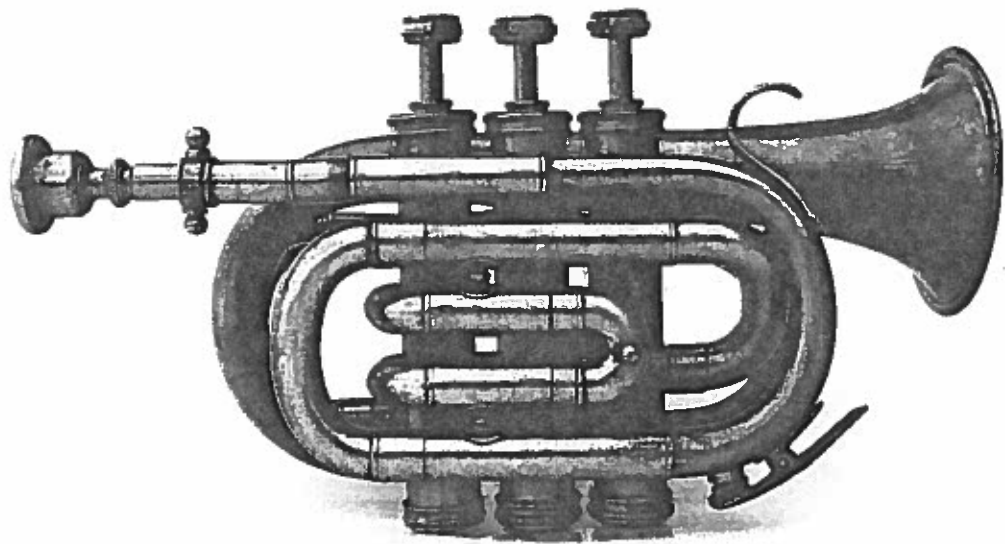


Louis and Bix



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Chapter 4

Louis Armstrong

Louis Armstrong is the most important figure in the history of jazz. He established many of the jazz traditions that continue to this day and broke down racial barriers throughout his career. After pioneering solo improvisation in the 1920s, he laid the groundwork for the swing style of the 1930s. In the 30s and 40s he was one of the first African-Americans featured in films and on network radio, and he continued to be a major jazz performer until his death in 1971. One example of his continued dominance in the world of music was that in 1964 Armstrong knocked the Beatles out of the number one spot on the *Billboard* charts with his recording of *Hello Dolly*. Even today, his voice can be heard on television commercials and in the soundtracks of major Hollywood films. If you've got a happy ending in a movie, then it must be time for Louis Armstrong to sing.

For many years Armstrong's birthday has been officially listed as July 4, 1900. He liked to call himself a "child of the American century."¹ In fact, he was actually born on August 4, 1901, but as a young man he kept changing his birthdate to make himself seem older to the musicians with whom he was working. He was born in New Orleans to an extremely poor family and grew up in a very rough part of town called The Battlefield. At the age of 11, Louis was placed in a boys home in New Orleans after firing a pistol into the air to celebrate New Year's Eve. At the boys home, he joined the band and made very rapid progress as a young trumpet player. Later, Louis spent time with New Orleans trumpet legend Joe "King" Oliver. Much of Armstrong's early knowledge came from the great jazz musicians living in New Orleans. Of these, Armstrong always said that it was King Oliver who was most willing to help out a younger musician like himself. Louis started to play jazz in and around New Orleans every chance he got. In his late teens he began to play in bands that traveled up and down the Mississippi River. He would sometimes be gone from New Orleans for months at a time, traveling as far north as Minneapolis, Minnesota and playing jazz all the way. As previously mentioned, when King Oliver left New Orleans, many of his best jobs were passed on to Louis Armstrong. A few years later, it was Oliver who sent back to New Orleans and brought Armstrong north to Chicago.

When Armstrong joined King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band in 1922, it made for an interesting band set-up. With two trumpet play-

ers instead of one, Armstrong spent a great deal of his time improvising lines that accompanied what Oliver was playing as the lead trumpet. Now remember that Oliver himself was improvising most of his material. Musicians were fascinated with Armstrong's ability to improvise



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the perfect harmony part no matter what Oliver played. As Armstrong's style of playing became more popular, Oliver occasionally let him stretch out musically, breaking away from the standard collective improvisation format. Armstrong's amazing skill at creating a coherent, dramatic improvised musical line could not be contained for long. He married King Oliver's piano player, Lil Hardin, and it was Lil who pushed Armstrong to go out on his own.

In 1924, New York band leader Fletcher Henderson asked Armstrong to join his band. Henderson was playing society dance music with a larger orchestra, but he wanted to play more of what people were starting to call "hot" jazz. He needed a skilled improviser, and Armstrong fit the bill. Within months, all the best jazz players were imitating Louis Armstrong's dramatic and innovative styles of improvisation. Just as in Chicago, when Armstrong hit town, the music started to change. Most accounts tell us that Armstrong enjoyed playing in this prototype of a swing-era big band, but he was often frustrated with the unprofessional behavior of some of the musicians. While all of Henderson's musicians were very talented, they often drank too much, showed up late to gigs and sometimes skipped entire jobs. Armstrong eventually returned to his wife in Chicago and started his own band.

In the years 1925 to 1928 Armstrong made a series of recordings with various collections of musicians he called Louis Armstrong and his Hot Five, and later Louis Armstrong and his Hot Seven. These Hot Five and Hot Seven recordings, as they are usually referred to, codified the art of solo improvisation. Many people view them as the true start of traditional jazz, but in reality, they are the culmination of almost thirty years of musical evolution. In many ways, these recordings laid the groundwork for the swing era, which we will consider in Chapter 4. In these recordings, Armstrong not only produced one incredible improvised instrumental solo after another, he also raised the level of jazz vocals. He had been singing off and on for several years, but these recordings represent the first time he was really allowed to demonstrate his innovative vocal style. In addition to singing the regular song lyrics with his rough, sandpaper-like voice, Armstrong was the first singer to record **scat singing**. This technique of using nonsense syllables to imitate the sound of a horn with the human voice was not uncommon among New Orleans musicians, but Armstrong was the first one to put it on record. Some of these early scat vocals included *Heebie Jeebies* and *Hotter Than That*. For years, instrumentalists and singers would study, imitate and try to interpret the music of Louis Armstrong.

scat singing [3]



Of the 65 masterpiece recordings made by these bands, incredibly, Armstrong received only fifty dollars per side with no future royalty agreement.² The records sold many copies in their day, and they continue to be rereleased in new packaging. They truly are the basis for much of what we do in the jazz idiom to this day, but Armstrong never saw another dime from them. You will find three recordings on your listening CDs that feature Louis Armstrong. These include an excerpt from *Potato Head Blues* and the tune *West End Blues* recorded with the Hot Seven and Hot Five respectively, and the previously mentioned *St. Louis Blues* recorded with blues diva Bessie Smith.

As the swing and big band styles became more popular in the 1930s, Armstrong fronted a series of larger groups. He continued to

make great recordings, but more and more he focused on popular tunes. No matter how commercial the piece of music, he still managed to add his unique jazz touch to the music. He enjoyed great commercial success for a time, both on radio and in film. In fact, he was the first African-American featured on a network radio show. As successful as he was, his bands were eclipsed by more popular groups of the day including the bands led by Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Benny Goodman. In the 1940s, Armstrong returned to the small band format. For the rest of his life, he would perform around the world with some of the finest and highest paid musicians in the business. He called all of his bands after 1946 Louis Armstrong and his All-Stars. Eventually, Armstrong and the All-Stars were sent around the world as musical ambassadors for the U.S. government's Department of State. Perhaps one of the most overlooked aspects of Armstrong's career is his early work in the civil rights movement. Long before the serious racial conflicts of the 1960s, Armstrong was using his wit, charm and talent to knock down many of the racial barriers he faced.

Bix Beiderbecke

In the years following the release of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band recordings, many young white musicians decided they also wanted to play jazz. Of these young musicians, cornet and piano player Bix Beiderbecke is considered by many to be the first great white innovator in the history of jazz music. Bix lived a very short and troubled life. In Ken Burns' PBS documentary *Jazz*, it's actually pointed out that Bix was one of the first white artists to really suffer the effects of a racially divided America. While it was true that black musicians weren't allowed to perform in public with a white band at this time, a white man like Bix couldn't regularly perform with a black band either. The best practitioners of the art that Bix wanted to create were black, and he was never afforded the opportunity to make music with them on a regular basis.³ Today, Beiderbecke is largely an unknown name outside of jazz circles. Nonetheless, he too was a jazz pioneer, and a tragic loss with his early departure from this earth. Had he lived into the 1960s or 70s it would have been very interesting to see what kind of music he might have created. You can hear Bix playing with saxophonist Frankie Trumbauer on the tune *Singin' the Blues* found on your listening CDs.

In the liner notes to a recent CD collection titled *Singin' the Blues*, author Michael Brooks paints a good portrait of Bix's short life.

Notes

1. *Satchmo*, Dir. Gary Giddens, (New York: CBS Music Video Enterprises, 1989), videocassette.
2. *Jazz: A Film by Ken Burns*, Episode 3 (Washington DC: PBS, 2001), videocassette.
3. *Ibid.*