

King of jazz: louis armstrong essay sample



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The great art of Jazz was born in the year of 1895 in New Orleans, Louisiana. Jazz is responsible for the creation of Drum Sets and the creation of words like “cool” and “hip”. Jazz was played in all the bars, honky-tonks, saloons, and dancehalls. Jazz was a tremendous influence on the music played today, but it would not have come so far if it was not for Louis Armstrong.

Armstrong is considered the most important improviser in Jazz (he taught the world to swing) (‘Jazz at Lincoln Center’). His trumpet playing changed the rules of music. Armstrong’s interest in music earned him the title of greatest trumpet/cornet player in American History. And to think it all started with a tin horn.

Armstrong, full name Louis (“loo-ESS”) Daniel Armstrong, was born in Uptown New Orleans, Louisiana to Mary Albert and William Armstrong. There was some confusion about the date of Armstrong’s birth. In those days not many people could read nor write, so they used the trick of remembering which major holiday was celebrated around their actual birth date. Many babies were born at home at that time, instead of hospitals. No official birth certificates registered for home births (Jones 42). For Armstrong July 4th, 1900 was the closest holiday to Armstrong’s actual birth date, but thanks to the found baptismal records it was stated that Armstrong’s actual birth date is August 4th, 1901. Armstrong died believing he was born on July 4th.

Armstrong’s parents separated once he was born. Mary (Mayann) Albert, Armstrong’s mother, was born in Butte, Louisiana. She moved to New Orleans as a child and worked as a servant to white family whose children she raised. Albert then married at age 15 to William Armstrong, Louis Armstrong’s father. Albert died in 1942 (Jones 43). William (Willie) Armstrong

was born in 1881. William worked as a straw boss in a turpentine factory for most of his life. He left the family once Armstrong was born (Mitre). He died in 1922 (Jones 43). Armstrong's maternal grandmother, Josephine Armstrong was born into slavery. She spoke of Armstrong's past relatives like his great grandmother who had been born while Louisiana was still a French Colony (before the early 1760's when the Huge Louisiana territory was turned over to Spain). Josephine Armstrong cared for Armstrong for most of his life as a child.

Armstrong was born in poverty in Uptown New Orleans, Louisiana (Kehoe 124). " There were bars, honky-tonks and saloons, and lots of women walking the streets for tricks to take to their " pads" as they called their rooms" (Armstrong-Satchmo). Armstrong saw all of this at a young age. Over time Armstrong earned many nicknames like, Satchmo (short for " Satchel-Mouth" referring to the size of his mouth), Dipper Mouth, Little Louie, Gate, and Pops (for his puffed up cheeks when he played trumpet) (Jazz at Lincoln Center). Armstrong was moved from one place to another once his father left the family. At the early ages of Armstrong's childhood he ended up in the care of his grandmother and uncle along with his sister, Beatrice Armstrong (1903-1987). At five years of age, he moved back to live with his mother and her relatives when she became ill, and saw his father only at special events. Armstrong attended the Fisk School for Boys, where he probably had his first encounter with music (" Louis Armstrong").

Armstrong began to work to bring in money for the family. He became the local paperboy and sold discarded food to restaurants around the neighborhood, but it was not enough money to keep his mother from turning

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to prostitution. Armstrong spent most of his childhood in Storyville, the legendary red-light district of New Orleans (“ Kehoe”). When he was 7, he had a job delivering small amounts of coal to Tim Bordellos and often ran errands for the prostitutes, who worked in them. Armstrong began to run the streets, hanging out at dancehalls close to home where he watched the Quadrille, a popular four couple dance in New Orleans danced by Creole, Black and White dancers. He also listened to the bands playing in the Brothels, especially Pete Lala’s Brothel where Armstrong’s future mentor, Joe “ King” Oliver performed. Armstrong dropped out of Fisk School and joined a quartet of boys who sung in the streets for money. Armstrong was the lead singer and the tenor. He would walk down the street followed by the baritone and the bass.

They would sing religious and popular songs. They would pass around a hat to collect money, they also danced. Armstrong began getting into trouble once he was on the streets. He was soon hired by the Karnofskys, a family of Russian Jewish immigrants. The Karnofskys took in Armstrong and let him work on their junk wagon. Armstrong was treated as family. Soon Armstrong started wearing a ‘ Star of David’ pendant to represent the Jewish family (Gates). While Armstrong worked he would play a tin horn to attract a crowd to the junk wagon. At age 8, Armstrong bought his first cornet with the money loaned to him by the Karnofskys (“ History-Timeline. org”). At age 12 he was arrested for firing a pistol into the air; he was sentenced to an indeterminate term in the Colored Waif’s Home for Boys, a juvenile correctional institution, where Armstrong continued to play the cornet with help from Professor Peter Davis History-Timeline. org”). “ My whole success

goes back to that time”, says Armstrong. He was made the leader of the home’s band and began to study music seriously (“ History-Timeline. org”).

Armstrong was released from the home and returned to home to live with his mother and step-father. Armstrong worked as a coalman during the day and played his cornet at Henry Ponce’s dancehall at night where Black Benney became his mentor. As an Adult, Armstrong was known for his hearty appetite. “ I may not die a rich man,” he said, “ but I will be a fat one”(Armstrong-swing). Before becoming a professional musician, he worked as a white-washer, on a milk wagon, as a laborer on a construction site and for a demolition company. Armstrong even sold the rights to one of his first songs he ever wrote, “ Keep off Katie’s Head”, for a promised 25 dollars, although he was never paid. The lyrics were later rewritten and the song published as “ I Wish I Could Shimmy like My Sister Kate”, which became a hit. Armstrong played in brass bands on the riverboats and steamboats of New Orleans Armstrong attracted a lot of attention to the boats. The people liked his personality. “ He had a sense of humor, natural and unassuming manner, and a positive disposition that made everyone comfortable” (Jazz at Lincoln Center).

It was said that he could start a solo when he was ten miles upriver and still be playing variations of it when the boat reached the dock. After playing on the boats for a few months, Armstrong received an invitation to play in King Ory’s Jazz Band, a hot jazz group. The 22 year old musician boarded a northbound train and played with the band. While in the band Armstrong didn’t know how to read music, so he faked it until he learned. This was a full-time jobs, he quit all his part-time jobs and worked on his instrument. On <https://assignbuster.com/king-of-jazz-louis-armstrong-essay-sample/>

March 19, 1918, Armstrong married Daisey Parker and they adopted a 3 year old mentally disabled boy named Clarence Armstrong who was the son of Armstrong's cousin, Flora, who had died soon after giving birth. The marriage didn't last and soon ended in divorce. Daisey died a few months later.

Armstrong later became 2nd trumpet for the Tuxedo Brass Band, a society band. During this time Armstrong finally learn to read music. In 1922, Armstrong joined his mentor's band, King Oliver, the influential hot jazz band called Creole Jazz Band in Chicago, playing with musicians such as his friend Bix Beiderbecke (" History-Timeline. org").

While in the band he married Lillian (Lil) hardin who was the pianist. He lived well in Chicago where he met Hoagy Carmichael and owned his first apartment. Armstrong made his first recordings on the Gennet and Okeh labels (Jazz records were popular in the country), including taking some solos and breaks, while playing 2nd cornet in Oliver's band. In 1924, he was urged by his wife to join Fletcher Henderson's band. Armstrong took the job, leaving the Creole band and becoming distant with his mentor. Armstrong then switched to trumpet to blend in better with the other musicians in his section. Armstrong played for 1 year in Henderson's band, making many recordings in New York. Armstrong and Oliver finally parted in the late 1924s. Armstrong began to experiment with the trombone and other musicians started doing the same.

Soon Armstrong included acting in his shows, imitating New Orleans citizens from his past, especially preachers. The orchestra played in the best venues for whites- only patrons, including the famed Roseland, Ballroom. Armstrong made many recordings on the side, arranged by old friends, Clarence and

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Williams Blue Five, from New Orleans. After playing in New York, Armstrong returned to Chicago persuaded by his wife who wanted to pump up his career and income. Content in New York, but later agreed with his wife that Henderson Orchestra was limiting his artistic growth. He played in large orchestras and created his most important early recordings. Lil had him play classical in church concerts to broaden his skills and improve his solo playing. She prodded him into wearing more stylish clothes to help his image. Armstrong's wife later named him "the world's greatest trumpet player". Armstrong then started working for his wife, playing the trumpet in her band. He began recording under his own name for Okeh with his famous Hot Five and Hot Seven bands. The produced hits like "Potatoe Head Blues", "Muggles", (a reference to marijuana which Armstrong smoked heavily) and "West End Blues".

These records set the standard for the Jazz group. Armstrong's band leading skill was easy going as St. Cyr noted, "One felt so relaxed working with him and he was very broad-minded...always did best to feature each individual". Armstrong later recorded with pianist Earl "Fatha" Hines (Most famously their Weatherbird duet) and his trumpet intro to "West End Blues" remained famous and influenced improvisations in Jazz history. Armstrong was now free to play whatever he felt, which included a heavy dose of effervescent jive. He also played with Erskine Tate's Little Symphony, which played at the Vendome Theatre. They recorded music for silent movies and live shows. Armstrong began to Scat sing and was the first to record it. It was so popular that his wife's group became the most famous Jazz band in the US. Many young and different races were influenced by Armstrong's new style. During

the next few years, Armstrong separated from Lillian and was married to other times.

He also joined many other bands; he even starred in his first movie called “Ex-Flame”. He also played other roles in 40 different films. Armstrong was later convicted of marijuana possession, but received a suspended sentence. He then left Chicago because of some trouble with the mob. Armstrong went to Visit New Orleans and received a hero’s welcome. He sponsored a local baseball team called, “Armstrong’s Secret Nine”, and got a cigar named after him. He soon was back on the road again and after a tour across the country shadowed by the mob, Armstrong decided to leave the country to get away from his problems. Armstrong went to play at concert celebrating Ghana’s independence which was attended by more than 100, 000 Louis Armstrong fans. Armstrong speaks out against racial discrimination and publicly condemned the violence that swept Little Rock over school integration.

In 1959, Armstrong was hospitalized due to a heart attack (Old). He recorded his last hit, “What a Wonderful World” and appeared in his last movie, “Hello Dolly” with Barbra Streisand. His version of the song Hello Dolly won him a Grammy for best vocal performance. Armstrong died in his sleep on July 6, 1971 (age 69) at Corona, New York City, New York. Pallbearers at his funeral included Johnny Carson, Dick Cavett, and Merv Griffin, choices that puzzled his friends (Kehoe). “On every conceivable level—technically”, critic wrote, “He singlehandedly turned Jazz into an art form” (Kehoe). Armstrong was later inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as an “early

influence”. The city of New Orleans honored him by renaming its airport as the “ Louis Armstrong International Airport”.