

# Louis armstrong famous person in american culture

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Louis Armstrong (1901-1971) remains a pivotal figure in American culture nearly thirty-five years after his death. In his twenties and thirties, he was one of jazz's foremost innovators, elevating the instrumental solo to a new and important role and helping invent the jazz style of singing. Later in life, he became a widely popular entertainer rather than an innovator, a sort of "living legend" who preserved the music of yesteryear and projected a friendly, comical, widely imitated persona by which he is still remembered.

Louis Armstrong was born in a poor section of New Orleans on 4 August 1901 but was unaware of his actual birthdate throughout his life. He always claimed to be born on 4 July 1900, and this was accepted as fact until researchers found a birth certificate long after Armstrong's death (Wikipedia).

Fatherless and virtually motherless (his mother was a part-time prostitute who left him in his older sister's care), he received little schooling and worked a series of menial jobs from an early age, including delivering coal and working for a family of Jewish junk merchants. Despite a harsh, impoverished childhood in one of New Orleans' most crime-ridden neighborhoods, he developed the optimistic personality that many Americans recognize.

His musical training began at New Orleans' Colored Waifs Home, where Armstrong was sent in early 1913 for firing a pistol in the air during a New Year's Eve celebration. During his 17 months at the home, he received instruction on the cornet and later recalled, "The place was more like

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a health center or boarding school than a boys' jail," though the home was known for its harsh, militaristic discipline (Bergreen 73).

After his release, he joined the city's fertile musical community by performing in local jazz bands under Fate Marable (who taught him his strong professional ethic) and Kid Ory, as well as on riverboats. After meeting Joseph "King" Oliver and joining his pioneering jazz band, Armstrong became an exceptionally skilled instrumentalist and traveled to Chicago with Oliver, where he began recording in 1922 and went on his own within a few years.

After leaving King Oliver's band, Armstrong's career flourished. Biographer Laurence Bergreen writes, "It was as though Louis had taken [jazz] out of its infancy and given it a powerful breath of new life and independence" (Bergreen 200). He formed a series of bands, most notably the Hot Five, with whom he had numerous hits (the first being "Muskrat Ramble" in 1926) and displayed his improvisational and interpretive skills. Though he began as a trumpeter, he began singing as well during this period, using his unconventional, gravelly voice to develop scat singing, which other jazz artists adopted.

He attained especially high standing among other jazz musicians for his virtuosity and ability to translate jazz (formerly the music of New Orleans' street parades and dances) to records. Bergreen notes that Armstrong "was the first important jazz musician to anticipate that his legacy would be actual recordings, not half-forgotten memories" (Bergreen 219), showing a shrewd side of his personality because early jazz artists (like its supposed creator,

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Buddy Bolden) were never able to reach a wider audience simply through live performance.

After World War II, Armstrong was no longer a cutting-edge innovator, since jazz had by now evolved away from its New Orleans roots and transformed into swing and bebop. However, says Bergreen, Armstrong “carved himself a unique niche in the music world . . . as a newly minted traditionalist” (Bergreen 433). He began performing not only the New Orleans “hot” jazz he helped create but also pop, blues, Tin Pan Alley, and show tunes, winning him great popularity with the public but critical scorn.

According to music critic Gary Giddins, “he was excoriated for playing pop tunes, fronting a swing band, appearing with media stars, sticking to a standardized repertory, engaging in vaudeville routines . . . mugging, entertaining” (Giddins 4). However, this second phase of his career is as important as the first, since he never lost stature among his peers, produced some vital work (especially his collaborations with Ella Fitzgerald), and won an even wider following late in life.

Armstrong was largely apolitical but strongly supported the civil rights movement, having experienced the effects of segregation his entire life. He harshly criticized Dwight Eisenhower’s perceived inaction during the 1957 Little Rock school integration crisis, called Arkansas’ segregationist governor Orval Faubus “ignorant,” and snubbed the federal government by refusing to participate in a government-sponsored tour of the Soviet Union in 1958 (Wikipedia). His warm, effusive, laid-back personality and friendliness

toward people regardless of race led some to incorrectly dub him an “ Uncle Tom,” though he generally refused to make race a personal issue.

Armstrong essentially left two legacies - as innovator and entertainer. Before reaching middle age, Armstrong’s accomplishments included his helping define jazz in its earliest years, as well as making the solo an important element of modern music. In addition, he helped define jazz vocals and popularize scat singing, long a key element of jazz.

After age forty, his second legacy was his familiarity to the American public and abroad, and he cared little about how some critics dismissed him for joining the cultural mainstream. According to Giddins, Armstrong played almost any kind of material because he knew “ that no song could diminish him and that he could lift most songs beyond their earthy calling” (Giddins 4). According to Bergreen, “ He was not just America’s greatest musical performer, he was also a character of epic proportions” (Bergreen 1). More than thirty years after his death, Louis Armstrong remains one of the most recognizable Americans, hailed as both a creator and performer more than thirty years after his death.

## REFERENCES

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