

This Day in History... August 4, 1901

Birth of Louis Armstrong

Louis Daniel Armstrong was born on August 4, 1901, in New Orleans, Louisiana. Armstrong was one of the most influential jazz musicians in American history. His distinct gravelly voice, skill in improvising lyrics, and mastery of the trumpet helped make jazz music a popular art form.

Armstrong grew up in a rough neighborhood known as “The Battlefield.” When he was six years old, he began working for the Karnoffsky family, helping their children collect “rags and bones” and deliver coal. The Karnoffskys treated Armstrong like family, feeding and caring for him, and taught him to sing “from the heart,” as he later recalled. Armstrong also witnessed the discrimination the Jewish family faced and later wrote a memoir about his time with them. He also wore a Star of David in their honor for the rest of his life.



Armstrong's famous nickname "Satchmo" or "Satch" was short for "Satchelmouth." Some claim the nickname dates back to when he was a street performer. It's claimed he would put coins in his mouth to prevent the older kids from stealing them, using his mouth as a satchel.

When the Great Depression hit, several clubs were forced to close, and bands split up. Armstrong moved to Los Angeles where the clubs were still open and appeared in his first movie, *Ex-Flame*. He later returned to Chicago and then New Orleans, where he sponsored a baseball team and had a cigar named after him. When he was harassed by the mob, he fled to Europe for a time, but then returned to the US and toured extensively. Soon, he began to have problems with his fingers and lips, which affected his playing, so he worked more on developing his vocal abilities. In 1937, he was the first African American to host a nationally broadcast radio show.



Armstrong was a major influence on the Harlem Renaissance, particularly Langston Hughes.

Armstrong dropped out of school when he was 11 and joined a quartet that sang on the street for money. In 1912, he fired a blank from a gun into the air and was arrested and sent to a sort of military camp, where he honed his cornet skills and became the camp's band leader. After being released in 1914, Armstrong found work in a dance hall and later joined a band on a riverboat. Armstrong described his time on the boat as “going to the University.” The band leader insisted they all know how to read music, which Armstrong learned.

Armstrong moved to Chicago in 1922, following an invitation from fellow musician and bandleader King Oliver. Their band quickly became one of the most influential in Chicago and Armstrong made his first recordings with them in 1923. After spending time in New York City with the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra, Armstrong returned to Chicago and formed Louis Armstrong and the Hot Five. His wife billed him as “the World's Greatest Trumpet Player,” and the band recorded 24 records over the course of 12 months. They had such notable hits as “Cornet Chop Suey,” “Struttin' With Some Barbecue,” “Hotter Than That,” and “Potato Head Blues.” As the band gained prominence, Armstrong was able to improvise and develop his own personal style. He was one of the first to record scat singing on “Heebie Jeebies” in 1926. That hit soon made his group one of the most famous jazz bands in the country.

The 1940s saw a decline in the popularity of big bands. Armstrong played with a few smaller groups and then formed Louis Armstrong and His All Stars. He was also the first jazz musician to be featured on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1949. He spent much of the 1950s performing around the world. Then in 1964, he recorded “Hello, Dolly!” from the musical of the same name. It quickly became the best-selling record of his career, spending 22 weeks on the Hot 100 and earning him a Grammy. The single knocked the Beatles out of the #1 spot on the *Billboard* charts and made Armstrong the oldest artist to have a number one hit at the age of 62.

In addition to his music successes, Armstrong toured Africa, Europe, and Asia on behalf of the US State Department and was known as “Ambassador Satch.” Although he was a major financial supporter of civil rights activists – including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. – Armstrong preferred to do so quietly. A notable exception was during the Little Rock, Arkansas school segregation crisis of 1957. Angered by President Dwight D. Eisenhower's inaction, Armstrong called him “gutless” and “two-faced” and cancelled a State Department tour of the Soviet Union.

By the late 1960s, Armstrong suffered from several health issues and had to take long breaks from recording and touring. His final recorded trumpet performance came in 1968 on the album *Disney Songs the Satchmo Way*. He died from a heart attack on July 6, 1971. Over the course of his career, Armstrong had 19 Top Ten records and appeared in more than a dozen Hollywood films. He's been inducted into several halls of fame and his former home is National Historic Landmark.



From the 1995 Jazz Musicians issue



Armstrong's singing style influenced Crosby and they later worked on a few films together.

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