

The popularity of jazz music began during the “Roaring 20’s” when people enjoyed going to clubs to hear this new sound. The roots of jazz extend back to slavery and songs that were sung by slaves to remember loved ones and express sorrow. As jazz continued to develop, it grew out of African-American music including ragtime, field songs, spirituals and blues. Many musicians and artists contributed to the success of jazz but Louis Armstrong is one of the most recognizable and dominating names to this genre. Steve Leggett describes Armstrong as “perhaps the most important American musician of the 20th century.”

Louis Armstrong was not born into wealth and overcame many hardships throughout his life. Armstrong was born August 4, 1901 in a rough neighborhood known as “Back of Town” in New Orleans, Louisiana to Mayann and William Armstrong. His mother and father were not steady caregivers in his life and he and his sister, Beatrice, were primarily raised by their grandmother, Josephine.

To help keep his mother from prostitution, Armstrong worked as a paperboy and delivered coal to dance halls where he began to hear artists like Joe “King” Oliver. After dropping out of Fisk School for Boys at eleven years old, he joined a quartet of boys. These groups of young men would sing on the streets for money. In 1912, he formed his first group, “Happy Shots”. While performing on the streets, Armstrong began to get into trouble and was sent to New Orleans Home for Colored Waifs. His longest stay at the Home was caused by him firing his stepfather’s pistol into the air during a New Year’s Eve celebration. However, the Home was beneficial to him, as it provided Armstrong with his first music lessons.

During his time at the New Orleans Home for Colored Waif’s, Armstrong was taught discipline and music lessons by Professor Peter Davis. He began to blow the cornet and was soon made the band leader. The Home’s band began to play around New Orleans. Armstrong, then

thirteen, was drawing attention for his cornet skills. At fourteen, he was released from the Home began to haul coal during the day and play music in dance halls at night.

Playing and performing were Armstrong's passions. He often played in city parades, in brass bands, on riverboats and listened to other performers for influence. Joe Oliver was one of Armstrong's mentors and acted as a father figure to him. Oliver went North in 1919, resigned from the Kid Ory's band, and Armstrong took his place as first cornet player. In addition to that gig, he was second trumpet for the Tuxedo Brass Band.

Armstrong's early musical projects helped shape him into a thriving cornet and trumpet player. The riverboat experience helped him learn how to read music. He was beginning to play trumpet solos to include his own personality and style. Due to his success, he was able to quit his day laborer jobs and focus on his music career.

Chicago proved to be a triumphant place for Louis and the jazz scene. Armstrong had his own apartment and Chicago was considered the center of the jazz universe. During this time, Armstrong made his first recordings on the Gennett and Okeh labels. Armstrong enjoyed playing with Oliver but was influenced by pianist and later his second wife, Lil Hardin Armstrong, "to seek more prominent billing and develop his newer style away from the influence of Oliver," (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Armstrong, page 4). He was later invited to play in New York City with the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra, which was considered to be the top African-American band of that time.

Once Armstrong began playing with Henderson, he switched the trumpet and began to include singing and storytelling, from his time in New Orleans, into his act. Many other horn players tried to out play him, but were unable to defeat him and many of them split their lips in their

failed attempts. On the side, he began to make his own recordings which were arranged by Clarence Williams, a friend from New Orleans.

Armstrong played with Henderson for several years and in 1925 went back to Chicago. He was a member of his wife's band, Lil Hardin Armstrong Band and soon began recording under his own name with his groups Hot Five and Hot Seven. His first song released was "Heebies Jeebies" in 1926. It was this song which introduced listeners to scat, which includes substituting nonsense sounds and words into the song. Armstrong also recorded hits like "Potato Head Blues", "Muggles" and "West End Blues." His career began to sky rocket and after his split from Lil Hardin, the group was renamed *Louis Armstrong and his Stompers*. He had success with his own lyrics but found his greatest achievement in adding his style to songs by artists like Hoagy Carmichael. "Armstrong's famous interpretation of Hoagy Carmichael's "Stardust" became one of the most successful versions of this song ever recorded, showcasing Armstrong's unique vocal sound and style, and his innovative approach to singing songs that had already become standards," (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Armstrong, page 5).

Armstrong's unique style and improvisation certainly aided his success. He was able to perform in clubs where audiences were filled with many famous people. "He often essentially re-composed pop-tunes he played, making them more interesting. Armstrong's playing is filled with joyous, inspired original melodies, creative leaps, and subtle relaxed or driving rhythms. The genius of these creative passages is matched by Armstrong's playing technique, honed by constant practice, which extended the range, tone and capabilities of the trumpet. In these records, Armstrong almost single-handedly created the role of the jazz soloist, taking what was essentially a collective folk music and turning it into an art form with tremendous possibilities for individual expression," (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Armstrong, page 9).

The Great Depression not only took its toll on the American population but also the entertainment world. In 1933, Armstrong moved to Los Angeles in search of new opportunities. A year later he went back to Chicago but a mob insisted that he get out of town. He then went to New Orleans where they treated him like a hero. During his three month stay in New Orleans, he performed many concerts, but his black fans were not allowed to inside the venue. Instead, they were forced to stand outside or listen from their radios. Armstrong was not immune to the segregation problems occurring in the nation. One radio announcer refused to introduce a black man, so Armstrong had to introduce himself. Touring during this time was also challenging, especially in the South. “Even finding a place to eat and sleep presented problems. The hotels were often for whites only. This meant the band had to sleep on buses or rent cheap rooms. They ate meals of bread and canned food,” (January, page 19).

After World War II the popularity of jazz was on the rise. Armstrong put together a band, the “All-Stars”, which combined traditional New Orleans sound with Big Band-style music. In 1948, he began touring the world with this new sound. Touring in Ghana was his particularly memorable and poignant because his ancestors were from there. On a later trip back to Africa, he was given the name ‘Okuka Lokole,’ which translates to “one who charms beats with music”.

As Armstrong aged, he continued to tour and loved the attention that it brought him. *Time* called him “America’s Secret Weapon”, and he was on the cover of the February 21, 1949 issue. “His first heart attack occurred in Italy in 1959 – he continued an intense work schedule that lasted through the final full decade of his life,” (Holland, page 40). In 1964, he became the oldest American, at age 63, to have a #1 hit on the Billboard Top 100, “Hello Dolly”. In 1971, after having pneumonia, his doctor recommended that he stop playing the trumpet. However, Armstrong ignored that advice and played for two weeks with the All-Stars at the Waldorf Astoria in New

York City. After the last show, he suffered another heart attack. He died in his sleep at his home in New York a few months later on July 6, 1971.

People who knew Louis Armstrong described him as a generous man who donated much of his money to help people in need. Many of his friends referred to him by one of his many nicknames. *Stachomo* or *Satch* was short for *Satchelmouth* which described his embouchure. He was also called *Dippermouth* because he would drink sugar water from the ladle when performing with Joe Oliver's band. He was also called *Pops* after he injured his mouth playing and relied more on singing than playing his trumpet.

His legacy continues to live on today. He is still recognized for his contributions to jazz music. Armstrong has received many posthumous awards and honors, including induction in the Jazz Hall of Fame, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the Gennett Records Walk of Fame, and the Louisiana Music Hall of Fame. The U.S. Post Office issued a commemorative postage stamp in 1995. In 1999, President Bill Clinton included Armstrong's trumpet in the millennial time capsule that will be opened in 100 years time.

Louis Armstrong was one of the most important founders of jazz. "He devoted himself to Armstrong brought jazz to the world at large and never stopped promoting it, and along the way he championed the lives and culture of African-Americans," (Holland, page 43). He used his life experiences in his music, learned a long the way and did not have any regrets at the end of this life. "I think I had a beautiful life. I didn't wish for anything I couldn't get and I got pretty near everything I wanted because I worked for it," (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Armstrong, page 8).

Student Activities:

- Louis Armstrong had many nicknames throughout his life. Using the information you have learned about Louis Armstrong, choose two different nicknames. Please explain why you chose them.
- Louis Armstrong was on the cover of Time Magazine. Please draw a cover of the magazine with Louis Armstrong on the cover. It can be from any time period of his life and include items or times that were important to him.
- At a young age Louis Armstrong was sent to a Boys Home for shooting a gun. This was a memorable time for him because this was when Armstrong began taking music lessons. Pretend you are Armstrong and write a letter to one of the boys from the old neighborhood detailing your time at the Home. After everyone has written a letter, switch with someone in class and pretend you are the boy and write a response letter to Louis.
- Complete a timeline of Louis Armstrong's life.
- Listen to one of Louis' instrumental songs and write your own lyrics.
- Create a dance to one of Armstrong's songs.
- Choose your favorite Louis Armstrong song and rename it. Please explain in one paragraph why you chose that name.
- With a kazoo, perform your own improvisation of a Louis Armstrong song.
- Louis Armstrong was given a record on the Record Walk of Fame after his death. You are accepting the record on his behalf, write an acceptance speech.
- Choose your favorite recording artist or group and then complete a Venn diagram comparing and contrasting your choice with Louis Armstrong. The diagram can include musical style, influences, presentation, concerts, and/or familiarity.

Bibliography:

Bergreen, L. (1997) Louis Armstrong: an Extravagant Life. New York: Broadway Books.

Brothers, T. (2001). Louis Armstrong, In His Own Words: Selected Writings. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.

Fahlenkamp-Merrell, K. (2002). Louis Armstrong: Journey to Freedom. Chanhassen, MN: The Child's World Inc.

Gourse, L. (1997). Blowing on the Changes: The Art of the Jazz Horn Players. New York: Franklin Watts.

Holland, G. (2004). Louis Armstrong. Milwaukee: World Almanac Library.

January, B. (2003). Louis Armstrong, Jazz Musician. Philadelphia: Mason Crest.

Jones, M., Chilton, J. (1971). Louis, the Louis Armstrong Story. Boston: Little, Brown & Company.

Kallen, S. (2002). The History of Jazz. San Diego: Lucent Books.

Millender, D. (1997) Louis Armstrong: Young Music Maker (Childhood of Young Americans). New York: Aladdin Library.

Mour, S. (2002). American Jazz Musicians (Collective Biographies). Berkeley Heights, NJ: Enslow Publishers.

Peck, D., Galloway, P. (1959). Louis Armstrong, Live in '59. (DVD) Germany: Reelin' In the Years Productions.

Tanenhaus, S. (1989). Louis Armstrong. New York: Chelsea House Publishers.

Travis, D. (2000). The Louis Armstrong Odyssey: From Jane Alley to America's Jazz Ambassador. Chicago: Urban Research Press, Inc.

Louis Armstrong - Wikipedia. Retrieved November 18, 2008, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Armstrong

Louis Armstrong: A Cultural Legacy. Retrieved November 18, 2008, from: <http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/armstrong/index.htm>

Louis "Satcho" Armstrong (1901-1971). Retrieved November 18, 2008, from: <http://www.redhotjazz.com/louie.html>

Time 100: Louis Armstrong. (2003). Time Life Inc. Retrieved November 18, 2008, from: <http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/armstrong/index.htm>

Louis Armstrong on the Cover of Time Magazine February 21, 1949



Sign leading to Gennett Historic Site in Richmond, Indiana



Starr Piano Building – Part of the Gennett Historic Site



Gennett Label on the Starr Piano Building



Starr Gennett Foundation Inc.

The Starr Piano Company

The Starr Piano Company began operations on this site in the 1870s. The Company gained an international reputation for Starr pianos, phonographs, and its recording division, Gennett Records.

The building with the Gennett Records parrot logo painted on the south wall is the last of an enormous network of factory buildings located here along the Whitewater River. This building was once used for the manufacture of player piano mechanisms in addition to several other uses through the Starr Piano Company's history.

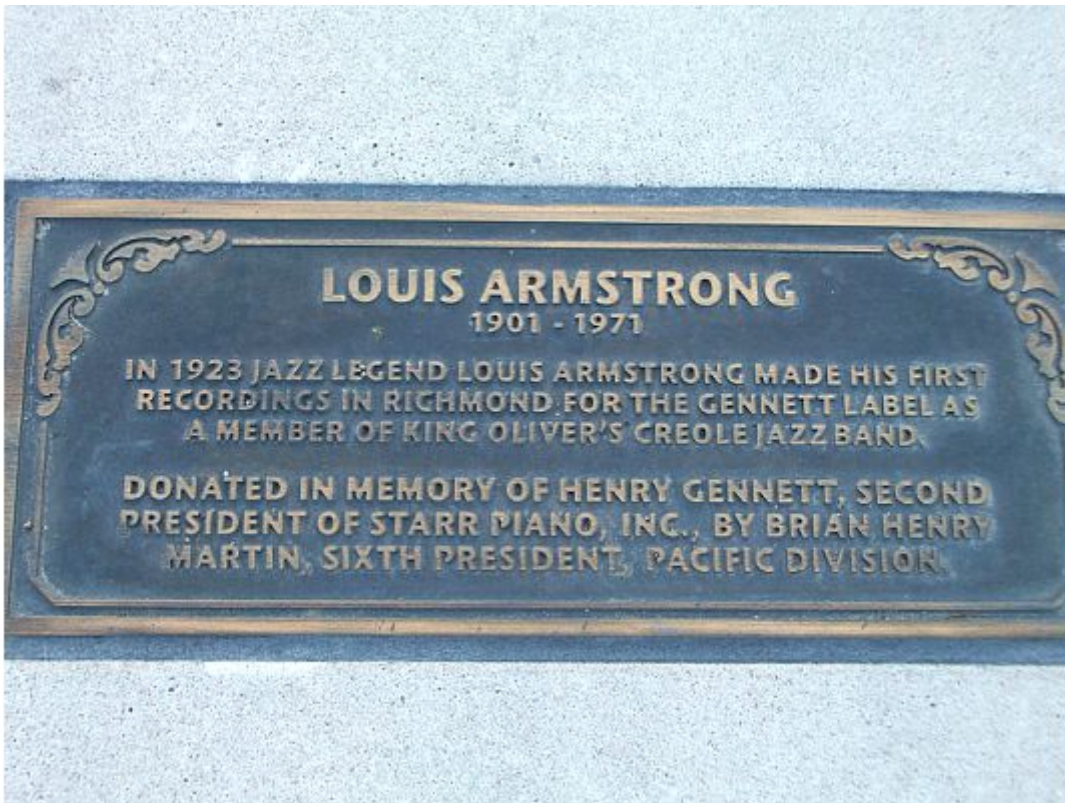


Today the Starr Piano Company is best remembered for Gennett Records and the important contributions Gennett made to early jazz, country, blues and gospel music.

www.starrgennett.org

City of Richmond, Department of Parks and Recreation, www.ci.richmond.in.us

Louis Armstrong - Record Walk of Fame, Richmond, Indiana



Louis Armstrong - Record Walk of Fame, Richmond, Indiana



Joe “King” Oliver - Record Walk of Fame, Richmond, Indiana



Hoagy Carmichael – Record Walk of Fame, Richmond, Indiana



Murals around Richmond, Indiana (Gennett Firsts and Hoagy Carmichael)

