



Louis Armstrong: Disney the Satchmo Way

“What we play is life.”

Louis Armstrong is considered by many in the music industry to be the most significant person in jazz’s history. His innovative career defined jazz music, transcended racial and socioeconomic barriers, and revolutionized American entertainment. Jazz icon Duke Ellington called Armstrong “Mr. Jazz” and “an American standard.” Famed entertainer Bing Crosby proclaimed Armstrong to be “the beginning and the end of music in America.” *Life Magazine* announced him as the “international ambassador of jazz” and “America’s greatest gift to the world.” And when music legend Tony Bennett described what America’s musical contribution to the world was, he simply stated, “We contributed Louis Armstrong.” Armstrong lived a life that inspired generations of musicians and entertainers. And though he made thousands of recordings, a Disney-inspired album towards the end of his career would become one of his most historical records.

Louis Daniel Armstrong was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, on August 4, 1901 (although he enjoyed telling people he was born on the fourth of July). He was raised by his single mother in a dangerous, poverty-stricken neighborhood nicknamed “The Battlefield.” Although the New Orleans neighborhood was violent, it was also filled with music (as was the entire city). The sounds of early jazz permeated through New Orleans’s streets as bands performed in brothels, nightclubs, parades, funerals, and dance halls. Armstrong’s childhood years in New Orleans would ultimately nurture his deep passion for music.

Armstrong dropped out of school at a young age to begin working in efforts to support the family. With only a fifth-grade education, he found employment working for a local Russian-Jewish family named the Karnoffskys. The Karnoffskys became like a second-family for Armstrong. The financial support he received from the family allowed him to buy his first cornet (a trumpet-like brass instrument) from a local pawn shop. Furthermore, witnessing the Jewish family's experiences being discriminated against, alongside seeing the discrimination of African-Americans in the racially segregated city, affected Armstrong's perception of social injustice. The Karnoffskys' warmth and determination so moved him that he wore a Star of David pendant for his entire life in their honor.

Armstrong began performing as a young teenager. He sang tenor in an all-boys vocal quartet and began learning to play his cornet. During a festive celebration On New Year's Eve 1912, he fired a pistol in the air on a dare and was consequently arrested. The judge sentenced Armstrong to spend time at the Colored Waif's Home, a reform school for African-American boys on the outskirts of New Orleans. During his time there, Armstrong joined the house band as a cornet player, and eventually became the band's official leader. Devoting such disciplined time to music training gave him the chance to mature his skills as a performer.

Once Armstrong was released from the reform school in 1914, he dedicated his time to becoming a working musician. Since New Orleans was a pioneering hotspot for jazz and blues (evolving from ragtime), musicians were in-demand. Armstrong quickly developed an intimate mentor-student relationship with Joe "King" Oliver, the top cornet player in New Orleans. Armstrong deeply admired Oliver and further honed his music skills under Oliver's teaching. Eventually, Armstrong became one of the most in-demand horn players in New Orleans, steadily playing with bands in town (led by popular musicians like Edward "Kid" Ory) and on Mississippi riverboats. He also met and married Daisy Parker, and together they adopted a three-year-old boy named Clarence, the son of Armstrong's deceased cousin, Flora. During this time, Clarence had an accidental fall, which left him mentally impaired from head trauma.

Unfortunately, Armstrong and Parker's marriage was brief, separating in 1923 after "King" Oliver invited Armstrong to join him in Chicago as a new member for Oliver's Creole Jazz Band. Armstrong found success in Chicago playing in "King" Oliver's band. The band was considered the best jazz ensemble in Chicago, and Armstrong earned a substantial salary and lifestyle. Additionally, he fell in love with and married Lillian "Lil" Hardin, the band's piano player. Consequently, Armstrong moved Clarence up to Chicago to live with him and Lil (Clarence lived with them until he became an adult and settled in the Bronx with a wife and life-long support from Armstrong).

Despite finding professional and personal milestones with Oliver's band, Armstrong and Lil believed Armstrong should leave the group to pursue higher positions beyond ensemble player. Armstrong and his wife moved to New York City, where he became a star horn soloist in a big band led by jazz artist Fletcher Henderson, transitioning from the cornet to the trumpet to better blend with the band. Armstrong's stint in New York would open several opportunities for him. Henderson's band was the first all African-American group to tour New England. Additionally, Armstrong began his recording career here. He not only recorded with Henderson's band, but he also played on side recordings with other significant jazz artists like Bessie Smith, Clarence Williams, Ma Rainey, and Sidney Bechet. Furthermore, Armstrong's innovative instincts brought a new level to the New York City jazz scene. His unique combinations of energetic rhythms, skillful solos, masterful improvisation, emotional expression, and infusion of New Orleans style blues with Chicago swing jazz made Armstrong a pioneer for the new age of jazz.

Although Armstrong found great success in New York City, he eventually felt irritated that Fletcher Henderson would not allow him to sing. Armstrong considered himself both a trumpeter and a singer and believed the full expression of his artistry was being hindered. Simultaneously, Lil was yearning to move back to Chicago. Ultimately, Armstrong and Lil left Henderson's band and returned to Chicago.

This second turn in Chicago would prove to be a tremendous career move for Armstrong. After performing hugely

successful shows around the city, Armstrong gained the confidence and popularity to record himself as an album headliner. In 1925, Armstrong gathered four other musicians (most were from New Orleans) and began recording a series of albums called "Hot Five." The original Hot Five band consisted of Louis Armstrong (trumpet), Edward "Kid" Ory (trombone), Johnny St. Cyr (guitar/banjo), Johnny Dodds (clarinet), and his wife Lil Hardin Armstrong (piano). As time went on, other musicians rotated in and out of the group.

Louis Armstrong and his Hot Five founded themselves in the New Orleans jazz style, a perfect fit since most of the musicians came from New Orleans. The New Orleans jazz style built itself on collective improvisation, in which the trumpet played the tune's melody, the trombone and clarinet played accompaniment, and the guitar and piano provided a rhythm section. However, Armstrong's virtuosic trumpet skills began dominating the Hot Five albums, resulting in Armstrong's prevalent trumpet solos establishing new breakthroughs for the art of improvising music. Additionally, he began imploring his groundbreaking use of scat singing (vocal improvisation using wordless syllables to imitate an instrument). Thus, Armstrong became the primary influencer of instrumental improvisation and scat singing (two fundamentals of jazz).

The Hot Five groups (and subsequent Hot Seven groups) became the hottest things in jazz, helping turn Chicago into a city defined by its music. Their albums brought New Orleans style and Chicago style jazz to a nationwide audience. Their emphasis on virtuosic improvised solos gave jazz music a new sound identity, and Armstrong rose as the central star of that sound. The Hot Five and Hot Seven recorded several hit tunes, including "Potato Head Blues," "Muskrat Ramble," "Muggles," "West End Blues," "Wild Man Blues," "Melancholy," "Willie the Weepy," and "Heebie Jeebies" (the song that introduced Armstrong's scat singing).

For the next decade, Louis Armstrong's popularity took him all over the country, turning him into a symbol of America's 'Jazz Age.' After his tremendous success in Chicago, he returned to New York and transitioned into being a band-leader, helping to usher in the 1930s Big Band swing craze.

Armstrong recorded several hit records while in New York, including “Ain’t Misbehavin,’” “Lazy River,” and “Stardust.” He also ventured into Broadway work as a musician. After New York, Armstrong relocated to California for a while before hitting the road on tour (which brought him back to his hometown of New Orleans for a brief stint). Armstrong continued winning over audiences and recording more hit records, including “All of Me,” “Sleepy Down South,” and “You Rascal You.” Audiences lauded Armstrong’s onstage personality and emotional singing and playing. As historian Gerry Butler stated, “He wasn’t just singing the song, he was *performing* it.”

Armstrong’s massive popularity spread overseas when he began touring Europe and drew in massive international crowds. Back in the United States, Armstrong furthered his appeal by venturing into Hollywood. He appeared in over 30 films, typically portraying himself or a likeness of himself (a.k.a. a bandleader or a trumpet player). Some of his most memorable movie appearances include *Pennies from Heaven* (1936), *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), *A Song is Born* (1948), *The Glenn Miller Story* (1954), *High Society* (1956), and *Hello, Dolly!* (1969).

During the late 1930s and early 1940s, Armstrong went through personal ups and downs. Armstrong and Lil divorced, and soon after, he dated and married a woman named Alpha. Armstrong and Alpha’s marriage did not survive too long before ending. After separating from Alpha, Armstrong met and fell in love with a woman named Lucille. Armstrong and Lucille married and remained together for the rest of his life.

Starting in the 1940s, Armstrong began touring with a small six-member band he called the All-Stars (smaller bands were more affordable due to the hard economics of World War II). Armstrong and his All-Stars became a touring sensation, performing over 300 shows a year. Their tremendous success led to them becoming the world’s highest-paid touring jazz group.

Armstrong spent the next decades touring all over the world, including North America, Europe, and Africa. He started being seen as a musical goodwill ambassador and earned the nickname “Ambassador Satch.” The term “Satch” (and other forms of the word) were lifelong nicknames for Armstrong. Early on,

people coined nicknames for Armstrong in reference to the size of his mouth. Names such as “Gatemouth,” “Satchelmouth,” and “Dippermouth” were all given to Armstrong. Armstrong later permanently adopted the nickname “Satchmo”—a shortened version of “Satchelmouth”—and lovingly used it to refer to himself on several album titles (including his upcoming Disney-inspired album).

As his fame and popularity reached new heights, Armstrong began using his platform to stand up for civil rights (although many in the black community ridiculed him for seemingly waiting too long to become an aggressive advocate). During the Civil Rights Movement, Armstrong publicly supported and contributed to Martin Luther King, Jr. Additionally, he refused to play at any venues that he was not allowed to stay in (essentially boycotting popular “white” hotels). Furthermore, Armstrong took a serious political stance in 1957 by publicly criticizing President Eisenhower and the Arkansas Governor for not allowing black children to enter a school in Little Rock, Arkansas. Armstrong protested this injustice by canceling a highly publicized tour through the Soviet Union representing America’s State Department. This progressive move led to Armstrong’s first significant career controversy and lost him a substantial amount of his fan base. However, he forged on to still see another decade of success.

During the 1960s, Armstrong’s health began taking a toll. He survived a heart attack, which forced him to focus more on singing than trumpet playing. Although his health was declining, he still had great career highs. In 1964, his recording of the Broadway showtune “Hello, Dolly!” made history by knocking the Beatles off the top of the Billboard charts, making Armstrong the oldest recording artist ever to have a Number One song. Other hit songs would include the pop-jazz tune “Mack the Knife” and the endearing ballad “What A Wonderful World.” By this point in his career, Louis Armstrong had worked with nearly every important person in the entertainment industry. However, one crucial collaboration had yet to be immortalized: Louis Armstrong working with Walt Disney.

It seemed inevitable that a pioneer of jazz would eventually cross paths with a pioneer of entertainment. Walt

Disney and the people at the Disney studio were all huge fans of Louis Armstrong. Armstrong performed in jazz festivals at Disneyland and appeared in a television episode of *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color*. Additionally, Armstrong would serve as inspiration for multiple Disney film projects, including *The Jungle Book* (1967) (see Chapter 10), the abandoned *Musicana* (see Chapter 14), and *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) (see Chapter 23). Walt Disney personally requested Armstrong to record an album of tunes from Disney's musical films. Sadly, Disney did not live to see Armstrong's Disney-themed album.

In 1968, Louis Armstrong recorded an album dedicated to some of his favorite tunes from Disney's films. His album, endearingly titled *Disney the Satchmo Way*, offers up jazz reinterpretations of ten songs from eight feature films from the Disney studio:

- "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah" from *Song of the South*
- "Teen Feet Off the Ground" from *The One and Only Genuine, Original Family Band*
- "Heigh-Ho" from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*
- "Whistle While You Work" from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*
- "Chim Chim Cher-ee" from *Mary Poppins*
- "Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo" from *Cinderella*
- "'Bout Time" from *The One and Only Genuine, Original Family Band*
- "The Ballad of Davy Crockett" from *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier*
- "The Bare Necessities" from *The Jungle Book*
- "When You Wish Upon a Star" from *Pinocchio*

Critics found Armstrong's Disney-themed album to be appealing, praising it as an example of Armstrong's talent to make any song his own. The album was also considered a well-rounded vehicle that showcased the various sides of Armstrong's musical personality. His love of scat singing naturally enhances the songs with nonsense lyrics such as "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah," "Chim Chim Cher-ee," and

“Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo.” At the same time, tunes like “The Bare Necessities,” “Whistle While You Work,” and “The Ballad of Davy Crockett” give a musical playground for Armstrong’s vocal enthusiasm and playfulness. In contrast, the slow-paced “When You Wish Upon A Star” allows Armstrong’s voice to sing with warmth and maturity (in a similar fashion to his famous ballad “What A Wonderful World”). He even personalizes “When You Wish Upon A Star” by sweetly singing the word “Mama” in the middle of the recording, creating a touching musical moment.

Disney the Satchmo Way also holds historical importance for sentimental jazz enthusiasts. The Disney-themed album is the last recording of Louis Armstrong’s trumpet playing. Although Armstrong sang on a few more records before his death in 1971, these jazzy Disney tunes are the final recordings of Armstrong’s horn-playing skills, the talent that launched his career over half a century earlier.

Before Louis Armstrong died, he wrote about how much he loved his Disney album. When discussing “When You Wish Upon A Star” (his favorite tune on the record), he wrote that the song was “so beautiful...I listen to that tune three or four times a night.” And when describing his overall experience recording the album, he wrote, “I haven’t enjoyed anything better than...well, I can’t remember.”

Louis Armstrong died merely a few years later after penning those reflections. Historians and critics still regard him as the man that forever shaped jazz. And for all of the career highs and lows, it was a Disney-inspired album that reminded him of the pure joy he found in a good tune and a sentimental heart. Louis Armstrong often spoke about how music should always reflect a performer’s love and soul—summing it up best when he simply stated, “What we play is life.”