

HUD Black History Showcase Series

Louis Armstrong
1901-1971

Jazz musician and entertainer, born in New Orleans, Louisiana to Mary Ann and Willie Armstrong. His parents split up early in his childhood, leaving him with his paternal grandmother. Later, at the age of five, he moved back in with his mother, and grew into adulthood mostly on his own, and caring for his younger sister. Louis' musical career began in his teens when he sang in a street-corner quartet for change from passersby.

His neighborhood was awash with honky-tonks featuring New Orleans-style music, usually small bands, two-to four-piece combinations. Louis "took" to the music and decided to make it his career.

Louis learned fundamentals of brass instruments while in a home for wayward boys in New Orleans. He had been sent there for a minor offense around January, 1913. He played in a band at the home. Following his release in 1914, he sat in with local bands, using borrowed horns and eventually bought his well-worn horn.

An early mentor for Louis was Edward ("Kid") Ory, co-leader of one of the best jazz bands in New Orleans. Under Ory, Louis established himself, playing on the riverboats and around town with the better Black bands. In 1922 he went to Chicago to join the legendary Creole Jazz Band. There he met and married Lillian Hardin, the band's pianist. She pushed Louis to advance his career and in 1924 he went to New York to join the band of Fletcher Henderson, where he astounded musicians with his technique and intensity and melodic line. Here began his status as a major figure in popular music.

He returned to Chicago in 1925 to make records under his own name. There he cut the famous "Hot Five" series between 1925 and 1928. These records are considered by critics to be the most important body of work in jazz. In the ensuing years, Louis produced many more recordings, which had a major impact on the jazz world. Louis Armstrong's methods became the model for jazz.

Louis' music began to attract a substantial audience of white fans. He began to sing and play popular tunes, some classic standards but more of them novelties and love tunes. He fronted a standard big dance band, featuring his music and song. Through the 30's and 40's, he led a series of bands and appeared in movies and radio. By the mid-30's he was one of the most popular entertainers in America.

At the close of World War II, the swing band movement came to an end, with fans moving to the new bop movement. At the same time, there was a revival of interest in Dixieland jazz. In 1947, Louis joined a group of jazz all-stars, playing a semblance of the old New Orleans style. His personality and warmth helped draw a new generation of fans. His fame grew through the 1950's and 60's and it was the ordinary pop tune "*Hello Dolly*" that was his hallmark. In 1964 his recording of this song pushed the Beatles out of the number one spot on the *Billboard* chart.

To Louis, the point of being a musician was to please audiences. Nonetheless, his place in music history rests not on his popularity as an entertainer but on the body of music made between 1924 and 1936, which in many ways has shaped American jazz.