differentiated jazz from these earlier styles was the widespread use of improvisation, often by more than one player at a time. Jazz represented a break from western musical traditions, where the composer wrote a piece of music on paper and the musicians then tried their best to play what was in the score."*  
•Excerpt from Red Hot Jazz.com
- Louis Armstrong* Born in 1901, Louis Armstrong is thought to be the most influential individual in the development of the musical style called jazz. Louis Armstrong played the trumpet and sang, influencing all other individuals interested in the genre of jazz music.
- Migration* To go from one region to another or one country to another, usually in a large group, or frequently over a period of time.

## Vocabulary, con't:

<i>Ragtime</i>	A style of music developed by African-American musicians, it was the first step towards jazz with syncopated rhythms.
<i>Reform School</i>	A school for young people for the purpose of causing them to abandon an evil way of life or conduct.
<i>Scat</i>	A form of singing using syncopated nonsense-syllable improvisation - scat singing has become a permanent part of the jazz vocal tradition.
<i>Segregation</i>	The separation (of a specific racial, religious, or other group) from the rest of society.
<i>Stock Market Crash</i>	The greatest economic crisis in American history took place in 1929 due to a combination of factors, including the overproduction of goods for public purchase, an unequal distribution of income, and the excess use of credit for purchasing.
<i>"Stride" Piano Playing</i>	A style of jazz piano playing that grew out of ragtime, it calls for rapid tempos and large leaps, or 'strides' of the left hand.
<i>Swing</i>	A smooth, flowing style of jazz popularized in the 1930s. It is an attack on the notes surrounding the beat, not on the beat itself. In 4/4 time, this means the accents fall more or less on the 2nd and 4th beats rather than on the expected first and third.

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(\*denotes source is available for loan through DAC)