Louis Armstrong’s Influential Career Essay, Research Paper

Louis Armstrong?s Influential Career

Louis Armstrong was the most successful and talented jazz musician in history. His influence and expansive career continues to make waves in the jazz world. That is what made him become what he is to many today ? a legend.

Born on August 4, 1901, in the poorest section of New Orleans, Armstrong grew up with his grandparents due to his parents? separation. On January 1, 1913 he made a mistake which turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to him. At a New Year?s celebration in downtown New Orleans, Louis Armstrong, also known as ?Satchmo? and ?Satch?, fired a pistol into the air and was placed in the Colored Waifs? Home. It was there that he was introduced to Peter Davis ? the brass band leader who taught him how to play the cornet (Brown 17). Soon after he began playing, Armstrong was made leader of the band ? something he was extremely proud of.

In June of 1914, Armstrong was free to leave the Waifs? Home. He was hired by various cabarets throughout the city, as well as for picnics, dances, and funerals. It was at one of these places that he was spotted by the famous Joe ?King? Oliver. King Oliver found Armstrong stand-in slots at orchestras and other venues. In 1918, he was offered the vacant seat left by Oliver in the band the Brown Skinned Babies. Kid Ory, leader of the band, once said that after Louis joined them he, ??improved so fast it was amazing. He had a wonderful ear and a wonderful memory. All you had to do was hum or whistle a new tune to him and he?d know it right away? (Boujut 21). At the end of 1918 Armstrong married Daisy Parker, a prostitute he had met at a dance hall that he played on Saturday nights. The marriage ended only four years later due to her beating him regularly (Bergreen 87).

Louis Armstrong was hired in May of 1919 to play on a riverboat that traveled the Mississippi River from New Orleans to St. Louis. Armstrong soon became very popular in St. Louis and was in high demand (Collier 124). Two and a half years later, he was thrown off the riverboat and fired due to a fight. After returning to New Orleans, he received a telegram from King Oliver in Chicago. It was an invitation to join The Creole Jazz Band ? an offer Armstrong couldn?t refuse. The Jazz Band cut it?s first record in the spring of 1923 and toured throughout Illinois, Ohio, and Indiana (Hadlock 64).

A year later Armstrong married Lil Hardin, the pianist in the band. He soon grew tired of playing in Chicago and left Oliver?s band to head for New York City. When Armstrong reached the City and began playing everyone went wild. No where had they ever heard anything like him. Before this time, he had only played instruments but he was soon encouraged to begin singing. It was then discovered that Armstrong had a natural extension of his trumpet abilities, which was singing. His gravelly voice was something new that had never been heard (Sadie 600).

Armstrong formed a studio band in 1925 called the Hot Five. The band included Johnny Dodds, Kid Ory, John St. Cyr, Lil Armstrong, and himself. These recordings were some of the most famous made by Armstrong, including ?Mandy Make Up Your Mind? and ?Money Blues? (Bergreen 96). A year later the Hot Five made their only public appearance at the Chicago Coliseum. The Chicago Defender spoke of ?Louis Armstrong, the miracle with steel lips,? (Boujut 27).

For the next few years Armstrong recorded with the Hot Five and played with other musicians in New York and Chicago. He then traveled to California, in July of 1930, where he starred in his first film, Flame. Only after he had been in California for a few weeks he was arrested at a nightclub for the possession of marijuana. The incident obviously caused a lot of controversy across the world. The sentence, six months in prison, was suspended after only three days. Mainly due to Armstrong?s addiction to marijuana, Lil separated from him and they no longer worked together (Boujut 33).

In 1932 the Hot Five split up. Armstrong remained in California and starred in Rhapsody in Black and Blue and You Rascal You. Later that year, he sailed to England where he played for the King (Crouch 171). An experience that ranked as ?one of the best times of my life,? he stated (Bergreen 107).

Something interesting happened to Armstrong in 1933. In London?s Daily Express the death of the ?trumpet player with lips of steel,? was reported (Boujut 36). Five days later Melody Maker issued a correction but the news had already spread around the globe.

In April of 1934 Armstrong began touring Europe. He visited various countries including France, Belgium, Switzerland, and the Netherlands where he was welcomed with open arms. The tour was scheduled to carry on to North Africa and Egypt, but the state of Armstrong?s? lips forced him to cancel his remaining shows and not play for over eight months (Brown 154).

In 1935 Armstrong formed a commercial style big band with fifteen other musicians (Brown 76). For the next twelve years he starred in various films and played with his new band. It was in 1947 that he abandoned the big band and returned to small band format. He joined the All-Star?s, made up of Jack Teagarden, George Wettling, Big Sid Catlett, Dick Cary, Peanuts Hucko, Bob Hagart. That turned out to be the group he worked with until his death.

In the heat of the Civil Rights Movement, Louis Armstrong was called an ?Uncle Tom? by blacks, referring to Harriet Beecher Stowe?s Uncle Tom?s Cabin. African-Americans blamed Armstrong for not using his fame to speak out against the unjust treatment of his race in the United States (Brown 92). They also said he was holding his race back because he didn?t demand respect from whites and he smiled too much when he was in public (Crouch 171). In Armstrong?s opinion he didn?t understand what he was doing wrong. He had ignored prejudice because he had been taught to respect people unless they had personally disrespected him (Brown 92).

It was in 1955 that Louis Armstrong was made America?s musical ambassador. He traveled throughout the world on the United States behalf and even made an album titled, Ambassador Satch. All over the world he was respected and welcomed to perform nearly anywhere he chose.

Hello Dolly, Armstrong?s most well known song was recorded in 1964. It hit number one on the Billboard charts on April 8th. It was accompanied by one of movies he starred in which shared the same title. For the next seven years of his life he was in and out of the hospital due to heart and kidney problems. On July 6th, 1971, Louis Armstrong died of a lung infection and heart complications. His last wish, that his trumpet be buried with him, was granted.

Louis Armstrong influenced almost all aspects of jazz technique and style. He was the first to improvise and elaborate on a given melody. This technique has since been attempted and copied time and time again. Armstrong introduced a freedom to music that continues to impact popular music (Sadie 601). Without this American genius music would not be what it is today.

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